

Death Notices

By [Diane Webster](#) (May 2023)



The Garden of Death, Hugo Simberg, 1896

Cousin Gary shoots himself in the head and dies. No, not suicide. He forgets to unload the rifle after he went shooting the day before. He remembers that morning before school. The rifle fires and kills my cousin. I am 12; he is 14.

I am taken out of junior high to go to the funeral. I don't remember seeing my aunt or uncle or Gary's sister and brother. Family members and strangers gather to view Gary's body. We

huddle in an outer room waiting for people to come and go where Gary is laid out. Grandma wipes tears away as she exits the room. I don't want to see Gary, but Mom urges me into the room. "You'll regret it later," she says. Gary lies in the casket. A huge, white bandage covers the right side of his head. That's where the bullet entered. No blood. What did it look like underneath? Like horror movie makeup? A tiny hole? A big hole? Would I see his brain? My cousin Gary is dead, lying in a casket, stared at like a baby zoo animal. "He looks like he's sleeping," I hear. No one sleeps in a casket unless he's a vampire, and vampires aren't real. I see plenty of them on TV.

This image burns the only memory, the only mental picture I have of my cousin Gary. Dead in his casket. A white bandage taped to his head. His suit ready for a funeral. At 12, I vow never to view another dead body.

The funeral happens in a church; the first church I am ever inside. How am I supposed to act? Head down? Hands folded? I stare at Gary's casket at the front of the pews. Massive flowers drape across the death of Gary. Wouldn't it be funny if he leaped from his casket and shouted, "April Fool's!" Scare everybody to death. Come on, Gary. Fling open the casket and jump out! *Jump out! Jump out! Ollie, ollie oxen free!*

Too late. We climb into cars traveling to the cemetery. We stop on the cemetery's narrow road and wait. What are we waiting for? Come on. Let's get this over. Skiffs of snow cover the cemetery grounds making it look even colder. I wear a tie-dyed coat, and Mom tells me to turn it inside out so the light blue color underneath shows on the outside. "If they don't like it, they can lump it!" I say. I think Gary would like tie-dye. Grandma is helped from the car. Tears fall down her cheeks, and she looks like a chimpanzee. Small. Sad eyes. Holding someone's arm or hand as we walk to the grave.

Cold. Shivering. Is Gary cold?

Grandma Webster dies the day before my birthday. I go with Mom to the funeral home to help make arrangements. The directors ask all the ancestry questions: mother and father names, where born, dates of everything. Mom can't think, but the genealogy books at home have all that information. I drive home and pack up the white book of names, dates and begets.

When Grandma's life fills out all the blanks on the funeral forms, we trudge into the casket showroom. Someone says Grandma liked green so she gets a green, metal casket.

I remember the movie, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. A ghostly woman is buried in a crypt, but she isn't dead. Her white, slender hand creeps out of the casket, then her arm, then her entire ethereal body wisps into the crypt. When I go to bed that night, her hand tickles my sheets. She tries to get a grip to pull the sheets off of me. I'm scared to look. I tuck the covers around my neck and pray I am stronger than the woman with the wispy, dead hand who's not really dead. I hope I am stronger as I stand here staring at the caskets in the mortuary's casket room. I hope I don't see something move out of the corner of my eye. Like a breeze of tissue that Grandma always stuffed up her sleeve for quick retrieval or snatched out of her bra. I shudder at the thought of snot on her arm or on her boob. Eew!

Uncle Carl dies the day after Halloween. Heart attack.

I like the first smell of his cigarette being lit by his metal lighter. The quick click of the lid flips shut afterward.

Lighter fluid? The whiff of quick-burnt tobacco? I am close enough to breathe in before smoke escapes his lips. His laugh penetrates the smoke. I watch him toss a pretend dead duck for his dog, Tish, training her to retrieve after his shotgun blast drops a duck or pheasant or dove to earth. I get to pet her after her workout. She likes that.

