

The Coffee Table Book of Funeral Etiquette

*Prologue: Be advised that dead bodies may not fully resemble the people they once were. This fact will be upsetting. Remember that the mortician did the best he/she could, and did not stretch the skin around the deceased's eyes so tightly as to make him/her appear Asian on purpose. Keep in mind that, upon first glance at the corpse, the bereaved may begin to feel as though they're in a bubble, encapsulated in a gaping emptiness.*

I stand over the body of my Aunt May, the body of the one constant presence in my life. Aunt May, never, not once, wore thick pancake make-up with circles of rouge on her cheeks like a china doll. She slept flat-out on her stomach, not primly on her back, hands crossed neatly one over the other. Her hair was wild and wind-blown, sticking out in frantic tufts, not perfectly positioned in stiff, starched curls. I expected her death; what I didn't expect was the wrenching pain in my chest when she went, the absolute, utter finality of the separation cleaving into me. I didn't expect to scream and hold on to her like a toddler when they took her body away. I didn't expect to recede inside myself. I didn't expect that at all. And so I stand over her body, the dutiful niece, my hair pulled back neatly from my face; I'm wearing a crisp black suit. I wonder, idly, if I can recycle the suit when I finally get my real estate license, or if that's just plain bad taste all around. Do real estate agents even wear crisp black suits?

"Mom," my son, Austin, says, tugging at my hand. Austin is six years old. I don't know if that's old enough to understand death, to understand that Aunt May's not just sleeping, that the creepy, pallid body in the polished box is not her. Austin wiggles his tie. "I think Walter just bit Grandpa."

I look away from Aunt May, across the dimly-lit room crowded with people. It's warm and the air smells of thirty different perfumes. Over by the guestbook, my best friend, Charlotte,

tugs at the tiny black snarling mass that is Walter, Yorkshire Terrorist extraordinaire. Walter lunges at my dad and barks, sharp and high-pitched, and the hum of conversation stops. Walter latches on to Dad's pant leg and growls, shaking his head. For a moment the air is filled with nothing but sad, sad organ music. *On a hill far away, stood an old rugged cross.* Dad kicks his leg until Walter lets go. Walter's posture changes, softens. People start talking again. My dad gives Walter a dirty look and goes across the room to hug someone. Walter glances up at Charlotte and wags his stub of a tail, as if he's expecting praise, then sits down and licks his chops. He never did get along with my dad.

I send Austin to my mom and walk over to Charlotte, my heels sinking into the too-soft carpet. I've never read a book of funeral etiquette, and I certainly don't know if there's one that covers proper behavior when the deceased's beloved Yorkie, specially instructed to be present at calling hours, starts attacking mourners. For a second I picture a funereal massacre—scattered limbs, Walter's muzzle wet with blood, people stumbling over one another in search of missing body parts.

"I think he's still out for blood," Charlotte says. She stands up. Walter takes his leash in his mouth and barks around it.

I wave my brother, Nate, over to Charlotte's corner. "Take Walter outside," I say to Nate.

Nate looks suspicious, or maybe that's just the look he gets on his face whenever Charlotte's around. Six years ago, Nate and Charlotte had a *thing*. Now what they have is a *history*. "You're the only one he doesn't bite," Nate says. I want to say "nuh-uh," to stamp my foot and insist Nate do it. Being around my brother brings out the latent brat in me. He's right, though. Walter's a nutbag, but I can make him behave.

I take Walter's leash from Charlotte and walk outside. It's a windy spring Hatteras day, chilly and sharp, with a blueberry sky. Aunt May would've laughed if I'd said something like "blueberry sky" to her. She had no patience for fanciful language. "This is this and that is that, no two ways about it, kid." Walter huffs and looks up at me, expectant, as if he wants me to say, "Go for a walk?" He paws the ground like a bull. "Not now," I tell him. I sit down on a stair step. My crisp black suit will get dirty and my hair's already wind-blown, but I don't care. The parking lot's full of cars and trucks, rusty old island vehicles with North Carolina plates and fishing poles sticking out everywhere. Charlotte's rental, a BMW with Virginia plates, looks slick and shiny and out of place. I want to take off my heels and run away. I want this fissure in my chest to stop pounding. I don't know how I'm supposed to do this all day. I don't know what to do. If I were to write a how-to book of funeral etiquette, it would be the coffee table kind. Glossy pages, bright illustrations. Something to set out at my parents' inn for guests to flip through as they wait to check in.

