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# Self-Defense

*Scott Hazeu*

No one takes pictures at funerals. Weddings, of course. Birthdays, anniversaries, graduations—no problem. Many people capture the birth of their children on film, yet funerals are somehow off-limits. The taboo is strong enough that even though I strongly desired to shoot my father's funeral, I didn't dare mention my feelings to anyone, not even to Darlene, my wife of seventeen years. So, I kept my silence and attended the services without film, walked behind the casket without the weighted swing of a camera around my neck, mingled with relatives at the luncheon without the enhancement of a lens.

Taking photos at a family funeral may seem distant or selfish, but I've never been good with people. I tend to be silent too long or at the wrong places in conversation. Besides, funerals are by very nature selfish events; the guest of honor no longer cares about calla lilies or pastrami cold cuts. Funerals are for the living.

This funeral was no different. Callous as it seems, I just wanted to get past the whole thing. I didn't feel like I was supposed to. I've heard people described as hollow inside, but that's not right. I didn't have a weight on my shoulders or in the pit of my stomach. I wasn't numb exactly. It was like when you've been wearing shoes all day, and you finally come home and take them off. If you stretch your legs out and stay very still, you get a tingly sensation that you're still wearing shoes. You know in your head that you're not wearing shoes, but if you don't look at your feet, it still feels as if the shoes are on. I heard that recent amputees have similar sensations, a ghostly sense that they still have a leg when, in fact, they don't.

If I didn't think about my actual feelings, closed my eyes and listened to the gathering around the burial site, the scene faded into a made-for-TV movie, and I could get a little sad. However, as soon as I opened my eyes or thought about reality for even a second, the grief was replaced by the sad fact that I was simply annoyed. The emotion that should have been there, wasn't.

It's not that I didn't love my father or want to feel some sense of loss; I just didn't. I stood in the receiving line comforting relatives that were little more than pictures on our refrigerator, resenting my obligation to offer slow, sympathetic nods and warm, lingering handshakes. The only thing worse was having to endure being comforted.

The day before the funeral I answered the doorbell and found Grace Stevens, head of our Neighborhood Watch committee, cradling a loaf of banana bread on the front stoop. She tilted her head to one side, squeezed my forearm with her free hand and, in a hopeless tone I remember from my father's few hospital visitors, asked me how I was doing. I saw the joy in her eyes at the good deed she was doing. She sincerely thought she was helping me, as if some sweet bread was payment enough for dredging up events that were already so close to the surface. At my expense she feels like a Good Samaritan, and this is supposed to comfort me?

People deceive themselves like this every day, especially when it comes to death. Most people know they are going to die, but they conveniently ignore the idea; they don't seriously engage it for days, weeks, or even a lifetime, because it's much more comfortable to be ignorant.

Once last year, when the family went over to my parents' place for Sunday dinner, the kids went out to ride their bikes in the back lane. The neighbor across the lane, Mrs. Franken, was an occasional grandmother to me when I was a kid. She often watched us after school until Mom came home, and when I was a teen, she would let me into the house with her spare key when I forgot mine. Her husband, Richard, died about five years ago, and my kids, Tyson was six and Samantha was almost four, were riding their bikes in figure eights around the smooth pavement of Richard's now empty parking space. Snapping candids of them with my telephoto through the kitchen window, I suddenly wondered where Richard was and who would park in my space when I was gone. For a brief second I came face

to face with the question of my mortality, all euphemisms stripped away by simple fact, and then, as always, something distracted me, and I went back to my ignorance just like everyone else. “Why don’t you take your eye out of that camera and go play with them?” my father had said. I startled out of my moment of clarity and turned to look at him, but he was just passing through the kitchen on his way to the john.

My father never understood the camera—that was my mom’s idea. My father tried to teach me to hunt, but it didn’t take. I tried. I went on a half-dozen or so trips with him, swimming through tall grasses or sitting in soggy, leaf-carpeted groves all in hopes of shooting something we could get a reasonable facsimile of at Hy-Vee. I think he held on to his hopes for me as a hunter as long as he did only because of my fascination with the scope. I could scan across a field with that scope all afternoon.

On my final hunting trip I spied a pheasant in that scope, a hen. I’d never really seen an animal in the scope, had never really looked for one. Without thought or skill I just kept looking at that hen and squeezed off a shot. The head disintegrated, and the bird zigzagged for ten yards or so before convulsively expiring. My father was mad. Apparently you’re not supposed to shoot hens and he “musta said it a hundred times.” That’s when Mom bought me the camera. She thought I could still tag along on the hunting trips and take pictures, even if I didn’t want to hunt.

