

WHEN  
YOU  
READ  
THIS

mary adkins

**H**  
HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © Mary Adkins 2019

The right of Mary Adkins to be identified as the Author  
of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance  
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by  
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,  
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover  
other than that in which it is published and without a similar  
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance  
to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 67331 1  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 67330 4  
eBook ISBN 978 1 473 67332 8

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable  
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable  
forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to  
conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

GOOGLING GRIEF

*by Jade Massey*

All the poems about grief  
are wrong.

My grief is the  
opposite  
of a couplet.

It is not pretty.

It does not make room  
for rhymes.

Here is my poem  
about grief:

So this is pain.

This is what it was  
all along.

SIMONYI BRAND MANAGEMENT

96 Morton Street, 9th Floor

New York, NY 10014

June 18

Dear Mr. Simonyi:

I came upon your company on the Stanford University Employers Forum, on which your firm is listed as a place where Stanford students have had positive internship experiences previously. Grace Wang ('16) wrote that she had a wonderful summer working with you and your colleague Iris. While "wonderful" is rather nebulous and uninformative, her point is well made. I see that you have not posted a fall internship opening, but I am writing to express my interest in interning for you come September.

I am a rising fourth-year with a deep and abiding commitment to public relations and communications work since the wee age of three and a half, at which time I launched my first promotional campaign for a line of children's toys created by my father, Carl Van Snyder Jr. My contribution consisted of conspicuously playing with the toys (which later became the award-winning ToddleGenius™ line) while at day care, in line with my father's at-home demonstrations. ;)

Since that time, I have established a proven track record of promotional success after promotional success. I am the youngest ever member of my fraternity to be elected social chair, and as such, I organized the Palo Alto chapter of the Race Against Alzheimer's this past spring, raising over \$100,000

for the organization Don't Forget Us. I am also a Krav Maga black belt, nationally ranked chess player (12-15 age group), and founder of the online magazine *SHAVED*, devoted to topics of personal hygiene and masculinity's fluctuating contours.

I would be thrilled to join Simonyi Brand Management in New York City as a fall intern and am available to begin as early as August 24. Also, I would not require a salary, as this Urban Internship Semester must be in exchange for credit hours only.

My résumé is attached. In an attempt to be thorough, I have declined to be brief. Please let me know if you have a page limit, and I will do my best to trim it down to one (though the font size, of course, may have to decrease, which I'm aware can be a challenge to more mature eyes).

Sincerely,

*Carl Van Snyder III*

If you want to find out you're dying from a bot, I have a recommendation: Dr. Hsu at New York Presbyterian delivers death warrants with the empathy of a salamander.

I should have expected nothing less, given that two weeks ago, he informed me that a CT scan showed lesions on my lungs by saying "This does not necessarily mean you have cancer."

I explained to Dr. Hsu that telling someone they don't necessarily have cancer is only good news if they already think they have cancer. For those of us who believe ourselves to be healthy, the correct phrasing is, "I have some bad news."

He thanked me for the suggestion.

Here's how it happened today. I arrived at the office around 8:30 as usual, before my boss as usual. I was reading news online. NASA reports that 25 million Americans have stockpiled guns in preparation for doomsday. A man has spent \$100,000 on operations to become a real-life Ken doll. My phone buzzed, and like that, I have lung cancer.

Dr. Hsu explained that not only are the lesions on my lungs indicative of cancer, but they also mean that I will probably be dying soon. He mentioned chemo, trying it, seeing what happens. But my cancer is special. It isn't referred to in stages like other cancers. It only comes in two varieties: limited and extensive. Mine is the bad kind.

"I want to be honest with you. The prognosis is not good," he said. I thanked him for his honesty, because that's what you do when someone bothers to point out they're being honest.

“Death is a fact for us all,” he went on, “but yours will most likely come in six months or sooner,” like the end of my existence is a gestating baby, or the love of my life. Half a year. Twenty-four weeks. Before summer.

