Cemetery Life

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MY YELLOW 1946 HOUSE faces Provo's peculiarly Mormon-Utah-style cemetary. Tall trees line small lanes which are set at precise right angles, a perfect grid made by Latter-day pioneer planners. The lanes come complete with miniature street signs marking the corners: "Center" and "Main," "2000 South" and "100 West." I eat my breakfast toast, drink my milk, and think strange thoughts: *391 South Main would be a pleasant, shady place to be buried.* Disturbing the precise system of their forefathers, later generations arranged the southeast corner roads in twirling cul-de-sacs and circular drives, a strange little maze with only one entrance and one exit. Some metaphor is doubtless begging to be made about how pioneer grandchildren modernize things, yet so much is the same: between the drives in every cemetery section are the stretches of always-green grass, watered every summer night at precisely eleven o'clock, even in the middle of monstrous thunderstorms.

When I tell people where I live, conversation fades then resurrects with a vengeance. People tease me about "quiet" neighbors who "don't disturb you with loud music." Cemetery humor soon grows dull as far as I am concerned, yet everyone seems to think it hilarious—as if they are the first to make the joke. I rarely explain that I am the one who is uneasy; I pull the blinds when I do step aerobics at home, and I blush when my swim-suited children screech in the sprinklers. There is an odd reverence demanded by a 21-gun salute, even if I hear it while scrubbing the toilet or changing a diaper.

Living here changes things. My neighbors and I gossip about the number of funerals (two last Saturday), about the Memorial Day flowers (wilted almost beyond repair by the time they are thrown out), and about the headstones we want when we die (plain and simple—no little bunnies or scroll writing). Another neighbor, who worked at the cemetery for a summer, let us know whenever an old grave was accidentally upset while workers were digging a new one. Apparently the otherwise meticulous nineteenth-century pioneers did not keep very good records of where they buried each other in the acres of green grass. Most people find that tidbit morbidly fascinating.

Funerals are commonplace, worthy of casual, across-the-fence chatter. The number varies greatly—one week there will be two funerals a day; the next

week, not a one. Most of the funerals are large, extravagant affairs with dozens descending in Sunday best. Funeral manners allow for black clothes, but more often I see navy suits and dresses of cool hunter green, autumn brown, or medium to dark blue. The style of choice tends towards simplicity. Certainly loud prints or strong clashing plaids are inexcusable, although teenage girls manage to get away with trendy florals and boys have little taste for conservative ties, if they wear ties at all. The mourners always seem to forget their coats in winter, so they huddle in a tight pack for the ceremony before leaving clumsily, wandering back to their cars in awkward little groups of two or three.

This funeral etiquette amuses me. Mere hours before they come, the gaudy yellow backhoe is chunking out dirt, dumping it in the back of a white Provo City truck. Minutes after the ceremonies, the dump truck lumbers back like a bulky dinosaur, carelessly dropping the old dirt beside the new grave, while cemetery workers crank down the coffin and get ready to heave shovels full of soil back into the hole. The somber ambiance and mystique of grief collapses under the roar of the truck and the mundane logistics of digging and dumping, although the bereaved families avoid these details. The mourners have their rituals, and the employees have their work; the worlds rarely collide.

A year ago, I noticed one of those rare instances. Shiny SUV's and dark colored Sedans parked head-to-toe in an affluent funeral procession, ironically joined by a battered green and white pickup truck, which is what originally prompted me to spy. When there were only five or ten people remaining by the grave, I saw the truck's owner. As the rain started dripping, he trotted back to the truck to grab his old black umbrella and help those last people to their cars. Then he stayed. Five minutes later, a lone worker came to crank down the brown coffin. The man watched, asking questions, casually chatting with the worker. He kept talking as he shrugged up the sleeves of his charcoal suit and hoisted one side of the metal coffin-support framework as easily as a hay bale. He balanced the weight comfortably between his hands and bounced it twice to get a solid grip. The worker set one side of the support in the back of the cemetery work truck, then the man in the suit shoved the frame forward. He was reaching for a shovel when another worker arrived, so he relaxed, propping his elbows against the vehicle. He glanced towards my picture window, but I ducked.

His casual observations of the real burial surprised me, jolted my assumptions. For all four-and-a-half years of my cemetery life, I have heard people make dumb jokes or walk away, tell me bizarre death trivia or choke on their ice water and change the subject to politics. The owner of the green and white truck cut through the fear and the ceremony; he encountered the dirt and details I see from my picture window. He crossed through my worlds, buried his dead, and left me wondering where he would go with his wet suit and muddy hands. A family luncheon? Does one wash grave dirt away under the harsh lights of a church bathroom? It seems like digging a grave should be a moment to remember, but dirt is dirt. Perhaps not.

My personal experience with the details of death is, frankly, lacking. My great grandparents died one by one, but they were so old—and I was so young. My only memories of them are snips, flashes of people I never really knew: "Grandma Great" thought someone was stealing her underwear and burying it in the yard, and Grandma Villa snapped at us during a family dinner because "all you kids are making Doris [her daughter] work too hard." I cannot visualize my great-grandfather at all, except for a few photographic memories recalled solely from fishing pictures taken the summer before he died. I remember his funeral, my Grandma Great perched on a stool at the head of the coffin, although this memory doesn't make much sense. Why would a ninety-year-old woman be sitting ramrod straight on a high stool?

