2012

Poetry and Prose: The Story and the Slant

Carol Arnett

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Judith Ortiz Cofer writes in But Tell It Slant: From Poetry to Prose and Back Again, that she sometimes likes to write about the same incident in a poem and in a personal essay. Each format, she writes, can improve and complement the other. Each set of poems and prose in this thesis explores this idea by describing the same situation, viewed in a different way. The bulk of the thesis is poetry accompanied by personal essays, and there are also some short fiction pieces accompanied by poetry.

Poetry and Prose: The Story and the Slant

Carol Arnett

Thesis Committe

Beth Mead, Director, MFA in Writing Program, Associate Professor of Humanities, Lindenwood University

Eve Jones, Instructor, MFA in Writing Program

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Introductory Essay

In my application essay for the MFA program, I wrote about my desire to reclaim my writing for myself. For years, I've been lucky to work as a writer, at various times being technical writer, newsletter writer, training writer, and newspaper writer.

The one thing that all these jobs had in common was that I was writing for someone else. Someone, an editor, a boss, a client, told me what they wanted and I produced it. Some of what I produced, I can honestly say, was just not very good. But when a client is paying your bills, you often have to give them what they want. I learned to cherish the small victories – convincing someone that a period was needed when they wanted a comma, writing a newsletter story that made electrical products "sexy" enough for a client, receiving a course evaluation that praised my clear and concise bullet points.

As I continued through my work life, I thought about pursuing a Master's Degree in English Literature. I was accepted into the program at Illinois State University. But as I began taking classes, I realized that the assignments were very similar to the job I was doing at the time. I would read a document at work and summarize it for a training class. I would read literature and literary criticism and summarize it for my class. After 18 credit hours, I got pregnant with my first child, and shortly after, my husband and I made the decision to move to St. Louis. While I was somewhat disappointed that I would be quitting the Master's

program, I was not overly upset. I knew it wasn't the best program for me, but I wasn't sure what was.

Fourteen years later, I was working as a training designer and developer, creating training classes for an electrical distributor, when I met a co-worker, Dianna Graveman, who had gone through the Lindenwood MFA program. As she described the program, I thought it sounded like something I would be interested in. As we talked, Dianna told me a few times, "you should write a story about that," or "that would make a great short story." The idea that I could write stories began to take hold.

There was only one problem – I had taken one writing class in my undergraduate years, and I hated the workshopping process. The idea of putting my work out there and having other people criticize it always left me with a feeling of dread. I thought I would just keep writing in my journal, keeping my "fun writing," as I thought of it, to myself, and doing my "work writing" for others.

Finally, I realized that I would regret not trying the program, and I applied and was accepted. Even submitting the application essay was difficult. "What if they don't like it? What if I don't get in?" Harder still was writing something very personal and sending it off to an anonymous reader who would render judgment on my work. I gave myself a goal of finishing the program before my oldest daughter started college and worked backward from that date to determine when I absolutely had to apply to make my self-imposed deadline.

In my first class, Fiction and Poetry, with Scott Berzon, Scott assigned a poem for the second class. We would make copies for our classmates, hand them out, and then workshop them in the third class. I waited for thoughts of the dreaded workshop to cause the familiar sick feeling in my stomach. But soon I realized that I wasn't worried about the workshop; in fact, I was looking forward to it.

When I related this to a long-time friend, she replied, "Well the you now is a lot different from the 18 year-old undergraduate." As I thought about her statement, I saw the truth in it. I'm not sure I could have handled this program at 18, or 20, or 25, but after years of writing all sorts of different things that all came back marked with revisions, the idea of a workshop didn't intimidate me. Or it may have been the criticism I was used to hearing from my teenage children. Having your writing critiqued pales in comparison to having your wardrobe, job, and life choices questioned on an almost daily basis.

My second MFA class, Creative Non-Fiction, with Andrew Pryor, was my first experience with non-fiction. I had enjoyed the poetry section of my first class more than the fiction section, so I wasn't sure how I would feel about prose writing again, but I really enjoyed the class. Two things from this class stood out for me. In my previous class, we had talked about finding our voices; in this class, we talked about creating our voices. When we wrote about something that happened several years ago, do we want to write in our present-day voice, or in the voice of the past, or do we want to create a better, stronger voice for ourselves? Some fellow students who wrote about abuse they had suffered as

children said they only way they could write about it was to write in a strong adult voice, a voice that knew the horror of what they were describing, but could approach it with some detachment. The idea of creating your voice instead of finding it struck a chord for me. I was beginning to worry because I felt like I hadn't found my voice; how good it was to feel like it was an active process. I didn't need to sit and wait for a voice; I could create it.

The second thing that stood out for me was an essay we read, *But Tell it Slant: From Poetry to Prose and Back Again*, by Judith Ortiz Cofer. In this essay, Cofer tells of the same incident in poetry and in prose and writes about how and why she did so. Cofer tells of an incident with her family when she was a child. In the poem, their car develops a flat tire near a sugarcane field and her mother takes her in to the field to smell the sweetness of the cane. Her father then roughly grabs her arm and pulls her out of the field, telling her that there is danger for her there. In the essay, Cofer expands on the idea, explaining that these flat tires and blowouts happened often, and it was her mother's routine to check the area, and if she found it safe, let her and her sister out of the car to pass the time. Her mother, she writes, would often show them something about the area as if they were tourists exploring a strange land. She also writes that they are in her mother's native land, and her father is not a native. He does not trust local foods, and they only eat processed food approved by the U.S. Government. In the essay, it is her sister who runs into the field and is pulled back by her father, who tells her that there are snakes in the field. The essay ends with her mother quietly muttering that there are no snakes on her island as they drive away.

I liked how the poem and essay described the same incident, but put a different perspective, or slant, on it. In the poem, we don't know the family dynamic. We sense some tension in the family, but we're not sure why it is there. In the essay, the tension is explained.

I was also fascinated by how the writer was able to fictionalize the event in the poem. In the poem, the narrator is grabbed by the arm, and no sister is mentioned. We discussed in class how she got to the truth without literally sticking to facts. I think that before this, I was a little too concerned in my creative non-fiction with getting every detail absolutely correct. This essay was the start of realizing that it was up to me to choose what was important and what was not, and include what I felt was necessary.

I fell in the love with the idea of writing the same story, but with a different 'slant,' poetry or prose. We did an exercise in which we wrote about the same incident in poetry and prose, and I found that it helped make each one better. If I wanted a better non-fiction essay, writing a poem first improved it. If I wanted a better poem, writing a paragraph or two before I wrote the poem made the poem better. Since then, I've been experimenting with this idea. This thesis contains several related poems and essays or poems and short stories.

So what is my voice? What have I created for myself? In this thesis, I tried to show this.

Many of the stories and poems in this thesis deal with domestic life, the day to day experiences of family. Many of the stories, essays and poems I've read in different classes relate "big events," life-changing moments in the writer's life.

I've read about addiction, abortions, and adultery. Instead of these big topics, I wanted to explore the smaller moments in life.

In *Baptism* and *Letting Go*, I write about the realization that my daughters will constantly be leaving and I will constantly be letting go. I do this through both the large event of my oldest having surgery as a baby and the smaller event of the first day she drove herself to school. I'm sure I'm not the only parent who has stood in a driveway and waved a child away, all the while wondering if she's ready, and knowing that this is just one more step in the road that takes her away from you.

I deliberately chose the moment of driving to school, partially because, for me, it was dramatic, and partially because it is not one of the typical "growing up" moments – leaving for Kindergarten, leaving for college, moving out. I like the idea of a small moment being charged with significance.

In *Surprises* and *Plus Sign*, I explore the idea of the "surprise baby," the unexpected child born to older parents. Growing up in a Catholic neighborhood, I often heard the whispers of mothers as they discussed another in their group being pregnant again. This was often described as an accident. When I found myself in a similar situation, I realized that word is charged with meaning. I consider my daughter a surprise, a happy event, not an accident. In *Surprise*, I celebrate this, while in *Plus Sign*, I acknowledge the very real worry and mixed feelings that accompanied the realization that I was receiving this surprise.

In *Homecoming* and *Tailbone*, I try to show the pain that old memories can still recall. I am often surprised when something from the long-ago past can

still bring up a strong emotion, years later. In *Homecoming*, I try to show how I can acknowledge those feelings, yet also acknowledge that other, stronger emotions have supplanted them. In *Tailbone*, I remember the physical pain I felt as the result of a betrayal.

