The Eulogy Business

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The first time I made someone cry for money, I was twenty-two and hungover, sitting cross-legged on my mum's laundry tiles with a Bic pen and a half-eaten sausage roll. It was a eulogy for a man I'd never met – a butcher named Stan with gout, three daughters, and an "infectious laugh." I wrote it in twenty minutes and charged two hundred bucks.

The middle daughter cried during the second paragraph. Ugly cry, too. Afterward, she thanked me like I'd brought her dad back to life for one last hug.

That's when I knew I was good at this. That, or I was going to hell.

I didn't keep doing it for the cash. Not really.

The money was nice – quick, clean, no taxes. But what hooked me was this one bloke.

After I read the eulogy for his mum – something about her hands smelling like jasmine and Jif – he pulled me aside and said, "You said what I couldn't. Like you reached in and found it."

He looked at me like I'd done magic.

Like I'd cracked open his grief and poured it back in with better lighting.

That scared me.

I'd always thought I was making things up – fiction with a funeral dress code. But maybe fiction was the only way they could finally tell the truth.

That’s what made it addictive.

The idea that I could write someone into being remembered the right way.

That I could clean them up, frame them nicely, and hand them back to their people.

Not perfect.

But palatable.

The bit that made her break? A line I made up about Stan peeling oranges at half-time and calling everyone “champ.” It just came out of nowhere. One of those clean little paragraphs I could pull from nothing.

After the funeral, she hugged me like I’d conjured a ghost. I went home and vomited in the garden. Not because of the job – because of the goon I’d drunk the night before – but still, poetic.

I should’ve been a writer. Like, a real one. Novels, short stories, shit like that. I had a folder full of stuff when I was seventeen – poems, scenes, half a screenplay. Mum called it “your paper fantasy.” My old man said, “What the hell are you gonna do with that? Print money with your feelings?”

Then he died. Heart attack in the garage. And suddenly I was “the man of the house,” like some pre-rolled destiny you get handed with the death certificate. So I stopped writing. Started working. Uni went out the window. I sold tyres for a bit. Did a Cert III in something I didn’t finish. Paid the rent. Paid the bills. Didn’t complain. Not out loud. But the words didn’t leave. They just got weird. Moved underground. And when I realised I could sell them – sell the grief-shaped ones, the clean little paragraphs that made strangers cry – it felt like cheating. Or resurrection. Or both.

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You can sell grief like furniture. You just have to know where the soft spots are.

That's what I tell myself when I open my email each morning: grief, boxed and ready to go. People don't want the truth. Not really. They want the story they can live with. The nice, pillowed version of the past – not the sharp edge of how things actually were.

That's where I come in.

I charge $200 for a standard package – $350 if they want it in 24 hours. Add $50 if they want something "more poetic" or "a bit religious" or "like the one from The Notebook."

I've had it all.

The jobs come in through word of mouth mostly – cousins of cousins, old teachers, one weird goth chick from TAFE who handed out my number at her nan's funeral. I don't advertise, not really. Just a Gumtree ad under "creative services" that reads:

Need a Eulogy? Ghostwriter Available. No Judgment. Quick Turnaround. Reasonable Rates.

Sometimes I wonder if that's the most honest sentence I've ever written.

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My mum still lives in the same brick shoebox on Welbourne Street, three houses from the corner deli and directly across from a bloke named Vince who once threatened to call the council over our lemon tree. I was six when we moved in. The paint's bubbled,

the letterbox leans like a drunk uncle, and there's always a pair of size 11 thongs on the porch that don't belong to anyone.

We're Lebanese Maronite on Mum's side. My dad was Maltese but never talked about it – said the past was "too European." Mum keeps every bill, warranty, and grocery receipt in a floral tin that used to hold butter cookies. Every cupboard door creaks. Every shelf holds something breakable and Catholic.

My cousin Mazen sleeps on the foldout in the study. He's in between jobs – again – but insists he's "just taking a break before crypto rebounds." The only thing he invests in is UberEats.

Every night, Mum cooks like she's still feeding six people. Sambousek, baked kibbeh, rice with slivered almonds, stewed green beans with lamb that falls apart like memory. Half of it ends up in foil for the neighbours, the rest in plastic tubs for tomorrow. Our fridge is a map of other people's lives – school notices from families Mum babysat for, a charity calendar with a donkey on it, faded photo of my dad at the grill wearing an apron that says Chef of the House, King of the Couch.

When the eulogy jobs started picking up, Mum just shook her head and muttered, "Ya Allah, from all the jobs in the world…"

But when the payments came in, and she saw I could cover the bills on time, she changed her tune. Now she leaves clippings from The Advertiser on the table: obituaries with circles drawn around the names. Sometimes just a star, no explanation.

