

Random Adventure

I met Morgan and Oscar at an outdoor exhibition this April 2021, and I haven't seen them since the school shut down. It felt good to talk to people face to face. Morgan had her two vaccines already, I just got my first dose, and Oscar was looking for an appointment. People all looked like a copy-and-paste from the zoom profile picture. Even we have already known each other well before, the human figures somehow seemed to be too much information for my brain system to generate.

I had my glass skeleton sculpture included in the show -- it was sleeping on the grass beneath a slender tree, whose wrinkles reminded me of skinless cats. It was an excellent location for my "skeleton of water." However, some random wild animal might just run across the skeleton's tail and broke some part of this work, which didn't bother me at all, as it was already a miracle for me to bring it safely here with my awkward driving skills. The glass body looked magical around 2-3 pm when the sunlight landed on it through the branches. Spring has arrived, and this odd semester was close to an end.

"I want to bury it here," I told them, "this is such a perfect place for it, and I want to leave it here forever."

"You need to make a box for it," Cha, the show organizer, said to me, "it's safer that way."

"Sure, I will make a coffin for my sculpture and take it back to where I found this creature, the Santa Clarita River."

I always call my art creations creature, and I genuinely believe it this way, as I was a believer in Object-oriented ontology.

"Oh, I always want to do coffin shopping. We should go together. It would be too strange if I go there alone." Morgan liked that idea.

It sounded like a random adventure, which I always love. I said yes, but I didn't take it too seriously, as I thought this plan might happen or might not be. Things were so difficult to plan and expect during the pandemic.

A few days later, Morgan messaged me for my opinion on which coffin/casket shop we should visit. I picked one and started to plan out a visit. We both think we should visit the shop as potential customers rather than crazy art students. Yes, I personally use my role as a fine art student for excuses and to make many things reasonable. We decided to invite Oscar. Apparently, we are not genetically related, so we decided to be adopted

siblings with one same mom and different dads, our beloved aunt recently passed away, and we are working together to plan her funeral. Morgan made a phone call and discovered that we need to refine our story -- Our 160-pound, recently deceased aunt loved the color blue. She never had any children (that explained why we are there) and was divorced (heartbroken, that is also why we are there). She had a cat once, and sadly it ran away with some wild cat when it was 10. It was chubby and orange.

We met in front of that casket shop on a Friday morning. It was close to me, but we were all late comparing to our plan. We kept repeating our aunt's information on our way entering the shop and didn't come up with a name until the last minute. Samantha Harris -- that was what we decided to call her.

The space was more open but also rougher than what I had pictured in mind. The ceiling was low and some cozy but suspicious furniture can be seen in every corner. The caskets were all lying on separate stands; they were in many different colors, with ornate decorations. The space was surprisingly peaceful and calming. I was sure that there was nothing inside those caskets at that time; however, they would all belong to someone in the future, someone who passed away. There will be a human body lying inside, lids will be shut, and nails will be placed in the caskets forever. It felt complicated when I realize this fact, as they all have a small universe inside. Caskets or coffins are entrances to another world.

The man working there friendly welcomed us and asked about our aunt's basic information, we went a little bit too much while refining the stories at home, but we tried not to waste anything we have already thought of. We pointed out that two blue caskets might be suitable, as it was her favorite color. Those caskets were stunning; the shiny glossy paint reflected out images, making the casket look fancy and expensive. It felt weird imagining myself owning one, but I couldn't help myself thinking about that. They seemed too extravagant for me, too narrow and small as well. There were unpredicted questions, but Morgan was well-prepared. She had the cemetery choices in her mind and didn't hesitate when asked whether we need flower service or transportation assistance. It has become a business chain---- they got us all covered, just like the old traditions.

A casket without paint and sustained a natural color of the wood stood out. It was simple but elegant. The man introduced to us that it is a traditional Jewish style. There's no metal used in it at all, just pure wood. It seemed pretty separated from all the others, and it immediately became our "number one choice" as the unfinished look was very appealing to all of us. The casket shop man got excited when we showed our interest in this kind of wood-oriented caskets; he even invited us to see their workshop and provided extra options by showing all the different types of wood they usually use. He

proudly presented us a massive chimney in their backyard, which has been there before they started the business, "maybe they used to fire bodies in it?" This thought came to my mind, but I wasn't sure whether it is appropriate to ask. We circled around the warehouse and studied various kinds of caskets, staring at the detail and pretending that we were trying to find the perfect one for our aunt Sammantha rather than having a spontaneous adventure. Whenever things were uncertain for us, we looked at each other in the eyes and said, "we need to confirm with mom. She is the one making decisions."

Morgan was a great actress or performer, Oscar seemed natural enough, and I was awkward. It was difficult for me to participate in this conversation, as I felt like a 9th-grade student facing exams. We tried to add some elements of reality as well, like talking about the Performing Life class that I was going to have that afternoon with Michael and my preparation for the thesis. The man working there was so friendly and patient that we all felt a little sorry, as we were taking up his time without any intention of spending money here. And luckily, no other customer was there.

"Have you guys eaten?" He asked us when we were trying to say goodbye.

"Where is the closest bar here?" Oscar replied to the question.

"None of them is open now, but there is a great shrimp taco place nearby, the best in town in my mind" He took out his phone and started to search for us.

We got the restaurant's name and thanked him. We really appreciated his help and kindness.

After leaving the casket shop, we stood, or more precisely speaking, squat on the curb outside, facing the casket shop for 30 minutes. We talked about birds, Morgan's incoming trip back home, and Oscar's obsession with finding a bar. We also laughed at ketchup packets as breakfast and the hole on Oscar's pants. He brought us plants to look after today, "A graduate present," as he described.

Yes, this was the last month for us to study at CalArts.

It was a strange but beautiful day. I did my first coffin/casket shopping, and decided to build a casket for my water skeleton. I will bring it back to the dry riverbed, cover it with flowers and seeds, and say goodbye.