

*Interment*

It was a rough winter and a brief spring. Nina had just come back from her uncle's funeral outside Laramie. "He had a good life," she said. "A good life and a good death. He went in his sleep. He went in his sleep and two days later, he had a funny funeral."

"Funny," said Ron. The three couples were sitting on the screened-in porch having cocktails before going out for pizza. They were life-long friends. This was a mid-May tradition.

"Several hundred people with funny stories to tell, all of them laughing for an hour. I call that funny," Nina said. "The minister had to cut people off because he had another funeral service right after my uncle's. At my funeral, do you know how many people will have a funny story to tell?" Nina said. "Not one." She looked around. No one contradicted her. "It makes me wonder if my whole life is wrong."

She looked sincere. They wondered if she knew.

Of the three wives present, Nina looked the most rested, perhaps because she didn't work. Her skin was smooth and olive, her hair prematurely white. The beautiful bone structure, the striking slenderness that made her a knock-out at twenty wasn't enough at forty. There was a slight hunch to her shoulders, a pulling away from people instead of an offering up.

"So, we drove to the cemetery," Nina said. Her voice wavered. She waited until she regained control, so she wouldn't sound laughable the way people who talk when they cry do.

"She missed her connecting flight," her husband, Derek said. "She had to sleep on a cot in the Chicago airport overnight. She was strung out. If the flight had gone smoothly, she wouldn't be as shaken as she is now." Derek had a bushy brown mustache. He always wore a beret. He needed something to cover his head because he'd lost his hair in cancer treatments. The beret and the mustache balanced each other out; without them he looked grotesque, shiny pink skin from scalp to chin. Derek had dealt with cancer heroically. Now he looked fake. He looked as if he were made of wax, a Derek candle you light by the wick of the beret.

"See—he always dismisses me," Nina said to her friends. It was true, but they were sick of hearing about it. "I'm not allowed to be legitimately upset by anything. Not even death."

"Why be upset about what we know is coming?" Derek said. He was playing the cancer card. His friends were immune—he played it too often. "Save that for the surprises in life," Derek said to Nina. He spoke too confidently. He *had* surprises. They were important and would destroy the marriage if Nina knew.

Nina's face grew lonely. She looked as if she was up against the wall.

Joe piped up in Nina's defense. It was his house, his porch where they met every May. "Let her finish?"

Nina's face went from lonely to vain. "We drove to the cemetery in one big, long, funeral train," Nina said. Her hand swept across the evening air in a single, stately stroke. "Two hundred cars, a hearse and the Wyoming sky." Everyone was touched by the image. "We all got out and walked to the grave. The Army Reserves sent out seven men in uniform to fire the 21-gun salute. You can have one if you served in a war. I kept thinking, *I don't want to be buried in Pittsburgh, I don't want to be buried in Pittsburgh*. And then I thought: why would I *live* somewhere where I don't want to be buried?"

Her eyes grew wide; they quivered. She was really asking.

"You can cremate me," Derek said. "Cremate me and throw me in the Monongehela River."

All of them were thinking the same horrible thought: what an occasion for Nina to meet his girlfriend. To punish Derek for having a secret from Nina which they all knew, they ignored him.

Joe spoke up. "Nina," he said. "You don't." And he looked very directly at her with a candor more spiritual than social. The air in the room grew cooler suddenly, sweeter and thinner as if they'd all just crossed the alpine line on a long, gentle, uphill climb. For a salesman, Joe had accomplished a lot of personal growth. He was a lovely, kind, well-balanced man. In college, he'd been superficial and athletic. Over the next two decades, his good build and good looks could have gone either way. He could have devolved into a pot-bellied has-been, his choir boy features shrinking into the drinker's volatile surliness. But something angelic stayed with him. His face emitted a practical joy, the light of the saved Christian without the

attendant judgmental reflex. Jeri was his second wife. She hadn't been to college with the others. She hadn't been to college at all.

"The Monongehela," Nina said. She was ignoring Joe's lifeline. Paralysis was her first response to liberty. It was a huge factor in her unhappiness. "That polluted sewer?"

Everyone felt dejected. They didn't want to hear ever again about how she didn't like Pittsburgh.

It was time to refresh drinks. Jeri got up. Her long, thick strawberry blonde hair was pulled back in a gidget-y pony tail high on the head. She had the best figure in the room, nice cleavage always two-thirds on display, a small waist, lovely calves that made all her shoes look festive. Jeri loved clothes. She was ahead of the season tonight in lemon linen shorts and lime linen shell. Her cardigan was tangerine cotton. Joe matched Jeri in lime-colored slacks and a white summer sweater. You could have cut them out of a catalog. Everyone reminded themselves that in his first marriage, Joe didn't dress like this.

