

I'm Glad My Oupa is Dead. Maybe

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It is an unseasonably cold day for August; the sky is pale and grey, blanketed in clouds and tinged blue with grief; the wind rustles the tree leaves and even the gradual ascent of the sun is cold, its rays of light a cool white.

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Two years ago, I watched my grandfather's funeral on YouTube. His service was live-streamed on the app; the perfectly planned program was displayed on a screen for those who no longer lived in South Africa to attend the funeral — to pay their respects to my grandfather. Mum had planned the ceremony with my aunts and, being an entire continent away without the time or money to travel back home, it was easier to have Oupa's burial be digital. We had to wake up around 5 a.m. because of the nine hour difference and yet, Mum had woken up earlier than the rest of us, pattering quietly around the house in preparation for the funeral. She was a part of the service; earlier that week, she had recorded her eulogy for Oupa, holing herself in the study upstairs as she re-read her speech for what felt like hours. Looking back, it's weird that she had to listen to a recording of her own voice on a screen, speaking words that she wrote about her own father, like some strange and twisted moment of astral projection or a surreal event in time. I don't know if Mum would share the same sentiments about it. I don't know if I want to ask her about it.

I don't remember much about my grandfather's funeral. Snippets of memory will flash across my mind, fleeting and waifish, and difficult to properly grasp -- to pull down and hold them long enough to see if they are real and not something that my mind has conjured up. Even

the exact date of my grandfather's funeral is something that I am unable to recollect in the recesses of my mind. There is no evidence of the event in my memory or the calendar app on my phone or my planner. No hastily scrawled journal entries written late at night. No half-assed attempt at writing a poetic epiphany about life in the philosophical vacuum that is the Apple notes app. Nothing. Makes it feel like it never truly happened. Like I never had a real grandfather and maybe I was never meant to have one. (My familial sphere has never expanded beyond the nuclear; I have circulated around my parents for the past fourteen years, learning the intricacies of adulthood through them. We are inextricably linked, an amalgamation of each other through something other than blood. We are a trinity of collective individuality that is difficult to separate. A grandfather could never have weaved his way into our realm).

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I am wearing a t-shirt from Garage. The material is soft and stretchy against my stomach, the fat of childhood still clinging to it. It wasn't difficult to find one that was black. The scalloped mock neck is comfortable against my aching throat. (I still own that shirt).

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I've been told that I have the memory of an elephant, as coined by my parents, my friends, and my co-workers. I can remember unphotographed moments from my childhood as easily as breathing, recalling those hazy, sun-coloured memories from my childhood and projecting them across the screen of my mind. I remember climbing the mulberry tree in Ouma Dia's backyard with Zani and Ryorn, picking fruit for Ouma to use for a pie. I remember swimming with my cousin in a family friend's pool under the blazing sun, filling the day with laughter. I remember the go-cart races at Mum's school. I remember kissing Jared after a pool party while the sun began to set when we were five years old. These memories are easy to look

back on. I can watch them play out in perfect sequence, details of smell and sound surrounding me as if they had happened yesterday. Yet, I cannot recall my grandfather's funeral when I was seventeen years old. I find myself searching through smoke to remember anything of importance, only to come up with air, my hands empty of any memories. (These hands have always been empty. I have been begging for scraps of a relationship since birth like a dog whining for food, turning me into a feral stray that will snap at any semblance of love from a grandfather I never truly knew. In my futile attempts, I sufficiently drew *my* own blood and broke *my* own teeth).

To be honest, I have very few memories of my grandfather. Everything I know about him has been shared from lips that were not his — his military experience, his love of country music, his ambivalence towards his grandchildren. Our short relationship was muddled by sporadic phone calls and dementia and fifteen-thousand kilometres and anger. Mum had captured the beginning of our relationship in a photo, where Oupa holds a three-month old version of me in his arms. His white beard is long, reminiscent of Santa Claus and his green eyes are bright. In the photograph, I smile up at him with shiny gums. I have no recollection of this. Yet, I remember sitting with him in his cottage in the afternoons. We would laze on his couch, our bodies separated by space, and watch as a game of rugby or cricket shuttered across the small television in his lounge. His cottage smelled like him, filled with the musty scent of his sweat and hair from the dogs. I don't think we ever spoke during these moments. When my parents called him or he called us, I would situate myself on the periphery of the conversation. I skirted around my parents in the kitchen or living room as I grabbed a quick snack or drink of water before retreating to the solitude of my room. Mum would beckon me from my room and I would begrudgingly leave my space, pulling the phone up to my ear to hear my grandfather's thick Zimbabwean accent as he asked me about school. I remember singing to him in French once, a

simple happy birthday or a silly tune we had learned in class; he had laughed, telling me that he used to know a little bit of the language, sprinkling basic words throughout our conversation. He told me that I had a great accent. This was one of the best conversations between us and I can remember feeling that conflicting concoction of fear and happiness fluttering throughout my body, hoping that our phone call would continue. That I would say the correct lines for him to keep talking to me, if only for a few minutes more. This memory of him is a good one — insignificant and a little unfleshed but good. Unfortunately, it makes everything more complicated. These smattering of sun-tinted memories have been overshadowed by hurt because how can you truly mourn a man that called you the Spawn of Satan, for no reason other than he believed that your father was the devil incarnate and had corrupted your mother into producing you? How can you mourn a man that disowned his daughter multiple times over the years, thus extracting you from his lineage? How can you love a man who does all this but keeps a shrine of you in his cottage?

