

The Constants

My first encounter with death was not the quiet passing of grandparents or the tearing away of family pets, and did not involve a stumbling conversation with my parents about the finiteness of life and a half-hearted relay of heaven and the immortal spirit. It didn't turn me to religion, it didn't cause me to plummet into depression or elevate to a new state of life-affirming inner peace, and the encounter itself only lasted fifteen minutes at most before I returned to normality, perhaps changed, but neither scarred nor enlightened.

My best friend in my first six or so years of school was a dark, tough girl whose personality was not appreciated by most, and our friendship wouldn't have lasted long, either, if we had been unable to make up quickly after fights and disagreements. However, under the rough exterior was an immensely loyal, brave and kind person whom I to this day am grateful for having known. My friend had a younger brother, and since he was even younger than my own brother, he was the youngest person imaginable to my seven-year-old self. Unlike my own brother, he was therefore unable to partake in more sophisticated imaginative play, and his toddler hands couldn't properly handle a video game controller, but despite these setbacks my friend and I (especially my friend) cherished spending time with him and teaching him the things we had learned in the five years we had spent in this world while he was still not a person that existed.

He was also fatally ill.

He had been born with some disease or another, the exact nature of which I don't quite remember (maybe I never actually knew). Though I do remember that he had to be fed intravenously, that the family spent a lot of time in the hospital, that the parents were very worried, and that all this made home a very stressful environment for my dear friend, who as a result spent most of her time at my house. Very quickly she was unofficially adopted into our household. While my parents were facing the unexpected dilemma of deciding whether or not to attempt to rear this unruly and rude child who was not technically theirs to rear, I was now spending most of my time with a person who simultaneously served as my best friend and a sister with whom I could engage in the fighting that is usually seen between siblings, but that my blood brother and I had never really initiated ourselves. My life was at this point the comforting routine that any good childhood consists of, going to school to learn and see my friends, continuing the seeing of friends after school hours, but spending time with my pretend-sister above all.

Early one Saturday I picked up the phone. The erosive qualities of time have left me uncertain of whether that was because it had rung or because I wanted to make a call. Either way, my best friend was on the line. After exchanging greetings, I chirped;

“Do you want to play today?”

“No, not today. My brother is dead.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I just wanted to tell you. We can play another day. I’ll call you.”

“Yes.”

“See you later.”

“Yes, see you.”

We hung up. Then I very calmly sat down on the couch, pulled a blanket over my head and my knees up to my chin and sat there, staring into the scratchy, yellowish-white fabric. At some point my mother entered the room, undoubtedly led forth by some maternal instinct that informed her of what was happening in the living room.

“Did he die?” she asked. I answered in the affirmative.

The mind is a funny thing. I have no recollection of what happened next, and only my logical sense has led me to conclude that my mother must have gently stroked my hair through the blanket, or sympathetically pulled the latter away and pulled me into an embrace, comforting her child who had just been exposed to the unfairness of the world. She might even have asked if I wanted to talk about it, and I likely said no. I do not remember. But I do remember those moments of silence under the blanket very vividly. As I processed the event, the feelings possessing me were not ones of fear, or anger. Nor even sadness. Only the slightest hint of confusion bit itself into the edge of me. I was not hiding under a blanket out of fear that the grim reaper would lay his eyes on me next, but because the living room was much too cluttered for my task. I needed a blank slate. In a sense I suppose I was grieving; the order of things in the world had shifted, and I needed to reorganize it. So that is what I did under the blanket, quietly taking inventory of my new reality. Something that

had been in my world before was now missing, and I needed to rearrange the remaining furniture, so to speak, to compensate for that.

Once I had done so, life went on. My friend came over a few days later, perhaps needing escape from home even more than before, but if so, not showing it. She was later rewarded for her eternal bravery with two lovely, healthy, younger siblings. Like all other humans, I would at several points since again witness life surrendering to time and sickness, and although my then older and more developed brain could muster a wider array of feelings, the urge to disappear under a blanket shone through. Above all, a need to keep my ever-changing world organized and constant was always present. Perhaps death will eventually be able to remove it – but if so, I suspect only my own passing will do the trick.