The men and Sandra were drinking Scotch. Jeri splashed more in their glasses. She poured wine for Nina and herself.

Joe's calm encouragement of Nina interested Sandra. Something was afoot this evening. Sandra was concerned that the three couples were growing apart. Instead of getting together spontaneously, everything was planned months in advance. Instead of catching up in between, they caught up all at once or not at all.

"Where do you want to be buried?" Sandra said to Joe.

"Actually," he said. His eyes were all apologies. "Darcy and I want to be buried side by side."

Darcy was Joe's daughter by his first wife, the woman they knew in college. She was Canadian and had moved back to Ottawa. Darcy was in her twenties now. She had just visited Jeri and Joe. Now she was gone.

"This is the first I've heard of it," Jeri said. Joe and Jeri had three sons together. "Which one of our boys are you two going to bump out of our plot for all eternity?"

No one felt any sympathy whatsoever for Jeri. Everyone remembered how graceful Joe had been the night Jeri came home from the hospital where her father was dying of stomach cancer and told Joe she'd just bought the last five plots in her family's burial ground to

put her father's mind at ease. He'd said to Jeri, *Jeri, I can't die until I know where you are*. By are, he meant, are buried.

To Jeri it made sense, her nuclear family of five buried in a row beside her parents in a run-down, inconvenient cemetery on the rough side of Pittsburgh where she was born, bringing so much hope and beauty into their doting, earnest, working class lives. She was unable to calculate the impact on anyone else's future: Joe would have to relinquish the two plots reserved for him and his spouse in his family's upscale cemetery; their three sons would have to stay single and remain in Pittsburgh all their lives; Darcy would have to choose Canada or cremation.

"Let me understand the dad rules," Joe said as if he were speaking to the evening air. The air was delicate, lavender-colored and transitional; it contributed to the evening's candor. "Jeri can be buried next to her dad, but Darcy can not."

"That's not what I'm saying," Jeri said although it was exactly what she was saying. She started in.

Everyone tuned her out. They were older and wiser now; they didn't try to challenge her or change her way of thinking. Jeri was unreasonable and she had stamina. She used the pitch of her voice to chew the huge, raw chunks of a marital issue into paste. Even complex, paradoxical issues became verbal slurry. To spite her, everyone silently hoped Darcy and Joe would end up side by side in Pittsburgh's elite cemetery, while Jeri would end up lying between her dead dad and four strangers.

"I'm cold," Jeri said when she was through. Nina's arms were folded tightly over her chest. "Are *you* cold?" Jeri asked her. Nina nodded yes. "Are *you*?" Nina asked Sandra. Sandra said she was. Jeri went inside to get the three of them sweatshirts.

While she was gone, Joe made a joke at her expense. When Jeri came back she heard the tail end of their laughter. "What was so funny?" she said. No one wanted to tell her. She handed out the sweatshirts. Nina and Sandra had been cold for awhile. Now they enjoyed the feeling of being warm. They sipped their drinks with pleasure and nestled in their chairs.

"I *said*, what was so funny," Jeri said. Everyone wanted to keep the joke a small secret from Jeri to pay her back for ten years of harangues. Joe caved in.

"I made a little joke at your expense," Joe said.

"What was the joke?" Jeri asked.

Joe told her. Jeri left the porch in tears.

"It's death, isn't it," Sandra said. "We're all afraid to die without knowing the truth. The little truth and the big truth." She meant the joke told behind your back and the mistress everyone knows about except you.

Sandra was the smartest person in the room. Everyone counted on her to sort fact from opinion. Everyone respected that noble thing, Sandra's thinking life, though sometimes it made them feel they didn't really know her. In college, she and Ron were considered *the* brains. He was tall and Abe-Lincoln ugly; she was short and plain. Now he was rich and handsome. She was rich and attractive. He was a doctor specializing in oncology and she managed investments for the University. Their style was classic. Suits with ties or blazers with turtlenecks—that was Ronald. Knits, gold, and Ferragamo shoes—that was Sandra. Plus, tonight, Jeri's sweatshirt.

"I don't think that's true," Nina said. Everyone was shocked. No one questioned Sandra. She was too deep. "I think we're all afraid to die because it's the unknown. The truth has nothing to do with it."

Derek's smile was wide, nervous and shallow. Sandra understood: Nina was facing off against her in lieu of Derek.

"Maybe to Sandra," Joe said, stumbling, "the truth is—different than it is to you."

