

Our Graves

by John

Leukemia was my thing, my death. Three weeks into my freshman year of high school the bruises started and then one day in gym class, the non-stop bloody nose.

I'd had beautiful, caramel brown hair, thick and voluminous, like the women you see in shampoo commercials. Once the chemo started up, all my hair began falling out. I saved it in little tupperware containers under my bed until my mother found them and made me throw them all away, which was probably the hardest thing I'd ever done. I died a few months later.

Everyone down here has their own death. You'd think they would start to get redundant, but they don't. My friend, Crystal Standish, accepted a ride home from a party with a drunk boy with big lips and a ripped Slayer t-shirt and when he went to run his hand up her thigh he lost control of the car and Crystal went straight through the windshield.

Another kid, Brian Cleary, was accidentally shot by his step-dad when they were hunting. Margie Forsythe, smoke inhalation when her house burned down. Gregory Mountain, drowned in Forrester Lake trying to save his sister's inner-tube, while she watched from the shore. And on and on.

But no matter how we died, we all end up here, in the Meadowlark Children's Cemetery.

Here's how I arrived and how I met my best friend, Lionel. During my last week alive, I had these strangely vivid dreams of a single candle flame made of dozens of reaching hands. Then one day I blew the candle out and woke up in the darkness of my casket. I threw open the lid to discover I was underground, in a dirt-walled room, with the faintest of light seeping through the walls.

I saw a worm dangling from the ceiling and I stood and touched it and it was this tactile sensation, of the sliminess of the worm, of the little dirt granules stuck to it, that alerted me to my new reality.

Then I heard scuffling feet from outside the room and I turned to see a young boy walk past. When he noticed me, he stopped and waved. He was pale and cute and missing a front tooth. I screamed in terror and he screamed sorry and went running away. This was Lionel. Not exactly friends at first site.

In those first days in my new home, I just sat in my casket, continuously running my hand over my bald head and crying. I had assumed in the afterlife that my hair would return. I had assumed in the afterlife that I might live on a cloud, eat ice cream sundaes for breakfast.

Some kids try and tunnel out. You can dig and dig until your fingers bleed, but you won't get anywhere. I know. I was one of them.

My friend Gretchen, who appeared after me, screamed for three straight days. She's really pretty and some of the boys started calling her Dreamy Screamy until I told them to stop.

Every now and again some kids get together to try and form an official welcoming committee for new arrivals, but it doesn't usually last long. At one point, this group who had all died in a bus crash on their way to a model-UN conference tried to organize a welcoming committee, but they got bogged down with by-laws and amendments. Mostly, we just leave newcomers alone and they come out when they're good and ready.

It took me about a week before I stepped out of my grave and went walking down the underground tunnels. I heard sounds coming from one of the first rooms I passed and I stopped outside it and watched as Lionel marched his little dog down the Monopoly board.

There were two girls there too, wearing matching velvet dresses, their money splayed out in front of them. When Lionel stopped his little doggie on a green property, one of the girls put out her hand and told him to pay up, and then she noticed me and said, "Hi." The other girl turned her face toward me too and I saw half of it was melted away, which got me to screaming and running away again. I've never been much good at first impressions.

Luckily, the two girls, Rachel and Emily, didn't hold it against me, and we played endless games of Monopoly later on. They'd both been Monopoly fanatics when they were alive and their parents had buried a board with them. They'd played thousands of games since, the board weathered and worn, muddy and scratched, the little iron lost for years.

It was Lionel who first visited me in my grave, shortly after the Monopoly incident. He walked in carefully, slowly, one hand raised in a hesitant hello. I was sitting in my coffin and I clutched the lid, prepared to slam it, to hide forever in its dark, dank interior.

"My name's Lionel," he said. "What's yours?"

Lionel was skinny, with bags under his big eyes. His skin was parchment thin. I stayed silent.

I wasn't ready to give up my name yet.

"You're dead, you know," he said. "And so am I. I mean, we all are down here. I died of pneumonia. It's okay."

"I had leukemia," I said.

"I don't know what that is."

"Like cancer."

"Well you don't have it anymore." Perhaps this should have struck me as miraculous, but the trade-off to this muddy underworld full of dead children felt too heavy a price.

