

The Graveyard of the Dead

I would never normally cut through the cemetery but I was running late. In trouble late. Shoelaces not tied up properly late. I skirted around the corner and straight through the archway. A flock of birds shot up into the air shouting at me as I ran along the old path, gravestones leaning at a funny angle, making me feel as if I'm being watched. It used to be a monastery once, mum had told me, and I shiver as I think of creepy old monks in hooded robes.

The world suddenly turned upside down. Sky where the ground should be. I was flat out on the path, sore-headed, knees scratched. I cursed as I stumbled back to my feet, and saw the shoelace that tripped me snaking on the ground as if they were alive.

That's when I see it. Out of the corner of my eye. Right by the bottom of the nearest gravestone...

A huge, fat snail was sitting on the grass, its gelatinous body rippling in the excretion of its own slime, two gross antenna protruding out of its fabby thickset head. It was staring at me with its eyeless face. "Hello there," it said in a mellow, almost avuncular voice.

I was baffled. Completely baffled. There was no mistaking where the greeting had come from, but I couldn't tell you where its mouth was. I blinked my eyes hard, real hard. When they opened the snail was still there.

"Good morning," it said. "How are you on this fine day?"

I didn't reply, disbelieving my ears and my eyes. I backed away a few paces. I turned around – so that the snail was out of sight, out of mind – and crouched down, head down, my attention fixed on the comfortingly banal task of re-tying my shoelace. One knot. A double not.

But when I looked up tentatively the huge, talking snail was still there. Not only that: it had grown larger, and was growing larger still. I yelped aloud not believing my eyes, for the snail was soon as large as a small toddler, then a gravestone, and larger still. I stood petrified, like the stone monuments all around me. But whilst I was still, it kept mutating, enlarging at a rapid pace. Before long it was so large that it blocked out the sky, and I was cast in its looming shadow.

The ground seemed to vibrate and I realised the now-ginormous snail was speaking again, its voice a hundred times deeper, an amalgamation of foreboding bass tones. It's slimy body pressed against mine, infringing my petrified form, enveloping me in its gelatinous form. Its voice resonated such that I more felt than heard what it said: "Welcome to the Graveyard of the Dead".

The only one three word phrase to describe what happened next: I was engulfed.

All was black.

All was wet.

All was slimy.

"I'm going to be late for school," I thought.

Dripping. Oozing. Trickling.

Swallowing. Breathing. Snoring?

"Hello?" I said.

“Don’t worry. You’re not alone... alone... alone... Trust me.”

Snorts, whistles, grunts. A sigh, a fart, the blow of a wet nose. Once? Twice? Echo.

All of a sudden the place was lit up in bright white. I looked ahead, startled. A rotting face was staring back at me – black gums, worm eaten eyes – atop a half-naked body, semi-putrefied.

“What’s your name?” I didn’t answer. I didn’t blink. “What’s your name!” said the rotting face again, peeling skin, purple and green, gashes for cheeks, half an ear on one side.

“Umm...” I said, and then I vomited. The vomit sprayed onto the rotten-faced man. He was unphased, even as it trickled down his chest, through a maze of thick, grimy hair.

“How old are you? How old are you!”

“I’m, I’m fifteen.”

And then my eyes dilated for the light had dimmed and for the first time I saw other bodies – moving, staring bodies – strewn across the floor, illuminated in the murky, jaundice-yellow light, each at different stages of decay.

The rotten-faced man spoke again: “I’m sorry to tell you this buddy, but you’re dead. Well dead. Dead dead.”

“I’m not dead,” I said.

“That’s what they all say,” muttered a skeleton bent over in one corner.

“I’m not,” I insisted.

“Then why are you here buddy?”

“There – there was a snail.” There was disgruntled mumbling.

“Well I guess if you’re not dead then the Snail will be sending you back soon.”

“Back where?”

“To the material world, of course.”

“Oh.”

“Look, buddy, we’re all dead. Long dead. But is there anything we can do for you while you’re here? Do you want some advice? There’s a lot of experience amongst us.”

“Umm, okay,” I said.

The rotting-faced man turned around and asked around. “Anybody got some advice for our little lad here?”

“Stay away from snails!” one body shouted. Others chuckled, for a disconcertingly long time.

The rotting-faced man shushed them. “Quiet down guys. Has anyone got some genuine advice for our living buddy here?”

“Ooh me!” A withered wrist shot up – withered with age, devoid of life.

“Yes, Maggie. Go ahead then.”

“Well. Firstly, never open an umbrella indoors.”