When not hunting, Carl fishes. Not offshore like we do, but from a boat. A boat as far out as we can cast from shore. He must catch the biggest, bestest fish from there. The river smells deeper out there. Inches away from water that can drown me. Inches away from a shotgun barrel. Safe with Uncle Carl.

It's a graveside service. I see this funeral from a hillside. Actual or real, my brain has carved this memory. I am apart. I am removed. I am distanced. I see the American flag handed to Leona, and the coffin burdens the center of attention even when we walk away.

We sit at the house. Our plates full with food that is supposed to fill our emptiness, the loss of Uncle Carl. I sit on the couch, not realizing I stare. When my eyes refocus, the woman I stared at smiles. A smile saying, she knows I was far away and had returned. Her smile says I haven't been rude for staring.

My eyes dart away; she saw my grief.

Mom calls me on Thanksgiving Day and tells me both Grandpa and Grandma died yesterday.

"Both of them! Was it a car accident?"

No. Grandma finds Grandpa dead Wednesday morning. As she talks

to Mom, she feels dizzy, and minutes later she dies.

I wrote a letter to them. They were supposed to get it and read it! Now they can't. Mom mails it back so I have to throw it away. I have to lose them again.

I tell Mom I don't know if I can come for the funeral. She doesn't want me traveling because of the weather. Because she doesn't want to worry about me flying. I feel like when I was in school and a friend of mine called and asked if I could come over. "Let me ask Mom." I'd wait an appropriate amount of time and then say Mom won't let me go. I was off the hook. When Mom tells me I don't have to come home for the funeral, I am off the hook.

Every time I look at the picture of Grandma and Grandpa on my dresser, tears well up. I hide the picture in a drawer until finally it gets pressed like a special flower between the pages of my photo album. I realize I'll never receive another letter from Grandma. I'll never get to sit in their living room and talk to them again. I'll never get the \$2 bill Grandma always sealed in my Christmas letter.

The next time I go home, Mom wants to show me their headstone and where they're buried. I don't want to go, but it's important to Mom. It's a headstone like all headstones except the names are family names. Family names that belong to me. On the back of the headstone the five children's names are chiseled. My aunts, my uncles, my mom. On a headstone. I feel no presence of my grandparents. I'm glad. I have them pictured on the farm when I visited and where I spent a week during the summer.

Grandma and I drank RC Cola I'd never get at home, and I'd watch her candle eggs she had gathered that morning. Grandma pulled a carrot from her garden and handed it to me. I brushed it off and ate it, tiny grit cracked between my teeth. The best carrots I ever ate. Grandma always knew where the farm

kittens were hidden. She'd lead me to the haystack and reach her arm between bales of hay and pull out kitten after kitten so I could hold their soft, warm bodies close to my chin. They smelled like hay.

Grandpa and Ginger, the dog, and I rounded up the cows and herded them into the barn to be milked. Farm cats gathered for their treat of fresh milk while I petted them and stayed out of Grandpa's way. Then Grandpa pushed the milk cart and me to the road where the milk cans were picked up by a guy in a truck who drove around collecting all the milk for the day.

I wanted a letter so bad.

Mom has her stroke a few days before Easter. When Dad calls on Easter day, it's weird he's talking and not Mom. I soon find out why. He's making calls to family members, and I'm the first. Mom has had strokes before, and they haven't been bad, but Dad doesn't have any more information than she's in the hospital. No clue how bad it is. If it's bad at all. I tell him I'll call my sister. We are both concerned but don't know what to do. After all, Mom has come home from other hospital stays. She'll come home from this one too. We decide to wait. Then our aunts and uncles call and email. It's bad. Mom can't talk or move her left side. It's bad.

My sister drives the 450 miles from her house to our parents' house. She sees Mom and calls me. She struggles unsuccessfully to hold back her tears. It's bad. Mom can barely talk, her left side is useless, but she knows people. That's the one thing we cling to. She knows people. After a few days, the doctors want to transfer Mom to a rehab facility 60 miles away. My sister has to get back to work so I am tag teamed to

go home. I drive the 750 miles wondering what I'll find when I get home. My sister tells me to prepare myself for the worst. For 11 hours I try. I decide I want to see Mom that evening. My anxieties can conjure more worries about what I might find by morning. I have thought enough. It's time for reality.

