Are You Dead, Father?

By John DiFelice

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We laid Dad to rest on a Friday. I know it was a Friday because it rained, and I often get depressed when it rains on Fridays, so it was just as well it was a Friday funeral because I would've been depressed anyway.

The service was beautiful even though the flower arrangements outnumbered the mourners, and the priest kept mispronouncing our last name. The cantor sang "Here I am Lord" with such genuine emotion that it nearly punctured the blanket of numbness that had covered me. Dad's brother, Uncle Robert, gave the eulogy because my brother Tommy didn't want to do it, and he didn't want me to do it, probably because I'm a woman. Tommy can be a bit of a chauvinist. Uncle Robert did a decent enough job, considering he and my dad hadn't spoken in over a decade.

I stood in the second pew, looking stupidly at the casket. I didn't want to, but it was right in front of me, and I would have had to make even more of an effort not to look at it, which would have only made me dwell more on how my father had been drained and embalmed and bolted into the coffin where he'd remain for eternity. Tommy stood next to me, emotionless—more so than I was—and silent and still, which is unusual for Tommy no matter what the occasion.

Just when I had wished that someone would slap me so I could feel something, I lowered my head to pray and caught sight of Tommy's hands as they grasped the back of the pew in front of him. They looked just like Dad's when he was young, as they appear in a mental image of a description of a memory I might have had as a child, of a solitary figure seated in a recliner with his hands resting on the arms of it. I was invisible to Dad when I was a child; his eyes would remain fixed on the glowing images of more interesting people doing more interesting things on the television in front of him. I'd watch him until the unruly hairs from my pigtails touched his hand, causing him to jerk it away. Those images are all that remain, and that's when it hit me that he was dead. I would never again see the creases in his face

that gave it such distinction or how his clothes smelled as I folded them and put them away. The last time I spoke to him was the last time I'd ever talk to him. The only proof he had ever existed were the genes that made up half of who Tommy and I had become.

I looked at Tommy, and he mouthed something to me. I'm pretty sure it was, "He's not there."

I didn't cry in church. I didn't cry when I got home and when my neighbor told me how sorry she was. I looked dry-eyed through the mail addressed to Dad and wondered how long before even his name would disappear from record. I never cried because I knew Dad would not have cried for me.

But I did feel something soon after. It began on a Saturday, two weeks after the funeral when Dad was delivered to my door. He came in a plain cardboard box and lay on my front porch, waiting for me to trip over him with my morning coffee.

I never got the chance. Tommy pushed past me, and I fell against the already deformed screen door, spilling my coffee over my feet. It was piping hot.

"Hey!" I yelled.

Tommy said nothing.

"What is that?" I asked.

He snatched the package off the porch and looked at me as if I had inconvenienced him somehow. He stormed back into the house and let the screen door slam behind him.

"Tommy! Tommy, what is that?"

It was the last I saw of him that day.

Over the following week, Tommy's behavior grew more and more strange. He spent every waking hour in the basement, which was odd even by his standards. Tommy is a computer whiz—it's what he does for a living—and he is so secretive about his work that I tell people he works for the CIA. He would only emerge from the cellar when he had to get more supplies, and he'd return from his missions with arms loaded with cables and connectors and things that looked like props from a science fiction movie set.

For my part, I spent the nights of that week going through Dad's few remaining possessions, and I was amazed by how few there were. Dad read voluminously but would only read books borrowed from the library. He played several musical instruments but owned not one. He had no car, and his entire wardrobe could fit in a tiny suitcase. He was a minimalist to the extreme, and it occurred to me that he had always been prepared to vanish without a trace, without warning, and without saying goodbye. That's what he did.

Dad kept a single picture on his nightstand, one of him and Mom on their wedding day. Dad, tall and plain, and Mom, short and strikingly beautiful, stood before the photographer while Mom smiled, and Dad looked off to the left with a blank expression that almost evoked pity.