In *High School* and *Sixteen*, I explore motherhood from two different angles. In *High School*, I write about the pain I feel when my children are in pain. My reaction to the emotional drama that comes with having three daughters still sometimes surprises me. When they are in pain, I hurt also. In *Sixteen*, I explore one of my favorite things about being a mother, just enjoying my children and their individual quirks. I also try to remember, as my beautiful daughter complains about her looks, if I was ever that insecure. Of course I was, and though I try to tell her how special she is, I know she doesn't always believe me; I wouldn't have believed it myself at that age.

In *Cemetery* and *Family Ties*, I write about the most important relationship in my life, that with my husband, and all the relationships that revolve around it. When I married him, I married his family, and these two pieces explore the relationships I developed with his different members of his family.

In the remainder of the non-fiction work, I write about my father, and his death and funeral. My father died between my first and second MFA cluster. As I took the creative non-fiction cluster, I wanted to write about him, but I couldn't manage to write anything coherent. After about nine months, however, I had a strong urge to write about him and his death. I found myself writing poems and

paragraphs frequently. In Elegy, I try to make sense of his death, my family's behavior, and the strangeness of funeral customs.

My fiction is inspired by reality, but I wanted to explore changing details and adding more to situations with fiction.

On Finding an Old Photograph and *The Christmas Tree* are both based on a photograph a friend showed me from a photography contest he was judging. The contest had a category for vintage photos, and he showed me this one, which impressed him as an unusual image. The picture is as I describe, and it is an strange image. I tried to imagine a story behind it or about it.

Angry Poets and *Introduction to Poetry* have their beginning in a car drive and experimentation with satellite radio that my family and I took. However, I veered from reality with what happens next in the story.

Chicken Coop and *Chickens* are based on several people I've met. My husband's family lives in a rural area, and they often laugh at the city people who think life there is idyllic.

As I chose existing works for my thesis and wrote new ones, I realized the most important thing I will take from the MFA program. Instead of a sense of dread at the thought of putting my work out there to be read by anyone, I experienced a sense of happiness at being able to do so. Instead of writing for everyone else, I've learned to write for myself.

Baptism

Cribs are for babies with colds, and fevers, and unexplained, invisible illnesses.

Our baby is in an adult bed.

Surgical cases require it.

She lies in the middle, hospital blue covers crumpled around her.

They tell us where to wait, what phone will ring when it's over.

They wheel her over, give us one more goodbye.

It's routine, they say, but nothing about this is routine.

We stand, helpless, and watch her go through the big silver doors.

She's strong, you say, she'll be all right.

You lean in, whisper again, she's strong, she's strong.

One terrified person comforting another.

But as you hold me, you shudder, and begin to crack.

So I join you in a chorus of hope and desperation.

She's strong, she's strong, she's strong.

Letting Go

We stood in the driveway and watched our 16 year old daughter drive away to school for the first time. It sometimes seems like her life has been a series of us letting her go. Kindergarten, the first overnight at a friend's house, high school, and now driving. She turned 16 over the summer, so she had only had her license for a few weeks, and here we were, again, letting her go.

"What could go wrong?" Steve asked. By now, I'm surprised he still asks me that.

"Obviously, she could get in an accident. She could get stuck in traffic. Why did we send her to a school so far away? Maybe I should have made her drive down one more time with me. Maybe I just should have driven her. Maybe we should have made her find a carpool. She still has to pick up Emily. What if Emily's late? What if she speeds because she's late?"

As he has so often since I've known him, Steve gives me a puzzled look and asks, "How do you live like that? Seriously, sometimes I wonder how you can get through a day."

His theory is that worrying doesn't help. My worrying won't keep her any safer. While I understand his theory, and I know it makes sense, I'm just not there yet, and probably never will be.

"Anyway, this is Marie. She's not exactly a wild child," he says. I have to agree with this. Her biggest problem while learning how to drive was gathering the courage to drive the speed limit. "We just have to let her go," he says.

I remember the first time we had to let her go. She had surgery when she was three weeks old. She had a condition called pyloric stenosis, in which the pylorus muscle, a donut-shaped door between the stomach and the small intestine, won't open. This fun condition affects boys more than girls, and firstborns more than later children. "She's one in a thousand," our surgeon said, with the enthusiasm normally associated with an announcement that you've won a lottery.

It's a routine procedure, but they wanted to make sure her stomach was empty before they did it, so they scheduled the surgery for the next morning and instructed us, and the nurses, not to feed her until then. A nurse informed me that only one of us could stay after visiting hours are over, so we decided I would stay and Steve would head home. This wasn't a good idea. I lasted until about two in the morning, holding her, trying to comfort her, knowing what she wanted, and not giving it to her.

The nurses changed shifts, and the new nurse was more sympathetic. Seeing me rocking away, crying along with Marie, she asked, "Is there anyone you can call to help?" When I replied that the previous nurse had sent my husband home, she just gave a deep sigh, took Marie, and said, "Some people are just crazy. Go call him and tell him you need him back here."

When Steve arrived later, she told me to go lay down in the lounge down the hall, far enough away that I couldn't hear the crying.

The next day, the surgeon came by, explained the procedure again, and they put her on an adult bed to take her down to the operating room. For some

reason, that bed bothered me more than anything else that day. Seeing her little body on that big bed drove home how small and vulnerable she was.

We rode down the elevator, and they let us say one more goodbye. Then we held each other as they wheeled her through the big metal doors into surgery. "She's strong," Steve said, but I could hear the catch in his voice.

Now, sixteen years later, we're letting go again. The only thing she has from that time is a scar. Steve sometimes calls it her "badass scar," since she's about as far from badass as you can get.

She's turned into a perky cheerleader who also throws shotput and discus, a smart student who often has spacy moments, a ravenous carnivore who doesn't want to know which animal the meat came from.

But I see her scar whenever she wears a swimsuit. It's small, a two inch line above her navel, and every time I see it, I remember how tiny she was in that big bed.

Surprises

You were a surprise

Not an accident

Accidents are calls in the night

Unexpected catastrophe

Metal mangled, bodies bleeding

Surprises are good

Unanticipated joy

Birthday parties and presents

A gift I didn't know I needed

Plus Sign

My husband was the first to suggest I take the pregnancy test. About three weeks earlier, I had developed an unusual desire to clean. I usually do what's necessary as far as cleaning, but suddenly, I decided to clean the basement, a task we'd both been putting off. I went through boxes of pre-marriage stuff, sorted through our daughters' old clothes and gave a lot away, and organized the room where we stored Christmas decorations. Steve said he started to wonder when he came home one day to discover that I'd painted the laundry room floor.

And then, as suddenly as the cleaning frenzy started, it stopped, replaced by a sleeping frenzy. I struggled to get out of bed in the morning, and fell asleep in the afternoon. At this point, Steve suggested I take a pregnancy test.

"I can't be pregnant. I'm on the pill," I said.

"Isn't that only like 97 percent effective?" he asked. "Couldn't we be the three percent?"

I don't know whether it was ignorance or denial, but it wasn't until a few days later, when I woke up feeling sick, that I thought he may be on to something, but even then, I resisted the idea. I'd been pregnant twice before, and each time, I got sick early and often. This was more of a slight queasy feeling.

Now, a week later, I was sitting in the bathroom, watching a stick to see if the magic line will appear. It's late fall and it's still dark outside and cold inside. We haven't turned the heat on; we've been wearing sweaters and sleeping under extra quilts. I didn't sleep well because I was cold, and also because I knew I

would take the test first thing in the morning. It's supposed to be more accurate then.

The directions said two minutes, so I start counting, mostly to keep my mind off the result. My bare feet are cold on the green tile floor. I wonder, not for the first time, what the anonymous people who built our house in the fifties were thinking when they picked three different green tiles for one small room, not to mention the green toilet and sink.

The bathroom has a window of glass bricks. They distort the light, so the neighbor's porch light has a halo, a little ring of light around it that changes as you move and look at it through different bricks.

After a few minutes, the unmistakable plus sign appears. Instead of throwing the stick away, I carefully wrap it in tissue and put it in a drawer, a morbid souvenir.

Then it's not just my feet that are cold, but my whole body. I go back to bed and burrow in the covers that have turned cold in my absence. I press as close to Steve as I can, stealing his heat. He's heard me in the bathroom. He puts his arm around me and whispers, "well?"

