

## Seen Not Said

I see the gravediggers alongside Interstate 94, somewhere in Indiana, south of Lake Michigan, during a brief sleet storm. I've been in my car five hours already, driving from central Wisconsin to southwestern Michigan to meet my father for his mother's wake.

I blink; the gravediggers vanish.

Oh, my acupuncturist had said to me weeks before, You're clairvoyant. You *see* what you know. She said this like other people say, Your hair is brown. She believes we all know absolutely the things we need to know. It just comes to each of us in different ways, through different senses.

Driving to Michigan this morning, I'm thinking about a recent disagreement with a friend. At first, I'd been adamant: she really should have told me she kissed a mutual friend, a recently ex-boyfriend of mine. I said, You should have told me! She replied, Everyone has secrets, things they don't mention.

She was right though – we all have things we don't say. To protect ourselves, to spare the feelings of a friend. Things we don't say that don't matter in the end. Then too, we all have things we wish we would have said. Things that might have mattered in the end.

I take the exit ramp off I-94 for my hometown of Paw Paw. The town slogan in the 80s was, "So nice they named it twice!" With a population of about a thousand, it wasn't quite nice enough for me to stick around after graduating from high school in 1986. Now, eighteen years later, I have an hour before I need to be at the funeral home to meet my father and his third wife, Susan. Enough time to see a grave I need to visit before I go to my grandmother's wake.

At the end of the exit ramp, I turn right, away from town, then another quick right onto the narrow, curving road that will take me to Allen's grave. I pull into the circle drive of Prospect Hill Cemetery and that's when I see the gravediggers again, but this time, they remain – heavy and dimensional – as I stare at them. This time, they are not in the ditch at the side of the road, but halfway up the sloping drifts of snow, digging a fresh hole amid the pocked-marked ancient tombstones and the glossy new markers; they are moving stiffly in their insulated Carhartt overalls and coats, ragged at the knees and cuffs, squinting in the sunlight reflecting off deep snow. I sit in my Escort for a minute watching them, feeling the weight of what I know, of how I saw them this morning. I sense too, the vastness of what I don't know. Wonder about what I couldn't see twenty years ago, and maybe, what I can't see now.

When I am in southwestern Michigan visiting friends and family, I come to this cemetery to see Allen. Rarely do I stop at the cemetery twenty miles away in Kalamazoo to visit the grave of Allen's best friend, my high school boyfriend Brad. Brad is buried in a flat expanse of manicured lawn, with young trees and flat bronze markers hidden in the grass. I love *this* cemetery – Allen's cemetery – filled with oaks, their huge crowns spreading shade over hundred-year-old headstones, monuments creeping back up to the top of the hill. Brad was my boyfriend, but Allen – Allen was my everything.

I slip out of my driving shoes, pull on my Sorrel boots and walk up the trail towards Allen's grave. I leave the groomed trail and stomp across the snow, boots breaking through the crust with a *whoomph*, and a thud as I hit solid ground. It's harder than I remember to look up and see his last name on the large family headstone. Before I even brush the snow from his small gray granite marker, the ache in my heart has climbed up my throat, behind my eyes, and spreads out like a tide, until I am gasping for air around my tears. The thin crust of ice beneath the

powdery snow liquefies as soon as it is exposed to sunlight, dark water pooling around his given name: Allen Azel. The memory of him, twenty years later, undoes me still. Dissolves me.

At the funeral home, I am alone with the casket; alone with Grandma Ruth. Her lips are done nicely; I can't see any of the stitching that keeps her mouth shut, preventing that slack-jawed look of the newly dead, or of the sleeping. Grandma never wore lipstick, but a shimmer of pink spreads like a slight smile over her lips. Her jacket looks large on her sunken shoulders: an unattractive linen thing with blocks of tans and oranges, looking summery and out of place in this snowy January. Her left hand is folded over her right, the small diamond chips of her wedding band twinkling in the careful show lighting.

Before I think too long of other bodies, of what I am doing, I reach out quickly and touch her right arm, just above the wrist. It's cold and firm. Like a thawing piece of chicken breast.

I didn't touch the other bodies; have regretted it always.

