

## Great Uncle Norm's Wacky, Wild, Wondrous Funeral

### Part One: The Wait

The weirdest weekend of my life began on a rather somber note. I remember sitting in the garage in the shotgun seat of my father's car while tapping the fingers of my right hand against my thigh. I had been sitting there for half an hour waiting for him to come downstairs; unfortunately, his time management skills are a little nonexistent. As I sat there waiting, my grandmother—who was in the back seat—asked me the same question over and over again at about seven minute intervals. "Where are we going?" Silently I cursed her dementia. I couldn't bare to lie, and I couldn't bare to tell her the truth. "Grammy, we are going to your brother Norman's wake."

Every time her response was the same. She would cry out in shock upon hearing the news and begin to sob. I would try and comfort her and seven minutes later she would forget why she was crying and ask again. "Where are we going?" Eventually I decided to reject all the anti-lie rhetoric I had been subject to throughout my childhood. "Grammy, we are going to get lobster rolls, big juicy lobster rolls from your favorite restaurant." A pause. "Why am I crying?" I looked back to see genuine confusion in her tear strewn eyes. I put my hand on her knee, looked up into those eyes, and smiled. "Allergies Grammy, they are always awful in January." She smiled back; "Thank you Annabeth."

### Part Two: The Wake

It's always weddings and funerals, that's what it takes to bring the entire family together. As I looked around the espresso-foam-colored room, I noticed that family members from all over the country had pressed the pause button on their busy lives to come pay their respects. My unusually tall cousins from Seattle were there, as were my diehard Catholic cousins from Texas, and my painfully health conscious cousins from Brooklyn. Amidst the tears and hugs of my many cousins, right in the middle of the room, was my great uncle Norman. The coffin was beautiful in a sort of macabre way, expertly crafted and polished to perfection. Folded to the right of Norman's head was an American flag—testament to his days in the marine corps.

For a while I managed to wander around the room unnoticed, simply taking in the bizarre scene. Yet it wasn't long before I felt a set of hands clasp my shoulders. I turned around to find that I was face to face with one of my favorite people in the entire world: my uncle Bill. There was an endearingly mischievous grin on his face, the kind of facial expression strictly forbidden at funerals. He began to whisper in my ear. "Pedro is here." With that he disappeared into the noisy throng of distant relatives, maniacally laughing to himself inside his head. Meanwhile, I was left chocking on the butterscotch candy I had picked up from a bowl in the women's bathroom.

If I could take a stick of white out to one person from my past it would be Pedro. He was my second cousin's second wife's son with a man who had come years before my cousin (in other words we weren't actually related). He was from Mexico and he looked like a personified thoroughbred horse, just shorter and with questionably colored teeth. I had met him years before at my cousin's wedding. Back then I was short enough that he seemed tall, and his teeth were a flawless white. When I first met him I assumed he was much younger than 25 and he assumed I was much older than 15. I figured out his true age before he figured out mine. Admittedly, before I came to this realization I had lead him on a bit. The last memory I had of him from that trip was when he tried to kiss me and I ran away. For some reason my uncle found the whole Pedro story brilliantly funny. I found it painfully mortifying.

Not long after my encounter with Bill I spotted Pedro across the room from me talking to one of the Brooklyn cousins—Brittney, a film professor at NYU and a dedicated vegan.

Thankfully he didn't see me staring. A few minutes later and Norman's son, John, gestured for us to take our seats for an agonizing hour of silent prayer. John was part of the Texas crowd. Towards the end of the hour each family went up one by one to kneel by the coffin and pay their respects. As I knelt next to Norman's corpse I reflected on two things. One of them Norman. I hadn't known him very well. My only memory was the time I went to visit his nursing home in Colorado with my cousins. On my way out I accidentally set off the alarm that is meant to keep the elderly residents from running away and sent the whole place into chaos. The other thing I reflected on was my mother and her conspicuous absence.

Every person present had gone up to kneel by Norman's body and pray except for her. People were starting to stare. She sat there in the corner looking timid in her short black dress. Where she came from in Iran this was not the way they did funerals. Not to mention the fact that

she was petrified of dead bodies. Ever since her older brother's friend brought her to see a mummy exhibit at a museum in Tehran when she was 14, she has been unable to go near a corpse. I silently pleaded with my eyes for her to go up and pay her respects, yet she turned her gaze to the ground and sunk in her chair. I sighed to myself. I could already tell this was going to be a very long funeral.

