

## Ashes of a Glasshouse

Rebecca Davey

According to the Astral Initiative, the rental period on mum's pod is about to expire. Her light will go out at 8:47 AM. I know this, because an infographic on the app shows a shrinking, glowing ball hovering above a discreet countdown. The hourly notifications are digital, but the invitation – the summons – surprisingly came by snail mail, printed on 210 GSM and threaded with black ribbon. The heavy paper, the clever carbon copy of the CEO's signature that *looks* handwritten, at a glance, are nice gestures. Proof of how much they care. Proof of how wide their profit margins must be, to send real paper to their thousands upon thousands of 'loved ones'. On the back: Recycle me!

Yesterday I stood before a mirror, weighing the respective pros and cons of the two belts I own. Black, or brown? Cufflinks, or should I roll my sleeves? Does it matter? It's not as if she's going to see.

It's not as if it's another funeral.

I settled on jeans, shirt, jacket. Black belt, no tie. Suits are for weddings and wakes, and I'm not going to a wedding anytime soon.

I'm lying awake, rethinking the cufflinks. Staring at the mandatory glow-in-the-dark strips along the cornices. Hoping, if I squint with sufficient intention, it will hurt my eyes. Even so, the first synthetic chirp of the alarm jars my marrow, interrupts my attempt to feel. I find and quiet the phone in seconds, a skill born of months of practice, of being careful not to wake Claire, now she needs as much sleep as possible. My watchful habits become instinct; I realised a few weeks ago that I'm always unconsciously listening out for her ventilator, for her beeping heart, just as we both, when Lucy was a new-born, always had an ear cocked towards the baby monitor.

Now, as then, I live in terror of waking to perfect silence.

Today, however, the machinery's still steadily pulsing and rattling. I dress in the dark, another routine I've perfected, and pad with light footsteps to the kitchen. I switch on the light; YOUSAGE immediately pings to life on my phone.

HELLO john. YOU HAVE ACTIVATED 'lights kitchen'. MY SYSTEM INDICATES THAT IN YOUR CURRENT LOCATION, THE SUN HAS NOT YET RISEN. EXTRANEIOUS ITEMS: 'lights kitchen', 'ventilator Claire', AND 'monitor Claire' ARE CURRENTLY BEING POWERED BY SOLAR GENERATOR – LEAVING ITEMS RUNNING WHILE NOT IN USE CAN DRAIN YOUR STORED ENERGY! DO YOU WISH TO DEACTIVATE 'lights kitchen', 'ventilator Claire', AND / OR 'monitor Claire' UNTIL SUNRISE, ESTIMATED 08:24? SAVE MONEY AND SAVE YOUR PLANET BY ONLY USING POWER WHEN NECESSARY! ADJUST SETTINGS [HERE](#).

Every morning.

I click 'NO', and do the same again when an almost identical message complains about the coffee-maker. While I'm waiting, I go through some emails. Mortgage. Utilities. An envelope can be ignored, but now it's all digital, I carry the bills with me. Everywhere.

Not an invoice. Not another "friendly reminder". But reading the subject line, I get a queasy feeling all the same.

*Dear Mister John Dughan, Loved one of the Loved,*

*The Astral Initiative has received and considered your recent application for Mitigation of Cost of Standard Memorial Services.*

*It is our understanding that your application was made in light of the following criteria: Pending Death of a Spouse / Pending Death of a Parent of a Minor / Pending Death Due to Terminal Illness of a Citizen below 35 Years of Age / Difficulty Paying for Medical Treatment and Memorial Services. (If you selected other criteria in your application that does not appear in this email, or if we have here listed criteria that you did not select, please get in touch with us via the contact details below as soon as possible).*

*As requested, we have considered your financial and medical circumstances, and spoken with your bank and your doctors as per the reference details provided.*

*We have confirmed the legitimacy of your circumstances as described in your application. Unfortunately, The Astral Initiative is unable to offer you a Mitigation of Cost of Standard Memorial Services at this time, due to the large number of similar applications we receive on a daily*

I scroll to the terms and conditions, squinting to read the smaller font.

