



## **Ceremonial Coldness**

*A short story by Achanes Outis*

In the midst of a ceremonial cremation, smoke engulfs the chimney. Some of it escapes into the room's ceiling, and escapes there through the discreet vents painted over to match the walls' colors. They were white, tampered with time passing by, and a careless brush passed over some stains.

The place wasn't always a crematorium. Before the buyout and renovations, it was a new age restaurant. Previous owners wanted to do something extravagant, unusual: Invite people to dinner and lunch beyond the town, hidden from its view by the hills. Issue was, they weren't fond of advertising their business, and word of mouth didn't reach many ears in a fast enough time. They sold the place for cheap, and then went on to do whatever they wanted with the debt they accrued. So, we guess, they didn't do much.

'Never cared to ask the funeral director for their names, maybe because I'd go check for obituaries, and somewhere along that possibility, I didn't want to know. Just a feeling, though; maybe they're still alive and well. But

doubt fills my mind, concerning this. Broken dreams lead to tragedies, most often, it seems. It still amazes me, but perhaps I shouldn't be thinking that way still.

My companion and I are standing over the open oven, looking down into the obscured opening, gleaming with the light of fire, human ashes flowing up, cinders like snow. We've been here, observing, trying to care, for many a ceremony now... maybe. We don't know how much is a lot, or how many is many. I don't want to get used to it, but I guess I got used to it anyway.

Oudis, the skeletal white-robed giant, seem to be fixating on the bottom of what it can see. I guess, given its height, they can see more than I. So I ask, without averting my gaze from the fire:

– “What do you see?”

– “As much as you.” Deep, monotone voice.

– “Do you not have a better view?” I question.

– “It's still all fire and walls with tar.” Dejected answer, like it's been asked before. And I suppose it has, but I forgot.

– “All plastered are memories of a dance between flames and flesh.” adding onto the observation, as poetically as I can make it on the spot.

– “Something like that.” Acknowledgment, agreement.

Oudis appears to pay little attention when I use abstracts, but I think they like it. I ponder then, do they not want to be a little prettier when they talk? Perhaps a question for later.

The smoke is lowering in its density. It will soon be about time to get the ashes, but we prefer to wait for the grieving observants to leave. Rarely, one or two stay, though I always wonder if it's because they can see my companion, or if they're just... unwilling to leave. That they want to keep grieving, to keep praying, to keep communing. Whatever they need to do, to keep on doing, to keep on Being, as much as they can keep on living.

While still looking through the fire, I ask:

– “Say, do you sense anyone that senses you?”

– “Hm...” A pause. “One.”

I turn my head and look at the public, most of them have their heads down, with over a meter of distance between them and the chairs they sit on. Out of the dozen present, two have their heads up. One is... physically here, but their eyes tell a different story. It's an old lady, that I believe is the wife... rather now, widow. Seems to be unwilling to register the departure still. Must have been tormenting her. Still will, and I wonder for how long, and if she won't stay in a grieving state, until it's someone else's turn to grief for her instead.

Then there's a kid; looks young, like he's in middle school. He doesn't want to be here. Not dressed like the others, but they don't care. Maybe he didn't know the burning one much. Maybe he didn't like him. Still, he feels like he should be silent and unmoving, he at least feels the need to be respectful. And I can see that he stares at my friend, so I stare back at him, waiting for him to meet my gaze.

Finally, he does, and for a second, his face changes to that of a fearful curiosity towards me. But he quickly looks down, shy that he seems to be. Hard to blame anyone, those that can see Oudis don't want to deal with the knowledge that they can see a manifestation of Death. By extension, they don't want to deal with me either.

– “Lixi, did he stop looking?” The robed skeleton asks.

I turn my head back, getting a fistful of the dead man's smoke swirling in my hair.

– “Yeah, made him look down.”

– “Thanks. Less to worry about.” A tone of gratitude slips in between vowels. Somewhat unusual.

For some reason, it thinks that those that can sense it, mean it harm. Yet they're always scared. Maybe that's why, simply enough. Scared people make irrational decisions. I wonder if they could even harm that strange skeleton. Sometimes I wonder if Oudis even exists at all; if the world is not playing tricks on my mind. But then when there's people acknowledging the existence of what most can't see, I guess it does exist. Just... hard to make sense of it. I don't mind it that much, though... I think, anyway.

Finally, the burning is almost over. I go to signal the operator, as for once, he's here today. I forgot his name and never cared to learn it past a point. Don't really like those that care not for their duty. Excuses after excuses, that one, which, with Oudis, we ended up calling 'Boston'; likes to lie and make excuses for everything, even when what he's doing isn't wrong. It's never enough, even when it's more than enough.

