

Kelley

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I haven't written in a long time. Maybe it's because my thoughts have been jumbled, or because my memories have felt disorganized. Maybe I haven't written because writing is a covert way of rehashing old bones hidden deeply in the trenches of my memory—memories that may be better left alone or, if I'm lucky, forgotten altogether in the graveyard of past times.

Graveyard.

This word is strange simply because it takes two words that exude two different feelings when said separately. When I say “grave” in my head, it sounds black and cold, and there's an image of a man with an awfully thin face wearing a scowl that seems to be swallowing him. When I say “yard,” I think of green and warmth and the budding of new sprouts. It seems to me the word “graveyard” is an effort to have the second word of a compound gulp the first in an unsuccessful attempt to equal out the sullenness of which the former word implies.

This is why I chose to have my sister cremated. Among other things of course, I like the idea of ashes becoming part of nature; molecules of a loved one floating around in the breeze of the seasons. It's the same reason why I like rain. A rain shower holds on to an eternity of existence as it falls from the sky only to get evaporated by the clouds and fall again. I wish people could live in a cozy cycle like that, and I wish we had the opportunity to fall more than once.

The day after New Year's, my parents and I boarded a flight to scatter some of Kelley in one of her favorite places. Aruba beckoned us with its crystal waters and leaning divi-divi trees; it was a vacation with a mission. Previously, Aruba had always been the spot for many family memories. We have always called ourselves a beach family and, over the years, the sun, sand, and ocean have become

a part of us. Our ears perk when we hear the sound of a steel drum, our skin tingles when the sun kisses our bare arms, and the corners of our mouths turn upward in satisfaction when we lick the sea salt from our lips. We knew that Kelley would want to be there.

As the youngest in the family, I was always either the topic of conversation or forgotten. The youngest always has a spotlight whether it is front and center, or in the corner alone somewhere...at least that is what I think. Sometimes, I will listen quietly, but intently, to a conversation going on at the dinner table, mulling over the content of the speakers and chewing my food for so long that it turns into mush in my mouth. Then, if I feel I have good material under my belt, I will pipe up and say my bit. The thrill of what I have to say makes me strangely proud. Even if my opinion is thought to be odd or bizarre, at least it has captivated people by being atypical.

When I told my mother without hesitation that Kelley would want to be cremated, she didn't think it was bizarre. I'm not sure where the sureness in my voice came from, but it was there and seemed to provide her with tangible security she could hold close in a time of oblivion. I stopped being the youngest at that moment, and I've been hovering somewhere in between since.

On the Thursday of that week, there was a wedding on the beach. The bride glowed with barefoot beauty, and her hair was curled in delicate tendrils. She was really very pretty, and I imagined this must be a milestone in her

life. The groom was also handsome, though when I looked at him I felt uncomfortable, almost claustrophobic. He was sweating in

his tux, and I thought that if I were to touch his back, I would be able to feel the squishy heat seeping through the jacket and warming up my hand. When the ceremony was over, the man and woman were called to the corner and asked to sign the wedding certificate. Their signatures looped in between and above each other on the parallel lines on which they were to sign—an intermingled mess of cursive that not only

pledged their devotion on paper, but made it thereby illegal to separate. Had my sister missed a milestone or a constricting societal norm? When I think about it, Kelley's life was so complete and good that maybe we could go so far as to rejoice in the fact that she had gone in a perfect state. She hadn't died due to a debilitating illness, and she wasn't nostalgic for days passed. She had lived in the moment and died in the moment—and maybe, that was better than anything.

Death is always tragic but there is something undeniably woeful about the loss of someone with the face of soft flower petals—perhaps because they haven't reached the expected milestones that we think make for a complete life. Maybe the reason my family liked the idea of cremation was because it seemed to preserve Kelley in the life she had been living, and despite the fate that had befallen her, we could literally take her into our hands and let her live how she had been.

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When I went off to college, Kelley and I talked even more than we had when we were in the same place. She was always narrating a crazy story that would have my sides in stitches and cheek muscles sore. She was the outgoing, witty one, and I, the shy, quiet one. I would relish in the moments she asked for my advice, carefully articulating my answer, and following up the next day I would ask “How did it go?” or “So what did you say?” Kelley and I were yin and yang—completely different but fitting together perfectly.

Friday, our second to last day, was cloudless and perfect. The day was beautiful and I laid on my back with my palms turned up like I was offering myself to the vast blue that hovered above me. As dusk approached, people gathered to watch the bold orange drop from its suspension in the sky, and I took my spot right where the water lapped the shore. And it was really nice. Because at that moment, though we were all strangers, we were linked together by the pleasure we shared for a sunset. A crowd of people who all felt like they were in the right place at the right

time and a joined exhalation of breath that was both content and satisfied in its humbled trajectory. As the sun melted into the water, I realized the sun and ocean were also like yin and yang.

Saturday, we let some of my sister go. My mom cried, my dad said something positive, and I, true to form, put on an emotionless facade. But through our exteriors the words, “I love you Kelley” came out as the breeze lifted the ashes, and danced with them over the water. That night, sitting in my bed, I realized life isn’t about longevity, or milestones, or even accomplishments. It’s the quality in which you live, and the happiness you feel. It’s the out loud acquiescence you utter to the dark each night, “Yes, life is quite good.” This, I thought, was the epitome of Kelley—a girl who lived a magnificently full life.

Perhaps some things shouldn’t be buried away in the hope that they may one day be forgotten. Rather, if plucked from memory and analyzed just enough, one can find there is a hint of beauty in just about everything.

