

Zak Salih

MR. BREYFOGLE

Three years after my father collapsed in his woodshop and wasn't discovered for two days, my mother announced she was marrying Mr. Breyfogle, the man who'd buried him. This was in January of 2014. I was still an undergraduate at a modest university in western Pennsylvania, consumed by aspirations to academia, spending my afternoons and nights and weekends in obscure corners of library stacks in pursuit of death. On this particular evening, while clouds spat snow across campus, I was at my usual desk in the Arts and Sciences library trying to draft a short essay on, of all things, the Graveyard Poets. I'd been five lines into my third reading of Thomas Gray's churchyard elegy (*Now fades the glim'mring landscape on the sight, / And all the air a solemn stillness holds*), when I received an email from my mother.

Wyeth. Mr. Breyfogle and I are getting married this spring. Will you be able to take time off school in late April? Call me. Mom.

Mr. Breyfogle.

Even then, on the eve of a marriage I'd suspected for months, he was Mr. Breyfogle. It was a joke the three of us had shared: my mother, my father, and I. We knew his first name too, of course. Everyone in our small Ohio town knew the funeral director. But perhaps in deference to the solemnity of his profession, we addressed him as Mr. Breyfogle, as if he were the father of some communal childhood friend. Occasionally, we'd bat his name around the family dinner table or point him out in a far corner of the Mexican restaurant one town over. My mother and father would wave or nod in passing; once in a while, we'd stop by his table and they'd share a few polite words while I stared at the thick knuckles on Mr. Breyfogle's hands, the knobs of his finger joints, and imagined them deep in the belly of a dead music teacher or auto mechanic.

In private, we had another name for Mr. Breyfogle, one my mother cautioned me—and my father—never to use outside the house.

Digger.

My father came up with that one.

My mother, who would become Mr. Breyfogle's fourth wife, had known him several years before my father, her first husband, died. He'd been a loyal customer at the bank branch where my mother handled small-business accounts, one of which was the account for Breyfogle and Sons Funeral Home. (There were no sons save Mr. Breyfogle; he was the last.) Her familiarity with Mr. Breyfogle's line of work, her inability to be intimidated by the nature of his occupation, her penchant for harmless flirtation, made it obvious why Mr. Breyfogle gave her the business. It also made it obvious why, when it came time for us to put my father in the ground, Breyfogle and Sons were the obvious people to trust.

At the funeral home, at the gravesite, at the repast in the basement of our church, numb with shock at the call informing me of my father's heart attack, at how long my father could have gone missing while being so close to home, at how he'd just gotten his new knees two months earlier and hadn't had time to use them—during all this, I paid little attention to Mr. Breyfogle. Even when he came to hug my mother and share his condolences with our family. I avoided his hands; I didn't want to imagine where they'd been just a day earlier. I sat there and spooned scalloped potatoes into my mouth until my mother's crying in Mr. Breyfogle's arms became too much; then I went outside and sat on the steps of the church to read Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* and forget my father's plastic face in his casket.

That fall, on a scholarship, I went off to college, to my mother's alma mater. Life tumbled on. My mother continued to work at the bank. I lost myself in the rhyming lines and rococo visions of long-dead Romantic poets. A year later, we were back: at the same funeral home, the same graveyard, the same repast in the same church basement with the same scalloped potatoes. In the same long arms of Mr. Breyfogle, who offered his condolences again, this time for the passing of my mother's Aunt Linda. Mr. Breyfogle lingered by the table with my mother and her sisters, and when my mother patted the seat of the folding chair next to her, he unbuttoned his suit coat and obliged. This time, I paid more attention to the man himself: sinewy where my father had been portly, clean-shaven where my father had sported the beard of a New England transcendentalist. Gregarious where my father had excelled more at brooding, at moving through life in near-monastic silence. But the same blue eyes, like lake water at high noon. I wonder if my mother didn't

look at those eyes, wrapped in wrinkles, and think my father was in there somewhere.

Shortly thereafter, Mr. Breyfogle's name began to come up in my mother's weekly phone calls to me. She'd seen Mr. Breyfogle at the bank that morning sporting a handsome leather satchel (and did I need one for my books?). She'd seen Mr. Breyfogle clipping shrubs outside the funeral home on her drive to step class. Then one day my mother called to say she'd had dinner with Mr. Breyfogle.

