

The Second Death

I opened a post office box in the name of a dead woman and watched as she received mail as if she were still alive.

It was like magic.

But I was the magician and – poof – the audience, too.

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I hadn't picked up my own mail in almost three weeks, so the little brass door to the 3-by-3-inch box was difficult to open because of the log of mail jammed inside. Magazines. Political flyers. Bills, many bills, the late ones in more vibrant colors and menacing font to coax me into opening them to see just how much I must pay to avoid being sent to collections.

It was then that I noticed a little paper tag hanging off box number 11 – four up and one over from mine.

I pulled the tag out and walked to the service counter to the same clerk who'd originally set up my own box.

"Hi, Fred. I'll be needing this box. I have a friend moving to town and said I'd get her one. I figured since I've had mine for 30 years you could just put her name alongside mine in the box."

"Sure," he said. "Her name?"

"Ildigo. Freitas."

I didn't tell him that he'd never see her in this post office.

I didn't tell her that she'd lived in Idaho.

I didn't tell her any of these other things either:

That she'd been a nurse.

That she recently gotten engaged.

That she'd told her husband-to-be that it would be no problem for her to find a job as a nurse in Arizona since he'd gotten the transfer to Phoenix from his company, the transfer he'd worked for and wanted for over two years.

That she'd said to him, and then told me, 'My family has been in nursing here in Idaho since the day my grandmother emigrated from Hungary. I need a resume to send out since the one I've been using was just a formality. Now I need to help show people what a wonderful nurse I am.'

That a random online search for resume writers in Arizona would lead to me.

That we'd talked half a dozen times to collaborate, probably more than we needed to, both of us enjoying the rapport and oddly intimate conversation that the isolation of the pandemic seemed to foster between people this year.

That she'd catch me on the week after my dad died in hospice from a stroke he suffered at his home office desk three weeks before, probably having something to do with continuing to try to be an entrepreneur at 88 years old and working as diligently as he had when he'd gotten his first job at Sears when he was 14.

That I never told her – and now wish I did – that the way she was able to so graciously

comfort me with a few kind words proved she'd have a career filled with patients who'd appreciate more than just her medical skills.

That we'd never finish the resume I was writing for her because two or three weeks into our efforts – just two days before her wedding in Idaho – she quit answering my calls.

That I'd give it another couple of weeks to reach out because I assumed she was preoccupied with the festivities and needed a honeymoon free from normal life.

That I gave it another week of no responses before I started looking online to see if she'd moved and if I could track her down.

That I found, within ten minutes, news that Ildigo, her fiancé and her parents were all killed in what turned out to be a crime of opportunity and addiction.

That two teenage brothers – neighbors of hers from another Hungarian family that knew hers for 50 years – had ended their addiction to opiates by driving to her house seeking drugs they adolescently assumed she'd have on hand, walking into the carport where her parents, whom they knew well, were about to drive off somewhere, shot them once each, then after a few seconds shot Ildigo and her fiancé when they came from inside to investigate.

That they'd remain at large for less than a day when their car, identified by other neighbors who'd seen it drive off erratically, was spotted in the parking lot of a drugstore they were planning on robbing.

That this news of a massacre would blend into the news of so many murders in so many

places in so many years and would remain largely a story of local interest.

“Take care, Fred,” I said. “Say hello to your wife.”

Fred did not know he'd never meet Ildigo.

He also did not know her mailbox would get a constant stream of vintage postcards with greetings and stories and wishes and confessions and those useless factoids that my father had always said made me seem like a trivia nerd and that my mother wrote down into a little notebook she bought me when I was eight and that she'd titled “Very Useful Facts.” She kept the notebook on her shelf of cookbooks behind a tattered “Joy of Cooking” and told me that only she and I knew of its existence.

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While my dad died of a stroke, I'll forever affiliate his death with those first days of COVID. For the three weeks after his stroke, I became fully aware of just how much the pandemic had affected every single event in our lives.

