

This party's dead: a journey to seven death festivals

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I doubt my father remembers breaking the news to me, with all the tact of a rhinoceros crapping on a drum, that everybody dies. I was five, and I'm pretty sure I brought it up. As the first shards of awareness slice into young childrens' brains, it's not uncommon for them to randomly announce, 'I'm never going to die!' so that may have been what prompted my dad to correct me, 'You will. Everybody does.'

I frowned, puzzled. That made no sense. I stared up at him as he deftly opened a tin of something for dinner, seemingly unaware of the problem he'd just given me to solve. There must be a concession somewhere. Ah, I've got it, I thought: 'You won't die though, Daddy.'

Of course I will.

My younger sister Lydia and I started wailing, as kids do when faced with something for which they have no resources to cope. We weren't exactly sure what dying meant, of course. Our awareness of it wasn't much more profound than, 'that terrible thing that, in Disney films, only happens as a punishment for bad people'. When it came to good people, like us, Disney would never, ever allow it (except to Bambi's mum. For some reason, Disney really had it in for Bambi's mum. Presumably they had to put Bambi in the sort of peril that would allow him to grow as a deer).

Studies show that children between the ages of five and nine tend to view death as something that can be dodged if you're smart enough, and you don't have to look very far to see where they got that idea. From the moment we were handed a chocolate egg and some well-meaning adult added the disclaimer 'It's not all about stuffing your face – we're celebrating Jesus rising from the dead' the idea was planted with a sugar hit to boot: be special and you can avoid death. Switch on the TV or open a book, and there it is again: on fatal situation after another, and the good guys were almost always magically excused. Aladdin was saved by the genie. Tinkerbell was saved by clapping. Ariel was saved when Ursula the Sea Witch got impaled by a ship's mast. Dorothy escaped the Wicked Witch. ET was saved by the telepathic magic of fellow extraterrestrials who arrived just in time. Anyone good in Star Wars was at some point saved by The Force. JK Rowling even called her villain 'vol

de mort', French for 'flee from death' – and much as in life 'you-know-who' had to be talked about in euphemisms.

And let's not forget the medicinal power of love, a veritable CPR in the world of children's stories: the Beast is saved because Belle says she loves him; Snow White and Sleeping Beauty both get revived by a kiss from a foppish landowner; and I'm jealous of kids with early exposure to Frozen, in which, in an unprecedented statement for feminism, death is thwarted by an act of *sisterly* love. In fact, love is better than CPR: contrary to what movies would have us believe, less than 8% of people who suffer cardiac arrest outside a hospital survive, but I'm yet to see a film where love, when deployed, doesn't do the trick.

The message was clear, even to little children: death is for baddies. Not us, and certainly not our parents. When our dad realised we were weeping for the loss of the entire human race and everything we had ever known, he pointed and laughed.

'It's not going to happen for YEARS!' he said, 'You'll be 80 or 90, you'll be an old woman. How old are you now?'

'Five and three quarters,' I said, but I didn't see what my age had to do with it. This was still very bad news. Quite shoddy, actually. I wanted to speak to the manager.

'So it's not going to happen for years and years,' he continued, 'And one day the sun will die too, and then there won't be anyone left at all.' I stared at him. What? How can the sun die? It's... it's *there*. It's the *sun*. 'But that won't happen until you've been dead for THOUSANDS of years.'

For some reason, that worked. I pushed the worry away, the way I would later push away the need to tidy my room, the need to do homework, the need to do my tax return. Perhaps it was the word 'thousands' when I couldn't count to a hundred, and 'years' when I'd so far lived the lifespan of a hamster. Perhaps he trivialised my worries by laughing at them. Either way, we stopped crying.

From that moment until the day we found the corpse of my father-in-law, I only thought about death every few hours.

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I didn't catch the trauma-clean man's name. I should have. He was there to confront chemical compounds like putrescine and cadaverine, to act as a rubber-gloved buffer between us and our mortal terror, to do a job we couldn't



A Santa Muerte altar in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, Mexico

do, while we stayed downstairs gingerly passing packs of dripping, green-tinged chicken to the bin, like children. He and my fiancé, Dion, seemed far away and distorted as they discussed the job, as if I was watching them through the wrong end of a telescope.

