

Googling A Ghost

by John Olson

How does one write an obituary for someone who might not actually be dead? And why did I feel such a strong impulse to write one?

I had to acknowledge this man's existence. Pay tribute somehow. He had once been a friend, a very dear friend. His death was impossible to accept. I had not seen him in many years, but my memories of him were still fresh, still had life in them. I had missed him over the years, but only in a vague sense. I missed him with the luxury of assumption, expectation. I kept thinking of a time in the future when we could renew contact. But now that he was gone, gone forever, gone with absolute finality, now I missed him. Missed him deeply.

The obituary I had accidentally found online, if it truly was his obituary, provided his name and age, but nothing else. How could I be sure it was him?

The few details I found elsewhere online were particulars that could only belong to this person. This included a list of cities in which he had lived, and a short list of women's names.

Could they be his daughters? Had my friend raised a family? Or were they all ex-wives? I recognized one of the names. She was a woman I had introduced to my friend, way back in the 70s, when I was working for a mailing service. She was a spitfire. It was not exactly a match made in heaven. More like Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor.

My friend's romances had all been stormy. His infatuations had all been powerful, Wagnerian symphonies of high emotion and windblown fire. He once broke his arm putting his hand through a wall during an argument. I had just returned from Europe,

depressed, absurdly poor, no prospects, my wife wanting a divorce, and my buddy shows up, laughing, his arm in a cast. The man was an alchemist. He could find the shine of hilarity in the most abysmal circumstance.

He was not, by nature, a violent man. He internalized his storms. I remember a time when he got Bell's palsy. He looked like a pirate. One eye bright and alert, the other sagging with stress and pain.

This is not the sort of thing one usually puts in an obituary. But is this an obit? It can't be an obit if I don't know for absolutely certain that my friend is dead. I don't know what to call this. Call it sadness. Call it frustration. Call it the world's weirdest obit.

He was only 63. How had he died? Cancer? Heart attack? Liver failure?

He had been a heavy drinker. Both of us. But I eventually made it to AA. I imagined the conversations we might have had. The kind that heal, that reinvigorate old friendships.

I met him in 1968. A mutual friend, a woman I was dating at the time, told me she knew a guy who was looking for a roommate. We were all attending San José City College. Students on modest incomes. And so we met. We got together at a pizza place and hit it off in a real big way. He brought his girlfriend, a 21 year old woman with the nicest set of legs I had ever seen, and a very sweet personality. We downed several pitchers of beer, at least, and by the time we parted, we had already become best friends. He was a joy to be around: kind, erudite, Rabelaisian.

We had had a falling out in 1984. The incident took place at a topless club. There were four of us. It was a bachelor's party for another friend who had recently moved up from California. A woman had been performing some dances for my old roommate and an

argument erupted. A Teutonic man with huge arms and luminous blonde hair headed toward our table. I was sure we were all going to be hauled out back and have the crap pounded out of us before being told to never come back. My friend, apparently, had assumed that the woman's dances had all been performed for free. Had this been a ruse, or had he simply been that naïve? I don't know. My brother-in-law, press secretary for the state governor, flipped out some cash and solved the problem, glaring angrily at my buddy, who was drunk, and nonplused.

We saw each other very little after, had a few desultory conversations over the telephone, in which we pretended to more friendliness than what was actually felt. The conversations were stilted. The spontaneity was gone. And then I made a fatal error; I suggested, since he'd been feeling remorseful over the incident in the topless club, that he pay my brother-in-law back.

That pretty much did it. It was a mortal blow to his self-esteem, and what remained of our friendship. He moved back to California a year later and we lost touch completely.

Time passed. A *lot* of time passed. Bill Gates. 9/11. The Internet. We had entered a new era. People were digitally connected. I looked for my old friend via the magic of Google. I missed the guy. I missed the past. I missed our conversations. I missed his energy and puckish conviviality.

My buddy had been in the computer business, a systems analyst. Surely there would be some mention of him online. But there was nothing. Nothing, that is, until I saw the obituary. Was it him? Was it truly him? That broad Dutch smile, that hearty laugh, that mischievous glint? Was he all just ash and a few crumbly bones in an urn someplace? Had someone collected his ashes? Who had come to mourn his loss? Who had become the people in his life?

The mystery of it was huge, and left me feeling sad, but for who, or for what, I could not say. 27 years is enough time for an individual to turn into somebody completely different. I mean, look at Bob Dylan, all the changes he has gone through. Maybe there can be no single obituary for anyone. We become so many people. Carry so many different ghosts. The ghosts of ourselves, in many cases. Our former lives alive in a past we can't quite reach, can never fully complete.

