

ELEGY

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The navy blue dress swished over my calves as I twirled, taking in a panoramic view of the graveyard. I'd expected more headstones. Wailing angels, cherubs, and crosses. Dramatic stuff. I'd also thought the grass would be nicer, like a golf course. Most of the markers were small plaques set into scrubby turf freckled with dead leaves. I tried not to show my disappointment. Almost everything looks better in the movies.

"Ready?" Clem plucked the lens cap off her camera. "Just act natural."

I snorted. "Right, natural."

The nude branches of a weeping willow stretched down and around us like a cage of bones. At the base of the trunk I moved aside a wilted floral arrangement obscuring the inscription on a plaque. No name, and no dates. Just the words *Beloved Daughter* and a quote I recognized from Rilke's *Elegies*.

Angels (they say) would often not know
whether they moved among living or dead

As a teenager I'd bonded with Rilke, wallowing with him in the fathomless pool of our shared existential depression. Even in happier times, his *Elegies* were something I returned to again and again. Comfort reading, in a weird way. Rilke's angels seemed more human than divine. Easily fooled. Easily hurt. Afraid to fly.

I brushed the dead grass from my legs, the skin smooth and

unblemished by bruises, nicks, or other evidence of day-to-day collisions usually hidden behind high denier tights. Vain, perhaps, but I was glad to look put together. I squinted at the sunset. “Are you allowed to do a shoot here? It’s a graveyard.”

“Cemetery, G. They’re called cemeteries.” Clem fiddled with some toggles and buttons. Then she glanced up, her brown eyes gold in the evening light. “Are you okay with this? When I called... I never considered that you might not want to come.”

“Like I had something better to do?” I pulled the clip from my hair, letting it tumble down my back and wincing at the release of tension on my scalp. “How long has it been?”

“Over five years,” she said. “I used to know it down to the day, but living like that, one sunset at a time—It’s hard.”

I nodded. Time didn’t mean what it used to. I glanced down at the plaque again. “You picked the inscription?”

Clem took a whistling breath through her nose. “Your parents did.”

“What?” An accusation as much as a question. “You let them—”

“You weren’t there. I was a complete mess and they offered to take care of it. When they showed me the design and asked what I’d like to add... I was touched. Couldn’t bring myself to change a thing.”

I fidgeted, mollified but unwilling to concede. “How did you track me down, anyway?”

She peered through the viewer and snapped a couple shots. “Wasn’t easy. I’ll tell you that much.”

Baby showers were the fucking worst. However, the new mom was on my team at work, and I felt obligated, despite my deep disinterest in her reproductive achievement. I dropped my expensively-wrapped baby food cookbook in the heap of presents and headed into the kitchen, because a girl’s gotta eat. I’d hoped to grab a snack in solitude, but instead found a cute blonde standing in front of the open fridge biting into a piece of fried chicken and washing it down with a swig of orange juice right from the carton.

Our eyes met. She lowered the carton and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. “Almost empty. No point dirtying a glass.”

“You know there’s a ton of food right here on the table.” I peeled a paper plate off the stack and loaded it with a few veggies and a lot of cheese.

“This is my sister’s place. She’s used to me shredding through her leftovers. I’m Clem.”

“Clem?” I asked, trying to match the awful name to the girl with butterscotch eyes, a soft pink mouth, and... Jesus, was that a dimple? Damn.

“Short for Clementine.”

“Ah, hideous. Clem is much better.” I shook her greasy hand. “George. Not short for anything.”

The truth was I’d always liked my name and hadn’t seen any reason to change it. As a kid I’d been obsessed with Nancy Drew mysteries, but too embarrassed to check them out of the school library, so I stole them, one by one, and hid them in my closet. I loved Nancy, with her titian hair and blue convertible. I saw myself as her best bud, a gamine tomboy conveniently named George. Plus, their fat little friend Bess sounded hot.

“So why aren’t you out there with those Lululemon bitches?” Clem asked.

I noshed on a wedge of Gouda. Evasive manoeuvre. Stuff your face to avoid answering questions.

