

*How old are you going to be someday? – A hundred and five!*

*The greatest hazard of all – losing one's self – can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss – an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. – is sure to be noticed.*

*Don't you see? We're going to get a second... chance.*

*Take me to that old familiar place / Take me to memories we won't erase*

*Take me to all that we had – the good and the bad.*

*I'll never forget you, / I'll never let you go –*

*I'll never forget you, / I'll always remember, / I hope you know...*

*Yeah, I'll take what is given to me / And I'll realize I'm not going home*

*And after a while (when all of your currency's gone)*

*And after a while (when all your mistakes have been made)...*

# ***Searching for a Former Clarity***

*Well, I've been twisting to the sun I needed to replace / The fountain in the front yard is rusted out*

*And all my love was down / In a frozen ground*

*All the things you knew for sure / Were not what they seemed / So wake me when it's over*

*Not everyone grows up to be an astronaut / Not everyone was born to be a king*

*Not everyone can be Freddie Mercury / But everyone can raise their glass and sing.*

*I may not be the perfect kind of person, / I may not do what Mum and Dad dreamed,*

*But on the day I die / I'll say, "At least I tried," / And that's the only eulogy I need.*

*Goodbye, Michael. I love you. I'm still yours!*

*And my next words could be my last...*

## 1. Wake Me When It's Over –or– A Second Chance

My mother's mother, Rose Feraco, told stories to me and my siblings when we were much younger. One that stuck in my memory for years was the tale about how her family – not the Feracos, whom she married into, but her own parents – came to America.

Her mother and father arrived on the Eastern seaboard unable to speak English, lacking connections, carrying little save their own dignity. My great-grandmother tried gaining her citizenship anyway, but failed. The process they gave incoming immigrants back in the day differs from the contemporary ways, but her command of English would've been too limited for her to succeed today – and left her failing in her present day.

After failing, she tried again, and failed again. What could you expect? After all, it's not like she could just turn around, bury her nose in a book, and learn English. One wonders why she even bothered trying again. What was the best she could hope for? She couldn't use the language. She couldn't belong here.

But my great-grandmother, like her daughter, and *her* daughter, and all three of *her* children, was stubborn. She tried a third time. She failed yet again.

She tried a fourth time.

And the official handling her case, having seen each of her previous attempts (and correctly sensing that she wasn't a woman who could be easily deterred), looked her in the eye and said, "Miss, anyone who wants to be a citizen as badly as you do deserves to be." He stamped her papers. She entered the country.

Rose was born a few years later. She was born an American.

-----

It's a lovely story.

It's apocryphal, of course. The details don't quite add up – I find it hard to imagine that someone who couldn't speak English could remember what the official said so clearly – and it's been so many years since I heard it, and since I started re-telling it, that I'm sure my recollection of the recollection of the recollection has been distorted as well. This is perhaps not "what happened" so much as it's what we've chosen to remember.

Yet I find myself not caring whether the story is fully true – not just because *some* aspects of the tale must be accurate, but because the story taught me something I've come to consider one of the most important lessons I've ever learned, and one that life has forced me to relearn countless times since.

My grandmother's story taught me that when you face something terrifying, when you face something that seems insurmountable; when you come face to face with your destiny...

You should make sure you face it courageously.

## 2. When All Your Mistakes Have Been Made –or– The Greatest Hazard of All

There are many things I don't want to lose that I probably will, and some things I've lost already that I never thought I could.

My vision, for example, is degenerating. It's a somewhat ironic, or at least unfortunate, condition, considering that I spend most of my life poring over work, burying my nose in books, or staring at various screens. For the meantime, I'm lucky: while my ability to see flat things (signs, license plates, text on t-shirts and printed pages) has been compromised, I can still see three-dimensional objects decently enough that I can drive without glasses. And when I feel like reading something or watching a movie, my glasses alleviate the problem pretty niftily (and stylishly!).

I don't want to lose my vision. I like observing things; I like reading. But I know, at some point, I'll either need to undergo some sort of medical procedure – no small thing for me, considering that my mother's eye surgery was botched back in the days when they used blades instead of lasers – or will have to deal with gradually losing my eyesight.

It scares me, honestly, to imagine a future where I can't casually pick something up and read it. So much of what I do depends on the proper functioning of those two delicate, irreplaceable orbs. How could I teach if I couldn't read? How could I coach if I couldn't see?

But far more terrifying to me than the idea of lost eyesight is the idea of diminished mental capacity. To lose one's eyes is one thing: to lose one's mind is another entirely.