"Of course it's different," Nina said. "We're two different people." Nina resented Sandra being the unquestioned authority all these years. Nina figured her life experience entitled her to be an authority too. Sandra saw where this was going. For years, the three marriages had helped each other, as if they were all six married. Derek's post-cancer affair was throwing this off.

Jeri came back with fresh make-up on. Joe patted his thigh twice. Jeri sat down on it. Sandra found their cuteness revolting. How dare they be named Joe and Jeri Jensen anyway.

"What about you, Ron," Joe said. "Where do you want to be buried?"

Sandra turned to her husband. She had no idea where her husband wanted to be buried.

"On the farm," Ronald said. "On the fallow hill, facing west. No marker."

The men admired Ron for having a family with roots in agriculture. His father lost the farm, moved into town, opened a hardware store, did well and bought the farm back. Ron was the first Gordon to ever go to college, let alone medical school.

Jeri was jealous because Ron was ending up with so much room. "Is that allowed?" Jeri asked.

"It's *his* land," Joe said.

"I don't think the Board of Health allows that," Jeri said.

Nina was envious too. Ron had the ideal interment, the interment Nina wanted without giving up anything to get it. She wanted to be able to leave Wyoming at the age of 18 to go to Carnegie-Mellon to meet a charismatic graphic designer, classical guitarist and bon vivant like Derek, without rupturing lifelong ties to her birthplace. Nina's nature had a twoness about it, as if she were looking simultaneously left and right, actively choosing neither. "What kind of funeral," Nina said. Her voice challenged Ron as if daring him to copy her and say, *a funny funeral*.

"No funeral," Ron said.

"You have to have a funeral," Nina said. "Or how are you going to get into the ground."

Ron corrected himself. "No service," he said. A doctor of Ronald's stature with no marker and no service. Everyone felt a little sad. They thought they knew why Ronald felt that way.

Once a year, Sandra visited her sister, a Buddhist scholar in Tibet. When Sandra came back, she always said she wanted to be immolated in the Himalayas and tossed up to Heaven with a great clanging of bells. Everyone felt criticized by this choice of Sandra's. Sandra was privy to mysteries that couldn't be communicated across the lawns and fences and garage roofs of the suburbs of Pittsburgh.

"We all know what *you* want," Joe said to Sandra now.

"I changed," Sandra said. "I want to be buried next to Ronald." Everyone looked at Sandra.

Ronald seemed surprised. Sandra, foregoing an end to reincarnation to lie side by side with him in the so-so soil of the Gordon farm. He raised his chin and reappraised his wife. Contained. That was his word for her. She was self-sufficient in every way. When they adopted a little boy who developed Cerebral Palsy, that was the only time she needed Ronald. She would have fallen apart without him. "Thanks," he said, but he sensed there was more to it.

"Do *you* want a service?" Joe said to Sandra.

"Yes," Sandra said.

"When did you change?" Nina said to Sandra. She was trying out a cross-examination tone.

"Awhile ago," Sandra said, though she had changed just now. If asked, Sandra would not tell them why. It was to make their deaths logistically easy on her son and his caretakers.

"I feel pressure," Nina said. "I'm the only one who doesn't know where she wants to be buried." She sighed a light sigh. "I'll be cremated with Derek," she said, as if agreeing to go to his choice of movies.

Everyone could see it now, Virginia showing up at the service in black widow's garb, as black and widowy as Nina's, asking if she might have a portion of Derek's ashes to sprinkle as she and he wished. Derek spent one night and one afternoon a week with her. The whole time Nina had been in Wyoming, Derek had been with Virginia.

Derek stood up and stretched politely, looking at his watch. It was time to go. Joe stood up too.

Jeri couldn't stand the tension. "What if he doesn't go first?" Jeri said.

"If I go first—" Nina turned toward Derek, tilting her face up at him so he would finish her sentence.

Derek's eyes raced around the room from object to object as if to form a quick protective alliance. He remembered to look adoring, but he made a mistake. "I'll get a consensus," he said, smiling down at Nina.

"A consensus!" Nina said, rearing away as if he were contagious now. "That's so—cold. I'm married to you. I want you to decide and no one else."

She was skating close to the subject. For the other two couples, it was nerve-racking.

"I want you to be so bereft, you make a monument to me," Nina said. "I don't want a *consensus*."

Nina expected someone to chime in, but no one did.

Cancer or not, no one liked what Derek was doing. Nina felt their dislike. It shamed and confused her. She misinterpreted it and blamed her friends for not respecting her.

Derek lifted his windbreaker off the back of the chair. He stuck out his manly chest as he slipped his arms through the sleeves. Joe was still standing.

