

A Transcript of Several Recordings

by William Northrup

So anyway, your mother wants me to make these tapes for you so you can get to know me. She saw a movie about a guy who did this. I told her this wasn't necessary, but you know how she gets. She kept bringing it up, telling me that the guys at the group kept telling her they were glad they'd done it, that the survivors all found these kinds of things very useful and stuff. By the way, I hate that term. I mean, seriously, it makes it seem like living with me was an ordeal or something. The guy who runs that group is taking therapy advice from a movie? I don't go to the meetings. I went to one. They're a bunch of people feeling sorry. Plus, I don't want to see some of those guys and all their tubes and bags and whatnot. Really, it's gross. Those guys are falling apart.

I don't know what I'm supposed to be telling you. Your mother told me to say whatever it is I think you'd want to know about me. She and I haven't really agreed on some important facts about these tapes. You see, I want you to know about the existence of the tapes but not be able to watch them until you're older. I feel like it'll be something to look forward to, and that this envelope will create mystery, but she thinks it's kind of cruel and that we should really just give these tapes to you when you're old enough, without any kind of suspense or build up. How old you're going to be is also up for debate. It's kind of hard talking to you when I don't know whether you're ten, or fifteen, or tonight's your graduation. One thing she did promise me was that these tapes are just between the two of us. You can, of course, decide to share them. I won't be there to stop you. Still, give it some thought. I mean maybe some of it won't be bad to show your mother, but I have no idea what'll be going on with her then and how much she'll be interested in what I have to say. Still, maybe she couldn't resist, and she's watching this now. Okay, just in case she didn't watch this, don't share the first tape with her. This one's just for us. Agreed? And Sarah, if you did watch this, you'll know that our boy withheld the first tape. I can't say I blame you; I'd watch your tape, too. Of course, I don't know you, and maybe you and

your mother are both watching this tape. I suppose it doesn't much matter.

I don't know what your reality is. What's your name? Your mother and I haven't figured that out yet. We weren't even going to know your gender, but then this whole thing came up. By the way, if you're ever interested in a real low effort job, ultrasound technician. Seriously, they rub some goop on a girl. That's all they do. I don't know where you're living. Are you in this house? You might even be in here. Maybe this room has been remodeled and looks nothing like this.

I have so many concerns about this tape. I'm desperately trying to avoid any kind of slang that'll date it, and I chose clothes that don't really scream any kind of era. So I'm trying to guess what it is you'd like to know about me that your mother couldn't just go ahead and tell you. I mean, she knows me, knows my family, knows where I went to school. I bet she can still give you a sense of my personality. Also, I don't want to use these things as some kind of confessional. We might have met. A lot of people go years longer than they're supposed to. I don't know.

Really, a lot of your life you're going to think that someone is screwing with you. They are. Really. People screw with you all the time. It doesn't matter where you are, what you're doing, or whom you're with. Someone there is screwing with you. They will do stuff just to make your life a little worse. Like for instance, there's this intersection nearby. If you still live here, I'm sure you'll know it very well. It's Methuen Street. Cars pull up to the end of our street wanting to turn onto Methuen, and the damned drivers, instead of coming to a stop, will cut the wheel. They need to get a head start on the turn, right? So these guys make your left turn onto Humphrey Street nearly impossible, and they're doing it on purpose; they're making you stop so you'll have to let them out, because they're really important and have some really god damned monumental stuff they need to get to. Son, every time you can, drive around them. Don't let them out. Make those pricks wait like they're supposed to. You know what the worst part of it is? This guy today had the nerve to flip me off, like I'd done something wrong by not letting him go. It's my right of way. Mine. So what I'm getting at here is: you can't let people screw with you.

My doctor has his way. Oh, he's a smooth guy, but even he's just like every one else. So, on one hand, this guy says there's nothing that can be done, right? And then, he starts talking about therapies and treatment options and clinical trials. But, there's nothing that can be done, but he'd really like to start treating me soon. The doctor doesn't push, ever. He'll

never insist. This guy makes it perfectly clear with his med school trained blank face and reassuring head tilt, that he thinks you really should go ahead and give every fucking thing a shot. I'm sorry. I just can't hold this in. You are not to talk like me ever. Now, I asked him what he'd do if he were in my situation. And do you know what this guy said to me, his first reaction? "I'm not in your situation, and each person has to make up their mind." It was then I knew he was a dipshit, one of those P.C. fucks using a plural possessive for a singular antecedent. Sorry, now I sound like a prick, but this doctor was screwing with me. He and his buddies are going to make me swallow all kinds of stuff that's not going to work so they can bill my insurance.

