

LINDA SPENDS A LITTLE TIME WITH CHRIS

Linda was to bow twice for each body she cremated: once before it was slid into the furnace, and another longer bow, (of no less than five seconds, as per company policy,) before the body was incinerated. On a typical day Linda executed five or six of these longer bows.

Her boss, Mr Yamashita, had many strict rules about the running of his business, and on her first day, he'd given Linda a handbook of protocol - all 173 pages of which he had written himself.

Linda often thought about the section of the book regarding the "*long bow of no less than five seconds*". Here were stipulated a difficult set of rules, but Linda made an effort to adhere to them obediently, for she found these rules agreeable. The long bow was important to her. More than just a formality, it was an intimate moment between cremator and corpse (and no one else), where the cremator paid their respects and gave their thanks to the deceased. That this last ritual might be appreciated - or even *needed* by the deceased - weighed heavily on Linda's mind. If there was a heaven and a hell, or some next place to go, then maybe, Linda worried, this last little ritual played some pivotal role in the rest of their infinite journey.

The Handbook stipulated that:

... the Cremator must peacefully think about the deceased for five seconds or longer, in the Respectful Bow Position (Page 87). The Cremator must pay respect to any of the following that they deem applicable:

- *Who they were;*
- *Their dedication to their faith;*
- *Their family values;*
- *Their achievements;*
- *Their lifestyle (leisure activities, hobbies, etc.);*
- *Their contributions to their community.*

To end the prayer, the Cremator will feel thankful toward the deceased for their life.

This was relatively easy if Linda had watched the service - easier again if she had known the deceased - but in many cases she would need to read a section of the program, if it had been provided, or even make some assumptions - he was kind, she was well mannered, etcetera - and be thankful to them all the same. According to Mr Yamashita, this gesture of gratitude was the reason their crematorium was so well respected.

The first body on this particular Monday belonged to Corinna. (Seventy-six, survived by two daughters and seven grandchildren.) Linda hadn't known Corinna, but from the funeral program she gleaned that Corinna had been rather pretty, in her youth, and that she had been the proud keeper of a famous lotus garden. Atop the cardboard casket was a bouquet of lotus flowers that Corinna's daughters had sent down with her. Linda made a plan to visit the lotus garden, and then immediately felt a pang of guilt at the realisation that she almost definitely wouldn't, even though her weekend was free and it was supposed to be sunny.

Linda, by now, had already stared at the casket for too long, and was beginning to feel a familiar sense of dread. She turned, took the back exit, plucked a chrysanthemum flower from the garden bed,

and took it back to Corinna's casket, placing it beside the lotus flowers. She bowed once, slid the casket into the furnace, and lowered her head a second time.

When almost three frustrating minutes had passed, Linda closed the furnace and ignited it. The flames warmed her face. Her nerves tickled with an upsurge of regret. She bowed a third time, a bow not specified in the handbook, and offered Corinna a quiet apology.

It had taken a year of working as a cremator before Linda had become a perfectionist about her low bows. Now, rarely would she perform one without becoming momentarily obsessed about its quality. The short bow never caused her stress – it was simply a bow to say *I'm going to move you into the furnace now*, and since the bodies never disagreed, it never bothered her. But the long bow – that was an intimate moment, the last interaction the deceased would have before being obliterated, and she took this responsibility seriously. What a horrible neglect, to execute a subpar final tribute to the departed...

Later that morning there was a call from the police station. Linda took a homeless man's body out of cold storage, where it had been for ten days while the police investigated his death. He'd been found resting against the concrete pillar of an underpass. They hadn't managed to work out who he was, and with no name or known family, the body would be cremated without ceremony. To Linda he looked eighty years old. How many of those years had been spent in poverty, she wondered, and what might it be like for an old man to survive out there with nothing... Looking at him now it was difficult to imagine that he could have ever had anything worth living for, or anything to contribute to the world... She tried to imagine him young: smiling, making other people smile, being cunning, clever, generous... Surely he had never been any of those things... She could easily imagine him being confused, or feeling lame, or sorry for himself – a lethargic young man, maybe an addict, or a criminal...

She tried harder to imagine his face young. Maybe he'd been a father, a career man, who later befell to tragedy, or strings of tragedies, until he was so defeated and alone – fired, widowed, abandoned – that he'd just given up entirely... Maybe blow after blow of loss and defeat turned him crazy. Sanity was a fickle thing... A few bad turns and your world could be suddenly upside down. Once Linda had been relaxing on a beach in Broome when a brown snake with a rat struggling in its mouth dropped into her lap from the tree above her – how quickly she turned insane that day! Years went by before her resting heart rate returned to normal. It was creeping up now just thinking about it, how its muscles tightened as it twisted against her wrist... The *strength* of it...

