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The Sand in the Glass: A Journey Through the Writing Process

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“To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.”
—J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

I. The Decision

Two Days Before My Birthday

Is it wrong to wish this wake were open casket? I just don’t wanna say goodbye to a box—an expensive one at that. No matter how vacant that body inside that glamorized box may be, it’s always better to see their face once more—heavily made up or not.

I guess it is weird, if not wrong to think about that—I don’t even know this man. I’m not a necrophiliac or anything; dropping into wakes is just a new hobby I have picked up in the last month or so. I have become pretty accustomed to loss. Coming to these, I can bring it back. That feeling. I can latch on to it. Why it happens, why it matters, why I need to keep feeling it again and again. I guess it’s more of a practice than a hobby. I mean, I’m studying at these, too. So I pore over the obits ‘til I find one far enough away so that I have very little chance of running into someone. I even established a few rules for this practice, just to null my anxieties:

1. Funeral parlor must be at least two towns/cities away.
2. Never visit the same parlor twice in one week.
3. Always stay up to date on social media. People always post about that stuff.

Today it is Mr. Truffaut’s wake, the flavor of the week, or the day I guess since I went to one yesterday too. Yesterday was Danroy Dillon, age 6, of Cambridge. Life never gave him a chance, or rather death didn’t. He drowned in the local pool so it was highly publicized—you can imagine the turnout. I had to park a few blocks away. I’m surprised there wasn’t a river of tears guiding me to the funeral home. Even though there is no way everyone paying their respects knew the kid, at least 90% of them were letting it

pour. They were all thinking about the child, and how awful it is to die so young. I was thinking about the mother, and how her hurt is much worse than her son's. That was the only one I almost watered up at, but I didn't. Nothing really fazes me since Maddie. However, today is Mr. Truffaut's day, and I highly doubt I'll be shedding tears here.

Mark Anderson Truffaut, age 50, of Pawtucket passed away on May 25th, 2014. He was the beloved husband of Tanya (Mallett) Truffaut.

Nearly every obituary starts out like this. Age, place of residence, and your immediate family you're leaving behind. Sometimes it says who your parents are/were, and sometimes it gives a little description of how you went: "So-and-so died peacefully surrounded by his/her loving family on such-and-such date at such-and-such hospital." Mr. Truffaut's didn't say any of that.

After we get the basic and necessary info, we get a glimpse of their lives and legacies in paragraph form. Mr. Truffaut kept it simple. No kids and worked in retail his whole life. Supposedly he had a movie collection of over 3,000 DVDs.

Lastly, is the logistical part of the obit: the time and place. The last bit of an obituary let's the public know where the services are being held and the visitation hours—which is how I wound up here, in Pawtucket, at some random man's wake.

So today, Mr. Truffaut wound up being my lucky winner. I took a peek in the visitation room where the casket is to assess the situation—moderate line moving at moderate pace, and a disappointing closed casket. I head back in to the lobby shifting past people who are only hanging around so they don't feel bad for just stopping by. This is one of the nicest parlors I've seen. It has vaulted ceilings, which is rare—most of these places are more claustrophobic than the coffin in *Buried*. There's certainly some ornament around the doorframes: hand-carved sunflower-like designs. And if it weren't for the golden flowers bordering the crimson carpet you'd swear we were walking into the Oscars.

Then I spot it—the unparalleled part to this ordeal—the collage. Visualize this: a woman has just lost her husband and is charged with the task of putting together a photo version of his legacy. Her cheeks sting from the salt running endlessly down her face. Her hands tremble as she rifles through bins and boxes of old pictures of vacations and birthdays and candid's. Her mouth wants to gasp at every memory-inducing snapshot. She keeps going and gasping and gutting it out until finally, she spots it. That one picture that halts her tears. That one picture that turns her sulk into a simper. That one picture that makes her say, "Now that is the man I love." And the process becomes much easier, as she picks and chooses more pictures to adhere to the poster board and voila; a person's life boiled down to photographs on a decorated board. She smiles, admiring her work and marveling at time. Then she cries again.

But I wouldn't know. I didn't make one for Barb, Uncle Jethro, Vince, Maddie's dad, or Maddie. I don't imagine it will be the same scenario when I make my own. But without a doubt it is my favorite part. Just above choosing your tombstone and epitaph. It's a literal snapshot(s) of a person's life. How did they live? What did they love? Who did they love? Who loved them? I wonder if Mr. Truffaut would appreciate the picture of him from the 70s with his thigh-bearing shorts and bristly mustache cruising on a Peugeot. Maybe he'd get a kick out of it. He might even enjoy the Hollywood stickers from Michael's slapped on throughout the collage. There's a film reel, an ADMIT ONE ticket stub, a tub of popcorn, and my personal favorite the mini clapperboard.

