

# The Smell of Death

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

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You might've listened as someone described the smell of a dead possum on a movie you were watching, or maybe you've been to an old person's home and walked in and thought to yourself, "it smells like death in here". None of these things prepare you for the real experience. Death doesn't smell like old people. Death doesn't even smell like that squirrel on the side of the road you found last Tuesday, smushed almost to a point where you had to guess it was even a squirrel. You might think death smells pungent, but in reality, it smells sour, almost sticky. It smells like what you know has to be bodily fluids but you can't pinpoint which ones. I know this because my mom smells like death.

She smells normal in the beginning of my memories, reminding me of a L'Oreal face cream she used to use, sweet and floral. She dances around, laughing at her beautiful baldness, letting me put all of my best princess stickers on her scalp. Her giggle as my dad tickles her on her good days, her stillness on the bad. The sound of her voice came as a surprise to me on some school days in elementary, sweet and loving, when she volunteered to help out even in the midst of her own body's epidemic. She knew when her meds kicked in she wouldn't be able to stay awake, so she planned her time with us around it. The sun was still rising on an October morning when I learned what 'playing hooky' was to get donuts instead of reading with the rest of the class. She loved harder than anyone I've ever met, especially for having such little energy, she was full of life.

She was the kind of person that would write you a letter after a big fight. We would argue about little things, as normal families do, and we would fight. I would be sent to my room. She would think on it for a while, and then get to work. About an hour or two

later, every single time, she would never fail to slide a letter under my door. She filled them with sweet "I love you"'s and pictures of us over the years, showing only love. She would remind me that we were a family, and that families do fight, but they love each other no matter what.

I would typically follow up this letter with a less-intense 'walk of shame' to her room, cuddle up next to her, and apologize. We would lay in bed for hours, well up past my bed-time, and talk about everything. She was my person, my rock. She was the holder of all my secrets, and now will be for the end of time. We would talk about boys, or soccer, or a book I was reading. We would talk about the upcoming week and what it might bring, and what that means for me. She smiled sweetly, and laughed a laugh that sounded like music. She was tired, and the back of her eyes showed it, but never the front. You had to look really hard to know. In my memory, and everyone else's, she was a fighter.

But as the memories come to an end, the sour stench slowly starts creeping up on me. Vivid images of us dancing around our kitchen on a Friday night, throwing popcorn at our old dog, who now shares that all-too familiar scent in my mind, slowly fade away into a memory I wish I didn't have. The smell. Doing homework to stay caught up with everyone else in my grade, while sitting beside a cancer-ridden soon-to-be corpse.

I hate to associate such a foul smell to such a beautiful soul, but it's hard not to when that smell took up a month of my life, and 4 years of my mental space. As her soul slowly and painfully disconnected from her body, all 7 of her long, pink, surgery scars from years before opened up, gaping and oozing as that familiar smell took control of the air around us. Death. It was all I could think about.

The smell of death didn't filter out the front door as "old friends", who I had never met, filed in to say their last goodbyes. It didn't even leave when the men in suits came to take her away in a disturbing manner that I was probably too young to witness. When they lifted her too-limp and too-cold body into a sheet, the smell of death didn't go away. When they rolled her stiff, empty vessel off the bed we placed in the living room for her comfort, the smell didn't even waver. When they clumsily carried what was left of my mother out of my front door in an awkward shuffle, the smell didn't follow. Even after the car drove away with a last goodbye I never got to say, the smell never left. At her funeral, where her body wasn't even present, it reeked of death. The smell only grew and grew as I had to accept that my person was gone. Not just "on a trip to Hawaii" gone, or even "moved across the ocean" gone. She was dead. Her body left to be used for research, as if she were a lab rat. Upcoming doctors stared into the open body of what used to be my mom, knowing that when they were done, they would just burn her into dust with the rest of the test subjects, leaving my family and I with nothing to remember her by, not even a headstone. No evidence to accept what had happened, only the smell the trauma left behind.

Even now, if I stand in the right spot in my house, the smell of death still wanders through the vents, my nose twitching at the scent. Death doesn't smell like the movies make it out to be. It's not a pungent, horror movie, stench that causes the characters in the film to realize they've fallen victim to the movie. The smell of death has followed me for the past 4 years, always as strong, never wavering, and still sour. I don't think I'll ever be able to escape it, as it slithers its way through the cracks of my broken mind, into my memories, filling up every fiber of my own being. ■