

XOXO

by craig shafer

Randy is a guy in his mid to late twenties. He is, for the most part, laid back and in control of his emotions. He likes the attention of his unseen and unidentified audience, he is charming, but rarely cocky.

**Randy unfolds a newspaper page.
He has difficulty flattening it out.
He scans the columns with his finger,
finds the item of interest, and begins reading.**

On December 23rd, Randy Crawford was the victim of a tragic automobile accident. He lost control of his vehicle on the icy roads of Wolf Creek Pass. He was transported to St. Mark's Medical Center where he never regained consciousness. Mr. Crawford is survived by Julia, his loving wife and his daughter Hailey, six. Memorial services will be held at Sacred Hearts Church on December 30th at 11:00 in the morning. Casual attire. In lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to...

**Randy's voice trails off and he stops reading.
Perhaps he has lost interest.
Perhaps he clears his throat.
He refolds the newspaper and sets it down.
He looks out to his audience.**

I don't know about you, but I was never a real fan of obituaries. They're downright morbid, if you ask me. I understand their purpose and everything, don't get me wrong, but it still kind of creeps me out to think about those people who read them every morning. It's sort of like, "Nothing like starting my day with a glass of fresh OJ and today's obituaries! I can't wait to find out if someone I know has gone on to the...other side!" Weird. Totally weird. So, before that one, I don't think I'd read one in years. But that one, that one I had my own...morbid curiosity about. Probably because it was mine.

So, now you're the one who's creeped out now, right? Don't worry, I'm not offended. Well, not that offended. I mean it's not everyday that some dead dude reads his obituary to you and stands around flapping his trap at ya. I guess it's your lucky day. Wait, lemme guess. You have a whole bunch of questions for me. Save your breath, lemme see if I can cover all of them. I have no idea why I don't look like the Crypt-Keeper. Honestly, it might be cool if I did. I could stand on a street corner downtown and maybe people would throw quarters into a hat or something. I know, I know, you feel pretty gypped. A real live dead...wait...a real dead dead guy is talking to you and he doesn't even have maggots crawling out of his nose, all of his fingers are intact, well except for this one- it dropped off last week.

**Randy lifts up his hand with one of his fingers held down.
He laughs and shows the finger to his audience.**

I am totally, totally messing with you. I'm all here...but what I don't know is why. I don't even know why you can hear me. Maybe you can't. It's sort of like being in a big, clear bubble. I can see everything that's going on around me, but I'm not a part of it. The living world is a giant stage play and I'm the one person audience that can't boo or cheer. Don't ask me to explain. There wasn't any instruction manual. If they passed out The Dummies Guide to Being Dead and Perpetually in Limbo, well, then I guess I missed it.

**Randy looks down for a moment.
Perhaps he is collecting his thoughts.**

Oddly enough, I haven't even thought about having a drink for awhile now. And lemme tell ya, that's a big step for me. I guess being dead has made a better man out of me. That was the last thing I had before the

accident. I was over at Mickey's, off of Highway 80, drinking with the guys after work. I didn't have just one or two, I had a bunch. I don't know how many. The weather was bad, the roads were icy and I shouldn't have driven. I lost control of the car and had a close encounter with a big oak tree. That's it. That's the ugly truth all spelled out for you.

You know, one of the weirdest things about being dead is that it makes the truth seem a lot less scary. If I was still alive and *having this little chat with you, I would be all about bating you with BS, giving you a line, trying to justify everything I ever did.* But now, it's like I don't have to do that anymore. I can just tell it. I was probably an alcoholic from about 17 or so, when I'd go out and party with my boys and then come back home and sneak up to my room and...party with another four or eight or twelve of my friends...and they all happened to be named Bud Light. I guess I was always either drunk or hung-over in front of my parents after that. And either they loved me too much or too little to notice. I met Julia in college when I was 20. Julia was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life. Here, take a look at her picture. Julia was worth not drinking. And so I didn't. For about a year. We got married a year later and I was the happiest guy on this planet of ours. Hey, screw that, I was the happiest guy in this little universe of ours. She was all I wanted. All I needed. But then Jules got pregnant, and, well, I got scared. Really, freakin' out of this universe scared. I had these gruesome nightmares where I'd forget to feed the baby or I wouldn't hold it right and I'd accidentally drop it on its head. I mean, bad stuff, seriously. So I was freaked out and I started drinking again. Not a lot but sometimes, you know. The scariest part was actually being in the delivery room with Jules. I mean, I never realized all of that stuff could come out of my wife. But Haley came out too, and, and, I know how corny this sounds, but I realized how incredibly amazing life really was. She was this tiny little person with bright red curls and these giant blue eyes...and...I was a Dad. I told her something when she was just two days old. I told her

**Randy is suddenly holding Haley in his arms.
He is directly speaking to her, very softly.**

"Your Dad is going to protect you forever. I'm gonna make sure you have everything you ever want or ever need. I love you."

