



D.P. Snyder

Ways to Grieve

Drip, drip, drip. It's been raining for almost two weeks, ever since they took Stevie away.

It's still dark when I get up to make some headway with my work backlog but instead I sit doing nothing in my office here at home. My hands lie on the keyboard like dead animals. The company has been understanding so far, but you only get two weeks of compassionate leave and after that, they can let you go with cause. Naturally, they give you fair warning. This morning's email began: *While we understand this is a challenging time...* In other words, fuck you and your grief and get back to work.

I carry the rain around inside me now, big, black bags of rain. The day it happened, it seemed as if my tears would never stop but the next day, they started dripping inside rather than out, filling me up little by little. The weight of it! Everyone has their own way to grieve, I suppose. Men and women are different, that's what my therapist says. My husband and I aren't the same, why should we be? But Ed started looking at me strangely, as if my dry eyes were some kind of insult to him, as if he needed me to cry all the time to prove something to him, that I loved our little boy, I suppose. That I am a good mother. Was a good mother.

Now, I walk around the house on constant alert, afraid of meeting Ed's accusing gaze. I am terrified that something that reminds me of my boy is going to break me again and pull those awful wrenching sobs out of me. I am numb and tired and I can't bear the effort of all that crying anymore. But how can I bear the weight of all the tears accumulating inside? And all I hear is that drip, drip, drip.

Despite the early morning darkness, I can just make out my little boy's favorite Halloween decoration through my office window, Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton, out there on the front lawn waiting to welcome the children tonight, Hallowe'en night. Later, I will put out the No-Touch candy dispenser for all our little Trick or Treaters. We decorated the front yard this year because Ed and I decided that Stevie would've wanted it that way. That's what we told ourselves.

His beloved scarecrow friend stands there now, large as life and twice as unnatural, his bony arms stretched out to both sides, crucified as always on the wooden cross that came with the kit. His raggedy burlap jacket flaps in the wind, and the rain wilts his straw hat and makes his orange plastic head gleam.

Two years ago, for the first time since the pandemic, we were finally allowed to be outside the house, although still wearing masks and shields. Stevie had just turned five and he suddenly understood Halloween and he was so excited about it. We went to Party City, and I told him that he could pick out his own decoration. Stevie's eyes sparkled above his Barney face mask as he looked around the brightly-lit store.

"Anything I want, Mommy? Anything?"

"Yes, darling. Anything."

He ran straight to Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton and wrapped his chubby little arms around him.

"This one, Mama! He wants to come home with us! He wants to be my friend!"

As if the hideous plastic figure were alive and needed a pal! My boy was so attached to that life-sized skeleton dressed in its colorfully-patched burlap shirt and pants that he wouldn't even let us buy him a new one in the box. No, he had to have *that* one! We were grateful that they gave us a deal on the display model and, when we got home, we set Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton up on the front lawn. I have to admit that it felt a bit uncanny, pressing the tacks through the holes in his hands to secure him to that rough wooden cross. When I pushed the biggest tack through his skeleton feet, crossed over each other like those of some kind of plastic Jesus, a gust of wind made one of the arms come loose and it whacked me in the head.

I was more surprised than hurt by the blow and I fell backward, hitting my head on the ground. Ed made a fuss but I told him to stop. I was fine, I said. In fact, I felt a bit nauseated but I needed to show Stevie I was okay. It's a mother's job to pretend everything is okay so that the children feel secure, isn't it? So, I left Ed and Stevie to finish setting up the Halloween decorations and I went inside to take an aspirin and lie down.

That spring, the pandemic and the cycle of lockdowns and provisional social freedom continued. They no longer discussed "the return to normal" on the talk shows, it was just vaccine schedules, masking requirements, and the "new normal", whatever that was supposed to mean. How I hated that phrase! We were all going a bit crazy from the pressure and we knew that virtual school was wearing on Stevie. I was in my office working one day when I heard a sound in the basement. I crept down the stairs armed with my grandfather's billy club ready to knock the stuffing out of some raccoon or rat. But when I flipped on the light, it was just Stevie there, sitting cross-legged on the concrete floor in the dark with that damned Halloween decoration, out of its box and sitting propped up against the cinderblock wall. It had a can of soda in its bony hand.