***

There are stories you can tell straight, and stories you have to edge sideways.

Job #1 – Lina's Teta

The first job that week is from Lina, a woman in her forties with hair like a steel sponge and eyes that could slice a brick. Her grandmother's died – a proper Lebanese matriarch, ninety-two, nine kids, hundreds of grandkids, "queen of the kousa," Lina says proudly. She doesn't want the usual wail and incense routine. Wants it "classy," like something you'd hear in parliament.

We meet in the food court at Castle Plaza. She brings a folder – printed emails from the family group chat, a list of "things not to mention" (gambling, the police incident, that cousin who moved to Perth), and a photo of her Teta standing in front of a Hills Hoist in a black dress, holding a shotgun.

"I need it to make people cry," Lina says, biting into a falafel wrap, "but not, like, too cry. Just enough that they feel guilty about not visiting more."

I deliver the eulogy two days later. It opens with a line about how "some women bake love into bread – Teta loaded it into a .22 rifle." Lina texts me a crying emoji and a fist bump. Sends an e-transfer and a voice message that just says:

"You're a fuckin poet, habibi."

***

Job #2 – Darren's Dad

Next up's a bloke called Darren who rocks up to the servo where my cousin works and leaves a printed letter in a Hungry Jack's bag. No email, no call. Just the note and two crumpled fifties.

His dad, he writes, was "a hard man." No quotes around it. Just a hard man. Worked the same meat-packing job for thirty-eight years. Never said "I love you." Never said much of anything.

He wants the eulogy short. Direct. Like a punch.

He showed us love in the way he taught us to reverse a trailer. In the way he always checked the oil before a long drive. In the way he sat outside during thunderstorms, drinking tea and saying nothing. He was a hard man. And we were lucky to know him.

I never hear back from Darren. No thank you, no complaint. Just silence. Like father, like son, I guess.

***

Job #3 – Grace (15), Editing Request
Grace is the one who shakes me up a bit.

Fifteen. Lost her mum. Wants to write something herself, but her teacher says it needs "polishing."

She sends me a Google Doc with pink font and smiley face emojis and a line that reads:

"Mum was my sky and my bones and my favourite taste."

I stare at it for ten minutes. Don't touch a word. I send it back with a subject line that just says:
"Perfect. Read it loud and slow."

She replies
"Thank u. I didn't want it to sound like a grown-up."

It doesn't. It sounds like heartbreak in a girl's handwriting. I cry in the Coles car park.

Ugly cry, too.

I don’t charge her.

***

Job #4 – Mr. Dinh

I met the Dinh family at a folding table under a carport in Woodville North, two streets from the train line, where the jasmine was thick enough to make your teeth ache. Their dad had passed – former ARVN soldier, came over in ’79 on a boat that he refused to talk about. Ever.

His youngest son, Henry, spoke the most. Wanted something dignified

“He was strict, but he sacrificed everything for us,” he said

The eldest daughter sat with her arms crossed, eyes hard. She hadn’t spoken to her father in eight years.

“Tell the truth,” she said. “He scared us. He made everything heavy.”

The mother just poured tea.

I wrote two versions – one soft, one raw. Gave them both. Told them to choose.

They spliced them. Picked from each. I heard it read later, and it sounded like a family forgiving itself.

***

Job #5 – Ava and Belle

Belle emailed me three sentences. Her partner Ava had passed. Cancer. Mid-thirties. Wanted a eulogy that sounded “like her – bit bogan, bit poetic. Swore too much. Made killer lasagna.”

They’d been together since 2014. No kids. One dog. Matching tattoos.

Belle didn’t want to read it herself. Asked her sister to. I sat in the back of that service in Port Adelaide, near the exit, listening to a woman in a pantsuit say:

“She was the first person who ever made me feel like being seen wasn’t the same as being judged.”

And I thought: this is what we’re here for. This is why we speak

***

Some days it feels holy. Other days it feels like scamming grief out of strangers.

There was a woman once – maybe early fifties, hair like wet steel wool – whose husband had died after a long cancer thing. She sent me all the details, every little thing, right down to the kind of slippers he wore in the hospital.

I sent her back a draft. One of my better ones, I thought. Beautiful. Clean. Story-shaped.

She replied with three words:

“This isn’t him.”

Then a second email:

“This is what you think grief should sound like. But it’s not ours. It’s yours.”

I didn’t reply. Just filed her message into a folder on my desktop called Cold Water.

