

Sandwiches  
by Daniel McMahon

On the other side of the light there's a car park.

I mean, it's quite a nice car park. As far as car parks go. Clean and new, lines marked in fresh yellow paint, the concrete all shiny grey. There's a row of pencil pines around the high brick walls, the tops swaying in the wind. Outside, trucks and traffic lights and life in general drone along. Inside there's an almost religious quiet.

Something goes beep and I whirl around. The light is gone but there's a fancy electronic gate rolling in its steel track across the driveway. Sealing me in here.

With these people. In the quiet I hear the chorus of whispers and turn back. There's a crowd of them - well not a crowd, maybe 15 in all - milling in the empty spaces. Clapping hands and nodding. Sharing brave smiles and making small talk and asking were they really allowed to park in here, oh they had no idea, nevermind they're just around the corner. Some of these people are carrying sandwiches. Some of them are crying.

And I know them. All of them. I'm whipping back and forth between the familiar faces and the sealed gate when they start to move. Shuffling into line. Beginning a long - well not long - procession along a curving path past a garden bed towards a columned entrance. Beside the entrance is a metal A-frame sign.

It says, in elaborately unnecessary curlicues, 'A CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE OF DAVID ROBERT HENDERSON'.

Okay then.

I, David Robert Henderson, remain in the car park with this information. It would explain the light, if not several other things. Outside the gate a bus goes by, farting smoke. Suddenly I feel myself filled with an immaculate love, a pure vibrating force that shoots out from the very centre of my being to connect with every place and time and molecule in creation.

Then it goes away and I'm me again. Bewildered and forgotten and vaguely annoyed. The train of mourners is disappearing through the entrance doors and I'm also late. For the one thing it should be physically impossible to be late for. I race up the driveway after them.

Inside it looks like all these places look.

Dignified blue carpet, distant couches and ferns, recessed wall lamps like even the furniture is trying to give you space. Not that I've seen many of these places to compare. I've been to two or three in my life, same as anyone. Like anyone, I avoid them unless I have no other choice.

The nervous milling people from the car park are now nervously milling in the vestibule, so that's progress. I circulate. Men in baggy suits, women in black slacks and cardigans. Teenagers in leather jackets and a toddler trailing from his mother's hand while he sticks the other in his quivering mouth. There's a man with a beard dripping tears on his specially polished shoes. He blinks at the skylight, praying for the strength to dry up.

"Uncle Greg?" I breathe, unheard.

It's him alright. Aunt Pam carries the sandwiches. Their grown kids are James and Harriet. My younger brother Kyle leads his wife Shoshana and the hand-chewing toddler, Oliver. There's Uncle Andrew and Aunt Tiffany with cousins Kay and Sophie. A few people from the office, Romesh and Other Dave and Erica, who's crying softly for me, nice. Then there's an old friend of the family named Delia and a fat man I've never seen who must be her partner.

And that's it.

I am simultaneously shocked by the low turnout and embarrassed by how much they care. Surely I know more people than this, though right now I can't think of any. Also I'm worried there won't be enough sandwiches to go around. Two medium trays, clearly store-bought. Aunt Pam sets them on a side table with the complementary water carafes for a truly biblical feast. If I died suddenly - which I must have even if I can't remember how - there wouldn't have been much time to pull this together. It would be extremely petty, not to mention pointless to get mad about it now.

Still.

"Ladies and gentlemen."

There's a clunk and sweep of double doors. A tall grey man appears, clapping his heels and palms together. His voice is as soothing and colourless as the water in the carafes.

"The service will commence shortly. If you would care to take your seats?"

Another procession. More awkward this time. People need to appear respectful but not eager. I slip somewhere into the middle of the line, between Aunt Tiffany and Delia. They share a brief sad rendezvous, so good to see you, oh god it's been so long and I am suddenly very glad to be invisible.

This might be the most painless family get-together I've attended in years.

We pass into a wide, low-ceilinged room. Row after row of function centre chairs mock me with their surplus. I'm busy staring at the far end of the aisle. Beneath the non-denominational altarpiece there's a long white box with chrome handles and a cascading flower arrangement on top. This box, if I understand correctly, contains my body.

The effect is so strange I can almost forgive whoever chose me a white casket.

Sobs echo. Deep rolling ones. Not from Erica or Uncle Greg or any of the others. The noise is coming from the front row, wafted on notes of organ music.

