

## The Twin Trees

I remember being ill. It was horrid. Of course, it was, it's illness – they're supposed to be. Though, it was awful in a strange sense – not so much the malady itself, mind, though it managed to ravage my body to such an extent that it was but a casing for my thoughts. Not even being frozen in that bed was the source of my pulsing anguish, knowing by their voices there were rashes and discolorations, growths and malformations, but feeling not a wince of physical discomfort.

Prior to this point, the decline was slow. As I felt my body shutting down, digit by limb by sense, I made sure to announce and declare my love to my family as often as I could, knowing – as they did by the chronic sadness glistening in their eyes - that it was only a matter of unknowable sunrises until my voice, too, would fizzle in to disuse and that soon, I'd be but an ever-sleeping form like some enchanted fairy tale.

And that's where the torture stemmed. The fact I couldn't urge them to just leave. Every day they'd visit, ask the same questions to the same nurses I knew only by voice (I'd conjured images of them but I would never know if they were accurate) only to receive the same answers.

My family would sit around me and talk amongst themselves; everything from dinner that night, to tensions at work – they would, in a moment of bolstered resolve, reach a conclusion of how to deal with a problem, only to be there the next day complaining about that very thing all over again. I was painfully aware I'd done very much the same in my years. My favourite, though, is when they would speak about memories with myself and my beautiful gone-too-soon Lori – to hear their candid perspective, allowing me to relive wonderful moments from a different angle, I was thrilled. She was a wild spirit, Lori was, who died a decade back; her ashes sat in an ornate cabinet that also homed her prized possessions and a thousand photographs of her, smiling and full of life. I wondered what would happen with those, with me – that was something they never discussed.

Ultimately, though, they were putting their lives on hold for me, and I felt like *I* was the sickness – some virus that was affecting the people I'd loved. My daughter, my son-in-law and my wonderful granddaughter, mostly. Every day they would spend hours on end in this limbo. The sooner I passed, the sooner they could resume routine and continue with their own stories. Not keep re-reading the last line of mine, holding on, not wanting to turn that last page because it would mean an ending.

But that's life! That's death. That's the nature of being.

I was an old man; I'd lived and loved and lost and laughed and longed. I didn't want them to languish in mourning my passing, let alone hinder their lives before it happened. I'd done my bit in life. I was luckier than my parents by a generous and wonderful three decades, and for that, I was grateful. I got to see weddings, I got to see the birth of my grandchild and great-nieces and –nephews. When I was bedbound and my routine of shops, pub and evening TV weakened to nurses, graphs, and pills, I knew the twilight of my life was fading – I was at peace.

I was able to reflect on the years as I approached their conclusion, and I replayed the ups and downs in my static leisure – oh, if only the staff and my loved ones knew, that amongst their beeps and weeps, in my stilled and dulled body, there was a chaotic rollercoaster of love and wildness zooming from morning to night. If only I could laugh, to show them, I would. How I could with hindsight and time, taste arguments, and review sexual encounters, and relive successes – all from the safety of their distant, consequence-cemented future. I was lucky to have that benefit.

And then, all of a sudden, I felt a strange filter on my thoughts and musings; they blurred and blunted in focus, stretched in a way not too dissimilar to my favourite whiskey's accompaniment, and snapped back, twisting and yawning through vapid vagueness and raw reality. Though I had no sight, I could see before me a bizarre and gnarly pulsation of dazzling colours, tinting the edges of my mind and being, filling in and fizzling out without pattern or creed, and then, as if passing an unseen, intangible threshold, I no longer could hear the usual medical beeps, or the echoed slap of leather shoes on ceramic floor, nor the sporadic groan of passing cars, nor the conversation of family and I knew, I knew, I knew, death had finally come for me.

Yet, still I thought. No, there was more.

I could feel.

I was enveloped, curled up and comfortable, as if once more in utero – but on my second time around with a sense of conscience and understanding. Though I still couldn't move, I was cradled and nestled by something so vast in scale and love that I knew I'd never need to. It wasn't the same inaction that I endured in body, bed and sickness, but a natural stillness – right, correct.

