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Grave Tending: With Mom at the Cemetery

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Key words: grief, cemeteries, death, autoethnography, loss, ritual

Abstract: This autoethnographic story shows the process of tending the graves of family members. In the past, the author reluctantly accompanied her mother on her visits to the family cemetery. Once there, she took on the role of distant observer as her mother took care of the family cemetery plots. When her mother becomes disabled, the author begins to arrange the flowers on the graves. Doing so leads her to examine the meaning of visiting the cemetery, feel and connect with her losses, and consider the customs she wants to be part of her own death. When her mother dies, the next generation of women in the family—the author, her sister, and sister-in-law—take on the role of tending the graves, connected in their love and respect for their mother and their feelings of family and family responsibility. This story examines the meanings of family rituals around death and how they are passed from generation to generation.

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References

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> "'Show me the manner in which a nation or community cares for its dead,' William Gladstone, the Victorian-era British prime minister, once remarked, 'and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land, and their loyalty to high ideals.'"
>
> (Quoted in KOERNER, 2000, p.52)

"Would you like to go by the cemetery?" I ask Mom, knowing she always is eager to go. It is July 2001 and I am visiting her in Luray, my hometown of 3000 people in rural Virginia.

"Oh, yes. I don't get there like I used to when I could drive. I'd go by the cemetery every Friday after I got my hair done. Sometimes more than that."

"What did you do there?" I inquire, so she can tell the story.

"Fix the flowers. Sometimes they'd fall out of the vases. I'd check the flag on Rex's grave to see if it had blown down, and I'd replace it if it was worn. I've put many a flag on his grave. I look after all their graves—Daddy's, Rex's, and Florence's."

"I know you do," I say. "You've always been the grave caretaker." [1]

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I drive down the familiar gravel road, past the sign on a post that reads "Evergreen Memorial Gardens Perpetual Care," then past the small, eight-by-eight-foot guard house with most of its white paint peeled off. A yellow strip, warning "Do not enter," wraps around the rickety front porch, making the shed look like a crime scene. Someone must be dead, I think, smiling at the joke inside my head.

"They need to fix this road," Mom says adamantly, her deep, southern accent strongest on the word "fix." I drive slowly, maneuvering not very successfully around the mud puddles fresh from the night's rain.

"They sure do," I say, as mud splashes on my mother's sparkling clean white Cadillac. We have this conversation every time we go to the cemetery. The road always has essentially the same pot holes, more or less filled with water depending on the weather.

"See the tombstones on that side over there," my mother directs, pointing to the left. When I utter uh-huh, she continues, "We wanted one for Rex, but they don't let you have no tombstones on our side, just the flat stones, and they're hardly big enough to write anything on except the name and date."

Though I know the answer, I ask, "Why not?" as much to make conversation as anything.

"They say they're too hard to mow around," Mom replies.

"Is that also why they make you put the flowers and flags in the urns on the stones?"

"Yes," she nods. "They remove any flowers you put anywhere else on the graves." I think about how the owners privilege convenience of maintenance rather than families' wishes.

"Look how our side has filled up," she says, as we turn to the right. "When we got this plot for Rex, he was the only one in this area. Now look, graves everywhere. I swear, more people are dying now than ever." She shakes her head.

Only one death per person, I think, but out of respect, don't say. "It just seems that way because you're older, so more people you know are dying," I do say.

"I don't know. I think more people are dying, period," she responds.

I look around. Red, white, and blue flags wave from vases; bunches of pink, red, white, and yellow plastic flowers predominate, broken up by an occasional blue or purple cluster. "Yeah, seems like a lot more," I relent.

Mom retells the story of getting the plot for my younger brother Rex, after he died in a commercial airplane crash in 1982 at the age of 29 (see ELLIS, 1993). "In the beginning, we had two plots, one for Daddy and one for me. Right there in the middle on that hill," she says, pointing to the highest part of the cemetery. "Then when Rex died, we needed three plots, so we moved down here nearer the road."

