

## Flushing Bethesda

This is, to my recollection, the first time I've stopped at the westbound rest area outside of town. There must have been times when I was younger, on the return leg of a trip to Pittsburgh to see my grandparents, when I'd told my parents I had to pee *right then* and couldn't hold it fifteen minutes, but it seems none were eventful enough for the sight of the slope-sided building to pull up any memories. Maybe they remodeled. Or maybe there's no way for me to tell one stop from another, always with the women's on the left and the men's on the right and the vending machines by the glass patio in the back overlooking some meager patch of a dog-walking area.

I'm not here to pee, though. I'm here for a delay, to give myself the time I need to scribble down some notes and have a good laugh at the information booth full of sunny brochures and magazines, all trumpeting the sights and smells of east-central Ohio.

We have a bridge! Shaped like a Y!

Plus that art museum that wouldn't hire me for a summer job back in the eleventh grade. As usual, the emotion assigned to the bit of hometown pride that catches my eye is spite.

I was looking forward to not having to deal with the area for a while. I'd already blocked out a stay-at-Ithaca Thanksgiving with grad school friends, and had nearly cooked up an explanation for my parents about how I was going to take up an open invitation to spend Christmas with Gary's family. But then, on 23 November 2016, Clark Westfield left his house punch-drunk in his Mustang and took a left turn off I-70 into a concrete support pillar. My phone rang off the hook the next day.

*I'm so, so sorry for you.*

*We're thinking of starting a memorial fund.*

*Just let me know if you need someone to talk to, Theresa.*

Bradley tried to talk to me over the phone, but he broke down sobbing after his first two words. I sat on the edge of my bed listening to him cry for close to five minutes. When he asked me how I was holding up, I told him that it still hadn't sunken in yet. He started crying again.

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Everyone from back home bugged me to go to the funeral. Clark's mother even called me personally and said she knew it must be *so* hard for me, since Clark and I were *so* close, but it would mean *so* much to the family if I dropped everything and showed my face. My parents called me later the same day with similar sentiment, phrasing their concern in a way that made me immediately suspicious that Mrs. Westfield had sicced them on me for giving a noncommittal answer.

The Westfields want me to give a eulogy. I have such a wonderful way with words, after all. They want me to tell them what they already know, about how Clark was such a wonderful young man with a promising future in business cut short by a highly preventable accident. Or by the icy road. I should probably blame nature.

I haven't had time to write a speech. We were finishing an article right up until I left Ithaca, and even with the late nights we put in it's not done yet, so I plan to drive straight back after they put Clark's body in the ground.

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I've had very few ideas for what to say in the eulogy.

The night before I hit the road I was lying on the couch, my head in Gary's lap, and as he stroked my hair and we zoned out to a nature documentary about tortoises, I asked him for advice. He said to just put down whatever I was feeling, since there weren't any wrong answers. I didn't really believe him on that last part. I lied and told him I was still in shock over the whole thing, and

he suggested that I think of past tragedies. But all my close family members are still alive. I've never been to a funeral before.

Not a real one, at least.

My parents got me a pet fish for my fifth birthday. I must have pestered them a lot, or promised to do more bible readings. I named him Bethesda for reasons now long-forgotten, and for a time he took over the honor of Best Friend from a girl named Lomira who let me borrow her Stacie doll once.

Bethesda was a goldfish. I think the official breed was called a comet. He didn't do much besides swim back and forth in his bowl, but I guess that was enough for me. A little less than a year after I got him, I woke up on a winter morning and bounced around the house proclaiming that it had snowed, and that as soon as I was done with breakfast I wanted to go sledding. When I went to tell Bethesda the news I found him lying motionless on the bottom of the tank. I was a savvy little kid and had heard from fellow kindergartners that fish float when they die, so at the time I was confident that he was just sleeping in to celebrate all the school closures scrolling across the bottom of the television.

