

20,000 Years of The Apartment For The Dead

by Poppy Lavelikov

It was the first snow day that Ricky'd had in his adult life. Work had called and he was a free man because nobody wanted to get up and buy anything. He pulled out his bong, performed two ceremonies with it, and waited for his roommates to get up. After listening to a few Rest Monster tapes he played at least once a week, he heard Narvis singing downstairs. It was the same song every day, with different words and a different tune. Something about drinking eyeballs, something about a thousand years in stone, a bit where he'd lose patience with sounding poetic and croon in an Irish accent about buttholes subsuming themselves into a mobius fart tunnel. Ricky didn't know if Narvis did this to alert the others to his being awake and bored, or if it was a nervous tic, like when they'd hear him yelling "fuck me to death, God" from his room after he'd said he was going to sleep.

Ricky went downstairs and offered Narvis the ceremonial bong, which he acted like he didn't want, but hit so hard that twenty minutes later he called in to work. They were laughing about how they would never make rent when Dane came out of his room and grabbed the bong before he even looked up at the other two.

Seven hours later it was getting dark out and they'd eaten nothing but grilled sandwiches from the liquor deli down the street. Their rate of speech had hit three sentences an hour, and every time one of them put on some music, the others would wish they had the strength to make fun of it or ask if it could get turned off. Often the music was really good, but they had a tough time with any good that wasn't their own.

Frost hit the windows and turned the living room, lit amber by cheap hippie bulbs, into a facsimile of Christmas. Narvis started complaining about how his record player was "pretty cheap. This

hash-head pill girl from Florida gave it to me because she was moving and had way too much money, so it's better than nothing, I guess." It was in vogue at the time to make fun of yourself for being annoyed by anything other than a bullet in the head, or being raped by foreign military (back in the day people were beaten for complaining so they never had to catch themselves doing it, or so the legends of Dane's parents had told), so Narvis caught himself, feeling like the whole internet was watching his affluent life, and said "Well, you know, there are people dying everywhere, so great. Whatever."

"Let's say a quick prayer for all of the people dying all over the world," Ricky said, picking up a stick of incense burning on the coffee table and performing the sign of the cross.

Narvis laughed the way he would whenever he thought he was onto something really cosmic and lucrative. "Yeah, we should start praying for the constant death in the world. Never stop. Then we'd actually be doing something with our lives."

Ricky hit the bong. "It's kind of Buddhist, that's cool."

"Shit," Narvis said while he stared at his records, not wanting to hear a single one but knowing that the right one would make him look like a genius for picking it, "Buddhists don't even really do that. Most temples or sects or whatever will pray over a bad incident, or for suffering in general, or even just for nothing at all, but we'd probably be the only people who totally dedicated themselves to ushering people into death."

"I'm down," said Dane.

Now they were on to something and they knew it. Dane had no reason to lie because he didn't know what he wanted, so he couldn't manipulate things with his opinion. In the whole time Narvis had known him, Dane had mostly approved of snacks and movies.

The next day they went to the vintage clothing shop downtown where the girl with the cute blue hair from Narvis's job worked one day a week. She wasn't there, and Narvis almost suggested that they come back another day, until he realized that they were about to start a new religious sect and that it would probably be hard for him

to seem attractive to anyone with blue hair after that. People with blue hair fuck under posters of religious figures, he figured, but that's about as far as they take it. They found three matching cowls in the back of the room, deep burgundy with the smell of a Catholic men's club: cigars, wood, talcum, and brisket. They bought them, and when the checkout guy asked what they had planned, Dane said "We're starting a cult." Ricky said "Hail Kranthus."

They got home and were going to start praying, but the apartment looked too much like an apartment to feel holy. There was a framed picture of a rapper hanging on the wall, taken while he walked through a graveyard looking orphan-sad. Trash Mountain, the huge mound of banana peels and cans of beans in the kitchen, was alive and well. Ricky suggested that they spruce the place up and get it at least up to "temple casual" status before they got to praying. Narvis suggested that since he didn't have any aesthetic values at all, they should do whatever they wanted to the place, and he'd start praying for the dying because they should set off with at least some recognition of immateriality. While the other two went to the hardware and garden store, Narvis stayed in his room and tried to list off every way that people were dying across the globe, giving a little bow and whisper of "time to let go" to each one, starting with war. He got to "death by stray bullet near Italian Wedding" before he fell asleep.

At the hardware store, Ricky and Dane had to explain for quite some time that they were not playing a prank, that their hoods weren't associated with a radical nationalist group, and that they did in fact want a lot of large rocks and reams of silk. The salesman asked how they were going to get the rocks home, and so Dane pulled his phone out of his cowl and called Narvis. "Hey, so we're trying to get a bunch of rocks for the living room, but we don't know how to get them back from the store."

"You're buying rocks at a store? We live by the fucking mountains! Let's just pilgrimage up and down the mountains, pray for the dead the whole time, and it'll be like an initiation through weight lifting or

something. Plus maybe some people will see us and this thing will start to take off."

Dane bristled. "I didn't think the point of this was to get noticed."

