

Claustrasophia

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Just past sunrise, and already the day's humidity was backed up to the plant roots. Sophie rode shotgun, squinting into the blur of June foliage at her elbow, and shielding her almond eyes from the morning sun above the hood. Her dad drove the faded pick-up with strands of his dark brown hair flagging out the window. Sophie no longer heard the clangs and thumps coming from the truck bed, but she knew he heard them just fine, knocking and ringing all over the goddamn place.

Ron took his eyes off the road at just the wrong moment, a side glance at his daughter. The driver's-side tire floated, then struck hard on the far side of a pothole. He and his daughter bounced in their seats. The metal shovel and wooden coffin came down in the flatbed. He didn't, but all he wanted right then was to slam on the brakes, gather his rage in the back of the truck, and start swinging that shovel around until the coffin was nothing but splinters. Then maybe he'd eat every last splinter, all slow and joyous like a fucking termite would do.

Instead, the truck started steering funny, good enough for a smile anyway. Ron killed the engine, coasting to a stop in the middle of the road. "Well, my little princess. Looks like we got ourselves a flat."

It wouldn't work on her today, his smug charm. "Guess I'll fix it then," Sophie said. She swung her door open real hard, and had crawled under the back bumper before her door even settled into place on its hinge.

As she began unscrewing the spare tire, her dad's door creaked open and he stepped down on the dirt. Seeing her dad's legs from foot to mid-calf, Sophie might as well have been five again. She used to creep upstairs and slide under her parents' bed, lying there in the dark for an hour or more, taking shallow breaths, refusing the dust bunnies' dares to cough, listening to the television drift up through a vent under the headboard. If the bedroom light came on, she'd observe in silence as her mom's and dad's feet came and went.

Ron took a few crunching steps in the dirt and leaned his forearms on the rim of the truck bed. Without lifting an elbow, he pulled a pack of smokes from his shirt pocket, snagged one with his lips, and traded the pack for a lighter. As he smoked, his eyes studied the edges of the makeshift coffin.

Sophie crawled out with the spare and rolled it past him. He turned like he had something to say, but didn't. He was probably trying real hard to think of some words that would change her mind, and get her back in the truck riding the other way. Too bad for him, but today wasn't about him. She ordered him aside so she could access the utility box in the truck bed, right where he was standing.

Ron shined a fake smile. “Oh, yeah. Guess you’ll be needing the jack.”

Sophie removed the jack and tire iron. She answered her dad’s fake smile, raised him the patented silly eyes, and poked him in the stomach with the tire iron. “Oh, sorry. Thought you were a lug nut.”

Funny business was the last thing he wanted to see from her. He didn’t even want to be out there. And now she was joking about a serious situation. Well, not today. No way. Not out here. At least she knew better than to ask for his help fixing the flat.

Sophie began jacking up the front end without warning. He jumped a little, like he’d been thinking and wasn’t ready for the jolt. She’d try everything she could think of to put him off-guard today. Somebody needed to. He’d grown much too commanding lately. When she was a little girl, they’d had more than the average share of laughs. She always thought that would continue to solve things. And it wasn’t that age had soured their relationship, but as she grew into adulthood, he seemed to have more than a little trouble letting his Sophie whittle away at her own life. Nor was this the only variable in the equation. There was also the matter of her mom to consider, the purpose of the coffin and the day.

“That takes care of that,” Sophie said, heaving the flat tire over the rim of the truck bed. On the far side, she dropped the jack and tire iron in loose to rattle around with the shovel and coffin. And back on the passenger’s side, the empty seat was hers to reclaim. She sat with the door hanging open.

“Hey, Soph. I wanna have another smoke before we hit the road.” Ron lit another cigarette, pacing the rear bumper.

Sophie stepped onto the dirt. All calm-like, she shut the passenger door and dug in, racing Interstate Firedrill-style around the front bumper like her dad taught her when she turned 16. A decade later, she still giggled the whole way to the driver’s seat.