*remind customers that non-compliance with our approved methods of disposal, or failure to adhere to your payment plan, can result in the legally-sanctioned seizure of the relevant biomatter*

I close the tab.

Summons by post, rejections by email. Veiled threat lurking in the addenda, cracking its knuckles like a 20's mafioso, crowbar tapping idly at his leg.

A click. The sudden cessation of bubbling, gurgling water – coffee's ready. I drink a mug for myself, and pour the remainder into a heat-retaining flask for Claire's carer, Sita, to drink later. Odd, how quickly circumstance can incorporate a relative stranger into one's domestic routine.

I thaw a frozen pastry under the grill. Pour out a glass of synthetic 'orange' juice. Place them both on a tray, and carry them to the bedroom.

I knock softly, whispering her name, and enter without turning on the light.

She's awake. Upright and staring at me. The blue screen's glow accentuates each bruise and hollow in her new, uncanny face.

She's lowered her oxygen mask to her throat. Her naked mouth's a hard, uncompromising line.

Her phone is in her hand.

"They BCC'd me. Apparently, it's standard procedure."

I place the tray on the bedside table as quietly as I can, minimizing my presence. "I was going to tell you."

"Why can't we afford a pod, John?" Her voice is scrupulously polite, unconcerned and slightly irritated, as if this is a business meeting that could have been an email. A mere administrative riddle. "Is it because you weren't actually made redundant, but quit?"

"How do you –"

"Mark called, from your old funeral home. Said the office was dull without you to bitch with, especially since the company's on the way out. Said he wanted to see how we were doing, if we needed help with anything." She takes a slow, rasping breath. "He said, considering our situation, he couldn't understand why you'd leave so suddenly." I see her

swallow, trying not to cry, trying not to undermine her own righteous anger. “To be honest, I’m having a hard time understanding, too.”

I touch her forehead with the back of my hand – temperature seems normal, but even so, I take a wipe from the bedside table and give her face and neck an awkward, cursory wash around the straps and tubes. She doesn’t like lying in sweat. She bears it for a few moments, but eventually, feebly bats my hand away. “I thought we had your redundancy package, on top of mine,” she says. “Your inheritance –”

“We still have the inheritance.”

“But what *happened?*”

When I started out, it felt meaningful. Friends didn’t believe me when I’d say, “Actually, it’s really quite interesting, gives me a chance to be creative,” but I meant it. I liked patting the backs, handing out the tissues, feeling like a source of something solid. I liked dealing with the difficult venues, bothering them until they agreed to put in a wheelchair ramp so dear Aunt Gladys could attend. I liked researching and tracking down table runners in the exact right shade of Tuscan Sun, because Grandpa Dickie said he wanted no dark colours, no white lilies.

I especially liked it when a new technician from the local crematorium called the office, one slow afternoon, enquiring about the chemicals in our coffin varnish. Hours later, we agreed she still didn’t have the information she needed, that it would have been unprofessional – irresponsible, even – not to continue the conversation over dinner. Sometimes at breakfast I’ll ask her, “So, is that everything your employer needs to know?” Around a mouthful of toast, she’ll respond, “Actually, I do have *one* more question...”

I liked my job. But there were days, too many, you’d sit with a single mother, leafing through a catalogue of four-foot coffins. Days oblivious children would sit and play with toy trucks on the floor, sirens blaring while their bleary-eyed, unshaven father apologized for the noise. Days you’d hand a grandma back her declined credit card, murmuring sweet nothings in response to “But what am I supposed to *do?*”

And all the while you nod, eyes kind and wide, subtly drawing their attention to the dotted line, as you cling to the sound of the back wall’s ticking clock.

As you feel yourself ossifying.

“It was...something after mum,” I tell her. Being on the other end, seeing behind the curtain. I couldn’t look families in the eye anymore. Couldn’t give them the hard upsell on the premium azaleas. Difficult to put the swelling apathy – and terror of that apathy, of what it might mean – into words. I shrug. “It had become sales.”

“We gave people closure.”

“Formaldehyde and profiteroles aren’t closure.”

“Can we even afford a pod now? Or are you just going to hand me over to –”

“Can we please not talk about this today?”

