

The Adjustment

We planned to arrive at the funeral home by six. The entire family. Aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, the cousins, children and grandchildren—all 39 of us. It had been a good morning for the Hertz counter in LaGuardia's Terminal A. I had come the farthest, excusing myself abruptly from my summer job on campus in Iowa.

We made the trip up the turnpike in time to spend the afternoon at the beach, trying to lose our sorrow in the timid, brown waves of the Sound. I'd gone to this beach with my grandfather every August for as long as I could remember.

The beach had been a special place for Grandpa since he moved to this town as a young father in the early 1930s. He loved the kle-o, kle-o, kle-o of the herring gulls as they waited, hovering, for part of a sandwich to drop from a young hand. On the clear, still days when the smog didn't creep out from the city, he'd jab his thick forefinger in the direction of Old Field Point across the Sound and shout, "You can see it! You can see it, can't you?" If we were lucky, we'd catch Grandpa on the most wonderful day of the summer. He'd say it was. We'd walk hand-in-hand with him on the cool, forgiving sand near the water until the tide started going out and it was time to go home.

This was our first trip to the beach without Grandpa. But all of us were reassured that some things don't change when, at about four, Aunt Molly began digging her watch out of a faded, canvas beach bag. "Four! Four!" she exclaimed, sounding like the bursts from the Metro-North trains as they stopped in town on their way to Grand Central. So we gathered our sandy, wet things and trudged off the beach.

The white August sun had heated the black parking lot to scorching. All of us firewalked across the shimmering asphalt and found our rentals, Impalas and Tauruses among the Mercedes and BMWs. We followed Aunt Molly out of the lot to the winding

The Adjustment

Beach Road, one car falling in after another in an unwitting precursor to tomorrow's procession. We made our way through the narrow road lined with sand and marram grass to the boulevards and massive, shady oaks of my grandparents' neighborhood. Our caravan turned carefully off the Lower Road onto the long, circular driveway of their house. Even in the shade of the old trees, the pea gravel popped like Fourth of July Snaps under the warm weight of the cars.

We tumbled into the house and took our turns in cool showers that washed away the day's suntan lotion, salt and sand. In the shade and air conditioning of the old house, my afternoon of beach sun quickly became a sunburn that would be more conspicuous than the pink tie I planned to wear to the viewing.

My mother grew up in this house. It is nestled to the south of the Episcopal Church and the town hall, but just before the town green and the large, wooden gazebo that's home to the Citizen Symphony. It seems those landmarks—like most of the buildings in town—were painted from the same bucket of white paint.

Though the old house is a mile and a half inland, it had been a mariner's home. Its most visible feature is the widow's walk, a railed platform on the roof that allowed the woman of the house to see out to the froth of the Sound. Through brass binoculars burnished by years of nervous hands, she could search for her husband's returning ship, though she wouldn't always find it.

The town was one of the two original colonial settlements on the coast, more than 200 years older than my grandparents' house. Almost four centuries later, the town and its people still take their colonial heritage seriously. The architecture of the northern colonies, a striking, sturdy woman with no makeup, can be seen everywhere.

The Adjustment

As we pulled into the parking lot of the funeral home, with its English balance and side-gabled roof, I caught sight of the A&P across the Post Road. Complete with a widow's walk, the grocery store was indistinct from the large, 200-year-old homes in the neighborhood behind it. The shoulders of the houses had slumped with age, making it look like they were turning their backs on their 20th-century descendant.

As I held open the funeral home's white, six-panel door for the group from our Impala, a stinging, air-conditioned cold rushed at me and began lapping at my sunburn. The faint smell of formaldehyde mixed with my father's Old Spice as we walked into the lobby. It was lit dimly on both sides with wall sconces of two flickering, electric candles whose ivory plastic bodies had been molded to make it look like they were melting.

We joined the rest of our family and stood shivering on the gray slate floor. All of us began to stare at the brass knobs of the closed parlor doors just ahead of us for the first sign that they would open. My grandfather's name, printed on parchment-colored copy paper in a Revolutionary-era font, had been hung to the right of the doors in a wide, gilded frame.

Even as we waited, each of us began our role in the drama. There were the criers, of course. But we came across the Atlantic from England in the mid-1600s to the American wilderness. We didn't cry then and we shouldn't start. Even so, the undertaker, a thin woodpecker in a dark charcoal suit and cheap shoes, entered the scene and scurried around the lobby hustling Kleenexes like a vendor does beer at a Yankees' game. Most of the family stood in silence, shuffling their feet on the slate and wondering what possibly could be happening behind the parlor doors.

A sharp, wooden groan punctured the raw air. Everyone stopped. There was the undertaker propping himself up on the brass knobs inside the partially opened doors. He

The Adjustment

had taken a mysterious back route into the parlor and was welcoming us like he was the host of a cabaret show.

“Please come in,” he said in a slow, practiced voice, bowing his head repeatedly like he was pecking for insects in an unseen tree. “Please, please come in. Please....” He had opened the parlor doors completely by now.

We went in slowly, like his voice, as if he’d used it to set the pace for our visit. The criers became louder as they took short glances up from their wet Kleenexes at the polished mahogany casket, brilliant, dark and final against the pale yellow walls. The shufflers stood still at assorted distances from it and stared at what their eyes found in its pillowed satin lining.

