

Thirty White Horses

Jessie, the second wife, did as asked at the memorial and read the poem Frank had burdened them with. It was like him to insist; when they'd been married, Frank had come home every so often with a stylish little book that looked as though it went to secret-society meetings, and sat down at the dinner table to read it, leaving her to smile sociably at her plate and eat alone. After his death, his grown son had come to her with the memorial poem, and said that his mother – the first wife – had asked if she'd like to read it. Jessie couldn't think of a way to decline. It was as if he had come from his mother with a basket of Frank's old, old laundry.

As Chris, the son, stood in her foyer, explaining what Frank wanted and collecting his square gestures to himself, she watched him with an old wariness, her dry skin shining in the dim hall. It was possible that in his sturdy middle age he'd forgotten the school friend he'd brought to lunch one Sunday, the one who'd held an inquisition on her ideas about death. The boy had insisted that she defend her contribution, as he put it, during that barbaric summer of '17, which had festered and healed over long before he was born, and which had never been as important to her as it became in the public mind. Jessie watched this grown-up Chris, ruddy and in a striped polo shirt, and believed he had forgotten.

So in the little rented memorial room, with its carpeted air of concession to old people who persisted in such events, she stood on the dais in a wrinkled skirt and read carefully into the microphone: "Or if your wish be to close me, I and my life will shut very suddenly, beautifully," which was apt, and she wondered whether he'd been imagining his own death sometimes when he read poetry. She thought of him sitting on the edge of the bed reading newspapers, stretching out his thin radiating worry about things so far away no one could possibly think of them. No matter where she went in the apartment, she felt him there, a sag on the edge of the bed. And yet he was the one who'd left her.

At the back of the memorial unit was a little mob of young people, loutishly quiet, with signs leaning against the wall that said DEATH IS PUBLIC. When she folded up the poem one of the young men hoisted his sign, which startled her. Another skinny young man had been up on the news a month before. She'd watched the program at home, folded in the green corduroy chair, listening tiredly as he talked about death being public and universal, and worth memorializing, and how they ought to have graveyards again. She'd agreed but felt they missed the point, this gang, and that they seemed to like some fey, book-learned idea of funerals. And besides, she'd heard they were inconsiderate. She'd

heard you had to have the reception somewhere else, otherwise they ate all the fresh fruit. But the young people caused no trouble and left as soon as Chris closed the ceremony, shuffling out as if class was over.

As she got her things, though, she found one of their flyers in her purse, on cheap green paper. It had a design on the front in the shape of a sine wave, and in italics *WE ALL FEEL DEATH*. Inside it said:

WHY should we pretend we are not affected by each and every death?

WHY do some people want to stop you from feeling the cessation of processes in others?

WHY can we remember the dead in our minds?

WHY don't we talk about *DISEMERGENCE*?

She dropped it on the floor and stepped away, annoyed and troubled.

At home again after the small reception, she and Chris sat together in front of the TV and she watched him watching soccer. They were in the living room with the afternoon pale and sociably bright and undemanding. She gazed at his hairline. It had never occurred to her, when he was a boy, that he might go bald. He sat on her couch in the offhand, entitled way he'd had when he was small and Frank was apologetic for all the hardships he imagined Chris would grow into, the hardships Frank dug up and invented and stared into with his shirt hanging open. The thought pained her, and she said "Oh," and clamped her mouth shut, but it was too late; Chris glanced at her uneasily. Materialism wasn't supposed to mean the end of mourning, this was what professors on the radio were always saying, but it didn't matter, the word had gone out of fashion. A saturating pity had fixed departed souls in her childhood dining room. Her mother had cried out, about the neighbors: Don't you remember how she used to get Neil to go up on the roof? Don't you recall the rabbit he kept in the garage?

Jessie said to Chris, "Go home, now."

"Should I call you about the apartment?"

"Yes," she said. "Please go," and he sat for another minute, watching the game, before he slapped his thighs, and got up, and went.

Humiliated, she sat like a knuckle in the green corduroy chair: In the gray light of the kitchen window Frank would stand inspecting pears for bruises; she thought of the deteriorating Christmas shopping bag he used as a file cabinet, stuffed full of bundled receipts. She was aware of the illicit density of her

mourning, and it did fix him there in the quiet and privacy of the high-ceilinged room. She hadn't seen the man in three years, not been married to him in seventeen.

There was among younger people not pity for the dead or bereft, but a sense of poignance, or the wish for it. More genuinely there was relief at the collapse of a ghost into itself, the relief of anonymous cleanness. There was a sentimentality she hadn't grown up with, an abiding desire to be kind, because life was weightless and therefore innocent, a momentary ghost arisen from concurrent bioprocesses that continuously closed themselves up, even as new processes were born. How this had come about – how people had come to like vanishing -- she didn't understand and no longer expected she would.

