

DEATH TASTES LIKE GINGERBREAD

I.
DEATH

PROLOGUE

This is about death, and how the dead stay dead. Despite the resurrection through memory.

Despite celebration of life. Despite all the ways the living are abandoned.

This piece is about the quest to remember, and in doing so, ensure that though the dead stay dead, there is choice in memory, and that alone binds them to the present that they are no longer a part of.

Death may taste like gingerbread, but it is remembrance which is sweet.

INCITING INCIDENT!

I remember the taste of gingerbread flavoured rum. It was cold out, but the living room was colder. The aircon had been putting in work. The T.V was on, but I don't think anyone was watching. The four of us had been sipping at our rum and cokes and swiping on our phones. I don't know if we were waiting for something, or just bored. I remember dad walked in. It must've been after 7:00. He didn't say much. I choked on my words. My mouth went sour. My drink repulsed me. I did not cry.

■ December 4th, 2020

Friday, 4 December 2020 - Some time after 7:00

📍 The Hospital

☰ This is foreshadowing.

Reminder that **today is the day**. Death will soon taste like gingerbread.

Stephen's Mum and aunt – your daughters – will be with you. On your last day, you will demand more pillows.

You will go gently.

There will be no final struggle.

Stephen will be haunted by this idea of you going 'peacefully'. No one will ever know if it is real or just something said to soften the hurt of loss.

Though, everyone chooses to live in that fantasy for a little while longer.

📅 The Zavitsanos Family

THE LETTER, FROM ME TO ME

Dear Stephen,

I am writing to you with the utmost immediacy. The funeral has been and gone. You remember it well, trust me.

You wrote a letter the night before. Sending it off with him. For some reason you did not take a photo of it. You did not re-write it. There is no trace of this letter ever existing outside of your big head. You have since forgotten the words. You will often strain your brain trying to remember, but

Each word

Each syllable

slips away from you.

You can see it, paraphrase it, but you will never recreate it as it was.

I want you to know, it is likely lost. But hope is not, you may still find it, scour your thoughts, make it up again like papier-mâché.

The final message may be recovered. The post-mortem dialogue.

I task you with piecing this together, and I wish you the most luck in this unimaginable challenge – dig deep before you become like me.

Yours faithfully,

Stephen.

MEMORY OF MEMORIES

The notion of memory was frightening. Mainly forgetting. How long until I forget your voice? Or the sound of your footsteps followed by your cane on the tiles?

If I had these fears, what would my *yiayia*¹ – *your wife* – fear?

Age is hunting her. An unfair duel.

What will happen when she cannot remember your wedding day?

What will happen when she cannot remember the name of your liquor shop?

Memory pulls you back here. Resurrecting you. But in time, memory **will** falter. What will happen then?

For fear of forgetting, I wish to remember.

In this writing, I wish to remember.

In keeping your alarm clock on my desk, I wish to remember.

But forgetting is inescapable. I will forget your voice, and your face in motion. I will forget seeing you in the garden.

I will forget you rolling cigarettes at 4:00AM.

The little choice in remembrance exists. Your photo is around the house.

Fighting to remember. When I forget the sound of your voice, I cannot forget your face – I choose not to. If nothing else, this comforts me. I'll swim in these memories for as long as I can and use the present to dry off.

¹ The Greek word for *grandmother*.

I LEARNT TO RIDE A BICYCLE FAIRLY LATE IN LIFE

Ten days after you died. I've learnt that death is not like riding a bike.

Practice does not make perfect.

Falling over once before does not make getting up any easier.

At Easter, the following year, we took a family photo. There were two streaks of light in the corner of the picture. Your niece insisted that it was you making an appearance. Being part of the family one last time. A small part of me wanted to believe that, even though I know what lens flare is.

This idea of spiritual presence – or more accurately, ghosts – has always been unbelievable to me. I would say that I'm logical to a fault (emphasis on *to a fault*). I'm religiously ambiguous, but I generally think that death is *it*. Or if not, the dead cannot return to Earth. At least in a way we visualise.

More than a year later, I got a kitten – Ivy.

