

The Sunroom

Creative Nonfiction • Alysha Matthews

I'm an artist, or a self-proclaimed one. A while back, I started painting a red skull on a blue ombre background. Since then, somehow the color got away from me and shifted towards a mulberry color. That's okay. These things happen.

I paint in my home on our patio-turned-sunroom-turned-exercise-space that occasionally gets flipped into my personal studio. The four large windows normally allow the sunlight to pour in and illuminate the little room, but this painting session takes place at night. So, the ceiling lights drown out any light the night might have held and diminished the windows to black squares against the bright room. Even the moon is hard to spot. We still have the same patio furniture in the sunroom from before we replaced the mesh screens with actual walls. To flip this room into my studio, I throw a sheet on the table, roll my easel out of its corner, and put my bag of paints on the table.

As I flip open the bag, the tubes of paint, brushes, and pallet knives watch me curiously. The newest member, a bottle of retarder, sits on top. It's supposed to keep the acrylic wet longer so it will blend better. I planned to teach myself how to use it; it can't be that hard. I taught myself how to ombre for this project, I think I can teach myself how to use this.

I sift through my paint bag until I find the correct colors: a few different reds, black, and white. I pop open a tube and slowly inhale. The chemical smell fills my nose. I love the smell of paint. I relish these moments

because it won't be long until my nose gets used to the smell and begins to block it out.

Carefully, I squeeze the colors onto my white palette. The paint slides out and pops onto the palette with little to no grace. I've always questioned why most palettes are white. The paint sometimes stains them, and it's clear when I haven't thoroughly cleaned it after. Unfortunately, any other color, besides the wood or clear palettes, would make mixing colors difficult.

I squeeze a few drops of the retarder into the little piles of paint. Thoughts fill my brain as I do this, and my hands continue moving based on muscle memory. The thoughts bubble up and overlap my focus on the canvas and my goals for the skull.

My grandfather's face emerges from the thoughts. He wasn't exactly an artist, but he was a creative, nonetheless. His home and backyard were his canvas. His paint was plants, construction projects, cooking, or anything he wanted. When we lived in New Jersey, he started making kites. He would bring them to us so we could try them out. We would fly them for him, and then later he'd come back with new and improved ones. His face would take a certain expression when he was in deep concentration; his usual fedora perched on his head while the complicated brain within decided how to best fix or create something.

I can't remember a time when my grandfather was not successful at something he put his hands to. Until he got sick. I guess he was sick my whole life, I was just young and didn't know. He smoked for a long time. The smoking caused cancer, which killed a piece of his lung and condemned what was left to a slow death. It took time for the rest of his lungs to start dying.

I remember him being tall, strong, and invincible up until a couple of years before he died. It started with a cough. Then it was a bout of pneumonia. Lots of pneumonia. Then the oxygen tank in grandma's house. I can't remember which came first: the stair lift or the leather, plush armchair. All I know was soon the stairs were too much for him, so we got him the stair lift, and he had a tough time getting comfortable, so we got him the armchair. We put it in view of the TV so he could watch wrestling. WWE was his favorite show to watch. He would argue with you if you tried to tell him it was fake. Whenever he left the house, which wasn't often anymore, he always wore that fedora. Even when the paramedics took him for the last time.

I try to remember the good things. Before he got sick, when things were simple. The face he would make when he was studying the kites he made for us: his eyebrows would draw in and his mouth would form a thin line. The way his smile trembled and how tears would roll down his cheeks before he laughed. Watching him prick his finger before checking his blood sugar. He did it so methodically but never robotically. I think I will always consider it beautiful.

We went to the beach a couple of times, but I can only remember one trip. I was young; all the waves were taller than me, but that was okay because Grandpa was with me. We were jumping waves together. No words, just laughter. A strong wave took me by surprise. Instinctively, I grabbed Grandpa. I guess the wave also took him by surprise. We slipped into a myriad of blue together. I think my mother shouted. I don't remember how we got up, but we lived! We laughed about this for a long time.

It's 2019, November. We should be helping Grandma make Thanksgiving dinner, or at least setting the table, but my cousin, sister, brother, and I are standing in the corner of my grandfather's hospital room. He's asleep. A heavy-duty oxygen machine is plugged into his nose. I didn't know they made oxygen machines that strong.

