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SEQUOIA NAGAMATSU

## Elegy Hotel

THEY GAVE BEREAVEMENT COORDINATORS like me studio apartments on the top floors of the elegy hotel. Some had naïve ideas about saving the world, but we were really just glorified bellhops for the mountain of climate plague victims awaiting cremation, for the families who wanted to curl up in a suite with the embalmed corpses of their loved ones and heal. Most people who worked here just had baggage they wanted to forget. For nearly three years, I kept my head down and barely spoke about the past, carting bodies from California king beds to the crematorium. But my golden-boy brother showed up in the hotel lobby a month ago with news of our mother, and invited me to dinner to guilt me into coming home.

I wore the plain black suit bereavement coordinators are supposed to wear during our high-end funeral ceremonies. My mom and JJ were already at The Lucky Fin on Fisherman's Wharf with oysters and a half-empty bottle of wine. My brother helped Mom up (I could have), and she pulled me in for a hug.

"Here's my other boy," she said. She had a breathing tube running across her nose and wheezed after she spoke. Her translucent skin hung off her frame like a shawl.

"It's good to see you, Mom," I said.

She looked at me as if she was going to burst into tears. Not tears of happiness. No, just the awkward acknowledgment that I had continued to fail her, the same pinched look I had seen over thousands of dinners and parent-teacher conferences.

I ordered the halibut with summer squash, a manhattan, and took the last remaining oyster on the table while JJ stalled, talking about renovations on his house in Vegas where Mom had been living the past couple of years. Oh, and did I know that his daughter, Petal, just started junior high and was playing junior varsity soccer? No, of course I didn't.

"And Dennis is working at one of those death hotels now," JJ said. "Isn't that right?"

"Few years now. They don't have employee of the month or anything, no bonuses or stock options, but I'm doing OK. I'm the manager for two floors." Of course,

the floors in my charge, the econo-rest rooms, had been unrenovated and retained the building's faux-Victorian aesthetic. Even in a hotel of the dead, life gave me scraps. Floral wallpaper peeled at the corners, a large water stain skirted the carpet around the broken ice machine, and a growing colony of gum wrappers dotted the hall.

"Manager?" my mom said incredulously.

"Yep."

"And what do you do exactly?" JJ asked.

"A little of everything really. Part host, part mortician, part concierge. I take care of our customer's needs," I said. "Including the dead ones." I kept a bottle of Jim Beam and an emergency joint in the dryer of the laundry room and would sneak away whenever the concerns of the bereaved became too much: "Excuse me, but my husband seems to be leaking." "Does the hotel have erotic films for rent?" "But how can you be sure my sister isn't contagious anymore?" Of course, at this price point, I didn't have it half as bad as the other floors with their bougie requests. Most people were just happy to be able to responsibly dispose of their loved ones at all.

"Oh," my mother said. "How interesting." I wanted to leave, but I needed to at least hear them out. I ordered another manhattan and concentrated on my food.

When our after-dinner coffee arrived, my mom gave JJ a glance. Here we go.

"So, here's the situation," he said. "Mom's real sick. We thought we got all the cancer cells a few years ago, but there are spots all over her lungs. We need help, Dennis. At home."

"Why didn't you tell me about any of this sooner?"

"Really? Do you know how many funerals we've had just in the past year that you never came to?"

"Right," I said. "OK, but what about a home aide or nurse?"

"Yeah, we've tried those. We're paying out the nose for those."

"I don't like strangers in the house, poking around my things," my mom said.

"So I'd live in your house?" I asked.

"That's the idea," JJ said.

"You'd have your own area," my mom said. "I know this isn't ideal—for any of us."

I drank my coffee. I looked at a sea lion swimming outside with Alcatraz in the distance. I folded my napkin into a shitty swan. I did everything but look straight in front of me at a desperate old woman shrinking into her chair.

"Can I think this over?" I said.

JJ shook his head and leaned in over the table like he was going to grab me. My origami mother looked like she was going to crumple into a ball.

“What is there to think about? What great things are you doing?”

“I’ll call you, OK?” I got up and kissed my mom on the cheek. She held on to my hands, as I pulled away.

