

Feed the Fish

It's two in the morning, and I'm sitting at my well-worn kitchen table, bathed in the white light of my laptop, perusing burial options. I sip my chamomile tea and google "coffins" like I was searching for a kitchen appliance. I never thought I'd be shopping for my own funeral at the age of forty-seven.

But here I am.

Earlier today, when the doctor told me I have stage IV pancreatic cancer and I should get my affairs in order, I came right home and obeyed. Even in death, I am compelled to tidy up—lest I be a burden on my family.

It's my favorite time of the year: April in South Carolina. The flowers are blooming. The weather is perfect. I've opened all the window to let the fresh air in. The night is quiet in our sleepy, gated neighborhood. In five hours' time, the dedicated citizens on my block will fire up their trusty gas-powered lawnmowers. My husband will join the legions of fathers and sons fulfilling their civic duty to maintain bright green, quarter-inch-tall grass.

I am clicking through images of caskets; the options and colors are endless. Wood, but what type? Metal, plastic, but what color? I can't help thinking that with the pillows and blankets, the coffins look like tiny beds. Which, in a way, is accurate. A bed for eternal sleep.

I am mulling over the fact that you can buy coffins from Amazon when I hear my son's voice in my ear. "What are you looking at, Mom?"

I startle, not just at the surprise of hearing Jack's voice behind me in the middle of the night, but because these are the most words he has spoken to me at one time, in as long as I can remember.

I snap my laptop closed and spin around to face him. His facial expression is guarded. If I've learned anything about motherhood, it's that your child's affection is like the weather. When he was a toddler, it was torrential rain—so much love and need, you couldn't absorb it all. Adolescence is like a never-ending drought. You start to believe you imagined the rain had ever existed, yet you keep hoping it will return.

He towers over me, my little boy who is not little anymore, but verging on manhood. If he stood up straight instead of slumping over, he'd be six foot two.

"It's nothing, dear." I flash him what I hope is a reassuring smile. "Are you hungry?"

I get up from the table, anxious to do something, anything but talk about why I'm reading an article titled *15 Ways to Have a Funeral on the Cheap*.

He shrugs and takes a seat at the table.

I take that to mean yes. I've become quite adept at interpreting his body language. Shrug means *Yeah, whatever*. Eyes narrowed, mouth slightly agape means *That was a stupid question*. He was always a pretty quiet and introspective child, but *I knew* him then. I knew his likes, his dislikes, what made him happy, what made him mad and sad. I was part of his inner world. Over the years, somehow I got pushed out, and that made me upset so I pulled away further. It was so different with my daughter, who hated me one minute and needed me the next. With Jack, it's like we're strangers who speak different languages and yet inhabit the same space.

He says nothing as I retreat to the kitchen. Which is fine with me, under the circumstances. I don't think I'll ever be able to say *I'm dying* aloud. The words would feel foreign and heavy on my lips. In my head, they spin round like a carousel. Just as I start to wrap my head around them, the words are gone again.

I open a loaf of Wonder Bread and drop two pieces into the toaster. Then I pour two glasses of milk and wait. I look down at my pink satin robe, starting to fray at the sleeves. Innumerable stains dot the front—my children's hand prints, left for all of time to see. When my husband gave it to me for Christmas, I felt like a Hollywood starlet. But that was seventeen years ago, when Jack was a baby. Wearing it now, I just feel cheap.

The toaster pops up. I butter the bread and sprinkle some cinnamon sugar. It's not an exaggeration to claim I've done this exact thing a million times before, but I've never tired of it.

I turn around to see Jack peering at my open laptop.

"What's going on?" He looks up, his voice angry. Not that he's ever happy these days, but right now I see more than plain old absence of joy. "Who's dying?"

I slide his plate of toast and glass of milk across the table, letting the question hang in the air.

I take a bite of my own toast and chew with the same enthusiasm one might have when chewing on cardboard. I want to swallow this mushy pulp, but then I'll need to give my son an answer. Once I say those words, this will be real.

I see past Jack's acne, his patchy stubble, his long brown mop of hair, to the little boy he once was. My instinct is to lie, to protect him. I am letting him down. If I were a good mother,

this wouldn't have happened. I wouldn't have been on yet another diet, trying to lose yet another twenty pounds. If I hadn't been on a stupid juice fast, I might have noticed the symptoms: weight loss, indigestion, abdominal pain. But I didn't notice. I just thought the diet was working. If I were really a good mother, I would have waited until I was old to die, when he was out of the house and already settled with a life of his own.