### Part Three: The Dinner

My Seattle cousins remind me of Amazon women, tall, strong and beautiful. I sat next to one of them, Sandra, at the hotel during dinner. As we shared a plate of French fries, she told me about her life traveling the world as a photographer and the wide array of interesting things she has collected. After hurricane Katrina she had gone down to New Orleans to document the destruction. One day, as she was walking along on the beach she found the top of a stop sign lying in the sand, perfectly severed from its pole and whatever street it had been on. She took it home and turned it into the top of a coffee table.

After talking to Sandra for a bit, I turned to the cousin sitting to my left and began inquiring into how he gained acceptance into Columbia University. However, it turns out leaving Sandra unattended wasn't the best idea. Somehow she had managed to get her wedding ring (and her finger) stuck to her boot zipper. At once around 20 family members crowded her and begin offering suggestions. An iPhone flashlight was deployed and we made so much noise as a group that I am surprised we weren't kicked out of the restaurant en masse.

In the end, to my great dismay, it was Pedro who saved the day. He suggested that we use the grease/sauce from the scallop dish he was eating as lubrication to remove the ring from her finger. It worked. Then I proceeded to use my tiny nimble fingers to remove the ring from her boot zipper. Later on as I was walking upstairs to my hotel room to go to bed I felt a hand on my shoulder. I silently prayed I would see uncle Bill, but no such luck. I turned to see Pedro grinning like a banshee. "Hey Annabeth! Long time no see! Great job with the ring back there, we make a great team." I made a sound that was something between a word and a syllable and proceeded to casually continue walking upstairs at the speed of light. One thing was for certain, this funeral was going to kill me.

### Part Four: Chapel From Hell

I sat on the church bench that was farthest back from the front between Uncle Bill and my mother. The service was in Latin and it seemed as though the duration was going to span the length of the Roman Empire. As my eyelids began to droop a bright light caught my gaze. Uncle Bill had his phone out and was texting during the funeral service. I looked up at him utterly appalled. He gestured for me to look down at his screen where he began to type the words: *Too much Jesus*.

I began to silently giggle and it occurred to me that maybe, just maybe, it would be okay for me to take out my own phone. I was expecting a text back from someone important, Andrea—the perfect girl. Now I'm not saying she was born perfect, no one is born perfect. She was born with one singular flaw: a bump in her nose. Then one day a few years ago she was playing polo, fell off her horse, and broke her nose. Her obscenely wealthy parents rushed her off to the finest plastic surgeon in New York City. Now her nose is immaculate, it's a work of art, it belongs in a museum. Anyway, I digress. I had texted her earlier inquiring into the means by which he had recently published a novel. As an aspiring novelist myself, with my first manuscript already completed, I was dying to know how. Of course the second I opened up my phone my mother caught both my uncle and I and her eyes filled with anger. In a few minutes that anger was going to cause a lot of problems.

As the priest began handing out bread wafers with his bare hands my mother began to recoil in her seat. She is an extreme germaphobe and feared the fact that the priest was passing out the bread without washing his hands meant we were all going to die of Ebola, or the Black Plague, or something entirely more sinister. Perhaps I should clarify on my mother's many phobias. Essentially she is terrified of everything that is alive, was once alive, or that may have recently been touched by something alive. She tried to whisper in my ear, discouraging me from going up to indulge in the body of Christ. However the anger my uncle and I had previously implanted sent her over the edge. Instead of a whisper what the chapel heard was a quiet yell. "YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THAT."

My uncle's mature response was to burst out laughing. Unfortunately he has one of those especially infectious laughs that is always much funnier than whatever he happens to be laughing at. I began to laugh as well, as did my mother. Suddenly the priest stopped talking and everyone turned around. All I can say is that in that moment I gladly would have traded places with my great uncle Norman.

## Part Five: An Unusual Toast

After the funeral my father invited about one eighth of the family up to his room to exchange hard liquor and Norman themed nostalgia. I tried to concentrate, but I was fixated on another thought entirely. The priest had said a lot of stuff I didn't understand, but the gist of it was something along the lines of: "If you are not a catholic you will go to hell." This bothered me. What if someone was of a different religion? What if someone was atheist or agnostic? What if they were born in communist Russia or China back in the day without any exposure to religion? If they lived a moral life shouldn't it not matter if they went to church or not? I was quietly pondering this in the corner while eating gummy bears when Pedro took it upon himself to encroach my personal bubble.

