

Grey : Matter
Johnny Golding

The first time it must have been rough. But now, crossing that barrier from the living to undead, I took your hand and lifted you, Charon-like across the sheets.

We sang, you and I together, not too loud, a tiny lullabye it was. “Golden slumbers kiss your eyes, smiles awake you when you rise, sleep little child, and do not cry, and I will sing a lullabye...” over and again for hours, hours in that dark, sickly-sweet night, the notes softly sweeping over your forehead, with our roles rapidly reversing, ferrying away from the landscape of my little girlhood memories, now but a dot on the horizon of life.

You had but one question, one urgent question, one question that I could barely hear, so close to your lips I had to bend.

“Sweetheart,” you whispered low and halting, interspersed with a darkly slung cough, “how do you tell someone you’re ... you’re very... angry with them, so angry, so very very angry.” The lullabye dried in the air as I considered. “I supposed you just tell them, straight up. There is no time to waste here, not one drop of time. We are travelling on the sheets, you and I, sailing way too close to the wind. You must tell them straight away and as soon as the birdsong breaks. I shall ring them for you first thing.” We were hardcore frank with each other – there was no reason to be otherwise. “Tell me, then, with whom are you so terribly, terribly angry?” The breathing had become laboured. It was not clear if daybreak would even make our newly carved agenda. And then, without missing a beat, “I am mad at your father, very angry at him, and I do not know how to tell him. He’s been dead for so terribly long now, I just do not know how to tell him.”

How to speak to the dead – how to speak, honestly, openly, angrily, to the dead – before it is too late?

This was your urgent question.

I considered for a second time. From the lung, the cancer had spored to the brain, nesting in over 20 inoperable spots. It spored again, now in the spinal bones, now in the wrists. Every blood beat seemed to wash another army of cancer nits into some body crevice I had not even known existed. “Well,” I ventured saying (if you remember), “you just tell him, gently and completely.” I went back to our lullabye, but you would have none of it, your restless legs taking over the white sea sheets, now lashing this way, now lashing the other. “He is coming for me. Tomorrow. Your father is coming for me; he told me so. He is coming for me and I shall tell him then. I shall tell him then and we’ll see what he says.”

I couldn’t bear it; silent tears and another round: “Golden slumbers kiss your eyes, smiles awake you when you rise. Sleep little child and do not cry, and I will sing a lullabye. Lullabye. Lull-a-a-bye. In the morning, still holding that tiny hand, all bones and blotches, I asked you, “do you remember what we spoke about last night?” half hoping, half presuming it was all a cruel dementia of the dark night kind of blues. “Yes!” you said cheerily for the first time in months, “Your father is coming today! And when he comes to my bedside, I shall tell him. I shall tell him ‘straight up’ gently but completely! I shall reach out and simply tell him! After so many lonely angry years, he is finally returning to my side. It will not be long now; not long at all.”