She sleeps on your black leather chair.

Yiayia loves her, but she won't admit it.

She's black with splotches of white, mainly on her paws.

My mum and aunt are convinced that you're in there somewhere. Like a form of reincarnation. You exist in my 5-month-old kitten, they contest.

I let them have this win.

"DEATH TASTES LIKE GINGERBREAD"

[FILMED IN FRONT OF A LIVE STUDIO AUDIENCE]

1. INT. GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH - FUNERAL. DAY.

1

The church looks very old. There are hung portraits of religious icons. White roses lined the front door but dare not enter the church itself - that is utterly uncouth. The priest is so old you would assume it's his funeral that he's presiding over.

There is a line of people huddled around a family of six. The youngest of the family, STEPHEN (18), looks extremely pale, you'd have thought he'd seen a ghost - maybe he did? The rest of the family stand solemnly and maintain composure, despite their tears. Stephen does not cry.

A flood of people approach the family. The unmissable sound of apologies echoes throughout the church.

UNKNOWN FEMALE FAMILY MEMBER

He was such a good man!

MAYBE AN UNCLE(?)

No one else compares.

UNKNOWN MALE FAMILY MEMBER

Wish we could have come and seen him
these last days!

CERTAINLY A FAMILIAR FACE

I loved him like a father!

As quickly as it came, it dissipated as they all returned to the pews, politely, and continued crying and moaning about how sad they were, *much* sadder than STEPHEN.

‘THE BURIAL’ – A JAMMED HOME MOVIE (14/12/2020)

Wearing all black, despite a 33°C day, I couldn’t wait to take my suit jacket off.

I was hungry when I should’ve been sad.

That is loss, I suppose. Being one thing when you *should* be another. Comparing yourself to those around you.

My brothers cried, why haven’t I yet? I see so many tears, where are mine? It is nonsensical yet damning.

I feel I did not give a good enough performance.

Time managed to run away that day.

Eighteen years of living with you concluded in one afternoon.

Your life. Neatly tied in a three-hour chunk of time.

Three trips to Healesville.

The VCE English exam.

Watching *The Godfather*.

I play through that day like a tape. Running through different ways it could’ve gone, as though it was a game. Trying to stretch out those three hours into something more. Sometimes the length changes. But still, it always ends. The same way.

Coffin in ground. Cemetery emptying.

Only six left.

But I hit rewind. And start again.

‘THE BURIAL’ – A JAMMED HOME MOVIE (14/12/2020)

Wearing all black, despite a 33°C day, I was content with wearing my suit jacket, at least to keep up appearances.

I was tired, when really, I should’ve been sad.

That is loss, I suppose. Being one thing when you *should* be another. Comparing yourself to those around you.

My parents cried, why haven’t I yet? I see so many tears, where are mine?

It can’t be that though. My brothers haven’t either.

Time managed to run away that day.

Eighteen years of living with you concluded in one afternoon.

Your life. Neatly tied in a two-hour chunk of time.

Listening to Frank Ocean’s *Blonde* twice.

Two trips to Healesville.

Watching *Blue Velvet*.

I play through that day like a tape. Running through different ways it could’ve gone, as though it was a game. Trying to stretch out those two hours into something more. Sometimes the length changes. But still, it always ends. The same way.

Coffin in ground. Cemetery emptying.

Only six left.

That’s enough for today.

THIS PAGE IS MEANT TO BE BLANK, LET IT SIT FOR A WHILE.

THIS PAGE IS MEANT TO BE BLANK, LET IT SIT FOR A WHILE.

WHAT'S DEAD IS DEAD.

What I would tell myself a year later.

I find it hard – the idea of coming to terms. Life after death.

Things continue. Sympathy dies as well.

Six months later there is no excuse for:

- Not attending school.
- Being distant with friends.
- Not being *who you used to be*.

Things continue. They should. As if all is forgotten.

The dead **do not** die again so why should grieving persist.

I will *never* be the me I was one year ago.

I will *never* be the me I was before I lost my pappou².

I will *never* be the me that thought death was like riding a bike.

