

Salt The Earth To See

Lila Harmonie enjoyed the uncommon thrill of her bare feet on her brother's grave. The cold crispness of the green grass gave her a pleasurable sensation that ran from her soles up through her spine. She was already visiting Oliver's grave in secret on a weekly basis. An additional secret made no difference. Lila knew how horrified Marion would find this particular behavior, as would Neil had he not disappeared from the family's radar six months earlier. Lila felt cheated that the her mother and her brother had competed against each other for so long about who loved Oliver the most. They were too self-absorbed to consider that Lila was just as capable an opponent for that prize.

There was no viewing of Oliver Harmonie's body. Even after all the time spent making him presentable, the careful attention to detail in Oliver's restoration, Thomas and Marion changed their initial decision of an open casket. They agreed that they wanted to spare the rest of their children from a particular final image of their oldest sibling – a cold, pale, lifeless face with the faint scars of reconstruction along his neck, cheek, and forehead. The last time Lila saw Oliver was when he was waving goodbye to her, just before he got in his truck to drive off for his private New Year's getaway. The memories of the long ago yesterday in December made Lila wince in pain.

The intermittent wind whipped through Lila's brown hair. Annoyed, she pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail. She sat in a folding chair while looking at her brother's tombstone. Her bare feet still took in the texture of the grass. Beside the chair sat her tomboyish shoes and a simple black purse, both of which perfectly coordinated with her round-framed glasses. Down in her lap, the diary that was a gift to her from Neil, who

was first gifted the diary from Oliver — the diary now known as The Book — was resting squarely on her thighs.

While she preferred rereading Oliver's writings more so than Neil's, Lila admired both of them for writing frequently. At times both of her brothers had made several entries within a week. For her, it was easier to take the time once a week at the open privacy of her brother's grave rather than in the confines of the busy house occupied by her parents and four other siblings. In a house dominated by the stalwart personalities of Marion, Victor, Heather and even Phillip, Lila felt so drowned out of existence that she could never concentrate enough to write down her thoughts.

Lila reached down into her purse and pulled out an unremarkable black pen. She opened The Book and adjusted her glasses. As she stared down at the blank page, Lila wondered how often her mother had been to Oliver's grave, or if she had ever returned to it since the funeral. In the six months since she had been writing graveside Lila had never encountered Marion or any other member of the family. For the first time, Lila entertained the possibility that she was, in fact, the only family member to make regular appearances at The Royal Park Cemetery. However, there was no way of verifying any attendance without asking or spying on her family, neither of which Lila had even the faintest interest in attempting.

Lila put pen to paper. Her words flowed as her head swayed from side to side with the rhythm of a metronome. She wrote long, meandering sentences with little regard to conventional paragraphs. Her written thoughts melded together until she used haikus to separate them.

She was undisturbed for fifteen minutes until she heard the sound of an endeavoring car engine overlapping with the approaching sound of tires crunching on pavement. Out of the corner of her right eye she saw a yellow-brown truck enter through the east gate. Her eyes moved and locked focus on the truck, then followed the truck as it rode down the slight incline of the cemetery road. The truck parked directly behind Oliver's tombstone. The young woman and the vehicle were less than ten feet apart, separated only by the tombstone and a recently trimmed hedge. Lila turned her eyes back down to the pages, hoping that the truck would vanish if she pretended that it was nowhere in her vicinity.

John Reginald needed to brace his left hand on the back of the driver's headrest and his right hand on the roof of the truck in order to pull himself out of his seat. At seventy-five, the age was noticeable in how he stood and in the way he walked. He was a tall man with thin grey hair. His jeans were faded and his flannel shirt had grease stains at the sleeves. He pulled a white handkerchief out of his back pocket and blew his nose before shutting the truck door.

Lila briefly looked up and to her left. John walked slowly, the heavy beat of his footsteps on the aged pavement growing louder as he made his way around the squarely groomed hedges. Lila, distracted by his footsteps, quickly jotted down a haiku:

In the valley I
Have a great view. But tell me,
What's real and what's true?

John came to the end of the hedges and to a small walkway where he then turned to his left. He grimaced as he made the steps across the walkway to a stone bench that resided in front of a large, sturdy tree. Once seated at the bench, John looked to his right

where Lila was sitting. Her face was down in The Book. She was concentrating on ignoring him more than she was on writing.

