Trudie

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She stood over me as I lay beside my father's freshly dug grave. I had been telling my dad about what he had missed in the last 3 months, as if the mound of earth and the coffin below did not exist. The cemetery became our old living room, where my dad and I lounged on the carpet and propped ourselves up on sofa pillows, lazily reading the paper, talking and dozing on Sunday afternoons when I came home from college. It must have been a peculiar sight to this old woman, who startled me back to the land of the dead, asking if I were okay.

I sat up quickly, suddenly embarrassed, and looked at her. I felt the salty trail of dried tears on my cheeks and realized that I must have been crying. It was okay to talk to them, she said. Somehow they hear. She introduced herself as Trudie and told me that her husband had died 13 months ago. She visited him every Sunday to catch him up on the week's events. We sat together on the hillside, a couple feet from where they had lowered my father into the ground in June. The site overlooked a small pond because my stepmother thought he would like the ducks, even though she used to yell at him for spending entire afternoons feeding birds and tame squirrels in our backyard.

Trudie told me how her husband had died choking on a piece of food at his favorite restaurant. The friend he had been dining with, a doctor, had not been able to save him, and the paramedics had arrived too late. Five years before, he had suffered a heart attack. In the months afterward, she had lain awake in bed next to him, listening for his rhythmic breath, watching the rise and fall of his chest, ready at any moment to call the paramedics and then begin administering CPR herself. She had gotten certified "just in case." Two of her grown children lived in the area and visited her regularly, but they were busy with their own lives, their own children.

Trudie stopped talking then and waited to hear my story. I didn't say much more than the word *cancer*. The details, though unspoken, were understood. I didn't tell her how I fed him Ben & Jerry's® ice cream in the hospital when he couldn't sit up after they removed the tumor from his brain, and how less than a week later, he defied doctors' orders and traveled 4 hours by car so he could see me graduate from college. I didn't tell her about the endless hiccoughs that wracked his bony frame towards the end because "something" was pressing on his diaphragm. And I didn't tell her how I held his hand as he fought, bloated and jaundiced, for his last breath.

Gold autumn day had become soft purple dusk, and

both of us said that we needed to get home. Trudie gave me one of her husband's business cards, explaining that she still worked at his law office a couple days a week. She told me to call her if I ever needed to talk. Then she took my hand and squeezed it. I squeezed back, and we parted ways.

I didn't see Trudie again until the spring. I had come to the cemetery with my stepmother to select a headstone for my father's grave, which had now flattened out considerably. As I stared down at the patches of grass growing over my dad, I remembered the burial itself, how I had watched family members and friends take up the shovel and heave dirt on top of the casket, on top of my father. And how I had not been able to bring myself to participate. When it was over, I fell into my mother's arms, and we held each other until everyone had dispersed.

It was the first time since the funeral that my stepmother and I had been at the cemetery together. It was sort of an unspoken agreement we had, because we both wanted to spend time alone with him. But this visit was different—we were on a mission. The two of us roamed through the graveyard, as if we were in a large outdoor furniture showroom, studying the different styles of headstones, picking out the ones we liked and didn't like. That's when we ran into Trudie during her weekly visit, and she immediately empathized when we explained what we were doing. She showed us her husband's double stone. It seemed kind of lopsided, with the right side still blank. Trudie and I exchanged phone numbers again, and she told me to call her so we could meet at the cemetery one day and then maybe have brunch. Definitely, I agreed, we would get together soon. I remember thinking how tired she looked, how much she had seemed to age in just a few months. I decided it must be the unseasonably warm weather, the heat that made her appear so haggard.

Months later, I found Trudie's phone number crumpled up in my pants' pocket. It had been a little over a year since my father had died, and my visits to the cemetery had become less frequent. I had since returned to school and was consumed by my new coursework and surroundings. On occasion, though, I'd catch myself making a mental note to tell him about an article I had read or a person I had met. Once I almost approached a man in the grocery store who, from behind, had a similar build and wore the same kind of hat as my father. Sometimes he would appear to me so clearly in a dream, that in the morning I was half-convinced he was still alive. But always, the realness and finality of his death would return, sometimes with a vengeance so strong that I felt as if the wind had just been knocked out of me.

It was just after such an episode that I found Trudie's phone number. I wondered if something similar had ever

happened to her, and I wondered how she was doing. I called the number on the card and got a recording with a voice that sounded sort of like her but much younger. I didn't feel much like leaving a message anyway, so I went to the cemetery that Sunday, the day of the week that Trudie always visited.

I found her there, beside her husband.

Where there had been solid ground, there was now freshly turned earth. Where there had been no words on the stone, there was now an epitaph. I knelt beside her grave and whispered to her, because I knew that somehow, she could hear me.

REFLECTIONS

Some Pompeian Artifact

I. (Implosion)

I saw your face today.
That's when you became a you:
mother, human, creature of God.

Your deep,
your silent
eyes filled me
with terror and humility
drawing me into the wake
of journey's end.

The calm and still of your face:
penult of an implosion.
I wanted to hide, but where?

II. Ripple

Peeling away your scalp
cranium appeared like some Pompeian artifact:
yellow, exhumed, released
from the gag of finality.

I wanted to turn to Hamlet,
but how easy he had it!
A skull, a name, and
fond remembrances
to clothe the awkwardness
that came from awareness.

But you, your brain,
my hand reaching into
the three-pound universe:
a museum piece in obsolescence
the Pacific in its vastness
quivering in my hand, quivering;
and the waves gently rippling
through
the history of being.

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