A car pulls up and I decide that Chapter One should deal with arrivals. *For the bereaved, the arrival of the one's former illicit lover may add an extra layer of complication to the grieving process. Try to maintain composure when coming face to face with the bodily incarnation of a past bad decision.* Royce Burrus steps out of his car, polished loafers, adorable Buddha belly, and all. I've been thinking of Royce lately, mainly because whenever I drive up and down Highway Twelve, which, between going to work, picking up Austin, driving Aunt May to doctor appointments, and going to Nags Head for real estate classes, I do about eight thousand times a day, I see big signs that say, "Make Royce your choice." Royce is running for County Commissioner. Two years ago, when I was stuck in a lousy marriage, I made Royce my choice. Then I dumped him and got divorced, and I've been single for two years now. Royce walks

across the parking lot to me. He's carrying a bright yellow bouquet of flowers and the largest card I've ever seen. If he'd mailed that thing it would've needed ten stamps, I swear.

Royce sits down on the step. I reign in Walter's leash and put him on the other side of me. "Evie, honey," Royce says. He always liked to call me that. "I'm just really sorry. I know you and May were close." Royce pats my back. The ghost of our affair hovers between us.

"Thank you," I say. Then I think that "thank you" sounds off. It's not like he just complimented my hair. Chapter One of the coffee table book would go on to consider appropriate responses to initial condolences. *The mourner should carry a set of stock phrases in his or her grief arsenal. Acceptable condolence-responses include "thank you," "he/she would be happy to see you here," and the ever-popular and multifunctional silent nod while beginning to cry.* "Thanks for coming." Only I don't know if I mean it. I stand up and Royce and Walter and I go inside. Royce holds the door for me and the warm, sickly-sweet air turns my stomach. Royce balances the giant bouquet and signs the guestbook. I don't get the whole guestbook thing. What do we do with it after? Charlotte catches my eye and I mouth *Royce* and jerk my head toward him. She grimaces and comes over to steer Royce to a group of older men in fishing waders. Yes. Waders.

Chapter Two of my book would illustrate proper funeral attire. *While the dressiness of the mourner correlates proportionally to their closeness with the deceased, and while the deceased did indeed enjoy both fishing and the company of fishermen, waders are never appropriate.* I'd make a shiny illustration of a fisherman with a big X over it. *Similarly dreadful funeral attire includes tight black satin dresses with butt-bows (just because something is black does not mean it is suitable); stonewashed denim (this is never appropriate); and Tar Heels baseball caps.* Walter and I walk over to Austin and Nate, who're both wearing dark suits and

blue ties. *Exemplary.* They sit side by side and I'm struck by how much they look alike. Maybe it's the outfits, or the way Austin adjusts his posture to match Nate's. I sit beside them, resisting the urge to pull Austin onto my lap. I pick up Walter instead.

"How's my kid?" I ask. I'm worried. Austin's never lost someone.

"Hungry," he says.

Nate ruffles Austin's hair. If I did that, Austin would have a fit. "We'll break for lunch soon and head back to Grandpa and Grandma's," Nate says.

Austin uncrosses his arms. He squints up at Nate. "Uncle Nate, can I ride with you?"

Nate doesn't answer because we're hit by a wave of condolence-givers, Nate's friends. He stands and shakes hands. A grasp and one solid pump. A back slap given. A back slap returned. I busy myself with Walter so I don't have to hug any of them. This batch of Nate's friends is the sort to carry soda bottles as portable spittoons.

"Honey, I want to give you this card." A hand on my shoulder. Kind eyes. Royce.

"You open it when you get home." Royce massages my shoulder, his hand staying a fraction longer than comforting requires. *Chapter One, sub-chapter one: hitting on mourners at calling hours is a faux pas. While proper comforting necessitates a certain amount of touching, anything beyond the standard three-second pat is unsuitable and should be avoided.*

Nate slaps the last of his friends on the back and turns, extending his hand to Royce.