The call was short, just long enough for us to plan for me to go in Wednesday. At some point in the conversation my boss walked in, and I noticed my 98-cent deli coffee had tipped over. The puddle dripped off the desk onto the floor. “WE ARE HERE TO SERVE YOU,” the paper cup promised, sideways.

As I told Smith that I have six months to live, I laughed, like it’s a joke. Is it?

He hugged me. I can’t remember if I hugged back. He smelled like the Ralph Lauren cologne I once bought for Daniel but then gave to him instead, after some fight Daniel and I had, of the dozens or hundreds. *Do you tell ex-fiancés you are dying?* The question flitted through my mind as a matter of etiquette, one my mother would have an answer to. Somewhere, on a shelf in Virginia, there probably is a well-worn book with a paragraph on what courtesy ex-lovers owe one another with regard to announcements of terminal illness.

For Smith’s benefit—he looked like he might have a heart attack—I kept talking, explaining the series of increasingly ominous events that led to this morning. First came the chest pains, then the CT scan, the results of which were delayed because of Christmas. Then the biopsy. It felt like someone else was talking about me. The actual Iris had fled. She’s already gone.

He asked how long “this” has been going on. I know now that by “this” he was referring to the tests—to my discovery of the disease rather than to the disease, itself. But I misunderstood.

“Who knows?” I said.

I realized on the train home he meant the tests. He meant: *Why didn't you tell me?*

I didn't tell him, of course, because when you tell people things, they treat them as real, and then you have to decide. I had been hoping for the best. I have always been an optimist.

Neither of us knew what one does after being diagnosed with cancer that will probably kill you. Certainly not resume business as usual. So I came back to my apartment, which I'm now regretting. Maybe I'll go back to work. At least then he'd stop texting to ask if I'm okay being alone.

Is that what people do? Avoid being alone with their new cancer? I could call Jade, but I'm sure she's in the kitchen with her cell tucked away in a closet. Using my triannual call to my mom to tell her I have cancer just seems cruel. And I'm not in the mood for the baby mamas (my friends from my early twenties who had babies in our early thirties and then ceased to be capable of talking about anything but their children, so we've drifted. Plus, our friend Sabine, who was the glue keeping us together, moved to California).

Frankly, I'm surprised this site made it to fruition. A year or so ago the founders came to the firm looking for branding assistance in exchange for equity in their "graphic storytelling platform start-up." Todd and . . . Chad? Ethan? According to Ethan/Todd/Chad, both people with terminal illnesses and stay-at-home moms were itching to blog in triangles, arrows, and colorful bar graphs. They had a colorful binder of demographic research on target niches, and Smith had been intrigued, initially (I wasn't—they were both the same shade of too-tan and talked about the future like it was a lottery they'd rigged). They had originally called it a d-log (drawing log, like "vlog"), but that didn't go over well in focus groups. Throughout the presentation,

Smith and I both fought to suppress our laughter. For days afterward, he and I came up with who else might like to make a d-log: geriatric clowns! Racist poets! Disgruntled ghosts!

Now, here I am, a data point come to life. Bravo, Chad. I have a heads-up, a full six-month lead. I get to sit with my impending death over coffee so we can make plans.

Things you don't think about dying, until it's happening: I will break my lease.

I was an assistant while I saved to open a bakery, which never happened. I wanted a family, too, but so much for that. I got skinny then fat then skinny again. I smoked then quit.

She was an admin who got skinny then fat then skinny then died.

Here's the thing I need to figure out. This whole time I thought my real life hadn't started yet. Turns out that was my life. I have six months or so to make that okay, somehow.

---

#### COMMENTS (10):

---

**DyingToBlogTeam:** Welcome! We see you've already begun sharing.

Remember that commenting on other users' Exit Posts will bring more visitors to your own page. Dying to Blog is a community of members facing the same challenge, and we want you to get your Maximum Departure Value™ out of it!

**BonnieD:** hi I'm Bonnie. I like your blog. u have to use more graphics tho because this is a graphics site and posts that get on the Popular page are never ones like yours. no offense but it looks like a word document. but i stumbled on you and like u so i will follow u anyway.