"Mr. Pumpkin Head is lonely, Mommy!" said Stevie. He was on the verge of tears, thinking I was going to punish him, I guess, for taking soft drinks without permission. Children can sense their parents' displeasure.

"Why didn't you at least turn the lights on, Stevie?"

“Mr. Pumpkin Head says the light hurts his eyes.”

I looked into those triangular holes the thing had in place of eyes and saw nothing there, only darkness. Why did I even check? I told Stevie that Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton was *only* for Halloween and he had to let him rest until then. No more unaccompanied trips to the basement, I told him. I was clear about it. There should have been no mistake.

But oh, the tears and the tantrums! All summer Stevie nagged and nagged me.

“When is Halloween, Mommy? When is it?”

“If you’re lonely, go to your room and play with Doolittle,” I told him. Doolittle was the hamster we’d bought for him when we decided he needed something alive to occupy his time since his whole social life was by then just us and the boxed faces on his computer screen during virtual school hours. But he said, no, he wanted to play with Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton and he pouted. I let him mark October 1 on the kitchen calendar in red crayon just so he would stop pestering me. We agreed that would be the date when his friend could emerge from the basement and not one minute before.

I understood why he was impatient and perhaps even a bit disoriented, though. All the public health plagues that have beset us in recent years have altered everyone’s sense of time. October? When was that? What did October even mean anymore? It all seemed so abstract. Not to mention that the weather is unpredictable now, hot then cold, dry then torrentially rainy, irrespective of the season. Our son needed to be reassured that the future existed, I suppose. But still, it was too weird for me, seeing him down there in the basement all alone in the dark. With that thing.

That’s how October 1 became the official date that Ed, Stevie, and I would take Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton out of his box and raise him on his cross in the front yard. The ritual was established and, in fact, that’s how we did it last year. This year it was no different, except that Stevie isn’t here anymore. When Ed and I put the Halloween decorations out week before last, it was a grim affair. More like a memorial service than holiday fun.

Here at my desk, I can’t focus on the spreadsheets and emails, so I go through my social media feeds instead. They’re filled up with memes from those old horror movies we used to love as kids, but the truth is, they’re not funny. Nothing is funny anymore.

The authorities just take the bodies now, you know? During the worst times, when people were dying in droves, the hospitals and police still did their best to comfort the grieving families and create some sort of ceremony to help them accept what they could not change. But now that we’ve all been through the wringer with the Monkeypox spike this year, they’ve stopped any pretense of sensitivity. The men in white hazmat suits came, went down into the basement, picked up my little boy, and they took him away. We got a certificate of death in the mail. No casket, no funeral, no nothing.

Gray dawn dilutes the shadows outside my window and now I can clearly see Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton with his arms pinned to the cross. But wait, what's that? Is it a Mischief Night trick? Someone has placed another tiny cross at his feet! I scan the trees for toilet paper, our cars for smashed eggs, but I see nothing. I call out to Ed, but as usual he doesn't answer.

My husband has gone so quiet since we lost Stevie! At first, we wept together. But when that big black bag inside of me started filling up with tears, he stopped talking to me at all. He'd look away when we passed in the hallway or kitchen. He would just leave the house without saying anything and drive off, who knows where. Then one night I woke up at three o'clock and he wasn't in bed. I went to the living room and found him there, awake and watching the TV on mute. And when I asked him what he was doing he looked at me and the gray light from the screen turned his eyes into black holes that showed no recognition, no feeling. Nothing. It was as if he no longer knew who I was.

Men and women grieve in different ways. But Ed's silence is beginning to weigh too heavily on me. I fear it will tear us apart and I am terrified that he will leave me. I know he blames me for what happened, although he won't say it out loud. I see the brooding way he observes me when he thinks I'm not looking. It was one minute. I left the box there for one single minute! With all the disease and destruction in this messed up world, who would have guessed we would lose our little boy that way?

The open basement door.

The Halloween decorations I was carrying up from the basement.

The box with Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton that I left on the top step when my office phone rang and I ran to the next room to answer it.

Stevie's excited footsteps racing to the basement door.

