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"Crossed Over"

by Richard Romano

The audience applauded and cheered riotously as his name was called by the large-lunged announcer. The futuristic set exploded in flashing lights, and portentous, otherworldly synthesized music played as the young, clean-cut man strode out on the stage. He was in his late 20s and dressed casually in blue jeans and a black pullover. His blondish hair was cut short, and he looked like the All-American boy. He could indeed have been the All-American boy. Except for the fact that he could talk to the dead.

Or so he claimed. There were those who were dubious, but just as there are those who believe that TV preachers have a red phone directly connected to the Big G upstairs, so, too, were there those who believed that Thomas Page could talk to the beyond. And several hundred of them filled the studio audience for the live "The Next Page" show every night. And according to the ratings, even though it was on a basic cable channel, it still pulled in

respectable numbers, indicating that there were a few million folks out there who also believed that Mr. Page could in fact converse with the deceased.

He stood in front of the only furniture on the set—two swivel chairs facing each other. He looked down at the stage and put his index fingers to his temples. As the crowd got silent, his head jerked up suddenly, and he blurted, as if receiving a message from Beyond, “Ann Hersey!”

The applause began again as a 30-ish woman came down the aisle, escorted by an usher. She was stout, had long brown hair done in a ponytail, and wore unflattering horn-rimmed eyeglasses. Her purple sweatshirt had a cartoon of a smiling cat on it, and she wore unfortunately tight purple sweatpants and white sneakers with highlights that matched the sweatpants. She was a vision in purple as she walked up onto the stage, and the man hugged her as if consoling some great grief. He gestured to one of the chairs, and she sat somewhat tentatively, literally on the edge of her seat. He strode over and calmly sat across from her.

Small talk was not his style, and he was a pro at building tension. So far, two minutes had elapsed since they first went on the air, and the only thing he had said was her name. As the applause again died down, and the

music ebbed away, he looked at her and began, almost *in medias res*.

"Your father died suddenly—*tragically*," he said overdramatically, almost William Shatner-like. "I see him now. He still loves you, you know."

He paused for dramatic effect. Ms. Hersey took that opportunity to reinforce what he had been saying.

"Yes, that's right. I just want—my mom wants to know why," she said, the tears starting. "Why did he kill himself?"

He looked up at her ever so briefly, then again cast his eyes toward the floor.

"I am listening to him now, he is speaking to me," Page continued. "He says to tell you that what he did was not your fault, that it was not your mother's fault." He paused again, but did not allow her time to speak. "He says he's sorry for what he did, for the grief he put you and your mother through, and hopes you'll understand. He says he has found peace now, and regrets that you and your mother are not with him."

"That's utter crap!" Joseph yelled, hurling a pillow at the screen. "I have no regrets and the last thing I want is that shrill harpie and that scheming cow here with me."

"Now, now," said Mitch, one of Joseph's best friends in the afterlife.

"What do you mean 'now now'?" This clown is putting words in my mouth. Suddenly *I'm* the jerk!"

"Joseph, you're dead. Who cares? It's over," said Arthur, who was sitting in an armchair. "I knew this TV was a bad idea. TV was bad enough when we were alive and it's even worse now."

"Speak for yourself, book boy," said Joseph. "I like sci-fi movies and I was hoping that at least I'd be able to watch them in the afterlife. Instead I get this pinhead pretending that I give a damn about those two vipers. And jeez, could she at least dress a *little* better. It's national TV for pete's sake!" He paused briefly. "And I hadn't intended to kill myself. It was just an unfortunate accident—"

"That's right, Mr. Autoerotic Asphyxiation," said Arthur. "That was a stroke of brilliance. So to speak."

"Oh, bite me, Mr. I've-Just-Had-Triple-Bypass-Surgery-So-I'm-Gonna-Screw-My-22-Year-Old-Acrobatic-Girlfriend-Immediately-After-Getting-Out-Of-The-Hospital," said Joseph. "I hear they're still scraping your left ventricle off her bedroom wall."

