

Last Word

By Suketu Mehta

The Obit Expert offers a service: he will write your obituary, the short story section of the newspaper. "What if you die tomorrow?" he asks the rich, the powerful. "Do you really want some hack on a deadline to assemble lies or unflattering facts about your life?" He will, therefore, sit with you, interview your family and friends, and pull together a 500-word obituary that can immediately be emailed to the papers on your departure; an obituary that is not a hagiography but which outlines the high points of your life, your achievements, and the family you wish to be associated with. "After all," the Obit Expert argues, "you spend so much time polishing your image when you're alive, hiring public relations experts, taking care of your grooming, being careful in the interviews you give to bring out your best. Shouldn't you pay even more attention to this most important article that will be written about you? The one that will summarize your entire life? That will be, literally, the final statement on you?"

The Obit Expert's initial clientele consists of corporate heads, prominent artists, politicians, activists. But then he finds out even the little people are conscious of how they want to be remembered. Shoe salesmen, bus conductors, insurance clerks also want to arrange their obituaries. "It may not appear in the New York Times," says a wine merchant, "but the Wine Trades Gazette will doubtless run a short notice, and I just wanna make sure they get the facts right. I don't want them speaking to my ex-wife."

Obituaries are those things most people stumble upon while turning the pages of the newspaper on their way to somewhere else, just above the classifieds and after the stock market listings. Few people read them online, for how many people would deliberately click on *Obituaries*? The Obit Expert knows that his profession is dying, his skills will not be passed down to apprentices.

Occasionally, he accepts a commission to write, strictly for private circulation, the other obituary, the one listing the secret life. Who the dead person's loves were, the shadowed side of his heart. "At the age of 31, Mr. H. fell in love with a woman not his wife. This adulterous love affair lasted with interruptions for the next thirteen years, before she broke it off. Subsequently, Mr. H. sought solace in prostitutes. He had another, far briefer, yearlong liaison with the lawyer Z.D. This was terminated when Z.D.'s husband discovered its existence. From then on till the end of his life, Mr. H. remained sexually faithful to his wife, who was never aware that he had ever been otherwise."

Is this secret life as important as the public one? Mr. H.'s distinguished career in the law, the many victories he won for his clients, his landmark acts of philanthropy and his civic works; where does this measure up in comparison to the anguished Friday afternoons when he had to leave his mistress, not knowing with whom she, a beautiful single woman, would spend her weekends? Which part of his life occupied his thoughts more? Which is more worthy of examination, if not of emulation?

Working on these private commissions, the Obit Expert has acquired a keen appreciation for gossip. All these people walking around the streets of the great city, secretful. Our attempt at getting at the secret life is gossip, he is convinced. Gossiping about a person is the greatest favor we can do them, because it shortens the distance between the lived life and the projected one; gossip is the bridge between us and our secrets; gossip helps to see a person whole. Oh what a relief for the person to realize that everyone suspects, and his secret is public.

In addition to running your obituary in the newspaper (and assuring good placement, and often your picture in the paper), the Obit Expert will keep a list of all your friends, family, business contacts and acquaintances, and immediately upon your demise mail in tasteful stationery the obituary to all of them, so that they know how to remember you.

These same friends, family, business contacts and acquaintances will be periodically interviewed and briefed by the Obit Expert so they know what to say if someone other than the Obit Expert calls them after your death. So he will ring up college friends, old lovers, and the neighbors and grade school teachers of your childhood, and bring them up to date on

your accomplishments, your many laudable volunteer activities. He will also listen carefully as they tell him what they might have, had he been a newspaper reporter calling to get quotes for an obituary at that very moment. Sometimes, in fact, he pretends to be just that, to get the truth. After listening carefully, if there is anything to be corrected, any misperception, any lapse in recollection, the Obit Expert will refresh the acquaintance's memory. "You say that you remember Mr. H. as an average student," he will tell your high school principal. "But, in fact, my analysis shows that he was consistently in the top one-fourth of the class where grades were concerned; he participated in numerous extra-curricular activities including track and the Young Pioneers' Club; and he was voted Secretary of his senior class. Perhaps you have overlooked these facts? After all, it's been thirty years..." Or to an ex-wife, "I understand your feelings about Mr. H. after he left you for a younger woman. But consider that he was under immense stress from the failure of his business, and that he was on the road for nine days out of ten, and it is in the nature of the human animal to crave companionship."