"We went to the country club," she said. "The one dad always said looked more like a nursing home. It's very classy inside. I had a dirty martini and a steak. Mr. Breyfogle suggested I get it medium rare for once. So I did. It was delicious."

"Oh," I said.

Aged seventy-nine as of the evening he proposed to her, Mr. Breyfogle had survived his previous three wives (cancer, cancer, cancer) and had buried all three. It's true that, on the flight back from school for the wedding, I feared for my mother's life. I asked her when her most recent mammogram was. I tried, in vain, to search for some sign of coercion or blackmail. If only for an excuse to brood, I imagined myself a Midwestern Hamlet, imagined my mother and Mr. Breyfogle somehow engineering my father's heart attack or rutting behind his back in the private rooms of Mr. Breyfogle's funeral home.

But in the days leading up to the wedding, watching the ease with which my mother moved in Mr. Breyfogle's kitchen, in Mr. Breyfogle's living room, in Mr. Breyfogle's arms, I realized my newly minted ex-boyfriend was right. I did think too much. Because the truth about my mother and Mr. Breyfogle was simple: She was in love—and loved. And I had no desire to assume the role of defiant male heir. No Telemachus was I.

After their wedding, my mother sold our family home and moved in to Mr. Breyfogle's large Craftsman, which fit her modest lifestyle like a baggy suit. It was the house, I joked with her once over the phone, that death built. (What I didn't say: "Including Dad's.") Whenever I came to visit, I'd sit and read in each of the four guest rooms, just so they'd feel occupied for a brief moment. Some mornings, for a change, I'd read at the kitchen table. I was—and remain—an early riser. Oftentimes, I'd come downstairs and there he'd be, an early riser as well, sitting at the large table in the pre-dawn light,

negotiating the newspaper with one hand, plucking apart a supermarket pecan roll with the other.

“Morning, Wyeth,” Mr. Breyfogle would say.

“Good morning,” I’d say.

Sometimes, Mr. Breyfogle would have the small TV in the kitchen on, and we’d periodically look up from our newspapers and books to watch one of the many *National Geographic* specials he recorded. In between scenes of bright-billed birds and solemn troops of elephants, we’d gasp at the surprising cruelty of nature: a crocodile bursting from brown river water to snatch a thirsty gazelle, an alpha wolf burying its snout in the belly of a lost cow.

“Jesus,” Mr. Breyfogle would say.

“Damn,” I’d say.

We’d laugh at the shock and awe of it all, then go back to our reading.

Slowly, we moved beyond common courtesy and talked about our lives. I told him about Tennyson and Blake and the delicious mausoleum silence of the library stacks. He told me about viewing schedules and casket prices. I complained about an absent-minded professor or an anthropology class I was required to take for my degree. He’d complain about his increasingly incompetent staff, about how long it took to find a vein in the folds of people who kept dying fatter and fatter. I’d share my thoughts on Catullus 101 and Milton’s “Lycidas.” He’d share his thoughts on funeral motorcades and the right way to stuff deflated chest cavities.

In truth, I hate having to explain my morbid literary preoccupations—to my boyfriends, to my mother. But with Mr. Breyfogle, I felt a curious permission to go on at length, as if I had all the time in the world to articulate why I sought comfort in such poets, such themes. I think Mr. Breyfogle appreciated me more for these specific intellectual interests. And I, in turn, appreciated his attentiveness, his patience, the deliberate way he’d put down his newspaper or shift his body away from the television when I spoke. Was he really that interested in my studies or, like any talented funeral director, was he pretending? I suppose it didn’t matter. Unlike my father, Mr. Breyfogle made me believe he cared. That was enough for me.

One morning in late November, while I was home for Thanksgiving break, Mr. Breyfogle and I sat at the kitchen table and read. On the TV, a lion

knocked a zebra skyward in a slow-motion cloud of savannah dirt. Mr. Breyfogle whistled, a single descending note, as the zebra fell back to earth. Then he asked what I was reading.