Between my day shifts of changing towels and rolling bodies to the crematorium, I’d go to the fire escape to chill with my only floor mate, Val, a young widow who dressed like a 1960s flight attendant: neck scarves, pencil skirt, an aura of cigarette smoke. My boss, Mr. Fang, didn’t like us going out there and would always say during meetings, “You have to at least pretend like you care about these people. I can’t have you dangling off the side of the building with a bottle like some lowlife.” His hoity-toity sensibilities kept him away from me usually; he didn’t like slumming it. Most days, we were on the fire escape giving each other therapy. This meant listening to Val wax poetic about why I continued to ignore JJ’s calls and more generally why I was such a fucking screw-up. But sometimes, usually on hump day, we’d hit happy hour with what little money we saved up and treat ourselves like royalty.

The following Wednesday we went to the Lumberyard Club, a converted pool hall turned adult entertainment emporium that looked like a cross between Olive Garden with its faux stucco and a laser tag arena with black and neon lights. These days, the only industries that thrived in the city dealt in sex, death, or the means to distribute those things on the Internet. I ordered chicken wings and an IPA from a waitress named Ambrosia, who was dressed like Princess Leia in that gold and purple bikini from *Return of the Jedi*.

“Den,” Val said, which was short for Dennis. Den of iniquity. Den of despair. A den, she told me once, was a place where things just settled in their own filth. “Have you still not decided what you’re going to do about your mother?”

“Val, what about him?” I pointed to Hung Solo gyrating his hips across the room. I guess it was Star Wars night. She rolled her eyes. I told her I was still getting my ducks in a row, that I needed to take care of my clients here before I left. I didn’t even have a suitcase anymore. “I can’t just up and leave. I’m needed at the hotel,” I explained.

“I think you’re full of shit,” she said. “Your brother’s rich. Mr. Fang can replace you with some other reject in a second. Unlike most of the other assholes in this place, you actually have somewhere to go.”

“Don’t you have a sister in Philly?”

Val talked all high-and-mighty with her tiny liberal arts college superiority but got real silent when I turned the tables on her. Once, when she asked me to help her hang shit on her walls, I thought we were in a space where I could ask her about her husband. We were exchanging firsts—first album, first kiss, first toy we could remember getting during the holidays. But when I brought up a photo of her husband she keeps in a locket and stares at from time to time, she walked away and ignored me for weeks, and I never knew what to say.

But not everything at work was the purgatory that Val made it to be. The only other coworker I talked to was Mr. Leung, our head janitor. He had a long, wispy beard and bushy eyebrows reminiscent of an old master in a '70s kung fu film, which made watching him work an almost meditative experience. I confessed as much to him and was immediately afraid that I came off as one of those Asians who knew jack about being Asian, which was mostly true. But he smiled to me nonetheless and a few days later asked for my help in providing under-the-table services for impoverished families in Chinatown.

“We have bio bag,” he said in a thick accent. “We need to burn. No money.”

We would wait until Friday evening when Mr. Fang went to see *La Traviata* for the umpteenth time with his wife. I'd wait by the service entrance for Mr. Leung and his friends to roll in whatever bodies had been stored in the freezers of restaurants. At first I thought Val wouldn't be on board. She seemed like a whistle-blower in another life, a hall monitor.

“Den has a heart after all,” she said. And who could refuse to help? Once, Mr. Leung rolled in an entire family of four. One of the children held a teddy bear.

“We can only give you this,” a teenage boy with his grandfather told us once, after we had presented them with cardboard urns. The boy handed us a tote bag full of food and the grandfather offered an envelope with money—barely enough to cover a lunch. I waved away the money, and after they left, Mr. Leung, Val, and I ate their dumplings and pork buns on the cold, linoleum floor, as we finished burning the bodies on the official docket for that evening.

Everyone Mr. Leung brought to us was very solemn and thankful. I felt good for whatever that's worth. They burned incense and held each other and cried while gazing at photos of their relatives. I bowed my head in respect. Once upon a time this was how we dealt with death. But something snapped in us when the dead could no longer be contained, when people didn't really get to say good-bye. Cryogenic suspension companies proliferated, along with death hotels, services that preserved and posed your loved ones in fun positions, travel companies that

promised a “natural” getaway with your recently departed. Mr. Fang gave us a checklist upon hire that reminded us to exude customer service, to never upset guests, and to remember that we were a hotel first and foremost and a funeral home second.

