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I'm sorry

I cry at funerals. Not banshee wailing. No. Instead, tears fall silently like a seeping creek hidden in the forest and I have to wipe them away before they stain my cheeks.

No matter what I do, I can't stop the tears. Funerals, like the one I am at now, where clouds of incense dissipate around the urn, but the scent lingers reminding me of death, always bring tears.

The ashes of my good friend, emptied into an urn and placed in front of the altar at the Basilica of Saint Mary in Key West, cause my tears this time.

Death is stubbornly in search of a dance partner and it dances with everyone, after all.

I do what I can to hide the tears.

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A few close friends, like the one whose ashes are in the urn and those sitting next to me, know I cry at funerals and think it shows a sensitive side of me.

They're wrong.

Sensitivity has nothing to do with it.

My tears are not for the dead.

I'll miss my friend, of course, but my tears are not for him.

They're for me.

I realize that an urn waits for me. Whatever the cause, every day I grow closer to my turn before the altar.

That's the true cause of my tears, my impermanence.

Friends sit on either side of me in the pews as Father John goes about the ritual of Mass. My mind returns to how my friend died. I know, as those sitting next to me do, that it should be my ashes in that urn. I didn't cheat death. My friend sacrificed his life so mine could continue.

I've gone over and over the situation that led up to my being alive today and why it isn't me in the urn. Why did my

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friend surrender his life? Did I let him? When the gunfire began, did either of us think about what we were doing? Of what was possible?

I didn't want to get involved when this all started. I'm sorry now that I did. It all came down to a government agency creating an alibi for evil. Something I couldn't go along with. In the end, I had no choice.

2

The Beginning

When it began is clear now, though at the time I didn't know it. Bob and I had finished breakfast at Harpoon Harry's, a half block from the water, when someone noticed a plume of smoke coming from one of the marinas.

A handful of marinas mark the waterfront of Old Town. A boat fire sends panic through the liveaboard community because the smallest spark can ignite and then flames jump between closely moored boats, ravaging them in minutes.

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That's what a plume of smoke meant to those boaters seated at Harpoon Harry's.

Before most of us could get out of our seats, we heard sirens. Fire engines from the new station on Simonton and Angela streets flew past and turned toward the city marina on Margaret Street. The parking area next to the Half Shell Raw Bar soon held an assortment of emergency vehicles. And they kept coming. Sirens wailing. Lights flashing. Cop cars. Ambulances. More fire engines.

From our seats, we watched firefighters in bulky protective gear pull heavy hoses down the dock toward the slips. The summer morning's heat had to make the gear feel like the inside of a sauna.

The city marina is home to many local boaters. It's nestled between the trendy Conch Harbor Marina and the city's ferry terminal. Most of the vessels are modest in size and price. The dockage costs are more affordable than the upscale Key West Bight marinas, especially for working men and women.

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“How long we gonna sit here?” Bob lived on a boat on Stock Island and his desire to see how the firefighters dealt with the situation was more than mere curiosity.

“Ready when you are.” I added a few dollars to the money Bob left on the table. “We won’t get close.”

I was curious too, since losing the *FenianBastard* — my live aboard sloop — and moving into Tita’s house, I’d begun to be a landlubber. News ink from my journalist’s days and saltwater from years of sailing had replaced my blood years ago, and the mixture often pulled me in exciting ways. But recently, my feet had become comfortable on ground that didn’t constantly sway.

“Close enough to know what’s happening.” Bob walked out the side door. I followed.

Cops had already set up barricades at the pier. First responders took over the parking area between the Half Shell Raw Bar and Caroline Street. More people than cars filled the city’s large parking lot catty-corner from the Half Shell.

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“We’d have a better view from Schooner.” Schooner Wharf Bar looked out over the water on the other side of the parking lot.

Bob nodded as he turned. We pushed our way through the crowd. There’s something about a disaster that brings out the best in some people, and the lousiest in others.

The four-sided bar at Schooner had plenty of empty seats. Noontime drew close, the sun reflected off the water, toasting the pavement. The shaded bar usually held locals and leftover members of the Breakfast Club before the lunch hour. Vicki placed turned-over cups in front of empty seats, her way of saving the spot for whoever had left with their drink to get a look at the commotion a football field away.

Bob and I climbed to the top deck of Schooner. The space held most of the drinkers from downstairs but we pushed our way toward the front railing. A few local characters turned away. They mumbled about the lack of fire and headed down to their seat at the bar. Obviously, drinkers, not boat people.

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We looked across toward the marina. The Coast Guard had two boats in the water keeping the curious away while the city's fireboat poured water on the wreckage. Firefighters contained the smoldering from dockside, looking like oversized cartoon characters in their fortified suits.

Even with all the commotion, I noticed the boat's size actually made it a yacht. My guess was fifty feet, but the burning hull made it difficult to be sure.

"Why's the boat at the city marina?" I looked at Bob.

"I was thinkin' that too. Didn't realize the city could slip something that size."

"T-slip." The yacht tied off at the end of the dock took up space for two smaller boats. "The city doesn't usually do that."

Bob looked toward Conch Harbor. "Should've been over there." He pointed to the other marina.

We were too far off to see flames, if there had been any, and the smoke plume turned from black to white so the

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crowd dwindled. A light summer breeze came from the Gulf and blew the smoke toward Caroline Street but the stench of the fire carried to Schooner, ruining a bright summer day in paradise.

“Let’s have a beer and see what the coconut telegraph has to say.” Bob turned away.

I checked my wristwatch. Almost noon. “One beer,” I said, not realizing that the one beer would lead me into a political cluster fuck that wanted to control the Keys’ waterfront and the cost, be it money or lives, wasn’t important.

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