My aunt, Anna, remains the smartest person I've known. I formed a very specific, lasting perception of her as a small boy: dignified and wry, with a British sort of sensibility, if that makes any sort of sense as a descriptor for a full-blooded Italian woman. When she enrolled at UC Berkeley, she became the first person in my family to go to college. When I was little, she and I wrote letters to one another by hand. I still have some of them, lined with her neat, mannered handwriting – a writer's hand, a reader's script. And she was so curious, always ready to travel or explore, with sharp, smiling eyes looking out from huge glasses.

She bought me books about grey whales and introduced me to *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Data was her favorite character, and became mine in turn. With Anna's help, I turned my collection of books into a "library," taped handmade due-date slips to the insides of the covers, and "checked them out" to her – pre-saging my work in Occidental College's library by a good fifteen years. That's a pretty nerdy game to play with one's nephew, all things considered, but she was the original Feraco bibliophile; it's impossible to describe her love for books without understating it. (According to my mother, Anna lost her two front teeth while trying to carry a bag of books between them because, well, she was already carrying too many in her hands.) That love of literature rubbed off on her sisters, who passed it on to me and my siblings in turn.

Anna and my older sister, Angela, were a lot alike. Anna planned to take her overseas once she graduated from high school.

But they never took the trip.

Anna suffered a seizure when I was still young – fourth or fifth grade – and tests revealed a malignant brain tumor that ultimately proved inoperable. The sickness took everything from her before she died. Her personality slowly bled away until she no longer lived behind her face. She

suffered for months, and died in our house, in the room belonging to my mother – her baby sister. I saw her body once before they removed it from the house. And I was strangely numb to it; it was upsetting, but it was like looking at a shell of someone I'd known. The woman we'd loved had disappeared, well before my sister could graduate, long before her body finally succumbed.

So Angela went to Europe alone after her high school graduation. She took some of Anna's ashes with her, and honored her last wishes by throwing them over the seaside cliffs.

-----

Anna and I didn't have enough time to become incredibly close, and that's something I'll always regret. I'd like to think that she'd be proud of what I've done with myself, of what I've accomplished, but it's hard for me to tell.

In fact, I don't know much about my extended family, save my grandparents, three aunts, two uncles, and a couple cousins I sadly haven't seen in years. But I spent a lot of time with my grandmother Rose when I was growing up. She lived closer to my parents' house than any of my other relatives did, and I stayed at her place whenever my mother and father needed a weekend without the kids.

Her house felt magical to me. She had a playground slide in her backyard next to a giant tree, a garden spilling over with fat flowers (roses, of course), a swing under a green plastic-roofed structure, and – best of all – cable television! (We didn't get a TV until I was six, and I didn't have regular access to cable until I moved into an apartment after graduating from college.)

So, to recap: my grandmother had TV, candy, and a personal playground out back. And she always played with me. You're not supposed to have favorites among your relatives...but come on.

You're probably used to living near a gigantic racetrack, but there's only one such place in my entire home county, and she lived roughly a mile from it. When I started working at the track for a summer job during my high school years, I would run to her house during my lunch break. We'd eat, play cards, and talk. She was a gambler (and was proud of me when I won money betting on racehorses for the first time), a storyteller, and a child of the Depression. She always kept bananas in the house because she remembered how her father cried when she asked him for some as a little girl; they didn't have enough money to buy them.

She was so funny; I can't even begin to count the number of times she made me laugh. She'd reverse her age with each birthday – her 81<sup>st</sup> birthday was her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday all over again – and she always told me that she'd live to be a hundred and five years old. I still don't know why that was the number she chose; all I know is I grew to believe that she'd make it somehow. And I developed a sort of spillover reverence for that number – 105! – with its holiness imparted by someone who never did anything for me that wasn't kind.

I remember her sitting on her step with me, counting the "sports cars" as they went by – the sort of game that can only amuse a hyperactive five-year-old boy, and the sort that indulgent grandmothers with vast reserves of patience happily lose to said five-year-olds.

I remember all the times we'd say goodbye – always appending "I'm still yours!" to "I love you," saying it and meaning it, waving as one of us drove away. I never got too old to smile when she said it.

And I remember her crying when we sat together in the redwood forest near my home after Anna died, the two of us alone, a mother weeping for the daughter she never meant to outlive and a still-young grandson who, frightened and unable to say anything for once in his life, simply held her hand, because reaching out was all he could do.