"What happened to that girl's face?" I said.

"Emily? She died in a fire."

"My hair all fell out," I said, and ran a hand over my skull.

And then the sound of a violin came drifting down the tunnel and a lanky boy with long hair went walking past, playing the most

beautiful song I'd ever heard. Behind him, a little boy with a crooked jaw, wearing a tattered red cape, marched and swung a stick in time to the beat.

"At least you have a nice head," Lionel said.

The next day it rained aboveground and the graves and their interconnected tunnels became muddy, the water carving little rivulets in the walls.

Lionel appeared again at my grave and invited me out.

"Everyone comes out sooner or later," he said. "Or you'll die of boredom."

He seemed so non-threatening, and I *was* becoming bored with my terror, so I let him lead me down the tunnels.

We passed a room where three young girls sat atop a coffin braiding roots together. One of the girls was missing an arm and worked quickly with her other hand.

"Making a jumprope," Lionel said as we moved on.

We passed another room where a boy sat cross-legged on his coffin reading from a big book.

"Bible Brian," Lionel said. "It's what he does, is read the Bible, all day every day. He's got a whole collection from other kids who got buried with one."

"That seems sad," I said. And it did, to be reading a book which was so clearly refuted by our existence in this place.

"I'd advise trying not to think things are sad," Lionel said. "I try and focus on the positive stuff down here."

"Like what?"

"Like stickball," he said as we took a right and turned into a cavernous room.

"What's stickball?"

"Baseball, with a stick."

Lionel walked over to a spot marked by a gnarled root protruding from the ground.

"Home plate," he said. Then, running the bases, marked by roots or rocks, he shouted out, "First, second, third." Jogging to a pile of hard-packed dirt at the center, he said, "Pitcher's mound."

"I don't really play sports," I said.

"I was buried with a glove and a ball. I *really* liked baseball."

Lionel ran out to the pitcher's mound and pretended to throw a ball. He then re-enacted an entire play, running to home plate to hit the pitch, then sprinting around the bases, periodically looking over his shoulder as if the ball was still in the air, or perhaps an outfielder was scrambling to get to it and throw him out at home.

He was funny. I smiled my first undead smile. He stamped hard on the home plate root and threw his hands in the air, silently cheering, chest heaving.

Besides what they might be buried with, the thing the children wanted most from newcomers was news of the above ground world, of the city they had left behind.

Once word got out that I might be ready to socialize, children began stopping by my grave to ask questions. Lionel sweetly stood guard outside my grave, poking his head in after each child exited to ask if I'd had enough.

"Do people still listen to punk music?" one boy, with a partially shaved head and gaping holes in his ears, asked. I told him yes and listed the few I could think of, which he answered with a discouraging sneer.

"Are there flying cars?" one young boy, bald and grinning, asked, which Lionel later told me the boy asked every new arrival. I told him not yet, but soon, the scientists were on the edge of a breakthrough and he clapped and laughed.

"Did you know my mother?" one quiet girl asked, her neck at a strange slant that seemed to give her reticence an odd curiosity. "She used to give piano lessons." But I had to tell her no, I'd played the flute in middle school, but never the piano.

In all, I felt woefully unable to provide anything of use or interest, and eventually—perhaps word spread that I seemed to know little

about scientific or cultural trends, or of other people in the community—they quit coming.

"There weren't as many people here when I got here," Lionel told her, "but I felt the same way, like I didn't know anything. But then this one kid, Jimmy O'Leary, asked me if Ted Williams, who played for the Red Sox, lived up to his promise, and I got to tell him that yeah, he did. And that felt good."

It was a while after I showed up, a time of relative quiet, with the arrival of only a single, new kid, just six years old, that the first angel appeared and took someone away. Patty Ziegler—who in life was a renowned babysitter and in death still watched after some of the younger children—told the story, from atop the pitcher's mound, all of us crowded around at her feet.

Lionel and I were inseparable by then and we sat together near the back of the assembly. If you had asked some of the more gossipy girls, they might have said there was something going on between us, but we were just friends.

