

Death is a Final Peace

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The man was standing on the chilled shore, gazing out over the gentle waves when the dog approached. His concentration broken, he looked down at the scraggly thing—mid-sized and scruffy. Altogether rather ugly, like a stuffed toy subjected to too many wash cycles. The creature peered up at the man inquisitively before relinquishing his prize by the man's bare foot. A dress shoe, nearly worn through in the sole and filled with briny grit. Algae already festered at the laces, threatening to overtake a moldy colony clinging to the smooth side. The man stooped over, resting his elbows on bony knees before the thing. It seemed oddly familiar, he knew not how. Like it belonged in a memory, but the memory of another man, plucked from a scrapbook tucked away in a dusty attic.

He gingerly picked up the shoe, cradling it in the crook of his pale arm. He glanced up for a reaction from the dog, but it was already gone, trotting down the rocky beach and toward a dull gray outcropping that stuck out from the jade sea like a tumor. The man opened his mouth to call after the dog, but finding no voice, stiffly hastened along the trail of pawprints. At last staggering around the corner of the rocky formation, he discovered the dog seated placidly at the side of a strange figure, the figure of a man.

Or what had once been a man. For the man was now at the mercy of the sea, slightly bloated and tinged in ghastly shades of green and gray. He looked to the man's face, saw the glazed over irises, now almost indistinguishable from the liquidy whites. His lips appeared an icy blue, an unholy smile that extended past his mouth to crawl up his cheeks. They were slightly parted, revealing a snaggle tooth encrusted in sea salt and grime. The man instinctively reached to graze his own snaggle tooth with a shaky finger, the filthy fingernail of the same jagged cut as the dead man's. He reached down then, extending his fingertips to brush dark

locks, now matted and crusty, from the mottled gray forehead. He found his hand tracing down, delicately brushing the eyelids into a final resting place. But his hand continued beyond the eyelids, down to the neck, where a thick rope had been fastened about the man's throat.

The rope was sturdy; it could have perhaps been considered new if not for its marriage to the water. It encircled the man's neck near the nape, knotted meticulously in the back before trailing down to the sand. It ended there, in the sand. Its jagged end had become frayed, as if it had been tested by the elements and overpowered. The man looked to the corpse's face once more. There was no sign of struggle, no lines of tension written into the rotting skin. Only tranquility, serenity perfected in the smooth lines of youth. A peace in death.

A smile played at the corner of the man's lips. Had this man died gladly, found greater meaning in the journey of ending? *Perhaps. Perhaps it is true*, thought the man to himself. *Perhaps the world is mere shadows and dust, a projection of ash on a filthy lens*. He chuckled to himself – his mind was empty, devoid of concept or burden – yet he understood the man's pain, understood his wish to free himself. He gently laid the shoe down next to the man's bare foot and was met with the tongue of the dog, licking a trail up his gangly arm and smooth face and into his salty, dark hair.

At this, the dog stood once more, trotting onward down the desolate beach and toward a distant tree line that stood guard over the pebbles, a legion of giants against the ocean's battering. The man gazed down one final time at the corpse on the shore and then turned his face out to the sea. The sun dazzled off of the turbulent waters, but he was not pained to look. No, there was no pain in this, no feeling of illusion. He saw everything, felt everything, heard every song in the world as it poured over the waters and flowed through his body. How wonderful it was to be there in that moment, free of the shackles of figment. He turned to follow after the dog, padding down the sandy beach as though through a dream. In his wake, only the delicate pawprints of the dog could be seen in the sand.