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*finalist***DEATH BIRD STORIES FOR NONBELIEVERS**

## Part I: Voodoo

On St. Patrick's Day, a few months after my father died of a heart attack while jumpstarting a truck in a snowstorm, I left my neighborhood bar too drunk for the brakeless bicycle I rode into rush hour traffic. Weeks later, I had a conspicuous limp from the tiny Toyota that struck me and a \$25 moving violation from DC's Department of Transportation. The accident had been all my fault: I was lost.

When I hadn't eaten in days despite ordering all of the Chinese takeout I never allowed myself, I contacted a friend I'd known since college. Despite being a scoffing atheist without a speck of religion in my heart, I asked Vanya, a spiritualist, for help. She had recently been initiated into a tradition based in the Congo, what seemed to me Santería and what I disparaged as voodoo because, having grown up religious, I felt I could be dismissive of religion.

Vanya listened to my complaints: I couldn't eat, couldn't keep a boyfriend, my job was a dead-end street. The "luxury" condo whose mortgage exceeded my pay didn't even have a bedroom. I spent evenings sitting on the marble bathroom floor listening to NPR, cooking my feet with a space heater. Since I hardly ate, I was chilled all the time.

"When was the last time you visited your dad?" she asked though I had not mentioned my father. She said nothing about the catalogue of longstanding woes that had suddenly become intolerable but did not include the fairly mundane event of a parent dying. Discussing his death, however much I missed him already, seemed reductive, remiss. I had real problems.

I answered I had not been to my father's grave since the funeral. It had only been two months.

"I can't eat anything." I reiterated, trying to return the conversation to my tangible troubles. "I run miles everyday but I can't eat."

"Go see your dad," She repeated.

I sighed.

My father dying was hardly unexpected. I had agonized about my father's death like any daddy's girl, realizing at six the near inevitability of having to exist in the world without him. I regularly envisioned how

I would react to his death as a child, trying to prepare myself. Would I attend the funeral? Shave my head? Head west on a motorcycle and disappear? How would I *bear* it? Losing my father was an ancient specter, its prospect torture for thirty years. When it finally happened, I only felt sedated. My signature long hair remained on my head, I never rode west. I suspected what I felt now had little to do with his death.

“I feel like I’m going to fall over,” I repeated to Vanya. “I can’t eat.”

“Go see your dad,” she said, ending the conversation. “Clean his grave.”

Clean it? I had no idea what that meant.

My father’s grave is just outside of DC in Adelphi, Maryland, in a cemetery less than a block from my childhood home. I played in this cemetery, learned to drive in it, hung out in it after school with my friends when I was a teenager. There were three cattail-circled ponds at its center, as well as a white mausoleum. Geese stalked the landscape in packs, low income high rises hovered over the trees that separated the cemetery from the Capital Beltway. Technically “inside the Beltway,” Adelphi is mostly what is deemed by scholars “a suburban ghetto,” but this graveyard was an oasis.

On the way to this cemetery after hanging up with Vanya, I passed another staple of my childhood: Popeye’s. The fast food restaurant was also walking distance from my childhood home. Often, after working shifts at his two full-time jobs, my father would stop at the drive thru in lieu of making for dinner a hybrid dish like hot dog curry. Needing to sleep a few hours before his next shift, he would bring home boxes of biscuits and chicken he was too tired to eat.

At the intersection near the stout orange restaurant, I felt a twinge of real appetite. I couldn’t remember the last time I had eaten any fast food, never mind Popeye’s. I was the typical perennially dieting American woman, but as I approached the Popeye’s, I felt hungrier than I had in weeks. I ordered large cajun rice, my childhood favorite, to go. The aroma alone felt like the past. I would visit my dad and eat this first meal in weeks from a styrofoam cup and I would feel better, I thought. Maybe Vanya was right. Maybe I hadn’t mourned.

