

To Speak Well of the Dead

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I couldn't get over the feeling that Brad Aikens' funeral was a picnic. We had borrowed a car; we had chicken and sprout sandwiches on whole wheat and two liters of Diet Pepsi. We were cutting classes, and I had Barbara to myself. She was more somber than I in her dark suit with her thick hair knotted at the nape of her neck, but then Brad had been much more her friend than mine. Although she had stopped seeing him, too, at the end, just like everyone else. He spent his last days in public places, drinking, smoking, popping and sniffing in total defiance of all university and town regulations. He killed himself by jumping off a fire escape, and a couple of students leaving a bar the back way found him at least six and maybe twelve hours later. Barbara said she couldn't stop imagining the details.

We drove south on the interstate that morning through mountains dun-colored with the muddy trunks of trees. I said, "Maybe Brad's problem was that he started to fade out. I can't remember what he looked like. I mean, it's like he was transparent: nobody noticed, no matter what outrageous thing he did."

Barbara turned her face away from the steering wheel for a second, and I saw that she hadn't worn lipstick, but she had more eye make-up than usual. "This may be profound," she said, and I warmed at the compliment.

Barbara was from Queens, New York, and she kept saying she couldn't believe she was going to college in Appalachia. She said we should transfer out, the two of us together, and be

roommates somewhere else. When I mentioned this idea to my parents, they began mailing me articles clipped from *USA Today* and *Time* about urban crime.

Brad's home town was Viola, which was just up the river from mine, a town we used to play in football. "It amazes me," I told Barbara, "that a person like Brad could come from a town like Viola."

Barbara changed lanes to pass a semi that was crawling up the hill, and as she did, something slid out from under the seat. I reached down and pulled up a hiking boot with two inch soles and a fuzzy plaid liner.

She said, "If the car breaks down, I don't want to have to hike out of here in heels."

"We aren't going to the Arctic tundra, Barbara. There'll be phone booths and maybe even gas stations and grocery stores. I heard they were getting a Pizza Hut in the Interior too."

She called everything the Interior except the university, where at least, said Barbara, you could find the odd chamber concert, although the emphasis should be on the *odd*. Sometimes she would stare for a long time and then exclaim how amazing it was that a person like me could come from a place like this, and sometimes I was deeply flattered, and sometimes— or even at the same time— I wanted to slap her face.

I told her when to get off the interstate, navigating without a map. The last few miles to Viola were through deserted farms and woods.

"Lookit— " she said suddenly, "Did you see all those crosses?"

There were three of them: two blue, and one orange, or maybe it was meant to be gold. They were ten or twelve feet high, sitting in the middle of a field with some black Angus steers moseying around their bases. "It's the crucifixion," I said.

"Why are there three of them?"

"The one in the middle is for Jesus, and the others are the two thieves."

"What thieves?"

"The thieves who got crucified with him. The one who went to heaven and the one who didn't."

"*Three* crosses? I never knew there were three crosses. How come they've got them on that farm?"

"There's this guy who puts them up. He has an idea to put them coast to coast, so you're never out of sight of them."

Barbara started to frown. "Isn't it illegal to put religious symbols up in public places? There was this thing about nativity scenes in some town in New England."

"I suppose he gets permission from the farmer, and the farmer can put what he wants on his own field."

"But everyone has to look at it. It's like an establishment of religion."

"It seems tacky to me."

"Tacky!" said Barbara. "I'd say it's worse than tacky. I'd say it's shoving your religion down other people's throats."

"Nobody complains. Everybody around here is some kind of Christian."

"Great. Thanks a lot. I feel real welcome. Maybe I'll just send them my name and address in case they need somewhere to burn a cross." She hit the brakes and swerved onto the shoulder, which was very narrow at that point, and almost dropped us into a ditch. The engine died, and I found myself gazing at a length of barbed wire.

I tried to speak quietly. "Barbara, it's just one guy—"

"There's never just one guy. They always have an organization. I bet it's the Klan or the

Aryan Nation or something. If they knew I was Jewish, they'd probably string me up. On one of the crosses."

"Barbara!"

"I mean it! I'm not joking."

"They just— I don't know— they believe in trying to convince other people to believe what they do."

"Right, it's called a pogrom. Where are those cigarettes?" We had found a pack in the glove box of the borrowed car. "And don't say anything about me smoking, my uncle died of lung cancer."

"Maybe I'll have one too."

"Not you." She snatched the pack away and shoved it into the door pocket without taking one herself. "I don't want to be responsible for you getting cancer in twenty years."

We had stopped eating red meat, and we always had whole wheat bread in our sandwiches. We had talked at some length about whether to bring the no-caffeine or regular Diet Pepsi. She sighed. "Are they going to shove a lot of religion down my throat at this funeral too? Are they going to say how Brad is having a big party up in Heaven? I couldn't take that, because Brad's got a lot to do with hell and not much with heaven."