I told him about the seminar I was currently taking on the Romantics, which led to Thomas Chatterton, which led to Wallis's famous painting of Chatterton's suicide. I pulled up a copy of the beautiful boy in dramatic repose and showed it to Mr. Breyfogle. He took my phone from me with his long fingers, stared at the screen, and scoffed.

"That's no suicide," he said.

"Huh?"

"Looks like an afternoon nap."

"Well," I said, "it's idealized, for sure."

Mr. Breyfogle smiled and asked where all the blood was. I pointed out the small bottle of poison on the floor of Chatterton's room.

"I see," Mr. Breyfogle said. He gave me a strange look, handed the phone back to me, pulled apart a ribbon of pecan roll like a carnivore in one of his wildlife programs. "Nothing romantic about the suicides I've seen."

"What's the worst one you saw?"

"The chainsaw comes to mind."

"The chainsaw," I said.

"Guy over in Elyria was kicked out of the house by his wife, so he drove his car to the alpaca farm she owned. He worked in landscaping or something, that's the only reason I can think why he'd be driving around with a chainsaw in the bed of his truck. People who brought the body to us said he'd gassed it up and tried to cut his head off, but he must have slipped in mud before he finished the job. Paramedics found him with this massive bite in his neck, you could see where the chainsaw had started to chip away at his neck bone. I wonder what those alpacas must have thought, watching a dumb thing like that."

"A chainsaw," I said.

"Oh-ho, yeah," Mr. Breyfogle said. "Tell that to your friend Chatterman." He got up and took his empty plate and mug to the kitchen sink. When my mother came downstairs, Mr. Breyfogle went over to her, said, "Have a nice day, Bean," and kissed the hollow of her neck before leaving for another day of work.

God, Mr. Breyfogle's stories! Those Grand Guignol tales! So bawdy, so baroque, so comical only because they concerned people I'd never met. More than the generosity of his wallet during meals, more than the tender moments I caught him sharing with my mother (an absent-minded shoulder squeeze, a refilled glass of white zinfandel), it was Mr. Breyfogle's ribald elegies for the men and women of northern Ohio that won me over. They were, to me, a strange sort of poetry. A way to make memorable, to bring out in violent relief, the imperfections of people I never knew existed. Every time I was at home, I probed Mr. Breyfogle for more macabre tales: of the obese man who'd died midway through his fourth fast-food hamburger and had to be pried from the cab of his truck in the restaurant parking lot; of the boys who played with javelins on a slippery hill; of the college girl who fell off the back of her father's speedboat and had to be buried in pieces; of the alcoholic who'd been found slumped at a urinal in the bathroom of a lakeside bar, his chin cupped by its porcelain lip; of the weak-hearted agoraphobe and his five hungry dachshunds.

The next time I visited my mother, a few months after the story of the Ohio chainsaw self-massacre, Mr. Breyfogle took us out to dinner at the country club. Over Caesar salads and steaks, Mr. Breyfogle asked me if I knew how to blow my brains out.

"Richard," my mother said.

"I'll be quick, Bean." Mr. Breyfogle patted her hand. "He loves these stories."

I cocked a phantom gun (the flintlock pistol of a dueling Englishman, I imagined), put the barrel under my chin, and mimed firing.

My mother rolled her eyes.

"Wrong," Mr. Breyfogle said. "Always put it in your mouth and aim up and back. That way, you hit the brain stem. This guy we got recently made that mistake. Put the rifle under his chin in the living room and right before he fires, his wife calls out to him from the bedroom. When the paramedics got there, the wife was off in a corner screaming at her husband, bone and shit was everywhere, and this guy," Mr. Breyfogle grimed at the idiocy of it all, "is sitting on the sofa trying to smoke a cigarette through the hole in his jaw. Died on the way to the hospital, of course. Otherwise I wouldn't be telling you about it."

"Riveting," my mother said through a corner of her mouth. Mr. Breyfogle

leaned in to peck her check while she tried to stab a crouton with her fork.

Of course, after every story, after the laughter had faded and a seam in the absurdity of the universe had been sewn shut again, I'd remember that my father, too, was one of Mr. Breyfogle's tales. Did he save that story, I wondered, for other people? Was there some arcane joke about how long it took to embalm my father (no string bean, certainly)? Did Mr. Breyfogle complain about having to search with tweezers for wood shavings in my father's ears, nostrils, and eyes?