"I am." It comes out breathy and rushed.

He's staring at me. I worry that now those two words have been spoken, it will push us even further apart.

He takes a sip of his milk, and his Adam's apple bobs. "When?"

"Doctor says three months. At the most." I think he is trying to hold back tears. Either that or he is glaring at me.

"What are you going to do about it?"

I shrug. "There's nothing we can do. It's too advanced." I shake my head. I want to pull him in my lap and press his head against my bosom and whisper, *It will be alright.*

"I can help."

I smile and shake my head. When he was little, he would ask me to play, and I would say, *I can't play right now. I need to do these dishes.* And he would say, *I can help.* The offer was sincere, but he had no idea what he was offering to do.

"Really," he continues. "I can do research."

"Oh." I reply, surprised. "Sure. Why not."

We pull our chairs together so we are sitting side by side. “May I?” he asks as he pulls the laptop toward him. He smells a little like sweat and a lot like Axe body spray, but I welcome the closeness.

His fingers fly across the keyboard. I watch in awe as he clicks one link after another, scanning for information. I take this time to study him, now that his guard is down. He is scowling and shaking his head, and then he mutters something under his breath: “Even in death, we poison the environment.”

As he opens up an Excel document and starts typing, I sit there mentally going over expenses. Average cost of a funeral: \$7,000 to \$10,000. Medical bills: God knows what they’ll add up to. We have a modest amount of savings. My daughter has three more years of college. My son—if he applies, if he’s accepted, if he goes—would start college in a year. I’m not very religious or spiritual. I just want the service to be nice and cheap. I won’t be there to see it anyway.

“What’s your budget?” he asks, as if reading my mind. As if he knows how careful I am with our limited funds.

“Five thousand?”

More typing into the Excel sheet. “How much do you care about the environment?”

This question perplexes me. The environment is something I’m vaguely aware of. It exists on the periphery of things I worry about. If our drinking water were polluted and undrinkable, I would care. If my children were exposed to hazardous materials, I would care. But our little world is safe. The things I care about are the basics: food, shelter, our health, the clothes on our backs, school, retirement.

“What does the environment have to do with anything?”

“Well, it seems the type of burial you choose can be damaging to the environment.” He slides the screen closer to me, and I silently read, my chin resting on my palm. *Cemeteries use a lot of water, pesticides, and fertilizers to maintain the grounds, which may seep into the water supply..... the equivalent of 4 million acres of forest are cut down to make caskets.... 800,000 gallons of formaldehyde, used to preserve bodies, is put into the ground every year.*

“Oh. That’s interesting,” I say, but my tone says the opposite.

“Plus, it’s expensive.” He pauses to gauge my reaction.

“What about cremation? That’s not so bad, right?” I ask, hoping to impress my son with my selflessness. I don’t need a fancy headstone or oak casket. Honestly, I’ll take the cheapest option.

“Cremation is energy intensive. It releases sulfur dioxide, mercury emissions, carbon monoxide.” His voice has taken on the quality of a professor, patiently explaining. “But there are other options, better for the environment.” His face is animated. I can see my son is passionate about the environment. I didn’t think he was passionate about anything but video games.

“The question is, what kind of legacy do you want?” He says this without judgment.

What do I want to leave behind? What all mothers want for their children: happy, successful, fulfilled lives.

“If it were me, I’d choose to do no harm. Even . . .” He pauses, swallows. “Even in death.”

I blink my eyes several times. Who is this man before me? How did I miss this?

“Darling, I’m open to anything you suggest.” As long as I can see him smile one more time, make him proud of me, feel the connection we used to have.

Jack seems satisfied with my answer. He watches me, his hands hovering just above the keyboard as if he remembers what brought us together in the early hours of the morning: cancer and death. He has long, slender fingers like one would see on pianist, just like his father. His father isn’t a pianist either, but an electrician asleep upstairs, completely unaware of our morbid endeavor. I thought the longer I kept it to myself, the more unlikely it was to happen—the more it would become a figment of my imagination, a dream that the doctor told me I was dying. I could be dreaming right now . . .

Jack plunges ahead, jumping between websites so fast, the text is a blur. I gather up what words I see, like beads on a string.

