The Funeral
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They waited until dark to have the funeral. Everyone from the village was there to mourn and share memories of Jonathan Hayes, who had fallen from his long struggle of sickness. Tonight they will send him away to help rid his burdens.

The moon was just over the horizon with a rigid glow over the restless waves and backwash that came from distance depths beyond the villager’s imagination. The winds were unusually rough, but they would not cause the event to be delayed because, as many would say, it was a perfect night for the proceedings. Many villagers hoped for a night to be sent away like this. After all, it would be hard to disagree, given the tradition and influence it holds over the village.

The church bells rang, and soon the congregation filed out of the oak double-doors of the village church. The group walked the worn cobbled path that wound through the rocky hills to the beach where they would commence their final adieus to their fellow village man.

They were led by the priest, followed by the pallbearers who carried the fine-sanded coffin carefully through the dips and turns of the hill. Following close behind was a woman draped in black, walking hand and hand with her children. She wore no veil,
and the grief and sobs that shook her for the past week showed clearly and stung more as the strong wind hit her face. The children had stayed close to her side since their father gave his last breath, and since that day they have not spoken a word.

Their silence has been the talk of the village as whisperings spread as to why the children have said nothing. Some conclude that the children are grief-stricken and would never know normalcy again. Few believed it to be a phase; yet, all have neglected to yield consolation to the children, for they, as children, were never given solace on their parent’s deaths.

The group soon arrived at the sanction beach to find rows of torches lit to border the section of beach and a long, natural pine canoe where the pallbearers would place the coffin. The sand proved to be difficult for the pallbearers as they all struggled on toward the water until the coffin was hovering above the canoe. Then they slowly lowered the remains of Mr. Hayes for his final goodbye.

The priest waited for rest of the group to descend from the path until he began the final service. He cracked open his scripture and looked down at the words that he had long ago memorized for a service he would not cared to admit how many times he has recited. With his hands holding the bottom of his
book and his tilted up high, he began the service.

“We here today are gathered to deliver our final goodbyes to our son, Jonathan,” roared the raspy voice of the priest.

“Beloved he is by the lord, and devout Jonathan was to he, we shall give rest to Jonathan’s soul. We will release his soul, and give his devoted love to God.”

The priest paused to eye his congregation who clung to every word. They loved the spectacle of this service. All were curious to see what would unfold, and to hear the next words of the priest as his pause was for effect. When his eyes rested on the black draped women, he continued.

“For Jonathan was loved by us all, and it is with love that we are going through very mixed emotions. Still, it should be known that we are sending our beloved Jonathan to a place he shall always feel loved. At the eternal embrace and word of the lord, Jonathan shall be in a place where he will join those who have left us before, and watch among us to make sure we live our lives safe and well until we too shall join him. Jonathan would want us to rejoice this day for him, and to feel happy that his soul will continue on. Though we grieve, we will grieve with bliss and continue on with Jonathan in our hearts. We shall always feel the presence of his love as he will be in presence for those who love
him.”

The sermon continued as the intensity and thrill of the congregation amplified. The night was slowly growing darker and colder, but the heat of torches warmed everyone. With the exception of the priest, no one dared to eye the grieving woman and her children. They all knew what was to come, and they knew that they would have their eyeful during that time.

The black draped woman gazed out into the sea and watched the rough waves make their way to shore as they flattened and ebbed back to the shoreline before the canoe. Silent tears ran down her face and she gripped her children’s hands tighter. She tried to make them look at her, but they would not, even turning away from all images that could be seen by looking down at the sand. Yet, the children tried to understand the words they were hearing.

“For what we do, we do in the name of the lord,” the priest continued. “The lord loves us as we love him. It is the word of God that we send Jonathan to his last resting place by sea. We are looked down upon for what we believe, but the lord looks down upon them, because we fulfill his name and word—not they! And the lord will judge those who follow his word in vain!”

Whispers were heard after the priest’s latest words. It was
known that he had tried to convert the nearby villages to his beliefs, though he could only gather a few followers while he was threatened from others. The village is isolated from other villages by the abundance of hills that surround them and by the endless sea and stretch of beach that the villagers do not visit for many reasons.

Still immune to his words, the woman fixed her gaze upon the coffin as tears were still shining from her face. She did not leave her trance until her right arm was tugged. She looked down to see her daughter staring into her watery eyes.

“Mama, can we leave?”

“No, my dear, we cannot. We have to stay,” said the Mother stroking her daughter blonde hair.

“But why do we have to stay, Mama? Why can’t we leave?” Her son asked, making his mother turn to look into his green eyes.

“Because we must stay, dear. We are not allowed to go. If Papa were not so weak while he was sick, he would have made sure that we were gone, but your Papa was very ill and could find no help. We can do nothing, my dear.”

