

SUSAN MCCARTY

SERVICES PENDING

MOUNT VERNON—Dale Edward Irwin, 36, of Denver, Colo., formerly of Mount Vernon, Iowa, died Tuesday, May 22, 2007, in Montbello, Colo.

Services: 1 p.m. Monday at First Presbyterian Church, Mount Vernon, with the Rev. Paul Mark Davids officiating. Burial: Mount Vernon Cemetery. Visitation: 2 to 5 p.m. Sunday at Morgan Funeral Home, Mechanicsville, Iowa.

Survivors include his parents, Edward and Paige Eldridge of Mount Vernon, and two sisters, Allison Painter of Cedar Rapids and Wilma Eldridge of Iowa City.

2 It's eleven p.m. in the newsroom of the regional newspaper where I work, and my wrists are screaming. I've been here since five, collecting death notices faxed, phoned, and e-mailed in, mainly from funeral homes, and entering them into the ancient newsroom computer system so they can be periodically copyedited and fired back to me for corrections. The next day's paper was put to bed at nine, but I'm still awake, updating service notices and preparing for the day obituary writer's shift by entering tomorrow's batch of obits. My shift is six hours long, but I usually stay seven. The only time I stop typing is to get more coffee. The only time I get coffee is after bedtime, when the next day's edition is practically set in stone, and I don't have to worry anymore about fitting in another late notice from a funeral home, called in just under the wire.

The police scanner squeals and spits out a report of gunshots fired in the vicinity of Third Avenue—only a couple of blocks away from our building. The late-shift news writer—a dirty blond twenty-something named Sam—moseys up to the main desk—my desk—where the scanner sits three feet away. He moseys almost everywhere he goes and has the thoughtful demeanor of someone who listens for a living.

“What was that report?” he asks.

“Gunshots, Third Ave.,” I tell him.

Even close to midnight, the newsroom is cacophonous. Someone has turned the police scanner all the way up because someone has turned the two televisions all the way up, probably because a copyeditor at the other end

of the floor has turned on a radio or some similar causal chain. Phones ring incessantly. The calls bounce from the empty desks of one editor to another until they finally forward through Sam's cell phone, which rings to the tune of Michael Jackson's "Beat It."

"You'd probably be able to hear the scanner if you put your phone on vibrate," I yell at him over the top of it all.

"Michael's the only thing that keeps me on point this late," he says. "Michael and cigarettes. Let's go."

I stand up, squeezing the spaces where my wrists meet my hands until they pop, and follow Sam out of the newsroom and down the stairwell to the loading dock. The janitor has been here tonight. Though the butts have all been swept up, somehow the concrete structure still reeks of them. I can't imagine what the newsroom must have smelled like in the seventies.

"Anything tonight?" Sam asks and passes me a Marlboro Light. As the night obits writer, it's my job to keep the news writers up to date on death notices that are newsworthy, which basically means violent. Car crashes, homicides, spectacular accidents involving farm equipment or livestock, anybody notable in the community. Anything with a newsworthy cause of death goes straight to the news editor's basket to be investigated ASAP. Somewhere along the line, the obits notes had become the police scanner notes, since I'm the only employee in the newsroom stuck to a desk her whole shift. That's not what Sam means though.

I take a drag of my cigarette and say, "Dale Irwin, thirty-six, originally of Mount Vernon, jumped to his death from a hot air balloon outside of Denver."

"Wow, that's a good one. That might be the best one yet."

"I know. I bet it was like flying."

"Bungee jump without the cord."

"Quieter than jumping out of an airplane."

"No building to block your view."

We are collecting them, the best ways to die. That sounds cynical, but it doesn't feel that way. It feels optimistic, and, if it ever comes to it, prescriptive. No one wants to rot away from cancer or keel over from heart failure. Those benign-sounding sisters, brief illness and long illness, are the most perverse because of what they aren't saying, especially in this conservative corner of the Midwest: drug addiction, mental illness, AIDS. We respect the death notices that tell the truth, even if we don't usually publish it.

