

EPITAPH

by Joseph Kwong

Dull light wafted through the clouds to blanket the yard. Gray eyes in wrinkled faces watched the lawn, with its fallen leaves. They had looked upon this yard many times before, and hopefully would do so again tomorrow. They would sit here and watch as long as Nature allowed--before the frost of winter came.

There were seven of them this late afternoon. They sat in silence. Some in wheelchairs, others in cushioned bone-white plastic seats. All were wrapped with worn shawls, scarves, or blankets--gripped tight with gnarled, mottled fingers. It wasn't that they were cold, but they felt better having something to hold onto as protection from any sudden chills. Nature was fickle, they knew, and a chill could fall upon any one of them, at any time.

A sparkle of gold flashed across the carpet of faded brown leaves. The sun had broken through the autumn shroud in a final effort to recapture the warmth of summer. It danced briefly upon auburn fur as a dog trotted up the path towards the sprawling porch where the seven sat and watched. The dog's golden eyes met their gray, and greeted them with a lolling smile.

Beside the dog walked Vivian. Her brisk strides swept aside the mold-spotted leaves and sent them twirling as she passed. She glanced at an ashen wood sign to confirm she was at the right place. The words "Candlehurst Home" could barely be discerned among the mosaic of weathered paint chips.

The two bounded up the porch's three wooden steps, and gave the sitters a final nod and smile before opening the large double doors and stepping inside. The doors automatically creaked shut behind them. The seven returned to gaze at the yard as the sun faded back into the gray of fall.

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The two brown dots that served as Freya's eyebrows raised up as the dog examined the stained glass dome overhead. Yet despite the light from above, and the lamps in the room, the

foyer remained in a haze of shadows. One of the black silhouettes moved, and as Vivian's eyes adjusted to the dimness, they noticed the thin man standing over an oblong rectangular table constructed of dark polished wood.

"Hello," Vivian said as she stepped up to the desk.

"What can I do for you?" the man asked. Up close, Vivian could see he wasn't as old as she initially thought. Late twenties, probably. His name tag read "Claude Peatman."

"I'm Vivian Buchart. And this is Freya." She glanced down at her furry companion. "I'm the therapy dog volunteer."

"Ah, right." Claude nodded briefly before reaching for the telephone. "Hold on. I'll get someone to show you where to go." Claude started pushing buttons on the phone and turned away to face the wall--signaling the conversation was over for now.

"What a cutie!" Vivian turned to see a short, elderly man in a gray sweater standing behind her. "And your dog's not bad-looking either," he said.

Beside him, a diminutive, and equally-aged woman in a yellow sweater gave him a half-hearted slap on the arm.

The old man said, "You're a little young to be retired, but I'm not complaining. I enjoy seeing new faces."

"Pretty new faces," the woman corrected.

Vivian smiled. "I'm afraid I'm just visiting, with my therapy dog, Freya."

The old man stooped over a bit to examine the canine.

"Therapy? Is he sick?"

"She. Freya. No, I brought her here to visit the residents."

"She's here for our therapy," the old lady explained. "We pet the dog, and we feel better."

"That's pretty much it." Vivian nodded.

The old man beamed a smile at Vivian. "Well, I'm feeling better already. I'm Wayne, and this is Wilma."

"His wife. He sometimes needs reminding, it seems." Wilma glared at Wayne.

"I'm Vivian." she reached out and shook her new acquaintances' hands. Freya sat up on her haunches and offered a paw as well, which Wayne eagerly shook.

"And it's a pleasure meeting you, too, Freya." Still smiling, he slowly straightened and gestured to the foyer around him. "Is this your first time here?"

"Yes," Vivian looked around. "It's more elegant than I imagined."

"Craftsman's style. Built in 1909. Remodeled in 1921, then again in 1971." Wayne swept a hand at Claude, who was still on the phone. "These folks bought it up in 1991."

Wilma frowned. "You told me it was in 1999."

Wayne ignored his wife. "Got it for cheap!" He leaned closer to Vivian and lowered his voice. "Because it's

haunted."