“Why not today? You’re about to see how it works. We need to at least *begin* to discuss –”

“No, we don’t. Not now. Not yet.”

“Why are you so determined to avoid this?”

“Because I don’t *want* to see you turned into a fucking lantern,” I hiss. “I don’t want to pay for the privilege of their contrived pity. And I... I don’t want you taken away from me, either. I can’t see you just... recycled, like they’re doing in the city now, with the streetlights and the radios. But I don’t know what else to do.”

“There’s my set-up with Nate. You could still...”

“*No.*” I have my own opinions about her friend Nathan. What they did. What it’s cost us.

The nights you’d emerge from the shower, grapefruit and gasoline. Your black fingernails. The occasional sly cigarette, because, laughing, *come on, it’s cleaner than the air out there...* The refusal to wear a mask outside, and now you have to wear one in bed.

Intellectually, I know it’s not her fault. But my older, reptile brain is bleeding.

She blinks. I see her mentally recoil, lengthening the miles another inch. “Then we’d both best hope this pesky terminal illness clears up soon. So you don’t have to make a choice.”

“Claire, I –”

“Has it occurred to you this isn’t vanity? I’ll be gone. I won’t care where I am. I was thinking of the two of you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

After a long moment, she points at the pastry. “More importantly: is that raisin?”

I want to kiss her. For some reason, I don’t, or can’t – it feels inappropriate. Instead, I retrieve the breakfast tray and bring it to her, perching myself on the edge of the mattress. “Chocolate.”

“Even better.” She picks it up and takes a bite. I watch her eyelids flicker with pleasure at the small treat, the stray flake of pastry fluttering on her lip. “How are you feeling?” she asks. “About today?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I asked Sita to lay out something for Lucy,” she says. “The grey dress – the one she wore to Roger’s wedding. It’s cute, but sombre enough, I think.”

“If that’s what you’d like her to wear.”

“With the frilly white socks. She’ll look sweet in that. Is she up yet?”

“No – giving her a bit longer in bed.”

“I should be with you.”

“Don’t be silly. You would if you could – I know that.”

“Will you be... all right? It’s not an easy day.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not like the funeral.”

“I’m just saying that you haven’t been – you haven’t *seen* her. It might affect you more than you realise.”

“I’ll be fine,” I repeat, aiming for sincerity. The words have lost so much meaning that I can afford to throw them around. I stand, kiss her forehead. Recite that I love her. Place the now pastry-less tray back on the bedside table.

As I reach the door, she says, “John?”

“I know. The grey dress.”

“And the white socks. These things are important.”

I wake our daughter. Groggy, too young to be bribed with espresso, she fights my attempts to dress her, doesn't like the way I plait her hair. Asks for mummy to do it instead. I consciously untense my jaw.

We walk down the fourteen flights to the foyer. For the third month in a row, the YOUSAGE leader board lauds Anne "Granny" Greenwich on the eighteenth floor for her low energy consumption. In the past month, her generator's used only the amount it takes to keep a standard fridge humming away in the background. I wonder if she's dead.

Outside, we wear our masks.

Though I've not yet had to sell the car – it wouldn't bring much if I tried – it's illegal to operate a private vehicle with fewer than four occupants inside the Green Zone. So Lucy and I walk to the station.

On the train, we stand – I clutch a yellow ring suspended from the ceiling with one hand, my daughter with the other. As on most modern public transport, all but three priority seats have been removed to make space for more passengers. Other travellers, anonymous behind their masks, unsteady on their feet, stumble and jostle against us as the carriage sways.

The view beyond the window blurs, speed-obscured. Slips gradually from grey to green as we cross unofficial but obvious class boundaries. I hold her hand and watch the headlines roll across the screen above our heads. It's muted, the rouged and shoulder-padded presenters chattering away to nobody. Punch and Judy with painted lips, their voice boxes slit.

FAMILY OF FIVE ARRESTED FOR ILLEGAL BACKYARD INHUMATION OF DECEASED GRANDMOTHER.