“Most people don’t want to read about that stuff,” the day obits editor had told me in training. “I mean, the families don’t,” she added. It’s true: people pay a lot of money to keep the ugliness and humiliation—that is, the truth—of death out of the notices they send us. “Died of colon cancer,” for example, might be replaced with some variant of “has joined the angels to sing in Heaven’s choir.”

Sam and I love the notices that provide some glimpse, however brief, into the lives and minds of our dead fellow citizens.

“Is it going in the paper?” Sam asks, curious how I was going to phrase it, probably.

“No. The family’s paying for it, so there’s no C.O.D.”

“It’s just for us then.”

“Just for us.”

We stare into the night from under our acrid concrete canopy. Two blocks away, a man is being chased by the cops, found with a gun, arrested. He’ll make the police blotter tomorrow. Domestic dispute. Luckily, no one injured.

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KEOKUK—Donald L. Schumacher, 93, of Keokuk, died Monday, July 9, 2007, at his home following a long illness. Arrangements are pending with De Jong’s Funeral Home in Keokuk.

A friend of mine who’s an undertaker in Boston once told me that, in his opinion, most funeral directors are gay Republicans. Since he’s a poet, I asked him what he meant exactly—David Fisher in *Six Feet Under*, or something more metaphorical? We were drunk at the time so our talk at this point immediately veered off in the direction of the new HBO TV show, beloved by us both. I never got an answer to my question, but now I think I kind of get his drift. Funeral homes are places of seeming contradiction. They are odd places, at once in lockstep with and operating completely outside of our cultural realities. Funeral homes are the public face of death, the business side of death. Because they evoke death, it’s important that they appear as death-free as possible.

It’s also important that they all disappear death in the same way. Funeral homes have a conformity nearly unmatched in other types of business—they are all awash in the same muted colors, the same quiet music, a stuffy, sweet combination of smells—scented Kleenex, decaying flowers, melting candles.

This is comforting. This is to say: *Look, your dead loved one or own body will be here in this place that looks like every other place. It will not be seeping in a hospital bed. It will not be crushed inside the twisted metal of your car. It won't be broken on the ground, in the middle of a National Park, in the middle of nowhere, alone. It will be here; isn't this nice? Aren't you getting a little sleepy already?*

Death as a lull. Death, nowhere to be seen. Funeral homes are creepy in a way that haunted houses aspire to be. Which is why I can almost forgive Carl the Funeral Director for being such a creep. Carl is the director of a funeral home in a small town, twenty miles from here. It's a farming community, deep in corn country, and bears the scars of a typical Midwestern town emptied out by agribusiness and the agricultural disinterest of the younger generation: the nearly deserted main street limps on, anchored by the café on one end where some of the old farmers, now retired, still meet for morning coffee and gossip, and the funeral home on the other.

The first time I met Carl, over the phone, when he called in a services pending notice, he told me I must be a brunette. I was so surprised I forgot to ask him the age of the deceased and had to call back a few minutes later, still puzzled. I got his secretary, told him it was the obits desk calling back for Carl. He picked up the phone: "Hey sweetheart." I forgot again what my question was. I went blank and hawed into the phone.

"What do you need, doll? I'm busy," he said, suddenly impatient, a little sharp. I remembered my question, and he answered, "seventy-three," and promptly hung up on me. I couldn't decide which way the winds of my offense blew more. Only that they blew for Carl.

As our phone relationship has progressed, Carl's come to trust me, in a way. I'm better at my job now, and he's stopped having snits if I call back, which I usually do since he always leaves important information out of every full obit he faxes to my desk. I have come to expect Carl's old-fashioned verbal ass-slappery, which has never been charming but which now, at least, I can ignore.