"Hey, I for one can't think of a better way to go," said Arthur. "What—like the end of a rope is better than—"

"Guys, this is getting tedious," said Mitch. "Every night I have to listen to you this. Come on! The point is, we're dead now."

It's true, the three of them were. The afterlife turned out to be nothing like they had expected. No harps, no angels. No devils, even. There was no Heaven, no Hell. There just *was*. Or *was not*. Whatever, all the expired souls had one-bedroom condos in an endless series of buildings. The temperature was a constant 76° F, it was always sunny, and the "post-retirement community" (as Arthur liked to put it) had a very nice pool. They didn't have to worry about food—what with being dead and all, nutrition and basic sustenance were scarcely an issue, although for those who missed food there was a convenience store that dispensed snacks—an infinite variety, and representing every native cuisine, what with the cosmopolitan nature of the afterlife. And the beauty was there was no weight gain.

The other advantage was that there was no need for money. Oh, sure there were those who were used to all sorts of nefarious ways of acquiring it when they were alive, and any post-mortem attempts at reprising that behavior was met with most sternly by the all-knowing and all-powerful

Afterlife Tribunal who ran things. Those who had had run ins with them learned their lesson, and fast. Maybe it was Heaven after all.

There was even TV, so perhaps it was Hell after al... Anyway, it allowed the deceased to peek in and see what was going on in the world of the living. The recently deceased found the TV a comfort (especially the unfortunate ones who had died while still young), while the ones who has been dead for a long time were increasingly dismayed by what was happening on the earth. One of Joseph's friends had died in 1944 and, watching an American news channel one afternoon, ran weeping from the room, inconsolable over the living conditions his children and grandchildren were enduring. "I died in the War for *this*? Jesus Christ Almighty." Joseph tried to reassure him that it wasn't as bad as TV makes it out to be, but to no avail.

Joseph had died in early 2000 as a result, yes, of autoerotic asphyxiation. He had seen a show on cable TV about it and was curious. His first, last, and only attempt ended with him watching cable TV in the afterlife. He suspected if he had been a bit younger he wouldn't have had the coordination and reflex problems that caused the trouble. But, then again, he often admitted to himself, when he was younger he hadn't had to resort to such things.

He had died in his mid-50s and in life had been a barber. Barber and failed novelist, that is. He could never afford to go to college, although he was well-self-educated. He started cutting hair in his uncle's barber shop to finance his writing and, well, one thing had led to another and pretty soon he was a barber by trade who occasionally wrote novels that were never published. He had made a decent living in a small New England town, was well-known and well-liked in the community, and had married in high school for what he had thought were the right reasons (love and all) but the marriage had soured over the years. His wife had been ambitious—but only for him. She deeply resented that he had remained, as she put it, "only a barber" and never pursued his writing with anything like methodical diligence. "She was highly intelligent, and there's no reason why she couldn't have achieved greatness on her own," Joseph had explained to Arthur once, "but she came from the kind of traditional Old World family that expected the men to have all the ambition and the women to have none. So she had become a bitter, alcoholic nag and had raised our daughter Ann to have pretty much the same low opinion of me. It wasn't a happy marriage, and I have to admit that I occasionally think that death was the best thing that had happened to me." It was kind of easy to see

why: he had good friends, a life-er, death-of ease, and had even started dating the former Mrs. Cleary who lived two buildings over. They were taking it slowly; after all, they had forever.

He, Arthur, and Mitch would gather every Friday night, and sometimes play cards, sometimes trade stories about the old days, and sometimes just hang out and watch TV.

"I mean, come on, guys," Mitch had been saying.
"Enough already!"

"Oh, Mr. Hero here doesn't like to hear the sordid stories of our declass  deaths," said Arthur, who had been a 63-year-old English professor and had indeed been dating a 22-year-old graduate student. "I'm sorry that we all can't have statues made in our honor."