"Really?" Vivian whispered back.

"I know these things. I'm a realtor."

"Retired realtor" Wilma added.

"Have you seen or heard anything...unusual here?"

Vivian asked.

"No. The only rattling I ever hear is from my own ball and chain." He dipped his head towards his wife, who slapped his arm again.

They turned to the sound of a man clearing his throat. Claude stood behind his dark desk, pointing at the man leaning against a far wall. "Rob will show you where to take your dog."

Vivian nodded, and turned back to Wayne and Wilma. "It was nice meeting you two. I hope to see you again. Maybe at Freya's therapy visit?"

"Sure." Wayne glanced at his wife. "It's not like we have anywhere else to go."

"Great! See you there." Vivian glanced at the man against the wall, who had now folded his arms. "I guess I shouldn't keep my new host waiting." As she turned to leave, Wayne spoke up again.

"He doesn't say much, that one, but my guess is you're not missing anything." Wilma slapped her husband's arm again, but with such lackluster that it seemed more a caress.

"I'll see you two later." Vivian gave them a final smile before summoning her dog to follow.

Rob wore the same outfit as receptionist Claude--a white shirt, black slacks, black soft rubber-soled loafers. His white plastic name tag read "Rob Otis." Vivian introduced herself and Freya.

"Rob," was all Rob said before walking away down the hall.

"So you got drafted to be my tour guide?" Vivian smiled at her escort. For a tall man, Rob had a slow gait. He was in his mid-fifties, she guessed, yet his head was drooped as if with age. His cheeks, chins, and stomach drooped as well.

"I was just told to take you to the Amanda Scott room--not give you a tour."

"Maybe after my visit?"

"If that's what they tell me to do." Rob replied without even sparing her a glance.

They went past an elevator, up some stairs, and down a corridor lit with a row of open windows and rustling curtains on their right. Arrayed on their left was a row of dark wood doors with sporadic sounds of televisions drifting out. They reached a corner and Rob turned left. Vivian followed, but Freya continued straight down the windowed hall--taking Vivian by surprise and pulling the leash from her hand. The dog's ears twitched left, then right, as if attempting to locate the source

of some sound, or song.

Vivian caught up to her and grabbed the trailing leash. "Where are you going? Why are you so distracted?"

This section of the corridor was darker. The windows were closed. The curtains drawn and still. The doors on the left were all silent. Rob came up from behind.

"What's down there?" Vivian asked.

"You want to go this way." He turned and walked away, with Vivian pulling Freya after her. Both the dog and her owner cast a last look down the hall before turning the corner.

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The Amanda Scott was a large sitting room with a black upright piano and textured orange and pink wallpaper. Plush sofas and orange-cushioned seats formed a circle around the center of the room. Center stage, for Stacey and Freya. The room was filled with a dozen of the elderly residents, who smiled at the visitors as Stacey and her dog took their places front and center. Stacey made introductions; she was a native Californian, twenty years of age, and was attending the Stannis College of Art and Design. Freya was four, and was a Jindo mix whom she had rescued from a shelter four years ago.

"Whats a Jindo?" It was Wayne, seated next to Wilma, both

leaning forward in their seats and beaming smiles.

Stacey explained they were a Korean breed. Originally from China, the Mongolians took a few with them when they went through, and left some in Korea during the invasion of their lands. They're now considered a national treasure of Korea, mainly for their extreme loyalty, but also for their intelligence. To demonstrate, Stacey used a series of hand gestures to command Freya into performing an array of tricks. The dog went down on her stomach and crawled like a soldier, weaved and danced between Stacey's legs, and when her owner pointed her finger imitating a mock gun, Freya dropped and rolled over with all four feet sticking up in the air like a dead bug. The room filled with laughter and applause, and both Stacey and Freya took a bow.

Stacey walked her companion around the circle of seats so her audience could pet and hug her furry friend if they desired.

"Can any dog become a therapy dog?" someone asked.

"Mostly, as long as they have a calm disposition and like being around people. Then they go through training, and get certified."