*"It's my job, John, I'm a cremation technician, it's what I do."*

*"Not anymore. You were made redundant, Claire. It's illegal."*

*"So what? Am I supposed to ignore these people? Should their loved ones be repossessed like old furniture, just because they haven't the money to throw at –"*

*"I don't care about them. You could be arrested. What am I supposed to tell Lucy, when you're not around? Sorry, sweetie, mummy can't make you dinner, she's busy playing pyromaniac?"*

*“Do you think this is a hobby? Do you think I get off on –”*

*“You could get seriously ill. The chemicals, the fumes –”*

*“I know what I’m doing.”*

*“At a crematorium! A real one! Not some ramshackle old warehouse in the arse-end of nowhere –”*

*“This is important to me. You don’t get to dictate –”*

In my memory she breaks off. Coughing.

Beneath each rectangular strip of light along the carriage sits a disposable name-tag, slotted into a plastic holder. They remind me of the nameplates on office doors, before a lot of large corporate buildings were deemed inefficient and repurposed.

A light flickers, dies. The cleaner patrolling the carriage huffs, approaching. He removes the name-tag, snaps it in half. Drops it in his trolley-bin.

The packed train penetrates the city centre. We pile off and out of the station. Here, where the other half live, the grass is literally greener, the air clearer.

I tell Lucy she can take her mask off, now, and type the address into my phone. The directions say it’s a short walk up a hill to the East, but I needn’t have bothered – as soon as we round the first corner, I see it.

Even from a distance, even having never laid eyes on it, it’s unmistakable. A glass structure of tessellated domes, like an inverted beehive, or tarpaulin quarantine bubble. Lit from within. Glowing with the dead.

“Daddy?”

I blink. Lucy’s staring up at me – probably wondering why I’ve stopped in the middle of the pavement. Can I do this?

“Come on,” I chivvy, as if she’s the one delaying us. “We don’t want to be late.”

At the front gate, we’re waylaid by a lackey in – honest to God – a black tuxedo. He’s even wearing a top-hat. “Good morning, sir – and young madam. Sir, may I trouble you for your name?”

I provide it.



“Some identification?”

I provide it.

“And your purpose here today?”

I provide it.

“My deepest condolences, sir. Rest assured, that as a loved one of the loved, we’ll do our utmost to make your experience today as meaningful and memorable as possible.”

I’d settle for *over*, but my voice of reason, which rather ironically sounds like Claire, cautions me. He’s just doing his job. “Thank you.”

“May I ask the reference number for your...?”

“Mother.”

I provide it.

He types the digits into his tablet. “Ah, yes. Here she is. Your mother’s pod is in the West Clearing of the Seraph Dome, above our Serenity Pond. A beautiful spot, if I may say so. If you’d like to follow me, I can escort you.”

“Couldn’t we find our own way?”

His smile doesn’t waver. “I’d be delighted to escort you and your... daughter? Sir.”

At least I can’t fault their security - or deny its necessity, considering the employee to my left, currently rubbing, with a rag soaked in paint thinner, the lingering ghost of graffiti from the glass. It says **TURNED AWAY PREEMEE BABY RIP CHLOE HEARTLESS BASTERDS!!!!** The jumpsuit’s still working on the exclamation marks.

Our Victorian friend is doing an excellent job of pretending he doesn’t exist.

I say, “After you, then.”

With the key card around his neck, he opens the door to the kingdom.

We step into a different climate. I expected the dome to retain heat, but it’s meticulously air-conditioned; an artificial breeze stirs plastic leaves. I wonder whose corpses power the wind. The pebbled path underfoot winds through sculpted trees and shrubbery.

Everywhere – above, below – the pods. The *lanterns*. White ovals, pulsating with warm yellow light. Some brighter than others.

Along one line of bushes, pods the size of a household lightbulb.

Distracted, I almost bump into our escort when he stops, abruptly, in front of me. “Here we are, sir. According to my map, your mother is just there, in the tree. The lower left branch hanging above the water.” He ‘points’, I notice, with his entire cupped hand. Like a Disneyland mascot, forbidden to extend a lone finger. I wonder if they share a training camp?

“Sir?”

“Sorry.” I straighten my smirk. “Nervous reaction.” I’m doing it again. Displacing. Looking up, down, left to right – anywhere but straight ahead. You’d think awareness of the behaviour would be enough quash it.

