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Life at the Cemetery

My heart lives at Hillside Memorial Park. This cemetery is serenity to me; my place of solace. When I feel lost in a tormented storm of confusion and conflict, I find truth there. I can cry if I want to without worry or care if anyone is looking. It is a rare freedom to unburden oneself, free from others' reactions and perceptions. There are usually no other visitors around but even if there are, we are friends and all of one mind. Outside in this world under the clouds and sky my tears pour out and when they do it feels good not to be hidden in a room, or sitting in a coffee shop stifling my emotions, hoping no one will notice. In this sacred space, I talk to my beloved Micaela and I am honest. I reveal everything and nobody counters telling me to feel otherwise. In the air of the cemetery all feelings are simply heard and accepted.

I.

Sometimes after I drop Maya, my six-year old daughter, off at school I head over to the cemetery for a little while before getting started with the business that fills my day. This time-out in the morning is a buffer between me and the normal world; a space that allows me to transition from the person I am inside to the one I'll show the world around me. I go to my baby's grave to think and be at peace with myself. And when I feel lost in a tormented storm of confusion and conflict, as I so often do lately, I can find my truth there. For me, Hillside Memorial Park is a place of solace.

Usually there is no one else visiting when I arrive at the cemetery. I pull the car up to the curb about twenty feet from Micaela's grave and scan the area for the thin birch tree that stands just east of her spot. As I turn the motor off, I survey the land to see who has left what this week. If it is just before or after

a holiday there will be plenty of balloons, flowers, and other seasonal trinkets. If it is any day during the week other than Wednesday, there will be a spattering of bouquets and plastic pots of flowers. If the potted plants have blown over from the wind, I stop to stand them back up as I am passing by, because that just seems like the right thing to do. If it is Wednesday, the grass is bare because the grounds workers have cleared and thrown away all the flowers and grave decorations to mow the lawn early in the morning, as the sign posted at the cemetery entrance declares.

During the first year after Mica died, Maya and I used to like to bring lots of little toys and mementos to leave at the graveside. Maya took great care to place sweet treats for her little sister on or near her marker. After the candies were all laid out, she would undoubtedly ask, “Mommy can I eat this one?” We arranged other small plastic toys, Winnie-the-Pooh, Tigger, Dora, and other Disney figures, angels, butterflies, all kinds of things we thought were pretty and that she would have liked. We’d leave two dolls, one that resembled each of the girls, lying together so Micaela wouldn’t be alone. When Maya and I had special days, we always tried to bring a piece of it back to share with Micaela, like the small shells Maya collected at Newport Beach. This I suppose was our way of continuing life all together. Others may view these rituals as acts of denial, but the bereaved are not so much in denial—I am all too aware of my child’s death. Rather our actions amount to a rejection of the unacceptable; a triumph of love over death, for death cannot sever the connection of love between a mother and her child. Despite death, the fact is that my daughter continues to be a part of my life everyday. I would write Mica letters when I sat at her grave and leave them in a small box that contained precious keepsakes like the candle from her first birthday cake.

II

The first person I always see after I step out of the car is Carl Joe¹ and as I walk past him I can’t help but smile. I imagine him to have been a fun-loving, simple kind of guy who enjoyed cold beers and hanging with his buddies. An engraved quote at the bottom of his marker quips, “Dying to see you again.” I wonder if his friends still go out and remember him and think about him often. Carl was only in his thirties when he passed away and I don’t know what caused his death. I have never seen anyone there to visit him who I could ask. I keep walking across the familiar grass and greet young Thomas. He was actually eighteen when he died and there is an etching of him as a young man in military gear. But the picture of him that stays with me is the coloured photograph from when he was about nine years old, which is set in a ceramic oval in the middle of his marker. Thomas was an adorable freckle-faced kid with a sweet

smile and an all-American look—who had a brain tumor. His sister told me one day that he had had an operation when he was ten but the tumor grew back and he didn't make it the second time they tried to operate.

I like to sit with Micaela or lie down on a blanket and read a book, if it is a warm day. I don't pay much attention to the world around me or worry about what anyone may think. Sometimes a couple will come by to visit a parent, bring flowers, stay a few moments looking at the marker of their deceased and then leave. Sometimes people will come over and talk with me briefly. Solitude or simple, compassionate interactions, all of it is okay with me at the cemetery. One time a group of four high school boys were hovering over a small stone nearby. They were smoking and I asked them for a cigarette, just to be friendly. We talked for a while about the people beneath the double mother/son marker, which they stood staring down at. Sarah, Garrison's mother, died of cancer a couple of years prior to her son's death. Garrison's father had been out of the picture since he was born and so he was left under the care of his older brother when Sarah died. One night after drinking and doing drugs, Garrison overdosed and died, less than two years after his mother had passed. I think Garrison's friends had the feeling that it could have been any one of them. They postured in tough high school stances, but their reflective silence belied that they had been jolted into an all too harsh reality that they were not ready to handle.