There is no before death, only after.

I change. I always will. Everyone does. So why should I change and *get over* this. Can I not remain in this state of perpetual grief? Where does that leave me. To pick up shards of my old self. Get back on the bike and keep riding. If that's the case, what do I tell the *me* from a year ago. What do I tell the *me* who couldn't cry?

The *me* who felt the pressure of academic achievement colliding with grief – a beautiful explosion. The *me* who that same day also died.

² The Greek word for *grandfather*

II.

LIFE

A EULOGY ABOUT EULOGIES - (FROM 'DEATH TASTES LIKE GINGERBREAD')

Stephen Zavitsanos

[Verse 1]

I think it's irresponsible to talk about death without including music.

Music is, in most cultures, the celebration of life and living.
So, equally, it must have importance in death, and the final celebration of life.

[Refrain]

Greek Orthodox funerals do not have music.

There is no backing track to a eulogy.

There is no eulogy at all.

[Verse 2]

In the church, the only person to speak is the priest.

There are also no images of the deceased to be placed near the altar. Only that of religious icons.

No music.

No eulogy.

No images.

[Verse 3]

The impersonality of the service is apparent.

It's what you sign up for when you want an Orthodox funeral.

But, in doing so, it strips a layer of soul from it.

[Refrain]

Greek Orthodox funerals do not have music.

There is no backing track to a eulogy.

There is no eulogy at all.

GENIUS

DYLAN SAYS WOODY GUTHRIE IS GOD – A POETIC ESSAY

To me, the most fascinating and vivid exploration of life through music is Bob Dylan's '*Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie*.'³

In seven minutes and eight seconds, Dylan recollects on what Woody Guthrie, the quintessential American folk musician, means to him. More a poem than a song, Dylan's piece rings like an elegy, as Guthrie was at *Brooklyn State Hospital* dying from Huntington's disease at the time.

Dylan's stream-of-consciousness style expresses hope in the purest form, emphasising that it cannot be found in grandeur or hedonistic living – '*no night club or no yacht club*'. He establishes what peeves us about everyday life and the necessity for something to make everything worth it, and for most, this arrives in the form of faith. Of God.

Though to Dylan, this is Woody Guthrie.

'You can either go to the church of your choice

Or you can go to Brooklyn State Hospital

You'll find God in the church of your choice

You'll find Woody Guthrie in Brooklyn State Hospital''

This is the kind of music that makes you feel good enough.

That validates the mundane or regular.

The kind of music which sees death, or its encroachment, as a reason to celebrate life.

³ Dylan, B., 1963. Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie.

This is no Orthodox funeral.

This is a funeral of meaning.

Tasked to write what Guthrie meant to him in twenty-five words, Dylan found himself producing this five-page, seven-minute piece as an early memorial.

The unbridled dedication to life.

To commemoration.

Music. Poetry. Writing.

This is how we grapple with inevitability. Much like Dylan's assertion that Guthrie is to him what God is to others. Let me extend this to music as a whole. I do not *want to cry*, that is why I have not.

I know I should, but I do not want to.

Let me make my grandfather's death a cause for celebration.

I choose this. I, like Dylan, want to find him *in the Grand Canyon at sundown*, alongside Guthrie and God.

Giving peace to my grief. Weaponise my grief.

Wear it. An ill-fitting suit.

If, through no choice of my own, it will stay with me forever. Can I not embrace it?

It becomes part of me.

I am a bowerbird. Picking up information. Experience. Lyrics.

It all becomes me.

NO ROOM FOR INTROSPECTION

At the very end of the day, I lost my grandfather.

No Dylan song or introspection can change that. Soften it. Make it any easier.

My future is unclear. Unsure. Undecided. But one thing is for sure.

You are not a part of it.

Whilst editing, a classmate read through this piece and offhandedly said, '*Dying is worse than death*', encapsulating a largely overlooked element of grief.

The prolonged.

Drawn out.

The fading.

Watching on as familiar becomes unknown.

In the night, a creature breaks in, steals who you recognise and replaces them with this – A shell which you observe.