"I mean take off like more people will join us to pray. Then maybe we can take donations and it'll be easier to make rent. I don't know, we'll figure all of that stuff out later."

Ricky and Narvis threw their backs out during the rock pilgrimage, so finally they borrowed Dane's brother's car and went back to the hardware store to buy the rocks. They spent a day arranging the rocks into a pond and sealing the gaps with caulk and rubber cement, then took buckets of snow in from outside and let it melt until it formed a clear pool.

"I think we should keep this water fresh. Water is like a crystal, so information can pass through it, and we can kind of use it as the center of our practice, so the souls transitioning can be cleansed in it," Dane said.

"Great idea," Narvis said, ripping the bong. "Ah, Jesus, should we keep smoking weed? Are people going to take us seriously if we're high this whole time?"

Dane exhaled sharply through his nose. "Why would people need to take us seriously?"

Ricky looked up from his phone. "The dead people need to take us seriously."

Dane nodded. "Yeah, that's what this is all about."

"Okay," Narvis said, opening and closing every cabinet in the kitchen over and over again, knowing that he had no food, "we'll do this by the book."

Two years later, the apartment was filled with jungle brush and strange, mostly amphibious and reptilian, wildlife. The guys had accumulated a number of humidifiers, and the atmosphere was stifling for a while until it got people into a slow religious drift. The walls were covered with stone reliefs of ancient faces, and vines criss-crossed the ceiling.

They'd accumulated a team of followers, and there had been enough buzz that people in the community came by to visit the temple apartment regularly. Ricky had become the de facto doorman, greeting the public and hinting with his manner at the reverence necessary for being in there. There was a man in the corner who got a newspaper delivered to the temple apartment, and cut out the obituaries every day and stitched them together into what was becoming a thick and huge quilt. People would walk past him as he sat in a chair they'd found by the dumpster in the alley out back, and bless themselves by touching some of the snowmelt in the stone pool to their foreheads. Occasionally somebody would come by who'd just lost a loved one, thinking that this all-purpose port of realms would make more of a difference than visiting the gravesite. Other people just seemed to like the idea, or atmosphere, and showed up to burgeon the energies and hum a little.

Narvis was in the constant process of organizing live streams and documentaries with film students from the University in town. When he wasn't down on his knees, touching his prayer beads and muttering with well-practiced sincerity, he was shuffling past worshippers, excusing himself to take phone calls where he'd back young kids with cameras into a corner of logic and get them to cancel their trips to go ski so that they could come to the temple apartment for what he said were really important days. "It's not a normal weekend here, though. This weekend we're hooking a polygraph to the crystal in the kitchen and seeing if it jumps when we try to talk to tsunami victims through it. Well, I'm sure if you guys are really in love you can take that trip later, when there's not so much going on."

The crystal in the kitchen was constantly being slathered with home crystal-growth kits, and was sprouting orange shiny lumps all over. It looked like an infected geode wound, but many visitors were cosmic enough to assume that it contained all of the energy of release and forgiveness that they figured the apartment was meant for.

Dane had stopped talking after a year of prayer. His diet had been reduced to rice and samples of protein powder that a couple of grocery store employees would bring him when they came to meditate. Sometimes Ricky thought that the people meditating weren't contemplating all of the deaths in the world, at all, but since there's no x-ray for soul searching, he let it slide. There was one guy, though, who talked about tantra on his first visit, and after that Ricky noticed that the man appeared to be doing groin clenches whenever he was in lotus. Dane was beloved by the people who visited them, because his stoicism held the room down like a bowling ball in a rubber mat gravity demonstration, and his beard was rugged and huge enough that if you got a second Dane you could have primal woodsman sex with him in the first Dane's whiskers.

It wasn't until the tenth year, at which point Ricky had gotten fat for reasons that nobody understood and Narvis was doing a press circuit explaining (in much nicer robes) why their work was important, that Dane fell in love with a ghost. He'd been immersing every tendon in his body in the circuitry of death. In his silence nobody ever found this out, but he'd taught himself to stop breathing for hours on end. He wasn't sure, himself- maybe he was taking microbreaths that he couldn't feel the wind of- but it seemed like everything ceased, and he could sit there in that calm, becoming dumb as everything unessential in his body phased out into a red wall of warmth. He saw places that he hadn't thought existed. He found his analog from 17,000 years ago praying inside of a white pyramid in Kathmandu, and saw how the fireballs being catapulted through the air outside were stopped in midair by a beam coming from the top of the structure. He projected himself through neck-deep water swallowing a city, and put his fingers on the foreheads of every floating corpse he saw. He prayed for the first man to be killed by a bird, and the first bird to be killed by man. When they asked him why he had come so far, he grew a cloud out of his chest and rode it away before he could scare them.

None of it had felt real, though. It was a perfect simulation that Dane was running. He had been so singularly devoted to covering all ground and being respectful of the specificity of his prayer that he'd mastered the formation of the world's history, both real and imagined, in his head. It had seemed that way.

When he started praying for Japan in the 1960s, he felt contact. Noriko had been pinned against the wall of a suburban apartment building by a bus that slid on a patch of ice. She thanked Dane for visiting her and granting her soul belated guidance and absolution, but then did what no simulation had done before, because Dane hadn't programmed his prayer simulations to do it: she asked what she could do for him in return.

