

A Curse and a Gift
by Louisa Tangula

He's gone now. My attention is diverted to a lonely, deserted road. There's no sign of life anywhere. It's pitch dark and I'm walking. I don't know where I'm going, but I have to get out of this darkness. A cold, unsettling breeze emerges from a warm, summer's night. I feel chills rising through my spine. "Something's wrong." I walk for a considerable amount of time. Finally, out of nowhere I see a speck of light. I get closer. A somber crowd stands in a circle with their heads down, as if at a funeral. Two cars, a red Pontiac Firebird, and a silver Toyota Celica, had lost control and gotten into a terrible collision. They look familiar. I force my way through the spellbound, immobile crowd. My heart beat fastens to a thousand beats per minute. I drop to my knees in hysteria. "Kelvin! Kelvin! Not you too! Please don't do this to me!" He lays there. Face up towards a glorious sky. There are millions of stars out tonight. But I haven't noticed them. He just lays there. His hands folded and resting on his thigh, he lays in a pool of blood, on the dry, brown earth. He hasn't suffered any substantial physical injuries from what I can see. He looks peaceful, so peaceful, in eternal repose. I can still recognize him. He's 6'1, with a dark, chocolate complexion, an athletic build and a handsome face. He is my brother. Claudia, a close friend of mine, comes up to me in tears. She puts her arms around me and says "I'm so sorry." She and Kelvin, both proud thrill-seekers were racing. She has survived the collision. My brother is gone.

I woke up sweating and distraught, in tears. My heart was still racing. I frantically recited psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer. After that, I grabbed the television remote which I had placed under my collection of stuff animals and turned on the television to Cartoon Network. Tom and Jerry was being showed. I reached for my journal which lay next to the remote on my bed, and began to write.

Imagine losing your uncle, cousin and a very close family friend in one year. Better yet, imagine losing four people that are very dear to you in a three year time span. Imagine being taunted by a frequent nightmare, a dream where you always lose a loved one. Better yet, imagine being tortured by a nasty, little voice nagging you with the question, "Who will it be next time?" As I sat in the safety of my cold, dimly lit room, I ponder my plight. Death.

It all started at 3 a.m. on March 31, 2000. Kelvin had gone over to spend the night at his best friend's house. It was Lamont's birthday. I was just about to fall asleep when the phone rang. Startled, I jumped out of bed, rushed to the dresser and picked up the phone. A quivering voice said "hello!" and the call was disconnected. I looked at the caller ID and it read "unavailable." I left my room to check on my mother. She'd been awoken by the call and was sitting on her bed looking rather gloomy. "Who was it?" she asked. "Unavailable," I replied. We stared at each other in silence, both not wanting to utter the forbidden phrase or think the worst. We knew the call was from Africa. When the phone rang ten minutes later, there was no escaping that dreadful news. Uncle Joe was dead! **"For the first time I understood the sharpness of the pang which the soul feels when a loved one lies with folded hands icy cold in eternal sleep"** (Hochschild 24). My response was an instant "no, this is not possible!" He had a stroke; it was his second stroke in six years. He had been hospitalized for only a week. A week! I didn't cry. I pretended that one of my favorite people in the world did not "go gentle into that good night" (qtd. in Fitzhenry 69). Uncle Joe was my dad's older brother. When their parents died, he left college to work and provide for his younger siblings. It was a hard task for a young man of only seventeen, but he did it. Education was of great importance to him; although he himself couldn't finish schooling, he was very particular about my dad and my aunt receiving the best. To my brother and me, he was a grandfather figure; our jolly, old Saint Nick. He

stood a mere 5 foot 6 inches, with a tamed black mustache, a shiny bald head, and a heart full of gold. He wore big 70s-inspired glasses, with circular black frames and tinted lenses. We always tried to pull them off his face. They were just so funny and at the same time mysterious.

