



*Jonathan Starke*

## SOMETIMES SALVATION

I'd been walking through a cemetery in France all morning with my father. The paths wind there. They don't run straight. I could hear my father breathing hard at the turns. I didn't tell him to keep up. It's not my business to say things like that.

A lot of the burial sites had tombs you could walk into like little houses. Some had windows or doors. Others didn't. Some had freshly cut flowers with water still dripping out of the sliced green limbs. These are the kinds of things you think of.

I'd passed by too many of the little houses not to step in one. I moved toward a tomb that held a married couple from centuries ago. My father grabbed me by the arm and said, "Jonny, no."

But my hand was already pulling the tiny double doors. I could feel his rough hand give.

Inside, it was mostly dark. The purple-and-yellow-stained windows were letting a little light through. It's no kind of light a person could get used to. A few candlesticks were knocked over on the offering ledge. I ran my fingers over the fissures in the windows.

My father stood outside the slightly cracked doors. I could see his shoes weighing down the grass. "They're dead and buried together," I said. I wondered if, so long ago, they buried them side by side at the hands.

Then I said, "Maybe they stack 'em, Dad." It either showed how much I knew about love. Or how little.

My father had lost two women. I had lost more than that. It wasn't a competition. It hurt all the same. We could see the pain in each other's eyes for years, and it probably explains how we can't look at each other now.

"I don't know if I could do this," I said.

No answer from outside the doors.

"Isn't it all difficult enough in life? They're doing it over when they die? What am I missing? Is it me, Dad? Have you experienced this?"

My father's shoes were gone. I felt like he was there still.





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I knelt down and put my hand on the slab. People would say it was cold. It was September, and it was not so cold. I left my hand there. I let my fingers try to take that energy.

When I walked outside, my father was gone. I found him later in the rain. He was standing under a tree, looking at a headstone in the form of a woman, blackened and coming out of the ground. She was only half complete.

Later, in the metro, I told my father to go down to the platform and wait for me. At the ticket machine, there was a French girl in running shorts and a ponytail. She was so lovely that I took a step back. She was trying to help an elderly Romanian couple make a purchase. They had freckles on their wrists. They were holding hands. You couldn't even tell their fingers apart.

After the transaction, the girl stepped to the side of the machine and watched to make sure the old couple made it down the stairs. I looked in her eyes as she followed them and could feel the unexplainable electric pull of what we could become. What the two of us could have made together.

I stepped forward, and she turned to leave. I could have said something then. I could have reached out. It wouldn't have been so hard. Life is full of those moments. You act—or you don't. The thing is, you can love someone from a moment, and, for years, I have carried the thought of her like a heavy stone.

After she was gone, I helped my father get a seat on the train and stood near him. I watched the doors open and close and thought of all the things I'd ever lost. Then, I brought my hand to my mouth and bit into my knuckle, thinking of how raw I'll be when I die.

