

EXCERPT: ADVENTURES OF A GRAVESTOMPER BY CORIN WHITE

You Sick Bastard!

Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death...

— Auntie Mame



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*Gravestomping? What the Fu**?*

My mother was fantastic at packing away her stuff for safekeeping. It was an art for her. She had shelves and shelves full of boxes which contained other boxes and in these were plastic bags turned with twist-ties which contained more boxes and bags and twist-ties. I don't know what was really in any of these boxes but she had a basement, four closets and an attic full of them. For all I know they contained her stash of twist-ties and plastic bags. I never asked her what was in them because it never interested me. Whatever was in those boxes was dead and stagnant and inaccessible. Why waste time trying to figure it out?

My mother didn't own anything precious or valuable. Just old knick-knacks and bed spreads, costume jewelry and outdated clothes that she'd never worn because she'd saved them for special occasions that never came. Still, she boxed them all and held



My grandmother's grave at Mount Carmel Cemetery in Hillside, IL. Down there is an unopened bottle of Chanel No. 5 that she was saving it for a special occasion.

on to them for safe-keeping. Someday they'd be significant, she thought. But they never were.

It was a family trait. My brother mastered my mother's talent for boxing up his stuff by the time he was eight and hoarded all of his treasures in boxes that he hid under his bed. When I was 29 we boxed my dead grandmother in a casket with a large bottle of Chanel No. 5, her favorite cologne. I'd bought her the cologne as a birthday gift a year before. Instead of enjoying it she packed it away for a special occasion. Guess her burial was as special as it got.

Humans love to box up their stuff and keep it. Jewelry and mementos, old photographs and diaries. 'Thin' clothes, one size too small, that they vow to someday get back into. Sporting equipment and musical instruments they swear they'll someday learn how to use.

Closets, attics and storage lockers are filled with stuff that people have boxed up for

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“safe-keeping.” We even box up the rotting corpses of our dearly beloved and shove them into storage facilities called cemeteries.

Maybe it gives people some sense of control. Some illusion of permanence in an impermanent world. But they’re not really fooling anyone. Special occasions never come and cologne goes unused. ‘Thin’ clothes become two, three, four sizes too small and slide a generation out of fashion. Musical instruments rust and warp. Sporting equipment molds. Bodies become monstrosities. When people exhume the treasures they put away for safe keeping they smell musty and decayed, and never seem to look the same way they did when they were originally packed up.

Graveyards and death may seem like very strange things to write a book about. Photographing and filming cemeteries may seem like odd things for a guy to spend his time doing. But if you really pay attention to this book and what’s running under the surface, you’ll know that it’s not really about death. It’s about living.

Graveyards teach us very important lessons about the transient and immediate nature of life. They teach us to live in the moment and to take risks. They teach us that there is more to life than what we do from the hours of nine to five every day. They teach us there’s something much bigger than the titles, relationships and tiny little egos by which we define ourselves.

Take a walk through any graveyard and you’ll see the culmination of lives spent exactly as yours are now: consumed by love; family; alliances and enemies; wars; financial success and ruin; broken hearts; illness; self-expression and self-torment. If there’s one thing that spending time in a graveyard teaches you, it’s that people don’t change unless they make a conscious effort to. They are now as they always were. You can see it just by reading the epitaphs on their tombstones. There’s no joy you’re experiencing now that thousands before you haven’t experienced. And there’s nothing you’re so tortured about at this moment that thousands of others haven’t struggled with too. Joy or pain, misery or magnificence — life always ends in the same place. You know the beginning and the outcome of your story already: so why not make the narrative in-between extraordinary?

Control Freak?

Humans think they’re in control. It’s the ego trying to reinforce its realness. The human ego’s like Pinocchio: convinced it’s a real boy when all along it’s been fabricated by a cobbler. And when things don’t go its way it throws tantrums. The trick is to approach it from the view point of the cobbler — but that’s another book entirely.

All my life, I’ve watched people struggling to maintain varying levels of this control. From those who’ll make everyone else miserable because they’ve broken a nail. To those who like to abuse waitstaff because it makes them feel powerful. To teachers who abuse their students to feel more in control. To parents who believe they’re entitled to manage their children’s fates simply because they gave birth to them. To religious leaders who have no answers to human suffering but still claim the right to dictate the lives of others.

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We've all met these people. The ones who believe they must own and control and manage and comment on everything and everyone. They believe life can't go on without them. They want to be respected but they don't respect anyone else. They're tense. They complain. They blow up. They're always having a "bad day" because things aren't going their way. Nothing is ever their fault and yet they're continually trying to control all situations and all people.

These people should spend time in graveyards. There they'll see all the indispensable men and women who ever lived. In fact, there's no better teacher about how little humans actually can control than a graveyard. When you find yourself complaining over a bad meal at a restaurant, the loss of a job, a relationship that's gone wrong, a fender bender, or an increase in workload, take a walk through a graveyard. It'll help you put things into perspective. We spend so much time worrying about inconsequential shit. We spend so much time investing our energy in stuff we can't control. And yet, in the graveyard, we see where all of this wasted energy eventually pours itself: into an open hole in the ground, that's sealed up with dirt and covered with a tombstone.

What This Book Is Not

This book is not a catalog of dead and gone. Nor is it a testament to the great men and women who built the city of Chicago, because any greatness that any man (or woman) can achieve is often destroyed after his death by the mediocrity and laziness of those he leaves behind.