Every time I asked Mr. Breyfogle to tell me another story, what I really wanted to hear was the story he wasn't telling me. I'd steel myself and think, Now's the time. Ask him about your father. Some morbid secret, some crude truth you can claim for your own. Now, while he's caught off guard with a pecan roll in his mouth. But I couldn't. Instead, I got other stories. The undisclosed pacemaker that had exploded in the crematorium five years back. The meek woman who asked Mr. Breyfogle, with no hint of shame, to bury her husband with his cell phone so she could call him up in his grave every night and say, "I'm glad you're dead, you son of a bitch."

A terrible fever kept me from traveling home this past Christmas, so I drove out to Ohio on a weekend in late January for the usual visits with my mother's sisters, the usual ponderous silence by my father's grave on the way to lunch, the usual stories at Mr. Breyfogle's kitchen table. My mother was fighting the flu, so I spent most of my time alone, in their house, moving from guest room to guest room with my books, wondering what Mr. Breyfogle was doing at the funeral home several miles down the road.

The evening before I drove back to school, the three of us sat in the living room watching TV, Mr. Breyfogle and I on opposite ends of the long sofa, my mother wrapped in an afghan on a leather recliner. I scrolled through Shelley's *Adonais* on my phone, longing for the comfort of the library stacks. In front of us, a hippopotamus bared its incredible incisors.

My mother couldn't stop clearing her throat, so Mr. Breyfogle offered to go upstairs and get her some cough drops.

"No more," she said.

Mr. Breyfogle rose to his feet.

"Richard," my mother said.

"It's no trouble, Bean."

A minute later, Mr. Breyfogle came back into the sunken living room. I looked up from my phone (*He is a presence to be felt and known / In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,*) to see him standing in front of us, voluminous in his green winter coat, holding my own gray parka in one hand.

"Join me," Mr. Breyfogle said.

My mother looked at me, cleared her throat, smiled.

The nearest 24-hour drugstore was five miles down the road, squatting in a sickly patch of lamplight next to a sandwich shop and a Polish bakery. I waited in the car with Shelley while Mr. Breyfogle went inside to get my mother the lemon throat lozenges she preferred. He came back out with the drops, as well as a bottle of nighttime cough syrup and a Bible-sized book of Sudoku puzzles. I held the parcel in my lap as we pulled out of the parking lot and drove away.

We took a different road, made several turns I didn't remember making on the way out. Mr. Breyfogle must have noticed me staring out into the rural darkness because he said, as if there were some cause for concern, "Just have to stop by the office. Funeral tomorrow, and I need to check on the guest of honor. I'll be quick."

"No problem," I said.

We soon slowed down by a long, low building I hadn't seen in years. There was a new sign on the brick, spotlighted by ground lights, that read BREYFOGLE AND SONS FUNERAL HOME. We drove around back to the empty parking lot. A cellphone tower loomed in the middle of the large field separating Breyfogle and Sons from a nearby development of close-spaced ranch homes. I thought: *To that high Capital, where kingly Death / Keeps his pale court in beauty and decay.*

"You can come inside," My Breyfogle said.

Together, we walked up to the back door of the funeral home. I let Mr. Breyfogle lead the way as we stepped into darkness. I heard his palm slide along the wallpaper; then the ceiling lights snapped on in a single, sharp burst.

"This way," Mr. Breyfogle said, as if I were in danger of stealing off into one of the side rooms lining the hallway. We passed a small office, a kitchenette with a buzzing refrigerator, a room marked PRIVATE that hosted mustard-

colored wingback chairs and a pair of old sofas worn down into lopsided smiles—spaces I vaguely remembered. I walked slowly, reverently, as if it were rude to be in too much of a hurry.

