Not Today Friend
(A Reflection on Life and Death as Seen by a Cynical Teenager)

All right, a quick break down: I was ten years old and enjoying the middle of summer, the time of year for which a ten year old boy exists. I spent my days as any healthy lad would, I swam with my pals (always embarrassed by the fact that my mother would insist on supervising us out of fear that one of us would suddenly forget how to keep his head above water and drown), played pick up games of home run derby in the neighborhood, and submitted to the more typical stereotype of 90s youth by sitting on my can, eating potato chips and watching television. Yes, it was shaping up to be one great summer, and being the carefree kid that I was, I never sensed that there was anything to worry about. Of course, in my more recent years, as a slightly older, more cynical teenager, I have developed the theory that in life there exists a cruel equilibrium, which likes to tease man whenever he thinks he's on top of the world by slapping him in the face and kicking his over joyous ass back into the unforgiving abyss of reality. That summer Mr. Equilibrium kicked me square in the teeth when my dad confronted me one afternoon with "Doug's dead."

Doug was my uncle on my mother's side. He was the youngest of the family and for some reason I never developed the strong relationship that I had with other members of my mother's family with him. Doug always seemed to be the oddball: he sparsely showed up at family gatherings and few members of the family spoke much of him. The few times I did see him, usually Christmas Eve or other family events that he deemed important enough to make an appearance, he kept a low profile. He nearly always wore plain Levi's-esque blue jeans that were always a bit too short thus revealing his white socks, which clashed with his customary tasseled brown loafers, and a collared shirt,
usually stripped that would smell faintly one of the cigarettes to which he frequently gave suck. But his most memorable feature to me was his thick, stiff, wiry black hair, which was always combed back to highlight his prominent dark moustache, which showed some premature graying.

By this time I had pieced together that Doug had run into problems with drug abuse in his past. In the summers I would frequently spend weekends with my grandparents in the quaint, one-storied house where they had resided since my grandfather was transferred to Tennessee in the 60s. After an evening of poker, which would include: blackjack, seven card stud, and the always popular five card draw, my grandfather would retire to bed, and my grandmother and I would spend time talking about whatever crossed our minds.

My grandmother is a very loving old woman who likes nothing better than to while her time away talking about past memories, even if I had heard her particular past memory a dozen times before. I guess she is the typical grandmother. She is very religious, she moderately spoils her grandchildren, and she cooks one of the meanest pot roasts you’ll find ‘round these parts. But where she supersedes the role of an average grandma figure is in her unconditional love for her family. No matter what her kids or grandkids did, she always loved them and always defended them in their best interest, while making sure that they were punished when they needed to be.

Back to the part about Doug’s drug abuse. Every once in a while during one of our late night chat sessions, my grandmother would mention how Doug had found his way into trouble with various substances. This issue is an area in particular where her
unconditional love shined through. She never ended a story without illustrating the sincere pride she took in her son by making a remark along the lines of:

“People should really look to your uncle Doug as an example of what a man can do with his life if he puts his mind to it.”

The more nights I spent with her, the more I learned about Doug’s problems. Apparently he first started with the common drug among teens, especially in the late 60s and early 70s, marijuana. She told me that when my grandfather first found marijuana on Doug, he went ballistic (I’m sure that after this initial encounter Doug was sober for a while out of fear of baiting my grandfather, a World War II veteran, again). But unfortunately my grandfather’s tough love did not solve the problem; before long Doug’s drug abuse mounted, and my grandparents sent him to rehab. Whether or not he came out clean isn’t relevant; by this point it was too late. Somewhere along the way in sharing a needle he managed to contract HIV, the unforgiving virus that might as well be Death himself.

Of course when my grandmother told me the stories of Doug’s troubled past, she was completely oblivious to fiendish virus treating his immune system like a Shoney’s breakfast bar. Hell, my uncle was oblivious himself until he started showing the symptoms. He went to his doctor in a futile attempt to address the abnormalities that he began to deal with. Before long he was in and out of the hospital living his last weeks because a selfish virus had chosen to take him at a tragically young age and put a damper on my terrific summer. Hence my dad’s shocking news, “Doug’s dead.”

