

Estranged

The will reading had gone as smoothly as I could have hoped. By that time we were a small family. Our parents, both only children, were dead and as such neither they nor any cousins were sniffing around for any of our grandfather's crumbs to inherit. There was only my sister, my brother and me in a room clearly accustomed to much more crowded affairs, and each of us were surprised, though it wasn't in our natures to show it, to find that the crumbs were in fact rather substantial.

In accordance with our grandfather's wishes the money was to be split evenly, as were the proceeds from the sale of a house that none of us had ever visited. My siblings both kindly agreed that I should take out of the lot whatever I should need for funeral expenses, and had both made vague excuses as to why they wouldn't be able to attend it, then they both departed the same way they had arrived; alone.

And so I was alone again, standing in an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar land, sole executor to the will of a man I'd never met. And it was there that I was filled with the most uncanny feeling of dread. You might wonder why a man so handsomely paid for such an easy ride would feel anything other than relief after fulfilling his foremost duty. You might think it was the despondent aftermath of seeing your siblings, now grown, disappear again indefinitely, or perhaps the guilt of taking a dead stranger's money, but in truth it was neither of those things. It was something else that had departed; my final chance to share a burden, which had left with my siblings as I had left the final line of the will unspoken.

Now the reasons why I felt the need to keep the final line from my siblings are my own, decipherable perhaps only to me, but I'd like this record to show that my omission was by no

means advantageous, and that the clause was one which would have been no more than a curiosity to anyone other than myself, the executor. This clause, clause 13 such as it was, was the sole reason for my dread. Reading it had left me with a teetering sensation as though finely balanced on the edge of a rather deep and dark rabbit hole, one with a gravity all of its own. Here is what it read.

It is in our best interest that my coffin, contrary to popular convention, be a perfect cube.

A cube.

Yes, a cube.

Now the thoughts that ran through my head when I first read the will were probably the same that are running through yours right now. Firstly, perhaps strangely, I considered it practically. My grandfather had left no instruction for the dimensions of the cube, was he to be crammed into a small crate knees up and neck craned forward in an eternal posture of claustrophobic torment, or was he to be laid flat in a larger box with all that black and empty space hovering above and his arms stretched out wide from wall to wall, and in which case would the grave need to be dug deeper, the headstone made wider? All of these images lingered unpleasantly, all unnatural in their own way.

Also there was the question of authorship. Though the will was signed by my grandfather, witnesses and solicitors, clause 13 was the only one to muddy the waters with this mysterious ‘*our*’. My grandmother had died not long after their marriage, so who was possibly represented in ‘*our interests*’? I was at pains to see how a cube-coffin could possibly be in my grandfather’s best interests let alone someone else’s. I briefly considered he was alluding to some sort of concealed relationship between *us*, a thought which sent a violent shiver down my spine.

But thinking back now those initial questions of practicality were distractions from the real question which was simply this; *why*? I forced that question into the back of my mind then and continued to hold it there through all the legal proceedings, the will reading, and the funeral arrangements up until the day I first entered the funeral parlour in search of a coffin.

I found the place halfway up the town's steepest hill which swept up to the castle and was lined with all manner of artisan shops, most of which were closed or closing before the settling snow. I translated its name as Kovac & Sons or some such like and entered. I had been to funeral parlours in my homeland and it seemed this was no different. It's as though there's a universally agreed degree of gloom that each must adhere to, I thought, a flickering sort in which the eye can never fully adjust.

"Hello," I called.

"Hello," came a call from one of the rear rooms, "be out in one minute."

I waited in the lobby. Rows of coffins were racked and shadowed against the walls, an impressive variety of woods, carvings and engravings.

All rectangular.

The man appeared. Kovac perhaps, or a son. He was a great barrel of a man with a scarred face and gammon arms who looked just as likely to put a man in his coffin as sell him one.

"How can I help?" He said in stilted English.

"I was wondering," I began tentatively, "if you sell any cube shaped coffins."

He looked at me blankly, clearly the word didn't translate well. I made a square motion with my hands and repeated "coffin".

"Box coffin?" He asked slowly, repeating my gesture.

I had been secretly harbouring the notion that a cube-coffin was common practice here, not willing to sound the thought in case I were to dispel it, but the carpenter's reaction quickly ended that delusion.

I nodded.

"Box coffin," he repeated, "strange... strange."

He paced back and forth behind the counter muttering to himself in his own tongue, and then as though following my initial line of reasoning stopped, laid his hands on the counter and asked, "You want big or small?"

I left the parlour having decided on a larger coffin. Kovac, or son, had seemed eager to get started on such an unusual assignment. He had agreed with me on the sizing.

"Yes, yes, he must be comfortable to lay," he had said, "he could even stand if he wanted."

Something about that comment had affected me a great deal, and it was the reason I decided to head to my grandfather's house. It struck me then just how single minded I'd become, why did I crave this understanding for some quirk of a man I knew very little about? Why had this dread tied its ropes within me? Why had I allowed it to? It had become a poisonous obsession for which I was convinced answers were the antidote, and I was certain I'd find them at his house.

The roofs craned in and the snow thickened as I ascended through the town. By the time I arrived the world had become all swirling whiteness. The house marked the top end of the street, and above I could see the castle only as an immense darkness, lurking with menace behind the icy veil like some great and unseeable beast that travels only within the blizzard.

I entered... and I could tell you that his house was that of a hermit, an alchemist, an occultist, a madman. Would you believe me? For that's what I expected to walk into. Were there dead animals pickling in jars or notes scattered across desks, walls and floors like leaves after a storm, covered in strange and ancient symbols? Preconceptions based on one eccentricity, and would it matter if any of them were true? Can the image of a man ever wholly be pieced together by his belongings, or the contents of his will? And I understood then with a flame blue flash of clarity that that was the crux of it all, the reason for my mania. Clause 13 wasn't an enigma but a torch, and it showed me just how little I knew of my own grandfather, of any of my own lineage. And I understood then that the answers wouldn't be found here, they'd be found only in conversation with a man now dead.

I stood there for some time in an already emptied house, feeling each dull moment of that anticlimax as it drifted passed unconcerned, just as I had been drifting through life, almost kinless and to all those living, estranged.

And now, standing alone at his graveside with a newfound sorrow, staring down at that crate which seems more like cargo waiting to be shipped to the underworld than a coffin, I'm left with this overwhelming fear that he is in there...

...standing in the blackness...

...waiting...

...waiting...

...for him to become me, and I him.