"I don't know. I think the Methodists are generally pretty calm these days."

"They'd better be. I don't want to see crosses everywhere."

"It's going to be in a church, Barbara."

"Oh, you know what I mean. This whole thing is spacing me. Why didn't they just stuff him in the ground? Or cremate him. Why do they have funerals anyhow?"

"It finishes things off. It makes it all seem connected. I don't know. You're the one who

insisted on coming."

"I've never been to a funeral before, you know."

"You were never at a funeral? What about your uncle with lung cancer? I thought you said it was so important to go to a funeral if someone you know dies."

"It is important, but my parents always sent me to someone's house to play. And recently, nobody in my family died, except my uncle, and my parents didn't tell me about that one until the funeral was over. If they hadn't been so afraid of traumatizing me, I wouldn't be so traumatized."

By the time we found the church, parked, squared our shoulders and slipped into a back pew, the minister was already talking about a young boy who used to do chores for widows. He walked their dogs, said the pastor, and cut their grass, and never took a penny, just acted out of his fine good nature.

I glanced at Barbara to see how she was taking it. I supposed what he said could be true. Barbara was looking up at the ceiling which was painted peach between dark rafters. Down front there were spears of gladiolus and the polished oak of the closed casket. I didn't know of anything unkind about Brad. When he got crazy, he didn't torture cats or molest little girls. I could picture him with a dog, part hound, who leaped and yipped in happiness to be going out-of-doors. I had a rush of nostalgia for the life Brad had given up: the dog, the opportunity to go to other people's funerals and feel sad.

It had been a long time since I'd sat in a church letting my mind drift. I had stopped going to church as soon as I left for college. The minister finished now before I was ready. They sang, "Blessed Be the Tie that Binds," and men in dark suits carried the casket up the aisle.

Barbara grabbed my arm. "Is he in that box?"

"It's the casket! If we'd gone to the funeral home, you would have had to look at the

corpse, and up in the hollows they preach over an open casket– "

"Stop. I don't want to think about it."

Most of the people were going over to a woman under the windows on the far side. Back-lighting from the colored glass windows made it hard to see her face. A large teen-age boy stood beside her, younger than Brad, softer contoured, hair brown rather than blonde, but definitely his brother.

I said, "I suppose we should go pay our respects."

"Is that what you do?"

"Well, it's what everyone else is doing." We hung back a little, but soon there were no more shoulders between us and the woman, so I said, "We're friends of Brad's from the University."

"From the University!" The woman didn't quite clap her hands, but reached out as if to embrace us, then didn't complete the gesture. "You came so far!" she cried. "It's Brad's college friends, Billy. It's friends of Brad's from the University." She introduced us to Brad's brother Billy, then to a man her own age, not Brad's father we knew, maybe an uncle or brother-in-law, then to an elderly great uncle who had stunning white hair and didn't seem to hear well. "Some of Brad's college friends!" she kept saying. "All the way from the University!"

She asked us to drive in the cortège to the Masonic cemetery, then back to the house for something to eat. I was glad, because I hadn't gotten enough funeral. There was something in all this I had been missing. Magisterial in my superior knowledge, I told Barbara, "Put your lights on. Leave a space between you and the next car."

"How did we get so close the front?" she said. "I can't be in the front."

"You won't be. We wait for the hearse and the car with the family in it to lead us."

It was a perfect day, I thought, for a funeral. Earth colors everywhere: the sun had come out, and dried grass and mud took on tones of yellow and rust, and the tips of the twigs were purple. A faint odor of dirt came from the pile beside the grave, the call of a crow, more dark nuggets of words dropped by the minister, the silence surrounding Brad's mother and brother. This, I kept thinking. This is. Then the creak of the ropes.

The Aikens house bustled with the women who had gone directly from church to set out food. Even with all the people, the house had a spare quality. The pictures on the wall were widely separated, the furniture aligned with the straight edges of the rug. "It looks just like home," I said, trying to joke, but Barbara had lowered her head, was giving the people one of her intense stares.

A broad-smiled woman with gray wings in her hair introduced herself as Aunt Martha, although she wasn't really their aunt, she said. She pressed plates into our hands and gave us a tour of the buffet table, pointing out sliced ham, Jell-O-and-Cool-Whip fruit salad, homemade Irish soda bread and double chocolate brownie.

She watched us fill our plates. "We all appreciate how far you came," she said. "It means so much to Phyllis." I wanted to spear the biggest fried chicken breast, but Aunt Martha kept watching, so I took a drumstick instead. Aunt Martha said, "A lot of us were saying how pleased we were— to know Brad had friends at the University. It's a comfort to know he had friends."

"He had basically dropped out," said Barbara. She would have explained more fully, but they called Martha about moving the coffee urn to a better location. Barbara said, "They're all dying to know which one of us slept with him. That's what they really want to know."