*April 1985. I am sixteen. My girlfriend calls me on the phone and tells me Brad is dead.*

*Doubling over, some small ache of sound slips past my lips. I hang up the phone and my sister Rita is there, demanding. She is a year older than I; a senior in high school.*

*What, she says. What is it?*

*She has my face between her hands and her head is turned slightly sideways – a wild horse afraid look in her eyes, nostrils flaring. I can see her fear, know it: she thinks our mother has died somehow.*

*I see relief in my sister's eyes when I tell her who is dead. It isn't anyone she loved so she lets go of me, doesn't say anything as I walk slowly outside into the April sun.*

I hear my father and Susan in the large foyer of the funeral home. I wait a few moments, listening to the smooth, low tones of the funeral director and Susan's slightly louder voice. I walk into the foyer where my father is busy with a hanger and his coat. Susan sees me first, tilts her head and clucks her tongue; her low "Ohhh" is drawn out as she comes towards me with sympathetic eyes, her arms outstretched.

I prepare to deflect the soothing consolation Susan thinks I need because my 100-year old, nursing home-bound, slightly senile grandmother has finally died. Each time I see Susan I am irritated that she does not respect the emotional gulf between my father and me. In the past, she has encouraged father-daughter walks that I easily deflected, while my father remained silent. She has told chatty anecdotes of their courting days that made me cringe, and wonder: Who is this man that she is describing?

Hi, Susan. My syllables are clipped close. Before I have greeted my father, Susan has enveloped me in one of her too-long hugs. Finally released, I turn to my father and give him a careful A-frame hug and realize I am bending down slightly. Is he starting to shrink already? His white hair curls slightly at the nape of his neck and over his ruddy forehead. His small brown eyes look tired behind silver-rimmed glasses.

Hi, Dad. How're you doing?

Fine, fine.

Then he asks about my early morning drive and how long it took, the route I followed.

This is one of our careful topics of conversation – our travels and itineraries and roads taken. I have learned to hide most of my life and my self from my father. If I don't say it, he can't ignore it.

My father spent a decade as the sound engineer at the NPR station in the college town east of Paw. My father discerns sounds that most people do not even hear. He focuses on amplitude and frequency and harmonics – the minutiae and facts of sound. He rarely discusses the bass line or the melody – the overarching arrangement of a song, like the emotions of life. At least not of my life. Maybe it's that he doesn't know what to do with those larger sounds of life; maybe they overwhelm him, maybe he truly does not even perceive them.

Searching for more small talk, I say, She looks good. My father's eyebrows lift slightly, forming a crinkled tent shape above his nose as his mouth forms a surprised, Oh?

I realize then that he hasn't seen his mother's body yet. Why I assumed he had I don't know. Hadn't thought I might be the first to see her.

*I am outside in the sun and the April sky is an aquamarine color I've never seen before, won't ever see again. I lie down in the middle of the lawn, the grass still cool against my calves and bare feet, and wait. Wait for what comes next, not knowing anymore what comes next. My girlfriend shows up and we sit together stunned. Somehow we wind up looking in my closet for what I might wear to the funeral. We are teen-aged girls: this is what we do – imagine how we will look, what story we will present. It is a good distraction from the story that we don't know what to do with: Brad is dead.*

*She leaves and I lie in the grass for a while.. I get up finally and get my car keys, but not my shoes. I drive west, towards Lake Michigan. On my way, I stop at the small brick duplex in town where my father lives with his second wife. My father is standing outside with his paraplegic neighbor Bud, sitting in his wheelchair, the ends of his dark blue pant legs neatly pinned up near his hips.*

*I look at my father, say, Brad's dead, my lips forming unfamiliar words.*

*Bud's mouth opens slightly and his eyes widen. My father's eyebrows lift into a crinkled tent and he mouths the silent "O" that he does when confronted with someone's inconvenient emotion. He must see that I've been crying.*

*That's too bad, Lo-Lo, he says. His hands are in his back jeans pockets, his weight on his back leg, front leg slightly bent. He doesn't move. I stand there, looking at him. Bud looks at my father, then back at me. Finally, my father looks down.*

*Emotions are private things, things to keep tamped down and out of sight. He is uncomfortable with feelings roaming around in the open like this. He says nothing more; there is no wave of sound reaching my eardrums, there is nothing in the air to help me.*

*Back on the highway I risk long, blind moments with my forehead pressed to the steering wheel, crying. I keep driving west, to the lake. I don't know what else to do, knowing only that I need motion, and that once I get to the lake, I will go in.*

My father moves toward the doorway of the viewing room and Susan moves with him, her long green skirt shifting in pleats circling her solid round hips. My father takes tight, even steps towards the casket. He looks narrow in his navy jacket, his hands folded with Susan's at the front of his waist. I stand in the doorway watching him get smaller. I turn to the end of the hall, look out the window, shrouded in filmy white nylon sheers, thinking about other wakes and caskets. How you never think about the casket moment ahead of time. Of how the bodies will look lying there.

