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Ashes, Incense

I am traveling on Amtrak from Rhode Island to Manhattan to say goodbye to my favorite cousin, Lorna, who is dying. It is seven-thirty on a Sunday morning. A gray flannel cloud blankets the Northeast Corridor. For the past six weeks, Lorna has not wanted visitors. But last night her husband, Ed, telephoned me.

“We’re in a bad situation here,” he said. “Lorna is...emaciated. We would like you to come down if you want to. It looks like she’s getting close to the end.” This invitation is a gift to me; I am so grateful for it, but also afraid. Ed and their daughters have been taking care of Lorna with the help of a hospice nurse. What do families know about caring for the dying? We learn as we go through it. What will I find when I arrive there?

I think of the Lorna I know: the woman who has been committed to working on behalf of refugees her whole life. Her sister Mary thinks it began in elementary school when the nuns put boxes in the classroom to collect coins for the missions. In the sixties Lorna and Ed worked with the Tom Dooley Heritage, supporting his work with refugees in Southeast Asia.

Their attention rose to a new level after the war in Vietnam when they decided to adopt babies from that country. I still have a photo from the New York Times in 1972 of Lorna and Ed waiting at LaGuardia Airport for the plane carrying Vietnamese orphans and their second daughter.

The Vietnam war was an anguish to us. We mourned its victims, friends and a family member. I remember the silver colored metal bracelet Lorna wore for decades, engraved with the name of a POW/MIA soldier, lost in Vietnam.

The train carries me across the gold and green salt marshes and canals on the Connecticut coast. If it were not shrouded in mist and fog, I could see the blue Atlantic to the east. Recalling the e-mail Lorna’s sister, Mary, sent to all the cousins, I weep. “I know Lorna loves you all very much,” she wrote. It’s losing one more person in my life whom I love, and who loves me – losing the love is what makes me cry. The maples alongside the tracks are splashed with autumn rust and yellow. The beauty of the world is an antidote to sorrow.

I write a letter to Lorna in my head.

“Dearest Lorna,

“Your life is almost over. This is an astonishing sadness as the empty space where the Towers stood. You have been a part of the structure of my life. I am listing. When we were children, your father would bring you and your sister on the train from Brooklyn to White Plains to our grandparents

house. My mother always kept your arrival a secret from me and my brothers and sisters because she couldn't handle our excitement.

" We would all chase each other through the house, exploring the long dark closet that secretly connected the two bedrooms upstairs. Remember? There was a box in there that held our grandmother's wedding dress, worn in 1900. Our aunts had saved it. When Aunt Helen was preparing to sell the house and move to a retirement home, she discovered that the dress had crumbled to shreds. She brought it to the backyard and burned it. That's what we do with tattered American flags and holy relics.

" I remember your work with the International Rescue Committee, teaching and often traveling to Thailand, Laos, and Africa. Ed took care of the children while you slogged in the mud of refugee camps, walked through rivers, slept in tents and convinced donors to support the doctors and nurses who worked in the camps.

" I think it was your sense of humor and serenity, different from the volatile temperments of so many in our family, that I loved the most. When you and I hiked on the Dingle Peninsula in 1989, and were far from our day's destination and hungry, we sat on a rock and opened our backpacks to some brown bread and two apples. I was tempted to complain, but you said, "Oh goody. Apple sandwiches!" And on that same hike, we had to cross a bridge with no handrails over a roaring cataract. "I can't do this," you said. I was confident. I said, "I'm not afraid, I'll help you." But after taking the first few steps I was frozen, couldn't move forward or backward. After *you* rescued *me*, you said 'All these years, I thought I was chicken, but now I know it's genetic!'"

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Grand Central. The ride is over. I take a taxi to Lorna's apartment. In the end, we all lose everything. Get ready.

Ed and Sheila and Kirin greet me at the front door. The girls say they are "going to do something for mom," ask me to wait and disappear into the bedroom. Kirin calls, "Dad. Come in." A few minutes elapse. No one comes out. It is silent. I hear no voices. I wait for one of them to beckon me in. No one comes. Is it possible? Can she have gone in these few minutes I am waiting to see her? Then, Kirin stands in front of me, looks into my eyes and says, "She has stopped breathing." Sheila stands near me, she cannot speak. Her eyes are full of tears. I put my arms around both of them. We hold each other.

I go into the bedroom where tall, thin Ed stands by the bed. Lorna lies still and pale, her eyes closed, her bony fingers resting below her breasts. I see no sign of respiration; although the longer I stare at her throat and chest I imagine I see movement. I feel for her pulse on her wrist and on the side of her neck. Nothing. No more suffering, no more vomiting, no more diarrhea and profound weakness. No more bafflement at why her eighty-five year old neighbor feels fine and she feels so miserable.

I think of my long trip and getting here too late to say goodbye. But I replace this thought, knowing with conviction that this is where I belong, in this room, with her family and with her.

Ed calls hospice to notify them. Hours pass as we wait for the hospice nurse to arrive. Ed lets me read the stack of e-mails he and Lorna have received from all over the world – Kenya, Bangkok, Nepal, Ethiopia, Jordan, Beijing, Seattle, and Washington D.C. They are loving letters from friends and colleagues at the International Rescue Committee. The family shows me a stack of photos that they have assembled for the planned memorial service. Mary arrives and her daughter comes in. Sheila's husband comes in. One by one or two by two we all sit with Lorna in her dark and quiet room.

The nurse sits on the sofa and does her work on her laptop. She is very kind and listens attentively to Ed sharing stories about Lorna, looks at snapshots and asks questions. The girls weep quietly, but Ed and Mary and I do not cry. Is it because to witness each others tears would worsen our distress?

Two staff people from the funeral home arrive. A man and a woman, identically dressed in white shirts and black pants, push a stretcher into the living room. They gently invite everyone to say their goodbyes. "We can wait," the woman says. The family and the hospice nurse file into the bedroom. Then, Ed and his daughters leave the apartment; they don't want to see Lorna depart. Mary and I stay in the living room, although Mary turns away and doesn't see the two carry Lorna, in a thick white plastic bag, to the stretcher and cover her completely with a gray wool blanket.

Opening the door, they wheel Lorna through the corridor, out the front door of the building and down the sidewalk to the street where their van is parked. From the funeral home, someone will transport Lorna to the crematorium where her body will be slid into a furnace and burned to ashes. This is what she wants. No wake. No funeral. We will celebrate her life at a memorial service at the IRC offices on 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue.

Later, back on the train, I finish the letter.

"My beautiful Lorna, we are kin. We share the same ancestors. We inherited gifts of intelligence, vision, energy, wit, and a love of books and travel from our grandparents and their grandparents. We share in the blood and bones of our interesting aunts and uncles who were scholars, singers, teachers and healers.

"I love you, and because of you I love myself, our children, grandchildren, siblings, nieces, nephews, cousins, our cousins' children and grandchildren. Because of you we all are connected to families on the other side of the world. We are one. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, 'Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.'"