My life became a blur of hospital visits, communication with his lawyers, visits to the funeral home that he'd handpicked and prepaid for his last hurrah, time crying with caretakers while my dad spent his last days in home hospice in his living room, uncommunicative, watching Marx Brothers movies I'd set up for him on a loop, and finally, a grim, socially distanced, minimalistic, funeral service that just me and my uncle, his older brother, attended with the kind and comforting cemetery manager.

I slept for 14 hours tonight after I buried him.

When I got up, in his house, from the couch in the living room I'd made my headquarters, I took a shower so long that the steam from the heat was first like a sauna and ended so cold it made me chase my breath.

I made a double strength pot of black tea and sat at the kitchen table with a fresh red pen and a stack of my dad's personalized note cards. His entire life he'd used these notecards to communicate, never buying birthday cards or holiday cards, just penning his wishes on one of these, then dropping them in a matching envelope. It had become a running joke in the family, but to him it was a matter of efficiency and expediency.

Under his name I wrote "To Do Today." Then a numbered list of the many things I had not done since the day of my dad's stroke. It's surprising how many regular life tasks go undone while you spend a great chunk of your day for weeks on end watching someone slowly die.

1. Groceries
2. Haircut
3. Laundry
4. Return avoided calls
5. Clip toenails
6. Plug ceiling leak
7. Scrub every surface in the kitchen (the floor likely twice)

8. Take out bags of recycling filled with frozen meal containers
9. Shop for healthy food
10. Get an oil change since you put on over 2,000 miles in 22 days.
11. Open the shades
12. Get the mail.

I quickly resumed my routine, numb perhaps, but functioning. My resume writing work kept me occupied. Apart from Ildigo, I had half a dozen other clients who'd all been patient with me.

Getting back the normalcy of being a freelance writer in a global pandemic was rather easy.

For me, the isolation had become a comfort, much more suited to my personality than my previous decades kicking fitfully in the smooth hum of fluorescent hallways and antiseptic offices of a global corporation.

* * *

The first postcard I sent Ildigo took me an entire afternoon on my dad's, now my, porch to start composing.

I did not know why I was doing such a thing.

I'd never really known her.

But her murder had startled me as much as if she'd been a lifelong friend in my personal life.

The brutality of this Idaho massacre wove itself into my DNA.

After I first read about the killings, I'd become fairly obsessed, spending long nights online

trying to learn all I could about her and her family. A part of me – the part of me that was a boy who dreamt of being granted three wishes – wished I could will them all back to life in one simple utterance. I wasn't even sure I'd use one of the other two wishes on my dad.

The meaninglessness of her death wove itself into my subconscious.

I began dreaming of her.

She began speaking to me occasionally in those dreams.

Because they'd included a picture of her in the original story about the murders, the voice in my dreams, the voice I'd heard on the phone, now had a face.

Her face would always and forever be 27.

Eternally youthful.

The first postcard was a picture of Alexander Calder in Paris in the 1920s next to one of the artistic inventions he created: a wire portrait sculpture of a friend, a single wire twisted and pulled and bent and uniquely coaxed into a three-dimensional outline of a face that contained as much life as any sculpture I've ever seen.

I've been collecting vintage postcards since I was a teenager, most happy when I found the rare one that had been stamped and sent, the mundane message still there in faded ink, a hello from a Florida beach to the family in an Illinois home caught in the dead of winter.

“Enjoying the warm sand of lovely Florida. Wish you were here. Auntie Mable and Uncle Jack.”

But for Ildigo, from this first one on, it would only be unused vintage postcards with an original note, a note written with far more deliberation than the one from Auntie and Uncle.

When I finished that first postcard, it read as follows:

Dear Ildigo,

While you are no longer in need of a resume, I thought you might enjoy being the recipient of the occasional postcard. I'll be sharing with you some randomnesses, some thoughts, some asides, perhaps even some very important facts. I'm kidding a bit, but I do think these notes will be interesting. Fact of the day: Long ago, the Egyptians believed that everyone died twice: once, when you take your last breath, and once again the last time someone says your name. While I didn't really know you, Ildigo, I'll say your name every morning I wake up. Every day until I'm gone. Ildigo. Every day until I die.