

# DOROTHY'S URN

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Patricia Harman

My husband is crying in his sleep again. In the morning, he won't remember his tears; he won't recall the grief that overwhelms him. After I hold him and tuck the covers around his neck I pad out to the living room. Outside fog shrouds everything.

I stand at the windows, looking out through my reflection, to the bare oak and maple. White ghost woman in her white terry cloth robe, short graying hair, middle-aged flower child. Snow litters the ground in patches, circles the bottoms of trees like lace. I can't see the Gazebo out in our yard. I can't see the lights from the cottages on the other side of the cove. The mist is so thick it muffles even the highway noises, a half-mile away. There's not a sound. How much of my life I live listening.

When I step out of the house in the morning, I'll listen for bird sounds, cardinals and robins and wrens. I'll listen to music as I drive to work and the news on West Virginia NPR. In the women's health office I share with my gyn husband, I'll listen to heart sounds and lung sounds. I'll listen with my fingers to a woman's breast, for lumps. I'll listen with my fingers as I probe her body for swollen or tender ovaries. I'll listen to what she tells me about her life, both sadness and joy, and I'll listen for what she leaves out.

My husband's mother is dying. For weeks Dorothy's been dying. On Saturday, just as I'm getting used to the thaw, it turns winter again. I wake surprised to see snow pouring down in small hard flakes; pouring like rain with no wind and no swirls. Already, the beehives, below the barren vegetable garden, look like small igloos. The pine trees are weighted with nine inches of white, their limbs pulled down toward the ground.

By sunset, the snow stops, and the low heavy clouds are lined with red. On the porch, mourning doves gather to glean seeds that have dropped from the bird feeders. Eleven plump smooth gray birds waddle just five feet away from the glass door. I wander downstairs to Tom's studio.

“What you makin’?” I ask as I stand in the doorway and watch my husband pull the soft pale gray clay up into a vessel, his broad shoulders hunched over the pottery wheel, his short hair silver in the fading golden light. “A cookie jar?”

“It’s an urn for my Mom.” Tom gives me a sideways grin. “She requested it for her remains.”

“A funeral urn? Doesn’t it make you too sad? Seems kind of morbid.” He shrugs.

“No, not really. Well maybe a little, but I like doing it for her.” Tenderness of love. Too sad for me.

Outside at the feeder a redheaded flicker picks through the millet. When he leaves, a downy woodpecker takes his place. There are chickadees, slate colored juncos, wrens, finches, and house sparrows; then a gang of grackle comes in like the mafia, rowdy brown and black speckled birds that gobble up the food, chasing all the smaller more docile birds away.

On the turnpike from Pittsburgh to Toledo, with the polished urn wrapped in two peach-colored towels in my lap, we fly by snow-covered cornfields. Living in West Virginia, you forget that the earth is not, everywhere, wrinkled. Without mountains, the sky curves over us like a blue cereal bowl.

Every exit across northern Ohio looks the same. There’s a McDonald’s or a Wendy’s with a service station, conveniently located at fifty-mile intervals. To the north the sky gets lighter, and you know that Lake Erie is out there. Grey water, crashing onto the break-wall of small tourist towns. When you pull off at a rest stop, sea gulls patter across the parking lot. We are on our way to visit Tom’s mother in the nursing home.

Grandma Dorothy, once a miniature powerhouse, is now a husk of her self, dried up and ready to blow away. She’s refusing food and iv fluids. I think that she wants to die, and I can’t blame her. It’s a cruel insult to be awake and aware ‘til the end, just waiting for your heart to give out or a blood clot to float into your brain.

Up until just six months ago, the five-foot-tall matriarch ruled the roost, like a banty; she let everyone in the family know what was expected and usually got it. I remember the first time I met Dorothy, in the little brick house on Colonial Drive.

It is harsh midwinter. Dean, Tom's Dad, was still alive then. This was almost thirty years ago. Mica, my first son by a different father, was still little. The three of us had hitchhiked up from our communal farm in Roane County, West Virginia, smelling of wood smoke, wearing coveralls and jeans. Tom was bringing me home to meet the family.

These were difficult times for our parents. I see that now. Mothers and fathers couldn't comprehend how their children of promise, Eagle Scouts, altar boys, American Legion Outstanding Students, and valedictorians were standing before them with long hair and beards, braless, jobless, and happy.

We knock once, and Tom opens the door to the kitchen. He doesn't wait for an answer, just walks right in. This is the home he'd lived in from birth to nineteen. There we are in our ragged clothes with our patched sleeping bags, our backpacks, and muddy boots. "How do you do," I greet the parents, ever a nice girl, almost bowing.

