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Deaths in the Family

First the One



The monster arrived at dawn.

Dawn was breaking like a yellow plastic cup thrown down by an angry child—a child whose dismay at the disruption of her expectations has not yet turned to fear. A child always expects another timeless sortie into play and wonder, but these are not on the monster’s agenda.

The monster had been traveling for days or months, from a place, though distant, curiously coterminous with the immediate.

We need not know the monster; it is unmistakable when it reaches you.



Sally sat on the folding chair, knees tight-pressed, frills pulled out taut, curls stiffly posed with mommy’s hair glue, patent leather shoes bright and black, with her lace gloves in her lap, fingers intertwined. She kept herself very straight, not leaning against the cold metal chair-back, and stared right at the coffin.

Sally had never seen a real coffin. On screens, maybe, but so fleetingly they never left a mark. Coffins got carried around a lot, and got driven in black station-wagons, or lowered into square holes in the lawn. She saw some pine boxes on the screen one time, tilted up against a cowboy building, with funny men sleeping in them, but those weren’t coffins, and

she didn't think of them right now. Coffins were such fancy boxes that she never even wondered if they had anything inside.

People liked to cry a lot around coffins, and most of them were doing that now. Crying was easy to do if you felt like it, but if you didn't, you never even thought of it. Having so many people doing it all at once was very unusual, and Sally kept herself especially straight, just in case. Every so often one of them would come and bend over and stare right into her face and then suddenly start crying. Usually old women. The first time, Sally got really startled, but there were a lot more all morning. One time a woman burst out crying so hard that it was like when milk goes up your nose, and Sally had to wipe her face with the lace hankie that matched her gloves. Mommy might not like using the hankie because Lace is for Looks, but the lady's nose drips were right on Sally's cheek. And she knew it was gross to let it dry.



Late in the morning, long after the monster arrived, someone announced the Viewing.

Sally's legs were sore and twitchy from sitting on metal for two hours, and her back ached. She was also hungry and fabulously bored. Daddy wasn't here, but he wasn't much fun anymore and either growled or turned away. All her aunts and uncles were here, even the ones who never came for holidays, and some other people Sally never saw before.

The monster headed straight for Sally, timing its arrival for the exact moment when she was about ready to climb down off her chair and curl up on the floor. Daddy let her do that in the living room, but this was somebody else's room so she knew better. The grown ups would all make a fuss instead of letting her disappear into the fur.



Today, this morning, she would be toasted just right, parboiled to perfection, ready for the monster's bite.

It only takes one bite.



The announcing man wasn't one of Sally's uncles. She had never seen him before, and his voice was very low like rocks in a bucket. He went up to

the coffin and rang a tiny tinkling bell and suddenly all the crying and whispering stopped and Sally sat up straighter than ever.

He said something about starting the Viewing, and mentioned mommy's name once or twice, her first name, which only daddy used and some other grownups who came to visit. Everybody else called her Mrs. Devon. Sally called her Mommy, unless she felt really bad and just called her You, but she never used her actual name. There was something very not mommy about having a regular name and Sally didn't like hearing the man say it.

After he talked for a while in his low stony voice, he lifted the edge of the coffin lid and raised it up. Half the lid opened, and Sally could see pink satiny quilting inside. The coffin was dark shiny wood like a piano, but inside it was bright and soft. Sally wondered what the bottom part was like, and why they would make a box that was like a bed inside, so she made herself as tall as possible, but all she could see was the underside of the lid.



The monster stood behind Sally and slowly arched itself up and over her, still invisible like everything behind you. Its head went upside down, pointing right at her like all the women who cried, but its jaws were open wide enough to consume her all at once, including the folding chair.



Some man went over by the open coffin and put a little wooden stair on the floor. Each step was covered in dark leather.

Aunt Norma came up and bent over the opening in the coffin for a minute and then stood up and started crying. She looked right at Sally, and cried even harder. Uncle Don put his arm around her and led her away. He glanced into the coffin very quickly as he left.

Sally wondered why everyone was sad, and she wondered if the coffin made them feel bad. It was just a box, but maybe it was magic. Maybe looking inside was like medicine and made you lose all your sadness at once. Sally couldn't decide how much sadness she had, because usually it comes from something that happens and you just feel it inside.

Aunt Dillie came over and took Sally's hand and Sally was very glad to stand up. She knew everyone was looking at her like they always did when she was dressed up, so she stood very still and tried to look serious.

Aunt Dillie led her to the wooden steps and Sally realized she could climb up and look into the coffin. That would be interesting, so she climbed the steps one at a time, holding Aunt Dillie's hand.



The monster was wrapped all around Sally like a big snake and its huge mouth opened in a wonderful monster smile. Yes, monsters can smile, sometimes quite nicely.



Sally put her hands on the side of the open coffin. Even standing on the top step, she still had to go up on tiptoe to see into the box.

