

11.22.63

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By Stephen King as Richard Bachman

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NON-FICTION

*Danse Macabre*  
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STEPHEN  
KING

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A NOVEL

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For Zelda  
Hey, honey, welcome to the party.

It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd.

– Norman Mailer

If there is love, smallpox scars are as pretty as dimples.

– Japanese proverb

Dancing is life.

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I have never been what you'd call a crying man.

My ex-wife said that my 'nonexistent emotional gradient' was the main reason she was leaving me (as if the guy she met in her AA meetings was beside the point). Christy said she supposed she could forgive me not crying at her father's funeral; I had only known him for six years and couldn't understand what a wonderful, giving man he had been (a Mustang convertible as a high school graduation present, for instance). But then, when I didn't cry at my own parents' funerals – they died just two years apart, Dad of stomach cancer and Mom of a thunderclap heart attack while walking on a Florida beach – she began to understand the nonexistent gradient thing. I 'was unable to feel my feelings,' in AA-speak.

'I have *never* seen you shed tears,' she said, speaking in the flat tones people use when they are expressing the absolute final deal-breaker in a relationship. 'Even when you told me I had to go to rehab or you were leaving.' This conversation happened about six weeks before she packed her things, drove them across town, and moved in with Mel Thompson. 'Boy meets girl on the AA campus' – that's another saying they have in those meetings.

I didn't cry when I saw her off. I didn't cry when I went back inside the little house with the great big mortgage, either. The house where no baby had come, or now ever would. I just lay down on the bed that now belonged to me alone, and put my arm over my eyes, and mourned.

Tearlessly.

But I'm not emotionally blocked. Christy was wrong about that. One day when I was nine, my mother met me at the door when I came home from school. She told me my collie, Rags, had been struck and killed by a truck that hadn't even bothered to stop. I didn't cry when we buried him, although my dad told me nobody would think less of me if I did, but I cried when she told me. Partly because it was my first experience of death; mostly because it had been my responsibility to make sure he was safely penned up in our backyard.



And I cried when Mom's doctor called me and told me what had happened that day on the beach. 'I'm sorry, but there was no chance,' he said. 'Sometimes it's very sudden, and doctors tend to see that as a blessing.'

Christy wasn't there – she had to stay late at school that day and meet with a mother who had questions about her son's last report card – but I cried, all right. I went into our little laundry room and took a dirty sheet out of the basket and cried into that. Not for long, but the tears came. I could have told her about them later, but I didn't see the point, partly because she would have thought I was pity-fishing (that's not an AA term, but maybe it should be), and partly because I don't think the ability to bust out bawling pretty much on cue should be a requirement for successful marriage.

I never saw my dad cry at all, now that I think about it; at his most emotional, he might fetch a heavy sigh or grunt out a few reluctant chuckles – no breast-beating or belly-laughs for William Epping. He was the strong silent type, and for the most part, my mother was the same. So maybe the not-crying-easily thing is genetic. But blocked? Unable to feel my feelings? No, I have never been those things.

Other than when I got the news about Mom, I can only remember one other time when I cried as an adult, and that was when I read the story of the janitor's father. I was sitting alone in the teachers' room at Lisbon High School, working my way through a stack of themes that my Adult English class had written. Down the hall I could hear the thud of basketballs, the blare of the timeout horn, and the shouts of the crowd as the sports-beasts fought: Lisbon Greyhounds versus Jay Tigers.

Who can know when life hangs in the balance, or why?

The subject I'd assigned was 'The Day That Changed My Life.' Most of the responses were heartfelt but awful: sentimental tales of a kindly aunt who'd taken in a pregnant teenager, an Army buddy who had demonstrated the true meaning of bravery, a chance meeting with a celebrity (*Jeopardy!* host Alex Trebek, I think it was, but maybe it was Karl Malden). The teachers among you who have picked up an extra three or four thousand a year by taking on a class of adults studying for their General Equivalency Diploma will know what a dispiriting job reading such themes can be. The grading process hardly figures into it, or at least it didn't for me; I passed

everybody, because I never had an adult student who did less than try his or her ass off. If you turned in a paper with writing on it, you were guaranteed a hook from Jake Epping of the LHS English Department, and if the writing was organized into actual paragraphs, you got at least a B-minus.