His insecurity and anxiety drives him to not be here a lot of times. Probably hiding at home in his bed, maybe behind a screen, forgetting his inadequacies. He had potential to be an outstanding member of society, but the weight of expectations from his peers crushed him. Now he tries to be content with what he has, but it's not what he loves, so he resents it, to a point now where he fears it.

If he could see Oudis, I think he would resign on the spot. He already thinks me weird for seemingly talking to the wind, but whatever, he probably thinks that's how I deal with the job. He's also kind, though I think that's because he's weak and tries to make up for it. Not dangerously weak, as he could never act upon anything except his survival drive, but even that seems to be less prevalent over time.

We've known him for a few years, and he's lost weight. At some point I even remember, he was on the path to 'better himself', but he gave up on therapy and working out 3 months in. He was unusually cheerful and would be here all the time, during that time. I don't know what did him in; what made him give up on it. Maybe this thing wasn't 'him' per say, maybe he didn't really want it. Maybe he takes comfort in the way he is, the way he always has been. Familiarity in mediocrity. At least, when he does his job, he does it properly. And no one really wants to be doing what we do, so we keep ourselves in that space just by existing in it. He'll die soon enough anyway, or so he thinks, or so I think that he thinks that.

Nevertheless, he catches my hand signal, and starts to smolder the roaring, devouring fire. I then silently leave the scene with my companion, opening the door for him to go first. Whenever I do this, people looking seem to think that I'm bracing before going to the harsh outside. Yet today is cold yet fair, wind has fled, and the sun warms the earth.

We sit on the wooden bench next to the entrance, with a painted ashtray on its side.

I grab some smokes out of my coat, give one to my friend alongside a lighter. They light it up, gives me back the lighter, and I light my smoke up. We smoke in silence for a minute. I don't think myself to be someone who is stressed out, but it always feels nice... and somewhat cool, honestly, to just smoke. I like the

taste of tobacco – the permanence of it: for minutes on end, it doesn't end.

That said, it surprises me that a skeleton can taste at all, but... I guess it works that way.

A coal train can be heard in the distance, beyond the hills, entering somewhere in the town, like an ambiance adding rhythm to seconds flowing unevenly like a shallow water stream.

Small band of birds are flying by the asphalt parking lot, with orange and grey feathers: Most likely robins, chirping in. The flying ones break the silence, while the grey desert stays asleep with empty cars cooling their engines on it.

– “Seems that the oven is satiated for now. I wonder when it'll be hungry again.” I mumble, trying to direct these words towards Oudis.

– “It will eat whenever. I don't think flames care much.” The skeleton answers by pondering softly.

– “Probably not. But given it was a restaurant before, who knows?”

– “Hah.” Exclamation purviewed as a singular laugh. “Indeed. Though it's not even lunch time.”

– “It's the end of the week, might as well be.”

– “For you, maybe.”

– “You can smoke and taste things, why don't you eat, even if you don't have a belly?”

– “Because I hate it. Too ephemeral.”

– “Fair, I guess.”

– “Don't guess on me. You won't even eat at lunch, as usual.”

– “I'll... eat a slice of bread. So you can't say that I won't eat.”

– “Ok, crumbs-girl.” Snickers under its jaw.

– “What the...” Perplexed by the new nickname, I stutter.

– “Not a great name?”

– “No, it’s stupid!” I exclaim, with a discreet smile on my face. Wouldn’t want Oudis to realize I’m smiling, though I think the tone betrays the intent to hide in the winter light.

– “It’s funny to me.”

– “... Fine. A name’s a name, after all. If it makes you happy.”

– “I’d like it to, but it’s just a name.”

– “Nothing makes you happy, no matter what we try for you.” And by we, I mean me, but it feels like there’s more than just the two of us, when I say ‘we’ for whatever.

– “Just being here is fine enough. Don’t worry about trying to make me happy, try to be yourself if you can.”

– “If I can. That why we’re stuck together?”

– “Stuck? I seldom leave your side but if you want more space, just tell.” They say, without a hint of grief or uneasiness. It is nice, the uncompromising honesty and knowledge of sensibilities.

– “No, it’s fine, meant nothing ill by it. Just that you seem to have chosen to walk alongside me, and as far as I see it, there’s nothing like you out there. So I won’t question ‘why me’ now, instead I ask ‘why you’.”

– “I like to think myself unique. And since I haven’t seen beings like me, for now I believe myself to be that. It’s nice and somewhat comforting.”

– “Surprising, coming from you. Thought it would make you feel uneasy or that you wouldn’t care.”

