


THE YEAR HE DIED¹

JOSE FABIÁN ELIZONDO 
Universidad de Costa Rica, Costa Rica
<josefabian.elizondo@ucr.ac.cr>

The Year He Died

• Day 1 of 365 •

Wednesday July 17th, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

It's been two months since my roommate died. I'll refer to him as "Tom" from now on. Lately, there have been many thoughts running through my head. One of them is how to overcome his death. It was tragic. Slap-on-the-face tragic. I'll tell you more about it when I feel ready. Not sure I can trust the words on this page, nor should you trust me so quickly. Give me time. For now, I've settled on writing a one-page diary entry per day. That way, I'll have the comfort and privacy to write, and delete, as much as I want. This is the first time writing non-fiction in a foreign language, so if I resort to using Spanish for interjections and dramatic effect, you've been warned. I mean to write these entries to document my process. I don't know what will come out of it, nor if it will be helpful, but I do have the need to start speaking up in ways that regular conversations would not allow for.

Today, I spoke of Tom. I hadn't seen my friend Dave in months. I was happy he was able to grab typical Louisiana po'boys on Mass Street on a Wednesday morning. Also, it was past noon, so a *Lagunitas* wouldn't hurt. Though I didn't want to fuck up the mood of our outing, I felt the need to tell him about Tom. I knew his son-in-law's father had just passed. Stupid cancer. More death on the table is not necessarily appetite conducive. I just wanted him to know maybe why I had been trying to reach out multiple times over the summer. I needed to see his face; hear his deep, western Kansan voice. I needed to smell his familiar cologne. I wanted to hug him and know some things don't change, that some things are still material.

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• Day 2 of 365 •

Thursday July 18th, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

I woke up to a shirtless pic on WhatsApp. It was 6 a.m. Jim gets up early to go to the gym, and he likes to communicate using visual cues. I am not mad at all. Who doesn't love seeing a hairy chest at the crack of dawn? (You don't need to answer). After a few texts, he called me. He asked if I had a new roommate by now. The Friday I met him was the night before Tom died. We had gone out for drinks at the Red Lyon Tavern. Love that place. We sat outside and talked for hours. Some hard ciders later, things had gotten frisky. Very publicly. Wasn't mad about that at all either. We decided to come back to my apartment. I noticed that there was a light on in Tom's room. I could see it peering from under the door. I turned my reggaeton on. Loudly, to muffle some of the noise I knew two strangers were bound to make. When Jim left, I remembered that there was a chance for people in Kansas to see the Aurora borealis. It was around midnight when I saw Jim drive away; I decided to walk around my apartment complex to see if I could spot any of that natural phenomenon. Nothing. What caught my attention was that Tom had a telescope in the living room. He was not interested in the phenomenon, apparently. I still saw the light on under his door when I got back from my unsuccessful mission. I wanted to knock on his door and ask him to watch for the lights together with his telescope, but I didn't want to bother. I had probably annoyed him enough by bringing someone over. I let that thought go. Also, the following morning was his graduation ceremony. Maybe he needed to rest. That could have been our last conversation, but I decided to lock myself up in my room and go to bed. I thought we would always have another shot to see the lights together.

• Day 3 of 365 •

Friday July 19th, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

Today I bought the pretzels Tom liked. He could live off cheap microwave ramen and coffee, but had an expensive taste when it came to pretzels. He had me try them once he brought a bag home that he was given at work. Fuck, they were good. Not my favorite, but I could see the appeal. He left them on the dining table in case I wanted to eat more. A couple of days later, I noticed the bag was gone. He was a kind kid, but there's a limit

to your kindness when sharing your favorite food. It is the first time I have bought something to relive some of those memories. It did me well. It reminded me of the first time I had the pretzels, and he watched my face illuminate with wonder. He was proud of his good taste. That put a smile on my face today. Good memory. Seeing Tom's face in my imagination feels like the longing of seeing a friend who's moved cities, and you only get the nostalgia of times past. It's not longing. It's not hurt. It's a moment that lingers and makes you laugh, turning a corner of your mouth up, not a full-blown laughter, but just enough to chuckle. Anyway, probably the bag of pretzels will also be gone in a couple of days. I'll ignore the nutritional facts on the back. I can blame Tom for this. I have no control over it. He made me do it. Am I wrong? On other news, I have a wedding tomorrow. It is the first wedding I'm attending here in the US. I am excited. More on that tomorrow. Or Sunday.

