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The Death of Eli Gold

Written by David Baddiel

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DAVID BADDIEL

The Death of Eli Gold

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... he persists in the bizarre adolescent idea that having sex with
whomever you want whenever you want is the cure for ontological¹
despair

– David Foster Wallace,
reviewing John Updike's *Towards the End of Time*, *New York Observer* 1997

Denise at thirty-two was still beautiful

– Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*

I cannot live without Arthur, despite certain inner resources

– Cynthia Koestler, suicide note

PART ONE

My famous daddy is dying. Some grown-ups think I don't understand what that means, but I do. Jada doesn't. When her grandma died, Jada told me her mom said that she'd gone to heaven. OK, I said. But then, three days later, Jada told me that she'd asked her mom when she was coming back. So I asked Mommy, and she said she wasn't; that she'd gone forever. So that's why I know what it means. It means you go away and you don't come back.

Me and Mommy go to the hospital every day to see Daddy. The hospital is called Mount Sinai Hospital. Mount Sinai was the place in Israel where God spoke to Moses, and gave him the Ten Commandments. I read about this in a book Elaine gave me called *The Beginner's Bible: Timeless Children's Stories*. When I was younger – like five or something – I learnt the Ten Commandments by heart. I don't know why I did that. I didn't even know what all those words meant then. *Graven. False witness. Adultery*. But I still remember the three that really matter. Thou shall not kill. Thou shall not steal. And honour your father and your mother.

The hospital isn't much like the picture of Mount Sinai, like it looks in the book. It's just a big building. It's right on the park, and from the big window at the end of Daddy's room I can see a lake. There's a lake in the picture in *The Beginner's Bible: Timeless Children's Stories*, too, in the chapter about Moses. Moses is halfway up the mountain, holding the Ten Commandments, and looking like he's really mad about something; there's a crowd of people at the bottom and, behind them, a lake. Sometimes, when I'm looking out that

window, I pretend that the lake in the park is the lake in the book, and that Daddy is Moses, even though he's always lying on his bed now, and can't stand up, or hold anything, especially not two big stones. But yesterday, Mommy came over to the window while I was pretending and told me it wasn't a lake at all, it was the Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis Reservoir. I said: what's a reservoir? She said it's a man-made body of water. I didn't understand what she meant by a body of water. How can a body be made out of water? I wanted to ask her, and also who Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis is, but then Daddy made that strange noise which is the only sound he makes now, and she rushed back to the bed.

The first time me and Elaine went to the hospital, there were loads of photographers outside. That's because my daddy is famous. Not like Katy Perry, or Justin Bieber, or any of those guys: he's famous in a different way. Mommy made me a scrapbook of bits cut out of newspapers from when I was born, and nearly all of them call him the world's 'greatest living writer'. I haven't read any of his books, because I'm still too young to understand them. But when I'm older – maybe eleven or something – I'll read them all.

Elaine told me to look down when the photographers tried to take a picture of me. Some of them shouted at me – 'Hi, Colette! Colette! This way!' – and I nearly looked up, but I didn't. I just kept looking at the shoelaces in my new Gap shoes, at the white tips of the pink strings.

'How do they know my name?' I whispered to Elaine.

'Because of Daddy,' she said, but she was walking quickly and keeping her head down, too, and didn't really explain what that meant. Then one of the photographers shouted at Elaine, 'Are you another daughter?!' and it was good that I had my head down because it made me laugh because she's my *nanny* and is, like, sixty-five or something!!

Daddy has been dying for a long time, even since before I was six. I know, because on my sixth birthday Elaine gave me *The Heavenly Express for Daddy*, which is a book to help children understand what happens when their father dies. It had a lot of pictures in it of a man

who is a daddy, but much younger than mine, with black hair instead of white, and no beard; but, like mine, he gets ill and has to go to a hospital. Then, God comes and sees the man, and tells him that he's going to put him on a special train, to come up to heaven and live there with him – but then after that I don't know what happens, because Mommy took the book away, because she thinks Elaine likes God too much. She took the book away, and said she didn't believe that children, just because they were young, shouldn't be told the truth. Especially me, she said, because I'm Daddy's daughter, and Daddy doesn't believe in God, even though some of his books are sort of about Him. *Daddy*, she said – well, she called him Eli, sometimes she calls him Daddy and sometimes Eli – *Eli*, she said, *represents a touchstone of truth in this world*. I didn't know what these words meant, but Mommy closed her eyes tight when she said them and I always know that's when she really wants me to know something, so I made sure I learnt them off by heart, like my three Ten Commandments.

