

# Obits

By: Noah Regan

“I’m sure that you’ve heard the news about our colleague and friend Ryan Hannigan this morning. He was one of our most faithful employees. 43 years he spent here. It’s unbelievable that he’s gone...I look across the office and expect to see him sitting at his desk. It’s incredible to think that he will never be seated there again. He was a man of few words but when he spoke, by God you listened. We grew up together you know. We made a pact when we were both twenty-two, fresh out of college and unemployed. We agreed that the first one to get a job would do everything within his power to get the other one a job. I was the first one to get hired here as a beat reporter covering city politics. Shortly thereafter I got Ryan in here. Employee picnics, company softball games, his first marriage, his divorce from his bitch of an ex-wife, his second marriage to Ellen, I was there by his side the entire time. Ryan was one of the good guys. They’re harder to come by than you think, which brings me to why I called you into my office. Eli, I’m offering you Ryan’s old position.”

“Thank you sir, I’m honored, believe me. But ah...sir, I already have a position here.”

“No you don’t, we’re cutting the theater and arts section of the paper.”

“What! I- I- nobody told me that they...”

“Don’t take it personal. We’ve had to make cuts across the board, and we can no longer afford to pay you to sit in the front row and critique faggy theater club plays, one man shows, or inform our readers about some Dutch artist who paints portraits of the Virgin Mary with menstrual blood.”

“Balthazar Johannes? The man is a genius!”

“Nobody gives a shit Eli. I mean no offence. But printing stories like that only inundates our mailroom with letters from pissed off retirees who threaten to cancel their subscription. We don’t need that! Readership has been declining sharply every year for the past seven years. Now, you’re a good writer. That’s why I’m not kicking you to the curb. Ryan Hannigan was a fixture here for over three decades. The man was practically family. And he was good at what he did, and never missed a deadline. You remind me a little of him. I’m giving you a chance of a lifetime here, Eli.”

A pregnant pause followed as Eli was still reeling from his lost position.

“Do you need to mull it over? How about a *Redbull*?”

Eli’s boss and editor-in-chief was not the *Redbull* swilling type. B. John Brant was a large formidable man in his mid sixties who just a handful of years ago would offer people that visited his office a glass of moderately priced scotch. But feeling old and out of touch with his increasingly younger employees, B. John Brant decided to contemporize by offering energy drinks in his office. He also began drinking cappuccinos in the morning as opposed to his usual black coffee. He traded in his large *Yukon* SUV for a compact sedan hybrid. He replaced his mahogany desk with a minimalist design

glass top “work area” with an aluminum tube frame. He missed his old table. The glass top was always cold under his forearms.

None of these things made him feel any younger or more relatable to his employees. He had started off in the journalism business chain-smoking unfiltered *Camels* in front of a typewriter. His first story was Martin Luther King Jr. speaking at the City Assembly. That was back when the newspaper was called simply *The Rockford Star*. Then in the nineties, when brevity was hip, *The Rockford Star* became *The Star*. The font was presented in a grungy, underground print text. As a child, Eli had first been introduced to the paper that he would one day work for when it was in this stage. Once the new millennium rolled around it reverted back to *The Rockford Star*. With this change came a more professional journalistic aesthetic, one that would look longstanding, established, a trusted news source in the face of the upstart, unestablished internet news sites. Then most recently the name was changed once again to *The Rockford Star Daily*, even though it had always been a daily newspaper. It was a way to remind people that *The Rockford Star* was current, up to date, and always there, even though Eli’s generation had fully latched onto up-to-the-minute digital news updates by corporate news agencies’ websites, along with unqualified pseudo journalists and bloggers that worked out of their mother’s basements.

Mr. Brant knew that he was the last of a dying breed. He would soon be irrelevant. B. John Brant was the dinosaur that could see the asteroid bearing down on the earth.

“I’ll take Hannigan’s position, Mr. Brant.”

“You made a wise choice Eli. You can get out of that shitty little workroom and move your stuff to Hannigan’s old desk. You couldn’t ask for a better spot. There’s a bathroom adjacent, you’re right next to the copy machine and you won’t have to share a workspace with that weird kid that never makes eye contact with me and smells like pizza rolls. Don’t let me down. I don’t want to regret giving you this chance. This is Ryan Hannigan’s life work, his identity, and now I’m handing you the reins since he can’t. Don’t fuck up.”

While half seated atop his desk, Mr. Brant leaned in towards Eli who was sitting before him. Placing one hand on Eli’s shoulder he said, “Smile! You look like I just ran over your puppy.” He forced an extra wide salt and pepper bearded smile. Perhaps to remind Eli how to do it just in case he forgot.

“I’m excited for this opportunity Mr. Brant. And I’m honored that you chose me. Just a quick question, what did Hannigan do here?”

“Obituaries, Eli! Are you daft or frazzled son?”

“I’m sorry sir. You won’t regret this.”

With nervous apologetic bows after giving Mr. Brant a dead-fish handshake, Eli exited Mr. Brant’s office backwards like a Japanese geisha that just performed a green tea ceremony.

Eli shut his boss’ door and stood before it looking down at his feet trying to catch the breath that had just recently left him. While shoegazing he noticed that the office was much quieter than it usually was. He turned and glanced around the temperature-controlled environment, and looked at everyone looking at him. His coworker’s eyes quickly returned to their work before them. Eli walked back to the cramped twelve by ten office that housed all of the forgettable twenty-somethings that either reviewed the

movies and music that the *Rockford Star Daily* didn't want to pay the Associated Press for, or reported the *What's Up* section in the Thursday paper, or the *Pulse* insert in the Sunday edition. They were also the de facto IT department since they were young and knew how to pirate MP3s and open a *Gmail* account. Tyler, who by the way *did* always smell like pizza rolls, was the first to confront Eli.

"Dude, did you get shit-canned?"

"What?!?! No, well I lost my position I guess, but I got Hannigan's."

"No shit? What did he do here?"

"Obituaries, I guess."

"Wow! Fucker's corpse isn't even cold and you're taking his job?"

"It's not like I asked for it. It was either that or the unemployment line."

"They're cutting your old position all together?!?! Shit, I was going to ask if you could interview my cousin's ska band to give them a little publicity."

"Well thanks for being so selfless, Tyler. You've got a lot of tact."

Eli began to collect his personal items. His metal *Swingline* stapler that he was lucky to snag (most everyone else have the cheap plastic kind), assorted pens and pencils, half dead philodendron that received little sunlight since the shades are always drawn, a pump bottle of hand sanitizer, his first article that he had ever written, *Rockford Player's Performance of Sound of Music Isn't Music To My Ears*, his Mark Twain quote of the day calendar and an assortment of other sundries. He left only random pages of paper, colored paper clips and loose change at the bottom of his desk drawers. Eli was now realizing that he had accumulated little in his three years working for *The Rockford Star Daily*.

He made his way across the office to a modest wooden desk with a knockoff Tiffany lamp, and a wooden office chair that looked like its straight out of *Citizen Kane*. The chair had a well worn seat pad that still had a very distinct ass indentation, as if the ghost of Ryan Hannigan made it into work and was continuing with his regular day.

As Eli began to unpack his paper box full of personal belongings, he noticed everyone glancing at him, giving him scornful stares as if he were pissing on Ryan Hannigan's gravestone. Once he sat down he surveyed the working area. There was an ancient AM radio that appeared to have come out of a bomb shelter. It had a clothes hanger for an antenna, and a strategically placed strip of duct tap kept the double D batteries in place.

*This must have been what I could hear whenever I was in this side of the office,* Eli thought.

Whenever Eli had been walking to the bathroom he could hear the muffled voices of talking heads haranguing the listener audience about the dangers of leftist ideology and the latent socialism that is occurring in this country.

Eli felt incredibly uncomfortable sitting at Ryan Hannigan's desk, surrounded by all the things that he had amassed in his forty-year tenure at the *Rockford Star*. Feeling self conscious, Eli glanced over each shoulder before opening the top right desk drawer. He slowly pulled the brass plated handle, and leaned over to see what the drawer had to offer.

"Eli!" Mr. Brant said in a jovial voice while gripping Eli's shrunken shoulders. A bolt of shock and surprise ran through him as he quickly shut the top right drawer. "I see you're making yourself at home. Great. Whatever of Hannigan's that looks personal or

collectable or sentimental just toss in an empty paper box for his wife to pick up, anything else you don't want you can toss in the garbage."

*I guess Mr. Brant never did seem like the sentimental type*, Eli thought.

"Now I don't want you to feel like you're in over your head. It's really a cake job when you break it down. You'll receive daily emails for you to go through, either from a funeral home that will have the very basic information and a faxed copy of the signed death certificate. Those emails usually contain age, when they died, where they died, who's preparing the body, which cemetery, visitation hours, memorial service hours...just the facts. You use that to type up the death notice. That is usually about 50 to 60 words or less.

"Then a day or two after the death notice we print the obit. You don't even have to do the heavy lifting. Usually the funeral director types them up for you. You just need to edit the obit, and make sure that it fits in the allotted space on A12. As you know the obit will contain how the deceased passed, if the family wants it printed, who will be the pallbearers, and in some cases who will be the honorary pallbearers, surviving members of the family, preceded in death by, then all of the background info from birth to death that add up to about 250 words. Unless the family opted for the larger package, then it can go up to 350 words. And the art department will frame the obit with a nice black border. It's as simple as that Eli. If you have any questions you can bother me."

"Mr. Brant?"

He was already ten paces away from Eli. He stopped his long stride and turned back around. "Yes, Eli?"

"So you're telling me that all I have to do is proof read obituaries?"