She had tried; she still tried, now and then. Once, over for dinner, Chris's wife, Gara, had left a pile of her sixth-grade materials, as she called them, on Jessie's counter, and Jessie, with a colander of washed mushrooms, had meant to move them but a cheap book on top caught her eye. On the cover was the iconic photo of a Muslim man clutching a phone and being helped by policemen out of a grave, and she sucked in her breath at the thought of giving such things to children. The book was called *The Burial Wars*. She set aside the mushrooms and picked up the little book, and had a sense that the past had closed up behind her and that whatever authority she'd had to talk about it was gone. She read, and when Chris and Gara came into the kitchen she looked up and said, "May I borrow this one?" And Gara, wearing so much daffodil for such a literal woman, glanced from the book to Jessie, at an uncharacteristic loss.

"I'm curious," said Jessie.

Gara shrugged. "You'll probably learn something from it. Let's leave her alone to read her book," she told Chris, and went out of the kitchen, and Chris looked down by way of apology and went after his wife. By the time they came back Jessie had put the book away. She and Gara chopped and cooked emphatically, as family, and then they sat down for dinner at the dusking table and watched the end of summer until Chris grew restless. After they'd gone, after that vibrating twilight had filled the apartment, she sat in the old green corduroy chair and turned on the reading light, and read from the beginning a schoolbook with no author.

Can you imagine what it would be like to live in a shopping mall? Fifty years ago, that's just what many families did. But they were not buying school clothes or the latest games. Instead they were looking for a roof to sleep under. It was a big surprise to America, but our population was growing fast. In one year the population of America

grew by 35 million people. In some cities the crowding forced several families to live together in small houses. This sometimes led to violence and homelessness. The government had to help. A lie. That had been the lie put out by immigration advocates. Stories of old people being shoved out in their nightgowns. There had been studies, searches for a single homeless granny in her nightie. She'd argued with her boyfriend about it: Was it her parents' responsibility, where so many people had come from? No, how could it have been. Her parents had had a house, they knew where they would put their children, they had wanted incineration anyway, but if they'd chosen burial they'd have made the appropriate plans. Luck, the boyfriend replied. No, her parents had been careful. There were provisions, insurance. People could be careful.

The schoolbook took its facts from the activists, the ones who'd shouted about the master grip on property. Pride of home, they said, pride of home was only a rehearsal for a permanent grip on land.

She read.

The American government built many housing developments and apartment buildings. You may live in one of these developments, which still stand today. That helped solve the housing crisis. But another crisis was looming. It was not about where people would live, but what would happen when they finished living.

Until the turn of the century, it was the custom for many people to bury their past relatives in holes in the ground called graves. This was wasteful because it took up so much room, over 80 cubic feet per person. However, it was a very old and meaningful custom that many people respected. The problems began when the parks where people were buried in graves began to get full. There was no room to dig more graves.

It was sadder now, she thought, than it had been at the time. She had laughed at first: No cemeteries, what next – but then there was video of the deceased and their families waiting their turn at the incinerators, the middle-aged women accompanying their deceased mothers, turning over the injustice heavily and minding their manners.

She turned back to the book. *Then there was an epidemic. Many people caught a virus called HB13A. It ended many people's lives. Suddenly millions of people wanted to bury relatives, but there was no room. Even if there had been room, it would not have been safe. The bodies carried the virus, and had to be incinerated. Few people liked this idea. They thought burying in graves was the only way to take care of the bodies. For them it was an important ritual. In reality it helped to spread disease.* She began to skip pages, thumbing past the photos of airplanes, the review of the charlatanry that told the gullible they could bury their dead in Mississippi. More vividly she

recalled the fat Floridian on television, shaking his head like a sleepwalker with open eyes, insisting that he would be burying Mom, and the obscenity of the nearly laughing reporter telling him the casket would be dumped in the ocean, or burned. "I got my certificate," he'd said, refusing to meet the reporter's eyes. To every needling question he said, "I got my certificate." There was a burial time, he had been sent photos of what the burial would look like. Finally he said, "Mom knows I'm doing what I can," and walked away, a large dangerous animal.

And there, in the schoolbook, was the photo that had haunted magazines for thirty years and only recently, who knew why, had been replaced by the photo of the man stepping from his selfish grave. There: the storefront, its flat Midwestern unambition. There had been a body that lay in an apartment above a storefront mosque in Ohio, the atypical bombings ten and thirty years gone by. A young sheriff -- so much younger on the textbook page, a boy really, a gray nervous crease in his double chin, said, "I am ordering you to incinerate." Thirty years on she could hear the quaver in *ordering*. A woman with dark circles under her eyes had explained the dead man needed his body intact for resurrection. But where could you *put* it? the newsgirl demanded. Well -- those storefront Muslims had a graveyard of their own. Flat landscaped green and flat markers, tucked behind a defunct steel mill, invisible from the highway.