Of course, a year into the job I’d end up doing more than what I signed up for and everyone knew, including Mr. Fang. In the lobby of the hotel there’s a rack of literature—brochures and books on the grieving process, on the services we and our affiliates provide. The covers are always ill-chosen stock photos of people in the 1980s. A few depict people strolling through Golden Gate Park, laughing at God knows what. One just has a man in a neon tracksuit holding a Walkman over his head in victory. Life will go on. Room service is available until midnight. Outside delivery and catering should be arranged with Golden Dragon or Buca di Beppo. Dial 9 for maid service. Dial 8 for the on-call mortician. Nowhere was it advertised that one of Elegy Hotel’s bereavement coordinators, a solid five on the hottie scale, would provide intimacy services for the grieving. The first time it happened I didn’t fully realize what I was being asked until someone who had lost two of their lovers said they just wanted to feel something else—a caress of my cheek, a squeeze of my pitiful biceps, a kiss with my cracked lips and postlunch halitosis. And then, and then—I learned to let them lead. Sometimes Val would drop a hint with a client that such a thing was even on the table. And then an elderly woman—just holding her through the night with her husband on her other side, her frail, wrinkled body curling into my own. A woman who said she had fallen out of love with her husband years ago and felt guilty for not being sadder. A couple who lost their son and said they wanted to see me again.

“This helped,” they said, as they put their clothes back on. “We don’t want you to think that we’re the kind of people that usually . . . it’s just that for the first time since we lost Nate, we’ve been able to not cry.”

“It’s OK,” I said.

“Thank you for this.”

I said nothing else. My ass was beet red. I told myself whatever money they gave wasn’t payment but a tip. It wasn’t supposed to be about me. But I wanted to see them again, too. I didn’t feel like complete shit and I had learned the hard way to hold on to those moments whenever you can. After I left, I grabbed my bourbon from the dryer and headed to the fire escape. Val was out there already, blowing rings of smoke toward the silhouette of a ballet dancer projected at the top of the Salesforce Tower. She wiped tears from her face and handed me the joint.

“I wonder if places like this will last now that they’re rolling out a cure. Maybe we’re all on borrowed time.”

I shrugged and took a long drag.

“Good night?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Do you like Starship?”

“The what now?”

“Like the band.”

“No feelings either way, I guess.”

“Do you mind?” I took out my phone and found the album, *Knee Deep in the Hoopla*, and pressed Play, one of the last vestiges of my childhood that my father gave me, that I couldn’t shake no matter how hard I tried.

“This is really bad,” Val said. “But like in a good way.”

We dangled our feet in the air. We draped a blanket around ourselves. I continued to ignore the buzzing in my pocket, until I switched my phone to airplane mode. I could tell Val wanted to say something, but she let it go for once. She rested her head on my shoulder, and we counted the tiny explosions of welders attaching wind turbines that looked like gigantic tulips atop buildings across an otherwise dark financial district.

My brother had tried to call repeatedly when my father died of plague complications. Most people would say I should have learned, should have grown from that experience, but I was still running away from it. And then there was the voice mail my mother left after the funeral, which I deleted before listening to and which had a duration of eight minutes and thirty-two seconds. I fantasized about that message, waffling back and forth between “We love you, Dennis. Please come back” and “Your father died disappointed.” I wanted to pretend again. And maybe that makes me horrible. It had been so long that what had happened seemed unreal. Credit cards maxed out after a year of trying to keep up with more successful friends. I was buying drinks for strangers. I started stealing from my job at Patagonia—a few dollars here and there, a fleece, a hat. When my parents finally bailed me out with a ticket home to Henderson, Nevada, my mother waited with her arms crossed outside our station wagon with wood paneling.

“You think you’re Mr. Big Shot?” she asked. “We dipped into our retirement to pay off your debt. The invoice is in your room. You’re paying us back in case you don’t get the hint.”

My dad was the good cop. He hugged me. I was shaking and he could probably see that I had turned into a kid waiting for the business end of a belt. "You messed up," he said. "We'll look into AA for you, therapy. We'll get through this together." He told my mom to back off.

And maybe it was because I was almost thirty and found myself back in my teenage room. Maybe I was just so far deep living in sad sack city that I didn't realize my parents were going out on a limb. When my dad told me to pick up our beagle's shit on the wee-wee pads in the basement, I sassed back.