John attempted to take a couple of deep breaths, but his fifty-five years of smoking only made him wheeze. Eventually the wheeze turned into a violent cough. He covered his mouth with both of his hands to try muffling the awful sound. Each time he coughed, Lila flinched and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

John noticed Lila's discomfort. "Sorry, little lady," he said.

"It's no bother at all, thank you," Lila said, lying through her teeth and keeping her back to him.

John slowed down his breathing, his wide chest expanding and contracting, taking in the vast spring air. He wiped away the sweat on his forehead with his left-hand sleeve. He avoided transferring any of the grease stains.

Lila reluctantly stopped writing. She closed The Book and kept it in her lap. As she leaned down to return the pen to her purse, she glanced upward at John. Lila thought that he would be looking at her with curiosity, perhaps even thinking about what a strange girl he had found sitting by herself in a cemetery on a picturesque spring afternoon. Instead, John was looking down at his cowboy boots, a freshly polished shade of brown. He wondered why he insisted on polishing them on this particular day.

Lila sat back up and looked at her brother's grave, directly at the spot where the granite meets the grass. She stared at the area and hoped for the quiet to carry on. She thought that if she did not catch the old man's attention earlier, then she might be spared from interacting with him. She was proven incorrect. "What's a young lady like you doing in a place like this on such a nice day?" John asked.

“I come here every week,” Lila said. “I come here for serenity.” She attempted to answer his question without the hint of annoyance. She hoped that the specific words she spoke, rather than using the tone of her true feelings would end the conversation before it could carry on. She was proven incorrect again.

“You come here so you can write in that there book of yours?”

“Yes.”

“How come?”

“It was a gift from my older brother,” Lila said. “I’m carrying out his wish.”

John looked over at Oliver Harmonie’s grave. “That him?” John asked.

“Yes. He was very important to me.”

“I bet he was,” John said. A solemn expression passed over his face. “I remember when your Daddy came to talk to me about buying that plot where he’s buried.” Lila finally made movement, turning over her right shoulder to look at John. Now she was interested in what John had to say. “If I think back...his name was Tom?”

“Thomas,” Lila said.

“Thomas. That’s right. My name’s John. Didn’t catch yours.”

“I’m Lila.”

“It sure is nice to meet you, Lila.”

“Likewise,” she said. Lila smiled at John and then, with the pleasantries over, turned her head away from him.

John pressed ahead. “So you really come here every week?” he asked.

“Well, I’ve missed a few Sundays,” she confessed.

“And every time you come out here you just sit there and you write?”

“Yes. I do.” Lila closed her eyes and hoped that John would have the decency not to ask her what she wrote about. Her privacy was sacred.

“I haven’t been out here since Nellie died,” John said.

Lila was relieved that he took their conversation down a different path. She opened her eyes and they caught the attention of the burial ground to the left of her brother’s. Whereas Oliver’s grave was a two-foot high monument, an elaborately carved tombstone with large black and gold lettering, Nellie Reginald resided underneath a simple, small headstone.

“That was October. When she died,” John said.

Lila peaked at the date on Nellie’s headstone. Her date of death was October 13, 1991 – just over a year before Oliver had died. The words left her: “I’m sorry for your loss.” She unconsciously channeled the many times that, because of Oliver, friends and acquaintances of her parents had said those exact words to her. At the time she always had doubts about their sympathy. Realizing that history was repeating itself because of her, Lila’s neck briefly twitched to one side, an unholy jerking of her head as if she were avoiding a flying insect.

John, unaware of Lila’s twitch, barreled on. “I wanted to ask you, since you’re here and all. I would’ve asked your Daddy, but it didn’t seem like the time or place. And he didn’t say anything about it, not that I was expecting him to. After all, things being as they were...” John had worked himself up so much, building to asking a personal question that he started to wheeze again. Lila waited patiently for him to gather himself and curtail his cough. She knew what his question would be. “What happened to your brother?” he asked.

If Lila was going to be trapped into talking to John, she was not going to strain her neck, back and shoulders. Nor was she going to continue giving off the perception of being rude. She moved her chair on the grass so that she should could look at John and talk to him directly. She repositioned The Book on her legs. Then she answered his question. “Three and a half years ago, five days after Christmas, he went to our family cabin for some alone time before going back to school. He was at UT. One morning he went for a long walk in the woods and somebody accidentally shot him.”

