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26 RECOLLECTIONS OF YOURS

1. Your body

I REMEMBER BENDING DOWN TO LOOK MORE CLOSELY, a few hours before your funeral, squinting as if reading fine print, surprised at the delicacy of the hole in the back of your head, smaller than I'd expected, a circular ridge rising in your tight Jewfro, the tiniest volcano, caked with your blood; you, 26, naked on a cadaver table in the back room at Berger Memorial; me, 20, a member of the St. Louis Jewish burial society but there mostly to see you, there because it'd been less than two weeks since I'd run messages between you and my brother (the lawyer) after your arrest, there because I needed to see for myself that you were really dead.

2. Your apartment

I remember your apartment in University City, a few years before your funeral, a garden apartment with no garden, behind the kosher bakery; me, on the couch with your sister-in-law, a Saturday night in the dark, teens back from a date, our first or second; her, visiting from out of town; me, a kid raised Orthodox, just learning how to be with girls who weren't; you, asleep with her big sister and little nephew in other rooms, the cool brother-in-law to her, the cool former counselor to me, the cool friend to my older brothers (the lawyer and the teacher), the friend who was like family but without baggage. Until there was.

3. Your investigation

I remember a St. Louis County homicide detective, a week or two after your funeral, asking if I killed you — *Holy shit!* — then me, answering “No”; then him, asking if my brother (the lawyer) killed you; then me, “I don't think so”; then him, “Would you tell me if he did?”; then me, pretending to think, “Yes, sir, I would”; then him, asking why I kept visiting your deli in the Central West End after you got out on bail and before you disappeared; then me, explaining that my brother (the lawyer) wanted to com-

municate with you but figured the cops were watching; then him, confirming, “They were,” before asking, “What were the messages about?”; then me, truthfully, “I never read them”; then him, “Anything else I should know that might be relevant?”; then me, thinking that was a subjective question — thinking that a lifetime of feeling like an outsider in the Orthodox Jewish community might make even the coolest person do stupid things — but answering, “No, sir”; then him, “Alright, you can go now”; then me, “Can I ask *you* a question?”; then him, nodding; then me, “What do *you* think happened?” — that is, why did this young husband and father end up in the passenger seat of his new Camaro near Lucas and Hunt Road with a bullet in his brain? — then the detective, narrowing his eyes, “You really want to know what I think happened?”; then me, “Yes”; then the detective, “I think some Jewish boys from West County got into something waaaay over their heads.”

4. Your hats

I remember your hats, forever before your funeral, ever present, as if you were an observant Jew who wanted to cover his head without wearing a *kippah*, your reasons different but no less compulsive, never an outing without a hat, so many hats, at least a dozen, maybe more, but always a hat on your head. Until there wasn't.

5. Your absences

I remember one of our weekly poker games, a year or so before your funeral, after you'd started missing some, after you started having money, real money, cash, enough that our games were now “only social,” you always vague about your absences — “traveling,” you'd say, Hawaii or Vegas or Miami, you'd hint — smiling that half-smirk of yours as we peppered you with the same questions and got the same responses, “I can't really tell you”; then Howard, one evening, “What *can* you tell us?”; then you, “I can tell you that I have to have a good memory”; then Randy, “What does that even mean?”; then you, “I have to practice”; then Ken, “Practice what?”; then you, “Memorization”; then Alan, “What do you memorize?”; then you, “I can't say”; then Barry, “Does it have to do with gambling”; then David, “Or account numbers?”; then Chuck, “Or amounts”; then Mike, “Just tell us”; then me, “Or tell us why you can't tell us”; then you, “I can't. And better you don't know, anyway.”

