

Cataloguing the Stars

by Andrew Lee

Tombstones were just a case of dead people bragging in the wrong place. Beloved, fondly remembered, loving this and that, nothing about having a crooked, you know... nose.

"Haven't you heard you shouldn't speak ill of the dead?" Agnes asked me.

When I die I don't want people lying about me. It's a terrible idea you know. Let's get together all the people who really knew a person well and then totally lie about them. Who do they think they're fooling?

"It's supposed to be about how sad you are that the person is gone," she said.

And what do you say when you aren't sad about it? I mean, it's true. There are people who die accompanied with sighs of grief and those with sighs of relief. The stone seldom gives away which kind lays beneath. Secrets and flaws tucked into their dirt beds and kissed goodnight with an unoffending block of granite.

One time Agnes claimed that memory has no acne. When I mentioned it later she said,

"It sounds like something I would say."

"Don't you remember saying it?"

"I can't remember everything. Sometimes you have to guess at what you said

before. You have to say to yourself, 'Would I say something like that?' "

"What if you never said it?"

"If it sounds wise, I'll usually agree that it was me who said it. If I can't remember anyway, why not give people the pleasure of knowing someone wise."

Agnes had this great aunt who slowly lost her memory near the end of her life and so went around writing tags and putting them on things around her house, so people would know who the items would go to when she died. Then she realized some people wouldn't want the item, so she wrote in a backup. Agnes talked about it for the whole two-hour drive back, while she hugged the Tiffany lamp her aunt left her. Hers was the only name on the tag.

"We are not tagging all of our stuff."

"Alex, seriously...OUR stuff? We are not tagging all of YOUR stuff. I can do what I want with mine. You barely even have any stuff at my place anyway."

When she turned twenty-seven, Agnes started having a hard time with reading. Things got blurred.

“Alex, it’s not a big deal. Life is blurred.”

Soon her vision got worse and worse. She would look it over tomorrow, she’d say. Her eyes were “just tired.” The doctors didn’t agree with her. Or rather she didn’t agree with the doctors. Macular degeneration. Agnes was going blind.

“Stop saying blind. I can still see you. I’m still here.”

Look up a medical condition online. Most of them are for older people, sixties, seventies, eighties. Right where it says, “But may occur as early as…” That was Agnes.

“I’m not fucking blind.”

Agnes took it really hard. She used to paint, take photographs. Her house was full

of her work framed. It all happened really fast. The first three months she spent a lot of time sleeping. She told me that it was like the walls of the world just closed in on her. She was trapped inside herself. She started calling herself “the old blind lady.” She was twenty-eight. I moved in and helped out around the house. I wish I could say that I cheered her up.

After about a year, something changed. She started working with organizations that trained her how to navigate the world. It wasn’t just about walking around. She learned braille, how to write and read. She learned to experience the world differently. Two years after she lost her sight completely I asked her if she missed it. It seemed like enough time had passed. She told me that I wouldn’t understand it, but that there was a whole blind culture out there that sighted people don’t realize. If she got her sight back, then she’d lose her world all over again. She wasn’t ready to lose the world twice. It was around that time that I began noticing the tags. They were written in braille.

“What does this say?”

“I told you that you should learn braille, Alex. How can I leave you love notes?”

“I’m trying.”

“It says remember the time you brought me an orange.”

“An orange? Why is the label on a spoon?”

“Remember the time that I said that I really wished we had a grapefruit for

breakfast, but we were out. You brought me an orange, all sectioned and everything.”

“Oh, right.”

“There is a difference between a grapefruit and an orange. An orange is sweet. I guess you were being sweet too.”

Sometimes I would ask about a tag, but Agnes didn't always answer. I admit that I stopped asking and finally they became invisible. I did notice when she moved on from tags to small envelopes. She was typing longer and longer notes, but she seemed happy. One day she went shopping downtown. The dark shadows of the past had disappeared completely. She was finally excited about things. New friends, blind and sighted showed up at what had become our house. She stopped thinking of me being here as pity. She never mentioned it, but she started saying things like “it's your house too.” Mostly when it needed vacuuming, but still. She was shopping for new towels. It could have been any day. She could have bought them any day of the week.

