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# Okay to Die

## Matthew Vollmer

"I thought I wouldn't be able to wake her up," my father said of my sleeping mother who'd been suffering recently from Cheyne-Stokes respiration, an irregular pattern of breathing often exhibited by people who don't have much longer to live. For the second time in two weeks, I had completed the five-hour drive from Virginia to my parents' house, which sits on a hill above two streams, at the bottom of a mountain; I had come, as had my sister, with the purpose of informing the woman from whose body we had emerged that

it would be okay, once her time came, for her to die. *Mom*, I imagined myself saying, *it's okay to die*. I could, as it turned out, say this easily in my mind. I'd said it at least 100 times since my father and sister had agreed we should gather around her and say it, and I believed it would be easy to say, once the time came, and it was easy for me to believe I could do so because I'd been making up the world and the ways in which I figured it should work in my mind for as long as I could remember. But when it came down to it, I couldn't say what I'd practiced in my head, partly because my aunt and uncle were there, with my mother, in the living room, and partly because I was glad for the delay that this caused, since it created the necessary diversion I required to help me forget that I'd returned home because I needed to tell my mother that it was okay, once she'd accepted the fact, assuming she had the wherewithal to do so, to die. My aunt—my father's sister—was explaining to everyone how she'd recently been in the operating room, just outside a curtain made of paper, during her daughter's recent C-section; doctors had been forced to carefully pry out—in a way they were not accustomed—the baby, who, at twenty-three weeks and weighing a little more than a pound, was quite fragile, and would have to live in the hospital for the next three months. This baby, according to my aunt, looked Asian. According to my uncle, who'd served for nine years as the president of the global Seventh-day Adventist church, the baby resembled a spider. My uncle, I surmised, even while he was talking, had never taken, over the course of his seventy years, a sip of alcohol. Spent a single afternoon at a cinema. Attended—even for research purposes—a rock show. Played a hand of poker. Browsed a *Playboy* magazine. I couldn't help but recall, a year before, how this same aunt and uncle had briefly stopped on their way to somewhere else to take a tour of the new house into which my family had moved, back when they described, with a certain amount of admiration, or so it seemed, the details concerning their two sons-in-law, both of whom were both Adventist pastors, and had recently discovered the treasures granted to those who are willing to dive into dumpsters that live behind grocery stores. "They can get whole bags of apples, unopened, just a little bruised," my aunt had said. "Bags of perfectly good lettuce. Strawberries. You wouldn't believe the amount of stuff people throw out. And it's just there for the taking." I had no

reason not to believe her. Now, after a ding sounded, she pulled out her phone and covered her mouth with her hands. The baby, the same one she'd been talking about, had just opened his eyes for the very first time, and her daughter had sent a picture to prove it.

"See if she knows who you are," my father said, nodding towards my mother, who was sitting in a living room chair. A blanket was spread over her body. I approached and took her hand. She seemed sort of like she was looking at me, and sort of not. She frowned. And then she slid her hand from mine.

Because I figured my father would want to know, I told him about my friend's thirteen-year-old daughter, who, in the last 24 hours, had been placed on suicide watch. I told him how my friend had followed the ambulance to the hospital, and had watched, during the thirty-minute drive, his daughter's face through the back window. My father knows this friend of mine, a colleague who'd accompanied me to my parents' house several months before to help me clean out their garage, which had been overflowing, thanks to my mother's illness and decline and my father's subsequent paralysis regarding duties extraneous to her care, with junk. My friend and I had gotten a little carried away; we'd decided that a lawn mower crusted with filth should be included in our first trip to the landfill, so we took turns sledgehammering it, in order fit it into the back of my father's pickup, an event I filmed with my phone and posted to Instagram. "Actually," my father posted, in a comment soon after I uploaded the movie, "that was the mower I used last night." He concluded the post with an emoji: a sad face whose eyes were welling with tears.

"I wanted to kill myself when I was fifteen," my father said. He couldn't—or

wouldn't—say why. He supposed he was depressed; the only reason he didn't off himself, he said, was because he knew his death would cause pain for the people who loved him. My aunt said that she once knew a girl named Angel who'd tried to commit suicide, and that Angel had made a pact to do it on the same night as a boy she'd claimed to love. Though their initial attempts proved unsuccessful, the boy later blew himself up—with dynamite.

"Dynamite?" I said.

"I think he just went out in the woods and lit the fuse," my uncle added.

"That'd be a quick way to go," my father said.