Two weeks after the package arrived—on a Sunday, four weeks after the funeral—Tommy's behavior started to affect me. I couldn't imagine what he was doing in the basement all day and night. I left him alone because I knew that's what he wanted; I also hated going into our basement and did so only to do laundry. Our basement had stone walls that molted decaying whitewash and low-hanging radiator pipes, making the six-foot height between the dirt floor and the petrified joists even shorter. I'm taller than Tommy, so I had to walk around hunched over so I wouldn't smack my head against the iron pipes or invite the cobwebs to infest my hair. A large piece of asbestos kept me away from the boiler, but none of this was creepy enough for Dad. He told the eight-year-old versions of me and Tommy that the ghost of a 1940s gangster named Mr. Spinalzo lived in the basement and would "rub us out" if he ever caught us down there.

I opened the door to the basement.

"Tommy?"

He didn't answer.

"Supper's ready."

I heard him tinkering with wires and cables. I stepped onto the landing, and it creaked horribly as my foot descended; the sound was a composite of all the footsteps that had ever fallen. The sounds

became embedded in the wooden boards from years of pressure and deformation. Somewhere within them, the sounds of my father's footsteps had been stored, ready to be released. I took another step and heard them come out, like putting a needle down on a vinyl record. Dad was in the stairwell, and his presence was as real as Tommy's a few feet away. I reached for the old radiator pipe that had been repurposed as our stair railing and walked down the steps slowly, one foot at a time, not stepping down to another until both of my feet came to rest on the same one. The stairs were open in the back, and even as a grown woman, I held my breath as I descended, waiting for Mr. Spinalzo to grab my ankles and pull me into the darkness forever. That's when I heard it.

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Tommy, could you get me a job where you work?

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There was no doubt it was Dad's voice saying one of his favorite things to Tommy. A father asking his son to get him a job sounds nice, but Tommy and I knew differently. It spoke of Dad's view that what Tommy did for a living was so easy that anyone could do it.

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Tommy, you're supposed to be smart?

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I assumed Tommy had Dad's cassette tapes, which we found in a cardboard box in the attic. Tommy searched like crazy for months to find them.

"Listening to tapes?" I asked. I was at the foot of the stairs with the largest radiator pipe inches from my forehead. Tommy sat at his workbench with a small black device, about the size of a laptop. He turned his head in a way that required the least effort.

"They're not tapes," he said.

"No? Then what is that?" I asked, pointing at the device.

"It's Dad," he said calmly.

"Oh." I paused. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know how else to say it," he said.

"Well, think of a different way to say it." I tried to keep my voice even.

He cleared his throat. "This isn't a tape. This is Dad's brain." He put his eyelids at half-mast. "Is that better?"

That made even less sense. "What do you mean by that?" I asked.

He looked at me, exasperated.

"Don't worry about it," he said finally. "You're not good with computers, Kelly."

It's amazing how someone who's known you your whole life can cut you down with one sentence. "You're not good with computers" referred to a horrible experience I had on social media. It humiliated me and cost me a job I loved teaching introductory drama and playwriting.

"Dinner's on the table," I said as sweetly as possible.

He turned away and went back to the device. "I'm not hungry."

He dismissed me with a wave of his hand. I turned and hurried up the stairs as the creaks and groans of the staircase filled my head with images of Dad walking up and down it endlessly, descending night after night into the dark shelter that he guarded with ghost stories and neglect, retreating to it for no other reason than to escape from us, his children. I walked into the kitchen and stared at the meal I had prepared, at the two place settings I had set instead of three. It was like there had always been only two place settings. I would have wrapped Tommy's dinner and put it in the refrigerator for him later, but I threw it in the trash.

Several nights passed before Tommy joined me for dinner again. We sat at our large oak dining table. The two leaves I put in it the year before were still there because I enjoyed the distance from Tommy they provided. We ate silently for most of the meal until I asked him about the sounds of Dad's voice.

"What is that device?" I asked.

“It’s Dad’s brain.” He said it as casually as if he were commenting on the dinner rolls.

“I don't know what you mean when you say that.”

“It’s not a past recording. It’s a saved memory. Pass the chicken.”