"It wasn't a statue, it's just a little...well..." said Mitch.

"Yes, a little what?" teased Arthur.

"Okay, it's a monument, but it wasn't my idea. I'm embarrassed by the whole thing, actually."

Mitch had been a 17-year-old football star, the sort of "David Watts" character Ray Davies had chronicled so well. Mitch, who also was at the top of his class and was the most popular boy in high school, died in a car crash. He had been stopped for a traffic light one evening at an

empty intersection in his small Ohio town when a drunk driver took a left turn far too fast and far too wide. He smashed into Mitch's car head on, killing Mitch instantly. Almost immediately, Mitch had become the poster boy for cracking down on drunk driving and a small monument was erected in his honor in the town square.

"Yeah, right, you were embarrassed. And Dewey defeats Truman," said Arthur. "This from the kid who died before he even lost his virginity."

"Sad really," said Joseph.

"Two more weeks! The prom was in two more weeks! I was going with Mary Jo Jenson. I had it all planned out. Fucking drunk." Mitch was still bitter, and one could hardly blame him.

Joseph and Arthur laughed, until the TV show they were watching came back from commercial. Ann Hersey was still on, and that got Joseph even madder.

"Ann, during the commercial break I was communicating deeply with your father," Page was saying. "He wants me to tell you that he killed himself because he felt that he had been a failure too you and your mother."

At that, Joseph screamed a long string of lurid profanities.

"He realized one day that he lacked the ambition to make of himself what he should have become."

"Is this clown reading from cue cards written by my wife?" said Joseph.

"He told me to tell you that he apologizes for being such a failure."

And at that Joseph got up, strode over to the television, and smashed his fist through the screen. And, what with his being dead and all, it did no harm. In fact, at that moment, Joseph swore it felt mighty good.

"Joseph!" whined Arthur. "Now look what you did!"

"This guy has to be stopped. We've got to do something."

Arthur snorted. "Uh, lack-of-Earth to Joseph. We're dead. There's not a whole lot we can do."

"We have to do something."

"I think Joseph's right," said Mitch. "This guy can't talk to the dead. No one can. He's putting words in the mouths of those who are unable to speak up for themselves."

"Guys, I hate to keep harping on this—so to speak—but we're dead. Who gives a flying—"

"Well, I do, damn it. If we were alive, there's no way anyone could get away with this. You've been watching this

show. Some of the stuff this guy comes up with is downright insulting. He's got to be stopped."

"So what do you intend to do?" asked Arthur.

"I don't know yet. But something."

Mitch sat up. "I've got an idea. Joseph, let's circulate a notice and see if we can find other people this guy claims to have spoken to. I mean, they're all around here somewhere. This show's been on for—what?—two years? He's on every weeknight, with, say, two or three weeks off a year. That's five nights a week times fifty-two weeks minus three, or five times forty-eight—"

"Wow, Golden Boy can do math, too," said Arthur.

"That's 240 shows or somewhere around there. And he has two guests per show so that's 480 dead people, and that's not counting all the people he's supposedly spoken to before he got the show. He must've had an act somewhere. Vegas would be my guess. Atlantic City at the very least. Maybe Branson, Missouri."

"All right, let's find 'em," said Joseph..

"What're we going to do once you've found them? We're still *dead*, however many of us there are," said Arthur.

"That's defeatist talk," said Joseph.

"Well, yeah. 'Cause we're about as defeated as you can get!"

Mitch got up. "Don't listen to him. Come on, Joseph. We'll figure it out."

And with that, they left Joseph's condo, Arthur alone staring at the punched-in TV.

"This yahoo should be boiled in oil. I don't usually wish anyone down there to have to come here 'less they're ready to, but I swear I'd be in seventh heaven if I saw that guy come strollin' into the courtyard out there. 'Course, I can't imagine he'd last very long."