I noticed then that my uncle—a tall, lean, bald man who looked at least ten if not fifteen years younger than his actual age, was wearing a pair of slippers he'd been given by United Airlines and a polo shirt with the numeral 1844 stitched on the sidearm: a reference, I supposed, to the fact that on October 22 of that particular year, a group of people, many of whom would later help form the Seventh-day Adventist church, sold or gave away all their belongings because they believed that Jesus would return on that date. Ever after, October 22nd, 1844 had been referred to, at least by Adventists, as "The Great Disappointment." I remembered that one of his daughters had told me how she'd once complained to her father about his confoundingly earnest submission to the puritanical demands of his own religious creed, and how my uncle had then admitted that, as a fourteen-year-old boy, on a trip with his parents to the seaside, he'd once bought and secretly worn a shark's tooth necklace, which he knew to be in direct violation of the revelation of his church's 19th century prophetess, who'd warned believers that they should not adorn themselves with jewelry.

My mother made noises, as if she were attempting to speak. But nothing resembling actual language came out. Once upon a time, she'd talked a mile a minute. Now, listening to her was like tuning in to a radio station whose signal made it through only ten percent of the time. Static, a garbled

transmission, occasionally a single phrase bursting clear through the murk.

"Kids have it so hard these days," my aunt said. She supposed that, in the 1800s, children didn't think of suicide as much.

"They didn't have time!" my uncle said brightly. "They were doing so many chores!"

I told everyone how my friend's daughter had "come out" as gay the year before, not because she actually considered herself gay, but because coming out had served as an act of empathy; she hadn't wanted a person she loved dearly and who'd recently come out for real to feel like she was alone.

"Kids that age," my aunt said, "they don't know. They just don't." She said that her own daughter, who'd once served as a schoolteacher, had a student who'd once confided in her; the girl had wondered if noting that another girl was pretty meant that she was a lesbian, and my cousin had assured her that she absolutely was not. How my cousin knew this, I can't say, and I did not ask my aunt whether, back when she was a teenager, she had known she was straight. Instead, I pulled my phone from my pocket and checked a news app. The Amazon was on fire. The President had floated the idea of nuking a hurricane.

My aunt remembered that the cigarette-looking burns on the quilt hanging on the wall above my mother's piano—which my father just had just paid someone to finally tune—had been caused by a little girl from our church twenty years ago, who'd been lighting, like an impetuous delinquent, Kleenexes with matches; the resulting blaze had been extinguished once the fire department arrived, but the firemen were still wary of coming into the house, as they knew my father as a man who, from time to time, kept the copperheads he found in and around the yard for pets, and because they didn't know that my father kept them in terrarium in the back porch they wanted to know, before they entered, where the snakes were.

"As if they were just loose in the house," my father said.

Perhaps because of all this talk of suicide, my father was reminded of the story of a twelve-year-old from nearby Robbinsville who, twenty-three years before, with the help of two fifteen-year-old boys, had stolen a car and headed west, stopping at gas stations to steal food and refuel without paying. I asked him what the name of the girl was, and then typed the letters into a search engine. A single story on an ancient Angelfire web site popped up. The page was black with green letters and included the following sentences: "In Robbinsville (population 740) everyone knows everyone else. It is a one traffic light town, all but lost in the mountains. The surrounding area is beautiful, full of hidden natural pleasures, yet to teenagers looking for excitement, Robbinsville is as thrilling as a grave." The threesome had reached Arkansas before a trucker aided, by blocking the road, their capture. Once they realized that their flight had come to its end, the boys took turns shooting themselves in the head with a .22 rifle; the twelve-year-old girl, despite having begged the state trooper to kill her, survived.

"I'm going for a walk," my sister said. I told her I'd join her, but first I needed to use the bathroom. I noted the room's wallpaper, whose border featured the image of an undulating ribbon. My mother, nearly thirty years before, had chosen the pattern. She had chosen and hung the little picture on the bathroom's wall: a Victorian-era print of a mother walking through a glade of trees toward a river, holding the hand of another child who wasn't wearing any clothes. I remembered how, as a child myself, I often wondered about this picture and about the other children—all naked—it depicted: one was running, arms raised in the air, as if in wild celebration; another stood at the edge of the distant lake, as if preparing to enter the water, while another—back turned to the viewer—hunkered at the base of a tree, head down, preoccupied with something at her feet or perhaps simply weeping.

