

Death Part One

Death: Part One

If I tell you this is a story about the time I worked in a record store, you're gonna think I'm the kind of person who tells you your favorite band's best song is the b-side to a single that was only released in Germany, or some shit like that. I don't even listen to that many records, and resented the customers who expected my knowledge to be encyclopedic; you don't expect the saleswomen at Nordstrom to have tried on every article of clothing and I haven't listened to every T-Rex album.

So if you want to read a story about some guy who will debate you on which line up of The James Gang is best, or whether The Smiths UK albums were better than the US versions, go reread *High Fidelity*. Or don't; I've never read it, so maybe it's nothing like that.

So when I tell you that this story is about the time I worked in a record store, believe me that it's not really about music. It's about me (duh) and about the guy who owned the store, who also taught guitar lessons upstairs.

Boomers who grew up listening to records loved to tell me I was too young to be listening to records, as if there haven't been a thousand articles written in every Boomer-targeted periodical over the last 20 years about the "rebirth of vinyl." Some of them were trying to flatter me, some dismissing me.

The store didn't make a lot of money, so I let Steve (the owner) pay me partially in guitar lessons. I didn't own a guitar, and still don't, so if you want to tell me I shouldn't have agreed to those terms I won't tell you you're wrong. I can tell you I know 17 chords, not counting power chords, but like I said, I have no guitar to pull out and prove it. I used to know more.

Steve's my uncle, so I was doing it as a favor to him more than anything else. I'm glad I did because, now that he's dead, it's good to have this kind of story to tell. A story that makes

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him look good, protective even, but flawed enough that you know I'm not making him sound better than he was.

So if I tell you the story is about my uncle who's dead, I want you to understand that he owned a record store and that I worked there one summer. He taught guitar lessons upstairs and he owned the building and summer was his busy season because the store was in a seaside town on the main drag. It wasn't within sight of the ocean, but you could walk there. If you're in a seaside town and *not* within walking distance of the ocean then, man, you're a fuck up and so are your neighbors.

Because there's nothing more depressing than the inland parts of a seaside town in New England. I know this because my apartment was about three miles inland in this particular seaside town and if there's anything more depressing than living three miles inland in a seaside town it's living in an apartment in said locale. This wasn't some seasonal rental for tourists hoping to save a few bucks by surrendering the ocean-view; this was a wood-paneled studio apartment above a convenience store, strictly for townie fucks such as myself.

Now you might say that living above a convenience store is, well, convenient, but this particular store was a front of some sort, though I never found out what it was a front for. Don't get me wrong, it was a real, live store, and if you wanted to buy cans of ginger ale from an apathetic, apparently mute man in an un-air-conditioned, cramped excuse for a shop, you could. But you'd better have cash and not be too picky about getting the right change.

The landlord was an Italian woman named Cecelia. And just so you don't think I'm one of those people who mention race or ethnicity even when it doesn't affect the story, let me be clear that I mean she was from Italy, not Italian-American. If I were to show her a draft of this story and I *didn't* mention the fact that she was Italian, she'd be pissed. You've just got to trust

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me on this, though, because I'm not showing her my story. First of all, I don't live in that apartment anymore and therefore have no contact with Cecelia and second of all, who shows their stories to their landlord? People who live with their parents, maybe.

Now, Cecelia features into this story in two key ways, the first by virtue of being my landlord and the second by virtue of the fact that she, through a series of twists I never fully understood, raised my uncle Steve for the majority of his middle- and high-school years. Cecelia had many children of her own (four, I believe, though her last name is a common one in this town), so I don't know how it happened that Steve ended up there. She wore all black to his funeral; she held my hand and cried when the coffin was lowered to the ground.

If a virtual stranger is going to hold your hand, a funeral is the place for it; when I think about it I feel something on the tip of my tongue, something about how we're all just bodies and we're all just souls, and our hands aren't real but also there's nothing realer than our hands and when we hold each other we're proving the paradox of existence and celebrating the very thing that disproves it. I don't know, like I said, it's not quite there. I was crying too.