“Of course, sir.”

“Are we all right to sit and wait here?”

“Feel free. Take as long as you need, and after...”

He can’t say it. All their euphemisms, all the thousands they’re paying their army of marketing graduates, and they haven’t figured out a sentimental way to say, “once your mother’s biofuel is all used up.”

“Thank you,” I say, extending mercy to both of us. Inviting him to leave – which, thankfully he does.

We perch on the bench.

Some people we passed on the way were talking to these things. I’m not necessarily against the idea – in fact, there’s little I wouldn’t give for one last, inconsequential conversation. But I can’t bring myself to believe I’ll be... heard.

I stare. Refuse to blink. I want my eyes to water – I want the moisture on my face to trigger something atavistic, some raw and real pain that must be lurking. If I can only get it started.

But I can’t feel her here.

The leaflets mentioned an “extinction burst”, warning that the lights burn brighter just before their final flash, blinking into non-existence. No reason to be alarmed. Like a supernova, they added, perhaps forgetting dead stars turn into black holes. Still, it keeps the metaphor going. I think about extinction bursts, those flashes of instinct forcibly ignored, eventually unlearned; those overwhelming, clamouring bone-deep drives. Fix mum’s air conditioner. Prune mum’s allotment. Give mum a ring – see how she’s doing. It’s been too long.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I say, more as a reassurance to myself, as validation of the fact, than to any particular audience. A little defensive, a little apologetic; mostly tentative: “I’m here now.” I sit with the fading vibration of the words on my lips, experimenting, tasting the sentiment as if for corked wine – I never have been able to tell the difference. Yes, very good. The bottle please.

There’s no right way to do this, Claire has told me. No wrong way, more importantly. Like sleep or an orgasm, she said, running her hands through my hair. If you think about it too hard, it won’t happen.

But I thought finally coming here, seeing it in person, would bring up... something. Which is exactly why I didn’t want to visit.

Perhaps if I’d come earlier, I’d have been able to access it. But being here confirms what I’ve feared from the start: this isn’t my way in.

I glance at my phone. 08:43. Four minutes. The infographic’s shrinking, growing dim in faithful accordance with its progenitor.

She wanted this, I try to remember. Paid for it out of her own lifetime of savings. It bought her comfort, to think of me here now.

08:45.

Gorgeous, searing light. Warm, white, cleansing, encompassing light. Light that, just for a moment, obliterates the distant sun. It’s more immediate. More real.

Water courses down my cheeks.

Darkness.

Blinking, as if I’ve been slapped, I look at my phone. 08:47.

The pulsing infographic's gone, the clock run down to four obstinate zeroes. It emits a single note in minor key. A pop-up asks how, out of five stars, I'd rate The Astral Initiative's service.

"Is that it?"

I put my arm around my daughter's shoulders. Kiss the top of her strawberry-scented head. "That's it, sweetheart."

Homeward bound, we retrace our steps through the necropolis of the less fortunate. A flashing billboard, advertising a new brand of fizzy drink, has been "proudly powered by Imelda Moreno, with thanks to her loving family." The soda bottle, it says, is made entirely of recycled materials.

I walk with my eyes to the pavement after that, no closer to knowing what I want, but vindicated in what I don't.

Hard months, harder conversations later, I take another journey. Alone and in the opposite direction. Instead of heading for the heart of the city, I travel outside and far beyond its boundaries.

At an isolated spot, I remove the heavy wooden box, and the trowel, from my suitcase. I choose a spot without grass, where the churned earth won't look suspicious. For the same reason, I resist the impulse to mark it with a circle of stones. Instead, I pluck a single sprig of bluebells from a nearby bush, which I'm glad to see is flourishing, despite the pollution. To the casual onlooker, it'll seem as if these flowers simply blew here, but when I eventually bring Lucy – even if they've rotted away by then, which is likely; even if I don't get the spot exactly right – we'll know. They're enough for today, and that's what matters. These things are important.

I tell Claire that I hope I've done what's right. That I hope I've kept enough of her with us, and let enough go.

On the journey home, with a lighter load, I look up at the light above me. The one I specifically requested feature on this line. I read her name.

Wanly, I smile.