She shook the thought away.

She bowed to the man on the trolley and moved him into the furnace, whereupon she froze and stared at him again, feeling the snake wind its way up her body. Maybe he'd been an alcoholic, or been abusive, that's why he'd been abandoned... Who turned their back on whom?

No! Pray properly!

She composed herself. A soul had lived in this body, she reminded herself. A soul that was once a child, and a lover, and that once mourned, laughed, hurt... A soul that was, what... a little bit of stuff. Ready and ripe to burn.

Quietly she said, "I'm not sure who you were, if you did good or bad things with your life, but I am sorry that it ended this way for you."

She ignited the furnace.

As far as Linda supposed, a soul was a little bit of biotic matter with some energy passing through it in a specific way before escaping back into the universe. When a person died, energy stopped flowing through that bit of biotic matter in that particular way. All the energy that had ever passed through that bit of biotic matter and escaped back into the universe was, according to the laws

of thermodynamics, still out there, just an infinitesimally small bit of heat mingled with near-infinite energy in a blanket of warmth. Perhaps, she often thought, if the soul really was just a bit of biotic matter with energy flowing through it in a particular way, well then perhaps in that case you could never really have a soul, only a snapshot of a soul at any given moment. Energy passed through it, and new energy entered it, and it was an ever-new thing, changing by the moment, a perpetual cycle of new and new deaths. Old energy from her own soul, in this case, would be out there, co-mingling with other energies in the warm blanket. To think of one's own jettisoned soul energy like this was surely as far as one could get in understanding what it was, the thing of being dead, she was sure. Unless, of course, her theory was wrong, and a candle's flame was just a candle's flame... She'd read once that the human body cycled its atoms completely over about ten years – meaning that the body she inhabited today did not contain a single atom that her body ten years previous had. She was a new candle now, and she'd keep rebuilding herself while the flame fed on its host to become whatever it might be next.

She thought these things while the man burned, and the brown snake's muscles constricted inside her throat, and she knew that in the warm blanket above her, the man's soul had certainly found the sentience to feel sorrow, and felt it now, and it felt betrayal...

Mr Yamashita ate his egg sandwich, responding politely to Linda's comments as she potted around the lunch room.

"The old detergent was better," she said lightly.

Mr Yamashita nodded, his eyes still lingering on the paragraph he was reading. Delayed, he muttered, "It was better, wasn't it. Cheaper, too."

"Really?"

"Yes," Mr Yamashita said. He lifted his head, sensing she was ill at ease. "Linda, I hope you don't mind me asking... Is everything okay?"

"Oh - yes. Just a rough week. I've just been... worried. About some family things..."

"Ah," said Mr Yamashita, accepting her lie. "I see."

She had been worried, certainly, but not about family things, and not for only a week – far longer. Her worry was a building boil in her mind for years now. Working here had built up pressure in the boil, and she'd allowed this to happen in the misguided belief that with enough worry-puss it might pop, and flood relief, and in that moment all the questions pressurising her puss-boil would find resolve, and she might feel peace. Flicking the TV on or the paper open would take her mind off the boil, and momentarily it would stop growing and in some cases the boil-pressure would reduce. But the boil remained, and as always, persisted to niggle. Today was a bad day for the boil. A lot of days were, recently, and she wondered how long it would be before the thing might pop. Sometimes she yearned for it to happen.

Mr Yamashita folded his paper. Did he want to say something else? Was he going to ask her to take time off? Or worse, was she not cut out for the job, after all? She wouldn't go easily, she knew that much. This was important work, and if Mr Yamashita replaced her with some teenager who would do her job for pittance, they would no doubt perform their long bow as a matter of muscle memory, barely interrupting their train of thought... They might even skim a second or two off, if no one was around to see. Hell, they might not bow at all...

"I wondered if it was about your neighbour?"

"Mmm," Linda hummed.

"This afternoon we'll be cremating Christopher, you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

The microwave beeped.

Linda said: "He was twenty-seven, didn't you say?"

“Yes, that’s right. I wondered if...”

“Thought he was younger...”

He nodded politely. “Were you close with your neighbour?”

My neighbour’s son, Linda thought. “I knew him, yeah.”

“You knew him?”

“Actually...” she said, and thought briefly of his face that one day – probably three years ago – when they spoke, sitting on the retaining wall at the bottom of her garden – how when she asked him about his work he simply said he’d given up on it. He picked a strawberry and she said to take a few...

“Actually... Yeah. We talked a few times.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, with a roboticism only Linda could know, having heard him say that same *I’m sorry* so many times.

“He left a note, didn't he?”

“He did. His father didn’t want it shared, but his mother thought it should be. They had an argument over it.”

Linda nodded.

