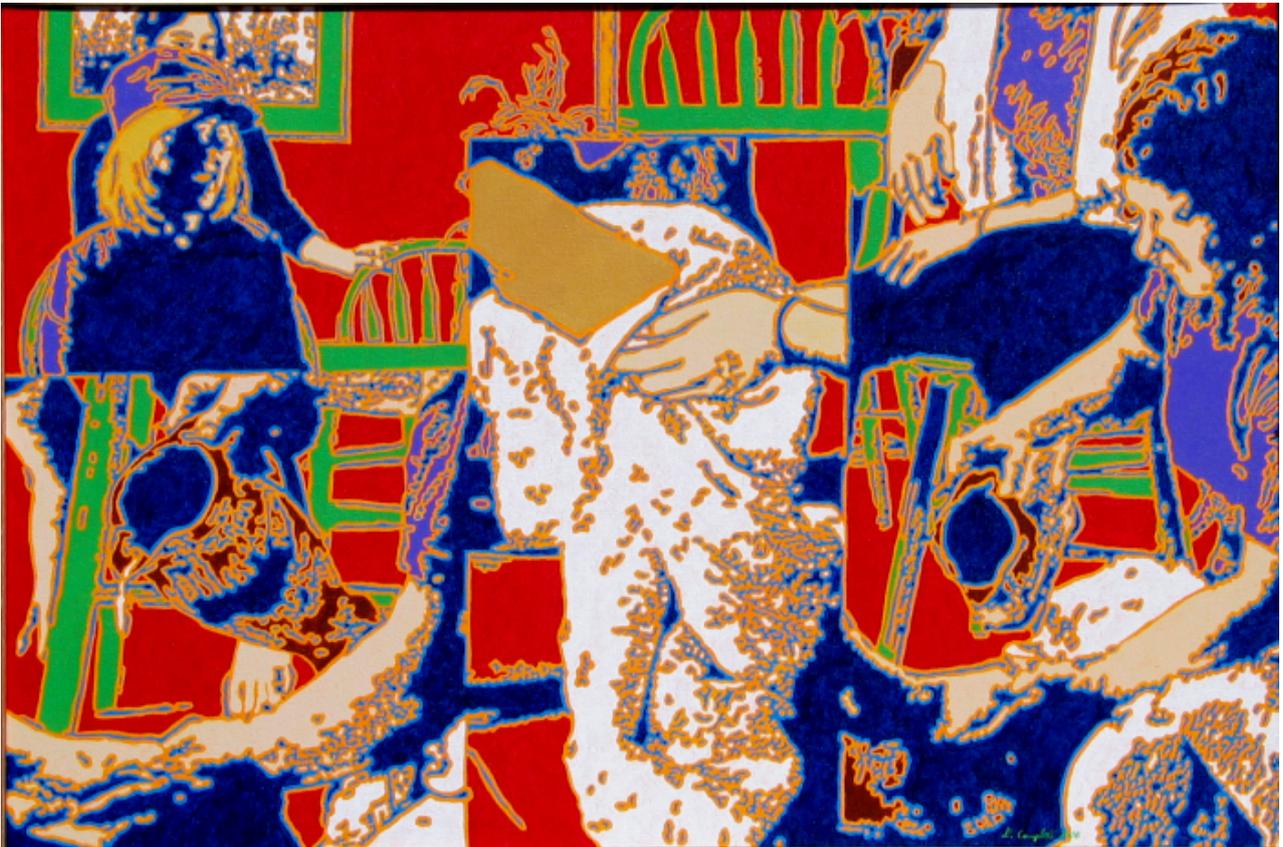


SHORT STORY

When the Soil Softens

by Tilbe Akan



"You Should Do As I Have Done" by Douglas Campbell

Another winter night. Again. There is no summer anymore, only winter and darkness. It's almost always dark now. Every day, it seems the sun tries to rise but retreats before breaking through. At most, a faint twilight. That's all I have now. Snow. Darkness.

But today is different. I feel it in my bones. Less alone somehow. A package arrived — first in years. No return address, no markings — just my name: Sinan

I don't open it. Not right away. I place it on the dinner table, at the centre of the house like an uninvited guest. I stare at it, breathing deeply, trying to calm myself. I've always been good at pretending not to care. At numbing excitement. I'll manage again.

My heart beats too loud. Annoying. Stop it.

Coffee. I need coffee. I leave the package like a bomb in the middle of the room. Maybe it is a bomb. That'd be fine. An end to this misery. A dramatic one, at least. A reason to be remembered.

The kettle clicks. The sound wakes me — like surfacing from a half-dream I can't fully recall. I try to gather my scattered self; piece together my emotions.

