Graham
It is possible to be alive and dead at the same time. To live as though there is nothing left to be done, no work to conclude, no relationship to foster, no love to feel. It is possible to know that your death is so certain and so near that you are already in the throes of it. To be in the heart of death, to be living the pain of hell, to be absent to your loved ones, while your body obstinately withers.

For years Marion built walls, much higher and stronger than those in our Smith Street home, so that when my day came she would be protected from her grief. I ignored this because it was more than I could bear. I blamed my fragile muscles, bones, nerves and tendons. But we realised that later the remorse for our lost days would come, so we chose a different path. The shadow of death will no longer be a companion, throbbing by my side. I will walk to death. My way.

My mind is claw-sharp. It has to be, otherwise I would not be deemed fit to make this decision. I have studied the brochure and watched the web videos and attended the mandatory counselling with sweet-faced Claudine.

My questions have been answered, all of them. Marion and I said our long goodbyes in the way that people who have been married for forty years can do. It took weeks and was sad and funny and felt like a gift.

Marion
Graham and I attended the Final Destination’s christening. It made us feel like we were part of something bigger than just our pain. We watched Captain Mertens hand Queen Beatrice a bottle of champagne, which she cracked across the ship’s monstrous hull and said in French, Flemish and English, ‘May your travels be comfortable and your final destination glorious.’ The ship was officially put into service and an hour later we boarded. I wheeled Graham around the ship and we marvelled at the gilt sculptures in the atrium, the shopping mall with gifts of memorial photos, engraved pens and Belgian chocolate, and the peaceful spray of the neon-lit water feature. We sat down to our evening meal – the silverware was stamped A835 in a barrel lozenge and the wine imported from all the right regions in Europe, Australia and the US – and retired to our cabin to sleep on 400 thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets.

As the sun rose the following day, the Final Destination encountered a protest vessel. The Life Warrior had apparently been following us since Zeebrugge. She sidled dangerously close and the protesters stood on deck with their posters, frowning at us, shameful sinners. The two vessels, ours enormous and imposing, theirs small and pugnacious, cruised into the international waters of the North Atlantic Ocean, each watching the other with suspicion.

On the third day, the Captain of the Life Warrior took to the megaphone. ‘So do not fear, for I am with you! Do not be dismayed, for I am your God! I will strengthen you and help you! I will sustain you and rescue you!’

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**Graham**
These protestors continue to follow us and blast us with their monologues of death and doom. Don’t they know that all of us have looked death in the eye, given it a teasing butterfly kiss to test how it reacts? We have questioned death more deeply than any of the truly living. We understand it and know it for what it is. It is hard for them to hurt us now.

Anyway, many of us are old and deaf.

**Marion**
The night before the burial, Captain Mertens addressed the ship over the PA. ‘Thank you for entrusting us with your dignified burial. Tomorrow your suffering will end. It is important that you know that despite our attempts to outrun her, the Life Warrior continues to follow us. I have been informed that she is approximately thirty nautical miles from us now, and gaining. By the time we begin the ceremony tomorrow, I expect she will be alongside us again. Unfortunately, we have no power to have her removed from international waters. She is within her rights to be here. As are you. I remind you that you are not breaking any laws. As passengers on the Final Destination in international waters you are subject only to the laws of Belgium. I ask you to remain strong, one final time, and trust that we will protect you and undertake your final request with dignity.’

At the conclusion of the Captain’s speech silence echoed through the ship. I imagined it to be like those moments as the Titanic sunk, as those clinging to her rails or scavenging from pockets of oxygen knew that a gulp of icy ocean was inevitable and that they were powerless against it.

‘Marion, can you take me to the foredeck, please?’
I wheeled Graham to the bow of the ship, set his brakes and sat down next to him on the polished oak seat, resting my hand on the brass rail. The sky was cloudless but Graham watched the water of the North Atlantic, today as dark as Indian ink.

I took my husband’s hand. My weathered but pliable skin pressed against his fleshless bones. We sat on the foredeck long enough to see flying fish frolicking in the water below. The sun was starting to set and the air turning to chill when another boat appeared on the horizon.

