

## My Grandmother's Funeral

My husband, two children, and I make the trip  
from Atlanta, Georgia to Southeastern Virginia  
as we do every year at Christmas,  
when we pile into the car with dogs and gifts  
and grumbles of  
“Too many suitcases--  
“What were you thinking?”  
while loading and unloading the car.  
But once settled in, irritation is glossed  
by egg nog, mistletoe,  
and warm gatherings  
at my grandmother's house.

But this is not Christmas:  
it's mid-October.  
And this time we don't drive:  
we fly,  
because we need to get there fast,  
because funerals don't wait,  
because we didn't plan on this,  
because it's all we can do.

The day of the ceremony  
we take turns  
taking showers,  
brush our hair,  
wear skirts and suits—  
just like we do each Christmas Eve.

But this time she will not greet us  
with fragranced, soft skin,  
sparkling costume jewelry,  
and a hug that squeezes out  
the sad.

This is when we need that hug.

I never told her  
how soft her skin was,  
how she smelled of lilacs,  
how much I need her hugs.

[new stanza]

My brother will carry the coffin.  
He worries that his shoes are scuffed,  
his thrift store suit too tattered.  
He tries to dye his shoes  
the last moments before leaving,  
hoping they will dry in the sun.

But we all know  
that she wouldn't mind the shoes or suit.  
She only cared about the person beneath the surface.

In her last hours  
in a morphine sleep  
my brother whispered in her ear,  
"I love you."  
He was sure her rhythmic snoring paused.  
He was sure she heard him,  
certainty easing pain.

Later that day,  
my aunt held the phone to my grandmother's ear  
so I could say from far away,  
"You are everything to me."  
Through tears and breaking voice,  
I tried to be as clear, as strong, as she.  
But her snoring never broke an even tempo.  
I don't think she heard me.  
I think I called too late.

My father says repeatedly,  
as if trying to convince himself,  
"She wanted it this way."

And this is true.

Every time I saw her,  
every Christmas, for years,  
maybe for a decade,  
she'd say,  
"Don't you be sad for me when I'm gone.  
I want you to know that I'm ready any time."

[new stanza]

She'd been ready for years.

But I never was,  
which she knew,  
which is why she kept reminding me  
that she was at peace with eminent end,  
which is why my father keeps reminding us  
that she wasn't sad to die.

So why are all of us so sad?

My mother,  
my grandmother's **ex** daughter **in-law**,  
prefixes and suffixes offering good excuse for distance,  
was my grandmother's best friend—  
indicative of how love abides  
when people are loving.

My grandmother answered all my mother's questions  
about teething, sleeping, potty training.  
Advice given  
only when asked,  
never unsolicited,  
knowing unsolicited advice is hostility.

My aunt, my age,  
the "saving grace"  
for a 45 year old woman who needs to nurture  
when her 3 teenagers won't stay home,  
speaks of my grandmother's address book—  
pages soft with age  
decades of dwellings  
scratched out when people moved,  
replaced with a new house number,  
street, and zip code,  
kept up to date until the end—  
though the handwriting becomes less precise.

Who will be the hub now?

Who will keep front doors wide open for anyone who's passing through?

Who will take the time to sit and talk

anywhere, at any time,  
knowing that conversation is all that matters,  
that dust and dishes never come between relationships,  
that heartfelt words are the source of life.

The only time she ended a conversation  
was when another one began  
and now.

Grandmother recorded her funeral on a cassette tape  
years before she died—  
her story, her life, in her voice.  
With pride in her eyes,  
she played it for us,  
at the kitchen table  
her art,  
the story of her life.  
We told her it was beautiful,  
but we didn't want to think of it  
didn't want to envision the end.

But with all she created  
in her very creative life,  
her funeral for herself  
was her most inspired piece—  
her life,  
her words,  
with music that meant the most.

This was her masterpiece.

Sitting in the church that afternoon in mid-October  
we hear that work again.  
The sun illuminates her face  
still within the coffin,  
her voice fills the sanctuary with softness,  
a southern grace,  
making it feel that she is with us.

I listen to her voice while looking at her face,  
so close to how it used to be,  
but so SO different.  
I'm hungry for her words

in her own voice,  
cling to every detail  
in ways I didn't when she was next to me:  
her life as a little girl,  
young Glenelle,  
in the North Carolina tobacco fields,  
mesmerized by the moon;  
her infatuation with my grandfather,  
the dashing soldier who came into the diner where she worked,  
ate fried chicken and collard greens,  
said they were the best he'd ever had;  
the deep, enduring love for her four children  
and their seven children,  
and their six children,  
earning the titles Grand and Great.

An oral story full of love, friendship, laughter, pain  
and music.  
She speaks of peace with death,  
as she always did in life.

Then in the church  
with her so close,  
her story ends.  
Her voice is gone,  
abrupt, complete  
silence.

No more words, no music;  
no Glenelle, no Grandmother,  
no mother, wife, friend, confidante.  
No comfort.

Just silence.

Her stillness in the coffin  
and empty  
hollow  
aching  
sunlit  
silence.