The slamming door and grinding engine could’ve meant she was just kidding, but the shifting gears let Ron know they’d be leaving on the sudden. He grabbed for the latched tailgate, cigarette dangling in his lips. Barely got his foot up on the bumper when the truck tires started sucking dirt. Sophie was howling all the way.

“Jesus H.,” Ron yelled through the back cab window. “You tryin’ to kill me?”

“You’ll have to dig second,” she said, cranking her head back. “I’ll wanna cool off some. Gonna be stuffy enough as is.”

Ron kept his eyes front. “Just watch the damn road, would ya? And take it easy. We don’t have another spare.”

□

Sophie cut the engine when she reached a roadside clearing. It was secluded enough for their purposes. As she unlatched the tailgate to unload the coffin, she ignored her dad, who smoked a cigarette in a pile of himself,

sitting in the upside-down flat tire.

“You know, I could help you with that,” he said, taking a drag.

“Apology accepted.”

He leaned forward, exhaling smoke. “Apology? For what?”

“What do you mean, for what?” Sophie pulled one end of the coffin off the truck bed. The opposite end slammed down against the ground.

“Hey!” He chucked the half-smoked cigarette over the side. “I know you don’t care what I have to say about all this, but for your own sake you might wanna keep that goddamn thing in one piece.”

Sophie dragged the coffin over the gravel and dropped it where she wanted it, then came back for the shovel.

Ron reached for his smokes as his daughter began digging her own grave.

Sophie was making quick work of the burial plot. She shoveled on semi-automatic, staring into the loose dirt she spilled in a pile. The texture of the soil, each sliding shovelful mixing with the rest, looked almost cottony to her. She imagined odors of soft linen and wood.

When she was six, she would hide in her bedroom closet, not under the hanging clothes, but in a bottom corner compartment designed for shoes and other small things. If she slid back into the compartment just right, with her head between her knees, she could grip the underside of the closet door. Carpet burn would surface on her fingers as she’d pull it shut. Sometimes she left a flashlight between her feet, should she really want to illuminate her blurry knees pressed beside her face. But with the flashlight off, she would daydream about being a worm. Her limbless body poked and wriggled through the network of tiny gaps in the cool soil. If she ran into a pebble, she dug under it. If she ran into a big rock, she dug under that too. She always went deeper.

After some time to himself, Ron climbed out of the truck bed and lit a cigarette. He walked at full stride to the driver’s seat and grabbed an overnight bag. With both handles scrunched as one, he carried the bag over to his daughter. His cigarette moved up and down as he spoke. “You know, I’ve done a lot of thinking since the night you asked me to bury you. Even then I knew you’d find some way to pull this nonsense off, and I would never, ever trust anyone else with all this, so I will keep my promise... under one condition.”

Sophie stopped shoveling and leaned on the handle.

Ron took a lungful of smoke, held it, released it into the air. “Take one of these with you.” He pulled a two-way radio from the bag.

She thought, That’s it? If she said no, he could still refuse. They both knew she couldn’t shovel dirt on top of herself. Plus, he looked so proud of himself, negotiating, compromising. “Okay. Deal,” she said, offering a hand to shake on it.

“No, here you go.” He tossed the bag aside, traded her the radio for

the shovel, and took over the digging operation. "Study the radio. If you have to use it, you'll have to use it in the dark, so figure it out up here while you can. Besides, I can still handle a day's hard work."

She looked at the radio. The only functions she really needed to place were the ON/OFF volume knob and the transmit switch. The rest was garnish.

When the grave was more than three feet deep, Sophie told her dad he could stop. She flipped the coffin lid off next to the shell.

Ron was dripping sweat. His long hair clung like vines to his face and neck. He pulled it all back over his shoulders so he could see to help lower the coffin shell into place. A few dirtslides broke free from the sides of the grave, spreading across the inside of the wooden box.

Sophie wondered if her dad could sense her doubt. She walked to the truck to grab a few things of her own. She left her backpack on the passenger's seat, but from it, she returned with a flashlight stuffed in her back pocket and a folded apron under one arm.