"Pretty much. But don't take your responsibility lightly. The families of the deceased are very emotional and the last thing they want to see is a mistake. They don't want their war hero father mistakenly referred to as "she" in the obit. Also, you have to make for damn sure that the picture matches the write up. That means properly labeling the photos as they come in and proofing the section before we print."

Mr. Brant finished his monologue with a smack of his hand on Eli's back,

"Listen Eli, you're competent, this job isn't complicated. You'll do fine."

Eli wondered if Mr. Brant thought he was such a good writer to keep around, why did he give him the position in which he did the least amount of writing.

After the dust settled from Mr. Brant's visit, Eli went back to riffling through a dead man's possessions until he was bothered by Tyler.

"Nice layout, Eli! You know you're right next to the exhaust vent of the printer? You're going to sweat to death in the summer."

"I'll manage."

"You've got a nice view of Melissa though."

Just a few desks away sat Melissa Harrison, the food critique. It surprised Eli at first when he found out that Melissa was the food critique. He imagined food critics as middle aged, overweight women who sit alone at restaurants and go home to their cats. Melissa was quite the opposite. She was Eli's age and was in fine shape. She wasn't your typical foodie. She had a degree from *LeCordon Bleu*, but no place to use it. With no restaurants except McDonalds hiring, Melissa got a job critiquing food at the same restaurants that wouldn't hire her.

“Check it out, Eli. Melissa’s wearing her pencil skirt. That outfit is my favorite, just after her pinstriped slacks. Girls always underestimate how much a pencil skirt accentuates their ass. It’s spectacular!”

“Did you have a reason why you came over, or was it just to ogle Melissa’s ass?”

“Oh yeah, remember my EMT buddy Tracy?” Tyler said.

“Tracy, you mean the guy that can’t meet a girl without telling her how he resuscitated a little girl that drowned at a birthday party?” Eli asked.

“Yeah.”

“Did you ever double check to see if he’s lying?” Eli said.

“Dude, he’s an EMT, he saves people all the time.”

“Well, the two times I’ve hung out with him, I’ve had to endure that story both times. I’m just saying he uses his heroic tale to get himself laid.” Eli said.

“Well, there’s a little girl still breathing because of what he did...so, you can’t argue with results. Wouldn’t it be fucked up if years later he tried to get laid by the same little girl he saved, using the same story about how he saved her?”

“Yeah, I guess. Why did you bring him up?”

“Oh yeah, Tracy told me that Hannigan died jerking-off in the shower.” Tyler said excitedly.

“Thanks for the info, but I really didn’t need to know that about him...wait, how does he know that Hannigan was jacking-off?”

“He said he died of an acute myocardial infarction. A heart attack! Tracy says that a heart attack is usually brought on by strenuous physical activity. Ryan was jerking-off in his shower and keeled over. I guess it happens more than you think. You only hear about it when a guy is shoveling snow in his driveway, or some such shit.”

“Huh. Well thanks for contributing to Hannigan’s already wonderful legacy.”

“I thought it was interesting...so how *does* it feel to be the new Hannigan?”

“Pretty damn strange. It feels like I’m taking over his life. I hardly knew the man. He never said *hello* to me in the hallways. He always had a pissed look on his face. He didn’t seem like a very happy guy. Mr. Brant was talking about him like he was the greatest thing to walk the earth. There must have been more to him than a crappy AM radio, some packets of artificial sweetener, a half of a bottle of cologne and punch cards from *The Subshop*,” Eli said while digging through an open desk drawer.

“Well, one thing’s for sure, he liked to rub one out in the shower before work.”

“Could you stop talking about him like that?” Eli said.

“What do you care?”

“The man’s dead. I think we should show a little respect is all.”

“Look at you.”

“What?”

“You spend five minutes as the new obits editor and suddenly you have this respect for the dead?” Tyler said.

“I just don’t think it’s necessary to be so crass is all.”

“I’m going to assume that “crass” isn’t a compliment.”

“You would assume correctly.”

“Well, I’ll leave you to your work. God, I’m jealous of your view. It kills me. You’re not even going to enjoy it.” Tyler said while admiring Melissa as she sat at her

desk, sorting through post-it notes with scribbles on them. “Hey Eli, do you think if I brought in my webcam from home you could point it at—”

“I’m going to stop you right there. No.”

“When it comes to writing *your* obituary, ‘considerate’ will not be mentioned.”

“Yeah, well ‘creepy’ *will* be mentioned in yours.”

***“I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.”***

**-Mark Twain**

The next morning Mr. Brant walked over to Eli’s desk cradling the elbow and arm of an obviously bereaved woman who was giving slight “*hellos*” and signs of recognition to the older employees of *The Rockford Star Daily*.

“Eli, I’d like you to meet Mrs. Hannigan. Mrs. Hannigan this is Eli Tims, he’s the talented young writer who took over Ryan’s position.”

She reached out her pale, frail left hand which Eli, being right handed, clumsily shook with his left.

“Young Eli was more than willing to take up where Ryan left off.”

Eli nodded his head in congruence with Mr. Brant’s, all the while feeling like a fake, phony liar.

“Eli, Mrs. Hannigan is here to retrieve some of Ryan’s belongings.”

“Oh, sure! I have them sitting in a paper box,” Eli said while searching beside him, looking for the sad, half full cardboard box that contained the life of Ryan Hannigan.

“Thank you John, if you don’t mind, I’d like to have a word with this young man here,” said Mrs. Hannigan.

“Of course, Ellen. Be sure to swing by my office before you leave.”

Mr. Brant walked away, constantly turning back to look at Eli as if he were afraid that he would say something insensitive or stupid.

“What was your name again?”

“Eli. And rest assured I’ll do my best to fill your husband’s shoes. It’s quite a lot to learn but I think I’m catching on fast.”

“Ryan hated his job.”

“Uh...”

“Don’t feel bad, but he really did. I’d have to rally him to get out of bed each morning just so he would show up for work.”

Eli sat there in silence. Not knowing if it was appropriate for him to nod his head in agreement.

“Ryan never liked John either. He considered him a blowhard. But I’m sure you already knew that.”

Eli, now feeling pressured, gave a slight nod, if only to recognize that he was listening.

“Well, at any rate Mrs. Hannigan, I have your husband’s things here for you.”

Mrs. Hannigan took one quick glance into the box and said, “Throw it out. Ryan wouldn’t have wanted me to keep any of that junk.”

Eli looked into the box of junk and silently agreed.

“The reason I stopped by Eli is to drop off Ryan’s obituary.”

“It’s already written?”

“He wrote it years ago.”

She handed it to Eli. He looked at the aptly written paragraphs illustrating Ryan Hannigan’s life. The first thing that Eli noticed is that it was too long for a regular obit, but knew that Mr. Brant wouldn’t have a problem with that. Stuck to the top of the sheet of paper was a hastily written scribble on a post-it note that said *October 15,*

*Natural Causes.*

That brief note was Mrs. Hannigan finishing the work that her husband couldn’t.

Mrs. Hannigan also handed over a photo of Ryan. It was a photo that was at least a decade old, Eli surmised by noting the lesser amount of gray hair. Eli noticed the same downtrodden look upon Hannigan’s face and wondered if he was ever happy in his life. He imagined Hannigan bungee jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge with the same apathetic mug.

“You can just crop me out of the shot can’t you?”

“Sure, Mrs. Hannigan. That won’t be a problem.”

“Right, then. It was nice to meet you...”

“Eli.”

“Sure.”

Before Eli could say another word Mrs. Hannigan was traversing the building back to Mr. Hannigan’s office. Eli had so many questions for her. She could have spent the day with him and he wouldn’t have the fortitude to ask her. Questions such as, “was Hannigan happy?” “Would he live this life again?” “Should I be stepping into his life right where he left off?” “Did he ever smile once?” and “Did he even know who I was?”

But he didn’t. Eli was left with an old printout sheet of paper that contained the biography that would most likely match his own in forty years, and a portrait of a scowling mug that couldn’t pick Eli’s face out of a line-up.

Eli couldn’t get over the thought of a man writing his own obituary. Granted Hannigan did stare at other people’s obituaries for 35 years. Yet, writing your own seemed so grim, he thought.

He wondered why he did it. Did Mr. Hannigan not trust the funeral director? Was he worried that the facts would get fudged if anyone else did it? Was it to save money?

Hannigan summarized his entire life except the closing chapter. It bothered Eli greatly. He questioned if there was some sort of therapy behind writing your own obituary.

That night Eli planted himself in front of his computer at home and began constructing his own obituary. What he began to write strangely began to take the shape

of a suicide letter. So he erased what he had and started anew. Employing what he'd learned on the job, Eli began retelling his life story in six hundred words or less. Starting with the nascent notable facts (i.e. birthplace, parents, education) and building toward his present life.

Eli Tims was born August 14<sup>th</sup> 1989 in Rockford, IL, the son of William and Ellen (Broderick) Tims. He graduated from Thomas Jefferson High School in 2007 and attended North Central College in Naperville, IL.

Eli began employment at The Rockford Star Daily at the age of 22...

...Eli enjoyed the challenges at work that each day brought.

Once Eli became settled in his work it became business as usual. A couple weeks had passed and he had grown accustomed to his duties. It was boring to him.

Death notices would arrive through his email. Eventually the obituary would follow from one of the four funeral parlors in the Rockford area. There was Heinemann Funeral Home, who was always late with their death notices and obituaries; Fitzgerald and Sons Funeral Home and Chapel, who always seemed to compose the best obituaries; Arlington-Hayes Crematorium, who wrote just as good of obits as Fitzgerald, but received much less business. Then there was Tranquil Gardens Funeral Service, which had the image of a fly-by-night operation. No one went there, unless they were broke when they died.

