

## As I Was, Remember Me Always

There had not been time for a single weed to sprout from the unsettled earth of the grave. That was how close he had come to saying goodbye. By a single blade of Bermuda, a solitary by-god sprig of crab grass, he could measure his missed chance.

Steve Cavanaugh noticed the name on the headstone right away - "SOPHIE CHRISTINA KARRAS," and in smaller capitals beneath, the single word "BELOVED." No qualifiers like *daughter, mother, wife*. The sentiment stood pure, available to all who had known her, and Steve (to whom she had surely been beloved) found it elegant. It was hard to miss the absence of her married name. Whether she had used or even taken George Vogel's name was a mystery to Steve, but by resting under her given name she was restored in part to the woman he had known before their separation. Steve did not imagine that George had considered his feelings in the choice of engraving, but he accepted it as permission to grieve fully, without embarrassment.

Later, it would occur to him that the gleaming new stone must have been ordered well before the other funeral arrangements. Otherwise it would not have arrived in time for the burial. Steve was not much for pomp and ornaments when it came to the dead, but he was thankful not to be kneeling at an unmarked grave, certain though he was that Sophie lay in it.

*[Transatlantic phone call: 37 hours ago*

"Hello."

George's voice was sullen with exhaustion. There was no trace of solicitation, just *hello*, informing Steve he was being greeted and ought to be damned grateful.

"George," said Steve, with just as little inflection. The two men had hardly spoken in a decade, and never with much warmth. Steve would have felt foolish speaking, as to an old friend, with too much urgency. "It's late. I'm sorry."

There was a brief silence. Steve could hear George weighing judicious replies. *In God's name, why would you call me? How did you get my number? What have you heard?* Any of these would have been reasonable, and Steve was prepared to explain without being snide or coy.

George was no fool. He knew without being told that Steve would only call out of concern for Sophie, that the number would be easy enough to extract from mutual acquaintances, that she must have written him something distressing. There was nothing else the two men could have to say to one another. Instead of pressing further, he simply said, "You want to know about Sophie."

"I don't even know what there is to know. I guess she hasn't been well lately."

Another pause followed, in which Steve distinctly heard a long rush of air through the receiver. It might have been a truck or motorcycle outside the house or hotel room (or hospital) wherever George had been resting. It might have been all the breath leaving George's body as he faced the rest of the conversation.

"Yeah. I guess not." It was not resentment or impatience Steve detected, but a surprising note of pity. "It's been longer than lately, Steve, and it's not good. I guess she must have written to you."

"Just a few e-mails. Not exactly the family Christmas letter stuff. It sounds bad, though, and I thought maybe I should--"

"We're saying goodbye, Steve." George was awake now, his familiar tone regained, snapping Steve's tentative courtesy short like an icicle. For an instant he took it to mean that George was now hanging up. Then he understood that the goodbyes were to Sophie. He felt a sudden chill through his whole ribcage.

"George, I had no idea. Can I help?" The question sounded ludicrous the instant it went out over the line.

"I'm making arrangements. If you'd like to come, well." The sentence sat there, incomplete but finished.

Steve's eyes were damp. He strangled the quiver he felt in his voice. "I wouldn't want to intrude."

"We can't hold anything up for you, if she goes," said George softly, evading direct answers. "I mean, you can't possibly expect that."

"Of course not, but if you'll let me come, I'd like to."

"Truth is, she'd probably want you there."

The third pause of the conversation was not as long as the others, but it was the one which would come back to Steve later, as he chased sleep without success in the last bulkhead seat of the British Airways 757. There was a riddle in George's tone that Steve could not decode.

It seemed unlikely that Sophie and George had discussed him, especially in a dire medical situation, and anyway there was nothing to suggest that George wanted him there. But in the nine years since he and George had last laid eyes on each other, Steve had learned to take opportunities as they came, no matter how grudgingly offered.

He gave his mobile and e-mail information, with the understanding that George would send any updates and important details, in case Steve was caught in transit when]

As a final act of mockery, the first drops of a good soaking rain pattered on his head. Reluctant to be watched while coming to grips with the actual sight of her grave, he had left the cab driver idling up the hill, just outside the gate. It was no time to turn back on account of a threatening sky.

As much as he wished he had arrived in time for the funeral, he saw that it was right to make the journey alone. Staring at the granite marker, he felt his heart grow quills, and he was soon as wet with his own tears as with the insistent drops from above. Where he had hoped for tenderness, bitter feeling flooded forth instead.

