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grief

: deep and poignant distress
caused by or as if by bereavement

Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, grief also has physical, cognitive, behavioral, social, cultural, spiritual and philosophical dimensions.

To my parents, who shaped me,

and

to Cosmin, who changed me

Acknowledgments

This magazine is a living dedication to the memory of my beloved son and my parents, whose love infused my life with a richness words can only hint at. Though their physical presence is deeply missed every day, their love and light remain an indelible part of who I am, guiding me always.

I am profoundly grateful for my extraordinary support network – friends and loved ones across two continents and six countries. You offered your unwavering help without expectation of recognition, and for that, I choose not to name you here. Your strength, kindness, patience, and quiet understanding were a lifeline when I needed it most. Your support was truly immeasurable.

To my friends and family who were my anchors in the darkest storms: your kindness and compassion were the very ground beneath me when I felt I had nowhere to stand.

To those who listened without judgment, who sat silently when words were impossible, and who gently shone a light on the enduring possibility of meaning, I am eternally grateful.

To my closest circle: you literally lifted me when I could not lift myself. Your unwavering love, patience, and belief in me became the air I breathed, the ink for my pen, and the path back to myself.

To my editor – there's a Romanian saying: *"la barza chioară îi face Dumnezeu cuib"* – even the blind stork gets a nest, by the grace of God.

That's how I feel about having him as my friend and editor. It was more than luck. It was one of those undeserved gifts life throws your way when you're stumbling through with your eyes half-closed. He read everything I sent, no matter how messy. He always said "if you can write it, I can check it.". He understood what I was trying to say, even when I didn't. And somehow, he helped me find *the nest* in all of it.

And to my son and my parents: you are in every word, every page, every heartbeat. This book exists because of you, for you, and in honor of you.

*These pages contain **my thoughts and my writing alone.**
This is my voice, my journey, and my deeply personal tribute to those I cherish.*

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Introduction

All this began as scattered notes two years ago, written late at night or early in the morning during those hours when the weight of memory was too much to carry in silence. After sleepless nights, I was often left with only fragments of what I had “written” in my dreams.

One Christmas, I even received a *Writer’s Survival Kit*: pens and notepads. I tried - *believe* me, I tried - but at 3am, you don’t want to start taking notes, you just hope to fall back to sleep again. The whole idea of “go to a good place” to fall asleep doesn’t work for me anymore. That good place no longer exists, and writing things down - on paper, at least - feels like the last thing I want to do in those wee hours.

The same goes for when I’m walking the dogs.

Someone once suggested I use dictation. A great idea in theory, but the accent... well, it takes longer to fix the anomalies than to just write from scratch.

I wrote this for myself and for the ones I lost, but I also wrote it for those still here, those who might recognize a bit of their own grief, humor, or resilience in these pages.

But no. Honestly, I pretty much wrote it for me because, these days, I forget more than I remember.

Do you know how many times I wrote this introduction in my head only to forget half of it by the time I finally sat down to write? Even now, I had something really smart in mind, and I totally forgot it.

You’ll find some *Snapshots* - short pieces that were already shared on my blog - meant to lighten the mood and give a deeper sense of who we were and what we did.

There are also a few Facebook posts, gathered in a section called *Thoughts and Contemplations*. The rest is all original, unpublished material.

Re-reading everything, I realized I don’t have many exciting or funny stories about my mother (as I do about my father), and that’s probably because she was always the one taking care of everyone else: my son, her nephews, in-laws, husband, friends, me.... She was the Care Giver (yes, *two* words).

Even when she broke her leg in two places one summer while looking after three young men in a tiny village on the Black Sea coast, she somehow managed to take care of herself, too. I don't know how she did it for six months, with the whole leg in a cast.

But when she got sick later in life, no one took care of her. And still, she faced it with a strength that asked for nothing, carrying her illness with the same quiet dignity and the stoicism that had defined her all along.

Naturally, I meant to write all of this down as it happened. I had plans. I had notebooks. I had the *Writer's Survival Kit* for heaven's sake. But apparently, what I didn't have was the ability to remember anything past 6am.

Still, what survived is here. It's not perfectly organized, and it's not always clear, but it's mine, assembled with love, sarcasm, and an alarming amount of sunflower seeds.

My Mother

April 25, 2007

How many mothers have begun learning a new language at the age of 60 and effectively mastered it well enough to read any book or watch any movie without assistance?

Do you remember the movie *Entrapment* with Catherine Zeta-Jones and Sean Connery? The scene at the top of the Petronas Towers where he tells her to jump down the vent with the only parachute and to meet him the next day at the train station? She warns him not to be late, and Connery responds, "I'm never late. If I'm late, it's because I'm dead."

That was **our** movie - my mother's and mine. We watched it every time it was on TV and countless times on DVD, just for the fun of it!

In fact, it became virtually a daily routine for us. Every morning at six, Arizona time (4 p.m. in Bucharest), I'd leave the house, driving forty minutes on chaotic highways to work. Only My Mother knew how much I hated those drives!

Lavinia, her friend, once wrote to me: "Every time I visited your parents, at exactly 4 p.m. our time, your mom would leave the room to 'drive with you to work' on the highway. Those 60 minutes were her daily soul food. That phone conversation was sacred: nothing could postpone or interrupt it! And she'd return to us so happy, smiling."

Memories flood back as I struggle to reconstruct that day, but it's hard to piece together a coherent timeline. Here's what I recall. I spent the entire morning telephoning their home repeatedly. Eventually, I accessed the voicemail and heard a concerned message from Mr. Tzucu, who expressed worry about my mother's whereabouts. He knew she had called an ambulance the night before. When I reached him, he downplayed everything in typical fashion, saying there was no need for concern. Finally, he told me which hospital she had been taken to.

When I called the hospital, to my great surprise, everybody was nice and, from one transferred call to another, I was able to speak with the anesthesiologist who was overseeing her surgery. The name of the surgeon stopped me in my tracks – it was a family friend. Years ago, he had told my mother, "If you ever end up on my operating table, there's a 90% chance you won't make it. With your health issues, I doubt I could save you."

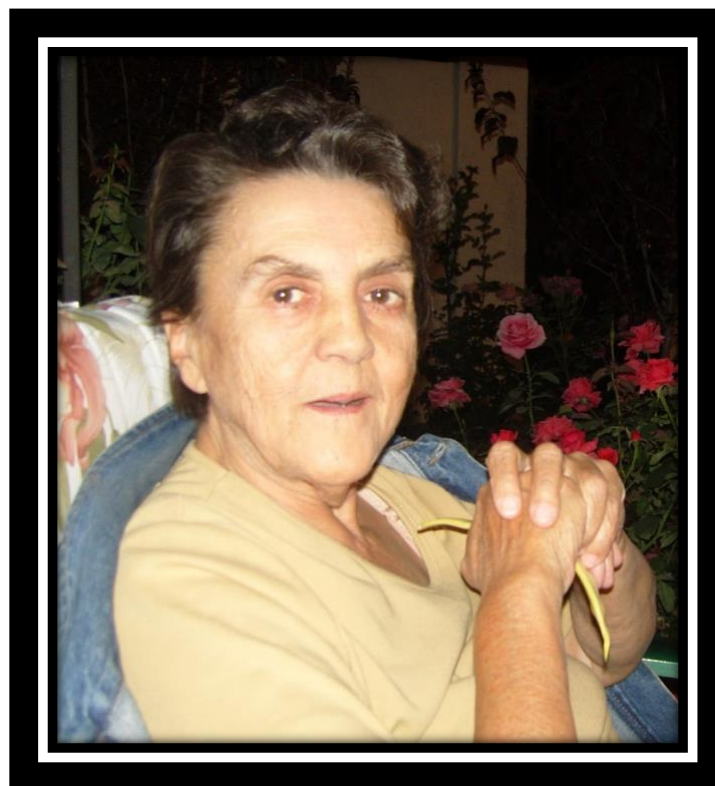
At half-past noon, Arizona time, I received the call I had been dreading: the surgery was successful, but they were unable to pull her back from the anesthesia. By 4:30 p.m., I was on a plane to Romania, heartbroken, preparing to help my father lay my mother to rest.

In his typical fashion, my father wasn't home. He was on the road with his cousin, handling some inheritance issues (a process I despised – I made it my mission to spend every cent I inherited, knowing how much of my parents' health had been sacrificed fighting for it, only that at the end of the day to be blamed for mishandling the whole process). When he finally returned, it was up to me to break the news. Of course, he had left his cell phone at home, always worried he might lose it.

One of the clearest memories of that day was the British Airways flight attendant's voice, stern and unsympathetic, that almost accusingly interrogated, "Chicken or pasta?" As I sat there, crying non-stop, tears streaming down my face, barely able to respond, she impatiently persisted, "Chicken or pasta, sir?" The young Russian by my left sacrificed himself by eating for two and calming down the lady.

The human mind often works (or doesn't) in mysterious ways.

It is often said that those we love sometimes know when their time is near. When we said goodbye at the airport that April, she hugged me tightly and said, "Ștefan, my love, thank you for all these years you have given me and for all the places we visited together. I never even dreamed of seeing Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, and all those beautiful places with all of you by my side."



Testimonials

“Grandma...

One of the dearest people in my life.

An almost ethereal presence – a spirit of such delicacy, refinement, and warmth that she lit up the lives of everyone around her.

It's still so hard for me to accept that she's gone, just like others we've lost in recent years. I can't bring myself to believe they've truly departed.

Instead, I choose to keep them alive – through memories, through love, through everything I do.

You'll always be with us, dear Grandma. Always.” - *Luminita*

"She was an oasis of joy and good cheer, a soft breeze that lifted everyone around her onto that same island of lighthearted delight.

I remember our last meeting at Hidro. She stepped into my office, and in an instant, the entire room was filled with her warmth. Her calm, joyful face lit everything up.

With her sharp sense of humor, she found a way to rise above even the toughest challenges life threw at her.

She had a rich, generous spirit. *‘Let us never let go of humor.’*

When times get hard, let us always remember Grandma Puicuța's words of wisdom.” – *Alice*

"When I remember... My God.

In spring, like migratory birds, they would return to the nest at Hulubești – the manor where we so often gathered and celebrated together.

She would start preparing natural juices, jams, and *zacusca*... all for America. Because the “lord” would always bring something in (fruits from the garden, mushrooms from the forest behind the house) and our wonderful homemaker would turn them into something magical, with such care and love. Then she'd invite us to taste, and it felt like stepping into an exhibition: everything laid out so beautifully, on the cupboard in the corner room.

Still, she always worried whether everything was just right for the guests. She was so empathetic, so easily moved.

But we, Marinica and I, Dorina, we weren't guests. We were family, right?

She took joy in our successes, mine, Cocuța's, Ionuț's, but she was especially proud when Marinica showed off his gifts: his jokes, his *țuica*, his beer. Those were nights when sleep was simply not an option!

Now, she moves among us like a holy spirit, watching over everything. Make no mistake – she sees it all. And it would sadden her to know we hadn't learned from the good she gave us: her kind words, her unselfish hands, her boundless love, and above all, her respect.

Even if it was just for something as small as an ant.

We'll see each other again in heaven. But until then: **“Come visit us again in the evening.”**

Dorina

The best English speaker among us, Tanti Cici, wrote a beautiful testimonial for my mother. It's so moving that it defies translation – even for her. But that makes sense; all the memories shared here by my mom's friends are raw, filled with love and pain.

Still, she redeemed herself by rewriting it in English. And as she did, she told me that, even after twenty years, it hurt just as much as the day she first found out.”

“First, I was in denial, trying to protect myself from a painful truth which was hard to accept: she was no longer with us. It's a difficult threshold to cross. Old random memories were flashing back. And suddenly, here is the first one which takes a clearer shape. As a child, I remember that the life of the one who gave birth to Ștefan was in danger. We were all trembling with fear as we received daily news from Ștefan's grandfather, who often came to our house and who had also baptized me in a critical moment of my life. One day we were told that life had won. Later on, when I met her, I realized that life had triumphed and saved quite a special human being: warm, altruistic, smart, kind hearted, refined, with a keen sense of humor.

Time passed, and Puicuța would lovingly gather us - me and my new family - around a table of homemade goodies. Her generosity seemed to unite us even more, with her, with her loved ones, with all the good people in this world. I remember a visit to her family's house in Caranda. A pumpkin pie that just as Proust's madeleines, continues to release memories of my past encounters with her. A black dog about whom Puicuța would jokingly say: 'Call him Nincompoop, and he will be your best friend'.

So sad that we couldn't see each other one last time. So heartbreaking un that we won't be able to see or even hear each other again. With her passing away, life has lost a remarkable person. And no, the pain of her untimely end cannot be soothed by memories. It can only be sublimated.” - *Cici*

How do you even begin to capture the person you loved most?

My memories of my mother are fragments, like pieces of an intricate and ultimately beautiful puzzle. When finally assembled, they reveal a vivid canvas of the kindest, sharpest, most sorrowful, and yet most optimistic soul I ever knew. She was the unwavering protector of her family, even when other(s) attempted to claim that mantle.

Beginning at the end: the very night my mother was rushed to the hospital, coincidentally, a former colleague's mother from Bucharest was admitted to an adjacent room on the same floor. Michaela vividly recalls:

“Ștefan, it was nearly 4 AM. The ward was alive with the quiet hum of pain and the anxious anticipation of sick individuals awaiting life-saving surgeries. Suddenly, a burst of loud laughter echoed from one of the rooms, followed by a childlike voice playfully recounting jokes and stories about America and her nephew, rallying all the 'girls' in the room. I immediately recognized it – a voice I'd heard countless times in the office: it was Mrs. Amalia, your mother. She seemingly set aside her excruciating pain, engaging with each patient, offering a comforting word and a flicker of hope. By the time her turn for surgery arrived, the room had transformed. Strangers had become kindred spirits, sharing life stories, hugs, and promises to keep in touch. When they heard what happened, they all cried like they'd lost their best friend.”

This memory, shared two or three years later, perfectly summarizes my mother.

These were the tenets of my mother's life philosophy, lessons she imparted simply by being who she was:

- She saw beauty in everyone, declaring, *"There are no ugly people. Each person has something beautiful about them: their eyes, their smile, their hands."*
- She taught that mockery of physical defects was *"the lowest form of intelligence,"* an act to be absolutely avoided.
- And her unwavering belief was that *"you assume all people are good, and you act as such, because people ARE good!"*

My mother was a perfect example of "don't judge a book by its cover." In her whole life, she surrendered to only the barest of necessities for herself. Her money went toward utilities, her son, and, occasionally, home improvements – though those were usually met with a lukewarm response from the man of the house. There was rarely anything left for personal indulgences. She owned a sort of "uniform" for each day of the week – modest, practical clothes.

I remember one line of hers that became a family saying. Whenever she had to attend a wedding, a baptism, or any kind of formal event, she'd sigh and say, "Oh no, I have to disguise myself as a woman," The first time I said to Cosmin, "I have to disguise myself as a mature and responsible father," he burst out laughing. "Mature? Oh, Dad, you're so funny."

Her life was undeniably difficult, scarred by both the communist era and the subsequent struggles of so-called original democracy. A considerable part of this hardship stemmed from her marriage to my father, a union that, on its own, would have presented an immense challenge for any woman. (That's a story for another time, though.)



Mom in action
Surprise photo – I didn't know I had it

For now, I'll share a few stories that often come to mind, seemingly separate, yet deeply intertwined.

In her line of work, my mother held immense responsibility: she was in charge of all spare parts for every power plant in Romania. This colossal task was shared with a room full of men, six or eight of them, if I recall correctly. Yet somehow, it was *she* who spent nights in megafactories talking to supervisors and workers alike, motivating them in an era when motivation was scarce, encouragement nonexistent, and threats from party higher-ups abounded.

My mother wasn't a woman who could simply bat her eyelashes and have things done. Instead, she was incredibly hardworking and exceptionally smart. She knew how to connect with people, treating everyone as the human beings they were.

And so, when it was time for me to move back to Bucharest (after spending my internship years in a small city far away), it was surprisingly easy to find an opening in the IT department at the headquarters where she worked. A new manager, brimming with fresh ideas, had just been hired. He was actively seeking young people with no prior computer experience. It sounds anticlimactic, perhaps, but it was actually a brilliant strategy: our minds were like a blank sheet (computer wise), we were the first ones in the entire building to have, to learn, and to use a PC.

I consequently found myself working in the same building as my mother, swiftly becoming "*Amalia's son*" to many. Then, a year or two later, a moment occurred that marked a turning point. As she walked down a familiar hallway, my mother overheard two people, their voices sharp with dismissiveness, ask, "Who is that woman?"

The response was swift and clear: "She's Ștefan's mother, the guy from IT."

That very day, she made her decision. Her work was done. Her son now stood on his own two feet. The next day, she filed for retirement.



Dad: "Woman, leave the man alone!"

Me, the always shy one: "Mom, let's go, please"

Mom: "Dear, it's the Easter Hat Parade – he *wants* to be seen! Plus, he's Romanian! Look at his costume!"

And off she went, straight to the gentleman, asking for a photo. I've no idea what else she told him, but the man's expression says it all.
(5th Ave., Manhattan – 1998)

But before all of this – before my internship, the IT job, and her retirement – there was my tutoring. A lot of it, because admission to an elite high school or a good college was based on entrance exams. In my case: math and physics. The competition was fierce – often four or five candidates for every spot. The smallest mistake could mean the difference between success and failure.

I already had tutors (Mom-sponsored, of course, as were all my high school and college, trips, camps, clothes), but my father wanted the best. Enter, The Super Tutor, a professor at the Polytechnic University of Bucharest, and a kind of our family friend, my uncle's best friend, actually.

He agreed to test me, a huge favor, to see if I had what it took to join his elite group of trainees. And there I was, going to that meeting without the slightest preparation, like a teenager out for a stroll rather than a potential future college student about to be judged by an academic gatekeeper.

The result? "He's so stupid I wouldn't waste my time with him!"

Bam. Just like that. Thrown in my mother's face.

My dad blew a fuse. He screamed so loudly the entire neighborhood must have heard him blaming my mother for everything. Then, turning to me, he demanded I explain the Left-Hand Rule (in physics) - which I didn't know, of course, because I was too terrified to think. And I was beyond embarrassed and angry at myself for bringing this upon my mother.