I was not looking at the casket. I couldn’t. I stood at a right angle to it and continued to survey my extended family and my shoes. As I stared at my loafers, I was overcome by a profound and anxious longing. I became soaked with random memories of Grandpa, fragments of our life together that came barreling at me, out of control, like they were being poured one after the other down a playground slide.

My memories of Grandpa felt different now. They once had been infinite, uncountable. But today, I could number each of them. And something had gone out of them, too. Grandpa had taken with him the chance to do any of it even one more time. For inside each memory of someone alive is the sweet, shining possibility that it could happen again, that it might be recreated and relived in an even more fantastic way. But when someone dies, that possibility dies with them and all that is left are Polaroids, however stunning, that will work their way to black, too.

The Adjustment

As I lifted my head, trying to shake myself of this new reality, it was clear that something was wrong. Even the criers had stopped, abandoning their tissues for appalled gapes. No one moved. It was quiet enough to hear the cars on the busy, rush-hour Post Road. I had no choice now. I turned towards Grandpa, pivoting on my left foot like I was catching a pass during a pickup basketball game.

I now was perpendicular to the casket, which had been opened completely by the undertaker. My eyes were the last to see what my parents and all my relatives had discovered since he had welcomed us so grandly. My mouth was the last to fall open.

They had dressed Grandpa in a navy suit and a well-pressed white broadcloth shirt with a point collar. He didn't seem to be wearing the clothes as much as they had found a place to rest, a quiet roost of bluebirds. The undertaker was at the casket, tending carefully to my grandfather's crimson silk foulard necktie. While he did, it had become clear to everyone else in the parlor that something had been forgotten.

Nearly everyone had started to mutter one thing or another about what they saw. I listened. The muttering was circumspect, but intense, like the grumbles of the Episcopal Women's Guild when they disagree with the rector. The mutterers might have gone on for hours, energized by their newfound malevolence, but they were doomed by the cowardice betrayed by their whispers. It was Aunt Molly who belted it clearly first: "His fly is open!"

There was a great exhalation. And then the muttering untangled itself and became a cacophony of scrutiny and condemnation. "Yes, his zipper's down...it should be up...his fly shouldn't be down!...how could it be down?...who would have made such a mistake?" Some of the children from the Midwest giggled and made quiet mention of the barns in the countryside past their suburban homes.

The Adjustment

All eyes left my grandfather and his open shop to look for the undertaker. The faces of each of my relatives had the focused glow of a searchlight during the London Blitz. But if the undertaker felt the heat of their beams, he wasn't showing it. He strode solemnly, but confidently to the casket, where he took a position directly in front of the open zipper teeth.

Wasting no time and looking straight ahead so he didn't draw further attention to the problem, he quickly moved the offending puller from south to north, without even a hint of the usual "zzzzzip!" When it was done, he took the same solemn, confident strides back to the lobby. It was only there, out of sight of his guests, that he mopped the sweat that had gathered on his forehead since Aunt Molly's declaration.

The whole thing lasted no more than a minute or two. But at the Connecticut Funeral Directors Association meeting the next spring in Trumbull, the undertaker was given the Excellence in Mortuary Crisis Management Award for his dispatch and calm. It is said that receiving the award is such an honor that the presentation ceremony is one of the only moments in an undertaker's career that will put a smile on his face. The statuette they handed the undertaker as he beamed from the podium was topped by two gold Minutemen in tricorns, each supporting one end of a gold casket.

As the undertaker wiped his brow in the lobby, the crying and shuffling began again, mixed with disbelieving comments about what already had become known in the family as "The Adjustment." Everything was returning to chaotic normal.

Out of the chaos, we began to approach the casket one family after another, with all the steadiness and determination of the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution that we are. We slowly paid our respects to my grandfather as I had thought we would.

The Adjustment

When the last family was finished, Aunt Molly turned quickly, but gracefully towards the lobby, its impotent candles still flickering, but producing no melted wax. The undertaker was still collecting himself. A hush fell over the parlor as we realized the exchange that was bound to take place next. Aunt Molly once had made a store clerk cry because she had been called “Ms.” instead of “Mrs.”

It had gotten so quiet that we could hear the Yankees’ game playing softly on an AM radio in the undertaker's office. Aunt Molly took the undertaker’s hand and, looking him square in the eyes, shook it with sincerity, enveloping the right hand he extended with two in white gloves. To our surprise, she said nothing. Aunt Molly couldn’t hide her dissatisfaction, but she did not rebuke him. When they dropped their brief grip, he left her quickly, shuffling backwards and making bow after bow, like a peasant spared execution by a feudal emperor.

Aunt Molly was moving on, and all of us with her. Tomorrow, there would be the funeral. We informed the undertaker just before leaving that the casket should be closed at the Episcopal Church tomorrow morning, hastily conceived insurance against any further dereliction.

We filed out of the funeral home quietly, enjoying the return to normal air and making dinner plans as we went. My cousins and I said we’d go back to the beach the next day. As we walked in the faded orange sunlight to our cars, my mind drifted to memories. The traffic had lightened on the Post Road and I thought I could hear the gentle waves of the Sound as the tide was going out.