6. Your cold

I remember one particular poker game, several years before your funeral, before those trips, before you had your own deli, when you were slinging sandwiches at someone else's, our friendly game with those cheap plastic chips — white, red, blue; nickel, dime, quarter — when those amounts could add up, for me at least, youngest at the table, money tight, paying my way through UMSL, working two jobs, learning poker the hard way, too hard that night, down \$30; you, cranky with a cold, running through tissues; my brother (the teacher) serving cupcakes, the kind with the delicious porous paper, everyone laughing at my xylophagic tendencies, which started in first grade, a nervous habit of a nervous kid, a habit that stuck even after I stopped being nervous, me liking the taste and mouthfeel, explaining this that night; then you, “Any kind of paper?”; then me, “No,” telling a funny story about ditto paper and blue lips in third grade; then you, half kidding, pointing to a used tissue near your chips, “Kleenex?”; then me, all serious, “For a price”; then you, “Ten bucks?”; then me, shaking my head; then you, “Twenty five?”; then me, head shake; then you, “Fifty?”; then me, lightning quick, grabbing the Kleenex and swallowing it whole, because I knew you would pay, because you always kept your promises, because you always came to my rescue.

7. Your charisma

I remember working with you at the children's clothing store on MLK Drive, a few summers before your funeral; you, the smooth salesman, talking parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles into onesies and jumpers and layettes and slip-ons; me, listening to everything you said, watching everything you did; you, who could talk almost anybody into almost anything; me, who always believed you, always believed in you.

8. Your investors

I remember my parents, a year or so before your funeral, bickering about you, about a chance to “invest” with you; my mom, skeptical; my dad, impatient, a rule-abiding middle school schoolteacher who'd suddenly become a risk-taker, who was suddenly willing to give his sons' friend real money, six-zeros money that he'd just inherited; my mom, a rule-abiding OB nurse playing to type, asking questions that my brother

(the lawyer) couldn't answer; my dad winning the argument; my mom, accepting defeat; my brother (the lawyer), explaining that repayment — and then some — would come regularly, and in cash.

9. Your house

I remember your new house in West County, a few months before your funeral, a step up from the garden apartment with no garden, a sign that you'd arrived, a sign that you'd amounted to more than people thought you would, if they thought of you at all, a sign of your worth, a sign of your success, a sign of something, for sure.

10. Your father

I remember your father, many years before your funeral, a Saturday morning regular at our *shul*, holding court outside the sanctuary during sermons, kids all around, drawn to his hearty laugh and wiry beard and stocky frame and meaty hands, red and rough from his job at the kosher slaughterhouse, a blue-collar man in a white-collar crowd, a paycheck-to-paycheck man in a synagogue full of business owners and teachers and lawyers and doctors, a father, my brother (the teacher) said, who could be “tough,” like our dad, a man who died when you were barely not a kid, a man you named your one-and-only son after, a man who was hard to know, a man like you, as it turned out.

11. Your policy

I remember hearing about an insurance policy, several weeks before your funeral, my brother (the lawyer) explaining your backup plan, explaining that everyone would be taken care of, explaining that he knew what to do, explaining that there was a safety deposit box with a cassette tape inside, a tape that would explain everything.

12. Your pseudonyms

I remember a running joke, for many years before your funeral, more accurately a running “fuck you,” a fake name that you'd give to restaurants — Talayna's, Lotus Room, Howard Johnson, Pasta House, didn't matter — a fake name every time, except not exactly fake, but rather someone else's real name, someone from the Orthodox community, someone who would never eat in a non-kosher restaurant, someone who would be mortified if they knew their name was even called out in a *treif* restau-

rant, someone you resented, someone who wouldn't even have understood why, which made you resent them more.

13. Your shiva

I remember your *shiva*, right after your funeral, in your mother's apartment, your mom quiet, your older brother quiet, your widow quiet, everybody quiet, nobody seeming too surprised that a graduate of the H.F. Epstein Hebrew Academy, a Jewish boy from West County, had ended up dead in the passenger seat of his car in a desolate corner of North County.

14. Your boy

I remember your son, days and weeks and months and years before your funeral, your miniature you, a boy named for your father, until he wasn't, his name changed after you died, after he and his mom left town, leaving me to wonder, for decades, what parts of you could not be dropped.

