

Last Supper

By Stephen Carter

"Have you heard the really bad news?" my editor, Doc, asked almost off handedly as he wound the film in his camera.

Then came that pause.

"Wayne and Elaine Fairbanks were killed in a head-on collision last night," he said, as if he were telling me who'd won a local football game.

Their pictures in the newspaper the next day were cut from overexposed family photographs, Wayne's bald and round head with a benign smile as long as a jack-o-lantern's, Elaine's small red lips outlining short teeth, eyes asquint over her cupie doll grin.

Doc used to sit at the next computer over from Wayne; they worked together every day, comparing notes and puns and putting out a newspaper.

"He came in to see us just a few days ago," Doc continued as he kneeled to take a picture of a little boy wandering under the boughs of a huge blue spruce. The Christmas lights strung on the tree made the scene cheerful. The cold had not come in yet to make the lights seem warm.

"Give me a hand up?" Doc asked me.

"It was an 18 year old boy, probably had been drinking, and in a brand new truck. They were on their way home from Arizona with their two teenage boys. He swerved into their lane, and they were killed instantly."

We're reporters. We munch on details like jellybeans. But we leave them out this time. We look at each other. Christmas lights reflect off Doc's glasses. The next day I hear him on the telephone with the Paige, Arizona police department trying to get an unhelpful dispatcher to give him some information.

"The Fairbanks fatalities," he has to say a number of times.

I remember a picture we took a few months before. All the newsroom employees were at the Golden Corral where we always have lunch to commemorate someone moving on to another (and usually better paying) job. We all stood in the shrubs next to the sidewalk trying to squeeze inside the camera viewfinder. We smiled, having everything humans could want: hair, fat, bad photography, a group to smile with.

"Give me a little while to react to this," I said to Doc.

One of Wayne's sons is on a mission for his church, as I once was. He left for two years—hugging his family as he got on the plane to Chicago to preach about eternal life—and wrote letters to them. Perhaps one is still on its way through the mail system. I picture him stretched out like a puppet now. The strings, once only miles long, have snapped; they wave in the wind.

I know this feeling. A year into my mission, my grandmother contracted a disease that hardened her lungs. She fell into bathtubs; she had to sit or lie down all the time. Then one night my mission president called me.

"Your grandmother has died," he said in his least business-like voice.

That pause.

"You going to be ok?"

"That's what the gospel is all about, sir," I said.

The string snapped. Outside, the hard snow was frozen to the ground; the streets were black and slick with ice reflecting the yellow glow of the streetlamps.

Wayne's other children are married, grown up, have children themselves.

Wayne and Elaine have left a centuries-old station wagon, a house with bread and milk still in the fridge, credit card offers in the mailbox, and maybe no will.

Besides that, there's the quadruple funeral. Four caskets. Are there group rates in that business?

The family has to ship the bodies, or perhaps *remains* is a better term in this case, back home to prepare and put a name on them. Ironically the bodies are shipped up the same road they were traveling when they were so abruptly wrapped and packaged—as if they'd driven suddenly into a dark cardboard box.

Bodies, lying under the weight that breathing had once buoyed, remind the living of what pure flesh is. Let the blood pool on the lee side of the body, let the mouth stick open like a train whistle, let the eyelids refuse to close, let the feet be numb.

My grandfather was found dead on the bathroom floor. It's the family legend that he was about to take a shower, felt a little sick and lay down. A few hours later my mother wondered who had left the water running, opened the door and walked three feet from his purpled face to turn the tap off before she stumbled into the bedroom to tell my dad.

"At least it happened fast," said Doc as we walked, "at least there weren't jaws of life tearing the top off the car and screaming."

The air in grandpa's room was still.

I helped carry his body into his bedroom at 2 a.m. My father had covered him with a large towel.

"You can get a towel under him and drag him if he's too heavy," said the hospice nurse, almost as old as grandpa himself. But we carried him. His back had been pressed to the bathroom tile and had taken on its coolness. I took the coward's end, the feet and legs; and Phil, my uncle by marriage, took the top. Enduring the face.

But what can be touched and handled for the last time on bodies that were killed instantly? Bent and mixed with slabs of metal, pierced and lacerated along with the naugahide, flung and compressed around the other soft bodies. Stopped. The paramedics had to take apart an ugly puzzle in which each move involved tearing, slow fluids, unnatural weights and finally white, reddening sheets.

We found a way to clothe grandpa, like dressing a sleeping child. Hefting his arms, rolling his head forward, lifting his torso up. This body is shaped like mine, but it does not move. Bodies, my mind keeps insisting, move. Bodies move.

We sat by grandpa's bedside. I read the last few pages of a book he had been reading that day—out loud, just in case he was wondering how it ended—my own spontaneous version of the *Book of the Dead*, guiding him to the lotus flower. From time to time I look up past his cold, white feet, into the blackness of the nostrils and mouth.

What happens, when only parts of it are shaped like you, when the rest is twisted, severed, broken? What happens when what gave you life, what taught you to repair a bicycle, what you debated with at the dinner table, weighs 200 pounds? There are no beds in Wayne and Elaine's case. There are bags. Closed caskets.

We often say, as we look upon the corpse of someone we have known, "That's just not him." We say something has fled and left us a dry husk. But now we know better, because all we have of Wayne, Elaine, and their two boys are memories that are far too close, the kind that trick you into accidentally making a telephone call, your stomach suddenly clenching as the phone rings and rings.

The "emptied" body is the touchstone for those who are still breathing. It's a mirror. Our eyes need a rest—to lie on the corpse and rest with it, to test each detail. Our own bodies, flensed, need to sit close by, solitary. The hand needs to rest near the casket wood. The young need to heft the weight of the body and carry it away. The dense wooden door has been closed. But we must at least be able to press our face to it and listen.