“I’m sorry, Tommy,” I said, “but I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

He didn’t get upset like he did before. Instead, he tried in earnest to explain it to me. Looking back, I think he wanted someone to talk to, someone who understood.

“The device in the basement contains Dad’s brain," he said. "Not the organic part, but all his memories. They mapped his entire brain and downloaded it to magnetic media.”

I focused on a practical question to keep him talking since I didn’t understand anything else. “When did this happen?”

“Within five minutes of his death.” He spread butter on his roll and stuffed the whole thing in his mouth. “Do you remember right after he died,” he said, talking through the mashed buttered bread in his mouth, “Do you remember how I ushered you to the cafeteria to get a cup of coffee?” He did do that. I had to think about it a little, but he did.

“That's when they came and took his body,” he said. I could see the bread stuck between his teeth as he spoke.

“Who came?” I asked. My heart started to beat quickly.

“People from Synapse.”

“What’s Synapse?"

“That’s the company that provides this service.”

“Why do you always have to joke around?” I said. “Dad isn’t cold in his grave, and you're making jokes.”

“Dad's not in his grave. He's downstairs on my workbench.”

“It’s inappropriate.”

“It’s better than being in a grave.”

“Stop it!” I shouted. Tommy did not flinch.

“You don't believe me?” he asked.

“No.”

“Really?”

“How can I?”

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Lots of times."

"Have I ever lied to you about something important?"

I didn't know, and I didn't want to try to think of a time. I ignored him and dished myself out some more carrots.

"What would it take?" he asked.

"What?"

"What would it take to prove to you that it's Dad down there?"

I looked at him. “Nothing. Nothing would convince me.”

“Perfect,” he said. “You know I like a challenge. There’s nothing I like better than destroying someone’s faith.”

He described Synapse and how they go about doing what they do, but I tuned him out. Since Tommy peddled wholesale fiction, whether I listened or not didn’t matter.

“When a mature technology hits the market,” he continued, “the R&D behind it is decades old. Microwave ovens were invented in the 1950s, thirty years before they became commercially available and found their way into domestic kitchens where even housewives could figure out how to use them.”

Tommy had little respect for women who worked inside the home, which went doubly for our mother.

I sat with my mouth open, recapturing some of the magic of my high school performance as Helena in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

"Tommy, how could you do this without asking me?" I acted hurt.

He smiled broadly. "Because I knew you'd never allow it. Because you lack vision, you'd be unable to see the gold mine in front of us."

As expected, he didn't miss an opportunity to point out his superior intellect. To him, I'm a small-town girl, hopelessly provincial, even though I went away to college while he stayed. Tommy has never left my parents' house. I returned only to take care of Dad after he became ill.

"What gold mine?" I asked.

"We have complete access to Dad's memories. We can run queries and find information."

This new line of questioning had knocked Tommy out of the doldrums.

"And not just his memories," he said. "We can have fun and run scenarios to see how Dad would react. And someday soon," he said, attacking another buttered roll with the table manners of a dog, "the programmers at Synapse are going to come out with a way to animate him."

"Animate him?" The flesh on my arms rose.

"Yeah. It'll be like Dad has come back from the dead."

Had Tommy said, "Come back to life," I don't think I would have been as horrified.

I tried to hide my anxiety by asking more questions.

"What kind of life would that be for him?" I asked. "Is he even alive in there? Is that him, or just his memories? If it is him, will he know what's going on?"

Thoughts flooded my mind chaotically; I couldn't piece them together into an intelligent line of questioning.

"I don't know," said Tommy, calm, "but I'm sure the Synapse folks will figure it out. They think of everything."

We ate in silence for a bit longer until Tommy looked at me. I half-smiled at him, and he looked

back with squinted eyes and a brain behind them that crunched through scenarios from a lifetime spent observing my behavior.

"Kelly," he said. "I know you don't believe a word I've said, but I will prove it to you. In the coming weeks, I will dig up something that only you and Dad knew, and you will be unable to doubt me, and you will treat whatever I say in the future as the gospel truth."

