

CLAIRE DONATO

Friends

[from *Burial*]

Father's cadaver rests horizontally in the autopsy chamber, though it cannot be seen. Mortician explains that after Father's body is embalmed, it will be placed inside a cooler for peepers to see. This way, peepers looking into the casket see a corresponding image of Father's cadaver's earlier person. Brains always store copies of the deceased; trouble is, the detailed image of a person's body after death may inflict mental damage.

Drying hair, damp from a shower, think, 'The morgue is a comfortable place.' Its linens and towels are dry-cleaned. Its desks contain menus, phone books, and a Bible to read. And its corridors are long, although the compass's magnetic strip is always out of order, always spins in circles like a pair of eyes (also out of order). To suffer from the spins, to get dizzy, twirl the body around quickly, in circles, until the eyes re-establish focus on one point in space. Regard a dead deer, a mirror, a face. No. A blotchy black dot, simple and smooth, fills in the eyes' steeple ridge, obliterating all that was seen, felt and lost in the past: a pair of blue eyes, crystal clear and easy in the dark; a bright yellow suitcase, faded by travel and age; and two rings engraved with arched waves.

Saddled with the outcome of the truth, crisis hums in the brain, cannot be extinguished, and a visible suspension of smoke, smoke clouds out, and the eye can feel the present in the brain, which contradicts each ring, each symbol of the past, present and future. Wind, it was nothing. Love, it was only a game. As for crisis, it continues without any clear message: a low humming sound in the brain is heard, has been heard, continues to speak. But no words are perceived. Thus the hum whirrs. The hum whirrs. The hum speaks.

And, all day long, the wind sings: sound persists, carries on, and the wind's electric currents pick up speed, blow through trees. In a gesture of grief, crisis hums through the trees without leaving a trace in the wind. 'Buzz-buzz,' hum the insects. 'Zz-zz,' hum the insects. 'Ss-ss,' hum the cicadas, which hover above grief with wide, open wings, as the low humming sound, devoid of speech, sings.

Drying hair, damp from a shower, notice the floor, walls and ceiling, all covered in nicotine stains. The floor is misshapen and crooked, and beneath its baroque carpet steer the dirigible ants who dodge death in a swarm, a low flock, a crowded army that infests every narrative regardless of its story, and there are stories of the morgue.

One story begins:

Once upon a time, the floor, walls, and ceiling were stained. Once, the morgue was falling apart, and its physical decay induced unease inside a person's brain, her twisted mind. Each day, the morgue fell apart. More and more. Days went by. More and more. Was the morgue in her mind? Even its employees assumed shapes, heavy outlines: physical forms that a person could not ignore—no, she could never ignore the ghostlike tracing of Apparition floating through the morgue; she trembled at the sight. Thought she: 'I too may one day give up the ghost.' Then she picked up the phone.

'Front desk,' a voice says, and the heart, caught by surprise, beats at the sound. A voice, a male human voice, however momentary, sounds in the ear like the voice of a friend, a familiar person one knows. Now the water lily painting looks gorgeous on the wall—fragrant, tall and bulbous—trumpet-shaped. Outside, it is snowing; the beach is covered in snow: microscopic flakes that join together, make white the beach, and ring in the ear like the *crack* of the lake.

'Front desk,' the Voice says, and a voice, a male human voice, speaks. The room appears unpainted, blank. Say, 'Hello.' Say, 'I've noticed nicotine stains,' and notice the Voice's steady breath on the line, a source of inspiration. Say, 'They look easy to clean.' Say, 'I noticed them on the ceiling today.'

Silence ensues, a gap in conversation during which a mass of stars appears, swarms up. Two eyes roll back, stare into the brain, and the brain's frontal lobe turns plum-colored, magenta. Together, the stars all resemble the shape of a face, although the eyes, nose and mouth are misaligned, out of order. Down the corridor, a sign reads OUT OF ORDER, and a length of masking tape covers the gumball machine's coin slot. Oh, gumball, gumball no one chews. How, then, must a person eat you?

'I'll send Groundskeeper up,' says the Voice, and his voice, a male human voice, hovers in the brain like an insect with wings, rings out like the sound of a spoon against glass, and there is tension in its silences, as if language sleeps underneath its surface or between each breath. Silence is what the heart needs, requires in order to breathe. Still, a voice, a male human voice, whirrs about the morgue's halls, travels down its endless corridors until it seeps into the baroque carpet.

A voice, however speechless, dwells in the morgue and the mind and the brain, insisting a person is never alone—that a person, regardless of her solitude, is never alone. However dumbfounded she may be by grief, a person is always in the company of others, strangers wholly unaware of the circumstances surrounding Father's death; nonetheless, fine company they keep, keep.

'Do you smoke?' The Voice says, and his voice echoes through the telephone's receiver as water in a cavern drips—*drip-drip-drip*, water drips; *drip-drip-drip*, a spigot drips; *drip-drip-drip*, the shower drips. One's hair is now dryer than before.