The visit lasts two stiff semi-congenial days, and then Dorothy stalks into Tom's old bedroom. We are still tangled in bed, under the covers. "Your father and I want you to leave," she says formally, looking only at Tom, but I know she means me. "You are not welcome here." The five foot tall woman never minced words, and rarely ever second-guessed her self. Maybe we should have known, that our sleeping together, in her house, unmarried, wasn't acceptable.

Mica is confused. "What's happening," he asks as we pack up our stuff. "Are we leaving already?"

"We have to go now," I tell him. "Grandma Harman doesn't want us here." I could have made up a story, but I told the truth. We're not welcome here.

The three of us walk away, with our thumbs out, down Union Ave, our packs on our backs, holding sad little Mica's hand. A scarlet letter is burned on my chest. The sun is out, and a light snow whips silver around us.

We didn't return to Fostoria for two years. When we knock the second time, still wearing coveralls and smelling like wood smoke, we have another baby, Orion. We enter the kitchen, the four of us, Tom, Mica, Orion in the baby backpack, and me, looking like characters

in a dust bowl movie, but this time we're married, and that makes all the difference.

At the toll way exit, south to Fostoria, we pass the Lowes Home Improvement and Wal-Mart. I know all the landmarks. Every two weeks we've taken this same five-hour trip from our home near Morgantown in West Virginia to Independence Hall in Fostoria, Ohio.

Last time, Dorothy confided in me. "They call this Independence Hall, but it's an old people's home. Look around. You see anyone who looks independent?" She still had her sense of humor. This was before she stopped eating and went down hill, a slow suicide, tired of hurting, tired of wearing diapers and having people tell her what to do. Dorothy just wants to go home to heaven and be with her love, Dean, dead now for thirty years. They will play hearts and poker, laugh and drink beer. Sometimes they'll dance to old tunes by Bing Crosby.

Tom and his oldest brother, Joe, slouch on the sofa watching a muted poker game on tv. The nursing home room smells of urine and disinfectant. Over their heads on the window ledge, Dorothy's white and gold porcelain urn glows like the full moon. Orion, our middle son, a grown man now, with a daughter of his own, sits next to them, tears streaming down his face. You can't hear him crying.

I am perched on a hard chair next to Dorothy's bed with Lissie, Orion's little girl, on my lap. Lissie's small hand and my hand, rest softly on Dorothy's, which encircles the hospital bed rail. The four-year-old strokes the emaciated wrist lined with blue veins.

"Grandma likes that," I tell my grand daughter. "It makes her feel better." We are bound in our femaleness to the dark regions. The deathbed is not as difficult for women to face. Death, like birth, we are bred for.

"It won't be long," I tell Dorothy. Her eyes are moist, and I know she understands.

"I hope so..." she says so softly. "I'll miss you." She glances across the room to the sofa; I know she means not just me, but her boys. We both have three boys.

"We'll be together again soon," I tell my 69-pound mother-in-

law who, thirty years ago, when she was 96 pounds, threw me out of her house. “This life on earth is the blink of an eye. That’s what the Bible says, anyway.” I’m not big on scripture, but I remember that much.

“I hope so,” Dorothy says again.

“I know so,” I whisper into her ear, with more confidence than I feel, but I can’t tell if she hears me. She’s collapsed in on herself, her dry mouth half open; her brain still sharp and her heart still beating, but the rest of her, one step closer to the grave.

The service is without a casket. Dorothy wished to be cremated, and she watches over us from an oak stand in the hand-made porcelain urn; the vessel thrown on the wheel, fired and glazed by her youngest son, Tom.

Pastor Nelson presides over Dorothy’s non-traditional service. At the end, when he asks if anyone has anything to say, we sit silent, shifting in the hard oak pews. Someone rustles their program. If we opened our mouths, our tears would fly out of us like wet leaves after rain.

My husband’s older brothers, Joe and Dave, their wives and children and grandchildren sit in the first four benches. Then comes our family, our three grown boys, handsome in their dark suits; the ones we bought for the oldest one’s wedding. Next to Orion sits his wife Ari and their little girl. Everyone keeps his or her head down, afraid, like school children, that if we look up we’ll be called on.

I look over at my husband, his tired, tear-stained face. Tom isn’t sure about an after life, so his sadness is more profound. I don’t go in for angels and harps, but I have no doubt that the spirit lives. What is essential about Dorothy is not in the urn.

As a midwife, I know that when a baby is born, the whole universe moves over. That first breath changes everything, even the alignment of the stars. And the death of one person changes everything, too.

The congregation is singing the closing hymn now, their voices gaining strength after the first weak notes. *Come home, come home, You who are weary, come home; Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, Calling, calling come home!*

Lissie leans over and hands me the drawing she’s made on the back of the Lutheran Church pledge card. “It’s the sun coming up for Grandma Dorothy,” she whispers.