

12-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Labianca, Griffen (2023) "Little Eulogies," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 28.
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol12/iss1/28>

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Little Eulogies

The funeral service was for my friend.

It lasted for nearly six grueling hours. Twelve if you counted the second day and the small eulogy given by the pastor of the church his family went to. I vaguely remembered him talking about his Sundays at church, as irregular and infrequent as many other middle class North Shore families on Long Island. In my family, church was a thing to laugh about, it was my brother whispering “Ooo hot,” as he dipped his finger in the small bowl of water that sits at the entryway of every Roman Catholic church. It was my father joking about being struck by lightning if any of us walked into a church on Christmas. “Bad Churchgoers,” my mother jokingly called us.

The house had been abandoned for as long as any of us could remember. It sat strangely on the corner of a neighborhood and reminded us of a haunted house from a Stephen King movie. Tall cypress tree with an abandoned tire swing and all. It was the summer of our freshmen year of high school, and the heat felt like you were sitting in a car with the windows up. Stagnant and windless. A pool sat in the backyard, pond scum overflowing the tarp that had slowly rotted away with age and changing seasons. Some of us joked about cleaning it up, skimming out the muck and coming here on our days off from whatever countless summer jobs we worked at. Deli counters, vet offices, pool lifeguards.

The boy who had scoped out the house, a friend of a friend, was a gambler driven by equal parts growing up poor around rich kids and growing up angry around poor kids. Six years later, his Instagram page reveals a man rounded out and softened up by time and work as a real estate agent. He’s

married to his high school sweetheart who no doubt had a hand in flattening out the rough edges of his younger self.

Our friend group consisted of a hodgepodge of kids like this, athletes who didn't take sports seriously enough to make it to college playing, honor students too stupid to stay in class when they could skip and sit in the cafeteria. Smart kids doing dumb stuff because the dumb kids did worse. Troublemakers who never did enough to get more than a wagging finger from a teacher instead of a suspension or a fine.

The kid had found a way into the house through a back glass door, less lockpicking and more jangling an old, rusted door frame until it snapped open. The first thing about the house was the smell: it was fresh, rather than the mold and rot that most of us expected. It was clean, as if it had been robbed rather than thoroughly scrubbed down. Kitchen cabinets and drawers were pulled out, silverware stripped clean from its holsters, the only things left were plastic plates and wooden spatulas. It felt more like the memory of a house than one that anyone had lived in.

The living room, connected to the kitchen, was open and an old leather couch was torn up and tossed over. Some of us marveled at the ceiling where a chandelier dangled high above, and the stairs snaked around the whole of the interior up into the second floor. It looked like a house from a movie, all glowing in the hot summer daylight. There were six of us, and we walked around the house with a tepid worship as if we were in a church, careful not to disturb the cobwebs and broken glass crowding the corners of the rooms. The only one who wasn't careful was Mike. A broken leg earlier that year left him with a big black boot, so he stomped around the wooden floor of the house. Never mind the fact that he was a giant who had a knack for crowding up open places with all six foot four of himself; a height that is either accurate of how tall he actually was, or one clouded by the reverence of my younger self. It was hard in those days to tell what took up more of the room he was in, his body, or his laugh. Whenever he chose to laugh, it meant shaking the room you were in; it was a call, like those big Viking horns people used to blow through. It ordered everyone else in the room to laugh as well, not in intimidation, but because it felt wrong not to laugh along with him.

The funeral home was the biggest in our hometown, a necessity for the waves of people who came to pay their respects to Mike, and his family. At this time, it seemed to me that it would've been unusual for someone we knew *not* to be there. The line snaked around the halls of the building, people lined up, around tables and chairs, up the winding stairs that some of us joked reminded us of that old house we snuck into.