And I meant it. It's important that you know that. I loved Julia, but my love for Haley was a hurt-your-heart kind of love. An afraid-your-heart-is-gonna-bust-up because it's so much and so big kind of love. I call her Halo, because she's a little angel.

**Maybe Randy fears he is going to weep.
He collects himself, perhaps clears his throat
and looks back at his audience.**

Alright, now you're thinking I'm some kinda touchy-feely, sappy sorta guy. Well, I'm not. I love pro wrestling and poker and lots of manly-man kind of stuff. Seriously.

You should probably know I tried to quit drinking. I tried even harder after Haley was born. I went to so many AA meetings that sometimes I'd show up at a work meeting and when it was my turn to talk I'd almost blurt out, "My name is Randy, and yes, I am an Alcoholic." The meetings would work for awhile and then I'd just stop going. If I hadn't drank in a week or a month, I convince myself I didn't need to go anymore. That the meetings were stealing my time with Julia and Haley. And then I'd drink again. I went to my doctor and got some prescription from my doctor...

Randy briefly re-creates his dialogue with the Doctor.

"Now, son, this is going to help you with the cravings." "How long do I have to wait before I won't wanna drink, Doc?" "You gotta be patient, son, you have to will yourself not to drink." "Well, umm, gee thanks, Doc, that's what I've been trying to do for awhile."

So I took the pills. And they gave me heart-burn. And ummm...after a few days I still wanted a beer, so I washed one down with a Heineken. I went through Hypnosis, I saw a Therapist, I went to Outpatient Treatment. And every time, I'd stop..for a little while.

I wasn't a made-for-TV-movie sorta drunk. I never, ever hit my wife. I never yelled at my daughter. I wasn't an angry drunk. I was what the substance abuse people call a "Disorganized Alcoholic." When I was drunk, I was useless. I wouldn't do the things I'd promised to do, I'd forget and that's how I hurt my family. And I saw the pain on Julia's face every time I'd start again. A pain so real it felt like it was etched in to my skin, like roadways across my body. I'd drink myself into a stupor and then I'd sleep for twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours to recover. Too drunk to pick Haley up from school. Too drunk to have dinner with our friends. I was sleeping so I couldn't go with Haley to the park to feed the ducks. I was too drunk to make love to my wife.

Randy pauses again, and perhaps stares out blankly towards his audience.

When Haley was five, I missed her Kindergarten play. "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas." Haley was little Cindy-Lou who- you know, the little who-girl who tells the mean-old grinch not to steal her family's Christmas tree. I slept through it. My boss had bitten my head off at work because I hadn't finished a project on time and so I went through two six-packs as soon as I got home. I was out cold by the time the curtains went up at Haley's school. I woke up in the middle of the night and went to the kitchen for water and Tylenol and she'd left me a note on the counter. I've saved it in my wallet ever since.

Randy takes the note out of his wallet and reads it for the audience.

Dear Dad:

Mom says I was the best Cindy-Lou ever. I'm really sad that you were not there, because you're my Dad. I want you to always be my Dad and not the Grinch. But I love you even when you're the Grinch. XOXO-Halo.

Randy carefully refolds the note and returns it to his wallet.

I spent the rest of the night sitting in my daughter's room, watching her sleep. Thinking things. Wondering things. What kind of father hurts his little girl like that? What kind of father picks a beer over his daughter? What kind of father was I? I was sober enough that she was able to love me, but drunk too much to not be able to keep her from hurting. It was the same with Julia. I wasn't the father or husband that they deserved. I was sober enough to somehow hang on to a job and provide for them, but drunk too much to be the man I meant to be. The man I wanted to be. It was this evil, horrible voice inside me, telling me to drink, insisting that I needed it. I could keep it quiet for a little while, but I couldn't make it go away forever. I couldn't kill it. I tried. I really tried.

