The Death of a Fat Man

I go to sleep to a variety of different types of music. On the Saturday morning that I have deemed important enough to write a theme about, I’m listening to Pink Floyd. The Wall, to be particular. “Comfortably Numb.” When I’m fading from beautiful, serene, azure REM sleep, David Gilmour is just hitting that second guitar solo, the one that everyone can hum, the one that made it the only song people want to get stoned to and have played at their funeral. I am on the precipice of consciousness, that nirvanic threshold between being completely asleep and being aware of your surroundings; essentially all I am conscious to is that one guitar solo. A profound feeling of oneness with one’s record collection and life in general. The nirvana is immediately shot point blank in the face when my mother knocks on my door. Between the song and the door, all I hear is consonants. I stumble out of bed, knock over the three bottles of green tea that I knocked back before going to sleep, turn down the stereo, and nearly fall asleep again before my mom shouts again.

“Deke, get up, we’re going to eat breakfast with Wingo.”

Ah, jeez. I’ve known Wingo forever. Quick character sketch. Born an orphan in 1933, Russell E. Wingo (always called by his last name) had a teenage life filled with crime. He even spent time in jail for shoplifting. His life didn’t get quite on track until he was discovered to be intensely good at sports, particularly basketball and baseball. He played baseball against MBA’s own Jamie Tillman, and is still in the hall of fame at David Lipscomb for his basketball accolades. After graduating from school, he became a used car salesman. Over the years Wingo has had one biological son, Russell E. Wingo, Jr., and has adopted four other children. Through the bizarre and random square dance of
life, the man met my Dad at a poker game on the day of the assassination of JFK. Dad has been Wingo’s best friend, right-hand man, and male spouse ever since. Mom claims Wingo and Dad both wept like Jesus when I was born. If Life were a cheesy sitcom, I’d probably call him “uncle.” He’s the kind of guy that teaches you the death grip nerve hold and tells you stories about your dad he wouldn’t want you to know. Wingo’s dying of cancer of the everything.

We’re eating at the Waffle House. My choice. Mom and I get there first. Dad’s gone to pick Wingo up at his apartment. The Waffle House is packed. Smells like a mix between stale cigarette smoke and coffee. We get a seat at the “waiting area.” We sit there for about five minutes, in that mode of conversation where both parties are content with staring at an inanimate object rather than speak. A booth opens up, and I get up.

“Deke, no, it’s Wingo.”

Oh yeah. Wingo is a fat man. Really fat. Has-trouble-fitting-into-booths fat. He used to be really lanky like me, but then he divorced his wife and married his fridge.

Dad and Wingo pull up. Dad gets out of the car first, then five seconds later comes Wingo. Wingo has a sort of waddle that’s been made worse by hip problems associated with cancer of the everything. He opens the door for Dad and waddles over next to us. He sees the open booth, insists that we take it. Dad argues; Wingo sits. Gets into it alright, a tight fit, but he’ll survive.

Here are Deke’s experiences with death in the past: I had a goldfish named Charley that died of being an old goldfish. And my brother killed himself. But I wasn’t that close to him, he was a half-brother on my dad’s side, 20 years older than I am. Committed suicide on the night of Wrestlemania X. Mom and Dad and I were in Florida,
unpacking our bags on Spring Break. We got a call from a half-sister that says Kirk’s
dead. I only remember being the first person to make Dad laugh after he found out. On
the plane ride back, I said, “If Todd [my half-brother on Mom’s side] didn’t tape
Wrestlemania, there’s gonna be another death in the family.” Idiot. Mom smacked me
square in the face; Dad laughed. Laughted. I hope one day I’ll understand that.

The way I saw it before being here at the Waffle House with a dying fat man,
there were two ways of dealing with your own mortality. The easiest way to understand
them is to look to the universal translator of all human conditions—The Beatles. There’s
the “A Day in the Life” method, employed by the Lifers (as I like to call them), and
there’s the “Helter Skelter” method, employed, sensibly enough, by the Skelters. “A Day
in the Life” is, for the uninitiated, a song ending with a huge, melodramatic crescendo. A
Lifer, when he learns he’s dying, goes into a huge rush, dying to do all the things he’s
always held back on because of fear for how it would affect him in the future. I also see
people who become incredibly religious upon realizing their number is up as Lifers.

“Helter Skelter” is a song ending with a series of fade-ins and fade-outs, culminating in a
single fade-out. Skelters become incredibly depressed when they learn they’re dying, and
slow down their lives, often voluntarily, confining themselves to a small area and a small
life for their final days, filled with grief and overanalysis. Jesus Christ was a Skelter, so
was my half brother who killed himself on purpose. Of course, as a fellow smartass once
said, “There are two kinds of people in this world, those who divide the world into two
kinds of people and those who do not.” Wingo didn’t fit into my little dichotomy.

The conversation, consisting mainly of me nervously talking to Wingo and
various chewing sounds and concealed burps and gargles from my parents, is mostly/
about movies and candy bars. Wingo makes exactly one comment relating to his impending date with the Great Beyond. Upon learning that the price of Hershey Bars had ballooned to a price far beyond the days of yore, Wingo says, “Jesus Christ, if things are getting that bad, I’m glad I’m dying.” Of course, he’s joking. Joking. He’s not glad he’s dying; he’s in a comfortable position some hypochondriac psychologists would call denial. He doesn’t have to worry about how he’s dealing with death; he just doesn’t deal with it at all. He made out his will a long time ago, so the logistics of it are long gone. To him, death isn’t some holy checkbook that must be balanced. Wingo’s not building to a crescendo; he’s not fading out; he’s just there. He looks happy enough to me.

I say my goodbyes to Wingo, who leaves with Dad; they go to the golf course, where both will play endless games of Chinese Poker (don’t ask me) in smoky converted lockerrooms. I go home, having nothing to do at about 10 in the AM on a Saturday. So, intending to sleep, relax, pontificate, or think of something to do, I put on some music. The Beatles, again. Abbey Road, the last album they recorded. Track 6, my new favorite song on the album, is called “I Want You (She’s so Heavy).” It’s a bluesy, loud, garish number that goes on, and on, the same riff repeated endlessly and without change, until, at around the 7-minute 38-second mark, it just stops cold. Cold. It’s almost as if George Martin (again, for the uninitiated, the Beatles’ producer and the maestro of their work, especially the later albums), acting as some musical deity, just decided the song had gone on long enough, and stopped it. No crescendo, no fade out. In a world of forced broad musical analogies, that’s Wingo. That’s also what I want to be.

Okay, armchair philosopher mode on. What follows are the opinions of a smartass overcynical teenager who has read too much JD Salinger and has exactly no
right to criticize anyone in his current condition. I may very well look back on this theme a very old Deke and wonder how I was ever this stupid. I think right now, society as a whole is a Lifer. It's as if after we realized we could kill the world, be it after Hiroshima or with the emergence of Duran Duran, we all started on a mad crescendo, desperate to do everything we can before The Big Day. I'm a Lifer. All teenagers are. I don't want to be, but I am. Wingo was too; he gorged himself with food when his wife fell out of love with him. Not anymore. Maybe it was the realization that he'd raised five human beings. It takes a contentment and satisfaction with life to completely come to terms with one's death. Wingo is satisfied with the life he's led. He's through writing the theme; he's ready to turn it in; and he's not worried about what grade he made.