Wayne tapped Stacey on the shoulder. "I know you can teach dogs to 'come', but can you teach them to 'go'?"

"I guess so, but I never taught Freya that."

"Well, let me know when you do. I want to teach my wife that. It'll come in useful at times. Believe me."

"So you want me to go, do you?" Wilma asked.

"I'll give you a liver treat." Wayne smiled.

"As long as it's from your liver." Wilma smiled back.

Stacey finished circling the room, and the residents thanked her for coming. The small crowd began to trickle out the room. Rob Otis was at the door. She didn't know how long he'd been standing there.

"Did you watch my presentation?" she asked.

"I'm just waiting to take you back out." Rob turned away and walked off, with Stacey and Freya following.

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The corridors seemed cooler than when they walked through earlier. Freya was in front, as if eager to show that she remembered the route they took.

Stacey asked, "Do you have a dog yourself?"

"Don't like animals," Rob replied.

"So you're more of a people person?" Stacey immediately regretted her question. She feared Rob might've

mistaken it for sarcasm. But if he did, he had no reaction.

She quickly changed the subject. "Have you worked here long?"

"Thirty years, come December."

"So I guess you like it here."

"I just don't like change."

Stacey was thinking of what to say next when Freya's ears perked up. She stopped and tilted her head as if straining to hear something distant. With a sudden lurch, Freya jerked the lead out of Stacey's hand and bolted away towards the windowed corridor. She turned left, and vanished.

Stacey yelled as she ran after her dog. Around the corner there was nothing--only still curtains and shut doors. All but one door. Stacey approached the last room at the end. The door was cracked open just wide enough for Freya to pass through. She most likely pushed the unlatched door open with her nose.

Inside, the lights were off. Scant illumination came from the window at the right wall, since the shades were drawn closed. The ceiling and corners were shrouded in shadow. An empty chair sat next to a bare table, and it seemed no one lived here. Then she saw the woman. In her eighties, Stacey guessed, if not more. She lay on a small wooden bed, with a white sheet draped over her. Freya sat on the floor next to her, looking at the prone form.

"I'm so sorry," Stacey said as she grabbed Freya's

collar. "My dog got loose. She doesn't usually do that--I don't know what got into her. We didn't mean to disturb you."

The woman's gray eyes stared up at the shadows looming over her head. Thin translucent skin wrapped around her skull, and dark veins spread from her hollow temples like barren winter branches.

"She can't hear you," Rob said from behind. "She's in her own world. I think she keeps talking to people from her past."

Tears rolled from the corner of the woman's eye. Stacey took a tissue from the nearby nightstand and wiped the tears away.

"Take care," Stacey whispered before pulling her dog away.

Freya barked in protest.

"Come on, girl. We shouldn't be in here." She tugged at the collar.

A groan escaped the old woman's throat. Her eyes continued to stare above her, but a gnarled hand stretched out--reaching towards Freya. Reaching for her past...

...for her Angel. Her outstretched arm was marred by bruises old and new. Lily's body bore many scars, but otherwise she was fit and shapely for a woman in her mid-thirties.

"Angel," she called.

A golden-haired mongrel bounded to her as Lily sat on her front porch steps. Tears rolled from the corner of the woman's eye. The dog sniffed at her, and licked the tears away.

"Angel, my Angel." She hugged the old dog as her companion tucked her head between the woman's knees and began rubbing its head against her stomach. "My...

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"...Angel." The old woman croaked.

Freya shook herself loose from Stacey's grip and ran to the woman's reaching hand. Lily ran her fingers through the fur, then began stroking the dog's head.

"Angel," she said.

"Huh, that's new," Rob muttered. "She doesn't respond to anything. I mean we spoon food in front of her mouth and she'll eat, but that's about it."

Stacey watched the woman with her dog. "Can we stay then? After all, that's what we're here for."

"It's not up to me."

"We can ask?"

"You can ask. But we have to leave for now."

Stacey reluctantly pulled Freya away and out the

door. The old woman's fingers curled and uncurled, groping for the dog that was no longer there.