One girl from my hometown died in a car accident driving back to BYU after Thanksgiving vacation. I was fourteen. Truth be told, I barely knew her, but that did not stop me from sobbing at her funeral. Everyone sobbed. It was tragic. But at least three-quarters of the people crammed onto the rows of metallic folding chairs never would have seen her again in their lives, excluding the rare high school reunion. In any case, we all came to the funeral and mobbed the cemetery. We talked about how we knew her and when we had last spoken to her. I secretly envied those with real grief. I was jealous of that world-worn, gray-lined look.

The crying, pale face showed up grieving in my mirror when my Grandfather Nielson died. I expected that. I planned for it. After all, I live across the street from the cemetery; I plan for death. Still he surprised me by dying October 19, 1998. I knew he was dying, but somehow I had ceased to notice the addition of another wrinkle, the bending over of another inch, the loss of a little more memory. Right after the phone call announcing his death, I slipped on my classy navy blazer with gold buttons and rushed out. One-half hour until class—too late to find a substitute. When I explained to my students why I would be absent on Friday, I surprised myself: despite my professional blazer, comfortable heels, and non-waterproof mascara, I cried, alternatively staring down at the floor, then up at the ceiling, muttering, "Sorry, sorry." An eighteen-year-old freshman clumsily patted my arm as the others filed out looking pointedly at anything but me.

"Was it expected?" my friend queried when I asked her to water my plants, and I found myself confused. How could I explain? He was ninety-four and ill, but I did not know that his death would be that day. I was shocked to find an anniversary to remember, one that I had lived through for years without realizing.

My meticulous plans worked sporadically at best. The plastic-doll-looking grandfather in the casket was expected. I cried sadly, not wildly, at the funeral, and my speech for my three-year-old about how grandpa "is still alive in heaven" went over perfectly. But—so silly—I had forgotten to decide what to wear. I sat on my bed the day he died and stared at my overstuffed hanging rod: fifteen or twenty dresses from which to choose, and each one was too flowery or too tight, too wrinkled or too casual. None would pack and travel to a funeral. I

hated them and all the stupid stuff of mortality. Still I wanted to look chic and beautiful, successful and skinny. I don't know who I was trying to impress.

Little things got complicated. I did not know that his hands would look alive, blue veins running ragged across puckers and wrinkles. It upset me that my cousins, who came respectfully, did not cry. My grandmother insisted that her husband was on a business trip. Then the day of the funeral, she eyed my sisters carefully, "Do you know where your grandfather is?" They looked at each other, wondering what words would come and how to respond. She stared at them calmly, then enunciated each syllable with a shake of her pointed finger and the click of her tongue, "He's dead."

A few years later, I find my grandfather in surprising places: a Christmas card address list, a roll of film lost in the bottom of a black nylon camera bag, the twenty-sixth of a random month—not even May, his birthday. I think of those last few memories, the ones when I sternly directed myself I will remember this. We ate a Dairy Queen lunch the Christmas before he died, and I grinned in my napkin when grandma and grandpa each ate their "full meal deal" despite looking so frail. On that visit—just as on all those last visits—he would finally figure out who I was, re-discover I was married, then recall, "Oh, yes. Your husband is a roofer. Doing quite well, isn't he? I always said roofing would be a good business to go into." For some reason, that flash of memory and precise response came back the same for the last four years of his life.

There is the memory of visiting grandma in the hospital the previous November, her bones barely lifting the bed sheet. Grandpa found us waiting in the square visitors' room, seated uncomfortably on hard chairs. He sat, then had someone bring him a book so he could show off his strangely improved eyesight, reading smaller letters than he had read in twenty years. After that he lapsed into silence, unable to join the conversation he could not hear. He roused himself to ask for his gloves, so that his hands would be warm when the nurses finally allowed him to touch his wife's palm. I watched the old man tuck his shaking fingers into the sheepskin-lined leather, and I thought I will remember this.

I hoard these memories and my trinkets. I have a quotation from the girl who died in the car accident, which is not nearly as profound as I used to think it was, but I keep it anyway because of her long, slanting pencil marks. I have a set of pink envelopes and one dollar bills from Great Grandma Villa. And I have stockpiled three dainty strawberry teacups; one opaque, shell-looking creamer bowl; and four delicate china saucers that Grandma Nielson gave me one by one for birthday presents, always wrapped carefully in tissue, never a complete set. I do not know the point of having a few mismatched teacups, especially when I don't drink tea. I like knowing that I have them, though, especially now that my grandmother has died.

Grandma Nielson's funeral was on a windy Saturday in October, almost exactly two years after her husband's death. Nearly a year before she died, I had decided that I would wear a light green two-piece suit, tailored and cinched with a thin green leather belt. She liked that color. We were the last to drive out of the

cemetery, and I looked back deliberately. The shoulder strap of my seat belt bit into the side of my neck, but I caught a glimpse of a yellow backhoe galloping towards the grave. That pleased me. I wore the right dress. I cried the right tears. But it was the backhoe that made me feel at home.

I do not desire a more personal familiarity with the how and when and where of death, but a cemetery circles my life. I see it every time I leave, every time I come home, every time I open my blinds. Some day we will move, but I plan to remember that grave dirt smells earthy and sweet whether it is dug by a yellow backhoe or a man in a charcoal Sunday suit who drives a battered green and white truck. I will not forget my daughter giggling on her new training-wheeled, two-wheeler bike as we wandered down the shady cemetery lane, and I will not forget those first Memorial Day flowers I fished out of the trash bin. I was unacquainted with funeral flowers then, surprised when they blossomed randomly all summer, shocked when they sprouted green leaves the following spring. I think of these things: I grew flowers left to wither on someone's grave; I tried to look pretty at my grandfather's funeral; I live across the street from the cemetery.