The Place for Her Body

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Diane hated going to the cemetery, especially in the summer. There were so many things she had to do, and watching her mother cry and plant cheap flowers was nowhere near the top of the list. She had loved her grandmother, but didn’t see much point in wasting a Saturday morning in the creepy place. Her mother would accuse her of being selfish and disrespectful. Diane defended herself by saying, “Grandma always wanted me to do things that made me happy.” Her father settled the argument without getting up from the sofa. “Go with your mother.” That was the end of it.

The ride to Overpeck Cemetery took about an hour from Diane’s house. The first ten minutes on the highway took them past suburbs similar to the one they lived in, but the scenery whipping past the window quickly changed. By the time the ride was a half an hour old there were fewer cars, less exits, and no McDonalds.

The hardest part for Diane was having to spend a solid hour each way with her mother. They had little to talk about, and Diane couldn’t get up and leave as she could at home when the conversation bored her. The ride made her feel very awkward. She loved her mother, but couldn’t stand to be alone with her. She felt as if she should enjoy the time they shared, but she couldn’t. If they did get into a conversation, a fight usually commenced. Boys, music, cars, beer, anything could set them at odds. Diane tried to keep the talk away from things her mother tended to interrogate her about.

Diane sat in the car wondering why her father never went with them. “Mom, how come like Dad never comes to see Grandma?”

Her mother rolled her eyes a bit. “He works hard all week honey. He thinks about Grandma a lot.”

“Oh for sure. He works hard all week! Like I do totally nothing at school. You have like this total wasteoid version of how hard it is to be a senior in high school.”

“Yes, I know honey.”

—Wordsworth
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“I think you’re scared,” Diane giggled.

“Of what?”

“Of the cemetery. You know, like something eerie might happen. Didn’t you ever see the beginning of ‘Night of the Living Dead’?”

“No.”

“Oh God, you’re so lame!”

“Darn it Diane, how many times have I told you not to say that! Being lame is not a laughing matter. Some people are born that way. I hate that expression.”

“Sorry.”

Her mother shook her head. “Why would you think I’m scared?”

“Because like the place is so skeevy. Like hundreds of BODIES all over the place. Every time I watch you planting those flowers I can just picture a hand coming up from the ground and grabbing you.”

“That’s disgusting Diane.”

“That’s Carrie.”

“What?”

“Forget it. You’re so...”

Her mother needed only to turn her head for the sentence to be stifled.

Diane turned on the radio and hoped for some Duran Duran. She snapped her gum, tangled some moussed hair around a finger, and thought.

Ten thirty. Everyone will be at the mall by the time we get to the bone yard. Tim will be there and I know Andrea will be hanging all over him since I’m not around. He likes me better, but he’ll hold hands with her and stuff so he doesn’t have to be seen alone. By the time I get there they’ll have hit all the good places. They’ll probably be in a movie. I bet the whole gang is there. Becky, Freddie, Howie, Joyce, Barbie, Danny. Not me though. This sucks big time. You’d think I never loved Grandma the way SHE carries on. Like excuse me for not wanting to spend my day watching her cry! I think about Grandma a lot, more than she knows. It just doesn’t make any sense. She’s dead. I respected her and tried to make her happy when she was alive. Isn’t that love? I don’t feel guilty about the way I treated her, so why should I have to go and stare at a grey rock with her name on it? I feel closer to her when I sit in her favorite chair in the living room back home. Mom feels bad because they had a fight right before she died. Well, she says they made up, but I don’t believe her. I loved her while she was alive, when it counted. Ten thirty-one. I bet the mall is filling up.

Overpeck Cemetery looked like every other cemetery in northern New
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Jersey. The ground was hilly and uneven, making any elaborate landscaping impossible. Tall trees bordered the bourgeois burial ground, but that was the extent of any greenery. The tombstones perched over each grave, lined up in precise rows flowing up and down the wavy countryside. At dusk, if one put his face against one of the smooth nameplates and looked just over it, an ocean appeared. Waves of stone, unmoving as if frozen by a camera.

The place was harmless, just an innocuous resting place for the dead. Scattered groups of people hovered silently near their loved ones, saying prayers, planting flowers, reminiscing. Occasionally the quiet was disturbed by a car travelling slowly along one of the rocky paths. It was a mild cacophony, and most people couldn’t hear it through their crying, digging, or Hail Marys.

Diane and her mother pulled over near the row containing Grandmother Betty. The sun burned directly overhead. Diane wanted to complain about the heat, but recalled where she was and remained silent. She looked around while her mother got the plants out of the trunk.

The only other people she could see were at the top of a hill to the west. “If some creature popped out of a grave they would never be able to help us in time.” she thought. Diane was confident this wouldn’t happen, but she couldn’t think of anything else to think about. The trunk slammed shut and her mother began walking down the aisle.

“Are you coming honey?”

“Uh-huh.”

Grandma Betty’s grave was in the middle of an unfinished row. There were small outlines where the rest of the headstones would go once nature ran its course for a little while longer. The remaining graves were marked by a thin grey metal pole stuck where the tombstone would go. Diane thought this arrangement was comical, as if the world had run out of dead people. Like her grandmother was the last.