It hadn't taken Joseph and Mitch very long at all to find other deceased folks who the TV Dork (as Joseph had taken to calling him) claimed to have spoken to. Blanche Harrington had been an 88-year-old southern belle, dead now for 10 years, when her son had gone on the TV Dork's show. The situation was complicated, but the TV Dork had apologized to Blanche's son for her not having left him a single dime as an inheritance.

"Why, he had said that I had said, and I quote, 'My darling Deforest, I hadn't wanted you be corrupted by the taint of my money. I wanted better for you. I know you have the ability to make your own way in the world and amass your own fortune.' Now, I would never say such a thing in

my life. I didn't leave him a dime because I knew that any money I left him would disappear right up his nose."

Others that Joseph and Mitch had spoken to had similar things to say. It seemed that most of the people who ended up on the show were scheming heirs who thought they had been cheated out of their rightful inheritance.

But then—not always.

"Look, I'm not saying I agree with everything he says," said Lucy Snow. "But what's he doing that's so bad? He's giving some comfort to the living. I'm afraid I don't have such a cynical attitude as to think that the living need to be told the entire truth about how the deceased felt about them. Just like I don't think that funeral eulogies need to tell the truth about how the living felt about the deceased. No one on Earth knows what we know. Let's let them try to console each other and focus on the good things about us all rather than the bad."

Lucy's sentiments were well-taken by Mitch, and as they walked across the long courtyard back to Joseph's condo, he had become a bit more reluctant about the endeavor. Joseph was still determined.

"Look, I agree that eulogies should not dwell on the bad things, and if people want to dwell on the good things, that's fine. That's certainly not a bad thing. All I'm

saying is that some slick snake-oil salesman shouldn't be allowed to go claiming he can talk to the dead. Not only because it maligns us, but because it's yet another scam used to bilk money out of the gullible. And *that's* what I have the problem with. We're unwitting accomplices in a scam. If a dead guy has nice things to say about his ex-wife, that's great, I take my hat off to him with more than a little bit of jealousy. But he should be able to say it himself or not at all."

Mitch stopped and looked at the perpetually sunny, cloudless sky. "You're right. I have an idea. Remember when you first got here? When each of us first got here we were given a packet of important contact info if we run into trouble?"

"That's right, we did, didn't we? I'm afraid mine vanished some time ago."

"Fortunately, I saved mine," said Mitch.

"Oh, you would."

"If you're going make comments like that I'm not going help you at all."

"All right, I'm sorry. I've just always had a problem with kids telling me what to do."

"Well, think about it this way—I've been dead longer than you, so technically I'm older than you, if you want to

measure age from the time of death. I've been here longer and know more about this place than you do."

"Good point," said Joseph. "Suddenly, I feel young." In his best (or worst, depending on your opinion) Bob Dylan imitation, Joseph "sang," "'I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.'"

"Great," said Mitch, getting enthused. "Let's rock!"

Back in his own condo, Mitch leafed through a sheaf of papers.

"If we have any problems, we can take our case to the Afterlife Tribunal. They meet every other Tuesday evening at 7:00."

"Great. Town meetings in the afterlife. Don't tell me they have zoning laws here, as well. Just what I need."

"The next meeting is tomorrow night, it appears," said Mitch. "We can make our case to the Board of Selectghouls."

"I see."

"That was a joke," said Mitch. "'Selectghouls'? Ah, never mind."

Joseph stared at him. "Huh. And you were the most popular kid in school?"

"Well," said Mitch, "it was high school. How much could that have been worth?"

"You are wise beyond your years," said Joseph.

Mitch grunted. "Yeah, and look where it got me. You know, I spent my whole teenage years being cautious and wise. Not because I wanted to prove anything, or be Mr. Goody Two Shoes, but because that's just the way I was. Whether it was genetics, or how my folks raised me, or some combination—I don't know. Whatever it is that makes us what we are, that's how I was. And to be a typical teenager with all the irresponsible rebelliousness—it just wasn't me. I don't disparage it, I just couldn't emulate it."