That got to me. Turn of the Screw can still make my blood run cold even though I don't believe in ghosts, and by the time I went to bed that night, one undeniable truth stalked me: real or not, Tommy had conjured the ghost of our father, and it hung heavily under our roof.

I wouldn't wish the next few weeks of my life on even the people who fired me from my teaching job. I had found myself in a Shakespearean tragedy, with ghosts that walked around freely and family members who spent every waking hour plotting my demise. I felt trapped in my own house, and even on the rare occasions when I ventured outside, my mind was still there, wondering what Tommy was doing in the basement, worrying that he was "running queries," whatever that meant, and trying to dig up information about Dad and me.

Tommy stopped coming to dinner. I watched the weight fall off him during accidental encounters in the kitchen, upstairs hallway, or passing in and out of the bathroom. He looked strung out, and I worried about him even though he made my life needlessly difficult. I had never seen him so focused on anything before, and I was sure he wouldn't notice if a train plowed through the center of our house.

But I noticed him. A week later, I turned from the kitchen counter, holding a bowl of peas, and saw him sitting at the table. He looked so out of place that I screamed and dropped the bowl. Peas and ceramic shards went everywhere.

"I failed," he said. He looked unwell.

"What?" I bent down to pick up the peas.

"I didn't find your proof."

"You didn't?" A feeling of relief swept over me, a kind I didn't know I needed. There was nothing in that machine, I thought. It was all a joke, a way Tommy had chosen to deal with his grief—a selfish, childish way, with no regard for my loss.

He shook his head. "You win," he said.

"I didn't know we were playing a game."

"I couldn't find anything I didn't already know about your relationship with Dad. I found all kinds of other stuff, though."

A knot formed in my stomach. "Like what?" I said.

"Do you want to know what Dad thought of Mom?"

My heart jumped around in my chest. This was not over by far. Part of me stood in awe of him, wondering where he had learned to be so cruel.

"Do you want to know if he loved her?" he asked.

"No."

"I always wondered about that. Didn't you?"

"Please stop."

"I have the answer now."

"Tommy, this isn't funny."

"I know you're curious. Do you want to know if he loved her?"

"What you're doing isn't real."

"If it isn't real, then what's the harm?"

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"Stop being a narcissist. This isn't about you."

A narcissist doesn't take care of her father, while her brother refuses to lift a finger to help.

"I don't need an electronic device to tell me whether or not Dad loved Mom," I said. "Of

course, he didn't. He couldn't love anything."

"You're wrong." He rose from his chair and walked slowly toward me. "He did love her; at least he thought he did. I can only go by his memories, and we are the narrators of our memories."

"Tommy," I said. "I know you're going through something now, but I am too."

"It's funny how the power of technology can still surprise me."

"Tommy, I'm worried about you."

"Do you want to know what he thought of you, Kelly?"

I think I shook my head. I'm not sure.

"I searched and searched for some kind of shared experience that the two of you had, something only you two would know about. I even looked for memories of abuse, but I found nothing. It's like, I don't know, like he never had a daughter. That's a shitty thing to say, and it's not what anyone would want to hear, but that's what the data says. I'm sorry."

He looked sincere. He looked concerned about me for the first time.

"You're making that up!" I screamed.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are! Stop!" I tried to regain my composure. "It doesn't matter. I don't know if that thing downstairs is real, and if it is, I don't understand how it works and have to rely on you. That's the problem. It's like I'm illiterate, and I'm listening to you read me the Bible, not knowing if what you're reading is really in the book or stuff you made up."

Tommy presented the evidence he had found. It included the name of the priest who had married them, Father Lafferty. He found Room 213, where they stayed during their honeymoon. He had a dozen pieces of evidence to prove that the device worked. I later corroborated his findings. But the details about their wedding were nothing compared to what he said about me. I always felt I meant nothing to my father, and there was physical proof. Then I got mad.

"You have no right!" I shouted. "You have no right to do this!"

"I have every right to do this!" he hissed. His voice became a snarl, and his face contorted into a shape that matched. I had never seen anything so grotesque. "The man gave me nothing while he was alive. He had no humanity, so I have no problem treating him like a machine now because that's what he was."