* * *

Coming through arrivals at JFK, Harvey Gold thinks that, these days, he would make a good immigration officer. What do they do, these guys? They look at faces. They sit in a booth and they check real face against photo-face. *Photo-face. Real face. Photo-face. Real face*. All day. And me, what do I do all day, he thinks, these days? I check faces. Every face I see, I check: I check it over helplessly, looking, examining, investigating. Harvey, of course, is checking for something else, although he wonders how different it is. The immigration officers, they're also searching for changes, for what happens to the face when it moves from stasis, from when it's *arranged*. They're checking to see how the face looks once it's not presented, face-on.

Whatever, he thinks, standing in line amongst the travellers, tired and bright and buzzing: *I'd be fucking great*. Especially – his red-eye eyes flick upwards, the pupils seeming to scratch against the back of the lids – in *this* light, this take-no-prisoners, angle-poised airport light. When eventually al-Qaeda decide it's time to smuggle Osama

bin Laden into America, he could have the best fucking Afghanistani surgery his siphoned-off dirty dollars can buy, he could come to my booth cut up and dyed and pixillated, and still I'd spot him. He could come in *sex-changed*. He smiles to himself at the thought, prompting the businessman standing next to him in the queue to frown. If he had looked closely, which he does not, the businessman might have noticed that Harvey's smile is not pure, that it contains within it a lingering frond of bitterness.

Harvey's iPhone, a pocket harp, tings in his trousers: a text. He scrabbles in his jeans, which are tight around the crotch – he feels the crotch of his trousers is always shrinking these days, from the disgust that he carries eternally around with him. He knows without looking that the text will just be AT&T offering him their services, but he glances anyway – and so it is, a message of hope and welcome to America as if from the Pilgrim Fathers themselves. He is about to force the phone back through the thin slits of his front pockets when he notices another text, this one from Stella. He taps on it with his thumbnail, a thumbnail kept long as a throwback to when he used to play the guitar and imagine himself on stage with his foot up on black monitors. *Darling*, the text says, *hope the flight wasn't too tough. My love goes out to everybody who'll be there, but most to you. Be safe. XXX*

He slides the screen three windows across with his thumb, to find Deep Green. Deep Green is a chess app that Harvey is addicted to. He takes it out at the first sign of boredom or entrapment – states in which his *anxiety disorder*, as various therapists have christened it, is exacerbated. He now reaches for it instinctively in doctors' waiting rooms, illegally in traffic jams, and in all queues, because he knows that if he starts to play, the end of the wait will arrive faster. The downside is that Deep Green always beats him. He plays it on Level 4, halfway through its eight settings, and knows he should go down a level but feels that that would be pointless: that any joy there might be in defeating the computer – which for reasons unknown to Harvey has christened itself Tiny: every time he loses he has to suffer a small, smug ting, accompanied by a gloating *Checkmate! Tiny wins!* – would be undermined by the knowledge that he had to lower its game to get there.

He has only just begun the game – although his thumb is already hovering over the RESIGN button – when he senses the businessman beside him twitch with irritation. He looks up, and realizes that everyone is now waiting for him to cross the green line and approach the booth. He puts the phone away, fumbles for his passport in the bumbag strung badly across his thighs, and remembers at the last moment: the American one. Harvey is, in so many ways, a dual citizen, and US law, always keen to assert its global difference, states in the clearest of tones that all travellers in possession of an American passport must enter the country showing the Spread-eagled Eagle. The immigration officer, who is narrowing her eyes at Harvey as if already interpreting his delay as suspicious, is a woman of about thirty-five. As he approaches the bitter smile returns, and with it the memory of the sex-changed devil, Osama.

Let us be clear about this. Harvey is not smiling – and was not smiling earlier – at the idea of Osama bin Laden in women's clothes. He is smiling to himself in the manner of a man who has accepted, unhappily, something shitty about himself; who, on this issue and many, many others, has pushed the RESIGN button in his soul. He is smiling to himself because he is thinking: obviously, *obviously* I'd fucking spot him if he'd had a sex change. Because then he'd be a woman: and women get checked by his eyes a hundred-and-fourteen-fold. This woman, this immigration officer; Harvey will look at her face much more closely than she will his. Even as her eyes perform a thorough and competent scan of his face, flicking occasionally to its corollary on the page – greying, jowly, passport-stern, behind the watery eyes just a hint of teenage memory of going into those photo booths with friends and making stupid faces far too close to the lens – however microscopic her examination, it is as nothing compared to the manic burrowing of Harvey's gaze all over her skin, Photoshopping her, running her face through the Rolosex in his head, gauging, gauging, gauging: smoothness, symmetry, vulnerability of eye, fullness of cheek, of lip, of hair, thickness and tastefulness of make-up, and, most importantly, of course, resistance or otherwise to the torrent of ageing. *Who knew*, he thinks, the American phrase entering his head

like a passport stamp? Who knew that the power of work, and indeed of international security, would be as nothing compared to that of sexual psychosis?