I can feel breath on my neck; I've been standing here a little too long. Shirts and ties and well-dressed women crane and crouch to get a view of the collage. Guess it's their favorite part, too. It's time to grab a spot in line.

The visitation room is off to the right of the lobby. I weave through the slight traffic 'til the casket is in sight. I hop in the line to my immediate left—the casket is settled at the back wall surrounded with lilies, carnations and chrysanthemums. Chairs are set up like pews but much emptier than a Sunday service. There's about six people in front of me, but two of the spots in the queue are occupied by couples (one old, one young) that will presumably kneel together. So I'm only three turns away.

This routine goes as followed: slowly step in front of the casket wearing a somber, stern, or thoughtful face (normally men go with stern, while women go with somber—thoughtful is unisex); take a few seconds to stand in front of the body/casket while reflecting; when ready, sign a cross to God, and kneel; take your time or pray or feign thinking and praying; stand and make your way to the condolences line, I like to call it. The deceased loved ones stand along the wall opposite the line and adjacent to the casket. Usually it's the immediate family, but there are exceptions like a Godfather or something. I have picked out a few common characters found in the condolences line. Most of the time there are two or three of these: the weepy one, the silent one, the drugged-up one, the awkward joke-cracking one, and the expressionless one. Some people blaze through this line with a swift handshake and a "My condolences," or an "I'm sorry for your loss." That's my technique. "My condolences," has become a sort of mantra for me. Not everyone is like me though. Some people hug, and I mean hug. They hold on to that sucker for as long as they can. Some people feel it necessary to explain exactly how they know the person who has passed. Then the significant other goes, "Oh that's right! He/she has told me all sorts of stories about you two!" whether they mean it or not.

Before I know it, I'm up to bat. I step up with my hands folded at my beltline gazing thoughtfully at Mr. Truffaut's final bed. I'm not really reflecting though, that's for after. Instead I'm studying the casket, and the cherry wood. No matter how finely polished and finished it may be, you can still see the grain—that's something I've always liked about wood. And then, I'm ready.

Forehead, lips, chest, left shoulder, right shoulder. Step forward. Kneel.

Hey there, Mr. Truffaut. I'm Cullen Hue. I don't know you, and you don't know me, but that's OK. I wanted to tell you I'm glad people came out for you. Maybe they didn't expect you to leave so soon, and I doubt anyone wanted you to go, but everyone seems calm about it. I hope this speaks to your demeanor—hopefully you were calm in life, and

death too. I can't really be calm about this stuff. Congratulations on making it to the finish line. Hope you enjoyed the race. Thanks for letting me feel this again. Take care.

Stand up. Turn around. Lose the thoughtful face and toss on a sympathetic one. Extend hand to each person in line. "My condolences," again, "My condolences." It's only Mrs. Truffaut (his wife) and Mrs. Truffaut (presumably his mother) in the line today. That was easy. The good thing about this whole technique is that nobody asks you who you are. They're too caught up in their emotions and it's too quick of an exchange to notice you have no idea who this kid trying to empathize with you is. Maybe that night they'll ask each other, hey, who was the strapping young lad with sandy hair and sky blue tie? And when they can't remember, they'll just move on. Besides, they're just happy people came to mourn.

"Cullen?" *Snap*. I'm out of my head. I was on autopilot, clearly, since I am already back in the lobby staring down at pair of black flats. I look up. My body knows before I do; my brain beats harder than my heart. Emmaline Dowd. Honors English and History, A block and D block. Her eyes were pink and puffy like she had finally finished crying fifteen minutes ago. I can't move.

"I didn't know you knew my Godfather," she puzzled. She continued on because I didn't. "He was my dad's best friend—how, how have you been? We've missed you in class these past few months." She scooped me up into an embrace. My back spasms when she touches me—my arms won't leave my side. She lets go.

"I—you, you didn't post about this anywhere," I blurt out.

"What?"

"I have to go."

I turn and march through the tall, mahogany slab doors, trudge across the parking lot, hop in my jeep, and take off.

