

*The cat cut across a series of backyards in a housing development as the sun cast thin light through the tree line and illuminated back windows. Eventually, the houses stopped and became undeveloped plots. There was a weird smell here. The cat followed her nose to a ditch not far in. A naked human foot poked out of it. Uh-uh, nope. She turned and shot back the way she came, behind the row of houses, under fences, over lawn furniture. She barreled through gardens, ripping petals from flowers with the coiled whip of her tail. She ran for the oak where birds greeted the sun from the upper branches and leapt for it. Her strong white claws hooked into the rough trunk and she heaved herself up, up and out of sight. Amid the remaining leaves, the cat shivered, tucking her tail around her wet feet, and began to scream. She hated this job.*

...

When his spirit left his body, which was almost instantaneous, it hung around a bit in case help came. This took a while. It was just before dawn and the first dog-walker might not be out for another forty minutes. But this gave him time to assess the damage. It didn't look so bad. It would've looked a lot better if that rock wasn't there, but it probably wouldn't take much to put the two together again. After all, isn't the hardest part of reanimation finding the spark? And here he was — the spark.

He tried stretching out on top of it, hoping to just sink back in. He imagined sliding down into the cooling body, a beat, and then a gasp and he would sit up and cough, then groan and gingerly touch his head and say something like I knew I'd feel *that* in the morning. But none of that happened. He just stretched out on top of himself and laid there, growing more and more uncomfortable. Then he tried mouth to mouth, although this was difficult because he'd never kissed a man before and there was blood on this one. He had to remind himself this is me, dammit, this is me, but as he bent his incorporeal head over his half-smashed very corporeal head a thought came to him that was larger and more than any thought he'd ever had before. No, it said, this is me. That is a paperweight.

He couldn't think of anything else so he clambered out of the ditch and sat, looking down. The sky lightened. He could see a light go on in his house just down the street. Maybe he could go for help. He got as far as the edge of the upturned dirt, but could go no further. And that's when he saw it — a sort of umbilical cord tethering him to the crumpled thing in the ditch. It looked like a telephone line, very thick and very real. He stood for a while, looking from the ditch to the house, then took the cord in two hands, dug in his heels, and heaved. He would drag his body to his wife's front door and

say, Good morning, honey. No, no, don't worry about it — I got the paper. In times like these it's important to have a sense of humor. But it wouldn't budge.

He was very close to becoming discouraged. But just because he was dead didn't mean he couldn't go on living. Unhindered by that chunk of meat in the hole, he could be anything. He could animate that bulldozer even. Get that thing chugging, he could rip down the whole development, unstoppable. It'd be like that movie, *The Car*. How'd they end up stopping it from running over any more people? He couldn't remember. He was going to try for it. He climbed from the push frame to the roller and hauled himself up to the cab. The handle wouldn't move. It wasn't locked or anything, more like it had been soldered closed. The window was open a crack, but he couldn't pour himself through like liquid or pass through like vapor. What was the point of being a ghost if you couldn't do ghost things? He kept with it; maybe it just took a bit of practice. Just gotta relax.

While he tried relaxing into the cab and then the engine, his wife came out to get the paper. Had he been facing the other way, had he seen her stand in her nightgown at the end of the driveway and glance toward the grey house a few doors down, a massive guilt would have bloomed in his chest — and 'bloomed' is a good word, an apt word, because guilt was probably the one thing he could still cultivate. He would have resented her for it, but that would have been okay, because maybe he would have turned away from her, back to his broken body, and thought about why that guilt hanged so heavily in him so that it seemed it was all he was.

But he completely missed her. And just like with his body, he couldn't figure out a way in. He kicked at the machine in frustration and threw himself onto a patch of grass. After a moment's thought, he tried picking up a rock, but it was glued down or something. He looked down between his legs; the blades of grass under his butt didn't even bend. It was as if everything was coated with military-grade shellac. The world had hardened against him. The afterlife had a lot more limitations that he would have thought, had he ever thought about the afterlife. It would have been so cool to possess a bulldozer.

