



Killing Off Ray Apada

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The first time I saw Ray Apada he was standing outside the 7-Eleven near campus with no shirt, singing what I later found out were Muddy Waters songs he'd translated into Spanish and tried to adapt to twelve-string guitar. His voice was some kind of bad David Byrne impression but he could play guitar really well, keeping his eyes closed like he was completely into it, this six-foot-tall white dude built like a rock-climber with black hair buzzed short.

Next time I saw him he walked right by me on campus looking totally normal, wearing khakis, jean jacket, and a backpack.

'Hey, were you at a 7-Eleven playing guitar last Saturday? Half-naked?'

He stopped. 'You're the first person to say anything about that one. But you're right. That bare-chested thing was cheap. Not my usual performance protocol at all.'

He smiled. I must've looked dubious.

'No, really,' he said, 'I'm staging a bunch of emblematic public experiences right now. Have you heard of Pistoletto? The Italian artist who rolled a giant ball of newspaper through the streets of Turin in '68?'

Before I could speak he reached into his backpack and pulled out a sketch pad.

'Look, this is my schematic for a contemporary update of the ball. It's got microphones, speakers, cameras, and screens that will record every nearby image and sound, including audience commentary. So when I roll it across campus it will keep recording and broadcasting, reflecting



everything around it, not just absorbing it like Pistoletto did, playing back all the sights and sounds that happen that day to the people who experience it.'

It was autumn, just a couple months before the presidential elections of 2000. Ray was in his junior year, like me. His dad was apparently a cello genius in a touring quartet with an international reputation and his mom had died when he was just a kid. 'It happened overseas,' he said, 'but I don't want to bore you with sad stories now.' Ray was on a music scholarship for classical guitar. In the semesters we hung out I met his friends Tristan, Leo, and Dave who gave him logistical help with his stunts. They weren't bad guys, just aloof with annoying habits that Ray never called them on, even when I made it obvious that they bothered me. Tristan liked to stare at people sometimes and say nothing when they spoke to him, even gave this one nice couple on the street the quiet treatment when they asked him how to get to the art museum. Leo and Dave talked in French way too much, which they knew me and Tristan didn't understand. But they were pretty serious about helping Ray goof off and Ray kept us from arguing with each other too much so we could actually accomplish a few things together.

They also didn't drink much, which was important to me back then. I'd had two girlfriends ditch me in eight months and it'd totally been my fault. Drying out for a little while sounded good, plus all I really had going for me at that point was a passion for a few German writers, a bunch of psych credits from my freshman year, and stacks of Musil and Broch to get through. I hadn't started hammering out



any serious future plans. So Ray and his friends were a nice distraction, a lot more interesting than anyone else I'd met at school.

A month after I met them, I carried a fire extinguisher during Ray's one-man version of the Polish avant-garde theatre piece *Carmen Funebre* as he walked from the graduate library to the bell tower on painter's stilts bearing a fiery torch in one hand and cracking a bullwhip in the other. He did a lame stint as ManRayMan for three performances at coffeehouse open-mic nights where he'd stand barefoot, shouting at a photocopied picture of Walt Whitman, act terrified, knock over a table and flee. When it was freezing cold he told us to meet him at midnight on the hill near the arboretum's main entrance. When we got there, in reverence to all artistic sacrifice, lost in the magnitude of what our forebears had accomplished and the vision of who he hoped to be, he was spinning like a genuine dervish in full regalia—he'd hired someone in the theatre department to make the costume for him—and his bare white hands, purplish in the cold, described a circle as he cycled round and round, his head cocked toward the night sky, staring up into the moonlight. He fell over a few minutes later and I felt lucky to be able to applaud in front of the world and pick him up by his freezing hands, holding him close for a second, this weird brother I couldn't stop following around.

I started to feel like he might become a lifelong connection to greatness for me. He didn't care if hanging out with him wore you out and it didn't matter that he rarely took the



time to offer so much as a thank you. But he kept doing and saying things that made me feel like I'd had a brush with the eternal, the kind of energy I'd always wanted to get closer to and merge with to flow towards better things. With Ray it was like traveling week to week with a different artistic guide, one day our happy Beat stereotype mad to live, the next day a bourgeois soldier, à la Flaubert's maxim to stay regimented in life and wild in our work. He got me seeing bigger things for myself. Ray seemed to have read everything; he feared Rimbaud, constantly wondered aloud if our times and society could have produced someone like Dostoyevsky, and loved Japanese literature, even got us all to read *Tale of Genji*. 'Japanese writing, I mean from Basho to Mishima, are you kidding me? We'll never get through it all alone. You'd need six lifetimes to read everything.' He wanted us to explore as much as he did, not so we could talk big, but to give each other tips on as many truly great things as we could before we graduated.