"What about Aunt Florence's plot?" I ask, trying to remember how they had acquired the fourth site.

"We bought that later. We were able to trade our old plots to someone who had another plot right beside Rex. So then all four of us could be buried together."

"Guess Art and I should get plots or figure out what we're going to do," I say, feeling a slight chill as I speak, contained by the normalcy with which Mom treats the subject of burial. "We'll probably be buried in Tampa." Actually I've assumed I would be cremated. It's easier, cheaper, and doesn't take up space. What difference does it make anyway? I don't say any of this.

"Well, Tampa is your home," Mom replies, "so it makes sense you'd be buried there." I think of how far away Tampa is from Luray. Surprisingly, I feel left out of my mother's plans, out of the family plot. I know she assumes that her other three children, myself included, will be buried with our spouses.

Maybe I *will* want to be buried instead of cremated, I think, in a place where someone might come and remember me, as we do now for my brother Rex, Daddy, and Aunt Florence. I realize I've never thought seriously about this before. My husband Art and I don't even have a will, I think, much less a cemetery plot. Even though he is 54 and I'm 49, we still react scornfully when telephone salesmen call to try to sell us cemetery plots. So much for being educated and prepared. [2]

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When I get back to Tampa, I talk these matters over with Art, who is Jewish. "I'd like to have a Jewish funeral," he says hesitantly. "It's our custom to be buried rather than cremated."

"It's okay with me," I respond, since I've not practiced my Lutheran religion since leaving Luray. "But you have to make the arrangements. You should get in touch with a Rabbi and we should have some connection with a synagogue." Delighted, Art agrees, though two years later, he still has not followed up, and I have not reminded him. We did, however, make a will and trust after his mother died in September 2001.

"We built that," Mom says about the stone mausoleum we drive by.

"Daddy did?" I ask, and she nods. "Of course, he couldn't have done it without you," I amend, remembering how, as secretary, Mom organized the family's small construction company.

"Ain't that the truth?" Mom responds.

Since there are only two names on the front of the mausoleum and ten vacant spaces, I ask her why more people weren't buried there. She says she doesn't know.

"That's where Clare is buried," she says, her attention now directed to her sister's plot farther along the road. "She don't have any flowers." She sighs, as we drive slowly past the unadorned grave. "When I could walk, I used to always pick hers up and put them in the vase if they had blowed out. Nobody takes care of her grave. Not like I take care of ours."

Thinking we've arrived at my family's graves, I press on the brake to stop just after passing Aunt Clare's grave. "No, up there," Mom says, "past the tree."

"Where you going?" she asks, when I apply the brake a second time. "Not this tree, the next one."

"Oh, yes," I say, feeling ashamed I don't remember where the family graves are. It's as though I block out the memory, like I block out the pain of loss. Perhaps I assume Mom will always know the way. Perhaps I don't really want to be here.

I recognize the three familiar graves in the distance decorated with some of the largest bunches of flowers in the cemetery.

It's clear someone takes care of these graves. A small American flag waves in the wind. "I see the flag," I say.

"I'd like a bigger flag, but they won't let you have one," my Mom says.

When I ask her if she wants to get out, she replies, "No, I can't walk on the grass anymore and it's uphill. I'll stay in the car. You go." Mom suffers with osteoarthritis and now can walk only with the aid of a walker. Yet it is still important to her to visit the graves, even if she can't get to them. I think how her deteriorating health has redefined and limited so many of her experiences, and how she still manages to find meaning in them. I hope I'm like that when I'm her age.

I breathe deeply as I get out of the car. I remember walking this same path at all three funerals: first, we buried my brother in 1982, then my dad in 1987, and finally my aunt in 1991. Each time I was in shock, somewhat removed, as though I were watching a movie, afraid that if I lost control, it would be gone for good. Today, this 20-yard walk continues to be a sobering experience, not something I enjoy. At the graves, as always when I visit, I wonder what I'm supposed to do. This is the first time Mom hasn't walked here with me. With her at my side, I'd stare at the grave markers and watch her pull weeds, arrange flowers, and tidy up the graves.