Then tolerance -- that thin-lipped Quaker virtue -- was gone. People more suspicious than she was asked, with sub-audible violence: Who else had land? The Muslim man did, buried with a phone in another secret Muslim graveyard. The man, wild-eyed and ashy, stepping out of the hole with the policeman's arm under his elbow, those officers and the TV crew all witness to his land, bought legally, his. An emblem, he had become, they held him up as on a pole. She had never quite understood. It had seemed incidental; there were always people getting caught under the wheels for all sorts of things. More important things had gone on -- why his picture in the paper? Why this ashy Arab? Now she realized she hadn't seen the image in years, and felt pleasantly nostalgic.

The living room was dark now, and she held the booklet up under the light: *The resistance to change led to tragedy. People no longer thought about life. All they could think of was finding places to put bodies forever. Many people believed that we live inside our bodies like genies in bottles. So we may, she thought. They thought people went out of their bodies when they died. Many people believed that they would need their bodies again. With no solutions, people grew upset. At that time, people thought of society as being made of many groups*

which were all different from each other. A group could be a few thousand people or many millions of people. Some groups suspected other groups were keeping graves to themselves. When hidden graves were found, many people became violent. It was a very challenging time for America.

Through the summer that tasted like silver fillings, people traveled with an army of invisible family; the grocery store and restaurants felt crowded with them. A heavy woman in a store said, “Well, I think it’s selfish of *them* to say we can’t bury,” and Jessie put down her packages and went back out to the glary sidewalk. And on the beach, where she’d gone, with her surgical mask on against the virus, to find the scrubbing lightness and the pale, flung salt sky, she saw thirty, maybe forty men standing together, up the beach, wearing religious medals with their bathing suits and masks, and a loose-fisted expectancy and nervousness. Everywhere the Public Health implored with the image of blood cells, the discoids with their Saran-wrap membranes wrinkling and giving under the touch of a probe, yielding virus.

Violence, she read, led to hatred of the extra people. In some cities, housing shelters were burned down. After weeks of violence, the President called an old friend at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His name was Dr. Ken Miller. Dr. Miller was a Unitarian spiritual leader. He was also a bioprocess engineer. Together, they created a video series for the American people. Dr. Miller had a very calm demeanor. People enjoyed listening to his voice. He convinced people to pay attention to life. He gave people a new way to think about what life is and what happens when it ends. His idea was called emergence. Emergence just means that we are all made of molecules. The molecules perform certain life processes. The interaction of those processes makes us who we are. Dr. Miller called it a miracle. He also said that when those processes stop, people stop being, just like when a program stops running and its function ends. He did not think we are like genies inside of bottles. But most of all, he thought people should concentrate on life, instead of what to do after life processes end. Many people disagreed with him. But others thought his ideas made sense, and were tired of the fighting.

As she had lived that gruesome year, autumn came; there were elections and the distractions of snow in Buffalo and border control in winter. After that, she did remember, the talk about life processes began, and silly conversations on the radio about how people were like computers. She went to work for a florist-supply company and ignored the foolishness for about six years. Then she looked up from her fulfillment records because she’d realized it wasn’t that they’d lost memorial business, but that there hardly was a memorial business anymore. It seemed to her there was

something cruel in not marking death, something that shoved people along without giving them time to feel it properly, large or small. In the back office Jessie had asked the bookkeeping girl: “Don’t you think you’d have a memorial if it was someone in your family?” The girl, lankhaired, turned and looked at her as if she’d called out something indecent down the sidewalk.

“Well...” and then, clear-voiced: “I don’t quite get what you’re asking? I mean I guess I don’t really see the point of memorials, but old people like to have them.”

“Why don’t you see a point?”

“I mean things begin and end all the time? Like —” and she opened her mouth and hesitated, seemed on the brink of explanation, and there, a summary look, identifying: a flash tribunal. Delicately, she said, “I guess things were different when you were young.”

When Jessie gave the schoolbook back to Gara and began to tell her own stories, Gara had had to explain to her that younger people found her past, the one which spoke through her, offensive. She retorted that she’d had nothing to do with that summer or the man climbing out of the grave. But it seemed her language carried that summer and the thoughts that had allowed it. Her voice, like the voice of all benighted generations, carried choking soot and niggers, chattel wives and jingo. Her time’s contribution was Death. That’s got nothing to do with me! she said.

