

Judith Harway

Chapter from *Sundown: A Daughter's Memoir of Alzheimer's Care* (Branden Books, 2014)

To Dust You Shall Return

"I've told my children that when I die, to release balloons in the sky to celebrate..."

-- Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

"Tell me," my father says, resting his hand on my arm, "do you know where your mother's ashes are right now?"

I am caught off guard. Of course I know. He has them. They are in a cardboard box on top of his dresser, less than twenty feet from the sofa where we sit as this conversation unfolds.

But, contrary to my assumption, his memory is not the problem. "It's just a box," he explains. "It says nothing. Maybe we should stick a label on it."

Tears well in my eyes. "But Daddy, you said..." Then I think better of it and shut up. He said lots of things before and after Mom's death, things he meant as comfort to us, and they all dissolve into what he says now: "Of course, it won't change anything."

Eight months earlier, after filling out my mother's death certificate, the hospice nurse handed me the business card of a funeral home a few blocks from my house. It's directly across the street from the elementary school my kids attended, facing the crosswalk where I taught them to look both ways and try to make eye contact with drivers to be sure they see you. It's kitty-corner from the firehouse, behind the public library. I had walked past it literally thousands of times without noticing it was there.

And what a peculiar call to make. "Hello. My mother just died. I'm looking for someone to handle her body," I said, struck by how lame and matter-of-fact my words sounded. I didn't want anyone to handle her body. In the four hours between her death and that call, I had already come to realize that I didn't want to handle it myself. It was no longer the unresponsive but familiar body I had embraced and kissed and wept over when I arrived that morning, the diminished body I had tried to lift into one last hug, the body from which I had come; the face was graying, and the flesh cooling as though packed with ice. It was no longer *her* body. It was something she had left behind. I did not want it near me, and I did not want anyone to take it away.

We met with the funeral director later that afternoon, around the same time his staff collected my mother from the nursing home. He worked hard to keep the mood light, running through a series of jokes so sappy we laughed out of pity. "Look at my *Pride and Joy*," he crowed, opening his wallet to show us photos of two brands of dish soap. *My mother died today*, I thought, seething; my father, ever the gentleman, validated this idiotic patter with quiet nods and grins. Then there was the infernal jargon of the profession: what *final repose* might we desire for her *cremains*?

My sister and I exchanged glances and rolled our eyes. Dad looked down and fidgeted: on this, the worst day he'd ever faced, a stranger expected him to hurry into a decision about what to do with what remained of the love of his life. I had already voiced my objections to embalming and burial, hoping that my revulsion would reinforce Dad's

inclination toward cremation. Then my sister spoke. “You know,” she said, evoking a circle of friends with whom my parents had shared the happiest summers of the happiest years of their lives, “Rose and Lynn sprinkled their husbands in the lake on Cape Cod.”

Dad brightened. Cremation it was. He chose the plainest container for Mom’s ashes. The funeral director assured my father that the simple cardboard box would be no extra cost, though the charge for it on the bill we eventually received was \$170.

My mind dials back to when my oldest dog died a few years ago, and I asked the vet how we would know that the ashes returned to us from the crematorium were hers. I trust this vet: I’ve known him for fifteen years, he’s cared for all of our pets, and he gave my daughter her first job. His answer came with a shrug: “We’ve never had any complaints.” Because Jackie, the dog, was a passionate swimmer, my kids waded out into Lake Michigan in April, a freezing proposition, tossing those dear ashes we assumed to be hers to the wind and waves.

And now, on my father’s dresser, there’s this cardboard box. “Do you like the idea of a label?” he asks. “Don’t you think we should let future generations know what’s in here?” He’s had second thoughts about scattering her ashes, and who can blame him? It won’t change anything.

About a year before we became parents, my husband and I traveled the Canadian tundra by canoe with a small group led by a wildlife biologist. We had big dreams and little sense of how arduous the trip might be. Driving over forty-eight hours from Milwaukee to Fort Smith, I was stricken with a stomach bug that we wishfully misread as morning sickness. Our fifth anniversary passed on the road, frequently parking our 1973 VW van on the shoulder so I could vomit into ditches choked by lupine and fireweed. At last we found ourselves camped beside a crystalline lake in Wood Buffalo National Park, breathlessly watching a flock of sand-hill cranes graze a marshy meadow, hoping that the wooziness which dogged our steps on solid ground – definitely flu, now that we both were afflicted – might pass before next morning when we’d lash our canoes to the pontoons of a couple of floatplanes and fly north.

Once aloft, my discomfort was compounded by the fact that my husband and I had boarded different aircraft. From a porthole of that single-engine Otter, I watched the infinity of the arctic landscape rolling out below, the scanty, haggard trees of the taiga dwindling to endless tundra. My teeth chattered with the plane’s vibration. The delicate white wings which carried my husband glistened like a tiny cross against a dark, water-pocked land that had nothing to hide. How, I wondered, could that miniature X mark the spot where the most important person in my life drifted improbably through air?

