

Before

By Jackie Shannon-Hollis

West to east on I-84. The freeway across Oregon an alley of green rising up to soft clouds. Following the path of the Columbia, greens change to browns, cliffs to rolling hills, forests to farms, the city to small towns.

Home to where you are gone.

Home to where Mom is without you.

Our first trip home since you died and all I can think of is all those other times. When you rose up out of your black leather recliner and came to the door to ask if we needed help with the bags we carried. The straps of our bags crossed our chests.

When I look at your picture you crack and break apart and all that's left is you dying.

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He grew up on the farm with his mother and father and half-brother Jim. His granddad, Francis.. And his aunts: Gertie, Pearl, Lena. He was beloved on the farm. On the farm his grandparents settled and his father got and then he got too.

His favorite color was blue. He had a pony. He had a dog named Laddie. He started smoking when he was eight and sometimes took sips off the flask his granddad kept in the car.

He was eight when Jim died. Jim and two girls crashed Jim's car in a bloody wreck, so bad that no one ever knew who was driving. Then his granddad died and the aunts got married and moved away.

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Last time I left, when I went back to my life in the city, Mom was small and alone on the red cement porch. The ache in me was as big as the empty space beside her.

That was just a few days after we put you in the ground, ashen, in a small bronze box with wheat etched in black. We took you to the cemetery from the service in the Elks Lodge where half the town came with food and cards and jaws set to a grim sadness.

Your oldest daughter had gathered pictures of you: a baby, a child, a college boy, a newlywed, a father five times, a grandfather seven times, a great-grandfather once. A 50th anniversary. You were on display.

But for me there was only you dying.

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He had a brown curl that fell on his forehead. He played basketball and football. Eight man. The town was small. He had a new car every year. He went away to college and his mother sewed his last name onto the label of every sweater. He had too much fun and got invited not to come back.

He met a girl and said she was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen in real life. He was 19 and she was 18 when they got married, like everyone else was, and started having stair-step kids. Step, step, step, step. Four in four and a half years. Boy, boy, girl, girl.

Eight years later another girl.

He was beloved by his family.

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We had a week of mourning after you died. Food poured into the house: six hams, five casseroles, three plates of cold cuts, four pies, two cakes. More that I can't remember. I drank cold beer every day. Shunned the food because there were too many choices.

The day when the minister came out to plan your funeral we tried to match the way you told the stories about your life and ours. Of the farm and of the town. Later the whole family stood in a circle holding hands so the minister could say a prayer for you and for our grief. Even though I didn't believe, I put my head down and held tight hands with one nephew on one side and one nephew on the other. I started crying and should have let go of the hands and got a tissue. The snot ran out my nose and onto my shirt and shoes.

That was on your seventy-first birthday, four days after you died. Your birthday without you.

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He was a farmer. Once, he said, he thought of being an architect. He grinned then and said that he built his five kids instead. Built a family.

He ran the farm and drove school bus and tended bar at the Round-Up Lounge and the Elks Lodge. He drank like his grandfather and father. He had his friends there: Melvin and Warren, Jack and Al. He was beloved in the bar. His kids memorized the number to the Round-Up and the Elks. He was an Exalted Ruler and went to Nassau and once to San Francisco.

He worked the farm and kept stock. Horses and cows, sheep and pigs, rabbits and chickens and ducks and geese. A goat. He couldn't slaughter any of them by himself because it was too hard to see them dying.

He came in from plowing with powder dirt on his face and in the creases of his blue denim jeans. He was white around the eyes from the goggles and pink on his lips and dust brown everywhere else.

He made a Santa beard with shaving cream. He wore Old Spice.

He took his kids to the beach every year after harvest. He sometimes got in the pool. He cut his brown curl.

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Your youngest came home too late from her conference in Reno. She missed your dying and the rest of us thought we'd already cried our biggest tears.

That was after the undertaker lifted your body out of the hospital bed that you resisted until your last hours. When you finally didn't have a choice. The undertaker put you in a black rubber bag and took you from the house you lived in all your life. I was in your black leather recliner and didn't want to let go of your dead hand because it was letting go of you.

That was after your sons came back to the farm after they'd just left thinking we had at least one more day. To find you lying still and silent. No longer struggling for air.

That was after your last life soaked out of you with a gasp and a tremble deep in your arm where my hand held you. I was next to Mom. My other hand wrapped on the cool silver railing of that bed. I was relieved right then. Your arm stilled. The railing warmed under my hand.

My older sister wept on her knees on my other side. My husband held your other arm and caressed you.

That was after Mom called for me, upstairs in bed, to "please come, come quick." After I left her and my watchful husband sitting next to you in the living room. Him pacing your breath and Mom grateful for the company because she could already feel you going away. Mom had ordered me to get some sleep in case she needed me again in the middle of the night to help with you.

That was after us kids had sat in the nook at the kitchen table talking about a funeral. And after. While your breath slowed in the next room.

You were calmer because the hospice nurse had come and showed us how to get you settled in the bed, how to give you medicine, how to help you eat or drink.