Suddenly, I notice that I'm standing on my brother's grave, and I move quickly to the side. Mom always said standing on a grave was bad luck. As kids, my siblings and I would dance around the graves we visited, touching them quickly with one foot when no adult was looking to see what would happen. It doesn't matter now, I tell myself. Mom has not said anything about this in years; anyway, I've seen her walk on the graves. Maybe that tale applies only to children. Or maybe it's okay to walk on the graves if you have a purpose, such as fixing the flowers.

I move back onto the ground over the grave where it is easier to tend the flowers. Noting the freshly planted grass just starting to peek up through the straw, I recall my sister-in-law saying the graves were a mess, because the owners had covered the sinking graves with fresh dirt. She had said not to tell Mom because it might upset her to know the sites didn't look their best. I'm glad to see someone has planted grass now. I quickly and half-heartedly adjust the plastic flowers—artificial flowers are so ugly, I think—and walk back. "Bye," I say as visions of my father, brother, and aunt flash into my head. They don't stay long. As usual, when I am at the graves, I push these memories away. Too many reminders here that they are gone, their bodies decayed.

Mom watches me walk back to the car. "I don't like those yellow flowers in Rex's vase," she says. "They don't go with the red ones."

"They look okay," I say, wanting her to feel satisfied. What difference does it make? They're only plastic flowers, I think to myself.

"They should fix this road," she says as we drive away. "That side," she says, "it's older. See the tombstones." [3]

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The next day I tell my mother that I saw some plastic flowers when I went to the new Wal-Mart. The store has been opened for several months, but its existence is still big news in town. "What about that Wal-Mart?" you can hear people saying to each other as they pass on the street or do business at the local bank. Mom has not yet been to Wal-Mart's because of her inability to walk more than a few steps. She got a wheelchair recently, and I am anxious for her to try it out, so I hold out the temptation of the plastic flowers to entice her to go for a ride.

"Were they nice ones?" she asks, and I know I've piqued her interest.

"Yes, and you can go with me to Wal-Mart's to get them," I say.

"How am I going to do that? I can't walk."

"I'll take you in your wheelchair."

"That's too heavy for you to get into the car."

"That's why we got the portable one," I respond, excitedly, dancing around as I speak, determined to break through Mom's tendency to say no to trying anything new.

"I'll be too heavy to push."

"That's why I work out with weights." I flex my arm muscles. "Come on, Mom. We'll have a blast. You can look around the store and buy what you need, instead of having to rely on someone else to get things for you. Remember how we used to shop together. You haven't shopped for six months."

"We'll see," she says, and I know I have her hooked. [4]

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Next day we go into Wal-Mart. I lift the chair out of the trunk and bring it to the passenger side. When she stands, I slide it under her and she plops down, winded by the effort. Still she reaches down to unfold the foot rests. "See, I told you it would be easy," I say, as I wheel her into the store. She greets several people as we enter and I can see her relaxing into the persona of a person in a wheel chair.

We locate the artificial flowers in the back of the store. The half-dozen bunches Mom picks out quickly fill the small basket I've placed on her lap. "Guess that's it," she says, stretching her neck to see what she's missing down the long aisle.

"Don't you want to shop some more?" I ask.

"The basket's full."

"I'll be back in a moment. Don't go anywhere."

She laughs a belly laugh. "Now just where do you think I'm going? I can't walk."

"I thought some good-looking man might try to pick you up and wheel you right out of here," I say, and she giggles.

"I ain't interested in no man," she says seriously.

