

July 11, 2003 (The Day I Died)

I woke from a fitful sleep to the most basic of urges—I had to piss—definitely the downside of drinking yourself to sleep with beer. Normally I avoided late night consumption of my favorite amber lager for this very reason, but here in the strikingly beautiful yet puritanical city of Salt Lake, you had to plan ahead if you wanted to drown your sorrow in Tennessee sour mash whiskey.

I suppose I could have hit one of the private clubs in the area that served hard liquor, but this pain ran deep—soul deep—and it called for a solitary journey into the dark swirling waters of alcoholically induced catatonic consciousness.

After I finished my business in the bathroom, I stumbled through the unfamiliar hotel room to the relative comfort of the rumpled king sized bed.

The demonic-red bloodshot eyes of the clock radio on the nightstand told me that it was only four-thirty. Too late to pound the three cold bottles of Coors Light remaining in the mini-fridge, but far too early to be left awake to soberly ponder the significance of the looming day—*my death day*.

I put my hands behind my head, stared blankly up at the dark ceiling, and let my mind ramble over my past fifteen years as a father: first smiles, first words, first steps, first grade. The years had flown by, and yet I could almost remember details from each and every day.

How could I ever forget the sight of my first born's afterbirth covered face twisting round and round as she burst into this world, so eager to take it all in? I can vividly recall the moment I held her swaddled doll-sized body and noticed the small pinch at the top of her tiny left ear—definitely a hereditary trait in that I'd only before seen such a pinch on my father's ear and mine. This sight put out to pasture the wild-eyed herd of longhorns that had been milling round the corral of my mind for many months now, always threatening to stampede through my decaying fence of marital and masculine security—for the bastard who only too recently painted the scarlet letter on my then wife's chest still dwelt a mere two doors away.

It seems just yesterday my head was filled with the soft sweet smell of my youngest daughter's downy head as I rocked her to sleep while she noisily sucked her fingers with her little heart beating next to mine.

I opened the floodgates of my insomnia-plagued mind and watched the years pass by. Could it really be over? Like every father, I always knew the fateful day that I'd have to give my daughters away would come, but why now? They weren't getting married, or going off to college, they were simply removing me from their lives, like I didn't exist anymore. From this day forward, I wouldn't have a part in their world. Today, to them, I would die at the conclusion of a quiet and formal meeting—*this couldn't be happening!*

A small part of my young daughters—the little corner we all have in the dark recesses of our minds—would remember, and maybe even mourn my passing, but their mother would undoubtedly ensure there were enough distractions to silence any uncertainty or remorse they might have. She'd probably planned a great celebration to commemorate the joyous day her daughters were liberated from the clutches of their loving father—*me*. On this momentous day, she would proudly place the mantle of fatherhood squarely on the shoulders of her most recent betrothed, and I, merely the God appointed birth father, would be forever banished from their utopian world—but keep sending that money.

These false preachers of the Gospel had duped my daughters, spewing their spiritual masturbation rather than teaching my blood to submit themselves as willing brides of our Lord Jesus Christ—*but everything I said was a lie.*

I might have actually dozed off somewhere during my melancholy trip down memory lane, but when the six-twenty wake-up call came, my mind instantly bobbed to the surface of lucid consciousness.

Given the day before me, the thick fog in my head and the troupe of Romanian gymnasts practicing somewhere deep in my stomach seemed particularly apropos. I mechanically went through the motions of packing and getting dressed—in funeral black of course—and got to the airport with just enough time to make my flight to Spokane.

The federal TSA employees moved the harried morning travelers through security with practiced efficiency, but in my head I could hear them chanting, “dead man walking” like a scene from some B grade prison movie.

I trudged to my departure gate, and stuffed a handful of antacids in my mouth in a futile attempt at quieting those damn Romanians. A half hour later I looked down into the monolithic crater excavated by the Kennecott Mining Company, and handed the flight attendant a twenty-dollar bill to cover three canned Bloody Mary’s—*it was only about an hour flight.*

The feeling of dread began to overwhelm me despite my vodka therapy, and by the time my plane landed I had to make a mad dash for the restroom. Worst of all, when I slammed the toilet stall shut, I realized my body was going to purge, but I couldn’t be sure from which end. Black jeans notwithstanding, I put my money on the greater of the two evils, and quickly sat my lily-white ass down on the paper butt gasket just in the nick of time.