His modesty didn't allow for this, so he shrugged her away and started praying for victims of drone strikes from 2013, but she followed, tapping on his third shoulder, bringing him fruit that he could nearly smell. She pursued him through the circuits of death, past the Battle of the Bulge, weaving in and out of the classrooms of Columbine, until he realized that he would never simulate anything this troubling to himself, unless his prayer had driven him mad. He didn't feel mad, because he liked Noriko and was only resisting the questions that come with loving what you think is a hologram.

He found the polygraph machine that Narvis had stuffed in the closet years before, and was getting ready to attach it to the crystal in the kitchen, which at this point was starting to break through the stucco ceiling, when he pictured her clearly and the needle on the machine jumped. She assured him that the crystal didn't mean anything, and that death was everywhere, so she never needed to meet him anyplace special.

For years, their love and Dane's tenuous grip on his sense of stability stayed hidden in his breathing, which became richer. When he worried that meditating while in love would detract from his ability to focus on healing the lost dead, Noriko would bring the dead to him and make his job easier. She could communicate on his behalf better than he could, having a dead tongue and all.

Dane broke his vow of silence to ask Suzette, a regular at the temple apartment who had suffered a traumatic brain injury and devoted herself to calm ever since, to marry him with his beloved ghost. He and Noriko had gone to a dozen gods of death, and to spiraling mandalas that made and sealed laws that superseded all of the laws of the Earth, but they realized while talking with each other and the Black Red Demon Lord Gaping Maw that since he was a living man, their union would not be complete until the living facet of the law had been completed.

The ceremony was a great success, despite the nature of a trans-ethereal kiss being hard to convey in a way that let onlookers coo. Noriko's relatives were there, which was tough because it was their first time meeting Dane, and they weren't sure if they wanted their daughter shacking up with a mortal vessel. He eventually charmed them with his command over all forms of intangible energy. Narvis even made it back from Africa, where he'd been setting up a satellite temple ("Closer to the action"), and delivered a long speech that ended with him trying to balance the budget out loud to himself. Dane's habit of silence prevented him from doing anything about this. Ricky, who had always thought of Dane as a brother, DJ'd the night with a mix of gamelan music that the uninitiated in attendance found grim.

Eventually, long after the original three tenants of the apartment temple had passed on, their disciples and the disciples of their disciples became embroiled in legal efforts to purchase the apartment, which was one section of a split Victorian house, so that it could operate independently of the whims of the management company that owned it. After 30 years and a lot of canvassing for donations, they won. Their timing could not have been better, as the crystal in the kitchen had begun to pierce the roof over the second floor, and the security deposit from the initial rental was now completely out of the question.

People from all across the world gathered there, bringing their respective bowing forms and theories on spectral technology. Like an opium den colliding with a particle accelerator, the small rooms

and downstairs half-bath were filled with bushels of sage burning on top of biohazardous bulbs spinning perpetually in zero-point field manipulators. Rezden Parak, the Tesla of the 2100s, did most of his pre-doctoral research there, developing the origins of what would eventually become the world's first plug-n-play brain mapping hardware. When he was at the apartment temple, he said that his goal had been to "see which parts of the brain didn't like meditating on death, and then fill them with something else." Onlookers said that his prerogative looked more like smoking pot and staring at diodes.

The world was changing fast, and within a thousand years, it was beyond repair. Humanity had temporarily banded together in a wartime-style effort to cover the wounds with elbow grease and engineering, but the spread of democracy had made it too easy for a dumb undulating mass to demand its favorite treats, and despite the claims that futurists had made for centuries that "everybody will make necessary sacrifices when the true ecological shit hits the fan," the severity of things was brushed under the rug by all but the most anxious.

Against the desire of the scientists who developed the ARK program to leave most of the population behind, mercy and the threat of a ten billion person class action suit led to the development, in 2,712, of spaceships so big and sustainable that one broadcasting VR shared persona described the fleet as "The Godfucker Archipelago." When they took off, only a few groups stayed behind, one of which was the devout membership of the temple apartment, who said that somebody now had to stay by the Earth's deathbed and whisper into her ear.

With most of the population gone and the kitchen crystal jutting half a kilometer into the sky, surrounded by the moss of the city's processors, the devout folks praying in the living room encountered a silence that made every call by one of the remaining and malformed birds cut through their minds, no matter how precise their meditations on emptiness got. To keep from going mad, there was often casual conversation held upstairs in Ricky's old room. "If

Dane was right, should we be praying for deaths that we can't know about? Deaths in the stars? Deaths of the stars?" or "This room looks exactly like how I pictured Ricky's style when my parents talked about him when I was growing up" or "What do you think Dane meant by 'The Crystal doesn't do anything'?" or "Did Narvis really hide his sword here?" "Nah, he never said that, people just twist real teachings over time to confuse you."

Halfway across the planet, deep in the pyramid that Dane had seen during its prime, 17,000 years ago, the first inhabitants of Earth got the all-clear signal, and started to crack the mountain-shaped shell off of their home.