As I walked towards my father’s still visibly new grave, my hunger felt poetic. Nostalgia filled me with the memory of this strange food that had meant so much to me growing up. Finally, I was hungry. I couldn’t wait to eat the meaty rice. Yet, when I reached where he had been buried, fragrant paper bag in hand, I stopped short. I squinted, though I could see: his flat grave marker was covered in broken glass and geese shit.

Clean his grave.

Incredulous, I tried to explain what I saw. The glass might have come from the trash bin up the small but steep hill I had parked on; it had rained heavily and often in the recent weeks of spring. Maybe a mini landslide had brought down the glass shards. Considering the number of geese stalking about, geese shit didn't seem unusual, yet when I glanced at the nearby markers, none had any of the streaky purple clumps that covered my father's flat marker.

Clean his grave.

Using a water bottle and Popeye's paper napkins I cleaned his simple marker. Then I pulled the grass that had over grown its edges and removed the flowers that had long withered. Then, even more hungry, I sat in the itchy grass and devoured the cajun rice with a plastic spork. My belly, magnificently flat for weeks, bulged. Appetite, elusive for weeks, filled me. I wished for biscuits. Clean his grave, Vanya had said. I wondered if she were a witch.

## Part II: The Widow of Spalding Gray

As soon as my father died I thought of Spalding Gray, the writer who killed himself by leaping from the Staten Island Ferry, but not because my father was depressed, though he had every right, considering how disappointingly childless, spouseless, and working class his children turned out to be, despite his herculean exertions across two continents. I thought of Gray, or more specifically his widow Kathie Russo, because of an Irish legend that Russo recounted after Gray's death.

The legend, described by Russo on public radio, claimed that any bird found in the home following a death indicated the current mental state of the dead in the afterlife. More succinctly: dead bird equals distraught soul; live bird equals happy soul. This is not a singularly Irish superstition. It is not only the Irish who associate birds with death. In fact, nearly every major religion associates death with birds, from the Hindus to the ancient Greeks. After Gray's funeral, Russo had been determined to keep birds out of their farm home. No birds, she incanted. The widow wanted no messages from the dead.

This was unlike my brother who, before our brain-dead father was even taken off life support, desperately wanted word from the other side. Where *was* he? Was he floating above when we decided to turn off the machines pumping his chest? Was it a relief? What did he make of the brimming funeral? Was he warmed by no space in the teeming pews?

Was it his magic that a humble savings fund, opened in Ceylon when my brother was an infant, somehow matured, thirty-odd years later, exactly one month after he died? Was it he who tipped the casket as it descended into the dirt, the pulley lowering it malfunctioning for the first time in thirty-eight years, the gravediggers said, a fluke accident that shaved eight thousand dollars off the funeral my brother and I could hardly afford?

Unlike my brother, Russo heard immediately from her dead. Regardless of her efforts—which included securing every window and all the screen doors—birds appeared in her home several times during the weeks following her husband’s suicide. They indicated by their very liveliness that Gray, whose own mother had also committed suicide, was at peace. Conversely, a dead bird would have conveyed, according to lore, the opposite message about Gray’s soul.

In the days following my father’s death, I, recalling Gray’s soul, considered the prospect of seeing birds, too, though with the weather there were fewer birds around. My father’s death occurred during what is joyfully remembered as *The Snowpocalypse of 2009*, when two snowstorms struck DC with accumulations of two feet twice in two weeks. The city was white for months. Days after the snowy funeral, I sat in a boyfriend’s apartment in Foggy Bottom, looking down on an historic traffic circle, taking in the starkness of the huge oaks and the slow moving drama of Beemers in the barely paved snow. I watched for collisions.

Suddenly, yellow-speckled starlings by the dozens landed on the slim ledges of the nearly forty feet of panoramic windows in the apartment. They landed in one ripple, a wave of black wings, then suddenly there: dozens of birds. I inched closer to the window nearest me. The birds did not take off. Instead they bore down, struggling to remain on the thin brick ledges because the ledges were not an ideal width for perching but also because the winter wind was relentless. Their feathers ruffled every which way; they seemed to squint. The bare branches behind them rocked. There were, despite the double paned glass, audible gusts.

