

COLUMBARIUM

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Not until my father walked into the post office—or perhaps it was a few days earlier at the bastardized crematorium—did I understand how much he despised my mother’s constant reminders. For at least fifteen years she substituted “No,” “Okay,” or “I’ll do it if I have to,” with “I could’ve gone to the Rhode Island School of Design” or “For this I gave up the chance to attend Pratt” or “When did God decide that I would be better off stuck with a man who sold rocks for a living, than continuing my education at Cooper Union?” I figured out later that my parents weren’t married but five months when I came out all healthy and above-average in weight, length, and lung capacity. To me she said things like, “I should’ve matriculated to the Kansas City Arts Institute, graduated, and begun my life working in an art studio of my own, but here I am driving you twenty miles to the closest Little League game,” or “I had a chance to go to the Chicago Art Institute on a full scholarship, but here I am trying to figure out why the hell x and y are so important in a math class,” or “Believe you me, I wouldn’t be adding pineapple chunks, green chiles, and tuna to a box of macaroni and cheese for supper had I gotten my wish and gone to The Ringling School of Art.”

I went through all the times my mother offered up those blanket statements about her wonderful artistic talents—usually by the fireplace while she carved fake fossils into flat rocks dug out of the Unknown Branch of the Saluda River—there at the post office while my dad and I waited in line. She sold these forgeries down at the Dixie Rock and Gem Shop, or to tourist traps at the foot of Caesar’s Head, way up near Clingman’s Dome, or on the outskirts of Helen, Georgia. My mother’s life could’ve been worthwhile and meaningful had she not been burdened with motherhood; had she not been forced to work as a bookkeeper/receptionist/part-time homemade dredge operator at the family river rock business; had she not met my father when her own family got forced to move from Worcester, Massachusetts, because her daddy was in the textile business and got

transferred right before my mother's senior year in high school. There were no art classes in the schools here; she could only take advanced home ec and learn how to make fabric and dye it, just as her father knew how to do at the cotton mill, more than likely.

"I could've gone to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston had I not been forced to take an English class that I'd already taken up in Massachusetts, and sit next to your father who cheated off my paper every time we took a multiple choice test on *The Scarlet Letter*. I blame all of this on *The Scarlet Letter*, and how your dad had to come over on more than one occasion for tutoring," my mother said about once a week.

I didn't get the chance to ever point out to her how Nathaniel Hawthorne lived in Massachusetts. A year after her death I figured out the math of their wedding date and my birth, and didn't get to offer up anything about symbolism, or life mirroring art, et cetera.

My mother died of flat-out boredom, disdain, crankiness, ennui, tendonitis from etching fake fossil ferns and fish bones into rocks, and a giant handful of sleeping pills. Her daily allotment of hemlock leaves boiled into a tea probably led to her demise, too, if not physiologically, at least spiritually.

According to my father, the South Carolina Funeral Directors Association didn't require normal embalming and/or crematorial procedures should the deceased have no brothers or sisters, and should said dead person's parents both be dead. Looking back, I understand now that my father made all this up. At the time, though, I just sat on the bench seat of his flatbed, my mother in back wrapped up in her favorite quilt inside a pine coffin. "We're going up to Pointy Henderson's, and he'll perform the cremation. Then we'll scatter your mother down by the river so she can always be with us."

Mr. Henderson was a potter, and president of the local Democratic Party. About once a year he came down from the mountains and enlisted young democrats—and we all joined seeing as once a year, too, he held a giant shindig that included moonshine for everyone willing to either vote right or, if under aged, at least put yard signs up.

"Cremation takes two to three hours at 1400 to 1800 degrees," Rick Henderson said when we got there. "I did the research long ago." He got his two daughters to heft my mother off of the truck and carry

the box to the groundhog kiln, which appeared to be dug into the side of an embankment. “My fire reaches near two thousand degrees on a good day,” he said. “After Mrs. Looper cools, I’ll go to ashing down the hard bones, if that’s all right.”

My father nodded. He’d done his crying the night before, as had I. “We’ll come back in a couple days,” my father said.

“You and me’s kind of in the same business, I guess,” Henderson said. “You take rock and sell it to people who want paths to their front doors and walls to keep them out, and I take clay and sell it to people who want bowls on their tables.”