I read it sometimes when I start to believe my own rhythm too much.

Sometimes I wonder if she was right. If all I’ve done is get good at dressing my own wounds in someone else’s language.

If I’m not a writer – just a grief leech with spellcheck.

But it pays. It pays better than tyres, or call centres, or retail. It lets me buy Mum groceries, put petrol in the Corolla, give the illusion I’ve made something of myself.

“Your cousin became a dentist. You write sad stories for dead people,” she says, not unkindly, just as a fact.

Sometimes I wonder what my dad would’ve said, if he’d lived to see this. If he’d heard one of the eulogies and said:

That one sounded real.

Then again, he didn’t believe in poetry. Said it was just “feelings dressed up to beg.”

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[EXCERPT FROM DRAFT #1 FOR JOB #6 WHO LOST BOTH GRANDPARENTS]

Grief is a house we move into without furniture. We learn to sit on the floor with it.

He smelled like Brylcreem and eucalyptus. And when he laughed, the dog barked too, like they shared a joke.

Her hands made fifty thousand sandwiches, but the one I remember is the last one – tomato and butter on white bread, cut into four like she did when I was sick.

***

I'm halfway through Job #7 – a bloke named Nick who apparently had "no enemies" and "loved gardening" – when the email hits my inbox.

Subject line: Eulogy Request – Elias Haddad

My fingers stop.

My chest tightens like someone's yanked my ribs from the inside.

I know that name.

fuck me.

Everyone in the community knew that name

Elias fucking Haddad.

Growing up first-gen Aussie, I got teased for everything – my name, my nose, my funny-smelling lunch.

Suck shit, you guys can keep your soggy sangas and cold sausages. I had mujaddara, fatteh, bamia that steamed up my Tupperware like a small, fragrant bomb

But *I* was the weird one.

Still – you cop it. You shrink yourself down until you're palatable, until the boys stop calling you "Ali Baba" in PE and just let you kick the footy. You learn which parts to cut off to fit in.

But Elias?

He never shrunk.

He wore gold rings and loud shirts. He parked his dusty ute on the curb like he owned every road. Always chewing gum, always talking too loud at the kebab shop, always calling people "cousin" like we were all on his payroll.

My mum used to say, "That man's pride is bigger than his debt."

She didn't say it with admiration.

And my dad –

My dad used to look at Elias like he'd just stepped in something sticky.

***

I remember the garage two nights before my dad died.

The hot stink of oil and lawnmower clippings.

My old man's shoulders hunched over the Corolla engine. A busted alternator. He refused to take it to a mechanic. Said they overcharged and "treat us like idiots." Said he could fix it himself.

Then Elias pulled into the driveway.

No knock. Just that big dumb grin and a slab of Pepsi under his arm.

They argued in low voices – well, Dad's voice was low. Elias always had one volume. I stayed out of sight, perched on the laundry step, half hoping they wouldn't notice me.

"Just pay me back when you can, ya habib," Elias said, all charm and cologne.

My dad didn't even look up from the engine.

"It's not about the money," he snapped. "It's about you always showing up when you smell weakness."

That wasn't the first time they'd had this argument.

Elias had borrowed tools, borrowed time, borrowed face – always giving it back with a grin and a "Don't worry, cousin."

But my dad hated that. Hated owing. Hated looking like he owed.

Elias had once talked him into co-signing a loan for a dodgy import business – vacuum parts, I think. It tanked. My dad ended up paying off most of it (largely why we still rent the house instead of owning it), and Elias just moved on, flashing teeth and acting like nothing happened.

I think that's when my dad stopped trusting people who smiled too easily

I couldn't hear the rest. But when Elias left, my dad kicked a bucket across the garage.

Bolts scattered across the concrete like teeth.

He died two days later.

***

I open the email.

Hi – I was referred by Lina. My father passed away this week. I'm not ready to write anything but my family wants someone to speak. Can you help?
His name was Elias Haddad.

No signature. No number. Just that.

I close the laptop. My hands are shaking.

For a second, I want to delete the email. Pretend I never saw it. Let someone else write this one – let the man rot in silence. But then I think of the daughter. A stranger.

Someone stuck holding the silence Elias left behind, just like I was.

And something cruel and old in me whispers:

Maybe this is how you get even.

So I hit reply.

Yes. I can help. What did you love about him?

***

Some people carry grief like a candle. Some wear it like cologne. Elias Haddad carried it like a medal he'd pinned on himself.

I write that line, then delete it.

Too lyrical. Too honest. Too much of me.

I try again.

Elias Haddad was a man of strength and loyalty. He was known and loved in his community…

I stop.

