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CONVERGE

Emily Greenlund

Felix Adkins wasn't dead, though to passersby he probably looked it. He lay beneath the gnarled branches of a sugar maple, flat on his back, the toes of his leather work boots pointed toward the cloud-ribbed sky. Hands cupping the place just over his heart, breathing deep and painstakingly slow, Felix imagined himself expanding into the dark place behind his closed eyelids.

Today was his eighty-third birthday. Birthdays had long since lost their shine. Standing naked in front of the foggy bathroom mirror that morning, Felix stared at himself. He watched his mouth form the shape of *eighty-three*. He watched himself blink, eyes lined with creases he had watched grow deeper each year, and then he leaned in, bracing himself against the porcelain sink with his palms, arms shaky, and stared into his own eyes. Eighty-three was absurd, he thought. At least his eyes looked the same.

Felix was the groundskeeper at Sunset Memorial Park Cemetery. Each day he awoke facing the same cherry wood window, early morning light the color of butterscotch or Crest toothpaste or tomato soup leaking in through the blinds. He would reach out to find the old matted cat curled on the pillow next to him, one eye the color of coffee and the other white, and the cat, Melvin, would purr as he rested a hand between its ears. He had never liked cats all that much, but at least it was a body with atoms and cells and blood vessels and nerve endings. At least it could feel him reach out.

The walk from his house to the cemetery was only two miles. Thirty years earlier he would have made it in twenty minutes, but eighty-three demanded patience. Eighty-three was the cat, purring with one eye closed. Eighty-three was the moon, toenail-shaped and still wide awake as the sun claimed her place in the sky. Someone should tell that damn moon to go to sleep, Felix thought as he shuffled slowly down the sidewalk.

He wasn't melancholic, though he had been for much of his life. As he made his way down the long winding road skirting the fence of the

cemetery that morning, a journey he had made hundreds of times, Felix was merely the ache of old joints, toes curled inside his boots, kneecaps creaking. This morning, more than anything else, he was tired.

He began at the front gates with hedge clippers. He liked to think he was their caretaker, that the hedges needed him as much as he needed them. The day was still new as he circled the hedges, sunlight leaking through the thick spider web-like branches. Next, he tended the flower beds, bending over with a watering can. Mostly tulips, mostly yellow and pink. He knelt down, knees on the cobblestone path, and reached out to pull the weeds up and away from the flower stems, roots and all. *Thank you*, he imagined them saying, *we can breathe again*. The flowers needed him, too.

At eleven o'clock, Felix wandered through the rounded paths, over the hills, past the red-haired girl sitting atop the lawnmower, motor off and neck bent at a ninety-degree angle with her eyes on a cellphone that rested in both her hands. He didn't know the girl's name, but he had seen her every few days for months now. He liked that about the job; they felt each other's presence without needing to acknowledge it.

Rounding a corner—rows of headstones stretching out, seemingly endless, in every direction, and sunlight patchy on the grass—Felix approached the tree. He liked this spot the most, though he had tried to find others. A single stone rose out of the grass beneath the sugar maple tree. It was small, shorter than his knees, but it was black marble and reflected the color of the sky, and it belonged to a woman named Rose. Rose had been his wife's name. *His* Rose had died nearly a hundred years after the Rose who lay beneath him, but he liked knowing that they shared the name and he figured the dead were all lonely. *His* Rose had been cremated twenty years ago now, her ashes thrown into the Baltic Sea off the Southern coast of Sweden. He had stood barefoot in the shallow water, watching her ashes become one with the wind and waves. For a second, he could have sworn they took the shape of her figure, curly hair windblown and arms wide open, facing away from him, but then she was gone.

He lowered himself to the ground slowly, bones protesting, and then laid back in the grass with Rose's gravestone a few inches from the top of his head. Closing his eyes, he filled his lungs with air. As he breathed out, he imagined his body merging with the earth beneath him, imagined every piece of him touching everything else. He had once tried to explain this strange meditation to Rose, tried telling her that it wasn't morbid at

all, that he was *listening for the heartbeat at the center of everything*. She had only laughed, smacking him on the shoulder with a dish towel and rolling her eyes beneath silver bangs, eyes shining.

