

## The Burial of a Wife and Mother

I kept my arm round Benjamin's shoulders, and he instinctively huddled into me. A few steps in front of us, at the bottom of a shallow grave, lay the coffin containing his mother. The gravedigger had lowered it in before our arrival, and so, apart from the two of us, the only person present was the elderly priest in his crumpled cassock.

A warm, late spring breeze was wafting through the small cemetery on the wooded hill above the city. This was definitely the kind of scene she had imagined, the way she would have wanted it. Always preoccupied with death, she had once told me about her ideal funeral, but she couldn't have had any inkling back then that, one day in May, she would drive through a red light at a busy intersection and a moment later would cease to exist.

The crowns of massive beech trees rustled softly above our heads. Their leaves already unfurled, they kept the thirsty sun from drying up the paths beneath them, sodden from yesterday's rain. The air was saturated with smells of different kinds but above all the smell of turned clay.

A burial like this had taken a lot of arranging, and over the last few days I had often worried that I was wasting time on it just when Benjamin needed me most, but now I mentally acknowledged that all those difficult negotiations with the authorities, the funeral home, the gravedigger, and the church had been worthwhile. If nothing else, I owed this to her—a leave-taking of the kind she had wanted. (Living with her had made me realize that there are people in the world who have been getting ready to leave it since before they were born).

The priest mumbled the words of the prayer with a humility that sounded genuine. He looked back and forth between the grave and us; he must have found us a touching sight as we stood there, silent

and alone. Benjamin didn't move at all, just pressed his head harder and harder against my chest. He didn't cry. Maybe it hadn't yet sunk in, or maybe he just accepted the death of his mother—naturally, the way children accept things.

What I was feeling, if I remember rightly, was a mixture of boundless grief and relief. Anyone who has ever lived with someone who finds living a burden will understand why I was relieved. And no one who has ever understood people like that, and caught a glimpse of the futility that stares them in the face, will be surprised at the tears springing to my eyes.

Just like her, I had quite often thought about the possibility of her death. Not because I wished her any harm. More because I had considered her death an acceptable way out for both of us. I had thought that if she would only die while we were still together, then her life would have some meaningful culmination, but if I were to leave her, perhaps taking Benjamin with me, I would absolutely destroy her. Except that now, when the prospect I had conjured in my mind had actually become a reality, my feelings were different.

The terrible certainty that I would never talk to her again, that her face would never brighten again, her hands never stroke Benjamin's fair hair again—it made me want her to come back. I wanted to talk with her at least one more time and apologize for all my roughness and lack of patience. I wanted to explain that my behavior had been nothing more than a refusal to accept her state of mind, so painfully out of tune with the world that it undermined all my certainties and brought my sense of order crashing down.

I had a thousand reasons to reproach her. A thousand reasons to blame her for the decline of our relationship: her sexual apathy, her selfishness, her lack of interest in my needs. Instead, I remembered just one little episode from a holiday by the sea, back in the days before we had Benjamin, when we were looking to the future with hope and were completely devoted to each other. I had jumped off some rocks into the foaming waves (they were high rocks, and I knew I'd only have the nerve to do it once). She was supposed to take a

photo of it but hadn't managed to click the shutter in time, and so I shouted and swore at her—God, really terribly. She loved me and I acted disgustingly. She must have forgotten it long ago—other days had come, grey and sad. But recalling it now, what I most wanted was to throw myself down into the grave, put my arms around her cold body, and beg her forgiveness. That was out of the question, and so all I could do was hope there was life after death, and her soul was looking down on us from up there, and she realized I would have wished her happy with all my heart.

Benjamin's first words when I told him she was dead had been, "Dad, are you going to be with me now?" The question suggested to me that he was taking it as realistically as I was. I had assumed I would have to get him excused from school, but in the end, he didn't lose a single day. At least it meant he hadn't had so much time to think about it and get overwhelmed by grief and self-pity.

The priest finished the ceremony and asked us to come up to the grave. I leaned towards Benjamin, "We're going to throw a little earth on Mom's coffin. You go first."

We had talked about that before, but he gave me a surprised look, and I saw that he was all choked up. "Already, Dad?"

I realized that as long as he could still see the coffin with her body in front of him, he could keep on believing he hadn't lost her yet. That moment would come when the coffin disappeared from view. With my arm round his shoulders, I led him to the edge of the grave. "Take a handful of earth and throw it down," I told him.

He clung to me desperately, "I don't want to, Dad!" All his composure of the last few days was gone.

"Benjamin!" I hunched down to his level and squeezed him, "Benjamin, Mom isn't down there anymore. Her soul is floating around us. She's looking at you, and she loves you a lot. She'll never leave you."

He ducked his head even further down my chest. "But Dad, if her eyes aren't open how can she see us?"

"A soul doesn't need eyes to be able to see," I answered, "a soul

sees us completely—just as we are. She just knows about us.”

“And a soul never ever dies?” he mumbled tearfully.

Although I believed there was some kind of spiritual dimension to our existence, I had never been convinced about life after death. But it was hard to remain a skeptic face-to-face with a grieving child, “Benjamin, that’s a thing nobody knows for sure,” I said, nonetheless. “Nobody knows exactly how it is, but I hope that something like a soul is still there when we die.”

“Because thoughts can’t go away, can they?” He brightened and raised his voice, “thoughts can’t fall apart like bodies, can they?”

I stroked his fair head. “You’re right, our thoughts, and our feelings too, our love, can’t just disappear. I’m sure they keep going. So, come on; let’s take handfuls of earth and throw them down to Mom in the grave. And while we do it, we’ll think about her soul, and how it’s going to stay with us.”