"Thank you for coming," he says. Nate knows that Royce and I worked together, once. He probably knows we had an affair, but he doesn't know it from me, and he doesn't show it, thank God. I know I should run interference between Nate and Royce. Chat about real estate. Talk about the time May brought my lunch to work and we all ate burritos outside. But all I can do is run my fingers through Walter's soft fur. That's all I can do for now.

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Chapter Three of the Coffee Table Book of Funeral Etiquette would concern Funeral Dining Manners. *When bringing a casserole to the bereaved, it is fundamentally inappropriate to include a card demanding that the mourner not break the dish. It is likewise unsuitable to ask the mourner to return said dish by noon the following day so that it may be used at the church potluck.* I toss the pink 3 x 5 card bearing the words DO NOT BREAK along with Emma Midgett's address in the trash and sit down beside my mom at their inn's long dining table. Dad's set out casseroles and Nate and Charlotte have stopped being awkward long enough to eat. *While a nice casserole is traditional funeral fare, keep in mind that not all mourners may be fans of tuna noodle. Do not take it personally if the bereaved discovers that the triple chocolate cake, the macaroni and cheese, or the green bean almandine all taste, in his or her distress, like lumps of wet cardboard.* I'd make a full-page illustration of a steaming tuna noodle casserole accompanied by a woman making an ick-face. Across from me, Austin stuffs lasagna in his mouth like he hasn't eaten in six days. I have a moment of panic—what if I was so trapped in the Grief Bubble that I forgot to feed my son breakfast? Then I remember fixing his Golden Grahams. Not too much sugar, but still tasty.

“Remember the time May bought that awful bus?” Mom asks. She's drinking her third mimosa, leftover from the inn's Sunday brunch.

*It is unwise to mix alcohol and grief when another set of calling hours await. Save your imbibing for the wake. Remember, too, that consumption of alcohol may induce false memories of closeness with the deceased.*

“Only May,” Charlotte says, putting her hand on my mom’s just for a second. *See Chapter one, subchapter one: appropriate vs. inappropriate touching.* Charlotte’s good at this sort of thing. She always has been. If Aunt May were here, she would’ve defended her bus. “That bus was damn practical,” she’d have said, slamming her fist on the table. “How many hours of enjoyment did your kids get out of riding that thing up and down the beach?” She’d have been pissed we made the executive decision to not take Walter to afternoon calling hours. Out the window, the Pamlico Sound is all whitecaps and sunshine, and I just want to be outside. Or maybe it’s that I want to be outside of myself. I don’t know how to crack the Grief Bubble, how to think about anything else. I feel trapped. If I were a mime, I could place my palms against its sticky, waxy surface. I contemplate this as a coffee table book illustration. *Mourner Trapped in Grief Bubble.* Then I remember Royce’s card. I excuse myself and go out onto the deck and sit in a swing.

*Chapter Four: Cards and Gifts. If one has not dallied with the mourner in the time span of two years, it is generally considered unsuitable to bestow a large, glittery card bearing dueling proclamations of sympathy and abiding love. Glitter, in general, is in poor taste. Proclamations of love may substantially impair the mourner’s fragile mindset, causing her heart to pound with something other than grief.* I tuck Royce’s card back in its giant envelope and tap it against my teeth.

The door opens and Charlotte comes out. She sits beside me and her skirt blows around her knees in the breeze. “How is it we’re not nineteen anymore?” Charlotte asks. She tucks her skirt under her legs.

“How is it we’re not nine?” Charlotte puts her arms around me and I breathe in her vanilla-Charlotte scent. “I think I might have sex with Royce tonight,” I say.

“Royce, the sequel?” Charlotte asks. She sits back in the swing but keeps one arm around me.

I play with a strand of my hair. It’s getting long. “I can’t stand this.”

Charlotte’s quiet for a while, but not in a judge-y way. We rock on the swing.

“If I sleep with anyone else, it’ll up my numbers,” I say.

“That’s not really fair to Royce,” Charlotte says.