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We sit at the dining room table, our three-person family seated on one side of it while we watch the live-stream on the computer. The sound begins to lag at one point, falling three minutes behind the video footage, and the voices of family members and friends no longer match their lips and bodies on the screen. Mum calls my aunt, Mickey, and we listen to the funeral service through a cell phone.

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There used to be this clear distinction between the memories of my grandfather from my childhood and my teenage one's. Now there is only a muddy line, the golden tinge of childhood overlapping with the grey-red bleakness and anger of teenagehood that creates this strange,

disgusting colouring across my mind. Or even as a simmering pot of anger that rests inside my chest that I've left on the stove of my heart, quietly bubbling and I have forgotten about it until the scalding water begins to boil over and flood the stovetop. And each time I go to lower the temperature, to stop it from spilling onto the floor, I burn my hands. I have never taken the pot off the heat — never dumped the water in the sink, washed the aged pot and placed it back in its spot in the cupboard. I leave it there on the stove, waiting until it hurts again, so that I can ruin myself for a reason I cannot uncover through my writing and instead keep up this balancing act of emotions I have become so accustomed with. Or maybe it's better described as a tangle of yarn, memories and emotions knotted together that makes it difficult to rationally differentiate between the two.

Maybe that's why I can't properly remember his funeral, let alone his actual death. My mother remembers these things better than I do. I think that makes her a better daughter. I think that makes me a bad granddaughter. If that's the case, then I've always been a bad granddaughter. I remember crying out in joy when Mum told me that Oupa died. Shock had unhinged my jaw open and incredulity had written itself on my face. I remember wanting to exclaim in glee, to celebrate loudly in a twisted sense of relief. I remember thinking that we were finally free.

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Dad leaves the table and sits on the couch. Mum cries at the dining room table and I quietly console her, as tears sprout in my eyes. I rub Mum's back and I think about how glad I am that Oupa is dead. I think about waking up at 5 a.m. the next day and how I would be more productive if I did. (I wake up at 9 a.m. instead). I think it rained for a little bit, like it always

does during a funeral. I think about how I didn't — wouldn't — miss my grandfather anymore. I think about reading after the service ends.

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I don't want to have memories about my grandfather. He lives in a compartmentalised version of my mind that I attempt to keep in the dark where they'll hopefully slowly fade away, damaged by the brightness of other memories. This summer, I threw out that teddy bear keychain with my face on it and hoped that he would finally flee from my space and that I can stop ruminating on our lack of a relationship but I kept his toy cars (I painstakingly cleaned them when Dad brought them home from South Africa, using a q-tip and water to dig into the little crevices, in the hopes that I would uncover some semblance of a relationship with him; after an hour, I discovered nothing. Dirt still resides on the metallic toys and I do not have the energy in me to clean them again. There is no secret to be found here – no unknown relationship with a man I never truly knew. I think that we were only meant to know each other through our artefacts), his silk ties and the various photos he kept of Mum, Dad, and me. Maybe that makes me a good granddaughter.

My aunt calls on the weekend and we rehash everything again; my grandfather is the centre of all our conversations — there is no escaping this narrative, no escaping his ghost. Her voice crackles through the speaker as she says: “Dani, you know, your grandfather loved you in his own way and whenever he got a little crazy, I knew that I could calm him down by talking about you”. I responded with a non-committal hum, my leg bouncing rhythmically, making the chair squeak underneath me. (I am so tired of talking about *him*). She continues on: “And it would. Because you were still his *pop*, his doll — this little five year old that never really grew up in his mind. But you were everywhere in his house. Every room had something that you'd

touched or sent.” We sit in silence for a minute, aunt and niece suspended across countries and oceans as we have always been, before I break our heavy stillness with a soft, “I know”.

I have repeated these two words too many times that the phrase has turned sour in my mouth, pricking the tastebuds of tongue with acid with an intensity high enough that I can no longer savour the sweet honey of childhood because, truthfully, I do not want to know.

It is a strange burden to bear this knowledge after everything and despite my family’s best attempts to make me feel better about his death and the lack of relationship between us, it will never cauterise the gaping wound my grandfather has left on me. Never makes it easier to be his granddaughter because after twelve years of living in separate countries, I was never a granddaughter; and sadly, I am alright with that.

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People keep crying in the video, openly mourning him and as Mum’s eulogy speech plays over her cell phone, her words praising my grandfather, I want to grab the phone and cuss him out for everything; about how miserable he made our lives in Canada as this ever-present, looming cloud of guilt and resentment that hung over our family — over me. I want to tell him about how guilty he made Mum feel for leaving him behind in South Africa (even though he told her that he wanted to stay) and about how selfish he was for receiving electroshock therapy, his grief after Ouma’s death overwhelming that he ruined himself, leaving his daughters to fend for themselves at a young age (There is more I want to say but I can’t because it’s not mine to tell. I can only fight for what I have perceived as wrong, brandishing a sword against a dead man). I want to yell and yell and yell at him until I became hoarse, my throat destroyed and body expelled of anger before leaving him in the dirt.

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