Anger shadows most of my memories of those two days. Anger at the adults, anger at our school, anger at ourselves, anger at Mike. It was a poison in me—more mist and fog than seething and red as it had been a week earlier. The first day was quiet. Those of us who were close to him had nothing left to say to each other, and those who felt they were close with him had no idea how to talk to us. It was nice in a way; misery was left to itself at the entrance of the big hall doors that lead into the room where his body would be. They were closed for the first hour, things getting set up, appearances getting ready. A part of me wonders now if that hour was more for us than it was for them, to prepare ourselves before we saw him for the first last time.

By the time I realized most of my friends had circled around me, leaving me alone and in the lead of the moshed crowd of people waiting, the doors had already begun to open. The man who opened them, a worker for the funeral home, was dressed in a tight collared penguin suit that looked a few sizes too big for him. At the time, I might've thought he was far older than any of us, but time and memory put him no older than any of us had been.

The few seconds before anyone made their way into the room were agony and lasted for an eternity. Everyone was breathing on top of each other, and despite the wilting summer heat of late August and the long sleeved tight buttoned suits we all wore, it somehow felt cold in the parlor. Eyes seemed to flicker between the door, to me, to the door, to me, to the door. Eventually, thought caught up with motion as I had already begun marching through the large double doors. Thoughts bled from me as panic churned in my guts. What came first? Respects to the family? Isn't there something to sign when you walk in? What about those little cards with the prayer on the back of an old photo of the deceased? It was too late for decision making by the time I realized I was sitting down with the others in a small bisection of the room, in a corner seat, away from his family, their backs turned as they sat on a red and green flowered couch that would've matched the interior design of an eighty-year-old woman's house.

Even as I think back on those grueling hours sitting and staring at the wood casket looming at the center of the room, I can't remember the face of Mike in that wooden bed.

The next hour or so in the abandoned house was equal parts exploration and graverobbing. Or at least, that was how it felt to us the longer we walked around. The family's history in the house became apparent, pieces of the inside were littered with the small memories of people who once lived there. As Mike and I were left to walk through the old turned-out bedrooms upstairs, the others looked through cabinets, closets, and the shed outside. Normally

he was loud, not in an obnoxious way, but his voice used to carry a weight to it that seemed to absorb my attention.

A lot of us were smart, or at least good students, but Mike was on a whole different level. Academic awards were piled high on tables and on walls in the office he shared with his father, a fact that I and the others learned years later when we visited his family after he passed. The office felt small and cozy, and his computer was still set up next to his father's. Posters of World of Warcraft and rap album covers were tacked up behind the monitor. It was the place where he spent hours playing Dota 2 with us online and yet in that moment it felt alien, a side of him that had been invisible between monitors and the static mic quality of TeamSpeak and Skype calls that lasted late into the warm hours past midnight on school nights.

In the old empty bedrooms upstairs in the abandoned house, books, toys, or anything not important enough to be carried away were left scattered across the floor or on top of empty open dressers. Mike had been quiet that day, a fact many of us never noticed until weeks later, he had been joking throughout our trip to the house, talking to Peter, a close friend who introduced me to Mike through our shared interest in Melee, a game we both attempted to play at tournaments. Only Mike's attempt was loose and fast, more a hobby than my own obsession with it. A fact I would learn later about Mike, through Peter, was that if he wanted to master something, it was only if time let him. Whether it was a video game, a sport, or Quantum mechanics; the only thing seemingly inexplicable to Mike was himself.

Mike slowly, and carefully, grazed his fingers over the journals and loose photos that sat on a faded pink nightstand next to a dust covered mattress. Despite his size he was gentle with the memories, a light blue journal or diary, its contents still a mystery now, as Mike refused to let anyone else read it. His jaw clenched tight in the way that said "no" and left no room for rebuttal. He left it to sit alone forever on the windowsill of the room in the sunlight. The photos that were scattered loosely on the floor were of a young girl. I couldn't place her age, possibly early high school, the same as us, but something about the pictures seemed ageless. The way the sunlight stained and discolored the photos, and the shirts and outfits of the girl and her friends in the photos couldn't be put to time, memories left scattered behind on the wooden floorboard of an abandoned home.