I still can't figure out how this works for him—he's the director of one of the busier funeral homes in the area—all those old, tired farmers. If the idea of buying a car from a guy in a loud suit with wandering eyes gives you the creeps, imagine buying a coffin from one. Although, I suppose there is a kind of soothing predictability in Carl's tactlessness. "Hey hon," he oozes when I pick up the phone. "Got one down from Keokuk. Donald Schumacher. That's S-C-H-U-M-A-C-H-E-R. Read it back to me, hon."

“Schumacher. S-C-H-U-M-A-C-H-E-R. Cause of death?” I ask.

There is a pause I’ve come to expect, a withholding, then a suggestion, the same every time: “Hey, maybe I’ll come down there so we can meet face to face finally.” Now I am the impatient one. But somehow I’m allowed to be as part of my reluctant indulgence of his behavior. I sigh and ask for the C.O.D. again.

“Long illness, hon,” he says, showing no signs of deflation. “See you later.” I can hear his grin across the line.

Carl is not a grammarian and tends to misspell the names of the dead and their survivors. This seems like it would be an important point when writing obituaries and planning funerals, maybe even a priority, but it’s not. And it’s not just Carl. Most of the obituaries and notices I receive from funeral homes have glaring errors in them. I almost always have to call a funeral home back directly after they send a notice to ask which of the four spellings of the deceased’s first name is the correct one. This means talking to Carl more than once per shift. Some days, I guess instead.

6 The idea of Carl communicating with my grieving family—of potentially being alone with my dead, naked body—is unsettling. I make up my mind: as soon as I can, I’ll make my own funeral arrangements. Until then, I decide to hedge against the Carl factor as much as possible and write my own obituary.

QUASQUETON—Marion Linda Wentz, 68, died Thursday, June 18, 2007, in a tractor accident at her home in rural Quasqueton.

Services: 10:30 a.m. Saturday at Two Rivers Christian School in rural Quasqueton. A private family inurnment will be held at a later date. Visitation: 3 to 5 p.m. today at Reiff Funeral Home, Quasqueton.

Marion was born Oct. 17, 1938, in Cedar Rapids. Marion was raised in Quasqueton and graduated from East Buchanan High School in Winthrop. She worked at Rockwell Collins and Procter & Gamble in Iowa City.

She was preceded in death by her parents, Jude Patrick and Eunice Miller.

Survivors include her husband, Robert, whom she married on June 8, 1959, in Quasqueton, and their children, Lisa Wentz of Ames and Robert Wentz Jr. of Chicago.

Marion is also survived by two sisters, Rose (Clark) Jedlicka, of Tempe, Az., and Sarah (Franklin) Allen of Cedar Rapids.

She loved her golden retrievers, Prince and Sally, and working in her garden. She was interested in reading and travel.

Geography privileges certain types of death over others in different parts of the country. Washington DC has its murders. The Atlantic states—shark attacks. In the West, people seem to ramble into death without much trouble—pinned by a boulder, dead from exposure, fell down a canyon, avalanche.

The farmed plots of Iowa are possibly the most unthreatening topographies in the world. Except for the occasional dog-sized black bear wandered down from the forests of Wisconsin and Minnesota in the east, or the odd rattlesnake stepped on by a rancher in the western wing of the state, there are no wild animals waiting to devour. The winters are frequently arctic, but we have no forests in which to get lost. Our caves and cliffs are modest, pretty, not breathtaking. We have no mountains to disappear into or fall off of. The homicides are infrequent and isolated—usually family related. No one picked off the streets at night and dumped somewhere for finding. Most people in Iowa die of old age, natural causes. The general exception to this is that everyone knows at least one person who has been killed in a brutal farm machinery accident, mutilated, crushed, bled out in their fields. This is Iowa's privileged death.

