

Name: Claudia Cora

Work title: A Speech At My Funeral

Category: Flash Fiction

Award: Silver Key

“Freaky.” The crowd looks down at where I stand, staring at my dead body. Well, my future dead body. As they watch, I slowly examine myself. I'm old, there's no doubt about that; they tried to cover the wrinkles on my face, but the knobbed hands and extreme amount of old people in attendance kinda give my age away. I'm dressed in a rather bland white dress and my hair is flowing down my shoulders, something my current barely-shoulder-length-hair self couldn't pull off in a million years. All in all, I look pretty good for an old dead person.

“So,” I turn and finally place the crowd. “My mom advised me to make this huge pamphlet of stuff that I should say based on how I died. But, upon looking at this... wonderful crowd, I've decided not to do that!”

There's a brief murmur of surprise at my gleeful outburst, which only increases in volume as I grab a huge stack of paper out of my bag and reverently place it on my dead chest. I quickly snatch it back, however, when I hear a distinct crack from the body.

“Guess the paper was too heavy, oops.” I grin sheepishly before quickly recovering my previous enthusiasm. I take a quick look around and spot a dapper old gentleman sitting in one of the front seats. “You there! What was your connection to me?”

“I was her husband,” The man says in a near whisper. There's a stark pain on his face, and I'm struck by the sudden revelation that I know these people - or, at least, I will. I sober up some and answer him solemnly. “I'm sorry for your loss. If she - well, I - picked you to spend my life with, you must be one awesome dude.”

I go down the line like that, asking people who they were to me and giving them my condolences. There are friends I've yet to meet, bosses I've yet to work for, employees I've yet to hire.

Finally, I reach the back. Two young adults are standing there, a male and a female. They look vaguely uncomfortable standing there in black suits. And they look exactly like me; the woman has my wild curls and the man has my height and that awkward stance I stand in when I don't know what to do. They both look like they've been crying. Oh dear.

I walk up to them with a sympathetic smile and hold out a hand to shake. "You're my kids, right? I just wanna say that I'm sorry for any trauma I may have - Oh!"

They both rush at me and engulf me in a huge hug. And start bawling again. Loudly. I slowly bring my arms up and hug them back, unsure of what to do. Awkward, remember? We stand there, two adult kids hugging the past version of their dead mom. It's such a wild scene that I wish I could snap a picture of it.

After a few minutes of this, Thing 1 and 2 pull away sniffing. The man starts talking, and I'm immediately taken aback by how much he sounds like me pre-I'm-the-coolest-kid-in-the-world phase. "Sorry, we just REALLY miss our mom and, well, you're the closest thing we have to her right now, ya know? Sorry again if it made you uncomfortable. I'm Nicholas and this is Laila."

"Well Nicholas and Laila, it's a pleasure to meet you." I sketch a wobbly bow in an attempt to diffuse the situation and turn to the crowd of people. They were watching the entire time (creeps). "It's alright folks! Please return to mourning me!"

After they all (slowly) turn back around, Laila speaks up. "We just wanted to thank you for coming. You being here means a lot to us."

“I was kinda forced to be here.” I shrug. “And it's not like I'll remember any of it when I go back to my part of the timeline. Them's the rules.”

“Even so, we loved our mom and having her back, even if you're not really her yet, is awesome.”

I smile at that, eyes brightening with an idea. “Well, I still have a few minutes left that I SHOULD be using to talk about how cool my life was and how I'll live up to my potential and yaddayaddayadda. How about instead,” I link my arms with hers and Nicholas' and start walking out of the church. “We go to an ice cream shop and I tell you embarrassing stories about my youth.”

Both of my kids smile and walk with me out the door. I giggle internally as I hear the outrage behind us, and Laila gives my signature I-don't-care-if-I-get-in-trouble-for-this smirk. “Yes, that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

Name: Alina Sukhovskaya

Work title: Homecoming

Category: Flash Fiction

Award: Gold Key

The Homecoming

It was a chilly and foggy Christmas evening in the midst of a small town. A mother was mixing eggs, milk, and sugar to make a new batch of gingerbread cookies as her children, a boy and a girl, blotted puddles of sweet frosting on cookies fresh out of the oven. It was tricky business as the frosting, as if doing it on purpose, melted over the sides of the hot cookie. The little girl even managed to steal a few cookies before her big brother noticed. She would huff and puff out air because of the hot cookie nipping at her soft tongue. The mother just looked at them, laughing. Her inexplicable happiness was the only thing keeping her going, for under that layer that the children saw, was a great yearning sadness for her one and only. The man was drafted to a war, a suicide mission, she thought. Miraculously, the side he fought for won the war with courage, bravery, and love in their hearts to lead the way through the bullets of the dirty Earth. She had not received any notice of whether or not he was alive.

