

A Shadow Or A Dream

It's a long walk, so he likes to get an early start. Gets up about seven, showers, and has a breakfast of dried cheese, poached eggs, and cold water. It's quiet. After he turns off the faucet, he can hear the last of the water in the pipe falling away from the house.

The road falls away from the house, past his neighbors' homes, toward a field of baby's breath standing fallow under a crisp October sky. He carries a bunch of flowers. Crows in the city's dull generic trees caw at him as he goes by. His shoes crunch in the gravel. He is simply glad to be out in the light.

He doesn't care for darkness. He used to wish he could make his bedroom darker, shield himself from the streetlights he believes are a pollution of modern life. But he has grown accustomed to a long and shallow dusk. Now he's almost afraid of the dark.

Without a dog by the bed to reach down and pet, without a woman in it to feel moving and breathing, and without his father's snoring – which comforted his fearful childhood – he feels adrift in the night. Like a small boat cut loose and gone on an outgoing tide. He adds another quilt to hold his body down, and prays his soul returns by dawn.

Is that too much? Alright. Imagine you're not reading this, not sitting in that chair that's never quite as comfy as it ought to be. Imagine your eyes are not tired, that you haven't had too much coffee or too little, that your back does not itch between your shoulder blades.

Imagine you are lying in the grass on a summer evening of your childhood. There's a soft glow from the house, but you can see a billion stars. And since for you it is summer, the fiery Perseids have come to fling themselves to death, so you can make a wish.

Speaking of shooting stars, he has reached the graveyard, finally. Everything is green, as after a rain. The leaves are raked, and the dead flowers cleared from the flat and unoffending stones. He sits on a dew damp marble bench by the gate to rest, and reads the little verse it bears:

If tears could build a stairway
And memories a lane,
I'd walk right up to Heaven
And bring you home again.

This is as good a place as any to leave the flowers, though she's not buried here. He sifted her cremated bones on the ocean, on the most happy, conscious, talkative part of it, the very edge. He stood with his pants rolled up to his knees and waited for the most perfect, compassionate little wave to come and break, then ebb and carry her away. Then he sang Old Shep and turned, and went for lunch.

Now from time to time, he leaves the car at home and comes, as in a pilgrimage. Because the sea is good for doing what it does, for cleaning up and washing all away. But the graveyard accepts and is patient, keeping watch, letting the years pass slowly in silence and in light. So he comes on foot, and now he stands and goes from stone to stone, and finds the name of a child, a girl with a name like a shadow or a dream, and he leaves the flowers there.

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