As I delved into my thoughts, I am transported to a cool, quiet, autumn evening in the Sierra Leonean province of Njala. The sun is slowly setting down in the East. Meanwhile, on the front porch of a gray, cottage-looking house, an older gentleman settles into a cozy hammock. Gently he carries a 5year old boy into his arms, places him to the left and then his 7year old sister to the right. He reaches for some candy he has placed on the banister. He hands the candy to the children, puts his arms around them, relaxes and rocks back and forth as he begins a story.

That was my Uncle Joe. I was sixteen, a sophomore in high school when we received the call from Africa about Uncle Joe's death. Even though he lived in Africa and I hadn't seen him for years, I still talked to him almost every weekend. Ours is a close family, a unit, separated by distance but connected in the heart and soul. How could I bring myself to deal the bitter reality? "Just to don't deal with it." I found solace in denial. "This is usually the first stage [of coping emotionally with death], experienced as a sensation of shock and disbelief. [The griever], is too confused and stunned to comprehend [the loved one] "not being" and thus rejects the idea" (Donatelle 544).

He stands in the dark, lingering. Always lingering. Faceless, but his cold, menacing eyes illuminate from the deep of the abyss.

It was barely three months after Uncle Joe's death that fate dealt me another bad hand. Again the phone rang in the early morning hours of June 30, 2000. This time it was Papa P. At the age of 55, he had died of a heart disease. He was a close family friend and our next door neighbor. He and his family lived in a small, one-story white house up the hill behind our house. Oh! How I remember the countless hours Kelvin and I spent running up and down that hill. Papa P's house was a quick getaway hideout for us. We would hide behind Papa P to escape from our cousins when we did something wrong. I remember on some Saturday mornings, instead of watching Tom and Jerry at home, we would go up the hill and there Papa P would be standing at the door waiting for us. Sami, Papa P's youngest son and our partner in crime, would already be situated on the couch with his Cornflakes. Sami, Kelvin and I were the three musketeers.

On one side of the road there is a Cinema and a couple of convenient stores. On the other side there is a stadium and a school. It's a warm summer day in Sierra Leone; a good day for a soccer game. Boisterous voices fill the air. A man and three young children stand in a long line in front of the stadium gate. Two of the children, a boy and a girl, engage in a mini soccer game of their own as they wait. The youngest of the children, a little boy restless from standing in the line, is now being carried on the man's neck. Slowly, they make their way to the ticket counter. The man pays for everyone and the party of four enters the stadium. They make their way to the vendors, get some refreshments and proceed to the bleachers. Comfortably situated, they wait eagerly for the game to begin.

Those were the days of childhood bliss with Papa P. The world was so much easier then. Once again, I utilized denial as my comfort food for dealing with the loss. But slowly, anger crawled into my life and began to consume me.

"Anger is another common reaction to the realization of...death. The [bereaved] becomes angry at facing death and perceives the situation as 'unfair' or 'senseless' and maybe hostile to friends, family, physicians, or the world in general" (Donatelle 544).

I became transparent with confusion and anger when two months after Papa P's death, we received yet another phone call. It was in the early morning hours of September 11th 2000. This time it was Luseni, one of my fraternal first cousins. Luseni was a 6 foot, 7 inch giant with the heart of a saint. He was always willing to lend a helping hand to friends, family, and strangers alike. Young, vibrant, well-learned and ambitious, Luseni had landed a job working as an accountant at the Bank of Sierra Leone. He died at the tender age of 25. The cause: heart disease! I was in a state of shock for days. He seemed so healthy. I soon learned that he had been sick since childhood and was on medication. Luseni had lived with us for a year or so back in Africa when he was making the transition into college. He had delivered Kelvin and me from the bland and rigid "teacher" John, our tutor from hell. Luseni was an extremely comical character. When we had tutorial lessons in Math, English, and French, he would join us and act as a "silent" spectator. Unlike "teacher" John, Luseni knew that for a six- and an eight-year-old, learning had to be fun. Whenever we found ourselves in a bind for an answer to one of "teacher" John's questions, he would gesture subtle clues. "Teacher" John found Luseni's designs disrespectful to his craft. Eventually, "teacher" John got fired for his frequent tardiness and occasionally showing up "semi-intoxicated." Luseni, well-learned in all three subject areas, English, Math, and French, became our new tutor.