‘How long have you been out of the country?’ she says, startling Harvey: sometimes when he is staring at them like this he forgets that women can speak. He feels heat flush through him in response. He has hot flushes regularly – he is virtually menopausal with them – but they are not brought on by rising infertility, nor by the temperature of the June New York morning, but by fear. He has nothing to be frightened of, or at least nothing concrete, but for some time now this has been irrelevant to his physical response.

‘I don’t know,’ he says, his voice a little strangled, and aware of its laconically flat Englishness. ‘Ten years? Maybe a bit longer?’

Her eyes, which are brown, and which Harvey has already noticed have running underneath them a series of what women’s magazines call ‘fine lines’, harden.

‘That’s a long time.’

She has taken it as an affront, Harvey realizes. For these sentries posted at the gates of the promised land such a length of absence is suspicious. It is suspect, the very idea that one of their own might want to be away from the mother lode for this long a stretch. What possible delights could anywhere else in the world hold for so long? He feels a movie need to say something weary and sarcastic, but quells it underneath a nod of agreement.

‘Business or pleasure, this trip?’

This makes Harvey pause. He stops running the immigration officer’s skin through a series of forensic sight-based (and, in his imagination, touch-based) tests. What is the answer? It’s multiple choice, clearly, with not enough choices.

‘My father is dying,’ says Harvey, as blankly as he can: he is trying not to make it a proclamation. It is not difficult to assume the blankness: as with all information of great import, both personal and political – births, deaths, relatives, wars, injustice, all the stuff of Hallmark Cards and CNN – the fact of his father’s death is taking a while to bed in. He knows it should affect him – he engages with the

idea that such information should shake him to the core, should easily shake down the fog of desire and depression that pumps ceaselessly from the pores of his exhausted, clumpy brain – but viscerally, *physically*, he doesn't feel it. He thinks he will, eventually, and is waiting for the moment to strike, but in the meantime remains afloat, abstracted, like a man who has been told that the plumber will arrive at some point between nine and five thirty.

But telling this to the immigration officer doesn't come out as blank as he wants: he is still trying to put across an idea of himself, the man so socked to by death that he has not known how to answer this question and therefore has told the bald truth. And he senses that there is something sexual here, something flirtatious, or at least, gender-biased: it is not a self that he would have presented to a man. He is trying to make a dent in this woman's imperviousness by doing the vulnerable thing. Of course, if he had really wanted to make a dent, he realizes, he should have said, 'My father – *Eli Gold* – is dying.'

It still works, however. Abashed, muttering sad sorries, she hands back the blue book and waves Harvey on into America. In doing so, their fingertips touch briefly above the eagle's claws, and for her it is less than nothing, but for Harvey it is a roof of the Sistine Chapel moment, divine electricity passing between their fingers. It passes immediately – Harvey is not a fool, he doesn't *believe* in his fantasies; rather, he is persecuted by them – but it leaves its scar, its never-happening scar, with all the others.

He fits the American passport awkwardly back into his overstuffed bum bag, and walks away towards the sunlit plains of the glass-roofed Arrivals terminal. Then he remembers Stella's text, and puts his fingers back through the half-opened zip, searching for the iPhone. They alight first on his house keys, and then on all the loose puddles of change that, from the outside, make this bag look like it is suffering from a terrible allergic reaction. How could the phone have gone? He was just looking at it! Did he hand it over to immigration officer with his passport? This is why he is wearing the stupid bum bag – a thing that he knows no one wears any more, and which stops him walking properly – in order not to lose stuff. He stops. His life has always been

plagued by this, the everyday disintegration of absent-mindedness, especially as regards the whereabouts of vital personal objects – keys, phones, wallets, tickets, other people’s address cards, documentation, jewellery, scarves, gloves – anything that can be carried about the person. But until his soul started to go bad, absent-mindedness was just something he accepted, a default fault, a thing which fucked up his life in little ways every day but wasn’t worth steaming about; now, however, if he realizes he has lost something, he can’t override it, he hasn’t the energy, neither physical nor spiritual. He hasn’t the momentum. These discoveries, these interruptions in his tiny progress, just make him want to stop. Finding out that he has left his wallet at home will make him want to sit down in the street; if he is in the car and the keys are not in the most obvious pocket, he will consider never driving away. The other day he was on the toilet and realized, too late, that he had forgotten to restock the paper roll, and felt, immediately, that there was nothing to do but stay sat on the black MDF oval forever, the shit on his anus hardening over time to a brittle crust.

