

## THE TOMBSTONE

All things in the universe work together in a manner sometimes hard to comprehend. Sometimes the confrontation with our minuscule place in the cosmos comes in surprising locations and the most mundane of times.

Roy and Martha were entering their golden years after 33 years of marriage. Their two children were grown, married, and on their way to successful lives of their own. One grandson from their thirty-year-old daughter, Leslie, and another from their twenty-seven-year-old son, John, had blessed the couple. Roy still worked, but had enough vacation time saved up to permit him a measure of leisure. The couple took an opportunity the few weeks before the hectic holidays for an overnight stay in Bartlesville. It had been a relaxing time for the couple, and they decided to explore the back roads home on a Saturday.

Their drive across the vast Oklahoma prairie led them through out-of-the-way towns like Pawhuska, Wynona, Hominy, Cleveland, Oilton, Drumright, Agra, and Chandler on their way home. It was a beautiful, crisp autumn day with a brilliant blue sky and comfortably cool temperatures.

After driving almost two hours, Roy spied a sign indicating they were approaching the town of Oilton. The small community was a shell of its former self. It had been one of those booming oil towns in the 1920s when some made fortunes and others lost lives. Years had passed since Roy thought about his grandfather on his mother's side, but something about the rusting welcome sign triggered his memory. Roy glanced over at Martha to see her quietly enjoying the repetitious countryside.

"My grandpa spent time in Oilton," Roy states dispassionately.

Martha straightens up in her passenger seat to survey the decaying town. "Your Grandpa Wills?"

Martha had only the vaguest memories of her husband's grandfather. He had been a sweet and feeble old man who attended their wedding, but passed away only a few months after their marriage. She had listened to family stories about him spending hours in a reclining chair reading his Bible, but knew little else about him.

"Yeah," Roy confirms. "He worked in the oilfields along the Cimarron River in the early twenties. He spent some time in Oilton, I think. In fact, his first wife is buried here."

"Your grandfather was married to someone before your Grandma Wills?" Martha quizzes.

Roy nods, "Yeah. My oldest aunt—Aunt Ruthie—was his first wife's child. She died in childbirth and is buried in Oilton. At least I think that's the story."

"I need to stretch," Martha claims. "Let's take a look." Martha surveys the small community before saying, "The cemetery can't be hard to find."

Close to the only gas station in town, the couple spied a worn and bent sign reading, "Cemetery."

Without comment, Roy turned up a narrow street that climbed a gentle hill about six blocks through a collection of homes that appeared to be constructed anywhere from the 1920s to the 1960s. Some were in good condition, but others looked abandoned. Two small towers fashioned as oil derricks, with the words "Highland Cemetery" welded in wrought iron spanning between them, guarded the city's graveyard. The size of the cemetery surprised them, appearing as if more people were dead than living in the small town.

"I guess this is it," Roy states the obvious.

Martha scans the larger than expected cemetery before saying, "Finding a single grave might be harder than we thought. Do you know where to look?"

“I have no idea,” Roy confesses. “I’ve never been here. I know my grandfather worked around Oilton in the twenties so maybe there’s some chronological order.”

Roy parks their car toward the front of the cemetery near a majestic, old cedar tree. The late afternoon autumn sun cast an almost golden glow on the worn and weathered tombstones. The couple splits up and quickly surveys tombstones marking the lives of the people buried there.

After a few minutes of fruitless searching, Roy announces, “I’ll call Mom.”

Martha smirks at her husband finally coming up with such an obvious solution. She had been married to this man for more years than she had lived without him, but still marveled at his reluctance to ask for directions—even from his mother. Roy’s mother answered and seemed somewhat excited that her son had taken the time to investigate some of the family’s heritage. It was not a short conversation. Martha continued to grin playfully as her husband listened patiently to what she assumed was a conversation detailing the circumstances about his family’s history.

Roy puts the phone away before saying, “She said it was south of the gate and close to an old cedar tree.”

“That sounds like where we parked,” Martha notes.

Roy nods and the two backtrack to the old cedar tree and quickly find the tombstone, which had been less than thirty steps from where they parked. They look down at the small marker in the middle of many other nearly forgotten monuments to lives past. The tombstone factually states:

PEARL I. WILLS  
AUG. 21, 1904  
DEC. 23, 1924

“Your grandfather’s first wife had the same name as your grandmother?” Martha says, after a few moments.

“Yeah,” Roy sighs. “I guess Pearl and Ruby and Opal were popular names back then.”

“When was your grandfather born?” Martha asks.

Roy calculates before answering, “1898, I think.”

“She was twenty,” Martha says sadly. “He would have only been twenty-six. Do you know what happened?”

“Mom said Aunt Ruthie was born December 17<sup>th</sup>. Her mom had some kind of complication after the birth. I guess it happened a lot back then. These oil towns were pretty rough: a lot of desperate men looking to make a living for themselves and few doctors. She got some kind of infection, Mom thought.”