My mother, I acknowledged, would probably never see this picture again. She would never again climb the stairs of her own house. I couldn't help but think that after she died, we should let her body rest wherever she lay, and then shut down the whole place, seal it up like a tomb.

On our walk, my sister told me about a recent patient, a man who'd come in claiming that he had poison ivy on his penis.

"Um," my sister had said, "that's not poison ivy. That's syphilis."

The man, who was wrong, disagreed.

"And then," said my sister, who has been trying to get rid of the eczema on her palms, "I looked up images of syphilis and found a picture of a hand that looked like mine."

After we returned to the house, one of my father's dental assistants arrived with a hymnal; he'd asked her to come to play my mother's piano, perhaps because he figured that music would serve as a palliative for my mother.

"Jackie just got married," my father said, "but she still lives in her house, and her husband still lives in his."

Jackie squinched up her face and said, "Whatever works! Am I right?"

She showed me photos of her daughter's dogs: Yorkie mixes that the daughter had, for some occasion or other, dressed in little nurse outfits.

"What did she do to make them stay like that?" I wondered.

"Threatened them with their lives," Jackie said. She hooted delightedly. Then she sat down at the piano and began to play "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." The hymnal she'd brought, as it turned out, was only to remind her of the songs she might play; she couldn't read a note.

As Jackie was playing, a lawyer and friend of the family who'd once told his wife that he didn't have to give her a Mother's Day present because she was not—as a woman who'd adopted a child rather than given birth to one—a real mother, stopped by the house with this same wife that he'd insulted many years before; shockingly, they were still together. While the lawyer, who wore pink pants and a shirt with a pastel checkerboard pattern, was talking to my uncle about how young people were leaving the church in droves, but that the church itself was flourishing, my father reminded me that the lawyer's sister, who, on the day she'd died, had gotten so drunk she'd led police on a car chase driving down the wrong side of the road. I visited the kitchen, opened a cardboard box, and retrieved a cruller that my sister had brought from a doughnut shop in the town where she lives. I then asked her if our cousin, the one who'd recently had the C-section, had given birth to a dead baby; I thought I'd heard my aunt say so, but couldn't remember having ever heard about our cousin having a stillborn.

"Miscarriage," my sister said. "Fourteen weeks, I think."

"And they'd already given the baby a name?" I said.

"Apparently," my sister replied.

I thought that was weird. My wife and I hadn't named any of our babies who'd died in the womb. I tried to remember if we'd heard each of their heartbeats. I wanted to say that we had. All four.

"Four?" my sister said. She hadn't known there were that many. Or maybe, she said, she'd simply forgotten.



"You know you're very sick," my father said, to my mother, who was sitting in the big living room chair, on a light blue pad that had been spread there in case she happened to wet herself. Except for the lunging engine of the dishwasher, the house was quiet. The day's visitors had returned to their homes, and my aunt and uncle, to give us some time alone with mom, had gone on a walk.

My mother blinked. Her mouth hung agape. Her eyes squinted. My sister and I each held one of her hands.

"And when your father was sick," my father continued, "and you knew it was time for him to go, you told him that it was okay, that he could just go to sleep. Well, we want you to know that when it's your time, you can do that, too, and that we'll be okay. Your children, they're grown and they don't need us like they used to. They love us, though, which is why they want us to know it's okay to go."

My mother didn't much like hearing this—or so it seemed. She pulled her hands away from ours. She frowned.

"Are you upset?" my father said.

My mother widened her eyes. "Yes," she said.

"Do you want to come live with me?" my sister asked, patting her hand.

My mother widened her eyes again, and said, "Yes."

"Do you know that your children love you?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "For pity's sake," she said.

Eventually, not knowing what, exactly, she could be said to perceive or understand, we abandoned the conversation.

"Did that go how you imagined it would?" my father asked.

I said I hadn't imagined anything in particular. The truth was, however, that I couldn't bring myself to say what I'd been planning to: *Mama, it's okay to die.*

My sister had not listened to my mother's heart, despite the fact that she'd said that she would. She hadn't wanted to. She didn't like to listen to people's heartbeats.

"But isn't that, like, your job?" I asked.

It was. But that didn't mean she had to like it. She didn't like to listen to her own husband's heart. And for that reason, she wouldn't lay her head on his chest.

"So like if you listen to his heart," I said, "you're afraid it'll stop?"

"Uh-huh," she replied.

My dad, who was reading something on his phone, wondered aloud if my sister's husband were to die and his heart transplanted into another person's body—would she listen to it then?

