

FATHOM LINES

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This is how it must have happened:

My mother sits in her parked car at the end of a cul-de-sac. In the trunk of the car is a box full of mementos, photographs and keepsakes from her life with my father, and from her life before him too, because she will never be that girl again. Beside the box is a shovel. She emerges from the car, into the rotten cabbage air, the smell from the paper mill always worse on rainy days. Pulling up the hood of her raincoat, she walks to the trunk to retrieve the box and shovel, then slops through puddles toward the entrance of a cemetery.

A faded wooden arch announces her arrival, Wamish Community Cemetery. This is where she buried her husband one year ago. My mother walks past the memorial garden, unadorned except for a column broken in two unequal pieces, a deliberate break to represent decay. It makes sense that the one monument in the place would be so pragmatic—people in Wamish have no use for angels or chalices. From the monument, my mother walks six columns over and four rows back. This is where she stops.

The stone is grey and cold, black letters spell out a name —Claude Rupert Tremblay—her husband's name, my father's name. There are forty-two years marked out, 1939-1982, and a little crucifix, but he never went to church. The space where a message might normally appear is blank; there are no words of consolation or remembrance. At the time the stone carver asked, my mother didn't have any such words to offer up.

If she feels overwhelmed, my mother would swallow down the tightness stopping up her throat. She would clench her fists. She would tell herself, I am not alone in this grief. She would not need more proof of that, than the cemetery and its hundreds of markers.

Other gravestones have names written on, and prayers, and the roles played in a life. Beloved Son, Cherished Husband, Loving Father. Some are adorned with intricately carved statues, a few have wreaths and flowers laid on, mostly fake, loud bright pink and purple colours that will never decompose. She doesn't have any flowers to lay though, just that box tucked under her arm.

She sets the box down next to the stone, readies the shovel, and then stabs the point of it into the ground, overturning snow, and sodden grass, and mud, the same silty mud from the day we buried my father. The shovel bites at the earth, tearing away large sections at a time. The resistance of the earth travels up the wood of the handle and into my mother's bones. Her arms begin to hurt, but the hole is not yet large enough.

She digs and digs. When the hole is wide and deep enough, she puts the shovel down. From her coat pocket, she removes a black garbage bag. She flaps it open, and maybe it catches in the wind, billowing, almost floating away. My mother sets the cardboard box of mementos inside, the seams already sealed with packing tape, the top already labeled: THINGS TO HOLD ON TO. She pulls the sides of the garbage bag up around the box and ties them closed with a tight knot. The bag is meant as protection against things that might otherwise seep in.

The box inside the bag laid into the hole gently, my mother shovels clumps of mud back into the hole, slowly covering it up. When she is finished, my mother tamps down earth with the back of the shovel and straightens up. Her body hurts. Maybe there is a spot on her back that is seized like a fist, or welled-up blisters on her hands. Her body will ache with the memory of this work the next day, but that would not bother her. It would fill her with a feeling of satisfaction.

My mother does not linger over her accomplishment. Instead she walks quickly and purposefully away from the grave. She is moving forward now, pulling the car out of the dead-end street, merging back into traffic, heading south down the highway.

That is what must have happened. And this is what my mother must have thought: If I am to move ahead, I must leave certain things behind—things too awkward or large to carry, things that weigh me down.

S P R I N G

L I S E 7 am, March 20 2008

The green numbers of my alarm radio eat minute after minute as I watch from bed. Thunder rumbles far away, rain hits the window—bee-bee pellets on tin. Beside me, the bed is empty. David is a morning person, already finishing up his routine in the kitchen: half grapefruit, half cup of raisin bran, three sections of the newspaper, two cups of Earl Grey tea.

For him, it is any other day. For me, it is the first day of spring, the day we buried my dad, twenty-five years ago.

When I was seven, Dad took me with him on his yearly visit to Montreal. It was a long drive from Wamish, just the two of us, and that day is my last best memory of him. I remember squeezing close to him on the bench seat of the old pick-up to stay warm because the heater had broken again. I remember the smell of machine oil and cold on his coat. He looked away from the road to the passenger window. His brow lifted, his smile cracked as he pointed out my window. It was a buck he saw, but I didn't look. Instead, I watched his face change, the smile lines melt and reform, a hand over his jaw, searching for the beard he'd shaved off earlier that week to keep his mother from pestering him about it when he saw her. Triangles of sun reached through the trees into the truck as we drove along, the light made him squint, traced his profile, and the shadow of him projected onto the car seat and rested in my hands for a moment.

Three weeks later, after a fresh snow, he went for a walk in the woods as he loved to do and was a long time in coming home. Mom had a pot roast in the oven and the house smelled of it. She banged in and out of the side door, calling him and grumbling about the roast going dry. Finally, she put on her boots and followed Dad's tracks in the snow. Mom found him, cold and grey in the snow, but still alive.

He came home from the hospital, but he wasn't better. They simply couldn't do anything more for him, and so Mom did it all. For eighty-four days, she fed him and wiped his chin when the food came dribbling back out. For eighty-four days, she washed every

part of him, and dressed him in his favourite clothes, and lifted him in and out of bed. For eighty-four days, she changed the sheets and the soiled clothes. For eighty-four days, she read to him from the newspaper, and shaved his face. For eighty-four days, she did all the work of living for him. And then she woke up on the eighty-fifth day, and he did not.