Combines and corn-pickers are the deadliest, with their furious, whirling blades. Most people have heard stories or seen television specials about farmers, often teenage boys, who become double amputees in a painless second when they lean into their harvester to clear out a grain blockage from the auger. These stories are amazing for the very fact that sometimes these people survive. Missing arms and hands, they drive themselves twenty miles to the nearest hospital. The big tractors are dangerous, with all their moving parts, but the small utility tractors—the kind of thing you'd use to till a few acres or haul a hay bale—are dangerous too, maybe more so because they don't look it.

I get the call early in my shift on Thursday, around five p.m. "This is Reverend David Carter," says the voice on the line. "I'm the director of the Two Rivers School in Quasqueton." Two little filaments blink inside my head, meet. "You're Sam's dad," I say. "I think he's on a story right now. He left about an hour ago."

"Yes," says the Reverend. "I mean, no. I need to speak to the obituaries desk."

“That’s me,” I say, suddenly embarrassed at my unwarranted familiarity with this man.

“I’m calling in a death notice. For our neighbor, Marion Wentz. She...I’m with her husband now. She died today. Her tractor flipped on her.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say and take all the relevant information—name, age, town, and where services are pending. Sam’s dad keeps clearing his throat. He asks me to tell Sam to call when he gets back to the newsroom. I say I will.

I don’t put the notice in the news basket. I wait until Sam gets back from his story—a fire at an abandoned warehouse by the river—and beckons me to the loading dock for a cigarette. He tells me his neighbor has died—his father had reached him on his cell phone. I am relieved not to have to give him this information. We share a quiet smoke. He finally nods and clears his throat, sounding just like his father, and tells me he’s going to smoke another and will be up in a minute. I get the hint and leave him outside.

8 Because Sam is the only reporter in the newsroom tonight, and farm machinery deaths are traditionally reported, he will interview his father about the death of their family friend and neighbor. At six p.m., when the Wentzes would usually be saying grace, sitting down to supper—a meatloaf and green-bean salad—Sam will be standing at his neighbor’s front door because his neighbor will have forgotten to ask him in. Or maybe Wentz will be at Sam’s family home, surrounded by the few neighbors his spread allowed him. Sam will quietly ask questions like, “What was she doing on the tractor?”, “Who found her pinned?”, “When did you find her?”, “Was she still alive when you found her?”, “How long did it take for the paramedics to arrive?”, “Why was she alone?”

To avoid the appearance of nepotism, another reporter will be called in to write the story that night, a reporter even more rookie than Sam. An intern maybe. Sam will give him typed notes and spell everything aloud, twice. He’ll be sleeping when the paper hits tomorrow, but he’ll get up earlier than usual and read the story just to make sure.

I don’t talk to Sam again until the end of my shift. He wanders over to me on the way to the bathroom as I’m shutting down my computer.

“Susan, some days,” he says, “I don’t know about this job.”

IOWA CITY—**Marvin Richard Pella**, 76, formerly of Iowa City, died Tuesday, Aug. 14, 2007, at his home following a short illness. Friends may call from 5 to 7 p.m. Friday at Gay & Ciha Funeral Home, 2720 Muscatine Ave., Iowa City. Burial: Saturday at Oakland Cemetery. Services are pending with the funeral home.

Here are the things I know about Marvin Pella: he rebuilt vintage speedboats by hand with his dad and used to race them up and down the river after his dad died and he was alone. Marvin mowed his grass every day it wasn't covered in rain or snow. He liked to shut the tin doors on the line of mailboxes at the top of his road and sometimes he shut them so tight my mom couldn't get hers open again by herself. He was missing part of the index finger on his right hand—I don't know why. I noticed it because he waved to every car that passed on their unpaved country road, the farmer's wave, the trucker's howdy, around before the peace sign—a lazy two-finger salute, incomplete. Seen from the wrong angle it would sometimes look like he was flipping me the bird. He wore overalls and a red mesh cap. He had never been married. He lived on the Iowa River longer than anyone else in the neighborhood. My mom and stepdad thought he was a pretty nice guy.