"Is that hers?" Ron asked, pointing to the apron.

"Yeah." Sophie held the top two corners so it would open hanging. She turned beside her dad so they could both see, and they stood silent for a time, staring at the different birds on the apron. There was a blue jay, and a cardinal, a finch, and all sorts of other backyard birds displayed in the ivy.

"Well, daylight's not gonna last forever," Sophie said at last. She pulled the flashlight from her back pocket and wrapped the apron around it. When she hugged her dad, he didn't want to let her go, so she said, "I'll see you in a bit," and broke free to put her foot down in the coffin. "Now, remember. Once you've got most of the dirt back on, wait thirty minutes before you dig me up."

"Okay."

"That's thir-ty min-utes."

"Unless you say otherwise." He threw her a radio. "Turn it on for a check."

She humored him as his voice came through the air and over the radio waves, saying radio check, radio check.

She sat down in the coffin, grinning. "It's amazing. I can hear you through the radio, even from this distance."

"Oh, ha ha. Go on and have a laugh at your old man." Ron helped his daughter direct the coffin lid into place.

Sophie had fastened short perpendicular boards around the underside of the lid to hold it in place. With one hand propping the lid, she leaned back on the other elbow, stuffing the apron bundle in her lap. "I love you," she said.

"Love you too, honey."

When she flattened her body out and lowered the lid, the rest of the guard boards moved into place. And then, she was inside. The coffin was

built tightly enough that very little dirt leaked in around the edges, but her movements were enough to circulate a fine dust that passed through light leaks near the top. The confined space would take some adjusting to. She only hoped her dad didn't think all the commotion meant she wanted out.

"All right, Dad. Start shoveling."

The words' dull echoes were much louder for her than for him, but they must have reached him. A shovelful of dirt struck the coffin lid inches from her head, sending a hot tingle through her body. She closed her eyes, trying to relax more for the next thud. Already the humidity was building up, like the time in Uncle Rex's sauna. For some reason, when she was about six, Sophie and her dad had stayed at Aunt Geraldine and Uncle Rex's house. When her dad and uncle were done in the sauna one night, Sophie slipped inside and hid under the bench in the dark, but only a few minutes passed before she needed out. She could not control that panicked feeling of trying to breathe the damp heat.

In the passing thumps of dirt, Sophie imagined her dad above, beaded with moisture, digging in the hot sun. He wasn't in bad shape by any means. He still put in full days at the construction site, but he'd already done quite a bit of digging for one day, enough that Sophie wondered if maybe weak hearts might run through both sides of her family. Once he put all the ground back on top of her, any trouble visiting him would visit them both.

Her eyes opened with the realization that she was breathing too fast and too shallow. She couldn't see airborne dust anymore, so there was no sense gasping wide-eyed into the confines of the darkness. She shut her eyes for a more comfortable darkness, listening to her dad's shoveling rhythm for guidance. She inhaled for two thuds, exhaled for two, until the falling dirt became less distinct, landing on dirt, not wood. She checked the radio in her lap, making sure the volume knob was turned away from the dead click of off. The sound of landing dirt had all but gone away, and the awareness of being buried deeper and deeper soothed Sophie. She felt safe, secure, and all alone. But mostly it meant she was on her way.

She wouldn't remember closing her eyes again.

□

"Remember the story I told you about the two diggers God used to mix all the ingredients of the Universe? Well, that one there is the big digger."

A young Sophie rested her head in the crook of her dad's elbow so she could follow the path his forearm and finger made into the sky. He took another drag on his cigarette, tobacco burning red, smoke gathering ambient light up into the night air.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah, hon."

"What's that one over there?"

Sophie's dad followed her gesture. "Which one? The W? That's

Cassiopeia, the queen. She sits on her throne in the sky, keeping an eye on the kingdom God made for her. There's the back of the throne, the seat, the legs, and that's where her dress billows out. See it?"

"Mmm hmm." She looked up and back at his face as he took another drag on his smoke. "Daddy?"

"Hmm."

