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SALT

Carolyn Oliver

Briony could barely glimpse the three-quarters size casket (olivewood, outrageous) beyond the ranks of drooping flags and teenagers in uniform. She stood ramrod straight, spade at her feet, just like the other Yoricks lined up a respectful distance from the grave. She'd been on edge for three months. Now, behind her sunglasses, it was almost a relief to roll her eyes. All of this for a dog?

Apparently this particular dog had been the pet of the headmistress at the military school in the valley—the uniformed mourners were her students. Must have been a big dog, Briony reflected. Maybe a Bernese. She was calculating the amount of water a dog like that would drink each day when the bagpipes cut in, which was probably for the best; getting angry made the heat worse. The students began to file out in orderly rows; at least there'd be no stragglers with this group. She could get her crew to work quickly, maybe even arrive for tea early, give them a bit of rest while they were still on the clock. She flicked over her mental file for this burial—the grave leaser wanted thirty-year apple trees planted. How original.

Yoricking was a good job, really. Recession-proof, largely outdoors, kept you in good shape, and, given the labor involved, came with an extra supply of water. The work did have its quirks, its drawbacks. Back problems, for one. And then it was always unpleasant to bury someone you knew, or even someone you'd heard of. At parties, when there used to be parties, you'd have to explain that yes, you knew Yorick was one of the bodies dug up, not the gravedigger in the play. Briony used to make a joke about syllabic economizing, though she couldn't remember it now.

After the dog burial came the end-of-shift tea, which always went down more like sludge. Most of the crew went home, but Briony and two others stayed. The cemetery had scheduled a small sunset service. Briony skimmed the file: middle-aged man, wicker coffin, no plantings—a short lease on the plot. Completely ordinary, aside from the timing. Sunset burials were a rarity, maybe twice a year; most people preferred their dead under the dirt by noon, so that the living could retreat to the comfort of their funeral-baked meats, their sleeping pills.

This grave was in a different quadrant from the dog's, far from their service

building, so after a short nap on threadbare couches, Briony and Jasper and Phoebe picked up their ladders and tools and trudged out to finish the grave. They'd gotten a good start the night before, but they were sweating by the time they'd finished the hole and climbed out. Jasper and Briony broke up the old coffin with sledgehammers, churning anything organic into the mound of earth. Phoebe tossed inorganic material—just a few shards of metal from much older burials—into a basket for processing later. All three of them were silent, alert, watching for a promising glint. Nobody was supposed to be buried with jewelry or valuables, but every once in a while they'd find a ring or a picture frame somebody had slipped into a casket for safekeeping. Nothing this time.

They put out the rush mats, the chairs, then stood aside for the florist, who did up the mourners' tent with swathes of flowers. An unusual touch. Briony sent Phoebe home, kept Jasper on duty for after the ceremony because he'd been late to the start of shift last night. They filled small wooden spades with dirt for the next of kin to sprinkle over the coffin. Briony spotted a flash of something too pale in the mound of turned earth—a bit of bone. She gestured for Jasper to either break it up or bury it deeper into the pile, out of sight. Jasper grumbled, but too softly for Briony to make out the words. The wind picked up, drying her sweat. Tonight, as she did after every shift, she would scrub salt from her skin.

She was brushing off her clothes when she spotted a man walking toward them. She checked the time—too early for the service, so not a mourner. Maybe a walker? The cemetery was popular with older people, who remembered its earlier life as an arboretum and came to see the few century trees still standing. But amblers didn't wear black suits, and the only others who visited the cemetery regularly were historians, who, in her experience, were too shy to approach the Yoricks, getting what they needed from the markers over the graves, or the record offices, or the security footage.

The man drew closer, definitely angling toward her. She told Jasper to re-tie the netting over the disturbed earth so that it wouldn't blow away. Then she strode forward to meet the man. Once she was out of Jasper's earshot she stopped and made her face impassive.

"I've come from Senator Windward's office," he said, once he'd drawn up close enough to make her uncomfortable, close enough they could be speaking in a café, or in a theater as the lights went down. She still remembered that kind of thing from the movies. He was handsome. Thirty-five-ish, so forty years from his time, according to current projections. She'd still be around to put him under. When

Briony didn't reply, he continued, "The senator would like to arrange a special burial."

Windward. She knew the name, of course. Windwards had been ruling this state, sometimes the country, for a lifetime, maybe a little more. White teeth, good skin, better money. An orator or two among the ranks, but mostly they traded on good looks and borrowed ideas. They had access to unlimited water and unlimited influence. She despised them, and while she wasn't alone among the Yoricks, she wasn't in the majority, either. They hired a few local people as estate caretakers every year—good-paying jobs, secure—and occasionally a minor Windward married outside the dynasties. A waitress, once.

"There's an office for those requests," she bit out. Damn it, if Joanne was just letting anyone in through the gates when it was almost time for a service—or wait, what if this guy had done something to Joanne? Like every dynasty, the Windwards had muscle. She looked him over again. No bulk at his side or his ankles—if he was carrying a weapon, it wasn't a gun. He was relaxed, except he kept moving his right foot. Nerves? Impatience?

He shook his head. "Time's essential," he said. "Meet me at the bench on the north side of the war memorial, the one closest to your apartment. Nine o'clock." She stared harder at him, not answering, willing the puzzle to unravel. He shrugged and strode off, veering away from the hearse arriving for the funeral. She stared after him for a moment, and then turned to get back to work, but her gaze caught on the ground. In the dust, Windward's man had traced three initials—her missing sister's initials.

His timing was perfect; if she left now to chase him down, she'd lose her job. The subdued funeral crept on, giving her time to think. She wouldn't cry, wouldn't waste the water.