Missing her was different than it had been twenty years before. Then, it was like rain so heavy you couldn't see your own hands. Like swallowing broken glass and inhaling sawdust, completely and utterly consuming. He no longer felt so raw. He dreamt of her often, green eyes speckled with yellow and a laugh the color of Tuesday morning, but his body was slowing down and he was becoming much more aware of the simplicity, the serenity of lying beneath a sugar maple and melting into the grass for a while. Soon he'd pull himself back to his feet. The flowers and the hedges and that old cat Melvin needed him, after all, and at eighty-three that was more than enough.

Georgia O'Connell was over the moon. After nearly four months, she was finally just an hour away from completing the three hundred hours of community service she had been sentenced to. Sick of lawn mowing was an understatement. She hated the way the tractor mower made her body go numb. She hated the rows of gravestones, hated the randomness of their placement, hated the silence inside her head when she wore the earplugs. She thought she was the epitome of a modern-day Sisyphus, chained to a lawnmower and locked inside the gates of a cemetery five days a week. All. Summer. Long.

She was sitting on the hard plastic seat of the lawnmower, smack-dab in the center of the two square miles that made up Sunset Memorial Park Cemetery. She had mowed in a spiral today, starting at the edge of the fence by the funeral home and circling around for nearly two hours before deciding to take a ten-minute break next to an above-ground crypt with the words *Jim's Skybox* engraved in the stone. Her ears were tired of earplugs and her hands felt like the static screen on the old box TV she grew up with. She was almost done for the day, but her mom wasn't supposed to pick her up until noon, so she figured she'd waste some time before reaching the center and returning the mower to the equipment shed for the last time. She was *so* close.

Just after eleven o'clock, as she scrolled through photos of kids from school wearing swimsuits and drinking from red Solo cups on her Instagram feed, Georgia watched through her periphery as the old man passed her on the path and then disappeared over the hill. He made her glad she was only seventeen, that she wouldn't spend another minute inside

the gates of Sunset after today. Why he *chose* to work in a cemetery when he was already so close to joining the dead was beyond her. She hated the girls from school, laughing with their arms around each other even though there was probably nothing worth belly-laughing about when the photo was actually taken. She knew this, but it still made her stomach burn to see the pictures.

Summer seventeen was supposed to be the best one yet. A month before school let out, Georgia had been with the same girls who were now frozen in her Instagram feed at Michael Bensen's lake house, wearing a silky red crop-top and drinking raspberry Kool-Aid mixed with Everclear from a silver water bottle. She didn't like the taste much, but Shay was next to her, long blonde hair pulled up in a messy bun and eyes lined with black and silver, and even though she wasn't talking to Georgia, Shay's hand rested next to her thigh on the step, pinky just barely touching her bare skin. Shay had asked Georgia to help her steal the golden ball from the roof of the conservatory near the high school that night. The idea was absolutely insane, but her eyes had been so *intoxicating*, her lips cherry red, and she had held Georgia's hand when she'd asked her behind the boat shed just off the beach, her thumb tracing tiny circles in Georgia's palm. How could she say no?

"Michael bet me four hundred dollars I couldn't get away with it," Shay explained, her brown eyes shining, "and if you help me tonight I'll give you two hundred."

Georgia was hesitant. The conservatory roof was a glass dome with a tiny ladder winding up to the golden ball that rested at the very top, and she was deathly afraid of heights. She opened her mouth to respond, still unsure what she was going to say, but suddenly Shay's lips were pressed against hers and she could taste her strawberry lip balm and all she could think was *oh my God, Shay Morgan is actually kissing me*. In the three years they'd been friends, Georgia had imagined the moment a billion times, but none of her daydreams even came close to the full-body thrill of the real thing.

Shay pulled away, her lips curling into a trademark Shay smile—no teeth, eyelashes fluttering—and she grabbed Georgia's other hand. "You don't even have to do any climbing. Just be my getaway driver."