"We were playing Monopoly," Patty began. "I had just landed on Broadway and was trying to figure out if I had enough money to buy it. When all the sudden this guy walks into Emily's grave, which is weird enough, right? I mean, like an adult. Bald and a little fat. And this guy is dressed in this big red robe, tied with a rope around the middle, and he also had, get this, wings."

This was the part all of us, having heard the story third hand, had been waiting for. A ripple of something—disbelief, astonishment, hope—worked its way through the crowd.

"When he walked into Emily's grave," Patty continued, "the wings brushed up against her door and they got kind of dirty, but, also, some of them were already sort of brown. Like, I mean, they weren't all white or whatever to start with. And his robe was red."

"You already said that," someone called out from the audience.

"It was an angel," Patty said, cutting to the chase. "And he took Emily to Heaven."

The graves were all abuzz with speculation. Brian, and his Bibles, were in high demand. Patty told the story over and over and it got better and better. I heard it at least six times. The angel began to glow, to grow larger, to utter a few words in a strange language that changed each time Patty told the story. I took to walking around to different graves, to listen and collect various theories and questions.

"How do we know he took her to Heaven?"

"Or that he was even an angel?"

"Patty didn't say anything about a halo?"

"Didn't Emily take Latin in school?"

I stopped by Lionel's grave on one of my walkabouts. He was throwing his tattered baseball up at his ceiling and catching it with his glove.

"What if Patty and Emily are just playing a joke?" I said. "Like Emily is hiding somewhere, waiting to laugh at us all."

"No, Lionel said, dodging the ball as it hit the ceiling and came back down at a weird angle. "I saw Rachel sobbing in her grave yesterday. Emily wouldn't do that to her."

"You think she had some kind of connection to Heaven?"

Lionel was about to answer when a big group went running past. One kid, Mikey Lewis, stuck his head in and yelled, "They're going to take apart Emily's casket."

Caskets were just about the only thing most kids had in the way of property down here. They were generally considered off limits to all but their owners. It struck me as a sign that things had reached some kind of pitch. Lionel and I joined the pack and raced along to Emily's grave.

When we got there, Rachel was lying on her sister's casket, her arms and legs clamped around its sides.

"You wouldn't," she screamed, but then two older boys stepped up and gently plucked her off the casket and placed her to the side, while the rest of the mob, armed with rocks, descended upon the casket and broke it into pieces.

"Stop!" I screamed at them, but nobody paid any attention to me. I ran over and hugged Rachel, who had curled up against the wall.

When the mob was done, the casket lay in pieces on the dirt floor, rusted nails sticking out, the fabric torn, the little pillow and all its stuffing ripped out. Everyone, finally coming to their senses, solemnly filed out of the room. What were they hoping to find is anybody's guess. A secret radio transmitter tuned to a celestial frequency? A ticket stub for a one way trip to Heaven?

Rachel suddenly straightened up. Then, on all fours, she scrambled across the dirt floor and picked a broken board up. There, underneath it, was the long lost Monopoly iron piece.

She held it up and started to laugh, her teary eyes growing wide with the memory of her sister.

The conjecturing went on for some time, back and forth, back and forth, all of us transformed into a philosopher, a theologian, an investigator of impossible truths, but all the while, none of us said what it was we were all really thinking, that we wanted the angel to come back, that we wanted to be next, to hold his hand, or cling to his wings, to be led off, or up, or in whatever direction Heaven might lie.

When they weren't engaged in debate, everyone did their best to make themselves desirable should the angel come back. The girls dug out old jewelry they had been buried in—earrings, locket, bracelets—and put back on their tights, their cute shoes that pinched their toes. They pinned their hair with barrettes. The boys put on vests, buttoned their jackets, combed their hair into a neat part with their fingers.

I tried telling everyone that it defied the very idea of Heaven for the angel to be even nominally interested in such surface details, but then one day I walked into Lionel's grave to see him literally spit shining his shoes. He grinned sheepishly at me and then put his shoes back on, almost falling over as he hopped in place.

Everyone did what they could to cover their sicknesses, their old wounds and deformities, but they took solace in remembering that

Emily had one of the more disfigured faces among us, and she had been the first to go.