People questioned Tranquil Gardens' practices. There were rumors of them using bargain embalming fluid and pulling out gold crowns with needle-nose pliers before the body was buried. Eli didn't know if these rumors were true or not. What he did know is that the rumors had an affect on Tranquil Gardens' business because he rarely edited anything from them.

The names of the fresh deaths filled Eli's inbox each morning.

Edna Kehe, 88, natural causes  
Michael Greoschel, 56, heart attack  
Timothy Hudson, 72, heart attack  
Jon Clark, 72, stroke  
Andrew Kinney, 52, house fire  
Marley Kinney, 48, house fire  
Albert Fink, 74, struck by a metro bus  
Anne Molseed, 83, natural causes



David Squires, 78, lung cancer  
Mark O'Halloran, 91, natural causes...

...and so on and so forth. They quickly began to lose meaning. They began to lose an identity. They were simply names and ages. Not people. People die every day and the universe moves forward undisturbed.

It wasn't until the respective individual's obituary crossed his path that he could see the person behind the death. He could form a vision of who they were and who they left behind. They were human. They were mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. Not simply black ink on recycled paper.

Eli began to recognize who was alone in their death. The individuals that most likely died surrounded by a staff of people that were paid to care, not family. It was a sick game that he played in his head that he took no enjoyment in. It came down to appearance. Like a tightly bobbed hair on a woman who was in her mid-seventies, with a prudish unsatisfied smile. Virgin.

If it was an overly enthusiastic, ready to please grin of a man who is desperately trying to convey an appearance much younger than his own. Single.

Eli assumed that those men had a strewn of relationships in their dying wake, but set the bar too high when choosing someone to settle down with... until it was too late. Those men died alone.

There was one person in particular that stuck out in Eli's mind. Daniel Rivenbark, 60. He died without ever marrying. He worked as a groundskeeper at a park for 35 years. His photo featured a stoic yet flawed face that had the grit and hardness of a butcher's block.

He looked like he had very few good days in his life. His entire life is summed up in a paragraph. His high school education and where he worked for 35 years. That's it. Whatever he did in between or within that time would remain a mystery to that obituary reader. The majority of his obit was who he was survived by: his parents, a brother who lived across the country, and a sister that lived in Rockford.

Preceded in death was a great-grand nephew. Eli wondered how it had affected him. Eli looked at Daniel and saw where he could possibly end up in forty hard-lived years.

His family didn't write a lot about him. There had to be some more to say about his life. Was there? Or didn't they simply care to?

Eli began to pick up on the euphemisms that obit writers employed when describing the deceased.

A "free spirit" was unemployed. "vivacious" was a woman who was a drunk, "a character" was a man who was a drunk. "Down to earth" was a person who was born working class. "Robust" means fat, "jovial" means really fat. "Tireless and dedicated worker" meant he didn't spend a lot of time with his family. A "long illness" was cancer. A "short illness" was a heart attack. "Lived a quiet life" meant he had no friends.

Eli noticed that if an individual had lived a long life and died at an old age, death was usually described as a reward after a virtuous life on Earth. But if someone was

middle aged or younger, their death was described as a great loss. Death by *natural causes* is the vague way of saying that their body killed them. Anything from influenza, heart attack to cancer could be classified as *natural causes*. You could be twenty-six and drop dead from heart failure and it could be classified as *natural causes*. Just so long as what killed you was *you*. Anything else like a car accident, suicide or homicide is categorized as *unnatural causes*. But no one wants that term in their obit.

There were certain phrases to describe one's end, *breathe one's last breath* and *put a period to one's earthly sufferings*. The word *died* was hardly ever written. Death is a morbid, disgusting process. Of course that is never mentioned. Instead they say *decease, demise, leave, pass* or *expire*, as if they're a carton of milk. It was meant to focus on the act of leaving, on the journey itself, rather than on its conclusion.

Obits focus on the spiritual. They aren't dead, according to their obit they have *returned home*, and are *living eternally in heaven flanked by God and the celestial angels*. They aren't rotting in the ground for the next few decades. No, they have *crossed the bridge between life and death*. They are *in the kingdom of Heaven or enjoying a holy and uninterrupted communion with God, living in the abode of peace*. They aren't unconscious, they *are happy*. If the deceased died a painful death it was noted that they *are now where care or pain can reach them no more or go to one's eternal rest*. They are *relieved of the anxiety of earthly care*.

It's not a grave, it's a *resting place*. They aren't dead, they're *resting*. Death is permanent. Resting isn't. Resting is temporary, so therefore death is only a phase.

If the person was a young parent the obit focuses on what they left behind, *she has left two loving children and a husband*. Focusing on their youth *taken away from us, carried off in the prime of life or be cut away in the bloom of existence*.

An obituary is clean, polished, superficial, sanitized. It's merely a snapshot of a life. It is written in the wake of a great loss, but fails to describe anything further. It provides a sort of consolation to those left alive. The ones left behind are bereaved while the one that died is enjoying *the joys of a better world*.

Suicides didn't exist in the obituary world. No, they *left suddenly*.

The families and friends of the "lost" don't cry. They don't scream at the substantial loss. They don't think about their own mortality, rather they *regret* and *lament*.

Death is taboo, an obituary isn't. Obituaries are poetic, vague, esoteric...

*Mortem obire*

*Ex vita exire*

*Requiescere in pace (R.I.P.)*

Eli celebrated life  
and everything that came with it.

One of the obligations of Hannigan's old job that was never disclosed to Eli was the responsibility of editing *The Rockford Star's Sunday Jubilee*, the weekly insert that announced childbirth, death remembrances and everything in between. It featured things like young couples that wish to announce the newest addition to their family. This

recently born child will be greeted by his/her big brothers/sisters that all have seemingly the same names: Madison, Jacob, Noah, Brittany, Emma, Chloe, Aiden, Ethan, Abigail, Jack, Emily, Conner.

The *Sunday Jubilee* also featured anniversary and retirement announcements, card showers for elderly shut-ins, wedding engagements, wedding ceremony details, *Lordy, Lordy Look Who's Forty*, 1<sup>st</sup> birthdays, 2<sup>nd</sup> birthdays, golden birthdays, sweet sixteen's, wedding proposals (which those were only introduced just before printing in fear that someone would slip the word). In remembrance or in memorials that featured dated pictorials (women with Farah Faucet hair and men with push-broom mustaches and long spit-curls crowning their bald heads) submitted by those who missed him/her and a vague poem from a long dead poet that best describes their lamenting loss. Birthday puns that poke fun at getting old, or jests that imply that the birthday man/woman are still young and childish even though they clearly aren't.

It was a nice change from dealing with death on a daily basis for Eli. At the very least, he was interested in seeing what came before the final chapter.

Eli lived a solitary, yet satisfying life.

An email arrived in Eli's inbox. This message wasn't a death notice, or an obituary. It was a news story about a vehicle crash that killed a nineteen year old girl. The story described a girl by the name of Emily Adams who was struck and killed in the early morning hours. The man who struck her vehicle, Jared Jenkins, 47, left the scene of the accident, but was found in his home an hour later. His demolished car was parked in his garage.

Eli scrolled down to the attachment and studied the picture of the slain Emily Adams. "She's beautiful", he mumbled. The photo of Emily Adams was a professionally shot portrait that featured her wearing a spaghetti-strapped sundress. Her arms were resting in a pyramid position with her fingers intertwined, her head resting on top of her hands. She featured a brilliant smile that was framed by long blonde hair that cascaded from a perfectly distinct central part.

The eyes of this now deceased girl that at one time had focused directly into the lens of a camera, were now staring directly at Eli, bringing a sense of life to this girl that had none.

"Hey Eli!" Benjamin said as he stepped up behind Eli. "I see you got my email. Mr. Brant wants you to pull some info from my article for her death notice."

Eli cleared the lump in his throat, "Yeah, sure. I could do that."

"It's a shame isn't it?"

"What's that?"

“That girl” Benjamin said while pointing at Eli’s computer monitor with both hands in his pockets. “She’s a smokin’ hottie man. It’s a shame that a body like that is going to be rotting in the ground.”

Eli felt his eyelids shudder, a sure sign that he was angry. He wanted to put Benjamin in his place for his lack of sensitivity, but realized that he would be defending a girl whom he had never met, and didn’t know existed until a couple of minutes ago.

Not to mention Benjamin would probably knock Eli on his ass. Benjamin was all arms and shoulders. You could tell that leg strengthening was not paramount during his evening visits to the Rockford Recreational Center. With such a large upper body and his scrawny lower half, it gave Benjamin a shape not unlike a silver back gorilla.

“What’s going to happen to the guy that killed her?” Eli asked.

“I talked to Pete. He was on duty and was one of the first at the accident. He said that the guy, oh...what’s his nuts, was shit faced when they found him. The guy driving the semi spotted the guy’s license plate when he tore ass out of there. The cops tracked him down. I guess the guy’s wife answered the door while he was passed out in his bed. He didn’t even tell her what he did, so she had no fucking clue what was happening. Apparently he was shit-faced. Can’t print that though until the blood test comes back to prove it.”

“So, wait? There was a semi involved as well?”

“It wasn’t a semi. It was a big hunk of shit flatbed truck. It was sitting at a red light, with that chick sitting behind that. The drunk plowed into the back of the chick’s car, sending her into the back of the flat-bed.”

“Was she alive when he found her?”

“Beats me. She wasn’t wearing a seatbelt, but Pete doesn’t think it would have made any difference. I guess she was slammed underneath the bed of the truck and it cut right into the top of the car. Shit, she could have been decapitated for all I know.”

“She wasn’t decapitated.” said a voice behind them. Mr. Brant stepped into their conversation. “The truck driver’s in deep shit as well. His flat bed truck didn’t meet DOT standards. It didn’t have a *Mansfield Bar*. You know...that bar that hangs across the back of a semi trailer? It’s so that if you run into the back of a semi you don’t go underneath it, like this girl did. It was named after Jayne Mansfield.”