If that does not work in persuading your ex-wife to revise her comments about you, the Obit Expert will try something a bit more forceful: "And, after all, it could not be said that your marriage at the time was on an even keel, even before the second Mrs. H. came into the picture, could it? Were there not certain tensions arising from ... your lack of ... shall we say, *responsiveness* in the conjugal arena? Did not months go by during which you failed to share your husband's bed?" If your ex-wife then screams abuse or hangs up the phone, the ever-patient Obit Expert will call again or send a letter by certified mail. "Should you repeat these unfair and unwarranted attacks on my client when called upon by the newspapers after his death, I, acting in my capacity as the jealous guardian of his posthumous reputation, will sue you for slander to the full extent of damages permitted by law. Furthermore, I am in possession of certain material facts about your own record in the marriage, which has been far from spotless. Would your children like to hear about the time Mr. H. opened the door of the maid's room to find you there with the servant in a position which left no mistake about the precise nature of your relationship? This may sound like a threat but, Mrs. H., I assure you that you have nothing to fear if you keep in mind only the truth about Mr. H. – that he was an ever-considerate husband, a fine father and provider, whom you met one magical evening at the Newport cotillion, and spent twenty-five happy years with until, through no

fault of either spouse, you decided to part ways. I urge you to erase all negative thoughts from your mind, Mrs. H. – they will only cause you great harm in your remaining years."

One day the Obit Expert was approached by a graying man. He came up to his office in the Financial District, opened the door, and stood there some time, indecisive. The Obit Expert looked at him across his desk. He assumed that the natural hesitation rose from the fact that the man had come here to ask for help with his obituary and, now that he was actually doing it, was actually here in this space, he was thinking: this is about death. I am going to die soon.

But it was not so.

"I want help in writing another man's obituary," the gray-haired man said. "I've heard that you have connections with the newspapers, you can get obituaries placed."

"A friend? A family member who's passed away? My condolences."

"*Not* a friend!" the Old Man almost shouted. Then, calmer, he said, "He was not a friend of mine."

The Old Man explained. The man who had passed away was a colleague, indeed a good friend from school days. They were both mathematicians. They had gone to high school, college, and graduate school together. Theirs was a friendship built on a shared wonder at the poetry of numbers. Walking around the silent streets of American university towns all night, sitting in cramped faculty offices and basements in graduate student ghettos, they had discussed theorems and proofs like other men discuss women and politics.

It came time to submit a dissertation, and the Old Man withdrew into his office for six months, not seeing anybody, not his advisor, not his students, not even his friend. The Old Man had been working on a groundbreaking explanation for why certain irregular numbers, called the Planar-Mundt sequence, flipped polarities when they approached extreme ϕ . The paper had no practical application whatever, but it was a highly sought intellectual prize. Finally, in great excitement, he asked his colleague to come over to his attic office one night.

All through that night, he demonstrated his proof, the entirely unexpected ways in which he had hit upon it, and the multiple new directions it opened up in the field. After his discovery, said the mathematician to his colleague, he felt just a little nearer to God.

The next week his colleague submitted the paper under his own name to the leading mathematical journal; it was promptly accepted, he was given the prize for best dissertation, and a full professorship at Berkeley before he had left graduate school. The Old Man could do nothing to prove that the work was his; he had been working on it in secret, and nothing he had done in the field before had led up to this. He could not now submit his own work for his dissertation because he would be accused of plagiarism. He left graduate school without finishing, and drifted for a few years, finding work as a dishwasher, a junior high school teacher, and a crossing guard. He never married – he never had enough of an income to support a family. For fifty-five years he had brooded, through the silent watches of the night, on where his life could have been – he kept up with his colleague's progress as he went from honor to honor.