“Christ Maggie we don’t need your superstition,” said a decaying man from across the room. “We’re already dead.”

“Well this young boy isn't and I'm going to give him my warning. Certain death will befall whoever opens an umbrella indoors. Remember that, boy. Secondly, more importantly,” she said, glaring deliberately across the room at the man who interrupted her before, “never get married.”

“I vouch for that,” said that same man, who I began to suspect was – or had been – Maggie’s husband. “Worst decision of my life.”

Maggie tutted and continued: “Third and lastly, don't get yourself eaten by a crocodile. It's a sad, sad death. Will you avoid that for me?”

“Okay,” I said.

Maggie’s husband addressed me: “Listen, son. Stay away from beautiful women. They’ll try to ensnare you – don't let them!”

There was a general grumbling from the other dead people.

A well-spoken skeleton spoke, who I later realised probably was – or had been – a monk. “I recommend that you do not engage with the female sex in any way. Resist temptation by excluding yourself from their presence. Suppress your desire; live free of sin. The Lord will reward you.”

“Ha!” said the well-spoken skeleton companion. “Yeah, and how did that work out for you mate?”

“The Lord is testing me.”

“This is Hell and you know it.”

“Ignore my weak-minded brother,” said the monk, irritated now. “Faith will always be rewarded.”

“Okay,” I said.

But his companion addressed me gravely: “Why, he is the one who should be ignored! When you get out of here, tell your friends that religion is a sham. I believed once too, you know. Look at me now. This is what you’ve got to look forward to. Immortality – what fun. See Boris over there?” He pointed to a crumbling pile of bones, in an only vaguely human form. “Two thousand years he’s been underground. Two thousand years, and he’s got thousands more ahead of him I’ll bet.”

“Okay. Umm, thanks. Can I go now?” I asked this tentatively, trying not to come across as rude, or disgusted, or frightened, or all at once – which of course, I was.

“The snail decides when you leave us,” said the rotten-faced man, still standing uncomfortably close.

“And when is that?”

“When? What is time?” was the reply.

“Huh.”

The voice of another decrepit body spoke up, standing by one wall. This speaking, gesticulating corpse looked more recently deceased than the others. “I’ll tell you something, kid. You get more attention when you’re dead than alive – it makes you realise how much people care. You should try it sometime: Death. We don’t mind it down here, do we folks?”

“Speak for yourself,” was the resounding mutter.

“Alright, alright, I’m joking. But seriously, here’s my advice, kid: don’t drop out of school. Please don’t drop out of school. Cling on to education as long as you can, cling on by your teeth and bleeding nails if you have to. Or you’ll end up with a shit job shoveling shit into in a shit whole until you grow old and frail, without a pension and blow what little money you have, and find yourself on the streets with no way to clamber back out—”

“We don’t need your whole life story Rob.”

“Seriously, in all seriousness, don’t drop out of school; it’s a sad chain of events from there, you hear me? I was buried by the council; that’s how low it got. Don’t end up like me. Please.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Can you promise me that, please?”

“I promise.”

At that moment there was the sound of grumbling, of a large and disgruntled stomach rumbling. “That’s probably the Snail gettin tired of you inside of him,” said the rotten-faced man, “you know, you being alive and all.”

I’m sure I was visibly relieved, although I had a strange feeling that I would miss the people I had met.

“You’ll probably be regurgitated soon, buddy. But before you go, I have one last thing to say: don’t eat boiled sweets. Especially rhubarb and custard flavour, unless you want to choke to death. Anyways, that’s my two cents on the matter. See you buddy.”

“Hang on,” I said. “You’re all saying ‘don’t’, ‘don’t’, ‘don’t’. Your advice is all ‘don’t do this’, ‘don’t do that’. Is there anything I *should* do?”

To that they thought hard. Real hard. Head scratched by hands hard.

Then at last the rotting-faced man answered. And as the wet walls of the insides of the Snail compressed to choke me out, just as the walls constricted and rippled and the people of The Graveyard of the Dead were lost out of sight, I heard those words of the rotting-faced man – although I now question that epithet, for they were all rotting, all decaying – I heard those last words of the rotten-faced man...

“Live without regret.”

And at that I was unswallowed – choked back up and slobbered out for I found myself on the grass of the graveyard, the sun still high in the sky, birds flitting between branches of trees, or perched atop the crooked gravestones – the snail nowhere to be seen.

The nearby church bell rang nine in the morning. I was late for school, so I went home, and I wrote up everything that had happened. And now I am going to rest. I’ve had more than enough learning for one day.