

# Death Days

written by Guest Contributor | October 13, 2020



First, Grandpa Larry died on my little sister's birthday. His death was expected. We did not know the day, but we knew the week. He was lying in a hospital bed in his bedroom that overlooked the pool and his talented pianist hands—with veins like ocean waves—were held by his husband and my father, who spoke softly to him as he left.

Exactly three weeks later, on my little brother's birthday, down went Grandma Ann. My parents got a call from the nursing home a few hours before midnight. She was leaving fast. She died while my parents were in the car, headlights sweeping the dark streets. The nurse met them at the back door. Grandma had been hallucinating for weeks, sewing invisible dresses with invisible thread.

These were coincidences that served as a lesson: birthdays were no more special than other days. This was a lesson that I, over any other member of my family, needed to learn.

I had always expected a lot from my parents on my birthday. I did not need expensive gifts or a well-decorated house, but a party elaborate enough to indicate that a good deal of forethought had been involved. For three years my father planned scavenger hunts. My seventeenth birthday was the most outrageous. My friends and I split into teams and raced around central London completing tasks that ranged from getting a dozen strangers to a sign a document stating that Britney Spears was an alien to drawing chalk pictures in front of the National Museum of Art. For my eighteenth birthday, my father planned a camping trip to Wales that involved bike rides, hikes in the snow, and campfire meals. My mother wasn't often present for the parties (there were three other children at home) but she would make whatever I wanted for dinner, and I always requested special rolls that took hours to prepare and were otherwise reserved only for Thanksgiving and Christmas. On my birthday, the behaviors of my family members were thick with meaning. Every pleasant exchange was a sign of love and every dismissal of my wants was a sign of dislike. If my mother had declined to make the special rolls, I would have thought she did not love me as much as she had the year before.

I had twenty-nine birthdays with all four grandparents. On my thirtieth birthday, I had two grandparents. Birthdays seemed only to mark the passing of time and the passing of my grandparents.

Then on my father's birthday, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Grandpa Sherrill died. It was unexpected. We had not thought about how a birthday was coming up and should we be afraid? After having breakfast and doing his stretches, he sat down in his recliner to watch golf and never got back up. He died within view of a painting I had made for him of a baseball stadium. He played two years of professional baseball for the Baltimore Orioles.

I know that my grandparents dying on my family member's birthdays is still a coincidence.

It is most likely a coincidence.

But perhaps when a baby is born into my family, a door is opened between worlds—between life and death—and every year on that same day, the door reopens. We enter through it, but we also exit. This comforts me because when we exit a room or pass through a threshold, we are not only leaving one space, but entering another. My grandparents were heading somewhere.

It's just a theory.

My sister called me from my grandfather's house two hours after he died. We were both sniffing, our voices changed by grief. "It's so strange how our grandparents are all dying on our birthdays," I said.

"It is," she said, and then laughed. "I told grandma that we are going to have to put her in bubble-wrap on the next birthday."

We laughed together. "Yes," I said. "We will need to keep an eye on her all day."

We quieted. My sister had just said goodbye to my grandfather in his recliner and it was the first time she had seen a dead body.

I asked, "Did it look like he could have been sleeping?"

"Yes," she said, and I could tell it was not a lie to make me feel better. To picture his body cold and grey would make it harder for me to believe any theory about the afterlife.

The good news is that the door is closed now and will not reopen before November 12<sup>th</sup>. Until then, I can step on a plane without fear. I can refrain from worrying when I feel a COVID fever rising. I can walk outside of my house in Portland, Oregon, and take deep gulps of thick, hazardous smoke. I am invincible.

I know this is not true, but now I feel the idea nagging at me like a tiny rock in my shoe. To those of us who are desperate for meaning, having three grandparents die on three birthdays is a gift. It is an open door. Especially right now when it feels like the earth is a marble rolling down a slide and into a pool of flames.

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