None of us wanted to wake him because we knew rest for him was hard. My mother told us so the night before while we waited outside his ER room as the nurse took his X-rays. I also didn't know that there were such things as portable X-ray machines. The doctor later pointed out splotches of pneumonia on the X-rays of Grandpa's weak lungs. Pneumonia that they had suspected was there the last time he was at the hospital but never treated. Grandpa slept peacefully after the doctor left. But we're standing in his hospital room now. Last night feels like a forever ago. We studied the tall, strong man that was now at the mercy of an oxygen machine, a hospital bed, and nurses.

"He looks so small." My sister bumped my hand. Maybe she had wanted to hold it, but I was too busy holding on to false hope. "I used to think he would just, you know, live forever."

I start to work on the shadows in the skull. The eye sockets must be near black, and the lightest part is where the light hits, so probably the forehead. Whenever I draw, I tend to make whatever I'm drawing very dark in value. I'm not sure why, it just always ends up that way. This skull is no

different. The shadows have gotten away from me; the skull has turned into a deep purple. There's no going back from this now. Maybe I can lighten it a little when I clean up the highlights and paint the teeth. I lose myself to reflection as I continue to work.

Death is inevitable. In my grandfather's case, he danced with death until he could no longer. My mother would often plan small family reunions. We would take over the backyard with our celebrations. Before these parties, my mother would pull my siblings and I aside to remind us that we weren't sure how long grandpa had left. I would look at my tall, strong grandfather with his gray fedora. That could not be a dying man.

I was right. He may have been sick my whole life, but he was never dying when my mother first said he was. On his death bed, he was skinny, exhausted, and needed help sitting up. Watching him slowly begin to depend on us made me question the idea of legacy; more so focused on the aspect of who tells my story when I die. Who keeps talking about me after I'm gone? Obviously, I'm still here talking about my grandfather. He fills my mind whenever I create, and I subconsciously include him in my art. What warrants the world remembering you and at what point does everyone forget?

I would like to propose that it's the little moments. The little things that really showed me who my grandfather was are how I remember him and define him, like the kites, or almost drowning at the beach. I think those little things become a person's legacy after they die. The people that a person loves and cares for are the people who continue to tell that person's story. My grandfather will always have a piece of my heart. I think he will continue to make his way into everything I create. I'm not sure who will tell my story after I die. I have no control over who feels the need to take that responsibility if anyone decides to take that mantle.

I start to clean up the harsh edges of the indents of the skull as I am once again reminded of another truth I can't escape from: Death does not care what I have accomplished. Death doesn't care if I had more to accomplish. Death doesn't care if I've been sick or if I am the picture of health. Death doesn't care.

I unexpectedly lost a friend and then a classmate after my grandfather died. As I grieved, I also started to not care, like Death. If at any point a person could be yanked away from me, why bother to form

friendships? If I could die at any point, why bother to achieve anything? I don't have an answer to these questions. I still struggle with that mentality. I've found things to be passionate about and people I care about, but in the back of my mind I wonder why I bother. I'm going to have to say goodbye at some point. I don't have answers or solutions. I don't have answers or solutions.

While I figure it out, I try to enjoy the little things, like painting late in the evenings with my sister and brother sitting in the sunroom with me. My mom floats in to say something to us. She says she's going to bed, but then she sees we're all sitting there enjoying each other's company, so she stays. My dad walks in and peers over my shoulder before asking about what I'm painting. I answer him, and he gives a little thoughtful, satisfied frown, nods, tells me to keep it up, and leaves to go finish whatever mission he emerged out of his mancave to accomplish.

Like I've said, there's much I don't know. Who tells my story? Who remembers me? Have I done enough for someone to care? I've realized that all I can do is make the most of my time and love the people I love. There's still much I must heal from, but time heals all wounds, or at least it makes it easier. The pain is not the gaping pit it was; it no longer threatens to consume me. I can breathe. I can laugh now. It's not so bad.

I gather my brushes. I take a step back from the painting to examine it. Sometimes taking a step back from something can put all the details into focus and show you how it is all working together. The teeth aren't finished. The flower crown is not on the skull. The highlights aren't light enough. I have so much more to fix. Not today. I leave to wash my brushes. The skull stares into the void.