As she put the gingerbread cookies into the oven, she sighed, glancing out the window, recalling how she had parted with her dear. It was early January when he had to go. It was a clear picture of the third platform at the old train station. Tears of innocent love escaped the couples' hearts as they held each other for the last time before he got on that bright red train that exhaled smoke into the frosty air. He left her with a long kiss, a journal, and a revolver for protection. She would write in this journal every day for the past 3 years, clinging to every moment she had in hopes of embracing him with words instead of memories. She kept both items in a nightstand drawer next to her bed that was filled with the scent of two children that cuddled up to their mother each night. They were tough, those three years. He would write to her only when he got the chance to between battles at a military camp in the mountains. The soldiers faced disease, famine, and loss of their comrades. The woman would read these letters only at night when the kids were asleep as soft sulks and shaky sobs escaped from deep within her chest. She would reread them, hundreds of times without a care in the world about how many tears escaped her tired, motherly eyes.

Snapping back from this melancholy trance, she caught a glimpse of the tasty pastries ready in the oven. Pulling them out, and warning her two children not to touch them, she heard a

knock at the door. Something about this knock was different, maybe it was the sound? It was a strong knock, as if catching the attention of the woman and holding it. Dusting off her apron, she creaked open the heavy wooden door. It was a man, a changed man now. He had silver streaks in his hair and creased wrinkles from the cruelty of the battlefield. A scar ran from the side of his face down to his collarbone, healed. Even through the worst of the war, the man stood with laughing eyes and a heart of gold. There was a moment of silence before a waterfall poured out of the man's eyes. The shock the woman felt hit her only seconds after she realized who it was. She cried out his name, sobbing and taking him into her warm arms.

The couple's beauty and youth faded over the years of the war through stress and suffering, but now, all that could be seen was love, stronger than time and more beautiful than a blooming magnolia tree in May. The little girl and boy quickly noticed their mother's happy sobs. The two were confused at who the man was, until realization hit them just as hard as it did their mother. The girl burst into tears running straight at them, wailing about how much she had missed her father. The boy, however, walked up and hugged the couple as well. But he cried silently. Endless kisses covered everyone's faces before the father was welcomed into the home.

He joined the children at the kitchen where they explained what their sloppy cookie designs were supposed to be, a helpless, laughing smile plastered on his tired face. After sharing cookies and milk, the children were put to bed for the fear that Santa Claus might not come if they were awake.

Name: Nailah Gayle

Work title: Simulacrum

Category: Flash Fiction

Award: Gold Key

“It’s a bit gaudy.”

Andrew gazed at the gold lettering etched in his father’s tombstone glittering in the three o’clock light. It was a Thursday, or maybe a Monday, but regardless, it was a frozen-over month. Teeth chattered across the sleepy city while the snow beat down and bombarded every surface. Andrew stared down the four feet of deep blue granite that crashed the wave of sullen white across the yard. Showy. Most people don’t plan on trying so hard to dazzle in death, but then again most people hadn’t met his father. With an ungloved hand, Andrew aimed his point-and-shoot and *snap*-- the shutter rolled and seized the scenery onto the film. He felt an elbow bounce on his down puffer and saw that Alice had joined him from the car.

“Totally gaudy. Makes everyone else look like they’re not trying.” She reached forward, wiping snow off the top. “Do you think dead people get jealous over others' plots?”

Alice looked up at Andrew, eyebrows raised waiting for a response. Her tanned leather boots sunk into the snow and sod, the cold suffocating her foot. She lifted it and shook, shooting bits of snow onto Andrew’s wool coat.

Her brother, smiling for the first time in weeks, turned and trudged his way to the cemetery’s exit. Their father had died a month before his birthday, and, on the day that would have been his sixty-fifth, the remaining family found it reasonable to visit their old, dead man.

Andrew thought of his father at nearly every moment of the day, except for the times he went out in the cold to spark a cigarette. Memories seemed to float away in the gray smoke, lifting into oblivion and thinning into the clouded sky. As the heat from the unfiltered Lucky Strike warmed the flesh between his index and middle, Andrew tried not to think of the dead beneath his feet, or packed into paper between his fingers.

“Ashing on the deceased definitely breaks some rule. Though I’m not sure which.” Alice had caught up and was crouched by his side, collecting snow and bits of ash into a ball. “If Father was here he’d first order you to ‘Put out that darn sin stick.’” Alice laughed at her bad

impression as Andrew took a long draw. “Then, then he’d say something super deep about life, and finally tell you to have fun for once!” Alice launched her snow-and-cig ball at Andrew’s side, who looked down to find that his cigarette had landed snuffed and butt-up in the snow. Then he began to remember.