The children looked away again, and the Mother pulled them into her embrace. Not a soul looked upon them. At this moment, they were alone and isolated—nowhere to flee or to cry
The Mother whispered to her children, “Always remember that I love you. No matter what anyone tells you. Don’t you ever forget how much I love you—Look at me,” and she snatched her children’s chins and forced them to look into her now dried-tear face. “Never forget that I love you, and when you’re older leave this place. Leave this forsaken place! Do you understand me, children? Leave this place!”

“Yes, Mama,” both of her children replied.

The mother fell to her knees to embrace them both again as her hands rested onto their heads. She pressed a kiss on each of their foreheads and expressed her love once more.

By this time the moon was well into the night sky and, like the stars, was being mostly covered by the dark clouds. The ocean was now not as bright as it was when the night first started which left only vast darkness and patches of moon-reflected sea.

“Jonathan was a loving soul,” continued the priest. “He put his love into everyone who stands, but he never loved anyone more than God and his family. An exceptional soul Jonathan was. He never put his love of his wife and his children above the love of the lord. Though some would argue that the word of god says otherwise, that the Lord must come first, we know full well that
the Lord will accept Jonathan into his promised land once we give him passage through sea. For the Lord knows that a man who shares his love is a man to keep.”

The priest spoke every word directly toward the Mother. She did not look at him. She did not have to see to know that his stare was piercing her stature as she could feel his gaze measuring every inch and aspect of her body. She despised the priest; though, she did not always feel this way. For a brief time she was a devout follower, and clung to his words as the congregation was now. That changed when she witnessed her parent’s funeral and was forced to watch when the priest held her by the back of her neck with a stiff grip of his hand. She would never forget those images. Now, she knew that her children would be forced to watch, and they, like her, would never forget the horrific scene.

“Let us now bow our heads and pray for our beloved Jonathan,” said the priest as he closed his book and held out his arms while his eyes were closed. “Dear Father, we come here today to...”

Everyone in the congregation carried on as instructed except for the Mother and her children. She focused on every couple that was there together. Many holding each other close, holding the hands of their children or tightly holding their infants
wrapped in crocheted blankets. She pointed out all of the old men and single men who kept close together. Then, the young women who were not yet married, but kept close to their families and awaited the arrangements of their wedding when they come of age. All had their heads bowed. All followed tradition.

The priest continued with the prayer, “Lord, we ask for you to please take care of Jonathan and watch over him as we know that he will watch over us. We thank thou Lord for thy love and gifts you gave us with Jonathan, and cherish for thy blessings each day. Thank you, Father. Amen.”

“Amen,” resounded the congregation.

At the end of the prayer, the moon was no longer covered by the indiscernible clouds that filled the night sky, and shined a blue haze over the mystical ocean and coffin to give the fine finish a bright glow into the eyes of those who witnessed.

Allowing an operative pause, the priest quickly pushed on, “Lord, we shall prepare our beloved son for his journey.” With a nod to the pallbearers, they moved toward a massive hump in the sand that was covered with a horse blanket, and, once pulled away, it revealed a stockpile of straw and hay. Each of the bearers gathered arms-lengths full of hay and straw, and stuffed around the empty spaces between the coffin and canoe. It took each man
two rounds of gathering and stuffing to complete the task. From there, they assembled to both sides of the canoe.

The Mother grew stiff watching these men stuff the dried grass into the canoe. She could feel the same tension arising from her children as they gripped harder and moved closer to cling. As the priest once again moved his gaze upon her, she knew that he was not the only one staring now. The eyes of the congregation would follow her every move and later speak of their accounts to neighbors and distanced villages who indulged in such talk. She would now be their event; the reason they all gathered in the beginning.

Offering her his left hand, the priest asked aloud, “Mrs. Hayes, will you please join?”

Silence followed. The mother did not move nor did her children. She accepted the priest’s cold stare into her eyes and challenged him with her swollen, red eyes.

The priest persisted with a whisper, “Mrs. Hayes, please join your husband.”

“No,” said the mother in a quieted, cold voice. Her children pulled tighter.

“Mrs. Hayes, if you do not join him, you shall be forced.”

She did not respond, but she did not ease up her stare at
his metallic, blue eyes. The priest grinned from this gesture (as he
viewed it) and decided to push once more.

“Mrs. Hayes—“

“No! I will not step into that canoe!” shouted the Mother,
startling her children and the men behind the priest, and causing a
mass of whispers to spark from the congregation. The only person
unmoved by her cry was the priest who still had his barely visible

crack-of-a-grin.

“Is this the way you choose it to be, Mrs. Hayes?”
whispered the priest, not resigning his focus into hers.

“It’s the only way it shall be. You can fool everyone else
about these funerals, but you’re not fooling me, nor will you fool
my children! I know the reason why you do this!”

“And it seems that reason will be burned with you, too.
Tom, please escort Mrs. Hayes into the canoe and tie her. Also,
Mrs. Hayes, I wouldn’t recommend shouting. After all, what
legacy do you want to leave behind for you children?”