He stops now, and again wants to sit, here on this faintly marbled floor scuffed with the marks of a million suitcase wheels; sit, cross-legged perhaps, until someone – God, his dying father, a woman, any woman – takes him in hand, finding for him his phone and his sanity. And then, just at the moment when the heavy hands of depression have started to push, gently, almost lovingly, on his shoulders, it rings, reminding Harvey that he put the phone back in his pocket and not in the bag at all. He pulls the iPhone out from its burial in a mini-dump of tissue dust, looks at the screen, and inwardly crumples: Freda. He considers for a moment not answering, pressing instead the DECLINE button, because his relationship with the caller is declining, because her call will only be about the decline of his father, because he, Harvey, seems to be now, perpetually, in decline. He taps ANSWER.

‘Freda.’ The strange thing that caller ID gives you, the need not to say *hello?*, the end of that querulous enquiry, the end, too, of the way that people can garner some small knowledge about what you think about them simply by the rise or fall in your voice when you do find out who it is: replaced instead by this, this ironic, flat certainty.

‘Harvey. Hi. How are you? How was the flight?’

He shrugs, then feels a bit silly for shrugging on the phone. ‘It was an overnight flight, in coach.’ *Coach*: a sliver of self-disgust goes through him at having slipped so quickly into the idiom, just because he is in this land, or maybe because, reflexively, he is trying to please Freda. ‘But seven hours isn’t so long. And it’s five times the price for Club. What hotel room would you ever pay five times over the odds to spend seven hours in?’

She doesn’t answer this. The iPhone emits a mournful crackle, before Harvey asks the question he knows she is waiting for.

‘So how is he?’

The pause before she replies is so long, Harvey has time to locate the Baggage Reclaim sign and begin trudging in that direction. As he does so, his gaze is routinely snagged by passing women. His neck hurts from not turning, from the urgent need to follow them as they move past, into places where he is not.

‘Not much changed,’ she says, after long enough for Harvey to have forgotten that she is there.

‘What do the doctors –’

‘Anytime. At best, two months.’

Harvey stops. He has known that his father must have roughly this amount of time left, but Freda’s bald statement of it comes at him like a fist. He had not been expecting this answer so soon: in fact, he now can’t quite formulate what the second half of his question was going to be – ‘What do the doctors think/plan to do/give him for the pain/look like?’ He was only going to go for some general question, and work up slowly to the big Specific. He knows why Freda is speaking like this: the directness, the refusal to couch, speaks of her ownership of his father – and of his death. With Eli Gold, she must always have arrived first, even at the place of pain.

Harvey’s eyes, moistened a little, more by tiredness than tears, stare into the defocusing distance.

‘Right.’

‘We’ve booked you a room at the Sangster. It’s a new hotel on East 76th Street. It’s very good.’

‘You have?’

‘Yes. I know it’s a bit further away from Mount Sinai than we’d like, but it’s a block from Fifth Avenue, and you can get a cab uptown from there.’

‘No, I wasn’t complaining. I –’ He reddened. He had assumed he would be staying at their Upper East Side apartment, had already imagined sating his curiosity about his father and Freda’s private life by flicking through notebooks and diaries, or perhaps just through living in their furnishings and amongst their artwork; but now he saw how much of a presumption that was, never having been there, and having seen his father only twice in the last ten years, both times in London. He saw how *untaken* for granted the idea of him staying there must be, and how clearly Freda was confirming his fringe status in the present family circle.

‘We’re still staying at home, but I’m thinking of staying nights at the hospital. It depends on how Eli is. I probably will at some point. But Colette will still be at home.’

‘OK,’ said Harvey, uncertain how to take this, wondering about the buried implication that he might be some sort of paedophile, that, obviously, he couldn’t stay in the same apartment as an eight-year-old girl. He wants to protest that he is very good with children – that he has an unmolested, undamaged nine-year-old son himself – but he quells the urge, partly because Freda may have meant nothing of the sort, and partly because Jamie is, clearly, damaged.

‘Well, thank you. The Sangster. That’s very generous of you.’

He colours as he says it, having realized he has assumed that Freda – or, rather, the ‘we’ that Freda refers to, a mystical duality of her and Eli – will be paying. He wonders if he should enquire, but hesitates, not wanting to get into a detailed discussion about whether they are picking up the tab just for the room, or if minibar and hotel porn surcharges will also be included.

The iPhone crackles again, drawing attention to Freda’s failure to say ‘Don’t mention it’.