Ten painful minutes later I emerged from the odiferous confines of my private olfactory purgatory and went to grab my bag and pick up my rental car. I was hoping the car came equipped with barf bags because I felt another abdominal exorcism coming on—*if only I could wake up from this nightmare—I love my daughters so much!*

Fortunately my cast iron stomach, thusly dubbed due to its recently acquired resemblance to a pot-bellied stove more so than its gastronomical fortitude, managed to hold down my Bloody Mary breakfast. Barely.

I called my ex-wife’s attorney to confirm the appointed location and time of my demise, and was advised that the fateful hour had been moved up. Lucky me.

My grandparents had both been recently admitted to a nursing facility and I had hoped to have some time to visit them during my purposely limited time in town. The schedule change left but a few minutes for my oldest remaining relatives, and though their time wasn’t as short as mine, I could tell when I hugged each of the withered vestiges of their former selves that the minutes remaining on their game clocks were winding down fast.

I had hoped that seeing them would bring me a little peace, and though they each tried to offer some encouragement, it was no use. My heart might be beating, but it was being tossed about by a dark furious sea, and pounded against the jagged shoreline of life by the raging storm of a vindictive woman’s decade long hatred—*this is so wrong!*

I did manage to make it to the conveniently located facilities in the nursing home before the remaining limited contents of my stomach came violently hurling out of my mouth like molten lava from a volcano. My acid charged bile scorched a passageway up

my esophagus and over my inflamed lips, while I painfully remembered long forgotten abdominal muscles dutifully doing their part to cleanse my body of its perceived source of discomfort—*if only it were that easy*.

Mercifully cool water splashed on my face allowed me to compose myself enough to make the twenty-minute drive to the courthouse—although for some reason the windshield appeared all wet and blurry—and when I arrived, I actually found a shaded parking place.

The parking place was important because I wanted a few minutes to try and get myself together; while I couldn't help but see the day as dark and gloomy, the rest of the Lilac City was enjoying bright blue skies and ninety-degree sunshine, and my black attire was not ideally suited for the heat.

I sat in the rented white Chevy Blazer and looked at the ominous courthouse from my shady vantage; I can assure you that Count Dracula's domicile in Transylvania never looked more foreboding. The dull vodka numbness was long gone, and I could really use another drink—or ten—right about now. Where was my buddy Jack Daniel's when I needed him?

The portals to this chamber of horrors appeared to be lined with razor sharp fangs already dripping with the blood of countless innocent victims, but I summoned my remaining reserves of fortitude, and boldly—more or less—entered the somber confines of the gothic structure.

Rather fortuitously I was still a few minutes early. I had just enough time to make another offering at the porcelain ivory throne. Regrettably, though I had time, I had no resources from which to make said offering, and my futile attempts to hurl became ever more excruciatingly painful.

I washed my face again, and then left the restroom to meet my fate; a fate I had been predicting for many years now based on a similar experience in my youth—*but knowing how the story ends doesn't make it any easier to read*.

Many years ago—far more than I care to admit—my dear mother had carefully sown seeds of resentment and rebellion against my own father in the fertile fields of my teenage spirit. However, her many efforts paled in comparison to those of my bitter ex-wife's.

The countless hours spent rehearsing my last words were for naught as I entered the small conference room—my gas chamber as it were—and spied the attitude and demeanor of my precious daughters. They were ripe and primed for battle; how dare I summon them simply to be reminded of my eternal paternal love! How dare I try to be a part of their lives!

When did their love for me turn to hate?

Words long practiced fled my grieving mind, and my wretched tongue forsook me. The dark glasses I'd worn to hide my tear swollen eyes wouldn't conceal a new torrent, and I fought back the rising tide of salty wetness. How I longed to speak to them—my precious daughters—with my mouth as clearly as my quill in the hope that someday they could reflect on my words and glean some small nuggets of comfort and truth.

But I can't even now tell you what I said in those fateful moments before my passing. I know I told them I'd forever love them, and they bore no guilt for this moral and legal travesty, but greater details I cannot offer.

My voice trembled, then faltered, and I quickly fled before the deluge of tears began. I had little pride left, but I instinctively sought to protect that which remained. I couldn't let them see me falter in the face of death; their father, a man who feared no creature that walked God's green earth reduced to tears by the horrific thought of being banished from his daughters' lives.

Now, even as I am dead to my daughters, my life goes on. The good Lord has blessed me in so many ways: a beautiful and wonderful wife, loving and supportive family and friends, a challenging and rewarding career, the list is far longer than I could ever pen.