But that was later, into the fall. Summer was a different time, one free and clear of all paradoxes. A seaside town in New England in the summer is the simplest place on earth. Everyone's there for the same reason (the ocean), and when they're more than a block away from the beach they mill around like zombies, but instead of craving brains they're satisfied by fried clams.

And the ocean itself—too cold to swim in, except to prove a point—turns up in the weirdest places. We call it shoreline, as if that normalizes the uncertainty of it, as if by receding the water is proving that it must return to us. Well, it always has. The allure, perhaps, is that this

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mysterious thing—the ocean—could be so much *more* mysterious if it chose. Instead it chooses relentless monotony and takes no notice of our pale-legged intrusion into its extremities.

It's impossible to live near the ocean for very long without writing about it, or painting it, or throwing yourself into it in a jacket weighed down by paperweights sold in one of the shops that line the main drag of every seaside town. Because of the price gouging these stores practice, most of us find we can't afford suicide, and write instead.

Steve didn't believe in price gouging; that's why he was always broke. He charged \$25 for half hour guitar lessons that lasted an hour, and happily accepted IOUs, even from tourists. He sold used records for little more than what he paid for them and didn't have enough money to buy new records from a distributor. Just get that shit at Urban Outfitters, okay?

Since Steve owned the building, and had paid off the mortgage years before after winning a large sum of money playing poker, I guess his expenses were minimal. I say "I guess" because I didn't ever talk to him about money, except to say "thank you" when he gave me my pay every two weeks. Come to think of it, I don't believe I've ever spoken to anyone about money except when it's changing hands. It just never struck me as an interesting subject and my writing about it proves that.

But we'll talk about anything to avoid talking about death; that's why we tell stories, so that we can ornament what we're afraid to talk about in accessories that distract from the intensity of it a little bit. It's a way of approaching something like death while avoiding eye contact. If I told you off the bat this was a story about my dead uncle and about my grief, about the night I spent in the hospital waiting room, preparing myself for how alone the inevitable would leave me, you'd cross to the other side of the street to avoid me. But couching it in an aloof tone, sprinkling it with observational humor, it lets us both get there.

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So this is a story about death, though not one about dying—I'm not gonna tell you all about what Steve went through, but that it was sudden. One minute he was alive, then there were about 300 minutes during which he was dying, then he was dead. I found him above the shop, in the room where he taught lessons, about 200 minutes into that 300 minute period, far enough in that there was no doubt about what was happening.

But, okay, I'm jumping around here. You don't know Steve, or me, or my connection to him. And that requires me to talk about his life. When someone tells you a story is about death, you know it's gonna be 90% about life, because a little bit of death tends to go along way.

This is not the kind of thing I talked about with Steve. Or anyone else. Steve and I are pretty similar except that he was charitable and I'm not. I care about other people, I just don't see why I have to prove it all the time; life's punishment enough without inflicting what I deem "all I can spare" on others who are only slightly more pitiable than me.

You see, I've been unemployed since Steve died and the record store closed—this isn't the kind of story where I inherited the store from him and turned it into a flourishing business; it's the kind of story I'm writing from a café in my home town that will kick me out into the snowy afternoon when they realize I don't have the money to buy anything. Unsurprisingly, Steve was deeply in debt, so everything he owned went to his Debtors, a word I capitalize because I imagine them as a sort of pantheon, but don't know their particular identities, or whether some dusty Allman Brother records will allow them to recoup in a satisfactory fashion.

Anyway, Steve wasn't a philosophical man; anyone who was raised by Cecelia during some of their formative years would consider philosophizing a particularly pretentious form of navel-gazing; her children, all fishermen, would, more bluntly, find it effeminate. But they liked that Steve owned a record store, because it meant he could always get them weed. I grew up with

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these men as uncles, and know them to be hard drinking and masculine, but also sensitive and not uncomplicated.