Somewhere amid his halting, hitching protestations a single coherent phrase fell out. In the advancing crackle of the rain not even a person sitting beside him would have heard it.

"Should have been me, not you."

It was a thunderless shower, but the sky answered his intonation by going a shade darker. Not long after, the rain grew too insistent to ignore. He rose to return to the waiting taxi.

The drops had already sunk deep into the earth, penetrating and enriching. The stirrings of new spring life began unseen, but what Steve felt was the quickening of something less natural. It was nothing so dramatic as resurrection, yet he had the sensation of being peered at from a distance away. He turned, and of course saw nothing. The evidence of his eyes did little to dispel his impression of a presence, neither hostile nor loving but certainly more dark than not. It did not seem to approach, but stayed to watch as the taxi dug ruts in the mud and turned back up the path.

Steve considered checking in at a motel, or even visiting a service station to clean himself up. He knew he was too late even to put in a meaningful appearance at any formal family gathering - the fickle whims of standby travel in peak season, plus the eastern seaboard weather, plus a security scare in Toronto had seen to that - but he was coming all the same to pay his respects. The more the feeling of whatever had watched him at the cemetery grew in his mind, the greater the unworthiness he felt at having arrived so late.

*[Second to last letter: 4 months ago*

Subject: no resolutions (ha ha)

Happy new year, mister Big Shot. I guess I'm down to writing once a year, but it seems to me you don't answer back in much of a hurry either. I suppose this is more civil than I imagined we'd be right from the start, so I guess pats on the back are in order.

I hope your latest masterpiece or whatever you're calling it is a success. I was going to say congrats on the West End premiere (London

at last!) but that may have been longer ago than I recall. It's been a stressful year and I'm a bit scattered.

Truth is, I've been under the weather for a while. Just a family thing I was born with, needing attention now and then. I do think it's beginning to tax everyone's patience, though George tries. If only that mother of his would try and keep her nose out. I must sound disloyal. To be honest I'm not sure how nice a person I ever was. It's why George and I work. We're neither of us very nice. Think how lousy your life might have turned out.

That's unkind. I hope you're as proud of yourself as your friends back here are. I don't see anyone much but we've always expected the best from you. George tells me I said something about you in my sleep. Tells you what kind of nightmares I must be having.

George is well, and his family and his practice and his poor relations abide unabated (is it you who used to say that? made me laugh). Anna has turned six, God help us all. She looks just like me, God help her. She is my little sable-haired anchor, although she did nothing bad to deserve it.

Take care of yourself, Cavanaugh, and for God's sake be a success.

S]

During the ride from the cemetery, an absurd fantasy came to Steve, in which he arrived at George Vogel's home to find a decrepit homestead gone to seed, with all the bereaved crying and rending their garments within. Of course when the cab stopped at the long driveway on the southern edge of Federal Hill, he saw exactly the wide spread of colonial mansion he had known would be there. Sophie had not left

him for any old community pillar. George Vogel was among the top five or ten orthopedic surgeons within a hundred miles of Chesapeake Bay.

Walking through the open gate, Steve could see indistinct figures through a window, cleaning up after the mourners' reception. He was spared the uncertainty of knocking at the door when George came out, his coat and tie forsaken, his collar askew. He appeared to be arguing with someone inside.

"There's no point in that," he said with strained composure. "Stay inside... I'm really not interested... look, can you just stay put and keep it to yourself for five minutes?"

He trotted down the steps, hands raised in half-hearted apology. His handshake lacked vitality, but he shook.

"We appreciate you coming, Steve. We do. But today's been tougher on everyone than we--"

The door crashed open and a sour, leathery woman's face poked out.

"George, tell him to get lost!" Then to Steve, "We are a grieving family and you are not welcome."

George turned to shout back, "Mom, I'm not kidding. Go back inside! You have no right."

"I've no right? Just go to hell then, the both of you." And she shut the door like she meant it.

At the last moment, Steve spotted a tiny girl's face, knee-high to the old woman, framed by Sophie's black hair. Anna. Steve swallowed a lump before it could climb his throat.

The two men spent a moment of silence, regarding each other. George did look like he'd rather go inside and forget about it, but he took Steve by the arm.

"Come on," he muttered, guiding Steve back down the drive, fumbling for keys. "We might as well get out of here, anyway."