– “I’m a skeleton draped in robes of a forgotten belief system. My existence is always a surprise to me, so I care at least a bit.”

– “Hm. I guess I can understand that. Even in familiarity of faces and my next-of-kin, existence still is surprising to me to this day. Always will be, I’m

guessing.”

– “Probably. You never really get used to it.”

– “How long have you been... existing for?”

– “Don’t know. My memories are a mess, it’s all strung together and I don’t know how long ago, a decade ago was.”

– “Like patching up a coat with cheap leather?”

– “No. Like... How would \*you\* say it?... Like cutting a rope, burning bits, and knotting it all together in a bundle.” Saying it with a finger on a cheek.

– “Must be a strong rope.”

– “Yeah, unusable though.”

I laugh, and can hear a little laugh coming from Oudis as well.

We finish our smoke, taking a last drag, flicking the stub in the ashtray, and go back inside the crematorium, awaiting at the entrance, as I start to make the rounds to say farewell to the people here, were they want to say goodbye to an employee of some odd description. They probably already said a lot of goodbyes already, though, so a stranger is maybe a bit much.

And that’s how it goes. Most of them just leave without uttering, but at least they nod. Some of them have a smile on their face: relief. The widow stays. The kid that stared at Oudis previously now walks away, and momentarily makes eye contact with me, and as soon as he catches the refracting sunlight on my glass eye, a fearful gleam betrays his teenage angst, and he looks away. I know that I’ll never see the kid again, and I’d rather it stays that way.

I leave the door open, so that the widow can leave whenever. I go to Boston and ask him to come help with the retrieval for the ashes, so that he can go grab the urn that was ordered. I go grab the tools for retrieving and cleaning. Just a little sweep will be enough, the receptacle should have most of the remains in them.

Whatever, not like the client will care to have it all; they will never know. Just the symbolic of memories in the ashes of someone that was. It’s always weird to me, and I guess that’s why I prefer burials. Oudis prefers them, too. It feels more respectful, and I think my friend appreciates that more. But not all want to give

money to be six feet beneath the moon, and most people these days just want to be done with it. Time is a memory to them, and they don't want to live too much in the past. Maybe they let themselves unable to be there for long, after all is said and done. It's 'never their choice', but it still is, somewhere.

Now, on the flip side, cremation. Burning is easier, faster, and, perhaps sadly, more cost-efficient. The graveyard next to the crematorium: it's just jars and polished marble boxes with fake golden plates, family names, plastic flowers. A sense of eternity, only that this eternity has a decade-long fee. In a few generations, the people that were in these boxes will be forgotten, and someone else's ashes will take their place. I know that we stock all the ashes in a room with a nametag on the bag, but they're never picked up. Still here, like a plastic mausoleum, like a memory that's not memory anymore. Money buys death, too. It's funny, in a way. A fossil to modernity, or something.

I don't know, I don't really care about that sort of thing anymore, and Oudis scolds me when I speak about wanting to live in the past, because I never lived in it. He says that things have changed so much for every living thing now, that to identify with what isn't anymore, is like living with a ghost that never cared for you. I know he used my tongue to try to speak to me in a way I could understand.

And I guess I gave him a gender though... maybe I should have done so earlier. "He", because of his deep voice. Even if it's a skeleton, I think it fits this being.

That said, he didn't mention the fact that all things that were now aren't, and all knowledge is gone like dust in gusts of wind. I could sense, when we had this talk, that he was holding some of his words. He didn't want to be more somber than he needed. And maybe he knew that I knew, maybe he just wanted for me to stop grasping at a fantasy like this.

But enough pondering for now. Once the widow is gone from this place, we will prepare the remnants, have it ready for whomever wants to pick it up. Sometimes there's someone that stays in the lobby for us to be done. It's nicer for us because we don't have to stock it up. It's kind of weird, when I think about it, to have all these bodies and ashes 'stocked up' like it's some sort of warehouse or store... but it is. And that's why it's weird, I guess. Storing dead humans. Wonder if that's why Oudis doesn't mind being here as much as most other places.

Finally, we'll close up the place, and friday afternoon will be clear of leftover duties. This week-end will not have any burials for our undertaker's, so we're free to exist outside of the presence of death. Well, others are, anyway. But I don't mind, and maybe that's why I'm here too. Just that, this peace and the ongoing suffering,



having to keep it out of your mind or snuff it out as much as you can... there's something my friend wants, and I think he lives with me because he knows I can provide that. I wonder what it is, though? Maybe he forgot, or maybe he wants to enjoy his time, maybe make memories that aren't strung together like a bundle of burnt and severed ropes... maybe.