I take the basket to the Courtesy Counter and ask the clerk if she will hold onto it for my mom who is in a wheelchair. "Certainly," she says. I pick up another empty basket. Six baskets and several hundred dollars of merchandise later, two very happy shoppers head for home. [5]

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The next day, I ask Mom if she wants to put the new flowers on the grave. She agrees, then says, "Oh, but Mr. Atkins is being buried today and I think it is at 11 o'clock. We shouldn't go during the funeral." Mom always knows who is being

buried and when, compliments of small town news casting and the obituaries in the local weekly newspaper.

"We'll be there before that," I say, looking at my watch. "It's only 9:30. On the way in, she again comments on the road and the mausoleum. When I again stop at the wrong tree, she gently says, "No the next one." This time we've not only brought new flowers, we also have a new flag for Rex's grave—another Wal-Mart find. "Look they're digging a grave," I say.

"That must be for Mr. Atkins," she says, turning to see. Two people are sitting under the tent; two others are bringing in the frame for the casket. Two are black; two are white; one woman and three men. I wonder what it is like to be a grave digger. Do you become immune to death? What happens when you are the grave digger and one of your relatives dies? I recall that a black man who worked for my father used my father's backhoe to dig graves. I doubt there are any black people buried in this cemetery. I wonder where they are buried. Maybe there are cemeteries on the other side of town, at churches on what is known locally as "Colored Hill."

"Put them on Rex's grave," she says, as I reach for the two bunches of multi-shaded purple flowers we have bought. "I guess you should take out the faded yellow and red ones?" she says questioningly. I nod and tenderly pull the new flowers out of the plastic bag. I recall the check-out clerk commenting on how pretty they were. I unroll and separate the two American flags. Mom takes one and I roll up the other. As I re-roll and place mine back into its plastic wrapper, I see Mom has re-rolled the one I gave her. "Oh, you want this one," she says. I gingerly take it from her.

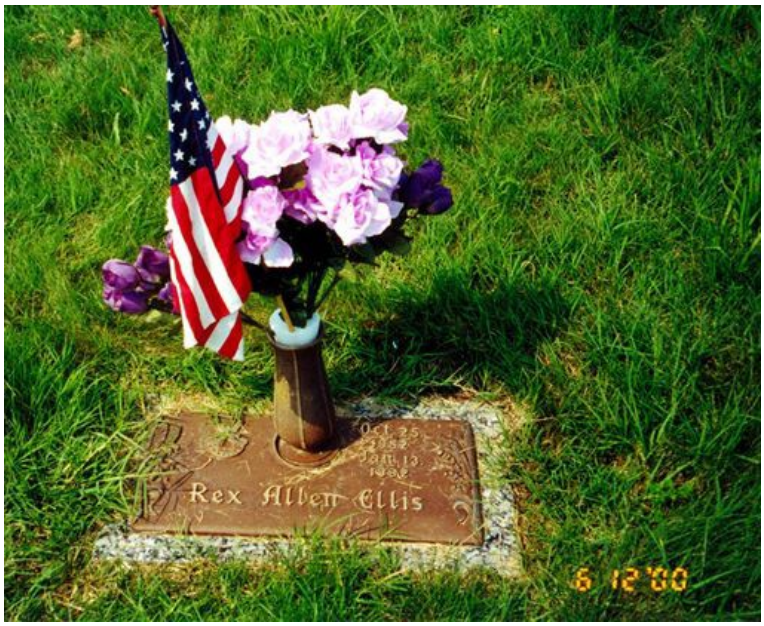
I think about how much she wants to help even though she is almost 85 and can't walk more than a few steps. I remember how she hands me items from the table to put back into the refrigerator after we eat, how she fixed my coffee the first day I was home. Since standing is so difficult for her, I'll bet it took twenty minutes to fill the pot, get the coffee, and measure it just right. I try to let her help, but it is easy to fall into doing everything for her. "I want to do for myself," she say sometimes when I reprimand her for doing too much. "As long as I can."

"How do you want the flowers?" I ask.