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Marvin's dead, and I'm one of the first people to know this. I get his services pending notice by fax with a note to expect a full paid obituary later in the week. The news is jarring and sad, of course. I'd always worried that I would someday recognize the name on a notice, so this feels expected. It's almost a relief that it's not someone I know better, but it's something else too. For just a little while, it is my secret.

For just a little while, I stop working. I take a smoke break and stare at the asphalt, which is wet with rain today and black enough to sink into for a little while. I think about Marvin, his house, his speedboats. I worry about who will mow his grass. For a minute I feel close to him in a way I never did when he was alive. But now he's here, in the middle of my landscape. Dead, he's everything at once.

There is a strange intimacy in being the bringer of this kind of news. Sometimes I feel like I should be able to look into the text of a stopped life and see everything that preceded the stopping. I don't know why. Maybe it's the reason we read obituaries in the first place—for a clue, a key, a decoder ring, something that will reveal the banal mysteries of a life at its end. Or the mystery of the death itself. No matter how close we are to it, we can never

be close enough, until we're too close. There is only being at the cliff's edge, then being over the cliff.

I walk back into the office and enter Marvin's notice. It is still my secret until the paper goes out, but I don't feel like keeping it anymore so I call my mom and tell her, and the news begins a steady march down the street until it fades away in the distance, a puff of gossip and half-remembered names.

Sam, out on his beat, texts me and asks if I want to grab a drink with him after our shift tonight. We meet at Grizzly's, a loud, local bar, at midnight. Sam is pulled together as usual—gray slacks, button down, always a pinch of something youthful, rebellious: tonight, navy blue Converse. We start off with tequila. After the second shot, I tell him about Marvin and my secret. "It was the first time since I took this job that I knew somebody who died." I shake my head.

Sam nods. "It's...weird. I was going to say 'tough' but that's not right."

"Yeah, weird." The waitress brings us another shot.

10 "Who do you know who's died?" Sam asks. I tell him. It's the usual parade—first grandparents, followed by peripheral school acquaintances announced over the loudspeaker during homeroom—once a teenage car wreck, once a pistol suicide. Then I tell him about the college boyfriend, years ago, the first dead person with whom I was in love, whose secrets I knew and kept.

"I'm sorry," he says. "That's terrible." Because what else is there to say.

But I'm drunk now and this is getting too serious, and because I tend to make terrible jokes when I'm nervous or sad, I say, "It was a great loss. He had a huge penis." And I don't even laugh at this, which is the whole point, and neither does Sam but he doesn't seem offended, just curious.

"Really?" he asks very sincerely, which *does* make me laugh and I'm grateful to him and thank god, there's yet another shot in front of us. We don't bother with the salt or the lime.

"You know, Susan, I've never had sex. I'm a virgin." Sam says. I cough out a little tequila at this. He looks pleased at this reaction and lights a cigarette.

"What?" I say, though I have obviously heard him.

"It's true."

"You're not..." I'm not sure how to say it, so I just do, "...saving yourself. For marriage?" He is a reverend's son, had gone to a Christian day school and college, but I found it hard to believe that people still did this sort of thing. Or didn't.

“Well, at first, that was it. But then...now...it’s just like, I haven’t gotten around to it. No time. I work all night at the paper. I drink with the news-room staff. All my college friends are all over the country...”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” For some reason I feel sad for him, not about the sex, but about being alone.

“It’s not your fault,” he says and smiles, and I suspect I’m supposed to swing at this one.

“It wouldn’t be,” I say and drunkenly try to wink at him, which I immediately regret—he is too lovely, too young. But he laughs and we talk about other things and I forget my awkward pass until later that night. When we are just out of Grizzly’s or standing at the door of my car in the summer-thick night he will kiss me—salt and tequila and charred breath. I will barely be able to catch my own beneath his dark, soft mouth.

IOWA CITY—Susan Meredith McCarty, 89, died in her sleep Thursday, Sept. 9, 2066, at her home in Iowa City. Friends may call from 1 to 3 p.m. at Lensing Funeral Home & Cremation Service, 605 Kirkwood Ave., Iowa City. Inurnment: Tuesday at Oakland Cemetery. Services are pending with the funeral home.

