



**Moments of Silence**  
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# Moments of Silence

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*Dead.*

*My wife is dead.*

Those were my thoughts, my only thoughts, as I stood at the side of Lauren's grave, surrounded by family, friends, and acquaintances. The pastor was speaking, but his words were indecipherable, his speech mere noise invading my single thought.

I lost track of my surroundings, barely noticed the cold air and crawling fog that enclosed me and the other mourners in the singular pocket of space and time that was my late wife's funeral. I did not even notice the minutes passing. The white noise of the pastor's words faded into the background, and my mind became silent but for that pressing thought.

It took a few prods from my son, Michael, to rouse me from my self-created solitude. I gazed at the boy blankly. He gazed back, through watery eyes.

I said nothing.

"It's time for your eulogy, Dad," he told me, his fifteen-year-old voice cracking as it had during puberty a couple years before, this time due to the stress of the situation.

I noticed the pastor's noise had ceased, and I nodded in acknowledgment, but I could not bring myself to say anything.

I walked slowly toward the pastor, to take his place and begin making my own speech.

Pastor Dave gave me a friendly and supportive pat on the shoulder, along with an encouraging smile, and he walked away.

I turned to face the gathering.

I started to speak.

No words came.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring at friends and family, not really seeing them. All I could focus on was the fact that my wife of twenty-two years was gone. Forever. She was no longer here at my side, nor would she be ever again.

I stood, lost, though I was surrounded by others who shared my pain. I stood, silent, for a span that seemed an eternity. I remember very little of the events that followed. I know, at some point, someone escorted me out of the figurative spotlight. Others stepped forward and spoke in succession, spewing forth kind words, remembrances of Lauren. I'm told the memories were fond and the words flattering. I don't know. I didn't hear. The single thought thrummed within my skull, drowning out everything else. It thrummed long past the funeral's end.

*Dead dead dead dead dead...*

I lived in stupor for a week afterward, existed in a fluctuating state somewhere between waking nightmare and nightmarish reality, but by the following Sunday, lucidity insinuated itself slowly into my mind, and I began to wake from the grip of temporary insanity that had taken its hold on me. I recalled almost nothing of my time in this purgatory, almost nothing of the funeral or, indeed, of anything since the moment I had received word of Lauren's untimely demise. I did recall the silence, however, that occurred in place of the eulogy I was to present, and it saddened me that I had not been able to bring myself to say goodbye properly.

I determined to rectify that situation, and so, that day, while my son and his younger sister were at church, I set out beneath a clouded sky, and with my woolen coat drawn tight to stave off the seasonal cold, went my way steadily along the two-mile distance between home and graveyard.

Throughout the first half of the journey, my mind raced with thoughts of what I might say to Lauren once I reached her grave, how I might properly and finally say my goodbyes. How many different ways are there to express one's love in words? How many ways to tell a departed wife she is missed? I don't know. I thought of many, score upon score. I thought of these, and I discarded them all. None of the phrases I formulated could capture precisely the way I felt. I am a poet by nature and by trade; I pride myself on my ability to capture complex emotions and thoughts, express them in encapsulated form in works of art. I could not do so that morning, and it enraged me. I grew angry with myself, and with my anger, and with the unpredictable nature of the world. My rage swelled, and I grew angry with God Himself. I hated the anger, and so I gave up, made a conscious effort at forgetting everything, succeeded, eventually, in allowing silence to enshroud my mind, as the clouds above enshrouded the earth below in their dismal gloom.

About an hour after I had set out, I stood once again at the side of my late wife's grave. For the first time since leaving the house that morning, I shivered. I pulled my coat tighter against my body, but it didn't help. The chills continued, no matter how hard I tried to banish them. In fact, the longer I stood there, the worse they became, and, at length, I stopped trying to ward off the weather, knowing that the chilly effect was not due to the surrounding temperature, but to something else altogether. I am a religious man, a man who places his faith in God, but I am by no means a claimant to enlightenment or knowledge of absolute truth, and

so I cannot profess to know what happens to the soul after it departs the body. That day, though, I felt as if Lauren were there beside me in spirit. It was her presence that caused the chills, her presence as she waited beside me, longing as much as I did for the final farewell to come.

I was in shock, I believe, and I could not—still could not—bring myself to speak. Instead, I just stood there, still but for the shivering. I couldn't speak, and I couldn't cry. I just stood, certain that Lauren was here with me, somewhere, even if I could not see, but scared and confused as to how that could be.

This emotion overwhelmed me, and I stood for some time. At first, I looked around, frantically, hoping to catch a glimpse of Lauren, some peripheral sighting of her shimmering spirit. When that did not happen, I turned my gaze to her gravestone, focused upon it alone.

Still, the fearsome feelings enveloped me. Before long, I felt as if I were trapped, confined within a compact cave. Around me, all became black, save for the headstone, which seemed to have grown to disproportionate size, filling the forward view of my tunnel vision. The characters engraved upon it were blurred; all I saw was the stone itself, that heavy, gray stone, looming large before me.