"Just so they're spread out," she says, "in the vase." She pulls her hands close then wide apart to demonstrate.

I walk to the graves, this time with a purpose. I feel the responsibility of placing the flowers correctly, which means doing it so that my mother is pleased. I take the red carnations out of my brother's urn, and shake off the pieces of foam on the bottom. Then I remove some pink ones slightly faded from the sun, and the yellow orchids. I place the two large bunches of purple flowers into the vase. I replace the tattered flag, making sure the new one stands tall above the flowers. What else do I do? She said to spread out the flowers, so I push them carefully with my hands, making sure not to put too much pressure on the stems, just as I would arrange fresh flowers. It's not easy in the small, narrow, fake gold vase with the rounded bottom. I worry I have spread the flowers so much they will fall out. I remove them and start over, this time inserting the stems in the Styrofoam

pieces in the bottom of the vase, the kind you get when you buy flowers from a florist. That will keep the flowers from blowing out of the vase. Finally, I again spread the flowers wide so they look plentiful.



I admire my work, then insert one stem of the discarded yellow flowers in the back of the vase, for depth and contrast. Not bad, I say, as I stand back. I will go to the car and ask Mom if she thinks the yellow flowers go with the purple. I'll let her choose.

No, I want to make the decision. I bet she'll like that I care enough to decide. She has had to decide all the time. I like them, I say out loud, then move to my father's grave. I remove the discolored flowers and then the yellow ones, which don't match the red ones already there. I place the pinkish-red carnations from my brother's vase in with my father's flowers. Now all of his are shades of pink. I stand back, then add some new white ones for contrast. Then I move to my aunt's grave. I spread the flowers wide and remove the badly discolored ones, replacing them with new flowers from Wal-Mart. Her color scheme is pink, white, and yellow.

Always before, I've tried to be neutral about the cemetery, going for my mother. Today, tending the graves, I feel more fully *with* my mother, even though she is in the car. I feel more fully connected to my deceased relatives, the pain of loss, and my memories. Perhaps this is what my mother feels here.

In that mood, I read the small flat stones in the ground. Starting on the left, nearest the road: "Florence Good, Born 1912, Died 1991." This time instead of hurrying off, I stop and think of my dear Aunt Florence, my mother's sister, who lived with us and helped take care of all four of us children as we grew up. I always thought she looked and acted like Grandma on the Beverley Hillbillies—feisty, energetic, hardworking yet playful, quick to temper, shy with strangers yet blunt, seemingly from an earlier era. I think of how she limped after her stroke, her leg bending backward instead of forward. Then visiting her in the nursing

home, where she lay naked and, when told by a nurse to cover up, she said abruptly, just like Grandma would have, "I came into the world this way, and this is the way I'm going out." No modesty. Case closed. Then she looked at me and said, "He's the one," and pointed to Art, who I had taken home to meet the family for the first time. Aunt Florence died two months after her foreshadowing proclamation.

I move to the right. "Arthur C. Ellis, Sr., Born 1915, Died 1987. I remember the call from my sister-in-law Barbara that fateful Valentine's day. "Your father had a heart attack. He's dead." "Are you sure?" I had responded, and when she said, "Yes, I'm sure," I replied, "I have to hang up. I'll call you right back." I sobbed and sobbed and it was a good half hour before I could talk to anyone. I was supposed to have gone home to see my parents that December, but I postponed my reservation until March, to help with recruitment in the department where I worked at the university. I never got to see Daddy again. I learned from that experience to do better at making decisions that would not lead to regrets. That strategy often brings the fear of death—my own and others—to my consciousness, but makes me feel peaceful at the same time.

