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## The Yearly Family Funeral

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## The Yearly Family Funeral

My siblings and I all loaded up in our minivan in our best clothes to go to Nowhere Important, Illinois to head to a wake. This time, it was an uncle. Or maybe it was a distant cousin. Our family's so massive, and so many family members have passed, that remembering who died when and what funeral we were going to is impossible. If I am counting correctly, my family and I have attended sixteen funerals since my birth. That's dangerously close to a funeral a year, but attending so many funerals has made me an expert.

Nobody important to any of us has died yet. The extended family has always been mostly people over seventy, so family gatherings consist of my family, a few way older cousins who think they're too good to socialize with us common, younger folk, and a billion old people. There's always the soft clicking of the walker somewhere within earshot, and someone on the other side of the room is always talking about their previous trip to the doctor in a voice so loud you can't tell if it's a private conversation or an announcement to the room. It's always just a sea of wrinkles and judgmental Christianity.

It always starts the same way. We go to the wake, which is hours of standing in an empty room, waiting for someone to show up and exploring the funeral home because, really, what else is there to do? For most of the hours and hours of standing around, I would scan the poster boards of photographs that surround the room to remember the one that was lost on a thick, dollar store quality paper-plastic hybrid. They are never all recent photos, and every poster board for every different person follows the same theme. It's them on the beach, and then by a new car, and then a family Christmas photo, and then, finally but most importantly, a photo of them holding an unidentifiable baby. And then another. And one more but outside the church after a baptism. It was almost as if they recycled the same clip art photos and traded out the faces.

My brother will at some point ask me if I want to see the dead body, and of course I want to! A lifeless shell of a human is always thrilling to see in a way, whether you are five with a morbid curiosity or eighteen and know that if you don't at least peek, you'll regret it for at least a week, or maybe just a few hours. It never looks like a real person, but there is this eerie sense of reality looking at it, like walking around a Halloween store, expecting the lifeless, motionless creature to be set off by a motion sensor, lunging, screaming, or cackling wildly. In all my funeral experiences, there has never been a screaming corpse thrown from the casket, but the sense of the possibility doesn't seem to go away. And during the drab of a wake for someone I never met, this doesn't seem like the worst option. What excitement!

When things begin to wrap up, when women in their mid-fifties have

flapped their jaws just long enough to call it a day, and their husbands saunter back to their spouses like an invisible chain is pulling them in close to their pearl necklaces. There is more likely than not going to be food. Usually pizza or sandwiches. I'm all over that. Free food? Nothing could stop me from getting to the back room and stealing a bite. Even if my Halloween horrors came true and an old man was chasing me straight from the coffin, I'd grab a plate and fill it up on the way out. That's probably just me, though. It's the reward for standing around for hours pretending to care for the person who's gone. Sometimes I feel like the whole room is thinking the same way, and everyone is just thankful they get to stuff their faces with cheap food rather than let words of remorse pour from their lips into half-listening ears.

The funeral always takes place the next morning. I think there was one time it was the same day, and the wake had been in the morning. Why would they mess up the system like that? Dead dude, listen. We have a system. Let us have a break from all the excitement, and meet again the next day.

People disperse through the pews of the church the next morning if everything goes according to plan. We wear the pizza sauce stained clothing from the evening before, knowing we only had one fancy outfit each with no time to wash up in between. No matter who died and no matter where in the world they lived, the funeral always ends up at the same old church. It may be the same preacher every time, or I may have this washed-out sense of what a preacher looks like and associated it with an array of different old men. With no clock in the sanctuary (whose idea was that, really? I still need to know the time. Being in a church doesn't make me some omniscient being who just feels the time), we would rely heavily on the fancy wristwatch my dad only wears to weddings, funerals, and class reunions. There was an endless tugging at his arm, and children climbing over each other to see that only thirty seconds have passed since they last checked.

There could have been a great funeral experience in our archive, but we bailed. We didn't know him well enough, and we decided it would be okay to check out of the funeral portion of the event. Huge mistake. He was a distant cousin who died in his thirties, named Jason, and he was always someone to avoid at family reunions. We should have known it would be a wild and worthwhile funeral, considering the funeral card from the wake consisted of a Monty Python quote, telling him that he was a freeloading bastard and to burn in hell. We keep it pinned up on the bulletin board for all times. It's a display of the lunacy we endure. We heard later on from very distraught elderly relatives that the funeral was a disaster or, as I would put it, hilarious. His sister spent her eulogy quoting *Lord of the Rings* and banging on a gong at odd intervals. I don't know if I would have been able to be there. I would be on the floor in tears, laughing at the sight. I would have gotten sent to the curb for sure. Would Jason have been proud of this display, or would he have buried his head in his hands and wished for it to end? I wish I could know.

This laid-back approach towards funerals has given me a false sense of security. I've been conditioned to believe that funerals are just boring and stupid, and death is just something you put on the calendar. I roll my eyes when I hear a family member had passed away, knowing what's to come. It's not so bad. People always freak out over death, like it doesn't happen every day around the world. But I know better. It's not as scary when you come face-to-face with it so often.

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