“Okay,” he agreed, even though he was still reluctant. We squatted right down together, and each threw a clod into the grave, releasing an even stronger scent of wet clay. Benjamin started to enjoy it. He plunged his whole arm into the heap and used it to rake the earth over the edge. Then he jumped over to the other side of the grave and started on the opposite heap. He was shoveling it down like crazy, and the coffin was beginning to disappear. Benjamin’s pants, shoes, and sleeves were covered with a layer of earth. It doesn’t matter—I said to myself, it isn’t important, but I had to make an effort to hold back and let him be. No, I’m not going to stop him, I kept assuring myself. I’m not going to slow him down with even the slightest hint. At that moment, I noticed the priest was standing a little distance away, unable to take his eyes off the scene. I went up to him with an apologetic smile. “His mom couldn’t have wished for a better burial, don’t you think?”

The priest gave me a chilly look, “A final leave-taking isn’t a football match,” he said witheringly, “You ought to be bringing him up to show more respect and obedience.”

The blood rushed to my head. It always winds me up when I try

to be friendly to someone and get a rebuff. “Why don’t you leave it to us how we say goodbye?” I snapped. “We didn’t need you. You were only here because that’s the way she wanted it.”

“We all belong to God,” said the priest with surprising detachment, and he turned and walked slowly away. I was already regretting my outburst, for anger was out of place here, and the real reason I had lost my temper was that I wasn’t even sure about Benjamin’s behavior myself. Somewhere inside, I had probably been ashamed of it, and that was what made me so irritable.

I went back to the grave. In the meantime, Benjamin had covered almost the whole coffin, and only one shorter side was still showing. If any of the relatives had been there, they probably would have fainted at the sight of Benjamin, ruddy-faced and digging with his bare hands in his filthy best clothes.

The coffin had disappeared, but plenty of earth remained on the sides of the grave. I caught Benjamin’s hand. “The gravedigger will finish it. Come and clean up.”

“The flowers, Dad, we’ve forgotten to throw in the flowers,” he remembered.

“You’re right.” (I had laid the flowers on a neighboring grave at the beginning.) “We’ll throw them in now.”

“But we’ll have to cover them up with more earth, Dad.”

I was glad that the earth-throwing was over. “No, let’s leave it like it is,” I urged him, “I like it that way.”

“Okay.” He gave a conciliatory shrug.

We each threw a flower into the grave and went to the tin sink by the wall of the cemetery. “You look a real old mess. Come here.” I tried at least to brush down his pants, but the earth was wet from yesterday’s rain.

Benjamin looked at me guiltily. “Don’t be mad at me, Dad.”

I put my hand on his head—I liked doing that, I did it often. “But I’m not mad at you at all.”

I saw his relief.

We set off back to the city. When we had walked thirty or forty meters

downhill, the hum and roar of congested roads and accelerating buses rose to meet us. I was thinking of myself at his age. How would I have reacted if my mother had died? I couldn't imagine it. It was true that I hadn't much appreciated my mother—she had spent several months of every year in the main Prague psychiatric hospital in Bohnice. Pure, radiant maternal love was something I had never really experienced. On the other hand, if she had died, my whole world would still have collapsed. The communist regime that ruled the country back then hadn't provided much room for maneuvering. For a start, everybody had to go to work. They had called it the “right to work” and immediately added “the duty to work.” How would my father have looked after me?

My situation today was different. Over the last few years, I had made a lot of money through short-term investments in stocks, and by the time of Benjamin's mother's death, the only work commitments I had were ones I imposed on myself.

We arrived back at the car. Before the burial, I had parked in the shade, but the sun had moved round and was now scorching the glass and the shining hood. “Wait!” I said, “Take those things off!” I pointed to the muddy trousers and shirt. “It'll be hot inside anyway.”

I helped him off with them, making sure he didn't get even muddier in the process. He slipped into the car barefoot, just in his vest and underpants. “Where are we going Dad?”

“Where can we go like that?” I pointed to his bare legs. “I don't think they would let you into a theater.”

He burst into childish laughter.

We rode through the Prague streets, and I drove self-confidently, aware that from now on how we lived would depend on me alone. I gripped the steering wheel with both hands and felt like a wheelman and a captain all in one. From now on, I wouldn't have to take account of her anxious neediness, and there would be no more endless quarrelling. My life was my own again, opening up towards the horizon like an avenue of tall trees. Maybe it was then, somewhere on the three-lane city loop, that my long-shelved

idea of setting out on a journey came back to me. At that point, it was still only a glimmer, a feeling. It was something to do with the need to fulfill a life with Benjamin—father and son—the way I had imagined it ever since his birth. Perhaps because he could never completely rely on his mother, his trust in me was boundless. For the same reason, I felt absolute responsibility for him. He seemed immeasurably dear and fragile to me. When he was two years old, he had caught a childhood illness and started to look like he was choking. That night I had been with him in our log cabin under the mountains, and freezing rain had fallen. The car, the road, and the trees around us had all been covered in a layer of ice as I drove him through the foothills, while he babbled something about fairy lights through his wheezing. Afterwards, I had often imagined us walking along the wagon track across the side of a nearby hill, hand in hand. We would set out early in the morning, and by noon the local people would see us high in the sky, climbing up through the white clouds. That was the kind of journey I had dreamed of, over the hills and faraway and never to return...travelers passing out of sight and out of mind, to the back of beyond.