John shook his head. The truth was worse to him than what he had imagined. “Goddamn tarnation. Bless your little heart,” he said.

All interpersonal clichés confounded Lila in one way or another, especially the phrase “bless your heart”. Still, she acknowledged his sympathy with a half-smile and a slight nod of her head. Lila assumed that John would continue asking her questions, but it seemed the tragedy of Oliver waned his energy. The silence in the cemetery held steady, save for the gusts of wind and the rustling of tree leaves. Finally, uncomfortable from the silence, Lila said, “I don’t understand how my dad bought this spot from you.”

“He paid me a fair price for it,” John said.

Lila blinked. “I mean the process. How did you know he wanted to buy it?”

“Oh. Someone from the cemetery office gave us a call one day. Said a man who owned the plots next to us was in need of buying a plot. Wondered if ours was for sale. So they put us in touch with him and we made the deal.” Lila noticed that John was referring to “us”, as if Nellie was a participant in the exchange. She decided not to insist that the fatigued elderly man be completely factual.

“But I mean...” Lila was still perplexed. “Why did you sell it?”

“Truth be told, I was never the sentimental sort...” John’s voice trailed off as he looked away from Lila, out into the open field of other people’s memories. Lila followed his look, having never taken in the size of the cemetery until now. To her it was always a small little world occupied by her and Oliver. “More truth be told, I needed the money.”

Lila, shifting her legs, turned back to him. She thought it was possible that John was confusing his stories. “Then it wasn’t for lack of sentiment?”

John felt the uncontrolled urge to cough again. He tried to stop it by taking more deep breathes. He managed to restrict his cough to only four bursts. “Nellie and I had these plots and she had her heart set on tradition when it came to being buried. Me, I never understood what the big deal was. When you’re gone, you’re gone. Why does it matter if you’re buried in the ground or floatin’ out there in the wind? Sometimes I think for being a tried and true Southern man, I got some queer ideas.” John stopped, choking back the tears of ironic sentiment. He gathered himself, then: “So I buried her the way she wanted. Figured when my time came, Robbie would do the same for me.”

“Who’s Robbie?” Lila asked.

“Robbie’s our son,” John answered. Lila nodded and resumed listening. “Then your Daddy comes along in need. Seems he had already bought the other plots beside us,” John said as he pointed at the open space of grass. Lila looked at the ground to the right of Oliver’s grave. To her surprise, she was uneasy thinking about her parents being buried near where she was sitting. “I figured it was the decent thing to do, let the man bury his son the way he wanted to.”

Lila, privy to more accumulated information regarding the inner workings of her family, said, “I am certain that it was my mother who was being pushy on the issue. My dad was just following her directions.”

John chuckled. “You sayin’ that’s a bad thing? Letting the wife run the show, that’s just what I’d call marriage.”

“I am saying that even in shock and anger and grief my mother was still the one in charge of whatever happened to Oliver.” Lila had a few disturbing thoughts about Marion before speaking again. “Wait. I thought you said you needed the money.”

John went to roll up his sleeves when he noticed the grease stains. He looked at the black notices, and then he resumed his task. The stress of reliving memories had caused him to perspire. The wind on his bare forearms relieved some of the accumulated sweat. “I always knew how to fix things. I’m good with my hands. I got the grease to prove it. But I was never good at fixin’ people. And poor Robbie was broke for years. Goddamn drugs and booze. I sold my own grave to help him.” John could not prevent himself from coughing again, but the coughing did prevent him from crying.

“It didn’t work, did it?”

John stopped coughing and shook his head. “He got help at rehab but when he got out he went right back to getting’ drunk and high all the time. I even told him what I did to help him. Told him Ma was never ashamed of him, no matter what kind of trouble he was in. But she would be now, knowing what I did for him and how much that patch of dirt meant to her. I didn’t mean it when I said it, but I was out of ideas. Thought that could scare him into acting right.” John paused then admitted, “He’s been dead nearly a

year.” John swallowed hard, composing himself to prevent another coughing fit. “Sorry for being nosy and going on like this. I sure do talk too damn much,” he said.

“You’re really no bother at all,” she said.