I never went on another hunt, but the camera stuck. It was one of those 110mm point-and-shoot models—the long, slim ones that resemble a jewelry store necklace box. The film came in a cartridge that loaded in the back. The whole thing slid right into my pants pocket, and I took it everywhere. At first it drove my father nuts. “If you don’t put that camera down, you’ll have to wait for the film to develop before you see what we did on vacation.” I think he was still disappointed about his son not being a hunter. He was a player, not a spectator, and I have the pictures to prove it.

My first pictures were of my family, and it didn’t take long before my mother and sister tired of being my subjects. Hannah, would yell, “Mo-om!” as I tried to frame her in my field of vision, and Mom would say. “David William, don’t even think of pressing that button,” as she approached the doorway, knowing I’d be waiting to catch her hair in motion with the back lighting of the kitchen window. Soon I came to depend on my father as my only reliable subject.

My father could tune out the world when he was busy at something. He once read the newspaper while some toast got stuck in the toaster and burned, setting off the smoke detector and sending my mother into the hall with a dish towel to wave the smoke away. Ten minutes later he looks over the paper and asks if something’s burning. This talent of his allowed me to shoot picture after picture undisturbed.

Viewed together, the pictures are a remarkable record of just over two decades. Waxing the Buick, replacing the bay window in the living room, watching *60 Minutes* on TV in a cloud of cigarette smoke, my father ages in black and white in those photos. My first prize-winning photo is one I took at seventeen of him bent over a bench grinder, sharpening a lawnmower blade in the garage, sparks flying.

The last images are all in the hospital. The side lighting of the south window in his room accentuated the deep creases of cancer in his face and the waxy wrinkles on his thin arms. Even now when I look at the pictures, I hardly recognize the stunted double of a man I once knew as my father.

The funeral was...well, a funeral. And me without my camera. The light in the cemetery was soft and feathery too. I had taken my own car, so I could get some space if I wanted. Darlene is great that way. After the service I went on one of my “hunting trips,” driving on country roads in search of a tree with perfect bark fingerprints or a barn with just the right shade of peeled gray.

It was early evening, and the light was just beginning to show signs of fading. The wind inspired only the wispiest of grasses to move now and then. The car windows were rolled down, and I remember smelling lilacs when a silent flash registered at the edge of my vision. The wheel jolted in my hands, accompanied by the bend and scrape of metal. The tires strained as the car spun 180 degrees to

a stuttering stop in the middle of the road.

After a moment of taking mental inventory of all major body parts, I drove the hissing car to the side of the road. The front corner of the car on the passenger side was pushed in at an angle, and as I stepped out to get a better look at the damage, I noticed a small deer hobble out of the ditch and into a grove of trees next to a fallow field of tall prairie grasses. It's hard to believe such a small, delicate thing could cause so much damage.

My father in me knew the deer wouldn't get far, and I had best put it out of its pain. I rounded the car to the trunk. My father would've had a gun with him; all I had was a tire iron and my camera. I grabbed both.

The gravel of the road crunched underfoot as I crossed the road and then took a few loping, uneven steps down into the grassy ditch and up the other side. I was momentarily worried that I'd disappoint my father once again and not be able to track the deer, but the ragged trail of broken and flattened grasses, smattered with blood, required no woodsman to decipher. I walked toward the trees with high, deliberate steps, as if wading through water. A dozen steps into the grove the air was slightly cooler. I could see the deer, kneeling several yards away, its eyes rolling back into its head—a young male, not much more than a fawn. He flushed out of the grove when I took a step closer, but he was badly hurt and only made it two strides into the field before crumpling into the tall grasses. The long, slender blades and the stringy seed heads thrashed about frantically for a few seconds and then resumed their gentle waving in the evening breeze.

I approached slowly, parting the grass with one arm, wielding the tire iron with the other. When I came upon him he kicked once more on his bed of matted grass and then lay still. I stood for several seconds, looking him over, waiting for him to move. One hind leg was completely misshapen and limp, and his flank was encrusted with glittering shards from my headlight. There was a massive swelling on his side and a lot of blood.

I circled around toward his head, intending to hit him with the tire iron, but he didn't even move. His eyes bulged, and the reality of my intended merciful violence with the tire iron was too much for me. I lowered the heavy tool, stepped closer, and leaned over the animal. With a last burst of strength, attempting to reach its feet, the deer lurched forward, bulldozing into me.

Instinctively I grabbed the deer around the neck as I fell backward. We hit the ground together, and I desperately hung on for a few flails until I heard a low, muffled crack. The animal's spasms slowed and ceased.

Before moving I rested on the ground for a minute or two, still hugging the corpse to my heaving chest. After uncurling my arms, I propped myself up on my elbows and then sat up, the deer's head sliding down my torso and onto my legs. The sun was rapidly setting, and its reflection off the few scattered clouds set the sky aglow with oranges and yellows. I looked down at the crimson-stained, lifeless creature, and the entire day came rushing in on me, not in shades of gray but in full color and detail. With the corpse in my lap and my broken camera hanging useless around my neck, I sat in that field and cried.