Life slowly leaves them.

Dripping.

Until the final burst. The *terminal lucidity*.

They appear to be themselves.

Full. Lively.

The creature must have regretted its actions.

Made it right.

They return, briefly.

Until the rally is over.

They

fall

through

again.

Clear the date.

Book your tickets.

The Case of *Yiayia v The Zavitsanos Family* [2020 – Present]

The plaintiff, *Yiayia*, maintains that the defendants, the *Zavitsanos family*, including but not limited to: *Stephen Zavitsanos*, are responsible for an overwhelming feeling of loneliness following the passing of her late husband. Though, *Yiayia* has not verbalised her claims, her counsel speaks greatly on her behalf.

She is in a house with five other people, yet still feels lonely, which, her counsel, suspects is a result of her family's inability to assume the role of her deceased husband. *Stephen* initially testified that '*we did not get rid of her husband. We are not at fault*'. Though, as *Yiayia's* counsel claims, these empty words are not followed by any action which seek to undo the undue harm eating away at *Yiayia*. Other family members involved in the suit argue that they are '*not at fault, yet we feel the guilt. It stains our faces*'. *Yiayia's* counsel responds, '*As they should*'.

The jury, consisting of mothers and widows, found the *Zavitsanos family* guilty on all counts.

In his acceptance of the charges laid against him, *Stephen* said:

'We all feel as though we fail. Every day. How do we try to be more than we are? How do we assume the role that is not ours? We cannot take up the chair of the dead. We cannot feed his birds. We cannot play dress up.

We will never be the husband of an eternally grieving woman [note, he cries, for the first time on record]. We cannot change ourselves. We remain grandchildren. Daughters. Son-in-law. I offer no resolution'

III.
GINGERBREAD

HOW TO MAKE GINGERBREAD RUM

INGREDIENTS

1 bottle of rum (preferably aged, anywhere between 70-80 years old)

1/4 cup of molasses

2 cm piece of ginger

4 cinnamon sticks

2 tsp whole cloves

2 tsp whole allspice

2 tsp vanilla extract

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine the previously mentioned ingredients in a mason jar.
2. Shake well, or not so well, it's your choice.
3. Set aside for 5-6 days, or until a loved one dies – whatever comes first.
4. Strain solids out of the rum.
5. Rebottle.
6. Store at room temperature.
7. Drink, and hope that it always tastes so sweet.

AS NEATLY TIED AS IT COULD

To me, death tastes like gingerbread. It always will.

It is now warm.

It is sweet.

It is the smell of nutmeg.

Death is as much gingerbread as it is a tombstone.

Death burrows itself.

Parasitic.

Wears it as a disguise.

Thinking it is hidden.

Rubbed in honey and molasses.

Sweet aroma.

Death *is* gingerbread.

THE VERY END OF THE DAY

The moment you experience something significant. That instant. A snapshot is taken. Auditorily. Visually. Olfactorily. Each sense spikes. Briefly. Cements itself in your brain. Burned in. Suddenly, the temperature of the room. The smell of the air. The sound of dogs barking. Everything is integral. Everything underpins the story.

Everything becomes you.

Latching on.

I remember the cold room. The taste of gingerbread rum. Who was with me. What day it was. When the sun set. I remember it all. As though I lived that day twenty times. I can't forget it.

That memory is as much me as my own fingers. Try as I might, I cannot separate it. Remove it. Death will always taste like gingerbread.

I bask in the memory of when it tasted sweet.

Swim in it.

Until the present dries me.

Until I see you, in the *Grand Canyon. At Sundown.*

EPILOGUE

And that is how it ends,

or how it should.

Graves are not dug up.

The dead are put to rest.

The grieving grieve some more.

I can now cry.

It is all neatly tied up as

I

hang

on unfinished

sentenc

.

IV.
THE PRESENT

TODAY, THE DAY THIS IS SEEN BY READERS

I have since pieced together the letter.

The words I left my grandfather. What I placed in his coffin before it joined dirt.

I now remember it all too well.

It runs amuck in my head.

Calling it home.

You don't need to see it.