

Mortimer Causa

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On Thursday afternoon, in the lobby of the National Bank, Mortimer Causa found out he was dead. He was depositing his end-of-year bonus payment from his employer, the firm of David, Thomas, Bento & Rosenstern, when the teller disappeared, leaving Mort at the counter and a line of clients behind him.

As he waited, the sun reached an angle to stream through a window and refracted off the crystal chandelier hung in the middle of the room. Mort followed a rainbow dancing over landscape paintings, ornamental mouldings and brass sconces. The lobby glowed, and he could make out details normally shrouded in civilized dimness. The clerk at the next counter was hiding a pimple on her chin with cover-up. The upper shelf of a cabinet hadn't been dusted. The carpet had suffered more than a few coffee spills. The sun dipped one degree lower and the spell was broken. Everything returned to orderly and efficient gloom.

Mort's senses awakened to the possibility of bureaucratic obstacles when, instead of returning alone, the teller came back to the counter accompanied by a manager in a royal blue suit.

The transaction Mort was attempting to conduct was impossible to complete, the manager informed him. The precise nature of the problem could not be disclosed due to the privacy policies of the National Bank. Mort would have to make an appointment by calling their central line, and would he now please leave the counter so those who maintained an account with the Bank might conduct their business.

Mort replied in the calmest voice he could muster, "I'm sure with your diligence this matter will be resolved in a few minutes—not to mention your exemplary customer service standards—speaking of which, you're implying I'm not a client, which perplexes me, as I've had my account over twenty years. As a matter of courtesy for a long-time patron, could you please tell me what the problem is."

The manager didn't appreciate Mort's appeal to reason and simply repeated that he must leave, adding that he did not wish to have to resort to calling the police to have Mort removed from the premises.

"That's a great idea," Mort said, permitting himself a more aggressive tone in the face of Blue Suit's suggestion that the use of force was necessary. "I'd love to hear why you shouldn't be charged with theft for not letting me access my account. I'll gladly wait while you call."

Mort sat fifteen minutes in an uncomfortable Chesterfield chair. He texted his principal that he had been waylaid, then scrolled aimlessly through photos of strange children and advertisements for hair regeneration treatments and testosterone pills.

The manager approached the policeman straight away when he entered the lobby, shook his hand, then pointed at Mort, like he was the defendant in a TV courtroom drama. The policeman followed Blue Suit behind the counter, leaned down to look at a screen, then straightened and started towards Mort with a slow, off-kilter gait.

"ID," he said, and Mort complied.

Officer Bland considered Mort's photo for a second.

"This isn't a police matter," he said, resting his hand on his holster. "The manager there says you're into some type of fraud. Says it's because this guy," Bland pointed to Mort's ID, "is dead. Showed me the screen—black on white. Account locked. Look, I know fraud when I see it. This is an administrative cock-up. Nothing I can do to help you there." He handed back the card. "Bank closes in ten minutes. Maybe you come back tomorrow," he said, and lumbered back through the lobby and out the door.

Mort didn't feel like going back to work, and having just made partner, he could permit himself small indulgences. He called his girlfriend and suggested he bring over ramen from their spot, with gyoza and a soft-boiled egg, which he knew she wouldn't refuse.

On Friday, Mort had his assistant contact the civil registry office, and the following Friday he received a manila envelope by courier. He placed the letter opener under the flap and dragged it across, opening the cavity. He could hear blood rushing through his ears.

According to the civil registry office, Mortimer Causa had died four months ago in an explosion at Reverend Mike's, a downtown watering hole Mort didn't think he had ever visited. He certainly remembered the news of the explosion, the work of a separatist terrorist group. The city had been on edge eight days, until police arrested the culprits.

The coroner's report detailed bone fragments and body parts recovered from the scene, belonging to a male of Mort's approximate age and size, but the decisive factor appeared to be the discovery of a half-incinerated wallet—Mort's wallet—he had lost it around that time. He still couldn't fathom how he could have been declared dead without so much as a phone call or someone knocking at his door, but whatever the reason, the fact of the matter was before him.