I hate it. I hate the rhythm of it – the obituary rhythm, like it's been photocopied from a thousand other speeches.

"Known and loved"?

He was known, yeah. But loved?

I open a new draft and start plugging in the usual scaffolding:

- Childhood story
- Favourite saying
- One brave or funny anecdote
- Something poetic to close

I try to remember how he used to laugh – this wet, slapping laugh like a guy who'd swallowed a drum.

I type it out, then sit back. My neck feels tight. My jaw aches. It's like my body's trying to keep the truth from leaking out.

This is the first time the words won't come right.

Usually they pour out, clean as a sermon.

This time it’s like chiselling through concrete with a teaspoon.

***

It hits me:

My dad never had a eulogy.

No one wrote one. No one read anything

The priest – some bored bloke from Maronite Services – just said the usual phrases.

Dust to dust. Mercy and light.

It was a Tuesday. The church smelt like bleach and lilies

I remember standing in the pew, fists clenched, throat raw from not screaming.

I’d written a few lines. Just a paragraph. But my uncle grabbed my wrist before I stood up

“Not the time,” he whispered. “Be strong. Be the man now.”

So I folded the page back into my pocket.

Burned it two weeks later in the Weber.

***

Now I’ve got two tabs open.

One says: Eulogy – Elias Haddad

The other: Untitled Document

I click into the untitled one.

Type slowly.

My father fixed everything except himself.

He didn't talk much, but when he did, it was worth hearing

He died on a Monday night with oil on his hands and a job half-finished.

My hands go still.

The cursor blinks.

I blink with it.

For a second, I can hear him – the way he used to clear his throat before speaking. The way he'd pause in the garage doorway before telling me to get the fuck out of the rain.

I realise I've been waiting eight years to write this.

I also realise I'm not writing it for anyone but me.

***

Mum's awake in the kitchen, drinking tea and sorting receipts like they might confess something new if she reshuffles them just right.

"Another job?" she asks.

I nod.

She doesn't ask for details. She never does.

Then:

"Your father would've liked that you do this. Even if he'd never say it."

I look at her. Her face is tired, but not soft.

"He was proud of you, you know. He just didn't know how to show it."

I want to believe her.

But I also remember the way he shook his head the day I brought home a poetry prize.

"That's not a job," he'd said. "That's a hobby for sad people with no future."

***

The deadline's in two days. The daughter still hasn't responded with any details.

I reread what I've got:

Elias Haddad was a man of strength and loyalty…
I delete it. Again.

Then I try something else.

He was not an easy man to love, but he was impossible to ignore.
He filled every room like a second sun – too bright, too loud, too close.
He gave, and he owed. He remembered every birthday but forgot every apology.
He was a father, a friend, a debt collector, a storyteller, a pain in the arse, a legend.
He was not perfect. But he was ours.

I sit back.

It's not kind. But it's not cruel either.

It's honest, in the way grief sometimes is after the first punch of it fades.

I save it as "Draft One."

***

We meet at a Gloria Jean's next to a tyre place – the kind of Adelaide shopping strip where hope comes to launder itself through bubble tea and chain bakeries.

She's already there, black dress, sunglasses on, even though it's overcast.

Late twenties, maybe. Hair tied back in a bun that says: I've held this family together for years.

I recognise her instantly – not from photos.

From the eyes.

Same as his.

Sharp, dark, unblinking.

“You’re the writer?” she asks.

“That’s me,” I say. “Thanks for meeting.”

She orders a soy flat white and doesn’t ask if I want anything.

I respect that.

***

We sit outside. I hand her the draft – printed, double spaced. She flips through the first page, the second, her thumb pausing where I’ve written:

He was not an easy man to love, but he was impossible to ignore.

She lets out a breath. Not quite a laugh. Not quite a sob.

“That’s… good,” she says. “Too good.”

“Too good?”

“You make him sound like someone I could forgive.”

“Is that bad?”

“I don’t know yet.”

She flips back to the start and frowns.

“This bit about the Corolla – where’s that from?”
“What?

“The line. About how he used to fix cars at night with the garage door open. That wasn’t in the notes.”

Shit.

I cover too fast.

“Sorry – that was in the research I did. I checked with some people.”

“What people?”

“Mutual contacts. From the neighbourhood.”

“What neighbourhood?”

“South Plympton.”

There it is – the flicker in her jaw.

“We lived in St Marys.”

Silence.

Tight. Cold.

“How did you know him?” she asks.

Not if I knew him.

How.

She already knows.

I look down. The words aren't there

"My dad and Elias… they were close. For a while."

"Right."