"There's no need to apologize at this point, Mitch. I mean, Art and I make jokes but we think you're a great guy—"

Mitch sighed. "I know, I know. It just seems unfair is all. The reckless survive and I'm toast."

"Well, that's not unusual. Why did Frank Zappa, who never did drugs, die so young while Keith Richards lives on? But, by the same token, Jimi Hendrix lived recklessly and died young, and James Dean lived recklessly and died young, and John Gielgud and Alec Guinness and my grandfather lived rather conservatively and died old. As far as I can tell, the pattern is that there is no pattern. It's all a big crap shoot. When your time is up, it's up, whether you're 17 or 35 or 125. And you have to live the

way you want to live, the way it occurs to you to live, rather than worrying about Roman candles fizzing out."

"Huh?"

"Kerouac. Never mind. Anyway, you can live fast and die young if you want but, as I'm sure you'll agree, there is no such thing as a beautiful corpse. They're all just freakish and disturbing."

"True."

"So basically all we can do at this point is try to make the most of our deaths. And I'm inclined to think that at the moment it's getting even with that TV chowderhead."

Mitch smiled, and at that moment Joseph felt more than a twinge of paternal feeling for the kid. He hugged him.

"How did you get so wise?" asked Mitch.

"I was a barber. Barbers and bartenders are in the unique position of getting to understand the whole spectrum of human behavior. In my favor, though, there are fewer fights in barber shops. And we have sharper implements in case any break out."

They separated, and Mitch was cryinglaughing. "Let's prepare our case for the Afterlife Tribunal," he said.

"You're the boss."

The next night, the auditorium in which the Afterlife Tribunal met was mostly empty.

Wow, thought Joseph. *Apathy is big after death, too.* The five members of the Tribunal itself sat down at a long table that stretched across the stage of the auditorium. They were of indeterminate age—or even indeterminate species. They seemed vaguely human but had strange, incredibly fair-skinned—almost translucent—skins that looked alien even if it wasn't. They wore white robes—as one would expect—but seemed to have three-piece suits on underneath. Joseph could make out striped ties peeking above the folds of the white togas. Neither Joseph nor Mitch nor anyone else in the afterlife knew who the members of the Tribunal were; they met here for 45 minutes every other Tuesday night, but no one ever heard from them beyond that—unless there was big trouble.

"Now, do we have any old business?" one of them intoned.

There was no response from either the audience or the other members of the Tribunal.

"Do we have any new business?" he intoned.

Again, there was silence all across the board. Joseph, Mitch, and their entourage of witnesses looked around at

each other, all of them afraid to be the first one to speak up.

"That being the case, we the members of the—"

"Excuse me," said Mitch. "I have some new business."

The five Tribunal members looked up. "This is the first time in countless centuries that anyone but us had had new business. What a novel event. Please, continue. We're bored beyond belief."

"As the exalted beings of the Afterlife Tribunal—"

"Oh, flattery will get you everywhere," said one of them. "But, please, we're not that exalted. We're just preternatural beings that rule the realm beyond the icy veil of death. We put our pants on one leg at a time. Granted, we accomplish that task with telekinetic emanations from our superadvanced brains, but, well, that's neither here nor there."

"Right," said Mitch. "Your ex- Um- You guys...may be familiar with a living being of the name of Thomas Page, who claims to be able to communicate with the dead."

"The TV Dork. Right," said one of the Tribunal members.

Mitch continued. "It is our opinion—" and he gestured to indicate the crowd around him, "that he has been maligning the dead with his false communications and

impugning the living reputations of those of us who are unable to defend ourselves.”

“I assume you are prepared to present examples.”

“Yes, I am.”

Mitch, who had actually planned to go to law school had been allowed to live long enough to do so, presented, over the course of the next two hours, a stellar case for supernatural interference into the world of the living. He had videotapes of the Page’s TV show, supplemented with testimony from the dead people Page claimed to be communicating with. It was all quite moving.