She had so many experiences, both beautiful and terrible. She had so many stories, and if you know anything about me, you know I'm a sucker for stories.

Then the years robbed her of them.

----

I don't know when it started for certain, but in my memories, it began when my grandmother fell and broke her hip early in my sophomore year of high school. She stayed with us, recuperating, for a time. When she left, she was...different. Maybe "incomplete" is a better word; in any event, I don't think she ever fully recovered from the accident. Her personality was just a shade different at first, visible only in little things that no one outside her family would notice. She stayed independent. She started walking again.

During my senior year, my grandmother visited us on Christmas Eve, the day when the Feraco side of my family traditionally holds its big she-bang – the dinner, the gifts, the whole nine yards. When everything ended, it was already dark, and my mother (who doesn't see well at night, thanks to that botched eye surgery) asked me to drive my grandmother home. It was the first, and only, time I ever drove her anywhere.

The drive was uneventful – I told a few jokes, made her laugh, tried to be the good grandson and keep her entertained. When we got back to her house, she got out and headed for her door, walking along the right side of a small, paved path running through her garden. I was going to walk ahead, open the door, be a gentleman. Instead, I stayed in the van a little longer. I think I was looking for something; it wasn't particularly important.

I'd gotten out and taken two steps when I saw her fall.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't a clean motion, or fast, or loud. She just teetered a little, leaned to one side, and went down, almost in slow motion. I was too far away to catch her. I couldn't even shout. She could have fallen left or right. She fell right, landing against a mix of ivy and prickly bushes that just barely cushioned her. And she couldn't get up. She hadn't fallen in a heap; in fact, she'd almost landed in a straight line.

I have no idea what I was thinking as she fell; I don't think I was thinking. I just remember watching, hearing her cry out my name, and feeling myself suddenly sprint six steps forward, as though I were a passenger in my own body.

I reached her, reached down, grabbed her shoulders, and pulled upwards. She came back up like she weighed nothing. She was sobbing.

I held her close, holding her upright, trying to comfort her. It felt like an infinite moment, like something snatched out of time and left where the minutes and seconds wouldn't pass normally, like the whole world was dilated and blurry and charged with fear.

As soon as she calmed down enough to speak, I checked to make sure she hadn't hurt herself. I thought she had to have broken her hip again, or done something even worse. I don't know whether it was a matter of her falling right (into the plants) instead of left (onto the concrete), or of the fact that she was walking so slowly and with such little momentum when she fell. Somehow, miraculously, she was unbroken.

I helped her into the house, made sure all of the lights were on, made sure she was OK. Before I left, I hugged her, told her I was still hers.

That's when she asked me, watching me with frightened eyes, to say nothing of the whole thing to my mother. She said she didn't want her to worry. I started to protest. She pleaded with me to keep quiet.

I drove home terrified.

But when I walked through my front door, I didn't say a word.

### **3. Twisting to the Sun I Needed to Replace –or– That Old Familiar Place**

As she aged, and her health problems piled up, my grandmother slipped further and further away. She would still recognize me when I visited, although slowly, like she was peering through a fog to make out my face. Sometimes she'd remember I became a teacher, and would tell me how proud I'd made her. She wouldn't remember that I'd moved to Southern California; she'd wonder why I didn't visit. I would have called, but she wouldn't have remembered. It would have made her happy in the moment, but I knew speaking with her would hurt – badly – and I never worked up the strength to call.

In retrospect, it seems selfish. I should have called her. But I still remember the dread that filled me every time I took out my phone with good intentions, and I understand why I couldn't.

My grandmother didn't disappear completely. She played games when the family coaxed her into doing so; she beat me at Yahtzee the last few times we played. My mother got her to read large-print books every so often; I don't know how much she remembered. Mostly, she just sat.

Her magical house decayed. The slide disappeared; so did the tree. The flowers died, the old structures collapsed, and the whole place grew weathered and worn.

We moved her from the dying house into a long-term facility. It was nice. The backyard played host to a family of squirrels – not a rarity here, but still noteworthy up north – and the area was quiet. She wanted to go home; she begged me and my mother to take her back. If I could have, I would have, but it wasn't safe, it wasn't feasible, it wasn't possible.

It was December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010, so I kissed her forehead on my way out, wished her a happy new year, held her hand the way I had in the forest so many years ago, told her I was still hers.

I celebrated New Year's with my father, then drove 400 miles back to Pasadena the next day.