No. Don't think about the package. Don't let curiosity take you hostage.

I open the window. The cold helps. Snow helps. Stray cats and dogs help. I scatter some food for them — *mama*. A word from my childhood. Turkish. It means food but sounds like *mom*. Like mothers feeding their children. Maybe that's why I remember it now.

I feel drowsy. I drink the coffee anyway. Not the time to fall asleep. But that's what I do under stress — sleep. Always have. Even as a kid. My weird little survival trick.

I feed the animals more *mama*. It's freezing out. They seem okay, grateful even. If it gets any colder, I'll let them in. No creature should freeze to death.

But sleep wins. Even coffee can't fight it. I drift off for a few hours, lost in complicated dreams.

Dreams are safer. In dreams, I'm with my mom, my friends, my grandmother — my best friend in the world. She told me stories underneath the quilt on cold winter nights, allowed me to lick the spoon when we baked, and even held my hand through one thunderstorm so that I wouldn't jump at each crack. She smelled like peach soap and freshly baked bread.

But not tonight.

Tonight, the dreams change. I see dismembered bodies in the streets. I feel blood beneath my feet. I smell the acrid smoke of burning flesh. That scent reminds me of that summer my grandma was ill and trapped inside, and I learned there are worse things than being alone.

The heat was suffocating against the windows, and the house seemed so sprawling, it was as if no one could hear anything. From then on, I began to view the world in a different way, as if the air was working against me.

I remember bathing my grandmother's body.

Everyone refused the task. Even the dead-body bather wanted nothing to do with it. But I insisted. She had bathed me as a child, it was only right I returned the favor. A final act of love.

Guilt is heavy. Heavier than the world.

I wake up. Different. Sharper. Ready.

I go to the box where I keep my remembrance. A small jar of soil from my grandmother's grave.

Some say it brings bad luck. I don't believe that. This soil is sacred. It comes from the place between worlds.

"She decided to change worlds," someone had said after her passing. What a beautiful way to describe death.

I take the soil in my hands, breathe it in. It smells like earth. Like memory. Like home.

Finally, I return to the package. I open it slowly, reverently.

A dull silver pendant drops into my palm.

An immortality symbol. How cliché.

I laugh bitterly. Dry. Every woman had one, once.

But my heart starts to ache.

It hurts in a way I can't locate. Not the chest, not the gut — somewhere deeper. A place only ghosts know.

I hold the pendant up to the light, though there's hardly any. It's dull, tarnished by time, or sorrow. Hard to tell which.

The design is strange. A looping knot, like a figure eight eaten by shadows. At the center, an empty socket. Something used to be here. Something that watched, maybe. Or listened.

The chain is cold. Not just winter-cold — absence-cold. The kind that crawls under your skin and sits inside your marrow.

I don't know why, but I put it on.

A pulse. Not mine. Not human.

The soil on the table begins to shake. I hadn't noticed I had spilled some. The jar lies on its side, bleeding earth across the wood.

It pulses, too.

I whisper her name. "Anneanne."

No answer. But something changes in the room. The air thickens. It smells like burnt lavender and candle wax. Like the days after she died.

I stumble back, knocking over the chair. I want to laugh again, but the sound catches in my throat. I feel watched. Not by eyes, but by memory.

A shadow passes across the floor — nothing there. I turn fast. Nothing. But the pendant burns against my skin.

I look down.

It's no longer dull.

It gleams. Just a flicker, like something waking up.

I grab the soil in my palm and close my fist.

"Why now?" I whisper.

"Why send this now?"

My voice sounds alien. Like it came from under the floorboards.

Then I hear her voice.

Not loud. Not clear. Just the *shape* of it.

"You forgot," it says.

"You were meant to remember."

I fall to my knees. The cold seeps into me. My spine trembles.

I am no longer in my home. The room is the same, but it's not. The wallpaper is peeling, old. The lightbulb swings without wind.

I know this place.

This is where she died.

But it's not the present. It's the hour of her death.

The exact hour. The mosque across the street had just invoked the night prayer, the imam's voice extending over the deserted streets. I counted each long note, unaware I was counting

her final moments.

And I am not alone.

I don't move.

The air is dense, like breathing through wet cloth. The light hums overhead, sickly, yellow. I remember this light. I changed it for her the week before she died. She said it was too bright. Now it flickers like it's ashamed to exist.

I try to stand, but I stay on my knees. This floor knows me. This exact corner. I held her hand here. I felt her pulse slip beneath my fingers like thread through a needle, tighter, thinner, gone.

The pendant grows heavier, though not physically. . It pulls something out of me. Regret maybe. A wound I had sealed with numbness.

“You were meant to remember.”

The phrase repeats. Not as a voice now, but as a rhythm behind my ears. Like blood.

