

Ready to Depart

The carved letters were covered again. Father Seraphim bent low and his back groaned. Gaunt knees settled into the soil and rutted fingers brushed fresh clippings of grass from the stone with care. This service fatigued him, but he performed it with joy. Having made the letters and numbers visible again, he sat and rested, breathing deep the heartening fragrance of pine.

Their meaning awakened memory, lifted his aged mind from the present and carried him gently into the past. He could see the face now: stern features, flashing eyes and a gruff voice veiling the tenderness below. The Arch-Layman. Frightful foe, faithful friend.

Father Seraphim smiled. *I have missed you, brother.*

Old joints creaked when he stood and the eyes of Father Seraphim found the nearby chiseled markings; the words were hard to pronounce, so he had usually called her Kind Lady. She had come to visit The Arch-Layman every Saturday for twenty years. Sometimes when she left, the stones would be washed, spotless and pure, cleansed from the spring of devotion. One Saturday, she came and lay down beside her husband, never again to leave his side.

The Arch-layman and Kind Lady were lonely then, for none called upon them. For thirty years now Father Seraphim had been their sole visitor, the only one who spoke to and for them. But his eyes grew weary and he longed now to sleep, so he had to say goodbye.

Offering a parting blessing, Father Seraphim ambled over to his many other friends who were forgotten by the world. He enjoyed their company; perhaps they enjoyed his. For sixty years he had shared his love with them. They had followed his voice in the noonday. And, after the darkness fell, he did not abandon them to the night. He rested on one of the tall ones, speaking quietly.

“I have been faithful, brother. Welcome me when I come.”

Next he entered and stood among the stones of strangers, the ones he had never met. These he only knew by name. Perhaps some had walked in light and others in darkness, but he knew with certainty only that they shared the common fate. Yet he had loved all the same, serving them and each day drawing nearer in body and soul.

Yet lingering doubt and fear reached into his heart, so he turned to face its source, knew that he could no longer hide from guilt.

And as he walked toward that fading tablet in the corner, under the shade of an old magnolia, his eyes fell, and his shoulders sagged. Her name was a terrible stirring - a lost joy and a festering wound. When he was young those deep blue eyes had looked out at him, bewildered, for he had confessed love for the Other that was too strong. Brokenhearted, she settled, accepted the fidelity of the quiet one who now lay at her side. Father Seraphim looked at the plain testament of that man, who was good, and confessed, finally.

"I envied you, sir, and I coveted the blessing that was yours, that which your devotion earned."

Bowing, Father Seraphim kissed the crumbling marker of the second choice who had loved like a first, and he wept, thankful for the kindness of the man who took his place.

"Forgive me."

A gentle wind consoled him and he moved along, eyes slowly closing on the names of husband and wife for the last time, and he was heavy laden no more.

A distant rumble and the blanket of grey crawling over the heavens reminded him that he must soon make ready to depart. He strolled over and sat by one last stone, whose letters told and asked his identity. Years before these had been fashioned simply, at his request, and for little expense. But their meaning had been invaluable. The incomplete space after the dash called out to him, reminding him of the slipping sands, of that finality which would make him whole. Father Seraphim closed his eyes, allowed the breeze to caress him as he lay down, as he marched through the gates of thanksgiving.