Fast forward decades later, I had a casual conversation with that same Super Tutor. He was proudly bragging about his “100% admission success rate.” The secret? He didn’t just accept *good* students, he cherry-picked the *best*, the ones who barely needed tutoring. Then he made them brilliant. A shorter leap to be sure, but in hindsight, pretty clever.

But still – you don’t tell a mother her child is stupid. You just don’t.

My Uncle and my aunt, even now, are wondering where that deep relationship freeze came from between his friend and his brother. And I, I was so mad at myself for bringing this embarrassment upon my mother that I started learning so hard that I got admitted from the very first try, which was no small feat. That day, I learned that true transformation doesn’t come from external validation or a “super” mentor’s stamp of approval, but from an internal fire sparked by adversity.



Metropolitan Museum

My friends often told me, "Oh, man, you want to be just like your father - a man's man," but I think this says more about them than me. I never wanted that.

One friend, however, consistently remarked, "You are so like your mother, just by looking at you and seeing what you do. Both of you are heading for a martyrdom that will never come."

He also added something it took me a while to grasp, even though he said it in Romanian: "She was so respected, you didn’t even dare walk in front of her."

For me, I simply wanted to be my own person. And I definitely *didn't* want to be like my dad.

....

When a problem needed solving, my father - the tall, handsome, macho guy - would go straight to the CEO to "*discuss and arrange.*" More often than not, he'd leave the office with a bag full of promises. My mother, meanwhile, always stopped at the Executive Assistant's desk, pointing at my father with mock exasperation: "Can you believe this is my husband?" Then, while chatting, she'd gather intel, until The Man came out of The Office.

By then, she knew exactly where to go, who to talk to, and what was the best way to get the issue resolved. They said their goodbyes like two old friends, wishing well to each other's children, nephews or nieces, each leaving with a bag full of newfound stories and a new friendship.

To no one's surprise, one of her best friends was the Executive Assistant for the Head of the Energy Department, and four 'Heads' later, she was still there, enduring all the storms, a Romanian Moneypenny.

This is why, even among close friends and relatives, whenever a problem *really* needed solving, they went to my mother. But of course, with my father's permission.



Catskill Mountains, 2000



World Trade Center, 1998

She always said *thank you*, even when life gave her little. And she said it with a grace that made you feel you'd given her the world, even if it was just your voice on the phone while driving to work.

My mother never sought the spotlight, yet she had a way of commanding every room, not by raising her voice, but by raising others. She was the quiet force who could soothe a hospital ward at 4 a.m. with laughter, who inspired overworked factory workers to keep going, and who knew that kindness was never a weakness, but a decision – a decision she made every day of her life, even when the world was cruel.

To most people, she was a colleague, a neighbor, a name they remembered fondly.
To me, she was the axis upon which my world turned.

When she retired, she did so not for herself, but because she believed her mission was complete: her son was safe, standing tall, recognized in his own right.

It took me years to understand what kind of love that was, the kind that lets go with a full heart, confident that she had given all she could.

So no, I don't want to be like my father. And martyrdom has no appeal.

But if I could be even just a little like her, the woman who taught me how to listen, how to laugh through pain, and how to live without bitterness, I would consider that a life well spent.

And maybe, in the end, that's what she wanted most: not for me to follow in her footsteps, but to walk my own path with the same courage, compassion, and stubborn hope that defined her every step.

And if I can manage to do that, without losing my mind or my sense of humor, then maybe, just maybe, I'm doing alright.



New York →



Arizona

Travels with Mom

My (our) excursions with Mom weren't as adventurous as the ones with my father, but they were just as interesting and fun. And seeing how pure and honest (almost childish) her joy was always made my day, my week, my whole trip.

While looking for photos in my archives, I took a long and welcome trip down memory lane: from Manhattan to Niagara Falls, Bar Harbor, and Las Vegas.

My mother, one of the most cultured people I've ever met, about Vegas: "*Ștefan, my dear, it's absolute kitsch, but I love it,*" she told me, giggling.

She was always ready for a trip. By the time Irina and I were still planning, she'd already be at the door with the luggage. I think she had a "go bag," like in the movies.

Since they came during fall and winter (very few summers – summers were for Romania), the beaches were closed, but that didn't stop them from roaming around Long Island, Jones Beach, the Atlantic City boardwalk, or the parks in New Jersey.

I think I should make a book just about their trips. Until then, some photos.



Las Vegas



Niagara Falls



Babele – Carpathian Mountains



Laundry day – 1998, New York



Christmas Tradition



JFK Airport, departures, helping each other



*Plymouth, 2002
Boston, Portland, Acadia Island*



Brooklyn Boardwalk, 2004



Acadia Island, Maine

My Father

July 15, 2017

At 4:30AM, Arizona time, I was jolted awake by the sound of someone shouting my name and a sharp pain in my chest. I checked the clock on the nightstand and shook my head in disbelief. I decided it must have been a dream. But just to be safe, I tried calling my father at home on each of his three cell phones. No answer.

I wasn't too surprised. He never took a cell phone with him when he went shopping or for a walk. Even after my mom passed, when I developed PTSD and severe anxiety, I'd begged him to carry at least one of his phones (one for each carrier), but it made no difference. They always stayed at home, fully charged, but untouched.

So, when he didn't pick up, I wasn't overly concerned. His doctor had recently given him good news about his cancer, and he was eagerly awaiting my visit in three weeks. That thought gave me some peace of mind, and it gave him something to look forward to. I went back to bed.

An hour and a half later, I woke up again and started calling him. Still no answer.

Hmmm... I decided to check the webcam I'd set up in his apartment for "just in case" moments. He knew about it and would sometimes wave or wink at me through the camera. The last thing it showed was him entering the bathroom.

That's when I initiated the "welfare check" plan. I called my friend, who had a spare set of keys to my father's apartment. But when he got there, the keys were useless—the door was locked from the inside, safety on. A chill went down my spine.

By 7:30 AM, after a Skype session with the first responders, where I identified myself and gave them permission, they entered the apartment. They found him lifeless in the bathroom, bent over, with a pair of socks in a wash basin.

Eight years later, I'm still mad at him for doing laundry that way. Everyone had told him not to bend over, to use the shelf we'd set up for him. But the washing machine? It was just another piece of idle furniture to him, an intrusive implement never meant to be used.

In the afternoon I was on the first flight to Bucharest. The next day, during the layover on Heathrow, I was already arranging the funeral. When I finally arrived in Bucharest and went to the funeral home, the staff said, "Sir, sir, as well as we embalmed him, we're in the middle of a heat wave. Hurry up, or he's going to start smelling. Let's do it tomorrow."

As it happened, I was ready. But what if I hadn't been?

Why not Testimonials?



He was a beautiful, very smart (borderline genius), funny, cultured, and charming man, but also a verbal and emotional abuser, a serial cheater, but somehow, still a gentleman.

Back in his internship days at a coal mine, there was no water available—so they used wine instead. It left him with a rather unorthodox liver, and an even stranger relationship with alcohol. This, of course, only raised my friends' admiration for him to entirely new levels.

After my mother's passing, and after two or three wild years during which his mistress en-titre tried to crown herself "lady of the house," he finally got rid of her, mellowed, and we grew closer.

I didn't ask for any testimonials. My father was a very controversial character, and I didn't want to take any unnecessary chances. I was a frequent flyer in my therapist's office because of him, and while writing this, I nearly called my current shrink.

I like to think that when he was diagnosed with cancer, I took good care of him, almost for two people, to ease, even a little, the guilt I'd been drowning in for not taking better care of my mom. Although, as my friends and my therapist pointed out, "Even If it had not been for your mother, what could you have done?"

I have tons of memories about him, both good and bad. I may write some of them here as they come back, but I'm afraid I'll never finish. And yet ... Here are some ...

Brooklyn, 2003–2004

I was walking around with my dad. We were on the ethnic avenue, the one lined with Polish, Greek, and Russian stores. There was this little new Russian shop we stepped into. Not much to look at, just some cold cuts and a modest selection of things, but the people – man, the people stood out.

The saleslady was beautiful. Not just "pretty," but the kind of beautiful that makes you pause mid-step. And there was a guy there too, big, imposing, but also beautiful in his own way. Sharp features, that tough kind of presence.

She was busy behind the counter, and I walked in with my dad, ready to buy something, anything, even if the shop didn't have much. I asked for salami. The woman looked at me completely puzzled. She seemed unable to say a word. Then the big guy approached, his voice deep and a little intimidating. He asked me something in a hoarse voice, I couldn't even tell what.

Right then, I noticed my dad wasn't focused on me or on the cold cuts anymore. He was watching the girl. Then the guy. Then back to the girl. And then he just smiled. No words. He simply made a small gesture towards the man -- like, *never mind*.

That was it. He turned and gently pulled me toward the door, saying in a low voice, "Let's go to the other store." Once outside, in Romanian, he said: "My Boy, you're so naive. These guys are not selling cold cuts, they are selling the girls."



*Piazza San Marco, Venice
(He had a deep love for animals, and somehow, they always knew.
Feathery or furry, they flocked to him like an old friend.)*

The Secret Language of Car Lovers

My father had this uncanny charm, a kind of unteachable talent for making himself understood, especially with people his own age, even if they didn't share a single word of the same language.

I remember one day at the Barrett-Jackson auction, a place where cars aren't just auctioned, they're *shown off*, like prized stallions groomed for important races. We were wandering around when he stopped to admire a car. A man about his age walked up and struck up a conversation. In English, of course. I stepped in, ready to translate.

But my dad just pointed at a detail on the car and said one word: “Pininfarina.” Then, turning to me, in Romanian, he explained, “Only this part was designed by Pininfarina—the rest is by (and here he named another designer). That’s how the manufacturer wanted it.”

The man lit up. “YES! Yes, you know!” he said, his face glowing. And that was it. Off they went. They walked together through the “Owners Only” section, tossing out names like sacred passwords: designers, makers, model years. No full sentences. Just fragments, gestures, nods of deep understanding. They pointed to chrome trim, hood lines, obscure emblems, like old friends fluent in a language only they knew.

Suddenly, I wasn’t needed anymore. They had crossed into another dimension, the secret, shared language of car lovers. And I stood there watching, realizing I had just witnessed something quietly magical. Something absolutely unique.



*Aachen, Germany, Summer of 2007
(after my mother’s passing, I sent them for three weeks in Germany, from North to South.
Years later my father told me that that trip, with Cosmin, saved his life)*

The Bus Rider

Tempe, Arizona, sometime during 2014-2015. A former college-only neighborhood, now full of young professionals, lively and enchanting. The city ran a free Blue Bus service, routes mostly designed for students, picking them up from scattered corners and dropping them off at the university or downtown (for *purely academic* nightlife, of course). It was a useful service. Even we took it a couple of times, especially when we knew we wanted a drink and had no intention of driving.

To maintain some semblance of order, there were designated stops, just like a regular city bus. My father was a frequent rider. He had a loose understanding of where to get on. But getting off? That was always a bit of a gamble. By then, walking had already become difficult for him. He refused to use a cane, and his posture curved gently forward, like a human question mark. One afternoon, I was walking with him, slowly, around the neighborhood, when a Blue Bus suddenly pulled up behind us and opened its doors. No bus stop in sight. Nothing scheduled. Just a quiet invitation.

My father climbed aboard like he owned the route, pulling me in behind him. He greeted the driver warmly, as if they were old friends. The driver smiled and nodded, and off we went toward the small plaza with the stores. That's when the surreal part occurred: instead of following the prescribed route, the driver *changed course* to drop my father off directly in front of one of the stores, just so he wouldn't have to cross the huge, busy intersection nearby. And then, after many thanks and handshakes were exchanged, we continued on our way. I was speechless.

Over time, I had learned that these were the kinds of moments when it was better to keep my mouth shut. But I couldn't resist a smirk as I said, "You've got your own personal bus driver now, huh?" My dad just shrugged, "They all know me. If you only knew how many times they've had to wake me up at the corner when I fell asleep..."



*Tucson, Arizona, Irish Pub – around 2010
(yes, the red shirt was his new favorite, after the pink one finally disintegrated)*

The Parsley Principle

The *Parsley Principle* applies when there's no need to buy anything. The only "*need*" is to escape the house. Enter the parsley. "Woman, I'm going to get some parsley!" my father's voice would boom as he stepped out the door. Or, "Woman, what do I have to buy today?" he'd shout from the hallway, tying his shoelaces, ready for departure. (The booming voice was a recurring theme.) And

from somewhere deep in the kitchen (a kitchen in any house, in any country, on any continent) came my mother's sweet, almost childish voice: "My dear, go buy some parsley."

A couple of hours later, Dad would return. Usually without parsley, but occasionally with a random item or two. Most often with nothing at all, which, for some unaccountable reason, surprised everyone. Every time.

I remember this especially vividly in Scottsdale, that snobbish, immaculate neighborhood we once lived in. He'd head out on foot, empty-handed, as sleek BMWs and polished Land Rovers cruised past him. Fit, tan, and dressed like a retired rugby player (which he was), he looked the part. Drivers would slow down and shout encouraging words: "Good job, man!" or "That's the way to good health! Bravo!"

But God forbid he came back with a plastic bag containing a loaf of bread, or actual parsley. The mood shifted instantly. The same drivers would look him up and down with scorn: "Wow, he walks to do his shopping." and "Get out of here, you pauper!"

So why the parsley?

Because you can't just walk aimlessly for hours. You need a mission, a goal, a destination. And parsley, well, it's small, light, healthy, and universally available. Perfect.

I've even adopted the parsley principle myself, though on a more modest level. My cousin, on the other hand, has elevated it to the art of an epic cycling odyssey. His local shopping center is just three miles away, but he rides his bike *around an entire mountain* – forty miles – just to end up back at the market by his house, where he finally buys what he needs. All for a sprig of parsley and the bragging rights of being called "The Legend" on Strava.

....

I could write volumes about my family – and maybe one day I will. But for now, I'd like to pause the stories about my old man with a few, let's say... conclusions.

He was the fun parent (well, his shouting episodes and anger issues aside.) He was the one who took you on road trips, who dragged you up to the top of the mountain to camp, or down to the seashore to watch the sunrise (and get second degree burns for falling asleep in the sun.) The one who taught me to row that ugly but indestructible Russian rubber boat on the Danube, the Black Sea, or whatever lake we could find. One summer we were visiting monasteries in northern Moldova; the next, we were flying down winding roads just to catch some flowers in bloom.

He was an *extremely* gifted driver. When he was behind the wheel, the car and the man became one. Road signs and speed limits, he used to say, were made for guys like *me*. Not for him. I remember him telling Cosmin, only half-joking, "With your dad's driving style, you'll get there for sure. *Sometime*."

With *his* driving style, he almost didn't. It was *his* car versus a tree. He had a powerful aversion to seat belts, an avoidance which twice saved his life: both times he was thrown from the car. The fact that his license was suspended for half of his life? A minor inconvenience. He drove anyway. But we always got where we were going, one way or another.

My father used to tell me, “I lived my life how I wanted, doing whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Now I just want to go quickly.”

After his death, two days later I walked into his kitchen. On the table: a half-burned cigarette, ash still clinging to its edge, and a glass of J&B.

It was such a reflection of his life – defiant, unbothered, and utterly him. Almost surreal.

....

Romania was – and in many ways still is – a deeply patriarchal society. The traditional roles of men and women were rarely questioned, and emotional expression, especially in men, often took the form of anger or dominance. What I keep writing about (anger issues, loud screaming, wife-blaming) were far from atypical outbursts or personal quirks. They were, and still are in many places, the norm. That was the atmosphere: homes simmering with suppressed tension, where yelling was a vociferous substitute for authority, and fault always seemed to fall on the woman’s shoulders.

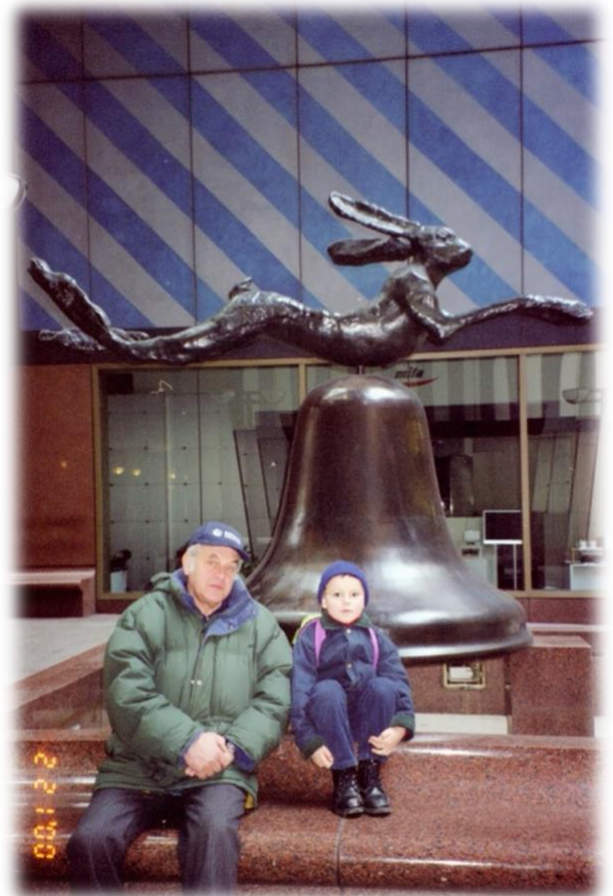
I was the unusual one. Not louder, not stronger, but different, quiet in my resistance, perhaps, or just too introspective to mimic the patterns handed down to me. In a world where anger was inherited like furniture, I found myself dragging those pieces to the curb. Not always successfully, not always gracefully, but persistently. Because even if I didn’t have a name for what I was resisting, I knew I could never live comfortably in it.





Staten Island Ferry, New York – 2000

57 St, New York



Sagrada Família – Barcelona, 2009



Saguaro Lake Ranch, Arizona – 2015



November 29, 2022

7:45 AM

I told my team at work: "I'm heading to my son's apartment for a welfare check. He missed our morning routine of wishing each other a good day."

