Wrapping Kevin

by Tiff Holland

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It was his last wish, to be a mummy, so we gave it a shot. I would have preferred cremation, an urn like my father's, but that would have been a waste. Dad has sat in a cardboard box marked “fragile” for seventeen years now, besides, my brother always had a sense of drama and he had that pouty look on his face when he asked, the one that reminded me of when he was ten and used it to make us all wait outside the multiplex in the freezing rain for the third installment of the Star Wars series. He was kind enough to slip us Milkduds during the movie. Pressed them like secrets hand-to-hand in the dark. He had good points.

This is what we told ourselves when we begin the mummification process. Of course, there was no place to take him to have this done. The funeral director shuddered when I mentioned it. Finally, I looked it up on the internet. The steps are simple:

1. First, purify the body by washing it with water.

I wasn't crazy about seeing him naked, but, as my husband Ray reminded me, it wasn't about me. We covered Kevin's crotch with a washcloth and gently sponged his alabaster skin. I could see his veins running up and down his arms like the off-ramps of freeways, and I thought about what a sickly kid he'd been. He started eating healthy after his first heart attack, all beans and bran muffins. Still no exercise, but then, he didn't have the body for it. He had no muscle. So, step two was easy, physically at least.

2. Make an incision on the left side of the body, below the heart.

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It was messy. I won't lie to you there. And he was my brother. Once I took up the blade, I had to put a cloth over his face, too. I kept expecting him to sit up, yell it was all a joke, to stop. Which I did since I passed out.

According to the directions the next steps are as follows:

3. Remove the liver, lungs, intestines, and stomach. Leave the heart intact, as the deceased will require the heart to travel to the spirit world.

When I came to, Ray had already taken care of number three, which I read over and over in an attempt to get myself together. I kind of liked the idea of leaving the heart intact for its travel to the spirit world, but it had failed him here, so what good could it do in the spirit world? And then I thought of all the mummies ever. Some of them had to die of heart attacks like Kevin. Were their bodies broken down on the side of some spirit world highway, waiting for a jump?

I was better prepared for step four. The reading helped, and once the organs were removed, they no longer seemed a part of Kevin. So we proceded:

4. Put each of the 4 organs you have removed into its own canopic jar.

I had looked up canopic before we started, when I first printed out instructions. Still, I felt clueless. I ended up using some of our grandmother's old Mason jars. The intestines were huge, huger than I expected despite my high school biology class but they fit, with a little pushing and prodding, into a giant-size pickle jar from Costco. But I couldn't manage number five. I reminded myself over and over of my promise, but what sort of culture or religion or whatever thinks you'll need your heart in the afterlife, but not your brain?

5. Insert the hooked tool into the deceased's nostril and pull the brain out through the nose. The brain can be discarded.

Discarded! This infuriated me. I thought of everything, all the thoughts and memories embraced by the folds of the brain. I couldn't do it, and I didn't let Ray, either, which he took as a relief after several minutes of holding the tool in front of each nostril, twisting it this way and that, then standing back and scratching his head. Instructions, it seemed, were insufficient to such a task. We moved on to number six.

6. Liberally cover the body in natron (a natural salt, composed of sodium carbonate and sodium bicarbonate with traces of sodium chloride and sodium sulfate). The natron will dehydrate the body and allow the blood to drain from it.

This was easier once, with some help from a friend who teaches high school biology, I mixed some of the stuff up. Kevin liked lotion. I paused over the place Dad broke Kev's arm when he was twelve. I had never really gotten a good look at the jagged scar just above the wrist, both bones broken, not the kind of fall-from-a-tree accident we were coached to tell Children's Services, but still an accident. Dad hadn't meant it. His fist was meant for my other brother, Mattie, who *was* doing drugs like Dad said, and mouthing off, which started the whole thing, the tussle on the street that led to Kev's trip to the hospital and Mattie going to live with Gram.

The scar was almost invisible after so much time, and Kevin preferred long sleeves. I traced it with my finger like a palm reader, and then took up the lotion again. He had always liked to be touched, and as our touch and the lotion warmed his body, it seemed less like he was dead, more like he might really be taking some kind of journey. Seven, however, was a bitch:

7. Allow the body to drain for 40 days.

I mean, forty days. If this were a Christian ritual, I would expect some sort of Flood connection. As it was, we left his body in the shed and worried that the buzzards circling overhead were going to tip off the neighbors because despite all the “lotion” and the lack of organs, there was a smell. Maybe we should have removed his brain, I don't know, but by then, he truly wasn't Kevin, and I resented the giant black wings casting shadows over the back yard while I tried to push my daughter on the swing or throw the dog the ball. Finally, I found myself inside, sitting in the recliner, watching old movies, trying to avoid the ones I knew Kevin would have liked. Until the fortieth day, that day we watched The Mummy on DVD, the original not a remake, and we started the last steps of the process:

8. When the body is fully dehydrated, wrap natron-soaked gauze or bandages around it. Make sure to cover the body completely from head to toe.

Ray and I had some experience with bandage wrapping having both spent at least one childhood Halloween in similar costume. There was some discussion as to whether the toes should be wrapped separately or as part and parcel of the feet. We finally decided to wrap each toe, although by then we were pretty exhausted. We waited a few days and thought about step number nine:

9. Decorate the mummy with appropriate designs or mask that fits the social station the deceased had in life.

Ray left this last part for me, and I was glad to have the time alone with Kevin. I looked through old pictures. I resisted the urge to use a sharpie marker to draw on a face. I considered dressing Kevin as one of the dungeons and dragons characters he had loved in his youth or maybe Luke Skywalker, or even Rocky Horror as he

had spent every Friday night his senior year onstage at the local theater, in black fishnets and a wig doing the Time Warp while the audience members held opened newspapers over their heads and threw rice and toast into the air.

In the end, I dug out his Tuxedo. He had season tickets to the local dinner theater and never missed a show. I tied his red bow tie over the bandages at his neck. The odor had subsided. The bandages had stiffened. It was almost as if he had been in an accident and was in a full body cast. I found myself talking to Kevin the Mummy.

“You look good,” I told him, and he did.

The bandages bulked him up some. He didn't seem such a skinny runt, and the tux, which I'd had cleaned, while frayed, still looked good, appropriate somehow for such a journey. “I'm glad I left your brain,” I whispered at the side of his head, as I balanced his glasses on the bridge of his bandaged nose.