I began to violently fake cough, but as usual he didn't take my hint. Instead, he held out his tequila glass. "You should have a drink for Norman?" I looked from him, to the glass, to him again. My lips curled up in a Cheshire Cat smile. I took his glass and raised it to my lips. Yet before the glass even touched my skin I executed what may have been the most obviously fake sneeze in all of human history. With the momentum from my fake sneeze I "accidentally" splashed the contents of the tequila glass up into Pedro's face. His facial expression was priceless. It was as though I had suddenly become a hideous alien creature with seven heads and butts for eyes. I popped a gummy bear in my mouth and said "To Norman!" Then I smiled and walked away.

That night I didn't sleep too well. I kept on thinking about death and hell and the moment I saw them lower Norman into the ground. I kept on seeing his face in my head and imagining it appearing in the mirror across from my bed, with burning red eyes. The sound of my grandmother snoring in the bed next to me calmed my nerves somewhat, but the deluge of horrid thoughts was relentless. I wondered if Norman was the type to haunt my mother, uncle Bill and I for creating a spectacle during his funeral. I wondered if dead people still have consciousness and just sit there in a box for eternity, bored out of their minds. I wondered if decomposition hurts. Finally I couldn't take it any longer, I turned on a light and started reading about the immortal legacy of Alexander Hamilton. Much better.

## Part Six: Finally We Talk About Norman

The next day the funeral took a lovely new turn; no more coffin, no more praying, and no more Latin. My family rented out a local French restaurant to throw a party in Norman's honor. For a good hour we ate, we talked and, we danced. Then it was time, for pretty much the first time since this funeral Odyssey began, to talk about Norman. I for one was quite curious as to who this guy was.

The first person to go up was his son John who talked about the struggles their family had faced during his childhood and how Norman's love was unwavering. When John was about 13 his mother spontaneously left Norman to join a religious cult taking half of his siblings with her—John and another sister refused to go. Despite this devastating experience, Norman remained optimistic and did everything in his power to be there for his children during this troubling time. In addition, interestingly enough he never divorced his wife. As the spouse of an ex-Marine, Norman's wife enjoyed quite a few convenient government benefits. Norman's love for her was unwavering despite her actions and throughout his life he refused to divorce her unless she remarried. This way she could always enjoy his government benefits. This former wife had made an unexpected appearance at the funeral, as John told his story I saw tears in her eyes.

Next was one of Norman's old buddies from the Marine Corps with another interesting story to tell. Back in the day, Norman had been the only one out of their group of soldiers who before their first day of training had never fired a gun. Upon his first attempt during artillery practice he was mocked and ridiculed by his fellow soldiers. Norman was not the type to tolerate this. That night he went out and bought a case of Budweiser and brought it to one of his superiors to use as payment for additional lessons. After some heavy persuading, Norman convinced this man to put extra time into helping him hone his skills. In the end, he was the best shot out of the whole lot.

Another story came from his granddaughter, Brittney—the NYU professor. She delivered an eloquent speech about how Norman had instilled in her the value of education and inspired her to pursue her career. Towards the end she began tearing up, the family's applause was like rolling thunder. Next came my aunt who talked about how her branch of the family had held very different political beliefs from Norman. She said that despite this fact, Norman was one of the few people of the opposing party who would actually sit down and talk politics with her in a

civil manner. He never yelled over her, and always would appreciate an argument that was backed up by considerable facts.

Finally, my favorite was when Sandra got up to share a short story she had written entitled "The Cautionary Tale of The Festering Finger." When Sandra was little, Norman had come up stay with her family for two weeks. She still remembered how one night her mother had decided to help Norman pop an enormous blister on his index finger. For a few days after this complex surgical procedure his finger was fine. However, it wasn't long before it became infected. Norman, a strong believer in avoiding doctor's visits at all costs remained stoic. Yet when the finger swelled up to five times it's original size he finally caved and got it checked out. In the end he narrowly avoided having his finger amputated. So now whenever Sandra considers popping a blister she thinks of Norman. I will too.

As I was leaving the funeral party to finally head home John stopped me on my way out. He wanted to point out a picture to me that was showing on the slideshow that had been created to document Norman's life. The picture was of Norman holding me as a toddler. We both had smiles on our faces that stretched ear to ear. I gave John a hug goodbye and thanked him for showing me the picture. As we drove away I couldn't help but think of that image and smile. This funeral had been quite the trying experience, but I was glad I had attended. Otherwise I would never have had a chance to appreciate the incredible person who was my great uncle Norman.