"Well, you're off the hook," Jeri said to Derek. Suddenly Sandra liked Jeri. Jeri was an office manager and had to keep many types of people happy and in line. There was something direct and feisty there. It was easier to appreciate when it wasn't all blasting at Joe.

Derek tried to duck the accusation. He put both hands on Nina's lovely shoulders. "Is the Cancer Casualty off the hook in the Bereft Monument Department?" he said. He produced a mist of affection as if he were a Broadway stage fog machine.

"I jumped down your throat back there," Nina said. Her tone was apologetic. "Who *would* you have asked?" She was conscious only of trying to prolong his adoration as she waited for Derek to confirm her expectations by uttering the names of their two children, Jackson and Victoria.

"Virginia," he said naming his mistress by mistake.

"Huh!" Ronald said. Jeri's eyes bugged out. Sandra watched, thinking, *We made him do that because we were all thinking that name.* Joe sat back down.

"Does anyone know what he's talking about?" Nina asked. No one said anything.

"Virginia who?" Nina asked. "That Virginia that left that message on your cell phone?"

Nina waited for an answer, then asked Derek again. "What Virginia?"

Derek's smile was stiff on his face. He looked naked. He knew to keep quiet.

Nina looked around. She understood. "Sandra," Nina said. "Is this true?"

"Yes," Sandra said.

To everyone's amazement, Nina protected Derek. "Why didn't you tell me?" she said to Sandra. "Derek's not going to tell me. You guys should have told me." Nina looked at Jeri. "Did *you* know?"

"No," Jeri lied.

Nina looked at Joe. "Did you?"

"Yes," he said.

If Joe knew, Jeri knew. Nina glanced back at Jeri, but decided not to investigate.



"You," Nina said to Derek with a snaky viciousness that chilled the air, "I'll deal with privately." Nina looked at Sandra dead on. "Some friend you are," she said. "I'll return the favor some day."

Sandra thought about that. Nina was punishing Sandra because Nina was enraged at a man she couldn't leave. Sandra had made her way in a man's world by calling people's bluffs. She wasn't about to let a lightweight equivocator like Nina take the upper hand in a matter this important. Sandra wasn't ready for this moment, but this moment was here. "Why wait," Sandra said.

Nina got a petty gleam in her eye. Her upper lip lifted slightly like a weasel. She had Sandra in her crosshairs. "Would you like me to tell Ronald what you did in Cape May," Nina said.

Sandra turned to Ronald. "Ronald," she said, "I fucked the bartender in Cape May."

Ronald was crushed. "You're kidding," he said. "Were we married?"

"Yes," she said.

"Did we have James?"

"Yes."

"Oh my God," he said. The authority went out of his face. "Why?" he said.

"I don't know," she said. Everyone except Ronald felt relieved that there was something she didn't know.

"I can't deal with that," Ronald said. "How can I ever trust you again?"

"The same way you trusted me when you didn't know," Sandra said. "Because I love you, I value you and I treasure our marriage."

"She wants to be buried by you," Joe reminded him.

It wasn't enough. Ronald looked lost.

"The *bartender*," he said.

He was deeply disturbed. He looked at the floor.

Joe and Derek looked at Sandra in a new way. Instead of being their friend's smart wife who never forgot a birthday or an anniversary, who made the best cheesecake anyone had ever tasted, who no one ever debated politics with because she always won, Sandra became that independent woman traveler emitting the whiff of availability not through provocative clothing, or flirty come-ons, but through her pores.

"You were with her?" Jeri said.

"I was bird-watching," Nina said. She was a little too proud of herself.

Everyone waited respectfully for Ronald to get his bearings. Actually, Sandra did know why she did it. When James developed Cerebral Palsy, Ronald froze. He wanted to send James back to the birth mother. He wanted to sue her hospital. There was a link between severe asphyxia during birth and the later onset of CP. There was an entire website devoted to it. Parents were getting multi-million dollar settlements to cover the cost of care. Sandra forbid this pursuit. Ronald backed off. It was up to Sandra to see James through. And she did. So well Ronald thought he was the one who saved her. For the exhausting solitariness of her unacknowledged burden, Sandra felt life owed her something. And it fell in her lap in the form of a strong-jawed, hulking, six-foot-six poet of an Irish bartender who saw her reading Flann O'Brien alone at the corner table of his seaside tavern. He sent the waitress over with a Guinness and a quote paraphrasing the book scribbled on a napkin: a pint is not *your* only man.