I still clung on to my memories of life, but they felt strange now. Like trinkets, safe and permanent on a mantel. It was as if I was peering through fogged eyes at a star freckled night, and each one I found was a memory I loved – a part of my world, but distant all the same. Still me, but no longer my responsibility to pay heed to. It was a relief.

How long I was held in this state of stasis for, I couldn't say. But, after an immeasurable period, I was met with the most curious sensation. I felt a wonderful and satisfying itch in some facet of my being, and then a part of myself I'd never before experienced began to stretch, reach out through this physical space, with a natural navigation, and soon thereafter, I felt *wind*. It fluttered and tickled at me – not my hair, nor my flesh, but caressed me all the same - and though I couldn't laugh, couldn't smile, or scream with sheer joy, the unadulterated happiness I felt was so potent, that should those actions be possible, I believe they never would have ceased.

I felt no anxiety, no need to rush this sensation, and as time trickled by, more itches, more reaching, more stretching, until soon, I was more in the open wind than in the cradle, and I could sense my surroundings.

Through vibrations, I heard squeals of joy. A voice so familiar, that were it possible, I would have wept tears of gratitude. My granddaughter. She was five when I passed, and though I could not deduce how much time had altered the voice, I was certain it was her. She was happy, ecstatic, and thrilled. "He's here! Mummy, he's here!" And the pride I felt, when I realised her happiness was because of *me* is something every one of those star-specked memories combined could not emulate.

Soon after, I could hear my daughter, her husband as they spoke around my new presence. She was sobbing in the way she did when good things happened, and he was soothing her emotions in the way he did when good things happened. I was the good thing.

"No, don't touch them, baby" I knew she said, though I couldn't hear the words themselves, I knew they were being said – they fell on me, and were absorbed, and treasured. "They need more time."

In a moment of farfetched clarity, I finally realised what had happened. Lori, for the longest time had said when she passed, she wanted her ashes to be buried, to be back at one with the world. But we researched, it was harmful to do. We didn't know what was best. We promised each other, as husband and daughter, to look in to it; there were avenues, companies that could

do it, but I must admit, I was selfish. I didn't want to lose her again. We'd kept her imprisoned in a cabinet. Yet, I was granted her wish.

The time my daughter claimed I needed was granted to me in abundance, and I was blessed enough to have frequent visits from my granddaughter and daughter, as well as infrequent visits from other family members. They would approach me, their footfall felt familiar after a while, and then sit – cross-legged, I think – at my base, telling me about their day at school and work, about their struggles and worries, successes and achievements – they would talk, and I would understand, and thank my very existence that I could be here for them.

They would speak to Lori, too, as if they believed she was here with me – ask her how she was, how she was doing, and though the mention of her name would sadden me, I believed that maybe she was present in some sense or another. I never believed, truly, in an afterlife, yet, here I stood. Sometimes I felt like I could feel her, but I also was painfully aware that if you want something enough, you can convince yourself of its possibility, no matter how unlikely.

As I grew stronger, sturdy, safer, I was granted the miracle of their touch. Though my exterior was tough and solid, to feel their softness on me could have melted it to a gooey liquid, felled me in a way nothing else could. I'd never thought I could be so lucky, but here I was, after death, though solitary and lonely, lucky enough to be feeling the embrace of those I cared most about around me.

Seasons passed – I could feel the warmth of summer's kiss offering a constant and soothing blanket over me, in which I would be accompanied by love and laughter as those gathered and drank, and danced, and ate and told tales. "One for old Benny," they'd cheer, and drink to my name, "And one for sweet Lori," they'd finish.

Though, to contrast this, I could feel the sting of winter's bite, denuding me and mocking me with howling laughter as I shivered, lonely and clacking in to the early nights. No cheers, no drinks, and no merriment. Yet, I thanked both in turn, because I felt!

Life was all around me, and I was a part of it in a capacity that was impossible. I could feel the surefootedness of squirrels scampering about me, the comfortable and carefully constructed nests of birds that hatched and fed and sang and flew. I could feel the soil, innocent and altruistic, offering me endless life. It was exhilarating in its silent, secret complexity.