I don’t know how to explain it to her, how to say I need something, anything, to make me feel like me again. “Could you please not be so mature right now?”

Charlotte pinches my arm. I poke her in the side.

“You’ll regret it if you hurt him,” Charlotte says. “Trust me.”

Nate pokes his head out the door. He’s wind-tousled in two seconds.

Charlotte stands. “Round two?”

Nate nods. “Time to go sit in that room and cry some more,” he says.

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*Chapter Five: Small Talk. Small talk can be a difficult issue to attend to during times of grief, for bereaved and comforter alike. Fitting topics of conversation to engage with mourners include, but are not limited to: the weather, fishing, games involving balls, and the fullness of the life of the deceased. Happy memories of the deceased are generally welcome, as well.*

*Unseemly topics include, but are not limited to: the last will and testament of the deceased, queries about putting down the deceased’s bad dog, statements regarding the lovely appearance of the corpse, statements regarding how the deceased is in a better place now, and queries*



*regarding the suffering of the deceased.* She had lung cancer. Of course she fucking suffered. I just want to smack Loretta Gray in the head. How is that okay to ask? For the first time in round two of calling hours, I cry. And this stupid black suit only has fake pockets. *See Chapter Two: Attire. It is most fortuitous for mourners to wear clothing with pockets suitable to containing Kleenex.* I find a box of scratchy, generic, funeral home tissues, but it's empty. I wipe at my eyes with my arm, smearing foundation on my suit sleeve. *Chapter Two: Attire. The bereaved should forgo makeup for calling hours and the funeral service. The mourner's face will be mottled from crying, anyway, and now is not the time for vanity.*

Loretta Gray has me cornered. She's one of those women who wears pastel polyester suits. "What did you tell Austin when she died?" she asks.

*Advice for the bereaved: try to retain your composure when faced with idiotic questions.* "I told him Aunt May's body got sick and stopped working, and that she died," I say. "That's what all the websites said to do."

Loretta "tsk tsk tsks" and tips her head to the side. "Poor fellow. Do you think he understands?" She gazes over to where Austin sits on the carpet playing with race cars.

Let me just go over and ask him, Loretta. *Son, do you understand that Aunt May is dead and that we'll never, ever see her again? Do you get that, kid? That she's dead, dead, dead? That she's never coming back?*

"I don't know," I say.

Loretta purses her lips. She shakes her index finger at me. "What you need to do," she says, "is pick him up and show him the body. Make him hold her hand for ten whole seconds so he doesn't think she's just sleeping."

"Why would I do that?"

“You don’t want him to think he’ll go to sleep and not wake up, too.” Loretta looks at me, eyes wide like I’m the dumbest parent in the world. “He needs to understand that May has gone to rest in the loving arms of Jesus.”

“Right,” I say.

She pats my arm. “The Lord never gives us more than we can handle,” she says. “Keep your chin up.” And she walks off to assault my mom.

*A cautionary note to comfort-givers: be advised that mourners are in particularly precarious frames of mind and may, in fact, snap at any given moment.* I go to the coat closet at the front of the funeral home and root around in my purse for my cell phone. I’m going to call Royce and get out of here. I rustle and shuffle and I can’t find it. I can’t find a goddamned thing. I pull out a brush, a tampon, a race car. I throw them all on the floor, and then I throw the purse down. “Very dramatic, kid,” Aunt May says in my head. I kneel down beside my pile of crap and lean back on my heels. I feel empty, turned inside out. I shove everything back in my purse and sit down on the floor.

“Okay?” It’s Nate. He’s got his thumbs hooked in his pant pockets. At least somebody read the subheadings for Chapter Two. Nate holds out a tissue and folds himself down beside me. We sit in the coat closet. When I look up I see Nate’s face is red. I lean my head against my brother’s shoulder and I don’t say a word.

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The preacher has a speech impediment, or else he thinks it sounds extra holy to over-enunciate the word “Lord” so it sounds like “Loo-ard.” I shift in the folding wooden chair and

glance around. Dad leans forward, elbows on his knees like he's engrossed in a particularly tight football game. Austin gazes at the ceiling, his mouth moving in an absent *ba ba ba* motion, singing under his breath. Charlotte's hair falls over her face as she rubs her forehead. Nate slouches. And my mother heaves with full-on, shoulder-shaking, snot-running sobs.