I've never known a fisherman who wants to die, but I've never known one who wasn't aware of the danger of his job either. Their fraternity is built on this bond, and it's hard for any other profession, except firemen, to understand. That's why fishermen don't like us in their bars but love us at their cookouts, where large extended families gather to celebrate with flamboyant abandon—fireworks, alcohol, children running underfoot, old women who hold court on the porches looking into backyards shared between four houses, each owned by members of the family.

Steve would bring a trunk-load full of instruments and he and his adopted brothers, and anyone else who could keep up, would jam on blues and classic rock tunes. Steve liked to say he wasn't really a musician, that he just knew a couple of tricks, but I don't think that was true. I think he liked to scale what he played to his audience, sure, but if anything that's a testament to his talent. I heard him really shred a few times, is all I'm saying.

No one complained about the noise at these cookouts because that's how it worked in the summer; it was a sort of native sound, an antidote to the racket drunk tourists were sure to be making. One time someone renting a house in the neighborhood tried to say something and someone slashed the tires of their mini-van. No one got charged with that one but everyone who tells the story will tell you they were there, including me. I was just a kid, though, so I wasn't *there* there. But I did see a few guys slip off in that direction and I'm not telling you who because it's none of your business.

I haven't seen this group of people much since Steve died, partially because they weren't actually my family and partially because I don't live around there anymore. But some of them

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were at the funeral and all of them were at the party after. Everyone got drunk, and I mean everyone, even the teenagers. One of Cecelia's sons tried to get some music going, but they couldn't agree on what to play, so it didn't happen. A few of us walked down to the beach after it got dark and sat on the rocks with a bottle of whiskey and a couple of joints I found in Steve's stash. You can't take it with you, as they say.

I don't know if this is adding up to much of anything. Sometimes you get too close to something that you care about, and you stop seeing it because you get so concerned with the meaningless particles that compose it. Well, now Steve's just particles to me and I don't know if I'm focusing on the right ones. I haven't told you much about my relationship with him, I guess; or about his relationship with my mother, his sister. I haven't told you what we talked about, how we talked, or what he taught me.

Well it seems disingenuous to try to document any one of those conversations here, since I don't remember any of them word for word. Who does? Sentences fade to summaries which dissolve into our overall impression of the person. You might remember snippets here and there, but I guarantee, if a conversation is a first draft then your memory of it is a fifth draft, chopped up by a merciless editor with a low word count as their bottom line.

So instead I'm going to make up a conversation with Steve here; I think it'll be truer to the spirit of the man. We can imagine, for the sake of this exercise, that he's dead (it's easy to imagine something when it happens to be true) but able to communicate with me for the duration of this conversation.

I imagine him looking up at me in the sheepish way he would whenever I caught him smoking weed, a brief frown representing fear of judgment or fear of me ruining some private

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moment, followed by a return to neutral as he remembered that I was cool, that I'd respect the ritual enough that we could talk some without pulling him completely out of the trance.

Steve: Oh, shit, hey, buddy.

Me: Hey, Steve, how's it going?

Steve: It's not going at all, I'd say. It's gone. But that's not so bad.

Me: Right, well, I'm not gonna ask about Heaven or whatever, because I know there's probably an NDA or something you've gotta sign...

Steve: You can ask all you want, but I'll tell you now, I'm not jamming with Little Richard or Jimi Hendrix or anything.

Me: I guess news travels fast, because Little Richard just died a couple of weeks ago.

Steve: I may be buried under a rock, but it doesn't mean I'm living under one.

Me: Yeah, I guess. Anyway, what have you been up to?

Steve: What have *you* been up to? I'm not flying around watching your every move or anything, but you don't seem like you're up to shit, to be honest.

Me: I mean, I wasn't doing that much before, either. Working at the store, sure, but—

Steve: You were making plans, anyway.

Me: It took me by surprise, I guess. You dying sort of pulled the rug out from under me.

Steve: Ha! How do you think it felt for me? Shit. I didn't wake up that morning thinking "I'm gonna die today, ain't that grand?" No. I woke up that morning wondering if I should rub one out then and there or try to get laid that night. In hindsight, I wish I'd rubbed one out.