**IrisMassey:** Thanks, Bonnie. Do you have a blog on the site?

**BonnieD:** no. my mom used to be on it.

**BonnieD:** hers was really good but it moved to the afterlife page.

**BonnieD:** they have to move them otherwise u'd just have a bunch of  
corpse blogs and that would be depressing lol

**IrisMassey:** I'm sorry.

**BonnieD:** it happens

**IrisMassey:** Thanks for the tip.

**Jan10101010101:** buy Viagra buy romaine penis large buy not here  
thank u for your excellent content

## EIGHT MONTHS LATER

Friday, August 28 | Simonyi Brand Management

---

from: smith@simonyi.com  
to: roslady101@yahoo.com  
date: Fri, Aug 28 at 10:55 AM  
subject: Vandalism of your posters

---

Dear Rosita,

I got your message. I understand your concern, especially after, as you note, we spent so much time perfecting the subway ad, and I remain grateful for your patience and gracious spirit during the photo shoot—agreed, he wasn't the most professional photographer around (apologies again for the fingernail clipping on-site), and I know you weren't thrilled to learn that I plucked him off of Craigslist, but that says nothing of how much I value you both as a client and as my dentist.

Remember that a year ago, no one knew who you were, because no one knew Paula Abdul had a ghastly mouth as a child. But then we all learned, thanks to that intrepid *Post* reporter, that you built Paula's mouth chair-side. You *made* Paula. It is a phenomenal feat, and one for which I'm glad you're finally receiving the recognition you deserve. Since the news broke, we have done an outstanding job (if I say so myself) harnessing your initial publicity to develop a personal brand. The interviews, the book deal, the additional celeb endorsements. Now that the book's coming out, and our campaign targeting commuters in the region has finally launched, I need to warn you about something:

fame comes at a price. You will have haters. It is inevitable. My clients don't read the comments, don't read the blogs, don't read the tabloids. And in your case, they don't pay attention to a little graffiti on a few subway ads.

We knew (or at least I did, and perhaps should have made more clear) when we decided to place the posters in New York subway stations that they would be vandalized. If you spend much time riding New York City transit, you will notice that no advertisement is immune from the occasional mustache or profane smear. These interactions with the ads, I would suggest, aren't something to bemoan. On the contrary, they enhance the likelihood of people noticing and remembering your smoldering, shimmering grin! Rosita de Santiago, DDS!

This is the time to welcome attention in any form.

Your reference with loathing the estimable Dr. Zizmor, New York City's first medical professional to take to in-motion, 2-D campaigning on the trains. Sure, his posters about getting rid of pimples rendered him the target of ridicule. He also now owns a yacht and three houses on two different coasts.

Relatively speaking, I think T-E-E-F-S neatly penned across your five front incisors is fairly innocuous.

Warmly,

Smith S. Simonyi

*President*

Simonyi Brand Management

---

from: YOPLAY <philgergel@gmail.com>  
to: smith@simonyi.com  
date: Fri, Aug 28 at 11:34 AM  
subject: YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE THIS B AS IN BULL + S AS IN SATIRE

---

NOPE.

NOPE NOPE NOPE.

NOT AGAIN.

YES *AGAIN*.

GO TO YOUTUBE

SEARCH MY NAME PLUS RAPPER SO YOU DON'T GET  
THAT YOYO TRICK MAN

CLICK ON "IT'S NOT EASY HAVING GREEN—ORIGINAL  
VIDEO"

SURPRISE!

IT IS NOT MY ORIGINAL VIDEO *after all*. THE LADIES  
HAVE BEEN REPLACED WITH MUPPETS, AKA I HAVE A  
BEAST FETISH APPARENTLY WHEREIN THE BEASTS ARE  
MADE OUT OF CLOTH

NOTE, FURTHERMORE: THE MUPPETS I "KISS" IN THIS  
"PARODY" OF MY RAP ARE ALL "MALE," BUT DUMMY  
DIDN'T EVEN USE KERMIT

FOOL

SO WHAT ARE THEY TRYING TO SAY NOW—THAT I  
AM A SINGER *FOR CHILDREN*?