Mort's first thought was to call his mother. He hadn't spoken to her in two weeks, having missed their Sunday call in favour of a brunch date at Café de l'Europe, meaning multiple mimosas and sloppy sex. Maybe it was that she'd birthed him, so it felt right to tell her of his alleged demise.

Mort could hear the TV in the background—the unmistakable urgent tone of daytime news. He agreed to stop by for dinner over the weekend, a penance to assuage his guilt. His mother seemed unperturbed by the news. The woman who was sent into a panic when his flight was delayed due to weather didn't react at all. But when Mort told her the circumstances of his supposed passing, she gasped and yipped in excitement, unable to get a word out.

"Victim," she gargled. "Victim of that terrorist attack! My boy!"

She had been following every twist of the story and recounted it in bursts of agitated sounds. Mort gathered only her dismay that the death penalty had been abolished, since every breath drawn by the six wicked separatists was an affront to God. She promised she would pray for him, and Mort didn't know what to say.

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Hannah entered his apartment without greeting, sloughing off her bag onto the floor. She was a doctoral student in sociology, smarter and better-read than Mort, but gracious about it. When they debated the texts she was teaching over dinner she let him get away with little things—like conflating deconstruction and post-structuralism—for which Mort was grateful.

“When are we getting married?” she asked.

The question itself was no great surprise. They had had a conversation some months ago discussing their respective expectations of a collective future, where Hannah conveyed that she wanted to be married soonish, and Mort indicated a rough timeline of a year might make sense. Mort had casually looked at rings online and had vague ideas of a spring proposal and fall wedding. He told her as much.

“That’s all fucked now though, isn’t it?”

“Sorry?” he said, needing a beat.

“Can’t get married if you’re dead, can you?”

“I’m sure I can get it sorted inside the year. Besides, what should it matter? We can just have a private ceremony.”

“A fake wedding? It’s always something with you, Mort, isn’t it? Wait until I make partner. Wait until you defend your dissertation. Wait to move in together because I’m such a busy, important attorney. I’m thirty-fucking-four years old and I want kids, so if you can’t marry me—actually marry me in the eyes of the law—before I hit thirty-five, this is fucking over. We’re a good match, Mort, but don’t think I don’t have other options.”

“How is this my fault?” he managed, but Hannah had already picked up her bag and shut the door behind her.

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Mort’s mother lived in a bungalow about an hour outside the city in one of those exurban towns populated by retirees and sad-looking families with too many children. The house was decorated with pastel knitwork and retail prints of flowers. Mort entered through the side-door from the garage. He couldn’t hear the TV on in the kitchen, nor did he catch a whiff of chicken paprikash, which was the only thing his mother cooked when he came over. He glanced at his phone to see if he had somehow mixed up the time, but it was six on the dot.

He wandered down the back hall and saw his mother seated at the vanity, wearing a black blouse she hadn’t worn in years, applying eyeliner. He stopped, held his breath and watched how she put her tongue to her lips as she guided the tip of the pencil under her eyes, then inspected, turning her head from side to side, leaving her eyes fixed on the mirror.

“You startled me! What are you doing here? Oh. I completely forgot. Did I tell you? I don’t think I told you. Channel 4 called. They want to interview me—it’s about you, dear, of course. Your name—the last victim—it’s all in the news. But you shouldn’t be here.” She put the eyeliner back in a drawer. “No, no it’s OK. You’ll wait in my room. You’ll stay back here and won’t make a sound, right?”

“This is crazy, Ma. You’re going to lie to people?”

“Lie? I ask you to sit and be quiet half an hour, and all you can do is call me a liar. Go ahead then. Do what you want. Don’t worry about me.”

Mort watched the news truck roll into the driveway from the side window as he ate a turkey sandwich with mayonnaise and a wilted piece of lettuce—the best his mother could muster in a few minutes. He could make out most of the interview from the hall. His favourite part was when the reporter asked his mother whether, after four months of waiting, the confirmation gave her closure, and without missing a beat she said he was here with her now.

Once the cameras had gone, Mort went back to the living room. His mother was still on the sofa, holding a baby picture. He put his arms around her.

“I didn’t think it would feel like this,” she said.