"He used to come around. I was a kid.

"So you lied."

"I didn't –"

"You let me think you were just a writer. Not someone with skin in the game."

She's not yelling. She's not crying. She's worse – calm.

"Did you write this for me? Or for yourself?"

"I wrote it for him."

"Bullshit."

"I wrote it for the truth.

"Oh yeah? Whose truth?"

She stands up. Pushes the pages back across the table.

“You’re just like him,” she says.

“What?

“You use people’s pain to tell your own story.”

Then she leaves.

No thank you. No goodbye

Just that.

***

I sit there for twenty minutes after she’s gone.

The flat white goes cold. A magpie hops around under the table like it’s waiting for me to feed it a metaphor

I fold the pages. Put them in my bag. Walk to the car.

I don’t start it straight away. Just sit with my hands on the wheel.

The line comes back:

You’re just like him.

And the part that really stings?

She might be right.

***

I go to the funeral.

I don’t tell anyone. Don’t RSVP. Just rock up in a black shirt that doesn’t quite fit and shoes with a crack in the sole.

It’s at the Lebanese Maronite church on Goodwood Road – same one where they buried my old man.

Same lilies. Same priest.

Different silence.

I sit in the back row.

No one recognises me.

Or maybe they do and just don’t say anything.

It’s that kind of silence

Heavy with things we all chose not to say.

***

The priest does the same routine I’ve heard a hundred times.

Dust to dust. Mercy and light.

Then calls up the family

She walks up alone.

No notes. No paper. Just her.

“My father was not a saint,” she says.

“He was loud. He was hard. He owed people things he couldn’t give back.”

“But he loved with the full force of himself. He loved like a storm. He loved badly, sometimes. But he never stopped.”

She pauses. Looks out at the pews. At the crowd that’s not quite crying.

“He didn’t apologise much. And he didn’t say goodbye.”

“So maybe this is mine.”

She looks down.

“I loved him. Even when I didn’t want to.

That’s it.

She nods to the priest. Walks back to her seat.

No polish. No metaphor.

But fuck me, it hit like gospel.

I finally understood – she hadn't hired me for the words.

She'd hired me to grant permission.

To make it okay to say her father wasn't perfect. To stand in a room full of mourners and speak with her own voice, not some polished version of his.

She didn't need poetry. She needed release.

And when she saw that I couldn't separate my pain from hers, she took it back.

Good.

She deserved that.

***

I don't stay for the mezze in the hall.

Don't shake hands. Don't smile at old neighbours.

I slip out the side gate and walk down Goodwood Road like I'm seventeen again, skipping school, burning daylight for no good reason.

The city feels too loud. Too sunlit.

I walk past the servo. Past the Hungry Jack's. Past the spots I used to know by heart.

Outside the IGA, I see Mr. Spiteri – my Year 10 English teacher.

Still thin, still wearing boat shoes.

He doesn’t see me.

Or he does, and doesn’t place me.

Or he does, and doesn’t say anything.

I don’t wave.

Just keep walking.

There’s a mural near the old deli.

Faded paint.

It used to say: YOU BELONG HERE

Now it just says: BELONG.

That feels closer to the truth.

I stop at a servo. Buy a sausage roll.

Sit on the bonnet of my car.

The pastry flakes in the wind.

Somewhere, a magpie sings like it’s warning someone.

***

I open my laptop.

One tab. No distractions.

Just a blank page.

At the top, I type:

Eulogy – My Father

Then I breathe, once, and begin.

My father fixed everything except himself.

He taught me to trust my hands, not my words – but he left me both, even if he didn't mean to.

He smoked too much, talked too little, loved like it was a private hobby.

He believed in full tanks, spare batteries, clean tools. In WD-40 and silence.

He taught me how to bleed a radiator, patch a tyre, seal a cardboard box. He called that love.

He never said he was proud of me. But once, after I fixed Mum's sink without asking, he gave me a look and a nod. That was his speech.

He died with a job half-finished and a home full of noise.

He left silence behind. But also: steadiness, and spine.

This isn't to forgive him. It's just to remember him. As he was. And as I carry him now.

Not perfect. But mine.

He didn't say goodbye. So maybe this is mine.

I print it out

Fold it once, clean down the centre.

Slide it into the envelope I've kept since the funeral – the one with the priest's program, the condolence card from Dad's cousin in Sydney, the photo of him holding a drill and smirking like he knew everything and nothing at once.

I don't show Mum.

I don't show anyone.

I just tuck it into the top drawer of my desk.

Not to share.

Not to sell.

Just to have.

The words didn't bring him back.

But they stayed.

That was enough.