"According to you, that's all any of us are. Would you do this to me, Tommy, after I die? Would you reduce me to bytes on a hard drive?"

"You beat me to it," he said. "Why don't you put that on social media? You can quote me."

I didn't want to, but I started to cry. I wanted to throw the ceramic shards at his face, but thick tears came out instead. I ran past him out the back door and kept running until my side, and my feet started to hurt, noticing only then that I didn't have shoes. Everything seemed to stop around me as if I had run so fast that I had become the only dynamic part of a still-life world. I imagined everything digitized as if my brain were on a disk without a physical existence. Instead, everything existed as pixilated images created on the fly. That is what Tommy believed. He said that the reality we think we live in isn't physical but virtual, and it always has been, and that's why the future can't be predicted; we all create it just before we move through it. As distasteful as the idea was, it comforted me when my parents died. It meant that they weren't dead since they, along with me, had never really been alive.

I walked up and down my neighborhood streets. I thought of the night the nurse had called to tell me that Mom was near the end and that I should get to the hospital quickly. I called to tell Tommy but only reached his voicemail. He claims he didn't get the message until it was too late, but I never believed him.

Mom had gone down to seventy pounds. Large bruises marked her arms where the chemotherapy had been injected. Her skin had lost its elasticity and resembled colored tissue paper. Her thick head of dark curls was gone, leaving sporadic strands that made her look unkempt.

When she opened her eyes and saw me sitting beside her, she lifted her head with what looked like every bit of strength she had.

"Kelly." She looked at me with eyes filled with sympathy. "This is so hard." And then she died. I was the only one there.

For years, I thought about what she had said to me. At first, I thought she meant that dying was what she found so hard. The longer I lived without her, and the more interaction I had with my father, the more I concluded that the thought of leaving us alone with Dad is what she found so difficult. Her last words were an apology for dying first.

Whenever Mom and Dad would fight---and by fight, I mean Mom yelling at Dad, who would sit in his chair watching TV like he didn't even hear her---I would always get in the middle, try to be the diplomat. Tommy would run to his room, and I'd find him writing programs in front of his computer. As a boy, he created an imaginary cyberworld where he had complete control over everything. I did it too, later in life, with the plays I'd write. On the page, I could control the characters' words and the outcome of every conflict. My characters behaved exactly as I wanted them to behave---until I handed the script to the actors. That is where Tommy and I differed. My characters could surprise me, sometimes in profound ways, if I were lucky enough to get some good actors. But Tommy's programs were different. He had absolute control over how they functioned. Any surprises to Tommy were called defects.

Standing there, I wrote Tommy into a play and staged it in my head. What drove Tommy? What was his not-so-internal conflict? I read it and rehearsed it over and over again in my mind. I tweaked it and ran it again. It became obvious.

I wanted to run to Tommy and throw my arms around him. I wanted to tell him I understood. I arrived home and threw open the deformed screen door. I ran down the stairs to the basement, immune to the history of the stairs assaulting my senses. I stopped with both feet on the dirt floor and looked at Tommy, hunched over the machine. Dad was there.

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Tommy, I am so proud of you.

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I ducked beneath the pipe and walked next to Tommy, shuffling my feet so I wouldn't startle him.

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Tommy, did I ever tell you how much I respect you?

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I stood next to him. A book called "Synapse Hacks" lay beside him.

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I love you, Tommy.

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He turned to me. "Did you hear what he said? Did you hear that, Kelly?"

I heard it. I listened to every word Dad had said and why he said it. Tommy had made him say it.

Couldn't he see what he had done? Couldn't he see what I saw, that none of this was real, that all he did was force Dad to say these things?

Tommy stared at me with a bittersweet expression. I grabbed his hand and pulled it in close, caressing it. My hair fell upon it, and he didn't jerk it away. The tears rolled down my face and dripped onto my feet. They were piping hot.

My response came out mechanically. There was no thought, no reasoning to them. They came out as voluntarily as a laugh or a sob.

"Can you make him say those beautiful things to me?"

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