The nurse came after my sister and I battled with your thrashing and her eyes met mine over you. How long would this go on? I hoped for both. Forever and fast. That was while Mom slept, exhausted from the night before which ended with my husband and your oldest son chair-carrying you to the hospital bed in the living room.

He drank while his kids played basketball and volleyball and acted in school plays. He checked report cards. He bought each of his kids a car. A Chevy, A Chevy, a VW, a Chevy, a Datson.

He worried about money and the farm.

He drank because it was in his blood to like it.

He liked long hair on his girls. He said only “shady ladies” got their ears pierced. He liked the late sixties because women stopped wearing bras. His friends started dying in the seventies and were all gone in the eighties. Warren, Melvin, Jack, Al.

He called his mother, ‘Mother,’ and his father, ‘Dad.’ They died too.

He almost lost each one of his children but the last. A horse, a horse, a horse, a crime. He was beloved by his children.

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The night before you died was the worst. Mom called me that night too. Her high panic voice trailed up the stairs and into my sleep. I was out of bed and down the stairs before I was sure it was true. That she had called for me.

She couldn’t calm you. We held you and talked to you. You tried to talk but only sounds came. Moaning, aching sounds. I was scared. You tried to get out of the bed you shared with Mom. You turned yourself completely around with straining grabbing arms. Your legs didn’t work. You seemed better on your side but couldn’t stay there by yourself. I lay down on the bed on my side. My back held yours and you rested there a while.

You had morphine for the first time. I told Mom to get some sleep so she could be with you in the morning.

The only word you said was “water.” Your last. I told you it was okay to go. I wanted you to go because me seeing you this way was what I knew you wouldn’t want. What I didn’t want. You didn’t go. Not yet.

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He drove only Chev Impalas. A new one every six years, right after the crop was in.

His first grandchild came. A girl. Then more. A boy, a girl, a girl, a girl, a girl, a girl. He quit drinking. He quit smoking. He quit chewing. He held the babies. He went to their plays, he went to their games, he went to their rodeos.

He was beloved by his grandchildren.

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Three days before you died you had your last big meal. I cooked for you and you said you weren’t hungry. You ate anyway and threw it up.

You fell asleep mid-conversation telling us how you fall asleep mid-conversation.

You said you didn’t mind dying but you wished you’d have another ten years. I said, “Me too.”

Your sober son brought you a coin from AA. Twenty-one years without a drink.

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He found his wife again. She hadn’t gone far.

He got fat. He got diabetes. He lost weight and started walking. He made new friends. They gathered in the morning for coffee at the Shoestring Drive-In. He liked gossip. He was beloved in the town.

He watched court TV. He read Dear Abby out loud. He talked to people about his kids and grandkids.

He had a great-grandchild. A girl.

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The doctor said it would only be a matter of weeks when we thought we might have months. You hoped for years. You said you weren't afraid to die but you were afraid of the pain.

Us five kids sat with you and Mom while the doctor told us for sure there was nothing they could do. It was only a matter of time. Time to prepare. The doctor was small and Asian and had little feet. His eyes were wet.

We cried one after another. Our tears caught on like a flu. You told us not to worry, "I've had a wonderful life with you kids." Then you wept.

Each one of our tears a small jewel of love.

#

He began to turn yellow. He began to feel tired. He stopped walking. His wife worried. His kids who lived in town called the one in the city. When his eyes went yellow they called the doctor. He only had five weeks left.

He worried that he didn't look good.

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I came home fast from vacation and teased you when you didn't get up from your black leather chair. You didn't have the energy but I wanted you to laugh and to know I'd be strong.

My husband and I were a thousand miles away when I learned you would die. The phone was to my ear and the desert sun was setting. That night I woke crying because I couldn't imagine my life without you. Us without you.

That was before I knew we would go on.

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The car takes me home. My husband takes me home to the place you were. We come in from the west and there is the farm on a hill to the south. The small rectangle surrounded by wheat that was just tender shoots when you died. The wheat that is now tall and green turning to gold.

Through the town. Main street one long line. The Elks Lodge, the Round-Up Lounge, Pete's Barber Shop, Two Boys Grocery, the Post Office, the Shoestring Drive-in. The track where you walked around the football field where your sons and grandson played.

Out of town, south, one mile. Up the gravel road to home. Behind the brown picket fence, the silent house.

Through the picture window that is by the red cement porch. Your black leather chair is empty.

But you are here.

#

He is here in the room with the picture of his mother as a child. He's here in the old oak table with the marble top, in the shelf of antique egg cups, in the fifth stair that complains of my weight. He's here in the nook of the kitchen, where he had oatmeal

every morning for the last five years. He's here in the back porch where his blue work coat and grey cap hang on a hook. Son, husband, father, grandfather, friend.

He's here in the ticking of the old black mantle clock that he wound every day.

He is here in the ache of my heart and the shelter of memory that keeps me locked to this place like the Rudbeckia, yellow and black, that comes back every year no matter how cold the winter.