Both Benjamin and Eli subtly nodded, then peered at each other.

“Jayne Mansfield. You know the actress?”

Eli and Benjamin stared at Mr. Brant blankly.

“How come your generation is so well educated, but you still don’t know shit? Jayne Mansfield was an actress from the 60’s. She was a sex symbol. She’d be like your Scarlett Johansson today. Jayne Mansfield died in an automobile accident in the mid or late sixties after she left a friend’s house. Her husband crashed into the back of a semi and their car went under the trailer. Jayne and her husband died instantly. Their kids in the back seat only had minor cuts and bruises. It was rumored that she was decapitated because in the police photos you can see that the top of the car is peeled away like a goddamn sardine can and there was blond hair tangled in the windshield. People looking at the photos assumed that her head wasn’t attached. It turns out it was a wig or her scalp. But ask your parents—they’ll tell you that Jayne Mansfield was decapitated. That’s why it’s important not to speculate, Benjamin.”

Benjamin politely agreed.

“I think you both have plenty of work to do.”

The remainder of the day passed just as any other. Work in, work out. With every email deleted, with every closing word spoken about a deceased loved one, there was one in particular stood out in the back of his mind. Emily Adams. This was Eli’s first obituary that he had to edit that concerned a young death.

Between proofing obits, Eli continued to reopen the email that had Emily’s picture in it. He felt self-conscious doing it. He would check over his shoulder before he opened it, and closed it not long after, burning her image into his head. She was becoming more beautiful with every look. It was like a great movie that becomes even better in its familiarity. Every line, every freckle, Eli committed to memory.

He will always be remembered for having a  
sensitive, sympathetic heart.

The next day Eli checked his email and saw that he received one from Fitzgerald & Sons Funeral Home. It was Emily’s obituary. He immediately opened it, and began reading.

*Emily Ann Adams, 19, of Rockford, died Thursday, July 18<sup>th</sup>, at Rockford Health System Hospital from injuries sustained in an automobile accident.*

*Emily was born February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1992, in Rockford, daughter of Gordon and Joyce Adams. She was baptized as an infant, confirmed at age 14, and was a member of the Cherry Hill Lutheran Church where she was a part of the youth group, and sang in the church choir. She was a member of the National Honor Society, and earned a 4.0 grade point average. She participated in varsity volleyball as well as track. She graduated from Temple High School in Rockford, and planned to go to The University of Illinois in the fall where she was planning to study to become a veterinarian. She worked as a waitress at Applebee’s for two years. She greatly enjoyed her job and coworkers.*

*She enjoyed the company of her close friends and family. She was patient, polite, and had a quirky sense of humor.*

*Survivors include her father and mother, Gordon and Joyce Adams, her brother, Daniel Adams, her grandparents Donald and Evelyn Adams and Robert and Helen Schoonover, as well as uncles, aunts, cousins, and a host of other relatives and friends.*

*Visitation will be 4p.m to 8p.m, Tuesday at Fitzgerald and Sons Funeral Home Chapel. Services will be held at 10a.m, Thursday July 23<sup>rd</sup>, at Cherry Hill Lutheran Church, Rev. Robert Stanberry will officiate. Burial will be at Orchard Cemetery and serving as Pallbearers will be Shawn Adams, Harold Adams, Sam Chaffin, David Rogers, David Mahoney and Herman Holloway.*

*In her short life she managed to touch the hearts and souls of many. She will be forever missed, and will continue to live in the hearts of her family and friends who will one day join her once again in the glory of eternal bliss.*

Eli leaned back in his chair, and with a long exhale, he noticed that his throat was constricting. It felt as if there was a massive walnut trapped in his esophagus. He immediately looked down and with quivering breaths tried to remain calm. Eli wasn't a crier. He hadn't cried in years.

After regaining his composure he forwarded the obituary on to the typesetters.

Eli had a creative vivid imagination.

That night Eli dreamed. He was lying on his back. There was a delicate hand with French manicured nails gently massaging his abdomen. The nails tickled and teased his chest hair. He looked over to his shoulder and saw soft blond hair with auburn lowlights emanating from subtle brunette roots. He instinctively kissed the top of the head. The head shifted and a face looked up at his. It was Emily Adams. Her voice was distant and difficult to hear. Her smile was warm and kind as she laughed. She shifted to her stomach and with her forearms she concealed her breasts. With another giggle she leaned in and kissed Eli. Her breath was warm and inviting. She pulled her head away slightly and stared into Eli's eyes.

With her pupils fully dilated, she leaned her head close. Her mascara eyelashes batted and brushed his cheek. Her distant cold voice spoke vacant whispers into his ear. It sounded as if she were under water. Eli politely smiled and laughed at her hazy statement. She then sat up and straddled Eli with her soft milky white thighs. They were both entirely naked. She leaned close, her soft breasts grazing his chest gently. With her lips close to his ear she whispered, "*Warm porridge.*"

She then leaned away from Eli and with her back arched she looked up to the ceiling.

Eli awoke with adrenalin flowing through his veins, and a hard-on that could punch a hole through drywall.

"Holy shit!"

*Is it alright to have a sex dream about a dead girl? Is that necrophilia? He thought. Well, I didn't dream about having sex with her corpse. Technically she was alive in my dream. I think that's alright.*

"What the hell does *warm porridge* mean?!"

Eli had a thoughtful, introspective,  
pensive mind.

Sitting alone at his desk, Eli had difficulty concentrating on the work at hand. He was continually thinking about the dream that he had about Emily. He thought about

what it felt like when he looked into her eyes, the soulful connection, the emotional conveyance. It all felt so real that nine hours later he had to remind himself that it didn't actually happen. He brought up the image of Emily on his computer yet again and stared into the eyes that fascinated him the previous night.

"Morning Eli."

Eli jolted and quickly minimized the picture of Emily Adams.

"Hey Melissa, how are you?"

"Just fine, thanks."

Melissa reached into the bottom drawer of the copy machine, loaded some legal size paper and tinkered with the control panel. Eli noticed that she was wearing her pinstriped slacks, Tyler's favorite. *I suppose he's going to be stopping at my desk so he can take a mental picture*, he thought.

"Java Hut, eh?" Melissa said while she was waiting for her prints. "What's your flavor?"

"Cappa-mocha latte with caramel drizzle and cinnamon shavings."

Eli was slightly ashamed of his coffee. He didn't much like the taste of regular coffee so he chose to drink a liquid dessert in the morning instead to get his caffeine intake for the day. He was also ashamed that he spends \$5.35 on his frothy cup of diabetes.

"Wow! Cappa-mocha..."

"...latte with caramel drizzle and cinnamon shavings." Eli finished.

"Huh. You're a complicated fellow Eli."

Melissa walked back to her desk with the new warm papers fresh out of the printer. Eli found himself now admiring her pinstriped posterior as she walked away. He was caught in the act as she glanced over her left shoulder. He immediately shifted his perverse gaze to the large heating duct that was across the room which left him looking like Stevie Wonder behind a piano, his head cocked to the side and looking at seemingly nothing at all.

Eli enjoyed the company of his caring  
considerate friends.

"What up, douche?" Tyler said while he traipsed over to Eli's desk.

"What are you up to?"

"Nuttin'."

Tyler grabbed Eli's stress ball and began volleying it between his palms on Eli's desk top.

"Yeah."

"How you doin'?"

"Fine man. Just working."

“Sweet.” Tyler said in his passive tone as he focused on the stress ball, knocking over Eli’s coffee mug full of pens and his phone receiver off the hook in the process. Tyler was more concerned about keeping the stress ball in play rather than the items on Eli’s work surface. Eli looked on slightly aggravated by Tyler’s classic time wasting techniques.

“Yuuup. So what’s going on Tyler?”

“Nuttin’.”

“Yeah...what brings you over here?”

This was met by another thirty seconds of silence until the stress ball hit the top of Tyler’s thumb and went bouncing across Eli’s keyboard. To which Eli casually placed his hand on top of the ball, thus ending the game.

“So what’s happenin’, Eli?”

“Nothing, dude. Just pretty busy is all.”

“Yeah, I hear that. Ain’t we all?”

Eli somehow doubted Tyler’s last statement.

“So I was going to tell you, we’re all going out to tip a few after work, you in?”

“Ah, I’m going to have to take a rain check on that one. Hit me up next time though.”

“What are you up to?”

Eli froze. He didn’t have an excuse banked.

“Eli, we are starting to worry about you. Why don’t you come out with us tonight and have a few beers?”

“I’m fine.”

“You haven’t been acting fine recently. It’s like you’ve shut down. People can see what you spend your time looking at...” Tyler said, hinting.

Eli looked at Tyler blankly, pretending not to know what he was talking about.

“...and we’re getting a little worried about your fascination with that dead chick.”

“Dead chick? First off, with what you *think* I’m doing on my computer is none of your business. Secondly, I have to make sure her information is correct. It’s my fucking work, something you wouldn’t know about. And thirdly, she has a name. Would you want people to refer to you as *that dead dude*?” Eli said in a severe but muted tone as to not make a scene in the office.

“I wouldn’t care because I would be dead! And are you editing her photo? I see you minimize it every time I walk up to you. People are talking dude. Jesus Eli, you’re falling apart at the seams. I don’t even want to think about what you do at night when you’re obsessing over her.”

“I don’t do anything! Did you ever think that maybe I just don’t want to go out? Maybe I’m not the kind of guy that likes to get shit-faced every other night.”

“You don’t like... jerk-it to her picture do you?”

“Shut the fuck up! What do you think? I’m some sort of psycho?”

“Take it easy man!” Tyler said with his hands up defensively.