"I'll do it when I feel like it," I probably said.

"You'll do it now," he yelled. "Right now your job is picking up d'Artagnan's shit. In return, you get to live here. Do you understand?"

Of course, I did not like that one bit. I stormed up from my futile job search and got into his face in the kitchen. When my dad got pissed, he puffed himself up like he probably did as the only Asian kid in a rural New Hampshire school, defending his lunch money from white bullies who he said always asked him if he could see in wide-screen.

"You want to come at me like that?" he said. "I will knock your goddamn teeth in if you want to be a punk."

And maybe that was true when I was a teenager. But even being scrawnier than he was, I had a few inches on my father and didn't have arthritis. I wanted him to punch me, so I could hit back. Right then I fucking hated him. So, without really thinking, I took it up a notch and pulled a butcher knife from the Cutco set a salesman had duped my mother into buying. Sweat pooled around my grip. I imagined plunging the blade into him and running out the door, a fugitive. Temporary insanity, my lawyers would call it. I'd sleep under a highway overpass that first night and eventually hitchhike my way out of state and on and on until I couldn't run no more. I'd turn myself in and my mom would come to my trials but wouldn't look me in the eye. When my mom did finally hear the commotion, she came up running from her craft room downstairs. I dropped the knife as she approached, but she already saw me. And in the split second that the knife took to fall, my father landed a halfway decent right hook. I answered in turn, tackling him to the ground. One. Two. My father's nose cracked. Three hits before I could feel my mother trying to pry me off. She cradled my father's bloodied face, shielded him from me. I might as well have been an armed robber.

"Get out of my house!" she yelled. "Get out now!"

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Recently, Mr. Fang has been sending the bereavement coordinators out into the city to talk to residents about our services. With the climate plagues abating thanks to new vaccines, death hotels like ours had been scrambling to rebrand. Send off your loved ones in our luxury suites! Say good-bye to morgues and cold storage and hello to three-and-a-half-star resort treatment! One hotel in Oakland had even begun to cater to early reports that plague treatment had produced memory loss in some people, spinning themselves as a care facility. I had been left out of the past few community-outreach endeavors thanks to what management called a “dickhead attitude,” but other hotels had been ramping up their marketing, so one day Mr. Fang partnered me up with Val, hoping some of her hospitality skills would rub off.

Val really hoofed it in the field like we got commission on whoever took a brochure. I enjoyed watching her in her element and learned a lot about how people are willing to just let you into their homes once they know you’ve experienced a tragedy of your own. Val started with a widow’s broken smile and ended with a foot in the door. She always asked for a sparkling water. There was a balance between customer service, door-to-door sales, and funerary stoicism I never quite mastered.

“Maybe try not smiling like a friggin’ serial killer when you walk up to people’s door,” Val said on our first neighborhood assignment.

“If you act now, you can get two—two funerary urns for the price of one. We’ll even throw in a box of chocolates and a gift certificate to Madame Tussauds San Francisco! You ever think about how messed up this job is?” I asked.

Val turned back halfway up a walkway, looking more than annoyed. I thought I was just fighting the man with a coworker, but something I said cracked her.

“Yeah, it’s messed up,” she said. “But some of these people need all the help they can get. If you’re not going to be serious about this, maybe just shut up and hang back.”

I wanted to say sorry, but Val was already knocking on a door. I waited on the stoop and answered texts from my special clients at the hotel who wanted to meet up. “We want you XOXO,” one couple texted, followed by a wineglass emoji and a kissy-face and an eggplant. I responded with a volcano and a rocket ship.

After I had visited Mrs. O’Donnelly and Mr. and Mrs. Saito in their suites, I took a long shower and headed to the fire escape. Sometimes it took longer for me to



feel like I had washed the death and sex from my body, for me to feel like I had scrubbed myself down to my shell, only to be filled up again the next day.

“Den, it’s a two-way street,” Val said, almost immediately. It looked like she had been waiting out there to give me a lecture. At first, I thought she was talking about my piss-poor performance during work, but Val was a better person than me and was always thinking about the bigger picture. “You can’t just wait for things to happen. You’re lucky your family is reaching out at all.”

