

## The Last Funeral at the End of the World

1747 words

Meg had kept collecting things for her baby shower even after the world had ended. Light things, easy to stuff in a bag and power-walk to the next safe location. For those first few weeks, she held onto the hope that she might still have one, albeit without the original guest list. Without her mother. Her friends from college. Her favorite coworker.

Her husband.

There were roaming groups in those first few weeks, makeshift tribes of survivors — other stay-at-home wives and mothers like herself, or basement dwellers in their late twenties, or au pairs shouting across the streets in their native language. All of them wealthy enough to stay inside as the world fell to ruin, until their canned food ran out and their delivery apps stopped working. Unstaffed car dealerships provided transportation, and when one SUV stuffed full with scared and angry upper middle class white people ran out of gas, they simply stole another one. Walmarts quickly became mini hubs of civilization — the guns were picked over long before the fruit and vegetables had even begun to rot. Meg’s final group had favored heavier assault weapons, raiding outdoor shops for ammunition and outfitting her with an ill-fitting tactical vest at 22 weeks pregnant. The final group had been mostly men, hyper-traditionalist types who spoke more of the baby’s value than her own, and they had often suggested naming the child after its father to “carry on his legacy.”

Meg never countered that her child might be born a girl, or might choose its own name once it learned the way to do so. She merely watched them bark directions amongst themselves,

broiling with fury that they had survived while her husband lay dead somewhere beneath the ruins of a collapsed office building in downtown Austin.

But they had good aim. So she held her tongue.

The eventual fallout had not been a climactic event. The men died, one after another, from a stray bullet or the blood sickness. It seemed that every vacant house they stopped at, every empty store they looted, their group became smaller, until one day, Meg was driving alone down a beaten road, carefully swerving between stalled vehicles all along the way, and openly weeping.

The bleeding had started eight hours ago. It hadn't stopped.

Thick, dark blood ran down her legs, staining through her elastic shorts and landing in clots on the floor mat by the brake pedal. She had no frame of reference for how much blood she had lost, no idea how much was in a pint or if that was even the right unit of measurement. It didn't look like it did in the movies. It was slow but constant, and it hurt so badly, like dozens of dull knives stabbing and twisting in her pelvis. Sometimes she had to slam on the brakes and scream, pressing her forehead against the steering wheel, until it ebbed away and she could see clearly again.

Everyone she'd ever known was dead. She thought she had prepared herself for things like this. After her husband, she didn't think she could cry like this. She had dried up, like seaweed left under the burning sun.

But she had never known her child. How could she lose someone she had never known?

She drove the giant stupid truck that the men had loved so dearly back upstate, blinking away her tears just enough to watch the remaining gas slip ever lower. She pressed her foot harder on the accelerator when the road opened up, when there were less dead cars to navigate

through. The environment didn't matter anymore. Black smoke coughed out of the exhaust and the sun beat down from the cloudless sky, unfeeling, unyielding.

The remnants of a small town rose up around her, old ranch houses and broken fences and fallen basketball hoops in driveways. Vacant ice cream parlors and graffitied libraries. A courthouse covered in blood and bodies baking in the heat. Meg passed them by until she came to a small parking lot next to a worn wooden sign posted in the ground.

*Wings of Peace Funeral & Cremation Services.*

Her family had held services for her grandmother here when she was a little girl. She remembered the dove on the sign, forever in flight. She had asked her mother where it was going when they passed it on their way to the building entrance.

*"To heaven, sweetie,"* she had said quietly, squeezing Meg's little hand more tightly.

Meg parked the truck in the lot and eased herself out of the driver's side, clenching her teeth against the pain and holding her belly with one hand, her thighs slick and sticky with blood. She looked up at the sign. The dove had never moved in its journey to heaven.

It was still stuck here, looking up at the sky, just like everybody else.

Walking had nearly become waddling in the past week or so, and the pain made it even worse. She took each step carefully, breathing hard, until she reached the front door to the funeral home.