‘Let’s go in,’ I said.

By morning, all preparations had been made. The crew were efficient and precise, professional and sombre. A few passengers had changed their minds, as had been expected. But Graham was ready, as was I.

At our final counselling session Claudine spoke very little. I missed the sound of her voice – her English, with its lovely French lilt, reminded me of being in Paris with Graham on our honeymoon – and I wanted to hear more of it. But Claudine left an empty space for us to fill.

In the adjoining chamber, which held a large bed facing a metre-wide porthole and a small array of medical equipment, the appointed doctor and nurse waited. We could have as much time with Claudine as we needed, but we were ready. We had said our long goodbyes and this morning there was not much we still needed to say. Throughout our married life we had been frank with each other and to both our amusement we discovered that the vast majority of the things we said over the years...
were positive.

‘Telling each other any final thoughts is an important part of the process,’ Claudine eventually advised.

Was there anything left to say? It seemed petty to drag up complaints now, but I trusted Claudine.

‘I wish you’d been around more when the children were little, Graham,’ I said.

‘I wish I had been too. I should have worked less. We should have had more holidays, like this delightful cruise,’ Graham said.

Graham could always make me laugh, no matter how dire the situation.

We fell into silence.

After a while Claudine spoke. ‘I’m satisfied that you are ready. Are you both satisfied also?’

Holding hands, we nodded.

Claudine signed the consent form, acknowledging Graham’s fitness of mind and understanding of the consequences of the transaction. Graham and I signed our forms too, and I wheeled him into the adjoining room.

**Graham**

That she would do this for me, on top of everything else, is unimaginable. She will take me to the edge of life, holding my hand to ease my fears, leaving no room for her own fears to visit her. She will be brave. It is easy for me and so much harder for her, left with days, months and years to wonder and question and feel. I know she will ask herself if we did the right thing in the end. I look forward to not feeling a thing. My brain has been troubled by pain for so long that it is impossible to remember the lightness, the ease that comes with its absence. At the beginning of my disease I could blast myself into the background and be free enough, my eyeballs floating, my mind a jalopy and my body a jigsaw put back together by chemicals which took away my ability to finish sentences but locked away my pain. The soup of coloured capsules I swallowed day and night dissolved the infrastructure of my life and made it blissful enough for a while. Until they stopped working.

Afterwards, Marion will still have life to contend with, with no soup concoction to comfort her, not even my warm hand to hold.

**Marion**

I touched Graham’s arm as he swallowed the liquid that prepared his stomach. I held his hand after his body was arranged on the bed. I grimaced with him as the needles were inserted into his lax and abused veins. I lay with him on the wide bed as the fluid was injected into the IV line.

We looked out at the ocean and spoke in whispers to each other as we waited.

I stayed with Graham for an hour after it was done, holding his hand tightly. After the tears stopped I studied my mind to see if it had been changed by this experience. Had Graham’s passing, graceful and quiet in the end, proved anything? Had there been angels waiting who turned him away? Was there anything left of him in this physical body that should be preserved in some other way? I could find no reason to believe in any of these things. I had farewelled my husband, the love of my life. He was gone. I would bear witness when his body, an empty vessel sewn tightly into weighted canvas, was delivered to the sea.


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The burials began on schedule at fifteen-hundred hours. The crew, on this their first mission, appeared to function beyond the sum of their parts. The Life Warrior lay at anchor at a disrespectful distance, silently judging us.

As the crew brought the bodies to the burial deck, where families and crew were assembled in tight and dignified lines, the protestors on the Life Warrior held hands in a silent vigil of prayer.

Samuel Barber’s Adagio for Strings played over the Final Destination’s PA. I hugged my arms around my waist. The wind was shifting. The breeze had blown gently all morning, but now it was billowing in an unseasonal bluster from the north, blowing Barber’s music over the Final Destination and the Life Warrior alike. The canvas-cocooned bodies slipped gently into the sea as the strings wove a warm nest around me and the wind whipped my hair into my eyes in an act of exuberant defiance.