Just to the left of Garrison is Emily's grave, which always has a pretty bouquet of purple flowers on it, no matter what day of the week it is. Her mom Jackie must get there before me on Wednesdays or maybe she leaves it on Tuesday night and somehow it doesn't get cleared away. Jackie and I see each other occasionally at the cemetery. Her daughter is buried about ten plots away from my baby. I remember about two years ago when we first met. I was there crying and she came over to me. We hugged and talked about how bad it is and how we hate when people ask us, "How are you?" She told me about what happened to Emily. Two kids from the local high school, who had supposedly been friends of her daughter, murdered her. Outrageously, one of them had actually come to and cried at the funeral before the police had unraveled the crime. As Jackie told me pieces of what had happened to her daughter, I realized I had heard the story before. I had seen the posters taped up in store windows all around Redlands shortly after my baby died. It displayed a picture of a beautiful, smiling dark-haired teenager who had gone missing. A couple of weeks later, the authorities found Emily's body in a shallow grave in the canyon and the story unfolded in the *Redlands Daily Facts*. I remember trying to avoid reading about it; I did not want to hear of another mother who lost her daughter. I was struggling and could not handle an ounce more of heartbreak, not even that of a stranger.

But I felt close with Jackie from the moment we met. We shared the ultimate bond of sadness. I told her I never for a moment imagined that my baby would die. It truly never occurred to me that my daughter could just be gone and that I would never have her again. I remember driving with Micaela strapped into her car seat one day shortly before she died. I was upset over something that I cannot now recall but I remember telling myself, “Well don’t worry; at least you will always have Micaela.” Jackie was a single mother who had served in the military. She told me she prayed every night that nothing would happen to her daughter; she always lived with the horrific knowledge that one’s worst nightmares can and do come true. I wonder what had happened to her in her life before this tragedy that gave her that terrible awareness. No matter what it was, I think this was worse than what she had been through before. We comfort each other briefly and it does help to be in the presence of another person who knows your pain. Jackie kindly tells me that it must be harder for me, having had so little time together with Mica. At least, she says, she had eighteen years with her baby. Emily’s cremated remains lie in a small grave with a black granite marker that bears her name and dates as well as her mother’s, with the death date as yet unnoted. The pretty photograph of Emily is laser etched into the India black stone, the same picture that was on all the “missing” posters, along with a smaller one of her horseback riding. Emily’s big smile is one that stays in your mind. I left a little angel at Emily’s grave one day, and Jackie left a small stuffed kitten for Micaela. Jackie promised me that Emily would watch over my daughter and stay close to her and it’s odd that even though I’m skeptical of an afterlife, it does make me feel better.

Micaela has many protectors at Hillside. Dell lies just two rows east of her in a double plot that had only her final date filled in. Every day Lupe, a gentle and elderly man would drive up with his big old Chevrolet and visit his departed wife. Lupe’s accent and gruff voice made it a bit hard for me to understand him but nonetheless we connected with scarce words. Lupe always greeted Maya by name, and reminded me that it was his daughter’s name too. Then he would proceed through his routine, dragging a folding chair from the large trunk of his car. He came everyday and sat with Dell for about an hour. He tended to her gravesite with great care, fresh flowers in the ground, a tasteful assortment of garden decorations, a wrought iron stand that rose up about five feet and curved into a hook that held a birdfeeder with rose-colored sugar water, delicate wind chimes, and the always attached, plastic covered Xerox of his wife’s obituary, telling her story and showing her photograph. Lupe and I would exchange a few polite words and then retreat into our private worlds, respecting each other’s purpose for being there. The stone on Dell’s grave has a laser-etched photograph of the couple together when they were much younger. I think it was a picture from their wedding. Lupe went to the cemetery every

day; he was still living with his wife, talking to her and spending his time with her. About two months ago when I went to see Mica there was fresh dirt on Dell's grave and I knew Lupe had died. I tried not to feel sad because I knew he wished to leave this world and be with his wife. Although he bore his grief bravely, life held no joy for Lupe since his wife had departed. He did not have to say so with words, it was obvious that he would always remain thoroughly entwined with the woman whom he had shared his life. In life and death, Dell and Lupe would always be together. Almost a year later, their stone is now filled in with Lupe's final date. I think about them when I go to visit my baby. Now the site is bare, no one decorates it anymore; it remains cleared and plain, like most of the others.

III

I never liked cemeteries growing up. They used to scare me. The idea of lots of dead bodies lying beneath the earth was nothing I even wanted to think about. I could never understand my best friend Monica who after school would go to Lincoln Park cemetery with other friends just to hang out. To her it was fun, cool. To me, it was just creepy. Like so many other Americans, young and old, I avoided real death as best I could and only dealt with it when I had no other choice. As a girl, I would turn my head away in the back seat of the car if we were driving past a cemetery. These places frightened me so I'd look away and close my eyes. When my great aunt Etta was dying in the hospital, my mom took me to visit her at her bedside, and I remember being aghast at her sickly appearance. I begged my mother not to tell me when she died but I overheard her tell my father a few days later and I quickly covered my ears. At age nine, death was a huge fear for me that I could not handle, and I tried my best to shut it out.