Then one day, atop the pitcher's mound, Kyle Bordeaux, a beefy boy with a rat tail and three missing fingers, told the story of the second angel's coming.

"I was in Brian's room with him. Just hanging out. He was telling me about the Bible and about angels." Kyle held up a worn Bible. A page fell loose and fluttered to the ground.

Opening it, he said, "This is from Exodus 3:2. 'There an angel of the lord appeared to him in fire flaming out of a bush. As he looked on, he was surprised to see that the bush, though on fire, was not consumed.' And so Brian was reading that to me and then, like he had called it or something, in walks this angel lady."

"It was a chick?" someone in the crowd asked.

"The most beautiful woman I've ever seen," Kyle said, spitting a little in his exuberance. "She's wearing this dark purple robe and she has wings that sort of curve around her."

"What color?" someone yelled.

"This color," Kyle said and from his inside vest pocket, he withdrew a large feather, white as snow. "And she walks right past me, takes Brian's hand, and then they just sort of disappear, leaving only this feather behind." Then, in a voice unnecessarily somber, he said, "Brian's in Heaven now."

There was a run on Brian's Bible collection, the kids who had originally given him their Bibles claiming they had only lent it to him, that they deserved it back. A fight, the first anyone could remember in our graveyard world, broke out over the last copy and it only ended when Blake Pearson, a large, rarely seen boy with a half-caved skull, waded into the fracas and separated the quarreling would-be-Bible-thumpers and took the book for himself.

When I was first diagnosed with leukemia, my born-again aunt sent me a card with an angel on the front. It was supposed to be a reassuring image, but even then I related angels with a trip to

Heaven, with death, and I wasn't ready to die yet. When I quit crying, my mom called my aunt and asked her to refrain from any more cards depicting heavenly messengers.

But now that we were all dead, and Heaven seemed like a way better option, angels were all anyone cared to talk about. All through the cemetery, as if overnight it had turned into a monastery, I could hear people reading aloud their newest biblical angel findings.

"For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct."

"For God commands the angels to guard you in all your ways."

"For my angel is with you, and he is the custodian of your lives."

"But the angel of the Lord went down into the furnace with Azariah and his companions, drove the fiery flames out of the furnace."

"And how, when we cried to the lord, he heard our cry and sent an angel who led us out of Egypt. Now here we are at the town of Kadesh at the edge of your territory."

When I recited to Lionel all the ones I could remember, he mulled them over in his quiet way and then said, "Those don't add up to much, do they?" and I had to agree, that all together they made profoundly little sense.

Sometime after Brian's angel, it was discovered that Jenny Cook was missing.

"I kept going to her grave," said her best friend, Michelle Macintosh, "but she wasn't there."

We fanned out down the tunnels. We searched the few small caves, the big cavern, but really, there weren't that many places to look, and we all knew she was gone, that, when none of us were looking, an angel had come for Jenny. This unseen event left many of us with a strange sense of dread. With no direct sightings of the angel's descent and Jenny's peaceful ascendance, the disappearance had a whiff of abduction to it.

Katy Long, who really was abducted and killed in a field on the edge of town, organized a complex buddy system so that no child would be alone should another angel come, so that all disappearances would have a second-hand record of their happening, a verified accounting of where the children supposedly went, and with whom.

There was a lull after Jenny. It felt to those of us still walking through the mud of our second life, that we had perhaps been left behind, that the children who were taken were specifically chosen, that those remaining were not deemed worthy. A quiet depression fell over the cemetery. Some of the children began to curse the appearance of the angels. It hadn't been easy to find contentment in their new dirty lives, their disfigurements frozen on their bodies, and the angels only served to raise their hopes, to give them cause to think maybe there was something else, something better. But when the angels didn't show, that hope dissipated and it was hard to find a good word directed toward the supposed heavenly guides.

To ease the somber mood, Lionel organized a stickball game. He visited me first, telling me he needed a girl to help with recruitment, and then the two of us went grave by grave, urging the children to forget about the angels, to set aside thoughts of Heaven and to come play, come be kids. The fact that I didn't know the first thing about the sport didn't lessen my excitement. Just seeing the joy in Lionel's eyes was enough for me. His happiness was contagious and before long we had recruited a full two team's worth of stickballers. He assigned positions, explained rules, personally escorted players to the field for the big game, scraping little marks in the dirt to show them their position.