Ariadne had gone missing three months ago, just before she'd been named a suspect in the bombing of some investor's summer home. It was winter; nobody was hurt. It was one of a string of these bombings, all of them paired with demands for equal water access. Briony supported the cause in theory, but wasn't about to get involved in the actions herself. Now her mind raced. How were the Windwards connected to the bombing? Who did the senator want buried, and why go through a Yorick? It was an expensive cemetery, all organic, all manual labor, so machinery wouldn't disturb the sleep of the dead. Even so, Windward could afford a hundred graves here, the best plantings. That wasn't the issue.

Jasper was fidgeting slightly, distracting her. They were about to sprinkle the dirt over the coffin. What couldn't a Windward buy? Her heart began to race. Maybe Windward knew about the books. They—the people Ariadne worked with—had approached Briony about hiding smuggled books in graves—not often, just when they couldn't be kept at a safehouse. Easy enough to bag the books, dig up the first couple feet on a new grave without plantings, stash the books, dig them out again after a week or two. Yoricks often worked at night, so they had the advantage of darkness, and besides, who ever talked to a Yorick?

Briony had agreed to the plan because she knew it was Ariadne's idea, and she was angry enough to be reckless. Now she'd give them up, of course. The books. For her sister, even if Ariadne wouldn't want her to do it, even if she might never speak to Briony again for betraying the cause.

She and Jasper filled the grave quickly. She was glad for the work, which disguised the trembling in her hands and steadied her nerves enough for her to plan. She'd been too reckless. She would eat at home—she would force herself to eat since she'd be no good to Ariadne if she blacked out. She would take a dry bath. Let Windward's man think she was in control, held a few cards.

But it wasn't the man who sat on the bench. It was a woman, her age difficult to gauge. She was dressed in black, except for a blue silk scarf, a waterfall. Provoking, but for once Briony was able to ignore how thirsty she was; she'd recognized Senator Windward. She was reading something that she put away when Briony sat down on the bench, as far away as possible, as if the senator were a contagious patient. Windward smiled, amused. She didn't verify Briony's identity, just started talking. "As a gesture of goodwill, you'll find your sister on your doorstep when you return. A bit worse for the wear, but quite alive. In return, I'd like a favor."

Briony's guts snaked and burned in fear, but she kept quiet.

"A story will break tomorrow, one that even I can't kill," the senator said.

"I've managed to live three years past my time—records can be so fungible, don't you think?—but some reporter's found me out, and unfortunately even Windwards must abide by the precepts. So for me it's chocolate cake tonight and the needle tomorrow morning. Needless to say, the uproar will be vigorous, the contempt widespread, and some people, like your sister and her friends, might consider vandalizing my grave, or even blowing it up, which I hear they like to do with second homes." She smiled at her own joke.

Briony struggled to catch up, still waiting for the senator to mention the smuggled books. “What do you want from me?” she asked.

Windward pleated a corner of her scarf, worrying the silk with her fingertips. “Despite my general pragmatism, I dislike the idea of my bones being disturbed. My well-deserved rest. So I would like you, and your fellow Yoricks, to dig the deepest grave you’ve ever dug. So deep nobody will be able to dig it up without the kind of machines absolutely forbidden in your cemetery. As a further precaution, the casket will be more than usually long, and extremely heavy. I’d like three trees planted—cherry trees. Sentimental reasons. Don’t worry, the cemetery will collect its usual fees, plus whatever is necessary for your extra time. In return for this favor—the depth and the trees, you’ll never hear from my family again. Your sister will be forgotten by the people interested in her. And you and every Yorick on your crew will have unlimited water rights for the rest of your time. Nontransferable, I’m afraid.”

She sat back, satisfied Briony would agree. Of course she would, but Briony wasn’t a fool. Her lips were so dry that they cracked when she whispered that she wanted the agreement in writing. Windward handed over the documents she’d been reviewing when Briony first sat down. Briony, in agony over her sister, nonetheless read every page, doing her best to make sure nothing slippery lurked beneath the surface. Not that there was a choice. It took three tries before she could summon enough spit for the DNA strip. Windward preferred the traditional blood. Her finger was laced with small cuts. “A lot of loose ends to tie up,” she said, noticing Briony’s interest.

And then it was done. Windward sauntered off into the night. Briony ran home, her copy of the contract folded and tucked into the back of her waistband.

Ariadne lay on her building’s front step, fuzzy and bruised, but enough herself to smile lopsidedly. Questions later. Briony put her in a bath, a real bath, called her crew, then walked into the kitchen to make tea—she could do that now, anytime she liked. She stared at her counter for a moment, then messaged her crew again. She needed them to bring one more thing. She put Ariadne in her bed, rushed into her uniform, checked the locks twice, then twice more, and went to the cemetery.

They worked through the night, through the day, peeling off in twos and threes to complete the day’s other burials. Near the end Briony was convinced they were close enough to the planet’s core that the heat was burning through her shoulders,

her legs. But they would finish, they would tie the ladders together and she'd be pulled out of this craterous hell. And she would have a small but sweet satisfaction, as the earth rendered the senator's majestic casket invisible: the Yoricks had laced the topsoil, the soil that would be mounded over the senator's resting place, with the one thing every poor person had too much of: salt.

CAROLYN OLIVER's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Tin House Online*, *Indiana Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *32 Poems*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Terrain.org*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Necessary Fiction*, and elsewhere. A nominee for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net in both fiction and poetry, Carolyn is the winner of the Goldstein Prize from *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the Writer's Block Prize in Poetry, and the Frank O'Hara Prize from *The Worcester Review*, where she now serves as co-editor. Carolyn lives in Massachusetts with her family. Online: carolynoliver.net.