He slumped into the wet ground near the cemetery’s gate as his last moment with Father flickered and played in his head like bent film in an old 35mm camera. Andrew cried. Sputtering and choking on tears, snot, and esoteric quotes about remembrance. He recalled clasping hands: Andrew's were warm and trembling and wrapped around Father’s— stiff and lightly scented with surgical soap. Andrew refused eye contact as Father smiled and faded away in those spaced beeps of the monitor.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Alice had sat down by Andrew’s side as he replayed the last time he saw Father alive. Green and grey flecks in her widened eyes were spotlit by the setting sun glow, now tearing up as she soothed Andrew as he collapsed wailing into her shoulder.

Retrieving a balled-up piece of this from his pant pocket, Andrew wiped the dried salt and snot from his face and looked up at Alice, eyebrows furrowed and quizzical at her brother’s outburst.

Andrew ignored his sister’s question, lifting his head from her shoulder and sliding down to lay out on the snowed Astro turf. The pair sat there for a moment as the sun continued to set, both staring up at flakes of snow and lingering smoke stuck in the sky.

Name: Amy Yadgar

Work title: Sofía and Abuela

Category: Flash Fiction

Award: Gold Key

“Sofía and Abuela” *[Intended for Young Readers]*

Sofía lay down on the grass in her backyard as she contemplated one word: heritage. The dictionary held many definitions of the word, and she wasn't quite sure which one was the right fit.

See, her teacher had asked her and her classmates to write a poem about their own heritage, but she wasn't even clear on what the word meant. Sofía decided she would ask her mother when she came home from work.

“Mom, what does heritage mean?”

“Huh, that's a hard word. Why do you want to know, honey?”

“Well, Miss Kelly asked our class to write a poem about that word, so I wanted to ask you about it.”

Her mom sat on their worn leather couch before answering.

“Heritage means your background, Sofía, like where your family is from and their traditions and culture.”

Sofía nodded and pretended to understand, although she really didn't.

“Ohhh, I get it now. Thank you, Mom.”

She then went to ask her dad in his study for clarification.

“Dad, I have a question.”

“Go ahead, Sofía.”

“What does heritage mean?”

“Hmm, that’s a tough one. But I’ll do my best to answer it. Heritage is basically what your ancestors pass on to you, and what you inherit. Your mother and I will pass down certain things to you, and someday, you’ll pass it all on to your children.”

Sofía still didn’t understand, but she didn’t think he could explain it to her differently.

“Okay, thanks, Dad.”

She left his study and grabbed her bag off the back of the dining room chair. She then made her way to the front door.

“Mom, I’m going to Abuela’s house. I’ll be back soon.”

With that announcement, she stepped out of the house and dashed across the street to her grandma’s place. Her mom didn’t even bat an eye, because Sofía went there so often. Abuela always cooked the best food for her and had her favorite games at home.

Sofía knocked on the door, and when her Abuela opened, she gave her a big hug.

“Hi, Abuela. Can I come in?”

“Of course you can, Sofía. You’re always welcome here.”

She motioned for Sofía to make her way into the house and followed after her. Sofía plunked down on one of her chairs and sat silently, trying to wrap her mind around heritage.

“Sofía, is something on your mind? You’re very quiet.”

“It’s nothing—I’m just confused about something.”

“You want to ask me? I might know.”

“Alright, but I didn’t get it when Mom and Dad explained it to me. But you can try.”

“Well, ask me then.”

“What does the word heritage mean?”

“Ooh, I can see why you’re confused now. I’ll help explain it to you in a while. For now, though, can you help me make my mother’s famous *arepas*?”

Sometimes, Abuela needed a helper in the kitchen, and Sofía didn’t mind helping out. After all, she would get to eat the food in the end, and her Abuela’s food was always tasty.

“Put your hair up and wash your hands,” Abuela told her.

Sofía raced to the bathroom.

“With soap!” Abuela added.

When she came back, she helped Abuela cook and clean, passing her the ingredients and using her hands to knead the dough.

Abuela explained that this had been her mother’s recipe, and her mother's before that too.

“Wow, so this recipe is really old!” exclaimed Sofía.

“Yes, this recipe is older than me and made with so much love. Sometimes, I think I can feel my family when I make these *arepas*. I know my parents and grandparents are gone, and I can’t explain it. But I feel it in my heart.”