And it worked. No one talked about the angels. Instead, they lobbed cheers at their teammates, slid into home base, dove for balls, called strike one, two, three in perfect unison.

Then, during the fifth inning, Scotty Herring hit a pop fly and all eyes turned toward the cavern's domed ceiling as the ball soared toward it, barely stopping short in its arc to fall back toward the

pitcher's mound, toward Lionel's outstretched glove. I called out to cheer him on, to assure him he had it. It was only when the ball thudded into Lionel's glove that we realized an angel, clad in a burgundy robe, with wings so enormous they left trailings in the dirt, had appeared to escort Scotty from home plate toward first.

The angel had Scotty by the hand and they were walking toward the scratched dirt marking first base. Scotty was smiling the biggest smile his face could hold. Half way to first, with all the children frozen in their respective positions, Scotty held his hand to his heart and his eyes lit up with wonder and it appeared as though he might say something, but then he, and the angel, were gone, a swirl of already-settling dust the only trace they were ever there.

We all dug in to wait. The angels would come for us all, was the general consensus. Patience was our new motto. Someone even carved the word into the wall of a tunnel.

And sure enough, the angels did come. It was never a sudden downpouring of heavenly light, a swarm of winged messengers descending with open arms, but their appearance became a regular facet of our lives. Billy Jenkins, Hayley Montgomery, Max Nadler, Felicity Remnick and a dozen other children were all escorted from their graves by angels, each of the events dutifully re-told by their friends and "buddies." More feathers were procured. One especially daring child, a sixteen year old with a twisted leg named Terrence Rutherford, who hobbled from grave to grave to show off his find, ripped a piece of tattered robe from an angel as the angel walked away with another child.

Speculation about the particulars of Heaven, once a taboo subject, became a popular pastime.

"Just pools and pools of Skittles," Nathan Green said.

"They give you a new puppy every day and he licks your face and cuddles with you," Samantha Trout said.

"You get your hair back," I said, sitting in my casket with Lionel, our backs against opposite ends, the soles of our feet touching.

"You can play stickball all day, every day," Lionel said.

"Come on, you can do better than that."

"With all the greatest players from all of history. Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson, Eddie Matthews, Joe DiMaggio, Lou Gehrig, Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays."

"Okay, okay."

"At Wrigley Field. And all the hotdogs you can eat."

In time, there were only a dozen children left—not including me and Lionel—and we all congregated in the cavern. We sat in a circle and we waited.

The first angel appeared in the middle of the circle and reached down to help Melissa Sylvery to her feet.

Another angel, a female, making her entrance later in the gap left by Melissa, took the hand of Ian Meenie. The angel spread her wings and then enclosed Ian in them, which all of us who remained agreed, without saying anything, was how we wanted to be escorted, wrapped tight in an angel's feathered embrace.

Ten more angels appeared, leaving behind shallow whorls and a few feathers, until it was just Lionel and I left. We held hands tight. There was the sound of trickling water, but otherwise the cemetery was as quiet as either of us had ever known it. There were no echoing footsteps, no violin notes, no giggling, no tapping of the little metal dog down Monopoly avenues.

Then Lionel turned and he kissed me—our first kiss. And I kissed him back, a soft kiss, reaching for his other hand, and when we parted, the angel was there. Dressed in a brown robe, his feathers verging on golden, glowing dimly. The cavern walls seemed to shrink around us, as if the cemetery were taking one last deep breath.

Then the angel extended both his hands and Lionel and I each took one. The angel's hands were huge and weathered, dirt in their many creases. And inside our chests our hearts began racing, which felt, despite the long absence, like the most natural thing in the world.

We walked a few steps with the angel and then, without realizing we had done so, disappeared.

I don't know what happened to our graves after we left, but it is still hard for me to imagine them empty. Instead, when I think of them, I see them filling back up. I see children, their heads misshapen, their faces road-rashed, their limbs missing or crooked, opening up their caskets to find themselves in a limbo stranger and dirtier than they could have ever imagined.

And I want to tell them to have faith.