On January 2<sup>nd</sup>, I sat down to grade my latest batch of essays, the ones I'd put off reading for the entire break because I knew my students hadn't really cared about writing them. School was set to start on the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

I made it through two papers before my phone rang.

And I knew.

-----

I walked, and walked, and walked. I told myself to walk until I cried. And I couldn't.

As I walked, the sky half-heartedly opened up, the way it's supposed to in those moments. The rain fell limply, warm and dirty, on my shoulders.

I walked until the raindrops stopped, then walked home.

And when January 3<sup>rd</sup> arrived, I drove to the high school, greeted my classes, and taught.

-----

My grandmother would have been 92 three weeks ago. I spent her birthday supervising the cross country team at a large, well-publicized invitational. She died before I became a head coach.

Every so often, I think of her, and subvocalize what I always used to say to her on my way out the door: *I'm still yours.*

I think about how little my life resembles the one I led when she knew me, when she loved me. I think about how little of me survived from my early twenties to now unchanged, and about how differently my life turned out than I thought and hoped it might.

I hope I'm still hers.

I hope my grandmother found what she believed she'd find, somewhere out there, on the other side of the sky.

And I hope she and Anna got a second chance.

-----

Both of my parents are starting to complain about memory problems.

Soon – hopefully not too soon – our roles will reverse once again, and it will be my turn to care for them.

I don't know how I'll do it.

#### **4. And My Next Words Could Be My Last –or– Together We Will Live Forever**

I want to be lucid, at least, when it's my time to go. But that's not something I can guarantee.

And I am terrified that far off, near the end of the line, I'll suffer from the same sorts of problems that felled my relatives. I fear that dementia, senility, or Alzheimer's will ravage my mind and leave my body barely functioning. I fear that my children and grandchildren will react the way I reacted to my grandmother's suffering, that their pain and fear at seeing me so reduced will keep them from me, and that I will be helpless to recover them, will lose them before I've lost them – that I will be abandoned by the people I love to face the things I fear the most alone.

There are things we adjust to as we grow older. Some of the things we treasure as children change and we also realize that the things we like doing as kids can grow less appropriate. We come to terms with the knowledge that liking something isn't enough to keep it the same forever. We understand that we can only enjoy something in a certain phase, or in a certain way, for so long.

Yet there are some things that seem to defy anticipation and preparation, regardless of whether you brace for them: everything from the degeneration of your body, senses, and (most horrifically) your mind to the inevitable loss of those you love and, ultimately, yourself. You can't stop these things. You can only hope to delay them, and even the actions you take to do so are futile in the end. These are the Unavoidable Things that lie along each life's road – or, in death's case, at the end of it. They almost seem impossible to face. But I know I'll face them someday, ready or not.

Honestly, I don't know how to even begin confronting the idea that a fate similar to my aunt's or my grandmother's could await me. I don't know how to steel myself for the moments when age begins stealing my mind from me. I don't know if I'll ever develop the personal strength or courage to face those things.

Sometimes, I pray I will, because I'm afraid I won't.

-----

In many ways, *Siddhartha* and *Gilgamesh* revolve around the ways in which one man faces (or refuses to face) what life brings. The books are also about the reasons why we let others into our lives; some of us can even keep our families at bay, while others let everyone and everything in.

You increase your vulnerability exponentially as you invest yourself in others' lives. If you keep to yourself, you can't be hurt (theoretically); if you love your family, you're placing your heart in a glass case under a sledgehammer. At some point, things break.

I'm fascinated by the degree to which Siddhartha compulsively divorces himself from those around him simply because he's scared of what he'll lose (them and, by extension, himself). But he does lose, over and over again. At some point, he loses track of what he's trying to keep, and he even loses himself. (It's counterintuitive: most people whose coin flips are determined by fears don't flip, but Siddhartha seems to be flipping because he's scared, not despite his fears.)

Gilgamesh walks an odder path. He isn't truly aware of what mortality entails in the beginning of his story, just as death remains an abstraction for me despite passing through my life every so often – the five kids I knew who never made it to twenty, my grandparents, Anna. Instead, he challenges Enkidu to follow him on an incredibly foolhardy venture, flipping the coin despite the fact both sides spell defeat for him, blindly trusting that fortune will smile on him anyway. When Death claims Enkidu instead, he responds by launching himself on a mad quest to seize godlike immortality for himself.