When those harsh words first penetrated my unprepared ears, I honestly could muster up no sincere emotional feeling in response. I stood there in shock with my brain
trying in vain to process what this unexpected tragedy meant to me. I regret to admit that I initially came to the conclusion of what I like to term sorrowful indifference. I was indeed deeply sad that a man had lost his life at the age of thirty-five, but at the same time I hardly knew him, and I had trouble feeling deeply hurt by his loss. But at that time I was a mere child; his death means infinitely more to me now when I ponder it. As a boy I had no real sense of mortality, as far as I was concerned I was staying around here forever, and there was nothing that could stop me. Recently, though, as I mature, it troubles me to admit that I worry about my own mortality frequently, and I’m only 17. A tragic death like Doug’s unwelcomingly reminds me of how fragile life is and how easily one can come to lose it. I fear that life may possibly be all that we, as humans, have and that an arbitrary force can come along and say:

“Sorry friend, but it’s off this plane of existence with you.”

Though I felt no great initial emotion over Doug’s death, the funeral would prove to be an eye-opening event for me. At first I was not too worried about the emotional element involved in grim spectacle of my uncle’s last physical remains being blessed and lowered into the dark, cold earth for an empty eternity of non-being because the previous school year I was blessed with the ever so wonderful task of consoling my best friend after he lost his father to cancer, and consoling him included going to the funeral of a man as unfortunate as Doug. But for some reason this time I couldn’t behave as the reserved “man” I liked to think myself to be.

I sat in the pew taking the very rare opportunity to visit with my cousins from Cincinnati whom I saw maybe once a year. I also caught site of a girl around my age who was related to Doug’s wife somehow. Well that did it. If a girl was present, there
was no way that I was going to let any “emotions” get the better of me; I wasn’t going to
cry like some sissy girl. But my ego was soon humbled. As soon as the service began
with the trite Bette Midler song “Lift You Up on Eagle’s Wings” (or something like that),
I looked around at all my family members who kept a calm, reserved façade, and
instantly my eyes fell on my grandmother. For the first time my uncle’s death meant
something to me. I realized that this nurturing woman had outlived her own son. I am
not yet a parent, nor will I be one anytime soon, but the thought of any mother outliving
her son, whom she had nurtured out of unconditional love since the day he was born,
absolutely shattered me. I burst out in tears. I reached for my mother who also began to
tear up. I finally gathered my composure and left the funeral as a somewhat more mature
kid with a better understanding of death’s overall affects. This death did not hurt me
directly because I felt no initial remorse, but rather it hurt me indirectly because it was
not until after I witnessed my family say goodbye to their conflicted, but good-willed
Doug that I began to grieve out of pity for them.

After the funeral, life went on as it always had. I resumed my carefree activities in
the neighborhood trying to scratch the surface of reality again. Though my activities with
my friends may have returned to normal, one thing was never quite the same again. I
would still go to my grandparents’ house, and my grandmother would still cook a huge,
delicious dinner, and I would still dominate a game of poker until my grandfather retired
to bed at ten o’clock, but from then on when I joined my grandmother at the kitchen
table, Doug never became the subject of our conversations anymore.

To this day I am troubled by the fact that no one speaks of the black sheep who
was starting to get his life together when mortality reared his degenerate head and said:
"Not in this life time pal."

The saddest part is the fact that Doug was the kid for whom my grandmother always stood up; for every one of Doug's lesser qualities, she could name three virtuous ones. Even now, as I sit here and write this essay on this event, an event to which I had paid no remembrance until I wearily pondered this assignment, I can't help but get choked up in thinking about what my family, especially my grandparents, went through. The strange thing is the fact that I never once saw my grandmother shed a single tear over his loss - even at the funeral; she merely paid her respects and let her troubled son rest. I don't believe that she didn't feel much remorse (I know better than that after hearing her tell stories about his childhood with a proud sense of nostalgia). Perhaps she didn't want to burden the family with any surplus grief by exhibiting her own anguish. In any case, if she intended to diminish my worries, she was unsuccessful because I saw through her stern façade and for the first time acknowledged the disheartening reality of mortality.

Doug's death is an event that takes place in everyone's life; of course the situation is different for each person, but there is always that distinct moment in everyone's childhood when they become painfully aware that life will not go on ceaselessly; it has to reach a conclusion, much like the conclusion of that eventful summer when I was ten years old.