"Oh, I don't think so." I was probably being naive, or maybe just more interested in the sweet fruit salad I hadn't meant to take because there wasn't a thing nourishing in it except maybe

the tiny mandarin orange slices suspended among pink bubbles. Somehow it seemed the right thing to eat here. Funeral meats and sickening sweets.

The problem with the coffee urn solved, it looked like Aunt Martha was going to come back, but Brad's mother came in from somewhere in the back of the house. Even indoors she continued to wear her black velvet beret, which made her head seem too heavy for her sloping neck. Her black dress was for summer with cap sleeves that bared her upper arms. The arms seemed soft, and her stomach too. There was something slack about her, vaguely embarrassing to me. She glanced at us as Martha tried to give her coffee.

Barbara nudged me. "She spotted us."

People kept talking to her, but she moved across the room toward us steadily. We backed off, but were stopped by the wall under a display of three china plates in an eighteenth century hayrick design.

Her head bobbed under the beret. "All the way from the University," she said, and stumbled, turned over on her ankle and had to catch herself on Barbara's arm. "I'm fine," she said. "I'm really okay. You'd think I never wore high heels before." And laughed out a tiny burst of noise.

Barbara leaned her face very close to Brad's mother. "Mrs. Aikens," she said, "I wasn't sure I wanted to say this, but I think I need to tell you, it was partly my fault about Brad."

Mrs. Aikens gave Barbara's forearm a quick pat. "It's so good to know he had good friends."

"But the point is," said Barbara, forehead practically touching Mrs. Aikens' now, "the point is, all his friends failed him. None of us were there for him at the end. When he needed us. Do you understand? No one was *there* for him?"

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Aikens. "I'm sure you didn't fail anyone."

"I *did* fail him. I could see he was falling apart, I mean, he was coming undone at the seams— "

"Seams?" murmured Mrs. Aikens, the smile fading, rolling her eyes toward the hayrick on the mounted plate. "His clothes?"

Impatient, as she often was when she thought someone was being willfully obtuse, Barbara said, "No, no, of course it wasn't his clothes. It was his *personality*. It was a total failure of all systems."

Mrs. Aikens teetered a little, hugged her own arms. "Why, you couldn't see the future, honey. How could you have known he was going to slip and fall off that fire escape? What could you have done?"

"My God," said Barbara, looking at me. "She doesn't know."

Aunt Martha had not been far away. "You haven't had a bite to eat yet, Phyllis."

"Not now," said Barbara. "I have to explain something to her. She doesn't understand— "

Martha used her smile broadside on Barbara, and simultaneously blocked with her hip, herding Brad's mother away. "I don't think Phyllis needs to talk right now," she said. "She needs to eat."

"I think I just might have a bite," said Brad's mother, smiling far off beyond the hayrick now. "It was so good of you girls to come."

I couldn't help myself from murmuring, "All the way from the University."

"Oh yes," smiled Mrs. Aikens, "from the University."

"She's on downers," Barbara said. "She thinks Brad is on the heavenly campus greensward. How can she not know he killed himself?"

"She knows," I said.

"No she doesn't. Why would she lie? How could you lie about your son's suicide?"

"She knows, but she isn't admitting the truth to herself."

"Then she doesn't know, she's lying to herself." Barbara's hair shifted ominously on her neck as if it were about to come free of its pins and all hell break loose.

I said, "Don't you see? They all know. Why else would Aunt Martha be so protective and get her away from us? They know, but that doesn't mean they're going to say it out loud, not to each other, not even to themselves."

"In other words, they don't want to hear that Brad was hurting so bad he killed himself."

"That's right. They don't want to hear it. Not in words."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I can't accept that. This is the one thing in his life Brad ever said loud and clear. He was murky a lot of the time, but he wanted people to hear this."

"How do you know?" And why was I taking this position? I felt myself down in the herd with the friends and neighbors while Barbara was on the mountain, the one with the leonine head and the Word. But I persisted: "I mean it, How can you be so sure? How do we know he really did it on purpose anyhow? Maybe he slipped or he was pushed, we weren't there. I can't even remember what he looks like. Maybe he wished all along just to be normal, you know, do what the rest of us were doing at college, or maybe he wanted to come back down here—"

Barbara's eyes grew enormous, and there were little flecks of gold in her irises. "This is about his pain. Focus on the pain," she said. "*His* pain."

I was slipping under her spell, although I didn't really believe she was right. "Barbara, these people aren't as good at being explicit as you are. Even Brad— you know— he didn't say it in words."

"Then I'll have to put it in words for him. He deserves that much." She touched my arm. "It's okay," she said. "They can take it." She took a few steps to the couch where the great-uncle was sitting with his wavy white hair. Barbara's hair was uncoiling down her back, beginning to unspring. "Brad killed himself," she said gently. "I know it's hard, but I think you need to face it."

