

Entombed

“Her absence was like the sky, stretched over everything.”

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

The memorial was over, and all the mourners departed. He was alone, but it was as if he was in the ground too, also lying in a silk-lined box in the dark. Their resting places could have been side by side, or opposite sides of the earth. The difference was that she was asleep, and he was awake. He still knew what was lost, and she...well, what did he know of what she knew any longer?

He wished desperately for sleep. Maybe there would be dreams. Maybe of her, and perhaps they would be good. Even if they weren't, he still wouldn't want to wake up. That moment would eventually come when his mind understood that it was a new day that would be full of the absence of her.

He knew, though, that no one could sleep on cue, and certainly not for as long as the pain lasted.

Unless.... Unless he was willing to follow her. It would require a different path, something more intentional than her slow subtraction from the world.

This was not his first contemplation of it. She had addressed it though, before the end. That was part of the knowledge they had shared. He knew her things. She knew his things. She knew where he would go if what had happened, happened.

“Live. Promise.”

In the moment, he had given his assent. What else could he do?

But what are promises given before you enter the wasteland that comes when the one you make them to is gone? Are they binding? Which one is bigger, the promise, or the apocalypse?

His phone vibrated on the coffee table. He was tempted to ignore it, but in the end couldn't ignore the possibility that it might be the one connection that would bring him a little way back from where he was.

Caller ID said, “Mom”. He let it ring until the last possible second, and then hit the green button. He spoke first, and hated the sound of his own voice.

“Hi, mom. You just left.”

“I know. I need to know you're ok.”

He felt some tears come. She had that effect on him. Her love was a constant in his life, but it carried an expectation that it would be enough, and it wasn't. Not now. He took the few seconds to master himself, and spoke evenly, but knew she knew what the intervening time meant.

“I'm ok.”

“I can come back. I can be there.”

He thought about what that would look like.

“No, mom. You can't help with this.”

He heard her hesitation on the open line, but then the acceptance.

“Ok. Call me when you can, alright?”

“Of course.”

He ended the call.

It was like he was pressed in a vise. One backwards crank from his mother's disentanglement did not release the pressure enough to give him any relief. Life still stretched out before him, and it was the full embodiment of empty. *She* was not there.

That was the heart of it. The truth.

The sun would shine. The moon would rise.

And she would never be there again.

There was an over-whelming demand for an acknowledgement of the end to all things that came with that. It was something that could not be disregarded, could not be assuaged. It demanded an answer.

His phone vibrated again.

He wanted to throw it across the room. Other people's opinions were just an intrusion now.

Caller ID said, "John".

It was his father, who hadn't bothered to show up for the funeral, *or* the memorial.

The familiar hatred blossomed. He answered the call, if only to vent his vitriol on someone else. Finally, a deserving down-stream target. Perfect timing.

"The fuck do you want?"

He was rewarded with silence on the line for a few seconds. Then,

"I called to apologize. I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"I don't care. I don't need your apology, or anything else."

He could feel the heat rising at the other end as it always did, and the response confirmed it.

"Yet you answered. Give me--."

He ended the call, and tossed the phone onto the couch next to him, unable to even summon the venom he wanted. The inevitable vibration of the follow-up attempt could be lost to the softness of the seat cushion. He looked away. No more calls.

The question now was really how much "no more" was he willing to embrace. Afternoon light was flooding through the living room windows, but to him it was as if it was from a far distant star, palsied and irrelevant. Even in the light, he was in the dark. It wasn't a literal grave like hers, but he couldn't shake the pressed-in feeling, the sense of confinement.

The minister had used the words, "final rest".

That's what he craved. Nothing left to carry, and an end to all the things he had to feel. Oh, to be asleep in the dark where she was.

His phone whispered on the cushion beside him. He told himself he wasn't going to look.

But he did.

Caller ID said, "Baby-girl".

He picked it up.

"Hey, kiddo. You just left."

"Yes, I know. But I'm lonely. Aren't you? I feel lost. Where are you?"

He knew what the last question really meant. It was part of the family lexicon. He hesitated before answering, but then gave it, because this person was his only real anchor left in this world.

"Nowhere good."

She started to cry.

He tried to summon words of comfort, but they would not come. All he could do was speak her name.

“Jess.”

She spoke through the tears, and he could hear her mother in the words. It was at once a reproach, and an embrace.

“You’re going to go too, aren’t you?”

This was it. It was the hinge. On one side, there was a lie. On the other lay the truth. But in between, there was a memory, like a half-open gate.

He and his wife lay together on the bed, both spent but still entwined. Each heartbeat and breath still descending toward normal, they faced each other. She put a hand to his forehead, despite the sweat still beaded there, smiled, and then spoke.

“This won’t be forever. But I think it will be long enough.”

“Long enough for what?”

It was the lazy answer of a man still lost in the afterglow, where thought did not reach.

She had turned away, and then pushed back into his embrace. He put his arms around her, and was headed towards sleep when she said,

“To go on.”

The memory ended, and that’s when he realized that she *had* known. Not the specifics, but that she knew even then that her time was limited. She’d known long before it became apparent. Sleep had taken him as she’d made that statement, and he had dismissed it as a dream. He didn’t know if it had been anything that he’d had to take with him into that blank space, but even if he had, that had been his place to forget it.

At that time, their then-teen daughter had hopefully been asleep in her room, but just as likely had been rolling her eyes at the sounds emanating from her parent’s bedroom minutes before. Now her sobs reached through the phone’s speaker, grasping at him, and calling him to account.

It was time to decide what the truth was, and what the lie was. Beyond that, which would he tell her?

“Dad?”

He could see the vast, empty expanse stretching out ahead of him, a wasteland devoid of the best part of him. It was full of sound and fury, but signified nothing.

He could also imagine the lightless, silk-lined box. A place to rest, untroubled, provided he could sleep.

And he thought he could.

“Dad!”

Another memory arrived.

He was sitting on the couch in their old apartment. Two year-old Jess was asleep on his chest, arms wrapped around his neck. He was thinking about how she was just a little bit heavier when she was fully asleep. Was that trust, or surrender?

“Dad! Answer me!”

He let out a deep breath before responding.

“Easy, Jess. I’m here. I’m trying to figure out what to say. You know I’m not great at doing that.”

He could hear the hitching in her sobs now, and then fully realized that her distress had grown far beyond her own grief at her mother's passing. She was now presented with the idea that she was going to lose both parents, because he hadn't dismissed the idea outright when she'd asked.

But even this wasn't enough for him to decide. He still didn't know what the truth or the lie was. He thought about the memory of Jess asleep on his chest.

Was it trust, or surrender?

He gave the best he could do in the moment.

"I have no plans. Life has changed, but I don't know how much, or how far yet. I've always tried to be honest with you, and this is where I am."

He knew it wasn't enough. Her distress intensified for a second, and then the sound of it diminished. He imagined that she had put her phone down. Perhaps it was on her thigh, or on the console of the rental car while she processed his answer.

A minute or so passed, and he sat in a sort of tableau, waiting for her to come back and deliver whatever she would. She did. Her plea was short.

"Please don't leave me too."

There was a reverse tidal pull to the words, as though they were not carrying him farther out to sea, but into the shore. They were carrying him towards solid ground. His first inclination was to assent, to agree. This *was* his daughter, and he loved her beyond many things.

The silk-lined box still called, though. The dark called. They both spoke of release, and relief, and rest.

The truth, or the lie? Trust, or surrender? He was here at last.

He gave his answer, both knowing what it was, and what it sounded like.

"I'm still here."