15. Your bookie

I remember another poker game at my brother (the teacher)'s apartment, five years before your funeral, table chatter about the football Cardinals, playing really well — *Six wins in a row!* — playing like contenders, but you not so sure; you, "hearing things," from wherever it was that you heard things, about a "serious gambler" betting *against* the team finishing above .500; then me, just a dumb fan, thinking about their 7-3 record and saying, "They're a lock"; then you, "Yeah, how much do you wanna bet?"; then me, "\$50" — more than I could afford, but all they needed was one win in the next four games — then you, "Done!"; and, of course, they finish 7-7, four losses in a row, because ... the Cardinals, because that's how these stories go; then me, distraught, \$50 short of \$50; then you, the next time I see you, "Why so glum?," grinning, knowing exactly why so glum; then me, "I don't have the money"; then you, "What money?"; then me, "The Cardinals bet"; then you, "Yeah, don't worry about it, I took care of you," and not for the first time.

I remember your shiva,
right after your funeral,
in your mother's
apartment, your mom
quiet, your older brother
quiet, your widow quiet,
everybody quiet.

16. Your arrest

I remember the confusion when you were arrested, a couple weeks before your funeral, out on bail after a few days, out after a drug deal turned drug bust, a side hustle, my brother (the lawyer) said to my parents, nothing to do with their investment, my brother (the lawyer) explained to my parents, nothing to worry about, my brother (the lawyer) told my parents — but telling me that your business partners *might* be worried, about what you might say to avoid jail; my brother (the lawyer), asking me to shuttle messages to you at your new deli in the Central West End; me, agreeing to act as go-between, back when we thought *The Godfather* was a guide to life, back when the world was young, back when I was young, back when my brothers were young, back when we were all young, back when we were all alive.

17. Your thumb

I remember your sliced thumb, a couple years before your funeral; you, standing behind the counter of that deli on Olive east of McKnight, a new job for you, a turkey-and-chopped-liver sandwich for me; me, stopping by for lunch after class on the way to work, listening as you described your injury; you, wiggling your bandaged thumb and laughing at your stupidity, bouncing on the balls of your feet, jumpy but happy, talking about running your own deli some day; me, wondering how you'd ever afford that on a counterman's salary; you, comping my soda and chips.

18. Your story

I remember that piece about you in the *Post-Dispatch*, just after your funeral, an article in a box; “Man in Drug Case Found Dead in Car,” the matter-of-fact story announced; recently “indicted on conspiracy and distribution of cocaine,” the brief story explained; “shot once in the head,” the formulaic story continued; “no suspects in the shooting,” your short story ended.

19. Your effects

I remember finagling a copy of your autopsy report, some months after your funeral, knucklehead me thinking I was in an episode of *The Rockford Files*, foolish me thinking how easy it was to fool people, adoring me thinking that it was just like you to have had an autopsy, rare for Jews, outside law and custom, like you, but required

when a body turns up dead in a locked car, like you, a 26-year-old male with coronary artery disease but with no hat in the list of personal effects. So unlike you.

20. Your physical

I remember asking about that life insurance policy, at some point after your funeral, learning that that you'd never had your medical exam, that the policy wasn't in force, that there was no money to make everyone whole, that you didn't quite have everything figured out.

21. Your friend

I remember my brother (the lawyer) in my sister and brother-in-law's den, a day or so after your funeral, curled up on their couch and crying, sadder than I'd ever seen him, sad because you were dead, sad because my parents' money was gone, sad because everyone's money was gone, sad because you were gone, sad because *The Godfather* wasn't a guide to anything.

