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I was surprised to find a birthday card from Curt in my inbox. It was especially strange because he had been dead for five months.

And it was a day early. May 11th. The day before my 29th birthday. I had started receiving cards through regular snail mail, but wasn't expecting the usual slough of e-cards until tomorrow. But that, of course, wasn't really the weird part.

I sat in the large open room I shared with a dozen other graduate students, the cold fluorescent light revealing every scratch and smudge on the surfaces of the desks, every tear patched with tape on the secondhand chairs. Hunched forward over the desk I time-shared with two other students, I stared into our dust-covered computer screen. In the fifteen seconds after recognizing Curt's name in the *From* column of my inbox, I gripped the tattered arms of my chair as one emotion after another crashed over me.

Recognition—that familiar name in my inbox.

Surprise—*The header says Happy Birthday! That's strange, I didn't expect Curt to remember my birthday.*

Delight—*He remembered my birthday! And sent a card. That's so sweet... and personal. Maybe he wants to resume our old flirtation.*

Confusion—*Wait... This is wrong. Curt is gone. Isn't he?*

Dread—*That's right. He's gone. I remember now.*

Hope—*But what if it's all a big mistake? He didn't really die, he was just really sick, and now he's recovered?*

Despair—*No. He's really gone. I saw him waste away.*

Anger—*Who would pretend to send an email from a dead man?! How sick! And cruel!*

Curiosity—*Who would pretend to send an email from a dead man? Why? How?*

I opened the email. Then clicked the link to the Hallmark e-card.

Two animated characters tortured me with an off-key rendition of “Feliz Cumpleaños” while I waited for the moment when I could skip ahead to the message.

Happy Birthday!

I had wanted to have you for dinner tonight—the dinner I promised but never got around to. But it looks like that's not going to happen. Sorry.

Have a great day.

And a great year.

And I hope you catch a cold.

Curt

The last line was an inside joke. One day when we were working together, three feet apart in the tiny office that he generously shared with me and another grad student, I had stifled a sneeze.

“Ohhhh ... noooo. You can’t do that,” he scolded, a little sternly, a little playfully. “A sneeze is like an orgasm. You’ve gotta let it go, you’ve gotta get into it. You can’t stifle it.”

Just then Jenna, the other grad student, walked in to find Curt giggling and me blushing.

“What?!” she demanded, never wanting to be left out of the joke.

“Oh, nothing,” I replied, trying to hold my own despite my flushed cheeks. “Just talking about Curt’s cold. He hates to cough but doesn’t mind sneezing.”

“Whatever.” Jenna sounded annoyed, obviously not being let in on the joke.

It had to be Curt who sent it. Not even Jenna would have known that inside joke. Not that she would do something like this anyway. But how did he send it? And when?

His death was completely expected. The prognosis was clear. The radiation treatments he had undergone in his twenties to rid his body of cancer had now caused the cancer that would take him. But the finality of his death—announced in a department-wide email—still knocked the breath of out me. *He died peacefully, surrounded by his family.* I had wept quietly, staring at that email on my computer screen in this same vast office I now shared with so many others. The other students must have gotten the same email at the same time, but glancing

around the room, I saw no particular reaction, and no one noticed mine.

After his funeral, I was haunted by his face, seeing it for weeks in shadows, reflections, abstract art, and in other people's faces. Not his face as I had seen it in those last few weeks, thin flesh over a narrow skull, but his face as I had known it for the last few years, bright-eyed and grinning mischievously, or staring gently and thoughtfully into mine. Was he haunting me now through the computer as well? Reaching out from beyond through an electronic medium? I had to know if he sent that email, and when.

I still had a key to his office. I hadn't returned it yet, even though I hadn't been in there since he had died. I had worked there, finishing up our last research project, after he had stopped working. But our project ended a few weeks before he went to the hospice. And even though it was a nice, quiet workspace, I couldn't bring myself to be in there. So I had taken up residence in the graduate student office, while Curt's office became an unoccupied memorial.

I opened the door to his office and looked around slowly, breathing shallowly, afraid to feel alive. It looked just like it had. It hadn't been cleaned out yet; they were waiting 'til the end of the academic year, still a month away. Everything was where he'd left it. His books, his files, data collection equipment. His computer.

We had so much fun in this tiny office. The department should have given him a much bigger office, considering the size of the grants he brought

in, but it was a political thing. They never gave him the respect he deserved, nor the office he earned. Oh, well. A bigger office probably wouldn't have been as much fun anyway. I had reminisced about it in a goodbye letter I sent him the week before he died. His ex-wife-turned-reluctant-caregiver had sent me a thank-you note on his behalf, saying it was the only humorous goodbye letter he'd gotten, and a much-needed reprieve.