Summers and winters came and went heralded by springs and autumns, and as I continued to reach in to an untouchable sky, so to, did my granddaughter bloom from child to teen to young adult. My daughter echoed through the years, too, updating me as they fell behind her. And though they continued to visit me, their life took precedence, and their footfall was dropping in frequency.

One day, my granddaughter was discussing how she was moving away soon for university – allowing me to realise had been around thirteen years since I was in that bed. She continued to promise she would visit as often as she could. When the day came, my hidden heart cracked as she plucked off a tiny piece of me, "To keep in my locket," she explained.

But this is what I wanted, all that time ago bedbound and frozen, for them to live on. This was inevitable. I would gratefully accept any small kindness of my involvement in it.

Not much longer after she left, my daughter, wise and proud as she was, sobbed to me, and soon disclosed that she was incredibly unhappy in her marriage. I was shocked, and for all the limbs I possessed, I could not reach one forward to hold her tight and comfort her. She explained how she was staying in the marriage because she was a mother, and that was her duty... but now that her daughter had flown the nest, she wanted to shed him. She had complained about him many times, but I was never aware it was on a level as severe as this,

and to hear her talking, neither did she. It was as if my silence left room for her realisation to staple, and the decline started.

Soon, she stopped coming out altogether. And in the absence of their soft voices and beautiful moments with me, I began to hear distant arguments, and shouts, and toxic words being spat from one to another as their love twisted and tainted in to hatred. And thus, my new life felt like a curse.

At intervals, my granddaughter would return, and the arguments would take a momentary and temporary respite. She would come out to me, and tell me about her experiences in a new city, with new friends, new cultures – being open with me in a way no-one ever was – until soon thereafter, she would leave once more and the anger would come screaming back like a heavy smog, choking out all kindness.

I was never told, but I soon realised that my daughter had moved out. And my son-in-law, too. Both had abandoned the house, leaving me standing there alone and stranded, to contemplate on their lives and my old one. No visits from anyone, distant or close family, and I knew then I was to be alone.

Those same summers came, yet they felt empty. The same winters mocked, and now they stung. I lost count of how many raced past me. All I could do was stand and endure, wishing that this new existence was no longer offered to me, as it had now felt like I was doomed to turmoil and confinement.

Or at least, I thought that would be the case.

One day, as I felt the twitched talons of a small bird, hopping from one spot to another, I was amazed to feel the familiar footfall approaching. It was altered slightly, but the rhythm was there all the same.

“Hello, Papa,” my granddaughter’s voice reached out, and instantly remedying all those years of torture. Her voice now deeper, slower, older. “I wanted you to meet your great-grandson, Benny.” I heard a high-pitched, nonsensical babble. “I’ve decided to move back to raise him here. Mum and Dad gave me the house,” she disclosed. “I’m so sorry I haven’t visited, but I promise I’ll stay. Benny will come and speak to you, too. And we can build a treehouse. We’ll have to prune you a little because you both look- wait-”

I felt her footsteps retreating, and I tried to call out for her to return. I didn’t want to be left alone again. I wanted her to finish what she was saying! Within moments, she was back. “You sit there, baby,” she said, and I felt the happy, flailing feet of a baby pattering about at my base – the same place they’d often sat speaking to me. “I never understood why she put you so far away,” my granddaughter was saying. “You’ve both been left for so long, but let me see,” her voice was straining with effort here and there, “if I can just,” barely any sound, “there!”

If I could describe nirvana, this would be it. Complete contentment. This was better than any description of heaven I’d ever heard, and I couldn’t understand that, for so long, I’d felt any sadness – that sadness had ever existed at all. Her touch in mine; our stray thin limbs knitted and woven around one another. I could feel the spark of her life within me, lancing from the base of my being to the peak, an embrace so wonderfully familiar that I felt as if I had just been made whole.

My wild, wonderful Lori. Holding one another.

They had done the same to her! She was here all that time. Just out of reach.

“There we go,” my granddaughter said. “Finally together again.” The little boy- my grandson at my base chuckled. “Come on you,” she said to him. “We’ll get you fed then come back out to see them.” She plucked him up from the shade of my leaves. “Now you two, behave,” she said, as her footfall faded.

And I knew then, that Lori and I... we were forever.