Georgia was so stunned by the kiss, Shay's lip balm still smeared on her lips, that she could only nod.

Georgia sat by Shay on the back porch steps and forced the Kool-Aid down, the bass beat of music from the basement below them shaking the

deck. She wasn't sure whether the knot in her stomach was from nerves about what they were about to do or from the kiss, but she figured drinking would solve both. The backyard was filled with people from school, most of them lingering near the keg that sat atop a fishing cooler just off the deck. Shay was laughing with Ryla—a girl with long black hair and blood-red nails she'd met from the rival high school—while Georgia went to the bathroom inside. As she watched Ryla rest a hand on Shay's shoulder, Georgia finished the contents of her water bottle. Georgia was used to watching Shay talk to other girls, but that night is stung more than it usually did.

Ryla leaned over to whisper something in Shay's ear and then turned and disappeared into the crowd, black hair billowing out behind her, and suddenly Shay was grabbing Georgia's hand and pulling her up off the steps. She didn't realize how drunk she was until they were next to her mom's blue van and Shay was kissing her again. Had they walked around the house? Through it? She wasn't sure, but the strawberry taste was back and the most gorgeous girl in the entire world had one hand on her cheek and another in her hair and she could have sworn the entire universe was inside her chest.

Georgia couldn't remember unlocking her mom's van or starting the ignition, but she remembered watching Shay climb out of the passenger side when she pulled up next to the towering conservatory and parked in the shadow of a large tree. Georgia watched Shay jog across the field and then disappear around the edge of the conservatory, but she had no idea how long she waited in the car, engine running. She remembered staring at herself in the rearview mirror, tilting it down to see her whole face. She remembered smiling at her reflection with unfocused eyes, remembered a breathy laugh escaping her lips, remembered *remembering* where Shay was and searching the dark outside the window for her silhouette. And then suddenly, Shay was back in the van, yelling "drive!", and as Georgia stepped on the gas pedal and peeled away from the curb she realized that Shay had her arms wrapped around a golden ball the size of a cantaloupe. Shay was laughing hysterically, yelling even though the windows were closed. Georgia couldn't understand what Shay was yelling as they sped away from the conservatory, but she yelled with her, pounding her hands against the ceiling of the car and laughing in triumph, steering with her knees.

They had made it down the road and past the high school before the sirens began directly behind them, flashing lights filling the van with

light. Georgia heard Shay swear, saw her shove the golden ball between the front seats and into the back of the van, but her memory stopped there. Georgia woke up alone four hours later on a metal cot in a room with no windows, head pounding.

Georgia and Shay were each charged with trespassing, though they were given different court dates. Georgia received a DUI along with being an accessory to a felony crime, and Shay was charged with a felony. Georgia spent the night in the temporary jail cell, staring at the chalk-white ceiling and attempting to piece her memory back together with little success, and in the four months since then she had relived the same memory fragments over and over and over while she steered the mower through the rows of graves at Sunset.

Her house arrest was coming to a close at the end of August, and she had her last meeting with her probation officer tomorrow afternoon. Georgia was more than relieved to be so close to freedom, but she still hadn't escaped the nagging ache she felt each time she thought about Shay. The last time she'd seen her was in the car that night, police lights flashing. Georgia had written her letters when her mom took away her phone for the rest of that month, but they lived in the drawer beneath her bed, collecting dust. She knew from kids at school that Shay was far away, that her family sent her to Massachusetts for the rest of high school, but she hadn't reached out to Georgia all summer and Georgia was settling into the realization that she probably never would.

At eleven thirty, Georgia started the lawn mower and headed back through the cemetery toward the parking lot for the last time. A woman wearing dark green pants was kneeling in front of a tombstone, her shoulders shaking, and as Georgia drove past she realized that the woman was actually laughing. As Georgia stared, the woman looked up. For a second their eyes connected. Georgia felt like she had suddenly invaded the woman's privacy, seeing the wild hysteria in her eyes even from twenty yards away atop the mower, and she looked away quickly. *Thank God* she would never have to come back again.