"Positive," I say. And then the tears come. All I can think is that I'm not ready for this. We have two kids already. This unnamed baby will arrive just before Josie starts Kindergarten and Marie third grade. I've been home with a preschooler for nine years, and the thought of five more is overwhelming. It's like the finish line was in sight, and then someone told me I had to start the race over.

Just a few months earlier, we took a trip to Colorado, and we talked about how nice it was that the girls were old enough that we could enjoy the trip. They never burst into tears for no reason, diapers were far behind us, they ate whatever we ate, no strollers or car seats were required. And now, we were going to start again.

When we first got married, I wanted at least three kids, while Steve thought two would be enough. After two, I agreed with him. And yet, here he is, taking this news in stride, seeming happy, even, while I wonder how we'll do this.

"How did this happen?" I ask.

Steve just laughs. "The usual way, I think."

"You know I'm so damn old, I'm probably high risk now," I say. "I'll have to see a special doctor. Oh God, monthly doctor appointments; I forgot about that."

"You're not that old. You got pregnant without trying; that must mean something."

"Remember when I said I wanted kids close together?" I ask. "This isn't close together."

"You and your sister are five years apart, and you get along great," Steve replies.

"Mexican food is going to make me sick for the next nine months."

"You probably only have seven and half or eight left," he says. "I'll give up Mexican, too."

"What will the girls think?"

"They'll be happy and excited, and they'll want to know what we'll name it."

"Where will we put it?" I ask. "We don't have another bedroom."

"We'll find room," he says, and pulls me closer.

Homecoming

Great to see you

It's been years

Yes, I'm married now, three kids

You?

That's great, good to hear

No, I never think of you

Wait

I take that back

I thought of you the other day

My daughter came home in tears

Because of a boy

And I remembered you

I remembered the hurt

But it was a distant pain

And I realized I hurt more for her

Than I ever had for you

Tailbone

The human body has a vestigial tailbone. Does is also contain other vestigial appendages? Are we full of useless parts, floating around inside, wasting precious space? Do we also hold on to vestigial emotion? Can the pain of a long-ago hurt still be felt? Is resentment just vestigial anger or jealousy?

I recently got together with my closest friends, women I've known since college. Talk turned to our shared history, the time when we were young and stupid.

"Remember that guy you dated?" Lisa asked, "the good looking one who hooked up with Anne? What was his name?"

"Darren," I replied.

He was my first serious boyfriend, the first college boy. I fell hard and fast the first time I met him at a friend's party, not realizing that his soulful gaze directed at me (and only me) that night has been directed at countless girls at other parties. His dark blond hair was just a touch too long, his shirts a little too tight. He had the bad boy reputation so popular with college girls. Only later do most of them learn that some bad boys are all tough exterior, with nothing inside.

But I didn't know that yet. All I knew was that he chose me, and he directed that blue-eyed gaze and that flirting at me all night, until he walked me home and asked me out. I remember the first time he kissed me, the realization that I was pressed against a man's body, not one of the skinny adolescent bodies of the high school boys I knew.

It only took a few weeks for me to fall, about the same time it took him to lose interest. Mutual friends planned a float trip, but I had to work that weekend, despite his pleading that I "blow off the job, who cares?" I'm embarrassed to remember now that I considered it, but my inner good girl must have been as strong as his inner bad boy, because I resisted, just like I resisted his pleading in the dark to go just a little further than the night before.

So he went without me and came back dating someone else, a friend of a friend named Anne.

And now, twenty years later, I can joke about it with my friends, but if I really think about it, I can still feel the pain I felt when I found out. When I overheard some other boys describing his and her bare feet sticking out of the tent in the morning, when I saw them together, when he explained what he did, saying, "we've been together almost a month, and you still won't give it up. How long was I supposed to wait?"

I remember begin surprised by the physical pain, the actual feeling in my stomach like I'd been hit. I didn't know that I'd feel it again, when I lost my first job, when my daughter was hospitalized, when my father died.

The tailbone may be unnecessary, a relic no longer needed, but when you break it, it still hurts.

Cathedral

The sun reflects off the green tile dome,

the cross on top reaching toward heaven.

Six arched wooden doors

open to the wealth inside.

Marble, mosaics, glass, gold.

Men wearing red shuffle in,

past the white-haired woman sleeping on the bench.

her possessions in bags piled at her feet.

All I Need

I can pinpoint the exact moment when I started to lose my religion. Not my faith, my religion. I was sitting in a pew in my Catholic church. I had stuck with it through the sex scandals, the priest in our parish who was caught with child pornography on his computer, the priest at a neighboring parish who embezzled money to feed his gambling habit, the general misogyny of it all.

I quit giving money to the larger church when they started giving money to groups that fought gay marriage, but I still attended my local church.

I could weather those storms; old habits really do die hard, especially those that have been passed down from your parents and been a part of your life forever. I had gone to Catholic grade school and high school, worn the white dress for communion, been confirmed, married in the church, and was sending my own kids to Catholic school.

When friends asked, during the pedophilia scandal, how I could keep going, I told them that I didn't always agree with the church, but I got something out of my Sunday visits. I didn't always like the big Catholic Church, but I liked my local church.

I could put up with a lot, but not, I discovered, bad sixties pop songs. I sat in the pew and listened as the priest asked if any of us knew the old song by The Hollies, "The Air that I Breathe?" He then sang a few lines, "sometimes, all I need is the air that I breathe, and to love you."

That's how we should feel about God, he said, all we should need is the air that we breathe and to love him.

Really? Does he know the line in that song, "Making love with you has left me peaceful warm inside," I wondered? Are we making love to God so we can feel peaceful warm inside? Did he even listen to the whole song? We'd already had a few sermons from him that referenced movies. Had we moved from his Netflix Queue to his IPod? And if we had moved to his IPod, what was a guy who couldn't be much older than me doing referencing that song? Did he know anything more recent?

Didn't he have any better ideas? Could he read some religious books? Wasn't there some kind of sermon help for priests? Surely they all run out if ideas sometimes. Someone must have capitalized on this with some sort of "sermons for dummies." Maybe I could anonymously give something to him.

After church, my husband asked what I thought of that sermon. I think if we get more sixties songs, I'm going somewhere else, I said.

Two weeks later, another Sunday. We sat down for the sermon as the priest stood up at the pulpit.

"Does anyone here remember that old Debby Boone song, "You Light up My Life?"

As my husband shook with laughter, I bowed my head and prayed. Dear God, if that's the best you can do for a messenger, I'm out.

High School

She came home crying.

A boy broke her heart.

No one tells you when they're young

That your heart will break a little too.

Each time they're disappointed,

Didn't make the team,

Didn't get the part,

Didn't pass the test.

Each time a friend betrays them

Or a boy breaks their heart.

Sixteen

"None of these pants fit because my body is so weird."

"Your body is not weird."

"Yes, it is. Look, my waist is smaller than my hips."

She looks at me, five feet ten inches of 16 year old, with a body most women would envy. Brown eyes meet mine from under the mass of brown hair she calls her "Marie mane."

She's proud of her height and walks tall, not with the hunched shoulders that tall girls sometimes have. Her only body worry, other than her too-small waist, is her thighs. They're very muscular, but she wishes they were even stronger. They're partially the result of genetics and partially the result of the two sports she's chosen in high school: cheerleading and throwing shot-put and discus. It's a combination that often surprises people, but she never understands why.

"I like to throw things. Shot, discus, other girls, it's all the same, really."

We're in the grocery store. I've picked her up from school and she's sporting her usual school look. Plaid uniform skirt, old track shoes, mismatched socks, sweatshirt from the latest dance, hair pulled into a ponytail with a wide fabric headband to catch the strays.

She's explained to me that she thinks one of the best things about her all girl high school is the fact that she doesn't need to have clean hair, wear makeup, or shave her legs.

We're looking at plastic spoons. "I think these are cheaper," I say as I grab a box.

"Mom, those are fifty cents a spoon."

"No, they're not," I reply. "One hundred for five dollars."

"Mom," she says, with a small, but still noticeable, roll of her eyes. "Five dollars divided by one hundred equals fifty cents a spoon," she says with all the assurance of a teenage honor student who knows that math is not my strong suit.

She loves to eat. Each year, she is amazed all over again when she loses weight during track season. "I don't know if it's the exercise, or the fact that I can't eat after school," she says.