*[Last letter: 3 days ago*

Subject: [none]

Steve, I'm sorry. Been worse than I let on and news is bad. Please if you talk to Anna please don't mention anything. loves]

On a Friday night it might have been a respectable place for a doctor and his guest to drink. On a rainy weekday it was purgatory, lit like a cheap stag film and smelling of too much disinfectant.

By the time any steady conversation got going between them, Steve was thinking he shouldn't have much more to drink. George was already pretty good and stewed.

"I'd only ever seen one case of Huntington's disease," said George down the front of his glass. "I consulted on a spinal complication, but the case wasn't advanced."

"An old professor of mine--" Steve began, but George was not about to yield the floor to an opponent.

"It's just management. She never got anything I'd call effective treatment. You just sit and watch as mind and body shrivel away together. It's nothing but a rapid degeneration switch you're either born with or not. Congenital. They teach you that word in English lit?"

"With books it's mostly venereal diseases," Steve said. The feeble attempt at levity was sour on his tongue. George charitably ignored it.

"What the hell is it you've done for nine years?" he asked

"I teach screenwriting two terms a year at the university, creative composition three, and seasonally I manage a small theatre."

"And you had to go to Britain for that?"

"When I got there the writing program was having its plug pulled, and the theatre was a deserted shitbox. I was lucky some of my old friends remembered me when the jobs needed filling."

"Well, get you." George buried his nose in the glass, bored and sorry he had asked. For a high-priced medical man he was no great patron of society or the arts. At his polished, well-spoken best George bore little resemblance to Steve's father, a self-poisoned steel worker who carried a lifetime's disappointment in his clenched fists, but in his cups he was every inch the embittered blue-collar meatball.

"She didn't start asking for you until the last few months. Not all the time, never overwrought or crying, just real casual. Innocent, you know. She'd seem to forget about you for whole stretches of time in between. She had a knack; she'd think to mention you on the worst, just the hardest damn days."

"What did--" Steve began, but faltered. Did it matter? Could any specific thing that Sophie might have said matter, except to pain and enrage her husband? The nature of her talk was plain to him as he thought back to the scene at the house. He changed his question.

"Were you there when she died?"

George's voice came back like the sound of a man disappearing, shrinking down into his clothes and shoes. His reply was small and muffled, which curiously put Steve more on his guard than ever.

"You bet I was there, Cavanaugh. And that's the one thing I'll always have over you. You weren't there. You missed the whole production, in fact."

"If I'd known, I'd have come."

George was suddenly alert and snarling. "If you'd known! How could you, overseas? You should thank Christ you had no idea. You think it was just fits and disorientation and lying in filth? You wouldn't have recognized her, Steve." Spoken that way, his name sounded like a curse. It was clearly meant that way. "There were days I wondered if she was even human anymore. She said such foul things, right to my face without a trace of recognition, to my mother, to our child! It was all I could do once or twice not to drive a stake through her."

Sorrow pulled at George's face, trying to overtake his anger, but not yet strong enough. He pushed himself upright, rattling their empty drinks. The bartender had abandoned them through some miraculous intuition that the two men needed a private talk. George wagged his finger in general accusation.

"And every now and then, the sun would shine and the birds would chirp and she'd just smile at me, and smile, and smile. And always on those perfect days, she couldn't help but puke up some fine memory of ol' Steve Cavanaugh, weren't we silly not to keep in better touch with him?"

Steve squirmed. Steve located the nearest exit. George nearly missed his own mouth with a glass of warm gin.

"But I know she saved a little bit of that sunshine for you," George said slowly and carefully. He was wading deep now. "Fact is, I think you got the very best of her. She kept that little laptop by her bedside for when she wasn't flopping around too much to play solitaire, or watch an old movie, and every once in a while she had the strength to send you an encouraging word. Never spoke your name to me once before the baby, before the fainting spells, before the prognosis, before the hospital. Suddenly, when things look their very worst, who do you suppose comes popping into her thoughts? And in all her sweet thoughtful letters I bet she never once called you a rat-bastard, lying son of a bitch, never accused you of trying to kill her in her sleep, and who the hell were you anyway coming into her room at all hours? She saved all that love for her husband!"

A few rheumy eyes inclined their way, but still nobody took much interest. It was not their glances that began making Steve feel haunted again. His peripheral vision stirred again with the notion of something ghostly and dark crouching nearby. "She knows you were there for her," he said to George, as quietly as he could get away with talking. "She must have. I can only imagine how hard it was on you."

