

DEATH NOTES

We physicists believe the separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.

—*Albert Einstein*

Today is a good day to die.

—*Crazy Horse*

George Giltner pushes my body against the wall of his double-wide, hand at my throat. I can see the black hair in his nostrils, which are flared like my mare Hannah's in a high wind.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. "Who asked you?"

"I did," his wife, Shirley, answers from the couch. "George," she says softly. George glances toward her with an expression like ground glass, then it softens to a milky sad glaze as he watches her. He moves away from me for a moment and adjusts the blankets around his wife's legs, checks to see her water glass is filled.

JANE

“You think because she’s old, it doesn’t matter.” The man sits down on a chair, the seat partially missing, and I can see his overalls bulge through the hole in the seat of the chair. I know I will think forever about how sad that bulge is.

He puts his head in his hands.

“Get out,” the man says. “I see you near this house again, I’ll kill you.”

“Jane,” Shirley Giltner said, “he doesn’t mean that.”

He means it, I can see that. This isn’t the idle threat of a person stressed. George is soon to be a man adrift, and he isn’t equipped to grapple with the incomprehensible. He runs a small nursery in Newberry; perhaps if he’d been a full-scale animal farmer instead he might have been able to accept the way things were. Or perhaps the lack of acceptance has nothing to do with life experience; George seems off somehow and I catch a glimpse of him as a child: a stern, silent boy twisting his red hair, the bald space at his crown creeping ever larger, his mother standing off to the side with a worried look on her face.

“Get out,” George says again.



Forty-nine-day rituals. Not many Jews observe the Counting of the Omer, a forty-nine-day period of self-reflection and spiritual renewal anymore, but Tibetan Buddhists have burying rituals that last forty-nine days. I’ll spend forty-nine days contemplating the end of my marriage someday; I’m soon to get a glimpse, but for now the idea is intriguing.



Helen had a younger sister named Della who was eight, and I knew immediately that Della was ill. I would find out

DEATH NOTES

later that Della had leukemia and had been to many doctors until the money ran out.

Della's sister Helen is my new friend from school. We were twelve at the time.

I visited Helen and Della often that summer, picked them both up to visit Jane's horse she boarded in Newberry. I would lift Della up on Hannah's broad buckskin back, waving off Helen's concern about Della riding bare-back.

"She's gentle as a fawn, Helen," I would tell her. "Let her feel the warmth of the animal under her legs."

Helen nodded and we lead the girl slowly down the path and into the woods where we'd walk for hours, Helen and I walking ahead quietly, so that all you could hear was the squawking of a crow or a sandhill crane in the distance, the gentle click and thud of the grasshoppers as they landed on our thighs or into the tall grass, scattering like parting wheat as we walked, and of course, the crunch of the gravel under Hannah's feet, the swish of her tail. Della wrapped Hannah's mane in her hands, and sometimes she'd lay her cheek against the mare's long neck to feel the rhythm of her steps, her eyes closing in pleasure.

"My parents would have heart failure," Helen said once. And I nodded. "What if Della tells them we didn't get ice cream?"

"Don't they notice she stinks of horse to high heaven?" I asked.

"No, I throw her in the tub the second I get back," Helen responded.

It had seemed a long summer, Helen and I becoming fast friends without really noticing. But we did notice the child growing weaker until Helen's mother would no longer allow the girls to go off leading Della in the red wagon they used to transport her to the stable—a mile out of town. Not seeing

JANE

Hannah seemed to take the life out of Della more than the illness, I thought. But Helen reported that Della would perk up the second Jane arrived.

“How did it happen?” Della asked her once.

“What?” I asked.

“How did you know about the horses, Jane?”

“I rode one once downstate with my dad,” I replied. “I knew they took to me, so I saved my money.”

The girl nodded and asked a hundred questions about how to care for a horse, the parts of the saddle, the conformation of a horse, what they ate, how long they lived, if horses went to heaven, and over the next week her health declined rapidly with each question. Helen’s mother Ann declined as well, the life in her disappearing along with the child’s energy.

One day, I walked in as the doctor was leaving and when I saw Della, I knew this would be the day. Ann hovered around the edges of Della’s room, tidying things up, dusting, freshening her water glass, while Helen sat by the window and watched the leaves which were starting to fall, listening as a sudden gust blew sand against the siding. Della was sleeping when I arrived, so I sat in the chair by her bed and waited. Finally, the child opened her eyes, and we saw—Della and me—sunflowers, a sea of them, Della kicking a soccer ball before it blurred into a whole fabric of experience the child understood perfectly.

