

You ever had to bury a friend?

Like, *actually*, bury them? The corpse, the dirt, and a shovel if you're lucky. The dirt stuck underneath your nails right after, and this terrible, terrible feeling of guilt that trails behind you every second of the day, and then curls up by your feet at night.

Because I have.

It was a cold, long November night, and we were alone. The wind howled outside, as we laughed, slouched over the table, half-drunk on our last bottle of wine, sharing the memories of who we once were. I remember finding a strange sense of comfort in the fact that, at once, it was only us left. The world beyond the frost-covered windows had grown distant; blurred by time, by grief, by the quiet surrender that comes when there is nowhere else to go. He told me that it was funny we pretended as if the world hadn't already ended, and I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye.

But he was right, you know?

Only now do I realize that maybe it did not end all at once, that maybe it had been ending for a long time, and we just didn't notice.

Hours later, he was dead. I remember staring at the empty chair in front of me, at the half-drunk glass of wine, at the space no longer occupied with his presence.

I didn't lay his body to rest for a very long time.

Days passed, time had lost its meaning, bleeding together like a drop of ink spilled into the water – dark, shapeless, impossible to separate. I kept on praying to God, even though he had long abandoned this forsaken realm, and I begged him for my dear friend to come back to me.

I told myself I couldn't bury him yet because the ground was too hard, frozen through the frost. And it was true, I suppose, but it wasn't the reason. The truth, as it tends to be, was much uglier. I couldn't let go. Not of him, not of what we were, not of the last voice that reminded me of the world I once belonged to. The silence became something else, something alive, pressing in from the corners of the cabin, from between the walls, from the hollow where his laughter used to live. At first, I thought it to be grief, that terrible echo of love that turns inward and begins to rot.

But grief doesn't whisper.

It doesn't wait for you to answer.

I kept the fire going, waking up at night to add more logs, afraid that had it died, the last of him would die too. And this ever-present warmth made him rot.

The smell came first; faint, at the edges of the room, something sweet and wrong. I told myself it was the meat in the pantry, the damp wood, the mold creeping in through the foundation. But deep down, I knew. The air had changed, it clung to my skin, thick and heavy. It seeped into everything: the blankets, the floorboards, even the wine still sitting on the table. Then, I stopped sleeping at all. I would sit by the body on the floor, watching as the firelight painted his face in shifting shades of gold, as if the flames were trying to remember him the way I did, alive and so full of movement. But if I stared too long, I would notice how his skin had begun to shift.

At first, it was only subtle; the faint gray creeping around his lips, the hollowness deepening beneath his eyes. The longer I watched – and I must admit, sometimes it was all I could do for

the entire day – the more the fire revealed. His skin tightened in some places, loosened in others, pulling his features into unfamiliar shapes. It was like watching the memory of him slowly fading, until all that remained was something that only vaguely resembled the man I knew.

And finally, I no longer could pretend it was the light playing tricks on me. But still, I couldn't look away, caught in the state somewhere between horror and reverence. His hands had curled inwards, the fingers stiff and pale, knuckles sharp beneath the thinning skin. There was a strange sense of beauty in the way it marbled; a meshwork of veins outlined against the paleness of his arms. I think the moment I truly realized he wasn't coming back was when I reached out to touch him. I had kept the distance between us for so long, but one morning, something cracked. His head was tilted slightly to one side, as if he was still listening to me. My hand – I remember it too well – trembled as I reached out, fingertips brushing over his hair ever so slightly. I wanted to brush it back, I don't even remember why exactly, but the moment I touched it, it came away beneath my palm.

And something in me went very still.

Everything later is kind of a blur; I remember as I carried him wrapped in a blanket, like a mother rocking her baby to sleep. The air outside was sharp enough to sting my lungs, but I didn't dare stop. I followed no path, wandering in hope of finding a place where the earth might still have remembered what it meant to hold someone. The forest swallowed us whole, and the wind passing through the branches above us sounded like his name. I found a pine tree, tall and old, and that is where I dug the grave. Not very deep, just enough for earth to take him back, and then I lowered him down. I couldn't bring myself to look at his face, and now I find myself wishing I did. I covered him with soil, handful by handful, and when I was done, I sat back. For a long while, I just watched the mound of earth in front of me and thought of what to say to him for the last time; but I spoke no word, afraid that I would not be able to stop.

And now, you find me here.

It is almost winter again, and I think I am ready to go. When the first snow falls, I will let the fire die. And in the dark that follows when the last ember fades, I will step into the forest once more.

But not far. Not far at all.

Because some graves aren't meant to only hold one.



Aleksandra Waliszewska