"That's exactly all you can do. Imagine it." George was quiet for a moment, then something made him croak out a laugh.

"My mother got it worst. The last thing Sophie called her, well, I remember only once I tried calling her that. It was after my Dad took after me. I was trying to blame her for starting up with him. She

popped my left eye so hard I went blind in it for a day. Sophie's just lucky she was sick in bed already." The pitch of his voice descended and stretched out wide, like a record player running low on power. Steve began to bristle at this kind of talk, but kept his silence a moment longer.

"I never believed in anything like fate, not ever, but when you came sidling in all rain-soaked with grave dirt on your knees, it all made sense. There's been a grand cosmic fuckup." He faced Steve again with an earnest, agonized expression. "I spent the last five years wishing my life on you. It should have been you that married her. The romantic. The suffering artist. I was never meant to be saddled with all this." He clapped a too-heavy hand on Steve's shoulder.

"Take it easy, George" mumbled Steve, shrugging himself loose.

George droned on. "It should have been you, son of a bitch. Walking the moors, writing little plays. Left home to lick your wounds like something in a crummy book. Well, I may have seduced her and spent money on her and wrecked your precious little future together, but I better not be the first one to tell you she was through with you, long before I got involved." His nose was running. "I never brought all this down on my head. I'm a doctor all day. I don't deserve to come home and play hospice nurse all night. She was finished with you but she'd have married you first, if only I'd had the sense to stay the hell away. Instead here you come, just to make me miserable, with your hands clean after all these years, thinking she just dropped dead like an opera. You never even had to carry the coffin."

Steve stood up, ears burning scarlet. He had to piss, leaving him little strength to keep a lid on his feelings.

"Listen," he hissed, "you know why I made this trip, you spiteful ass. It sure as hell wasn't for your sake. What I can't figure is why I bothered trying to pay respects to you at all. You can have my sympathy. Hell, I'll drink with you, but if you feel cheated having to care a little extra for Sophie without any extra applause, you can take it up with God or your mother or the Crisis Hotline, just so long as I don't have to hear it. Here I was thinking a loss like this might make a human being of you."

George looked like he needed a valve twisted to let something dangerous out. "I hope you're happy, Cavanaugh," he growled. "I hope you stay that way, so one day the perfect person can come along and spoil it for you."

The bile between them got the better of Steve, who spat. The shady thing watching perpetually at his back seemed to squeal with glee, splitting his head with overwound engines and nails on slate.

A paring knife rested inches from the fist each man had on the bar. They both shot sidewise glances at it. Steve was just drunk enough to think about grabbing it, just one swipe at the air between them to spook George. But if he was tight enough to think it, George might be in a fit state to try something for real.

Before the perfect moment could come, Steve shot out his leg, kicking the other stool flat-footed. George toppled from his precarious perch. His nose popped smartly on the floor. Steve prickled with relief.

At last the others in the bar paused, Old West style, to look. Only Seger, crooning "Still The Same" from a crooked-legged jukebox, went on undisturbed.

The bartender, a derelict ex-Marine type, unslouched to full height, purely as a display of authority. Steve eyed him, refusing to apologize or worry. Visible signs of weakness were the only dangers. He drank happily in rougher pubs than this all over the Isles. Hell, even in the West End.

His composure kept the temperature in the room nice and low. The bartender, placid and already bored, jerked his head toward the glasses. "How 'bout this tab, man?"

Steve had backed nearly to the door. He pointed to George, who had struggled to all fours, gums smacking, palms slick from a puddling nosebleed.

"My friend's good for it," Steve said evenly. "He's an eminent physician."

*[First letter: 8 years ago*

Subject: re: Safe travels

Dear Steve,

By now, I imagine you've gotten where you were headed - Edinburgh, if I recall. It's still strange to imagine you finally making such a bold charge. Perhaps it really is what you've needed all along.

I won't exactly say I'm sorry, which would be to admit more than I feel I owe you. I regret leavaing things as we did, but I don't see how the situation could have been helped.

I did love you and still do, but I told you I would not uproot my life for the sake of your artistic career. If I am at fault for not taking your ambitions seriously (let's face it, what evidence did I have to go on?), then you were in the wrong to assume I would jump blindly onto your bandwagon the minute a shiny opportunity abroad presented itself. You know me better. Clearly you were never satisfied with your prospects as long as we stayed together, but that was always your problem, not mine.