A couple of years later, my friend Susie called and told me rather casually that a boy named Mark in our sixth grade class had drowned. After hanging up the phone, I freaked out so badly that my parents did not know how to calm me down and I think I really unsettled my dad who just kept telling me to splash some cold water on my face. Mark had French kissed me the week before at a party when a group of kids were playing spin the bottle and this had made me, a painfully shy and innocent eleven year old, so uncomfortable I called my mom to pick me up but I would not tell her why. Mark asked me if I was leaving because of what he did and I lied and said "no." When I heard he had drowned, I felt shaken to the core. I thought it happened because of something I had done wrong. He had asked me just a few days earlier at school if I would "go out" with him and when I again said "no," he laughed and claimed he was glad because he was just joking. Mark and his uncle had jumped into

a river to go swimming but the undercurrent was too strong. His uncle barely survived and was not able to rescue Mark. Beyond my vague sense of shame, I felt overwhelmed by the fragility of life; the instantaneous and omnipotent grasp death holds on all of us. I feared that I too might die at any moment, if I simply took a wrong step or made a faulty move. My mom tried to comfort me and tell me life was not so random. As always her strength moved to reestablish order and control, but I was not convinced. I cried all night long for Mark, his uncle, and his family. The next day at P.S. 95, Mrs. Larritza, our teacher, looked very sad and Christine, another girl in the class, remarked on how puffy my eyes were, but needless to say, I did not attend the wake.

Everything is as different now as my childhood world of the Bronx is far away. California cemeteries are friendly and familiar places to me. I teach courses on Death and Dying, take my students to visit gravesides, and actually relish the opportunity to talk about issues surrounding death. I feel comfortable with the people who lie beneath the ground at Hillside. In fact, they have become a kind of community to me, the friends that surround my daughter, stay with her body, and keep watch over her when I am gone. Robert John Morgan, Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Air Force, stands guard over Micaela and makes sure she is protected. Carl Joe, Thomas, Tina, Dell and Lupe, they are always there in the same old spots as if waiting for my arrival. I greet them silently in my head as I walk across the grass to visit my girl. Passing the familiar names and faces time after time, I feel that we are all friends of an odd sort and this interconnectedness feels comforting to me.

The only thing I don't like are the too frequent disturbances of the newly deceased being placed into the ground. The additions and transitions upset my peace of mind. I am bothered by the burial precursors: the rolled out metal canopy that announces an upcoming funeral, the dug out pits with inhabited coffins waiting on the side, the wreaths of flowers pinned onto standing frames. I also do not care for the post funeral signs, which include an array of wilting flowers that cover a newly filled grave, or worse a flat rectangle of fresh dirt that stands out in contrast to the grass around it and remains anonymous, unmarked. Perhaps these ongoing indications of the end of life and the beginning of death resurrect in me buried emotions of grief-stricken loved ones in the throes of raw heartache. New death takes me back to the initial weeks after my baby died when shock and utter devastation engulfed me.

The area where Mica is buried is the section that is filling up fast now with new bodies interred every day. Recently when I went to visit, there was fresh dirt from a newly filled grave adjacent and just above or west of my daughter. I was indignant. I wondered who the deceased was, as the earth plot contained no clues to his or her identity in place yet, only a droopy single lily marked the site. It bothered me that I had no knowledge or control over who would lie so

close to my baby. Is this a good person? Someone who I want to be so near to my daughter? I regretted not having thought to buy that space for myself. No one had asked me if it was okay to bury this person right over my baby. Futilely, I am still trying to be her mother, protect and watch over her, gain a measure of influence in her life, or rather in her life after death. In this instance, I am troubled less by the transitions and more by my lack of control over anything. Perhaps these are not such different things.

Regardless, this cemetery is serenity to me. In this sacred space, I talk to Mica and I can be completely honest with her. I can reveal everything. I express what I am feeling quietly but out loud, and nobody counters and tells me that I should feel otherwise. I frequently tell my baby how much I miss her, how much it hurts that she is gone, and how sorry I am that I did not take better care of her. I do not have my mother there to shield me and not allow me to say or feel guilty in this way. For the truth is that I do, logical or not, it is my unfortunate reality. And in the air of the cemetery all feelings are simply heard and accepted. I can cry if I want to and not worry or care if anyone is looking. It is a rare freedom to unburden one's self completely free from others' reactions and perceptions. There are usually no other visitors around at the cemetery but even if there are, it does not matter, we are friends and all of one mind. Outside in this world under the clouds and sky my tears may pour out and when they do it feels good not to be hidden in a room, or sitting in a coffee shop stifling my emotions and hoping no one will notice.

¹Some names throughout have been changed to protect people's privacy.