In January, Ray got what I thought was good news—he won the Tapper Award for student playwriting. He had submitted a work-in-progress called *Dynamo Blues*, a one-man show about his philosophy that no soul should pursue a single art. Ray had said many times that he'd never specialize, it just wasn't in his blood. 'That's what turned Gregor Samsa into a cockroach—society's pressure to specialize,' he'd said, and what killed Mozart was the need to make money, and every artist was wise to fear the limits imposed on them by the world in their era.

Winning that award didn't give Ray a big head, it had the opposite effect, but it definitely messed with the good



connection we had going. A few days after he won he got banned from Levin's Books for showing this little guy who said Beckett was overrated. A day later, Ray came to my apartment and said, 'That's it. From now on I'm a writer. I'm dropping everything else. Writing, only writing!'

I almost laughed, but he looked terrified, which scared me for reasons I didn't understand until many years later. If he was serious, this wouldn't be a small decision, since he was on a music scholarship.

I didn't question him about it right then, just tried to calm him down a little. 'Of course you're a writer,' I said, 'that's what you've always been.'

'This is a sign,' he said. 'Winning this prize happened for a reason.'

I told him I understood.

'You get it, right?' he said. 'To finish the play I have to focus on it and nothing else. I have to specialize for a little while, let my other stuff suffer.'

I remember how relieved I was to hear him say this. Even as a half-ass spectator to the things he did I was exhausted. Because of Ray I was behind in my readings and had also turned down a chance to work with a girl on a project that later got published in an anthology from a serious university press. I had no idea what kind of grades Ray was getting but assumed he was doing okay, though maybe in retrospect he'd actually failed some classes or been on academic probation. So it felt good to hear him confess that it was impossible to do quite so much and he might have to tone things down a bit. I was looking forward to a break. But I got roped back in a couple days later when Ray confided that he was having these almost catatonic fugue episodes every day,



some lasting nearly two hours when he'd stare at the pens on his desk, or at his hands in his lap, worrying that he'd chosen the wrong art and was headed in a bad direction.

'I look at something and see it,' he said, 'then I blink and it's still there. I blink again and I thank God that it's still there, on and on like that, terrified the pattern might end.'

I told him to stay put and talk to me for a while.

He said he'd spoken to the music school dean and officially declined his scholarship. He also had an appointment with an advisor about changing his major. So that was it. All the work he'd put into studying music would probably amount to no degree and most likely there wouldn't be any more musical or theatrical stunts.

Though it was serious now, I was secretly, and suddenly, happy. I saw myself graduating before Ray, beating him in at least one way with a cheap victory. After all, he had his playwriting award. What did I have to show?

'You're doing the right thing,' I said.

'I know. It's what she'd want.'

'Who?'

I thought for a second that maybe all along there had been some girl he'd been dating who none of us knew about, someone who encouraged this big change of heart and urged Ray to throw away his scholarship. But a few minutes later he started telling me about his Mom and how she died. I had known about his Dad's music success, but I didn't know his Mom had been a writer. She'd started out as a biophysicist, earned a ton of money, then turned poet, traveled sometimes with her husband, wrote about the places they went, and published several essay and poetry



collections. She was with her husband in 1992 after a concert in Bucharest and his next show was in Rome, so they decided to visit Medjugorje in what used to be Yugoslavia, where the Virgin Mary had been appearing for more than a decade. It was October, cold as hell in the mountains, and she caught pneumonia the day after they visited the hill where the spirit had descended and spoken so many times before. Open civil war was getting into full swing at the time and Ray's parents were stranded by some of the early fighting. They couldn't get her treatment.

'She died riding in the back of some car with my dad. He'd promised a guy ten thousand dollars if he could make it through the mortar fire and streets full of craters. But the war was too intense that day. It stopped them.'

Eleven-year-old Ray had been back home in Virginia at boarding school when she died.

We only spoke that one time about her death, but it was clear that of course he must've been holding back on blaming his dad's touring lifestyle for his mom's death, and that his parents' success had inspired him badly, to try and be as good as the both of them, rather than settling into one real thing he loved. We were already about three-quarters of the way through college and Ray just hadn't made the kind of splash he felt he had to being the child of two brilliant people. So now something in Ray had snapped under this decision to pursue writing, his mom's chosen art, all because he saw the playwriting prize as a direct sign to follow her and abandon music, his dad's art.