“A copy of it,” he said, handing her a folded square. “Thought it might help...”

Linda took it. Poor, poor Christopher, she thought, holding the note while Mr Yamashita left the room. He never was at home in himself. She considered it a long moment, then unfolded it.

I remember when if you made a promise to yourself, you took it seriously. Things we told ourselves then carried weight... It must have been that we had a greater respect for promises, or a greater respect for ourselves, or both. I remember the nutty hickory back-taste, the chemical-tinged sensation of a marijuana cigarette sinking into my capillaries, and how that didn't scare me then as it does now – now that I don't trust myself, or keep promises with myself. I remember creating art on my own without need of codeine, l-theanine, and MSG to take the edge off the caffeine, modafinil, and dexamphetamine bumping around my skull. I remember honestly believing I deserved a place in this world, just by virtue of my inheritance of the code of evolution and a spark of life – being here meant I deserved to be here. Now what do I believe of myself? That I will repeat my mistakes, again and again, over and over. Ignore my health, over, over, and over, squander my time away on the trivial, make lists of things I should do but not do them, judge, criticise, lean this way and that on one bias and another. I can trust myself to continue becoming more cynical, less disciplined, less intelligent, less trusting, more paranoid, (and more and more, to boot), and more confused, and more frustrated, and ever more disappointed in myself... What can you trust, once your ability to trust has been undermined? And how can you feel safe, then? Call it phase two and hope for a phase three and that it's better? Take that little placebo hope-pill - the best sedative on the market - and ride it out quieted and dumbed? Convince yourself it wouldn't have made a difference anyway, in the grand scheme of things, even if you did become that person you believed you would? If there's nothing left for you here and you're not going to make an effort, then you're wasting everyone's time. I'm going to do this thing now, and I want you all to know I'm sorry and I love you.

The note remained in Linda’s shirt pocket while she extracted the homeless man’s bones. She’d become faint after reading it. Now she was nauseous. She yearned to pull her gloves off and take some fresh air.

Ashes...

Bones...

Scoop them up, take a breath, back into battle.

She paused, squeezing a handful of ash, recognising that the battles were long finished once her job started. Everyone had moved along; family, friends, doctors, nurses... And here she was, sweeping up battlefields inside battlefields inside battlefields...

Call it phase two and hope for a phase three and that it's better...

Gently she tipped the ash into the cardboard urn, telling herself that once this task was done, she'd get some fresh air. She swallowed laboriously, her throat squeezing tighter...

Later she stood before Christopher's body and bowed once, then slid him into furnace one. After boxing up the homeless man's ashes, she'd helped with Christopher's service by handing out programs as guests arrived, then she'd watched from the back. The service had been full and heavy with sorrow. Young funerals were awful. Now it was just her and the young man, and between them would be the last interaction he'd ever have, one-sided as it may be.

What caused a young man to give up so, in the midst his life? There was a little soul spot in there, somewhere, which would soon be burned away. There was some energy up above too, in the warm blanket, that once ran through Christopher's body.

Linda lowered her head, counted to five, and ignited the furnace. Her skin constricted around her limbs. She stared into the fire, then found herself removing her shirt, her shoes, her socks...

Found herself considering the belly-height of furnace two...

Found herself hearing whispers, giggles, spat-out curse words...

Linda slid herself legs first into furnace two, rolled onto her hip and shuffled herself around. A strong wind had come through the crematorium, hissing hatefully around her ears, and in it she listened hard, listened for the voices from the warm blanket to tell her what she'd done, *how* she'd done... She reached a hand out from her little stone coffin and pressed the ignition button.

The flames sucked away the air from around her, pulling a piercing cry from deep in her belly.

YES! WE SAW YOU!

Her skin prickled, began to crawl into bunches, shrivel, peel away. There was a putrid roast and melted hair smell, her flesh bubbled.

WE ALL SAW!

Oil fizzed and popped, the flames grew, she saw red only, then nothing. She was screaming on the wind that roared through the burning leaves, the forest ablaze.

UP HERE! WE'RE UP HERE!

Now her limbs were blackening meat, turning to smoke and ash, revealing the bone beneath. She screamed, screamed with the wind, laughing with it, gulping in the flames. The boil of worry in her mind rapidly grew, in a moment she felt it fill her skull, then with a hot burst of steam, spray open like a boiler pushed past its limits.

LINDA, ALL THE ANSWERS! IT'S A NEW PHASE! COME!

I AM, she screamed, I'M TRYING!

She felt herself dry out, knew that by now she'd disintegrate around her bones with a good knock.

YOU'RE NEARLY THERE, LINDA! GO! GO!

WE ARE BOWING.

I...

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING BACK AT ALL THE TIME?

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING BACK AT ALL THE TIME?