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She is survived by a brother, Marshall, of Chicago, and a sister, Jennifer (McCarty) Arnold of Iowa City, and many nieces and nephews.

Susan Meredith McCarty was born March 24, 1977 and attended Iowa City West High School. She lived in Boston, New York City, Provincetown, Mass., and Salt Lake City. Susan wrote when she could and read when she couldn’t. She loved her three dogs very much. Like Edith Piaf, she regrets nothing.

At local papers, obit writers are the lowliest newspapermen. If a newspaper even staffs an obit writer, it’s only because the obituaries section is the most profitable section of the newspaper. Therefore the work done should not, cannot, be daring. It is more like data entry than writing. If the obituary is a free notice, it contains certain information. All other information included is billed by the word. And if a family pays for an obituary, the obituary writer is just a conduit—a proofreader who makes sure the information is delivered in the correct style of the newspaper. Besides the names, she doesn’t even have to check spelling—her computer does that. Being an obit writer at a

small, local newspaper is the journalistic equivalent of starting in the mail-room, complete with tiny humiliations and paychecks. This, I think, is why obituary writing has only become a creative phenomenon at bigger, national papers. Only the bigs can afford the kind of writer who can, appropriately and with greatness, profile a life even greater.

The small-town obituary is not as concerned with greatness, with life. If they're free, they're only about death—who died, how died, where died, when died. They mention “survivors,” as if the very fact of having lost someone put the family in a similar peril, which they, the lucky ones, happened to pull through. They live, but their living is only noted in proximity to this recent death.

12 The paid obituaries in my paper often include bits and pieces of the life left behind, but these lives and their narrative arcs are more or less the same. Went to high school, got married, had kids, worked here, had a hobby and a pet, a favorite phrase, went to war, went to church. The sisters, brothers, and spouses who write these obits—some of them after lifetimes spent reading the newspaper every day—have internalized the genre, handing over information as if filling out a form. In this way, the newspaper's readership becomes even more homogenized; in death all lives look alike. There is a small kind of horror to this—a life's worth of living condensed into a paragraph that looks just like your neighbor's—but I think there's a comfort as well, a sort of retreat into a communal spirit; all those gone before you to keep you company when your time has come. It's not unlike the familial notion of land in Iowa, of century farms, of the passing of property from parents to children to be used for the same purpose, maybe even the same crops, for generations. A collective ghost. It's an idea that is still around, even as the family farm disintegrates, and children move to cities, parents retire to condos sprung up like corn around the outskirts of those cities.

My mother asks me to go with her to buy her burial plot at Oakland, an old and beautiful cemetery in Iowa City that is supposedly haunted. She's excited, as if she's picking out a new car.

“It's creeping me out how happy you are about this,” I say, after she finds a place—a drawer, actually—in an open-air mausoleum underneath a huge oak tree. The legendary Black Angel statue is nearby. Kiss a virgin underneath its open wing at midnight and it will turn white again, they say. The fact that it's still black is supposed to be a testament to the indecency of liberal Iowa City. I think of Sam's burning mouth.

“Well, now I know where I’ll be,” Mom says, smiling up into a breeze that has begun to blow over the tops of our heads.

“Why here?” I ask, “Why not in Traer, with Grandma?”

“I thought about that,” she says, “but I want to be able to hang out with my old friends and neighbors when we’re all dead together.”

“Sounds like a party,” I say. We walk towards the office on the grounds, and I notice for the first time that she’s maybe not as tall as she was, that her shoulders are slightly uneven. We speculate about what kinds of martinis would be appropriate for such an event. Washington Apple, we decide, since they’re too strong for the living, and something soft and cloud-like, Frangelico maybe, a wisp on the tongue, like melted cotton candy—there, then gone.