*Brad, lying there, black stitches pulling at his full red lips. Me, striding up a center aisle between brown folding chairs to the casket, my best friend following behind in the roiling wake of my grief. A sea of curious faces turn toward me, like waves coming in to shore. I see only a blur of stunned, drawn faces: why are we at a wake for a 16-year old? I feel them waiting, mouths holding a line to see what the girlfriend will do, how she will act.*

*We don't stay long. Only long enough to whisper condolences to his mother and then turn towards the casket. I place a yellow and a red rose in the casket, carefully avoiding Brad's hands. I don't cry there. I barely breathe there. I haven't yet learned the social graces of wakes, hanging around chatting with family and friends while the dead lie there like black holes, sucking all the light and matter out of the room; the center of attention, but also ignored as much as decently possible.*

*In November, nine months later, Brad's best friend Allen lies there at the same funeral home in a dark casket in a small, low-ceilinged side room. His friend David lies in the main viewing room having died a day before Allen of injuries from the same car crash. A small white towel is folded over Allen's forehead, covering the wound where his head cracked the windshield.*

*This time, there are about twenty of us from school standing in a half-moon around Allen's casket. Our backs press up against the back wall as we stand, rigid and bewildered and silent. There are no adults in this room.*

*The five feet of space between us and the casket has a palpable density to it that no one dares engage. We leave the space alone, weighty and perfect, hoping it will protect us from the pull of the black hole, from something un-nameable. Because if this can happen, again, whatever cannot?*

*I stand there for a long time, arms wrapped around sobbing friends. Finally, I move towards Allen, feeling awkward and slow and exhausted, pushing through something heavier than air that I have yet to name. I put two roses in the casket, yellow and red, and leave.*

Susan is sitting in the front row of chairs, my father is standing near her, staring towards the casket. As I walk up the aisle between the rows of chairs, he pulls a camera from his jacket pocket and takes a picture of Grandma Ruth. He turns as I approach and says something about taking care of paperwork as he leaves the room. I know it was once a common practice to take pictures of the dead in their caskets, but it unnerves me. I slowly pace around the room, occasionally stopping to rock back and forth on two feet.

My father reappears. The viewing hour officially starts. Old family friends of ours show up. Three members from the Church of Latter Day Saints arrive. My grandmother was never an active member, but they used to visit her in the nursing home. One of the them approaches my father and says, Your mother was so sweet. Everyone in the nursing home just loved her. She never had a bad word to say about anything or anybody.

This aspect of my grandmother is legendary. Susan pipes up, I had to wait a week before I met Ruth the first time, so she could get her hair done. And then she asked me all sorts of questions about my education and my family, obviously checking my credentials. I must have passed!

Susan laughs and everyone else chuckles. But I can't help thinking the obvious: if Grandma never said a bad word about anyone, how would you know if you passed or not? This is the down side of such good manners. You can't ever really know someone like that. Can you?

*I have to go in. I have to wade into an April of Lake Michigan so cold it hurts my bones. I bend over, submerge my long brown hair, close my eyes and bend lower, opening my mouth for the icy hurt. I think of letting the lake fill my lungs, fill me with something other than the fire of ache in my chest. Let me become the lake, instead of trying to rearrange myself around what it means that Brad is dead.*

*I see Allen's face. His best friend is dead; I can't leave him too, can't do that to him. The sound of roaring water fills my ears as I lift myself from the lake, coming up in a crashing cascade of water and stagger, off-balance, falling to my hands and knees, water just to my chin, exhaling a low sound, a wail really. Then silence.*

*I am totally alone. There is no one else on shore. There is no one anywhere.*

The viewing hour is over, and I go up to the casket a final time to look at the smoothed skin of Grandma's face and the perfectly sealed lips. I turn to look at my father. Wonder what things unsaid will be buried with him. I move into the foyer again, leaving my father and Susan sitting in the first row of chairs near Grandma Ruth.

I go to the window at the end of the foyer and try to push the sheer nylon curtain aside, the edges buried in heavy blue draperies. I want a clear view of what's outside. I find the edge of the curtain, push it aside, and beyond the parking lot, in a field of snow, I see my father as he stood years ago, hands in his back pockets, silent and watching. And Bud, sitting there with no legs.

