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Burials

LESS THAN A MONTH PASSED between my mother and grandmother's deaths: my mother, at 74, died from complications related to Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, while my grandmother, who, after attempting to stand up from her wheelchair, fell, broke bones in her neck, and was taken to a local emergency room, where doctors claimed that, despite the fact that she was nearly 101, her vitals were better than 90% of the other patients there; even so, she died only days later in a hospice unit. I realized, as I typed this, that I didn't really know—not technically, at least—how either one of them had died. Like, I knew that my mother, for instance, had woken up on her last morning with a smile on her face and that when Tina, her hospice caretaker, had asked if she'd had a good night, my mother had responded with an emphatic "Yes!" In a few minutes, though, all the color had drained from her face and Tina led her back to bed, where my father held her hand until she breathed her last. Had her heart simply stopped beating? I texted my sister to see if she remembered. She didn't. Maybe, she said, mom had suffered a stroke. She couldn't imagine that she'd had a heart attack. I wondered if perhaps there'd been foul play. I typed "FOUL PLAY" in all caps. "Stop," my sister texted. I stopped. Still, it was strange to think about. How I didn't really know the official cause of my mother's death. I remembered, then, how "good" other people had said that she'd looked after she died—and she had. How her face retained such a peaceful expression. How my dad had slept in the same bed with her the night after she'd died and how weird I'd thought that had been at first—and then how beautiful. How, when it'd come time for to bury her, my sister and father and I had lifted the sheet where she'd been lying and used it like a hammock to carry her to the wooden coffin one of my father's friends had carved especially for her. How my father had taken the bouquet of flowers gathered by his grandchildren and a piece of foil-covered Dove chocolate and placed them in one of my mother's hands. I hadn't known, at the time, that objects buried with the dead were called "grave goods," or that the Etruscans used to engrave a word that meant "from a tomb" on objects they buried with the dead, to discourage grave robbery. I thought about how Buddhists who died in the Himalayas didn't have to worry about such things, because instead of in-ground interments, the Himalayan dead received so-called "sky burials." The dead were left on the sides of mountains, as a final act of generosity, to feed birds and other animals who might feast on the remains. In some cases, "sky burial masters" cut these

bodies into sections, subsequently pounding different parts into paste using barley flour, tea, and yak's butter, joking and laughing all the while to give the impression that what they were doing was not unusual and to ensure the soul's safe passage to the afterlife; once vultures had stripped the bones of the deceased's flesh, the sky burial masters returned, to grind up the remains for crows. I remembered seeing a depiction of a Cheyenne sky burial in the movie *Windtalker*, where an old warrior's body was wrapped in fur blankets and set atop a scaffold made of timber: such structures might have been initially conceived in lieu of burying during winter, when frozen ground would've discouraged digging, but also to prevent the dead body from being eaten by wolves. According to National Geographic's YouTube page, "On the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, the Torajan people believe that a person is not truly dead until water buffalo have been sacrificed at their funeral, serving as the vehicle to the afterlife. Until that time, the bodies may be kept at the family's home for weeks, months or years and are fed and cared for as if they were alive. Some Torajans continue their relationship with the dead through a ma'nene' ceremony, a type of 'second funeral' in which families bring out their ancestors every few years and change their clothes and clean their bodies and crypts." I texted my sister about the Torajan people, and she said that the idea of playing with a dead body was hard for her to think about. "So weird," she added, referring to our dead mother, "that the body she has inhabited for 73 years is there. Lying there. All the hard work those muscles did . . . but she isn't there." By "there," my sister meant the Vollmer family cemetery: a clearing in the woods about a hundred steps from the house our parents had built, and where our mother had been buried, mere feet from the graves of our paternal grandparents. "She might crawl back out tho," I said. By "she" I'd meant "mom." "Stop it!!!" My sister replied. "I think that's why they put rocks on papa's grave," I said, remembering the jagged, triangular stones that had been dumped on the place where my maternal grandfather been buried: three hours away, in Greenville, South Carolina, in the Gilbert family cemetery. "To keep him put," I added. It made a kind of sense to me. My grandfather, whose final resting place was located the far end of "the field," on the land where he'd grown up, had been the most stubbornly determined man I'd ever met; if anyone could defy the grave, I figured he'd be the one. As a toddler, my grandfather had lost three of his fingers when he'd rested a hand upon a chopping block, refusing to move it even as his six-year-old sister Effie proved true to her word by threatening to lower—and then lowering—the axe she'd been holding above her head. Because of this handicap, he'd grown up to become a scrappy boxer, strong and tenacious despite his size and the lack of a complete set of digits, the sort of hotheaded fighter other boys regretted tangling with, supposing the stories he'd told about himself had been true. Years later, he'd driven a cab in Washington, D.C., studying Chemistry textbooks at red lights while working his way through dental school. Eventually, he'd