Mom knows me so I feel good about that, but her speech is slurred and several times I shake my head because I don't understand. My sister and I have one day together before we exchange responsibilities. She drives home, and I stay to arrange the transfer to the rehab facility. The hospital staff wants me to transport Mom in my personal car. What?! She's bed ridden, can't move, can hardly talk, has no control over her bodily functions, and I am not going to have her ride in my car or Dad's van. I say, "No," several times and tell the staff they have to arrange an ambulance to drive her the 60 miles. Finally, they realize I'm not giving in, and arrangements are made.

Dad is confused, upset, doesn't know what's going on, doesn't want his wife moved out of town. "They don't tell me nothing. They don't tell me nothing," he repeats. My sister and I convince him this is Mom's best shot at getting better so she can come home. I also convince him to let me, and only me, follow Mom to the rehab facility and get her settled in. I'll take him over the next day. Thank God, he agrees because dealing with both of them would be like herding cats.

At 80 miles an hour I race behind the ambulance. Having no idea where the rehab facility is I'll be damned if I let a car pull in between us. The EMTs unload Mom and whisk themselves away back home. I'm glad to see one of my aunts there, but everything still rests on my shoulders. I follow everyone as they get Mom settled in her room. I sign my name a lot on a lot of paperwork. Now back to Dad, but I don't know the way out since my guide, the ambulance, has already left. My aunt has no idea how to give me directions, and the hospital people are no better.

“Take the beltway and ...”

“Where’s the beltway?”

I am an alien wandering the hospital halls. Asking stupid questions. “You’re here and you don’t know where the beltway is?” I can’t be the only person who has asked for directions! I give up. I know enough to drive in a direction, and I find the freeway. The freeway is familiar. The freeway drives me through my childhood as I go home. Slower than I drove earlier. Older than I drove earlier.

Dad doesn’t understand much of what I tell him. He wants his wife home. He wants his life back. He wants it like it was before. I do too. I ask people to drive Dad to the rehab because he’s afraid he’ll get lost, and I have to go home to work. He’ll be alone, without Mom, and I don’t know if he’ll be okay. For 20 days Mom is in rehab. The powers that be say Mom has to move to a nursing home or assisted living facility. They think she can handle an assisted living facility. We have less than a week to arrange the move.

My sister and I both drive home. We get an assisted living apartment and furnish it in two days. My sister stays there to put the finishing touches on the room while I drive Dad to the rehab facility to collect Mom. I struggle not to show my disappointment when I see the staff do for her as much as they did 20 days ago, but I can’t deal with that yet. I focus on Mom. I focus on getting her home.

It’s a revealing drive to the assisted living facility. Mom lost the filter on her thoughts. I listen to her conversation on my grandparents and am surprised by her anger. She calls Grandpa a son of a bitch and that he almost worked Grandma to death. Her anger with her father, my grandfather, is new to me, and I don’t know what to say. We talk about the horses in the fields. Dad is silent in the back seat. What are his thoughts? What is he feeling? What will he do? What will

happen with Dad?

Mom gets settled in her room, and we hear the first complaint. The bed isn't a hospital bed, and she can't pull herself up or around without rails. Never mind that the rehab facility told us she could use a regular bed. My sister and I exchange looks of helplessness and disappointment. We did our best, and it isn't good enough.

We realize Mom shouldn't have been referred to an assisted living facility at all. She thinks it's a hospital and that everything will be done for her whenever she calls. We didn't do the right thing. How many other things will end up wrong? My sister and I agree not to leave on the same day so I leave first. My sister leaves the next day. Neither of us knows how all this is going to work. We have no experiences to help us through this transition. Our hope is Dad will eventually move in with Mom, and they'll be together and taken care of.

When I leave, I think it would be better for everyone, including Mom, if she will close her eyes, and never wake up. The Thursday after Memorial Day she does just that.