I know my father is crippled in ways few people can see. My father, crippled by his own unease, standing there long ago, crippling me.

*My mother meets me outside our house as I walk up the brick path from the gravel drive, home from the lake. We sit on the picnic table and I tell her where I've been. Later, she sits on my bed with me for a while before leaving me to sleep. After she goes, I get up and turn my closet light on. Darkness makes my life infinite, and right now that is far too much to bear. I hear a car drive up our long driveway, and then a knock at the back door. Voices, and my mother knocks on my bedroom door. Allen is here, she says.*

*I get out of bed, zip a sweatshirt up over my nightgown and let him in, closing the door behind him. I lean into him, my arms around his neck. He holds me stiffly and I step back. He sits on the end of my bed as I sit back against the headboard and tuck my legs under the covers. He is on his way home after being with Brad's parents all day. I don't ask him about any details of Brad's heart attack and he doesn't offer any. There are long silences. My small room feels confining. We are aware of my sister sleeping in the next room. We are being polite, maintaining control.*

*He doesn't stay long; we don't know what to say to each other about this.*

*He says, I'll call you soon, as he pulls the door shut behind him.*

*Allen and I see each other several times that summer, but we can't quite launch a romance. There is that death between us. Our relationship remains a strange dance of advance and retreat. He tells me things about the night Brad died. But we never really speak about that shared thing between us, never offer up our feelings at the heart of it, never get to the heart of us.*

My father and Susan come out into the foyer. We agree to meet at a local café for soup. I pull out of the parking lot and head back downtown. An older tan Buick stops at the traffic light in front of me. The teenage boy in the passenger seat, spiky black hair and gold hoops in both his ears,

turns his head to look at his girlfriend and stretches his left arm along the back of the front seat. He touches her blonde hair, shot through with highlights, just at her temple, strokes it slowly back behind her ear, down to the nape of her neck, rests his hand on the seat. I see his lips move, his head tilt slightly. She never turns her head. She's waiting for the green light.

*In October Brad has been dead eight months and I drive Allen home from school for the last time, not knowing that it's the last time. But I've felt something pricking at the back of my neck off and on since Brad died; I fear another death is out there. I worry that it will be another one of Brad's friends, a boy I've been parking with underneath the power lines miles from town. I never even consider that it could be Al. Never consider it could be this man, the first to accept everything he knows about me.*

*Taking him home, I'm doing forty-five in a thirty-five mile per hour stretch along Black River Road. He says, I got stopped by a cop along here a couple months ago.*

*I say, What were you doing?*

*He leans over, looking at my speedometer. Deadpans, Oh, about what you are.*

*For some reason this is hilarious to us and we laugh for a long time. When I pull up to his house I say, Allen. When are we going to go out again?*

*When you stop dating all my friends. He kisses my cheek and gets out.*

The traffic light turns green and I smile faintly, feeling the raw ache at the back of my throat and a dull throbbing starting in my forehead. If I had just known how to say the unspeakable things: sadness, rage, grief, fear – would we have been able to connect? Would he then have been with *me* that night, instead of in a car going too fast around a curve?

The café is warm and smells of baking bread. My father and Susan talk of my uncle from California who will meet the plane carrying them and Grandma's casket to Oregon. Susan says, When we were going through the last of her things, we found all the letters she'd kept. You and Rita did a real nice job writing to her.

We tried, I say.

I feel my throat closing as I form the words in my head before I speak to my father. I reach out over the tablecloth and pat his hand. Hold it. It is warm and dry. I speak slowly, forcing the words out on a current of breath, You did a really good job taking care of her. I know she appreciated how much you did.

I don't remember ever holding my father's hand before. He nods his head. Does he sense the shift of the thing that feels slightly dangerous to me, this talk of praise and feelings? It feels odd to me too, but also like I've given a gift to him, the same gift I did not get from him so many years ago: I've done the important thing, I've said *something*.

After soup and salad, I say good-bye to my father and Susan in the parking lot and get in my car. I head back towards the highway, towards the cemetery. Snow, tinged pink from the setting sun, is visible through the sharp black lines of tree trunks marching up the hill. I circle onto the entrance ramp, merging into the flow of cars heading east.

The heaviness of this long day sinks into me and the tears come: for all the things I didn't ever say to Allen. For all the things I won't ever, can't ever say to my father.

And the weight of what I know becomes this: The world hangs together on a web of things not spoken, as much as on a web of what is.