opened his own practice, built a house on the land where he'd been born. There, he, with his sweet and longsuffering wife, raised four kids, among whom he later divided the property. Both his sons, one a dentist and the other a stock broker, neither of whom had ever taken much of a liking to the other, and who had fought so brutally with each other as children that they often made my grandmother cry, built houses on this same property, each within sight of the other and both within sight of the house in which they'd been raised. My aunt Diana, an accomplished and celebrated interior decorator who'd married my mother's youngest brother, had designed the house where she lived with my uncle to resemble that of a French country estate, and had ordered materials from all over the world—floorboards from a factory in Georgia, a door with a stained glass window that had once belonged to a church in England—so that as soon as the house was finished, it would look as if it'd been standing there for a hundred years. Inside this house, there were exquisite drapes. There were dead animal heads on the walls. There were murky 19th-century landscapes with gilt frames. There was a library of books about the Civil War and a desk that stood upon an honest-to-God tangle of rhododendron branches. There were giant vases with ten-foot-long flowering tree limbs inside. And there were these unforgettable Victorian bird boxes: terrariums made of wood and glass that housed dioramas where stuffed birds were frozen forever in place. It was a house you could not walk into without thinking, *Wow*, and it was certainly a house that no one who'd known her could've walk into without thinking *This is so Diana*, which meant that visiting this house again to attend her wake felt like attending a party inside a wealthy person's very nice tomb. Diana had died unexpectedly, on New Year's Eve, 2017, after a couple of policemen outside the Topsy Taco noted her stumbling towards her car and said that she could either come down to the station and get booked or they could take her home. She'd chosen the latter but reportedly had not been happy about it, and after the police dropped her off, she turned right around and walked through the dark back to the Topsy Taco, to retrieve her car, but had fallen down as she was crossing East North Street and was subsequently hit by a car. She bled to death in the street. There was no one in our family more elegant—more refined—than Diana. She drove a Gucci-themed Fiat. She wore dangly earrings and shirts that shimmered and sparkly necklaces. She remembered to purchase Christmas presents for all the children in the family, and wrapped them in paper that looked as if it'd been made out of actual gold and silver. I don't know where Diana was finally lain to rest, but I know it wasn't the Gilbert family cemetery, where the remains of my youngest cousin, grandmother, and grandfather had been buried. "God's time," my father once said, "It's just perfect." This was on September 11, 2019: the day my mother had died. I was driving on I-81, headed toward their house. My father told me that, the night before, he'd prayed to God and said, "Lord, I'll take care of Sandra for as long as you need me

to. For a day, a week, a month, a year. However long it takes.” And then she’d died the next morning, 18 years—nearly to the minute—that the second plane hit the World Trade Center. Wow,” I said. I didn’t say, “Does it not strike you as ironic that you’re saying ‘God’s time is perfect’ eighteen years to the day that terrorists ran planes into the World Trade Center?” I didn’t say, “Do you think the people who lost their fathers and mothers and sons and daughters and aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins and friends on that day think that such an attack was somehow ordained by heaven?” I didn’t say, “I don’t believe that.” As it turned out, I could think whatever thoughts I wanted to in the privacy of my skull. I didn’t have to say everything I thought out loud. I knew that when my father used the phrase “God’s time” that he meant God was in control, that He “had a plan,” and that if one prayed that God’s will be done and then whatever happened was, indeed, what God had willed. I had to admit: I didn’t like thinking that God’s plan was to kill my mother slowly over the course of ten years. I wasn’t comfortable imagining God as a kind of giant overlord in the sky who pored over blueprints for human activity. When did God’s time begin—and when did it end? Was mass extinction part of God’s plan? Human trafficking? Child sexual abuse? If everything regarding my now deceased mother’s life had actually been a part of God’s so-called plan, were we supposed to think of the disease that slowly sucked the life out of her as . . . a *blessing*? In a way, I supposed, it could be read as such. It had certainly brought my parents closer: in her final year on earth, my mother seemed to long for my father’s presence more than ever. And my father—a man who, for years, returned from work to be pampered with hot meals served by my mother, who also dutifully cleaned up whatever mess had been generated by the cooking and eating—had, over the past few years, taken up the up tasks—breadmaking, applesauce canning, soup making, cleaning, bill-paying—that had once been such a central part of my mother’s existence that everyone in the family had taken them for granted. And though I had feared my mother’s disease would sour her otherwise cheerful disposition into a kind of foul, mean-tempered spirit, she never lost her ability to smile or laugh. Were these not the facts? Had not my last interaction with my mother, via Face Time, been a joyful one? Had she not laughed at the faces I’d made? Perhaps her disease *had* been a kind of blessing. Or perhaps that was simply a story I was telling myself now, as I studied the numerals on her tombstone, her life reduced to a dash between them, an entire life shrunk to a horizontal line, reminiscent of a single person in repose.