My sister and I plan our mother's funeral. Dad tells us to do what we think is best. He doesn't have the strength to deal with his wife's funeral. But what do my sister and I know? So, I take all the names and dates to the funeral home. We are led into the private room with urns and memory books on display shelves that surround us like Indians circling pioneer wagons in the middle of nowhere in the old west. Go ahead. Here I am. Shoot me with an arrow. Put me out of my misery. We're told Mom wanted a pink casket. Yes, a pink casket is available. Good. One thing we can do right.

My sister wants a video of Mom and Dad's life. I don't. I don't want to see pictures of Mom while she lies dead in front of us. My sister wins. I want to see where the funeral will take place. I hope to head off any more anxiety I will have

when the day arrives. We tour the chapel. Where will I sit? Where will the casket be? Will the casket be open? I learn the casket will be closed until the end of the service and then opened. Anxiety surges into my body. I don't want to see Mom in her casket.

I want Mom the way she was on May Day when I came home from school; a May basket clutched in my hands. I'd run into the yard, duck below the window so Mom wouldn't see me. I'd raid the lilac bush and pull blooming dandelions out of the grass. All of these overflowed the May basket I had made. I'd sneak up to the door, knock and sprint around the corner of the house. Mom opened the door and was so surprised to see flowers hung on the door knob. That's the Mom I wanted.

It rains the day of her funeral. I watch my cousins tip their umbrellas onto my aunts and get them wet. I want to laugh. I want to stand with them and dump rainwater on someone. I want it done. I want ... I don't know what I want. I just want it done. Dandelions bloom in the grass.

I don't unpack my suitcases for a year. I expect Dad to die at any time, but he surprises us. Except his forgetfulness progresses. Never diagnosed as dementia or Alzheimer's, but he has it. After several months, my sister makes the decision to move back to our hometown. She convinces her bosses she can do her job there. She rents her own house and has Dad over for evening meals. But Dad is on his own during the rest of the time. He wanders as he drives. Eventually my sister slips a GPS device in his car. At least he won't be lost forever.

After three years, my sister and I decide it's time to move Dad into assisted living. We plot behind his back. Arrange for

the room, move some items in we don't think Dad will miss and while a friend gives him a ride through the countryside, my sister and I raid Dad's house for personal items and clothes to put into his new room. Now we have to get Dad there. There's no explaining to him why we think this is best for him. He's fine and safe in his own God damn house! I feel like I'm putting the leash on an old dog and leading him to the car for his last ride before we head to the vet's office to put him down.

My sister and I take turns staying with him that first day and repeat over and over why he has to stay and not go home. It's hard telling our Dad, no. He swears like the sailor he was. "This is bullshit!" He beats his cane into the floor. "Why can't I go home?"

After a week, I drive home. I call Dad and if after I tell him who I am, he answers, "How about that," then I know he knows me. When he stops saying that, Dad isn't there, and probably doesn't know who he's talking to even after I tell him it's me.

The Thursday before Labor Day, Dad dies and joins his wife. Several months earlier, my sister and I had arranged a prepaid funeral and had plans on paper, but we didn't think we'd need them so soon.

The last thing I see of my Dad is his right hand in the coffin. Only because I don't know the casket is going to be opened, and thank God, I'm seated behind the lectern so I don't see more than his hand.

That hand was the one I'd take as a little girl and arrange around my body until it fit just right so we could both sit in his chair and watch TV. My nice, warm Daddy nest. When Dad had his rocking chair, my sister and I would get on either side of him and get that rocking chair rocking back and forth so fast it tipped over backward. We'd all laugh as our feet sprawled

up in the air, and we ended up jumbled between the wall and the chair. Over and over again.

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Diane Webster's goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life, nature or an overheard phrase and to write. Diane enjoys the challenge of transforming images into words to fit her poems. Her work has appeared in *El Portal*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *New English Review*, and other literary magazines. She also had a micro-chap, *Between Journeys*, published by Origami Poetry Press in 2022.

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