What made the job hard was that the red pen became my primary teaching tool instead of my mouth, and I practically wore it out. What made the job dispiriting was that you knew that very little of that red-pen teaching was apt to stick; if you reach the age of twenty-five or thirty without knowing how to spell (*totally*, not *totilly*), or capitalize in the proper places (*White House*, not *white-house*), or write a sentence containing both a noun *and* a verb, you're probably never going to know. Yet we soldier on, gamely circling the misused word in sentences like *My husband was to quick to judge me* or crossing out *swum* and replacing it with *swam* in the sentence *I swum out to the float often after that*.

It was such hopeless, trudging work I was doing that night, while not far away another high school basketball game wound down toward another final buzzer, world without end, amen. It was not long after Christy got out of rehab, and I suppose if I was thinking anything, it was to hope that I'd come home and find her sober (which I did; she's held onto her sobriety better than she held onto her husband). I remember I had a little headache and was rubbing my temples the way you do when you're trying to keep a little nagger from turning into a big thumper. I remember thinking, *Three more of these, just three, and I can get out of here. I can go home, fix myself a big cup of instant cocoa, and dive into the new John Irving novel without these sincere but poorly made things hanging over my head*.

There were no violins or warning bells when I pulled the janitor's theme off the top of the stack and set it before me, no sense that my little life was about to change. But we never know, do we? Life turns on a dime.

He had written in cheap ballpoint ink that had blotted the five pages in many places. His handwriting was a looping but legible scrawl, and he must have been bearing down hard, because the words were actually engraved into the cheap notebook pages; if I'd closed my eyes and run my fingertips over the backs of those torn-out sheets, it would have been like reading Braille. There was a little

squiggle, like a flourish, at the end of every lower-case y. I remember that with particular clarity.

I remember how his theme started, too. I remember it word for word.

*It wasn't a day but a night. The night that change my life was the night my father murdirt my mother and two brothers and hurt me bad. He hurt my sister too, so bad she went into a comah. In three years she died without waking up. Her name was Ellen and I loved her very much. She love to pick flouers and put them in vayses.*

Halfway down the first page, my eyes began to sting and I put my trusty red pen down. It was when I got to the part about him crawling under the bed with the blood running in his eyes (*it also run down my throat and tasted horrible*) that I began to cry – Christy would have been so proud. I read all the way to the end without making a single mark, wiping my eyes so the tears wouldn't fall on the pages that had obviously cost him so much effort. Had I thought he was slower than the rest, maybe only half a step above what used to be called 'educable retarded?' Well, by God, there was a reason for that, wasn't there? And a reason for the limp, too. It was a miracle that he was alive at all. But he was. A nice man who always had a smile and never raised his voice to the kids. A nice man who had been through hell and was working – humbly and hopefully, as most of them do – to get a high school diploma. Although he would be a janitor for the rest of his life, just a guy in green or brown khakis, either pushing a broom or scraping gum up off the floor with the putty knife he always kept in his back pocket. Maybe once he could have been something different, but one night his life turned on a dime and now he was just a guy in Carhartts that the kids called Hoptoad Harry because of the way he walked.

So I cried. Those were real tears, the kind that come from deep inside. Down the hall, I could hear the Lisbon band strike up their victory song – so the home team had won, and good for them. Later, perhaps, Harry and a couple of his colleagues would roll up the bleachers and sweep away the crap that had been dropped beneath them.

I stroked a big red A on top of his paper. Looked at it for a moment or two, then added a big red +. Because it was good, and because his pain had evoked an emotional reaction in me, his reader. And isn't that what A+ writing is supposed to do? Evoke a response?

As for me, I only wish the former Christy Epping had been correct. I wish I had been emotionally blocked, after all. Because everything that followed – every terrible thing – flowed from those tears.