SMITH, I AM DONE. WITH. THIS. DRAMZ.

AFTER "RAIN ON ME, SIR JESUS"—ok GOSPEL WAS A  
BAD IDEA, NOT MY FORTÉ SO MUCH AS *not my forté*—I  
HAVE STRUGGLED TO ESTABLISH MYSELF AS AN ARTIST  
WITH RANGE DESPITE PRESSURE FROM THE MASSES

WHO NEED ME TO FIT INTO A NEAT AND APPROVED CATEGORY OF MUSIC. I SUPPOSE MY RECENT DIP INTO COUNTRY DIDN'T HELP. DO PEOPLE THINK I CAN'T MAKE UP MY MIND ABOUT TO WHAT GENRE I BELONG? BUT I AM AN ARTIST, AND ARTISTS:

- A. EXPERIMENT
- B. UNDERSTAND THAT JUST BECAUSE YOU EXPERIMENT DOES NOT PLACE YOU INTO A CATEGORY
- C. ARE SUBJECT TO SO MUCH SCRUTINY WE OCCASIONALLY OFF OURSELVES

I'M NOT GOING TO OFF MYSELF, BUT I DO EXPERIMENT, AND AT THIS POINT IN MY CAREER, I DO NOT HAVE ANY INTEREST IN PRETENDING ONLY TO BE INTERESTED IN ONE FORM OF SELF-EXPRESSION JUST TO PROTECT MY "brand" LEST I BE ABANDONED BY MY FANS, AND MY CAREER END BEFORE I AM DECREPIT AND USELESS, SUCH AS AT AGE 45.

I AM A VERNAL 32 YEARS OF AGE. BUT AS A WHITE RAP ARTIST OF SHORTER STATURE CLIMBING AN UP-HILL HILL, I AM FATIGUED.

*I AM SLEEPY.*

EVER SINCE I WON *SARAN WRAP'S FREESTYLE SHOW-DOWN* AND GOT MY FIRST RECORD DEAL FOR "DON'T WHIZ ON ME" FOUR YEARS AGO, I HAVE BEEN THE TARGET OF THOSE WHO WOULD WISH TO SEE ME SHRIVEL UP LIKE A MAN'S JUNK IN THE SNOW.

IT IS TIME TO END THESE JUVENILE ATTACKS ON MY

MUSICAL GENRE EXPLORATION ONCE AND FOR ALL.  
HOW DO WE FIGHT BACK?

AS THEY SAY: D.I.Y.D.D.Y.O.

DO IT YOURSELF

DON'T DO

YOURSELF

OFF

PLEASE ADVISE,

YO-PLAY/Phil

---

from: smith@simonyi.com  
to: YOPLAY <philgergel@gmail.com>  
date: Fri, Aug 28 at 12:04 PM  
subject: re: YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE THIS B AS IN BULL + S AS  
IN SATIRE

---

I understand your frustration. I truly do. You are my most valued client, and I give you my true opinion, always.

I think we should ignore this video. It's nothing. "Fighting back" or responding in some way could be seen as thin skinned. You want to be perceived as having a sense of humor, right? Being playful, like your music?

Finally, remember what they say about all press?

SS

---

from: carl@simonyi.com  
to: smith@simonyi.com  
date: Fri, Aug 28 at 12:09 PM  
subject: Today's Agenda

---

Good morning Boss!

Today's schedule:

10—~~Leah Rollins-Loebel (Prospective Client), Nutritionist to the Stars~~ (sorry—already passed)

1—Call with Phil Gergel (aka Yo-Play)

3:30—Proposed meeting with Carl, me, on the following action items:

- A. The possibility of assigning me more tasks that utilize my strengths rather than tasks that a chimp could do
- B. How one schedules a book tour when one doesn't agree with the premise of the book

Also, I took the liberty of cleaning out my desk a bit, as there were a few drawers on the bottom with contents, and I will be needing the storage space for my gym clothes, etc. I imagine these items belonged to your former employee who predated my tenure here at Simonyi Brand Management. Much of it appears to be trash (receipts, scraps, to-do lists), but I didn't toss anything, as there were some other items as well—a straightening iron, lip gloss, a few self-help books, an article torn from a magazine titled "Becoming Your Best Self" (what a bleak testament to the pressures of womanhood, this assortment—I might have to use it in a short story).

