



To Grieve the Living

Kat Sandefer



The gravedigger built a shrine at the edge of the cemetery. He knew it was silly; he didn't even know what god he was devoting himself to. Despite his doubts, he felt like it was important, necessary.

Hugh pretended he didn't feel a twinge of disappointment when no one showed on the first night. Or the next. Or the next. Eventually, Hugh forgot about the shrine and dug through the long night shifts, alone.

The nights were beginning to blur and as they chilled, he was reminded of the injury that took him out of the game all those years ago. There were a lot of regrets he had, but that one might be one of the worst. Of course, letting his kids stop speaking to him was the worst. The anger of his youth had spilled into adulthood, making his fuse short. He was just lucky he never laid a hand on his kids, but his voice was loud.

Unforgivingly so.

On the first snowfall of the year, just as Hugh was getting ready to finish his last grave, a figure appeared next to the shrine.

"I'm a god for the dead," the figure said, its voice wispy and warm, to Hugh's

surprise. "And not a very powerful one. You are very much alive." It gave Hugh an amused smile. "What could I possibly do for you?"

Hugh sighed, setting his shovel down. His knees were creaking, and he was starting to feel the years of digging in his back. He was tired; his kids were all grown up and haven't spoken to him in years, and his wife was buried three rows down. He was staring at some god that decided he was worthy enough to speak to. There wasn't much life left for him, so he smiled back.

"To be honest, I didn't believe there was anyone out there." Hugh said, kicking at the dirt that brushed against the edge of his jeans. "But here you are."

The figure nodded, humoring him. All this figure seemed to do was just humor him. It was irritating.

"Here I am, indeed."

The figure stayed and watched him work, to Hugh's eternal surprise. Eventually, Hugh turned to the figure and asked,

"I don't have very long, right? That's why you're still here?"

The figure was quiet for long enough that Hugh sighed and went back to shoveling. But his hands were old, and the wind was just too cold, so the shovel slipped out of his hands and clanged by the figure's feet.

Hugh kicked the snow in frustration.

"Let me help you."

Hugh protested, "You don't have to do that."

The figure continued to hold onto the shovel, looking at Hugh with an infuriating amount of patience. The figure didn't look like what Hugh expected, it was not imposing or frightening. The figure was unassuming, almost pleasant. Uncomfortable, Hugh turned back to his digging. The figure stayed and watched, supervising, perhaps.

Hugh wasn't sure what happened after one decided on a god to worship.

The days and weeks passed; the figure watched Hugh work in silence. On his way out, his boots crunching the snow, Hugh would stop at the shrine and murmur a quiet prayer, not entirely sure what he was wishing for.

After one particularly cold night, when his hands were nearly frozen to the handle of the shovel and he was quite certain that he had frostbite on his nose, he considered calling his son. His cough was deepening, and he wasn't able to dig nearly as much as he used to.

He knew that his boss was too cheap to buy a machine, but Hugh figured that, once he was dead and needed to be buried next to his wife, his boss might need some more help. Hugh knew that his boss needed the hands, but he couldn't wait until he could hold his wife instead of a shovel.

Could ghosts hold hands?



"Why did you build this shrine? Is it not just another burden to you?" the god

asked one night, appearing in front of Hugh. Its voice was almost angry, dripping with confusion. This was the first time that the god sounded like a person.

"This is a cemetery. Is death not welcome here?"

The figure smiled ruefully, shaking its head.

"Cemeteries are for the living. You of all people must know that. No one has ever built me a shrine. I assumed you mortals had forgotten my name." Its voice reminded Hugh of hot chocolate by the fire in the dead of winter: warm, comforting, just enough to keep the icicles from creeping in. Was death the icicle in this particular metaphor? Hugh wasn't sure he cared enough to think it through.

Hugh looked down at his worn-out boots, feeling a flush of embarrassment.

"I didn't, I don't, know your name. I'm sorry. It's just I, I get so lonely out here and I thought that there was likely someone as—"

"Someone who needed the company as well?" The figure asked softly, handing Hugh the shovel.

Hugh nodded after a moment of hesitation.

"You should have built a bigger shrine to a bigger god. Maybe if you would have impressed an older, more powerful death god, he would have given you more time."

Hugh looked at the figure, this low-level

god of death, in something akin to shock. They stood there, in the cold dark graveyard with the wind whistling some kind of requiem.

"More time? You think I want more time?" Hugh laughed for the first time in months, nearly bent over in amusement. "What about my life gives you the impression that I wanted more time?"

The death god looked confused. Hugh went back to digging.

"I thought I was out of time," Hugh said quietly, his disappointment crushing.

"I am inevitable, but never hasty," The figure said quietly, his voice almost inaudible over the wind. "I will keep you company and you will do the same for me."

Hugh leaned the shovel against the nearest tombstone, assuming the person wouldn't be bothered. He glanced up at the figure, almost curious why it wasn't in a black cloak with a scythe.

Maybe the scythe is only for people who don't come quietly.

"What if you get bored?"

The god smiled, looking amused at Hugh's expense.

"I have lived a long time. Boredom is as inevitable as I am."

Hugh nodded, that he could understand. He walked through the after-effects of death all the time doesn't mean that he didn't get bored.

"So, you'll stay?" Hugh asked.

"I'll stay."

Hugh smiled, before grabbing his shovel, glancing down the row, squinting through the darkest evening of the year. It felt like he had thousands of miles to go before he was allowed his eternal sleep.

At least he didn't have to do it alone.