

APRIL NEWMAN

The Bedroom

The bedroom had dark plank floors with one rug poking out in the center. The walls were yellow behind a painting of wild mustangs galloping through a mountain range, their muscles statuesque. Grandma kept quarters in turquoise beaded purses from South Dakota on her dresser, the brown-edged photos of her children jammed into the sides of her mirror. In the corner was a black roll-top writing desk. She placed a photo of her father, Donald, there.

Grandma died in that bed. The same one where her children were conceived. She died skeletal thin and skin faded the color of a sliced pear, almost translucent, her shoulder bones and clavicle pronounced; eyes pinched and sunken. A delta of wrinkles fanned softly toward her ears, and her lips were flat and nearly purple. My Persian cat, Walter, folded himself into her side as she lay dying. In her morphine delirium, she called out names of schoolmates, strangers to us.

“When I die you have to play *Beulah’s Boogie*. And dance. And I mean it,” she had told everyone on different occasions; she may have been dangling a cigarette. Of course I promised. But when it actually happened, I wasn’t nearly ready to dance.

She waited until all of her children and grandchildren were in the house, blown in from the road or down the street—all tattered like wet newspapers. She passed exactly two hours after I stepped off the plane from Florida. I don’t know how she realized I was finally home, her eyes like clamps in that yellow room, the light now custard around us.

When it happened, the cat jumped up and out of her arms, running with his body crouched close to floor, his hair raised high up like a ridge on his back. Half a dozen people crowded her bed, sitting on the edge or standing near the window sill. They checked her pulse; they felt her lips for signs of life with their trembling fingers. They murmured and cried out, but everyone was still touching her as she melted away.

One of my aunts turned on *Beulah’s Boogie* almost immediately. It sounded loud enough to fill a football stadium, the jazz horns blaz-

ing as they zipped her up in a black bag and rolled her out of the bedroom for the last time—this time on a gurney. *Dance!* But my legs were a zombie's, arms made of rope, and the whole scene felt filtered through a lens smeared with butter. *Dance!* Time had turned on its ears. *Dance! We have to dance!* And even though my wrists weighed a thousand pounds, for her I raised my hands.