Roy quits talking and shuffles around the gravesite, as if trying to get a perspective about something he is missing. Martha occasionally witnesses her husband in brief moments of sentimentality and senses this is one of those times. They originally stopped at this obscure little cemetery intending to stretch their legs, but she knows something’s on her husband’s mind.

“What are you thinking?” Martha finally asks.

“About what?” Roy snuffles defiantly.

Martha did not respond immediately, but then says, “About this place, I guess.”

Roy looks at his wife and nods slightly.

“Grandpa never liked Christmas, much,” Roy begins. “I see why, now. He would have stood here—maybe at this very spot on Christmas Eve, having lost the wife of his youth and holding a baby not even two weeks old.” Roy looks around the cemetery before continuing, “It would have been brown and bleak in December. This old cedar might have been the only color in the whole countryside that day. This old tree looks like it’s been here since the beginning of time. I bet it didn’t look much different then and—my grandfather stood here having lost everything in his wife and holding

everything in his daughter. He was twenty-six years old. That's a year younger than our son John. Can you imagine John standing here under those circumstances?"

"I can't, and I don't want to," Martha groans.

Roy is silent for a few seconds before adding, "My grandpa was always an old man to me. It's hard to imagine he was once young. He'd been to the Great War before coming to the oilfields. I knew that, but it's never seemed real before—at least not this real. He went back to Missouri—near Monett—where family could help with Ruthie. His first wife's family was more well-to-do than his clan and blamed him for taking their daughter away to live in a place like Oilton. Mom says it was a bad time. They didn't want much to do with him or Ruthie. They said it reminded them too much of the daughter they had lost.

"Grandpa's cousin took the little girl in to help him out. Grandpa did odd jobs, but times were hard. After a year, the cousin prodded him to return to the oilfields. He could make money back in Oklahoma, but there was no way for him to take care of his daughter. The relatives wanted him to leave Ruthie behind. They offered to adopt the girl, but she was all he had left.

"A neighbor girl helped the family with Ruthie and was good with the baby. She was only seventeen, but old enough to marry and without better prospects. My grandparents married and moved back to Oklahoma—with Ruthie."

"Your Grandma Wills was the girl?" Martha asks.

Roy nods with a grin, "I guess you could say it was a marriage of convenience, but they had six more kids on their own and were married nearly sixty years, so—I guess there was something more than babysitting going on."

Martha chuckles at her husband's assessment while moving to hold his hand. "This is an important place and time to you."

"It was to my grandpa, I guess," Roy concedes. "I still can't imagine what a terrible day that must have been."

"You don't get it," Martha clarifies. Martha organizes her thoughts before saying, "We're all caught in a circle of life. We're born, we live, we die. It's inevitable." Surveying the cemetery, Martha explains, "All of these tombstones represent that circle of life. Each of these markers is a testament to the birth, life, and death of each person here. Many lived lives too short and some lived to ripe old ages. What matters is how they lived while they were here. I never knew the woman buried under this tombstone, but I believe she was loved. She gave birth to a girl that was sweet and good. Your aunt had three children of her own that would not be here if not for this woman. She died, and that is tragic, but look at what was gained."

"I guess," Roy sighs.

"You're still not seeing the point," Martha chides. "If this woman had lived—if your grandfather had not endured this tragedy—my world would be upside down. My life would be nothing like what I've enjoyed so much the past thirty-three years."

"You've lost me," Roy huffs. "This was a very bad day for Grandpa. I can almost see a twenty-six-year-old man looking much like my son grieving this loss, but how does that turn your life upside down?"

Martha puts her hands on her husband's cheeks as she explains, "Without this tragedy, your grandfather would have never gone back home to Missouri. He would not have met your grandmother. Your mother would not have been born—at least not exactly like she became. You would not have been born! We would have never met, and if I did have two children they certainly wouldn't be the same children we've raised, and loved, and cherished. Everything is connected. If your grandfather had not had a terrible Christmas Eve all those years ago, nothing would be the same. I love this woman that I never had the chance to meet. I'm sorry she died so young, but I don't regret it. Look at what became of your grandfather's tragedy."

“I never thought about it that way,” Roy stammers. “I guess everything that happens to us, takes us to where we are.”

“And everything that happened to our ancestors has made us what we are,” Martha adds. “Let’s go home.”

“Why the hurry?” Roy asks.

Martha smiles, “I want to look at pictures of my kids when they were young. I want to call them on the phone and see how the grandkids are. I want to cherish all that I have, because of what happened here in 1924. I want to make sure I live my life as best I can.”

Roy nods and moves to the car. He takes one final look at the ancient cedar tree guarding the tombstone his grandfather had placed those many years ago. As he starts the car and begins to pull out of the cemetery drive, he says, “I never expected to find such an important place here.”

**THE END**