Ann stepped toward me. The woman looked startled and I thought perhaps even Ann had gotten a glimpse, but then it was gone, replaced by terror and grief, and some kind of suspicion that I was somehow responsible for what was about to transpire.

But there was no terror or grief on Della’s face, just gratitude.

DEATH NOTES

“Thank you,” the small child said.

I think sometimes they see me Kevorkian-like and expect my home to be chock full of equipment like Dr. Death’s Thanatron (“death machine,” from the Greek thanatos meaning “death”), or the carbon monoxide gas mask he called the Mercitron (“mercy machine”). Kevorkian was strange, but not as strange as they want you to think and there were much more interesting things about him than his assisted suicides; mostly he was funny. His *The Kevorkian Suite: A Very Still Life* was a 1997 limited-release CD of five thousand copies from the *Lucid Subjazz* label that featured Kevorkian on the flute and organ playing his own works with the Morpheus Quintet. *Entertainment Weekly* called him “weird” but “good natured.” He was also an oil painter. He sometimes painted with his own blood and he painted one picture of a child eating the flesh off a corpse; I’m guessing he made some money from those.



A man had had a bad car accident and I gathered next to the car along with a large group of townspeople, the movie theater having just let out. Car accidents were uncommon in Newberry, but this one would later be blamed on brake failure and driver error as Tom Jensen had begun down the hill much too fast. They pulled Tom from the car which had crashed into a telephone pole (Tom trying to avoid hitting a young girl who had started across the street) because they were concerned the engine was going to blow. The steering wheel seemed to have crushed the man’s lungs and there was blood in the corner of his mouth, but he appeared

JANE

fully conscious. He seemed unaware of the people who had summoned help and who were trying to make him more comfortable, until I squatted next to him.

“What is it?” he asked me as he looked into my eyes. “What am I seeing?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. “I think of it as kind of a glimpse, I guess.”

The people standing around asked each other if they had any idea what we two were talking about. They looked uneasy and said that Tom must have been hallucinating, though they watched me warily.

Since time was not linear in the glimpses, not sequential, and since there were so many possibilities to it, I never bothered looking either direction much.

“It’s nice,” he said to me. He seemed to be turning his head slightly each direction as he looked into my eyes. The crowd watched him search my eyes. “It’s a gift,” he said. And while I hadn’t been sure of that at first, I had, in fact, come to think of it as a gift, or as an aberrant kind of accomplishment, like standing on the seat of your bicycle or juggling gourds.

“Don’t leave,” he said, and I assured him I wouldn’t.

The crowd shook their heads, and after Tom died, they asked me if I had been humoring him.

“Of course not,” I’d answered, and walked away.

This was the second time I’d been present when someone died.

They talked about me after that.

Paradoxically, some asked for me and though I didn’t want to, I always went.



Time is irrelevant.

DEATH NOTES

I didn't know what the glimpses were back then, would never really understand them in a way they could be articulated, but they stopped surprising me. They didn't necessarily reveal the truth about the human condition, nor did they disprove anything about spirituality. It was simply part of the way things were, a reality I was somehow aware of, that others couldn't see without me. It was a glimpse of the fabric and each glimpser made of it what they would. Sometimes they were alternate possibilities that paradoxically seemed part of a whole.

I'd see someone's past, maybe a birth, parts of a childhood superimposed on the present, but I also saw the future, almost as if someone had taken a huge brush and smeared them all together so they ran into a continuous whole. If a person was dying, they, too, would see. I would turn my head one way and see a blurry past, the other way and see the future. More confusing yet, there seemed to be different migrations, other worlds. I knew the dying could see them, too.

They usually smiled.

Sometimes I can't see the glimpse myself, but the dying person always can. And though I can see that these glimpses take away the fear from the dying, and though I know with certainty that death, as a state of being, or as a point in time, has been diminished by this reality, it still hasn't, somehow, removed all fear for me. I'm not sure if it is still death I fear or the glimpses themselves or the reaction I get from others, but something still makes me uneasy.

Perhaps it is simply because they expect me to have all the answers, those who survive, and I don't have answers.

