

Father Stories

The road was not wet.

That was all she told us about the night our father died, months before we were born.

Why would she say it like that? None of us, the triplets, ever knew, nor really asked. But we had our theories. Her casket now just a few feet away, people coming by and saying nice things that don't match the woman I knew. Don't embarrass me or her, or yourself, by saying she was sweet.

Say something real. She was strong, yes, she was old, she was raw. She is dead. But don't use words that make me ask if you are at the wrong funeral.

My sisters and I talk amongst ourselves, wondering, even today, what she meant. By telling us about the road or the rain, did she mean to imply that he was a bad driver? That it was his lack of skill that killed him. Was this a wife's complaint about her husband's driving? But it had such an edge. It wasn't a marital complaint about a husband pulling out of the garage too quickly and ripping the side mirror off the car. She wasn't describing a time when he took a turn too fast and the tire rim reeled away.

No, she was talking about the man she'd married five years before. The man with whom she shared a bed and a house, well an apartment, in Chicago, for *five* years. She was carrying his kids and he must have known it. She was almost two months pregnant. And even if she wasn't showing, although she must have been, with three kids in her belly. What was her emotion when she found out she was pregnant? They'd tried for years, or at least she thought they'd been trying. She didn't know he didn't want kids, until some friend of his mentioned it in passing weeks after he'd gone.

So maybe he wasn't trying. Does attitude really have anything to do with it? The doctor had told her to relax and let nature make it work. He said that stress hurt her chances, although she didn't believe him. But they never said the man had any impact. Never told the husband to relax and let his sperm do the walking. It was always the woman who inhibited the process, somehow.

I always wondered how she found out about the accident. You'd think it would have come up, at the dinner table, over a holiday when there was nothing to do but sit and try to talk. But we were all afraid to ask. When we were in the sixth grade we pooled our Halloween candy

together and gave 14 pieces (seven each) to our sister Brooky, if she would ask. She ate the soft candies, the toffees and taffies and then chickened out.

Was it a phone call or some dramatic walk up the steps by a medical worker to tell her he was dead? I asked, sort of, not outright, because that wasn't the way we talked, but in a slightly roundabout fashion. It was just last week when I said, "that must have been some phone call" and she said, "mmmm, hmmm." Because that's the way she spoke at the end. It was only then that I had the guts to ask her. Ironic, is that the right word, that I asked her the question after I knew she couldn't answer? Once the tubes were in her mouth and down her throat, everything blocked and clogged.

But I wanted to know. Not just now, but always and forever, I wanted to know everything about what it was like to be twenty-five, the age I am well past. When she was young and vibrant and must have been so happy with that big secret in her belly. Maybe it was a secret even to her. Do you feel it at two months? Do you feel six arms and six legs or does it just feel like a normal pregnancy. She wouldn't have known the difference.

What did he know? Maybe he just said she was fat. Or maybe he was sweet about it and said there was more to love. Or he was even sweeter and never mentioned it.

Or maybe he was scared and knew something was up. I imagine he left that night, the night she told him, and he drove so fast that the tires ran away from the road and flipped him into oblivion.

It used to be the not knowing I couldn't take. I always expected that one day, someday I would find out. She would tell me. I imagined that day so many times, that it would happen without me prompting her. Without me asking or suggesting, just her sitting me down, holding my hands in hers and laying it out.

She would tell me in long dramatic detail how she told him about the pregnancy and he was so excited, he kissed her face until it was red. He needed to get something, maybe flowers or cigars or candies and he fled from the room and she never saw him again. But I knew that wasn't her style. No nice stories or happy endings.

On a blue day I imagined her at the kitchen sink, looking out the smudged window onto that same brown lawn she'd been staring at for fifty years. And she'd turn to me as I snapped peas at the table and she'd tell me about "that awful day," when she caught him cheating and she chased him from the house and never heard from him again. He wasn't dead, but to us he was.

Or he'd lost his job and when he told her about the unemployment she told him about the kids and he panicked.

So what gets me now is that we won't ever have that conversation, even the dark one. There is no one left to tell us what happened to the man who helped bring us into life. We are orphans now.

There are no pictures from that time. And we've been through the house, everything gone and divided up, and even then we couldn't find a wedding photo. They must have existed? She must have loved him, my father.

"I'm sorry about your parents," a voice said, shaking me from these thoughts. I looked up from the low slung chair to see an old man hunched over his cane with an odd smile on his face. Not a funeral smile where you nod and acknowledge the mutual grief, but a friendly expression asking for more.

My hand reached for his, the left one as his right one seemed molded to the stick he leaned on. It was soft and thin over a structure of small fish-like bones. He wanted me to say something else, more than just an acknowledgement of his arrival or the respects he was paying.

"It's just my mother," I said.

He held my hand, well past the time for letting go.

"My father died years ago," I added.

"I know," he said. "I was there."

Most of my hair had fallen out during the first bout of chemo ten years ago. But the roots were still there, some of them. And what remained stood stunned by the comment, a link to my past.

I braced my arms on the skinny chair and heaved myself up to meet his face.

"You were a friend of my family?" I asked, his visage unrecognizable to me.

"No," he said, looking down and shaking his head.

"But you knew both my parents," I said.

"Yes," he nodded. "I met your father."

"My father?"

"But it was too late," he said.

"Too late? Too late for what?"

“It was my car,” he said in a way that suggested I should know what he was talking about.

“Your car,” I said.

“It was dark.”

My silence suggested I needed more.

“I was tired and it was late,” he said.

The small man’s eyes were moist now and red-rimmed.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“There was no way I could see him in the dark.”

“It’s okay,” I said, although I didn’t know what I was absolving him of.

“And so I made the turn, but he shouldn’t have been crossing.”

“What else?” I asked.

“The tires slipped,” he said.

“But it wasn’t raining,” I said.

“The road was wet,” he said.

“It wasn’t” I told him. “The road was not wet.”

“But I thought it was.”

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