* * *

To say I'm rattled would be an understatement. That's the first time that has happened to me. Guess my rules were too thin—she definitely knows what's up now. Oh well, it's not like she's gonna see me again. I hope she doesn't tell anyone, but I guess she kind of has to. That's just a hobby of mine though, right? Everyone has their hobbies; mine just happen to have a common yet uncomfortable theme. Luckily, deep breathing exercises *do* work. In through my nose, out through my mouth and with a couple heaves of my chest the endorphins are flowing and my head is clear. This is my favorite time to reflect—autopilot driving is as easy as it gets. That makes me a hypocrite though; you should be safe in cars.

Mr. Truffaut led a simple life, yet he still had plenty of people there to mourn him. It was nothing like Danroy's crowd but that is to be expected—I didn't even go to Mr. Truffaut's at the peak visiting hours. That's quite telling though, isn't it? The amount of mourners you have? Through life we are kind of just gathering followers, fans, those who believe in your life, care about its outcomes and will miss you when you go. Maybe that's more of an accomplishment than what a lot of what cultures value—having a great job, getting the most girls, acquiring tons of money—maybe life should be about getting as many mourners as you can. Maddie had a lot. I think I'll have a good showing.

I snap out of it when I see the giant CVS sign out of my peripherals. When did I get on route 44? I jump into the left lane, toss on my blinker, pull into the parking lot and head inside.

The cashier is a kind old lady I've seen here before. She always has her pearl colored hair tied up in a ponytail with her leopard print glasses resting at the tip of her nose. Of course she has on her standard issue CVS navy blue polo with a red nametag reading:

SCARLETT

I always like to picture what Scarlett looked like in her twenties. She has a pretty face, slender-like, and her hair still has its shine so it must have been impeccable in her

prime. And not to mention, she isn't overweight so she must have been a fox back then. But with a name like Scarlett, how could she not be?

"And how do I have the pleasure of helping you today?" she asks as I step up to the counter.

"Just seeing if my pictures are developed. Cullen Hue."

"OK, lemme check." She steps over to the yellow Kodak counter and rifles through a drawer. Scarlett pulls out one of the cardboard photo holders. "Cullen, you said?"

"Right."

Scarlett waves it and nods in victory as she brings it up to the register.

"OK," she says, "that's gonna be \$20.49."

I only have a twenty. I hand it to her.

"Can I run out to my car and grab some change?" I ask.

She considers.

"Don't bother," she grins, digging into her pocket and pulls out two quarters. What a gal. "These for your Senior scrapbook? Been printing a lot of those lately."

"Not exactly," I reply. "But thanks a lot."

"You can even keep the penny," she says, beaming.

I nod and smile, grabbing my pictures and turning for the door.

"Have an excellent!" she calls after me. An excellent what, I ponder heading back to my Jeep.

* * *

Given my current habits, it's a good thing my family is so busy. They're my sister's taxi. If it isn't a soccer game, it's soccer practice, and if it's not practice it's specialized training. Then she's always begging for a ride to her friends and whatnot. My parents are always on the run so they eat out a lot too; what I'm getting at is, they're never home. Since I'm not at school either I have all day to do what I want like go to wakes, read Kubler-Ross, work on eulogies—the normal stuff.

Plus, it has given me time to master the art of paper basketball. I'm a regular Reggie Miller. Twenty-seven miserable drafts will do that to you; my trash is brimming with crumpled notebook paper.

*I feel like I have been dreading
this day my whole life. After all,
this man taught me—*

Crumple.

I sink another shot—at this point I'm just cushioning my shooting percentage. I have to get this thing perfect though; it's the eulogy for my dad. Oh, he's not dying or anything. In fact, he's probably healthier than me. But I can't let my words about my loved ones go unspoken again, even if I go before they do. Mom's is done, so is my sister's, but for some reason I'm stuck on my dad's. Two out of three eulogies are finished. That's solid, but there's still a lot to be done tonight. So what's left? I jotted down some stuff that I won't be able to take care of the arrangements myself, like my cemetery choice (Melrose, in Brockton), the funeral parlor (O'Keefe-Wade, in Taunton), and my playlist, which is as follows:

- The Permanent Rain by The Dangerous Summer
- Chelsea by The Dirty Heads
- Fix You by Coldplay
- Time of Your Life by Green Day
- Etc.

I still have to finish my collage, too. I'm not going to bother with a will, I don't have enough to give. I don't want to have a hand in who speaks either. Whoever wants to prepare something about me can do it. There will be no priest at my funeral either—even though I was baptized and got communion, I never really liked Christianity. It seemed too heavy handed. I'm putting my faith in the unknown. I don't know that there will be an afterlife, but a guy can dream right? Then I can find everyone. Especially Maddie. Then maybe we can live the life we planned together. Writer's block has got

the best of me, so I slide my chair over to the bed and where I spread out all the photos to conquer this collage.