• *Day 4 of 365* •

Saturday July 20th, 2024

Salina, Kansas

We were in Salina around 7:30 a.m., although the wedding started at 6 p.m. I arrived that early because I was driving with the one friend—João—who lives across the street and who was also driving another friend—Iza, who was going to do the hair and makeup of the bride—Fe and many other people. Fe only wanted to be seen by Iza, so João and I ended up exploring Salina all day long: breakfast at Moka's at 8 a.m., farmer's market at 10 a.m., Ad Astra library at 1 p.m., and Skye Brewery at 4 p.m. I told him I had started writing this diary, and he seemed very excited. He said he'd love to read it one day. Though it was Fe's wedding, Fe and I had concocted a secret plan to execute during the reception. I was in love with one of Fe's friends. Hunter. Even his name is hot. Fe'd told me that Hunter's sister and her husband would be at the wedding. It was the perfect time to ambush them and convince them to put in a good word for me, hoping Hunter would reach out. I felt like back in 1999, giggling at the fact that I was indeed trying to get them to act as cupid, as matchmakers. I remember finishing the conversation by saying "Hope to be part of the family one day", shaking Hunter's brother-in-law's hand— as if that were just a matter of time. Time will tell if old-fashioned approaches to going on dates still work. I couldn't help but notice that there was a young guy dancing with what must have been younger siblings or cousins. He looked just like what Tom must have looked

like, maybe five or eight years ago. Kind kid, dancing with a couple of small girls holding their hands and jumping in circles as if nobody was watching. There was just joy.

• *Day 5 of 365* •

Sunday July 21st, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

I woke up cuddled by a man whose identity is not to be disclosed. I've known him for a year now, but for the longest time, he never told me his name. When he did, I didn't even care to learn it; it was probably a fake name. I had arrived in Lawrence at 3 a.m. after the reception. He insisted he would arrive at my place at whatever time I made it back. He wanted physical contact. It didn't matter how late and far he needed to travel to spend whatever was left of the night with me. He knocked on my door past 3:15 a.m. He didn't sneak out to come meet me. His wife was away with the kids for the weekend. It felt good to have a warm body holding on to me after such a long day. After a long shower the following morning, I made some cheesy garlic bread and scrambled eggs. We talked about PREP, Doxy PEP, and about his journey dealing with his being bisexual and coming to terms with it while in his (what I assume) late forties. His wife doesn't know yet. He confessed that sometimes he wonders what it would've been like to have experimented more with men, or anyone in general, before getting married. I told him about Tom's passing. Not the circumstances. I felt he needed to know why he could come in and out now without worrying about my roommate, but I thought he didn't really need to know more than that. Upon drinking his coffee, he went back home. In an interesting turn of events, later that day, I was having a drink at the pool with João when I noticed that Hunter started reacting to my stories on Instagram. Being a little disinhibited by the buzz in my drink, I told him that I had attempted to get his attention through people at the wedding; he acknowledged that they had, in fact, talked to him about me. I asked him out on a date. He said yes.

• *Day 6 of 365* •

Monday July 22nd, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

I am sleep deprived. Go figure. Between work and two research projects, I'm trying to keep myself busy. But it's hard to have any motivation and keep awake after such a weekend. On the other hand, I got a notification from the Lawrence Public Library:

the *Tears of the Kingdom* game was available for me to pick up. I love that libraries here lend video games! It's such a smart way to make people go physically to a library. It keeps them relevant and makes you leave the house for a while. I have work to get done, though. I need to be a responsible adult. Answer emails, address changes required on a research proposal, submit a final project for my summer class. I found myself closing my bedroom door, as I did when Tom lived with me. I'd normally close the door so as not to bother him. I didn't want any noise coming from my room to travel all around the apartment. I think I was just trying to be considerate with others and their spaces. There was no need for that today, or the last month for that matter. I was used to locking myself up and just typing away for hours. I can spend hours just looking for articles and reading hundreds of abstracts, only to type a couple of usable sentences. Getting a PhD in Educational Psychology was a lonely endeavor. Or I made it so. Today I opened the door and told myself not to close it. I let the air flow coming from the open windows. I hadn't opened the windows since early spring. It was 87 degrees out, but all I wanted was to feel the warm breeze fill up the space. Maybe once I get a new roommate next month, I'll consider not locking myself up too much. Or so often. I'll reconsider opening up the windows more.

