

## Death in the Family by Harry Friedland

My Uncle Rex, one of my mother's brothers, died when I was eleven years old. It was the year 1965 and it was my first encounter with the phenomenon of death. My mother came into my room one evening, crying and distraught, sat down on my bed, took my hand and right away it was clear that we'd better listen.

My brother and I shared a bedroom and we argued (read: "fought") about who was entitled to what share of the floor space in the room. The boundary lines were constantly revised. We didn't realise that that activity itself had become a game. But at that moment it was instantly clear that things of greater import were happening, or about to happen.

"Uncle Rex is dead" said mom, and instantly provoked a whole new flood of her own tears.

Uncle Rex was probably my favourite uncle at that time. He had a wide range of interests and a study that was packed with things which I found fascinating. He was, inter alia, a ham radio fanatic and transmitted his own news bulletins and commentaries to the world out there. He was a prodigious reader, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves all round his study. He collected things and displayed them in glass cases: military medals, model ships, etc. He had catalogues, memorabilia, flags – and pervading everything was the signature aroma of his pipe tobacco. I never smelled that smell anywhere else. He owned it. Perhaps it was his own blend. I wouldn't have put it past him to blend his own pipe tobacco!

Like all of mom's family, he was a physically big man, and in the sepia photo in which he stared out into that study, in his South African Army uniform, taken somewhere in the Northern Sahara during World War II, he sported a fierce Lord Kitchener moustache and bore a striking resemblance to that man.

But now, in the wink of an eye, in a puff of smoke, without any warning, without goodbyes, without any reason to believe that he would be going – he did just that. What was so strange to me was that I saw nothing. I had to believe people who told me that he had died. There was nothing to see – just a metaphorical space where he had once been.

And then a couple of days later I learned that there would be a funeral (of course – but when you're eleven you don't necessarily put these things together – and what's a funeral, anyway?) My brother and I couldn't go, of course – we were too young. We had our nanny, Katie, and mother thought that it would be OK to leave the two of us at the house with her for a couple of hours - although this would be the first time that that happened.

Some of the out-of-town family members had gathered at our house before departing for the funeral. It seemed to be a festival without the festivity. Ma had an unimaginably big family, most of whom I had never seen before, and they had arrived from all around the Cape Province. I heard the names of little towns that I had never heard of before, and strange faces that I had never seen before, who pronounced those names. There was much

bustle and noise, with everyone in smart clothes, and then suddenly someone announced that it was time to go and they all trooped out.

Mother turned to me just before she stepped out. "Now, don't you go answering the door for anyone at all while we're out" she admonished me, with Katie looking on. "And the same goes for you, Katie. If anyone comes to the door, you just stay quiet as a mouse. Don't go to the door. Don't talk. Don't move until you're sure that the visitor has left."

This message was so unusual and was delivered with such emphasis that we listened to mom with eyes as big as saucers. What did she fear so much? What could be so dangerous? What danger could be so imminent, on this very ordinary morning?

So the adults left and suddenly it was quiet, and after a while my brother and I resumed playing, although every now and then we'd cast a nervous glance at the front door but eventually we stopped doing that, too. Katie was somewhere else in the house.

And then it happened.

The doorbell rang, and we froze, as we were instructed to do. There was a breathless pause that seemed to go on for a long time. The front door was a very solid, heavy old door – so heavy, in fact, that the massive brass hinges consisted of moving components that ran on little brass ball-bearings. The upper part of the door contained a circle of thick stained glass with a lead-inlaid motif in red, blue and green. Through that glass I could see the hulking silhouette of a very big man. I waited for the figure to go away, but it didn't.

Minutes passed.

Suddenly the door shook with three heavy blows: They reverberated through the entrance hall and down the corridor. "Come on! I know you're there! Open up!" cried a guttural voice.

Clearly, Katie was not going to oblige and she remained frozen to the floor. If anyone was going to do anything, it would have to be me. As if drawn to the door by some greater force, I opened up and was confronted by a sight from a horror movie. A huge creature stood there, in a grey coat, his face a mess of scars and boils and his hands the size of shovels. My throat went dry and I couldn't speak. My brother peered out from behind me.

In a surprisingly gentle voice the creature asked, "Is jou ma hier?" ("is your mother here?"). She wasn't. So now my brother and I were going to die alone, probably ripped limb from limb, possibly eaten. When I didn't answer he said, "Dis OK. Ek sal wag" and ever so gently he pushed the door out of my hand, slipped past me into the house, found the lounge, and sat himself down. He sat there, completely still and silent, while we looked on, dumbfounded and frozen.

Eventually he turned to look at us, studied us curiously, and then started to speak. He told us this story. He spoke slowly, in English, in a thick, low, guttural voice – really low, like a bass instrument – and we listened, compelled, transfixed.

He introduced himself. He said that his name was Stefaan Visser. He said that he was mom's brother. I had my reservations about that since I'd never heard his name before, but there was no way that I was going to argue with him.