I sat at the kitchen table, watching the trauma-clean man's papery hands gesticulate as he went over the particulars of how he would clean up the fluids left by the eight-day-old cadaver of my father-in-law-never-to-be. The trauma-clean man was dusty, what you'd call rugged. About 50 years old, but with grooves in his face so deep you could file tax forms in them. He had worn out, sandpapered vocal cords, and a voice like shoveling gravel. Tobacco-stained teeth flashing under pale, dry lips, which cracked as he chatted about clearing blood, dirty needles and rotting bodily excretions from otherwise lovely homes. I watched him, thinking, 'You were a baby, once'.

It's when he said 'fluids' for the sixth or eighth or thousandth time that everything went dark. The kitchen table pressed against my forehead, comforting and sticky. Nothing in Chris's house was ever quite clean.

The night Chris died, Dion and I were arguing about flossing. He said he tried it once and it made his gums bleed. I told him that means he needs to floss, damn it. Then I asked if Chris had replied to his email.

'Is she alright?' asked the trauma-clean man.

The day after Chris died, my friend Rhik invited me to a PR event for the launch of Hotel Chocolat's Christmas line of chocolate. Chris was probably stiff with rigor mortis by the time we left with our freebies.

'I'm fine!' I chirruped, infusing my voice with sunshine but not lifting my head from the table. 'Just resting my eyes!' Tears dripped onto my shoes.

On the third day I'd posted a picture of my coffee, on the fourth day a picture of Dion smiling with a tankard of beer. And I asked if Chris had replied to his email.

'Let me know if you'd like a tea or anything!' Had I really just offered tea while pretending to be cheerful? I'd never been more English.

On the fifth day I took my cat to the vet and asked Dion if Chris had replied to his email.

'No thanks love, you're alright,' said the trauma clean man, 'I'll go and get started.'

At the weekend I'd met a friend in Camden and she'd cried with worry over a rash on her back. It turned out to be nothing. Chris was already bloated and green when I sent her a text saying, 'You worry too much.'

I heard the trauma clean man turn and walk to the stairs, coughing like he had a badger in his chest. 'Are you ok?' said Dion.

The day before Dion found Chris, I was at the vet for a follow-up appointment for my cat. He was fine. The loss of his testes hadn't bothered him at all. I asked Dion if his dad usually took so long to respond to emails. Eight days. Eight days. How could it have been eight days?

Dion lay a hand gently on the back of my neck. 'That guy,' I said, still faux-chipper as I clasped Dion's fingers in mine, 'was a baby once.'

I didn't know how to grieve for Chris. I didn't know how to never see him again. I didn't know how to deal with knowing the smell of a rotting corpse, or how the man who treated me like a daughter transformed into a problem to be collected, driven away and incinerated. I didn't know how to explain to the part of my brain that did a double-take whenever a man with white hair rode past on a bicycle that it wasn't him, it would never be him.

I worried about letting people know how destroyed I was; would they believe me? Would they think I was milking it for some kind words, some time off, some slack in my workload? He wasn't my dad, and no one asked how I was. Clearly, this was not my loss to grieve.

On the bright side, that seemed like an excellent excuse not to do the emotional work of a bereavement. Instead, I spent my time doing what clearly *did* need to be done: staying inside all day, stalking my friends and family online to make sure they too hadn't dropped dead since they'd left my sight. Had they posted on Facebook in the last few hours? If not, I messaged them. If they didn't reply I messaged again, on any and all available channels. If they still didn't reply, I'd message someone close to them – had they seen them? If not, I planned to go to their house, and if necessary, break the door down so they wouldn't wait eight days to be discovered. I seemed to be the only one who'd worked out that anyone outside my field of vision might be dead; so here I was, one person checking on everybody else, who were all apparently content to be blindsided.