The whole atmosphere was oppressive. The darkness was heavy, as if it were a single monolithic stone, as black as death itself, curving around me, threatening to fall down upon me, crush me, entomb me forever, imprison me here in this single moment for all eternity. The darkness was heavy and seemingly alive. It extended itself, crawled, snaked, slithered, tendril-like, and entered inside me, wrapping itself around my heart, transforming that once vital organ into the same heavy black stone, slowing, slowing, slowing the coursing of the blood through my veins, and pressing down with its heavy weight, constricting the ebb and flow of oxygen within my lungs. I felt as if I were dying, and I came to hope that it would not take long for death to come.

Things continued this way for some time—I don't know how long—a few minutes, maybe—perhaps as much as half an hour. At some point, though, the experience stopped. The darkness withdrew from within me. My breathing became regular once again. The blackness that blocked the world around me melted away in a phantasmagoric rippling effect, to be replaced, piece by piece, by the sad surroundings of the cemetery—the twisted trees, devoid of leaves, the withered grass, dead and dying flowers, the cackling birds above, perched on gnarled branches and framed against a background of gray and massless clouds.

The headstone dwindled down to its normal size, and the engraving came into focus: Lauren's name; the standard epitaph proclaiming her a beloved mother, wife, and friend; the dates of her death, reminding all who looked just how short her time on Earth had been; and two lines of pentameter from a sonnet I had composed for her during the early stages of our courtship, long before we had ever married—

*In love, where death's cold reach cannot extend,  
A single moment of life may last forever.*

I read the words engraved upon the stone, and suddenly the tears flowed forth, as does a mighty river after bursting through a dam. They were the first to come in the ten days since Lauren's demise, and so I let them flow, unsurprised at the deluge that cascaded down my face toward the ground below.

As I wept, my mind turned once again to thoughts of goodbyes. What was I going to say to create that closure I so desperately craved? What could I say that would express everything I felt? My mind again went blank; the darkness threatened to descend upon me once more.

I refused to allow it.

I forced myself to focus upon the words displayed before me. I kept them from blurring this time, and in so doing, the whole of the poem represented before me by a mere two lines broke suddenly into my conscious thoughts. I had written the poem shortly after my father succumbed to cancer a quarter of a century before. It was my way of expressing my love for, and my gratitude toward, Lauren during a period of time in which she had offered me her own love, giving of herself, unrestrained, supporting me in my time of trouble, standing firm as an ancient stone or deeply rooted oak and extending that strength to me, sacrificing small pieces of herself, her own vital energy, that I might not succumb to weakness. Her effort was successful; she saw me through that painful period of life that would otherwise have crushed my fragile heart and soul.

Indeed, it had been some twenty-five years since I had first put that poem on paper, yet I remembered it well. It seemed, then, as I stood beside Lauren's place of rest, to scroll before my mind's eye in its entirety:

*A mighty oak may stand a thousand years;  
A stone may stand a thousand times as long;  
The earth herself forever drifts among*

*The stars. Yet, man—how quickly he endears  
Himself to Death! At best, one hundred years  
Has he to live before he moves along  
Into his grave, succumbs to Death's sweet song.  
Too short is life—too short!—and filled with tears,  
A million tears worldwide in every hour,  
Impeding joy and hastening life's end.  
'Tis pain to live, yet love helps ease the endeavor,  
Endowed, indeed, with strange and mighty power:  
In love, where death's cold reach cannot extend,  
A single moment of life may last forever.*

It was during those days, quite early in our relationship, when I first realized just how deep her love for me ran, and that I returned that love in equal amounts. Lauren had been there to relieve me of some of the pain my father's illness and death had caused. She had listened to me in my mourning. She had spoken with me, uttering words of condolence and advice. But the true mark of her love, the one thing that saw me through that period, the one thing that helped more than any other, was that she often spent her time just holding me, cradling me in her arms, or sitting beside me with an arm around me. She spent much time with me, neither speaking nor listening, but merely sharing the silence, and she had done the same in other moments of crisis throughout the years. I had learned to do the same for her, and over time, it strengthened our bond.

Now, she was gone; who would ease the pain of her passing?

Emotion overwhelmed me, and I became weak. Lest I collapse from the burden of my despair, I seated myself upon the cold earth above Lauren's grave, supporting myself against her headstone, with my eyes closed.

I wanted nothing more than to leave—the atmosphere, the emotion, it was all making me sick—but I determined not to go until I had said my piece.

"Lauren," I began, prepared to ramble, for I still hadn't decided what I wanted to say. "I—that is—"

I stopped, as I started once again to weep.

"No," I whispered to myself. I had to speak. I was determined. I had to say goodbye.

But emotion overcame determination, and I cried. The tears came fast and hard. I shook, and I quivered.

After a moment, determination once again gained a foothold, and tried again to talk. “Lauren—”

I paused for a deep breath, felt yet again that the tears would take over, tried to force them down. And then—

Then, something inexplicable happened.

Calmness possessed me—suddenly and unexpectedly—and galvanic chills streaked up and down my spine. It was the calmness that comes only in the presence of love, and the chill that comes from a lover’s touch.

I knew then, with absolute certainty, that Lauren—somehow, though she was dead—was there beside me, holding me, sharing my pain as she had done before. I smiled, and I knew peace.

Lauren was there, and she expected nothing of me. I did not need to say goodbye, for she was not gone. I did not need to tell her of my love, for she knew, and she shared it. I did not need to do anything, save sit there, sharing with each other—as we had so many times before—and as we have so many times in the years since her death—the silence of the moment.



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