The planes touched down, side by side, on a broad expanse of water. Anywhere else, this would have qualified as a lake, but as August dawns, high arctic rivers spread across flat reaches of permafrost in endless oxbows and vast, meandering pools that vary crazily in depth. We splashed into shallows at the edge of twenty pellucid acres, our first introduction to the river we were to paddle for the next two weeks.

I remember each of our companions on that trip with affection, but the one who returns to my thoughts most vividly is Carl, a sweet, guileless man with a goofy sense of humor. Once, as my husband and I strained to catch up after detouring to explore, we heard his voice singing out across choppy water: “It’s Beetlebaum!” Easily twenty-five

years my senior, Carl was protective of me to the point of chivalry and took great delight in making me laugh.

Carl was the first mortician I had ever met. His father started a small-town funeral home, and he grew up helping out behind the scenes, eventually taking over the family business. “Isn’t that awfully depressing work?” I asked, and he shook his head: “It’s wonderful. It’s all about people. I work with folks when they are most in need, and I love being able to help.”

My curiosity piqued, I peppered Carl with questions, like an anthropologist gathering data on an unfamiliar culture. He answered with endless patience, explaining the process of embalming and the psychology of open casket funerals, both of which I found mystifying and creepy; sometimes his eyes misted up as he recollected the grief of particular clients.

During one of our conversations Carl told me a strange, apocryphal story about a corpse being exhumed after five years to ascertain how it was holding up. It’s possible that this was an urban legend, but I found myself riveted by the weird details: because the body had been embalmed and “laid to rest” within a high quality casket, it was well preserved and completely recognizable, the only blemish being some mold growing on the face. Then he laughed and remarked that most embalming jobs would not look so great five years out: unless the casket had a remarkable seal, vermin and moisture would get in, and the resulting decay might take a little longer but would be no more lovely than leaving a body to the natural bacteria that cause it to swell with gas and turn the flesh all runny. “Death isn’t pretty,” he said, “but if folks want to think that Grandpa will always look the way they remember him, that’s OK by me.”

The other day, my father asked me again about the label for Mom’s ashes. Again he said “so that future generations will know what’s in there.” Why keep ashes lying around the house in a cardboard box for future generations? For that matter, why try to preserve a body from natural decay? If we believe that the essence of the person departs at death, that the soul departs, why worry about the remains at all?

I didn’t know until I looked it up that strict Jewish tradition does not condone embalming: because the body contains a soul which is due back to its creator at the moment of death, Jews bury their dead within twenty-four hours to make good on a sacred debt. Embalming prevents the body from returning to its source (“for dust you are and to dust you will return”); for similar reasons, cremation is unacceptable.

Faced with the question of what to do with my mother’s body, however, tradition and law never had much purchase. My father, skeptical of religion and fearful of emotion, favored a no-fuss approach. This jibed with my own disdain for euphemism. I grew up among Catholic playmates who were told, “Your puppy has gone to sleep,” or “Grandma is resting in the arms of Jesus.” Even in first grade, though, I knew a lie when I heard one: the puppy had been flattened by a truck, and Grandma was resting underground in the cemetery. According to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the ground-breaking thanatologist who described and named five stages of grief, “the elaborate expensive display of an open casket with all the makeup... enforces the belief that the person is only asleep, and ... would only help to prolong the stage of denial.”

The last evening we spent on Wolf River, Carl broke out a big flask of Johnnie Walker hidden in his pack and passed it around. There was a sense of pride in our circle: we had put many miles of tricky water behind us, dogged by heavy winds and rain; we had scouted for wolf dens, tracked caribou, laid side by side beneath green curtains of aurora; we had grown close and comfortable in one another's company. My husband and I took some friendly ribbing about our fallacious assumption that we had started a pregnancy at the start of the trip, and everyone made us promise to write as soon as we actually became expectant parents. We ran through all the inside jokes we had accumulated in sixteen days of isolation, and toasted our commitment to keep in touch.

All good intentions aside, life is a process of separation: after a few years of exchanging cards, we lost track of these dear people. If Carl is still alive, he must be nearly eighty. In the years since we paddled together across the tundra, the only other funeral director I've ever met is the sleaze-ball we entrusted with my mother's body, a fact which makes my memory of Carl more precious today: I know he would have honored my wish to let go, as well as my father's need to hold fast to an unlabeled cardboard box full of ashes.

What is left of my mother's body, then, is a carton of chalky grey dust that I trust has something to do with her flesh, with her being. Although she was raised to believe in a cloud called Heaven, a place so perfect the dead would give thanks for dying, she taught her own daughters to cherish the here and now, to love life on this earth because it is all we've got. That's why, when I imagine Heaven, it looks much like the tundra: pristine and windswept, lined with caribou trails and pocked by wolf dens in the lee of eskers. The face of eternity is frozen and flowing at once, its waters sustaining flocks of snow geese and teeming with arctic char. The light is relentless, so clear that when you look downstream you can see into tomorrow, where low-bush berries ripen vividly towards autumn. It is a landscape that owes nothing whatever to man.