My theory, which I didn't have to tell him since I'm sure he knew it, too, was that there was some guilt or trauma



connected to his mom's death that had to be expelled, so he could grieve properly like he needed to. I offered to help and he agreed to work together.

After a few back-and-forth discussions about possible methods that might work for us as amateurs to get at some of his anxieties, checking in of course with our texts on Jungian analysis and some of Freud's essays, we decided to use a simple approach to help him chill out, where he'd vent for as long as it took, in as much detail as possible, telling me his bad dreams, including any frantic daydreams and obsessive thoughts, all blended together, forgetting the truth—and I'd transcribe everything he said. I knew it would mean losing study time for side projects that might've helped me get into a good grad school, but I have to admit I was curious as hell to see how our plan would work out, knowing it might actually backfire and I'd get to see Ray break down, maybe witness this incredible mind deteriorating right in front of me. I could catch up later on my studying.

The goal was that once some of these particular demons were captured in words they'd be at his mercy, not vice-versa. He'd have them in another dimension besides thought and could mess with them in this realm the way he felt his memories of his mom were holding him captive.

We both knew he could've done something like this with a shrink, or done it by himself, but working together saved him time and cash. Since Ray had just abandoned his music scholarship his dad had cut him off of family money for a little while, so funds were tight.

Ray would talk, lying on the floor usually, while I typed quick as I could, transcribing things pretty much word-



for-word on a laptop. We used this process for about two months and seven dreams. By the sixth and seventh dreams we had our technique down pretty well.

Here's the seventh and final transcript we made, starring Ray, as told to me by the man himself.

Ray Apada: Dreamdump #7: March 7, 2001:

I remember sitting with a crowd of people in the first few rows of a quiet theatre near the stage. It was late, about one in the morning. The lights in the theatre were low. The stage was dimly visible. There was this irritating tour guide man like a ringmaster who did a lot of talking in a wild but at the same time perfectly ordinary voice. I remember him talking about, or maybe I want to remember him saying something like, 'It is, after all, just a room with a great story,' and then going on about how the show he was producing was spiritually different than every other show that had ever existed before, that it was the best kind of show because his didn't progress, or change, except as a memory, as something we the people would remember later on as being better than the first time we all saw it together.

I think I remember thinking the guy was sort of crazed because he said the show we were about to watch was going to be quite violent and involve very real physical pain for several individuals in the audience, with hammers and sharp flying metal and flames and at that point a woman in the audience





stood up looking scared, or pretending to be a damsel in distress so she could show off her sheer dress, barely veiling her black bra and panties.

The theatre guide laughed and said it was fine, there was no danger, he was just talking theoretically, so the woman sat back down again to some quiet laughter from her male companion and two other men in the group.

Then as the man kept talking, all I could think about was how transparent, lacy and quite appealing the whole idea of a perfect performance was. I remember a phrase like ‘collective orgasm’ right before the theatre man suddenly got really furious about some failure and shouted, ‘It would’ve convinced the world, Matchmaker!’ Which was hilarious to me and some other people in the crowd.

When the show started it was one actor in jeans and a t-shirt. Except below the rolled-up ends of his jeans I saw he wore very black socks made out of silk or something, and no shoes. The actor started reciting what was I think a poem. I remember looking from my seat through the rows of people and seeing the back of my mother’s head as she first leaned over whispering to a man on her right, and later on leaned to whisper to a man on her left. I looked away from her toward the actor on stage and noticed that he sort of resembled me. (Okay, maybe it was me performing for my parents, trying to impress them. I get that).

When I looked back into the heads of the audience in the dark theatre I couldn’t see my mom





anymore. Then the actor started yelling a long rant and all I remember him saying was ‘anguish’ and ‘a hand splashing water,’ as he really beared down to scream, with his fists at his sides, then a lot of swear words before he repeatedly yelled ‘adjust, adjust,’ or maybe he said ‘anguish’ again, with his eyes wide open, turning his head toward each person in the audience one-by-one until it didn’t even sound like a word anymore.

After the actor’s little poem was over the stage lights went off and the house lights came on. The actor bowed once and walked away to the sound of us politely clapping.