When Mitch had rested his case, one of the Tribunal Members said, “Your case was expertly and convincingly presented. We’re really impressed. More importantly, though, we feel quite strongly about what you have presented, and we agree that this idiot has gone too far. And even more importantly, we think it would be ripping fun to have this guy *actually* communicate with the dead. So, tomorrow night, he will do so. So be ready for it. We have Mr. Page’s guest list for tomorrow night. We should take care of them very quickly. We’ll be taking reservations for rest of the program for the next 20 minutes.”

“You got his guest list?” said Joseph. “It must be great to have supernatural powers.”

“What supernatural powers? It was posted on his Web site.”

The audience applauded and cheered riotously as Thomas Page’s name was called. The explosion of flashing lights and synthesized music indicated that yet another episode of “The Next Page” was starting.

On cue, Page strode out to hit his mark on the stage, and, as usual, looked down at the stage and put his index fingers to his temples. As the crowd got silent, his head jerked up suddenly, and he blurted, receiving a message from Beyond, “Carl Landau!”

A doughy middle-aged man stood and shuffled up onto the stage. He took his seat, as he had been instructed to do during rehearsals, and Page took his own.

Landau was preparing for the opening remark. So was Page, but at that moment, Page’s body jolted forward as if he had been struck by lightning. His eyes shot open and he looked panicked. The stage crew caught on immediately that something was up, but stayed where they were. Landau was blissfully ignorant and thought that Page’s strange convulsions were merely part of the act.

"C-c-c-c-c-c-c-cxxxxxx," was the rasping, slightly meaty noise that came from the back of Page's throat. "C-c-c-c-ARL!"

Landau looked over calmly at him. Page had gone completely white and was starting to sweat. He appeared to be fighting his own mouth.

"Ca-a-a-a-rl," he said loudly, straining to get the word out.

"Yes, I'm here, Pop," said Landau, ever the optimist.

"You fat piece of crap," said Page. "You killed me."

Landau, as you would expect, looked completely shocked. He leaned over to Page. "What do you think you're doing?"

Page tried to respond as himself, but was unable.

"You get away from me," said Page's body. "How dare you have the nerve to try to contact me. You must have known this clown was a phony to agree to this. You must have known if he really could talk to me that I'd have nothing good to say at all."

Landau was completely dumbfounded.

"If you had gotten off your ass and taken me to the hospital when I asked you to I wouldn't be dead now. But, no. 'Pop's just a hypochondriac,' you told everyone.

'There's nothing wrong with him,' you said to your sister.

'It's in his senile old head,' you said. But it wasn't, was it, peckerhead? It was a massive fucking coronary! Was the season finale to *Survivor* so-o-o much more compelling than taking your goddamn father to the damn hospital? Was seeing who won that rock stupid waste of videotape more important than calling 911? You're a worthless piece of crap, and you should have put me in a home like I wanted, and if you thought I was going to let this idiot get all sappy and sentimental and pretend to be me, you're out of your meat-filled head."

Page's body went limp, and Landau scanned the stage personnel for the producer. He leapt from the chair and charged over toward him.

"How dare you do this! I'll sue you, the show, the network, everyone involved in this!" Several stagehands had to wrestle Landau's hands from around the producer's throat.

"I don't know what's going on!" yelled the producer.

By now, everyone onstage, offstage, and backstage was completely clueless as to what was going on. The audience meanwhile sat in stone silence.

The producer yelled, "Can we cut to commer--"

Page's body jolted again. "Agnes Prescott!" he warbled, not looking at anyone or anything in particular.

As you would expect, no one in the audience moved.