At exactly eight o'clock, I roll out of bed, shower quickly, brush my teeth and pull a comb through my hair. The mirror above the sink is covered with a film of steam, all I see is the vague shape of my head. I swipe the condensation away and a woman is reflected, first the lips and nose, then the eyes. A pinched mouth and creased forehead, eyes that look so flat and sad. How long has my face been turned down this way?

In the kitchen, David sits reading the Real Estate section of the paper, his curly brown hair perfectly combed and gelled, his lavender Oxford shirt freshly pressed, and a napkin puddled in the lap of his wool pants.

“Sleep okay?”

I shake my head. “Nightmare.” The same one as always. Faces, and also legs—all of them clad in black nylon or grey flannel—and the polished tips and heels of shoes slowly sinking in sticky mud, the tremulous voice of the pastor, and the robotic response of the mourning crowd...Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ... For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind ... Hallowed be thy name, forever and ever. Amen. Mom swaying slightly as she stands beside me, and every so often a little moan leaves her throat, like a mourning dove. The air on my skin weighed down with the threat of heavy rain, and the sulphur smell of the paper mill. But more than all of it, the thing that stands out is the way Mom grips my hand so tightly, and the way it feels dead with cold. As if she, and my hand along with her, are freezing and becoming stone.

Not a nightmare, a memory.

The phone rings and David answers. His face, normally so smoothed out and pleasant, squishes into a momentary frown.

“For you. It’s Ben.”

“Ben Granger? I haven’t heard from him in years.”

“You say that like it’s my fault. I’ll be late tonight. Don’t worry about supper.” He hands me the phone, places a dry kiss on my cheek and heads off to work.

Ben Granger.

Perfect moments still unfold in my mind when I will them to. But there were other moments, too. Regrets and words never said. Moments for declarations that passed without any. In the end, I messed it up. Not overtly, but with a hundred imperfect little moments. Slowly, whatever good thing we had, I quietly undid.

“Hello, Lise? It’s Ben.”

“Ben, wow—” After so long, all the times I have thought of him, this is the best I can muster.

“We lost track of each other, I guess.” Which makes it sound like it wasn’t a choice we both made.

“Yeah, somewhere around Denmark, I think.”

“Look, I’m sorry it’s out of the blue like this, but I could really use your help. I talked to Dani last week and she mentioned you freelanced for The Preservation Society.”

“For a year or so now. Why?”

“I might have some work for you. Do you have time for coffee?”

“Today?”

“I’m not up to much this morning, but if that doesn’t work—”

“No, I can meet you.”

“My place, then? Quarter to eleven? I’m above the Qwik-Kut on Bloor.”

I take my bike into the city. David doesn’t like me riding. He worries I’ll get hit. He also worries that our neighbours will think I’m weird, or poor. When he treated himself to the BMW last fall, he gave me his perfectly respectable Saab. I told him I didn’t need a car and he said that everyone needs one sometimes. So, I told him I didn’t want a car and he said I was being stubborn. Mostly it accumulates dust in the garage until David takes pity on it and takes it to the carwash.

I take Lakeshore trail to Parliament Street and ride north to Cabbagetown, my old neighbourhood. I was almost eight when we moved into a new townhouse on a back lane. It was amazing to know that our neighbours were just yards away, instead of kilometres. We didn’t need to drive anywhere, groceries and clothes and school and the library were all just a ten-minute walk. I marvelled at my new ability to see right to the end of the streets. I could stand in front of the townhouse and see a car coming from blocks away. The streets were stick straight and flat, no corners, no danger of blindsides. In Wamish, roads dipped and climbed, narrowed into bridges, turned on a dime. You could lose sight of people on those roads, but it was like losing them in a maze; there were only a few directions to move before hitting a barrier of some sort.

Now, out on the main streets, huge rooming houses are shoulder to shoulder with coffee shops, a couple of dive bars, and the basics of retail: pet food, hardware, beer, gas. Near No Frills, a tiny black woman pushes her bundle buggy up the street hunching under the weight of her clothing, what appears to be every piece she owns: bright pink ski gloves, toque, scarf, winter coat, maroon wool skirt, baggy jeans tucked into striped athletic socks, ragged men’s slippers. At the intersection, the old white guy with one leg sits in his wheelchair, jostling his stump and shouting out in his eerily high voice for spare change. Tucked behind this street scene, down the side lanes, are the heritage homes, the pretty perennial gardens, the fancy cars.

I turn onto Carlton keeping an eye out for my mother who is probably starting out for the library about now, then north on Jarvis, past the ballet school, and Jarvis Collegiate, my old high school. I pedal faster, turn left. Wellesley is a blur. Queen's Park is grey and barren this time of year, an island amidst a river of cars tilting with speed. The pedestrian signal engages, the cars halt as if dammed.

Before it became the legislature, the park used to be an estate lot and reached south all the way to Queen Street. Eventually, they built Toronto's first university building. Later, they used it as a women's lunatic asylum. But who knows that except me, someone who is paid to read land transfers and old surveys so I can write up heritage plaques? And does anyone care? Some things a city leaves behind in time; others, it willfully buries.