Even when I get close Mum looks very small. She and Dad are waiting together, in two chairs to the right of the casket, like they've camped out for the best spot. Mum is bent forward in a kind of crash position. Her shoulders bounce off her knees with each loud boohoo. Dad alternates between patting little circles on her back and fiddling with his tie.

This is all quite intense. I would wish I was somewhere else if I knew anything about the other places available.

The tall grey director floats up the aisle, waits respectfully for people to filter into their seats. Then he nods respectfully at the organist, who respectfully stops. When he steps aside Dad staggers to his feet, crosses to the lectern and grips it like it's the only thing holding him upright.

"Thanks everyone..." he coughs eight or nine times, "For being here. Amanda and I appreciate it. This is very hard but look... we're not here to be gloomy. It's not what David would have wanted."

I turn on the spot, unseen in front of them all, and I say, "Isn't it?"

"So I'm going to say a few words," says Dad, "Then a few of you will share some happy memories. Then we'd love you to stay for morning tea, and sign the guest book, which is just here with some of Dave's special things..."

He waves at a trestle table draped in white. Around a photograph of me they've built a little shrine. A school tie, a trumpet case, a football scarf in red, white and black. I haven't played the trumpet since school and I bought that scarf for Dad when I took him to a game but okay.

"One thing I'll miss about Dave," says Dad, "Is his sense of humour. I remember at my 60th..."

I crouch by the table, poring over my special things. A model aeroplane, a pen knife, a lopsided plush frog. Apparently I died at the age of twelve and I've just been wearing this body around in the thirty years since. That would explain a lot, actually.

"... but it was the same one he'd bought for my 50th, and he said 'I'll buy it again for your 70th' and we all laughed, didn't we? Remember that?"

There's a wet chuckle. I've noticed the ratty green canvas bag Mum brought all this stuff in, sticking out from beneath the draped white cloth, and I don't think I'm corporeal to shove it back under. I whisper, "That wasn't a joke," then for all it matters turn and announce to the room, "That wasn't a joke, Dad. You're very difficult to buy gifts for, alright?"

Nothing. Awkward silence and damp trusting eyes. Nobody found me this interesting when I was alive.

"I talked to Dave on the phone just last week..." Dad is struggling now, a plug in his throat, "Told him to take care and it's been too long and we should catch up, y'know. So this was just so sudden and unfair and... and..."

No good. The words back up behind the blockage and spill into a puddle at his feet. There's a commotion in the third row and Kyle is up, sidling into the aisle, coming to the rescue.

"Okay, Dad, you're okay..." he guides Dad back towards Mum and a lattice of consoling hands reaching over the rows. Kyle coughs. Maybe even squeezes out a tear of his own.

"Hey everyone. For those who don't know me I'm David's younger brother. Look, I'm just gonna say it. Dave was a weird guy."

People laugh. Genuine relieved cathartic laughs. Aunts and cousins and even my Mum snorting involuntarily into their fistfuls of tissue. How dare they take comfort in honesty. How dare they start to heal.

"He could be very distant," says Kyle, "Very particular. He didn't like to show his feelings or put himself out there. I mean, we couldn't even get him along to the hospital when Oscar was born..."

Oscar, right. Oscar, Oliver - whatever his name is he wriggles free of his mother and squeals mummy who daddy talking bout and everyone laughs harder and I resent a child for stealing my show.

"But..." Kyle smiles and recovers, "But we all saw how kind and considerate he could be as well, right? He had this generous streak. It took me two years to introduce him to Shoshana, but when she and I were studying overseas he bought our tickets home for Christmas, every year."

I charge at him, one trembling finger outthrust.

"That was a loan, Kyle! I tried to explain to you. Do you have any idea how many emails I wrote and deleted?"

He doesn't.

"I think Uncle Andrew is next with some funny stories, but..." Kyle wipes his eye and shrugs, "Dave... I'm sorry we weren't closer, mate. But I'll miss you. Wherever you are."

He won't. Not yet.

I'm only halfway back down the aisle.

It's difficult to stomp on this carpet. Either because I am now composed of ethereal matter, a being of pure energy, or because this is very nice carpet. Somewhere behind me Uncle Andrew starts doing material recycled from my 21st birthday party. The chapel doors come up fast. I reach for the handle and a sudden attack of metaphysics stops me dead.

Do I continue to exist outside of this room? Or this building? Please tell me I haven't been sent to forever haunt the car park, even if it is quite a nice one. Whether we're talking traditional theistic afterlife or basic ghost logic there must be a reason why I'm here. Some unfinished business.