I bought a royal blue poster board from Staples the other day—not one of those flimsy paper ones but one of those sturdy four-ply ones. I decided not to use any stickers or decals like Mr. Truffaut's. Instead I'll paste construction paper to the back of the photos to act as borders—blue on blue. Light blue like the sky and royal blue like my eyes.

From under the bed I grab a shoebox full of old photos of me as a little kid and through the years. The ones I developed today were much more recent, and I knew I would want them included. I made sure I had a pic with everyone I have lost (with the exception of Maddie's dad). There one with me and Barb at my 10th birthday party—she's giving me a huge smooch on the cheek while I cringe and resist. There's one of Uncle Jethro and me at a family Christmas party, his snagglepuss tooth very prominent. There's one of me and Vince and a couple of our other friends before high school posing like thugs—this is before our friendship kind of faded, I hope he'll forgive me when/if I see him again. Then of course there's the one of me and Maddie. Actually, there are a few.

There's a candid of us at her cousins wedding. We aren't even looking at each other, we are looking and smiling at something to our left. My arm's around her and Maddie is holding onto my tie and petting it like a dog. There's another from junior prom. You can't see Maddie's face but you can see her hair in an up-do shimmering and me struggling to slide the corsage onto her wrist. Just looking at my smile I can relive that happiness. I sort through the rest of the pictures until I find a few with my parents, a few of me as a tyke (one of me in a lion costume imitating a roar, one in my rat-tail phase, and one of me flying through the air in karate class when I was eight). Of course there's a couple with my sister and my hockey teams through the years. It's so tough to cater to everyone, and I don't want to cram the poster board too much. Regardless, a half an hour later and I'm done. I take a deep breath, in through my nose, out through my mouth, and I feel like I just took a heavy pair of shoulder pads off my shoulders. I

lean back in my chair, and look upon this legacy. I'm a fan. Have I accomplished anything really? I guess not. But look at these people. These people who love me and I love. I'm sorry to leave them, but I just have to know. What's next? Where did Maddie go?

Then, I'm ready. I know what how to write my dad's eulogy.

Everyone in the room look around. Look at all these people who cared about my father. I'm sure he cared about you too. I bet you never considered that one day you would have to bid him farewell. Maybe because it's such a scary thought that we ignore it. But I have a secret to tell you. Each and every one of you is going to be in my father's position one day. It is the only inevitable truth on this planet—that we will all die, and that all of our loved one's will die. I have been paralyzed by the thought of this day for quite some time. After all, my dad is literally half of me. But it's OK, I'm not here to bring you down. Knowing this fact is actually the most beautiful thing of all. Since we know that we are all going to be gone one day, we are forced to face living, and forced to love. I loved my dad, and I did not want to see him go, but there's a reason I'm not crying. It's because I am so glad I got to love him and learn from him. Thank you, dad. And thank you to everyone in the room for loving my dad and letting him love you. Take care everyone, especially you, dad.

And this time, I don't crumple it up. I seal it in an envelope and put it with the other eulogies and notes I've made about my arrangements on my desk. It's not time for any more decisions tonight. It's time for bed, before anyone gets home to ask me how my day was.

i.

We fought that day, me and Maddie. In the kitchen, in her living room, in the car—until I conceded. The transition out of the coveted honeymoon phase was made tougher by current circumstances. Her father had found himself in hospice care, which I knew was the equivalent of a white flag, but Maddie didn't. He had been sick for a while—Hepatitis C from an old tattoo—but hospice? That was a surprise. Maddie blamed herself, despite imploring him days on end to go get checked out. He hated the doctors though, that stubborn Italian; he brought on his own demise. There were episodes where he would pass out and have to be taken by an ambulance. He went