Mommy was inside.

Something like mommy. Mommy like wax. Not mommy. Wrong, wrong not-mommy.



The monster closed its jaws around Sally's little body and engulfed her in its hot inescapable mouth. It was dry and dark inside the monster's mouth, with teeth all around her, and lots of wiggling tongues that bumped against her all over. Sally screamed, but nothing came out. She twisted around and hit against the monster's teeth and tried to fend off the twisting tongues. The monster tasted all the colors of her little life and swallowed her whole.



Aunt Dillie wrapped her arms around Sally and lifted her up so she could see better. Sally was so light and pliable. She didn't understand, but later in life she would want to know that she said good-bye to her mother.

Sally stayed limp in her aunt's arms. Uncle Pete came over and gently took her and she hung over his shoulder like a doll in her lace dress and shiny black shoes. Her arms went around his neck and she clasped her hands in the pretty lace gloves.

Uncle Pete carried her out of the chapel and put her in the car seat and drove her home. Aunt Norma and Uncle Don were already there, and they took her upstairs and put her to bed even though it wasn't even lunch time.

Sally stared at the ceiling, but she saw only the monster's stomach, red and dry, with nothing in it but her.

The grownups smiled sadly at Sally's upturned face and tiptoed from the room.



Then the Other



Ward 4C, end of hall, Room 28: Harold Grosvener. Inside: Marjorie his wife, son Kendrick, daughter Beverley, and a few friends from the Legion Hall who just dropped in to say hi.

Also: rack of colorful flat-screens with requisite sine waves and other graphs of Harold's primary bodily functions, get-well cards propped open on a credenza next to fat-straw beverage container, and week-old flowers.

Marjorie was staring at the far wall, lovely pale green with desaturated orange stripe across middle, interrupted by huge doorway with heavy windowed panel that swings both ways. Her thoughts had gone random a few days ago, and she spent most of her time staring, while her personality whiplashed among several dozen intolerable scenarios. All the scenarios radiated from a single point, Harold's imminent death.

Kendrick and Beverley were arguing, fulfilling the promise of siblings just entering their third decade of life, while the Legion Hall crowd tossed quiet, awkward anecdotes back and forth like a medicine ball.

A sudden hush fell over the room as Nurse Polticci entered, bearing a tray with half a dozen syringes. The Legion Hall men watched uncomfortably while she emptied the syringes, one after another, into the tap on Harold's I.V. line. As the third one mixed into his drip, the display on one of the monitors sped up, numbers increased or went down, and certain indicators started flashing. The family members looked at each other in horror. When the fourth syringe's contents joined the flow, the colored numbers and graphs settled back down, and Harold's family did the same. The Legion Hall men remained paralyzed with empathy.

"What are they doing?" whispered Kendrick to his mother, but she just turned and stared at him, imagining his face aging and turning black before her eyes.

"They all just die on you," she said.

“What?” Kendrick took her arm. “Don’t say that, Mom.”

“It’s no use,” she said, pulling away. “You’re dying, too, my sweet beloved darling. Everyone is. Oh lord.” She put her head down and stifled a sob while more tears seeped from her eyelids into the caked makeup on her cheeks. Her mascara was waterproof and did not run.

Beverley watched helplessly, unable to think of a single consoling remark, admiring her brother’s ability to mumble something appropriate even when nothing useful could possibly be said. Her chair was too far away to take her mother’s arm, so she took her own arm and pressed it to her chest.

The nurse finished injecting things into the tubing that kept Harold in his present state, whatever that might be, and marched from the room with a curt nod at the men. They turned as one, watching her leave, and then looked at each other. A silent consensus formed among them, and they turned abruptly toward Mrs. Grosvener, tipped their heads respectfully, and then hurried out of the ICU into the general population.

“It was nice of them to come,” said Kendrick. His mother swallowed. “Yes, I guess it was,” said Beverley.

A few hours later, Dr. Bower came in. The family perked up, watching him check Harold’s chart. A wave of unfounded optimism swept through each of them, and was immediately dashed by the resigned look on Dr. Bower’s face.

“He seems to be resting comfortably,” he said in his unusually deep doctor voice. The family nodded and waited for his next pronouncement.

“I don’t think he has long to wait,” Dr. Bower said. “Harold’s slipping away naturally now.” He paused, observing the family’s dazed stare. “Probably just a few more hours,” he said. The family lowered their eyes. “If that.” They sighed audibly, in unison.

Dr. Bower strode to the data panels and checked the knobs and selector switches unnecessarily, tracing his finger along one or two of the glowing graphs as if to absorb just a little more information. It wasn’t good to appear perfunctory.

Then he turned and gave the family a taut smile, and rose up on his toes a little. “I must be going,” he said softly. “But I’ll be back.”

Marjorie looked at her children, her face slack and without hope.

