



# WHAT BUFFY TAUGHT ME ABOUT DEATH

*Content includes death,  
grief, and complicated  
familial relationships*

“I went to wake her up. She was kind of cold,” Aunt Mary tells me on the ride from the train station. “I was touching her hand, saying Mama. She didn’t respond. She wasn’t breathing. I knew she was dead.” Without once looking at me or asking if I wanted to hear, Aunt Mary tells the story of discovering her mother who was her responsibility for the past year. She needed to share. She told the story over and over, as if she needed to believe it was real. Her mother, my grandmother, was gone.



If we were in Sunnydale, not Fremont, California, it would be three to seven days until my grandmother tried to claw herself out of her burial ground. Instead of a ground burial, Grandma is enclosed in a community mausoleum. At the funeral, the cemetery workers couldn't steadily insert her casket in her designated space. My family watched in silence as they struggled to keep balance and avoid dropping our deceased grandmother who wouldn't have a problem haunting them for their mishaps.

My big brother, Jack, smirked as he stood beside the pallbearers. The chosen men in our family stood side by side while the rest of my grandmother's family sat in lawn chairs. We all stared at the cemetery workers fumbling around with Grandma's casket. I scanned around the room and wondered, "Is anyone going to laugh yet?" Each foot shuffle interrupted the silence.

*Thump.* Did these men just drop my grandmother on the floor? Bang. They just hit her casket against the wall!

And finally! We hopped out of our seats and left as soon as her casket was placed inside. We said our quick goodbyes to family members and split before heading to the repast. My brother and I burst into laughter once we entered his car. We both know for a fact she is pissed as hell.

Vampire Grandma would have to use her new superhuman strength to kick herself out of the enclosure. The gravediggers would be the first on her list of people to sire.



Welcome to Sunnydale. It's right before the daylight breaks. Night creatures are retreating to their shelters. Most humans are tossing around in their beds, bodies getting ready to bear the sound of alarms.

And there goes mine. It was time to get out of bed and prepare for another 12-hour day in a classroom. After six weeks of the same routine, it was becoming easier to forget there was a world outside of those walls. It wasn't even seven am. It might have been barely seven. I saw I had a missed call from my aunt. I checked the voice message transcription through my texts. Google Voice managed to properly transcribe only "your grandmother has passed." The phone rang again; me calling my aunt. **She repeated: your grandmother has passed, she passed away about six this morning.**



My grandmother had passed. And my sisters weren't answering their phones, neither were my parents. I had to be the one to call. I had to be the one to break this unfortunate news that would surely ruin everyone's day. I had to be the one to call. They would answer my call. My sister Lee said, "Thank you for calling me" and "Yeah, I'm fine. Make sure Sabrina is okay."

Sabrina was not okay. I had to call her husband's cell after attempting to reach her cell and the house phone. He tried to get her attention several times as she ran around their house, rushing to get my niece and nephew ready for the day. One last time, he politely yelled "Babe!" She caught her breath and reached for the phone. "What's up?"

Even though I knew she hadn't, I asked if she had heard from Aunt Mary. She knew what was coming next when she asked "why?" Silence. *Your grandmother has passed.* Silence. *Your grandmother passed away around an hour ago.*

“Thank you for telling me,” she told me, as if I had only denied her admission to her top university choice. She hung up the phone, and as I learned later, cried into the arms of her husband.

I couldn't figure out what I was feeling, if anything. I became preoccupied with the body—my grandmother's, mine, strangers I passed on the street, the countless people coming in and out of the room she died in.

Where did the body go?  
Would we still feel her presence?



I remembered Anya's monologue from "The Body" episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer:

*I mean, I knew her, and then she's, there's just a body, and I don't understand why she just can't get back in it and not be dead anymore! It's stupid! It's mortal and stupid!*

My grandmother was mortal. Half the comments and actions she made during my lifetime might have implied otherwise, but she was indeed mortal. She was 83 and she died. I would have to step into that living room and come to the realization that my grandmother was dead.

After class I sprinted down the hill to catch the train and breathe for what seemed like the first time in hours. Strangers passed me on the street and I wondered, "Do they know that my grandmother has passed?" *Is it showing on my face, that someone close to me has passed? Do I look sad? Like I am grieving? Am I grieving yet? Do these people have a recently dead someone in their life as well?*



I never thought much about death or the afterlife before. I still don't. It freaks me out. I mean, really. My chest tightens, my breathing gets shallow if I think about it too long. It feels as if I am being sucked into a black hole. Mortality is real, of course, but there's no way people think about dying and being dead. Most of us don't sit and think about how we are going to die. Alright, maybe some of you do. But I'm not about that. Death is weird. One day we're here, the next we're not.

What's weirder is grief and mourning. According to Joan Didion, "Grief [is] passive. Grief happened. Mourning, the act of dealing with grief, required attention." My family's life was disrupted with my grandmother's death. The first 24 hours were spent preoccupied with the fact she was no longer alive. There weren't any stories to tell, because, you know, you can't speak ill of the dead.

She tried to redeem our image of her in the days before her passing. Her body was so frail by then, she could only move her neck and hands. She held my face as she apologized for not being a better grandmother. I nodded my head and told her it was okay. But It wasn't. You can't forgive people for the scars they've given you, at least not that fast and not on their terms. She wanted to go peacefully, which she deserved. However, I didn't have to forgive her. There was so much I wanted to tell her, to ask her: Who was she before she became this person? Did she recognize herself as she changed over the years?

My grandmother was not the best person. From what I know, she never tried to be. She spoke without consequence in a world that told her she shouldn't exist. She inflicted pain upon her children who wanted to learn how to understand her. They carried their pain onto us, her grandchildren. It was hard to forgive her for that.

Imagine being a human, like most of you might be. You are human, you have all of these feelings. Intense, overwhelming feelings. And nothing makes sense. Then imagine dying—don't freak out too much—and returning as a demon or vampire. You may look the same, feel the same. But you continue to live on the outside of humanity, watching everyone you know live their lives without you. Demons and vampires attack us at our most vulnerable; they know us well, where and how to capture us. They aren't real, but most of us live in fear trying to avoid the bad we think we can predict. We hurt those around us as we prepare for battle.

Death, I learned, does not stop us from living; we do that ourselves when we don't speak up—for ourselves, for others, when we hold inside our pain, when we fear the worst, which never comes.





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