Chris’s mother wanted nothing to do with cleaning out Frank’s apartment. Jessie asked Chris: “Is she getting around these days?” Which meant: Did his mother think it was nonsense, the idea of effects? Was she modern? So quickly personal disclosure had closed down; there was something disreputable about the idea of the narrow we, the peer group. Once, drying dishes, she’d stopped to listen to an old man on the radio whose voice had had her own craving for the inside jokes and camaraderie of people from a certain time and place — what’s wrong with it? he’d asked — but the woman expert talked impatiently about the meaninglessness of individuals and subgroups, and then they were on to the next caller. They’d put him in his place. From processes arose the person; from all human processes arose the society. There were no peer groups, no cohorts, only humanity. Well, one abided by conventions, but you couldn’t say, Oh, I just want to know how we’re doing, us old ladies. You couldn’t look around yourself anymore, to see that you hadn’t been left behind.

Chris only said, “She’s great,” and asked whether Jessie wanted time to herself in the apartment first, or whether she was coming to help shovel out in general.

“I’ll take some time. Twenty minutes.”

“Want boxes?”

“No.” This was true. She felt modern. On the day of the cleanup Chris and Gara brought a box anyway, and Gara made her take it.

When Jessie got upstairs and opened Frank’s door, she found the old odor of marriage surprisingly faint. It was a long narrow apartment with warped wooden floors and yawning sash windows, and painted radiators. Someone had thought of curtains and a little braided rug at the sink of the tiny kitchen. They didn’t overcome the sense of the long room as being best for roller skating on a rainy day. Frank wouldn’t have minded the old kitchen, and his desk would have asserted itself as work anywhere, pushed against a wall. Someone had left a plate of sandwich crusts on the radiator – Frank always ate the whole sandwich -- and there was another on a bookshelf with a bottle of Jamaican cola. Newspapers and plastic shopping bags had been left where they’d fallen. He’d been robbed if the nurse fee was supposed to have paid for light housekeeping, and about this she was sharply angry.

There was a sock under the dining room table, a crumpled footy black sock. When they’d been married she’d civilized him into picking them up. She thought, *Oh, pick it up*. But the sock reposed on the floor; an unusual gravity pinned it there.

She’d been afraid of finding Death collected in the high corners of the room, as she had in her mother’s house, after her mother died. But in this apartment there was only the cheap-painted factual walls, and dirt, and garbage, and the sock, and not a soul otherwise. She was mortified. She put a hand to her mouth and couldn’t think why she felt so savage.

She went back down the stairs.

“Didn’t find anything?”

“Those *filthy* — they robbed him. You know that.” The vehemence surprised her. Gara fumbled with the thermos lid and poured a vigorous cup of coffee, and made Jessie take it.

“Drink,” she said.

“Yes.” Embarrassed, Jessie gazed at the coffee, its surface shifting in convection currents. As if offended by her watching, the mist abruptly changed direction, and its old vaporous shape might never have been. Indeed she forgot, moment to moment, the hypnotizing form. She blinked and declined to notice what she had seen. Whether or not it was evil she couldn’t tell. Then she felt Gara’s eyes on her and sipped the coffee.

“Well, I’m tired,” she said, giving it back.

“Sure,” Chris said. “Lie down upstairs, if you want.”

“I’ll go. Leave my share to do.”

“No,” he said, “there’s not that much to do.”

On the bus home she looked out the window at the leafy streets and wished not to think of Frank, though she remembered the back of his head as he sat at the desk and licked envelopes. It occurred to her that if she’d read Frank’s poem for anyone, it had been for the young activists, greedy for any memory. Archivists, who knew why. She sucked in her breath and felt she’d given him to a bad home. Though he had been a husband who treated her, in the end, shabbily.

I want an orange, she thought, severely, and was so tired she closed her eyes.

In her friends’ building she sat at a round table in the sunwashed lounge, and ate oranges. She picked the membrane off carefully as they listened to the news and small groups of women played cards. The room was deliberately open to all but there were never young people around. It was clean, in here. In time the sun would bleach the carpets, and this afternoon staff in neutral uniform would clean up the tiny detritus. Tomorrow would be as airy. In the lazy light of the tall windows, she felt unmoored.

She spoke abruptly to the man cracking peanuts beside her.

“We had a memorial for Frank,” she said.

“Oh - did you.” He opened his red-rimmed turtle eyes and blinked at her. He watched her as if from behind a window. And then – was this what all the long practice was for, the practice of getting along with people? – he drew a little breath, and asked genially if the orange was a juicy one. Yes, she replied, it was, and they marveled together, in words that meant no harm, about the wonders that allowed one to eat an orange at any time of year.

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