“The baby thing is so not my scene.” Clem peeked out the kitchen door and studied the gaggle of ladies in the living room, passing around a sleeping infant. “Do you have any babies, George?” I shook my head as she approached me with a thoughtful expression. “We should be friends. You’re stunning, by the way.”

I gulped down a mini-carrot dipped in hummus. “Eh?”

“Your face is perfectly symmetrical, did you know that? I want to measure it. Have you ever modelled?” Her nervous grin showed her molars. “God, that sounds sleazy, but I’m a photographer—which sounds even more sleazy—but I really am, and sometime, when you have time, I’d like to shoot you—with pictures—take pictures, of you, is what I mean.”

I liked Clem. Her spazzy social skills, and her porcine grazing habits. I liked that she found me interesting. And what girl hates being told she's beautiful? I definitely wanted to know her.

"It'll cost you dinner," I said.

I took in Clem's ponytail, the frayed cuffs of her sweater, and the faded denim clinging to her hips. Thinner. Harder around the edges than I remembered. An acquired seriousness that suited her somehow. She still wore her wedding ring. I glanced down and saw a matching stripe of gold on my own finger, and a thin scar running over the back of my hand, up the outside of my forearm. Clem's eyes followed the pink thread all the way up to my elbow. I clasped my hands behind my back. We weren't there to talk about scars.

"You're all grown up," I joked.

She snapped pictures from different angles and heights while I strolled and twirled. "You look the same. Always a princess, even in your pj's. Navy is your colour, perfect with your skin."

Turning my flawed arm from the camera, I gave her a dramatic, arched-back, hand-to-forehead glamor pose. "You picked this dress?"

"Figured you'd want something classic."

My laugh lodged between my collarbones, hardening like a clod of frozen earth.

Clem lowered the camera. "What is it?"

"The last time I saw you..."

"I was a whale."

"Pregnant. Crying all the time." I swallowed past the lump, thinking of how much I'd missed. "Now I get it, because you knew. Somehow, you knew."

"George..." Clem reached into her purse, pulling out her wallet. "I brought her picture with me."

I clutched my elbows and squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm sorry, I can't. I want to, but I can't."

Her arms surrounded me and I inhaled the perfume of autumn and warm skin trapped in the weave of her sweater. "Let's not waste time

being sad or sorry. We're here, now. Clem and G. Same as before."

"Except it's not." I skirted as close to the unspoken truth as I dared. "It's not the same at all. Why did you call me, Clem? Why did it take you so long?"

She held me tighter, whispering into my neck. "I was scared. I didn't know if you'd still be you. And right now I just want to take your goddamned picture, okay? Can I do that?"

I straddled the ledge of the bathtub while Clem perched on the vanity reading the side of the box, her forehead knotted up. "Maybe it's too soon?"

"Okay," I said. "So wait another week."

She swivelled her head toward me so fast her hair flew out and slapped against the mirror behind her. "And sit around wondering? Forget it." She studied the box again. "Can you go downstairs and get me a mug?"

"A mug?"

"It says I can go right on the stick but I'll end up peeing all over my hand."

I went downstairs and rummaged in the back of the cupboard for a mug. An I heart NY we hadn't used much before and I would certainly never use now.

"You're leaving?" she asked when I turned to leave the bathroom.

"We aren't pee-in-front-of-each-other people, Clem. No baby is going to change that."

Her face clouded. "A baby is going to change everything, and when it does you're going to freak out because you actually have to take it seriously, and I'm going to have to take care of the baby and you."

"Cracking a joke doesn't equal desertion of duty. And we both know that of the two of us, I'm the serious one."

She had no idea. Being a mother was something I hadn't dared allow myself to want, for how unlikely it was. But now I had Clem, and I wanted our children more than anything. But I was terrified.