She leaves a trail of wrappers all over the house, from Kraft singles (her favorite), string cheese, candy, chips. She'll try anything, but will draw the line when she's had enough.

"Are you sure you don't want the last piece of pizza?" I ask.

"It looks so good, but I can't," she says.

"Had enough?"

"Every time I feel full and I shove more food in because it looks good, it never ends well. I try to remember that."

Cemetery

If you drive

Past farms

With broken down tractors rotting in the fields

Past leaning down houses

With ragged couches on the porch

Past mobile homes

With scraggly dogs tied up out front

Past the low water bridge

With the water flowing over the road

Past old mine entrances

With rusty padlocks on chain link fences

Eventually

You will see

Only green hills, dotted with trees

Clear streams flowing swiftly

Lazy cows lying in the shade

And a small cemetery

With a white fence

You may want to stay

Keep moving

Only family gets in

Family Ties

"Now that the ground's thawed, they're ready to go through with Grandpa's funeral," my husband said after his weekly phone call with his parents. "They want to do it next Saturday – lunch at Grandma's, and then out to the cemetery."

"OK," I said. "Are they having a minister or anyone? Your Grandpa didn't go to church."

"No, no minister," Steve replied. "This is kind of the unusual part. They want me to handle the graveside service."

"Have you gotten ordained when I wasn't looking? You're a computer guy, not a minister."

"You know Grandpa was never one for church, and they don't need anyone to dig the grave, so they all talked about it, and decided this was the way to go," Steve replied. "I'm the oldest grandkid, so I'm the one."

"A do-it-yourself funeral," I said.

I met Steve in college. One of the first things I learned at Mizzou was just how sheltered my life had been. I grew up in a large Catholic family in a neighborhood of large Catholic families. After Catholic grade school, I went to an all-girl Catholic high school. My mother had a set of rules we lived by. We ate dinner every night at six o'clock, and you better be home for it. Never wear white after Labor Day, never wear a skirt without hose, never wear pants to a wedding or funeral, plastic utensils and paper plates are tacky, don't question authority,

nuns and priests are always right, don't date anyone you can't picture yourself marrying, so don't date anyone who's not Catholic.

In high school, I started to notice the arbitrary nature of some of these rules, and began suspecting she made up some of them as she needed to. Once, when I wanted to go to a concert downtown, it took an intervention from my dad to sway her from her conviction that a group of girls did not go alone to a concert.

But it wasn't until much later, after I was married, that I realized that I had become more like her than I wanted to. I was often guilty of measuring people by a set of standards as rigid as her rules.

If you grow up in a large family, you get used to the noise. Dinner was always loud, with lively discussions on every topic you can imagine – politics, religion, music. I shared a room with my sister from the time I was born until she went away to college when I was 16. My brothers were in the next room, my other sister next to them. All of us shared one bathroom. I remember craving quiet. As a teenager, I used to climb into our old tree house so I could read in peace.

At college, I experienced a freedom I never had before. No one cared what I wore, I was encouraged to question what I learned, and no one knew if I went to church or not. I dated a series of boys I couldn't imagine spending more than a few hours with, much less marrying.

My sister used to say I looked like a lollipop, with a skinny body topped with the big hair that was fashionable then. My friends and I would spend hours with mousse, gel, sprays and curling irons to achieve giant hair, into which we put

giant bows. We wore lace belts and socks in an effort to look like Madonna. I was disappointed when I got my job in the dorm cafeteria because I had to wear my hair in a net under a big black and gold baseball hat. We also wore black and gold aprons that covered us from shoulder to knee.

It was at this job that I first noticed Steve. I was usually assigned the job of keeping the salad bar in the dining room stocked. I noticed the big guy who got a salad every day. He seemed huge to me. He was tall, well over six feet, and had the body of a football player. He also had an incredibly deep voice with the barest hint of a drawl, almost black hair, and deep brown eyes.

I can't say it was love at first sight, but it was fascination at first sight. He was unlike the boys I had been dating. He didn't get to know my friends and figure out if I was seeing anyone; he just asked me out. I was a junior, still not sure what I wanted to do, and hopping majors at every semester. At a time when I was floundering, he seemed to know exactly what he wanted and how to get there.

Our first date was the first time I had ever been in a pick-up, a fact which fascinated him. "You don't know anyone with a truck?" he asked. "How do you haul stuff? How did you move up here?"

"My dad rented a van," I replied. "How much stuff do you need to haul?"

"Not a lot, but when you need to, it's nice to have a truck."

I had told him, before our date, that I would have to be home early to study, the story my friends and I usually told so we had a ready-made excuse to end things early. After a few hours, I realized I didn't need my excuse. We saw a movie and then walked all over campus. We talked, but not always. Steve never

felt the need to fill the silence. At a time when most guys I dated tried to be the life of the party, I was impressed by his quiet assurance.

My first few meetings with Steve's parents didn't go as well as our first date. All of my mother's rules seemed to come back to me as we drove up the long drive to their house. There were cows. And though Steve explained that the area they were in was not the yard, but the front field, all I could see were cows in the yard and a gravel drive littered with manure.

The first time Steve came to my parent's house, my married brothers and sisters came for dinner. Since I'm on the younger end of my family, my older brothers and sisters sometimes act like extra parents. But while I knew they were curious, I also knew they meant well. We all sat around the dining room table for hours after dinner, which was normal for us.

Sitting down to eat that first time with just Steve, his parents, and his sister was very different. There was no lingering over coffee or dessert. We sat, we ate, we got up. I wasn't used to a quiet dinner and was convinced they didn't like me. All my defense instincts said that I shouldn't care what these people thought. It was easier to deal with them if I thought of them as backward, small town people whose opinion wasn't important.

I was also surprised how close his family lived to one another. His parents lived on several acres, with his aunt and uncle in a house across the field, and his grandparents were planning to build a house across the road. The land had all been in the family for generations.

At the first big dinner with his cousins and aunts and uncles, not only did we eat with plastic utensils off of paper plates, but his mom brought a trash can right into the dining room so we could throw them away.

It was also the first time I met his cousins, the ones who grew up across the field. There were five, and each one was almost as big as Steve.

From the first time we've met, his cousins have referred to me as the "city girl," and enjoy finding out about the gaps in my knowledge. I found myself determined to prove them wrong about me. I've eaten paw-paws, persimmons, and rabbit, all after they discovered I'd never had them. I've gone mushroom hunting, where I found more snakes than mushrooms, but I drew the line at gigging frogs, after they told me I should wear old clothes because "it could get pretty bloody."

His cousins are what Steve calls "good old boys." They're country guys who are proud of their life, and love hunting, fishing, big trucks, and fireworks. One is also a teacher, one a mailman, and two are registered nurses who work at the State Mental Health hospital in town.

I met Steve's Grandpa after we had been dating for about a year. They had just moved back to Farmington after spending the first several years of their retirement in the West.

The first thing I noticed about Grandpa was his hands. Almost every finger showed the sign of a long-ago injury, the result of three decades spent working in lead mines. Two were missing the tips, and several had strange bends,

like they had been broken, but not set correctly, which was exactly what happened. He told me once that if he hurt himself at work, he just asked a co-worker to fix it as best he could, so he wouldn't have to have his pay docked for sick time.

From the first meeting, I liked Steve's grandparents. While his parents, and especially his mom, didn't seem to know what to think of me, his grandparents were welcoming from the start. His mother sometimes acted like my being Catholic was a strange and unknown thing. His grandparents didn't belong to any church. It didn't matter what religion you were – they didn't trust any of them.

Grandpa had a subtle sense of humor that I appreciated. When we visited, they would send us home with bags and boxes of produce from their garden. They shopped at the discount grocer, where you pull an empty box from the shelves for your purchases instead of using bags. Once, Grandpa handed me tomatoes in a big box that had once held six bottles of vegetable oil.

"You really should cut back on the oil intake," I said.

"Oh, we don't really eat that much," he said, and then noticed I was joking. "Oil is good for you," he said. "Anyway, that took us almost a week to use," he joked back.

After that, whenever they gave us produce, it was always in a different strange box. Grandma complained that he spent all his time at the store searching for boxes for us.

"We've been eating a lot of Mexican," he would say as he handed me a box that once held twelve jars of jalapenos, or "Making a lot of potato salad these day," as he set down a box that once held six gallon jars of mayonnaise. "Draw your own conclusions," as he handed me a box that once held dozens of adult diapers.