Then a cat came plodding up out of the early morning mist and stood next to him, looking in the direction of the body. He was never that into cats, but, hey now, this was something. Maybe this cat was his spirit guide. He reached for it, but the cat dropped under his hand like they do when they don't want to be touched. It skulked up to the edge of the ditch, all tensile sinew and muscle, and sniffed the protruding big toe.

Whatever it smelled, it did not like. It hunched its back in a grotesque contortion and fluffed its tail then bolted toward the houses. So much for that.

Finally a neighbor came jogging by with his dog. He saw the foot and called 911 and in ten minutes the cops were pulling up. Just one car. No lights, no sirens; they pulled up to the curb in that soft, heavy way well-made cars move. Doors opened and shut with a hollow click. The man sat on the ground and the two cops stood flanking him and all together they considered his naked foot.

...

The hours after the initial discovery were brutally slow. The TV made it seem so quick, but there were procedures before the procedures could proceed. Neighbors stood at the end of their driveways with their coffees and their papers and watched from at least half a block away. He wondered what they could see from all that distance. It was only a matter of time before his wife would come out, too. He wished they would take him away before processing the rest of the scene, but they didn't. And then there she was.

His body had been carefully lifted away and stowed in the back of the coroner's van before she arrived. They didn't need her to identify the body, but she had asked to see the ditch. Two officers stood with her at the edge as she looked down at the bright red trace of her husband. He could have stood with her — the cord would reach — He could have stood next to her and watched her try to make sense of what she was seeing. Maybe realize there was still stuff left in her to break. He would have been surprised. And touched. Maybe even have a change of heart, his hand would reach out, the guilt would bud into regret, contrition, the heavens would open and a golden light would come down on them. His wife would feel an unnatural calm, a strong sense that it would be all right. But instead he hid in the van. Then the technician and the examiner climbed in and they drove off.

...

When his clothes had been combed over and his pocket contents filed away, he was a conscious but intangible being coupled to a slab on a slab under a bright light. The police had picked at, scrubbed at, lifted away all they wanted and what was left was what belonged to him. Well, he was over the body. Those two were caput, over, done. Like some B rated villain, all he had to do was get rid of it.

He couldn't be the only ghost, right? If he existed, that means this existence is, like, a means of existing. Ghosthood. So he'd wander the world and have some fun. Meet a nice young lady ghost. Now he was dead, he couldn't get into too much trouble on account of not being able to interact with anything. He'd have to be smart about it. Be aware of when doors were opening and closing and so on.

He studied the cord. At first he thought it was a manifestation of his anger and shock and once he came to terms with this new reality he would be allowed to move on. But he wasn't angry or shocked. He actually felt pretty okay about the whole thing. Not the luggage, obviously, but he was still here. Then he thought the cord was some convoluted version of the chains on Marley's ghost and the trappings of his hedonistic lifestyle had bound him forevermore to the body he had so misused, but, no, that wasn't it. Marley was a cautionary device and there was no one here to caution. There was no heaven, hell, or purgatory, no blankness, no void. Just this immense room with dim corners, the smell of disinfectant, bare bulbs, and boredom.

If he couldn't get rid of this thing, the rest of whatever would be spent sitting beside his own grave. He'd have to sit there and watch his wife cry and, later, he'd have to watch the woman in the grey house cry, and maybe he'd see the man who pushed him come and unzip his pants and whiz all over his headstone. And he'd just have to sit there. And what? Wait for his body to decompose? This cord did not look like organic compostable material. He remembered the time he scraped his leftovers into the compost bin and a bunch of raccoons ripped into it. The video he had taken of a raccoon sitting on his lawnchair and eating a chicken leg while five more raccoons dragged the compost bin around in the background had gone viral.

He was still laughing when the coroner came in. He stood over the slab and took several deep breaths, keeping his eyes on the corpse before him. He pulled on a pair of silk gloves and extended a hand over the dead man's body as he had done a million times over, all day and in his sleep. He began at the top of the head, hovering over the face, down the left side of the chest, to the left hip, the left knee, around one foot to the other, up the right knee, right hip, then the dead man's ghost felt a surprising tug. The roving hand had snagged the umbilical cord. The examiner held his hand there and with the other took a pair of small scissors, too small the man's ghost thought, and snipped it as though it were an errant thread on a new jacket. The dead man felt himself lifting into the air. This was it — freedom! The great beyond. The next new thing.