8:01 AM

I entered his apartment. One minute later, I was on the phone with 911, struggling to even remember the address. They had to trace my call. Eventually, I managed to give them the apartment number. My mouth refused to open. I couldn't form words.

8:10 AM

First round of questions from the police. First responders came and, after 30 seconds in the apartment, they left.

8:15 AM

The medical investigator arrived. A young woman, Cosmin's age.

8:25 AM

Second round of questions, this time from the supervising officer: Drugs? Alcohol? Depression? Suicidal thoughts? Mental health issues?

They asked everything. The whole time, they were calm, courteous, even apologetic.

8:31 AM

Preliminary cause of death: accident.

....

I don't remember much else from that day, or the weeks that followed. Just fragments. We were trapped in a nightmare, living in some arid, parallel universe. Somehow, we managed to drive ourselves to funeral homes, get quotes, look at resting places. It felt like we were planning the burial of someone else.

I remember how tired we were of all the "directors", funeral director, monument director... Then Irina found someone whose title was "client representative". She paused. Gave him her full attention. When he said he could accommodate everything (date, place, number of people), she

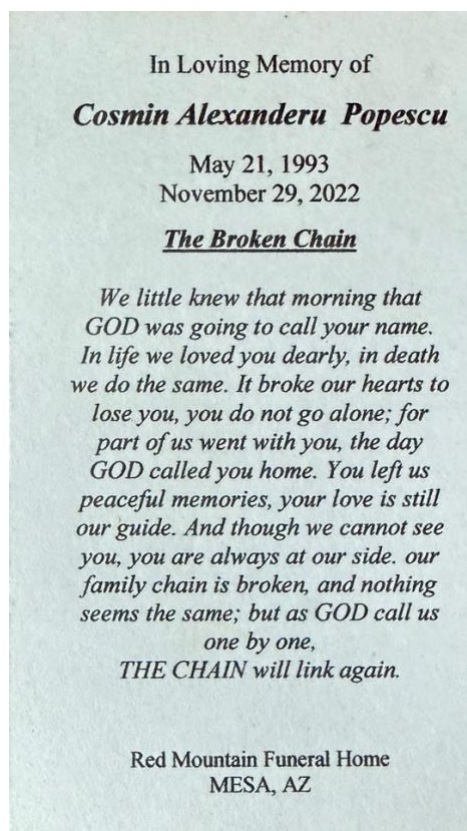
chose his company. He had but one small request: "Just not Tuesday. My wife is due to give birth." Our hearts melted.

But then came the flowers. The ribbon. The words to write. That's when we broke down. Our minds, our bodies – they simply gave out. Reality had hit, unannounced and however unwelcomed, and the illusion that "this is happening to someone else" was shattered. We left the flower shop in silence, unable to say or write a single word.

Now that I write this, I realize the words for the ribbon should have been obvious. Whenever we asked Cosmin what he wanted for Christmas, for his birthday, for Easter... his answer was always the same: "*Peace and Quiet*" – "*Liniște și Pace.*"

It would have been the perfect message to inscribe on the monument, too. But the stress, the pain, the pressure... we forgot.

So now, my son, may you forever have *liniște și pace*.



At the funeral home, we were shown a few short poems to choose from for the cards each guest would receive. We chose The Broken Chain. Something about it just felt right – it put into words what we couldn't quite say ourselves.

We even had a photographer, just to be able to remember later who came to say thank you or simply to acknowledge their presence. I looked at those photos only once. I couldn't look again. All his friends, all the family -- their faces were turned to stone from so much pain. His best friends refused to look at him. I made a 40-minute slideshow with his photos to play on loop at the funeral home. Irina chose the background music. I don't remember the band's name. I never watched it again.

I was deeply moved by how many people came, some from out of state, some from abroad, former co-workers, college and high-school friends... I hadn't realized he had so many people in his life. But in a way, it wasn't surprising. He had that rare gift: the ability to connect, to talk, and to truly commune with people from all walks of life. He used to say to me, "Dad, when you talk to someone, talk *to* them. I see your attention drifting sometimes. That's not okay. People notice. In that moment, you have to make the person you're talking to the most important person in the room" (his grandmother was like that).

Seeing all his friends together for the first time, getting along, despite how different their worlds were (something he always worried about) was both heartbreaking and beautiful. They told stories, they laughed, they cried. They were brought together by tragedy, but held together by love.



Testimonials

Cosmo,



You were the first person at CVS to start talking to me on my first day of work and offered to go on breaks and lunch together and I always remembered that. From there our friendship blossomed into something I will cherish always. The memories I have hanging out with our group of friends going to dinner will always bring a smile to my face. You were such a generous soul bringing me little bags of pistachios every now and then and I still have and adore the big book about 'I Love Lucy' you got me when you were out and about thrifting. It was always a joy to talk to you about anything under the sun. You are loved and will be deeply missed.

From Jacki

I'm so sad to hear this news. Cosmin was such a sweet and gentle guy. He always asked me how I was doing, he was fun to talk to, and so smart! I hope he's happy and excited to be on his next adventure!

From Nancy Hunter

Cosmo,

I will never forget the times when I first started at CVS, you were the first person to come sit with me at lunch, take walks around the building, sit out on the second story balcony, the list goes on and on. I will never forget our deep conversations about life at the countless restaurants we dined at, and the times we walked aimlessly around Fashion Square for hours goofing around people watching. I can still hear your laugh ringing in my head. Those were fun times. One of our last messages together was me telling you I'll be in town this week to visit, and that we should hang out. I honestly can't believe you're gone. I will forever miss you and cherish the fine moments we had together. You were and always will be one of my closest friends. The goals you set for myself will be accomplished and like you told me "You'll be fine, you can do it. I'm excited to see what you can do."

Thank you for everything from the bottom of my heart.

From Dylan Miller

Cosmin,

I don't have a recent picture of us together but this is the last meme you sent me and I will always remember how deeply caring of a friend you were.

I can't recall how we became friends; I just know you and I were invited somewhere by different friends and that was that. We'd go out to dinner with our group and always see each other at someone's house party. We weren't ever too far away from each other even though we were studying different things and had different plans after college.

What I do remember though is that you always checked in on me or reminded me to have a good week, even after we all moved away. I remember after graduation and I had just moved to New Orleans, you'd called once to check on me and I mentioned in passing that I missed refried beans in Arizona. A week later I got a box from you filled with canned beans. Thinking about it today made me laugh even though I'm heartbroken to learn that it was my last ever box of surprise beans from you.

Whenever we talked on the phone, we'd tell ourselves how good we were at adulting, talk about our new jobs, new apartments, birthday milestones, eventually seeing each other in person once the pandemic was over. I'm going to miss you and those calls so much.



I promise to keep adulting for the two of us, and may the Mother Superior of the Order of Eternal Indifference continue to bless us both.

From Sarah K

Playing this one again and thinking of the times we'd hang out and vibe together. You left town to go on a trip and now you're too far away to hang out in person anymore, but you'll still be in our hearts and minds. Wish I had more time to get to know you but I'm glad for the time we had.

From Stormy Gray

I remember a dark cold afternoon in December 1997, in the PROTV courtyard in Bucharest... thousands of people were attending the live show performed by the best local rock bands and queuing to receive a PROTV beanie.

Among them, my long-time friend and classmate Stefan with you! So I saved your Dad time and I shortcut both of you for 2 beanies. You were very happy and proud to wear the fanciest local stuff. I kept this image over the years, I imagined you crossing the Atlantic with the hat on, and later, on a chilly Arizona evening, you were looking for the old Protv hat one more time.

I'm sure you have your old beanie somewhere hidden in your pocket. Farewell Cosmin!

From Misu Predescu

Hey kiddo,

I don't know what to say... really. I'm still scratching my head thinking why rushing to get to the other side.. of town. I hope you're making just as many friends there and that you found your grandparents.

Hey listen... if you ever meet Aspera, my most beloved gsd, please please pretty please give her a hug. She looks mean but she's a great protector and she'll make a great friend. She's very smart and the two of you will make a great team. She loves hunting in the woods Just be patient with her when she chews your favorite shoe, she's just showing her affection.

Oh and btw... I really love this picture. Keep it to your heart, your mommy and papa are very proud of you. They're missing you very much.

Keep your chin up and be strong. You have to learn new things now... you can do it!

Sending you hugs and much love!





Hopefully I'll get to meet you one day. Your papa is super proud of you, eh? Don't tell him I told you

See you on the other side... of town.

Bye kiddo! Be strong!

From Lavinia Ilies

We've met in May 2013, in Bucharest. All I knew about you was from Irina and Ștefan stories, paired with a warm tone of voice and a smile in their eyes. I remember you were amused by walking in Piața Obor with grandpa, who was difficult to follow as "he is running not walking, thanks God he is tall and wears a hat or I could be lost". And we talked about career, what else?! I have recommended you few distance European courses on diplomacy and mediation. Great pleasure to meet you, young man. You gave me the impression of a pragmatic dreamer. Memories of you will always produce that effect on people: a smile in their eyes.

From Roxana Ene Mocanu



Cosmin, so glad to have known you, even though for a short while. Your great sense of humor and your decency, you were the salt of the earth, a genuine good human being. I was looking forward to many more great dinners our families shared, and hopefully will share and learn more about you from your amazing parents. Love to you and Irina and Ștefan. In our hearts

From Rita Kimball

Looking at the photos and reading these wonderful posts bring back Cosmin's wonderful smile and his beautiful, wide-open heart. There are no words deep enough to express our sorrow, but the joy of knowing him, even for a little while, enriches our souls for a lifetime.

From Craig & Rita Kimball

Cosmin, I will miss you very much, you were like a son to me.

I have two sons and you were like a third son. Kind and caring always looking to help anyone who needed help.

We first met in the mailroom, mtn view. When we all had limited space because of all the mail trays Every day.

We had our own code words, we laughed a lot when we both wanted to scream instead.

We shared are problems of the day and when down we cheered each other on. Our mascots where the squirrel, and I painted him a little hedgehog.

He went out of his way to take me home, when I didn't have a ride. He was the nicest person you could ever have known. He will be greatly missed by me and us all on the UMChecks team. Our memories of you will never be forgotten.

"Lady" Pamm



Cosmin, my friend,

Very few people have made an impact on my life as you did. Somehow, we were kindred spirits from the beginning. I always enjoyed our conversations about everything, from the meaning of life to the latest gossip. Deep subjects and frivolous bs, it was always fun. You made an impression on so many, in so many different ways, because I think

you always knew the importance of valuing others. I was always amazed at the efforts you made to connect to everyone, which is why you were so special to so many of us. Memories of you will always bring a smile, and joy to my heart. I will always be grateful to have known your light, and I will never forget the time in my life that I was privileged to know you, and call you my friend.

AloeHA Cosmin

From Dee

Oh Cosmo you were such a kind and silly soul. I will forever remember you and the jokes we shared.



See you on the other side buddy

From ChevyBowtie Girl

I can say that I've had the absolute pleasure of knowing him since our freshmen year of college. We saw each other in our dorm common area and something just told us we were meant to be each other's people. We also had the pleasure of surviving an art history class together taught by a such pompous sounding professor that we would mimic and mock that entire semester and even up until last November. We would meet up and share our complaints about crazy roommates. Cosmin was also there for me when I lost my best friend, who was also a mutual friend of his. They shared a birthday and were both these genuinely unique souls who wandered through life making others feels listened to, cared, and validated.

Cosmin is such a beautiful soul someone and let them live their to time to see how that person gentle, kind and understanding. time and care he gave by remembering, and checking in while before I lost my best friend, like a comet. But after she around more often. Just this last see him every other week and month or once every two months. friends who saw him will be will miss his "meep" text "sharings of the TikToks" in hung out in person.

He also had this wonderfully dry of dark sense of humor. The of his mouth still have me in stitches to this day. All we would do sometimes was just quote old memes and old vines together and a couple of times just sit and watch them together. He shared hilarious TikToks that he'd find that I would still find myself referencing and referring to with my husband when he wasn't around.

He was a friend that I wanted all of my friends and family to meet. He was a friend that my husband had no choice but to get along with. And of course, they did because Cosmin was just that awesome. He quickly became friends with and was accepted by my people with ease.

He even got my son gifts for my baby shower and the first book of a series we will now be collecting obsessively because his Uncle Cosmin got it for him. I am so thankful he signed that book because we will have something from someone so wonderful...

Cosmin made such an impact in my life and the lives of the people he met. He is one of the few people who taught me how to listen to understand and connect, not just listen to respond and share an opinion. He is loved and admired in abundance and will be greatly missed... But even though he's gone, those wonderful memories will continue to live on in so many people's hearts.

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that would befriend life and check in from time was doing. He was so He was generous with the listening deeply, with those people. For a he just orbited into my life passed, he made sure to be year sometimes we got to sometimes it was once a And for that, my family and forever grateful. I must say I messages and the between those times we

and quick-witted with a bit things that would come out



Dear Cosmin,

I miss you immensely. I wish I would've just shown you or told you more how much you meant to me and how much I appreciated your presence as a true and close friend in my life. I hope you find true inner peace, love, and acceptance my friend. I hope you can now see and understand the part you played in people's lives. Please send Kelly my love. May she enjoy your company for a while now until I can join you two again when it's my time. I quite look forward to that reunion.

Love always,

*Kyrie  
From Kyrie Hall*

Cosmin,



it was a privilege to know you and to see you grow up to be the fine man that you are today. You left a big hole in our hearts which we will try to fill with happy memories of you.

*From Iulia, Victor, Andreea, Cata*



The good ones are leaving too soon... We wish you farewell in your new journey! Fond memories will keep you in our hearts forever.

See you again, someday, somewhere...

*Flavia, Lumi, and George*

Stefan and Irina,

There are truly no words to express the grief that you and your entire family are going through and will continue to carry the rest of your lives. This loss is great and it is felt by the many people that he touched throughout his life. Know that while I may be in New Mexico, I am here for you both no matter what you may need.

Cosmin was more than just a friend to me. He was my family. He has left a hole in my heart that may never be filled. I know that your family felt that he was a part of it as well. I do not know if I will ever have another person in my life quite like Cosmin or who will mean as much to me as he did.

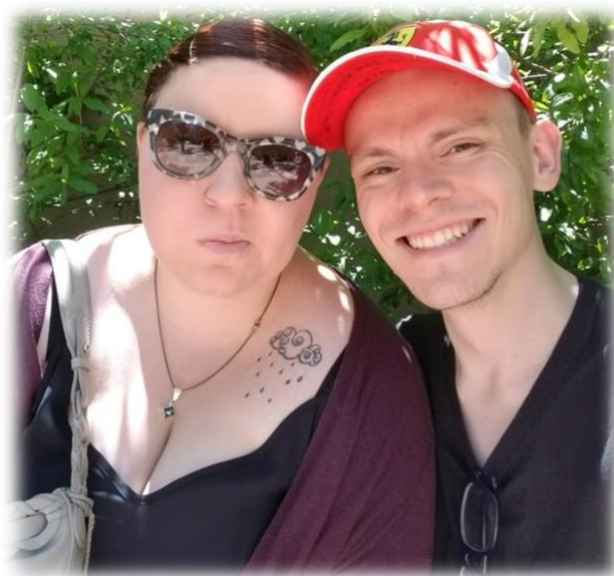
Grief is a process that is not linear and has no timeframe. It is okay to be sad, to be mad, and to miss him. There are questions that we will have that we may never get the answers to. ***Cosmin was a complex individual who chose not to share parts of his life with us when he needed our help.***

It is important to know that despite what happened there should be no guilt. We did our best we could for him and I think he knew how much we all cared for and loved him. He was surrounded by family and friends in his life and we will continue to care for and love him as he is gone.

My grief will take time too but I will choose to remember all the love and joy Cosmin brought into it. I first met Cosmin at the University of Arizona in 2014 through club activities. I never imagined what our friendship would grow into. We stayed close even after graduation, moving to separate cities and then states.

We spoke almost every day and shared so much with each other. Cosmin was one of my biggest supports in my life and I can only hope I was one for him. I know that he knew how much he meant to me.

I had Cosmin in my life for 10 years and am grateful for every day that we had. I will carry his memory and legacy with me for the rest of my life. I will continue to do the things we had planned to do together and I know he will still be with me.



*Cosmin was a complex individual who chose not to share parts of his life with us when he needed our help*

Know that I am here for you and your family. The loss of a child is something no parent should ever go through. I will continue to be here to remember Cosmin for everything he was and was meant to be. Do not hesitate to reach out to me for anything. We grieve together as parts of his family and know that I will continue to keep him and you in my thoughts and prayers.

*Gwendolyn*

## The Obituary That Was Never Written

On this day, May 21, 2025, we finally write what should have been written long ago: Cosmin's obituary. As Irina reminded me, heartfelt testimonials, however beautiful, are not the same. And so, nearly three years later, this stands as a modest attempt to honor him, formally, publicly, and with love.

Cosmin was born in a small Romanian town in 1993 to two teenage parents, both just sixteen. Shortly after his birth, his biological mother left him in the care of an orphanage. Nearly two years later, we were incredibly fortunate (and forever blessed) to find him and adopt him.

He grew up wrapped in love, from his parents, and even more so from his grandparents. His favorite person in the world was Grandma Puicuța, my mother. Summers at her farm in the village of Hulubești were a kind of paradise for him: barefoot, carefree, and full of laughter. I can still picture him running up the hill, giggling, while the old shepherds and grandparents watched with amused delight as his potty training became the day's unexpected entertainment.

At age four, Cosmin emigrated to the United States with us. It was the beginning of his American story, starting with the school system and culminating in his full citizenship. I remember one of his earliest math problems in first grade: it involved the length of a football field. He was the only student to get an F. We had no idea how long a football field was. Almost 30 years later, I still don't know, and I still don't care. He was upset at the time, but it became one of those stories we laughed about for years. There were many such stories.

He moved from a school for gifted children in New York City to a public school in Scottsdale, Arizona, where he was placed in an ESL program. His confidence faltered, and the struggle followed him into high school. This was also the time he began exploring his identity and sexuality, with courage, honesty, and vulnerability.