*Chapter Six: Weeping. While funeral rituals provide a socially sanctioned space for public displays of grief, mourners are obligated to weep in a manner that is not melodramatic. The Melodramatic Weeper may feel the need to be in the spotlight of the comforting action. Try not to hold this against the Melodramatic Weeper. After all, the Melodramatic Weeper may not have the chance to weep at another funeral for an extended period of time, and must make the most of the occasion.* I put my arm around my mom. She weeps into my shoulder. My black suit, which hasn't felt crisp in five hours, gets wet.

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,” the preacher, Dr. John, quotes. I know he's quoting the Bible because he uses his special Bible-quoting voice, soft and precise. He stands in front of Aunt May's coffin in his preacher-robe. “When I speak this verse I can't help but think of May.” Dr. John talks about the Apostle Paul and how he was in prison, chained to a Roman soldier as his guard. I wonder where they were chained. Ankles? Wrists? “Like Paul, May lived the last years of her life a prisoner to a body filled with sickness, yet she never complained.” Dr. John has an earnest face. It looks like he truly believes this.

Mom wails. I glance at Nate. His mouth twitches. Aunt May was many things, but uncomplaining was not one of them. “Get that fucking blood pressure cuff off me,” were her penultimate words.

Dr. John lays his hand on his Bible. “May, like Paul, seemed to rejoice in her affliction.”

This time Nate snorts. He turns it into a cough and covers his mouth with his hand. He squints. Mom shakes her head back and forth into my shoulder, sobbing in little *heh heh* puffs.

*Chapter Six, subsection one: weeping and laughter exist on the same psychological continuum.*

Dr. John talks about how the death of a Christian is a wonderful thing. “The problem is, we don’t believe that,” he says. Dr. John leans forward on his pulpit. “We think of death as some hideous monster come to cut off all our joys.”

Austin sits up straight. He stops singing under his breath. Mom’s weeping dials down a notch until she’s just resting on my shoulder, breathing through her mouth.

“We live in a cruel world, and so when death comes to take us to the Lord,” *Loo-ard* “where we shall have perfect health, wouldn’t you say that death is a friend?”

Austin’s mouth moves again, but this time it’s because he’s chewing on his lip. He grabs my arm, then climbs onto my lap. I can’t move.

Dr. John goes on, telling us how wonderful death is, and how God will give us all his beloved sleep one day. I wonder how I’m supposed to get any beloved sleep tonight when all I can think about is putting Aunt May’s body under six feet of sandy earth tomorrow morning. The Aunt May in my head turns to me and winks. “You know what the opposite of death is, right?” she asks. “Death with his hooded black cape and sensual bony fingers?”

“Life?” I ask her back.

“Hah!” She pokes me in the ribs. “Sex.”

I wonder if she’s right. I wonder if being naked will crack my Grief Bubble, or if an orgasm will. I think of Royce.

*Chapter Seven: Leavetaking. The funeral guest should keep in mind that mourners have just put in a full eight-hour day of public grieving. Lingering is inappropriate. Suggestions for future lunch dates are best kept to another time. One to two sets of hugging, cheek-kissing, and I'm-so-sorry-ing is the standard culturally observed norm; more than that is excess. Take heed when the funeral home stops playing sad, sad organ music. This is generally a leavetaking cue.*

I wander around the funeral home waiting for the last stragglers to leave so I can go home and get Austin settled. I extract my phone and send Royce a message. "I've missed your Buddha belly." He sends one back. "The lucky Buddha's missed you." I write, "Thanks for the flowers. I used to only get them after sex." Royce responds, "I could bring you roses in the morning." I put my phone away and go over to the coffin. The Grief Bubble, which had gotten less sticky as I messaged Royce, circles back over me like a veil. I stand over Aunt May and wonder who selected the pink satin coffin liner. At least they didn't put her in a pink satin dress. Aunt May wears a nice pantsuit which is neither pastel nor polyester. Then I study her body. The caved-in jaw from cancer surgery. The gnarled hands. The short legs beneath the half-open coffin. She looks doughy, too soft, which is strange since she's probably in rigor mortis. I think again that this isn't my aunt. This isn't May.

