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Veil

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My co-worker Tom invited me to his wife's funeral. I thought it was strange- we'd only ever chatted occasionally during lunch. He wasn't a very exciting guy, either. Past middle age, small. His hobby was classic literature. The first time we met, it was Dickens- most recently, Wilde. It wasn't my thing, but he absolutely loved them. He loved to ramble on about their use of foreshadowing and symbolism- he always loved reading between the lines, he said. Knowing what a work *really* means. I always nodded and pretended to listen. It bothered me a little, but he enjoyed it and so I always sat there for him. I was surprised when he invited me- he said that I was his only real friend in the office. I wasn't aware we'd reached that level of intimacy, but I accepted the invitation regardless. It was the polite thing to do.

The funeral was held in a small cathedral-like building that looked a hundred years old. The parking lot was almost vacant, save a few cars scattered here and there, and I almost think I'm early but no, it's ten to three- that's when the service begins. Maybe everyone else was just late. I parked my car next to a van with "Veil Memorial Services" printed on the side. Years ago, you might've seen a hearse there, but services like Veil had become much more common.

Veil was born out of the notion that presenting a corpse at a memorial service was outdated and morbid.

I walked into the building and met two Veil representatives who welcomed me, then handed me a program and a pair of glasses before ushering me into the chapel. The pews were as vacant as the parking lot. There couldn't have been more than fifteen people. They were all much closer to Tom's age than mine. I suddenly felt very awkward, and so I sat in back. I listened to soft hymns playing through a speaker while I silently deliberated with myself how long was a

respectful amount of time to stay, and how quickly I could book it out of there. I hated being near people I didn't know, and I especially hated being around *sad* people I didn't know. There was too much stress, and I make it a point to avoid stressful situations. They make me depressed as hell.

While I was plotting, a man from Veil made his way to the stand and spoke into the microphone;

“Please rise.”

We stood and turned to the entrance to view the procession. Tom walked in. I expected to see more behind him, maybe who were hanging back, but no. Just Tom walked down the aisle. I'd never seen him look so small. He looked like a wet napkin, and seeing him so weak made my heart fall. He may not be very interesting, but he *was* a nice man.

I wished there was something I could do to lighten his burden, but I didn't know what.

He made his way to the front row alone. He sat with perfect posture, he kept his head up high. I didn't know what was running through his mind, but I knew it couldn't have been good.

There was no eulogy, no sermon. Instead, the Veil man asked us to put on our glasses.

Their services had become so popular that you hardly ever saw a traditional funeral anymore. “Goodbyes Beyond The Veil.” People didn't want to think of their loved ones as corpses pumped with chemicals in wooden display cases- they wanted their final glimpse to be untroubled, to see their loved ones happy and healthy.

I put on the glasses and at the vacant podium appears a a woman in a floral sundress. Her hair was pale brown. You could see her smile lines and her brown eyes. It was like she was really there.

Veil lets you record your final goodbyes, and then presents them to your loved ones through augmented reality.

They thought the best way to say goodbye is in person.

I thought it was incredible the lengths people would go to make themselves miserable.

“Hello,” began the woman, smiling. “If you’re watching this, then I’m dead.” A chuckle from the crowd. Misery loves dark humor. “Really, thank you for joining us. It's been *swell*.” She talked about the good times, her favorite moments, inside jokes. It all meant nothing to me. She talked about all the lessons she’d learned, but I’d heard similar lectures already. I found myself almost drifting off, but I did my best to pay attention. Veil saves the cost of a funeral home, but it doesn’t come cheap.

She ended her speech with a smile. “I’ll see you on the other side.” She waved, and was gone.

Through the veil.

Thank God, that meant I was that much closer to leaving.

The representative let us know that there are refreshments in a different room and we all shuffle there to see three large tables decorated with platters of chocolate strawberries, sandwiches, pasta, salads and a lot of other delectables that made me think it had probably been worth coming after all. It was all *so much*, you could feel how much effort was put in, and I felt renewed sadness there were so few people there to experience it all.

I wondered how much Tom had spent on it.

I wondered how many people he’d invited.

People milled around and talked, and with such a small group it should have been no surprise that they all knew each other. None of them seemed too broken up about just having seen a loved one vanish from their lives forever. Nobody seemed very interested in making new friends either, and so I was left standing alone in a corner, stuffing my face with food in lieu of conversation, nodding at anyone who happened to look my way. Nobody did, much. I felt incredibly obtrusive again. I was the wrong end of a magnet, being repulsed from everyone else. I thought I'd better find Tom and say goodbye. I scanned the room, but he wasn't there. That was weird, *he* of all people should be there, but nobody seemed to notice he was gone. Either that, or they didn't care. I looked into the kitchen in the next room, he might be prepping even *more* food for the gathering but he wasn't, and he wasn't in the hallway, or even the bathroom. I walked back to the foyer, where the men from Veil were still sitting. I thought that they'd be gone by now. I asked them if they'd seen Tom.

“He wanted to watch the program again.”

Oh. Well, I could go inside and interrupt his mourning to let him know I'd come, or I could just leave and run into him at work next week.

Guess which I chose.

I'd just pulled open my car door, when I thought about what I was doing. I was leaving a man alone to be miserable. A man who considered me his closest co-worker. I felt *guilty*, and though I didn't want to turn back I knew I didn't really have a choice. I would like to think I had no business butting into Tom's life, but if not me then who else? From what I'd seen, nobody cared about Tom. If they did, they were great at hiding it. I might as well make sure. The man fed me, it was the least I could do.

I walked back into the chapel. The woman's voice could be heard coming out of the speakers again, and though I couldn't see Tom, I could hear him. I heard what sounded like pure misery. Moans so raw, so *powerful* I almost fell back. It was coming from the podium. I crept forward carefully. He was kneeling, rocking back and forth and wailing right where his wife would be standing. Tears clouded the AR glasses. It was a horrible sound. It was a horrible *sight*.

I can't explain it.

I shouldn't.

There was nothing I could do but watch till he cried himself raw. Dry heaves took over, and he lay on the floor, hacking.

I waited for him to quiet before I spoke.

"Tom, I can't imagine how you feel right now. I haven't been around as long as you. I'm just not that experienced. But I know those glasses aren't going to help. People are always finding better ways of making themselves miserable." I took the glasses off his face. "Something that helps me through tough times is talking. If you want to talk this over with me, I'll stay here with you. I'm sure there's plenty of food left over, too. We can eat and talk. Just like work. How does that sound?" He nodded, and I helped him up. He gave me a big hug.

We ate, and Tom told me about his wife.

This time, I listened.