Cosmin earned his bachelor's degree from the University of Arizona in 2011. In keeping with tradition, he sought a summer job, wearing flip-flops and shorts to interviews. It earned him more than a few smiles. He learned his lesson, landed a job with a lawyer's office, and made such an impact that his early references opened doors at every job thereafter, including at CVS Health and Boeing.

From the tributes and memories shared, one might assume he died by suicide. He did not. The truth is more ordinary, and in many ways, more heartbreaking. His last job placed him under the authority of four demanding managers, one after the other in quick succession, plus teammates quitting only after two or three months. The constant pressure and lack of stability slowly eroded

his energy and confidence. Ultimately, the role became unsustainable. In order to preserve his well-being, he made the courageous decision to leave after just eight months.

He was on the rebound, looking for new opportunities, setting up interviews, polishing his resume. He was rebuilding. His death was sudden and, tragically, avoidable. He was simply tired, so very tired, and, in that state, he didn't pay enough attention to his surroundings.

But Cosmin's story is not defined by how it ended, it is defined by the way he lived: with integrity, intelligence, warmth, and quiet determination. He was a deeply loved son, a loyal friend, and colleague. He brought light and thoughtfulness into the lives of those who knew him. He deserved more time, more peace, more recognition, more joy.

He grew up with a wry sense of humor (that surfaced when least expected), a quiet strength, a quick mind, a gift for friendship, and a stubborn streak that fueled both his frustrations and his achievements.

He was cultured, an avid reader, thoughtful and philosophical. He connected more easily with older people ("old like you," he'd tease me, just to get a raised eyebrow) than with his own generation, whom he often found shallow, empty, and vain.

He was also deeply polite, almost comically so, always greeting people when he entered a room, always saying "thank you" and "goodbye." I watched people react in disbelief at his simple and honest courtesy.

He was ours, through and through. Our son, our joy, our challenge, our pride.

Cosmin's life was not easy, but he met it with strength, sometimes quiet, sometimes defiant. He was loved beyond words and is missed beyond measure.

We remember him with sorrow, but also with immense gratitude. For his laughter. For his presence. For every moment we shared.

He is survived by his mother and father (it still feels surreal to write this), and by a lifetime of stories, photos, acts of kindness, and laughter that continue to echo in the hearts of all who were fortunate enough to know and love him.







# Word Dump

In no particular order

*By Cosmin Popescu*

## ONE WORD

Agnostic  
Albuquerque  
Ambitions  
Antiques  
Asexuality  
Buddhist  
Controversial  
Crossroads  
Dance  
Drawing  
Emotional  
Fall  
Folklore  
Fuzzy  
Immature  
Intention  
Languages  
Literature  
Mundane  
Nonsense  
Obscure  
Organized  
Pagan  
Poetry  
Reading  
Reno  
Splits  
Taxes  
Thorough  
Thriftig  
Writing

## TWO WORDS

Academia, Pursuing  
Chain Smoking  
Drop, Caffeine  
Drop, Energy  
Drop, Sugar  
Endless Streets  
Gender Dysphoria  
Golden Armadillo  
Identity, Queer  
Long Drives  
Neko Case  
Sleep Deprived  
Southern Gothic  
Suburban Critique  
Tango Merrily  
Travelling Pagan  
Unassuming Life  
Unrequited Love  
Urban Decay  
Vaguely Spiritual  
Wandering Around  
Well, Read

## THREE WORDS OR MORE

Author/Writer – Social Critic  
Buying friend's childhood  
home  
Camper or Trailer Life  
Cleaning: But actually tho!  
Further defined by our intent  
Missing the suburban life  
Moving to a small town in the  
middle of nowhere  
Mundane office worker  
moonlighting as a  
Openly expressing what  
they're feeling or experiencing  
Pants: American Eagle  
Political: History, Science,  
Sociology – Eastern Europe &  
Latin America  
Prayer =Also a Spell  
Sharpie Pens – Annie  
Singing by the campfire  
Starting [over] again,  
elsewhere  
Turned blue collar  
Used book stores  
Working Class Fancy

# 2021 Random Scatterings

By Cosmin Popescu

## Not so new pet peeves

### *Demands/Requests [be it family/coworkers]*

PROBLEM: Rhetorical or Implied: Assumptions/Presumptions

IMPACT: Ignores your boundaries [schedule, abilities/needs]

EXAMPLES:

Usually related to providing a service, or a helpful activity

Being told to do something, rather than being asked.

Being volunteered/volun-told to do something. Fun-datory completion

Well, figured you're not doing anything else?

What else would you be doing instead?

### *Pointed 'Factual' Statements*

PROBLEM: Opinions are stated as feedback/judgement; Unclear resolution

IMPACT: Dismissive or Hurtful language

EXAMPLES:

The trash is full. Have you noticed? Were you going to notice? Or do something about that?  
[Could have asked: 'Can you take the trash out?']

Worker/Leadership Qualities:

Bossy, Controlling, Micro-managing

Blunt, Brash

Hurried/Impatient

But that gives the impression nothing is ever good enough/sufficient

There's often a non-tone-deaf way of expressing a request/standard

### *PTO*

Taking PTO. Feeling guilty. Re-shuffled workload, likely increased volume

This is earned time. You don't take much PTO throughout the year.

No one is going to question end of year [expiring] PTO.

Mood swings & Self Medication

Reducing self-effacing behaviors

Replacing with alternative or more beneficial behaviors

## Hannah – Ruth

*By Cosmin Popescu*

Warm sunny blue skies  
Occasional rain showers

Waking across the arched bridge  
Starting at the cars passing by, to and fro  
The bridge getting slightly bumped with the cars passing underneath

Swinging on swings  
Gazing at the sky  
Faster and faster

Walking through the desert park  
Seeing the sunset go down throughout the walk  
Starting at one end, walking through, reaching the other end by park/school

Loss of driving, walking, meandering around town  
Music was playing on a mixed CD  
Driving with friends who just got their first DL  
Walking, exploring around the mall  
Poster hang out on the walls, as well  
CD covers, drawings poetry, msn messenger  
Wooden shutters, Turtle Box, Corner small desk  
Shoe clicking on the marble/tile floor walking down the hallway  
Making silly movies on a camcorder, with costumes and wigs

Hanging out on the couch  
Sitting while they play the piano; Improvising music together  
Walking from the school bus together; Meeting up again at the stop again in the morning  
Scrunch bracelets, hair ties, multiple layered shirts, long modest summer dresses  
Making snacks in the kitchen  
Getting to know their parents  
Hearing about their siblings, their stories and goals  
Making/ Editing their sister's wedding ceremony

Drifting further and further apart  
Growing in separate ways  
Drifting, Passing, Swirls

# THESEARCH

By Cosmin Popescu

## *Stuff In My Life That Just Makes Sense*

Dissociative Episodes, Irritability, Mood Swings

Driving

Putting in all the miles; Driving out of my way to see people [one way effort]

On/Off Interests & Hobbies [i.e., Arts n Crafts, Personal Research Binges]

Wanting to learn another language [doesn't seem to matter which]

## *Surrounded by these constantly*

*Buzzing Thoughts* - Can't you just not? Chill bruh.

*Professional Progress*: Internships? Job change? Volunteering? Shifting priorities?

Have I done enough? Would I need to do more?

How should I do things differently this time around?

Problem solving? Nah. Avoid it or just let it fester, until you just fall apart [again]

Be more of a Dan or Amy? Be less of a Gary. Be much less of a Selina.



## The Little Teddy Bear

It was one of his first stuffed animals – one of many – but it was the one he always took special care not to lose whenever we moved between the many houses we lived in. It was about six inches tall, not very big or fluffy, but he loved it, even when it began to show its age.

One year, I brought him a Romanian charm from a traditional country fair meant to be worn like a măștișor and, when he saw it, he was exceedingly enthusiastic.



A măștișor is a traditional Romanian talisman that celebrates the arrival of spring. It's a small decorative charm, usually tied with a red and white string, and it's typically pinned to clothing or worn like a brooch throughout the first part of March.

It's a present usually given to women, but, in some regions, women also give them to men. It's a small but meaningful gift to say, "Spring is coming, and I wish you luck and joy."

*Țăță de mătă*, Romanian slang for "cat's nipple," (or, as I jokingly put it – hiding behind my ESL status – "pussy titty"), is an idiom often used informally to describe something really cute, tiny, or adorable.

That's an expression I used a lot, even if the direct translation is... well, less standard.

The way I explain it here is also the way I explained it to Cosmin many years ago, and, thus, he agreed to allow me to say it. But only in Romanian. And thereafter, every spring, we gave the women in the house, a "măștișor."

At first, when he was younger, Cosmin was, to say the least, extremely annoyed at the actual rendering in English, but when I explained that, although it sounds a bit risqué when translated literally, it's not a vulgar expression, but one that's often used with affection, he agreed to allow me to say it, but only in Romanian.

When we accompanied him on his last journey, we gave him his sunglasses, the glasses with the famous red frames, and his little teddy bear, pinned with the *măștișor*.



## The Painting

As I have mentioned elsewhere, Cosmin loved books – a fact well known by all his friends. A few years ago, one of his friends from Utah painted this for him.

It's a dreamlike forest, full of books and light (even the trees are wrapped in book pages), and if you look closely, you'll see Cosmin there, reading quietly by the stream.



# Pets

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## Letter from Lucy

One evening, in 2009, after nine years of wagging and bounding, my dog did not greet me when I came home from work. I opened the door to silence. I walked in to no excited nose nudges, no joyful dances, no licking and prancing. The silence was deafening and ominous. I searched the house, finally finding Lucy in her travel crate. She looked up at me with her large, sad eyes, unable to move. Initially, I thought her arthritis had flared up, but after two days of testing, it was discovered that she had spondylosis, a degenerative condition of the lower spine. Because of her age, surgery was not an option. All we could possibly do was to make her remaining time as comfortable as possible.

In 2011, after two years of watching Lucy grow weaker and more sorrowful, we made the heartbreaking decision to take her to the veterinarian for her final visit. As she crossed the bridge, we held her paws, and, surrounded by love and sorrow, the gratitude reflected in her eyes.

We would love to think that she perhaps – just perhaps – was able to send us this letter:

Dear Mommy and Daddy,

I just wanted to share how happy I am here in doggy heaven. It's amazing! My legs feel great now, and I only go potty outside, just like I used to before I got really sick. The other dogs are so friendly, and sometimes I even bark back at them. It feels wonderful to bark and to walk again!

The views are incredible: I can see all of Scottsdale and even Staten Island, all the places we went together. I can even keep an eye on our backyard and watch you with Bill. My curiosity has returned, and I'm exploring every nook and cranny, just like I used to. Remember how I would tug you in every direction on our walks? That stopped for a while, but now I'm back to being my old, spry, ramblin' self!

Thank you for taking such great care of me for eleven kind and wonderful years! Last two were kind of bad, but you carried me in your arms, and you swam with me.





You might think **you** picked me out at that pet store, but actually **I chose you!** I knew you were just the perfect family for me, and you never, ever proved me wrong. You took such good care of me - especially you, Irina. You always filled my food and water bowls and kept them clean, which meant the world to me. Thank you so much for being my very best friend.

You took me to the vet for checkups, and you helped me when my knee went bad. Remember my little issue with hemorrhoids? You nursed me through that, too, even if you couldn't help but laugh. You knew how silly I felt with that lampshade on my head, and you comforted me through it.

But could you please get rid of all those photos and videos of me bumping into things with that "cone of shame" around my head? They just don't do a thing for my boxer image!

The love I felt from everyone was incredible. I felt like a sister – always ready to return the affection for all the cuddles and gentle pets. I know you all loved me so much, even when I couldn't show it like I used to.



But Irina, you meant the most to me. We spent the most time together, and you showered me with love and care for 11 years. How many times did you pick up after me? How many doors did you open for me? How many hairs of mine did you clean off or sweep up? Thank you for everything!

I'm sorry for the little accidents in the car and in the house at the end. I just got so sick, and ... well, you know.

There's no way I could ever express how grateful I am for the joy and support you gave me. I was sorry to leave, but I was so tired and unwell. I was having far more bad days than good ones. It was time, it was time. Now, I'm happy again!

Please remember me with joy and a smile, just like I remember all of you – Stefan, Cosmin, Bill, everyone. There are no collars or leashes here, and I go for long walks whenever I want to, ALL the time! Life is wonderful! It truly was my time to go, and I'm grateful you made it so peaceful, so loving, and so dignified.

# The End of An Era

The late October air was soft that year, the kind of days you find only in Arizona. At the St. Francis festival, Franciscan monks gathered to bless pets that people had brought to be consecrated. For those without a pet, there was no issue: you could adopt one right on the spot.

We already had Lucy, our lively and clever boxer, but, since Mom was very sick and adored cats, we thought we'd surprise her. We decided to take her along to the adoption event to see if one little cat might capture our hearts – or, as cats tend to do, make us work to capture theirs.



It was the whole family: Mom, Dad, Irina, and Cosmin. Lucy stayed home, naturally, since we were questing for a feline friend. It was 2005, nine years after we'd come to the U.S, and nine years after mom had been learning English. By that time, she was pretty fluent, so when she said, "Let me take a look by myself", we let her explore on her own to search freely for the right kitty. All except Cosmin, of course, who stayed close, just to help if needed.

When we found Mom again, she was cradling a small black and white kitten, clutching it as if she'd never let go – and the little one seemed just as reluctant to leave her arms.

For nearly 20 years, Bill (formerly Fortune, which our family of ESL speakers found too hazardous to pronounce) was so much more than a pet that he became a beloved member of the family. Through life's ups and downs, Bill offered quiet companionship, endless playfulness, and a warmth that filled our hearts. His gentle purrs and steady presence were a constant comfort, a silent but ever-present friend. Well, sometimes he liked to sing the songs of his Ancestors in the middle of the night, which usually woke us up in a total panic.

As a kitten, Bill was all curiosity and mischief, but he grew into a wise, loyal companion. His early days with Lucy started out at a rather remote, suspicious, and clearly defined distance, a neutral zone that actually seemed to foreshadow potential disaster. But soon, their hesitancy blossomed into a lasting friendship: the two eventually learned that they were better as allies than enemies and aliens. Photos of them together still warm our hearts.

Bill loved life's simple pleasures: sunbeams, a toy to chase, a cozy lap. He'd curl up anywhere, from our shoulders to my wife's chest, even her head, always sensing when a soft nudge or a quiet

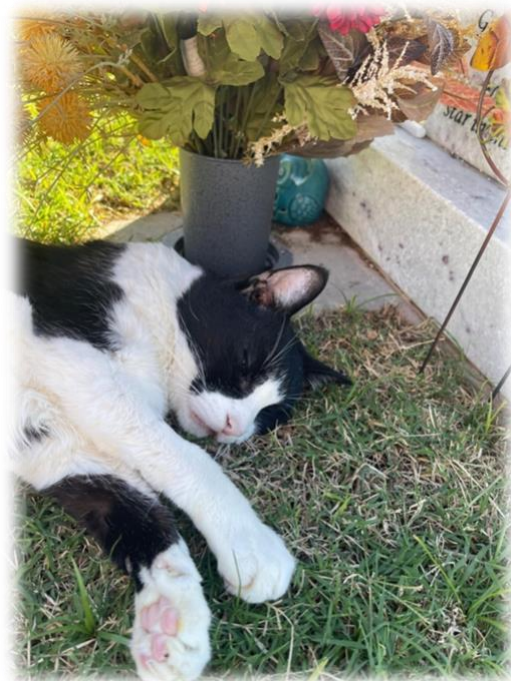
meow was needed most. His spirit was resilient, his affection endless, and his bond with each of us unbreakable.

Now, our home feels a bit emptier, but the love he brought into it will stay with us forever. Thank you, Bill, for all the years of joy. You'll be deeply missed, but never forgotten.

Irina often said that, as long as Bill was with us, Mom was, too – as though a portion of his unquenchable spirit resided within her. She wrote recently: "Before our last visit to the veterinarian, I took him to Cosmin's grave so he could feel the grass and hear the birds one last time, letting him go peacefully, just as he'd lived. Bill, our Guardian Prince who used to return at dawn with his nightly trophy, is irrevocably bound to the precious memories of when our grandparents and Cosmin were still with us. Losing him feels like losing them all over again."

"This," she added quietly, "is the end of an era."

Rest in peace, old dear friend.





# The Great Cat Escape

One day, in the chilly Arizona morning air (a surprisingly cold 48F), while I was about to take the poor sick Lucy, our dog, out for her business, the door burst open and our nimble cat, like a bullet, shot out from between my legs.

Now normally, our cat isn't allowed to roam outside unless he's on a leash because of those pesky vultures, coyotes, owls, and all sorts of furry or feathery predators. The typical life expectancy for cats around here is just four years, but ours had already outlived that by three, so the neighbors were actually laying bets on how much longer he was going to last. But that's a whole other story!

Anyway, the cat escaped, screaming "Freedom!!" at the top of his lungs, and hightailed it out of there as fast as his little legs could carry him. His fat dad (that's me) was dumbfounded. I managed to tell my wife the cat had taken flight and, looking absolutely pathetic and ridiculous with my 265 pounds, set off in my pajamas and one slipper to retrieve the fleeing feline. The little guy suddenly stopped right up in a tree, hesitated for a moment, then jumped off abruptly and ran to the next one, apparently hoping that it wouldn't be quite as prickly (the first had actually been a cactus and, well, cacti do what cacti do, they prick).

All the while, in my calmest voice, like some kind of Cat Whisperer, I was explaining to him how much better off he'd be at home, how he shouldn't jump the fence because his big daddy would find him (or not), and other sweet nothings to keep him from getting spooked and vanishing for good.

Meanwhile, having none of it, the cat wasn't just idling about. Being as clever as he is, the little guy realized that the ground was a bit soggy (it had rained for nine hours straight, and everything was a big puddle) and it was terribly uncomfortable on his paws. So, the little rascal stopped in front of another tree (this time a real one) and, with a typical cat-like contemplative pose and expression, paused to wait for me, being very careful not to get his bottom wet.



