

DEATH ACCORDING TO CLARICE ADAO

MAGGIE FELISBERTO

I think I was dead on the table. They won't tell me as such, but I have this lingering sense of the world without oxygen. I have never seen a ghost, but I feel ghostlike in the hospital halls, pale from post-surgery in a white gown with gaunt features. I needed so much blood, oceans of it, to keep me alive during the procedure. I needed blood and luck beyond my own capacity, blood and luck to skate the edge of death and come back to life on the other side. The doctors won't confirm it, but I know I was dead on the table.

Here is how death has changed me: it hasn't. I have decided to be the same person, the same Clarice as before the procedure, regardless of what may or may not have changed about me physically, including my flirtations with the grave. Before I was dead, I was a woman, and after my death I continue to be one woman amongst billions of women who have nothing and everything in common. How many women have had the same procedure done with no complications whatsoever, and how many have died never to come back?

No matter. I have died and come back, died and come back a thousand times over before in my soul. What's one more death, one little death, in comparison to the multitudes of deaths I've felt in the foundations of my being. What is an ocean of blood next to a tsunami of doubt? If anything, it's a validation that despite it all, I am still alive. The whole thing should be pretty invigorating, when I think about it.

I have been thinking about a lot of things lately, even before the procedure. I had been thinking about death, of all things, when I got the news that I needed surgery. I don't want to say I prognosticated it, but it's one correlation among many correlations that inevitably lead to the appearance of causation, and if it appears as causation, it therefore is causation, and therefore I caused my own death on the table by thinking about death in the run-up to the procedure.

These are the thoughts my sister calls "deranged." I call them complex, and I love them. Thoughts about death keep me alive, keep me wondering and guessing about the end so that the mystery remains a mystery, and I remain a young Miss Marple gathering clues by being nosy with death—nosy but not so deep in it that I can't look past my own nose. I had died in my heart and my soul, yes, but to die bodily remained as a great romance in the way of the Romantics. My sister is a scientist, and I am a folly.

I find myself more hungry than ever before. I fasted before the procedure, then subsisted after on fluids so much so that a permanent sense of lack fills my stomach. It is not a void, but a furnace, and I cannot shovel enough fuel into it to satisfy. I wish I could say this sensation was new, but it is only insofar as it relates to my gut. I have never been satisfied.

If I am to be the same Clarice as before, I should tell you what that Clarice was like, except Clarice is such a bore that no one would read her posthumous memoirs. I have lived a boring job and worked a boring life for so long, it cannot be overstated just how dull that has made me. I am a drag, a consumption of time so unremarkable that to notice me would give the same irritation as a mosquito flying on the other side of the net. I am nothing, and my death has not changed that fact.

I am nothing, and I am a furnace. I am a nothing-furnace burning through the meaning of my precious life. I don't know why life is precious, but I accept that it is because so many others say it must be so. To me, it's less that life is precious and more that it is fragile. Life is fragile, and it takes gentle but firm hands to keep it safe. My hands have never been firm, though they have been gentle enough to get me here. The doctor's hands were firm enough to bring me back when their gentleness failed them. And thus, I am alive, still a fragile, precious thing.

My sister is a scientist. She believes that life began billions of years ago, and that life will continue beyond the demise of humanity in ways that we could never predict. For her, life is made of cosmos and dark matter. Life is made of particle physics and biochemistry and stardust. My sister is confident in herself because she is confident in the universe. Science is about finding answers to the questions that make life so incomprehensible.

I never had a head for science. I'm more like my father, who is a professor of Brazilian literature. Literature is about taking the answers that we think we know and questioning them until they don't mean anything anymore, leaving you with nothing left but the questions. My sister could never handle this nonsense just like I could never handle the logic and security of answers. We are different people, and I think perhaps she is happier.

In fact, she must be happier, because I have sworn in the past to never be happy again. I often think, why would I curse myself with this, then I remember the way my happiness was torn from me like a wild animal tearing apart the carcass of its kill. I have never been happy, and every time I think I may have achieved it, happiness abandons me and I wish for death.

How cruel, to have died on the table only to be brought back.

How cruel, and yet, and yet–

And yet I find I relish being alive.

Life is strange. I have never relished any aspect of it before, and now I find myself starving for it. Each drop of water, each taste of lime green hospital gelatin fills my furnace with a desire for more, more. I cannot stop. My sister brings me a sandwich, and I savor the cold cuts and cheese and bread like they are the body of Christ himself. I do not believe in god, but I believe in the power of this sandwich to redeem my life of despair. I crave a plum or a nectarine, some tangy stone fruit to wash it down.

Life is strange. I want to gobble it up and consume it, to live it with vigor and in ways I've never even thought to try before. I want to ask those damnable questions until they turn into things of hope.

Death is strange. Even having been there, having spent precarious and precious minutes within it, I find death more foreign than ever before. Death is a question, one that I will ask again and again, but one which I no longer pretend to seek an answer for. Death is strange, is all the answer there will be. And the strangeness of death is the strangeness of life, and the two are one like the light and the dark holding hands into infinity.

I have tasted death, and now that I have, I am free to hunger for life.

This is how death has changed me: in every way imaginable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Felisberto is a queer nail polish enthusiast with a PhD in Portuguese literature and an MFA in creative writing. Her work has been published by Bridge Eight Press, Change Seven Magazine, Tagus Press and Routledge. She lives in Massachusetts with her sister and nine pets.