“What would?” he asked, but she was oblivious. She held the picture frame against her chest and rocked back and forth in his arms.

The phone rang. His mother jumped up.

“That’ll be my sister. Sorry about dinner, but you’ll come over next weekend, yes? I’ll do chicken paprikash to make it up to you.”

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On Monday morning, Mort’s assistant accosted him before he got to his desk. He was wanted urgently in Mr. Thomas’ office.

“Morty man,” Mr. Thomas greeted him as he knocked on the open door. “What’s this business of you being dead?”

Mort told the story from the start, as Mr. Thomas tapped his pen against the edge of his desk: Blue Suit at the bank, the civil registry office—Mort left out the bit about his girlfriend—his mother’s fixation with being on the news.

Mr. Thomas interrupted Mort’s description of the TV interview. This situation was putting him in a tough spot, he was saying. Legally speaking. Mort couldn’t be an employee or receive a salary. The amounts he’d been paid the last four months would have to be clawed back. The sum was substantial, and Mr. Thomas was getting pressure from the other partners. The firm had a

claim to a death benefit from the insurance policy the partnership purchased on Mort's life. They couldn't jeopardize that claim.

Mr. Thomas was counting. Thirty. Sixty. Two-hundred thousand. A quarter-million.

"Can't you just put them off a week? I'm already drafting a writ of mandamus," he lied. "I was hoping you would represent me."

Mr. Thomas' tone intensified, admonishing Mort not to let his emotions cloud his judgment. His death certificate was on file. Thank you, by the way. It would be wrong to ignore. He should know the law is unconcerned with subjective views of reality. Mr. Thomas looked at his watch and stood up to dissipate the unpleasantness.

"I've got to get to the conference room. Sorry, Mort."

Mort went back to his office, sat at his desk and looked out the window. It was still early, the orange sun just under the skyline. He could see traffic still blocking the highway. Hundreds of cars stopped by kinematic waves of humanity. A fierce wind whistled past the plate glass. He stood and pressed himself against the pane with his arms at his sides and looked down.

Mort's breath fogged the surface and all he could see was a patchwork of grey. He considered the moisture on the window then exhaled heavily again. Mort raised his index finger and wrote his name over the hazy city.

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It was a matter of days until the bailiffs closed up Mort's apartment and seized his car. Mort absconded with a couple suitcases of stuff to his mother's. She was still reveling in her TV appearance. She had managed to get a recording of the broadcast that she would play every night after dinner, silently mouthing the words as she watched along. Mort would watch with her, and she always asked him whether he thought she seemed like a good mother.

"You are a good mother, Ma," he would reply.

Mort had tried to get his own interview, writing missives to newspapers and TV stations, but had only received a single reply:

Sir/Madam:

While we are sensitive to your situation, the *Tribune* does not presently publish personal interest articles.

Yours truly,

Tribune Staff

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His court appearance was a flop. Mort sat in a windowless room a Friday morning in a slightly creased suit. A lawyer for the Registrar and an associate from his former firm (Marcus? Marcel?) sat on the other side of the room. When the file was called from the roll, the clerk asked counsel to identify themselves for the record.

“Mort Causa, applicant,” Mort said.

Justice Louis looked up from his file. Mort thought he saw a glimmer of recognition in his eyes—Mort had appeared before him only a few weeks prior—but he must have been mistaken. Justice Louis didn’t even let opposing counsel speak.

“Am I to understand that you are appearing for yourself? And the object of your application is to challenge a proof of death from the Registrar? And you are—or claim to be—this selfsame deceased?” Justice Louis shook his head. “You have no standing here. Dead men don’t plead. Get yourself a lawyer and set a new date.”

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Every day, Mort would take the train into the city and walk. It was easy to kill time in museums or libraries, but Mort preferred the noise and volatility of the street. He let himself be carried by the movements of crowds, following the direction of the largest swarm of people. He enjoyed the clash of bodies probing for space in subway cars and elevators, the smells of strange hair and clothing pressed against his face.

Mort found himself on campus. He walked across the icy quad and up the hill to the Arts Building. He waited for Hannah outside her class. When it was over they sat on the steps, watching groups of students collide and divide in social dance. Mort bummed a rolling paper, some shag and a light from an unkempt undergrad. He let the smoke linger in his mouth.