Upon mention of his name, the tallest of pallbearers moved
forward bearing rope around his broad shoulder. The Mother
stood her ground and refused to let he children do the same as
they were now sobbing into her black dress. The bearer was only
few inches from her until she bawled, “Don’t you dare touch me,
Tom! How dare you do this! After what Jon and I have done for you and Mary! How can you do this?"

“It’s tradition, Sarah,” said the tall man with a soft voice. “You knew this day was coming.”

With those words he seized the Mother by her arm, and forced her toward the canoe with her children still latched on to her sides crying more violently and uncontrollably.

The priest took action. “Francis, pull the children away and bring them to me. They shall watch with me just like their mother did years ago.”

The only bearer with a thick beard and heavyset built stepped with arduous strides to retrieve the children.

“Stop this! Stop—No—No! Don’t you take my children! Let go of me—Let go of my children!” Her cries raveled inaudible talks from the congregation. Though everyone was watching the event, many were staring at the priest’s coarse face with concerned looks and worrisome movement.

The priest addressed his congregation, “Do not worry, Mrs. Hayes is gravely grieve-stricken. She is still shocked by our beloved Jonathan’s death. Therefore, we must help her to join his journey so she may be with him when they arrive at the promised land.”
These words seem to put the crowd at ease and silence once again fell upon the congregation.

“Let go—Let go! Don’t do this—This is murder—Murderers—You are all murderers!”

“People who fulfill the word of God are not murderers, but only his children who carry out life and love as he tells us it shall be!” announced the priest. He handed his scripture to the bearded man as he arrived with the children. The priest hands clasped tightly on their shoulders, but he still stared at their mother with the indifferent grin still on his face.

The tall man wrapped his rough arms around the waist of the Mother and hoisted her into the canoe. He kept a firm grasp on her wrist as he pulled the rope off his shoulder to bind her wrist and legs, and then tied the other end of the rope to the bow of the canoe.

She showed no more resistance, but she stared at the priest and whispered, “You wait priest. You, too, will have your day—Yes! Ol’ Chris Jenkins will have his day in which he will be sent out into the sea to confront the lord he solemnly preaches!”

“Yes, Sarah, my day will come. However, unlike you, I will be dead when I am sent to sea.” He kept his eyes fixed upon hers’, and with a few seconds pause, he added, “Enjoy your voyage, Mrs.
Hayes. Don’t worry about your children; they’re in safe hands. I’ll make sure of it."

“May you die alone, Chris! May you not be greeted by one soul upon your death. I pity you,” said the Mother and turned away with tears trailing. The wind was still strong and blew into her face, but she embraced its sorrow and let it wipe away her tears.

“Push it out," commanded the priest. The pallbearers each gripped a side of a canoe with the tall man at the very back-left side carrying a torch. They slowly dragged the canoe until it was well into the water and the ebb of the ocean began to take its course. As it pulled away, the tall man stabbed the torch into the deck of the canoe, causing a fire to slowly ablaze.

The Mother stared out toward the horizon as the canoe floated to vast darkness of the ocean. Soon, flames engulfed the whole canoe. It slowly began to blacken the finish of the coffin, and ashen the black dress of the Mother. Her Children tried to look away, but the stiff grip of the priest hands on their necks prevented them from looking away. The heat of the flames burning their eyes dried their tears before they could streak down their faces.

The congregation watched as the flames slowly took their
course. They expected to see her struggle, and hear her piercing screams to reverberate throughout the beach and over the hills. She did not move nor did she scream.

Before the flames took her, she turned toward her children who could not look away. She tried to give them strength by ignoring the pain to conjure the best smile she could make, then mouthed three small words to her children, which only they understood. There were no tears on her face. Slowly, she became nothing but flames.

A dead silence followed as only the crackle of the flames could be heard, but the priest broke the undesirable silence by announcing to those who would listen, “Now, may Jonathan Charles Hayes rest, and his burdens be no more.”

They all witnessed the canoe of flames drift slowly out to the horizon. The glow of the moon was completely covered, showing only a small circle of opaque clouds in the starless sky as the flames soon turned into a small glow that could only be seen by a short outline of the horizon that the flames illuminated throughout the complete darkness of the ocean.

The event ended and the congregation disbanded. Turning away, they made their way back toward the cobbled path back to the village. The priest produced a wood smoking-pipe from his
pocket and left with the children at his hands, and the pallbearers were the last to follow as they gathered the remaining torches.

Few times, people would look back to see if the ball of orange light could still be seen. The children chose not to look back as the priest hummed a gospel. It was a difficult climb up the mountainous path as the worn stone proved to be tough for footing. However, they soon completed their ascent on top of the hill and walked the straight path back to the village. The wind still blew hard, this time on their backs, and it carried the stench of burned flesh towards their noses, which would remain with the village for a week, however, the visions of the night would remain till they, too, are sent to the promised land by sea.