By noon, though, Bethesda was belly-up at the surface, and I bawled my eyes out into my mom's skirt for the rest of the day. I couldn't cope. After dinner we gave Bethesda a storybook toilet funeral, complete with my dad reading from the family bible. I cried myself to sleep while my mom sat and stroked my hair, trying to convince me that Bethesda was in a better place now. At the time I was still a good little Methodist girl, and eventually I began to believe that my goldfish had indeed gone to swim with God. But I never asked for any pets after that.

I don't think I can tie that into a eulogy.

I thought about it though, and it made me go looking up facts about goldfish, and noticing that they're supposed to live a whole lot longer than Bethesda did, and wondering what sort of blame could be assigned to my younger self in his death.

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Clark's parents wanted me to send them photos of the two of us together. Maybe it's for a memorial slideshow or something. Maybe they're still clinging to the idea of the two of us as a couple, six years after our only "date" and now even more guaranteed not to happen.

I'm trying to remember if I even have any good pictures with Clark. Definitely nothing recent. Just the photo from our senior prom, with Clark wearing a white tuxedo with a tie that didn't quite match my dress, standing in front of a tropical-island-themed cutout with his arm draped around my waist and his armpit sitting heavily on my shoulder. I'm sure Mrs. Westfield has a copy of that one, given that she took it. I was embarrassed out of my mind and I'm pretty sure I voiced some sort of protest, but she took it anyway.

At the end of that night, he asked me out, and because his friends were watching I told him I'd have to think about it, and spent the summer trying to drift apart. We'd be at colleges hours away from each other, after all. We talked once, albeit over text, about our career plans. I said I was interested in being an artist, like I'd been since sophomore year, but by that point I really had no clue. He was going to major in business.

I remember being a bit jealous that he sounded really excited about it.

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I pull over to the side of the road to let an ambulance blare by. Given the weather, it's probably another crash. They happen all the time. I wonder how many funerals there are in Muskingum County each day. One of our high school friends comes from a family that runs one of

the local funeral homes, and as far as I know he had plans to stay in the business. He's probably working there now. He might have helped prep Clark's remains.

That's kind of fucked up.

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My biggest concern is that the eulogy might be wrong. A bunch of people sent me links to Clark's obituary in the online paper, and half the stuff it said was new to me. We hardly spoke to each other in the past six years. Clark definitely wouldn't be able to write a eulogy for me. He'd probably say I went to church every Sunday and was planning on attending art school, neither of which is true anymore. He'd say I was shy and kind and caring and sensitive and a good friend. Which is also false, apparently.

Am I supposed to break down crying in the middle of it? I remember one of my professors explaining to the class that he'd have to miss the next week because he was going to his brother's funeral. He could barely get the words out. I feel like that's the way it's supposed to be—I'm supposed to be broken by the news somehow, and the fact that I'm not suggests I'm broken in some other way.

I'm trying to imagine what it would be like if Mom or Dad or Gary died, but that doesn't seem like the kind of thing you can imagine adequately. And it wouldn't be the same, anyway. I'm still not sure I'd be able to cry, but at least I'd have something to say, because something would be missing. If I was going to write a eulogy for Clark, I should have done it freshman year of college.

I should have called Bradley back. He was Clark's friend by more than just association. He should be the one giving a eulogy. He'd have more to say. I probably should have called a lot of other people, too, to offer support and such. But then I'd have to explain to them how I was handling the news so well, and I don't think we're ready for that.

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The lot in front of the church is full despite the ice, so I park across the street. The front steps are familiar, as is the dread I feel ascending them, readying myself for a charade like I did every Sunday in high school and on the Christmasses back home in the time since. Only this time it's worse. Stage fright is always worse for solos.

Clark's mother is standing in the foyer mopping her face with a black handkerchief. I try to look sad as I take her hand and mutter half-convincing condolences under my breath, worrying if the words sound right. As the last few people find their seats, I hide away in an alcove to review the notes I scribbled down at the rest stop. It's all garbage. None of what I wrote is real.

Bethesda went to Fish Heaven.

Clark is dead.

What else is there to say?