So I turn back. I slouch into a chair in the very back row. There are still plenty spare.

Uncle Andrew has his jacket off and his sleeves rolled, pacing in front of my casket like when he MC'd my brother's wedding, "... bit of an odd duck, our David, wasn't he? Quiet, hardworking. Never married or had kids. Such a shame, I think he could have made someone very happy, just never met the right... girl? Boy? Honestly couldn't tell ya... anybody?"

Christ.

I look at Erica from the office, who I always meant to ask out and never did. Erica with her twist of dark red hair, which looks black from this distance. She tosses her head for a sparkly laugh and it occurs to me that my chances with her are about the same now as they were before.

"... now we're going to hear from Romesh, who worked with David for... blimey, was it ten years, Romesh?"

"Ten years, yes..."

Romesh is up, excusing himself past Erica, straightening a thick stack of A4 pages in his hands. I feel something like the opposite of the immaculate love I felt before, a suffocating inrush of every pleasant feeling in the universe retracting into a squelchy ball of hopelessness somewhere in my lower intestine.

"My boss?" I wail, "That's the best they can do?"

"Actually it is, Dave. You don't have to be such a prick about it."

The voice comes from the back row.

From the woman sitting next to me in the back row, where there was not a woman sitting before. Plus one to attendance, I suppose.

She's middle-aged, short and thickset, with wild grey hair and bright eyes. I've never seen her before but she could easily be another aunt. One of the eccentric ones I work extra hard to avoid contact with, because she lives a long way away, or because she likes to kiss-hello, or because she wears pink Hawaiian shirts and sandals and a collection of faded knuckle tattoos, like this woman does.

There are lots of questions I could ask at this point but luckily the most complicated is also the most obvious.

"Who are you?"

"Shh," she says, "I'm listening."

She points at Romesh, who squares up to the lectern, lays out his papers and smiles optimistically. I like Romesh. I liked my job and all the people I worked with and I like to think they liked me. I did not imagine my earthly legacy would be determined by the place where I opened spreadsheets and used the photocopier and kept my breakfast cereal.

"David..." says Romesh, "Was quite simply the best Claims Support Officer our department ever had."

"Senior Claims Support Officer!" I yell.

"Dave," says the woman, "Please don't heckle at your own funeral."

"They can't hear me anyway, right? Besides, this isn't a funeral, it's a performance review."

"Whatever you want to call it. This isn't for you. It's for others to process their feelings. Achieve a degree of closure."

"So long as they don't expect to achieve a decent lunch."

"These people loved you. Though I'm starting to wonder why."

I scoff, "Is that why I'm here? To learn a lesson about taking things for granted? To see what the world will be like without me?"

The woman turns.

Her bright eyes are a fathomless cerulean blue. With a single cocked eyebrow, the tiniest twitch of a lip, the flaring of one nostril she conjures a look of disdain that could level mountains. It hits me like a thunderbolt made of pity. I flinch and recoil into the next empty chair along.

"The world will be mostly the same, Dave," she says, "You learn whatever lesson you like. Now, can I listen?"

And she turns back to watch. We both do.

Romesh is on page four, "... another thing about David is that he was wonderful in the office kitchen. Without being asked he would wash the coffee cups, organise the fridge. It's funny, you know, we only noticed when he went on holiday for two weeks in August of that year..."

I feel the immaculate love again. My body is a loose collection of dust particles whirling through space, a whisper in the continuum that forms everything from the tiniest flower to the mightiest sun and it's so very beautiful I can't even begin to comprehend.

Then it goes away and I remain. My lower lip starts to shake. My eyes bulge and I squeeze them shut.

"I can't go back," I say, "Can I."

"Sure you can."

I scramble across seats again. She looks at me like I'm stupid. Which, at this particular moment, I am.

"Wait, what?"

"You can go back. Who do you think I am, Dave? Why else would I bring you here?"

I goggle. I flail. I do any number of things except what I'm trying to do, which is form the words how what yes yes please I'll do anything.

The woman heaves a sigh. Perhaps the longest suffering of all long-suffering sighs, born of exasperated millennia. She tilts her chair back and props her sandalled feet on the one in front. The faded purple knuckle tattoos clap over her face and drag across weary bloodshot eyes.

"Everyone gets to do this. Everyone gets to attend their own. For most people it's a sublime consummation of all the emotions and experiences they knew in life. I'm sorry you don't seem to be enjoying yours."