She stood and watched her mother. It always fascinated her the way her mother planted the flowers. Not so much the way she put them in the ground, but where she sat when doing it. She would never rest over the grave, always to one side. Like she would suffocate Grandma or something. Diane knew it was respectful, but to whom? Grandma doesn’t know. Mom just likes to FEEL as if she’s being respectful. Too bad it’s too late for that. She should have done it when it counted like I did.

Diane had invented a little game she enjoyed playing in the cemetery. It was a morbid interpenetration of “The Name Game.” She would see how many names she could memorize from the graves near her grandmothers. She wrote them down when she got home and would bring the list on the next trip to check her accuracy. Today, however, she had forgotten the list, which meant she would have to fill the time differently.
She listened contemptuously to her mother’s sobs which had finally arrived. She looked again at the undug graves and again thought about how silly they were. “Mom?”

“Yes honey?”

“Like what’s the deal with these metal sticks?”

Her mother looked nervously over her shoulder, “Um...those are marked for...you know...”

“People who aren’t dead yet?”

“Yes.”

“That’s totally gross! It’s like they’re waiting for someone to kick.”

“Don’t you say that!” she snapped.

“Chill out Mom.”

“You,” she shook her head, “don’t understand.”

“What d’ya mean?”

“Those are ours.”

“Oh sure.”

“I’m not kidding honey. Those are our graves.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Before Grandma died she bought them for us so we could all be together.”

“Who is ‘us’?”

“Your father, me you, and Sean.”

“But Sean is only two years-old.”

“I know. We only found out about it when we read Grandma’s will.”

“How come you never said anything?”

“What’s the point? I figured when you were older...”

“This is like totally bizarre. It’s disgusting.”

“Please honey, try not to overreact.”

“Which one is...mine.”

“The third one down. I’m here, next to Grandma, then daddy, then you, then Sean.”

Diane turned and walked to her grave. With each step she became more and more aware that one day she would be dead. The reality of the ground and thin metal pole made it seem much closer than she would have liked. During the
first eighteen years of her life she had not spent much time thinking about death.

There it was. The place for her dead body. Suddenly she became aware of her body. Her heart beating, her lungs filling with the clean country air, the mild precursory cramps of her period. All these were amplified. She could hear her bodily fluids flowing around, the nerve endings firing, her large intestine crushing the salad she had eaten for breakfast. Someday she would be dead, sitting under the dirt she stared at, the metal pole replaced by a tombstone bearing her name. “Diane Robertson, 1969-20??” She felt a little sick trying to fill in the last date. Maybe she would be killed in a car accident and not even make it out of the century, beating her family in the race to be with Grandma.

The slowly descending sun at her back cast a shadow over the grave. It was her shadow, intricately detailed. Diane’s imagination filled in the details. She saw her form cast over the dirt exactly how it would lie someday. She couldn’t move. She stared at the black outline of her body the way it would lie for all eternity. Her own daughter would come and plant flowers, a grandchild complaining in the background about having to waste a Saturday going to see Grandma Di.

She looked briefly at Sean’s grave. He was so young, it seemed like he would never die. She stared at his place and thought of him thumping around the living room back home. Trying to absorb the borders of his existence was too much for her.

Her mind became cluttered with questions, conclusions, and ideas, each one battling for dominance. Eventually, the jumbled thoughts turned into hysterical confusion. She cried for herself, for Sean, for mother and father. Yet she couldn’t focus on any one thing. The tears of unknown origin, but they flowed freely, consistently. They had some purpose she could not discern.

Me dead? Still a virgin. Lots left to do. So many things to go through. College, marriage, children, old age. Too far off. It’ll never happen. Yes it will. There’s the proof. They’ve got a spot picked out for you. They KNOW you’re going to die. Sean too. He’s so young. But he’ll be dead too. Everybody does die. Not just old people. We’re all old people.

She walked around her grave and removed the metal pole. “I’m not ready to die!” she screamed and threw it as far as she could. The crying became heavier.

“Diane!” Her mother jumped up.

She didn’t hear her mother rushing towards her. “And neither is Sean!” She grabbed the pole from his grave and threw it in the same direction.

“Diane!” Her mother grabbed her and stopped short when she saw the streaked red cheeks of her daughter’s face.

“Mom...” she hugged her mother and let go what little she had been
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holding back. "Why...why did you have to tell me?"

Gently stroking Diane’s hair she said, “I thought you were old enough to understand.”

“Well I’m not.” It was hard to speak through the tears. “And I’m never coming here again! Never! I can’t”

“All right honey.”

“Now that I know that’s my grave.”

“Okay, okay.”

Diane opened her eyes and squinted. The sun reflected into her eyes, magnified by the tears lining her lids. She could make out figures on the hill. They were looking at her and her mother. Two solitary living figures huddled in the midst of a graveyard. She closed her eyes and tried to forget about the people. She tried to think about the mall, but could not.

She blinked and looked again at the figures on the hill. They were clear now. Four black silhouettes against the horizon.