

Unearthing

Every morning Maia found her husband's shoes on the front porch.

Before she went to bed, she always liked to have all the shoes lined up under the bench, the door locked, the key in its place. Yet each morning when she woke up, Amos's shoes were outside, covered in mud, dirt clumps scattered on the freshly swept porch. It wasn't a problem for Maia to wipe off the faded leather, tidy up the porch, and neaten the shoes under the bench inside. In fact, she enjoyed this little task, making something clean out of what was dirty, so she never said anything to Amos. Maia knew Amos wouldn't like to be questioned about his nocturnal activities, so she let it be, quietly cleaning up his shoes day after day. He had always liked a nighttime stroll, after all.

Maia's hesitance to talk with Amos about what he was doing each night was not borne out of nothing. The last few years had seen Maia and her husband grow apart. Amos was retired now, but he would get up at dawn each day to walk through the woods and work on the cabin he was building. Often Maia wouldn't be home for dinner because she was out volunteering or visiting her sister. Sometimes days would go by when the two wouldn't see each other at all.

Maia thought this change had begun when their adult daughter, Leticia, died. Before the accident, even after Leticia had gotten married and moved out, Maia and Amos had spent every evening together, walking the length of their property at sunset, drinking tea on the back porch, making love in the cool of their room. And Leticia would come over each weekend, bringing her slowly growing family with her, and they would all enjoy a picnic together, or Maia would teach her granddaughters to cook while Amos talked for hours with Leticia. Their family had been so tightly knit,

so perfectly affectionate and close, until that awful day when the heavy rains filled the lake to overflowing, and a moment of faltering had lost their only child to them forever.

After the accident, Amos, once so full of life, had grown sombre and withdrawn. He looked so much older, grayer, weaker, that Maia was hardly able to recognise the man she had married. It pained Maia to watch the joy and love of her once beautiful marriage fade, but she told herself that perhaps Amos needed more time to heal. So she let it be, day after day, week after week, and year after year.

Maia had been sick with a fever for two days now. In her seventies, she seemed to catch everything that came around, but this illness had left her feeling very out of sorts, and she was even finding it difficult to sleep at night.

At around one in the morning, Maia was laying awake, waiting for a bout of dizziness to pass, when she heard movement at the front door.

A burglar?

Maia pulled back the covers and shivered as the cold air stung her. She glanced over at the other side of the bed and scoffed softly when she saw it was empty. Amos must be on another of his nightly walks – that would explain the noise she had heard. Maia eased herself back onto the bed, deciding to wait up for him, see where it was he was always going. After all, she was already awake. But as soon as she resolved to stay up, her eyelids grew heavy, and she slipped into a restless slumber. When she awoke again, it was morning, and Amos was bustling in the kitchen. Maia felt weak and achy.

“Amos?” She winced at the feeble sound of her voice.

Amos, brow furrowed, walked into the bedroom, still holding the tea kettle. “All right, Maia?” he asked in his gruff voice.

“Could you take me to the doctor?”

The visit with the doctor didn’t last long. He diagnosed Maia with a bad case of influenza, gave her some medicine, and ordered her on bedrest for a few more days. Maia couldn’t sleep that night, and again she woke out of her tossing and turning to the sound of someone at the door. Maia fought a wave of dizziness as she climbed out of bed and headed to the front door, determined this time to see where her husband was walking. She peered through the doorframe, watching Amos follow the path down towards the forest. It was as she thought – he was taking a nighttime walk.

Yet something urged Maia to keep following.

Maia tucked her feet into her slippers and wrapped her housecoat around herself before tiptoeing down the path after her husband. She felt compelled to stay silent, not wanting him to discover he wasn’t alone.

Amos kept along the winding path until he reached the old oak tree that had been there as long as Maia could remember. As the biggest tree on their property apart from the ones deep in the forest, it had always provided welcome shade in the summer and a place for Leticia to play when she was young. Still with his back to Maia, Amos leaned down and picked up something from the ground. By the light of the moon, Maia could make out that it was an old shovel.

