

The Problem With Burying Mom

By Kera Morris

If we had been an average family, I imagine we would be dressed in blacks and navy blues, standing by a lectern holding a book for people to sign in to—like when high school ended each summer and students passed around our yearbooks to sign and remind each other to stay cool.

We would thank people for coming, tell them how much Mom would have appreciated it, and snuffle with decorum into tissues laced with aloe to keep delicate skin from chafing; funeral directors honestly think of everything.

It was like that for our father, and I'd seen it at the funerals of friends. At 18, when a boy I'd loved with the intensity only available to teenagers died, I peered at his final book with something bordering on hysteria. If I wrote something, I don't recall it.

But we weren't a normal family, and I wager the only reason my father had had a visitor's log several years prior was due to his surviving siblings all being Southern pastors who were comfortable with the pageantry of death. So comfortable that they were perfectly at ease worrying at us about funeral costs and the damnation of souls—his, to be precise—while standing beside my still-living, occasionally-conscious father's hospice bed.

I told them to get out. My sister admonished me for it. I've never taken these people as well as she can.

But whatever a normal family might be, we aren't. Where my father had a cadre of brothers and

sisters-in-law to attend his death, my mother came from a fractured family who wanted nothing to do with one another. One aunt had written a few years prior that she simply couldn't wait for my mother to drop dead, because then the land their father had left them would be entirely hers.

My mother's funeral consisted of my children, my husband, and myself. My stepfather made a guest appearance, a cameo just a moment long, to thrust a bag of ash and bone chips into my hands and drive away.

Sitting by a headstone laid a decade earlier and flush with the ground, clutching a teaspoon and a small, glass crucifix, the moment struck me as completely absurd, and the inappropriate laughter that's part and parcel of me bubbled up.

It was a hot day, mid-June in West Virginia's Kanawha Valley. The air always smelled of something toxic, with several industrial plants nestled along the river. Growing up, my friends and I referred to our corner of the world as the Chemical Valley.

Mom always found my friends kind of alarming. My favorite people were the sort with mohawks and combat boots, studded jackets and facial piercings. She thought they were *bad kids*, never really learning that these were avid readers with a keen interest in history and politics, and they'd always kept me safe. Now she shares a resting place with one of them. The boy who died, whose funeral's signing book horrified me.

My children stood awkwardly by while my husband gazed about the cemetery. My mother had insisted she was to be buried with her best friend and surrogate father, Pop. My 8-year-old was named for

him—not Pop, of course, but his given name—because Pop was a big part of my family. Sometimes, more so than Mom.

But being buried with him proved something of a problem.

In the first place, we couldn't afford a genuine interment. In the second, resentment on both sides of each of the dead prohibited it just as much as the destitution. No official interment was to be permitted. We weren't welcome here.

I set to work. I slipped the teaspoon under the grass and wiggled the groundcover up, setting aside the clod to pat back down later. I set to digging a tiny hole as best I could, a Lilliputian shovel wrangled by a chuckling, crying Gulliver.

That only took a few minutes. I opened the thick plastic bag after some struggle and reached in for a handful of the woman who'd created me. Her bone fragments grated between my fingers, and bit into my palm.

It didn't seem that odd. A half cup of Mom, give or take, went into the little hole I'd made with my teaspoon. My sister had requested the crucifix be placed with the ashes, but I hadn't made the hole large enough. Hot and frustrated, I jabbed the spoon handle into the side of Mom's miniature grave, wiggling it back and forth to make a slot to slip the long end of the cross into. It worked.

My stepfather had said that what my mother wanted for a eulogy was simply an explanation that she had been a registered nurse. I smoothed the handful of misplaced dirt over the cross and the ashes and

told my kids that their grandma had been a nurse, a long time before they were born. That she'd been hurt and couldn't work anymore, ever since I was even younger than they were. That she missed the hospital a lot and kept her textbooks and read them from time to time and tried to keep up on new information she'd never need for any more patients.

I told them that when I was sick or hurt, I'd call my mother and she'd be audibly excited to feel useful again. Even if I knew that what *she* knew wasn't right any more, or at least outdated. It didn't matter.

Mom often wasn't in the real world with us anyhow. She saw things that weren't there and remembered things that never happened. It made for complex conversations and a lot of trouble.

I hadn't been there, when she died. I was abroad, with a GI Bill funding the way, having tried my hand at biomedicine and finishing instead with a plain old science degree. Mom consistently forgot that I wouldn't be a physician, endlessly pleased that I was following her footsteps into the healing arts.

There's so much I didn't know about her, sometimes because she didn't offer anything and sometimes because she invented her own reality.

For fifteen months I was deployed to the Middle East and calling home could be quite a nuisance. What I didn't know was that she refused to leave the house for days at a time, assured that if she wasn't by the phone I would be killed and it would be her fault.

After she died, I inherited all of her journals, and found letters she had written to my stepfather, each of my siblings and myself. They were confused, disjointed, and several years old. Reading her journals,

separating fact and fiction became impossible. So much of what she wrote could potentially be true.

More of it was heart-wrenching. She had visions that I was unhappy, or something terrible was happening to me. When those visions happened, she wrote about them in great detail and waited near the phone. We weren't a demonstrative family, and not close. We didn't hug each other unless someone was getting married or had died, and even then, it wasn't a sure thing.

I realized that the relentless worry and time spent waiting irrationally by the phone was her way of loving. Distance helped, somehow.

When she told me she had terminal cancer and had less than a year to live, she asked when I was graduating from medical school. December, I told her. I'd fly her out to watch me walk the stage to collect my degree. She was absolutely delighted, and we talked about all the places we'd visit before I started my residency. She told me stories about patients of hers thirty years before, I asked her advice on patients who didn't exist.

It had taken a bare second to realize it didn't matter that it wasn't true, but I knew this would confuse people. I contacted the few who Mom might talk to, who'd try to correct the misinformation. My stepfather, taking care of her, caught it on his own. *Your mom says you're taking her to New Zealand*, he said. Yes, I replied. *She'll love it*, he said. I could hear her in the background, crowing with pride that soon she'd fly abroad to watch her youngest receive a medical degree. She died a few days later, months before her physicians had suggested.

In the hot cemetery, I replaced the clod of grass over the bit of hole that held a bit of my mother and

wept. My children patted my shoulders; *I'm sorry your mommy died*. I hugged them and said simply, *me too*.

A small urn returned with me to New Zealand, and a bit of her was spread near my university. At least part of what I promised was true. And what she wrote for herself, in that pile of dollar-store notebooks—whatever is true, and whatever isn't, I know she loved me, and she'd forgive me for inventing those last few stories I told her.