And you want to know what the worst part of this is? You and I are also people who will screw with other people. That's the saddest thing. Sometimes, you won't even know you're doing it. Other times, you'll think you're entitled. Like calling in sick when you're not sick. You'll maybe call it a mental health day, but you'll tell your boss something different, and that guy might wind up getting stuck doing his job *and* yours, if he can't find anyone to cover for you. I mean, what's the big deal? Everyone does it, right? It's wrong, but if you're like I was back in the day, you'll do this kind of thing at least once every couple of months. Most of the people you screw with, however, will be those poor people you think are beneath you. Most of the time it'll be unconscious, but there'll be some times when you'll be a real dick. Like let's say you and your buddies go on some kind of road trip, there's drinking involved, and you've had too much. So you signal for the driver to pull over. He spots a gas station up ahead and pulls you and your buddies into one of the spaces. You make it to the curb of the little sidewalk between you and the bathroom door, reach out your hand for the handle, and projectile vomit all kinds of booze and stomach contents onto said door. What are you going to do? I bet you'll hop right into your buddy's car and tell him to "step on it." The right thing to do, the ethically pure thing, would've been to ask the station employee for some cleaning supplies, or a hose at least, and you know it, but you'll decide, on some level, that this is what that employee gets for not going to college. He has earned cleaning up frat boy puke. Listen, I'm supposed to give you advice, so here it is. Don't be a dick.

I went to one of those meetings. I've mentioned them before. I've been avoiding them for weeks. Your mother took me. I'm driving less. You know, I thought I might get something out of it, because your mother had been talking them up and she's usually a good judge of things, but it was a big time waste. I found out I'm angry. Gary told me that. Gary told me it

was okay to be angry. I kept my mouth shut. Your mother was there to give me the eye if I was rude. I'm sure you know the eye. So Gary went on about how someone in my situation needs to release the anger, that these tapes I'm making aren't for that, and that I should only be calm with you. He thought I should take the opportunity to yell at God, if I believed in him, or to curse fate if I didn't. To tell you the truth, I couldn't see much point in either.

Gary had us all sit in a circle. None of us were too bad. Some of the guys were in wheelchairs already. I've always been proud of my legs, how strong they are. I used to swim. I had a great kick. I could streamline well past the flags and always pulled out first. Sorry, I hope you don't get why that's funny. I like a show, and I've been watching the DVDs. You see, this show makes it seem like work is just a real drudgery, that it's a soul crusher, and that being either ridiculous or insane is the only way to survive. Innuendo as defense mechanism. But, if you really wanted to show someone being bored to death, have that person be an invalid who doesn't have enough energy to read, because that's an active form of entertainment, who consequently has to watch television all day. Seriously, son, books knock me out. I know; I'm digressing again, but you have no idea how awful it is when your mother goes to work. I cry. I really do. Every time. But she has to go, obviously. It's only okay when she's home or I'm making one of these stupid tapes. I really can't do anything. A lot of people dream of that, not having any responsibility, and I get it. The fantasy always involves money and health. Gary had all of us, the dying and the not so much so, go around the circle and introduce ourselves. I felt like I was in some kind of twelve-step program. That's exactly what these things are, by the way. What Gary is saying is that all of us have to get over our life addiction. I really hate this guy. At least the guy running an AA meeting is a drunk, but this guy Gary isn't dying any time soon. Do me a favor. Look him up and kick him in the nuts. I mean pulverize them. You see, I figure the only equivalent feeling to slow death would be to be tied up against your will and to see someone slowly go to work mutilating your junk. It's about helplessness and parts of your body no longer having a function. The doctor doesn't think my legs have much more than a couple of weeks. He recommended I get one of the powered chairs. Gary needs to know what that's like.