More scared even than I'd been on our first date when all through the movie, I sweated through my capped-sleeve blouse reminding myself that it was better to be up front. Better to be rejected for who I was, than desired for who I wasn't. Afterward we lounged on a Starbucks patio and I told her I wasn't a cis-fem. Her forehead wrinkled, and she blinked a few times. I told her it was okay to ask questions. I didn't want there to be uncertainty between us on that score. She asked if I had a penis. I asked if that was a problem, fearing she might be one of *those* dykes, savagely protecting her gold star status. She shrugged, slurping the dregs of her iced coffee. Then she grabbed my hand and took me back to her place.

Maybe it was stupid, and selfish, but that day, and every day since, I'd been the love of her life. Would the baby take her away from me? Things were tense with all this fertility stuff, and I'd already been shut out of one family. I didn't think I could survive losing another.

"Are you even listening?" she demanded. "Do you even care?"

My spine stiffened. "Just pee in the fucking mug."

"Don't yell at me!" Tears ran their twisting course down her cheeks. "I can't do this alone, G. I need to know you'll be there."

I bit my cheek, but wasn't able to hold my tongue. "If you can't see that I'm in this as much as you are, then maybe you should get that thing scraped out before we make a huge mistake."

"Cunt," she snarled, and slammed the bathroom door in my face.

Leaves crunched under my ballet flats as I walked over to a large marker in the shape of an Egyptian obelisk. Eccentric, expensive, and cheeky in a phallic way. I wrapped my arms around it, and laid my temple against the cold polished granite. Over my shoulder I heard Clem's camera click.

"Whoa, I think I've got it," she said. "Don't move, I'm going to take a couple more."

I hugged the obelisk tighter. "They show up on digital?"

"Well..." *Click, click, click.* "Purists would say you ought to use film, but the investigator I contacted said digital works just fine,

better actually. Less artifact. And I don't want something that can be explained away as a blotch of unevenly exposed film. It's gotta be authentic—especially since I decided not to bring her.”

I tried to keep my breathing invisible, and tried even harder to ignore the uneven expansion of my ribcage and the lopsided thump of my heart under navy blue georgette. Rilke said every angel was terrible. Clem couldn't have known what she'd be summoning. A ghou, madness made flesh, a monster. I couldn't blame her for wanting to protect a child from that.

A hundred questions swarmed around my molars and I sealed my lips against their escape. Judging by the look on her face, Clem was itching to ask me the same questions.

Are you happy? I wasn't unhappy.

Is there someone else? Doubt it.

What have you been up to? Outcroppings of memory glimmered here and there but really, I couldn't say. Perhaps there were rules.

Do you still love me? From the moment we met, to the moment I left, to the moment I answered her call. I never stopped. That, I knew for certain. That, I could've said. Could have, but didn't.

I turned the key in the lock and shuffled into the foyer. Before I could kick off my pumps, Clem called out. “If I'd known you'd be late I wouldn't have cooked.”

I sniffed the air cautiously. “You cooked?”

“Grilled cheese. Just something I'm trying,” she said with a weary smile as she shifted her distorted body on the couch. I slid my hand over her belly, feeling a greeting kick beneath my palm.

We rested against each other in a rare absence of conflict. We were far from the picture of joyful expectation. I was banking overtime so I could take a month off. She was still working as well, weeping with exhaustion at the end of every day. Sex wasn't a thing that happened anymore. The first three months of her pregnancy she couldn't get enough, and I happily obliged, exploring her constantly changing body with equal parts awe and envy. Now I could barely touch her,

and everything I said made her burst into tears or fly into a rage.

Over one persistent issue.

Clem insisted I was going to leave. I promised. I reasoned. I argued that I'd done nothing to indicate that I would bail on her. Over and over, but she would only shake her head, claiming she had a bad feeling.

"G?" she said hesitantly. "It's getting close now. Don't you think we ought to tell your parents?"

"The parents who wouldn't even come to our wedding?"

"It's their grandchild. Babies have a way of softening people."

"As far as they're concerned, I died the day I wore a dress to Nana's funeral."

"You did?"

"Navy blue boat neck. Classy. I looked like Audrey Hepburn."

Clem smiled. "Still do."