“Well, don’t say stupid shit and I’ll take it easy.”

“Melissa asked if you were coming out.” Tyler said in a hushed tone while pointing his thumb through himself to indicate Melissa who was sitting no less than fifteen feet behind him.

“So? I don’t give a shit. You’re the one that’s after her.” Eli said.



“She’s not interested in me Eli. I think she’s takin’ a shine to you.”

“Well, I’m not interested in her. Sometimes things don’t work out so conveniently.”

Tyler let out an exhausted exhale. “Fine, do what you want. Go home and cry in your *Cheerios* like a pussy-loser. Just keep in mind that unlike your perfect dream girl, Melissa has a pulse.”

Tyler turned and walked away. Eli could once again feel his eyes shaking with anger. His heart was racing, the whites of his knuckles showing through his red clenched fists. He looked ahead of him and saw Melissa with a look of concern on her face before she redirected her eyes back to her computer monitor.

Never being one to hold a grudge, Eli was always  
the first to forgive.

It was five to five and Eli made his way back to his old work area to talk to Tyler. Tyler minimized a website that featured candid up-skirt shots of girls on escalators, subways and other public areas taken with cell phone cameras.

“Hey Tyler, you’re right, I’ve been acting a little weird the past few days. I think going out and having a few beers would be good for me. I mean, if I’m still invited, I’ll go out with you guys.”

Tyler stayed seated and stared at his pretend work, never once looking up at Eli. “Yeah, man, you can come out with us...I don’t just spend my life drinking you know?”

“I know you don’t.”

“I feel kinda shitty about that last thing I said to ya.”

“Well, that *was* kinda shitty but...you were right. I need to live in reality.”

By this time they had made their *mea culpa* without any awkward glimpses or eye contact. Tyler still transfixed at his monitor, Eli admiring the office laminator. All amends were made.

He could be often found enjoyed long  
conversations in spirited environments.

After work they went to *Kilroy’s Bar & Grill*. It was a couple of blocks from the office. It was a warm summer night. Eli liked walking down a sidewalk with a group of friends in the busy district of town. It made him feel like he was a part of a moving party that motorists and other pedestrians could witness. Once inside they sat at the corner booth with an *L* shaped padded bench, the usual spot that the group sat. In the group was

Eli, Tyler, Melissa, Benjamin, Slim Todd from the mailroom, Sara from accounting, Nola from the art department and Dan. Dan seemed like the odd man out of the group. He was thirty-seven, more than a decade older than the rest of the group. He was a single guy who didn't have anyone to beckon him home after work; however, he was the first to refill a pitcher of beer when it was empty so the group didn't mind having him around.

Everyone piled into the booth except Tyler who was hanging back. Melissa was seated and Tyler didn't want to block his friend, so he nonchalantly stood at the head of the table fiddling with his cell phone, waiting for Eli to tuck himself into the booth before he sat down. Eli took the hint and slid down to Melissa's greeting smile.

The evening played out like most. The conversation started out slow with Eli hesitant to talk to his table partner seated next to him. Within the general conversation he tried his damndest to appear quick, witty and funny to Melissa. A couple of pitchers later the stilted conversation began to flow more freely.

"So what do guys prefer, blondes or brunettes?" asked Melissa.

"Well, I'd have to say that at a cursory glance a guy notices a blonde more than a brunette. But upon meeting them hair color has nothing to do with it." Eli said. It seemed to please all of the girls at the table, particularly Sara who was a blonde and Melissa who was a dark brunette.

"A chick could be receiving chemo and as bald as Vin Diesel and I would still plow 'er!" Tyler exclaimed while refilling his pub glass. His statement was met with alcohol laced laughter. The kind of laughter that comes easily after a few beers have been imbibed.

"I read that girls will pass judgment on a guy within the first seven seconds of meeting him." Eli said to the group.

"Really?!" said Melissa. "I can hardly believe that...well, possibly. I guess that's kind of true!"

"Well", asked Tyler, "where was the first place that you saw Eli. And what did you think of him?"

Eli was suddenly red faced and claustrophobic trapped in that booth with his friend asking compromising questions.

"Let me think, the first time I saw Eli was like a year ago when you cut yourself with the paper cutter. I was walking into the break room to make some tea. You were standing in front of the sink running your thumb under the faucet. It looked like there was a lot of blood."

"Ah yes, I remember that. Well, you certainly caught me at one of my finest moments. That was the first time you had ever seen me? That must have been a great first impression."

"Now, that run-in was at least seven seconds Melissa. What did you think of our boy Eli here?"

"Well, to be honest I was impressed. You seemed pretty tough. I couldn't tell that you were even hurt. It's like you were standing in front of the sink washing carrots or something. Not to mention I remember asking you if you were alright and you said, *I'm fine, how are you?*"

"Hmm, he's considerate even when he's wounded." added Benjamin.

"So how would you judge Eli overall from your first encounter?" Tyler asked.

“Very favorably... yeah.” Melissa said with a smile. She swept her hair over her ear while she looked at Eli with a look of contentment.

“What do guys notice about girls?” Nola asked.

“Eyes, boobs and butt.” Tyler chimed.

Everyone laughed, but none of guys sitting at the table corrected the statement because when they stopped to think about it, the answer was right on the money.

A couple of pitchers later the conversation began to divvy up into two person exchanges, the way it tends to do as the evening progresses. The jukebox gets louder and people begin to tire of yelling across the table. Eli and Melissa were seated in close quarters talking to each other.

“Girls are more perceptive when it comes to body language than guys are.”

“Really?” Melissa said.

“It’s true. There are certain idiosyncrasies that a person exhibits when they are interested in the other person.”

“Like what?”

“Well if the other person’s shoulders are facing you, eye contact, dilated pupils, mirroring—”

“Mirroring?”

“Yeah, when a person is subconsciously mimicking what the other person is doing. Like crossing their legs if the other persons legs are crossed, arm placement, even breathing. Sometimes when two people who are attracted to each other, and engaged in a deep conversation, their breathing will actually unknowingly become in sync.

“Really? Do you think that our breaths are in sync?”

“It would be your loss,” replied Eli, “I have asthma and respiratory sinus arrhythmia.”

“Oh.”

Eli rolled his eyes to the back of his head, as if he were looking at the frontal lobes of his brain, and wondering why it let him say that.

“What else is there?” asked Melissa.

“Touching, that’s a big one. Even if it’s just a playful punch it shows serious interest.”

“It’s funny the way it works. It’s always obvious to people watching, and not the two people that like each other.”

“You’re right. Usually the people that are attracted to each other are filled with too much self-doubt. They end up second guessing or dissecting every statement and situation until they convince themselves that there was nothing there.”

“You’re exactly right.”

Eli was beginning to feel much more comfortable around his new friend. That is until she asked him, “So, how do *you* flirt with a girl?”

“How do you mean?”

“Like, show me. If I was a girl that you wanted to flirt with how would you do it?”

“How do you know I’m not already?” Eli asked. Trying to sound confident, trying to sound deliberate, but failing to mask the fear in his hollow voice.

“Hit on me.”

“Well...first I would face you, as I discussed before. Then I would introduce myself, *“my name is Eli.”*”

“That would be your opener? You’re just going to walk up and introduce yourself?”

“Well, not only that. As I said before I would place myself within close proximity. Sometimes it’s all about how close you are when you speak to them.”

“Really? ‘Cuz I’ve had my share of creeps that have crowded me.”

Eli paused, squinted and leaned in close to Melissa.

“What? What is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

“What? No, what is it?”

“It’s nothing. It’s just that I never realized that you had such deep green eyes.”

“Really?”

“While I flirt I deliver a compliment, usually about their eyes, if I mean it or not.”

“You shit!” Melissa said while punching Eli on the chest.

“A playful punch!? That’s a good sign for me!”

“Yeah, I should’ve hit you in the face!”

“But you didn’t.”

“I guess I didn’t.”

“Everything is coming up Eli.”

“Don’t get so high on yourself there partner.”

“By God, you’re already referring to me as your partner. I don’t know Melissa, I think our relationship may be progressing a little too fast for me.”

Melissa laughed and pushed Eli away.

“Wow! Another playful touch, I can’t lose!”

“I think I’m creating a monster. So how else do you come on to a girl?”

“It’s not as easy as it sounds, you know? I mean we guys have to do all the heavy lifting.”

“I don’t think so.”

“No, really, yes it is the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is still expected of guys to approach the woman.”

“Why do you think that is? Aren’t we decades past the women’s lib movement?”

“Yeah, but girls still expect the guy to do it. And having to make the first move is a terrifying thing, particularly for a guy like me. Take into consideration of all the couples that you see around us.”

Melissa looked around the bar and saw an assortment of couples both young and old enjoying each other’s company.

“Everyone you see around us, it all began with an awkward conversation started by the guy.”

“Girl’s hit on guys.”

“Yes, but they rarely make the first move.”

Melissa was silenced thinking about it.

“Because it’s expected of the guy to approach the woman, the girl that he has in his sights may express interest by flirting back at him, but for the most part, in the majority of situations girls expect the guy to walk up and say something cheesy, and buy them a drink. Then the girl has the upper hand. They sit there high in their barstool

awaiting for the stupid fucking things that come out of a guy's mouth when they are trying to express that they are enamored with a girl, just so the girl can either give them the Caesar thumbs up or down. It's an audition, its fucking torture."

"It really shouldn't be that way. For the most part girls like to be hit on. Even if the girl isn't interested, they still like the fact that a guy is interested in them."

"Sure, it's an ego boost for them by turning down a guy that likes them, but do they realize what it does to the guy that approaches them? That guy has to scrape up what's left of his dignity and walk away. Like a stripper picking up the loose dollars on a stage."

"I wouldn't go that far."