The great-uncle struggled to his feet and shook Barbara's hand. "Pleased to meet you," he said.

"Brad was trying to get across a message. His life was shit."

Mrs. Aikens' uncle tipped his head to one side, looking puzzled, trying to reform the syllable he thought he had heard.

I said, "There's no point to it, Barbara, okay? They're suffering already, can't you let them suffer their own way?"

Barbara looked at me, looked around the room with its small pictures and isolated plates on the wall, so similar to my mother's house. "Do you want me to participate in vanishing Brad? You know I can't do that." She bounded away across the room, bumping people and excusing herself too loudly, and I watched her until she made a sudden change of direction and found Brad's brother Billy half hidden in the window drapes. She spoke urgently to him, then the two of them disappeared into the interior of the house.

Well, I thought, there's one who's going to get Brad's message. I got coffee, circled the room, pretending I was on my way back to someone. I found myself at the wall with the three china plates again. They nagged at me: who had plates like that? Not my mother, but someone in my family. My grandmother? But we would never have hung them on the wall, I thought. Stood them in a row on top of a hutch, maybe. But it didn't matter, this was still the house I'd

always known. I had gone to the University so I wouldn't end up in a house like this in a town like my town. With dollhouse plates on a blank wall.

I turned away and bumped into Martha, who met my eye coolly. "Where's your friend?"

"Giving Brad's message to Billy."

"Listen, you and your friend knew Brad—"

"Yes and no," I said. "At this moment I can't even remember what he looked like."

"Then you certainly don't know Phyllis. You don't know the family. Phyllis's husband, when Brad was in high school, died in a hunting accident."

"Killed himself?" I said.

"Shot himself," said Martha, not blinking. "No one knows the exact circumstances, but it was a great tragedy."

"That's grim." Martha gave me a chance to take it in, but I wasn't going to be taken in. I wasn't part of this, I was from somewhere else. I said, "There's no question about Brad, he really jumped."

Martha went on as if I hadn't said it. "Phyllis had a nervous breakdown over Brad's father, and we don't intend to let her have another. So you see, nothing is simple, nothing is as simple as it appears when you're eighteen."

"Nineteen," I said. "Why shouldn't she have a breakdown if she wants to? If people on all sides of her are killing themselves it seems logical to me." Saying this made me feel a little better: someone doomed to a small life would never say that.

Martha's face was more interesting when she didn't smile. "What do you want from me?" she said. "Evidence of stupidity or words of wisdom?"

Wisdom, I thought. Tell me how you can live in a place like this, and tell me why you

love Phyllis, and how can you stop another person from breaking down.

Barbara was leading Billy back into the living room.

"Oh no," said Martha.

Barbara looked like a dark angel: her hair had spread out behind her now, the boy so close that he seemed to have bloomed up out of it. "I told Billy," she said.

"Oh Billy honey." Martha reached for him, but he pulled back.

His eyes were red, and he had a couple of infected pimples on his cheeks, tender skin just above his ears where his hair had recently been cut. "People should know," he said. "Brad deserves that much."

"That's what Barbara says," I said.

"Right," said Billy.

"And what about your mother?" said Martha. "She deserves something too."

Billy looked at Martha with childish accusations in his eyes. "Brad had his hair long. If I'd of known that, I wouldn't have got mine cut for the funeral."

"Listen, Billy," said Martha. "The funeral was for your mother. That's who you cut your hair for, and all I ask is that you think of her a little longer. Can you leave her out of this? Okay, Billy?"

Barbara touched Billy's arm and said, "We'll leave the rest of the people out of it, the ones who aren't strong enough."

Billy nodded solemnly. "Okay, my mom doesn't have to know."

Martha started to speak, but her smile twitched and her eyes seemed to bulge, and I realized she was about to cry. Now why does she have to do that, I thought. Why do people always do the thing you don't expect.

But then I had a gift: a picture in my mind of Brad as clear as I had ever seen him in life, probably clearer. Wearing crusty jeans and a black denim jacket with the sleeves cut off; his arms bare and little homemade blue ink tattoos of imaginary animals on his shoulders and biceps. He shook his head and his hair shifted, swung, came to rest.

At that last moment, I wondered, had he gone out onto the fire escape on impulse? Did he hesitate? Did he just jump? Or perhaps sit for a moment on the rusting cross bar, for one instant of a piece, not scattered.

Choose, damn you, I thought. At least let it be that you chose.

He lifted both his hands and jumped.

I said to the others, "I finally remember what Brad looked like."

But Martha had gone back to Phyllis, successful in protecting her friend, for the moment. And Barbara was giving Billy her phone number because, she said, she wanted to be there if he ever needed her.

So I closed my eyes and watched Brad fall again.