So I'm using these tapes for the wrong thing, but I think, in a longwinded kind of way, I'm giving you the best kind of advice I can give. What you need is a release. Before all this, I used to go to the gym, and that was a release. But when you can't do anything but talk, talk's what you have to do, and I can't talk to your mother. She's a real trooper. You should see

how hard she works to be composed, like she's on top of this. She has it all covered. Being in charge, she needs to be a never resting hospice shark. She's

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in her own kind of denial, and only a real jerk would try to snap her out of it. We all have to deal. The worst part is how much it's fucking up Sarah's life. You're going to be pretty old when you see this, so this might be too late, but stop giving her shit. Do what she says and keep your

mouth shut. What you're going to need is a release, and teenagers usually release in one of two ways: yelling at parents and partying. I've already covered the first part, but I want to say a few things about the second. Don't be stupid. First of all, this is tied into the whole don't-give-your-mother-shit rule. She's going to worry. She should. You're going to hate it when she asks you all kinds of questions like, 'Where are you going?' because your addled mind is going to see some kind of invasion of privacy. Try, whenever you think your mother is being a dictator, to remember that she's seen more death than someone her age should and that can make a mother overprotective. And, also remember you are heading out to do something you know is wrong. You are. Don't roll your eyes; it is wrong, that's why you're so vague and say shit like, 'Out' when your mother asks you the question. The truth will only validate her mistrust, and you know it. I guess what I need you to do is figure out a way to release without being a dick to your mom. There's a hoop out front. It came with the house. Shoot forty free throws before every conversation you have with your mother that might be unpleasant. Free throws saved my dad a lot of grief.

I hate that I'm saying this, because I know you've heard it before. It's a cliché. In fact, it might be the king of the clichés ruling over all its subjects. You can catch more flies with honey. Be nice. Be polite. Hold the door for the guy behind you. Life really will be more pleasant for you if you are more pleasant to others. It's really true.

I've been a lot more positive these past couple of days, and I feel better. Seriously. Not really physically, but I'm not sitting around, in front of the TV, hating everything I see. I've been motoring myself over to the big, sliding door in the kitchen and looking out on what's happening in the back yard. I never had the kind of patience it took to do this, but now it's all I want to do. Our dog stares out these doors with me. I never got it. There

never seemed to be anything worth looking at, and I'd watch him looking out the doors. I always took it as a sign of Man's superiority—that such boring things didn't interest us. But, all that was delusional thinking. It all has to do with focus. What fascinates our dog should be fascinating to all of us. Really, it's weakness that makes an onscreen car explosion more interesting to us than the ways leaves fall. Jasper and I saw the way the breeze would shift direction and how the bottoms of the leaves are a lighter shade of green than the tops. He and I both knew that the wind makes it so that the leaves show us their undersides. This let Jasper and I know the rains were coming. Mind you, there wasn't a cloud anywhere. Not one. But, I patted Jasper on the head and told Sarah she'd better rollup the van's windows. Your mom thought I was nuts.

What's going on is I've made the days longer. You can slow down time. It's relative. There's this quote I've always liked. Now, I haven't been in my classroom for months, so my memory might be fuzzy. This quote was on a poster in my room. You know, hold on, let me look it up on this thing. Sorry, it's a good quote. I just have to find it. Hold on...one more second... Yeah, here it is. It was Kafka who said, "It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet." I always liked it because I thought the kids might read it and not be in such a hurry all the time. Or, even better, they might do some thinking instead of their usual doodling and texting. What I hadn't realized was that even the slower pace I moved at was still way too fast. You really are going to have to find some time when you can just stop doing anything. It's amazing. I could stare out that window all day. Your mother's the only reason I turn around, really, but when she's at work I'm at the window with Jasper.

So listen, things are looking good now. Your mom's due date's only a month away. I'll probably get to meet you. I think if I continue slowing things down, I can hold on until then. I'm having a hard time doing this. Seriously, cynicism's a hard thing to let go of, but I've even started trying to pray. I just really want to make it. Your mother walks over to my chair, sometimes. She'll just grab my wrists and place my hands on her stomach. You move around so much. You never stop. I think you're getting frustrated. You must be out of room. There just can't be any space left. I've never paid this much attention to a pregnant girl before. I guess I thought the kicks were kicks, but they're not. Sometimes we can see a big bump in her side move half way around her stomach. It's weird. It reminds me of this time, when

I was like nine or ten, and a mouse got behind the cover my parents had draped over their couch. I remember watching this little bump move across the length of the couch back. I was freaked out because I obviously knew what was underneath there. Our cat, Titus Andronicus, didn't let the mouse go much farther. I left the room. I just couldn't watch what happened.