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When Stacey returned the following week, the retirement home had tacked up Halloween decorations. The Amanda Scott room featured a paper skeleton dangling from the central ceiling lamp. It wasn't scary, but rather a smiling cartoon creature. Grinning and beckoning. It spun on a thread, casting shadows of its bony fingers across all in the room like a macabre game of spin-the-bottle.

Her audience was pretty much the same as the week before. Freya performed tricks, and the residents laughed and applauded as enthusiastically as their first visit. Wayne and Wilma were there, with their usual banter. At the end of their session, Rob was waiting by the door again.

Stacey smiled. "I asked if we could visit that poor woman again."

"Yeah, they told me," Rob said. "They said if it seemed to help, then okay. But as long as someone's with you."

"That's great," Stacey smiled. "Can we go now?"

"No. She's asleep."

Stacey's smile broadened. "You checked on her for me. Thanks."

"I was assigned to her wing this morning."

Stacey said, "Maybe she'll wake up in an hour or so. Would you like to have lunch with me?" Stacey beamed her most charming smile. "My treat."

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The restaurant was a residential home now converted to accommodate diners. Most of the patrons, including Stacey and Rob, sat outdoors at plastic tables scattered around the front lawn. Freya lay on the ground at Stacey's feet. Rob sat across from them, shoveling a heap of fried rice into his mouth.

Stacey took a sip of tea as she leaned forward towards Rob. "So who is that poor woman?"

Rob spoke between chews. "That's...Lily...Hazeton." He swallowed, then spooned another mouthful before speaking again. "She's been here about a year. No one visits her, but Roberta, the assistant manager, says someone makes her payments on time. Her niece, she thinks."

"That's so sad," said Stacey. "No wonder she's not responsive."

"Except to your dog, Freya."

Freya lifted her head at the mention of her name, and opened her mouth in a grin.

"Yeah, Freya seems to help."

Rob scooped up his last bite.

Stacey wiped her mouth and placed the napkin in her plate. "Ready to go back?"

Rob rose to his feet, still chewing.

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Lily Hazeton had been wheeled back inside by an orderly after a brief visit outdoors to get some sun and air. She was still in her wheelchair, secured by safety restraints. The orderly, a squat rotund woman, was busy readying Lily's bed when Stacey, Rob, and Freya entered. The dog ran up to Lily, sniffed at her, then quietly...

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...whimpered. Lily heard the whimpering. It was Angel. She was locked outside, trying to get in.

Despite her harsh life, Lily could still have been considered beautiful, if not for the blood streaming from her nose. She had her hands up, shielding her face, but a fist still crashed through.

"You barren, dried up bitch," Tony bellowed. "You saying it's my fault that you can't get pregnant?"

"No," Lily sputtered. "I just heard on TV that doctors can help. Maybe if we both saw one?"

"We? I'm not the one who's shriveled inside." Tony drove a kick into Lily's gut, crumpling her to the floor into a fetal position. "There, maybe that will help your insides."

Outside, Angel was barking and...

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...whining. Freya's whimpers were interspersed with quiet yelps. The orderly gave a frown in her direction.

"Hush, girl." Stacey approached Lily. "Can you hear me, Lily? Would you like to have a visit with Freya?"

Lily groaned mournfully, and ended with a rasping wheeze. Tears trickled down her face. Freya tried to move towards her, but Stacey kept her back.

The orderly cleared her throat. "She's upset. I think you should leave her alone."

Stacey dabbed Lily's tears away with a tissue, then tugged at Freya's lead. "Let's go, girl. We'll come back another day." Stacey walked out of the room, tugging at the reluctant Freya the whole time.

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The winter brought cold rains and killing frost. The front porch of Candlehurst Homes was empty. The seven could no longer sit and watch the hours tick by. Besides, today was a special day. It was time for the annual Christmas party and Stacey was invited, along with Freya. They promised eggnog. The gathering was held in a large chamber on the ground floor. Strings of lights flickered on and off in random fashion, catching the occupants in colorful hues before dimming again. Stacey recognized a few of those who attended her sessions, but many others weren't there. She assumed their families picked them up

to spend the holidays with them. Some residents came by to say hello to Stacey and Freya, and to share stories of past holidays, dead pets, fading memories.

