

FUNERALS ARE BETTER WITH TATER TOTS

by Bradley Walton

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FUNERALS ARE BETTER WITH TATER TOTS*A Dramatic Monologue***by Bradley Walton**

SYNOPSIS: Michael's little brother, Ben, is dying. During a visit Michael recalls something Ben declared years ago, at the age of four: "Funerals are better with tater tots." In the cascade of emotions that follow, Michael's inner walls begin to crumble as he slowly realizes that the time has come to acknowledge his pain so that he can say goodbye to his brother.

CAST OF CHARACTERS*(1 either)*

MICHAEL/MICHELLE (m/f).....17 years old, determined to remain upbeat in the face of their younger brother's terminal illness.

TIME: Present day.**SETTING:** A room in the hospice ward of a hospital.**SET:** Bare stage.**COSTUME:** Contemporary, everyday clothing.

AT START: MICHAEL on a bare stage.

MICHAEL: Hey, Ben. It's Michael. Here for my evening visit.

Mom's down in the cafeteria. She'll be back in a while.

I'd ask how you're doing, but I guess that would be kind of a stupid question. Looks like they've got you resting pretty well, though. I'm glad. You were miserable there for a while. So, yay for that. Yay drugs. Hospice drugs, I mean. Bad drugs are, y'know... bad.

So, I want you to know... I'm not going to talk about anything sad. This is going to be a totally positive, upbeat visit. Granted, I always try to be positive and upbeat when I visit, but from here on out, I'm making it a priority. I think you deserve that. And I want you to know—I have gotten to be the master of positive and upbeat. 'Cause being depressed and anxious and worried... it doesn't accomplish anything. Plus, it just sucks to feel that way all the time. So I've learned to focus really hard on stuff that I like, and find little things to distract myself. The internet is great for that. Thank God for cat videos, you know? So I'm good. You don't have to worry about me getting all weepy.

Pause.

You wanna hear something ironic? I don't know what to talk about. Here I am, in charge of a one-sided conversation, and you're out cold and probably can't even hear me, so I could literally say *anything*—but I don't know what to say. I'm drawing a complete blank. No jokes. No stupid stories. Nothing.

But I can't not talk. I mean, when am I gonna get a chance like this again?

(Suddenly mortified.) Shoot, sorry. That came out wrong. I didn't mean—I—I wasn't thinking—just—sorry. I'm sorry.

Pause.

I'd kill to think up a good toilet joke right now. But it's like I have—obnoxious block. Like writer's block, only it blocks me being obnoxious. But wait... *(Reaches into pocket.)* we have—*(Holds up phone.)*—internet!

(Looking at phone.) Let's see... what's an IP address? The address of wherever you go to the bathroom. *(Beat. Looks up from phone, puzzled.)* What? I don't get it. Oh, wait—IP... like peeing... I pee! Get it? *(Beat.)* Okay, yeah. I think I'll stop there. *(Puts phone back in pocket.)* I got treated to an ad for mortgage refinancing while I was reading that. It was a picture of an old man doing this impossible yoga pose with a doughnut in one hand. What it had to do with mortgage refinancing, I have no idea. Then again, I've never refinanced a mortgage, so maybe there's some connection I'm missing. But I doubt it.

It's a shame life doesn't have commercial breaks. So that whenever things get really dramatic, like they do on TV, you catch a little breather.

(In a melodramatic female voice.) "How could you do something like this to me, Bob? I want you out of my life forever!"

(In an announcer voice.) "With new Win-Win fabric softener, your clothes will never smell like they belong to a loser again!"

(In a melodramatic male voice.) "Please don't break up with me, Connie! My life would be meaningless without you!"

(In an announcer voice.) "Come gorge your face at Idaho Andy's Potato Chip Super Buffet! Hundreds of brands and flavors with millions of toppings! You'll go wild for our tater tot dessert bar!"

Actually, that sounds pretty cool—maybe not the dessert part, but... a potato chip super buffet with tater tots. Who wouldn't love that? It reminds me of... (*Beat.*) Grandma's funeral—sorry, I won't get depressing with this, I promise. I was seven, and you were four. Do you remember what you said?

"Funerals are better with tater tots."

Not "funerals *would be* better with tater tots"—no, "funerals *are* better with tater tots." Like you were some great, experienced funeral connoisseur who knew more about funerals than anyone else in the world. And this wasn't even at the reception, it was during a prayer at the graveside. And everybody started laughing, even the people who were crying... even the preacher. Mom looked so mortified, but Aunt Mary whispered to her that Grandma would've thought it was hysterical, and then Mom laughed, too.

The thing is, you kinda had a point. Funerals would be so much better with tater tots. I guess it might be hard to hold onto a plate and feed yourself and blow your nose at the same time, but the funeral caterers could walk around with platters and offer them to people during the service—that would work.

Funeral caterers are a thing, right? I've only been to two funerals—Grandma and Uncle Jeff—and they were both years ago, but I remember there was a ton of food after both. People (*Fighting a little to keep from breaking.*) die all the time—sorry—so funerals would probably be their own special branch of the catering business. And that would involve being around sad people. Completely different from catering a wedding, where everyone is happy. It'd be a whole different set of social skills. And switching back and forth from one to the other—that'd be like, emotional whiplash.

Except... preachers do weddings and funerals. Probably sometimes on the same day. So maybe caterers do, too. Or maybe people just bring food and help out. That's actually really nice, if it works like that—people helping out. Supporting the family that way.

Pause.

Sorry, got kind of somber there. Didn't mean to do that.

You know what else I remember about Uncle Jeff's funeral, besides the food? It had rained really hard that morning, and you slipped and fell right on your butt in the mud and your pants were all stained. I laughed so hard, I thought you were gonna kill me. But then I felt so bad for Mom, losing her brother, and then having to deal with us. I don't know how she got through that.

Beat.

I don't know how she's gonna get through this. But she will.

Beat.

Sorry, got somber again.

Beat.

(Looking around.) What do you think of this room? It's okay, I guess. Sort of nice, without actually being nice, if that makes sense. Clean. Bright. Cream-colored walls. It's so... inoffensively benign. Huh. I think that's the first time I've ever used the word "benign" where I wasn't talking about—well, you know. Anyway, the room, it's just—bland. So oppressively devoid of personality. I almost wish the walls were some hideous green and there was plaid carpet on the floor. No, I take that back. I don't wish that on you—not on top of... *(Fighting to keep voice from breaking.)* everything else.

Sorry—why do I keep doing that? I said this would be a positive, upbeat visit. Because however bad it's been for me—for everybody—it's been worse for you. You deserve a normal conversation. Or as normal as a one-sided conversation can be. I should be able to give you that much while I still can, before you—you know... die.

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