

A dark, moody photograph of gnarled tree roots and soil, serving as a background for the text. The roots are thick and twisted, with a rough, textured bark. The soil is dark and appears to be rich and moist. The overall atmosphere is somber and natural.

Family  
Funerals

## Family Funerals

There's always been something peculiar about funerals and memorials in my family. For instance, my dad's father died and was buried in Houston, Texas. Turns out there were two viewings in the house that evening. As my dad was preparing for his dad's, he noticed that his father didn't look right. He chased after the mortician to say that they had parted his dad's hair on the wrong side. Hundreds of people were coming and "this mistake would be *seen* by all of them." The mortician said he'd deal with it right away. An hour later, when the service was about to start, a shriek was heard from the other viewing room. The mortician had parted the *other* guy's hair on the wrong side, thinking he was my grandfather. Well, that one was easy to fix, but by the time he got back to my grandfather, the hair follicles had stiffened and there was no way to change the side of the part. It just stuck straight up. So they put a hat on him.

I was fifteen for my first family funeral. It was for my great-uncle, who was a great big crazy-looking farmer dude who had, in my mother's childhood, tried to pick her up by the ears. His coffin was huge and it was open. No way was I going to file past and have a look. As speakers went on and on, I edged out of the mortuary and into the rain in Middletown, Indiana. I sat down on the sidewalk and lit a cigarette from my newly-acquired stash of Salems snatched from my dad's sock drawer. I just cried and smoked and cried. I found funerals to be *grotesque, humiliating and generally insincere*. Presently my Mom came out in the rain and found me in a puddle of water and a cloud of smoke. First, there was the scolding. Then she confided that she found funerals pretty nasty, too, but she figured it gave people *an ending to the story*.

When my father died, I was seventeen years older with two little kids. Daddy had been diagnosed with heart disease about four years earlier. He had had three heart attacks by that time. I admired him greatly—he was a city planner with socially liberal views, although he always *said* he voted Republican. He was a Southerner who was a vehement supporter of equal rights. He was hilariously funny but had a terrible temper and very strong views. He once remarked over dinner that he opposed cemeteries because they exemplified poor land use and declared that he wanted to be cremated. When he finally went into the hospital, they put him on a respirator. After a few days he began to mime cutting the cord. My mother refused, and she had power of attorney. "You'll get better. You can beat this thing." This was a culture where death was a horrible accident, to be avoided and denied until the corpse was cold. After two weeks I had to go home and be with my kids. He died two days later in my mother's arms.

I wrote the obituary and came back again for the funeral. My dad was a highly respected man, and his funeral was packed. I had the organist play "The Yellow Rose of Texas" because he used to sing it to me. My mom respected his wishes to be cremated, then buried his ashes in the cemetery, so he got half of what he wanted.

And then there was Mom. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at 75 and left her body eight long years later. The folks in the nursing home in Indianapolis had blithely violated her do-not-resuscitate order several times, so that she spent about seven of those years a complete vegetable. One day at work I got a call from the nursing home to come quick. I was in

California, I explained. “Well, come quick anyway,” they said. I got another call half an hour later that she had died of pneumonia.

While I was planning the memorial, I also wrote her obituary. She had been a musician, a singer. But then she met my dad at 19 and dropped out of college to marry him because he was in the Army Air Corps and might have to fight in the war. She worked in radio at first, but ended up working most of her life as head of sales promotion at Farm Bureau Insurance. She was diligent in mentoring and hiring women in her department. That’s really how I learned about feminism. She never even used the word; she just lived the idea. And she was successful at her job. When she retired at 70, her manager and his boss took her to see “Phantom of the Opera” on Broadway. It was the biggest thrill of her life.

Excepting me, my husband, my stepfather and his wife, no one came to her funeral. It had been too long since she’d disappeared from people’s lives. One of my best friends from high school hosted the event. Then we drove to Miller cemetery where my father and grandparents were buried. It was snowing, so the cemetery had put up a bright blue oilcloth tent for the interment. The burial was fairly easy—although she was buried in the cemetery, I had had her body cremated—so she got half of what she wanted, too. Figured it was fair.

I was spreading rose petals over both graves when a small, gloved hand pulled aside a corner of the tent and stepped inside, bringing in some of the swirling snow. “I’m Ruth Lowry,” she said. “The Middletown High School class of 1940 is having a reunion. They sent me to pay tribute to Rosemary. She had a beautiful voice. She led the Christmas Caroling every year. She was friendly and kind to all of us, and we will always remember her.” Then Mrs. Lowry laid a bouquet of flowers on Mom’s headstone and went back out into the snow in her dark coat and gloves, gingerly stepping in her own footprints. I guess that’s when I finally cried.

And so, as it turns out, it wasn’t that nobody came to her funeral. It was that everybody from her 1940 class cared for and remembered her. And *that* was the tribute she would have really loved.