The bullet that killed Agnes was from a 9mm automatic, and was meant for a teenager Jeremiah. After all my stupid fears about her walking into traffic, and my not-so-stupid fears about her not getting out of bed, she was killed by a stray bullet that could have killed anyone.

I was sitting there, after I received the phone call from the police, and I saw one of her tags. Then I saw another, and another and the more I wandered through the house I realized that they were everywhere, taped to the bottom of things, attached to things in every room. Attached to a mug: “That time when you were racist when you were trying to be sweet.”

“This isn't the mug I wanted.”

“Does it matter?”

“I'm going to pretend you didn't say that.”

“I was thinking that there are benefits to being, um, differently sighted. Like now when someone is talking to you, you can't see their race. It's like an ideal society.”

“Yeah, but they can see mine and besides someone's race wasn't an issue to me before anyway.”

“I was just trying to say.”

“Yes, I know, but you are still stupid.”

There were so many notes and tags, and letters. That time you kissed me. And that time that you really kissed me. And then there was a note that described a scene, this kiss, and it wasn't me. And then attached to a dress: "The time that I convinced you to wear my clothes and you looked better in them. It was the one time I remember being jealous of you." That was definitely me. "That time we waited out the rain, under that overpass bridge and you told me all about spray paint and tagging as an art form." That was definitely not me. I admit I was pretty angry, and then I remember that Agnes had mentioned a friend she knew when she was twelve who became an "urban artist." These notes, they weren't all for me. Some were for people from long ago.

And some weren't.

"Remember when we went skinny dipping in that pool that time because you said that I was beautiful and that you wanted to see each other as we really were. Then the lights of the backyard went on, and the house was full of people, even though you said your friend was out of town. I laughed when they saw me, because it was so surprising but when I got home I cried because that night my body was just for you.

I never told Alex."

And buried under books in her night table was a wrapped up little box, with an envelope.

It said,

"It was this one time, a year after I lost my sight, and you went to go see your parents. I couldn't bear to leave the house. There was this little box of razor blades that I used to cut frames for photographs. You need to understand, the world had disappeared for me. I feel so stupid right now, but all there was was non-ending black and I couldn't take it another day, or another hour. I went to the bathroom and poured a bath and took off my clothes and took one razor blade out of the package. And it slipped out of my hands, and fell without a sound.

I got on my knees and searched for it, reached around like the blind old lady I kept calling myself. There was a whole box of them, but I needed to find this one, for some reason. It took me five minutes to find it. It was sitting on one of your socks, Alex. And I got so mad because you never picked them up, and why can't you do such a little thing, and suddenly I wondered why it mattered that you left those socks there when I was leaving this world anyway, but it did.

I cried for an hour, just holding onto your sock. When I finally stopped, I got dressed, and drained the bath and called a counselor, one of the ones you had been encouraging me to call. And when you got back home, your socks were on the bathroom floor and I never complained about them again."

And the time we hitchhiked:

“There were so many stars. When that car finally picked us up, I almost didn’t want to get in. You never see so many stars in the city. I wanted to disappear into them with you.”

And a long letter to a friend she had lost touch with:

“I was bringing this blanket I made to you when you told me that you had just lost the baby the day before. I was the first one you told after your husband. And while I held that little knitted thing in my hands, all I could think is how much I wanted to have a little one to share with Alex. There just never seemed to be the right time.”

I invited everyone we both knew to search the house, to match up notes and letters to the ones they were for. I left out the notes and tags that Agnes meant for me too. No secrets. No lies or softening things up. We knew her so much more now than when she was alive.

Agnes, there were times I wondered if, wherever people go when they die, you could see again, or if you would choose not to. I’m not sure it really matters, as long as I could still see you.

We didn’t hide you beneath a tombstone. We planted a tree in our front yard where we buried your ashes. After all of the letters and notes you left, people began leaving ones they wrote to you, tied to the branches of the tree. Some notes were left by old friends, or by family. But some were left by people I have never met and I realize that there was so much more to you than was my role to know at the time.

There were times it made me angry, but now there is only the feeling that comes when I know I will never see all of the stars. Some days it makes me sad and others it just makes me wonder.