Eli rolled his eyes. "Well then, how would you approach a guy?"

"I don't know."

"Because you've never had to do it! You can sit back and wait for guys to come onto you."

"I hit on guys."

"You show signs, but you never walk up to a guy and really hit on him. Girl's do what's called a protean style of flirting. They don't overtly hit on men, the way men hit on women. It's an in between form of flirting. Sure, they'll do their regular laughing, playful punch and all that good stuff, but a woman will never walk up to a man and really hang themselves out there."

"*Prodean?*"

"Protean. The name comes from Proteus. He was a Roman or Greek god, I don't remember which. Proteus was a shape shifter. He was ambiguous."

"How do you mean?"

"Just like Proteus, girls are ambiguous in their flirting. They never commit, and call a man attractive and say that they must have him. They sit back coquettishly and give him signs that they are attracted to him. That way if the guy isn't interested in them any longer or never was to begin with they can pretend that they weren't either. It's a self preservation thing, I guess.

"It kinda' sucks to be a man, I guess."

"It has its perks though."

"How's that?"

"I don't know. I figure I wouldn't want to have it any other way. I mean, even though when we come up to talk to you in a bar it's a little terrifying, but also feels really good to talk to someone so personally that we don't even really know. Or when we do get your number, deciding when we'll call you. We'll put it off. We'll wait a few days or so, as to not look eager. Girls consider it a dick move, you know, making them wait. But we are thinking all through Sunday what we'll say to the girl that we met last night and when we'll call her. We think about her when we're at work on Monday and convince ourselves that it's too soon and that nobody is in a good mood on Monday. So we wait another day. Then Tuesday rolls around and we look at the phone number that is so neatly written on the back of a bar receipt. We admire the cute way you write a little circle to dot the "i" in your name. We wonder what you meant when you underlined your name twice. We decide that Wednesday will be the day we will make that call. On Wednesday night we wait for our stomachs to settle. We'll promise ourselves at the next commercial break we'll call you for the first time and we'll sit there looking at the clock.

The commercial break will start, and it will be for a product that we'll convince ourselves that we're interested in, but in the back of our minds we know that it's just because we're too afraid to dial that number. Then we finally do it because we promised ourselves. We type in the number, put the phone to our ear, listen to the distant muffled ring, consider hanging up but know that you'll know that we called, so we sit there, listening, hoping that you'll pick up, but at the same time hoping that you *don't* pick up. We think about what we'll leave for a voicemail if you don't pick up, doing subtle coughs to clear the phlegm our throats...then you pick up. It's like jumping off a cliff at that point. You're on the other end, waiting for us to say something. But then it's fine after that. We talk and it's no longer scary. It's like being wrapped in a blanket. We sit back in our chair and do our damndest for the conversation not to run dry—which is a good thing about you girls. Usually if we can get you talking about something that you love, we just have to listen. And we can just sit back...happy that you're talking to us.”

“I can't say that I had ever thought of what leads up to the call.”

“But you appreciate the call, don't you?”

“Always.”

“Well, there is usually a lot of sweating that's involved in making the call so it sounds natural to you.”

“Would you sweat that much if I gave you my number?”

“I would lose sleep.”

“Don't lose sleep over this.”

Melissa pulled a pen out of her purse and grabbed Eli's hand, opening his palm. Eli prevented his fingers from curling as Melissa dug the ball-point pen into the delicate areas of his soft palm. She wrote her name and number with the gentle swooping letters that Eli had come to expect. She topped it off by underlining her name twice.

Eli felt the desperate need preserve this number, full well knowing that he could contact her in the office – he knew her extension – but this was something special, he could call her at home. He clasped his hand slightly, but was sure not to smudge the ink. He sat in the booth still feeling the resonating sensation from the ballpoint pen, careful not to lose the precious digits.

The jukebox was playing *Journey's* “Open Arms” and Nola had convinced Benjamin to slow dance with her. Eli was about to go into his regular cynical diatribe about how you can't go to a bar without hearing at least three *Journey* songs since their resurgence in popularity, but Melissa exclaimed that she loved the song.

“You should take Melissa out on the dance floor and show her your moves Eli,” Tyler shouted over the music.

“I'm pretty comfortable sitting right here.”

“He's being modest Melissa. He's actually a hell of a dancer. I can't keep him off the floor!”

Tyler got up out of the booth and grabbed Eli by the elbow and forced him out of his spot. Melissa slid out as well. Eli was more accustomed to dancing to loud hip-hop music with a beer bottle securely held in his right hand as a sense of security and balance, or at the very least as an excuse for his lack dancing ability.

Melissa stood before Eli and they awkwardly locked fingers. Eli placed his right hand on the hip of Melissa's light Khaki colored slacks. The very same light Khaki

colored slacks were Tyler's third favorite in Melissa's collection of ass-accentuating wardrobe.

Tyler would go on long jags about these slacks. How they draped from her legs like a tight, damp shower curtain. Tyler would ask Eli about what he thought the fabric felt like, and how the slacks looked like they would feel like a cloth/rubber composite. It's definitely an unnatural fabric, Tyler would say while stroking his chin in contemplation.

Now that Eli had his palms placed on the very same fabric that was debated he could report back to Tyler that the slacks have the texture of a thick napkin.

Their faces were close. Melissa glanced over to Eli's shoulder. Eli suppressed the beer burp that was working its way up his throat. He could feel her breath on his sensitive neck. It felt strange to Eli that before they went out to the bar he had only exchanged a few short sentences with Melissa since he had known her, and now there was this apparent chemistry between them.

Melissa leaned in close to Eli's ear and whispered, "I'm really glad that you came out tonight, Eli."

Eli didn't respond. All he could think of was *warm porridge*.

After Steve Perry and the rest of *Journey* wrapped up their power ballad, Eli no longer felt like dancing. He no longer felt like doing anything except going to bed. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to dream of Emily while he still had a beer buzz. He led Melissa back to the booth. He had a half a beer sitting in front of him. He didn't feel much like drinking it.

Benjamin and Nola were still out on the dance floor. The music had changed to *Lady Gaga*, a crowd favorite. They were still slow dancing as if *Journey* never stopped playing. Their arms were wrapped around each other's waists as they eagerly exchanged a sloppy kiss.

Eli got up from the booth, and stumbled a bit on his way to the bathroom. He rounded the pool tables and passed the table top shuffle board. He stood before the urinal and used his crystal clear piss stream to push around a soggy cigarette butt at the bottom.

The door swung open with a crash, a figure streaked across the restroom and grabbed Eli's shoulders and began to vigorously massage them.

"Dude, you are going to get laid tonight!" Tyler murmured into his ear.

"Do you mind not rubbing my shoulders while I'm holding my dick? That has to be breaking some man-law or something."

"She is totally into you! Not even you could fuck it up at this point."

"I'm tired as hell, I'm gonna go home."

"I stand corrected."

"What?"

"You *are* going to fuck this up!"

"I'm sorry if me being tired is fucking this up."

"It's not about you being tired. Is it?"

Eli stepped away from the urinal and passed Tyler who had a look of disbelief on his face. He washed his hands and noticed the big blue towel roll was not only entirely used but was lying on the sticky, moist bathroom floor. Eli reached for the bathroom door handle and Tyler slammed his hand and foot against the door preventing Eli's exit. Eli tried a half-hearted tug to no avail.

“Tyler, let me out.”

“No! I’m not going to let you out until you tell me that you are going to take Melissa home.”

“Why are you so hell bent on me getting laid?”

“I want you to get laid so you stop acting all *Norman Baits!*”

“I’m not acting *Norman Baits*. I just want to go home. It’s late.”

“I’m doing this for your own good. You’re not the Eli that I know anymore.”

“We’ll talk about this tomorrow, let me out.”

“No! You’re going to go home and get all creepy, dwelling on about that dead chick!”

“Emily! And no, I’m over that.”

“No you’re not! I’m trying to help you Eli.”

Eli pushed Tyler away from the door and into the wall. Tyler pushed Eli into the sink.

“You go home now, the next thing you know you’re going to be digging that chick up and wearing her skin like a scuba suit!”

Eli caught Tyler with a right cross against his temple and sent him back into the wall where he slid down to one knee covering his face.

Eli froze and looked at his friend kneeling on the wet bathroom floor. He opened the door and made his way back across the bar towards the exit without looking at anyone in the booth as he left the bar.

He walked down the empty sidewalk. The cool night air felt nice against his hot flesh. He continually glanced behind him to see if anyone was following him, especially Tyler.

“Shit, shit, shit, shit,” he mumbled to himself as he increased his walk to a jog, both hands stuffed in his pockets.

Once Eli returned home he locked the door behind him, and without turning on the lights he sat on his sofa. Eli, the man who wasn’t a crier began to cry. He covered his face with his open palms to not only catch the tears but to muffle his sobs so the people in the adjoining apartments wouldn’t hear him. Eli convulsed and whimpered as he pictured the closest person that he could consider a friend laying on a piss covered bathroom floor.

The feeling of an ice-cold hand was felt at the center of his back. Eli quickly stopped his crying and jolted his head up and immediately looked around him. He saw no one. After pausing for a few seconds, wide eyed and shivering he said, “Emily?”

Eli went to bed that night already feeling the early signs of a hangover. He positioned himself on his back and rested a second pillow against his chest on top of his outstretched arm. He figured that if he didn’t meet Emily in his dreams he would at least recreate the feeling he had the previous night.

Eli greeted every new day with enthusiasm.

Eli awoke the next morning to the dreaded sound of his alarm clock. He tried to reach the alarm to slap the snooze button to make the blaring buzzing stop but couldn’t



move his arm. His right arm had not shifted once during the night and was still underneath the strategically placed pillow. He reached with his left arm over to the night stand and began knocking the alarm clock with the back of his knuckles of his left hand until the buzzing ceased. He removed the pillow with his only capable hand and massaged his right forearm. It felt as if a million pixies were poking him with pointy needles.