The two finished and put the *arepas* in the oven. They smelled so amazing that Sofía almost forgot her original question.

“Wait, Abuela, now that we’re done, can you answer my question? What’s heritage?”

Abuela chuckled and replied.

“Well, heritage is that *arepa* you have in your hands, that we made together and that my mother and her mother made in the past. That’s heritage—all there is to it.”

Sofía smiled.

“Wow, thank you, Abuela. I get it now.”

Except this time, she meant it.

Name: Emmanuel Minier

Work title: The View of the Lake is Beautiful

Category: Flash Fiction

Award: Silver Key

Fresh out of high school, the boy felt worse than he ever felt in his entire life. This emotion, vomit-inducing, and sense-blocking, should be something no one should ever feel. His favorite foods, now bitter, were no longer made to enjoy, but to at least eat something, as anything else would be inedible. The very house he lived in was a gruesome and violent reminder. A reminder that pulled him limb from limb. One that made him want to twist his teeth and wrench his hair out. A reminder that he would never see them again. He needed to be anywhere, anywhere but here.

The place he went to could barely be called a forest. It had the absolute minimum of trees required to be a forest, but other than that, nothing. He walked this path before, however, it was usually with other people. He kept walking until he saw a familiar sight. The view of a lake gave energy to the boy. His pace got faster, the distance between footsteps widening. He sat as close to the lake as possible, feet almost touching the water.

He came here all the time with them. It was the moment in which he was happiest. To sit here, by himself, he didn't know what to feel. Should he be happy for the time they spent together? Or perhaps sad that he had to be here all alone? The man was deep in thought, looking directly into the lake... no, he was looking at himself. The still image soon crumbled as small but violent waves shook the lake. Much to the boy's surprise, the lake started to reflect a memory he himself doesn't remember.

The lake showed a small toddler, smiling as he was moved up and down. The room around him was decorated with bright colors, mostly blue. Judging by the decoration, it was clear that they were celebrating the little kid's first-ever birthday. It seemed random at first, but with closer inspection, the boy realized that the man holding up the baby, and the woman cutting the cake, looked like younger versions of his parents. Two people he thought he would never see again.

And they were both so close. So very close. So close that he could touch them; and touch them he did. Just then, he heard singing, a tune that almost everyone knew. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you..." The boy's body felt both lighter, but harder to balance. Two strong arms moved him up and down. The only sound that came out of the boy was just a primal giggle. A giggle that sounded like he had nothing to worry about in the entire world. He wanted this moment to last forever, but his lungs didn't agree.

When he broke free from the bliss, the man felt pressure from every part of his body. His feet didn't touch the ground and felt like he was flying through the air. No. He was swimming. The boy quickly realized, and swam to the top of the lake, and took a large breath of air. All those years that he spent on the swim team didn't seem like a waste now. He quickly swam to shore and tried to make sense of what just happened. He scratched his small beard in confusion. Adding to the confusion was the beard that didn't exist a couple of minutes ago. He looked into the nature's mirror and concluded that he was older. How much older, however, he could only guess.

The lake seemed to have gotten tired of the man looking at himself, as it played another memory of the man's past. This one, the man remembered a little more vividly. It was his fifth birthday, and it was celebrated with everyone in his small class. They played until their little legs gave out and then some. The children soon gathered around the table in which the delicious chocolate cake sat like royalty. The one cutting the cake was once again his mother. Her smile was one that he could still remember easily, even without the lake. How he wanted to hug her again. And he was just so close. So very close. So close that he could touch her; and touch her he did.

The taste of the chocolate was the best thing he tasted in his entire life. He savored every single one. But he knew he had to do it quickly as it could end any second now. Before he could have the last bite of his chocolate cake, he felt the same pressure he did before. He knew what he had to do, and swam up at a speed that surpassed any speed he'd done before. He once again swam up close to the shore. He felt his beard and it was much full than last time.

The man realized what was happening and knew that this was too dangerous to continue. It was obvious that this was not worth the risk to keep doing. The man knew that he was six years older in just a couple of moments. He walked up to leave and took one last look at the lake. This, however, made him remember his favorite birthday to date. It was his 14th birthday. And he couldn't resist...

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The elderly man sat near the lake. His bones and muscles became lazy, and no longer wanted to move. He knew he couldn't survive another trip. However, then came his 18th birthday; the last birthday he would see them again. His parents looked exactly as he remembered them. And they were so close. So very close. So close that he could touch them; and touch them he did.

