

“IT ALL DEPENDS how deep your brothers are buried,” my father said. We were sitting at the kitchen table and he was taking papers from a gray steel box, removing fat red rubber bands, sorting things into piles. “Somewhere I have a deed. The Sacred Heart allows double burial, at least that’s what old Mary Becker told me years ago. But you have to go down seven feet with the first one. Where’s my glasses? Here. No, that’s not it. We’ll have to see how deep your brothers Mike and Bob are buried.”

Aunt Kitty, my father’s sister, came into the kitchen and went to the windowsill over the sink where we kept my mother’s medications. “You two ought to get some rest. I’m all right with her for now.” She was holding the vial of pills in one hand and adjusting her glasses with the other, peering at the label. “Dare she have another one of these so soon I wonder.”

“Give it to her if she wants one,” my father said. “It don’t make no difference now. Here,” he said to me, sliding

the metal box across the table, “see if you can find anything from the Becker Funeral Home or the Sacred Heart Cemetery.”

“Wait,” I said to my aunt; she was filling a glass with water at the sink. “She can’t take them like that. You have to crush them in sherbet.”

“Shit!” My father reached for his wallet. “Quick!” he said, handing me a wad of bills. “Run up to the corner and get some more sherbet.” I took the money from him, saw it was about thirty dollars, and peeled off three singles. “This is enough,” I said. He was already walking away; he waved his hand. “Who gives a shit. Buy ten. Buy twenty. It’ll just go to the fuckin’ doctors anyway.”

Aunt Kitty touched me on the back of the neck so I would know to say nothing. Dad went into the living room, where he’d built a smaller room in the front by the window for my mother; like the one we’d built years earlier for my brothers, it was made of two-by-fours and cheap panelling. There was a shower curtain over the narrow doorway. I saw him go in. I heard him say, quietly, “How’re you feeling, sweetheart?”

That small room where my mother died is gone now. The rented hospital bed faced the large front window; hanging plants obstructed the view of the street. The top of the window is leaded and stained glass, deep purples alternating with tulips of opaque swirled cream and frosted panels. Heavy drapes, closed at sunset, were opened each morning at the first rumor of dawn. Generally, during her last weeks, my mother slept little, and then only in the morning when she saw the window brighten again. Her bed was placed along one of the makeshift walls so that

one of the two-by-fours served as a narrow shelf beside her for a box of tissues, her inhaler, a jar of Vaseline. Next to the gurgling oxygen compressor, her night table held her alarm clock and two pictures of her infant grandson, Robert, my son.

It is a mere accident of time that my mother began to die so soon after her first grandchild was born, but the irony of it produced such pain that it sometimes seemed to me that all of nature had conspired to torture us. During her last days, among the things my mother whispered to no one in particular was, “Not now. Oh, please, not now.”

I left to buy the sherbet, using the back door so I wouldn't disturb my parents. I could hear my mother crying, my father soothing her, my mother saying something in a hoarse whisper. By then I had learned not to intrude.

THE CHRISTMAS BEFORE, my wife and I came across something in a card shop called “Grandma's Book.” The pages, illustrated like a children's book, were headed with questions. “What was your favorite subject in school? Where did you live when you were growing up? How did you meet my grandpa?” Kathi made it easier for me by buying one for her mother too. The store had no “Grandpa's Book,” so I bought two notebooks into which I copied all the questions, in different colored inks, and pasted in humorous pictures from magazines, an alligator next to “Did you have any pets when you were a boy?,” a log cabin next to “What kind of house did you grow up in?” All this effort was of course to keep from singling out my mother. All to keep her from thinking we'd given

up hope. We had. And she was never fooled. The book is blank.

AT THE FUNERAL parlor, Dad was dissatisfied. “She never stuck out her jaw like that. That’s not right.” He wanted me to share again in his outrage.

“It doesn’t matter, Dad. This isn’t Mom. Mom’s gone.”

He sighed through his nose and gave me a look both disappointed and angry.

I was wrong.

I went forth from my mother’s body and, the eldest son, I had traveled far from her. My father disciplined himself, as husband and father, lover, to come back to her body, always, back to the body of his love. His grimace was a measure of the gulf between us.

“Dolly,” he said, touching her hands. He shook his head and wept.

And I understood my mother’s death was not our common loss.