My dad was back and asked us if we wanted drinks and everyone was standing in the aisle holding a wine glass or a whiskey glass or a martini. I remember wondering if the woman in the transparent clothes was worth talking to. I tried to get next to her but there was something going on with her and the two guys who had laughed when she had freaked out before, or pretended to freak out, and the tour guide was kind of hanging near her, too, protectively it looked like, or maybe just trying to get in the running, and I just felt alone and snubbed. What really made me decide to leave though is that at one point I looked at the stage and saw in the dimness off in the wings that the actor who had just performed was standing there like a corpse staring at us, either because he thought we couldn’t see him, or because he was fully devoted to what this whole thing was about, but either way, I





looked back and it seemed like he had seen me and was smiling at me for noticing him there.

I remember I didn't point him out to anyone else, even though I wanted someone to notice the guy, too, but I was too shy, and felt like I should have known that the theatre really is just a strange place after all. So I just put my whiskey on the end of one of the theatre seats, half-cushion, half-metal, facing upwards, kind of waved to the crowd who didn't stop talking or drinking to say good bye and I walked away up the aisle feeling like my life depended on me being strong enough not to look back toward the stage before I left. And I didn't.

That's the end of Ray's dream.

He never said much about the other transcripts we made, but the first time I printed this one out he read it and said, 'This classic method we're using is good. Confronting your memories lets you put destiny right there, dead center.' I didn't have time then to figure out what he meant exactly. I'd wasted weeks and needed to get serious about my classes. He had to finish his play so he'd get the Tapper Award money.

I didn't see him freak out again after we made those transcripts. He was less frantic and I felt like I'd helped him at a critical time, one of those clear-cut moments when a friend needs help and you think you can't, because of what you hold against him, but you actually manage to pull it off. We had drinks once or twice and he seemed good before the school year ended.





That summer, I worked painting houses as part of my uncle's business. Ray emailed me just once. "This play is the best thing I ever worked on. I couldn't have done it without your help. Thanks, man." I told him it was no problem, then did some complaining about how much my summer job sucked and mentioned a few grad schools I was thinking about applying to next year. He didn't write back that week or the week after. I wound up drinking more and more. That of course just made me feel worse. I should've been saving that beer money for school; unlike Ray, some of us didn't have family money to cover tuition and everything else.

I wrapped up my summer job with my uncle and was back in school by the end of August. Weeks went by and Ray wasn't around. Then 9/11 happened and I got a bit worried when Ray still wasn't returning calls or emails, even though I knew there was practically zero chance he'd died that day since he lived in Delaware with his dad at the time. This was confirmed when we got a broadcast message from our university president saying that only an alum had been killed, no one else from the school. I didn't have Ray's home number at his dad's, which made me feel stupid for not thinking of asking Ray for it before, and when I checked it wasn't listed in the student directory.

After the attacks, my folks said I should take a break from school if I needed to, but I stayed and studied hard, focusing in, sort of hoping my effort might conjure up Ray, and he'd reappear in the form of this great young writer, clean-shaven and ready to go and we'd patch things up with the old group, which had split up in some sort of post-9/11





freakout or something when everybody started boozing harder, dropping out, and hooking up pretty frantically with whoever they could and I went from having a decent crowd of people around me to almost no one.

Nobody from the old group really had anything to say when I asked them about Ray. I started to avoid them out of spite at first, then embarrassment for letting them get to me. When I called Ray's phone again a month later the number belonged to someone else. I smothered my hope of seeing him ever again by imposing common sense on myself, telling myself that all those stunts had been fun but not that big of a deal, and neither had those little therapy sessions we did, which I'd never mentioned to anyone, and don't think Ray ever did either. I held on to the dream transcripts though, out of sentimentality, I suppose.

I couldn't see any good reason why he had abandoned me like that. It was nice that he'd opened up and let me help him that way, but he never acknowledged how close we got. I couldn't believe that even as just good friends, after sacrificing all that time for him, even if he wasn't coming back and wouldn't be returning the favor of being there for me like I was there for him, he could've at least stayed in touch during my last year at school. Just hearing from him a few times would've been a huge help.

Instead, I studied alone like a fiend, trying not to drink too much, slowly bending my GPA back into better shape. I put off the applications for grad school, financial aid, and grants. I just didn't have the energy anymore. Though my grades had suffered, I still graduated in the spring of 2002, without any honors but right on schedule in four years with





my relieved parents smiling at me and cheering when some dean called my name.