"Like in those pictures you see?" my sister asked.

"What pictures," I said.

"You know," she said. "Those pictures of people, a mother, let's say, whose child had died and donated their heart to somebody else and then the mother tracks down the person carrying their child's heart, and places their head against their chest and listens."

"You're acting like this is a thing," I said. "Like I should know somebody who's done this."

My sister shrugged.

"That reminds me," my aunt said. "Of this woman in our church whose daughter donated all her parts after she died. Eyes, heart, kidneys. As much as she could."

"That mother had a lot of people to meet," my dad said.

"Man," my sister said. "Organ harvesting team? That's a rough job. Once a body dies, you've got to rip out those organs very quickly."

"Ask Tim," my dad said. Tim had been a friend of the family for years and—once upon a time, according to my father—had worked as a bone harvester. I didn't know what that was. According to my father, bone harvesters visited morgues and harvested cadaver parts.

"Wait," I said. "What?"

Instead of answering me, my father continued to tap the screen of his phone. It wasn't clear whether he was communicating or reading the news.

"A cadaver is a medical word though, right?" my aunt asked.

"There's a body farm outside Knoxville," my sister said.

Was that like the thing where they peeled skin off dead people? My aunt

wanted to know.

"No," my sister said, "that was an exhibit."

"'Bodies,' I believe it was called," I said. "I saw it once."

"The body farm, though," my sister says, "is a place where you can donate your body to forensic science. They study the various ways that you decompose."

It was true. I'd heard a story about it on NPR. Some bodies they placed on the ground. Some were submerged in water. Others they locked in the trunks of cars. If your loved one donated their body to the body farm, you could call, periodically, to check up on its condition. And someone would update you on the extent of its deterioration.

My mother would not be going to the body farm. She would not be donating her organs. Her final resting place, in the family cemetery, had already been mapped out. Her coffin—a hexagonal pine box—was sitting in the garage, between the Toyota Highlander and the Ford truck my father had purchased a few years before, along with a camper that I doubted he'd used more than a handful of times. The bottom of the casket had been filled with cedar chips. My father had tucked a sheet over the pile. I pressed down on the fabric. It gave a little.

"That's gonna be comfortable," I said. I imagined my father wrapping my mother in a quilt. I imagined people—perhaps even me—helping to lift her body and lay her inside. The casket would then be carried, by whatever men were present, out of the house and up the road to the clearing behind the house, where my grandfather and grandmother had been buried. And then it would be lowered into a hole in the ground. Her grave.

"I'm thinking about getting a picture of me," my father said, "to put on the underside of the coffin lid. So your mama can look at me when she's down there. I might get a little solar powered bulb or something to go inside. So that she'll have light to see by." And then he told me how my uncle had said he didn't think he'd want to be buried in a casket. The thought had made him feel claustrophobic. "He wants to be cremated," my father said. "As if there's more room in an urn!"

My mother was asleep on her back, blankets pulled up to her chin. "Look how young she looks," my father said. I looked but I couldn't see what it was that he saw. I told them both goodnight. Smoothed the hair on my mother's head, gave her a kiss. Told her I loved her. "Love you," she said, in the kind of moaning way she had now of speaking what little she did. *It's okay*, I thought. *It's okay*. I retreated to my bedroom. The biggest room in the house, other than the living room. The same room where, twenty years before, I'd blown marijuana smoke out the windows after my parents had gone to sleep. Where I'd poured myself secret shots of Wild Turkey. Where I'd first removed the shirt of my first real girlfriend and where my friends once convinced me to drink an entire bottle of Robitussin. Where, one night when I was nursing a sunburn, my father appeared, wearing only his underwear, and handed me two foil packets that held samples of Vicodin and said, "Don't take both of these at once," which was exactly what I did. Now, the glow-in-the-dark stars in my bedroom weren't, I acknowledged, as bright as they used to be. They were, like actual stars, dying. They couldn't hold their charge very long. I tried to watch—and thereby somehow assess the extent to which their light was dwindling. The thing was, though, I wanted them bright. So I hit the switch by my bed. I covered my face with my hand to shield my closed eyes against the brightness of the overhead lights. Miles away, down in the valley below, a sign in front of the Baptist church, one of the few venues that would hold all the people who would come to pay respects to my mother once she died, asked passersby "Why wish upon a star, when you can pray to the one who created them all?" I

flicked the switch again, making the room dark once more. And then I opened my eyes, to see the universe I had made.

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