And there I was, wobbling around in my pajamas and one slipper, rolling and tumbling, trying to approach the cat from behind, as we learned in the Brave Romanian Army during corn harvest. Now, you know that cats are very proud animals who never admit to their mistakes, so my cat would not have gratefully jumped into my arms for all the treats in Arizona, but he kind of pretended to trip and let me catch him. What joy! He purred so much, I even stepped into a deeper puddle out of sheer happiness.

With all the dignity I could muster, my trophy in my arms and a soaked pajama bottom around my legs, I went back inside where my lady wife was in a panic so complete that she had even terminated her hours-long daily conversation with her mother.

She scooped up the kitty, gave him a kiss, hugged him, dried him off, and proclaimed, “Stefan, drop a few pounds! Can’t you tell the cat’s just making fun of you?”

Welcome to my world.

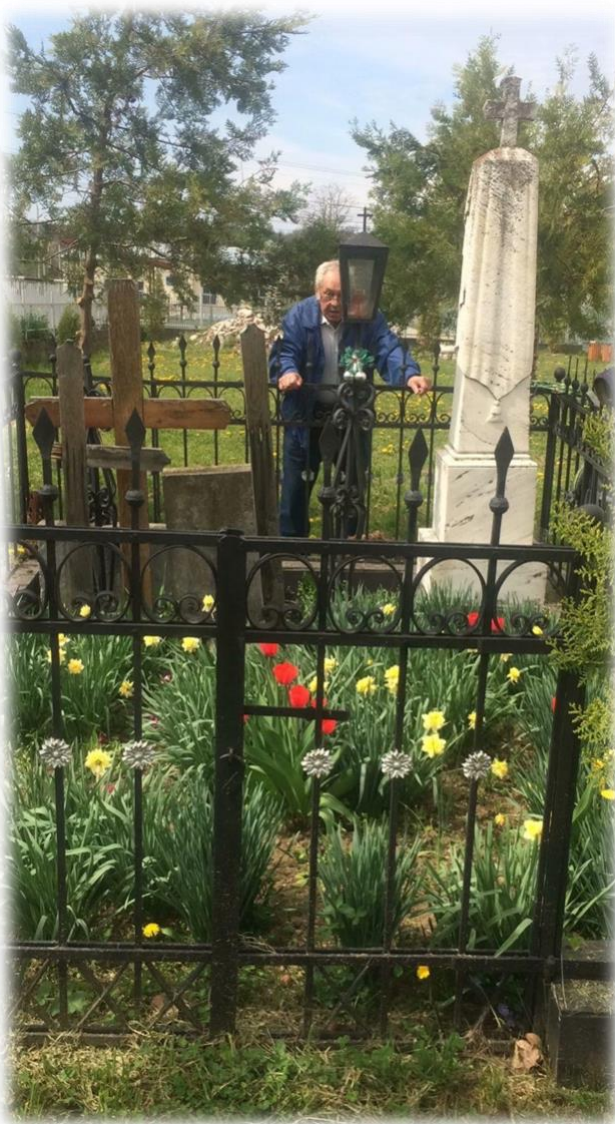


# Snapshots

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## The Grave Kit

Whenever we asked my father why he didn't leave Romania for good, he would respond curtly, "Someone has to take care of the graves!"



We'd laugh, and I'd joke that he was like the knight guarding the Holy Grail in *Indiana Jones*.

He looked after the family graves at Bellu Cemetery (in Bucharest), Hulubești, the Crematorium, sometimes at Târgoviște, where his grandmother's family is buried, and even made the trip to Ghighiu Monastery to visit Uncle Sache's resting place. He'd also stop by his in-laws' grave but made me promise not to tell anyone.

He had this dark blue, canvas-plastic bag – a dubious but durable fabric – that was always ready for action. At any given moment, it held candles, matches, a small handsaw, a tiny hoe, and a pair of scissors for trimming stubborn weeds or branches.

He never went anywhere without it. Alongside empty 5-liter water jugs, it lived permanently in the trunk of his car.

Now Dad is gone, too. And I'm left with the blue bag.

I sold his apartment, and the "grave kit" ended up at my mother-in-law's place, where I'm supposed to stay when I visit Bucharest. I use it once, maybe twice a year when I go to Hulubești.

Now Cosmin has gone to meet his grandparents...



And I catch myself saying a version of Dad's line:  
"I'm not leaving Arizona because I have to take care of The Grave."

And I've got my own super kit.

Since I don't have the blue bag, I got myself a little Husky bag – complete with a small shovel, scissors, a water bottle, and a special little lamp, a gift from Dad. Naturally, I've got candles and a lighter too. I've replaced the old water jug with a 1.5-liter plastic bottle, its cap pierced to make an improvised watering can.



Poor Grandpa – he never could've imagined that his miner's lamp would one day be used on his grandson's grave. But I don't leave it there. I take it with me when I go. I only leave the candle lit, sheltered under Irina's little plastic cup with its melted bottom – so it gets oxygen, but stays protected from the wind.

## May 21st, 2023

As you all know (or maybe you don't), today was Cosmin's birthday. My forever-29 would have been 30.

But that's not what I wanted to write about (actually, it is exactly what I wanted to write about, but since it's difficult, I'll stick with the spinners). I'm here to talk about wind spinners. Garden wind spinners, to be precise.

One of the most popular decorations in the cemetery are wind spinners. There are so many that only human imagination limits the types and designs: paper, plastic, light metal, shiny, matte, patriotic, pride...

Because FOMO is real, the lady of the Popescu household quickly jumped on the wind-spinner bandwagon. For two weeks, she researched wind spinners. We almost bought one from Amazon (sold out at the last second), then another one (too big), before finally deciding on two identical spinners from Hobby Lobby – small and delicate, just like him.



*The wind spinner*



If you look carefully at his cross, you'll notice a metallic plaque with his name on it. The plaque's sole purpose is to cover the dates: birth and passing. Originally, his date of birth was set as May 1st, courtesy of yours truly. Wrong! It was actually the 21st.

I suggested a Sharpie to squeeze an ugly "2" in front of the beautiful "1," while my lady insisted on this little plaque. So, we got the plaque.

If you look even closer, you'll see the plaque is not perfectly centered. This was inevitable, as only two engineers installed it.

This reminds me of the curtain rod in Cosmin's living room, which I installed myself. After measuring three times: ruler, level, stud finder in hand – I finally drilled the holes and hung the rod. And yet, the darn thing was just a little lower on the right side! Not by much, but enough to drive you nuts every time you looked at it.

In true Popescu tradition, the plaque is also just slightly off-center, leaning a bit to the left – just enough to be noticeable, just enough to drive you crazy every time you look at it.

Back to the spinners: the two small and delicate wind spinners from Hobby Lobby are made of iron, making them quite heavy. While all the other spinners in the cemetery whirl like crazy at the slightest breeze, Cosmin's iron spinners stand there proudly, completely motionless, waiting for the mother of All Storms to finally show their true power and spin.

I can almost hear Cosmin laughing, "Dad, they're just like you: it takes a lot to get them moving and only a little to make them stop."



# The Monument

After at least three relentless months of research by Irina (complete with emails spanning New Zealand to Canada, via Italy and Los Angeles, three nervous breakdowns, two days off work for me, and a river of tears) in June 2023, we finally decided on the design, the text, the punctuation (!), the layout, the photo, the background, the granite color... and we put down the deposit.

Irina had first found the monument's design on a German website. Two email exchanges later, she was somehow talking with the manufacturer in northern Italy: "No ship to America. Bye," came the curt reply.

The guy at the monument shop in Arizona almost fell out of his chair when we showed up with a full-scale cardboard cutout of the monument 1:1 scale, all dimensions marked, every detail mapped out.

The [original] blue glass cross turned out to be such a challenge that we eventually had to abandon the idea altogether.

This was after we *finally* found a lovely woman in Canada who could make a custom blue glass cross. She only wanted \$2,000 plus shipping – 'a bargain, considering that the sculptor in San Francisco asked for \$18,000. (I think he thought he had to make the entire monument? No idea. Then again, he was some kind of internationally known glass artist. How Irina even got to him remains a mystery.)

A lady from New Zealand quoted us \$10,000 plus \$2,500 shipping. A local artist in Gilbert haggled with Irina down to \$7,000 from \$10,000. Maybe—*maybe*—we would've chosen one of them. But with the Arizona sun as brutal as it is, we feared the glass would crack or fade. Plus, since no one had ever really done this before, we knew the installation would be, well ... complicated.

And, honestly, it started to go against our initial intention: to create something simple—not flashy, but not generic either—and decently priced. Somehow, Cosmin was on track to end up with the most unusual and expensive monument in the entire cemetery.

The very next morning—after we'd made the down payment and I thought, *finally, it's all decided*—Irina looked at me, skipped "good morning," and said, "We have to change the photo background." And so, we nearly started from scratch again...



One week before the one-year anniversary, the monument was installed. Looking back at what I wrote in July, I can say this:

- Cosmin has the most beautiful and subtly unique monument – unusual, but not *in your face*.
- Choosing “*no glass*” was a good decision. The folks at Western Monument confirmed that the Arizona sun destroys everything eventually, and if the sun doesn’t do it, the hard water will, quickly and without mercy.
- Choosing “*no glass*” was actually a *great* decision. As a friend of mine said: “The nothing is everything.”

And I’m sure Cosmin would’ve loved that. My little philosopher.





# The 2023 Family Reunion

## My Family's Resting Place

The primary reason for my trip to Romania was to bring the first temporary cross from Cosmin's grave in Arizona to Hulubești, to my family's resting place. It felt not unlike a mission.

In the early days following Cosmin's passing, before we received the second temporary cross (a wooden one from Amazon with his name and photo, designed to last at least a year), we needed something for the funeral. Amanda, his cousin, wrapped a metal cross in woven wicker, adding artificial ferns for decoration. After it was blessed by the priest, I decided to take it with me to Romania, along with some artificial flowers (sorry, Dad, but no one tends to the grave, and dried flowers would have looked offensive).

The first thing I did after landing in Romania, at 12:30 AM, was to head to Hulubești. At around half past ten in the morning, I left with the same Uber driver from my last visit. He no longer worked for Uber, but when he heard the reason for my trip, he took the day off to accompany me.

Once we arrived, I placed Cosmin's cross next to the graves of his most cherished grandparents ("from this planet," as he used to say). As soon as I did, I was overwhelmed with an immense sense of peace that washed over my soul. It was like a guiding light that stayed with me for the rest of the trip. I felt blessed, free, and unburdened – as though all my worries had been transformed and lifted. It was an incredibly spiritual experience, and the days that followed felt more like a sabbatical than anything else.



When I arrived to the churchyard, in Hulubești, I was disheartened to find the grave in a pitiable, neglected state. The cleaning and planting Anca, Mișu, and I had done last year were gone. Weeds now surrounded and overwhelmed the plot, as if commanded by an anonymous, hostile force, deliberately summoned and ordered to entangle and entrench. The thuja bushes my father had planted after my mom's passing had grown into a massive hedge that was now in occupation over the plot.

The gravestone, iron fence, and monuments, installed in the early 1900's, had never looked so defeated, desolate and worn (well, maybe they had during the communist era). With the little time I had, I did what I could. I got together with Anca and we returned to Hulubești, armed with gardening tools.



Anca tackled the delicate work, removing the entangled vines with care. I focused on cutting and forcing back the overgrown branches of the thuja plants. After about an hour, I noticed Anca scrubbing the edges of the grave's curb with a small brush.

"What's the matter? Did you get bored after dealing with all those vines?" I teased.

"You just don't understand," she replied. "You men never pay attention to the details."

She was right. Every little thing mattered to her, and it showed in the meticulous care she gave to even the smallest corners of the grave.



After a couple of hours, the grave was liberated and transformed. Vines and weeds had been banished, the bushes shaped, stately and at attention. Even the gate opened and closed easily and silently again. We were pleased with our work, knowing that Anca would be the one to visit during winter, and we wanted her to have no trouble accessing the grave.

... until next year, Hulubești!

Even the long journey back to Phoenix – two flights and nearly 23 hours of travel – was surprisingly easy. I passed through customs without hassle, and the officers were friendly and helpful. But soon after landing, the magic began to fade, leaving me with only memories of those peaceful days.

## Instead of a Conclusion

Anyone who has experienced the unimaginable pain of losing a loved one understands the deep and indescribable sorrow that accompanies such a loss, and when Cosmin also departed from this earth, it felt as if my entire existence had been irreparably shattered. The weight of these losses is something that only those who have experienced it can truly comprehend.

For someone who has lost a child, the pain is something that cannot be truly understood. It is a pain that never heals. It is a pain that gnaws at your soul and leaves emotional scars that will never go away.

During these difficult times, there may not be a prescribed set of rules or guidelines for how friends should behave. However, my friends demonstrated an innate understanding of my needs. In the immediate aftermath of losing Cosmin, they provided unwavering support, even from afar, and were available at any hour. It felt as though time zones ceased to exist. Upon reuniting with them nearly a year later, a simple additional handshake or heartfelt hug was all I required.

In the following three weeks, they generously took turns showering me with care, like a kind of healing dance. They nourished me, drove me around, and took me on some great trips. They even set aside time from their jobs and loved ones, solely for my sake.

True friends are always there for you, offering support and understanding without passing judgment, regardless of the circumstances. They provide a safe harbor where you can be yourself, knowing that they will always stand by your side, no matter what challenges you may face.

## My Friends, Thank You!



*Hulubesti, 1998*

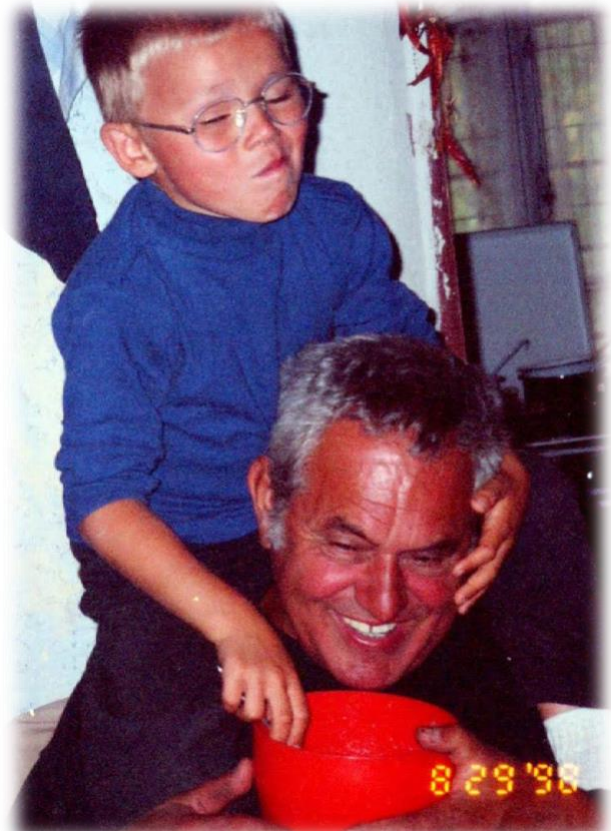


# Mother's Day

Somehow, we survived our first Mother's Day without Cosmin. With the help of a bottle of rum from OSHO Distillery and a bottle of chianti. But mostly the rum.

I listened on repeat to *Memories* by Maroon 5

"Here's to the ones that we got  
Cheers to the wish you were here, but you're not  
'Cause the drinks bring back all the memories  
Of everything we've been through  
Toast to the ones here today  
Toast to the ones that we lost on the way  
'Cause the drinks bring back all the memories  
And the memories bring back, memories bring back you"



*Hulubesti, 1998*

# Dreams

## **Last night, I dreamed of Cosmin.**

It was only the second dream in two years.

In the first one, he was with his 'most beloved grandparents', and they were packing bags. Some of the bags, I wasn't even sure whose they were. Maybe mine.

I was there too, watching them, and I said:

"Pack only for yourselves. I'm not coming."

"No, no, come with us," they kept saying.

"I love you more than I love myself," I told them. "But I'm staying."

And then I woke up.

....

## **Last night's dream felt like a continuation.**

It seemed I was visiting the grandparents. It was their house, but somehow also Cosmin's.

Then, suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

It was Cosmin.

I opened it.

He saw me and, without hesitation, hugged me, just like he used to, though rarely.

He was always more reserved with shows of affection.

He was with two boys: one shorter, and the other tall and handsome, just the way he liked.

He introduced them to us. I chatted with them.

He went into the kitchen with the grandparents.

A little while later, he came back into the room.

I looked at him and asked,

"How are you, Tzic?"

And he answered, with all his heart, and a serenity I hadn't seen in him in years:

"I'm good, Dad."

And then I woke up.

# The Haircut

Last evening, Irina gave me a haircut.

She used to cut both our hair, mine and Cosmin's.  
I'd ask for a trim, but she'd always go after Cosmin first.

Initially, he'd resist, agreeing only so she'd stop pestering him, though, of course, she never really did. In the end, he'd sit through it and, with a little grin, he'd say "Thanks," like he kind of enjoyed it.

Last night, she cut my hair again.

Short, as always. It's the only way she knows how, which is fine with me. I like it that way.

But while she was trimming, she started to cry because memories of Cosmin came rushing in.

She realized she'd never cut his hair again.

And now, as I write this, I feel the tears starting, too.

Somewhere in the middle of all this, the little plastic attachment (the one that decides the length of the cut) popped off. She didn't notice right away and kept going distractedly over and over the same spot.

She really botched it this time. On me. And there she was suddenly, laughing and crying at the same time.

There was a time when that would've really bothered me.

Now I simply say, "If this is the worst thing that ever happens to me, I can live with it."





# The Morning Jumper Cable Crisis

Sometime in June of 2021, at 6:30 in the morning, my phone rings. It's my son. "Dad, my car won't start. All the dashboard lights are on, and there's this weird sound – like tzac tzac tzac."

I pause, already sensing where this is going. "Okay," I say, that's it?"

"No. There's also a message saying the battery is low. Look." He pauses dramatically and sends me a photo. I almost fainted.



"All right," I say. "Remember that black box thingy I got you for Christmas? Use it."

"How?" he asks, genuinely confused. I'm trying not to roll my eyes, but it's hard. "Read the instructions," I tell him, teetering on the edge of yelling.