“You mind if we keep talkin’ then?”

Lila was obliged to keep listening to John. Even with her tendency towards seclusion, she could not turn away from a man baring his soul. Sentimentality and grief brought the strangers closer together. “Not at all. I’d enjoy that very much,” she said.

“That’s swell. You got any more family?” John asked.

She catalogued: “Mom. Dad. Another older brother, three younger brothers, and a younger sister.”

“Nice big family. Y’all get along well together?”

Lila contorted her face as if she had just tasted something sour. She needed to find the right description. “More or less.”

“I had two older brothers and Nellie was the middle child between a sister and a brother. But with us it was just me and Nellie and Robbie.” John looked down at his boots again, “Soon it won’t even be me anymore.” Lila raised an eyebrow and parted her lips. He kept his head down and heard her silent question. “Doc says I don’t have very long. ‘Swat I get for smokin’ all them years.” John coughed loudly for emphasis.

This time Lila’s condolences were authentic. “I’m really sorry, John.”

“Aww. It’s all right, little lady. My time’s up. Happens to all of us one way or ‘nother. Every day’s just one day closer to the end. Just never know for sure when that’s gonna be. Just thanking my stars I have some sort of idea.” John’s gratitude was palpable. A man who had experience with death knew the value of life.

Lila let loose tears of rage. John was petrified that his prattling was the cause. He moved to one side of the bench to be nearer to her. He considered reaching out with his hand to touch her, to comfort her, but he let her cry uninterrupted. After a minute, Lila stopped crying. She calmly took off her glasses and folded them into her right hand. “No one in my ‘nice big family’ understands me. The only one that probably did was him,” Lila said as she pointed at her brother’s tombstone with her left hand. “And even as different as we were, Oliver didn’t let us being different get in the way of being close. He made the effort, more so than I ever did if I think about it. Ironically, he may be the reason why I am so much of an outsider in my own family. Everyone else is so multidimensional like him – beautiful and talented with so much to offer. I guess all I have is that I’m just smart. I’m smarter than all of them. I wanted to go to a different high school when I was given the choice, but after Oliver died I stayed at the same school to be valedictorian just like he was. I’m going to Stanford in the fall. I’m going to be a doctor.” Lila was amazed at her openness. She never remembered ever confiding such intimacies. Isolation brought out her elocution. She lingered to plan her next sentence. “You see, when the buckshot from the shotgun shells hit my brother, some of the pellets severed the carotid artery in his neck and some of them went through his brain and out the back of his skull. Between the rapid blood loss and the brain trauma, he died quickly. He probably didn’t feel anything or even know what happened.” Lila wiped at her teary eyes. “I like the scientific explanations of things. Everything gets put together or even taken apart a certain way. It can be explained how my brother was killed. But it can never be explained why this happened. Why was he in such a hurry to leave us that Christmas? Why was he wandering out in the woods by himself?” Lila cried some more, burying her

face in her hands. Three and half years earlier she had done the same thing, sobbing over losing Oliver for a reason that someone as smart and methodically logical as her could not understand.

Lila knew something had happened when she felt the grass under her bare feet shift from the impact. She had cried for so long and so surprisingly loud that she did not hear John slump off of the bench and onto the ground. When Lila parted her hands she saw John prone on the grass. His eyes were closed. His skin was paler than it had been. Lila gently laid The Book on the grass. Then she put her glasses back on and stared at the inanimate John, a ghost laid out on display under the bright rays of the sun. She saw with clarity that John had finally found his long-forgotten peace.

Lila calmly went over to John and crouched down behind his head. The grass on her feet felt warmer than how she had experienced it previously. Just to be thorough, her index and middle finger on her right hand touched his neck. There was no pulse. She removed her fingers from his neck and delicately placed her hand on his forehead. She studied his lifeless face, curious as to what features John might have passed on to Robbie.

Lila returned to her chair, taking in the enormity of all life. She was thankful that John's death was merciful, painless and she was remarkably happy that she witnessed it. After considering which member of the cemetery personnel she had to contact regarding John's body, Lila picked up The Book off of the grass. She retrieved the pen from her purse and opened The Book to where she had stopped writing. Lila looked back at John for the last time. On the empty space of the pages Lila scribbled down:

No one is quite me.
And when I die I hope to
Salt the earth to see.