I skip over the empty grave next to Daddy's, the one reserved for Mom, and move to my brother's. "Rex Allen Ellis, October 25, 1952-January 13, 1982." This one is the hardest. I think of what Rex was like as a kid—full of life, playing jokes, kind, and loving. We were best friends. I shudder when I read the date of his death; the tragedy comes into full focus. I imagine his head hitting the front seat as his plane dives on take off into the Potomac River in Washington D.C. I remember vividly the day of his funeral. It was a blizzard-cold and snowy day, not warm and sunny like today. My body shook and I was numbed by the unreality of our loss, the cold, and the Valium I took to get me though the funeral. Will I ever get over this loss? Of course not. But I will continue learning how to live with it. I let the feelings of grief move through me. "Rex, I love you and miss you," I say out loud, my voice choking.

I move back to the plot that sits between my brother and father. "Mary Katherine Ellis," it says, "Born 1914, Died"—there is a blank space. Seeing my mother's name on the plaque troubles me, and I wonder how she stands it. "It don't bother me," she said when I asked her once. "We're all going to die." I glance back at my mom, who is watching me from the car.

I gather the discarded flowers and take them to the car, looking back over my shoulder as I walk. Looks good, I think. Having gotten so involved in the flowers, I find myself wondering who will tend the flowers on my grave, if I have a grave that is.

"What do you think?" I ask, getting into the car and waiting for approval. I place the tattered flag and discolored flowers on the back floor.

"You did a good job," she nods, and I smile.

"What do you think of the yellow ones with the purples ones?" I ask, wanting a more specific response.

"They're okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, they put any colors together nowadays." As we drive off, I look around the cemetery at the multi-colored clusters and think she is right. My eyes are pulled to the large stone statue of Jesus praying that stands in the center of the cemetery at the top of the hill.

We drive past the newly dug grave. Now the hole is covered with a green, grass-colored blanket, showing only the vault frame. Six chairs, draped in matching green cloth, are lined up beside the casket. The three men and one woman are gathering up their tools. "That must be for Mr. Atkins," my Mom says again.

"Hey, you want to put these flowers on Aunt Clare's grave?" I ask, pointing to the discarded ones in the back of our car. "They're not great, but they're better than none."

"Oh, yes," she says and smiles a big smile.

"We'll drive around the cemetery again," I say. "We're driving in circles." Again she smiles.

"It's that one," she says, pointing to a grave with no flowers.

I get out and carefully arrange the flowers in the vase. "Her vase doesn't have any Styrofoam," I say when I get back into the car.

"I've got some at home," she says. "I'll bring it next time I come, whenever that is. Whenever someone can bring me."

"Won't Art bring you?" I ask, knowing my brother will take Mom to the cemetery any time she asks.

"Yes, but he doesn't like to come to the cemetery," she acknowledges. "He won't come by himself, only when he brings me."

On the way out, we once again drive by my family's graves. I think how well cared for they are. "Our graves look the best," I say, "of any in the whole cemetery."

She nods. "I always look after them."

Who will tend the plastic flowers on my mother's grave? I wonder. I hold her hand, feeling intense love as we drive home. [6]

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September 10, 2002. Mom died yesterday after being bedridden for a year. My sister Judi moved from Mississippi to take care of her. My brother Art and sister-in-law Barbara helped out whenever needed, and I visited often during the year to spend time with Mom and relieve my sister. The whole family was with Mom when she died. As much as we hated to see her go, we told her we loved her and then cheered her on her journey. For days before her death, Mom had dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, and premonitions of the trip she was about to take. When she asked us to go with her, we told her we couldn't, but that we were sure Rex, Daddy, and Florence would be there waiting for her. That thought calmed her, since she had recurring visions of being with them already.

As part of the funeral arrangements, Judi, Barbara, and I go to Wal-Mart's. Our mission is to buy new plastic flowers for our family's graves. Mom will be buried in two days and we want all the graves to look nice during her grave-side ceremony. (It will not matter that nobody actually sees the flowers at her funeral since the green grave cloth covers all the family graves. Judi, Barbara, and I know the graves have been properly tended.) We take our time picking out flowers, going back and forth down the thirty-foot long aisle filled on both sides with plastic flowers. Flowers also are stacked at the head and to the sides of the aisle. Plastic flowers are big business in this small town. We get very serious about choosing the best.