The door was unlocked, and the front office had clearly been raided. Furniture was gone, carpet stained with all kinds of liquid, electronics ripped from their cords on the front desk. Meg dismissed it all and kept going, down the main hall, past the viewing room, and into storage.

The back rooms, too, had been raided, but lucky for her, caskets were far too heavy to take on the road. Most of the shelves still held them up, varnished wood cases in shades of white

and brown and black, covered in dust, though one shelf had collapsed. Caskets had fallen to the cement floor, some cracked, others laying on their sides half open.

Meg picked the nearest one. Her head was feeling lighter now, like a balloon on a string. There wasn't time to find the perfect fit.

She slipped one strap of her backpack off and let the whole thing fall to the ground, then lowered herself to the floor, leaning her back against the casket. She unzipped the largest pocket and started placing items inside of the casket, one by one, around the satin-lined perimeter.

Her mother's favorite bracelet, that she'd given Meg when she dropped her off at college for her first year. Her father's glasses with one lens missing. Handwritten birthday cards from her aunts and uncles. Her grandmother's favorite book, *Gone With the Wind*. The collars of all her old pets, their nametags clinking against each other. Mementos she had salvaged from her home before she had moved on to the road, searching for — what? food? community? she didn't know then and she'd never found out.

Half-empty, her backpack began producing more colorful things, fresher things, untouched by time. Purple ribbons. Yellow onesies. Bows and straws and napkins in cotton candy colors. A shiny plastic sash that read *BABY MAMA* in big, pink letters. Meg sobbed, hiccuping as she lay each decoration among her long dead memories.

Her backpack was empty at last, but she kept moving, stuffing the bag at the top of the casket like a pillow. To her right was a turned over desk where the employees must have taken their breaks. Empty soda bottles collected nearby, and an *Entertainment Weekly* lay open on the floor. She reached for it, twisting her body to pull it closer, and almost laughed when she turned through the pages, articles about movies that would never be released, interviews with actors

whose names would be forgotten alongside everyone else. But Meg remembered, even if it was just for now. She was the only being still alive who found meaning in a magazine.

It must have been delirium that made her do it, but she started tearing the pages, collecting photos. Beyonce joined her family in the casket, then Meryl Streep, and Amy Winehouse, and Harrison Ford. She tore out the faces of people she didn't even recognize, young rising stars who might have become household names in a few short years, people right on the cusp of achieving their dreams.

But those were human dreams. The universe was too big to notice human dreams.

Meg discarded the mutilated magazine and worked on pushing herself up. Her arms shook under her weight, suddenly so much heavier than ever before. She strained until she heaved her body over the edge of the casket, falling inside shoulder-first, hissing at the now distant pain between her legs. It was softer inside than she'd expected it to be. Or maybe she just couldn't feel it.

She didn't bother to close the lid. A woman her age would have had an open casket funeral, anyway. She shifted where she lay, upon her bed of ribbons and mementos, and lay her hands crossed upon her swollen belly, stroking it.

When her grandmother died, Meg had been too young to understand the purpose of funerals. Why would everyone gather in one place just to be sad at the same time? They were all already sad — what did it matter where they cried? It felt wrong to look upon her grandmother's face, a face she had known to show only smiles and laughter, and see it so pale and sallow and dead. It was only when she got older that she understood. Funerals were not so much for the dead as they are for the living, for those left behind. They are a collective ritual that humans perform

to bring order to a world that feels so suddenly shattered. It is one of the many first steps in healing, in moving onward.

But what was a funeral with no one left behind? The storage room was empty around her, just as empty as the building, the city, the state, the country, the world.

What was the point of a funeral if there was no one to attend?

Meg sniffed, her nose red, her eyes puffy and aching. Her belly felt cold, motionless. A quiet funeral it would be, then. One not for the living, but for the dead. For her family. For her husband. For the people who hadn't survived as long as she had. For music and movies and books and paintings, things that had mattered so much while meaning absolutely nothing.

For her husband.

For her baby.

For her.

Meg let her eyes flutter shut, leaned her head back, and opened her wings.