"I... I'm sorry," I gulp down enough of my tongue to speak, "I'm not a bad person, I just --"

"Wasn't much of a person at all. You didn't try, or seek, or take risks or feel things. You thought life would come and find you before death did."

"Well... yes."

Her eyerolls are like two blue planets arcing through the heavens.

"A lot of people think that. That's why I built in this failsafe. We just take some of that fundamental life force and return you to the moment of your birth. Fully aware of everything, your previous life, even this conversation. You can start again, older and wiser. Do things right this time."

I stop flailing. In fact I stop breathing.

"How... how come we've never heard about this?"

"Because nobody has ever done it."

"Chosen to go back?"

"Yes."

"Why not?"

"Well, it takes quite a lot of life force to return someone in their original matter. And that has to come from somewhere. So if you go back, a certain number of people - say, one hundred - don't get to be born. Never even begin their journey. So people don't do that. They're happy to pass on."

Instead of breathing, I frown. My moment of transcendence has to wait for another exercise in pedantry.

"You're saying every single person, in all of human history, has been given the choice to live a new life by killing a hundred unborn babies?"

"Pretty much."

"And not one person has done it?"

"Not one."

"What about thieves? Murderers? Dictators? "

"They're evil people, Dave. I skip them. I'm not an idiot."

I laugh, although it's really more like a miniature panic attack, a high-frequency sound burst. Whatever is inside my chest is beating very fast. I look desperately around the room for guidance, like my Aunt Tiffany might know more about the nature of reality than the woman I'm talking to. Anyway, Aunt Tiffany is shifting in her chair, sniffing around, politely wondering when the service might be over.

"You... you said 'pass on'. Wherever we pass on to must be pretty great, right?"

"It's more conceptual than that. I can't really explain it."

"But going back is a completely valid option, right? I mean there aren't... consequences?"

"What kind of consequences?"

"You know. Eternal damnation. Extinction of the soul."

"Nope, nothing like that. Well, not for you."

"And... you don't influence this decision in any way? You're not going to tell me what to do? Or... stop me?"

She shrugs, "I'm not your boss, Dave. He is."

We both turn to the front of the room again. Romesh is on page six or seven now, telling the story of the one and only time everyone in our office went out to karaoke and I refused point blank to participate in even a single song.

"... that was David to me. Along for the party but never the centre of it, you know? I tried to get him out of his shell. For instance, this previous September I asked him to run an inter-departmental workshop --"

"Heeeyyyy!"

Uncle Greg is the hero this time. Leaping up from the front row, clapping Romesh on the back. His eyes are still damp but his beard hides a big thankful grin.

"Let's save these stories for morning tea, shall we? Darren and Amanda, what do you think?"

Mum and Dad nod.

And like that, it's over.

The mourners are on their feet and in the aisle before the organist can even shake out her fingers. The tall grey director swoops in to give her the order and she plays the final hymn prestissimo. Aunt Pam hugs my Dad, Kyle hugs Aunt Tiffany, cousins Kay and Sophie and Harriet all hug each other. Even Delia's fat anonymous boyfriend finds solace in someone's waiting arms.

They file past me. Heads held higher, already chatting more brightly. Oliver, Oscar whatever his name is falls on the floor in a giggling fit and they all step over with indulgent smiles until he's scooped up. New life takes the place of old. This is the apex of my significance, the most I will ever mean to them. I will only diminish from here.

Mum and Dad come last. Arms around each other, bearing the guest book and their misplaced memories of me in a ratty green canvas bag. Marching boldly down the aisle into a future without me in it.

I stumble up and after them. Through the open chapel doors I watch them welcomed into the bosom of morning tea. People are taking serviettes and rushing the sandwiches. Negotiating over ham cheese tomato and egg mayo and the weird one with onion. One of the trays is already empty. A thin blank sheet of crumpled paper strewn with bitter leafy garnish.

Much like me.

"What'll it be, Dave?"

I turn back.

The woman is standing there, five foot nothing, her Hawaiian shirt glowing sunset pink against the backdrop of my casket. She wipes a knuckle tattoo across her nose. Kicks off one sandal and shakes a rock out of it.

One last time, I feel the immaculate love. There is no death, no fear or suffering, merely states of consciousness rising to a celestial sphere so far it cannot be reckoned, so near we could reach out and touch it if we only knew how. Figuring out how is quite difficult right now because a loud voice inside my head is saying send me back send me back I'll do better or maybe make all the same mistakes again I don't care just please please God send me back.

"So," I clear my throat, "When you say a hundred unborn babies..."