Below him, the examiner stuffed his silk gloves into his back pocket, reached for the box of nitrile gloves, and continued his work. The dead man tried to hang back and

watch, none of this was on TV, but the pull was too strong. He was being carried away, gently, slowly, but definitely lifted away. The man's severed ghost bumped up and around a long fluorescent light and a few pipes before settling against something soft and cool and spongy, like a mushroom in a pile of leaves. He flipped himself around and saw the ceiling was moving. He had landed on a small pile of ghosts. Some were bloated and waterlogged, some burned, some looked pretty good, considering. They were pulling over each other, clawing their way to the wall. A few had already made it and were gripping the peeling paint, trying to get back to the ground. A few pressed their faces against the thin plate glass windows.

Down below metal clanged on metal. Someone entered and there was a swirl of fabric. A tap-tap-tapping. The sound of water. More clanging. It was driving the man crazy; he had to get back down there. He had a right to know! He gripped the shoulder ahead of him and pulled. The neck turned and a man looked at him and spoke as though through water. It freaked him out. He tried talking. He sounded perfectly fine. But the guy made a face at him and rolled his hand off his shoulder. The dead man pulled himself along anyway, heading for the corner. He surged up, or down, through the undulating throng and crested right by the hot water pipe. He managed to propel himself down by bracing his legs on both walls and pushing until he got lower than the fluorescent lights. The room was empty. They had taken his body away.

He was tired. And frustrated. What had they done to it? He supposed it would be in one of those drawers with the tiny meat locker doors. He started for it, groping along the sink, when he heard voices. They were coming back. A young man hustled into the room and took a quick look around before heading to the far wall where the bodies were stored. He checked his paper then pulled open a door near the bottom and pulled out a slab. What luck! It was him. The ghost resumed his roundabout journey to the far wall. The door opened again, this time the coroner had a guest. It was the man's wife. They needed her to formally identify the body after all. The ghost stopped dead. After a moment's hesitation, he let go of the sink and floated away.

After she identified the body and left, the coroner and his assistants put the body on a dolly and a man from the funeral home took it away to be dressed and painted. All this he could see from just beyond the lights. He felt the urge to follow it, but then he checked himself. It was good it was gone. Good riddance! Let them hang out with that crumpled old thing. He'd figure out a way down from here and then he'd figure out the next step. He was good at getting himself out of tight spots.

...

The funeral itself was pretty standard. And, for the record, he could have made it. If he had floundered his way back to the pipe in the corner and dragged himself hand over hand to the floor and slid his way along the sink to the door and waited until someone had walked through, he actually would have found that the man from the funeral home was caught up chatting with one of the mortuary assistants. In fact, their conversation from open to close happened to be just enough time for him to grab on and hitch a ride on the dolly. But he elected to stay behind. And that's a shame because he would have been surprised at his popularity. There was no drunken blubbery or violent bouts of anger, the possibility of which may have been the reason he stayed away. People were upset — he was a bright young up and comer and it was such a shame, such an unmitigated blow to the family and community at large. So while this man continued to refuse his own personal journey of redemption, some real growth was happening at his funeral five miles away.

...

His wife was tall, composed, dressed all in black. Truthfully, she'd been grieving for years, it ran down her throat like a constant post-nasal drip, and it was nice to finally acknowledge it. She stood all day before her husband's casket and thought about who she was expected to be now. Every night, she had bowed her head over her food and prayed the earth would open and swallow up the whole family in the grey house. Every Sunday, she knelt at the altar and invisible green gas poured out of her mouth as the wafer went in. She had poisoned herself over and over until there was nothing left in her but spite and putrefaction.

