Monday

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The image of a waning autumn moon remained etched upon the pale blue surface of the early morning sky. The air was pink and brittle and silent except for the solemn toll of an old tin bell steadily drawing nearer.

In his excitement the night before, Arthur—a boy living at the end of a ragged brick road—had forgotten to set his alarm early for the start of the ceremony. Luckily, the old bell did nicely as an alarm all on its own. As he clutched tightly to his floppy white pillow case in dead slumber, the ringing met his ears and echoed through his mind. It triggered the part of his brain which readily recognized it as a signal to rise.

Arthur sprang straight out of bed and into his red rubber rain boots. In the same moment, downstairs, the old grey cat leapt onto the windowsill and watched curiously as the strange procession rounded the corner, moving steadily up the red brick road. He briefly acknowledged the fading moon, greeting it with a twitch of his ear before dropping back to the floor and planting himself at the foot of the stairs.

Above, a bedroom door flung open and out tumbled the oversized rubber boots, awkwardly fitted to Arthur’s undersized feet. There was no time to consider the complications of such a choice in footwear. He tumbled down the steps. Blinded in his anxious stumble, the boy failed to notice the grey lump seated at the bottom of the stairs. As he reached the floor he realized his mistake, and in the same instant jerked himself forward to avoid crushing the poor old cat flat into the carpet. His feet shifted in the big boots as he soared through the air, forcing him to depend on his head rather than his feet to break the fall.

The ringing in his head began again and although he was unsure whether it had more to do with the tin toll of the old bell passing by, or the impact of his brain crashing against his
eardrums, he knew there was no time to waste.

Reaching the front door, he ignored the clomp of footsteps falling down the stairs behind him.

Three men dressed in black uniforms, plain and stoic and without even a flicker of sympathy between them, stepped in synch, performing their strange ritual as they went. The man in the middle held a small wooden box, secured with a metal lock. He stepped just ahead of the other two. To his right marched one who carried nothing but a dark rag, neatly folded over his arm. To the left the old bell was held tightly by the third man.

In synch with each ring of the bell—a task performed between short intervals of mourning silence—the right man reached out with the rag, gently dabbing the bottom of the box before returning to his original position.

Arthur watched mystified as they passed the house. Customarily, each member of the family was meant to step outside to pay their respects, but many had fallen out of the practice in recent years. They preferred sleeping the morning away to partaking in traditions they couldn’t understand. As the procession passed beneath the whisper of a moon painted overhead, a small figure appeared beside Arthur.

Eddie watched as silently as Arthur did, bowing his head ever-so-slightly to match his brother’s somber posture. He glanced up at Arthur every few seconds to ensure he was doing it right. This was a game they played each week at the same time, and Eddie had learned to treat it as routine.

The bell grew fainter as the three continued past. Arthur slowly raised his head, craning his neck to track them and finally allowing his body to follow his gaze into the street. Unable to bear the thought of the three dark figures vanishing into the horizon as they had each time before, he set off, accompanied by the faint squeak of his red rubber rain boots as he walked.
Afraid to break the crisp silence of the morning air by calling to his older brother, Eddie instead followed softly behind him. His slippers fared poorly against the jagged brick of the road, but he had no time to waste in retrieving the proper footwear. Arthur could not be left alone to wander the streets and Eddie felt an unspoken duty to protect him on his journey.

The neighborhood was still, and of the few spectators who had bothered to gather on their front lawns, all sleepy-eyed and indifferent, fewer cared to notice the two young boys in their matching blue pajamas, one in slippers and one with rain boots, trailing just behind the ceremonial procession. Even Arthur failed to notice Eddie for several blocks, and then he mainly acted as though he hadn’t. So entranced by the clang of the bell, and so filled with curiosity over the wooden box, he could concern himself with nothing else. But soon the neighborhood came to an end and the boys arrived at the broad, bustling street which signified the start of the town. Arthur paused and reached down to grip his brother’s hand. He held tightly until they reached the other side.

Through alleyways and over bridges, into the park and out of the park, across main roads and highways, past a string of geese retreating to their little blue pond, and all the way up a sloping green hill, they followed the old tin bell. By then the sun had come and gone, and the moon had fallen back into focus. The boys, exhausted and hungry from an endless journey, collapsed into the cool evening grass before reaching the top. Arthur sat up on his knees and watched quietly as the dark figures vanished over the crest of the hill, out of sight at last. In a moment, his silence was matched by that of the bell. Eddie perked up his ears at the sudden absence of their traveling companion.

“Arthur,” he whispered, “I think I’ve gone deaf.”

Arthur got to his feet and began to crawl up the hill until he could see just over the top. He caught a sliver of sunlight shrinking into the distance. It cast a vast arrangement of
headstones in long shadows before being swallowed up by the horizon.