"Agnes, it's your mother!" said Page. "Agnes, you'll never believe it, but I found your father here in the afterlife. I mean, and I should come clean about this, I found your *real* father, not Teddy, who you thought was your father. Look, Aggie, I never got the chance to tell you this while I was alive, but Teddy isn't your father. I mean, he and I were married and all, but Bertram, that's your real father, we met at the Safeway while Teddy was in Vegas at his bachelor party and, well, one thing led to another, and I was actually carrying you by the time Teddy and I got married. Bertram died when you were still a baby. I'm sorry I never told you that, but I thought you should know."

The producer—Leonard Bret—knew he shouldn't have let the show continue like that, that he should have cut to commercial, but, well, he knew good TV when he saw it. He had no idea what was going on, perhaps Page had finally flipped, or had a nervous breakdown, or was trying to commit career suicide. He also knew that the ratings were going to go through the roof, and that he could try one more deliberate attempt at this format. If the ratings for that stayed high, he could claim a legitimate TV hit and not just a squeaking-by basic cable program. If he could

bring the format to a major network....He knew then that there was no way in hell he was cutting away.

It went on like that for 45 more minutes, as voice after voice emanated from Page's body. It wasn't all negative; there were some very nice sentiments expressed as the deceased—especially those who had died abruptly—got to express to the left behinds those things they never got to express in life. Whether the right people were tuning in was anyone's guess, but it was touching nonetheless.

As for Page, he was getting weaker and weaker. He was riding lower in the seat, until finally he slid off and hit the stage floor with a coccyx-crushing thud.

"Cassandra Daystrom, this is Arthur Desmond," came Arthur's voice from Page. "I just want to say it's not your fault. Um...I knew full well what I was doing and I kept certain things from you. It's just that—I really loved you—really love you, present tense. I haven't looked at another woman since I died and, well, I know that doesn't sound like much of a big deal, it kind of is, if you knew what I knew. Look, I'm sure you've moved on, as well you should. You're young, and you've got at least another 50 years before your heart explodes in the throes of passion." He paused. "Okay, I'm kidding, but please continue with your studies. You can actually earn a living with a degree in

English, believe me. And think of it this way: you'll actually be able to communicate effectively to colleagues using the actual English language rather than those goddamn e-mail smiley faces. I have to go now, but, please, I can't imagine that you're watching this stupid show, but if you do see this, I love you."

"Marv and Emily Baxter," came another voice from the depths of Page's larynx. "This is your son Mitch. I want to explain what's going on. We've been watching this show, and this guy's a fraud. We got mad that he was putting words in the mouths of the dead, so we hijacked his body and we're expressing our own feelings. This is the first and last time we'll be doing this, and I just wanted to say that I appreciate all that you've done for me. The monument was a bit much, but I do admit if there were such things as ghosts—there aren't, by the way—I'd be haunting that drunk for a good long time. Tad—bro—I know you never liked being in my shadow and I know we've had our differences. I never wanted the attention mom and dad gave me, and I really did wish they hadn't treated you like a second-class citizen. I don't know what you've been up to since I died, but listen to me: you have my personal okay to celebrate my death. You are no longer in my shadow. Live you own life, go nuts. Achieve what you know you can achieve, rather than just

another arrest for possession. Mom, dad—Tad's a good kid—well, he's probably not a kid now—so please, for my sake, treat him as you would have treated me. Thanks.”

Page was now supine on the stage floor. Bret himself was now sweating profusely, and some time ago had ripped off his headphones. Network brass had appeared and were clamoring for at least one commercial, what with needing to pay various bills and all. The last thing he heard was something about the shortfall in revenue coming out of his salary. Like his salary would cover even the merest shortfall in revenue, he thought. There were only a few minutes left before he had to cut away.