• *Day 7 of 365* •

Tuesday July 23rd, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

It'd always crack Tom up whenever I told him a DL guy was coming over. He'd understand perfectly and hide momentarily in his room before my new guy knocked on the door. They didn't want to be seen. They'd barely shared their face pictures using expiring photos over Grindr. It wasn't like they would've been opposed to meeting Tom; he was very good-looking. The first time I saw Tom, I thought to myself, "Fuck, you're cute!" These DL guys had trusted me with their privacy and wanted to keep it "down low." Some of them even told me they wouldn't come to my place if my roommate was around. They were very protective of their identities. Tom couldn't believe how many closeted, married, secretive men were living such a life. He never criticized me or them, don't get me wrong. But he was 21 when we met, so this was a new world to him. I think he wasn't gay or bi. He was always very accepting, though. But not once did he bring a girl over in two years. He'd tell me stories of talking to women over Tinder and such, but he never went on dates, or at least I never knew about it. All to say that today, a new DL

came over after work. A ginger daddy whose furry chest hair was starting to turn white. He referenced his wife several times, and he told me he's hurt that his son is moving away to Tennessee with his grandson. Rarely do you think about being so physically attracted to a grandpa. I think he mentioned he's 50, so our age gap is not that big; 13 years is not that much. I guess I'm old enough that dating grandpas is not weird at all. It only speaks of how time flies and how dating age-appropriate men works as you become a childless daddy yourself? More on that later, I guess.

• *Day 8 of 365* •

Wednesday July 24th, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

It has been a week since my first entry here. I knew this was going to be potentially a good idea to deal with my grief, but it has felt much more than that. I feel very free to be honest and transparent. I feel I don't have to store away memories with Tom. All the opposite: I feel I should try to remember. Writing this diary has kept me paying more attention to my actions, especially those that I took for granted when sharing a space with him. I have been living by myself for over a month now, and I can already see how much of what I did in my daily life was impacted by knowing that Tom was in the next room or simply making a cup of coffee in the kitchen. It is the first time someone I've lived with has died. It is nothing like when my uncle Chico or my grandparents and great-grandparents died. Those deaths, though they stung in varying degrees, did not leave me with constant, daily reminders that they were gone. I didn't share spaces with them every day. I thought I was going to move out of this apartment. I didn't feel it would be healthy for me to stay. But once the days started to go by, I felt that being in the space helped me heal more than leaving would. Moving out would look like I was running away from something. I decided to stay. Facing my reality while keeping on living in the space where Tom didn't inhabit anymore was a constant reminder that things change, that nothing is permanent, that living is not to be taken for granted, and that our good memories can always alleviate the pain. I'm curious about what I will be writing in two weeks, in a month, in a year.

• *Day 9 of 365* •

Thursday July 25th, 2024

Lawrence, Kansas

I had a revealing dream last night. Tom was still alive, and it was the night before graduation day. He had his buddies over. I hated how rowdy they were. It was the party of the century. Everyone was graduating. There were people everywhere and red cups filled to the brim wherever you looked. I was at the party, but I was not having it. I was pissed. I was mad at Tom. I was mad at it all. I don't know what came over me, but I started knocking cups out of everyone's hands, pouring liquids all over the entire apartment. Everyone stared in disbelief. The quiet "Mexican" roommate had lost it. I stomped over the cups, glasses, and puddles—such a fitting tantrum for a 36-year-old. I didn't care. I was in tears when I saw the mess I had made. I decided to run into my bedroom; I knew I had messed up. That was my last night with Tom before he moved out the following morning after the graduation ceremony. Still dreaming, I woke up the next morning with the deepest regret and embarrassment. I heard Tom in the living room, so I came out eyes fixed on the sticky floor to apologize. Then he looked at me. Before I could say a word, he said, "It's all good". He smiled; he had forgiven me. He assured me he was fine. I took a long breath and smiled back, pressing my lips. I felt seen. He was okay with my tantrum, and he'd forgiven me.

That's when I woke up with a smile on my face. I felt the need to stop writing. It was all good.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

JOSE FABIÁN ELIZONDO es autor de las novelas *Hacia ningún lugar* (2021), *Cuando los cuerpos recuerdan* (2024) y *Flesh (Un)Bound* (2024), así como de múltiples poemas y cuentos cortos publicados en España, Colombia, México, Venezuela, Brasil y Costa Rica. Sus historias mayoritariamente navegan temas queer y distópicos dentro de contextos latinoamericanos. Estudió el Grado de Inglés en la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Actualmente se encuentra realizando un doctorado en Psicología Educativa en la Universidad de Kansas, EE.UU.

Contact: josefabian.elizondo@ucr.ac.cr

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4819-0213>