After parking the mower inside the shed near the cemetery gates and getting the woman at the front desk of the funeral home to sign off on her community service hours, Georgia sat on the curb and waited for her mom's car to pull in. She bit her nails and tried not to think about Shay. She felt lighter than she had since that night four months ago, and she tried to tell herself that she would only feel better with each day that passed.

She climbed into the passenger side door of her mom's blue van when she pulled into the parking lot around noon, and then she watched as the cemetery disappeared from sight through the window for the last time, thinking she'd be happy if she never mowed another lawn for the rest of her life.

Addy Drake hadn't been back to his grave in almost two years. It felt strange to be walking through Sunset Memorial Park Cemetery again after so much time. As she followed one of the many winding cement paths away from the parking lot, hands deep in the pockets of her wind jacket and shoulders tense, she thought the trees looked more full, more *alive* than they had when she had been a regular visitor. Then again, she hadn't paid much attention to things like trees back then.

She had been waiting for a sign from the universe that it was time to return for a while now. She didn't know what she was looking for but she trusted that it would come. That morning, at the cafe across from her house before driving to work, she had finally gotten the sign she'd been waiting for for so long.

She was more exhausted than normal that morning, her eyelids falling as she stood under the showerhead, the water not quite warm enough but not daring to mess with the finicky handle. Too many times she'd attempted to turn it up just to find herself wrapped in the shower curtain, attempting to escape the scalding water as she frantically tried to turn the handle back towards cold. She was ready to move out of the old bungalow she'd occupied for too many years now, and that morning she mouthed a silent *thank you* at the grimy ceiling tiles in the shower because in just three weeks she'd be leaving for good.

The walls felt weighed down as she passed through the hallway wrapped in a towel, no longer adorned with photographs but nails still sticking out where they had once been. He had died nearly seven years ago but she had kept most of the photos up, feeling like removing his face from the frames was some kind of metaphorical murder. *Fallacy of the heart*—that's what he would have called it. And so the pictures stayed, his eyes watching her from the walls as she had attempted to begin again, this time without him.

She got dressed with the lights off. She liked that leaving the lights off made the act of dressing more *body* than *mind*. She chose the green pants (corduroy) because they felt soft in her hands. Underwear (silk), bra (also silk), socks (polyester), then the pants, soft as she pulled them over

her legs in the dim blue light of the sunrise through the small window in her closet. She chose the white shirt because it felt like running water in her hands. Then the wind jacket, the black boots. The lights in the house were off as she stepped through the front door and locked it behind her, daylight beginning to spill through the streets like coffee creamer.

As she crossed the street, she realized she had once again forgotten the ring on the dresser in her closet. She wouldn't see him today because he was away for work until Saturday night, but she still felt guilt gnawing away at her stomach as she felt her naked ring finger with her thumb. Why couldn't she remember the ring? Didn't she love him? She did love him. Without a doubt, with the same certainty she knew her own name, she wanted to marry him. Stepping into the cafe, she reminded herself of this certainty, that the ring had nothing to do with her desire to spend the rest of her life with him. *It's just a ring.*

She ordered her usual—large iced Americano, no cream—and the barista's eyebrows flew upward.

Reaching into a minifridge behind the register, the barista, a small girl with wire-rimmed glasses and a tattoo of a moth covering her forearm, pulled out an already-made Americano.

"A guy came in less than five minutes ago," she told Addy, "and he ordered this and then left without grabbing it. It's free if you're okay with the melty ice."

Addy thanked the girl as she took the free drink and then left the cafe again. She whispered another tiny *thank you* to the brightening sky as she crossed the street once more and climbed into the driver seat of her 1998 Subaru outback. She buckled her seat belt and then reached down to grab the coffee from the cup holder beside her. As she lifted it to her lips, she caught sight of the name written on the side of the plastic to-go cup and felt her chest go cold. *His name.*

She stared at the cup for a moment before reaching down to unzip her purse and pull out her phone and call the speech center office number.