‘So shall I ...? When shall I ...?’ says Harvey, trailing off, accepting his secondary role.

‘Maybe go to the hotel, now ... and you can come tomorrow morning?’ She speaks with the American inflection, the vocal hike indicating a question, a possibility for discussion: but Harvey knows better.

‘Tomorrow morning? I was hoping ...’ God, how much trailing off am I going to do, he thinks. He is an uncertain fellow, Harvey, in an uncertain situation – the old son returning to see the dying dad, surrounded by his new family – and now it seems as if Freda’s take-no-prisoners certainty has crushed his ability to make even the smallest statement of intent. And, also, he can’t match her: he can’t fold back her steeliness, can’t say that he thinks he should come straight away, because maybe his father might die today. His fingers reach without thought for the plane ticket in his inside pocket, with its devastatingly open return, something that had cost Harvey substantially more money when ordered – a charge which had provoked a moment of irritation, not with his father for the indefiniteness of his time left, but with the airlines, for not having a special *close relative’s last days* exemption clause. It isn’t fair, he thinks, *it’s not fair* that I have to pay extra because my dad is dying and I don’t know when to book the flight home. Harvey’s heart is heavy with such unfairnesses.

‘Well,’ said Freda, ‘today we’ve already got quite a lot of people visiting ... my mother’s here now, and then a group of Eli’s colleagues from Harvard in the afternoon – plus there was talk of Roth coming by some time this week, so ... obviously he gets very tired ...’

‘Maybe I’ll just go to the hotel and call later.’ This is the best defiance Harvey can offer.

‘Yes. Please do.’ There is a voice off, high and insistent.

‘Yes, darling, in a minute. Mom’s on the phone.’

‘So we’ll speak later.’

‘Yes. Good to have you here, Harvey. Eli will be so pleased to see you. Goodbye.’

‘Goodbye.’ He clicks the OK button on his phone, and forces it back into his jeans. Roth? *Philip* Roth? Harvey loves Philip Roth more than he has ever been able to admit to his watchful-for-literary-slights father. He feels intense desire to meet the dark bard of American sex

and clear the decks of his depression, making him wonder, angrily, if he shouldn't just turn up unannounced at this great literary lunchtime: he is, after all, Eli Gold's son, the only one of the three adult children who has been prepared to make the journey. Then self-awareness settles like soft snow back upon him, and he realizes how far such an action is beyond him, he who has always hated confrontation anyway, and these days need only to be confronted with the smallest of obstacles for his depleted energy reserves to drain away to nothing.

Harvey moves into the Baggage Reclaim Hall, with its always palpable dynamic of tension and relief, as exhausted passengers wait nervously for their cherished belongings to be spat onto the oval belts. His conveyor, No. 4, is sparsely populated now, the phone call having slowed down his movement here. He can see his suitcase, some Samsonite-alike with pull-out handle – again, due to the particular nature of this particular journey, he didn't know which of the numerous bags piled up under the stairs to pack – forlornly beginning what looks like its twentieth or thirtieth rotation. A woman he had noticed on the plane, sitting four or five rows in front of him on the opposite side, is there, beginning to look anxious. She is in her early twenties, dirt-blond long hair parted like that of a Woodstock girl dancing towards the crackly camera, sea-blue eyes, and, even under the whip-lash Baggage Reclaim lights, skin so smooth that if Harvey were to reach out and touch it – as every cell in his hands is urging him to do – his fingers would slip.

Her bag, pink like bubble-gum, tumbles out of the conveyor hatch, the relief registering on her features, softening them even further, and making Harvey remember something one of his many more sexually opportune friends had told him once, about how, while waiting at airports for luggage, he would try and steal a furtive glance at the labels on the suitcases of any waiting attractive women, and then offer to share a taxi in that direction. As she picks up the bag, Harvey, impelled by the thought, does flick his eyes downwards and, catching sight of the zip code, thinks it might be an address near his hotel, but never has any intention of going through with all that stilted 'Hey, I

see you're going my way' shite. It just tears another little track through him, the idea that it could be done, that someone else could do it.

An older woman joins her, and helps her heave her bag onto a trolley. She moves away: she hasn't registered Harvey's presence, even cursorily. He looks at his watch. He now has time, far too much time. He looks again at his iPhone and ponders the text from Stella. *I should call her back*, he thinks, *let her know I've landed*. But then the other thing grabs his heart with its cold hands, and, instead, he sits down on the edge of Conveyor Belt No. 5, to watch his suitcase travel round Conveyor Belt No. 4, round and round and round, like a lone ship on the greyest, most mundane of seas.