"No need to get worked up," he replies casually. "Mom's already on her way." Whaaaaat?! I shout internally. Outwardly,

I'm calm. Inwardly, I'm crumpling. I was out walking the dogs, minding my own business, enjoying the peaceful morning before work – and now this.

Time passes. I get home, feed the dogs, sit down to work. The phone rings again. It's my wife. "THE PIECE OF JUNK YOU GOT COSMIN ISN'T WORKING!" she proclaims. Loudly.

Oh, boy. Now I'm officially annoyed. "Wait, I'm coming," I reply, resisting every cell in my body that wants to say, "Don't get all worked up," because you never say that to an already worked-up woman. Ever.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrive at the scene of the crime.

My wife's standing beside her car, holding two long jumper cables and looking utterly perplexed. Cosmin's by his own car, holding the jumper pack, equally baffled. They're both about two seconds away from completely losing it. "What's going on, my loves?" I ask, trying hard not to let the laughter bubbling up spill out.

"The jumper thing isn't doing what the instructions said!" my wife exclaims.

“Oh no,” I say, with dramatic flair. “That’s terrible! The first time I’ve ever heard of this happening! (wink wink) So... what did you try?”

They walk me through the steps. The instructions say to wait for the message ‘cables properly connected,’ but that message never appears.”

“Well,” I say, peeking under the hood, “the cables look properly connected to me – even if the car doesn’t think so. So... go on. Push the button. Start the car.”

My wife is in full-blown panic mode now, still gripping the jumper cables as though they might explode. “What if...? What if...? No, no, nooooo!”

But Cosmin’s already in the driver’s seat, eyes squeezed shut, bracing for impact.

Click. He hits START.

The car springs to life – purring like a content cat. My wife, visibly relieved, immediately switches gears into logistics mode.

“You, go to the dealer. I’ll come with you. Then we’ll get home, and the dogs...”

I zoned out, got into my own car, and drove off before she could assign me anything.



# Lost in Translation

I managed to convince my son to join me for the Very New Cars Exhibition in Phoenix, the one that takes place every year after Thanksgiving Day. Unfortunately, it turned out to be neither “very” nor “new” nor much of an “exhibition.” We wandered through the sparse displays, feeling increasingly underwhelmed. No VW, no Subaru, no Mazda, no Volvo—not even Honda. The glaring lack of exhibitors had us muttering like two grumpy old men. After a quick lap around the place, we admitted defeat and left, thoroughly unimpressed.

To justify the absurd parking fee—and because Cosmin’s stomach had started making ominous noises—we headed to Cornish Pasty in downtown Phoenix, between Monroe and Central.

Boom, we sit. Boom, we order. Time for a little chat.

I had just received some news from Romania. Robert the Attorney had updated me on how Mr. Titi was planning to fix an apartment I also had an interest in. So, naturally, I launched into the details: Mr. Titi said this, Mr. Titi said that.

Meanwhile, our waitress—a bold type with a definite “free the nipple” attitude—kept giving us side-eye.

I noticed Cosmin shifting uncomfortably. He mumbled something about me “talking too loud.” A few people at the bar started glancing our way, but my hearing isn’t what it used to be, so I didn’t catch on. I just kept going, loud and clear, making sure *I* could hear myself. As it turns out, so could half the pub.

Finally, Cosmin couldn’t take it anymore. “Dude, you really don’t get it.”

I was about to blow a gasket—*How dare he call me ‘dude’?! But then, in a rare flash of self-awareness, I realized what was happening. My face flushed hot.*

“Oops,” I muttered. “I should apologize to the girl.”

“No,” Cosmin said, shaking his head. “That’ll just make it worse.”

“How could it possibly be worse than this?”

As the waitress passed by again, I decided to salvage what was left of my dignity. I looked her straight in the eye and, completely mortified, said, *“Miss, I was talking to my son, in Romanian, about a man named Constantin. His nickname is Titi. If I offended you in any way, I’m really sorry.”*

I must’ve looked so pitiful that her stance actually softened. The tension drained from her shoulders as she seemed to realize I wasn’t some obnoxious jerk—just an unfortunate victim of a linguistic mishap.

She leaned in slightly and asked if I wanted another cider. A small but welcome sign that all was forgiven.

# A Day in the Life of Five Under One Roof

*1998, Fall, while still renting at Sonia and Saul*

In a previous email, Vlad, my younger cousin asked me, “How is life with five people under a small roof?” A fair question, and one I’ve given a lot of thought to. Here’s how the day goes:

**5:15 am:** Irina’s alarm rings, a gentle reminder that the day is starting. She waves her hand over the sensor of her once-beloved Braun alarm clock (which she still mourns), turning it off and rolling over to claim a few more precious minutes of sleep.

**5:19 am:** The alarm sounds again. Another wave, another roll.

**5:23 am:** Round three. This time, **Ştefan** is wide awake. Irina, facing the reality of another workday, finally rolls out of bed. The morning ritual begins, while Ştefan, ever hopeful, attempts to steal a few more minutes of rest.

**5:55 am:** The calm is broken: “What should I wear?” comes the first call.

**5:57 am:** “Nothing fits me anymore; I’ve gained so much weight,” follows swiftly.

**6:13 am:** After a chorus of these lamentations, a door slams, and silence returns as Irina rushes to catch the 6:15 bus. Will she make it in time? It’s anyone’s guess.

**6:13 – 7:22 am:** Ştefan indulges in a final hour of sleep, though somewhere in the background, Grandpa is quietly starting **his** morning routine.

**7:22 am:** Cosmin’s alarm, positioned strategically next to Ştefan’s head, goes off. As it blares on, Ştefan, bleary-eyed, waits for Cosmin to shuffle in from his room to silence it.

**7:23 am:** Now in his father’s bed, Cosmin flips on the TV at full blast. Grandma storms in, gently reminding Cosmin to “turn that damned thing off and let the poor guy sleep.” Cosmin, in his infinite wisdom, assumes “poor guy” refers to the TV, turns it off, and then starts clambering all over Ştefan.

**7:25 – 8:25 am:** The next hour unfolds with Cosmin’s signature chaotic routine. Breakfast is slow and deliberate; dressing is a challenge. And bathroom time? Let’s just say it involves a book, several dinosaur toys, and a lesson on toilet etiquette. Meanwhile, Grandpa sneaks in, his voice rumbling, “Woman, what the hell am I supposed to buy today?” “Parsley”, Grandma whispers.

**8:25 am:** Cosmin heads off to school, escorted by Grandpa, leaving Grandma and Ştefan behind, both already spent from the morning whirlwind.

**9:00 am:** Slowly recovering, Grandma flicks on the TV, ready to record *The Cosby Show*. Grandpa, back from the school run, grumbles about Grandma’s TV habits. In her defense, she explains that watching TV helps her manage the English-speaking neighbors better. Grandpa, as usual, pretends not to get the hint, and reaches for yet another coffee.

**9:30 am:** With the house now quiet, Ştefan turns to his studies, Grandma tackles her chores, and Grandpa heads out for his next battle: grocery shopping.



This is where the day gets interesting. Grandpa, after decades of managing a Romanian household shopping budget, was convinced that life in America is cheaper. Yet every shopping outing proved him otherwise. He was always engaged in an epic struggle with price tags, often returning home with the most expensive version of whatever he set out to buy. The growing pile of returns—dubbed “Mount Return”—got loaded into the car once a week for Irina to return to the stores.

Grandpa defends his record by proudly pointing out the rare 2% of times when he gets a good deal. “See how well I nailed it?” he’d say, smug.

Ever since he found ten dollars on the street, Grandpa has become obsessed with scavenging. Refusing to take the bus, he now walks everywhere, eyes glued to the ground, hoping for another score. This new hobby has introduced a collection of “treasures” into the house: random screws, a pair of glasses frames without lenses, a lidless wooden box, and a piece of wood meant to keep the car from rolling away of its own accord. Oh, and let’s not forget the broken lamp that almost found a home here. Fortunately, we narrowly avoided the acquisition of a defective dishwasher he spotted on the curb.

Life then rolls on uneventfully until three in the afternoon when Cosmin returns from school with Grandpa. A late lunch follows, accompanied by Cosmin’s 86th viewing of *Beauty and the Beast*, until Irina arrives home from work around 5:30 to reclaim her share of the household chaos.

At that point, Ștefan heads off to his evening classes at the local community college, having been told that earning a degree in the United States would open doors to top Wall Street jobs and improve his English. Neither of these two pieces of reassurance proved useful or true: Wall Street wanted Ivy League students, and only one of his eighteen classmates was an American.

Once a week the grandparents took a trip to Manhattan, seeking adventure and excitement in the Big Apple. They always came back exhausted, content, but a little numb from the day. The maps we gave them, naturally, remained quietly and neatly folded at home, and the cell phone we bought to help them stay in touch while they roamed the city, also remained tucked away, just as quietly, in a drawer.

Each trip seems to have ended the same way: they would head toward Canada instead of Staten Island, mistaking north for south, and they would realize their error somewhere around Central Park, grumble about it, and begin the long walk back. There was talk of visiting Quebec one day. But on foot? Even they aren’t that ambitious.

# A Non-Hallmark Christmas Story

Cosmin didn't like Christmas.

He had enjoyed it a long time ago, back when he was younger and his beloved Grandma was still with us. They even attempted caroling at one point, but being Popescus, they quickly realized their limitations and ended up simply reading the words—plenty of feeling, but no singing.

When Grandma left us, it shook Cosmin to his core. Grandpa, too, was devastated and stopped visiting. Winter celebrations became dry and hollow, with us, the parents, doing our best to fill the enormous void left by Grandma, though with little success. We went through the motions, trying in vain to create new traditions, like taking trips on Christmas Day, just to stay busy and avoid the specter of an empty table. And so we visited Sedona, Lake Havasu, the Monastery in Florence, and other beautiful places, all quiet and devoid of tourists.

It was during these years that we realized the best Christmases were the ones spent by the fireplace or cuddled with a pet, sharing memories of those who had left us.

Then, for a few years, Grandpa returned to celebrate with us. Those were good times. Cosmin was home from college and, once again, the table was filled with sausages, cabbage rolls, polenta, and other traditional delights. Christmas felt festive again. Our traditional Christmas Day trips, too, seemed better than ever because, rather than merely a way to avoid overeating, they were, instead, a wonderful way to reconnect and spend time together.

But then Grandpa joined Grandma, leaving us with an even deeper emptiness. That same year, though, the Favorite Nephew got married, and with him came his new in-laws: a traditional Polish family.

In the spirit of unity, we were invited to the traditional Christmas Eve dinner at the new in-laws' home. Cosmin and I protested, albeit weakly, mainly because we understood that these were Mom's people, her tribe. We had to keep close. So we dressed up, promising to lean on one another, and off we went.

Their house was a masterpiece of Christmas excess, every square inch clustered with decorations. When we stepped inside, Cosmin audibly groaned, "Oh God!" and I could feel him rolling his eyes. But that was nothing compared to the living room. It was overflowing with presents—tens of beautifully wrapped bags and boxes, leaving only a narrow path to the beverage cart. As East Europeans, we're no strangers to excess, especially when it comes to food and hard liquor, but even we were overwhelmed.

Under his breath, Cosmin muttered the Romanian equivalent of "F..k me! This is no way to celebrate Christmas!", a phrase he usually reserved for something over the top. His face looked as

though he'd just bitten into a glass ornament. I couldn't help but chuckle. We escaped to the patio and spent most of the evening there, safely beyond The Holly, Jolly Christmas.

Years passed. The Christmas Eve tradition plowed on, the family grew, children started crawling through the house, and the pile of presents became so immense that the beverage cart had to be moved into a hallway or wherever it was closer to the thirsty guests. Through it all, Cosmin and I kept leaning on each other. Eventually, the Other Favorite Nephew got married and, a little over two years ago, Cosmin left us to join his beloved grandparents.

This is now our third Christmas without him. They say the second year is the hardest, although I don't know who decided *that*. From here, each year feels just as painful as the one before. Last year, I think we attended the Christmas Eve gathering, but I can't quite recall: the memories are obliterated by grief. This year, however, we'll go and I'll write about it. They're my wife's people. Her tribe. She has to keep close.

As for me, I'll be there, and I will be leaning on my memories, bracing myself for the sharp, rendering taste of a glass ornament.



*Christmas 2018*

# My Father's "Bomb"

The so-called "bomb" is, in fact, a spherical outdoor wooden stove-slash-grill, a reasonably priced cast-iron contraption my father bought from Walmart. Hence its enduring nickname: *Grandpa's Bomb*. Over the years, many movers have raised eyebrows when we assured them, "Don't worry about the bomb. We know how to dismantle it. We'll put it in a black plastic bag."

A couple of Saturdays ago, I was out on the patio, burning wood - specifically, the last three years' worth of Christmas trees (!), which, as everyone knows, ignite with theatrical flair: crackling pops and dramatic flames. With a glass of single malt in hand, I found myself staring aimlessly into the fire.

Still, the amateur photographer in me stirred. I snapped a particularly striking picture of the flames and sent it to my wife. She came out to join me, and we ended up reminiscing, about past holidays, about times when we were all together, about Grandpa's gifts: the water dispenser, the grills, those deceptively humble things we hadn't fully appreciated at the time but came to treasure for their quiet practicality.

As the family's unofficial photo archivist, I dug through my digital trove and found this snapshot from 2006, in Scottsdale, fire light, my mom, my dad, and Cosmin.



God, the wave of memories that picture brought. It was the winter of 2006, my mother's last Christmas with us, the last time we were all together.

Then Irina, true to form, voiced one of her sudden deep thoughts: "Grandma Puicuța left us too early," she said, sighing. "The whole family dynamic changed. And not for the better. Everything would have been different."

That set something off in me. A whole night of thoughts, restless, wordless, and unyielding. I tried to capture them on paper, but both my mind and the page resisted, and naturally, by morning, most of them had dissolved. They always seem that way, these moments of memory: fragile, elusive, but somehow also timeless. I keep trying to picture how life might have been had my mother still been here. One of those persistent **what-if** scenarios. And the conclusion is always the same: everyone would still be alive.

I know that dwelling on the past like that isn't exactly the healthiest exercise. And yet, sometimes, I just can't help myself. Theoretically, I understand I should look forward. But after losing Cosmin, "forward" feels "so unclear, so ... *transparently wayward, a shrouded, almost spectral illusion.*" (Craig Kimball)



# The Last Memory

In October 2022, we had our high school reunion at a restaurant in Bucharest. Most of the old gang showed up in person, and those from out of town joined via Zoom. I'd been to a few reunions before, so I wasn't expecting any surprises. But this time, there was a new face—someone we hadn't seen in years—a woman from Canada who had just been located and eagerly agreed to attend.

As always, the usual questions started flying: Where are you living now? What do you do? Married? Kids? But when it came to her turn, her response took everyone by surprise: "I'm not defined by my children," she said. "I'm defined by me. I am my own person." There was a brief moment of stunned silence, then everyone resumed chatting as if nothing had happened.

A month later, I brought up the conversation with Cosmin. He fully agreed with her point of view, while I couldn't have disagreed more. We debated back and forth, both sticking firmly to our positions, all while laughing at each other's arguments.

As he was leaving, in true Romanian style, we spent another 15 minutes talking outside the house, and then an extra five while he sat in his car. Just before he drove off, he leaned out the window, pointed a long finger at me, and said with a grin: "Be your own person."

Then, laughing even harder, he added, "And for God's sake, Richard\*, grow a pair!"

He drove off, his laughter fading into the night.

Those were the last words we exchanged, on November 27, 2022.

\* *Super bonus points if you know where Richard comes from*

# Grief Awareness Day

Today (August 30th) is National Grief Awareness Day. For me, this is called “every day”.

**What's normal in grief?**

© Megan Devine

Normal grief is so much more than sadness. If it's in the body or the mind – grief affects it. This list covers some of the most common experiences of grief, but it's definitely not everything. Whatever you're experiencing, chances are someone else has felt it too.

- trouble sleeping
- physical exhaustion
- forgetfulness
- inability to concentrate
- trouble reading
- irritation with others
- disbelief that it happened
- feeling numb
- mood swings
- sensory overload
- inability to cry
- restlessness
- dark humor
- deep sadness
- phantom pains
- hypersensitivity
- confusion
- trouble concentrating
- nightmares/dreams
- anxiety
- loss of appetite
- increased appetite
- short temper/frustration
- hating the grocery store
- headaches
- stomachaches
- forgetting words
- relationship stress
- loneliness
- feeling guilty
- time loss
- intrusive thoughts
- wanting to be left alone
- needing people nearby
- feeling misunderstood
- clumsiness

for more on what's normal inside grief visit @refugeingrief

refugeingrief.com REFUGE IN GRIEF megandevine.co

I could write pages about grief (and I did, actually), but if the last 18 months taught me something is that grief never ends and it's uniquely personal. I learned to live with it, and even if sometimes I laugh or smile, it doesn't mean that “I'm done” or “over it”.

# The Endless Emptiness

At the end of March, in 2024, we geared up to mark the second Easter without Cosmin.

This year, we accepted our relatives' invitation and found ourselves in a house bustling with two toddlers, two very pregnant mothers, one young girl in her late teens, and another young girl, navigating her journey through life.

Never did envy or ill feelings surface within us. In fact, we wholeheartedly wished them all the best. Yet, it was challenging to sit on the sidelines, unable to engage in discussions about parenting, schools, colleges, and life strategies.

We departed, a tad melancholic, with a profound sense of emptiness lingering within.

*Melancholy*, a sculpture created by Albert Gyorgy, portrays the void that grief leaves us with.

As dark as this artwork may be, it serves as some sort of comfort to those who've experienced a loss, as they feel they identify with this sculpture.

This famous sculpture can be found at Lake Geneva, Switzerland.

I came across this photo today, and it resonated with me on a deep, molecular level.

....

We might seem that we continue to lead our lives as if everything is normal. There may be fleeting instances of joy and happiness, occasional laughter, and my sarcastic comments and witty writing. Nevertheless, genuine happiness evades us at this moment. The humor born from true contentment and joy has disappeared, never to return.