The mind repeats the question: *Do you smoke?*

Say, ‘Why?’ Say, ‘Do you?’ And think—one may experience another person’s voice on the phone without feeling distance; one may greet desolation in a crowd of faceless persons; or, one may come face to face with death in the autopsy chamber, and death’s casual nudity may leave the body feeling lightheaded, dry in the throat. No one will know.

‘I smoke,’ The Voice says, and his voice, his male human voice, provides little relief from feeling alone. No one will know. Amidst the darkness, soap and little mints—once newly replaced, now strewn on the floor—the brain is ablaze, cannot make decisions of sound mind without impulsively reacting to the body’s rapid currents, which curl into depression every time emotion breaks.

Say, ‘I smoke too.’ A lie—the body has excreted a lie in response to the Voice, his voice stuffed with roses, and a peculiar anxiety now overtakes the body, works its way up from the ground toward the mouth’s crooked teeth, which are chattering now from the sound of his breath, or is it the cold?

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A few minutes later, meet the Voice. ‘Follow me.’

Following the Voice—his voice, a male human voice—down a stairwell, a concrete hallway that reeks, through a door under a sign marked EMERGENCY EXIT, the body falls into a coma, a state of deep indifference marked by a blank look. That which separates one person from another is always marked by a blank look, a distance kept by holding one’s arm out at a length, which results in the mind never moving too close. The Voice extends his hand, offers a smoke. His hand is cracked at the knuckles. And the smoke, white and shaped like a tube, is a poisonous flower, a summary of death taken into the body by a *léger de main*—a lightness of hand—whereupon the brain fills with smoke, the mind fills with smoke, and the lungs fill with smoke until they turn black, unable to take air in, expel out, or blow.

‘When was the last time you smoked?’ The Voice says.

Think backwards. ‘Can’t remember.’

A visible suspension of smoke presses between, clouds out. The dead can see the air just like the lungs revile flames without conviction. The Voice reaches out his blue hand, his dry ocean. ‘Your hair is dark; the snow makes it light,’ he says, as if this statement is a poignant observation that will cause the blank look to dissolve, thereby bridging the gap between deep indifference and friendship. Rest assured, this face-to-face meeting is not about friendship—think, ‘no, not at all,’ watching his hands tremble blue from the cold. There, in the wind, in the snow, think ‘two bodies,’ think, ‘a little carnal disruption; shut the door,’ think, ‘in the big picture, the door will reopen,’ and then shut the door, still ajar in the brain, open to the possibility that death may be worth keeping, may be worth saving in a book filled with words, white space

and punctuation.

Say, 'Have you ever been in love?' and the Voice—his voice—a male, human voice—says, 'I once fell in love with a woman.'

A fool falls in love. One who dwells in indifference dwells at a distance from love, from its unexpected currents and the lonesome tumbling that causes a person to fall on her knees, if she falls. And there is never any reason to fall, to become so attached to another that one is driven to say, 'I once fell in love,' followed by an ellipsis, '...', a trail leading down a path into—what? Some fatal dream? One grows weak from conflating the future and past, and the ellipsis, '...', always leads into an exposed empty vat, the interior of an urn whose lid has been removed, whose ashes have been spread into water where, in time, everything dissolves, giving way to the past.

Look out at the horizon—the illuminated skyline against the dark and snow—and think, 'The heart is to blame.' Think, 'Indeed, the heart is the source of all blame, and the dead may be to blame for the living's misery.' If only the living could accept the dead's innocence.

Say, 'Who loved whom first,' eyeing the clock that glows midnight above the town's lit chamber. And the smoke is but a little stump now; the Voice's hands have stopped shaking, overcome by the cold. Meanwhile, a blank look has dropped down into the heart, and each minute that passes is weighed down by grief.

'Love wasn't something we discussed,' The Voice says, inhaling.

Say, 'But you had sex?'

'Sex is dull,' The Voice says. 'Do you have friends?'

Say, 'Why?'

'Do you want to be friends?'

Look toward the center of town. It is snowing quite heavily now.

Say, 'Maybe.' Say, 'We'll just have to trust that one of us won't fall in love.'

A fool falls in love, becomes suddenly cold. Then the ocean turns to stone, becomes static. And a heart turns to ice in the autopsy chamber, though no heart controls its own heat.

'I don't think that will be a problem,' the Voice says, lowering his eyes in a contrary signal, a wave meant to disorient any fixed impression of the heart in the mind. Eyes, which sob and sob and have sobbed and have taken the place of their sobbing, have already entered into a relationship with the cylindrical containers of tears that pour out from every high object: the clouds, superimposed in the sky; the showerhead, infinitely circular and impossible to adjust; and the chamber's brightly lit clock, which sounds *tick-tock, tick-tock* every hour, the brain's newfound addiction. Meanwhile, temptation sounds all the time, although the mind, separate from the body, sleeps alone. And the Voice's hands are chafed, so blue and grotesque. Who in the night in the world would ever hold them? His knuckles are tinged with dried blood. His fingernails, jagged and bitten. 'Can I ask you a question,' he says, at

which point his hands, his representation of loss, ricochet against the heart's empty space.