Though try as I might to move on, to forget, my heart will always have a piece—a big piece—missing. I cannot help but long for my daughters to summon me from the grave.

Given the chance, I can, and will, rise like the Phoenix from the ashes of my funeral pyre, but only they can summon me from the abyss.

My greatest hope is that they'll do so before the dirt on my casket is literal rather than figurative. But until that longed for day arrives, if indeed it ever does, I will continue to watch their lives from a distance, like some benevolent ghostly apparition.

I'll pray for them each day, and hope that the Lord will watch over them while I am not able.

Six Months in the Hole

The days have passed, the time that waits for no one has moved on, but the burden of my cold earthen blanket seems to weigh more heavily on my broken heart with each passing moon. The dank soil of death presses on my chest, fills my nostrils, and leaves a fetid taste upon my parched lips. Though I've been in my grave for a mere six months, it already seems an eternity has passed.

Time heals all wounds they say—but what the hell do *they* know? What of the wounds that never heal—the gashes in tender flesh left open to fester and weep—or hearts that still throb after they've been torn to shreds, refusing to give up their tenuous grip on life?

It's strange how some injuries visited upon us are inflicted by a blade so keen, the flicker of honed steel on flesh isn't even felt until the rent is pulled apart by life; and the crimson river roars from the tear like a flash flood, sweeping away every scrap of normalcy, every belief of decency from the very life it sustains. But once felt, once so revealed, the pain instantly becomes all consuming, painting every scene before our eyes in midnight-black, darkened by a solar eclipse unlike anything the bulk of humanity could even imagine.

Let the humanists who pontificate on man's basic goodness taste of my cold cup, served up by a vile she-devil—the very embodiment of evil, cloaked in a rotted veil of Christianity.

Mankind may indeed be good as a whole—despite Biblical contradiction of this bathetic notion—but if so, deep, dark cesspools of wickedness swirl in the stormy sea of goodness.

Though I can't say I expected to be resurrected by the fruit of my loins after such a relatively short interment, hope does spring eternal in the hearts of the faithful—as well as the foolish.

My current melancholy is likely driven more by the season rather than any recently crushed delusions of the goodness of humanity. The merry music and bright lights mock me in my time of grief and mourning. The myth of family gatherings—of familial devotion and a mother’s unconditional love—lies shattered on the cold stone steps of our hallowed halls of justice, merely one manifestation of a bitter woman’s decade long vendetta, and perhaps her most diabolical victory.

At the time of my death, I understood my resurrection—the figurative evocation of my spirit by my daughters—would not occur anytime soon, if at all. Nonetheless, I foolishly dared hope that once they realized I’d been murdered, my precious angels would flush from the serpent’s nest—Medusa’s very locks—and quickly summon me from the frigid darkness.

It amazes me now that in such a barren and fallow field my seed took root and blossomed so beautifully. I am repulsed by what can only be rationalized as my youthful indiscriminate foray into the perversion of necrophilia; as even then, the wench was undoubtedly dead, or maybe one of the undead—a hollow shell of pale, pasty flesh with a frozen shard of stone in place of a beating heart—a soulless vampiric creature of the dark.

The passing of years has seen her evil grow—exponentially—as she managed to find a fellow bloodsucker to wed in unholy matrimony. Together they feed their poison to my daughters while they subsist like leeches on the fruits of my arduous labor.

Any beauty I believed in at the time of my youthful marriage was surely the result of my view of the world through innocent—perhaps ignorant—eyes, and exacerbated by the rose-colored glasses of immature naïveté. If only I could be so encumbered again, for the harsh glare of bitter reality is gnawing on my soul, like so many plague infected rats scurrying through my dry and sun-bleached skull.

But the hands on the clock of time have swept open the heavy drapes of my youthful innocence, and once so drawn, the blinds cannot be closed again.

Tragically, life is oftentimes replete with such horrors, but as far as I’m concerned, the only cure—death—is worse than the disease. And maybe I wouldn’t have it any other way. You see, I’ve been cursed with the tortured and melancholy soul of a poet—though regrettably, my Creator stopped short of blessing me with a poet’s pen.

I’d like to think I’m chasing happiness, but maybe I’m just chasing it away. If I tried to count my blessings, I could be so employed for a lifetime; but I chose instead to feed the ache in my heart, always going round and round like a dog chasing its tail. If loving my daughters was a choice, I could simply chose not to love them anymore and this horrific ache in my heart would disappear. But I could no more stop loving my children than the wild goose could refuse to fly south in the fall; I will love them always—no matter where they go in this life or what they do with it.