As for George, I won't hold anything you've said up til now against you, but you were very wrong to jump to all those conclusions. Believe it or not, he only made his intentions clear once we were both certain that you and I were done. I don't expect the two of you to make friends, and mainly for that reason I expect this will be goodbye, at least for a long time. I am happy, after all this, with the choice I made. I sincerely hope you will be able to say the same.

All my best,

Sophie]

Of all the insidious questions that crept around him where he sat in the departure lounge, the one Steve could not quiet was whether Sophie, in her strong and lucid moments, had sent messages to him unaided. If not, the identity of her confidant would surely be impossible for him to find out. It seemed ridiculous that George would have knowingly helped his dying wife write to her old flame. Even knowing full well how poorly the word "flame" captured what they had been to one another before the rift, George had shown the limits of his graciousness that afternoon.

Steve had taken the chance to change in the men's room outside baggage claim, allowing him to wad his damp suit into a dry cleaning bag, then into the duffel. Now wearing the ragged tee and broken-in jeans he kept special for long flights (often preceded by even longer campouts in the standby line), he felt a touch more human. He checked the suit and duffel through, to be claimed and dealt with at Edinburgh Airport in the morning - may God grant an open seat and soon. With his wet hair smoothed down and reading glasses perched atop his forehead, he should have been easy. Flipping through a magazine whose title he scarcely noticed, he tried to banish his ugly encounters of the day. He had come so close to taking a few days in the States. There were one or two colleagues in the city he could ring up, and who would be glad to see him. Even so, he was no fit company. It would be unfair to impose his melancholy on someone he had rung up for a friendly visit. Better to return home, lie low, try to enjoy his short leave someplace where he stood a chance. It was a bad time. The only purpose he could serve by staying was to dig up more dirt and chase answers that would bring more misery. If there were any more sordid mystery to Sophie's life and death, he felt he could live without reading the end. There were plenty of better paperbacks within easy reach.

Still, something very like obligation seemed to nip at him. He felt the darkening just behind him, at the end of the last empty row of seats. He felt a black gaze. The unbidden dweller on his threshold had returned to see him off.

*The watch nurse would know. Surely she had done the typing, squeezed Sophie's hand in sympathy, kept the communication from the*

*family as long as possible. It would be no trouble at all to track her down and pose a few questions over a canteen coffee.*

Sophie had been his great love, no question. He could not reduce what she had been and, sometimes in private, still was to him. But he and Sophie had each made their choices. It was difficult to read punishment into what had befallen her, especially when the intended lesson, or who was meant to learn it, was so unclear.

It was a horrible, unworthy end. He was not done weeping for her, he felt sure. Regret was one thing, but self-castigation was one of the things he had left home to avoid in the first place.

*[One evening, 11 years ago*

She kissed the top of his head. They were in their first apartment. Their only apartment.

"Can you tear yourself away?" she asked. She was dressed already. He peered up at her from his seat at the computer and pulled a face to make her laugh. She nearly did. Stuck out her tongue.

"I suppose," he said without conviction.

"Don't break your stride if it's anything good. It's just that drinks with Becky is turning into a whole big thing. Ralph's coming, and bringing their friend George Vogel."

"Vogel? What's he do, drive a Panzer?"

"Some kind of doctor."

"Oh, a war criminal! Just up from Rio, huh?"

"Nevermind," she said, laying a hand on his head. "You don't get to meet strangers. I excuse you."

"You spoil me," said Steve.

"Just don't ever ask me to leave the city," said Sophie.

He took the hand and smooched it. "I'd have to have a damned good reason."]

The recollection snapped him to life.

"Go," he said to the falsehood, the rotten sham of her memory that had dogged him since his arrival.

The malign, petulant presence leaned in his direction. Grief and guilt squeezed his insides, daring him to stay behind, to miss the flight, to break the chain of chances that had shielded him so long.

*Had George's mother known? Is that what had made her so angry? Was it Steve she loathed, or the son whose devotion was not strong enough to ward off memories of old love at the end, when such things really counted?*

"You're an impostor," Steve hissed. "You were never mine. I did not send for you. I don't know you."

No bell tolled, and no cock crowed. So instantaneous was the sense of lightening that Steve might have only started awake from a traveler's doze. He heard his name called at the gate, courteously but with gentle insistence. The skies were clear, his flight had come in, and with no more baggage than two drink coupons and a movie magazine, he got to his feet.

He still had an ocean to cross.