The morning of her husband's death, she woke from a nightmare. Someone had cracked open her breast bone and they were reaching into her gaping chest. She had sat up in bed, heart pounding, and waited until the sky grew light, then she went out and got the paper. When the police rang her doorbell, she was already sure that everything was different. Life, as she knew it, was over. So, she had a choice to make — she could either follow him to the grave or she could gather up what was left and nurse herself back to health. That night, when she couldn't sleep, she put a nature documentary on low and listened to a soothing British voice explain ocean currents. As she slept, whirling eddies reached deep into cold waters, churning up exotic nutrients on which phytoplankton thrived.

Early in the afternoon, when the funeral home was mostly filled with coworkers and acquaintances, the woman in the grey house arrived with her sister and two small children. They stood a little ways away on the other side of the casket and tried not to

look at the widow. The little boy fidgeted a lot, which is what little kids do. She knew that, objectively, but a thin slice of irritation caught in her throat. No, she rejected it, she rejected all the bitterness she'd ever directed at that family and she was sorry for all the evil she wished on them.

Instead she watched the little boy and, summoning up all the pity she had left, thought how difficult it must be, to be so small that you can't disappear inside yourself the way an adult can. She was spending the whole day tucked up inside her body. It was very comforting. Was there just no room in him yet? How many years does it take to carve out that silent space? And what is it we're born with that we jettison to make room for that empty space we all enter when the eyes unfocus and the ears unplug? Or maybe as we grow we gain more space. The woman looked at the boy's mother. That was a woman inside her own body. She looked like a shell. A delicate pink shell you'd pick up on a beach while vacationing. A little miracle. A sherbet sunset. The poor thing looked made for love.

...

Meanwhile, back at the morgue, the coroner was cleaning up for the night. The silver table gleamed, reflecting onto the ceiling. He returned his box of gloves to the cabinet, ran his utensils under hot water and left them to soak while he gave the table another wipe down. Then he returned to the sink and sprayed the soap away. He had assistants, two eager grad students who hadn't yet learned where to stay out from underfoot, but he gave them the weekend off. One of them seemed very promising, but she was a bit sensitive. Willing to watch without asking too many questions. She seemed to go on instinct. The other would be more suited to clerical work. He wanted clarity, the right words, black and white, a series of steps. The coroner liked to frustrate him by changing his procedures without warning. There's more than one way to skin a man.

He walked to the door and gave the room one more look, then he pulled on a cord that ran up to the window slats, tilting the plate glass windows open to let in the night air, turned off the lights, and left for home. The ghosts silently drifted out of the open windows and into the night. All, that is, but our ghost.

The man felt scared for the first time since he came to in the ditch. He felt the tug sucking him toward the open window and it scared him to think of lifting up, up and out of the atmosphere to fly on forever. He spent a lot of time clinging to a pipe, but as his grip increased so did the pull, and eventually he let go.

He drifted over main streets and neighborhoods, ponds and baseball diamonds, and it occurred to him he wasn't going steadily up, but rather up and over, dipping down a little now and then. He must have been riding an air current. It was actually kind of nice, like when he was little and his mom took him on drives through the country, just the two of them. Sometimes they'd stop for ice cream or she'd pull over and they'd look out over a field and watch the cows graze. These weren't times for speaking, but for looking out the window and feeling the sun on your face. The ghost closed his eyes and watched the shadows through his eyelids. He drifted this way all over town, noting landmarks and favorite spots. If this was it, it wouldn't be so bad. He could see the world if he got on the right current.

But then he stopped. He had landed over his own street. There was the ditch, this time with yellow police tape around it. And there was his house. There were cars parked in front. He recognized the three belonging to his great aunts, who could be counted on to preside over every death in the family, but there were more, a lot more. Was she putting up his whole family? The air drifted him in closer. He was about a house away when the rear door slid open and a figure stole around the side of his house and across the street. It was his wife. She had wrapped a big blanket around herself and held a casserole dish in her hands. She went up to the grey house for the first time in her life, although she'd done it a million times in her mind, and rang the doorbell.

Fascinated, the man drifted closer, past his house and his family all drinking to his memory, until he could see them. His wife had set down the casserole and pulled the woman into her blanket. He watched as they cried, holding each other inside a soft cocoon illuminated the golden light of the doorway. And not because of its goodness or morality, but because of its very nature, the seedling reached toward the light.