With Luseni's death came that awful nagging voice. It started to take control of my life. I was living in constant fear. I wasn't afraid to die; I just didn't want to lose anyone else. *"Who will it be next time? Why is this happening to us? Of all the thousands of people on Earth, why, why did You have to take those three? It's not fair. I can't breathe! Every time I turn around someone is sick, someone is dead or dying,"* I wrote in my journal. I didn't get mad at my friends or my family or the world. All I could think of was, "Why is God doing this to us?" "There is a reason for everything and valuable lesson behind every experience," my mother, woman of great faith would say.

That reason became more ambiguous in the beginning of the year 2001; we received yet another phone call. I had grown accustomed to death, and denial had grown accustomed to me. This time it was Uncle Raymond, another close family friend. I remember him as a jaunty, middle-aged fellow, with a cowboy edge to him. He had a proclivity for tight jeans. His shirt tucked in neatly, his outfit was always held together by one of those "cowboy" belts. His shoes, I always thought were funny-looking and different. Uncle Raymond had been friends with my parents years before I was born. When my father traveled to London during the summers or was away from town, Uncle Raymond would pick my brother and me up from school. He and his family lived about fifteen minutes away from my house in a splendid, one-story red brick house. What made it so splendid? The backyard. It was humongous, with plenty of free space for us to roam about. It also had two mango trees and an apple tree. I remember, Kelvin, Mohammed Lamin—Uncle Raymond's youngest son—and I would throw stones to ripe mangoes when we couldn't find an adult to pick some for us. We were warned by Uncle Raymond not to try to get mangoes by stoning them down. But, being the mischievous children we were, we did it anyways. We didn't care about the danger, we just wanted some mangoes.

It was all so overwhelming. I just couldn't understand that there could be any reason, in the part of the Almighty for the continuous hurt and pain. Denial was no longer an option. Three weekends after Uncle Raymond's death, I was talking to Anna, Uncle Raymond's wife, and I asked

for him. “He’s gone, N’hawa. He’s really gone,” she said. Reality had finally sunk in. I would never see these people again. Not in a physical sense. Death was a curse and gift, it was my burden. My journey to ascertain meaning in death had just begun.

He stands in the dark, lingering. Always lingering. Faceless, but his cold, menacing eyes illuminate from the depth of the abyss.

“The only way to get through life is to keep the Lord close at heart, always.” This is a phrase my parents inculcated in my head as I made the transition from childhood to adolescence. They knew that adolescent years were critical to the person I would become. Born into a Methodist family, attending church on Sundays was a must. My parents nurtured my brother and me to be people of faith. However, when that faceless stranger, Death, made his way into my life and unleashed his wrath, my faith in God was shaken. I couldn’t understand what reason, if any, He would have for taking away my loved ones. “God is not supposed to bring me pain and hurt,” I reiterated. With the help of my mother, I began to realize that being mad at God and staying mad, would not eradicate the hurt from my soul. So, I became “a seeker on a quest for meaning” (Guinness). I dedicated myself to prayer and asked the Lord for guidance. I took a deep breath and the revelations began to descend. Here today, gone tomorrow. We are all wandering souls traveling through the unpredictable sea of life. When the end is near, what matters the most is how you lived your life. “Time goes. Ah no! Alas, Time stays, we go” (qtd. in Fitzhenry 443). Our time as inhabitants of the terrestrial world is so limited. It is up to us as individuals to utilize that time to bring meaning to our lives. When these revelations dawned on me, I looked back on the lives of my loved ones and I found solace in realizing that they had lived happy, fulfilling lives. No matter how small, they had left their legacies through their children, their relationships with others, and kindness towards humankind. “If I should die tomorrow, what would my legacy be? Would I walk ‘gentle into the night?’” I wrote in my journal. Carpe diem! Seize the day! Every night, before I got to bed, I thank the Lord for a day gone by and the dawn of a brand new day. For each new day that I experience, I thank the Lord for being alive and well. No matter how terrible a day, I still thank the Lord, because I am alive and free to live, to love, to learn, and grow.

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