I guess as I ponder it—and Lord knows it’s in my thoughts every day—my murder should have come as no surprise. The coup de grâce delivered some six months ago in that obscure corner of the Spokane County courthouse was merely the symbolic ending of a decade long struggle for my very life; the final and violent spurt of scarlet jugular spray soaking into the pages of the book of my life should have been expected, and given my penchant for sorrow, embraced like an old friend.

After all, wasn’t my death foretold by my own prophecy? And wasn’t it merely a simplistic and unimaginative rewrite of a similar chapter in the tome long ago scratched in the grit and mud where the thorny bush of my life burst from the rocky loam?

The moonlight glimmer and flash of sharpened steel took many forms over the years, but all were inflicted with the same heinous intent and murderous motives.

The one who gave birth to my precious seed committed this crime little by little—with slight of pudgy hand—erasing me, my essence, my very spirit, from my daughter's lives: my voice from this tape, my picture from that shelf, my messages from the recorder, my letters from the box. Quick as the serpent's strike, she took a drop of blood here; left a dollop of venom there.

My beloved daughters grew so fast; time was my worst enemy, and but one tool of the evil one. Countless unlawfully stolen moments created a chasm of unfamiliarity and adolescent patriarchal apathy—brainwashing 101: isolate from the truth, and inundate young minds with false propaganda. Like Stalin—a murderer of millions—said, “Give me a child for the first seven years, and I'll have him for life.”

This most recent manifestation of Satan's betrothed hadn't the mental capacity to draft such a nefarious plot, but even the most ignorant animals can be taught to follow a script, and perhaps will even instinctually add a few personal embellishments. The rats all find the cheese, but given the chance, one or another will zig instead of zag their way through the maze.

And now, it's so easy to get caught up in my pain that I become blind to not only the good that surrounds me, but also the suffering of other pilgrims trudging down the path of life at my side. In the grand scheme of things, is my burden worse than that of so many others?

When the Towers fell, thousands lost everything they'd ever had, or ever would have; and as a nation we lost our innocence. With every passing day, another soldier or Marine's loved ones must bravely open the door to greet the most unwanted and despised visitor imaginable. This harbinger of grief comes clad in a crisp dress uniform, and proudly bears a neatly folded red, white, and blue flag—oak display case optional.

Or what of those forgotten souls quietly suffering on the Dark Continent? What of those soon-to-be childless parents watching their AIDS inflicted babies' wither away under the harsh glare of the sub-Saharan sun, blissfully ignorant of the fact that the same voracious virus is coursing through their veins as well?

If I look outside myself, it's not so hard to find others with pain and struggles that far exceed mine—but such pious soil and hallowed ground is tread by others with much greater moral fortitude than a humble sinner such as I.

Like Papa's worn and weary Santiago, I often wonder, is the knowledge that you've given everything in a noble struggle reward enough? The old fisherman—my literary doppelganger—drifted into port with mere bones from his great fish, while I sail through the sea of life with nothing but bittersweet memories and dreams of what could have been—what should have been, and what should be.

Lord knows I've fought the good fight for the priceless souls He's entrusted to me. I've given it my all, but as I scan the horizon from this dark vantage, it seems as though I've lost the battle; have I also lost the war?

Unlike Hemingway, my quill is still wet, and my story has many chapters yet to be written—or so I like to hope. But as I quietly lay here in cold slumber—dead to those whom I love—my dimly beating heart yearns for life beyond the grave. My heart, my very soul, is consumed with a righteous lust for my birthright, the love of those in whom my blood flows, both upstream and down.

The sand is trickling downward—ever more quickly it seems—in the hourglass of my life, and though I try not to look, I can feel the reverberations of the falling grains in my bones, like an earthquake that is shaking the foundation of my life. Each tremor brings me closer to the end of my book; but I lovingly wait, watching and listening as the Author of all life turns each page of the story in His perfect time, and in His perfect wisdom—*For the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.*

Maybe my daughters will resurrect me before my work here is done, and maybe they won't, but I take comfort in the knowledge that He is watching.

He knows all truth—all knowledge that is written in the book of the Lamb—and He knows I've done my best to fulfill the charge He has given me—and only me—in my daughters.