I caught up to Mr. Breyfogle outside the embalming room. The door was closed, but Mr. Breyfogle opened it for me. I stood at the threshold, afraid to enter the sterile space with its floor tiled like a bathroom shower stall. There was no one inside. Quickly, I scanned the industrial gray sinks, the steel file cabinets lined up underneath county maps, the orange neck rest on the shallow white embalming table, the sign above it that read TODAY ME, TOMORROW YOU. I thought of my father here, covered by his own white sheet. I thought of his blood, his body fluids, riding the lips of the white table on their way down the drain. I was still staring at that drain, dark and serious, tasting an impossible question on my lips, when Mr. Breyfogle cut the lights off.

“Over here,” he said. “Margaret’s in the chapel.”

At the end of the hallway, we moved through a set of double doors and into the funeral home’s lobby. To our right was the small chapel I remembered, with its wood-beam ceiling, its slender windows looking garish in the bright light from the strip mall across the street, the same rough carpet I recalled scraping my black loafers against while forcing myself to look down into my father’s open casket.

Margaret was tucked comfortably into her eternal rest, papery hands folded over a pale blue linen dress. A small sheaf of wheat tied with ribbon rested against her stomach. Taped to the inside lid of the open casket were pieces of paper scrawled with children’s names and stick figures. We lingered over her face: the squat bulldog jaw, the frothy white curls of her hair, the crinkled eyes and painted lips. Mr. Breyfogle leaned in to appraise her. I imagined him taking one of her hands in his and kissing her, gently, on the lips.

“Barry’s new,” Mr. Breyfogle said. “He has a tendency to paint some of the women like showgirls. Still. Not bad.”

Then Mr. Breyfogle caught something. He stepped back, cocked his head.

“Wait,” he said. “Nope. Chin’s not right. See how it looks off a bit?”

I said I had no idea what Margaret’s chin was supposed to look like.

Without ceremony, Mr. Breyfogle leaned over, flattened his right hand, and used the crook between his thumb and forefinger to push down on Margaret's chin. I stepped back to give him room, and also because I felt this was something I shouldn't be seeing. Mr. Breyfogle jabbed downward, repeatedly. I watched his arm move like a piston. His back to me, Mr. Breyfogle looked like a mad sculptor molding a stubborn, half-wet chunk of clay. I heard him grunt with exertion. I saw the coffin rock on its cloth-covered bier.

"There," Mr. Breyfogle said. He stepped away from Margaret and wiped his hands on his slacks. "Better."

I didn't go up to see what he'd done. Instead, I stepped back. Mr. Breyfogle continued to look down at Margaret. I thought of the incredible span of time between my father's heart attack and his arrival at Breyfogle and Sons Funeral Home, of limbs like blocks of ice. I said my father's name.

"Did you do that to him, too?"

Mr. Breyfogle kept his back to me.

"I did," he said. "He'd been dead for too long. No one else touched him, though. And no one else knew."

"Knew," I said.

Mr. Breyfogle turned to me, looking weather-beaten. He spoke to his hands. I could see the blue hilltop of Margaret's bosom behind his arms.

"Your father was a good man, Wyeth," Mr. Breyfogle said. "I imagine life was painful for him without it. His knees, the medicine. I don't think he meant it. They gave him too much, so he took too much. Your mother doesn't want you to know about all that. She'll kill me, if she finds out I told you. But it's just not right, you not knowing. It's just not right."

Somewhere in the middle of Mr. Breyfogle's words, eye-blink fast, my organs rearranged themselves inside me. Heart crammed under liver, intestines wrapped around lungs. I had to sit down in one of the wooden folding chairs set out in front of Margaret's coffin to search for my heartbeat, my breath.

Mr. Breyfogle came over and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Let's keep this between us," he said. "For now."

My father alone in his woodshop.

My father alone in his woodshop eating pain pills.

“Okay,” I said.

It was all I could think to say.

Mr. Breyfogle softly steered me out of the chapel and back into the lobby. I turned to watch him cut off the chapel lights, could still see Margaret’s coffin banded by streetlight coming in through the windows. At the other end of the lobby, I saw a door I didn’t remember being open for other funerals. It was a small showroom. Inside, urns lined the shelves like puffins on the edge of a cliff, standing resolute above display caskets with open lids like hungry mouths.

Last night, five weeks after that trip back home, my mother called and, with a calmness I didn’t expect, told me Mr. Breyfogle had passed away. He’d died that afternoon at home, suddenly, unexpectedly.