"Grampa said Mommy's in Heaven now, and he pointed at the sky when he said it. D'you think Mommy could be the queen?"

As Ron spoke, the motion of his words moved smoke, forming clusters from the syllables. "Well, honey. The stars make whatever shapes you want them to be. And most people think Heaven is up there somewhere, so if Mommy went to Heaven in the sky, then I suppose that could be her up there."

"Where do you think Heaven is?"

He took another long drag, shredded leaves becoming dust and smoke. "You see how this smoke spreads out in the air? I think Heaven is all around us, and when people die, I think their spirits just spread out like the smoke. Even though it *looks* like the smoke goes away, it doesn't. It just spaces itself out in the sky until you can't see it anymore."

"Really?"

"Sure. So, when Mommy went to what Grampa calls Heaven, I think she just spread out like smoke. We don't see her anymore, because she *disappears* like the smoke, but she's really everywhere all at once."

Sophie gazed through the W of the queen, certain it was a window to outer space that her mom was looking back through.

□

—*all right?*

Sophie snapped up, smacking her forehead against what she couldn't see. She tried twice to open her eyes, making conscious efforts to wake up. But she couldn't be dreaming. The odors of dust and pine were too real, and nothing made sense in the humid darkness. Her head felt heavier than usual.

*It's filled in. You all right down there?*

Where am I? she wondered.

Her hand explored a bundle of fabric in her lap. She felt two objects in the fabric. One she identified as a flashlight. She slid her thumb over it until a cone of light flickered from her lap.

*Come on, Sophie. No jokes now. Answer me.*

The other object was the radio her dad gave her. The coffin was a tight space, especially now that the lid would not budge. Sophie wrenched her arm to bring the radio near her mouth.

"Hey, Dad."

*Sophie! Thank God. Are you all right?*

"Yeah. I'm fine."

*I've been calling you for a while.*

“Oh. Sorry. I was, uhh... lost in thought there for a bit, remembering how we used to stargaze in the backyard.”

*Oh yeah. You used to love that. Listen, you okay down there?*

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

*So, what’s it like?*

“Hot. And cramped. Listen, Dad. I’m gonna turn the radio off for a bit. I’ll turn it back on if I have any problems. Okay? Love you.”

*No, Sophie. I don’t think that’s—*

Sophie hoped her dad wasn’t so angry about the radio that he dug her up early. She doubted it anyway. Turning the flashlight off, she returned it and the radio to her lap. The apron is what she brought to her breast in the dark silence.

Until a few months earlier, she hadn’t seen the apron in years. Right away it reminded her of one of her favorite hiding spots. When she knew her mom was about to wash dishes, she’d run and hide under the kitchen sink, to listen to the rumble of warm water rushing through the drainpipe. She’d hold her ear there as long as she could, until her mom used hot water anyway. The last day Sophie hid there, the cabinet doors opened and the sudden wash-in of sunlight brought the birds and ivy of her mom’s apron into view.

Sophie’s mom crouched to grab the jug of bleach, but was quite surprised instead to find her daughter there. “Oh. Sheez.” She lowered to her knees to get face to face with her daughter. “Sophie. You scared me. What’re you doing under there?”

“Hiding.”

“Well, I can see that. Are you okay?” She extended her hand to help Sophie out.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Then why were you hiding?”

“I like hiding, Mommy.”

“I see. Well, can you promise me something?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“I don’t want you hiding under the sink anymore. There’s a lot of dangerous things under here. Do you understand?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“All right, now run off and hide somewhere else, and when I’m done here, I’ll come find you.”

“Okay.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? You’d better go hide.”

□

Sophie stayed awake for longer than she realized. She’d wrapped the apron around her face to smell it, and to filter some of the dust circulating in the air. She’d been six for her mom’s funeral, so bits of it were all she ever remembered. For a while, her young mind had even forgotten whose funeral it was. At only the age of six, she knew her mom had died and she knew



she'd been to a funeral, but the two were not forged together. She'd loosely woven them since, each time revisiting her memories of that day. But always, that day belonged more to her mom than it did to her.

