

Angeliah Story

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Personal Narrative

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I Don't Flinch Anymore

There is a boy sprawled on the pavement, the hole in his chest gushes ruby-red secrets everyone already knows but never says out loud. Blood moves through the concrete cracks, searching for who is to blame. Phones rise like reflexes. Not to call 911, but to freeze this young black boy's final breath. To post this to Instagram before his mother even gets the call. A Black boy who could've been a doctor. A lawyer. A scientist. But now his heartbeat is replaced with a headline, and his dreams are stripped.

I do not flinch anymore. Does anyone? Not on the 4th of July when we are stuck deciphering which sounds are gunshots and fireworks. Not when we hear "he was an innocent child." Not when a Long Live hashtag rudely elbows its way in front of another name. In Killadelphia, death has no boundaries. He lets himself into your home, opens the fridge like he lives there, and decides who to take. Then to top it off he sits at your dinner table with his feet up.

"You're surprised I'm still here?" Death asked me. "This City fills me up."

The first time I met Death was outside my poppy store. I was nine, with a memorized list etched in my brain: Aluminum pan, Elbow noodles, and condensed milk. I waved to all the

familiar faces. Everyone knew my chocolate face: the sweet, little girl with barrettes you could hear a mile away and big eyes you couldn't say no to.

I skipped through the aisles like I always did, like they were a maze built just for me. I carried these three vital ingredients for dinner to the cashier and pulled out my blue EBT card. I paid \$4.67 at first but then pointed to a green pack of sour Skittles behind the counter. *How would Mom know?* It was \$5.73 now. The black plastic bag said “thank you” with a smiley face, but for what?

That is when I heard it—yelling, swearing. The words Mom told me I wasn't allowed to say. The kind of arguing I'd learned not to look at. Rule #1: mind your business.

But death doesn't play by the rules.

A boy came around the corner. He was barely a man. Young, sweating, and running like he wanted to escape his shadow. Even at nine, I knew that block didn't have space for both of us.

But it wasn't fast enough.

My heart began to race. Was he running from someone? Toward someone? Should I run? I froze. Then came the second man, visibly older, with a black oversized hoodie that almost swallowed him, pulling out something hungry. The gun. As if it had not already gobbled hundreds of black boys, yet still longed for more.

Boom.

The boy's body dropped down to the ground like a puppet's strings were sliced, sour Skittles rolled into the street like marbles. His body twisted in ways I didn't think were possible.

As if he were playing Twister by himself. His eyes were open, way too open. The blood was way darker than in the movies and poured from his chest like a faucet you couldn't get to stop.

I did not scream or cry. The numbness I felt wasn't new to me. Research showed how “exposure to high levels of violence at age 11 was associated with lower levels of internalizing problems...emotional desensitization to violence in early adolescence contributes to serious violence in late adolescence” (Mrug et al). In neighborhoods like mine, silence is our survival. I thought—maybe if I don't move, death won't see me. Maybe he'd eaten enough for the day. Maybe the boy on the ground with a hole in his chest was his dinner for the day.

“I'm never full,” Death whispered to me. “I'll see you again.”

I walked home, humming that same deli tune, gripping the black bag. Thank me for what? For staying quiet? For not helping?

Three years later I was now twelve. Death came to visit me as he told me. This go around, he dressed in a Black church suit.

He chose my grandfather.

My grandfather fought him for as long as he could. Death brought in machines, medicine, and hospital beds, but Death was patient. One week the caretakers told us he was doing well, and the next they told us to prepare our goodbyes. Death is funny like that. He fools you into thinking you are safe, then takes you as soon as you let your guard down.

“You should be lucky,” death told me. “I gave him extra years.”

I held my grandfather's hand until it turned to ice. The man who snuck me Tastykakes, got me off the hook with my mom, ate 2 raw eggs because it was “good for the gut,” was gone. The beeping soon began to slow down. Then stopped.

“I told you I would be back.”

I have seen death so many times he doesn't scare me anymore. He always updates his Instagram when I see the newest hashtags reading, “#LongLiveDame” or “#LongLiveLaysia”, he laughs at the candles and teddy bears people leave, and he does not need to knock anymore. My community is now familiar with him. “Community members become desensitized...a collective trauma is produced” (Everytown 2023). We no longer dwell on death, we no longer ask “why him,” we no longer try to bargain. There is no point. We are all figuring it out, we are all trying to survive, unfortunately, only the best will win and make it out.

And still, we move on. We live our lives, not knowing when ours could be taken. Every hashtag, every remembrance post, every casket, reminds us that these deaths are real, not just numbers. They are wasted potentials, stolen futures, and empty spaces. Death may have room on this Earth but we must remember that so do we.

I continue to navigate through this city known for its “brotherly love.” I commonly walk past murals of black faces frozen in time, candles that burned until the wax gave out, and framed photos that made room for themselves on sidewalks. I could not ignore the question growing in my head: *How can a child grow up while expecting to die?* I know I am still here, I am blessed to see 17, I am grateful to make it to my senior year, but I can not help but wonder. *Am I next? Are you?*

Works Cited

Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. Invisible Wounds: Gun Violence and Community Trauma among Black Americans. Everytown Research & Policy, 27 May 2021, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/invisible-wounds-gun-violence-and-community-trauma-among-black-americans/>.

Mrug, Sylvie, Anjana Madan, and Michael Windle. "Emotional Desensitization to Violence Contributes to Adolescents' Violent Behavior." *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, vol. 44, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 75–86. PubMed Central, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4539292/>.