Randy clears his throat and considers something for a moment.

I've been honest about everything except for one thing. I guess I might as well just spill it, right? I mean, it's not like you can go tell anybody "Some dead dude named Randy Crawford just told me..." Right?

Randy chuckles.

That night at Mickey's? I only had a couple of beers. Keep in mind, this is coming from the self-proclaimed alcoholic, and believe me, it was rough, knowing what I had to do. I went out to my little red Tercel and I said, "Alright, Ernesto the Toyota, you've served me well, Buddy, but it's last call." I had to keep my self together, you know? And I drove up to that spot on Wolf Creek Pass, the bend right before the Oak, the spot I'd picked out a few weeks before. There weren't any other cars on the road, and I just sat for a minute

on the road and I thought about how much I loved Jules and Halo and how I knew what I had to do. And then I jammed my foot so hard on the accelerator that I was scared it push it through the floorboard. And then I hit that big old Oak Tree, head on. Like a fly on a windshield. And then I died, out there alone on Wolf Creek Pass in the middle of the night, in my little old rusty Toyota Tercel that I'd named Ernesto. I died because I couldn't stand to keep living as someone I didn't mean to be. I died because I couldn't keep hurting the two people I loved more than I loved myself. I died because I'd taken out a life insurance policy a few months before and I set everything up to look like an accident, and my death wasn't ruled a suicide. The policy paid out even if alcohol was involved. There wasn't even enough alcohol in my blood-stream to really show. Everything worked out just as a planned.

**Randy pauses again, for a moment.
Perhaps he isn't certain how to address
the audience now that he has revealed this.**

Perhaps you think I'm weak. Or you think I'm a horrible person. Well, let me tell you, I wasn't a very good one when I was alive. Perhaps you think I thought a big lump of cash was a fair trade for not having a husband or a father. I don't think that. But it was the best I could do. Sometimes, in life, you're given a certain range of options and you pick the best of the bunch. And the best I could do was make sure that they'd never need a penny. And that's what I did. Because I couldn't stop. And I wasn't willing to keep hurting the two people who loved me no matter what. I told Haley when she was two days old that I'd give her anything she ever needed. I was able to give more in death than I was in life.

What I didn't count on was having to watch afterwards. I never even considered that. I thought it would just be black, to be honest with you. I never thought I'd watch Jules go out on her first date since I died. But I wasn't angry. I saw happiness in her eyes- a happiness I hadn't seen for a long, long time. I didn't think I'd have to watch Haley stub her big toe and not be able to pick her up and hold her. I didn't think that was how it worked.

I was never a real spiritual guy when I was alive. It's funny how being dead can change a lot. I don't know how long I have to stick around here and I sure don't know what's next. Maybe there's two options, maybe there's more. Maybe I'm almost as scared of that as I was when Halo was born. I dunno. I do know one thing, though, I can wait forever. And I will if I have to. If it takes eternity before I get to see them again, if that's the price, then I can handle it. Because that's how long love can wait. It's like living as a shadow-existing as the strange shades of grey between the black and the white. Not being with the living but not quite dead either. I can handle it. I'm probably not supposed to even try to communicate- I'm sure it's against the rules or something, but I wrote something and I'm going to leave it on the kitchen counter at the house I lived in when I was alive. And then I'm going to keep waiting.

**Randy unfolds another note and
reads it for his audience,
very softly.**

Dear Halo:

This may be really hard for you to understand, but your Dad wants you to know that you did a really super job as the Great Pumpkin in your Halloween Play. You were so spooky! He also wants you to know that life is going to be really, really hard sometimes. You're going to have to make tough choices and be so strong. It will seem impossible sometimes. But it's not. Life is so beautiful, and you will be loved by so many people. Love them strong, Halo, and let them love you back. Don't ever be controlled, not by anything. Tell your Mom that your Dad loves her and wants her to be happy. He loves you too- forever, and that's a real long time. You'll see him again sometime, when you're an old, old lady. Don't forget about him by then- cuz you're gonna live to be at least 300! Even when you can't see him, he's there, and he's watching to keep you safe. He isn't drinking and he won't ever again. And he loves you so much. Forever. And Ever. XOXO.

**Randy refolds the note and takes a
last look at his audience.**