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Dr. O'Donnell

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Winter Birds on Barren Trees: A Visit to Arlington Cemetery

*It is natural for humans to fear the unknown, and Death is the greatest of all unknowns.
Ephemerality is a part of life and its cycle, but just because something is a law of the universe, it
does not mean it's any easier to make peace with.*

There are flowers on the nearest grave.

Bundled in grocery store tissue-paper, blooming out together through the maw of a paper cocoon are a set of crimson roses, wine-dark petals yet to know the brush of winter's fingertips. They paint a stunning picture, a splash of red against the subdued shades of dead earth and weathered marble, a heartbeat somehow thrumming in a barren, gaping ribcage. They can't have been left here for long; they look as fresh as store-bought flowers can possibly look, and though Virginia winters lack the same bite as the ones in my current home of Syracuse, New York, the cold here is hardly any kinder to springtime signs of life. It's mid-December, after all; it's a far shot from spring, and the earth has long-since said farewell to autumn. It's a time of sleep, a time of endings, a curtain call on any last signs of summer and spring vivacity.

Distantly, I can't help thinking how fitting it is that this is the time of year we've decided to bid my great aunt her final farewell-- there's something almost poetic about it, really. I'd

entertain the thought a bit more if not for the cold, hollow feeling settling in my chest and the silent presence of my immediate family members a few short steps away. Instead, I shove my hands into my jacket pockets and go back to focusing on anything except my mother as she spreads my great aunt's ashes over her grandmother's grave. It had been eight months since she'd died and eight months since her actual funeral, but only now, in this solemn, unforgiving December were we actually dispersing her ashes, and quite frankly, I have no desire to pay it much mind.

I look over to the skeletons of trees towering over us-- winter has stripped them of any signs of life, a thin, dusty layer of snow settled over naked branches. A pair of tiny finches are perched on one of the longer branches, their soft chirping barely enough to disturb the heavy atmosphere-- they're a striking sight, too, their muted colors still vibrant against a monochrome background, their persistent signs of life lighting up the morbid setting the same way a very tiny candle illuminates an ink-dark room. They're almost out of place here, at Arlington Cemetery -- a place rich with history, rich with the bodies of common men and historical figures alike, all united under the inevitable banner of death's embrace. A great deal of my family members rest here, and now, however much I wish otherwise, my great aunt joins them, her remnants scattered across her own parents' resting place.

I've been to Arlington Cemetery a fair number of times now; since a great number of my family members served in the military, a few of them are buried here -- notably my long-deceased great grandfather and great grandmother. Since my mother's side of the family primarily resides in Virginia, most trips out there would inevitably lead us back here; my mom always wanted to pay a visit to her grandmother's grave. I only ever expected to visit this place for those occasions, in all honesty-- it's strange to actually be saying my last goodbyes to

someone I knew and loved here. But this had been the location my second cousin and my mother had settled on, and I wasn't one to question their judgement.

Besides, a part of me thinks my great aunt would like it here-- beside both of her parents, in a place not far from the place she's called home for her whole life, somewhere well-kept and well-known and familiar, in a little niche besides the trees where songbirds like to rest.

I at least hope she'd like it here.

I remember the day my great aunt died with an alarming amount of clarity, if only because I'd been blissfully unaware it was even happening to begin with. It happened in the tail end of the first third of 2019, in the last few days of April; I'd been up in New York with my mother, participating in a scholarship competition in Syracuse-- I spent the whole weekend putting my well-honed public speaking skills to the test, and I'd even gotten the chance to meet up with a longtime friend in person and spend some time with her. It had been the most fun I'd had in a long time. True happiness can be a rare thing for a girl like me-- persistent issues with depression, anxiety, and what could very well be undiagnosed autism had the habit of mitigating all of my chances at joy, so I always remember moments of true happiness all the more clearly.

Then I stumbled back through the door of my house after a four hour flight, got the news that my great aunt had very suddenly passed away, and all of that joy withered in an instant.

The months after that are a bit of a blur to me now; I graduated from high school only three weeks after my great aunt's funeral, spent half of the summer wallowing in unprocessed despair and the other half trying to pull myself together for my impending freshman year of college, and all the months after that actually attending college and trying to settle my life's trajectory. Recovering wasn't easy, if I can even call it recovering at all-- it's more like I set the

matter on the backburner, trying to look forward instead of back, no matter how my heart still burned with grief and repressed emotions. My classes at Syracuse University took priority; at the time, I greatly preferred to focus on the gauntlet of general courses I had to work through instead of paying any mind to the recent loss in my life.

My great aunt was one of the most important people in the world to me. She was a glistening pearl settled among the tarnished masses that composed my mother's side of the family, and she'd played a vital role in my life for as long as I could remember. She gifted me a love for literature, sending me home from her house in Virginia one day with a set of notecards, kept together by a bright red ribbon, each one of them bearing a list of classic books she knew I'd love-- she was mostly right, too. (All she'd failed to account for was my future great distaste for Charles Dickens, which we never could agree on.) To this day, I haven't worked my way through the whole list, but I've never once misplaced it.