Sometimes, on a humid summer's day, the pile of dirt next to a shiny wood coffin will come to her, and she'll dissolve from the memory to find herself staring into the fire pit out back. Or maybe her dad tells her she's crossing the center yellow line into oncoming traffic. It's only in recent years she's made sense of the dark-dressed people around the grave, like Aunt Geraldine and Uncle Rex. Sophie and her dad had stayed at their house for a few days—the sauna trip. And one day in her early teens, while watching television, she'd learned who the stranger was, the man dressed in a sharp black robe and white collar, speaking over the coffin, speaking on and on, people looking at him with listening eyes, or staring at his feet, or the coffin.

When the speaking man is silent, most people walk away, past the field of gray tombstones planted in the green grass of the cemetery ceiling. The priest is the fifth-to-last person to leave the grave. Sophie steps nearer the hole in the ground, her dad stands behind her, and two strangers lower the coffin into the grave.

Sophie's dad taps her on the shoulder and crouches to tell her a secret no one else should know. "Sophie, honey, Mommy has died. She's leaving us all behind so we can miss her every day. You may see her again someday, but not for a long time. This is just her way of telling a joke that can't be untold, and it was a mean joke, but it's still just a joke. Do you understand?"

Sophie says she understands, and her dad stands up.

She wants to see if her mom is in the coffin. She lowers herself into a dangling L with her legs inside the grave and her belly resting on the edge. Her dad is watching her, his head cocked a little to one side. He just wants to know where she's going. He's not stopping her though. She digs her fingers into the soil overflowing the grassy edge of the grave. Her whole body dangles down in. When she lets go, her feet land in the soft dirt beside the coffin. The two men above begin shoveling dirt down. Sophie tells them to wait, but they must not hear her. She opens the coffin lid just enough that she can crawl in and lay on her mom's legs and stomach. The inside of the coffin is silky and padded, and the sound of dirt falling on the lid becomes the soft double beat of a distant heart.

The beats grow thinner, and Sophie's mom pulls her up. Their heads rest closer. She whispers in Sophie's ear that they should wait a few more minutes in silence, just lying together. And so they lie, tangled in each other's limbs, listening to the diminishment of the double beat.

"I think we're okay now," her mom says at last.

"Mommy, why'd you play a joke on everyone?"

Her mom exhales one breath of laughter into Sophie's hair. "Is that what your dad told you? He's such a jerk. Now, don't you listen to everything he says. Okay?"



“Okay, Mommy.”

“I didn’t decide this joke. I had it chosen for me.” Sophie’s mom tightens the hug. “I know it may not make sense to you, but we can’t always choose the jokes that get played on us. Do you understand?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Mommy?” Sophie craned her head back until her scalp pressed on her mom’s chin.

“Yes, dear.”

“Daddy said you’re leaving us. Was he joking about that too?”

“No, he’s not joking. God says I can’t stay with you anymore.”

“But why?”

“Sophie, I don’t know why.”

Sophie was scared to, but she had to ask, “Are you mad at me?”

“No, honey. I love you. I do. I promise.”

“Then why can’t you stay with me?”

“It just doesn’t work that way sometimes.”

“Why not? No one asked me if you could stay.”

Sophie’s mom brought her lips down on Sophie’s hair, and Sophie could feel from her mom’s lips the shape of each word on the top of her head. “I know, hon. But no one asked me either. Death is one of the hardest things to make sense of while you’re alive. Leaving life is something humans can’t understand until they’ve experienced it from both sides.”

No words come to Sophie’s tongue. She doesn’t totally understand, but she feels okay, because this time is their time, and that’s enough. She can feel her mom’s breathing, can feel her going to sleep. Sophie turns face-up and tries going to sleep too, but it’s too hot. She can’t get comfortable. The space is too small. Her chest feels like it’s not getting any air. She presses against the lid, but it won’t move.