I realise now that this was death anxiety in its purest form, but at the time I thought I was a genius. We all need a little faith to get through the day – that the people you love are alright, that no one you know will fall down the stairs or get hit by a car today. In that moment of unaddressed grief, that level of faith seemed foolhardy; a dangerous, ridiculous assumption.



Nyatapola Temple during the Gai Jatra festival in Bhaktapur, Kathmandu Valley, Nepal

When I attempted to go outside for the first time in weeks – ostensibly to buy a sandwich, but really just to see if I could – I had a panic attack in the supermarket, threw the sandwich down and ran home. Even I was self-aware enough to admit these weren't the actions of a genius. Sitting at my kitchen table, feeling the air mercifully thin out into something breathable, I cast my mind back to my two years living in Mexico, the Day of the Dead celebrations, and how the people told me with a straight face 'We are not afraid of death'. I googled 'death festivals around the world' and within two hours has confirmed that we are definitely the odd ones out. In fact, I had a list of seven death festivals – one for every day we didn't find Chris – and decided that not only would I go outside, I would travel to see how others deal with death anxiety, and write a book about it.

I attended *Día de los Muertos* in Mexico, where I joined a disastrous cemetery tour and had an awkward but uplifting one-way chat with Chris's photo on a candlelit altar. I attended the *Gai Jatra* festival in Nepal, where I joined a procession of people who had lost someone that year, who danced along the streets to joyful music and drums and chanting, with toddlers dressed as little Vishnus clutching deep pink incense sticks as thick as cigars.

I visited the *Festa dei Morti* in Sicily, where children wake up to a treasure hunt for presents hidden by the souls of their dead relatives. I visited Thailand to celebrate the Chinese festival of Qingming with my father and my Chinese stepmother. The festival involves sweeping tombs and burning paper money as a gift for the spirits, though these days people also burn paper iPads, cars, mansions and iPhones.

I got hit in the head by a corpse in Madagascar (on a journey like this this was bound to happen at some point).

I was privileged enough to have an invite to one family's *Famadihana*, the Turning of the Bones. People travel from all over the country every five to seven years to exhume their relatives from the family tomb, re-wrap them in fresh sheets, have a raucous party, and re-bury them. People hoist the freshly-wrapped corpses on their shoulders and dance to the upbeat trumpets – which is how I was hit on the head (I don't know if I was kicked or headbutted; I didn't ask.)

I then flew to Kyoto in Japan for the Obon festival, during which spirits are welcomed by a dance, and get a ceremonial send-off in the form of enormous mountainside fires in the shape of Chinese characters. On the kindling, people write their wishes so they can hitch a ride to heaven on bonfire smoke.

Finally, I made my way to Tana Toraja, a remote area of Indonesia, to see Ma'nene, where the continuing relationship with the dead is done in an extremely literal way: the dead are exhumed from their burial caves, dressed in new clothes, and walked around town – perhaps even posing for a selfie with the great-grandkids they never knew.

Throughout the seven festivals, a message emerged over and over, one I never got in Britain: death is normal. It does not always mean something has gone horribly awry. I wonder if by having an annual death festival, people give themselves time and space to deal with their terror of death, so that when someone dies they can focus on their loss. In a society where even contemplation of mortality is resisted until someone dies, we're forced to contend with our fear and our grief simultaneously, at the highest moment of trauma; no wonder we're struggling. Having grown up with the message that death is avoidable, an aberration, and a punishment, what do we have to draw on when it turns up anyway?

I have met some weird and wonderful characters throughout the journey, including a politician who is planning to become a cyborg and live for ever, a man who kept his wife's corpse in the bedroom for six days, and a voodoo priestess in New Orleans who fights for spirits' rights. But all roads lead back to the festivals; these celebrations of life, death, the people we loved and lost, and our very selves.

I doubt my father remembers breaking the news to me, with all the tact of a rhinoceros crapping on a drum, that everybody dies. And until my father-in-law did, I'm not sure I believed him. But I know now, and I've asked people all over the world how they cope with it, with knowing.

I'm glad I asked. ■

Erica's book *This Party's Dead* is available to pre-order at unbound.com/books/deathfests and set to be published in early 2021.