

Editor's Note

Katie Boyer's "Funeral in my Head" is an unconventional personal narrative in which the writer imagines her grandmother's funeral. What do funerals represent to the writer and her family members? What do they represent to you? Close your eyes and recall visiting your grandmother. What sights, sounds, and smells come to mind? What specific details about her grandmother does Boyer include in her essay? How do the imagined details compare to those from her actual experience?

Boyer takes risks with her content—imagining a funeral—as well as her form. The first thing you may have noticed about this essay is the use of italics: what do they signify? The essay is fairly choppy, yet memory and daydreaming are often fragmentary. Does Boyer's essay show a link between form and content? Does the unorthodox organization work? If yes, how so? If not, what might improve it? How might you describe the tone of "Funeral in my Head," and how does Boyer convey it (ex. title, first line, point of view, descriptions). This stylistic approach may evoke varied responses from readers, but Boyer's internal and external observations about this moment in her life certainly resonate.

Funeral in my Head

Katie Boyer

The room was dark. This was a place I had been so many times and yet I felt lost. I had never been to a funeral before. My black dress needed to be ironed, but this wasn't the time to worry about how I looked. I was nervous to speak in front of a crowd of crying family members. It didn't really matter what I said when I got up there—I can't bring my grandmother back. I wasn't sure how to talk to crying people and I definitely didn't know how to comfort them. I had to make my family proud though; especially my dad, my dad needed it. I stood in front of the room as the watery eyes slowly looked at me. I felt stupid going up there with note cards; this should be from the heart.

"Anne Boyer was loved by all who knew her. She had a strong, charismatic personality. I couldn't have asked for a better grandma. She did all the 'grandma' things with me that she was supposed to do: Grandma Anne taught me her secret recipes, always gave the best presents, kissed me when I didn't want her to and smiled as I wiped it off.

I spent a lot of time around Grandma Anne in her last few years and there were some things I became accustomed to that I especially miss. Every Sunday morning I would find her in the living room, already well into her day, reading the newspaper or doing a crossword, which she was so good at. She would spend as long as it took on a crossword to fin-

ish it, always setting it down and coming back to it. I never had that kind of patience. I would find her crosswords all over the house.

On those Sunday mornings, while my grandma was doing those daily word puzzles, I was excited to make French toast from the recipe she taught me, making sure to add just enough cinnamon and vanilla for flavor. Her approval meant so much. She taped the recipe onto the inside of the kitchen cabinet for me so I could do it all by myself. It became our Sunday special.

She lived a long and happy life. I only wish I had been more a part of it. I miss my grandma everyday but I try to remember that she is a better place watching over us."

This is how I imagine my grandmother's funeral if there had been one. I would have believed in God and His heaven for a few moments at her funeral. I try to imagine what that day would be like down to every detail. But the fact is it's been over three years since she died and we never actually had a funeral for her.

My father is her only living son and never once mentioned having a funeral. "Doesn't he love her?" I wondered. "Isn't having a funeral the right thing to do when someone you love dies?"

It's not that my father wasn't as upset as I was, because I know it was indescribably hard for him when his mom died. (I know because a very unusual thing happened: my father cried in front of me. I can't recall any other time this happened.) Maybe funerals aren't about how much you love that person who passed away but more of a tradition and a way to get closure—a tradition that all families practice but mine.

I remember that phone call the night she died. My dad had been in the hospital alone with her all day. He didn't want my sister and I to see her in such bad shape. I tried not to cry when my dad told me; I waited until I was off the phone. I wanted to be strong for him.

My parents got divorced when I was seven and since then my sister and I lived with my mom and saw my dad every other weekend. When I was about thirteen, three years before my grandma died, my dad moved into her house to take care of her. The whole family thought she didn't have much more time to live, but she stayed with us much longer than we had expected. I like to think that her Alzheimer's got better (or at least became more stable) because of my father's presence. His new residency there was accompanied by weekend visits by my sister and me. It was the first time we really spent more than a few hours with her. No one really knows what kept her alive so long, but without that miracle, I would have never really known my grandmother.

My grandma's house always smelled like cigarettes and so would I after spending a weekend there. I hated that cigarette smell, but maybe there was something to

be appreciated in it. The cigarettes were something she grew up with and was used to. She was addicted to it. It was part of her generation; it was part of her. Now, the smell of cigarettes, however unpleasant, reminds me of good times with my grandmother.

I admire the obstacles my grandma had to overcome throughout her life. She managed to get out of an abusive, loveless marriage and raise her two children on her own. I admired her will to live through her disease and everything she must have gone through while she was sick—emotionally and physically. (The toll it must have taken on her emotionally to be pushed around in that old wheelchair for years is heartbreaking!) I can't imagine the strength and courage it took to get through each day.

"She was sick. We did all we could for her. I know she appreciated you being there for her Dad. She was ready to go to her final resting place. She lived a full life."

Maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised that her death passed without any form of a funeral. When my uncle died about eight years earlier, it was a terrible time for my family because my parents had just gotten divorced a few months before. I was only eight years old and I barely remember my uncle. My dad took my sister and me up to the family cabin in Tahoe to spread my Uncle Bruce's ashes in the surrounding fields. It seemed to be the perfect small ceremony even though neither of his parents participated.

"My grandma always believed things would work things out for themselves. She believed in God and heaven and peace and love."

Normally, I am a very skeptical person—too skeptical even for religion. I don't know what happens to our souls when we die. I've gone to church but could never fully grasp the idea of an all-powerful being. I never knew anyone who died before my grandma. Maybe it takes the death of a loved one for someone to really examine his or her beliefs. By no means have I been converted to Catholicism in the hopes of going to heaven with my grandma now; but it definitely does give me comfort imagining her happy and healthy and safe for the rest of eternity in a magical place.

After I spoke, my dad said a few words about his mom. He is a man of few words and luckily there wasn't much that had to be said, we all knew how he felt. I think my grandma would have been pleased with the funeral. All of our family was there plus a few close friends. We filled her tiny living room. As we piled into the kitchen for the small recep-

tion, there was one thing on the table of assorted dishes that stood out—French toast. Maybe no one else understood it, but I had made it for my grandma that day.

I thanked all the guests for coming. I thanked them for caring and for being a part of her life. I gave hugs to people I didn't know but it felt good.

A funeral is a sign of respect. Funerals might give some sort of closure, but I'll never know how that feels. Funerals are for the loved ones left behind when someone dies. I don't think my grandma would object if she knew she wasn't getting a funeral. She deserved to have a funeral thrown for her and my dad deserved to have one for her too, but this essay is the most they ever got.

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