I could never have that type of conversation with his parents. I was, on the one hand, trying too hard to impress them, and on the other hand, judging them and finding them lacking.

I thought the area was beautiful, but I also couldn't imagine living there. I saw their house, with its outbuildings and cows, and the neighbor's trailers, and the low water bridge that wasn't a bridge at all, but a road through a river that sometimes kept them stranded during high water, as horribly backward. How could you live where rain could keep you stranded? Who would want to live in a place where there were run-down trailers just down the road?

In my family, college was expected. When I met Steve, two of my older sisters were working on their graduate degrees. Steve's Dad never finished college, and his mom went to junior college for an Associate's degree. After years of teaching, she went back for a Bachelor's degree at night school. He was the first of his cousins to go away to school.

Steve's mom taught in the Farmington public schools, and I knew she thought my private schools were a waste of money. The first time our parents met was at Steve's graduation, when we shared an awkward meal. We had delayed this meeting until after we were engaged. Now, both sets of parents were probably

wondering what was wrong with the other and why we seemed reluctant to have them meet. In addition to other differences, my parents were closer in age to Steve's grandparents than his parents. I was one of their youngest children, while Steve was the oldest in his family.

Grandma was the surprising savior at that meal. Whether she didn't sense the tension, or just chose to ignore it, she kept up a steady stream of conversation. She couldn't be prouder of "her Stephen," and told my parents how wonderful she thought I was and how nice it would be to me as another granddaughter.

Steve and I moved to Peoria right after we got married because he got a job with Caterpillar, and I was quickly learning that my English degree wasn't going to result in an immediate job. But after we moved, I landed a job as a technical writer, also at Caterpillar, in the building next to his. We liked living in Peoria, but after our first daughter was born, we both wanted to be closer to home.

"Do you want to live in Farmington?" I asked one night.

"I'd like to, but what would we do there?" he said. "Unless you work at the hospital or teach, the prospects are pretty dim."

So we ended up in St. Louis, with frequent visits. Steve still refers to Farmington as "God's country," and could easily live there, although it's changed since he grew up. More and more chain restaurants and stores have moved in. The Wal-Mart Supercenter is a lot different than the small store that was there when he was younger.

When we started dating, the only option for food after 9 o'clock was the Plank Road Inn, a little diner outside of town that was open all night. It was a tradition for his friends to end their nights out with "B and G at the PRI," biscuits and gravy at the Plank Road Inn. Now there's an array of fast food restaurants, and the PRI is closed.

The first few years of our marriage, we visited as frequently as we could, but Peoria to Farmington was a four hour drive. My favorite part of those early visits was always the time we spent with Grandma and Grandpa. Their house was small and there were usually a few of Steve's younger cousins there. The noise and the crowd were familiar to me.

Steve was used to Grandma constantly offering food and fussing over him, but it was a new experience for me. Grandpa and I had discovered a shared interest in history, and he would usually have a new book for me to borrow or article to read.

Each visit also helped break down my misconceptions about Steve's parents. I originally interpreted Mom's silence as disapproval or dislike. I began to see that she was just naturally quiet, a trait she shares with Steve. Dad, I discovered, has the same quiet sense of humor as Grandpa. There is a church in the area that puts funny sayings on the sign out front. If Dad thought I would like one, he would pull over and write it down so he could show me later.

"Grandparents are the only people you can really brag about your kid to," a friend told me once. After I had Marie, my first daughter, I understood what she meant.

From the first, Steve's parents showered Marie with love. They were openly affectionate with her in a way they never were with me, or even with Steve. Suddenly, Mom and I always had something to talk about. She wanted to know all the mundane details about Marie: what happened at the last doctor visit, what new thing she learned, how much she weighed, what she ate, everything.

Grandpa died in February after a long illness that started with a tick bite. He loved to walk in the woods and would spend hours outside. Their property adjoined a state park, so he had an almost unlimited walking area.

Once he got Lyme disease, he was sick for a while and then got better, but he never seemed to fully recover his old strength. He seemed to get weaker and weaker, and every cold took more out of him. It was a gradual decline, from using a cane to using a wheelchair, to spending most of his time in bed. By this time, we had added another daughter, Josie. It saddened me to realize that in her memories of Grandpa, he would always be sick.

He had a very strong desire to stay out of a nursing home. Grandma said he had seen too many people go into one and be miserable. Even when Grandpa was in a hospital bed in his room, he was still happy to be home. "At least I'm not in a nursing home," he'd say.

He also had a frugality that many Great Depression survivors shared. When they moved back to Farmington after ten years of living in Idaho, he decided to build a house, using the foundation of his parents' house. The house had burned down several years earlier, but the foundation remained, along with perennial flowers that still came up near the door. Each spring, yellow daffodils lined a non-existent path from the street to where the door used to be.

This frugality extended to his plans for his death and funeral. He didn't see any need to pay a funeral director more than the minimum amount required. After researching his options, he decided that cremation was the way to go. This caused another disagreement with Grandma, but one they agreed to disagree about. He would be cremated, and his ashes buried, and she would be buried beside him.

Grandma's family had a family cemetery. There are probably hundreds of them in Missouri, small plots of forty or fifty graves. They dot the landscape in Southeast Missouri. Her great-grandparents started their family plot in an area about 30 miles from Farmington, over winding country roads. I knew this because she had Steve and I drive her there once when we visited. She liked to keep an eye on it, she said. Since it had started so long ago, no family lived nearby anymore. She was the closest.

At Grandma's house before the funeral, we added our peach pie to the food on the table, and everyone filled a plate. One thing I've always loved about Steve's family is the food. We had deviled eggs, ham, coleslaw, potato salad, Tennessee green beans, baked beans, pies, cakes, and pitchers of sweet tea.

I stopped to talk to Paul and Joann. Joann is my father-in-law's cousin, but she grew up with him after her mother died and her father ran off. I've always liked her and Paul. They don't live in Farmington, either, so we're both outsiders, in a way. When I first started coming to these family dinners, Paul always made a point to talk to me. He also warned me about the cousins. "You've got to talk back to them; don't let them scare you."

We took our plates outside and sat in the shade with several of Steve's cousins.

"Hey, City Girl, what's the strangest tattoo you've ever seen?" Jason, the oldest cousin, asked.

"Don't answer," Steve said, but I couldn't resist.

"Um, I don't know. I don't think I've seen too many strange ones," I said. "Why?"

"We're trying to figure out the weirdest one ever," Justin, Jason's brother, said. "We think Jason's seen the strangest. Want to know what it was?"

"Sure," I said.

"When I was in jail, I saw a guy had flies tattooed on his ass," Jason said. "Looked like they was flying out his ass. Ever seen something like that?"

"No," I said, "but, honestly, I haven't seen too many naked asses – not as many as Jason, I guess."

"She's right, Jason," they said. "What were you looking doing looking at some dude's ass anyway?"

I asked Steve later when Jason was in prison. "I don't know, a while ago. It was when he and his wife had a fight and she broke his arm," he said.

"Why was he in jail if she broke his arm?"

"I don't know all the details," Steve replied. "Sometimes, with my family, it's better not to know."

After the funeral lunch, we piled into cars and trucks and headed out to the cemetery. We passed through beautiful countryside, rolling hills just turning green for spring. Big houses on several acres would be next to two trailers close by the road. Finally, we turned off the state road, and onto a series of ever smaller roads, until we reached the gravel drive to the cemetery. We all got out and waited for Steve's dad to unlock the gate.

Everyone looked around for a few minutes. Joann showed me the marker for her and Paul's gravesite – a small circle of concrete with their names on it. "We'll get nicer when the time comes, of course," she said.

After a few minutes, Steve called everyone together. He talked about Grandpa, and shared some memories, then asked everyone else to do the same. I talked about the time when he had tied an inner tube to a tractor and pulled me and Steve around his back field in the snow. I liked being able to bounce all over, while knowing that I was safely tied to Grandpa.

While other people were talking, I looked back to see our daughter Josie dancing like all little girls do when they're wearing a dress. She was spinning in

circles, watching her dress fly up around her. I went over and grabbed her hand. "Not now," I said.

When the memories were over, Steve's dad lowered the box of ashes in the ground, and everyone took turns throwing in a handful of dirt. When we were done, Paul came up to me.