I shrugged. "It was elegant and Nana would've loved it, but Mom and Dad acted like I'd showed up in full fucking drag."

"Body glitter and platform stilettos. You could totally pull it off." Clem said, her swollen fingers toying with her wedding band, strung on a chain around her neck. "I just... I don't want you to regret anything, with your family."

"You're my family." I splayed my hand on her stomach. "You, and this little beast. Now, if you feel like being bad, I'll go out and get you an iced coffee."

"God, yes," she groaned. "I'll come with you."

"On those ankles?" I glanced at the puffy flesh spilling out of her socks.

"I've got your meatloaf squatting in my uterus and you complain about my ankles?"

I sighed. "Woman, did I not just offer to acquire contraband for you?"

"So you did."

"Your ankles are beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Prepare to be caffeinated." I kissed the tip of her nose, feeling safe and loved, knowing we'd always find each other. "I'll be right

back.”

A questioning look in Clem’s eyes had me gazing down at my legs, so smooth an hour ago, now a hash of scars. Trauma, gone silver with age. My vanity cried foul but my deeper self—the part that knew where I’d been, but couldn’t talk about it—that part knew this body was a borrowed item. A summoned facsimile, fumbling towards entropy. And it could’ve been worse. Clem could have been in that car with me.

I twisted my wedding band on my finger, feeling the tug on my thin skin. “Clem... there’s a lot we aren’t saying.”

She nodded.

“But there’s something you need to say.”

Another nod.

“Tell me.”

“They invited us for Thanksgiving,” Clem said. “Every year they invite us. Every year they send birthday and Christmas cards.”

I scowled.

“They were devastated, G. And people change, doesn’t the inscription on the plaque prove that?”

“*Too Little Too Late*, would’ve been more appropriate.”

She snapped another photo. “Don’t frown, it makes you look old.”

I rubbed my arms, not surprised to feel the pattern of old wounds drawn to the surface. My whole life, my parents loved their fantasy son more. They chose a person who didn’t exist, over their actual kid. Now they wanted to be a part of their granddaughter’s life. They wanted a chance to do better, but that was no guarantee that they would.

Clem took my hands and kissed my knuckles. “You don’t need to forgive. That’s not what I’m asking.”

I pressed my thumb to her lips. The aperture of all her unspoken words. *Do you trust me to protect her?*

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

“Light’s gone.” Clem capped the camera lens and led me to the skeletal tree where we sat side by side in the thickening dusk. “I’ve

always wanted to do it in a graveyard.”

“They’re called cemeteries, Clem. And why didn’t you ever say so?”

“Probably, I would have, but we ran out of time.”

She leaned in and I shivered, feeling her warm cheek against my bare shoulder, and the scrape of her teeth on my throat.

“Necrophile,” I teased, and gave her a playful shove.

Clem grabbed my wrist, pulling me off balance. I fell on top of her and we laughed like a normal couple, goofing around on a morbid third date. She pushed my hair off my face, the only part left unscathed. “You still look like Audrey.”

I kissed her then, really kissed her. The way I should have the last time. Her lips tasted like root beer. Still addicted to Lipsmackers. Still the adorable barbarian, raiding other people’s fridges and drinking from their cartons. She’d held onto that part of herself, and I held onto her so long that it was nearly full dark when we clambered to our feet.

“I’m glad you called,” I said. “We’ll have to do this again.”

A smile curved across her face like her own disfiguring scar. “Next time I’ll bring little G.”

“I’d love that.”

“See you soon.”

“Yeah.”

We lied with all the love we had between us, and I saw myself reflected in the mirror of her eyes, not as a decaying revenant, but a princess. She slung the camera over her shoulder. I watched her walk down the path until her shadow slipped through the gate.

At least she got her photos. A few orbs to show a five-year-old girl with my name, my blood, and the love of my life watching over her. Maybe my parents would be a part of that. It wasn’t up to me to correct or complete. Not anymore.

I wandered to the base of the tree, to a plaque with no names or dates. Just Rilke, his angels, and a *Beloved Daughter*. ■