

## A RECOLLECTION OF DEATH

—from Andrew Harowitz, *Memories of the Living*

My dearest Michael.

My love.

I still remember the moment I surrendered my broken heart on that last bitter, rainy day of October, burying it with a tattered piece of my soul beneath the cold, still ground.

You were there of course, dressed in your finest black suit and a matching dark tie, and I am sure you saw, as did I, the last traces of autumn fade to winter, in a cycle unbroken since the twilight of the Ice Age—in those ancient times when the last glaciers melted away from the northern continents and poured their essence into every sea and ocean of the world.

Great and small flocks of blackbirds and crows swept over us in their mysterious formations, some late to start their journey to the south, others simply launching into the sky—those that never leave our lands—they are like the keepers of death, winter's closest ally. Tell me Michael, if you remember, did you hear them sing, as their melodies soared high into the heavens? It was lonely sound like that of a train whistle before sunrise, or the roar of the long-trucks, rolling down the highways between cities late at night.

Did you know that it's on the first day of spring that life truly begins for the newborns and young? It renews for the old still blessed to be with us, and for those of us caught up in the turbulent in-between years, it is just another marker of the slow passage of time.

We followed the long hearse that day in a car, black as coal, with windows tinted for the privacy of all. Your parents sat on the back seat beside me. Did you see them there? Listen to your mother's cries? Watch your father's falling tears? Did you look upon me, lost so far inside myself that I showed no emotion at all?

Our procession crossed the city of Fair Cedar on a journey spanning from the church to the cemetery. As has always been custom, we ignored the stoplights and stop signs on the way, cutting off traffic and slowing only for turns and bumpy sections of road.

When we at last entered the misty graveyard, the rust shrouded iron gates squeaked as they swung open. I heard and even felt their haunting echo that followed us along the curving drive through the forest of tombstones and trees.

I saw yellow and orange lilies and roses, both white and red, among the grave markers and stones. Did you see them dying in weather more unstable than crackling ice on a thawing lake? Looking past them, I saw statues of angels and saints, bright as stars, when brief breaks in the gray clouds let the sunshine pass down to the earth below.

I remember every bump in the road, Michael, as from my window, I watched the passing trees, without a leaf on their branches—they seemed naked in the cold, half hidden by distance, the thickness of the haze, but more so by the tears that refused to drip from my burning red eyes.

Our sad parade parked stretched along the side of the road and I lost count of those who stepped out from their warm cars to join us in the damp, cold air. I followed just behind your parents and they followed their parish priest. He was dressed in his cassock and robe and carrying his crucifix before him like an upraised sword. For reasons I still don't understand, I think I cracked a smile at the oddity of it all, but it was gone before anyone else saw it.

Your mother and father—they walked close, their hands held tight between them. But I only held white roses, still on their stems, which I had done all too often, and everyone else clutched tightly to umbrella handles, sympathy cards, and bouquets of many colors.

I heard a haunting whistle that filled my soul with dread, but it was only the echo of the wind, blowing through the boughs and branches of the trees. It made me feel so alone, Michael, in a place all gray, empty, and almost silent. I truly wept then. I cried in those days and more times after that than I could ever hope to count.

Though it was cold, I wore only a black jacket and matching pants, no coat or gloves to keep me warm. My suit was an older one of yours that your parents let me borrow—not brand new like the one you wore that day. My arms were too short for my hands to even reach the ends of the sleeves. I looked silly and I wanted to laugh, but by then, I had forgotten how.

We came at last to a casket resting at the center of a large velvet cloth—it was the second I'd seen that day, Michael. Do you remember why? I think they were trying to hide from us the open pit beneath it, but we all knew the truth—the ever-hungry earth awaited on yet another feast.

I stayed near you and your parents throughout the entire service, but not too close. I was not their beloved son. They were not my heart-broken parents.

A fire burned inside of me, Michael. Twice, I think I nearly threw up, but I stayed steady and strong. I stood firm for the soul once belonging to the body resting in the mahogany box, too long for a child and too short for an adult, but just the right size for a fourteen-year-old boy. The lid of course remained closed. We both knew why; didn't we?

Thunder rumbled far and near, and the crows cried out, launching from the trees in formation for reasons unknown. My world went hazy. I wiped the tears away with my sleeves, but they just kept flowing like a waterfall down both of my frozen cheeks.

I watched your mother and father, leaning on one another, as the stone-faced priest read from his prayer book. I wanted a shoulder for my weary head—I needed a hug or at least some sort of touch, but you would not even look my way. You only stared at the sky with your eyelids closed tight. No one, Michael, no one consoled me—my grief ran through me unchecked, a sorrow much too deep for an already grieving boy of thirteen years to bear alone.

A shadow of the approaching storm fell upon us. It grew dark. A strong wind ripped away flowers and stole umbrellas. Then it started to drizzle. And the drizzle became a downpour.

I opened my eyes wide and tilted back my head, with my mouth open. Do you remember when we used to catch raindrops on the tips of our tongues? We were younger then, and the drops tasted sweet, not like the bitterness I felt in those passing days of loneliness and death.

Your father, who had always been kind, offered me his umbrella, but I only shook my head. I wanted—no—I needed to feel every icy touch of water, as it soaked through my suit. I shivered, but the fires of grief flowing through me remained—I burned inside, hot like an open flame.

The priest's words seemed mumbled, but I am sure that it was a fine eulogy. My attention was focused on a coffin containing a boy only a year older than me. He was but a child stolen away by twisting metal, exploding glass, and the unquenchable thirst of a river swollen well past its banks.

Your mother lost it then, Michael—did you see? Did you hear her cries? She beat her fists against your father's chest, and he just held her, whispering words of comfort for her alone.

I watched in tearful silence, as other wives, sisters, and daughters fell into the arms of their brothers, husbands, and sons. Their weeping seemed like a great and sorrowful symphony that only brought pain to my ears. There were no shoulders for me to rest my head upon, though, no one held me. You kept your arms at your sides, and you stared at the sky with your eyes shut tight.

I fell to the ground, and the sky unleashed a deluge. My knees splashed in the sodden muck, but I barely noticed. Then I heard a scream, a roar that knocked me flat. Michael, do you remember? I do. I'll never forget. That scream was mine, from my own lips, but it came from somewhere much deeper.

I thought that you touched me then on my shoulder, and I thought I heard your gentle laugh, and even a whispering of your voice, sad and quiet. I looked up then, but it was only your father, reaching out to help me back to my feet.

I was all alone, Michael. You were there, but you would not meet my eyes. You didn't even look my way. You only stared, as ever you will, into that mysterious beyond. I buried my heart that day, Michael. I buried my love on the last day of October, in the rain, when we buried you.