He began to think of the things that transpired the previous night with a great amount of regret. He felt stupid. He couldn't believe that he punched his friend. He considered calling in sick.

As he entered the office he went straight to his desk and avoided glances from everyone. He stared at his computer and couldn't bring himself to look over at Melissa. He stole one glance and saw her sitting at her desk, dutifully working. He checked his email and saw the fresh list of Rockford residents that, unlike him, didn't survive the previous night.

Nick Shubatt, 84, Natural causes  
Mike Benseid, 48, Car wreck  
Carl Grace, 58, Natural causes  
Rita Frye, 83, Natural causes  
Rex Port, 78, Lung cancer

He went to work immediately sorting through the information and typing the death notices. After an hour it felt like any other day except the previous night was annoyingly poking him in the back of his mind, like the prickly sensation in his right arm that morning. Eli figured that it was time to face the music. He walked back to his old workroom to try and smooth it over with Tyler.

He had forgotten the strange funk that his old workroom had. There before him was Tyler's desk sitting empty.

*Oh God! He didn't come to work. I must have really hurt him. I should have checked on him. I shouldn't have just run out on him.* Eli thought.

Eli asked the Asian intern who sits next to Tyler, where Tyler was. He could never remember what the intern's name was.

"Well, its morning and he's been gone for fifteen minutes. I'm sure he's taking a shit." said the nameless intern.

"Oh, thank God."

"If you stick around he'll probably tell you about it. He always talks about his shits." she said in a defeated, subdued tone.

Just then Tyler stepped into the room. His left eye was swollen and had a dark hue surrounding it. Tyler stopped in his tracks.

"Eli...what up?"

"How you doing?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Did I miss anything after I...you know, left?"

"Not much. Dan got drunk and started making moves on Slim Todd."

"Again?"

“Yeah, it’s hilarious. Slim Todd said that Dan put his hand on his knee. And every time he laughed he would massage his kneecap. He didn’t look over at Slim Todd once.”

“What did Todd do?”

“He was polite and ignored it until there was a big laugh from all of us and Dan slid his hand up Todd’s thigh. Then Todd decided that it was time to go home.”

“Ha! We all know that Dan’s gay, why doesn’t he just come clean already?”

“I don’t know. And Todd, as you know, is spineless. He’s probably going to end up blowing Dan ‘cause he doesn’t want to offend him.”

“Yeah... say Tyler, I just wanted to talk to you about what happe—“

“Hey!” Tyler said while he signaled Eli to follow him out into the hallway.

Eli followed Tyler into the hallway.

“I guess it’s better to not talk about this around the intern.”

“No it’s not that,” replied Tyler “I got her to believe that I joined a Fight Club.”

“Ah... well, I just wanted to say that I was out of my head and that—“

“Don’t worry about it dude,” Tyler interrupted. “I’ve never been punched in the face before. It’s actually kind of cool. It feels like a right of passage in becoming a man.”

“Well, I’m relieved that you’re not pissed at me.”

“I’m fine. Not to mention I’ll be punching you in the balls when you least suspect it. I feel kind of badass walking around the office with a black eye. People keep stopping me and asking what happened? I just tell them it’s a long story, and walk away. I hate to see it go. I’m tempted to give myself a little booster shot in the eye once it starts to fade.”

“What did you tell everybody last night?”

“They didn’t notice. They just asked where you took off to.”

“They didn’t notice that?” Eli said pointing at the ring under Tyler’s eye.

“It was just a little puffy was all. It didn’t look like this until I was giving Melissa a ride home. Oh, by the way I gave Melissa a ride home. I just gave her a ride home. I didn’t move in on your territory.”

“She’s not...did she notice it?”

“Yeah! It was right when we got to her place and I thought, well she’s a little drunk, if she wanted to make-out a little for the free ride home I wouldn’t be opposed. I leaned over the center council just as she was opening up her door. The dome light flicked on and she had this look of confusion and terror on her face. My eye looked much worse then than it does now.”

“What did you tell her?”

“That you punched me.”

“Shit, you didn’t tell her about any of the other stuff did you?”

“Of course not—probably not.”

“Good. Wait, what?”

“Well, she asked about the eye. I didn’t know what to tell her so I didn’t say anything. She must have thought that you abuse me or something because she started to tell me a personal story about her uncle abusing her, and how it helps to talk about it. We talked for a quite a while actually.

“She was abused by her uncle? How? Physically or sexually?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“She was pouring her heart out to you, and you weren’t paying attention?”

“I was paying attention at first but then she just talked and talked, and I started getting a little bored so I started imagining having sex with her.”

“You what?!”

“I started imagining myself having sex with her as she was talking to me. Haven’t you ever done that?”

“No!”

“Oh, it’s great! When the girl that you are talking to is continuing on and on about shit that you don’t care about—“

“Like possibly being taken advantage of by her uncle...”

“Yeah, I start picturing myself having sex with them. It’s easy, and actually pretty personal. I mean you are holding sincere eye contact with them the entire time. As they carry on you picture them without their clothes on. And instead of what they’re telling you about—“

“Being molested by their uncle...”

“You picture them saying something dirty to you. You just have to sit there and occasionally nod your head while they drone on and on. All the while your mind is a million miles away having sex with them. It’s incredible!

“You’re despicable.”

“What?! I’m sure that I’m not the only guy who does it.”

“So you’re imagining having sex with Melissa as she’s confiding in you about how her uncle abused her?”

“Or took her to the park, I don’t know! Like I said, I only appeared to be listening to her. Although she was getting pretty misty eyed, but I was able to incorporate that into my fantasy-fuck.”

“Jesus dude, I suddenly have this urge to deck you again.”

“If you do then I’ll surely be getting laid by Melissa. She seems to have a thing for violence...or against. So have you talked to her yet today?”

“No, not really planning on it either.”

“You should really clear the air. She thinks that I’m in an abusive friendship with you.”

“Yeah, thanks for that. Why don’t *you* talk to her? You’re the one who’s fawning over her.”

“I’m not fawning over her.”

“You’re imagining having sex with her.”

“I do that with a lot of chicks. I have a passionate soul. Remember when your sister was in town visiting and—“

“Stop right there, or I swear to God I *will* punch you again.”

“Do you think Dan imagines having sex with guys? You know, like when he’s staring at the back of a guy’s head when he’s standing in line at the bank, or something?”

“Well, I can see that you’re back to your regular self. I’ll let you get back to work, or whatever you were doing.”

“Talk to her.”

“I will.”

Eli didn’t talk to her. He never saw an opportunity to talk. He waited for Melissa to print something off so that she will have to stop by Eli’s desk. But she remained seated

most of the day, printing nothing. At one time he thought that she was heading to the break room to get something to drink. He followed a few steps behind her but she went into the women's restroom instead.

The day passed and she didn't as much as glance over at Eli.

In the midst of Eli carrying about his day he noticed in his documents that Emily Adams' viewing was today. He quickly brushed the thought of going there aside figuring that if he considered it long enough he just might be stupid enough to do it. *Nothing good can come of me going to it*, he thought. Yet he couldn't bear the thought that this would be his only occasion to see Emily in the flesh, so to speak. After tomorrow she will be out of his life for good, even though she was only in his life by thought alone.

Eli's compassionate, loving heart and quiet strength were inspiring to all whose lives he touched.

*I have to go to that wake...  
...that would be weird of me to do though. I mean, it's not like I'm crashing a party. One can pay their respects to an individual whom they never met right?  
No. Just go home. You'll regret it if you went.  
I can't get her out of my head though! Perhaps it's like a song that you can't get out of your head. You're supposed to listen to the song, and then your mind will stop focusing on it. I need to go to the funeral to finally put this to rest.*

With his last minute decision made, Eli tugged the steering wheel to the left, barely making the turn. His bald tires making a high pitched squeal sound as he rounded the corner.

Once inside the Funeral Home he immediately saw people standing in the entrance with solemn faces and quiet conversations.

The line to see Emily was quite long. It looked like many of her former classmates and peers made it. The line weaved past a guest book for signing-in, which Eli avoided. A couple of card tables were set up with a collage of photos. There were still-shots of Emily wearing her volleyball uniform, white kneepads, and her right arm carelessly draped around the ball that was held against her hip. There was a shot of Emily brimming with excitement standing in her driveway next to a used red sedan.

There was a shot of her blowing out her birthday candles through the empty gap in her mouth where her baby teeth once were, her young friends on either side wearing *Backstreet Boys* and *Brittany Spears* t-shirts. Photos of her high school proms, Emily had seemingly gravity defying, tediously prepped hair that was done up with a few strategically place strands that draped to her neckline. Her date was wearing an ill fitting tuxedo, awkwardly standing behind her with his hands on her waist, a canvas of the London Bridge as a backdrop.

There was a clipping from the sports section of the newspaper that showed her carrying the baton across the finish line; senior photos of her sitting next to an old dam, under a brick arch bridge and one of her seated in a studio with her hobbies neatly spread out amongst her feet.

Eli wished that he could have known her when she was going through these events in her life. He wished that he was the man pictured with her in the photo of her high school graduation party, seated at a picnic table in her parent's garage, drinking punch and enjoying an open faced ham sandwich, or seated next to her on a rollercoaster at *Six Flags*.

Eli could hear a group of girls talking in front of him in line.

"She just got off her shift and was supposed to come over to Courtney's. It's just what, four blocks away? The worst thing was is that she was still alive when the ambulance got there."

"That's horrible. When did you find out about it?"