Mr. Breyfogle. Even in death.

The story, as my mother told it, was this. She’d come home from running errands and had found him in the living room, sitting on one corner of the sofa, hands in his lap, head cocked back, mouth slightly open as if his soul had forgotten to close it after departing. The television was playing one of his animal programs. Thinking he was taking a nap, my mother went upstairs to take her own. Two hours later, she came downstairs to find him in the same position.

“I went over to ask him what he thought about doing for dinner,” she said. “And then I knew.”

I imagined my mother sitting on the step into the sunken living room, phone in the crook of her neck, arms hugging her knees against her chest. Why wasn’t she sobbing? Why wasn’t she beating her breast? But she wasn’t like one of my poets. There was no romance in her shock, her grieving. Just a medicinal numbness, an emotional dissembling you could just as well get from swallowing a pain pill as you could from composing a pastoral elegy.

“I’ll pack a bag right now,” I said.

“There’s no hurry, Wyeth. He’s already at the home. Jane from church is coming to stay with me.”

I thought of Mr. Breyfogle, naked and dead on the white table where my father had once laid. I thought of clumsy hands putting hooks under his eyelids to keep them closed, pressing into his rib cage to expel built-up gas. I

thought of his blood slipping away into a network of underground pipes.

"I'm sorry," I said to my mother. "I'm sorry."

"Me, too," she said.

There was another minute of silence. I strained to hear through the phone if the television was still on, waited for a squawk or roar or hiss or bellow. Then my mother said she had a few more calls to make before Jane came over.

"I'll be there tomorrow," I said.

"That will be fine, Wyeth. I'll see you then."

I told my mother I loved her, then hung up. After staring at my phone for several minutes, feeling an aching pain for the woman known in certain intimate circles as "Bean," I grabbed my messenger bag with my notepads and my book of Shelley poems, wrapped myself in the fur-lined parka my mother and Mr. Breyfogle had sent me for Christmas, and went out into the freezing March night.

I stalked a half-mile through muddy snow to the Arts and Sciences library. Inside, I walked straight to the back, past the circulation desk and the glass-walled periodicals room, down a narrow linoleum corridor lined with copiers, and into the stacks. I took the small, metal staircase two flights down and sat at a small, wooden desk among the spines of long-forgotten student theses. I piled my coat and bag on the single shelf at the top to make the space even more confined. Then I opened my Shelley and tried to read. Of course, I couldn't. Instead, I sat there, rocking slightly in the wobbly chair, turning around once in a while to make sure I wasn't being watched. I stared at secret patterns in the grain of the desk and thought of Mr. Breyfogle's puppeteer hands articulating my father's rigor-mortised limbs, wiping sawdust off the lenses of my father's eyeglasses.

I'd never told my mother what Mr. Breyfogle had confessed to me that night at Breyfogle and Sons. I chose instead to walk around with my rearranged organs, to maintain the idyllic story my mother had created about a heart attack. I'd decided to wait until the three of us were together again, until there was time to hear the entire story from her lips, from Mr. Breyfogle's. There would be, I believed, time for a confrontation. Now, with Mr. Breyfogle gone, the story felt lost forever. What good was that terrible knowledge if there was no one to share it with?

MR. BREYFOGLE

At a quarter to eleven, my mother sent me a text.

Wyeth. Jane and I were wondering if you'd be willing to share a story about Mr. Breyfogle at his service. You tell good ones. Just a thought. Love, Mom.

Distraught, without thinking, I texted back several lines from Shelley: *Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep / He hath awakened from the dream of life.*

My mother: ???

Me: *Get some sleep. I'll text when I'm on the road.*

I put my phone away and started to cry.

A story about Mr. Breyfogle. What story could I possibly share that would do him justice, aside from the one I'd sworn not to tell? How could anything live up to the private eulogies he'd given so many others? There was nothing ribald about his end. No spiteful widows or hungry dogs, no angry chainsaws or boating accidents. No private addiction hidden from a son. Mr. Breyfogle was an old man who took a nap in front of the TV and never woke up. His heart, unlike my father's, had simply stopped. How unexciting. How dull. Who would ever want to hear about a death like that?