The Professor leisurely went through three wives, all of them young and beautiful graduate students; he jetted from conference to conference around the world, which paid for an immense library of rare books. And now he was on the verge of a painless death, lying in a room in his own house, surrounded by children and grandchildren. He had only a week left, said the doctors. All his colleagues applauded his heroism in the face of certain death. He did not wish to be kept alive artificially. "Let me die in peace, as I have lived in peace," he was quoted in the paper as saying.

"So," said the Obit Expert, after the Old Man had finished. "You want me to set the record straight."

"I want you to do more than that," said the Old Man, leaning forward in his chair with new light in his phlegmy eyes. "I want you to twist things, I want you to make him look like the worst monster on earth. Make up things – bad things. I want him to be remembered in such a way that his children change their last name."

This was a new one for the Obit Expert. He thought about it, and was excited by the challenge: to take a man's life and, by means of certain suggestions, by looking at the same

basic facts in a new light and by convincing others to do the same, make a positive into a negative, or vice versa. Take philanthropy: you give me a man who has donated a vast fortune to the American Cancer Society. Is this surely not a sign of guilt, a vain attempt at atonement, by a man who has made that fortune in the cigarette business, killing many times more people than his bequest will save? Or is it a heroic gesture from a pioneering industrialist at the very end of his life, a modern-day Carnegie who accumulated a vast pile through sometimes questionable means only so that he could give it all away to the poor; a kind of trustee of the people's wealth, wisely accumulating and administering it for the good of the multitude?

And, not for the first time, the Obit Expert thought of himself as a shaper of memories of the future, of memories yet to be born of facts that lay like unformed clay, waiting to be shaped by the artful hands of recollection.

The Obit Expert accepted the Old Man's assignment, and set to work gathering and cataloging facts about the Professor's life. He did not have much time – the death was days away. He gathered all that had been written by or about the Professor, and it was considerable. He spoke to his colleagues, his friends. Then he interviewed his two ex-wives, posing as a newspaper reporter (and indeed, there were other journalists out researching his life for favorable articles that were daily being written about the dying laureate – out researching, even, in case the worst should happen, an obituary, the replacement of which with his own version would in itself require the Obit Expert's utmost effort). One evening the Obit Expert looked at all the piles of paper, all the computer records, all the interview tapes in front of him on his desk. It would be most difficult.

The Professor seemed to have led a singularly blameless existence – even his ex-wives spoke well of him, understanding that his towering genius needed more than one partner for its inspiration. He had helped younger mathematicians win fellowships, teaching positions. His children remembered him as a loving, if sometimes distracted, father. And his fellow mathematicians, all save the Old Man, spoke of him in terms reserved for the likes of Euler and Ramanujan – "the most significant mathematical mind of the last half-century" and "a thoroughly original approach which will change topography forever". Princeton was waiting to rename its Mathematics faculty after him. And not one of them – not his peers, not one of

those that survived of his mentors, not his students – alleged or even suggested that he had ever taken credit for work not his own.

The Obit Expert knew that there was only one man remaining on earth that could provide him with the information needed to destroy the Professor's reputation.

It wasn't very difficult to get into the house. The suburb in which the Professor lived had no fear of the adjacent city. The Obit Expert simply climbed into the Professor's ground floor bedroom through the half-open window. A solitary nurse was asleep on a chair, holding in her lap a newspaper with her horoscope.

The Obit Expert stood in front of the Professor and said the Old Man's name.

Slowly, the Professor's eyes opened.

The Obit Expert said the Old Man's name again.

The Professor was smiling now. "Is it time to go?" he asked the Obit Expert. "It must be time to go, because you've come, you who I've been waiting for all these years."

And the Obit Expert held the Professor's hand as he went.

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