“You look like shit,” she said, then asked what she was getting in his will—a few paintings from his apartment, including one she had been keen on. Two figures played volleyball, each only visible from the waist up. The figures were mirror images, one facing away from the viewer and the other fading into the background, features blurred. The ball was a yellow comet. Mort told her he thought she should keep it.

Mort was lightheaded from the tobacco. He stood up and said words and walked down the steps. The clouds were unbearably white. He tried to shield his eyes, but it was no use, the light reflected off the snow and ice. The world became blotches of blue and burgundy. Someone had taken a scalpel, cut the city open and pulled back the veneer, revealing pulsing, fleshy bits of existence. Mort could hear the grinding of metal, feel his bones vibrate. He let out a low groan in the same key.

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Mort's lawyer looked almost as shabby as him. His suit hung off his frame as he hunched over the desk straightening the file. Justice Marks barked at him to hurry up, but he was unflappable.

“My Lord, given the overwhelming evidence that the man who sits next to me is the same man the Registrar says is dead, we must insist this case be promptly heard on the merits. We are available any time, even today, my Lord.”

Marks turned to counsel for Registrar.

“We have no objection, Mr. Justice Marks, only a slight complication. You would agree that it would be in the interests of justice to hear from the coroner who declared Mr. Causa dead? He has unfortunately taken ill—something serious I'm afraid—and he will not be available for at least a month. And yes, I have inquired about obtaining an affidavit in lieu of testimony, but he is simply in too delicate a state. Strict orders from his doctor.” She proffered a letter. “We will be speaking to him the first day we are able, I assure you. In the meantime, I must implore you to grant a small delay. It would be risky to make a final determination without hearing from the man who made the medical finding at issue.”

“One month,” Marks growled. “If I don't have your coroner here in a month, I'm proceeding, medicine be damned.”

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From his seat on a bench in the tourist district, the building across was half-hidden by fencing. Pictures and posters littered the panels, plastic flowers at the base. The scene was lit by streetlamps and watched over by a disapproving priest in a turtleneck, eyes inches above the shrine.

Mort raised himself and walked the perimeter of the fence, peered through the gaps. He reached the far side where it ended against the wall of the adjoining building. He set his foot halfway up, reached for the top, and almost gracefully pulled himself over.

The windows were boarded up. The door was just a piece of plywood. Mort pulled it open. The place was empty except steel piles and stacked bricks. Skid marks streaked the walls, the roof a quilt of tarps, dotted with nails. Mort stood in the center and conjured.

The bartender rattles ice in twin cocktail shakers as he shouts something to the waiter. Patrons press up against the bar brandishing fingers or smiles. In darker corners, wannabe Don Juans hum their lines to the impressionable and unimpressed. People are dancing between tables, tentative steppers and groovers in abandon to the music. A couple embraces. Hands are in hair and hands grasp a waist. The air is heavy with potential energy.

Cut to white. The soundtrack goes silent. A wave rips through his body. Fire separating flesh. Mort doesn't feel scared, just stupid. Stupid in the face of the infinite, with a tiny thought like pain, or love, or death.

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“Hey,” a voice was saying. “Hey! You can’t be here.”

A security guard was coming through the doorway, headed straight for Mort. Mort was bolted in place. The guard put his hands on him.

“You gotta leave.” He pulled Mort off balance.

Mort didn’t resist. He fell into his broad chest, cheek against his Kevlar vest. His arms flexed around Mort’s torso, holding his entire weight. His skin was so soft. It smelled of cocoa butter. Mort looked up into his eyes, pupils dilated, sucking in every photon.

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A vacuum woke him. The whirr of the motor. Brushes spinning over carpet. Grains of sand rattling up a tube.

The sun was breaking through lace, drenching the bedspread. A greenhouse. Flowers on flowers. Mort kicked through them, unlatched the lock and unwound the window crank. Cool air rushed into his lungs.

Rivulets ran down the slope. The skunk cabbage would be blooming. Purple and green fingers jutting from black puddles. The odor of rotting meat.