Burial pods.

Tree.

Eternal reef.

Burlap sack.

Shroud burial.

Conservation burial.

Flameless cremation

Finally, he turns to me, his face impassive once again. What is he thinking? What is he feeling? His emotions used to live at the surface, but after years of teaching our children to hide

them—*don't cry, don't yell, don't whine*—any strong feelings he has are as far away as the bottom of a well.

I thought that's what we were supposed to do.

We talk at length about the pros and cons of each burial option, like we're economists, scientists, businesspeople.

“You could do a natural burial.”

I skim the text on the screen: . . . *buried in your choice of a natural cemetery or green burial preserve . . . rather than a plastic, metal, or wooden casket, a shroud made of natural materials is used . . .*

“Think coffee sack,” he says, “or bag of potatoes.”

I must be making a face, because my son places a hand on my shoulder briefly, like a butterfly pausing to rest before flying away. “I agree. No potato sack for you.” He continues on to the next option. “With burial pods, the ashes are put into a biodegradable urn, which in turn would help grow a tree. You could choose which type of tree. You can be buried in a backyard, or even potted and brought indoors.”

“Your father would never remember to water me.” I shake my head. “I'd be dead in a week.”

Jack gives a little high-pitched laugh and then his hands fly to his mouth trying to smother the sound. When he's recovered, he says with a smirk “But think about this: You could sit with us at the dinner table. And I'd introduce everyone to you. ‘And here is my mother, the potted tree.’”

The image comes to me instantly of a potted tree balanced in my chair, the broad green leaves quietly looming over my husband and son as they eat, forcing them to maintain some semblance of table manners—drinking from cups and not containers, not slouching or talking with their mouths full. I kind of like that thought.

Jack finishes his toast in two bites, his cheeks puffed out like a squirrel who just won the acorn lottery.

And now it's my turn to try and laugh, like venturing out onto thin ice. Laughter is the gateway to crying.

My son shoots me a nervous look.

I clear my throat and push the feeling back down. Neither of us is ready for my tears. They will make death more real, instead of like helping him with a school paper. We are researching options. For someone else.

“Okay, so this one is super cool. It's an artificial reef. They take the . . . remains, and mix them with cement, and make what's called a reef ball. Then they put it in the ocean to create a habitat for fish and coral and other creatures. You could even choose to be near Myrtle Beach. That's only two hours from us.”

“Fish.” I nod, mulling it over.

He wrinkles his nose “It's not like you're literally feeding the fish. You'd be helping restore their habitat.” He quickly types *coral reefs dying* and pushes the laptop toward me once more.

Now I'm reading about how the ocean absorbs excess heat trapped in our atmosphere, and how this increase in water temperature is bleaching the coral everywhere.

My son is reading along with me, over my shoulder. Now and again, he interprets the text for me. "Basically, what it's saying is that high water temperatures cook the coral to a crisp."

I continue reading and learn about scientists predicting damage to most coral reefs by 2030. And if the coral reefs are destroyed, the whole system collapses.

"Think of all the marine life that rely on the reef for their feeding and spawning ground. Think of all the people who rely on these reefs for food and jobs. It's like taking away trees from a forest, but it's happening underwater. We're destroying an entire ecosystem." He is emphatic.

I am nodding along like a bobble head trying to understand. *Heat is bad for coral. Coral reefs support fish. No fish to eat means many, many people will die.*

My son looks at me like it's my fault, like I'm personally responsible for the collapse of an entire ecosystem. Then he shakes his head. Maybe he thinks I just don't get it. He starts typing again, and this time a video called *Chasing Coral* appears. "Watch this, Mom."

We are sitting even closer now as we're taken on a journey below the surface. I am captivated by the underwater world hidden from our view, by the coral of all shapes, sizes, and colors—the skyscrapers of the sea—and by the abundance of life, both big and small.

Schools of fish zip by. A stingray glides across the bottom of the screen. A translucent jellyfish resembling a plastic bag makes its slow pulse upward.

I forgot how much I love watching marine life—a rare glimpse into a private world. When Jack was a little boy, I used to take him to the aquarium in Charleston. He loved petting

the stingrays, poking the jellyfish, cupping the starfish in the palm of his hand. He'd stand rooted to the spot, watching the sharks circle in that big tank. He would have stayed there for hours if I'd let him. But I never did, because his sister was bored already and begging to go back home.