“What if I bulldozed the street?” I asked. “What if they’re just calling because they’re desperate?” I pictured holding a View-Master to my eyes, scrolling through all the times I let my family down—being held back in third grade for not being able to multiply, cocaine in my backpack senior year, being picked up from the county jail. There was the one time I brought home Nikki Ishio, who was on the cheer squad and on the honor roll. I took her to prom and everyone in my family loved her and told me not to fuck it up. And then I fucked it up. And, of course, there was my father’s bloodied face. The funeral I never went to. All the times I told my brother I hated him and meant it.

“It’s almost never as bad as it seems,” Val said. She was trying to convince herself as much as me. “You have a chance to make amends. That’s something I couldn’t do even if I wanted.” But the thing was I didn’t want to reach out. Sure, I missed them, but who were they really? Who was I to them? The probable drama and heartache seemed too much to bear. I was in control at the hotel. I was somebody without a past.

“I just don’t see that happening,” I said. But I’d be lying if I said I never thought about being a better person, a better son. After I left my mother and JJ the day they asked me to help, I took a long walk home past the Ferry Building and down Market Street. When I got to Union Square, I sat down and watched the city pretend to be what it used to be, all the shoppers and business people streaming in and out of buildings. I listened to a canvasser for a rival death hotel make his pitch: “Sleep with your loved ones on their way to eternal slumber!” It didn’t sound horrible if you had someone to grieve, if you knew people would grieve for you. Sometimes I wondered who would come when I passed and dreamed about what my father’s funeral was like, how I would have entered a church and everyone would have gasped. I’d sit next to my mother and hold her hands while sensing JJ’s need to punch me out. I would wait until everyone approached the casket one by one and then stare down at some noble approximation of my father.

“I’m sorry,” I’d say. And maybe I’d cry or completely break down and my mother and JJ would pick me up from the floor. Everything was so goddamn dramatic and perfect in my head.

I went through half a pack of Parliament Lights and Val just stared at me like the biggest idiot in the world. She took out the photo of her husband she kept around her neck and handed it to me.

“I was in Mexico when he got the first symptoms,” she said. “Some of my friends were going, the vacation was paid for, so he said I should go and have fun. I was touring Aztec ruins and going to beach bonfires when he was throwing up in the toilet. He didn’t say anything until I was ready to come back. Ridiculous, right? Never wanted to bother anybody about anything. If a neighbor hadn’t seen him passed out in the hall with pustules on his arm, he probably wouldn’t have gone to the doctor at all. His family flew out. My sister was helping him. When I got back I thought I’d take care of him. That’s what people expected me to do. But when I saw him I didn’t know how to handle it. His skin was sloughing off his face like it was wax. He had no hair. He could barely speak. I was afraid to be near him. They say he contracted a strain of the plague during a business trip to China, some aggressive flesh-eating bacteria in the water that had the virus. I let my sister do everything. I went to school, I stayed at the library, I did everything I could to avoid that hospital room.”

Val began sobbing. I left the fire escape and returned with a box of tissues from one of the guest rooms.

“When he passed, I didn’t get the call right away. I was at a movie, stuffing my face with popcorn. I never got to say good-bye. I didn’t even try.”

I didn’t know what to say. I patted her back and passed her the bottle.

“You need to ask yourself what the hell you’re waiting for,” she said. “I like you, Den, but I’m getting pretty damn tired of hanging out here on this fire escape having the same damn conversation.”

When I got back to my room, I reviewed my missed calls. I listened to my brother on my voice mail, no longer angry but just tired. I’ll call him tomorrow, I told myself. I’ll definitely do it this week. If not for myself then maybe for Val. I texted good-bye and a string of heart emojis to the few clients I had continued to care for and ignored their replies, their pleas to get me to stay: Is it about the money? We didn’t think this would end so soon. We’re not ready.

I sat out on the fire escape and gazed at the city, trying to come back to life before

cleaning my apartment and finding some boxes to collect what little belongings I had. I got caught up in the comforting idea of resetting. Those transitional movements toward all that could be possible made me feel whole. I thought about patching things up with my family, making Mom proud. I'd learn Dad's recipes (even his famous curry chicken bowl), redecorate her room just the way she wanted, and maybe, on her good days, I'd take her to a Vegas show like Cirque du Soleil. In my mind I could hear my mom telling me she loved me. But my phone remained on the kitchen counter unplugged from its charger for days. When I finally bothered to recharge it, my phone vibrated several times with seven missed calls and voice messages from my brother, each angrier than the last. I hated getting yelled at, being told I had messed up. I deleted them all and kept telling Val the next day would be the day, until Val didn't mince words and told me to get the hell out, that she was done with me.