“At least he said Dad’s resting comfortably,” said Kendrick, and Beverley nodded.



Harold stood on the cliff. The sun was painfully bright as he looked out across the Grand Canyon at the north rim, 1000 feet higher than he was, and imagined the whole area rising up over the aeons while down below the Colorado river cut deeper and deeper through the strata. Now the river looked like a piece of blue yarn dropped into the chasm thousands of feet below.

And then he screamed. He screamed for Marjorie and he screamed for Kendall and Beverley. He screamed the names of his friends, his distant relatives, his acquaintances, and all the people he knew and remembered. None of them was with him in this stylized geological surprise.

And then, helplessly, he screamed for the tens of millions who had died while he lived, from old age, from disasters and car crashes, from diseases, from hatred and war and senseless violence, and from accidents, from the buffoonery of fate, the pointless buffoonery of natural laws entangling the limbs of innocents.

He screamed again the name of his wife, who would not die for decades hence, but whose light had already faded in the dark hallways of his imagination. She might have never existed, or the children. He could no longer know. Knowing itself was fading, fading like the lights in the corridors, fading like the sunset, bleeding its color into the blue-black night.



The thermocouple in Harold’s oxygen cannula warmed past the trigger point, and a beeper went off at the nurse’s station down the hall. In Room 28, two yellow numbers on one of the ICU panels turned red and began blinking.

The family members gripped the bed frame, watching the enigmatic data readouts anxiously. A nurse hurried into the room and began checking the tubing that ran into and out of Harold’s body. Harold’s chest rose and fell very slowly, and only just a little. The rest of him did not move. Marjorie reached for his hand, but the nurse was in the way.

Another nurse came in, and a few minutes later Dr. Bower returned,

looking professional and engaged. The medical people moved around the bed, doing little things that the family didn't understand, speaking occasionally in soft encoded phrases. The family looked at each other and then looked back at Harold.

Around 4:00 PM, some more beepers started up, and other colored lines and numbers began blinking and changing color, and the nurses moved around faster, checking everything. Dr. Bower didn't come back, though, and the family thought maybe this was just a phase. But it wasn't.



Harold's soul slipped out into the room through his nostrils, with his last dying breath. It circled the room a few times, looking down (in a manner of speaking) or just looking, at the room and the people clustered around the bed.

The soul then spread itself out, conforming somewhat to the shape and size of the ceiling, and it seemed to peer at the whole room at once, with a meta-geometric view, seeing from all angles, from all possible positions on the ceiling at the same time.

Then with a diaphanous shudder it expanded farther and gained depth, thickness if you will, and rose up higher, enveloping Room 28, in fact gradually engulfing the hospital wing, inside and out, and surrounding it for 50-100 feet in all directions, even into the ground, through the basement, permeating the storage rooms, permeating the HVAC plant and the pathology labs and the morgue, down into the soil, around the perimeter drains and the building tile which surrounded the foundation of the hospital, down below the tips of the taproots of the trees on the front lawn.

Harold's soul expanded upward, too, far above the nearby manicured treetops of the hospital grounds. Birds flew through Harold's soul as it expanded, and high-drifting tufts of dandelion fuzz floated within it, as it moved into a roughly spherical form, and then held for a while, looking again at the lifeless body on the bed surrounded by people.

It looked at the room, the ICU ward, the wing, the basement, and the tree roots and trunks and the leaves blowing in the upper reaches of their branches. It looked at the birds and dandelion fluff flying through itself. It looked at all these things from all points and all perspectives within

the sphere it encompassed, and then with another kind of shudder it contracted a little, to a sphere perhaps no more than 30 feet in diameter, barely enclosing Room 28, barely descending past the far corners of the ICU. Perhaps for one last look.

Then in a matter of seconds it expanded rapidly and steadily, encompassing more and more of the buildings and the city and the region until its size was irrelevant, its size was beyond size and it had no more corporeal analogies to represent itself. And still it grew.

Beyond the solar system, it paused again as it looked down into the planets, into the heart of the sun, and savored the fusion fire fueling the great orb. In like manner it savored the delicate motion of the moons swinging about the planets they served, and it saw the motions of the planets circling the sun on a timescale that was no longer biological.

Then after basking in this vision it spread much farther out and within a short time subsumed the Milky Way galaxy and all its billions of suns and planets. Not long thereafter, on a scale of less and less relevance to any frame of reference, it encompassed the galactic region, the inter-galactic fabric, and finally the entire family of galaxies, stretched over 15 billion years of growth and evolution.

Harold's soul looked down now on *Hiranyagarbha*, an almost egg-shaped notion of a creation whose reality is only dimly hinted at by words, now beyond the conceptual, now beyond the now, and Harold's soul was at last emptied of tension, devoid of compression, of definition, of all specificity, of duality itself, at long last boundless, outside of time, and truly free.