

Little Glass Bottles

We were told to stand in line along the end of my father's casket. I remember this most vividly because I had to borrow my cousin's shoes. I did not have dress shoes of my own and his were too small, so the whole day was uncomfortable. I was thirteen at the time and stood in line between my mother and my younger brother. The whole town knew my father and practically all of them had come to pay their respects. We had not been living in the town for a very long time. We had only moved here three years before my father died so we were each surprised that he had managed to leave such a positive impression. I would later discover that funerals were also a kind of social event inasmuch as noticing who did not attend would be a point of future ridicule. Although our town was small, there were two funeral homes. One had become a preference for the more affluent families that had lived in town the longest. The second was more popular with younger families and was substantially cheaper. My father was displayed in the second home. I don't remember how many hands I had shaken or how many hugs and kisses I had received. I do remember thinking that there were too many flowers. Between the perfume, cologne, and floral bouquets, the hint of liquor on some people's breath, the smells were overwhelming. There were moments where I thought I would be sick. I would have welcomed the opportunity to be excused from the crowd, but still the day wore through. There was a rhythm to mourning and I was beginning to notice repetitive language from each person. Someone would talk about how natural my father looked or how sad that this was the only time we all got together. They would hug and kiss my mother and then hug and kiss me and tell me how much I had grown. I'd mutter a thank you and think of anything else. I have never been comfortable with receiving attention. Even now the memory makes me want to be sick.

My mother did not cry after my father's death. Even at the wake she did not snuffle or weep softly. She did not say thank you to those who had come to mourn. My mother had nothing to show on

her face besides a subtle indentation that began and ended between her eyebrows. The slight creasing of tense facial muscle was imperceptible to the crowd, but I had seen the expression too often to miss it. My brother was ambivalent. I'm not sure he recognized what it all meant. It wouldn't be until the next Christmas came and he did not receive his usual number of toys. Only then would the gravity of emotions well up from inside him. Looking back I don't think I have ever forgiven him.

Towards the tail end of the evening, when the room was beginning to clear, I asked to be excused to use the bathroom. A simple nod from my mother was enough to send me away and out the back door. I stood on the back steps and leaned against a pillar beneath the awning. The air was cold, but not abrasive. Even in the fresh air I could smell the lingering aroma of the flowers and the people who had brought their impressions to me out of kindness. There was a cigarette smoldering in the ash tray next to me so I picked it up and started smoking it. I don't know why I did that, but it made me sick almost immediately. Someone close behind me began to laugh.

"You shouldn't smoke."

I jumped and flushed red. In my moment of panic I forgot my father's funeral. It was just a moment, but my mind leapt to how much trouble I would be in for having smoked a cigarette. In that same moment I thought what my father would think. Then I stopped worrying. I did not reply, but instead spit on the ground and wiped my mouth.

"You're what, now," he lit his own cigarette, "fifteen? Sixteen?"

"Thirteen." I don't know what had happened to my voice, but it sounded much smaller than it was. I heard my voice as though I had cotton in my ears. I remember his boots were black with white leather in a floral pattern down the side and silver on the toe. They were so bright and polished that

they didn't present any color at all. It was as if the sun itself lived on the ends of his boots. It hurt to look at them directly.

"I remember when I met your daddy," taking his glasses off and wiping them on his handkerchief felt more performative than necessary. "Your daddy was running around town, trying to find one goddamn store that sold wallpaper. I don't know why he was Hell-bent on it, but he sure was a pain in the ass about it. No offense."

I looked at the ground and kicked loose stones around. I used to collect stones and little glass bottles that were buried in the woods. I used to think about what could possibly be held in bottles that small. Even if it were medicine you couldn't fit more than two or three capsules inside. I kept them on my windowsill and sometimes the light would shine through and made colors on the floor.

He wiped his hand on his pants and stretched it out to meet mine. "Robert Colby. Call me 'Bob'."

"Elizabeth Malkmus." His hand was enormous and hairy as it dwarfed my own and seemed to swallow it whole. The smell of his cigarette and cologne was subtle, but it was there. I began to feel sick again but held my composure so as not to allow Mr. Colby another reason to talk to me. I did not like him from the start.

"How's your mother, Lizzy? Is she doing OK?"

I shrugged and looked at the ground, kicking loose stones. "She's fine, I guess. Hasn't cried yet."

"Grief is funny like that. You could go weeks, months, without feeling anything and then all of a sudden it can come upon you. You could be slicing tomatoes or watching an aspirin commercial and then, whoop!" He made an upward clapping motion to accentuate his point. "Has your brother cried yet?"

I shook my head and looked at a car parked in the lot. I did not have any interest in the car, but I did not want to look at Mr. Colby. I could see his reflection in the door and that was enough attention that I would allow him. He looked in the same direction and his eyes met mine in the side of the car.

“Take care of your brother,” he put out his cigarette, “and your mom.” He had begun walking away but had stopped, looking back as though he had forgotten something. “You still up at that house on East Foster Road?”

I hesitated for a moment too long and then nodded.

“Well maybe I’ll come by in a few days and see how you and your mother are doin’.”

I did not say anything to the positive or the negative, but instead walked back to the steps. It was warmer inside the funeral parlor, and I shivered with the temperature shift, but the aromas returned as a creature of larger and more sinister intention. My mother and brother were sitting in the front row of chairs in observation of my father. I sat next to my mother and remained silent for a few minutes before my brother said that he was hungry.

My mother began to pet the top of his head. “We have lots of food at home. Let’s sit here for another minute or two.”

My mother maintained her expression; the hint of pressure between the eyes carried so much weight that I could never understand then. It was as though her entire composition were held up by the bridge of her nose. My mother was the strongest person I had ever known, but every so often I thought that the slightest shift in her axis would have her crumple like a paper doll. I knew that it was important, but I wouldn’t understand why until much later in my own life.

Back in the car and on the way home, I inquired as to the character of Bob Colby and mentioned that he might be making a social call in the coming days.

“I don’t want you talking to him,” my mother said. I pressed her for an explanation, but she began to lean harder on the accelerator the more I pressed her. Then she started asking me questions like, “what did he ask you?” and, “what did he tell you?” and the like. She was driving so fast and asking me questions so quickly that we nearly blew through a stop sign and into the side of a flat-bed truck. She caught herself, thankfully, and we skipped a bit in the car as we skidded to a stop. We sat in silence, the three of us, until my brother reiterated his hunger and asked when we were going to get home. A sound began quietly from somewhere in the car. It was so unusual and unnatural that I became frightened when I realized that it was coming from my mother. Suddenly she burst into violent tears and shrieks that made my brother and me freeze up in our seats. Now we had had our fair share of shouting matches in the past, but never in my life had I heard my mother scream like that before. It sounded like years of crying had been dammed up behind her stoicism, but that dam had clearly broken. She came up with words I had never heard before and a few that I knew I wasn’t supposed to know. This fit lasted for what felt like an hour, but in reality could not have lasted longer than two minutes. When it was over, with my mother folded over the steering wheel and trembling out small whimpers of exhaustion, I softly put one hand on her back and made a small rubbing motion. My mother jumped when I touched her, but she relaxed in a moment and I promised her that I would never speak to Bob Colby for as long as I lived.