"I can't, Dennis," she said. "I don't know what to do for you. You need to grow up."

"I know," I said. "I promise I'll go. I'm sorry." But Val quickly became a ghost, moving through our shared hall as if we were strangers. She'd nod, make small talk about work, but never again did she ask about my life. Drinking out on the fire escape suddenly felt much more pathetic. Down below, life was moving on. There hadn't been a wildfire in months and the air was marginally comfortable to breathe again. People were starting to go out again and fill the restaurants and bars. I thought about calling JJ and asking to talk to Mom. Maybe if I promised her, heard her voice, I wouldn't be able to back out. Maybe if I told her I really wanted to help her. I imagined the conversation for so long that I almost felt like it had happened. But it hadn't.

I was removing a body from one of the rooms when JJ called again. Several times in a row. He was a brother I didn't deserve, the kind of person I would never know how to be. What was so different in his upbringing? Soccer? The fact that my parents spent so much time trying to help me not fail out of school? All the wasted attention on me that left him alone? I remember him crying on several occasions, saying how I got everything and it wasn't fair. My thumb hovered over the Decline button, but I finally picked up. The entire summer had passed since my mother held my hands.

"I don't know why you deserve this call," he said. Everything else sounded like it came from the bottom of a well. And when he stopped, I thought about hanging up and wallowing in the purgatorial red lights of some strip club or bar. But

I stared at the body on the gurney in front of me—a man named Bobby who had three grandchildren here the other night. I heard them singing, laughing. They were celebrating a life. When I came in to deliver chicken tenders, the children were reading bedtime stories, nestled next to their grandfather. I hovered the phone several inches from my ear as I half listened to JJ explain what had happened in between yelling at me. Even then I couldn't be decent. When there was finally a lull, when he asked me if I had anything to say for myself, I asked my brother to let me take care of things.

"Give me this," I said. "Please. I know I don't deserve to ask for anything."

By the following afternoon my mother had been moved from the hospital morgue to our presidential suite. It would take my stipend for the next two years to pay for it, even with the discount Mr. Fang begrudgingly gave me. When I walked into the room, my brother was already there. He had been busy, decorating the room with family photos and replacing the bedspread with a quilt our grandmother had made. On every conceivable surface, he had placed a vase of flowers. I sat next to him on a love seat at the edge of the bed. He was watching some travel show about Rome and crying into a glass of Pinot Noir.

"Never really did anything for her either, Den," he said. "She never went anywhere. Not like I didn't have the money. This is probably the nicest place she's ever stayed."

"Remember those KOA campsites on family road trips?" I said. "Helping Dad pitch the tents, waiting for Mom to come back from the grocery store because we always forgot something."

"Mom hated those trips," JJ said. "She slept in the car because Dad never thought it was necessary to buy sleeping pads."

"It was never all bad," I said. I thought about me and JJ creeping through the forest with flashlights, waiting for our father to jump out at us wearing a ghillie suit.

JJ shook his head and poured me a glass of wine.

My mother looked like she was taking a nap. The mortician did a good job. I could picture her getting up, asking us what was on the agenda for the day. *Shall we go to Alcatraz? I've never been. Can we get some chocolate at Ghirardelli? Or more likely, you're still on my shit list, but I want to have fun for once in my damn life. Whatever you want, I'd say. I'm so sorry.* In two days, I would cart my mother to the basement and watch her reduced to ash. I would present our top-of-the-line urn to my brother. By the following evening, we would be joined by relatives

and family friends, and I'd retreat to the shadows after awkward handshakes and niceties, feeling unworthy of being there. I walked over to the bed, surrounded by candles and flowers and photos of a small, unremarkable life. I told my mother stories about everything she and my father had given me but I never said thank you for—the karate lessons and birthday cakes and second chances. When I finished, I draped myself over her body, an ear where her heartbeat would be. I told her I was sorry. I told her I loved her. I waited for her embrace.