

a deadly dull

Brendan Harris

the father's eyes are cloudy, a fine mist working over the whites until they are dull grey voids.

he sees a shadowy figure in front of him, looming over him, watching, waiting. this is the grim reaper, he thinks. he has come for me again.

this isn't his first brush with the paranormal. for months now, ghosts had haunted him, turning his once peaceful home into a circus of spirits and apparitions. it was innocent enough at first; what started as corporeal shades in the corner of his eyes progressed into poltergeists and demons taking the forms of intruders, knocking over glass bottles and breaking furniture. his orderly rooms became mazes of debris as the ghosts made messes faster than he could clean them up. they played with his memory, too. they took forms of loved ones and played with their features, making him question the names and faces of his friends, his family, even his own children. when he told his son of the hauntings, he grew indignant, saying there was no such thing as ghosts. but nothing else could explain what was happening to the father's home.

time and time again, his cries would fall on the deaf ears of his son until he finally ended up here: the nursing home. my son must be getting rid of me, he thought. he never did listen to his father, so his only recourse is placing me here, out of sight and out of mind. but his change of setting didn't stop the supernatural experiences. now, nearly every day, this shadowy figure that he called the reaper would visit him, standing at the foot of his bed, glowering at him, waiting for his time to run out. he would call for help, and each time the

reaper would disappear, leaving only him and the bewildered nurse in the room. at least she didn't treat him like a lunatic.

now, as he stares at the figure, its features begin to soften until he can make out his mother, in perfect black and white like she had stepped out of a polaroid. he can make out her colorless features; her striped dress, her wavy hair, her long painted nails. her face, however, is misty and translucent, shimmering and shaking in the dim light. she holds a hand out to him, beckoning him to take a walk with her. he shakes his head violently, knowing to resist the illusion.

then, without warning, it hardens into a masculine form: his own father, rough face, short cropped hair, cotton shirt. his colors are present, but they are subdued, hard blacks and browns smudging his skin like ink blots on paper. his face, too, is murky, the only exception being two black pits where his eyes should be. they bore into his soul, always judgmental. he remembers how unfeeling and cold his father could be. this form doesn't beckon him, it just stares, all-knowing and all-encompassing.

again, it changes, now into his oldest son at age 17, pimples still dotting his boyish face. he looks happy to see him, waving at him feverishly. he is tempted to wave back, but he keeps his hands down, opening his mouth to shout but saying nothing. it starts to laugh and point at him, opening his mouth wide to mock him.

then, it shrinks down even shorter, now taking the form of his youngest as a child in elementary, still holding the stuffed rabbit he could never part with. he looks at him from under the foot of the bed with concern in his eyes. he hears him utter "Dad?" before becoming out of focus and indiscernible. as much as he wants to believe him, he knows the concern is fake, conjured up in an attempt to make the father feel vulnerable and weak.

the reaper continues to do this rapidly, only staying as one form for enough time to be made out before changing, again and again. he can hear it start to laugh, knowing the torture it is inflicting on him.

this is the grim reaper. he has come to take me, he thinks.

he wishes he was dreaming, but this apparition is very real. finally, he lets out a scream, raw and piercing, but he is surprised to find that the voice that escapes his throat isn't his now but the voice of him as a child, weak and afraid. this causes him to scream louder.

this existence is hell.

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the youngest son stands over him, watching him scream with a broken voice. his eyes stare at him but never *look* at him, any familiarity lost in the deep wells of his pupils. the son shakes his head, wishing that his father would recognize him. it had been like this for weeks now, but he still keeps visiting, hoping for any change but coming up with nothing every time. when his father called him, he would always show up, even when his ranting about "ghosts" was incoherent and childlike. he would watch him rip up furniture like a rabid animal until his hands were raw, collapsing from exhaustion at the end of it. of course, the father would never remember these episodes. he would always blame it on ghosts and the paranormal, but the son knew better. he tried to be there with him, hoping it would pass. but it never did, and now the son is here, still trying to tend to a dying father.

"mr. harris?" a voice calls out.

the nursing home door opens, revealing a tall woman in a white doctor's coat. she looks to the bed, still containing the softly screaming father, then to the son. her face changes to a pitiful look, an apology hanging on her lips.

"i'm sorry, mr. harris, but i think it's time for you to go. you can come back tomorrow if you'd like!"

the son looks to her then back to the father. he doesn't want to believe it, but he knows that the cycle will continue to repeat itself. he knows that the father's mind died long ago, but the body still lives on, screaming and crying at the mere sight of his son trying to visit. he has to remind himself that this man – this shell – in front of him isn't the father he knew. however, this doesn't make the sight any easier.

"no. that's fine." the son says.

a tear begins to roll down his cheek. he closes his eyes for a moment, collects himself, then looks at the father once more, still screaming, voice weak.

"goodbye, dad." he says, turning away and pushing past the nurse. he makes it back to his truck without incident, starting up the engine and putting it into gear. the loud rumbles of the engine mask the uncontrollable sobs that escape his lips as he drives away.

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author's note: this piece was inspired by a song called "deadly dull" by the band movements.
if you enjoyed this story, please give that song a listen.