Dear Lord God, I pray that you watch over and keep Amanda and Kayci while I am not allowed, nor able, and Thy will be done, here on earth as it is in heaven.

Daddy Date Night

I cried today—though these days there's nothing very strange about that. As the years have passed, I find myself much more cynical than I was when swaddled in the innocence of youth, and yet much less stoical. Big boys don't cry—but daddies do.

Today the pain cuts even deeper, like it often does when the writing on the calendar marks a special occasion. This is the day the Lord hath made, but I haven't the moral fortitude to rejoice and be glad in it.

Many years ago—nine or ten maybe—my daughter's school held their annual "Daddy-Daughter Date Night," and for the first time they included the little girls in the kindergarten class. To a man who has no female children it might seem like a trivial and silly affair, but to a father of daughters, the annual event that is always held close to Valentine's Day signifies and celebrates the special bond between father and daughter—a bond like no other.

This bond of trust, love and protection, this patriarchal mantle of responsibility, remains until it is transferred—usually with great difficulty, pain, and much soul-searching—to the shoulders of a young suitor taking the hand of the man's pride and joy—the very apple of his eye—in holy matrimony. At least that's what I thought when I signed up for this daddy gig. I guess my ex forgot to read the parental rulebook—let alone the Bible she's always thumping.

Anyway, tonight's the big night, and for the first time, I'm not invited. Tonight, their *new daddy*—the moron who still hits me up for money to subsidize his fatherhood—is getting the honor, the privilege, of escorting my daughters to this annual event. Never mind the fact that he's some Johnny come lately. Never mind the fact that I've been there every year. Never mind the fact that it is so wrong—morally, emotionally, and legally—my ex has decreed that it shall be so. Long live the Bitch Queen.

For days and weeks now, I've tried to avoid thinking of this night. I've tried to stop thinking about all the many years I made the twelve hundred mile flight to escort my precious daughters to this event, or the year I even made the pilgrimage to this Mecca of

fatherhood twice—the year the school decided to have separate nights for elementary and junior high. I have no regrets of the time and effort required to attend these special nights with my girls; indeed, I have nothing but pleasant memories of each night: dance lessons, parlor games, and good times with fellow fathers and their daughters. I guess that's not entirely correct. I do have some ill feelings associated with one of the nights—the one a couple years ago where my ex managed to convince my daughters that their *new daddy* should accompany us to this unique celebration. And now, after many years of the Bitch Queen's incessant efforts to push me from the lives of my daughters, the Eunuch has the glory of the special night all to himself.

Do I sound bitter? Of course I am, but how could I not be? I've had the most precious thing in my world—my daughters—stolen from me. I've been murdered to them, cast in a shallow grave, and had my very memory erased from their young minds in a blazing funeral pyre. And though they're too young to comprehend the deed, I've been stolen from them too, but perhaps that aspect of the crime is much less important. I can only pray to my silent God that they seek the truth sooner than their father did; my mother committed a similar crime against my father, and it took me twenty years to figure it out. In fact, I was only able to do so after I had children of my own.

But, through all the pain, my broken heart—my shattered heart—still beats, albeit feebly. Beneath the dark ashes of the grave, my love continues on, and I watch the passage of the seasons in my daughters' lives from a distance. If only I could will my heart to stone—make it impervious to this horrific ache that consumes me and makes me blind to the many blessings I enjoy.

I'm tired, beyond tired, of being left in the cold ground. I crave the warm of my daughters' love, and yearn for the moment that I'll be able to take my God-ordained place in their lives. Every night I dream of the wondrous day that I'll be summoned from this dank den of soil, and rise like the mythical Phoenix from the ashes of my grave to walk again amongst the living. But with the dim light of every dawn, I realize my time has not yet come—this hellish nightmare rolls on.

As for my silent God, I sometimes wonder if He even cares. He's the one that made me the father of my daughters, but He's also the one that's allowed the Bitch Queen to take them away from me.

Aren't you watching God? Can this be your divine plan? To allow a vindictive mother to encourage her daughters to break Your fifth commandment—the only one of ten to include a blessing if it's followed? Why don't You hear my cries oh Lord?

I lift my eyes to the sky and strain to hear the Almighty's reply, but the silence is deafening, and it echoes through my rotting skull. I can do nothing but wait—and hope. I do make one futile attempt to reach beyond the grave. I make a call to the florist, and order corsages for each of my daughters—I can't have my Princess and Angel attending this evening's festivities without being properly adorned.