

Death by Numbers

by Aaron Davenport

An air of melancholy swept through the Davenport household on a rather normal weekday evening. No ominous warning precipitated the event; in fact, there wasn't even the slightest moment for preparation. I had just set a plate of steaming Jambalaya in front of my six year old son, as the final rays of sunlight reflected off the surface of our dining room table. On that particular day, I was over-caffeinated, sleep-deprived, and transitioning to domestic duties after a ten-hour shift at work. My son, on the other hand, was joyfully playing with his dinner, full of zeal and displaying his usual carefree attitude. His math homework loomed at the edge of the table.

Then my son, Roen, began to throw an unusual line of questioning towards me in a rapid succession. Roen said, "Daddy, how old will we be in fifty years?" I told him I would be seventy-six years old and he would be fifty-six years old, so far we were safe from the impending doom. He then asked how old his Papa would be in fifty years. Without any real tact, I casually said, "If your Papa is still alive he will be a hundred and eight years old." I knew I had made a grave mistake once horror became painted upon his face and anguish clouded his golden brown eyes. With an air of panic he said, "Papa is going to die!" I immediately thought "oh shit!" and focused on damage control. However, his inquisitive mind was determined to open the doors that I would have preferred to remain locked. He had only started staying with me on a full time basis a few weeks prior to this exchange. Through moments, such as this, I began to weed through the items that he knew and the ones he was

presently happier for not knowing.

My son was eager to test the reach of this newfound knowledge of existence, dragging everything to a logical end. He questioned if all those dear to him would also perish and die. He listed his mom, sister, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and finally asked about my mortality. As honestly as possible I said, “Yes, Roen, everyone dies.” Tears fell slowly down his reddened cheeks. His eyes moved solemnly to his plate and he twirled his fork, while his mind raced through what he learned and all its implications. It appeared that Roen’s mind came across something that he had never questioned. In a flash he leaped from his chair landing hard on the cold tile floor and gazed into my eyes with utter terror and bewilderment. In a shrieking and trembling voice Roen yelled, “I am going to die?!” I was utterly surprised to find that I was able to restrain from bursting out in hysterical laughter; thankfully, composure settled in. Clearly, my six-year old child was confronting his first existential crisis. I slowly dropped to my knees and warmly embraced him; I felt the dampness of his tears against my chest. The sun had gone down, and the dining room was faintly lit, as my son gradually became sound enough to break from our embrace.

We remained eye to eye as I began to console my son. I explained, in child terms, how the beauty and magic of life is contingent upon the impermanence of all living things and how the very nature of life is to sail through its many different stages including death. Roen had moved beyond the point of consolation – he wore the face of a child who had just found out that the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and Santa Claus weren’t real. He disdainfully looked over at his partially eaten dinner and then over at me: “I’m not hungry. I am going to take a shower,” he said, then somberly walked down the hall towards his bathroom.

In the meantime, I began to construct and number a mental to-do list, and started tackling the most glaring task.

I laughed to myself hoping he could wash away his sadness and despair. Meanwhile, I washed the dishes, and contemplated how wonderful it would be to look upon life without the slightest notion of death or decline. A blanket of silence momentarily covered the home, until the sounds of Roen brushing his teeth crept down the hallway. Wearing Spiderman pajamas he walked out of his bathroom looking refreshed and at ease.

We wearily climbed into his bed and went through the usual bedtime story routine. We were reading the second part of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Steadfast Tin Soldier." We jumped into a tale of a courageous underdog who triumphed against many challenges and survived dangerous adventures. The little tin soldier was the perfect protagonist for any child to adore. However, as I was reading the tale, the ending sprang vividly into my mind. There was no time to abort the mission. I reluctantly read out loud how the brave tin soldier was cast into the fire by the maid and how his one love, the paper ballerina, was blown into the fire with him, by a howling wind coming from an opened window. As he imagined the little tin soldier and paper ballerina slowly burning in the fireplace, I could sense my son's heart melting through the bed. "They both die!?"