# Wings, Whiskers, and Fireflies

## A non-believer's guide to signs

After my mom died, maybe three or four months later, my father found a baby pigeon on the sidewalk, barely alive. He took it home and, slowly, patiently, nursed it back to life. He named it Dosoftei<sup>1</sup> and kept it in the kitchen for months.

When I visited that fall, Dosoftei was still there, flapping from cabinet to chair and landing on guests' heads. He preferred women. I think their hair must have reminded him of a nest.



I remember Irina, the young family doctor who once saved my father's life when he had pneumonia and stubbornly refused treatment. She bought him medicine and stayed by his side for two days until he improved. Of course, I only found out about this much later, years later, so I didn't have to worry in real time.

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<sup>1</sup> Dosoftei: (1624–1693) was a real significant figure in Romanian cultural and religious history. He was the Metropolitan of Moldavia, the head of the Orthodox Church in that region, during the 17th century. He was a scholar, poet, and translator, known especially for translating religious texts from Greek into Romanian - an important step in making spiritual texts accessible to the common people. He's credited with compiling and printing the first Romanian psalter in verse (a poetic version of the Psalms) and is seen as one of the early fathers of Romanian literary language.



Irina had long, curly hair, and Dosoftei loved curling into it. Somehow, he was very civilized and never pooped on anyone. One day, my father left the window open, on purpose, just to see what would happen. Dosoftei was getting restless and, like any normal bird, he flew away.

He came back a few times, alone or accompanied by other pigeons. Until, one day, he didn't. My father swears that the pigeon was sent by my mother to help him. That year, they both healed each other.

[My father had a unique gift of naming our pets: the pig was Cleopatra, the goat, Desdemona, and a small dog, Bujumbura.]

....

When Cosmin left us, I read somewhere that fireflies are the souls of the departed. In Romanian tradition, a soul rises after forty days.

For forty days, every single evening, we saw fireflies dancing around his grave. Every. Single. Evening. Around his grave.

....

On May 20th, 2023, one day before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, during our usual visit to Cosmin's resting place, we had an unexpected encounter. A family of hawks circled above us. Usually, it's just the crows and a few small singing birds, but this time, the hawks came. They looked at us. Stayed a while. And when we left... they left too.

If I were the sort of person who believes in signs, I'd say it was Cosmin and his beloved Grandma and Grandpa checking in on us. But I don't believe in signs.

Or do I?

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When Bill passed, as sad as it was, Irina inherited a cemetery cat, a scruffy alley cat that belonged to no one, and to everyone. Several people fed her, my wife included. We still had some of Bill's food and treats left.



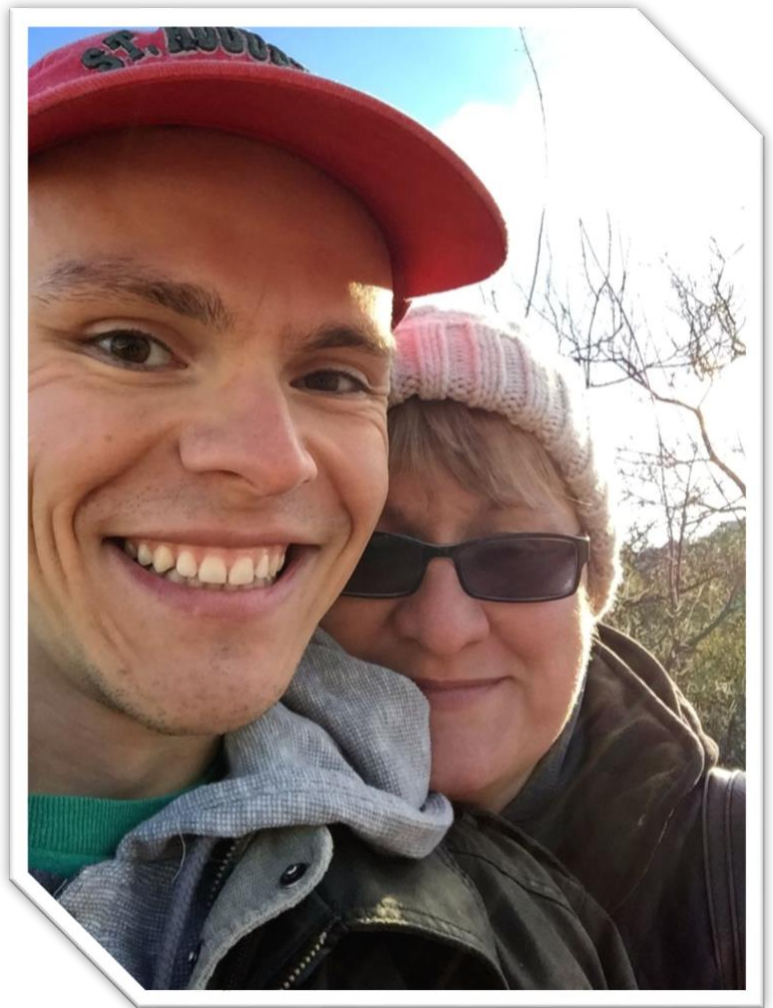


My wife visited the grave every day, bringing food and talking to the cat the way she used to talk to old Bill. The cat only came out for her and never let anyone touch her, never let anyone close. That's how she'd survived all those years.

The maintenance guys tried to chase her out from her hiding place so they could water the grass, but she evaded every attempt. Then, one day, she didn't show up. There was a metal mesh laid on top of her hiding spot. We can only hope that, wherever she has gone, they are taking good care of her.

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Sometime, somewhere in Colorado



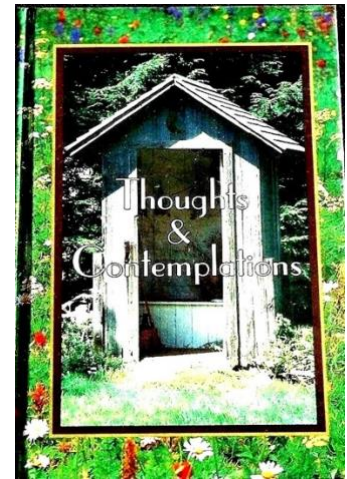
# Thoughts and Contemplations

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## Where did this name come from?

A long time ago, back in New York, when the Odd Job store still existed and Cosmin was very young, I bought him a journal. On the cover, there was a little wooden outhouse tucked away in a forest, with the title: “*Thoughts & Contemplations*.” We had a good laugh over that notebook. It was perfectly us, because, well, both of us enjoyed spending a little too much time in that room. Since cell phones at the time were brick size, we had all kinds of other things too, like reading books and magazines.

Two years ago, I started thinking of putting together some of my deepest feelings related to the passing of my dear ones. Not only is it very hard, but the grief never ends. It changes, everything and everybody, and the feelings evolve in ways I didn’t know were possible. A small example. I never thought I would be able to listen to anything but sad, classical music. Fast forward two years, classic rock is blasting through my speakers. But when I start feeling too relaxed, I’m suddenly overcome by a wave of guilt.



So, I've entitled this chapter *Thoughts and Contemplations*.

I came across some social media groups for parents who've lost their children (yes, I'm still addicted to social media. Guilty as charged). One of the groups was actually quite helpful at first. But, over time, I realized it leaned heavily into the whole “medium” angle, which isn’t something I personally believe in. They even had a subgroup specifically for fathers, which I thought was a great idea, as most of the posts tend to come from mothers. But, as I said, they lost me at the Mediums. During one of their weekly Zoom meetings, they had a Guest Medium join. What followed was a whirlwind of a woman. She was very young, extremely loud, and spoke at a thousand words per minute, confident about having connected with some gentleman’s son. For some reason, she completely turned me off, even though the other fathers seemed genuinely moved and impressed. I just couldn’t get past the whole performance of it all.

I cannot use the “regular” Facebook feed. Actually, I can, technically, but people don’t really understand, and they get bored quickly by so much grief. I call it “grief fatigue,” which is probably not quite right. They want me to just get over it already. I don’t blame them.

Eventually, I found another group “**TCF, The Compassionate Friends**”.

What is TCF? From their own Facebook page, they are a “private group specific to the death of an adult child or children. We are a peer-to-peer support group, and not professional counselors or therapists. We share our experiences and heartache, and how we are **coping** and **finding hope**”



again on this journey. Together, we remember our adult child or children for the love, joy and memories held for them.”

Thus, when I post in the TCF group, I know there are parents going through the same things I am, and that makes all the difference. I read their posts and it seems like I wrote them. Same with them – I posted something today, and immediately some comments were “Oh, this is exactly what I’m going through!”



*Postavarul Peak, Romania (August, 2019)*



# Thoughts

*(April 23, 2023)* – Today, during my regular bargain hunting trip, I found a product called 'brioche pretzel'. My first instinct was to also buy one for Cosmin, so we could taste it together, make fun of it, and enjoy a good laugh.

And then, the gut punch came...

*(May 20, 2023)* – While doing our daily routine at Cosmin's resting place, we had an unexpected visit from a family of Hawks, three Harris Hawks. Usually there are some small, singing birds, and lots of crows. But this was a first. They came, looked at us, and when we left, they left, too. If I were one who believed in signs, I would have said that it was Cosmin and his beloved Grandma and Grandpa checking on us, but I don't believe in signs.

Or do I?

*(December 15, 2023)* – As often happens when I write these things, my mind floats back. It's mid-December. For the first time in 13 months, we took some books from the time capsule that is our son's apartment. Every week when we go there, we speak to him in a low voice, as if we don't want to disturb him. This day, as we removed some books, it felt as though we were stealing something from him. Back at the house, we placed his books beside ours in the bookcase. Through her tears, my wife said, "The baby's back home."

*(December 18, 2023)* – I remember wanting it to be January 2nd. I wanted to totally skip the holidays. If last year we were left alone, this year we are somehow expected to be back in full swing: relatives, presents, visits, Christmas spirit, and New Years' parties. After My Mother's passing, in 2007, Cosmin stopped enjoying the holidays. They were very close, and he took her death very hard. We were both leaning on each other, playing pretend and, actually, having a bit of fun doing it. But this year I was getting tired of saying "**No**" and, mostly, having to explain why not. I shouldn't have to.

....

*(July 22, 2024)* – I feel I can't keep up the act of being fine. I'm worn out from trying. What I truly need is some space for myself. I recently spent a month back in the Motherland and reconnected with old friends. Initially, they were understanding and considerate, but soon they started searching for the "old me," the upbeat, always cheerful guy with a beer in hand. They can't seem to accept that I've changed, and now their patience is wearing thin. Mine, too, but this is who I am now....

*(April 15, 2025)* – yesterday, while we were walking the dogs, we passed one of our neighbors' houses. Two police cars were parked outside, along with a CSI/Coroner van. It was a major trigger, because I was the one who found our son that day of November, 2022. My wife arrived [at his apartment] forty minutes later.

Then, as we resumed our dogs' walk, she started with all kinds of suppositions: "Why isn't there a medical van? Or a fire truck?"

"They were here," I said softly. "They come, they do what they can, and if there's nothing left to save, they leave."

"But at Cosmin... they weren't there," she said.

"They were," I whispered, my mouth suddenly dry, as if she had turned the key again in that locked room of memory. And I ... I was up at 4 a.m., trapped once more inside that slow, unfolding nightmare.



*Tempe, Arizona (spring of 2016)*

# Contemplations

## The After Loss

This grief is crushing. I miss my old life, the joy I had with my family and with my friends. Now I'm filled with sadness, anxiety, and fear. I'm tired of pretending to be strong. It feels impossible to keep carrying on when everything feels meaningless. Trying to find hope again feels like a constant battle, and right now, I'm just so worn down.

It's like I'm not even myself anymore. I feel so lost and empty, like a part of me has died inside. I'm just going through the motions, not even sure of what I'm doing most of the time. This isn't a "new normal." It's not normal at all, and I don't think it ever will be. I can't find any joy in anything. My heart goes out to those who have found a way to navigate this difficult and undesired path.

I've been existing for 17 months now. Some days are tougher than others, but I can't remember the last time I had a truly "good" day (actually I do – any day before November 29th, 2022 was a good day). I run on fumes. Work gets done, but that's about it. It's like I'm just going through the motions, existing but not living. No matter how hard I push, I feel stuck. Exhaustion and a sense of futility drag me down. It's hard not to ask why it happened and what I could have done better. Every day feels the same, a blur of weeks.

The thought of everything is overwhelming. Every little task feels like a mountain I have to climb. Even going back to the motherland for a month, something I used to love – buying the tickets used to spark such joy, I was looking forward to a chance to recharge. Now, the whole trip just fills me with dread. I know my friends care, but honestly, all I can handle right now is peace and quiet.

A spouse dies, you're a widow. Parents die, an orphan. But a child? There's no word. You're just...hollow. Grief isn't a clock that punches out after a set time. Society (and friends) expect you to be "over it" and get on with life.

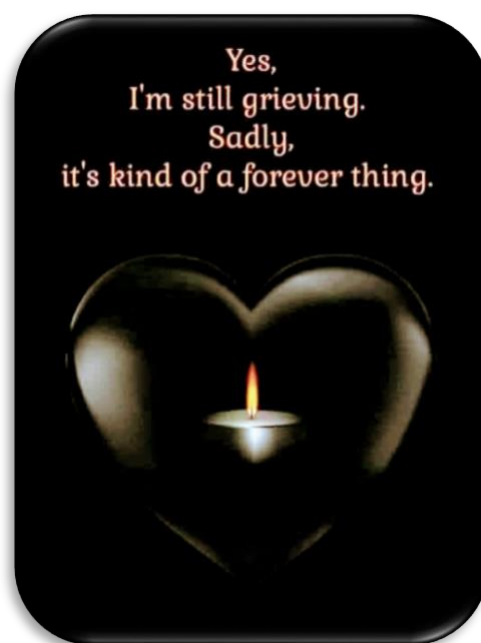
"Life goes on!" they say, chirpy and, suddenly, clueless.

"Let's go see a tribute band!" **No.** I can't feel a damn thing. Yet, I'm there, a ghost in the crowd.

"Easter lunch at my house?" **Why?** I just want silence. But the house fills with noise and faces.

"The Rolling Stones must-see event?" **Ugh, no!** I never even liked them! Yet, here I am, trying to squeeze into clothes that feel foreign, driving one hour to the venue.

My friends, the ones who've been there for me since November of '22, have unintentionally become like pushers lately. I get that they care, but their attempts to get me back into social life feel overwhelming. Society itself feels foreign now, a place I don't recognize anymore.



I recently came across an article on *PsychologyToday.com* by Larry Carlat, about us, the extraordinary parents. "We are *extraordinary* parents who feel things that no ordinary parent has ever felt, and we can endure the deepest pain because that has become one of our superpowers... Some of us have an unlimited capacity for compassion and forgiveness. Some of us become impervious to pain. Some of us are masters of disguise. Some of us can turn to stone. Some of us can become invisible. And then there are those of us who can open up and share it with the world. We walk among you. We are your friends and neighbors, your co-workers, the quiet couple who sat at the table next to you in a restaurant last night. We are the *extraordinary* parents. And we don't mind if you want to call us by our first name."

It was beautifully written by a professional and talented writer who, unfortunately, is part of this League of Extraordinary Parents. But if I'm being honest, I consider myself more of a *Duct Tape Parent*, wrapped and patched, carrying a roll with me at all times for those moments when I start to crumble and need to look whole again.

After the loss of my son, I thought grief would be my permanent companion, a constant shadow following me wherever I went. And for a long time, it was. Every laugh, every moment of peace, every small spark of happiness felt like a betrayal, as though, by allowing myself even a sliver of light, I was somehow erasing him. Or diminishing the weight of his absence. But what I'm slowly learning is this: Joy doesn't erase Grief. Loving life again doesn't mean I love him less. If anything, it means I carry him with me into those moments of light.

He's there – in the laughter I thought I'd forgotten how to feel, in the beauty I notice because of him. And maybe, just maybe, embracing those moments is a way of honoring him. Because he's still a part of me. He always will be.

I once found a quote from an unknown therapist that, at first, seemed to mirror my life perfectly: "You're not healing to be able to handle trauma, pain, anxiety, depression. You're used to those. You're *healing to be able to handle joy and to accept happiness* back into your life." But the more I thought about it, the less it rang true. Maybe half of it is wrong. Maybe all of it. Or maybe it just doesn't apply to me.

Because I am not healing. I'm learning how to live with the grief. And joy? Happiness? Don't even think of wishing me "Happy Birthday," or anything else that starts with "happy." If I seem not sad, it's not because I'm happy.

It's because I'm tired of pretending.



# Coping with Grief

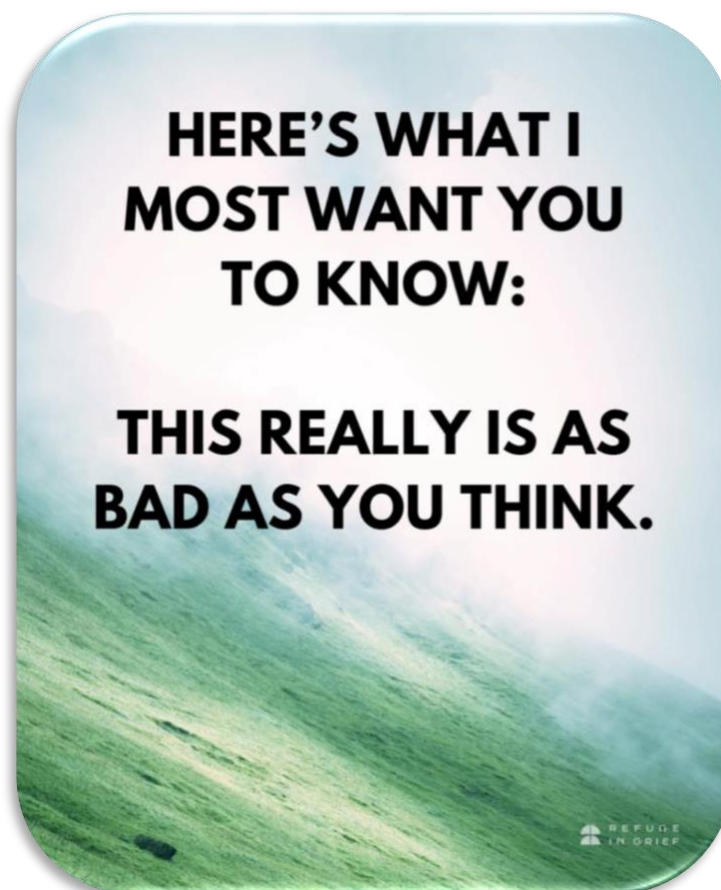
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When my world changed, when grief arrived like an intruder with no credentials or departure date, I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't want pity. I didn't want cheerful slogans. I didn't want to be anyone's project. But grief has a way of cracking you open, whether you like it or not. And eventually, help started seeping in through places I hadn't expected.