After an hour, the eggnogs were filling her up, and she excused herself to search for a restroom. Freya followed her into the corridor. She turned a random corner in her search, and came across a lone man standing in the middle of the hallway. He guzzled from a plastic cup in his hand.

"Rob?" Stacey asked as she approached the figure.

He turned a little in her direction, but did nothing more to acknowledge her presence. Stacey stepped closer to see what Rob was preoccupied with. A wooden ledge was built into the wall, and a cork board hung above it. A handful of greeting cards were tacked upon it. A small vase of cut white flowers sat beside a framed photograph. Stacey recognized the smiling man in the picture. Wayne, the realtor. She read the cards suspended over his likeness. "My condolences..., You'll be missed..., My sympathies..."

Stacey took a step back. "Wayne? When did--"

"Last week," Rob said. "After your visit."

"What? How?"

"Heart attack."

"How's Wilma holding up?"

"She went out-of-state to bury him. They got a family plot somewhere, I heard."

Stacey picked up the photo frame in her hands. "It's nice of them to set up this memorial."

"They do that for everyone who dies here. The staff call it the 'Goodbye Shelf.'" Rob lifted his plastic cup up and toasted the photo. "One day I'll be here, I guess. A photo on a shelf. And after a month or two, I'll be tossed into the trash."

Stacey placed Wayne's picture back down. "Rob, what you do here is important to the residents."

Rob snorted. "Anyone can do this job."

"Yes, but you're the one who's doing it. You're the one who's helping these people."

Rob downed the rest of his eggnog, threw the cup into a waste receptacle, and headed back towards the music and lights.

Stacey caught up with him, with Freya close behind. "Rob?"

The large man spared her a sidelong glance.

Stacey smiled. "Speaking about helping, can you tell me where the closest restroom is?"

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Lily Hazeton lay in her bed, with Stacey and Freya standing beside her. Outside the windows, men moved about removing Christmas decorations, now that the new year had come.

Rob stood leaning against the door frame. "She hasn't been doing too well. They were thinking of sending her off to a convalescent home."

"Lily?" Stacey spoke softly. "Freya's here. Is it okay if she says 'hello'?"

Both Lily's hands were hidden under the sheet. Only her face was exposed. Her eyes were open wide, but she wasn't seeing the woman standing beside her. She was seeing...

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...Tony, her husband. Face red. Fist raised. She couldn't hear what he was saying--only the ringing in her ears. And the faint sound of barking. It was Angel, outside the house, beyond the locked door. A fist flew towards her, and she threw her hands up to cover her face. More blows came, and she curled up to weather what came.

The barking grew louder as Angel moved to the open window. Lily hoped to catch a glimpse of her dog, but her view was blocked by Tony's head as he leered into her face.

"I'll kill you. I kill you," he slurred. His features were obscured in shadow as the window back-lit him. But Lily could imagine his bloodshot eyes boring into her. Dripping with rage, and satisfaction. Now the real punishment would begin.

But it didn't. There was a loud crash as the floor lamp fell over. Tony cursed something unintelligible. Then she

heard a familiar growl in front of her. Angel. The dog had climbed in through the window and now stood between her and Tony.

Tony snarled back. "God damned mutt! You broke my lamp, now I'm gonna bust you up!" Tony reached for Angel's collar, and the dog snapped at his thick, meaty fingers.

"God dammit!" Tony yelled as he pulled his hand back. "You wannit that way? Fine!" Tony drew his right leg back and punt-kicked Angel's chin. The dog's jaws snapped shut with a hollow clomp, accompanied by a yelp as her head shot up towards the ceiling. Tony kicked again. Angel's front paws lifted off the ground as she spun around to crash into the wall.

Lily wheezed. "Please don't hurt her."

Angel tried to get up, but Tony continued his assault, beating her back down.

"Stop!" Lily screamed.

Her command froze Tony in mid-blow. His eyes widened in disbelief. Behind him stood Lily, arms upraised over her head, holding the fireplace prong.