I unclench my fist. Soil has mixed with sweat, turning into a dark paste. I rub it between my fingers. The scent — damp, metallic — floods me.

Her garden.

The day we buried her.

The silence after.

She used to say: “Soil remembers. Better than people do.”

I laughed back then. Now I believe it.

The pendant presses against my chest like a finger accusing me. I stare at the package, now just cardboard and tape. Ordinary. Utterly meaningless — until someone touches it.

I stand, finally. Legs trembling like I've walked out of a war zone. I go to the hallway mirror.

I hate mirrors.

But I look.

I expect to see someone older, more destroyed. But it's just me. Thirty-four. Hairline retreating. Eyes ringed like smoke-stains.

But the pendant. It looks new now. As if polished by my guilt.

As if it wanted to be seen again.

I try to take it off. Fingers won't obey. It stays.

Fine.

I return to the table. Pour the remaining soil into a ceramic bowl. I place the pendant in the centre. Like an offering.

Or an investigation.

Why now?

Why this?

Who sent it?

And then the final memory breaks through. The one I've been exiling. The one I'd buried deeper than the grave itself.

It wasn't natural, how she died.

Not truly.

It wasn't suicide.

It wasn't illness.

It was resignation.

And I helped her resign.

Not with poison. Not with a knife.

But with silence.

With absence.

With leaving her alone for days.

I told myself it was work.

But I knew.

I knew when I left, she might not wait.

And she didn't.

Now the package. The soil. The pendant.

A verdict.

Not from her. From myself.

So now what, Sinan?

You've remembered.

You've dug up the bones of your own failure.

What do you do now?

I don't sleep.

I sit by the bowl. Soil, pendant, my own cowardice arranged like ritual objects.

The sky outside never lightens. It hasn't for months. Even the weather is tired of pretending. The world doesn't end with fire. It ends with ashes.

I stare at the pendant again. My fingers twitch, resisting, but I pick it up.

The chain is warm now. Or my skin's gone cold enough to confuse the difference.

I want to throw it. Into the snow. Into the sea. Into the garbage, with the rest of the things I couldn't be bothered to mourn.

But I don't.

Instead, I open my notebook. The one with nothing in it. The one I've carried around for years to look like the kind of person who writes things down.

I write.

“She asked me to stay. I couldn't.”

I sit back. Let the sentence rot on the page.

Then another.

“The pendant was hers. I buried her with it.”

It's true.

So, what is it doing here?

Did I forget? Did someone dig her up? No. No. Don't invent ghosts. Stay in the blood and bone of it.

I remember now.

I kept it. Told myself I'd return it to the grave. I never did. It sat in a drawer, hidden under expired medicine and foreign coins.

And someone sent it back to me.

No — *I* sent it.

I packed that box in a moment I couldn't remember. A blackout of grief. Or self-hatred. But now I can see the yellow-lit kitchen table, the tear of tape, my hands shaking, pressing the cardboard flat until it held. Addressed it to myself.

Because I knew one day I'd forget enough to be surprised by it.

Because I wanted to be haunted.

It worked.

I feel something hot crawl up my throat. Not vomit. Not quite tears.

I want to confess.

But no one's left.

She was the last one. The only one who believed I was more than what I became.

And now I'm a man alone, talking to soil, wearing the last thing I should've let go.

Maybe I write more.

Maybe I don't.

But I leave the notebook open this time.

And I don't clean up the soil.

And I let the pendant stay where it is — against my skin, pressing into the heart of the matter.

I sit with the soil.

My fingers are stiff around the bowl. The silver pendant digs into my palm. Dull. Cold. Familiar.

It smells like the earth she used to turn with her bare hands. She never wore gloves. Said gloves made you forget things were alive.

That memory surprises me. I hadn't thought of it in years.

Her laugh comes next — short, dry, always through her nose first. She used to laugh at the TV, even when it was off. Said she could still hear old lines echoing in the static.

I don't know why it comes back now.

But it does. One memory. Then another. Then more.

The day she taught me how to fold börek. The way she used to hum when she swept the floor. How her hand used to press the back of my neck when she prayed.

Not all the memories are of her. Some are of my friends. My mother. My old apartment with the orange curtain that caught the morning light just right.

They're small things.

But they are warm.

I look at the snow outside. It's still falling — but it's brighter. Not quite sun. But something close. Something enough.

I step toward the window. My breath fogs the glass.

I write her name into the fog.

Just her name.

For the first time in years, I don't cry when I say it.

I don't bury the soil. I don't wear the pendant. But I place them together. Carefully. As if I finally know they were never meant to save me — only remind me.

Winter hasn't ended.

But I don't feel trapped in it anymore.