

Plush Hedgehogs Don't Prick

My Brother

He passed away at the table from twenty-eight cans of Red Bull mixed with vodka, surrounded by amateurs from the association of citizens persistent in preserving the language, tradition and old crafts. His heart stopped in the middle of a midnight poker game. A detailed description was provided in the coroner's official statement following the autopsy. An inconsolable explanation of a sudden death. Mother felt the force of the explosion in Brother's chest as if someone had struck her knees with a sledgehammer. She lost her balance and fell over the wooden rocking chair in which Grandmother and her mother had died, shriveled with age. We kept moving the chair from one room to another, unwilling to find a permanent place for it. It always bothers someone or suddenly gets in the way. Only Brother contentedly rocked in it, his stomach swollen, after a hearty helping of broccoli with red meat for Sunday lunch. Mother listened to a synthesized voicemail with the relaxing sound of a Buddhist gong and the murmur of water. Bad news is now announced together with those crappy things that, according to psychoacoustics, relieve stress.

You'll never be able to walk again (a gong strike that resonates for a long time).

Your spouse is cheating on you (a gurgle and two short strikes on a baking tray).

You don't exist (the rumble of a waterfall).

Vera

For days, she hasn't gotten out of bed. She hopes for a dream in which she'd see her son. His body is lying in a large refrigerator. The family vault is full. In a new synthesized message, a monotonous male voice offers vault expansion services. Parents, caught unawares by the situation, contemplate the existing options. Companies own cemeteries, crypts and towers. Your mortal remains can be buried in the ground, mummified or incinerated, and the ashes scattered from an airplane, launched into space, turned into a diamond or mixed into paints to create a portrait.

"I just want one more chance to talk to my son."

Vera entered the room with bags under her eyes, wearing a wrinkled nightgown, an empty glass in her hand. Her words shattered the tension dominated by the irritating sound emanating from the pest inside the rocking chair armrest. The persistent weevil finally fell silent.

"I found a company that provides burial services at a new type of cemetery they call Taiga. They also offer an advanced memory preservation option. I scheduled an appointment for tomorrow at nine."

ETERNIME (Because We Care group)

We entered a glass sphere through a water curtain that opened before us. Above the door, there was a gleaming sign: DEATH IS NOT THE END. The hall is filled with the scent of a summer shower, complemented by the harmonious sounds of the organ and a swarm of tiny colorful lights chaotically moving near the ceiling. My sandals are squeaking on the marble floor. A hologram of a butterfly is flickering within arm's reach, skillfully eluding me whenever I try to catch it, guiding us through a manicured garden of bonsai trees and rocks, shaped like mountain peaks, to consultant fifty-two.

“As you could see in our promotional material, we propose an entirely new type of eternal resting place for your loved ones. We lay the deceased in a biodegradable capsule and plant a tree above it that feeds on the products of the decomposition of the deceased's body. We have an abundant assortment of saplings on offer. And all our cemeteries resemble memorial forests. In front of each tree, there's a stone projecting a hologram with all the biographical data about the deceased. That's the basic package we offer.”

“I saw that you also have a special service regarding memories.”

“Yes. It's a novelty we've included in our program since last quarter. We provide the service of communicating with the deceased.”

Vera trembled, a lump in her throat.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s a chatbot that possesses all the characteristics of the deceased in terms of non-verbal and verbal communication, the same tone of voice, facial expressions, hand gestures, frequently used phrases. You’ll almost entirely believe you’re conversing with your dear departed.”

“Is that really possible?”

“Vera, wait, slow down. We have to think about this carefully. I’m not keen on playing with new technologies and something unnatural.”

“Stojan, I don’t think I can bear all this. Don’t deprive me of the chance to hear him one more time.”

“I’m with Mother on this.”

“If you all agree, you need to provide us with all the video and audio recordings at your disposal. As for the deceased’s online activities, we’ll take care of that. You’ll receive an initial version of the chatbot with which you’ll have to correspond for a while. The more you do that, the more convincing the interlocutor will eventually be. After that, access to the chatbot will be exclusively available in the memorial forest. We concluded that’s the only proper way of its use that won’t prolong the mourning process.”

“Okay, let everyone grieve and mourn as they wish. I’ll support you. But don’t expect me to use it.”

My father snapped his fingers.

Funeral

The burial was conducted within the family circle. Outside the cemetery, a group of demonstrators and religious fanatics were yelling as banners against desecration of tradition hovered above their heads. Young saplings were growing around the place where we laid the body, above a stone the size of a human skull. On the other side of the cemetery, a forest had already formed. I took a walk around.

“You have to touch it,” said a skinny, hunched old man in white coveralls who tends the grass and cleans bird droppings and muddy rain spots from the stones.

“Sorry?”

“I said, touch the stone, that’s how it is activated.”

“Ah, thank you.”

“That spot is empty. You see, there’s no tree there. Try over there. That one drank half a liter of sulfuric acid and invited a friend for a game of tennis before his fiftieth birthday, but you won’t see that in the pictures. They only put nice things there.”

A holographic projection of the suicide’s biography and poignant moments. Cute. Nothing more than that.

“Try over there. You can even talk to her.”

I touched the stone and in front of me appeared a beautiful red-haired girl of my age, who looked at me questioningly. I got frightened, turned around and left. The old man laughed behind me.