“Do you remember the aquarium?” I whisper, searching his eyes for a connection, begging him to remember with me.

He says nothing, neither confirming nor dismissing me.

We sit stiffly in our wooden chairs, shifting, trying to get comfortable, but the images are painful. We witness the coral, dying before our eyes. The water is too warm for too long. At first the poor creature turns a shocking white, and then it gets browner and fuzzier as other forms of life take over. The ones that prey on decay. In silence, we watch the coral go from dying to dead.

Dying. The word pretends there's a chance, a microscopic chance. You can stop it, turn it around. It's an action word. You could still be recovering just as much as dying. *Dead*, on the other hand, is abrupt and final. There's no coming back.

Jack turns his hand over and pushes it toward mine. I reach out and grasp it. Not like I hold my husband's hand, fingers entwined, an unbreakable bond. Like I used to hold Jack's hand walking down the street, with complete belief that my grip would save him from running out into traffic.

The film ends, but I still feel submerged in the underwater world. The weight of death, my death, presses all around me. Before, I was just an observer. Death was something that existed outside the safety of my underwater vessel. But the seals have been compromised, and I am taking on water, losing oxygen. My mortality is no longer abstract.

“I could feed the fishies,” I say softly.

“What?” His face perks up, his brow knitted.

“Remember? Every time you wanted to go to the aquarium, you said—”

“I want to feed the fishies.” The corner of his mouth raises into a smile.

I catch a peek at his braces. We’re still holding hands, and it’s him who is keeping me safe now.

He remembers. The giant saltwater tank. The rainbow of fish. The neon coral. “I thought the rocks were glowing.”

Yes, I thought, yes. More. I want to hear more.

He runs a hand through his knotted hair. “You know, Mom, all those things we did growing up . . . the aquarium . . . collecting shells on the shore . . . kayaking through the marsh.” He shrugs. *Yeah, whatever.* “That was the best part of growing up. And it kinda stuck with me. You know . . . this love. Of nature.”

I’m dumbfounded. That was never the purpose. I just did things to see his face light up with joy.

“You know, I’ve applied to Catawba College. I want to get a degree in environment and outdoor education.”

My mouth drops open, and closes, like a fish washed up on the shore, breathless.

“How?” I squeak out. He knows what I mean. *How is this possible? You are a failing student. You show no ambition. You never even told me you wanted to go to college.* In fact,

every time I said the word *college*, he put on his giant headphones, looked down at his phone, and walked out of the room, as if my question didn't even dignify a response.

The familiar sensation winds its serpent body tighter and tighter around my chest, the slow painful squeeze of a boa constrictor, of the knowledge that I've failed as a mother.

Shrug. He looks away from me and speaks to the living room, where the predawn light is starting to filter in. "I wanted it to be a surprise. To see if I could get into college. Do it on my own." Slowly, he turns to face me. "I didn't want to get your hopes up."

I see clearly now that I am partly to blame for the slump to his shoulder. I've been that nagging burden he's had to carry. *What are you going to do with your life? Look at your sister. She's in law school. Don't you care about anything? You can't live in our basement for the rest of your life.*

His eyes are shining, like a black road after a light rain, when the sun comes out. "I wanted to make you guys proud of me."

"Honey . . ." The word catches in my throat, as thick as the thing itself. "Honey, we will always be proud of you. We've always been proud of you. You just have so much potential . . ." Every child must hate that word: *potential*. I know I did. "My goal in life has always been for you to be happy."

I can't help myself. Even after years of being rebuffed—*No physical contact is to be initiated by the parent!*—I wrap my arms around my son and hold him as tight, as my imaginary boa held me. The walls between us crumble, and our islands of pain join temporarily. For too long, I have been a stranger to him, and he to me.

“I didn’t do enough.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

At last we pull back from the suffocating embrace.

“Maybe you can beat this, Mom. Maybe you’ll survive.”

I nod solemnly. “Yes. Maybe I will.”

In the strange light of the new morning, I feel a connection to all those coral reefs across the globe. Below the surface, we are both silently dying, leaving behind this fragile life we take for granted until it’s too late. And I feel peace.

My son will be okay. He will visit my underwater grave and see the fish and coral. He will think of me and know the best part of me was making him.

I will be part of the reef. I will undo a little of the damage we’ve done.

I will feed the fish.