Curt,

Even though we've only worked together for a few years, you've managed to provide me with the most practical lessons of my graduate education, including:

- how to fit 3 people into one tiny office and still get work done.
- that one should never underestimate the number of consent forms you'll have to sign in order to get a decent sample size. And relatedly ... buy the damn signature stamp!
- how to analyze my own handwriting, and yours ... a short, funny man with a self-deprecating sense of humour.
- that everyone is political, despite appearances to the contrary.
- how to get a research grant to pay for a toaster oven.

I've enjoyed working for and with you. I was looking forward to learning more from you.

Here are some of my favourite memories of our time in the office:

- you, me, and Jenna daydreaming about building a loft in the office, in which only I would be short enough to work.
- you buying a toaster oven for the office (on the grant) just so you could make us bruschetta while we worked.
- me almost setting the office on fire because I was trying to make toast, mail merge, print 50 letters, and stuff envelopes at the same time (glad no one else was there for that one).
- you and me making Jenna squirm by talking about hippies, and sex, and anything else “too personal” for such a “professional” work environment.
- sneezing.

May whatever God you believe in kiss you goodnight.

By the time I sent that letter, he had been slipping away for months and was mostly gone. As the cancer shrank his body and the pain depleted his spirit, he became more and more a ghost. The last time I saw him, the shadow of his lively, funny self still played behind his eyes as he hobbled anxiously to check his email. But his energy drained quickly, and his shoulders folded into his chest, shrinking his already small frame.

He had become more affectionate when he found out the cancer was back to stay. Hugs in greeting hello, hugs in parting. Now he hugged me

and I could feel his hands like a skeleton on my back. Rigid arms around my shoulders; cold, stiff fingers on my back. As if rigor mortis had already set in. I could hardly believe this was the same body of the same man with whom I'd worked for the last two years. I couldn't associate this body hugging me with the body of the vivaciously self-effacing man who had been my boss, my mentor, my friend. Usually so calm and resolved, he began to break down as we said goodbye. Maybe he knew it would be our last meeting. I didn't know, but I suspected.

I sat, straddling his chair and leaning forward into the back, like we always used to do. I turned on the computer. It was old and took minutes to boot up. I spun in his chair and stared across the small room at the chair I had occupied for the last two years.

We had laughed so much in this office—at ourselves, each other, at Jenna. Long hours stuffing envelopes and cleaning data turned into conversations about ourselves, and we'd still be in the office an hour after we'd finished working. Straddling our chairs and leaning toward each other, over the months we moved from talking about work and our own paths that led us here, to department gossip, politics, and personal aspirations, then to anything—relationships, goals, insecurities, sex, hobbies, spirituality, and occasionally the study we were working on. Sometimes he drove me home. I never asked him in ... I had roommates. Instead, I hinted that I would accept an invitation to dinner at

his place. He hinted that he might invite me one day, but he never did.

The log-in screen came up. He had told me his password once. The name of an old lover, Robin, who had continually broken his heart. I typed it in, and waited again.

I had wanted to know him for a long time. I had wanted to learn more from him than this short twenty-four months and two projects had allowed. I wanted him to help with the statistics in my thesis manuscript. I wanted to publish with him. I wanted to keep talking with him. I wanted to know him better. I never knew whether he wanted anything from me. The last time I saw him, he just wanted to die.

I stared at the screen, not sure what to do next. I needed some indication that he had sent the message—some folder or file—but if I didn't find it, I wouldn't know if it was because he didn't send it or because I didn't know where to look. I opened My Documents, scanned the lists of folders. I clicked on a folder called Personal. Nothing with my name on it, nothing that said "birthday" or even "letters," let alone "letters to send after I'm dead." There were files with the names of other women I knew he'd dated: Robin, Linda, Daria—his last girlfriend, a crazy professor in the Agricultural Department who was the world's leading expert on walnuts and would barely let Curt out of her sight outside of work. He wanted to date casually, but she told him they were going to be together for life. That was three months before he found out his prognosis. It turned out she was right.

I began to feel like a voyeur, or a grave robber. Pilfering the private thoughts of a dead man. I closed the folder and leaned forward, letting my chest rest against the back of his chair. I lowered my cheek to the chair back. It smelled like him—a mixture of his aftershave, old leather, and some unique Curt-scent.

When I looked up at the computer screen again, about to turn it off, I saw the date in the bottom right corner. May 12. His computer was set a whole day ahead. He had done that on purpose, his own way to stay ahead of his deadlines, though it meant he missed a lot of meetings. He had probably used a timed message delivery program to send the card, and hadn't thought to correct the date. When did he write it? How long before he died? How long had he known he wasn't going to be here now?

It didn't matter. He had known. And he had thought of me as he was preparing to go. I shut off the computer. It may contain the last remnants of his thoughts, but not his ghost. He is gone.

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