Ten years later, I was in an elevator two thousand miles west of the city where Ray and I went to college and while I can't be completely sure, the music in there sounded very much like Muddy Waters' 'Mannish Boy' adapted for twelve-string guitar, a soft instrumental version with these nice, almost inaudible microtones. I stayed on the elevator to listen for a few more minutes smiling at people who probably thought I'd lost it.

Hearing that music was for me the second surprise I had since college that some part of Ray was still alive out there. The first came when I read online about a couple productions of *Dynamo Blues*, Ray's award-winning college play that triggered the crisis I helped him through. There had been a production in Savannah in 2005 and another in Oakland a few years later. It was cool to see his name on my computer screen under the words 'Written by.' I felt as if there were an invisible co-credit beneath it for me, like I imagine parents feel when their kids accomplish things.

I'm glad one of us had some artistic success. Mine probably would've been academic. Not that I haven't done pretty well—I make decent money. After college, my uncle offered me an entry-level gig doing human resources administration. It sounded boring, but I took it because it paid well. Now I've really chipped away at my school debt, and was able to move out west. I never made it to grad school. It just felt crazy to consider taking on more debt to go get, of all things, a Ph.D. in German literature. If the



people in the program sucked, it was just going to be lonely all over again and twice as expensive.

I've never tried to get in touch with Ray and he's never reached out to me. I did almost contact his dad once. I'd been drinking bourbon after reading the transcript about Ray's dad and dead mom in that theatre; I still have well-preserved copies of all seven of the dream transcripts we created. It was after midnight and at the kitchen table I was ready to send an email to Ray's dad at the Peabody in Baltimore, when I realised I'd never met the man. I froze and got the feeling I was about to write to the other world, not because the guy was rich, more like a ghost, since I only knew him through Ray's dreams and comments years ago about how badly they used to get along. Maybe Ray's dad hadn't spoken to him in years either. I had enough sense that night to delete the email.

It's a bit embarrassing to still read the transcripts occasionally and get stuck thinking about college days. In my peaceful moments I can see that the transcripts are real evidence that I helped nurture Ray's talents, even if I didn't manage to accomplish the kind of things he did. I helped him. I thought of him and wanted him to succeed, maybe because I felt like I owed him for inspiring me, even if our friendship didn't turn out the way I hoped.

When I read the transcripts I remember sitting close to him and how sick but strong his face looked that day he whispered about his mom dying in that war when he was so young. I know that for him the dreams he told me held a meaning about her and death that he couldn't admit. He seemed to like how impossible it was. I got the sense, and



still feel grateful to him for showing me, that he believed his fate would change for the better if he could figure out some small part of that secret's nature. For me, it was significant to see that even as brilliant as he was there were limits to what he could understand about himself and her.

He needed to reach out to the dead in his own way back then. Lately, it's started to make a lot of sense for me to think of Ray as if he were dead, too. I just sat down with coffee in the living room one Saturday morning, took a sip, looked around and thought that it would be nicer if I could imagine that Ray was just gone forever. It was as if I could see the words and finally feel them: you will never get Ray back. You will never find him again because there is no one like that for you to find. I could take those memories and do what feels natural, move him in my mind among the dead. He would belong to another realm for me, where my dad is now, and a cousin, an ex-girlfriend, and my grandmother. That's where Ray really belongs, after all, after so many years without any contact. If I could kill him off, I could maybe use him the same way he used his mom. My memory of his life connected to hers connected to mine would vanish, breaking the chain of caring so much and worrying about it, if possible, leaving me with my own life again. He wouldn't have to be a real person anymore, just a story emptying itself of memories about someone I may have loved, but who didn't have time for me because he was too preoccupied with things I never really understood.

I haven't been able to kill Ray off completely yet, but I did his memory some real damage in my mind the other night. I was lying on my couch reading the seventh dream





transcript and halfway through I imagined Ray started to talk, warning me about my habit of looking back and re-living his old dreams so often. He was finally trying to be helpful, invoking the tale of Lot's wife, whispering about cursed people turning to salt and losing their souls. I imagined holding up the stapled transcript of his dream in my hands and tearing the pages in half from top to bottom. Holding the halves lightly in my hands, they would tilt and sway, letting the sentences I had typed slip off the pages, silencing Ray, forming a pile of small black letters on my chest. I could sit up on the couch and brush off his words. I would be free to forget him if I could stay strong. The only remnant of Ray would be a few torn sheets of blank paper twitching in my hands as I carried them toward the trash and steadied myself before throwing them away for good.