The brothers, suddenly regaining their strength, scuttled to the top of the slope. Though the three men had vanished—their task apparently completed—the boys discovered something entirely more intriguing. There they found a sprawling graveyard, its headstones blooming from the hilltop in erratic clusters, seated beneath the deep night sky. They came to the first grave in the lot, stopping dead before it.

"It's fresh," said Arthur, examining the recently disturbed pile of dirt. Just behind it was a stone with some soul's name engraved upon it, but Eddie was unable to read and Arthur did not care to look.

Eddie, considering the implications of a freshly dug grave, stood still in contemplation. Arthur, undisturbed, got straight to work. His knees planted into the grass, and his fingers penetrating into the dark earth. He began to dig.

Eddie shook the dirt from his slippers as it piled up around his feet. He couldn’t understand why a person would want to uncover something so clearly buried beneath the soil for a reason. As he considered this, he stooped down to assist Arthur in his task.

Although the soil was soft and easily displaced, the growing darkness proved a significant obstacle, and Eddie was forced to take breaks every now and then to recover from the laborious work. His hands were so small that his fists could only hold so much dirt, so he had to work twice as fast as Arthur to make the same progress. Certainly, he had never felt so weary, or worked so hard in his life, and for what purpose he was unsure.

It was during one of his rests that Arthur’s grimy fingernails fell through a thin layer of dirt and dug into the hard wooden surface of some mysterious object, buried no more than three feet beneath the deep green grass of the cemetery hill. Even through the darkness Eddie could see the surprised features of his brother’s face. Perhaps he had believed he would never find
anything at all, or maybe he had not stopped to imagine what it was he might find.

Eddie leaned forward on his knees as Arthur lifted the small wooden box from its final resting place. He carefully placed the box in his lap, and fiddled with the strange metal latch. It opened with little resistance, as it is unlikely anyone expected that the box might be infiltrated by a strange duo of grave robbers beneath a gleaming platinum moon.

As he lifted the lid with a cautious squeak of its hinges, he discovered something warm, sticky, and incredibly unpleasant coating his hands. Eddie peeked into the box, his mouth hanging open, and began to cough as a few unsettled dirt particles tickled his throat. He was unable to see the box’s contents until Arthur reached in to grab it, lifting it gently from its humble coffin. With a brief wave of compassion washing over his face, he held in his hands an object no larger than Eddie’s little fist, dark and pulsating softly: a human heart.

The boys were naturally uncertain over how to react. Neither had ever expected to encounter a real living heart, apart from the ones beating happily along inside their own chests. This one, however, was not quite living. It was slowly dying, and Arthur could feel it struggling along with each heaving pump. Suddenly, he reacted.

“Catch!”

The heart flew briefly through the air, and landed in Eddie’s tiny grasp. Instinctively tempted to drop it, Eddie instead tossed it back to his brother, who mirrored the action. They began to bop it back and forth between them. Soon the boys were laughing, jumping over headstones and tumbling into the grass, playing their strange game of hot potato.

Arthur sent the heart soaring through the air and Eddie leapt forward to pluck it from the sky as it flew gracefully across the moon in one final moment of true glory and freedom. Eddie clutched it tightly as he collided with the ground, giggling softly.
as the blades of grass tickled his nose and cheeks. He felt for the oddly comforting pulse of the organ, pressing it to his ear to hear its pulse. When he found that he could no longer feel its labored rhythm, he sat right up. Suddenly, the grotesqueness of the situation overwhelmed him. A long wisp of a cloud moved across the moon and he felt a lump of despair sinking into his stomach.

Eddie laid the dead heart in the grass and began to drag himself away, tugging himself backward with large fistfuls of grass. The cloud passed, giving the moon full view of the scene below and in turn clearly illuminating everything. Eddie brought his hands before his face and for the first time noticed the dark, sticky layer of blood thickly coating them. He rubbed his hands vigorously into the grass and deep down into the dirt. Eddie looked up to his brother for help, and was greeted by a big pair of perplexed eyes. Arthur looked down on the little heart with disappointment, not in himself or even in Eddie, but instead because it had not met his expectations or matched his curiosity. It is best remembered that although the heart serves as a useful organ, it makes a lousy football.

Arthur snatched his brother by the arms with his own bloodied hands, and as he was dragged up, Eddie’s foot came down on the used up heart. He did not have the time to look back at the smashed lump of human flesh lying there among the gravestones, all exposed and abandoned.

The two boys flew down the hill, leaving the red rubber rain boots and those thin little slippers far behind. By the time they reached the bottom, leaping and tumbling over the soft green grass, they collapsed in a heap of laughter and excitement. They walked home, hand in hand, in a path of silver moonlight.