"I saw her dancing," he said. "You know where she was?"

As I looked back, I saw she had been dancing on his and Joann's plot. "Oh no," I said.

"No, I think it's great," he said. "How often can you dance on your grave?" He held out one hand to me and one to Josie and spun us both around, and we danced on his grave in the late afternoon sun.

"It's beautiful here," I said. Paul nodded. "I'll be happy here," he said. Steve came over then.

"What are you doing over here?" he asked.

"We're dancing on Paul's grave," I said, while Paul continued to spin Josie.

I looked up at Steve, both of us still red-eyed from the funeral. "You did a great job," I said, then I looked around at the graves of his long-ago relatives, surrounded by a white picket fence. It really is a pretty place. "I could be happy here," I said.

Insomnia

The night is long. The dark is deep.

I lay staring, waiting for the sun.

Why can't I rest? I need my sleep.

The room is warm, with cool clean sheets.

It doesn't matter. My mind runs.

The night is long. The dark is deep.

Get out of bed, quietly creep,

Find something to do that needs to be done.

Don't wake the kids. They need their sleep.

My favorite chair; take a seat.

Start a book, a boring one.

The book is long. The night is deep.

Quit the book, decide to clean.

Catch up on work, answer e- mail, every one.

Do it now, then get my sleep.

A chance to finish all I've begun.

Check off tasks, one by one.

The night is long, the night is deep

I'm working now; then I'll sleep.

Number Games

My husband talked me into getting a smart phone. I wasn't sure I would use it that much, but he convinced me that I would. I knew the navigation feature would be useful, and I was willing to try switching my little paper planner and phone book to my phone. He also pointed out my complaint that I often spent time at sporting events and schools, waiting for one of our daughters. I could search the web, play games, catch up on email, all from my phone.

Within weeks, I was hooked. We used Google Calendar for all the family's activities. I could call from work to make doctor's appointments; I always had my calendar with me. My daughter started track, and I used the navigation program to find the best way to all the different high schools where she had meets.

I also discovered and downloaded several games for my youngest daughter to play when she was bored, at yet another game or practice for one of her sisters.

I liked some of the games, too. I found Whack – a – Mole strangely compelling, and I played hangman with my daughter. I downloaded Sudoku, but didn't play it too often, although I sometimes did the version in the paper.

Then, about a year after I got my phone, I got a call on it that changed everything. My Dad, who hadn't been doing too well since his latest heart attack, had another attack and died. It was, as my brother described it, the call we'd been both dreading and expecting for a while. In fact, my brothers and sisters had

talked about what would happen if my Dad was hospitalized for a long time. The long hospital stays were hard on my Mom.

So while I expected a call, I expected it to go like the previous ones had. He had a heart attack, or a stroke, and he was at the hospital. I didn't expect my Mom to tell me that he had a heart attack and was dead before she could call 911.

The next few days, the phone was my lifeline. I called my friends, my job, and my cousins to let them know. Later, as I sat in the funeral home with my Mom and sisters planning the service, my phone came to the rescue when we realized we were one pall bearer short.

At night, when I couldn't sleep, I played endless games of Sudoku. I would lie in bed and play until I fell asleep with the phone in my hand. I knew my husband found this new obsession strange, but he seemed to sense that I needed to do something until I fell asleep. I've always told him that I envy his ability to fall asleep instantly; I always lie awake for a while before I fall asleep. But really, I'd grown to enjoy this time, twenty minutes or so of dark quiet to relive the day or plan for the next day. But now there was too much I didn't want to relive, too much I didn't want to think about.

It wasn't lost on me that Dad loved puzzles. He did the crossword every day, even after a stroke wiped out his short term memory. I never understood how he could remember anything long enough to write the correct clue in the box. He also did the Sudoku puzzle, the scramble, and the CryptoQuip in the paper. Sometimes I thought I was trying to connect to him somehow, but I really think I was avoiding any thought at all.

I always played on the easiest setting, which surprised my husband. But I didn't want a challenge, not then. The easy setting used just enough brain power that I couldn't think about anything else. If I tried a harder lever, I would have to think about what move to make, and when I was thinking, my mind would wander. I didn't want to think, not about anything but which number went in which box.

Waiting Room

Silence is broken by Braham's Lullaby drifting quietly through the waiting room

Signs explain that it plays when a baby is born,

two floors up on maternity.

Intensive care patients can't hear it.

Loudspeakers don't reach beyond the double doors.

But in the waiting room, we listen.

A woman embroidering is the only other person awake

amid the worriers spread on the couches and chairs.

Her family waits like us for good news, bad news, any news.

The woman catches my eye and smiles.

At least someone is happy tonight.

Bodies

The first dead body I saw was my father's

And I remembered a conversation I had with him

Years earlier

An old war movie on TV

on a lazy Saturday afternoon

Combat, fighting, dying

"Did you ever see a dead body?"

"More than one

And it never got easier"

I look down at the hospital bed

It won't get easier, I know

Stones

I went to visit my father's grave.

Crosses filled the field in neat rows,

all the same.

Every time, I have to find it again.

I think I know where I'm going, but it takes two or three tries to find the right row.

Each time I go, I put a shell on the cross; my dad loved the beach.

This time, there is a stone already there.

It can't be an accident; no rock would get there unless placed by human hands.

Must have been one of my brothers or sisters.

Who else would remember him this way?

I should ask them sometime which one of them visits.

I thought I was the only one.

Do they talk to him like I do, tell them about their lives?

I decide not to ask.

I'll let someone else talk.

Elegy

My mother heckled my brother as he delivered the eulogy at our Dad's funeral. She had been putting off getting hearing aids for years, and since she couldn't hear, she talked much louder that she thought she did. What she thought was a quiet comment to my sister, was, in fact, loud enough for the front half of the church to hear.

"You're not going to talk for too long, are you?" she said to my brother over and over in the days before the funeral. She didn't want a eulogy. In fact, she seemed determined to have the most non-personal funeral ever.

"I don't think we need pictures or a video or all that jazz," she said.

"No, Mom, some pictures around the room won't be tacky," we responded. We reminded her of other funerals she had been to that had personal touches.

"Remember Mr. Kennedy's," my sister would say, referring to a neighbor. "They had pictures near the guest book, and it was nice."

So she didn't want a eulogy. I also think she was afraid of what my brother might say, or that, God forbid, he get emotional. Mom doesn't believe in public displays of emotion, even at funerals. I heard for years about the way my aunt and uncle were "carrying on," as she put it, at my grandmother's funeral.

"I do my crying alone," she would say, but I always suspected she didn't cry at all. She is too controlled, too contained, to have a messy emotional breakdown.

So at the funeral, I could see her getting more and more worried as the eulogy went on.

"This is longer than two minutes," she said when my brother was mid-way through. Several people turned, and my sister quickly leaned toward her and said something that quieted her down.

A few minutes later, when I saw her lean toward my sister again, I braced myself for another comment. She didn't disappoint.

"When is he going to shut up?" she asked, again loud enough for most of the congregation to hear. My sister hurriedly tried to shush her before she said more. My brother, at the pulpit, paused for a moment, but to his credit, continued on.

Nothing about a funeral, or any modern American death, is normal, of course. From the moment I got the call from my niece saying that something was wrong, I saw the stranger sides of most members of my family.

My niece called me because she couldn't get my sister, her mother. I answered the phone to hear her sobbing, "Grandma called and she said Grandpa's dying and she called 911 and she tried to call you or Aunt Mary but no one's answering and my mom won't answer and I don't know what to do and they're taking him to the hospital. What should I do?"

"Stay there and keep trying your mom, and I'll go to the hospital," I said.

As I drove there, I told myself that my mom could be dramatic and maybe nothing serious was happening, but in the back of my mind, I knew this was

different. When I got to the hospital, I was sure. I knew when I asked at the emergency room desk that something was very wrong. I'd been in that position before, and usually, the person at the desk takes my name and tells me to take a seat. This time, she looked at me with genuine compassion, got up, and told me she would take me down the hall to see my mother.

When we got to the small waiting room, my mom looked up and said simply, "he's dead." Dad had been having health problems for years – a stroke that resulted in short term memory loss, two heart attacks, bypass surgery. I had seen him a week earlier, and I thought to myself on the drive home that he was looking a little older lately.

I sat down next to my mom, leaned over, and cried.