Molly answered after two rings. "Lily Lake Elementary school, how can I help you?"

"Molly," Addy said, "It's Addy. I'm so sorry I didn't call sooner, but I woke up with a nasty stomach bug and I won't be coming in today."

Molly assured her it was no problem and told her to drink some tea and spend the day in bed.

Taking a shaky sip of the coffee, Addy started the ignition and pulled

away from the sidewalk in front of her house. She had been waiting for a sign, and she knew in her bones that this was it. As she merged onto the highway, headed towards the cemetery, she opened up the glove box and pulled out a small red bag, tucking into the pocket of her jacket.

She held the red bag in the palm of her left hand as she made her way through the rows of gravestones, sunlight tie-dying the freshly-mown grass as it filtered through the trees.

The night after they buried him, she had returned to the stone and sat with her back resting against it and watched stars spill across the sky like salt above her. She stayed there like that, chin turned up, until the sun began to wake again, thinking, *I'll never meet someone else, I'm thirty-five and I'll spend the rest of my life mourning him.*

As she approached his headstone nearly seven years later, she felt a laugh bubbling up in her chest. She knelt down in front of it, eyes blurry with sudden tears, and she reached out to trace the name engraved in stone.

When they had met at twenty-six, she thought the name Gabriel Richmond was the most beautiful sounding name in the history of the world. The years were filled with barefoot dancing and microwave popcorn and vintage sweaters with holes in the sleeves, and though they had barely scraped by, there was always music playing through the kitchen stereos. She had loved him with a ferocity that terrified her, and when she received the call from the hospital just short of ten years later that he had died of a sudden heart attack, that they were still trying to determine the cause, she had watched the pieces of her world fall away through their bedroom window, the phone falling to the floor at her feet.

Kneeling in front of his gravestone now, Addy traced each letter of his name with her pointer finger just as she had a million times before.

"I met someone," she choked out, gasping in a breath, "I met someone and I'm getting married in three weeks and we're moving to the coast."

She felt strange saying the words out loud, but as they left her mouth she felt her whole body exhale. She began to laugh then, at first a strangled sounding cry and then a full-chest laugh, tears still spilling from her eyes as she pressed her hand against the stone.

She continued to laugh as she became aware of the buzz of a lawn mower driving down the path towards the parking lot. She caught the eyes of the driver for a moment, a young girl with hair the color of butternut squash, but then the girl looked away and continued to drive,

leaving Addy alone at the gravesite. Was she crying or laughing? She felt hysterical and unleashed as she reached up to wipe her nose with the sleeve of her wind jacket.

Addy reached in her pocket and pulled out the red bag. As she untied the opening, she realized it was the first time she'd opened it in seven years. She reached inside and pulled out the ring, a small thing made of guitar string that they had chosen together, and she slipped it on her ring finger for a second. It felt strange seeing the old ring. Her hand was much older now, forty years of wrinkles creasing her knuckles, and the ring looked so much rustier than she remembered it being.

"I miss you," she said to the stone as her laughter faded away. *Fallacy of the heart* once again came to mind. An image of Gabriel, dark curls brushing his eyelashes as he chopped onions, hips swaying to the jazz coming through the kitchen speakers.

As she placed the ring atop the gravestone, once more resting her hand over the letters, she felt as if the world outside the window had finally stopped falling away, the pieces no longer collecting on the sidewalks and streets like dead leaves. As she stood up, Addy whispered one last *thank you*, this time directed at the ground beneath her feet.

Returning to her car, Addy reached in her pocket for her cellphone and called him. The phone was ringing as she pulled out of the parking lot. As she passed through the cemetery gates, she caught sight of a man wearing a button-down shirt, one button off the whole way down, holding his phone up in front of him in search of cell service, face red with frustration. For a moment she wondered if she should stop, roll down her window and ask the stranger if he needed a ride somewhere, but then Henry answered.

"I love you," she said in place of her usual greeting. Thinking of the ring still sitting on the dresser, Addy turned out of the parking lot and passed the man without a second glance, the cemetery quickly falling away in the rearview mirror.