"The fuchsia-colored ones are my favorites," I tell my sister, and she adds a few more stems to her selection.

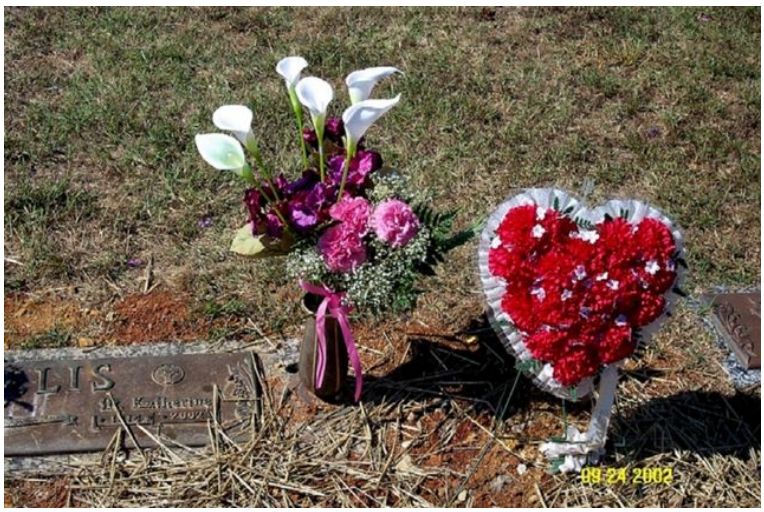
"I like a little white mixed in," says Barbara, picking up some baby's breath.

"What do you think about these calla lilies?" I ask.

"Nice," says Judi. "I like calla lilies. They're different from what you usually see in cemeteries."

"We need these for bulk," Barbara says of her selection of tight bunches of plum and white star-shaped flowers.

When we drive to the cemetery, I point out where the graves are. Approaching, we admire the flowers that Barbara last put on the sites. She's been tending the graves since Mom became bedridden. We put the fuchsia colored flowers and white calla lilies on Mom's grave. Then we rearrange the other vases, taking out faded stems and replacing with new plum and white flowers.



We talk about Mom and how she used to take care of the graves. It feels good to be working together on Mom's behalf, knowing how important tending the graves was to her. It feels good to be with women who loved her as I loved her. Tending graves seems to be women's work. Odd, how good it feels to be at the cemetery this time.

On September 24th, Mom's birthday, Judi adds real, fresh pink carnations and white baby's breath to Mom's vase and sends a photograph to me in Tampa.

Near Christmas, Barbara changes the flowers to poinsettias for the holiday season. Judi and I talk on the phone about how she and Barbara will put lit candles in glass on the graves, as Mom did every Christmas, no matter the weather. When I see the pictures my brother-in-law Ron sends me, Art and I decide to visit his mother's and my mother's graves in the summer. I find myself eagerly looking forward to returning to Luray, making a trip to Wal-Mart, visiting the cemetery, and rearranging the beautiful plastic flowers. [7]

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> "I had always thought there would be no connection for me with Sullivan, Indiana after our parents died. But now I hope one day to visit the graveyard where we released them. It is part of a ritual pilgrimage that heals the loss. This task is more important than words; it is more than I can say. The iconic gestures of ritual practice move us through these life transitions." (RUSSELL, 2002, p.9)
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> "The word cemetery derives from the Greek, koimeterion, meaning 'to lie down and rest.' Perhaps this is why these spaces are so tantalizing ... Often located on high ground or within shady groves, they offer the gift of a spectacular view and a quiet space ... Whether a cross, a tablet or block, a carved image of the sepia fading of a photo daguerreotype, the grave site is a story, a gestural act of remembrance and connection. A cemetery is a version of a library, each grave serving as a unique book end." (VAN HERK 1998, p.54) [8]

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