His happy voice calling out, "Mom, I'm going to get Mister..."

Me yelling, "Wait, wait for Mommy!"

His cry when he tripped over the box.

That sound, like a bag of rocks hitting all fourteen steps.

That thud.

That silence.

The silence was the loudest sound of all. I cannot stop hearing it.

I guess I'll put on my raincoat and go outside to investigate. I see that Stevie's hamster Doolittle is nailed to a tiny, rough cross made of branches lashed together with twine. My God! Thankfully, the animal is dead. I find myself unable to touch it or deposit it in the garbage. I go back inside and shout for Ed over and over, but he doesn't answer. Where the hell is he when I need him? How dare he retreat into his accusatory silence? How dare he leave me to handle all this alone! But it's still early. Perhaps I can pull myself together to get rid of that monstrosity before the neighbors see it. It is always hardest to do the things that must be done.

I go back to my office and turn off the ceiling light. Now, the bluish beam from my computer screen makes the skin of my arms and hands look pale and ghostly. I sit down and place my fingers on my keyboard again, a pose of normalcy that helps me gather my thoughts together. I see I have a new email. Subject: Urgent. I open it: *Be careful what you do.*

I am startled for a moment until I look at the sender's address. It's from my own private Yahoo account! I break into uncontrollable laughter. Of course! I remember that I scheduled this email to myself over a week ago when I wasn't coping as well as I am now. I was afraid of all the violent thoughts I was having, the destructive fantasies. That's when I started writing notes to myself and scattering them around the house, just like the TeleHealth therapist suggested. Affirmations like *Life is beautiful, Love is eternal. There's always tomorrow. He will always live in your heart.* That sort of bullshit. Reading it now, I laugh so hard that I almost choke. The memories start to flood back.

I smile as I walk down the hallway toward the kitchen. The walls are bristling with multicolored sticky notes on both sides, a mural of my own creation. There are so many messages from me to me, all written in my own neat, controlled handwriting. I stop to read a few. *You are a witch. You are your son's worst nightmare. You killed him. Murderer.* As I read them, I remember who I am and what I have done. Poor Doolittle! But why should he go on eating and defecating and running on his little wheel when Stevie isn't here anymore? And now I also recall why Ed didn't answer my calls for help, why he's been so quiet for so long.

I turn on the light, carefully step over that first riser, and walk down to the basement. I sit down at Ed's workbench where Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton's box lies, empty and waiting for me to pack him back into it until next year. I promise Ed that I am not going to let them take him away from me, too, not ever. I tell him that I will have to find a shoebox for Doolittle, how I stopped feeding and giving water to him because I could see that he was too lonely without Stevie. Laughing, I explain to him how I've integrated the little furry figure into the Halloween decorations and I tell Ed how funny it is that I forgot that it was me who made that cunning little cross. I tell him how much better it is this way now that Doolittle gets to be part of the holiday fun.

Then I feel sad and tell him that I am sorry and that I hope it didn't hurt too much when he kicked the stool away and the rope went taut. I promise Ed that when he becomes a skeleton, too, I will faithfully dress him up every year and hang him up on a big cross in the front yard, right next to Doolittle and Mr. Pumpkin Head Skeleton, just like Stevie would have wanted.

But, as usual, my husband says nothing. All I can hear is that annoying drip, drip, drip. Well, it will stop one day, there's no doubt about that. And anyway, as my therapist always says, men and women have different ways to grieve. I will just keep managing things around here as usual and doing all the talking while my husband hangs there from the beam on that thick rope and listens.



D.P. Snyder is a bilingual writer and translator from Spanish. Her work has appeared in *The Sewanee Review*, *Exile Quarterly*, *Two Lines Journal*, and *The Write Start*, among others. She is a contributor to *Public Seminar*, *Reading in Translation*, and *World Literature Today*. Her story “La puerta secreta” (The Secret Door) was a finalist in the 2020 International Short Story Competition of the San Miguel Writers Conference. A former *New Yorker*, she now lives in historic and haunted Hillsborough, NC. Find out more about Snyder’s writing at dpsnyder.us (<https://mailstat.us/tr/t/53n4pq9w19poj14u/2/http://dpsnyder.us/>).

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