Did Amos come out here to *garden* in the middle of the night? Maia stepped a little closer, barely daring to breathe for fear he would turn around and see her there.

With a short grunt and the sharp *thwack* of the shovel hitting dirt, Amos began to dig. Clods of soil flew up behind him, filling the air with a sharp, earthy smell.

Maia could quell her curiosity no longer.

“Amos?”

He did not deviate from his work.

“Amos.”

He didn’t even seem to hear her.

Maia stepped closer. “*Amos.*”

She reached out a hand to touch his shoulder and he whirled around, his eyes full of—no. No, that wasn’t anger. His eyes seemed glassy, almost far away, as if he wasn’t really there at all. “Amos, what are you *doing?*”

Amos just grunted in reply and turned back to his digging. Maia clenched her fists tightly, feeling lightheaded. She felt the sense that something was horribly wrong.

“Amos, please. Why are you out here? It’s the middle of night, and we both need to get back to bed.”

Still no response, just the repetitive motion of Amos scooping up more dirt, tossing it aside.

Maia’s head was spinning now – she needed to lie back down, but first she had to make Amos come back inside. “Amos, please, I—”

The ground seemed to collapse beneath her and suddenly Maia was on the ground. Her head ached. She had heard a loud thud – had that been her falling? Everything seemed foggy, as if she was in a dream.

“Amos?” she heard herself say.

Then he was there in front of her, alert, holding her face in his rough hands.

“Maia? Maia, are you all right?”

Maia vaguely observed that it had been a long time since Amos had held her like this.

“Maia, what’s going on? Why are we out here?”

“You were... walk... walking and...digging... and...you wouldn’t answer...me,” said Maia slowly. She felt weak.

“I... I was?” Amos shook his head, rubbed his eyes. “All right, Maia. I’m going to take you inside.” He cradled her in his arms and carried her down the path.

The next thing Maia remembered was being woken up by Amos sitting at her bedside. The sun was just rising outside of their window.

“Amos. Why were you out there last night? And all those nights before?” Maia asked when her eyes connected with his. Her voice was still rough from the illness.

Amos looked lost. “I...I don’t know.”

There was a pause as Maia thought for a moment. “You were sleepwalking, weren’t you?”

“I suppose I was.” Amos ran his hands over his face and shook his head. “If I hadn’t woken up just then, when you needed me... I’m so sorry, Maia.”

“It’s all right,” Maia whispered. “I’m all right now. But are you?”

There was a long time where Amos didn’t answer. Then he said, “Last night... I had that dream again. I was hearing her voice.” Amos looked down at his mud-stained hands and breathed in sharply. “She’s calling for me and I’m trying to find her, but I can’t. She tells me she’s in the forest, so I search and search for her, but I can’t find her. I can never find her.”

A few days later, Amos and Maia drove half an hour to the cemetery. It was a surprisingly warm day for the end of October, and Maia was feeling much better than she had been a few days ago. Hand tightly clasped in Amos's, she walked down the dirt path to the back of the cemetery, where Leticia's grave lay.

There was silence for a few moments as they looked at the dark gray stone, engraved with the name of their daughter. She'd only been 44 when she'd died, leaving behind her husband, her three beautiful daughters. All Maia's friends said she was too young, it was too early – but wasn't it *always* too early?

"Leticia." Amos's voice was harsh with tears as he stood at the place where their daughter was buried. "You're not ever coming back to me, are you? No matter how much I search."

Maia placed a small hand into her husband's rough, worn one.

"I... miss you, Leticia." A heavy exhale. "More than I can ever describe. And I—" Amos broke off and turned away from the stone, his cries echoing through the empty graveyard.

The sobs were deep and guttural, as if coming from somewhere buried inside of him, fighting to get out. Something about that sound pierced Maia right through.

Yet it had to be. Amos had to be there in that moment, grieving completely at last. He had to finally accept that Leticia was *gone*.

Dirt still in his fingernails, callouses on his palms, eyes red and shoulders shaking, Amos stood. Maia held tightly onto her husband's arm as he cried and as together, they said goodbye to their daughter again.