22. Your hideout

I remember another poker game, two or three months after your funeral, with one of the Davids visiting from LA, telling a funny story he heard at *shul*, a funny story about another of the Davids getting a strange bill in the mail, a bill from a by-the-hour-motel in Overland, for some unpaid phone charges, a funny story that made everyone else laugh but made me think of you, made me think of restaurants and fake names, made me go to that motel and play *Rockford Files* again, made me lie to the desk man about an expense report — “You know how they are in accounting!” — made me riff about needing a copy of a bill from a few months back, a bill, as it turned out, with your unmistakable scrawl forging the other David's signature and address, a bill corresponding to those few days after you went missing and before you turned up dead, a bill with several calls to a single number, a bill I never showed anyone but my brother (the lawyer), a bill I should have given to that detective, a bill long lost, a bill that for years made me wonder who you were calling and why.

23. Your case

I remember calling St. Louis County, almost four decades after your funeral, won-

dering if there was a story to report, a murder to solve, a mystery to unravel, wondering if we would ever learn the status of your very cold case, wondering all sorts of things while my call was transferred, wondering more when another homicide detective informed me that your case wasn't cold at all, that it had been closed a year after you died — *Wait, what?* — wondering how I didn't know that; then me, "Was the case solved?"; then him, "Yes, it was ruled a suicide"; then me, "That's it?"; then him, "That's pretty much all I could find out"; then me, "Okay, thanks for your help," ending the call but wondering still, wondering if it was possible that you had arranged your own execution, wondering why the police would even think that, wondering what *you* were thinking as you sat in the passenger seat of your new Camaro, sat there waiting for someone to pull a trigger — at your request or otherwise — sat there with your head uncovered, sat there with all of your thoughts and none of your hats.

24. Your cassette

I remember calling my brother (the lawyer), almost four decades and one day after your funeral; my brother (the lawyer), who never quite got past losing our parents' money, never quite got past losing you; I remember calling my brother (the lawyer) to talk about you and that summer but mostly to ask about that safety deposit box, ask about that cassette tape, the one with your backup plan that didn't back up anything; then me, asking, "Did you give the cassette to the police?"; then him, answering, "Yeah, I think I did"; then me, "I guess that's why they closed it as a suicide"; then him, "Yeah, probably"; then me, "Do you think it was?"; then him, "I honestly don't know"; then me, "Okay, thanks"; then him, "Why are you thinking about all that now?"; then me, "I think about all that a lot."

25. Your funeral

I remember your funeral, so humid and hot, the half-forgotten cemetery in U-City, on North & South near Page, where Jews in St. Louis weren't buried anymore, at least until you went underground there, with so many people who loved you above ground there; me, with my brother (the lawyer)'s summer associate, my quasi-girlfriend (or whatever she was), who had so many rules about dating (or whatever that was), who had all those intimidating law school friends, like that third-year who told too-perfect stories that my quasi-girlfriend said I should only listen to with "applied

math” — “Always divide by two and subtract 50,” she would say — my quasi-girl-friend, who knew there was something “sketchy” about you, who knew *your* math didn’t add up, who knew not to press my brother (the lawyer), who knew I would tell her everything I knew, even though all I knew didn’t amount to much in the end.

26. Your legs

I remember your shorts, a dozen or so years before your funeral, your spindly tanned legs descending from them; you, the cool junior counselor at a day camp in suburban St. Louis; me, the paper-eating mess of a day camper; both of us on a field trip to Forest Park, all the other kids pairing off to ride those paddle boats, all the other kids pairing off with friends, all the other kids *having* friends, unlike me, or so it seemed, on the saddest day of my life, or so it seemed; me, smaller than small on the dock, or so it seemed, watching boat after boat casting off, watching kid after kid pairing off; me, crying softly; then you, a voice from behind, “Why are you crying?”; then me, turning and sobbing, “Nobody wants to go with me”; then you, flicking my shoulder with the back of your hand — *Ow!* — and saying, “That’s because I’m going with you”; then me, through sobs, “What do you mean?”; then you, “What do you mean what do I mean? C’mon”; then me, on a boat with you; me, pedaling next to you; me, chosen by you; me, seeing all the other kids seeing me, seeing me differently; me, seeing myself differently, seeing myself mattering, seeing myself as special, seeing you save me from myself, or so it all seemed. 🕒