“I’ve never seen birds on the ledge like this,” my boyfriend commented from behind me. He opened the camera on his iPhone. “Look how many there are.”

“What do you mean never?” I was already in disbelief about the starlings’ abrupt appearance. That their appearance was singular had not occurred to me.

“Never,” he answered, marveling himself. He continued snapping photos.

“How long have you lived here?” I asked, still looking at the shiny

birds bearing down against the weather on the narrowest of edges. He and I had been dating for less than a year.

“Four years,” he answered, clicking at the birds with his phone. “Not one bird ever.”

### Part III: Yes

When my father was a boy in Colombo, he dismantled his father’s radio. Curiosity about its inner workings—how voices from afar were transferred by the tiny box—propelled him. After reconstructing the radio and evading the reproach of his schoolteacher father, he grew confident. Soon he discovered he was not simply handy, as many boys were encouraged to be, but that he was talented with his hands, comfortable with anything mechanical, and trustworthy with all tools. These were not his only endowments, however.

A trophy-collecting track star with a love of sports my brother and I would both inherit, he was handsome and quick to tease. Up until his last week he replied, “India” to any question of origin or location, whether it be where he had purchased his hat, where he had to drive one of his carpoolers or where he could be found later that day: India. Where did you find my shoes? Where should we park? India. His answer was so deadpan and swift it always took a moment to register as a joke. He was quietly funny, modest in everything. This translated even to his ambition, which was wholly and unswervingly bound up in my brother and me.

By the time my brother was born in 1972, Ceylon was already a bloody place with scant opportunities. Despite the civil war my father managed to secure a position with a prestigious bank—now defunct—that he no longer viewed as adequate. No street was immune to violence, nor any quarter of the island really thriving, and thus small chance my father would leave my brother’s prospects in such barren straits.

My father arrived in Washington, DC, in 1974 and commenced the proverbial rocky immigrant road. To secure my mother and brother’s arrival, he devoted himself to numerous jobs in addition to total service to the Indian Embassy. He filed every application related to their arrival, smiled through every overtime hour he worked at a wide variety of (simultaneous) entry level jobs, and answered yes to any request for his prodigious skills—plumbing, carpentry, car mechanics, roofing, even navigation of DC’s infamously labyrinthine streets.

The only thing my father didn’t know how to do—expertly—was

rest. In his last years, he remodeled our childhood home, room by room, even though he was nearing seventy. He performed my last oil change. He made mutton curry for Thanksgiving. His last days were spent as I so often recall him, hunched over a loved one's disabled vehicle.

He always said yes. Yes a thousand times. Yes in excess. Yes to any colleague, any friend, any boss. If I asked for oranges one day, I would have oranges for weeks. Oranges waiting in bags for my next visit, oranges of different kinds, oranges because I had asked and the answer was yes, of course, yes, always yes.

My father was an affirmative, an affirmation. My brother and I never wanted for encouragement. We never doubted we were the entirety of our father's universe. He drove us to every major city in the US, waited endless hours for the close of football practice and piano lessons, and made evident in every instant that each step he took away from Ceylon was for the sole purpose of securing a promising life for his wife and children.

The day I cleaned my father's grave and ate for the first time in weeks by happening upon the very food he used to bring me, I called my brother.

"I went to see Appa's grave by the way," I mentioned lightly as I exited the cemetery. I didn't want to worry my brother with my hunger so I didn't relay anything about Vanya or the cajun rice. I only reported that I had cleared away the dead flowers.

"That's funny," my brother answered. "I dreamed of him last night."

Unlike Gray's wife, my brother did not receive any instant signs from beyond though he did develop a perspective on ghosts: he welcomed them. He wished for any contact, settling for dreams that didn't come as often as he wanted.

"I hadn't dreamed of him in a while," my brother continued. "A long time."

"Oh yeah?" I asked absently, pulling into traffic. I was thinking of my hunger and of the cajun rice. "What was *Appa* doing in the dream?"

"He was bringing us food."