Narcissus Redux

Squirming within their retinas to avoid what’s mirrored on the water’s filmy tension, two eyes drawn close to his return his vision, remind him of two eyes he’d thought destroyed. His sudden wish to see the pool’s life scatter, imaged on that smooth-cheeked, rippling face, is granted by his hand; the clouded surface splashes its banks, frightening off an adder, while new-hatched minnows thrash down out of view with green and silver gestures through the algae. He shivers at the sight’s identity, absorbed in how again his “I” turns “You,” and though he knows the outcome, can’t resist watching himself, bending to kiss, be kissed.

— George Franklin

How To Live Your Life

Peter Goodman sits amidst all black in the well attended funeral service, and strains to act exactly as he’s read he should.

Don’t be too relaxed. This can lead others to think that you are uncaring, or worse, unable to control your grief.

Peter sits straighter in the unfolded, plastic chair, as the woman next to him dabs her eye with a handkerchief.

But don’t be too attentive either. This can give you the ghastly appearance of being one that is excited or turned on by these events. It may also lead others to believe that you are feigning your emotions.

Peter drops his shoulders and unclasps his hands, resting them lightly on his creased slacks.

Find a comfortable intermediary attitude for yourself. Solemn, but supportive. Concerned, but understanding. Remember: A funeral is not a one-shot affair. There are many follow up events and there will be plenty of time to display a full range of emotions to both the mourners and the other guests.

Peter runs his hand through his wavy, light brown hair.

Over-cleanness or being too well-dressed may also lead others to believe that you have been anticipating the event.

Peter breathes deeply, remembering the crumpled shirt he deliberately threw on this morning.

But an unkempt manner may imply that you are unable to successfully get on with your life.
Peter smooths the crease on his pants and pulls out the cuffs of his shirt underneath his jacket.

The entire crowd suddenly stands and shuffles down the grass aisle, towards the open casket. Peter merges as casually as he can. He flashes the seated family a "solemn but supportive" look, along with a small nod. The overweight mother sobs freely into her handkerchief; the small boy on her right, whose feet don't quite reach the ground, stares at the corpse with red eyes; the contrastingly well-shaped, teenage girl on her left stares back at Peter with lustful eyes, blinking slowly. It throws Peter completely off guard that a girl so much younger than him and the sister of his deceased (although distant) friend would give him such a look at this sober event.

How odd that she should look at me like that, he thinks. I hardly know the girl and furthermore this manner of hers is utterly inappropriate for an event such as this one.

Peter feels a slight pressing from behind. He realizes with horror that he has spent far more than the average amount of time over the body. What will they think? he wonders.

He shuffles quickly away from the grisly scene, surprised for the millionth time by the peculiar (and often inappropriate) behavior of people in this world.

What will they think? he wonders.

Peter walks quickly down the grass hill, towards his red, compact car.

Under no means should you exceed the speed limit. If you must, do not exceed by more than the socially-accepted five mile margin.
Peter sits on the edge of his worn, overstuffed chair. In front of him, on the coffee table, lie three of these massive books. He snatches the one in the center and violently throws back the heavy cover. The words "Touchy Situations" and several lines below that "Volume 1204 (Updated and Revised)" stand out in large letters. He turns back the mass of paper to the bookmark, breathing heavily.

Relax. You've just attended a funeral. That's a very difficult thing to do.

Peter slides back in his chair, resting the book on his lap, and closes his eyes. He breathes deeply, runs his hands slowly over his face and hair, and continues to read.

Did you make a good impression?

"I don't know!" he snaps in exasperation, wondering that very thing since he got into his car. His words bounce off the thick books around him and hang in the air, as if they were unacceptable. If you didn't, well, that's not a good way to start. People might—and usually do—judge you based on your first reaction to this sort of event. But it's okay; as said before, there are still many follow up events to come (see chapter 29).

Peter breathes deeply. Damn, he thinks. Why can't I ever get these things right the first time? Why can't the book be there, with me?

He closes his eyes tightly, the lines around them spreading as he does, and resolves to make amends at the next social function.

* * * * *

Peter, it finally being his turn, makes his way over to the seated, grieving family. He)
o,

"Hello, Peter. How are you?" asks the mother.