“Ann Hersey—this is Joseph, your father,” said Page doing an adequate, albeit unintentional imitation of Joseph. “What you heard last night, what this guy told you—it wasn't true. I never would have said those things, and if you have any memory of me at all you know full well I never would have said those things. One thing was true, though: I do love you. You drove me completely insane when I was alive, but you're my daughter and that has to count for something. I know your mother thinks I was a total failure in life—but I disagree. Neither of you were ever hungry, or poorly clothed. I provided pretty damn well for you two and maybe we didn't have filet mignon every night,

but that stuff is bad for your heart if you eat it every night. Look, Annie, if there's one thing I have learned in the process of being alive and then dead it's that you can't expect other people to make you happy. I mean, you can be happy with other people, but if there's something you want, go and get it. Don't expect anyone else to share your ambitions, and don't marry someone and then condemn what it is they are. We're all different. That was the problem that your mother made, and why she and I had such a bitter marriage. She wanted me to become what I never wanted to become rather than go out and become it herself. I did not consider myself a failure, and actually I rather enjoyed my life—the part of that didn't involve your mother. Perhaps that's mean to say at this point, but I have to be honest.

“I have to go now, but please think about what I've said. Live your own life the way you want to live it, and treat the people in it as the wonders of nature they are. Remember—you're dead forever, and you're only alive for a brief period of time, and take it from me—everything you've accomplished in life evaporates upon your death. Why spend that brief time making someone's life miserable?”

And with that, Page was silent. There was complete inactivity among the stage crew as no one knew what was

going on. At that point Page began to moan in his own voice, Bret cut to commercial.

"I thought that went well," said Mitch. "A nice combination of the bitter and the sweet. I think that would qualify as good TV."

Joseph agreed, and yet Arthur was conspicuously silent.

"Arthur, you old softie," said Mitch. "I had no idea you had such a sentimental streak."

"Hey, I was an English professor. All those sonnets wear off on you after awhile."

"Well, I for one feel better," said Joseph.

"Yeah, so do I," said Mitch. "And I bet Sentiment Boy here feels better, too."

"God'll get you for this," said Arthur.

"He already did."

"Good point."

The three of them went on the way they always had. Being dead, they didn't have access to a great deal of variation in their—well, their lack of lives.

Thomas Page never returned to "The Next Page." He had a nervous breakdown and was committed to a mental

institution. He spent the next five years there; upon his release, he became a gravedigger in a small southern town and stayed in that job until his own death many years later.

Leonard Bret did indeed get a career boost from the "ad libbed dead show"—as it became known. Naturally, no one in the business really believed that the dead were talking, but they were impressed by the ratings nonetheless. After "The Next Page" went off the air the next day, he was assigned to a new "reality programming" show that was in development in which several individuals were pitted against each other, and basically, had to kill each other. Whoever was alive at the end of the show's 14-week season won a vast quantity of cash. The show was condemned by the critics, as well as anyone who had even modicum of taste and sensibility. Needless to say, it was a huge hit.

Ann Hersey had watched the broadcast and sat in her double-wide completely stunned. Upon hearing what had indeed sounded like her father's voice, she broke down into tears. Later, she thought about what he had said. It was at that point that she decided to leave her abusive, alcoholic boyfriend, and her small New England town, and head to New York City.

"What are you planning to do once you get there?" asked her mother, who, as you would expect, was opposed to the whole idea.

"Jessica's cousin's brother-in-law works on Wall Street. I thought I'd make contact with him and see what I can do. All I know is I have to get out of this town."

It wasn't easy for Ann, as it isn't easy in New York City for anyone from a small town. But she made some contacts, paid attention, took some courses, met some people, and eventually, 10 years later and 60 pounds lighter, was a high-powered literary agent. And although none of this connected, and wouldn't until long after they were both dead, she had fallen in love with an editor at Random House—Tad Baxter, Mitch's brother. They married and lived a long happy life together.

When they had both died, there was a joyful reunion in Joseph's condo. Joseph was happy to see that Ann had made something of herself, and Mitch was happy that Tad had tuned out okay after all. At one point, Joseph had inadvertently come across his wife, who had succumbed to a cirrhotic liver and was pissed that there was no booze in the afterlife.

"You can't win them all," said Joseph.