This was the gist of his story:

Stefaan entered this world in a barren, godforsaken stretch of the red-earthed Karoo, among the black, lightning-scorched rocks and the koppies of a moonscape which seared itself into memory. Such a bleak beginning does things to a boy, and the silence of that lonely expanse set the tone for his life. Like his brother Rex, he left home during World War II: he joined the South African Army as an ambulance driver. He went "up North" with the army to Abyssinia, and he never returned to the Karoo.

After the war, he shoveled coal into the boilers of the great steam-turbines of the ships which plied the route between Southampton and the East. Being in the boiler room he may not have seen much of the sea while under way, but he knew every port on every coast.

He had children. He was vague about that.

He had lost a finger in a fast-moving hawser chain, and his face was scarred in a boiler room explosion, a long time ago.

He was not a reflective man and he lost no time in hope for the future or memories of the past. Where he laid his head tonight, that was his home: the meal before him (if there was one) was both the best and the worst he had ever had. His only clothes were the ones which he wore, and his only money – why, it was the money he had just spent.

In his youth he had been a blind force, like the rush of a river in flood; he towered ominously over others, and they were, mostly, wise enough to read the signals and get out of his way. He had no friends other than immediate company, no loyalty to anyone or anything other than his own simple needs, and he belonged nowhere other than where he was.

Hours went by. I don't think I breathed in all that time, I swear. Finally, I heard a key in the lock, and mom's voice, and I could feel air in my lungs again. She was saying something to my dad as they came in, but as she passed the lounge, she must have sensed something because my brother and I were standing there so strangely, and then she saw the creature. She stopped in mid-sentence and froze in the lounge entrance.

Suddenly he was on his feet, a pleading look in his eyes. His manner was apologetic, humble – this terrible creature was bowed and subservient, and I had no idea what the hell was going on.

My brother and I were shooed out of the room with whispers and gestures, but we hid in the dining room and I overheard snatches of an angry, whispered conversation, the voices rising and falling and loaded with all sorts of emotions which I did not understand. I peeked round the corner. My mother was snatching bundles of cash notes out of her handbag and shoving them into the hands of the creature. She was very angry, her gestures were full of anger and contempt.

Then he shuffled out of the house, down the path, and out of sight.

After some hesitation mom sat my brother and me down in the kitchen and told us about her brother Stefaan, who we had never seen or even heard of before.

"He's not really a bad man" she said, "but he's not good. Don't let him in here again and never talk to him. Do you understand?"

Oh, we did, we sure did.

Barring one more occasion, I never saw him again.

I saw him for the second and last time in 1973. Again, it was a death that drew Stefaan in. My Oupa Visser had just died in Mossel Bay, the funeral was over and everyone was gathering at Ouma and Oupa's little house above the harbor. Everyone was on the stoep. Relatives had come from all over the country and we were meeting distant family who had never even seen each other before. We were a huge crowd. Families were large, and Oupa Visser was a Patriarch, a powerful giant of a man, well over 6 foot, with a full head of silver-white hair and a white "bokbaard" (goatee). Even in his eighties, his back was as straight as a ramrod, and he carried his "kierie" (walking stick) more as a weapon than for support. My entire childhood, I had pictured God like this.

We had gathered on the stoep out front and somehow the occasion had taken on a festive air, rather than mournful: new friendships were being forged, old ties were being renewed, and generally the simple joy of knowing that you were part of a clan, was quite tangible. Suddenly, there was a hush in the crowd and a chill in the air. There was a stir near the outer door of the stoep, then the door opened, and the face of the creature appeared. It is impossible for me to say why this man had this effect on the family. I simply don't know enough about him. The young people there certainly couldn't have known him and I suspect that many of the older people were in the same position but the attitude of those who did, seemed to affect everyone.

The crowd parted for him in silence and he walked through them until he reached Ouma. She was a small, bent little old lady and he towered over her. She took his huge hand and led him into the house. No-one followed them.

Nervously, the conversation on the stoep renewed, with frequent furtive glances at the door which Ouma and Stefaan had passed through. A long time passed. Eventually Ouma reappeared, followed by Stefaan carrying a huge cardboard box. I learned later that all Oupa's clothes were in the box. They were to be Stefaan's inheritance. One by one, everyone on the stoep took out their wallets and purses, cash was collected, and that, too, was put into the cardboard box. Stefaan did not look at anybody. Once again, the crowd parted and he made his way through the outer gate, down the steps into the street, and eventually out of sight.

I never saw him again.

I do not know whether he lives or not. I once heard from my mother that he had a daughter who lived in Port Elizabeth who looked after him but I really can't say if that was true.

Those two great truths – the visitations of the Angel of Death, and the fact that a family can turn their backs on one of their own – those two, have somehow remained intertwined in my mind all my life. Is that an inappropriate association?

I don't know

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**Written by Harry Friedland**

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