Tony's lips quivered. "You threatening me, woman?"

Lily looked up at the iron prong gripped tight in her hands. She seemed just as surprised as her husband. She had no idea how it had gotten there. But she did not lower it. "Just stop hurting my dog."

"Sure," Tony took a step away from Lily. "I'll

stop...after I kill her." He lifted his knee high and stomped down on the dog's head. He smiled and turned to Lily just in time to see her rushing at him, he wrought-iron bar whooshing in a blur.

Blow after blow hammered down upon him. Tony backpedaled as he fended the attacks off with his forearms. "What? Why?" was all Tony could stammer.

What is this for? Lily thought. Why? Lily had so much she wanted to say. So much she kept to herself until now. This is for everything, she wanted to say. But all she could do was close her eyes and scream. Lily swung down, with everything.

The curved prong came to an abrupt halt as metal crunched through skull. Lily's grip grew slack, and the rod slipped to the floor. The other end was firmly embedded in her beloved dog's skull.

Angel's eyes turned up to look at her, then continued rolling up until only the whites showed.

"Angel?" Lily knelt and placed her hands upon her companion's head. They came away bloodied. "Angel. Please. No."

Tony staggered towards her from behind. "You crazy bitch." He raised his meaty fist.

Lily curled up around the body of her friend and let Tony vent his rage upon her. His beating began anew, but she

felt nothing. She was already numb. She was already somewhere else.

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"Please forgive me," Lily whispered.

Stacey leaned forward. "Shh. Everything's okay, Lily."

Freya whined, and Lily blinked. The old woman saw the young lady standing over her, but that was not where the sound came from. She continued her gaze downward until they came to rest on the dog. "Angel?"

Freya rushed over and licked her face.

"Oh, I thought I had..." Lily swallowed. "But you're alright. God, thank you, thank you."

The dog licked her again.

"You're alright," Lily whispered to the dog. "You're alright. Everything's alright."

Stacey glanced at Rob. "Do you know what she's talking about?"

Rob shrugged. "Who knows? At least she's not crying, for a change."

Lily rolled to her side and placed both hands on the dog's cheeks.

Stacey smiled and nodded. "I guess that's all that matters."

They stayed until the early afternoon sun filtered

through the window. Lily fell asleep--one hand still draped over Freya's neck. Stacey gently placed Lily's hand back onto the bed, and led Freya out the door.

#

Spring had come again. The seven reappeared on the front porch in their shawls and blankets. They had made it past another winter. Another year. Stacey smiled at them, then went inside. Stacey and Freya started with their usual performance in the Amanda Scott. Then, they visited the east wing. Lily's room. Lily never became lucid again, but Stacey always went to see her. Until the end. And even after that, Freya still insisted on coming to Lily's room to view the empty bed. No one was sure why Lily had passed on, since no autopsy was performed. Due to her advanced age, it was just assumed to be organ failure.

Rob and Stacey stood just inside Lily's room, by the door. "I don't know if I ever told you," Rob said. "But you know after that day, she never cried again. And when the end came, she actually had a smile on her face."

Stacey spoke softly. "So did you ever find out more about her past?"

"I asked Roberta, but we don't know much more about her."

Stacey glanced at the empty bed. "So we'll never know why she was always crying."

Rob shrubbed. "But we know why she stopped." He jutted his double chins out towards Freya.

"Yeah," Stacey looked appreciatively at her dog "I guess that's the important thing."

The window was open. A warm breeze rustled the blinds, beckoning Freya closer to the light. Stacey and the man were still chatting behind her, but Freya could hear through their din. She cocked her head and perked her ears to better hear the laughter of a young woman, and her dog. Freya's mouth opened in a smile, and then added her own playful bark to their song.

Stacey turned and raised a finger across her lips. "Hush, girl. Why do you always get so excited in here?" She patted her thigh with two slaps. "Come on. Time to go."

Stacey stepped out of the room as the man held the door open. Freya followed, but cast one last glance at the window. White light streamed through, to wash the room free of shadows.