I didn’t get the connection. I guessed that clay was kind of like ground-down rocks, to a certain extent. I looked at Mr. Henderson’s daughters, who were my age, and were so inordinately beautiful that no one spoke to them in school. If Homer came back to Earth and met the potter’s daughters, he’d’ve had to rewrite the Siren section of *The Odyssey*. One of them said, “Sorry.”

I said, “I’m a democrat,” for I could think of nothing else. “I’m thinking that some laws need changing.”

The other daughter said, “Sorry.”

My father and I drove back home, as they say, in silence. Right before my mother slumped over in her chair dead at the age of thirty-three, she had set her last pancake-sized rock, a fake millipede etched into it, down on the stool. For her carving tool she’d been using a brand-new single-diamond necklace my father bought her. I don’t know if her engagement ring, which she normally used for such forgeries, had worn out or not. My father had bought the necklace as a way to celebrate a new account he’d won—as the sole river rock supplier for an entire housing tract deal down in Greenville that would include a hundred patios, and driveway-to-front-door paths.

I sat at the kitchen table reading a book about three out of the four ancient elements. My mother had just gotten up to go to the bathroom, I assumed. She said, “I could’ve gone to the Maryland Institute College of Art. Here I am walking to the bathroom one more time.”

Those were her last words, as it ended up. “Mom’s last words were ‘Here I am walking to the bathroom one more time,’” I said. My father, without offering a reason, performed a u-turn in the middle of highway 108 and drove back to Mr. Henderson’s. I said, “I guess she didn’t know those would be her last words.”

“Maybe she was a visionary. Maybe Heaven’s just one giant toilet, Stet. I don’t mean that in a bad way.” I knew that he did mean it that way, though. My father didn’t cotton to there even being a Heaven or Hell. In the past he had said, “If there was a Hell in the middle of the planet like some idiots believe, I think I’d’ve seen a flame or two shoot out from as deep as I’ve dug for rocks over the years.”

We drove back up Mr. Henderson’s rocky driveway not two hours since we first arrived. He had already shoved my mother into the chamber. My father told me I could sit in the truck if I wanted, which I did at first until I realized that I had something important to say to the potter’s daughters, something that might prod them into seeing me as special, something that might cause both of them to be my dates at the prom in a few years. I got out and stood there. Mr. Henderson explained something about the firing process, about the wood he used, something about how he can perform cremations cheaper than making his own pots because there’s no glaze involved. His daughters walked up and stood with us twenty feet from the kiln door. I said, “My mother was an artist.”

They said, in unison, “Sorry.”

Smoke blew out of the kiln’s chimney, and my father said, “Well I don’t see any smoke rings going skyward. Which means I don’t see a halo. Come on, son.”

Not until I had graduated from college with a few degrees—my father had told me to get my fill of education before coming back to run the family river rock business—and married my wife did I understand the backtracking to Mr. Henderson’s makeshift crematorium: My father wanted a sign from the Otherworld, just in case his final plan bordered on meanness or immorality.

I’m not sure what we spread down by the Unknown Branch of the Middle Saluda River. It’s not like I shadowed my father for two days. I imagine he flung plain hearth ash down on the ground. At the post office, though, my father told Randy the post office guy, “They all weigh the same. You can weigh one, and the postage will be the same on all of them.”

There were six manila envelopes. Randy said, “Don’t you want return addresses on these?”

“I trust y’all,” my father said. “I trust the postal service.”

To me, Randy said, “You applying to all these colleges?” He sorted through the envelopes. “I guess you are, what with all these admissions departments.”

I said, “Sorry,” like a fool, for the words of the Henderson girls rang in my ears still. I’d learned long before not to contradict my father. A man with a river rock business doesn’t keep many belts around. I could go throughout life saying my father never spanked me, but I couldn’t say that I’d never been stoned, in a couple of ways.

Driving back home my father said, “She got her wish. She finally got to attend all those art schools.” Then he pulled off to the side of the road, past a short bridge. Beneath it ran a nameless creek. I got out, too, and together we took drywall buckets out of the back of the truck, trampled our way down the embankment, and scooped up smooth rounded mica-specked flagstone, each one the size of an ice cube, each one different in glint.