"Good Lord, will you cry like this for me when I'm gone?" my mother asked.

When the nurse came in and asked if we wanted to see him, I hesitated.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait until someone else gets here?" By this time, I had called both my sisters and my brother.

"Why would I wait?" she said.

My mom has always been closest to my oldest sister, so I thought she might want her there, and also, I didn't really want to go with only her. I wanted someone who would cry to be there.

So in we went, and saw him lying there, with the breathing tube still in his mouth.

"They can't remove it yet. The medical examiner has to come," the nurse explained.

I stood and looked down at my dad, and not my dad. A part of me was sad, and a part of me was aware that he wasn't there, not really. Knowing he was alive an hour ago – Mom said they had just eaten lunch – made it even stranger.

I had seen him in countless hospital beds in the last five years, but it was so different. He looked the same, but the life was truly gone.

As I looked down at him, I remembered once, when I was a teenager, when we were watching an old war movie. Knowing that he had fought in World War II, I asked him if he had ever seen a dead body.

"More than one," he said, which surprised me. He rarely talked about his time in the army, and when he did, it was to tell stories of having all the champagne he wanted in France and eating in pubs in Ireland. He never talked about killing and bodies and fear.

"What was it like?" I asked.

"Not good, and it never got easier," he said.

The next day, I picked up my mom and we met my sisters, Kathy and Mary, at the funeral home to choose all the accessories of death.

We chose the flowers upstairs, and then the funeral director led us to the basement to choose the casket, thank you notes, and guest book. When you are there, in the moment, it's all so strange that you rely on the funeral director to

guide you through. It wasn't until weeks later that I realized we had just spent over two hundred dollars on a package of note cards and a blank book.

Dad always said that he agreed with Johnny Carson, who said he wanted to be put on the curb in a Hefty bag when he died.

"I wonder if they have anything in Hefty green," Kathy said. Mary, meanwhile, found a coffin for herself, white lined with pink satin. "I think I'd look good against the pink."

I was amazed at the variety. There were models of various woods, with different metals for the handles, different color fabrics inside, different finishes.

We finally decided on the basic model, reasoning that it would be covered, first by flowers and then by the flag. We told Mom that none of our relatives would notice, anyway. "Really, Mom, have you ever been to a funeral and thought, 'what a nice casket?'"

The funeral director had left us alone to make our decisions, and now we had to find him. As I put my hand on a doorknob, Mary grabbed me. It wasn't the door to the stairs.

"Never, ever open a strange door in a funeral home basement," she said.

Two days later, I picked up Mom again to take her to the funeral home, this time for the visitation. Once again, it was just the two of us.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait to go in? Everyone should be here any minute."

"If you want to wait, you can, but I'm going in," she said, so I followed her in. Mom was pleased by how Dad looked, but I barely recognized him.

"You would never know he had been sick," she said. I though you would never know anything about him at all. He was a perfectly generic old man.

While we were there, the rest of the family arrived. My daughters and the rest of his grandchildren inched their way toward the casket. One by one, they started to cry, joining their parents.

Mom was the only one who didn't cry. "Look what you kids have done," she told me. "All your kids are crying now, too."

Over the next few hours, a steady stream of people came in. I hadn't seen some of my parents' friends in years, and it was shocking to see them looking so old. I explained over and over who I was – I'm Bob's youngest daughter - introduced my husband and children to numerous people, and occasionally escaped to the break room, where two of my cousins had laid out a spread of food.

If the room with the casket was somber, the break room was like a party. Nieces and nephews, high on the sugary desserts and soda, ran around, while cousins, aunts, uncles, and in-laws caught up with each other.

After several hours, I went into the parlor, what they called the room with the casket, and saw my brother-in-law sitting alone on a couch in the back.

"Hey, Patrick," I said as I sat down.

"Hey, yourself. Can I get you anything?"

"I just want to sit and not talk for a while."

The next day, we met at the funeral home for the last time. The chairs in the parlor were rearranged from the small groupings the day before to rows facing the casket. The funeral director showed my sisters and brother and I to the first row, then directed our spouses behind us. It was the first time in a long while that I didn't have my husband beside me, and it felt strange to have him behind us instead of with us.

We were headed to the church, so there was just a short service at the funeral home, led by the director. Afterward, he had everyone file by the casket for one last look, starting with my mom and siblings. As we stood there, I reached for my brother, and my sisters for each other.

I felt sorry for my mom; she neither gave nor received a hug. She didn't want one.

After everyone else had gone outside, Mary asked her if she was ready.

"I'll be out in a minute," she said. "I just want you all to leave."

After the funeral, and the eulogy, we went to my parents' church for lunch. At this point, I think Mom started realizing that her comments during the eulogy may have been louder than she thought.

She sat next to me and tried to talk about how long my brother spoke. "How did he even know all that?" she asked. My brother had talked about my dad's time in the army, and his early working life. "I don't know why he had to talk about that," she said.

"I thought it was nice, and it wasn't too long," I said.

After lunch, everyone went home, with plans to come by my house later that night. Since I planned on driving Mom home, I didn't drink, but my siblings sure did. Kathy ended the night by hugging me over and over and telling me what a great sister I was, as her husband steered her toward the door. Mary repeated "what a day, a hell of a day," over and over, and Rob, the interrupted eulogist, threw up in my front yard.

After they left, my husband and I were cleaning and I thanked him for helping to take care of my brother.

"I can't believe they were all drunk. I can't remember the last time I saw Kathy like that, if ever, and Rob – gross."

Don't worry, my husband assured me.

"If there was ever a reason to drink, today was it."

The next day, I thought it was over. It was a Saturday, and all I wanted was to read the paper, go to the farmers' market, and have a normal day, with perhaps a long afternoon nap.

But that afternoon, Mom called. The woman who didn't cry had finally broken down, but I couldn't tell if her tears were for my dad or from embarrassment at her outbursts at the funeral.

"Do you think the whole church heard?" she asked.

"No, Mom, I'm sure it was just the first row or so."

I spent close to an hour calming her down. When I got off the phone, my husband asked if I wanted to drive over and see her.

I thought back over the week of vomiting brothers, heckling mothers, caring nurses, giggling sisters, crying kids.

"No," I replied. "I'm done."

Fiction

On Finding an Old Photograph

The grainy image is scratched on the edges, after being hidden away in a box

In an attic, or basement, or secret hiding spot.

She stares defiantly, proudly at the camera, a long cigarette in her hand,

Naked in front of a bed, where a man lounges, fully clothed

A cloud of smoke between them

A Christmas tree on the nightstand

The Christmas Tree

We found the picture in a box of old photos at an estate sale, and even though we bought the box, and searched every picture, we saw him in only one.

My sister Terri and I like to go to estate sales when the weather is nice, but we're not hardcore. There are people who bring their wheeled carts, who greet each other by name, who always go to the same room when the house opens, looking for specific items, maybe World War II memorabilia or Depression glass.

We go mostly to look, and we occasionally buy. We both like to refinish furniture, and we've bought a surprising amount of end tables and chairs that now furnish our homes wearing different disguises, new paint or fabric covering the flaws we can't fix.

Last week we went to a sale in the next town. We thought we would go to a few sales that were listed in the paper that day, then try a new restaurant for lunch.

Our first sale was pretty good. Terri picked up two lampshades, and I found some old fabric that I planned to sew into curtains for my kitchen. The second house started out with more of the same. There was nothing too interesting in the kitchen or living room, so we wondered downstairs. The basement is usually where you can find the cheap stuff and the odds and ends. There's usually a table with Christmas decorations, old kitchen things that the homeowner exiled to the basement years earlier, and things that you can't imagine a reason to keep.

This house also had a box of photographs simply marked "old pictures." We saw, as we looked through the box, photos spanning several decades. Some had a label on the back, but most didn't. Then one picture stopped us both.

It was an old black and white picture of a bedroom. There was a Christmas tree to the left, a small one on a nightstand, and next to it, in the center of the picture, stood a naked woman. Her hair and make-up looked like something from the 1940's or 50's. She held a cigarette in one hand, and looked right at the camera. And although she didn't have any clothes on, there was nothing erotic about her pose. She seemed a little defiant, staring at the camera as if to say "so what?"

Behind her was a bed, and lounging on that bed, covers around his waist, was a man with a half-grin on his face as he looked at her.