Sophie wants to feel for her mom, but she can’t get turned around. She has begun to wonder if her mom is still there behind her. Maybe she’s not in her mom’s coffin anymore. Maybe she’s in a coffin all her own. Maybe God’s playing a joke on her too. Her dad too? Maybe her dad’s buried in a grave next to the two of them. What if God is playing a joke on all three of them all at once?

She listens closely, to the sound of the angels coming for her. Their swords are scraping in the dirt. Scrape and pause. They’re digging down so they can lift her up and carry her off. Scrape and pause. When they grab her, she’ll tell them not to forget her mom and dad. Scrape and pause. The digging swords stab deeper and deeper into the dirt. They’re just above the coffin. And then one of the swords strikes.

She can’t wait for them to get her out of here. Death is more anguish than she expected. Her lungs are struggling to absorb the thick air around her. She can’t stop rattling her knees on the coffin lid. Her chest burns like it has cracked open, with hot dust settling in the wound. Her heart beats like boiling

water, exploding pieces at a time against the coffin lid. Strange light leaks in from the world above as the angels scrape their blades around the edges.

Sophie presses her palms against the coffin lid. Stale, dead air sinks from her torso as she sits up, rushing through the cool air of rapture. Dirt cascades into the box. She lurches for the breath that will fill her lungs with crisp, new air. The weight of the coffin lid comes off her hands and is flung aside.

An angel appears in the brightness. He says, "Oh, thank God." He reaches down to help her out. His face is damp with sweat and dirt, and it looks like he's been crying.

"I'm so glad you're okay," he says. The angel is her dad.

Sophie's legs are not ready to work just yet. She sits on the edge of the grave with her feet in the coffin. Looking like it could use a good kick, Sophie uses the side of her foot to send the flashlight across the coffin.

"Ready to get out?" her dad asks.

Sophie shakes her head no. Her heaving breath is on the mend. She lets go of her dad's grip, using both hands to brace herself on the opposite edge of the grave.

Her dad lowers his feet into the coffin to sit beside her. "You are okay, aren't you?"

She nods with eyes closed.

"Wow," he said. "That was not fun for me." He kicked the far lip of the grave. "Was it fun for you?"

Sophie raises an eyebrow. "Ha... ha," she says, dusty and broken, in need of air.

"Water?" her dad asks.

He gets a bottle from the truck. By the time he's returned, she has managed to crawl out of the grave. She sits upright on level ground, holding her knees to drink the water.

Her dad looks like he's preparing to cover the coffin and shovel dirt on top when Sophie manages another word. "Wait," she says. When he looks to see what she wants, she says, "Apron," pointing at the coffin.

Ron flips the coffin lid off and steps down in to get the apron. He leans pretty hard on the shovel handle stepping back out.

"Gettin' old?" she manages.

"Funny," he says, helping her to her feet.

Sophie reaches into her dad's shirt pocket for the lighter. Held over the open coffin, fire gathers quickly up from the bottom corner of her mom's apron. Sophie watches the flames as if listening, until her arm feels their direct heat. The burning fabric falls into a fiery pile on the bottom of the coffin.

"Okay, now you can cover."

Ron flips the lid roughly into place, and begins loading shovelfuls of loose dirt on top. Sophie watches each one, until the entire loose pile has

been returned for the second time that day.

Ron steps back. The burial plot finally makes him smile a bit—probably because now the two of them can get the hell out of here. But all of a sudden, he doesn't seem in that much of a hurry.

Once seated in the truck, Sophie looks long and hard at the dark, raised rectangle with lighter, time-hardened dirt around it. Between her and her grave, the light of the evening sun plays in a crack on the windshield. Her dad's sideways glance reveals some sense of acknowledgement, and his grin seems something of a mild explanation, but both fade nearly as quickly as they've come.

She needn't ask about the crack. It makes sense, like the dirt caked on his forehead, the past in the context of the present. She looks forward, her grin fading in its own way.

The evening sun shines red through the tree line as father and daughter drive on out of there. In the passenger-side mirror, Sophie watches dust swirling in the smooth evening light, the remembrance of going and coming back, all in one day's light.