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EWP Practicum
Prof. Pat Hoy

Assignment #4: Scene

Grief has avoided me, for the most part, and for that I am thankful. Yet within my heart festers a fear that someday it will arrive without warning, out of the blue, and a perfectly normal day will be shattered by the news that my life has irrevocably changed. I know this happens because it happened to a good friend of mine from high school a few years ago, out of the blue, without warning, and although he never told me those emotions I've seen them in his eyes.

That day was a perfectly normal day for most, and close enough for us high school pals, although we'd all been shaken by the news. Sailing up north in my father's minivan, joking and laughing, glad to share each other's company again, just like old times, except that this time we were older, grown men in fact, and we were off to sit *shiva* with Andy because his father died.

We were driving to Co-op City, an unremarkable block of brick buildings in the middle of nowhere north of New York City. Co-op City was always an abstraction to me; I knew Andy grew up there, and lived there until college, but I'd never visited. And now we were lost. Lost and late, and a good thing too, because I was terrified of what awaited us there -- covered mirrors, Andy's mother, Andy; death and tears and grief.

They were all there, all right. His mother smiled as soon as she saw us. "Oh, you lovely boys," she murmured, happy to see us again -- and then burst out crying. Someone held her hand and led her to the couch. Only a few lights were on, low fluorescents in the kitchen, Andy standing

there awkwardly amongst the cookies and celery stalks and dip, adjusting to the emptiness of a house full of strangers.

Walking in that door, seeing Andy there, lost, we didn't know how to mourn; it's one of those things you'll never understand until you have to, and thankfully it was something we'd all avoided. Instead, we did what we knew how to do; we laughed and joked and told bad jokes and laughed some more. I don't know whether we were trying to cope with that grief or avoid it, but it worked; for three hours, Andy was alive, unencumbered by the death that surrounded him.

In his book *Souls on Fire*, Elie Weisel relates a story told by the Chassidic sage Reb Nachman of Bratslav':

"Once upon a time there was a country that encompassed all the countries of the world. And in that country, there was a town that incorporated all the towns of the country; and in that town there was a street in which were gathered all the streets of the town; and on that street there was a house that sheltered all the houses of the street; and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a man, and that man personified all men of all countries, and that man laughed and laughed -- no one had ever laughed like that before."

And who was that man? asks Weisel, puzzled. He does not know.

But I have a guess. It was Andy; no, it is each of us, alone, when we are surrounded by a grief that seems to extend to the end of the world and back again, when, like Reb Nachman, we have nothing else to do but throw up our hands and revel in what Weisel calls a "laughter that springs from lucid and desperate awareness ... laughter of protest against the absurdities of existence, a laughter of revolt against a universe where man, whatever he may do, is condemned in advance."

I cannot imagine that in the same situation I would have that courage, but I hope that in the same situation I will have that courage. After all, grief is inevitable, avoiding no one, arriving without warning, and it seems the only sure way to mask or mend those shattered days is through a few hours of laughter, if you can only fight back the tears.