Little eulogies were spelled out everywhere in that home. In the master bedroom, old copies of Hemingway rested dusted and lonely in a drawer. Old beaten-up sneakers sat mud stained at the front door, laces chewed through, aglets cracked and frayed from what must've been a particularly busy dog. Small notches were carved alongside dates and names in the doorway of a bathroom, ages of heights lost to the fading of sharpie ink against time. Post-

ers of Justin Timberlake and Coldplay blanketed shoe boxes full of burned cd's with "Cassie's Mix" scribbled across the neon-colored plastic casings.

It was a house both left behind and completely forgotten by time. Only the sun and the rain and the dust left any measure of their age.

It took me nearly an hour to eventually get in line and give my respects to Mike's family. An hour more of standing in nauseating, gut churning anxiety. And then another hour after sitting alone with my friends in what felt like bleacher chairs near the casket. Teachers who knew us, or knew Mike enough to know us, came up and gave their respects to us. We quietly, or silently gave our thanks and they either left, or stayed long enough to talk to other teachers. Either about how horrible it all was, or how horrible they all felt for us, or how horrible they felt for Mike's family, or how horrible the ones closest to Mike must be feeling.

It was unique in a disappointing sort of way how people older than us spoke about death. Grief was never admitted, as if acknowledging your own pain was somehow selfish to the suffering of others. Perhaps that was the case, or perhaps the pain in which we felt lonely together was more than what the teachers or administrators or coaches felt. Or perhaps no one was ever really close enough to Mike to admit how upset they were. I didn't cry at either of the services. Neither did my friends who were close with him. Part of me wonders if it was because we knew how long Mike had been hurting for. Or maybe, it was because none of us felt we had the right to cry for him, as if none of us ever truly knew him.

Eventually we were chased out of the house by a neighbor in a pickup truck. We scattered from the innards of the house like rats from a hole and spread out across the neighborhood, sprinting, the pickup truck spewing black smoke like some beast from hell out to punish us. This was the fervor and panic that could only accompany the thoughts of kids who weren't really bad but had been bad enough to do something stupid. I ran alongside Mike, his big boot stomping and dragging through the pebbled, potholed street near my house. Eventually we made it to the front stoop of my house, both of our cellphones were dead, so we sat waiting for Mike's sister to pick him up after he used my home phone to call.

I've owed Mike a eulogy for nearly six years now after the pastor asked if anyone had any words they'd like to say, and I stood there silently. Too nervous or too weak to say anything. After a pause that felt too long, and a few words

spoken by the Pastor, they played the song “See You Again” on a speaker that had been wheeled out on an old plastic cart. Like the ones we used to have in grade school if we were about to watch a movie in class. In the awkward quiet of the funeral parlor, I laughed, only a chuckle loud enough for Peter to hear. Then he laughed as he felt it too. The tug of an old memory, both of us remembering Mike ranting and joking about how stupid he thought the song was late one night on a skype call.

The laugh felt easy, a little acknowledgment between us about our shared memory with him. It was a little memory, and as I remembered it, I began to remember the many hundreds we had made with him together. Easy memories that made me chuckle into the collar of my too-big dress shirt. quietly enough for no one else to hear. Memories of his laughing, or old jokes he made, or old arguments we had. Little memories that made me feel like a “bad churchgoer,” laughing at my own little eulogies.

My time with Mike was filled with moments like this, moments where we were alone together but not lonely together. Sitting, talking, joking, or even arguing, but rarely ever silent with each other. The sun was going down in the way that late summer makes lovely, all deep orange, pink and lavender. Or maybe it was just going down normally, the sieve of time diluting my memories of Mike into abstractions of beauty that I might’ve wished for quietly to myself. We sat in the silence of a suburban neighborhood in July, young kids squealing and laughing from somewhere unseen, trees shifting in the wind as the heat began to break for the cool comfort of night. Just together, waiting. A part of me puts my hand against his, or rests my head against his shoulders, or just blathers out all the ways I feel about him but can’t tell him.

The real me sits there quietly with him in the twilight before the dark sky rolls in with the night and all its stars scatter out like old memories against the floorboards.