Me: Is there, uh, is there sex in, uh, wherever you are?

Steve: You can call it Heaven, as long as you don't imagine a bunch of clouds and shit. And there's a dating scene here but it's rough. Who wants to fuck me when they can fuck Steve

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McQueen or, hey, you know who's really popular with the ladies for some reason? That guy who played Ernest. You know, *Ernest Goes to Camp*? Angels love to fuck Ernest.

Me: That's—really?

Steve: No, I'm just fucking with you. Come on, there's no sex here and no Ernest, either. It's just... being dead feels kind of like a state of mind. Like it's a choice I made, a thought I thought and now I can't stop thinking it. But it's there on the tip of my tongue, you know, whatever's next. Another riddle.

Me: You never seemed too existentially concerned when you were alive. I always thought of you as someone who kind of had it all figured out for yourself.

Steve: I didn't have shit figured out, but I didn't care to do so, either. Nothing's easier than sleeping on an un-made bed, you know? But you were always thinking about that junk. Meaning of life stuff, weren't you?

Me: I don't know if I'd say I was thinking about "meaning of life" per se, but I want *my* life to have meaning.

Steve: And yet... You're, what, you're writing this, that's it. I died over a year ago. Oh, hey, sorry I didn't have much of anything to leave you. In my will, I mean.

Me: I don't care about that. Honestly.

Steve: Yeah, it was just a bunch of old junk anyway. Hey, do me a favor, right?

Me: Sure, what?

Steve: Tell Cecelia thanks for me. Ah, never mind, you'd just seem crazy then. Too bad this conversation isn't real, I'd be able to drop some real profound shit on you.

Me: I don't think—I mean, that's getting a bit meta.

Steve: You're the one writing it! It's only as meta as you make it.

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Me: That is and it isn't true. It feels kind of, I don't know, I guess for a second it felt like you were really talking to me, that I was channeling it through my pen.

Steve: But then you remembered—

Me: But then I remembered—

Steve: That I don't believe in Heaven—

Me: And that you didn't make jokes like this—

Steve: And that I didn't sound like this at all—

Me: And that you never once called me "buddy"—

Steve: That's the truth, buddy.

Okay, so that's why we don't talk to the dead; they have nothing to lose and therefore call us on our bullshit. We must be unbearable to immortals.

Steve was right that I got his voice wrong, but he was considerate enough not to point out that I got my own wrong as well; maybe it was pity, or self-pity. I can admit it: I don't know what my own voice sounds like, not now anyway. What happened to me after Steve died?

Look, I don't want to get into it too much or anything, but Steve helped raise me. I don't want to get into why because that would involve slandering some people who are still alive. And after Steve died, I had to move back in with those people who I don't want to slander (and I have nothing to say about them that isn't slanderous), far from the ocean and far from tourists and far from any energy more potent than the kind that powers a fridge.

Sometimes when I make the long drive down the wooded street my childhood (and current) home is on, I stop looking at the road all together and watch the power lines; I think about the current within them, the electrical stream that connects the light bulb in my bedside

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lamp to the 75 inch television in my neighbor's house. And some nights I scream into the light in the hope that the sound will be carried through those lines and come out of those neighbors' Dolby surround sound stereos, and that they'll think they're hearing a ghost. Not even my parents hear me, or if they do, they ignore me.

I guess I let it slip that I'm living with my parents, well so what? Who cares that I'm 26 years old and living in my childhood bedroom? Who cares that I used to work in a record store and now I don't? Who cares that my uncle owned that record store and now he's dead? Who cares that he wanted to be cremated and who cares that he wasn't, who cares that he's buried in a cemetery overlooking the ocean, and who cares that I haven't visited since the funeral?

There's more I want to say, but you'd only understand it if you've lost someone you love. And I do mean *you*. It's a fraternity, really, one we all join eventually. So I can wait. What else is there to do?