This book is not a genealogy exercise. It's not an attempt to get you to cling further to your family. It's not a celebration of the bonds we make when we are here, because those are leveled the minute you take your last breath. There's no endorsement here for any product or lifestyle; no celebration of the fact that we are human, as humans have proved, time and time again, that they're so very flawed, tiny and ignorant that they continually make the same mistakes over and over and over.

This book is, rather, a reminder of how all of those things rot and crumble. You may ask if this is a nihilistic view of life, but, if you believe in philosophies such as nihilism this book isn't for you. Because human philosophies have as little permanence as the tiny egos which conceive them. I'm not a pessimist. In fact, I'm the opposite, as I believe each of us has the potential to reach enlightenment this lifetime if we choose to. Problem is, most humans don't make that choice.

This is a book that demonstrates one incontrovertible fact: nothing lasts. There is no greater obstacle than this. Nothing more frightening or inspiring. Within a few short years you will be buried in a place much like the ones in this book. Lifeless. Possibly forgotten. Life will go on without you, no matter how irreplaceable you think you are. And therefore there is no reason for you ever, under any circumstances, to say, *I can't*.

People live their lives saying, *I can't*. They define and shape their lives by those limiting words. They adopt them as a mantra and use them to sabotage every opportunity that comes their way.

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Ever asked yourself what your life would be like if you refused to say, *I can't*?

What if, for just a week, you eliminated 'I can't' from your vocabulary? What if, for that week, you refused to define yourself by that limiting phrase? What if, instead saying *I can't*, you sought out the people, lessons, and processes which would enable you to say, *I can*? True, it takes a lot more courage to live that way. But there will be plenty of time to pack your life away in a nice little box. There are enough cowards in the world. What if, for a week at least, you were brave? What do you think would happen?

In the end only you can choose how you wish to live your life. But when you're acutely aware that there's only one, inevitable outcome to your life's story, what's to be gained by filling the main narrative with *I can't*'s? After all, what are you really afraid of? Failure? Rejection? Sure these things hurt, but not half as much as a life filled with regrets.

What Would You Do With Your Life If You Knew You Couldn't Fail?

Failure. It's the concept that seems to keep most people from acting to make their dreams come true. *What if I fail?* they ask before they've ever even started.

Have you ever asked yourself the question, *How would my life be different if I knew I couldn't fail?*

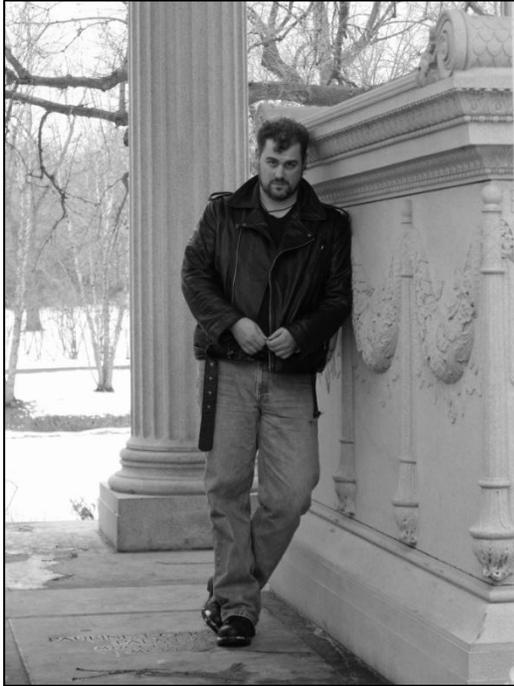
Maybe you've asked this question at a party drinking with friends. Maybe you've asked it while sitting on your bed in the middle of the night wondering where your life was going. Maybe you've asked it while walking down the street or wandering through a graveyard. Maybe you've asked yourself this question while sitting at your desk, trying to look like you were working, but avoiding the tasks in front of you because you found them so tedious and mind-numbing.

As you ask yourself this question, ask yourself too how you define failure. Everyone has their own definition of that word. What does the word mean to you? And how does the definition affect your life? Does the fear of this thing that you've defined control your life? How can that be if you're the one who's defined it? If you've defined it then you're the only one giving it power. You're also the only one who can disarm it. And that also means you can't blame anyone else for your failures.

What if you started to play with the role that definition has in your life? What if, instead of limiting yourself by that definition, you simply set it aside for the time being, and thought of one little action you could take every day that could bring you closer to your goals and dreams? Remember, a brilliant idea with no action behind it won't go half as far as a mediocre one with action backing it up.

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About the author



Corin White grew up in the largely Italian/Irish northwest side of Chicago. He holds a BA from the University of Illinois - Chicago and an MFA in Creative Writing from Chicago's Columbia College.

For over eight years, Mr. White served as faculty at Loyola University, DePaul University and Columbia College – but recognizing a career of conformist “living death” looming ahead – fled this life of grinding penury and mental abuse as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

As the Gravestomper, Mr. White enjoys his reputation as a highly-regarded motivational speaker and coach and is able to share his hard-earned wisdom with those who seek it in a way that was not available to him during his stint in academia.

To contact Mr. White please feel free to email him at TheGravestomper@gmail.com, or follow him on Twitter @GraveStomper.

You can find him on Facebook <http://www.facebook.com/#!/Gravestomper?ref=profile> or enjoy his blog and publicly released videos at <http://gravestomper.blogspot.com/>.