She appears more composed than the day before, Peter observes.

Composure is a crucial (and often telling) sign. Your actions should be in accord with the victim's state of being.

"I am fine, madam. Although I am terribly sorry about your son. I wish to extend my fullest—"

What was the word they used? Peter wonders anxiously in mid sentence as the family looks up with questioning (and perhaps suspicious) eyes.

"My fullest condolences," he completes with a reddened face.

"Why thank you, Peter," the mother answers.

But Peter does not hear; he is distracted by the lustful eyes of the teenage girl beside her. He quickly diverts his eyes to the thick, brown carpet—lucklessly, they fall on a section which is badly stained. He now feels more nervous than before.

"Some tea?"

Peter turns and is aghast to see a servant standing beside him, waiting.

How long has he been waiting there for me? Peter wonders.

Peter accepts the cup, unable to speak. He stands over the grieving family, the cup of tea scorching his hands. He looks to the floor, in an effort to avoid the stare of the girl, but his eyes fall again on the stain. A cold sweat forms on his back. He looks guiltily to the mother, but is repulsed by her
cheap makeup and frazzled hair, and cannot focus on her.

"Where do you think he is, Peter?" the mother asks slowly, in a deep, demonic voice.

Peter blinks several times and licks his dry lips.

"Who, madam?" he asks finally.

"My son, of course," she answers, rounding as if she were accusing him. She leans forward with her bad breath and asks through clenched teeth, "What do you think happens after death?"

It seems to Peter that suddenly the entire room of mourners closes in on him, presses their ears to his lips. He spins and whirls in the small, heavy room and uses all his power to refrain from vomiting. He racks his brain for the proper chapter.

A Crisis Situation.

Don't panic. There are many levels of socially unacceptable behavior. In most cases, you will tend to think your behavior is the worst while, in actuality, it is not nearly as bad as you had supposed. With this in mind, collect yourself and take a look around you. What have you done that is so bad? Can it be made up for in the future? How well do you really know these people?

For now, concentrate on what you've done and what you're doing. Stop yourself before it gets any worse.

"Peter! Peter!"

The mother, in a sudden fit, grabs Peter's shoulders and shakes him violently. Men in black suits come rushing up on either side to detain her. Peter backs away, realizing from outside himself that he's dropped the cup of tea. He turns and flees the surrealistic scene.

He stumbles to his car.

"What do you think happens after death?"

The words ring in his ears as fog falls gently on the streets.

* * * * *

Peter holds the directions up against the windscreen, trying to block out the stinging rays of the sun. He squints as he scans the last line on the crumpled piece of paper for the thousandth time: "Route 85 all the way."

Could this be right? he wonders anxiously. I have been on this road for hours. And what will happen once I get there? How will they treat me? Is my action intrusive?

Peter spots a sign in the distance, the only marker on the barren road: "Writer's Compound." His heart beats furiously in his ears.

Here it is. Just two miles. But what will they think? Well, it's not my fault. There was no answer. Not anywhere. What was I supposed to do?

"What do you think happens after death?"

I could kill her.

Peter slows his car considerably as he passes through the wide, marble gates. He looks curiously around himself, taking it all in. A low, sleek building of stone stretches out before him. Spaced every twenty feet are immense stained-glass windows, all dark and sombre, depicting graphic scenes of debauchery and death.

Peter, eyes opened wide, slows his car to a
stop, unable to reconcile the images around him.

Perhaps they are examples, he reasons. Yes, that’s what they are—examples of how not to live, scenes for these brilliant writers to draw from when creating the guidelines of life.

Peter breathes deeply as he approaches the massive, oaken doors, exhilarated just to be within the presence of such genius. He recalls his boyhood wish to be one of the writers, and realizes how silly it was to even ponder such a thing. No, these men cannot be made, they must be born with the gift, the intuition on how to properly lead one’s life. What a gift it is!

Peter, breathless from anticipation, pulls open the heavy door. It creaks violently.

* * *

Sealed Epilogue: Break Only in Utmost Emergency

When all has gone astray, and you realize that you have nothing left to live for, follow these last instructions.

Peter, the book balanced in his hand, the sealed epilogue broken, pulls down the door to his garage, his car running softly behind him.

— Noah Taisan Lukeman