Siddhartha and Gilgamesh aren't any better at confronting the Unconfrontable than I fear I'll be, and they both come to pay a tremendous price. They're strong men who aren't strong enough to wrap their arms around their own worlds; stuff keeps slipping out.

Yet when they learn how to face the unavoidable things life brings, discovering with fitful steps how to do so – to expose themselves to pain, suffer, and endure – they finally benefit. Once they stop being afraid, everything calms down.



There's a tremendously valuable lesson in there, especially for a naturally-cautious person like myself. Some risks are obviously just too big to take. Yet if you never risk anything, if you cut yourself off from the things that can bring you joy and pain in equal measure, if you distance yourself from people and places just because you're scared to lose them...you may just be numbing yourself. And life is too short to be lived numbly.

I just have to be strong enough to live with feeling...for it may ultimately take more strength to endure love than anything else.

## **5. Let Us Rather Run the Risk –or– Everyone Can Raise Their Glass and Sing**

Soren Kierkegaard once said that “The greatest hazard of all – losing one’s self – can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss – an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc. – is sure to be noticed.” Well, I know that gut-wrenching feeling of loss, that moment when you become viscerally aware that your self is slipping away, that you are only in control of certain things, all too well. Perhaps that’s why I try so hard to control the things I can, and to live in a very specific way.

When I read *The Tipping Point*, I remember all of the times I failed my math tests, and remember how hard it was for me to resist the urge to cheat. I remember all of the times I passed beggars on the streets when I wasn’t even in a hurry. But I believed, and still believe, that the measure of a man lies in whether he can abide by his standards when no one’s watching him. And I remember handing my lunch to a homeless man in third grade because to do otherwise seemed unfathomable.

I am nowhere near perfect, but I do try to control the things I can. Sometimes, I wonder if that makes me more vulnerable to fearing the things I can’t, or to obsessing over what I can’t regain.

But if I pass on my present because I’m fixated on what I’ve lost forever, I run the risk of making Jake’s, and Siddhartha’s, and Gilgamesh’s great mistake. I run the risk of fulfilling Kierkegaard’s prophecy.

Instead, I hope I can heed Teddy Roosevelt’s words:

We are face to face with our destiny and we must meet it with a high and resolute courage. For us is the life of action, of strenuous performance of duty; let us live in the harness, striving mightily; let us rather run the risk of wearing out than rusting out.

I hope that, at the end of my days, I can look back, just as Gilgamesh looks back at the walled city that will outlive him, and see something. I hope I can face the end with the same courage that the world bestowed upon those incredible women who came before me. I hope I wear out before I rust out.

I hope I can look at all I’ve done, at my failures and triumphs, at the people I try to keep alive forever in my stories, and feel that my life meant something.

And I hope I can remember it all.

- 
- + Reflect on Kierkegaard's quote about losing one's self; it describes the middle sections of *Siddhartha* and *Gilgamesh* fairly accurately. How could someone lose themselves? Do you fear that will happen to you as you age, or do you feel like you'll keep track of yourself? (Will you do to your parents, heritage, culture, and past what Siddhartha did to his?)
  - + Are you primarily motivated by your hopes or your fears, your strengths or your weaknesses, what you have or what you want? What determines your willingness to take risks?
  - + What can cause you to welcome someone into your life? What can cause you to push them away? Would you ever avoid allowing someone to get close to you simply out of fear?
  - + Why is family worth the inevitable pain? Why are friends? What's so terrifying about facing life alone?
  - + Who are you most afraid of losing? Who's most afraid of losing you?
  - + Should we fear death, loss, and degeneration, or simply accept them as inevitable byproducts of living – the price of admission we all must pay?
  - + Is there a greater test in life than when we must face the Unavoidable or Unconfrontable Things – the things we cannot prevent, cannot avoid, and cannot defeat? How can one learn, over the course of a long, rich life, to handle those moments with grace instead of hatred, bitterness, or terror?
  - + Where can we look for answers to our questions if not in ourselves? (We know wisdom cannot be taught, but we also know that the wise share.) What's the most valuable lesson anyone's taught you? How did they do it?
  - + Which stories have you've encountered, or which experiences have you had, that have shaped your answers to these questions? Is there anything to find in literature or life that can help us grapple with them?

---

Blog Title: "Searching for a Former Clarity," Against Me!, *Searching for a Former Clarity*

Quotes on the First Page and Section Titles: Søren Kierkegaard, Jake Sisko, Lupe Fiasco, Bear vs. Shark, Bon Iver, Longwave, Frank Turner, Dear and the Headlights

---