It was a picture that begged a million questions. Who was she? Why was she standing like that? Who took the picture? Who puts a Christmas tree in the bedroom? And the most important question to us – What was our Dad doing on that bed?

"That sure as hell isn't Mom," Terri said.

"No, but I'm sure that's Dad. I've seen enough pictures of him when he was younger to recognize him."

"Who is she? I don't know anything about Dad dating before Mom."

"Neither do I," I replied, "but that doesn't mean anything. Remember, he was 30 when he met her. I guess he wasn't celibate until then."

"OK, we can't talk about Dad being celibate."

"Based on that picture, I'm talking about Dad *not* being celibate," I said, just to see her squirm a little. "Anyway, I wonder who she was. He sure looks happy, or maybe content is the right word." And it was true. He didn't have a 'look at me

with a naked girl,' goofy smile, just a satisfied little grin, like he enjoyed her 'screw you' attitude to the camera.

"I'm buying it," Terri immediately said. "We're buying the whole box in case there's more."

We took the box upstairs to the card table set up for payment.

"There's some interesting pictures in there," said the woman who took our money. "A lot of old pictures of churches and parks. The man who lived here collected pictures, I guess, but his kids said they didn't know any of the people in them."

She was right – churches, parks, a zoo, a train station, and our Dad lounging in bed with a naked woman.

As we loaded the box in the car, Terri said, "Mom is going to freak out."

"Oh no, she's not," I said, "because we are *not* going to tell her."

"I think she'd want to see it," Terri said. "I think I would."

"Are you crazy? It obviously happened before Mom met Dad. He looks pretty young, maybe early twenties. Maybe it was when he was in the army. The age would be right."

"Do you think Mom knows?" Terri asked. "That Dad, you know, dated other women before her?"

"I can't imagine why she would think he didn't. Dad was a pretty charming guy, even in his seventies, remember? Women always liked him." I thought for a minute and added, "Why don't we just hold on to it for a while? Think about it before we say anything?"

So now, in an old cardboard box in my basement, sits a photo of my Dad, relaxed and happy with a naked woman who is not my Mom.

Angry Poets

Not all poets are

Love happiness sunshine

Sometimes they are mad

Introduction to Poetry

It's Mother's Day, and after church and brunch (prepared by you and the kids, and delicious, thank you), you ask what I want to do.

"How about we go out for ice cream?" I ask. "I've barely been in the new car."

So we put the kids in the back of the new car and head out. "So, still liking the car?" I ask.

"I haven't had much time to drive, really," you say, "just back and forth to work."

As we drive on, I get out the owner's manual and notice the satellite radio card. "It has satellite radio?"

"Free for the first six months. Then we'll have to decide if we want to keep it."

I read through the card. There's a station for everything. Instead of just country radio, there are five or six different types of county: country classics, new country, country western, early country.

Then I see it – BookRadio. I reach down and enter the station number.

"Fuck! Fuck this shit!" screams the poet from the speakers. I frantically search the card for another station, any station, while you try to remember how to turn it down.

"Mom!" shrieks Violet, our oldest daughter, shocked that I would select a station like that, while the poet continues his rant against whatever it was that made him mad.

Finally, you figure out how to turn the radio off. "Well, that was an interesting choice," you say.

"Well, that wasn't what I expected. I thought it would be an interview with an author or something. Like something on NPR."

"What NPR are you listening to? Because I've never heard anything like that on 'Car Talk'."

"Very funny, Mr. 'I can't turn the radio off'."

"What did that mean?" our youngest daughter, Angel, asks. "What's so funny?" At this point, Violet is laughing so hard she can barely speak.

"You guys were so freaked out, you almost ran us off the road! When I get my license next month, I won't run us off the road messing with the radio. I'll pay attention to my driving."

We continue on to our favorite ice cream shop, where everyone gets cones. As soon as we sit outside, Angel drops the ice cream off the cone, down her shirt, and onto the ground. As I stop her from picking it up, you assure her you'll get her another. As I follow you inside for more napkins, you lean down to whisper in my ear.

"Fuck. Fuck this shit," you whisper with a laugh.

We continue home. When we open the door, we see the trash can knocked over on the kitchen floor, and a flash of orange tail as the cat runs for cover.

"Maybe he smelled the breakfast leftovers," you say as you bend over and begin putting the trash back in the can.

"Fuck. Fuck this shit," I mutter as I join you.

Two days later, you're going through the mail, paying bills. "Adding Violet to the car insurance is going to cost more than we thought," you grumble. "Fuck. Fuck this shit."

Four weeks later, I fall into bed beside you. "What a day. I thought I'd never get out of work. I'm dead tired." You lean in and pull me close. "Fuck. Fuck this shit," you murmur, half asleep.

Six months later, the basement floods. As we work in ankle-deep water, putting everything on higher ground, all I can think is, "Fuck. Fuck this shit."

A year goes by, and the new car isn't new anymore, which is good, because Violet backs it into the garage door and totals it.

"I'll miss it," you say as they tow it away. "Fuck. Fuck this shit."

Chicken Coop

When you reach inside

Take what they've made in the night

They peck and it bleeds

Chickens

When Ellen wanted to kill the chickens, she knew it was time to move. Their experiment in country living was over.

She and Brian had such high hopes two years earlier. He found a job at the school in Fredericktown. He would teach history, she would find something, and anyway it didn't matter if she didn't find something right away, because the housing prices were crazy low and they could finally get a little place with a few acres and plant a huge garden and get chickens, and maybe goats, or sheep, they weren't sure, since they were both raised in the suburbs and had no idea what animals they could raise.

Ellen had wanted an old farmhouse ever since she fell in love with "The Bridges of Madison County," several years earlier.

"I want a house like Francesca, an old farmhouse with a big kitchen."

Brian would tease her. "You know Clint Eastwood isn't going to arrive in a pick-up and sweep you off your feet, don't you?" he'd ask.

"No, but maybe you could get a truck and wear a few cameras around your neck," she laughed.

Their friends in the city thought they were crazy.

But after everyone left, they lay in bed talking.

"I think they're jealous," Ellen said. "They wish they could come with us."

"Or they really do think we're crazy."

It started out well, but after two months without finding a job, Ellen started to worry. After six months, she was ready to give up.

"Maybe we could get some chickens, sell the eggs for money," Brian said. "After all, you aren't doing anything else all day."

No, I'm not, she thought. She started to forget the shared dream. In her mind, the idea to move was his. She missed the mall, lunch with friends, wine bars, baseball games.

"We can do all that on the weekend," he said, but he was always busy at the school, taking on every extra project offered.

"We need the money."

She threw herself into the chicken project. She visited the Farm and Home and bought a book that told her how easy this would be. She would be up to her knees in eggs in no time, the book assured her. First, she would need a coop, so she went back to the Farm and Home and bought the build-your-own-coop kit. The nice older man working, who looked like he know his way around a chicken coop, stopped her from buying three.

"Just start with one, then you can buy the lumber and wire and use the plans to make another."

Brian started coaching track, and she started building chicken coops. Every Saturday, while he was on a bus to a track meet in a distant town, she built another coop, until she had six.

He would come home to lumber and wire on the ground.

"Jeez, I'm never here, and when I am, all you can think about is those chickens."

She went back to the Farm and Home for chickens, enough to fill the coops. The book's easy to follow directions had failed to mention the smell. The chickens were like a baby, she thought, without the fun parts. She cleaned poop, fed them, and couldn't leave them alone for the night. She had to make sure they got back in their coops, tucking them in at the end of the day.

She put a sign at the end of the road – Fresh eggs for sale. And she waited. If she was lucky, she sold a dozen a day. So she made egg salad, fried eggs, deviled eggs, omelets, quiche, frittata.

"Could we please have a meal that doesn't involve eggs?" Brian asked.

"Think of the money we're saving."

"Some of the teachers are going on a float trip to celebrate the end of the year, have some fun before summer school," Brian said. "Want to go."

"I can't. I can't leave the chickens overnight."

"Can't you find someone to watch them?"

"Who? I don't know anyone here. You go off every day, you've met people. The longest conversation I've had lately has been with the chicken man at the Farm and Home."

"You can stay, but I need to go. You know I want that assistant football coach job in the fall, and this is my chance to spend time with the coach."

She watched him leave Friday morning, with an overnight back and a tent. She went to her chickens, opened the gates, loaded her car. She drove north and didn't look back to see the chickens follow her down the drive.

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