through some rehab and returned home, only to be couch ridden speaking in mumbles and half-hearted hellos. I found it tough to look him in the eyes; his weakness made me feel far too vulnerable. The declination continued until he wound up in the ICU, where it was determined his liver was deteriorating and had little hope. Hospice care was the only option. Maddie was adamant on me going with her that day, and quite frankly, I didn't feel comfortable. Of course I was resistant. A man on his deathbed—why the hell would he want me there? What gives me the right? I did my best not to go, but we had never fought like that before. Flailing hands, glaring eyes, names that I'd rather not repeat—it went all the way to the car. Slamming the steering wheel, punching the gas pedal, threats of pulling over—then out of nowhere I realized Maddie didn't want me to go, she needed me to go. I guess that's a part of love: stepping up for someone no matter what the circumstances are. You can't boil something so visceral like love down to one thing, but this was definitely an epiphany for me. So of course she had some spite, and it was the type of spite that yielded comments like "Well, you don't wanna go so just drop me off." She wanted my refusal to prove how much I cared—I knew she appreciated it. So together we went, stepping through the sliding doors into the chicken broth emanating cafeteria and the insufferable aroma cleaning products—I don't know if germs have a smell but the combination of smells in a hospital have to be the closest thing to it. Maddie knew where we were going, so she led the way up the elevator and down the hall. I can't help but look into people's rooms—you'd think they would keep the doors closed. I always have these tingles that refuse to go away, and I do my best not to breath in a hospital—short quick breaths to deflect anything nasty from getting at me. Then we entered the room. Maddie's mom was bent over her husband brushing something on his lips—I found out later it was to keep moisture on there for him. She never left his side and never let his lips dry, like an unending kiss. She gave me a half-hearted hello and hugged her daughter, who went straight to her father's side. I sat on the couch and perused the pamphlets. How to Console a Loved One, What Happens to the Body, etc., etc. These words didn't do what happened any justice. I sat in silence for the most part, until Maddie's brother Mark and his girlfriend showed up and we chatted about sports and whatnot. What do you talk about when there's a dying man in the room? That's when the priest came in and gave him his last

rites—I have no idea what he said, nor do I care, because who is this man to tell a dying man that he is forgiven and whatever else—the dying man has far more wisdom. A short while later, Maddie’s mom’s twin sister came. This is where everything began to happen. Maddie’s mom was still next to her husband whispering I love you, keeping his lips moist, and kissing his forehead. I was silent for the most part. Mark’s girlfriend and me sat on the couch by ourselves for the most part. I don’t know how to explain the next part. It was getting late. Maybe after nine. Maddie was sitting next to me on the couch. There was a lull in the room. I looked at her dad, jaundiced, unresponsive, being mourned already. Tears were just rolling down Maddie’s face. I felt a surge of, not energy, but spirit rise through my veins. I looked around—Mark had his girlfriend, Maddie’s mom had her sister, and Maddie, well, she had me. Chills ventured up from my toes through my spine. I turned to Maddie.

“Maddie,” I said softly. “Maddie. Go say goodbye to your dad.” She looked at me reluctantly. I nodded and nudged her forward. They crowded around Maddie’s dad with me, Mark’s girlfriend and Maddie’s mom’s sister in the background. I remember watching him, knowing that before my eyes, he was ascending somewhere. He was leaving his body. The body really is a vessel—Christianity got something right, I remember thinking. Like the pamphlet said, I saw him take his last breath, and that was that. I held on to Maddie as tight as I could. I hugged her mom and her brother for the first time. I stepped into the hall to call some friends, to call my parents. Regrettably I asked Maddie to take a walk. I needed to get out of there, to clear my head, but of course Maddie didn’t want to leave her dad. She had to figure out a way to accept that she could never speak, never get advice, never hug, never be mad at, never hear I love you from, ever again. I didn’t know how to help Maddie; I couldn’t help myself.

Here I was, 15 years old, witnessing someone die before my eyes. Some people can go their whole life without seeing a human life pass. Not only was I faced with my own mortality that inevitably I would die, but that I would have to see all of my loved ones die as well. That pain is much worse the pain of knowing you have to die. I have to watch my dad die, my mom die, hopefully not my sister die—I’d have to watch Maddie die. I couldn’t deal, couldn’t comprehend, couldn’t handle it. We stayed there for a

while. I don't know how long. Maddie's mom asked the nurse to stay with him until they took the body to the morgue (though she didn't phrase it this way). She didn't want him to be alone.

We left as somber as they come. I tried to hold Maddie's hand but she wasn't having it. Her mom said she would let me sleep over. That was thoughtful of her. I don't remember driving home—I remember screaming my favorite song at the top of my lungs, tears streaming down, smashing the steering wheel. I got home and knew what I needed. My dad was standing just inside the door like he knew what I was thinking. I latched on to him and hugged him harder than I ever did. He hugged me back, and told me it was OK. I knew it wasn't. I don't think he understood the gravity of the situation.

A few days later, I smoked some weed with a friend. I sat there and closed my eyes. I pictured my dad, his body vacant, lying in a casket.