I didn't follow a plan. I didn't go looking for help with a checklist. I just kept moving – haltingly, unwillingly – and along the way, certain things held me up. Some were professional. Some were accidental. Some were nothing more than a sentence at the right moment.

Grief doesn't heal, it changes, and sometimes what helps isn't the big dramatic gesture, but the small, steady ones: a hand on your shoulder, a shared memory, a message or a WhatsApp call at their midnight or at my midnight.

I never asked for the help, but I'm grateful it found me anyway. In hindsight, even the messages that seemed annoying at first, helped.



# Surviving Grief

This chapter is a tricky one. It's about surviving and, somehow, learning to live with grief

When my mother left us, guilt was the predominant feeling. Sadness, of course, but the guilt and sorrow consumed me. After my father's passing, it was the feeling of frustration. I was upset with him for dying in such a stupid way. His prayers weren't for healing, but for speed: "God, make it quick. I don't want to be a burden to anyone," and this time God listened.

As painful as those losses were, they followed the "normal" order of life. Still, with each loss, a part of me died too. The brain has a way of protecting itself, by locking the ugliest memories in drawers you hope never open again. Or at least, that's what I hoped. But it also locked away some *useful* memories, making an absolute mess of my mind.

Some specialists say it takes at least five years to feel even a vague sense of normalcy.

One day, I realized: I'm an orphan, and somehow, in a very twisted way, the thought made me smile. But when Cosmin left us – so suddenly, so unexpectedly – the Earth shattered. All the rules of grieving (as though grief has *any* rules) flew out the window.

## Therapy

There are two kinds of people: those who believe in therapy, and those who don't.

After my mother passed, I saw a therapist who tried to ease my guilt. She explained that you can't be blamed for not knowing what you weren't told. We talked a lot, but that was the main takeaway.

When Cosmin passed, I turned to the service my company generously provided (for mental health). The first therapist was honest. Looking back, I appreciate that. She said, "*I don't know what to say to a parent who's lost a child.*" But in the first days, when I expected a magic wand to be waved to ease my grief, I was really upset.

The second one *did* know what to say – or at least she thought she did and I thought she did. She told me things I wanted to hear, until I realized she was reading from brochures. The number of platitudes I endured was staggering. Her script was good, maybe even thoughtful, but it had nothing to do with *me*.

Finally, I found a local therapist. A Romanian psychiatrist who specialized in grief. She was a blessing for many reasons. She knew our customs, our religious traditions, the remembrance services, the rituals. I didn't have to explain anything. It saved time. We bonded quickly, if that word can be used about working with a therapist.

When I told her that Cosmin was adopted, she immediately understood the struggle of getting a child, of the conditions in those institutions. She had worked for an NGO back in Romania. The best part, though – the moment everything shifted – was when she said: "Tell me about him."

It took me two full sessions. She asked follow-up questions. Then, she dropped the bomb: "Cosmin seems like he was on the spectrum, a high-functioning autistic." In that moment, all his little quirks,

his sometimes-odd behaviors suddenly made sense. It was one of those *WOW* moments. This, of course, opened a whole new line of thought, one filled with questions that will now remain unanswered forever.

Fragments of conversations with Cosmin began washing over me in waves. Bits of chats, odd moments, subtle signals. They let me know I was *there*. I *knew* that something wasn't quite right – not wrong, exactly, just... not how it ordinarily might have been. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

My baby didn't like loud noises – in a world where everything is loud: cars, concerts, TVs, the hum of life itself. He didn't like crowds either. I remember how upset he'd get when Grandpa launched into one of his yelling concertos (and he had many), or when parents raised their voices with or without reason. (After all, we are Romanians – when he first went to a Farmers Market in Romania, he understood. He didn't like it, but he understood where we came from.)

He liked well-set schedules. He hated lateness with a passion (well... that I can relate to). He was meticulously organized. The absolute chaos at his last job – I'm sure it didn't help. In fact, that's why he quit.

He was very disciplined with money, for a person his age. He hated owing anyone, and he wasn't a fan of lending either – mostly because he didn't want to be disappointed if people didn't pay him back. (I can relate to that, too.) He liked the feeling of things being in order, accounted for, squared away.

When he liked something, he researched it obsessively. (Oh, my baby... the coffee aficionado...)

Any attempt to open a dialogue with him led nowhere. He rejected every suggestion of seeing a doctor. "I know what's going on," he'd say. "They'll put me on medications and I don't want that." Now, of course, I know I should've pushed. And pushed. And pushed some more. But the risk was that he'd shut down entirely, refuse to speak at all, and I respected him too much to treat him like a child (although, for me, he will always be My Baby).

"Yes," the lady shrink said. "It's very possible. Many adults live on the spectrum. Some don't know it. Others know something's off, and they find ways to adapt."

....

After all these losses, I was convinced I had major depression and PTSD. That I needed serious medication.



But my therapist had other thoughts and, clearly, another strategy for me. She told me, “This is grief. One hundred percent. Ugly, suffocating, tentacle-wrapping, body-and-mind-sinking grief.”

I never quite knew what her exact plan was, but we met for a year – once a month, sometimes more. She listened. She observed. She analyzed. And slowly, something shifted.

After 14 months, she let me go. Not because I was “cured.” Oh no, grief doesn’t work that way. Grief stays with you for life. It was simply because I could walk on my own again.

### Friends and family: The People Who Stayed

Some friends disappeared. I don’t blame them. Grief is awkward, contagious, full of landmines. Others, former friends, resurfaced, eager to reinsert themselves into our lives, mostly out of curiosity. I turned them away without hesitation. One of them even said, “Even if you lost your child, I’m still upset with you. This doesn’t change anything,” a pointless statement and a useless phone call perhaps meant to prove my father right, again. Years ago, he told me that man was both a jerk and an idiot.

But the ones who stayed, those friends are heroes in my book.

They did exactly what was needed in a situation with no script. They followed instinct, guided only by care and friendship. They listened to the same stories, over and over, because I needed to tell them again and again until the words changed shape.



Some didn't say much at all. They simply existed beside me online, on the phone, on a bench, on a boat, until I remembered how to laugh again or just breathe a little easier. It wasn't what they said, it was that they didn't disappear.

And yet, I find it harder to write about the ones who helped me than about the ones who failed me. Maybe because I don't care about the jerks, but I *do* care about the real ones. I don't want to embarrass them with praise or to write something wrong (like criticize their car, for example).

I know I've said this before, but sometimes it felt like my Romanian friends coordinated among themselves before I landed (during my first trip to motherland, after...), assigning roles, like a secret support squad.

"You – airport."

"You – boat."

"You – drive him around."

"You – don't have a car? Fine, just be there for him. People might try to take advantage [of him]."

And they were there, constant contacts on both sides of the ocean: text, audio, video. They listened to me tell stories, cry, talk about nothing, just so I wouldn't be left alone with my thoughts. And when they sensed I could walk by myself again, they took a quiet step back. But I know they're still here. Old friends, new friends – still here.

This "walk by myself again" seems like a recurring theme, but it is fundamental in the process of learning how to live with grief. And honestly, I appreciate more the ones who told me, "I don't know what to say," than the ones who vanished for the same reason. Although, when I think about it, none of my real friends vanished. They were – and are – still here.

### And then there's The Lady from Montreal.

She doesn't quite belong in the "friends" section, although our conversations feel like a deep, steady friendship. She's my grandfather's goddaughter and my father's childhood friend, and somehow, she became mine too. Our chats carry that rare mix of affection and clarity, memory and perspective, like talking to someone who knows both the child you were and the person you're trying to be.

She reminds me that family isn't always about proximity or labels. It's about who shows up, and how.

Which brings me to ...

### ... family

A complicated word in any situation – and more so when three-quarters of them live 5,000 miles away. Maybe they didn't know Cosmin well. Maybe they had their own struggles. I feel them by my side, I tell stories, but I don't open up with them the way I do with *The Cousin*, the one who's called me *every single day* since that November in 2022 (except for brief gaps, like now, as I write this and he's 10 time zones ahead).

Last night I was on the porch, pretending to read, just staring into nothing.

Irina: “You miss his phone calls, eh?”

“Eh...”

And if you think that he and I discuss advanced math or late-night philosophy like my father and Cosmin used to – no, we don’t.

Sometimes there are long pauses. Other times, we exchange recipes for bread and dog food.

More often, though, we just answer the (in)famous “How are you?” question by actually telling each other how we are and, following Cosmin’s advice, I actually *listen* to the answers.

## Colleagues: The Accidental Helpers

The company I work for offers several weeks off (part of the bereavement leave policy – no questions asked). Looking back, I realize I’ve been with the same company through all my major losses, just under different managers each time, and somehow, every one of them showed up with quiet kindness. They didn’t just approve my time off, they encouraged me to take the maximum allowed.

Still, every time, I decided it would be better to return to work. The structure, the routine, it helped when my mind was unraveling in all directions.

My current manager took that support to a new level. She called me every week for a mental check-in. Not about tasks or deadlines, but just to ask how I was doing. A caring, steady voice on the line reminding me that someone at the other end noticed. When I returned to work and she stopped calling, I was like Pavlov’s dog, only staring at the phone that didn’t ring anymore on Friday afternoons. The amount of gratitude I owe her will never be repaid.

Some colleagues showed kindness in quiet, non-invasive ways. A flexible deadline, a card, a smile, a comment on social media, a nod in a meeting that said, “I’ve got you.” It wasn’t emotional support in the usual sense, but it helped. They gave me space to rebuild myself at my own pace, without pressure or pity.

I have to mention *The Pastor*, a colleague whose heart is somehow even bigger than his voice, which is saying something. He called me a couple of times just to pray together. The first time he said, “*Frate*, let’s pray.” I nearly dropped the phone. I had never done that before, but when we finished, I had tears in my eyes.

## Social Media: The Strangers Who Understand

I found myself, late at night, scrolling through grief groups.

At first, I didn’t contribute much. I still don’t, only when I get overwhelmed and can’t bring myself to post on my own wall.

In the beginning, I just read. Post after post from people who were confused, furious, hurt. People like me. Eventually, I slowed down. Too much grief, too raw, too much to carry that wasn’t mine. But those groups reminded me that I wasn’t uniquely broken. Just...human.

I know I’ve written elsewhere about Facebook, so I won’t repeat myself, but I also use Instagram, though in a different way. Facebook is where I write; Instagram is where I read.

Which brings me to *The Book*, the Bible of grieving people: *It's OK That You're Not OK*, by Megan Devine.

It's interesting that I remember this now (I almost wrote "funny," but there's nothing funny about it – just... coincidental, maybe.)

My therapist once asked me what I did between our sessions, what helped me hold it together. I answered without thinking too much: I scroll through grief groups. I read *It's OK That You're Not OK*. I write whatever comes through my mind. And I walk my dogs. That was my survival list. It wasn't a plan, certainly not a cure, just a quiet rhythm I could return to when the days blurred or collapsed.

Speaking of dogs – volumes have been written about their unconditional love and loyalty. In my case, they serve an additional role: food critics. I used to cook for Cosmin. He liked my food – or didn't. Either way, he always let me know. The dogs, on the other hand, are the best consumers I've ever had. They eat *everything*. Anytime. In any quantity. No rejections, no reviews, no complaints.

And honestly? Coping with dogs is better than Xanax. (Not that I'd know, but still....)

### Books: The Ones That Spoke When I Couldn't

My uncle has a saying: "If you go to a hardware store, no matter how strange the thing you're looking for is, someone else needed it before you — and they probably already built it."

Adapting that to grieving: If you feel it, no matter how bad it is, someone else felt it too, and wrote about it.

Over the years, starting with My Mother's passing, the popular clichés about the five stages of grief gradually lost their meaning for me. I was told – and I came to understand – that grief doesn't follow a specific, predictable timeline, there's no fixed order. Denial doesn't always come first, and acceptance, if it tarries at all, doesn't always arrive last. Each so-called "stage" can appear, disappear, or even overlap in unexpected ways. They can last minutes, days, or return months later with no warning.

If that sounds confusing to you, it was confusing to me too, and it turns out I wasn't alone. It didn't make much sense to Megan Devine either, a psychologist and author who had her own world shattered by the sudden loss of her partner.

I discovered her book at a time when I was no longer looking for comfort in people or in the well-meaning – but often shallow – encouragement in Facebook groups. I needed something else, something that didn't try to fix me or cheer me up. I needed honesty, even brutal honesty. I wanted someone to tell me that, yes, this hurts like hell, and no, you're not broken for feeling that way.

Megan's book did exactly that. She didn't sugarcoat anything. She gave me language for things I didn't even know I was feeling. She affirmed the chaos, the weight, the strange clarity that sometimes comes with grief. And, more than anything, she reassured me that everything I was going through, every messy, contradictory, painful part of it, was valid, that I wasn't doing grief *wrong*.

Around the same time, I was also spending time on Instagram – not for a distraction, but because I was finding small islands of truth there too: quotes, posts, and fragments of other people’s experiences that echoed my own. In some ways, reading the book and scrolling through Instagram became two interwoven paths – different mediums, yes, but messages speaking the same language. They were both, in their own ways, helping me carry something heavy. Together, they gave shape to what I was feeling, and, even more important, they bequeathed the permission to keep going without needing to make sense of everything.

This is the final chapter, and for some reason, it’s the hardest one to write. Maybe because I’m trying to sound smarter than I am, stepping into the world of mental health – definitely not my area of expertise. These are things I’ve lived through, feelings I know too well, but somehow turning them into words is proving harder than I thought.

So, I’m leaving this part to the people who actually know what they’re talking about – like @refugeingrief and @lightaftergrief on Instagram. Their posts are full of insights, helpful tools, and small truths that made me pause. Some were completely new to me – like “toxic positivity.” Others made me stop and think, like “grief is love.”

I had never heard of toxic positivity before, but once I read the definition, it clicked. It’s that pressure to stay positive no matter what – to smile through everything, even when things are falling apart. It’s the idea that sadness, anger, or fear should be pushed aside for the sake of optimism. But in reality, that kind of forced cheerfulness can feel invalidating. Sometimes, you don’t need a silver lining – you just need someone to sit with you in the dark.

That’s what I’m learning. That grief isn’t something you get over – it’s something you carry. It doesn’t mean you’re broken; it means you’ve loved deeply. And that love doesn’t just disappear.

So no, I’m not a therapist. But I’ve been there. And if any of this feels familiar, you’re not alone.

I wrote in the beginning of this chapter:

“Some specialists say it takes at least five years to feel even a vague sense of normalcy.”

I’m halfway to that five-year mark, and no, nothing has changed.

The pain hasn’t softened. The shock hasn’t worn off. The empty chair is still empty.

I’ve learned to move around the grief, maybe. To build a life around the crater. But the crater’s still there.

People like to say, “*Time heals all wounds.*” Maybe for some.

For others, time just teaches you how to hide the limp.



# YOU HAVE THE RIGHT

TO COMPANIONSHIP <sup>to</sup> SOLITUDE  
TO MAKE OTHERS UNCOMFORTABLE <sup>to</sup> anger  
TO TELL THE TRUTH

TO REFUSE  
**ALL**  
UNSOLICITED  
ADVICE

TO MAKE DECISIONS BASED ON  
YOUR OWN NEEDS

TO TELL  
PEOPLE WHAT  
IS AND ISN'T  
HELPFUL

TO SAY  
YES

TO SAY  
NO

TO ASK FOR  
HELP

TO NOT SHARE  
PERSONAL  
INFORMATION

TO CLAIM  
YOUR OWN  
MEANING

TO PEACE  
of BEING

TO  
SADNESS

to  
HONOR  
WHO  
OR  
WHAT  
YOU'VE  
LOST

TO MAKE DECISIONS IN YOUR OWN TIME  
TO NOT BE

TO FEEL  
**'STRONG'** CONFLICTED  
OR  
'INSPIRATIONAL' TO CHANGE

TO TAKE BREAKS  
FROM FEELINGS  
AND FROM PEOPLE  
@REFUGEINGRIEF

**Please Be Patient With Me**

**I lost my child,  
and it may seem like  
a long time ago to you**

**It is every day for me**

# Instead of Epilogue

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\* Richard Bucket is the mild-mannered and long-suffering husband of Hyacinth Bucket (who insists it's pronounced "Bouquet") in the iconic British sitcom **Keeping Up Appearances** (*Wikipedia*)

Cosmin said (many times) that I reminded him of Richard, Hyacinth's poor husband, doomed to a life of quiet sighs, awkward smiles, and slowly dying inside. I didn't know whether to be flattered or offended. But I understood what he meant. The man who goes along with things not because he's weak, but because he loves the one dragging him into madness. The man who says little, rolls his eyes often, and endures with grace (or something close enough). Maybe that *was* me. Or maybe it was just Cosmin's way of saying: "I see you. I get you."

Text: Stefan Popescu

Photos: Stefan Popescu's Personal Archive (unless otherwise specified)

Website: [www.thegiftedhusband.com](http://www.thegiftedhusband.com)

Editor extraordinaire: Craig "The Admiral" Kimball

Quotes from: Megan Devine's [www.refugeingrief.com](http://www.refugeingrief.com)

NOT THE END







We hadn't stood this close, physically or emotionally, since that day in April 1995, when we stood before a judge and promised to love and protect Cosmin, our soon-to-be adopted son.

In the 28 years between those two moments, there was life. Marriage and parenting didn't come with an instruction manual — we just did our best and hoped it would be enough.

Cosmin used to laugh and say, "Dad, even if I *had* come with a manual, you're the kind of man who'd never read it anyway."

He was probably right.

But for him, I would have read it, cover to cover.