She was a frequent traveler, unhindered by age or other limitations. My great aunt went to see corners of the world I'd never even heard of when I was a child, and she almost always came back with foreign gifts: a headband from Israel, a wooden carving from Romania, and a myriad of other small treasures. I still have all of them, too-- if anything, I've clung to them far more tightly now than I might have as a child. I understood their worth then, but the memories clinging to them now makes them more than irreplaceable.

She'd promised me, once, that the two of us would go out and see the world together one day; when I'd started college, or even when I'd graduated if we wound up having to wait, and sometimes I feel as though I wished away my childhood waiting to be old enough to see what she had seen with her. The promise never saw fruition, of course. Of all of the things in my life I'd been prepared for, her death was not one of them.

And that's the strange part, really. I think about Death very often, perhaps more often than a girl my age should. It's almost as if I consider him to be much like an old friend; he's waited in the wings for a great deal of my life, watching, seldom interfering, but he can hardly be called a simple bystander. I've seen him standing on the side, yearned many times to meet him face-to-face, but we've always eluded one another. I've never really feared Death, or the enigma of what comes after-- if anything, the grand mystery of it all enthralls me, and it always has.

That day at Arlington was one of the first times I doubted that enchantment; it was the first time I'd thought of Death and known anger instead of intrigue, the first time I hadn't really cared for the great enigma or the poetics, the first time I'd truly felt the hollow weight of loss. I've lost people before: my paternal grandfather, maternal grandmother, several pets in my younger years, and I'd made peace with all of it with relative ease. Life and death are intertwined, and all things that come into this world will one day leave it, after all. My great aunt's death was the first time I'd ever felt the full force of being left behind, of losing someone to someplace I couldn't follow.

To this day, I haven't really made peace with my great aunt's death; I still have days where I think of our promise, or think about calling her to catch up on lost time, only to be hit with the cold reminder that there's no one there to call. It's gotten easier with time to quell the lingering hurt, but I don't think it will ever fully disappear. I may have found my fascination with mortality again, but there's a bitterness that flows with it, sometimes-- bitterness for what feels like a betrayal, even if I rationally know that a concept like Death cannot betray an arbitrary idea of a connection.

Still, human hearts are seldom ever rational.

“Emma?”

The sound of my father’s voice immediately interrupts my silent reminiscence, dragging my thoughts back from the past to the present. I blink, tearing my gaze away from the nearest grave to look back at him, tilting my head inquisitively.

“Are you ready to go?” he asks, his voice infinitely more solemn than it ever usually sounds. I can’t quite conjure up a response, so I simply nod and start walking, dead leaves and dusty snow crunching beneath my boots as I make my way to the car, gearing myself up for the eight-hour drive back to my parents’ house, Death still lingering in my heart and my head, his presence impossible to ignore.

I think of the finches perched on the bones of that skeletal tree, of the roses draped over a stranger’s grave; neither are meant to last. The winter birds may see their barren trees blossom and die and blossom again, but it is a sight they will only know so many times-- the roses will wilt in a few days’ time, already cast upon their deathbed, further unable to thrive within the season’s unforgiving hands. They are ephemeral, even more so than humanity, and yet they live regardless, even if only for a moment.

That’s the most vexing part of all, isn’t it? That the end lingers over us before the beginning is set in stone, that Death could extend his skeletal hand any minute of any hour, and yet we still fight to live. We let ourselves love things knowing they may not last, let ourselves enjoy life’s momentary gifts no matter *how* momentary, let ourselves live knowing that we are mere grains of sand in an eternal hourglass. There are those of us who fear the end because of what we do and do not know, but still, the rule stands that we live regardless. Creatures with shorter lifespans and lives full of more danger than us think little of the end, and some of us do the same-- opting to live with joy and hope despite the lingering threat of transience.

So though my great aunt took a piece of me with her to the grave, I can stitch a new patch over the hole left behind-- it may not be the same, and it may not operate as it once did, but it is a new piece of me, one that has brushed with mortality and knows the weight it has. If winter birds can stand on the skeleton of a tree they once loved and continue on, if flowers laid with love can wilt and yet still convey their message, then I know I can stand in the ruins of loss and rebuild myself still.

To me, that is what it means to live.

About the Author

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Emma Sheedlo is an aspiring fiction author currently living in Johnson City, Tennessee and attending East Tennessee State University. She has every intention of one day writing fantasy and sci-fi novels, but for now, she's content to simply focus on getting her degrees settled. She is an avid lover of card games, birds, and all manner of literature, and most of her own personal works revolve around the concept of death and the nature of mortality. She's a lover of all things macabre and existential, and is more than happy to introduce any readers to works including them.