I have placed it all in crates I found in the lobby of the building, so if the super comes a-knocking, guilty as charged. They are stowed behind the conference table.

Oh, and there was also what appears to be a printout of a blog. It is titled “My Life’s First Draft: A Blog Turned into a Book by Iris Massey.” She seems to want you to publish it. (Side note: Based on this Post-it, I have inferred that this woman who last sat at my desk *died*? How recently?? Because fyi *that* is something I’m going to need some time to process . . .)

Off to lunch,

Carl Van Snyder

Associate

Simonyi Brand Management

---

from: smith@simonyi.com  
to: carl@simonyi.com  
date: Fri, Aug 28 at 12:11 PM  
subject: re: Today’s Agenda

---

Carl,

Thank you, but an agenda would be much more helpful if you would send it at the beginning, rather than the middle, of the workday.

Also, you are not an associate so please remove that from your email signature.

And what is this about Iris and a blog? I don’t see it on your desk . . .

Thx,

SS

---

from: smith@simonyi.com  
to: iris.a.massey@gmail.com  
date: Fri, Aug 28 at 12:58 PM  
subject: no subject

---

I wonder how many people continue to email other people after they die. That'd be an interesting radio story. Or just a depressing one.

I have a new intern who started this week, Carl. He fell out of the sky in June, and Richie convinced me to hire him since it's going on four months and I haven't been able to bring myself to look for your replacement. He is twenty-one and full of pep. I figure it might be nice to have someone around.

Meanwhile, a month after his spectacular "rap funeral," Phil—the one client making me any money at this point—has decided to return to rap, having discovered that country requires more of a "singing voice" than he's capable of. And of course the transition from "Yo-Play" to "Phil Gergel" did not go unnoticed by the tabloids. Now that he's done with country, he's pretending that he never left the hip-hop world, and we are continuing to pretend that he's straight.

His "funeral," your cannabis-induced brainchild (I am tempted to make a joke about how your death spared you from having to endure the execution of it), rivaled your original vision in its spectacle. Webster Hall was packed. His coffin was ushered in by six bodybuilding pallbearers in white tuxes as a gospel choir sang a funeral march. Dwarves in party hats distributed folded paper unicorns that looked more like horses wearing KKK gear, since the paper didn't take well to the horns. He retained your idea of being "reborn," emerging from the coffin via suspension cords, just like the best part of a community theater production of *Peter Pan*, and

the crowd was delighted. It was exhausting, and far less amusing than if you had been around.

I am shocked by how much I miss you.

Every day, I knew you'd be here when I walked in, and every day, we would make fun of this absurd field we are in.

When I offered you the job, I was sure you'd leave it within six months, tops. I think we both did. This job was your bridge to your future.

But then a year went by, then two . . . should I have pushed you to leave? I didn't because I liked having you here. I was selfish.

Iris, I have no clue why you stuck around this place so long. But dammit, the best part of every day was making you laugh. I wasn't conscious of it as my goal, but it was.

The last time you and I spoke, it was about Richie, how happy you were with him. You sounded downright giddy about it. Then, you said that the night before, your sister had taken you dancing. To me these seemed like good signs.

I asked if you needed anything.

"Tell me something funny," you said, so I told you how Phil had adopted a guinea pig and named it Abraham Lincoln. Your laugh turned into coughing. And then we hung up, but first I made myself say that I missed you. You said it back. I think we both wondered if it was our good-bye, since you wouldn't let me come see you, but I told myself that that didn't make sense. You were dating my friend! And going dancing!

I waited for you to come back. And you didn't.

I'm in deep, Iris. I got in deep.