"She was my family," my dad says, putting his arm around me. "She raised me." He pats my hair like I'm a kid and it feels nice.

"I know," I say. "I know, Daddy."

Mom comes over and stands beside Dad. They hold hands. Charlotte and Austin walk up. Nate ushers the last straggler out then takes the empty spot in front of the coffin. He picks up Austin. "Do you want to say goodbye to Aunt May?" Nate asks.

Austin doesn't answer. I don't think he wants to. I don't think any of us do.

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Walter leaves three turds on my bedroom floor. "Thanks for that," I tell him. I flush the turds, wash my hands, and go back to my room. I've just gotten Austin to bed and Walter's asleep on my pillow. He lifts his head then settles it back down on his front paws. I'm trying to decide what to wear to Royce's. Black panties—morbid or sexy? Charlotte knocks and sticks her head in my bedroom.

"I brought you some tea," she says. She sets a mug on my dresser.

I sit down and pet Walter. He opens one eye then goes back to sleep. Charlotte sits beside me. "Can you listen for Austin tonight?" I ask. This shouldn't be too much of an imposition since Charlotte's sleeping in Austin's top bunk bed.

"Of course," she says.

I lift Walter, pillow and all, to the other side of me in case he wakes up and decides to get cranky. "I think I might have inherited a dog," I say.

"Maybe you could get on that dog whispering show." Charlotte stretches her legs out on the bed and leans back on her elbows. She opens her mouth to say something else, but just then a scream from Austin's room rips through the air. We both jump up and run in.

Austin sits with a rigid spine and screams and screams. It sounds like he's just been stabbed. "Baby, what's wrong?" I climb in bed and pull him into my arms. Charlotte sits and massages Austin's feet.

Austin stops screaming. He sobs instead. I don't know which is worse. "It's Skeletor," he says. His body shakes.

"How do you know about Skeletor?" I don't let him watch that crap.

"Dad and I watched it." Austin's face is red. His lip trembles and his hair sticks on his forehead in sweaty strips. He clutches his Batman comforter in both hands. "Skeletor's coming to take me. He said so."

I smooth his hair, kiss the top of his head. I rub his back and straighten his blue pajamas.

"Skeletor's just pretend," Charlotte says. "He's a drawing. He can't hurt you."

Austin shakes his head. "He's coming."

I rock him back and forth, back and forth. His small body collapses my Grief Bubble and I'm flooded with the sharp pain of today until my chest literally hurts. Or maybe the Grief Bubble doesn't collapse. Maybe my Grief Bubble and Austin's merge.

*Epilogue: It is the bereaved's ultimate challenge and responsibility to comfort fellow bereaved persons. Especially if the fellow bereave-ee is your son.*

"Don't let him take me," Austin says. He clings to my waist.

I hold Austin's face in my hands. "No one's taking you. I promise." I hug him and cry into his hair. His small body shakes against mine; mine against his. We fit tightly together, me and this body that was once part of my own.

Charlotte and I stay with Austin until everyone calms down. We put him in pajamas with Transformers on them since Transformers can beat up Skeletor any day of the week. We sing songs and read an old picture book that's too easy and drink warm milk and finally Austin falls asleep. I smooth his hair one last time and Charlotte and I slip back to my room.

I close the door, softly, and lean against it. “Thanks for helping,” I say. I’m shaken. My phone’s blinking on the dresser and I sit down on the bed to read a message from Royce. “This little Buddha’s ready to be enlightened.”

Charlotte picks up the now-cold mug of tea. “That’s why I’m here,” she says. Then she sets the tea down. “If you need to go see Royce, I can take care of Austin if he wakes up.”

Part of me wants to run out the door. To be anywhere but here, thinking of anything but death and burials and Skeletor. I stand up. “How does anyone ever figure this out?” I ask.

Charlotte shakes her head. “There are no rules,” she says.

I pick up my tea and we pass Austin’s room, walking down the hall to the microwave in the kitchen. *There are no rules, except that sometimes there are.*