Really, if there's a bright side to any of this it's that I'll never have to do what my dad had to do. Dads are in charge of dead animals. Every mouse carcass Titus Andronicus left for us my dad had to get rid of. I was so repulsed by this I was afraid to go near my dad, or touch his hands, or feel anything he had touched. I didn't think there was enough soap in the world to wash off that grossness. I mean a live mouse is pretty gross, but a dead one? My dad had to bring Titus Andronicus to the vet that last time. He cried, my dad. I saw him afterward. He sat in the dark in his office and cried. When your mom and I got Jasper, I thought of my dad. I thought there'd be a day when I had to bring Jasper to the vet. I'm supposed to be in charge of dead animals. Jasper's still young. He still has years to go. You and he will probably be great friends. His breed's supposed to be great with kids. I mean this is all pretty silly. I'm sure by the time you're watching this Jasper will be long gone, and now I'm making you remember your childhood pet. Don't cry. I'm sorry I brought this up. It's just, there are rites of passage is what I'm getting at, and I'm not going to get to go through them. Some, like the killing Jasper one, I'm happy about. Though I feel bad that your mother's going to have to take the lead on that one. Others I'm sad about missing, but what can you do?

Gary stopped by today. Sarah asked him to. She thought I was spending too much window time; that I don't talk anymore. You know, I get it. It's just I can't say anything to her without that feeling. There's a moment right before crying when your teeth hurt. I don't know why, but I'd never figured out that's because you clench your jaw before you cry. At least I do. I've always fought it. I've never enjoyed crying. You probably don't, but there are some people out there who "enjoy a good cry." Avoid these people. And, you become way more aware of your sinuses at that moment. You feel the air in them because you breathe more deeply, but it also feels like they're wet. That's mucous. I thought it might be tears, misdirected tears, but it's mucous.

I'm on oxygen now, as I'm sure you've noticed. I'm not breathing well. I'm really shutting down. Sorry. I'm not trying to bum you out. I asked Gary whether these tapes were kind of cruel. When I'm at the window I've

been giving these a lot of thought. Sure, you're learning about your father. I'm sure you're happy about that, but you also have to watch me die. If you don't watch these, you'll never have to see a guy lose a hundred pounds. You'll never see sores. You'll never see lesions. My skin is gray. I already look dead. Sorry. Gary told me he thinks this is still good for you. I fucking hate Gary. I really fucking hate Gary. He thinks I'm depressed. Well, no shit. It's a good thing my insurance is paying for this.

It's not going to be today or tomorrow. I feel worse, but I know it won't be in the next couple of days. This will be the last tape. It's clear: the doctors, Gary, and your mother all think I won't make it to your birth. I'm supposed to say goodbye. I've already talked to your mother. This is not to be sad. It's how it is, and it's pointless to fight.

I'm working on being okay with what's about to happen. I don't think it'll hurt, but that's almost more unsettling. I could at least hope the pain would knock me out. I don't know if there'll be a spasm when it happens. Will I be sleeping? What will I say? Will I see your mother? I'm afraid she'll be out of the room. Hell, she could be in another room. There's so much pain associated with the entrance, but I won't even notice the exit. I could be asleep. I always thought that'd be the way. Now, I'm horrified of it. I don't want to be alone. I don't want Sarah to be at a vending machine. What if I'm dreaming, and the dream never ends? How long do you think I'll go before I figure out that I'm dead? The only cool part of this is that I'm about to know. If there's something else, I'm about to see it. If not, I won't notice. Excuse me.

Listen, I've been ignoring some truths up until this point. I know that when you watch this, your mother will have remarried. She's too young now to be alone. You know, I told her as much. Whoever this guy is, it'll be okay. There will be another guy. He'll be your father. He'll have done all the bike assembling, turkey carving, hand holding and street crossing, first day at school dropping off, and Jasper killing in my place. I'm going to be a curiosity to you. And you know what? That's fine. It makes sense, really. It's okay. I want you to feel however you feel. There's a lot of pressure on people to feel the right things at the right moments. Gary thought I was too nonchalant about death, and then I was too angry. Do me a favor: don't forget to kick Gary in the nuts. But don't think you have to miss me, or that watching these tapes is anything but weird. It's really weird.