Name: Jack Cole

Work title: Unremembered

Category: Flash Fiction

Award: Silver Key

Trace sighed heavily, giving weight to his melancholy. It wasn't as if he couldn't place his sadness. He could. He just knew there was no cure. The only solution was time. Minutes, then hours, would replace the dull ache with a lessened hollow. He swept his hand through his thick unkempt hair and looked at the sad brown eyes reflecting back at him in his mirror. He blinked to make sure he was there, still living, and not just a frozen shadow of loneliness. He smiled sadly as he recognized his own existence. He moved an arm. He could see himself. He was not invisible.

Trace knew exactly what the problem was. He had simply misjudged his own importance to others. He didn't understand what it was - how he missed it. He thought they had been close. A tight trio of brotherhood. Always together. It had come out of nowhere. At least it had for him.

Trace was driving Milo to school when his friend had mentioned it casually.

"Yeah, looks like Sam and I will be heading out on the same teen tour," Milo remarked as Trace drove out of their neighborhood. "Happens that we're both going at the same time."

Trace smiled clumsily, keeping his eyes on the road. "Well, that sounds like a lot of fun."

It took a few hours for Milo's news to sink in. When it did, Trace tried to reconcile the relationship he thought he had with the other two boys with what was happening with the trip. He desperately tried to rationalize why they hadn't bothered including him in their plans. He gave himself a pep talk: "Don't be ridiculous. It's a coincidence. Their families happened to schedule them on the same trip. They didn't even know they were going together. Maybe they'll even realize they left me out and tell me to come."

Weeks passed before the trip, and Trace managed not to dwell on the invitation that never came. His friends left. Then, inevitably, the social media posts arrived: the two buddies raising their fists in celebration at the peak of a picturesque mountain top, Milo and Sam toasting with

new friends at a restaurant with frothy hot chocolates, and the boys laughing with abandon as they covered a girl in white sand at a beach. It stabbed Trace - each picture liked by hundreds, with warm responses, "Looks like a postcard!" and "Sweet beach!" Each photo made him dissolve a little more into his own nothingness. Four days, then a week passed since his friends had started their adventure and not one quick text asking Trace how he was or telling him he was missed.

Trace lobbed in a Snap to his friends – "Hope you're having fun!" Several hours later a terse response – "Sure are! Have a great break!" from Sam and a picture of them together on a roller coaster from Milo. Trace winced and shut off his phone.

This wasn't the first time he had lived this. It was an actual pattern in Trace's seventeen years of life. It just kept happening to him. Over and over. Not only with Sam and Milo. With all his friends. For Trace, it was like a broken record of failure, a winning record of isolation. He thought about the pool party he had stumbled on the year before.

Dropping off his brother with a friend at a nearby park, he had glimpsed a sea of teens by the pool not thirty feet away from him. Surprisingly, he realized he knew some of them. Then, slowly, he recognized every face. He walked up to his friends, confused.

"Hey, I didn't know everyone was meeting up," he wondered aloud to Alon, his friend of seven years.

"Oh, yeah, for Carly's birthday."

Trace glanced over to Carly who stood a few feet away.

Carly bit her lip, saying, "Stay, Trace, just come in the pool with your shorts on."

It slowly dawned on him. They were all there on purpose. Because his friend Carly invited them. All of them. Except Trace.

“Uh, no that’s okay. I’ve gotta get home. I told my mom I’d run some errands. Bye.” Trace smiled weakly, slowly walking away. He had waved at a few other friends, silently begging them to come over to tell him not to go and explain to him it was a big misunderstanding. They waved back and turned away, shrieking happily and posing for pictures. He peeled himself back into his own oblivion, willing his feet to get him to his car and ignoring the prickling sadness pulsing through his head.

It almost felt like a relief when it happened this time with Milo and Sam. No, not a relief, Trace corrected himself, just a familiar feeling of expectation. He knew what it was to feel solitude. But was it solitude or was it worse than that – a total lack of significance to those he had called friends. He looked down and moved his hands. He could see them. He wasn’t a ghost.

Trace would reprimand himself. “Your life is lucky. You have everything you want. Your family is close and loving. You are at the top of your class. Everyone calls you a friend.” But as he walked away from yet another misunderstanding, he wondered how he was so easily disregarded and why he fell into this void time and time again.

He walked out of his house, then aimlessly wandered around his backyard, completely forlorn. He leaned against his garage and shut his eyes for a moment, feeling only emptiness except for the stinging of salt tears. When he opened them, he noticed a moving truck across the street. A teenage boy and girl stood next to the open truck talking to each other. They started tossing a football back and forth.

And Trace smiled almost imperceptibly. Maybe this time will be different. Maybe this time he wouldn’t be forgotten. This time, they will see him.