Ronald's eyes were on the floor as he envisioned a bartender and his wife undressing in a hotel room while Ronald thought she was birdwatching. Sandra loved Ronald's stamina and diligence, his moral code and common sense. She felt compassionate, but she didn't want to do Ronald's work for him. He had to forgive her on his own—or not. With a shock, Sandra realized their bond was the weakest of the three.

"Everyone's telling their secrets," Joe said. He turned to Jeri.

"Do not," Jeri said.

Joe started to tell anyway. "We haven't—."

Jeri did something unexpected. She stamped her feet and shouted nonsense syllables to drown out Joe. "Blah-blah-blah-blah, na-na-na-na," Jeri shouted over and over. Nina and Derek struggled not to laugh.

Joe tried again. "We haven't—."

Jeri drowned him out. "Blah-blah-blah-blah, na-na-na-na."

Sandra watched Ronald. Everyone had forgotten his hurt. That was always the case. The strong medicine man who served mankind was supposed to be impermeable to pain.

Jeri stopped her tantrum.

"We haven't had sex for nine years," Joe said.

Everyone already knew this. Joe told Derek, Derek told everyone. Jeri looked around. Everyone had the same look on their faces. Jeri couldn't quite put her finger on it. She was too fascinating to herself. The look was boredom. After their third child was born, Jeri and Joe made a pact. She would have her tubes tied if he would undergo a vasectomy. Only one procedure was required, but Jeri wanted them to feel equally neutered. It worked.

Sandra was still stunned by the concussion of realizing that she and Ronald had not worked on their emotions. Sandra was envious of the other marriages. Nina would use the Virginia affair to torture Derek privately until his cancer came back and he lost the strength to maintain two relationships. Joe and Jeri would grow old wearing matching plaids and holding hands, her narcissism continuing to develop in him ever more subtle and refined skills as a facilitator.

Emotionally, Ronald was the most rigid, primitive man in the room. Sandra was smart but brittle. It was easier to go it alone, so they had. Sandra recalled the blur of grief, guilt and fatigue during James' diagnosis. It was a time of soul-testing pressure and blinding overwork at the office. A hedge fund Sandra was heavily invested in had collapsed. She alone persevered with James' treatment, arranging surgery and rehabilitation, scheduling time at home three evenings a week to exercise with him. It almost worked.

James was one of the ten to thirty percent of children with CP whose outcome from aggressive treatment was poor. He was six years old now and lived in an institution in Wilmington, Delaware. Sandra visited twice a month. James still loved her more than she loved him. The grass had grown over the sinkhole in their marriage where James had been, but it was treacherous going and it stunk. Sandra wanted her marriage to stay in place. In years past, the other two marriages had helped Ron and her love each other. Now it seemed they were on their own.

Joe stood up. "Mr. Donello stops taking orders at nine," Joe said. It was 8:30. Tonight was opening night. They always went for sausage pizza his opening night. It was the best sausage pizza in three states because he made his own sausage. Mr. Donello was very old and everyone was afraid that one of these autumns, he would not put up the little *See you in May* sign in the window, but one that read, *Thanks for your business all these years, we're closing for good.*

Everyone stood up.

"Are you okay, Nina," Jeri said. Nina gave her the so-so sign, fluttering a flattened hand in the air. Ron stood up and put on his jacket, his eyes still on the floor.

"There was this message on his cell phone," Nina said to Jeri on their way out the screen door.

At Mr. D's, they stood in line with the last three groups to be served. Sandra was touched at how the funky charm of Mr. D's lakeside dive could distract the emotions and lift their spirits of six middle-aged people who'd just said terrible things to each other. The gingham curtains, the fresh coat of white paint, the sloping wood floors, the green smell of the cold lake, the hint of must in the old wood tables and chairs, the hearty sizzle of fresh, home-made sausage—it combined to produce an incalculable balm.

Her friends quickly resorted to acting the way they would have acted if their secrets were still secret. Jeri and Nina complained about their houses. Derek stood apart in an attitude of self-absorption, his eyes sliding around the room sizing up the men and nudging second glances from the women who found him attractive. Joe literally looked up to Ron, asking for the inside scoop on his celebrity patient. It was in the headlines. Ron was treating a thug who came to the hospital directly from prison with four body guards.

A table for six came up, but the couples agreed to wait for the corner booth where they sat every year. That gave Sandra hope. The booth emptied. The same waitress they had every year cleared and re-set. They piled in the way they always piled in, a six-headed twelve-legged organism roosting in a crevice. Sandra and Ronald always went first, sitting at the window across from each other. They did again tonight. That gave her hope too, though very very little, about as much as the gingham in the curtains, the cold green smell of the lake water outside.