"It wasn't for an hour or so, we were waiting for her at Courtney's. We even heard the sirens pass by and didn't think anything of it. It wasn't until Brad called me that I found out."

Eli thought about the misery and the terror Emily must have felt at the end of her short life. A shiver went through his body.

The line drew nearer to the casket, surrounding it was a massive assortment of flowers and potted plants. There were petunias from, *your friends at Applebees*, a large geranium from *the graduating class of 2010*.

Eli could now see that it was an open casket, and was surprised to see that it was since it sounded like a pretty horrific accident. The line shuffled by until Eli found himself standing before the remains of Emily Adams. She wore the same spaghetti strapped sundress that she was pictured in for her obituary. Her skin was waxy and pale. It had an unnatural appearance to it. Her arms were folded across her chest. Her chest looked full, as if she were holding her last breath of air. Her hands had spiked, spindly veins, her finger nails were perfectly manicured. It was a French manicure. Above her, placed on the hinged lid of the open casket were various ribbons and plaques, one from Temple High School for perfect attendance. She looked like a sleeping beauty, like she wasn't dead. At any moment her eyes would open and her head would rise from the silk pillow, rested and rejuvenated.

Eli stood before her with his hands folded in front of him. *It's strange, people are here to say goodbye. I guess I'm here to say hello.*

The line continued past Emily, and Eli was greeted by her relatives. He received polite handshakes from aunts and uncles with stale black coffee on their breaths. They solemnly thanked him for coming as he repeated the obligatory, "I'm sorry for your loss" to each of them.

Eli made it to Emily's father, mother and brother. Her father had a brave, stoic look on his face. His thick black beard concealed his mouth. It was tough to see exactly what he was expressing. Her young brother appeared surprisingly apathetic, looking bored while attending his only sibling's wake. He glanced around the room with indifference wearing a blue suit and tie with black sneakers. Each, Eli gave a warm handshake to, and repeated the same, "I'm sorry for your loss," like a mindless automaton.

Emily's mother sat in the last chair just past her son. She was the only one that was sitting. She had wads of discarded tissues tucked in the cuffs of her blouse. Her eyes were bloodshot and had large bags under them. Her nose was red. Her cheeks were puffy and raw from her tears. If she was wearing make-up it was no longer apparent. She appeared the most distraught. She looked like she didn't have the strength to stand, and that she had not slept at all since the night of the accident. Eli didn't shake her hand. He didn't want to bother her.

Eli made his way past the mother and between the rows of folding chairs that had family and friends scattered around them. He paused at the large double doors at the entrance of the viewing room, turned around and got one last look of Emily between the later onlookers.

Eli paused before a table in the entrance that had a bowl full of peppermint ribbon candy and a stack of small folded papers that featured a portrait of Emily with her obituary and service info on the inside, the poem *Footprints* printed on the back. Eli grabbed one.

Just as he was about to make it past the front door, he was stopped by a well-dressed, dapper man wearing a tailor fitted suit, and shoes that were polished like mirrors. He had a demeanor that was as calm as a lamb to slaughter.

"Are you a friend or family member of the deceased?" he asked Eli.

"Friend," Eli said while looking down, seeing his distorted reflection in the man's black shoes.

"You have my deepest sympathies, sir."

Eli gave a nervous subtle nod.

"How did you know Emily?"

"Well, it's...complicated, long story."

Eli felt cornered, so he decided to turn the tables.

"How do *you* know Emily?"

"I didn't know Emily, per say. I'm the funeral director, Michael Fitzgerald." He reached out his soft warm hand that smelled of aftershave for Eli to shake.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Fitzgerald."

There was a pause before Mr. Fitzgerald said, "And you are?"

"Eli Tims."

"Eli Tims, that name sounds familiar. Have I met you before Eli?"

"I don't believe so."

"Hmm, I could have sworn just earlier this week..."

Mr. Fitzgerald looked up with his arms folded, and was taping his index finger on his arm.

"Eli, did you take over the obituary section from Ryan Hannigan?"

"Yes, yes I did."

"That's where I remember your name. I've been sending you the obituaries."

Mr. Fitzgerald had a satisfied look on his face, which then gave way to skepticism.

"How was it that you knew Emily?"

"Well, truth be told, I never actually met her in person."

There was a pause as Mr. Fitzgerald glanced away and bit his lower lip.

"Have you a minute Eli? I'd like you to follow me."

Eli had a feeling of panic as he followed Mr. Fitzgerald through the corridors of the funeral home. They walked through a seemingly endless number of small dark rooms with hardwood floor and tapestry rugs, China hutches, landscape paintings; leather bound books leaning against each other on a shelf. It was as if the books had been untouched for years yet they did not appear dusty. The final room had a large oak door with a polished brass knob. Mr. Fitzgerald opened the door, and politely signaled Eli to step into his office.

Eli began to wonder if Mr. Fitzgerald was going to call the cops on him.

*Is crashing a wake illegal? Granted it's in poor taste, but I hardly think it's illegal. Was I trespassing?* Eli thought.

"You a drinker, Eli?"

"Sure."

Mr. Fitzgerald stepped behind his desk and opened a glass cabinet lined with decanters. He placed the key that he used to unlock the cabinet back into the top drawer of his desk. After tossing a couple of rocks of ice in the crystal tumblers from his ice bucket, he filled both glasses half full, and placed one before Eli.

"Have a seat Eli. I'm not too much of a drinker myself. It's nice to have some on hand though when you are dealing with grieving relatives. Sometimes if the family member has a drink it can clear their mind and they can focus on the business at hand. That's what it is really, Eli, it's a business. It can be tough doing what you and I do. When it's Friday afternoon and the sun is shining through the windows it can be tough to deal with a grieving family that just lost a loved one. While you're thinking about taking the wife out for surf and turf, or doing a little fishing off the side of the house boat—are you married, Eli?"

Eli simply shook his head, no.

"Ah, well you see the people that you're dealing with have an entirely different mindset. And you need to be respectful of that."

Eli politely nodded and took a sip of his drink. It burned the entire way down his throat and felt like it was climbing back up. He wished that he had known that this was what Mr. Fitzgerald was talking about when he asked him if he was a drinker.

Mr. Fitzgerald took a long sip, and appeared unfazed by the incendiary drink before he continued.

"But a man needs to separate himself from it as well. If I didn't treat the deceased like another job, another paycheck, it would feel like attending a funeral of a loved one everyday. It's important for us to remain removed, objective in our professions. Do you understand where I'm coming from, Eli?"

"I shouldn't have come here should I have?"

"No, if anything for your own sake. Your predecessor, Ryan Hannigan, edited obituaries for as long as I've been a funeral director. He dealt with many deaths. Day after day after day, but he didn't get personally involved with the deceased. And by doing that, the deaths that you deal with become muted and perfunctory. It's much more tolerable."

"I wasn't getting personally involved either, but this one came along and... and she was just a kid, you know?"

"Listen, when I started out working for my father, I was organizing funerals for classmates that died in Vietnam. That could have been me in the coffin just as easily."

Mr. Fitzgerald leaned back in his office chair and took another long sip. Eli followed suit, and was thankful that the melting ice was taking some of the bite out of the drink.

“I console people. I have to be the stable rock during this event when things are turned upside down. *You* have to be sympathetic, but also remind yourself that it’s not your loved one you’re dealing with. What we have tonight is a perfect example of a tragedy. This isn’t a great-aunt that lived to the age of eighty-eight. Those services are different. They aren’t unexpected. People sit around, and they are celebrating the life that was lived. Tonight people are lamenting the life that could have been.”

He paused and looked at Eli.

“Did you like the obituary, Eli?”

“It was good. I didn’t change a thing.”

“An obituary like Emily’s is one of the tougher ones to write, but not as tough as writing one for an infant that died of SIDS. It’s nearly impossible to write about a life that has yet to be lived. At least Emily had a few years on this earth. It’s better than nothing.”

“I understand that, but it doesn’t make it any less tragic.”

“Growing up, you only have to deal with the loss of pets and elderly relatives. That’s if you’re lucky. When I was thirteen I lost a friend, Bradley LaGrange. He died in a farming accident. That was when I first discovered that I wasn’t invincible. You feel invincible as a child. It hit me hard, and it took a long time for me to recover. At times it felt like if Bradley could die, what’s keeping me alive? You can’t spend your life coping with your inevitable death. ‘Life is for the living’ as they say, Eli. The only people that miss life are the ones that are alive. And the people that do that aren’t living their life. There is nothing to miss when you’re dead.”

Mr. Fitzgerald finished his drink. The ice cubes clanked as they hit the bottom of the glass. Eli took one more polite sip, and then set the nearly untouched glass of whiskey on his desk.

“Well, Eli, I should get back to work. Peppermint?”

“No thanks.”

Mr. Fitzgerald placed his hand on Eli’s back, and led him to the office door. Just before he turned the knob he looked at Eli with kind, sympathetic eyes and gave him one more piece of advice.

“Forget about Emily. There is no such thing as a healthy obsession.”

Eli went home to his apartment. It always felt cold when he walked into his dark, empty main room. He took out his laptop and contributed to his obituary.

Eli lived a full life, a life without regret.  
He was never one to pass on an opportunity that  
came his way.

Eli thought more a minute, smiled, and closed the final chapter in his life by typing...



He leaves behind his beautiful wife of 60 years, four children, twelve grandchildren, and countless friends that he had made over the years. The large fortune that he has amassed will be put towards a museum in his honor.

*One might as well be optimistic in this prediction, he thought.*

Eli looks at the faint scribble of a phone number on the palm of his hand. He admires the feminine handwriting—*Melissa* spelled with the cutesy dotted “i”. Without a second thought he picks up the phone, dials the smudged numbers from his open palm and listened to the distant, muffled ring.

*Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring, ring—click – “Eli?”*