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Plastic Pigs, Replacement Brains, And Other Things that Break my Heart

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Author Bio

Kriscinda Meadows is an English major and a Writing minor. She is a "nontraditional" student in the sense that she built up a portfolio of life experience before going to college. Among many other things, she has been a bookseller in Pittsburgh, a commercial production house painter in Cleveland, and worked with an ever changing group of illegal immigrants making ceramic tile glaze in Topanga Canyon for celebrities, outside of Los Angeles. Musically, she enjoys Elliott Smith, David Byrne, Dead Kennedys, Bad Religion, Mission or Burma, and much more. Literature-wise, some of her favorite books include Lord of the Barnyard by Tristan Egolf, White Noise by Don DeLillo, and A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius by Dave Eggers, and much more. She is a vegetarian. She can be best described as a Democratic Socialist. She loves garlic and zombie movies.

Plastic Pigs, Replacement Brains, And Other Things that Break my Heart

The look on my mother's face—drawn, brows arched, not in anger, but as if asking forgiveness—as she said the words “Your father's gone,” would stay with me and be the blueprint for the new building I was erecting. Experience as architecture—milestones turn to cornerstones and this was the experience to usher in the construction of what was officially my adulthood.

We stood in the kitchen and my mother sat at the table. I told her I knew it, and walked over to the sink. My older sister, Becky, leaned against one of the cupboards, her face slowly beginning to pinch into what was going to be a very long week of crying. I didn't cry. I didn't cry until his viewing, not until we all sat down to hear the eulogy. I slid a cigarette out of my sister's pack, went out to the back deck, and smoked. I watched the smoke curl up into a very black sky; it left my mouth like I imagine people think a soul leaves the body when it's time. This was not what I believed in. He was here and now he is gone. Just like mom said—he didn't “pass on” like most people do. He was just...gone.

Dad had been sick for the previous nine months. When I think of that length of time and how hard it was for him—the radiation, the chemo, the surgeries, the nausea and starvation—it seems like a very long time. But when I think of it in terms of the day before we found out it was cancer, it seems painfully short. I was living in Los Angeles, far away from my family's home in Pennsylvania, and had only been there for about two months when my mother called me with the news. Two months previous to that phone call I had stood in my parents' driveway, my father inspecting the packing job I'd done.

He was black, but not ace-of-spades black. His complexion was caramel—a testament to generations of biracial relationship in his own family tree, which he himself perpetuated when he married my mother, who is a very pale Canadian. He had a penchant for polo shirts with horizontal stripes, and jeans. On the weekends, when he'd commence with the yard work, he'd don one of his old, beat up trucker's caps—the kind with the mesh backing. He never wore them properly; he always looked as though someone might have plopped the cap slightly askew onto his head when he wasn't looking. Out of his mouth protruded a white plastic cigarette filter. He began chewing on them three years ago when he finally quit after forty years of smoking. As a kid, I rarely saw him without a cigarette in his hand, and now I never saw him without the white plastic filter, clicking between his teeth as he passed it back and forth with his tongue.

He considered the truck of my car, being the whiz he was at packing the most amazing amount of stuff into the tiniest of spaces, and everything I owned was in my car. He had no suggestions, nothing to move around there so I could fit this here and that there. He was satisfied, and he

coughed. He'd been coughing for a bit longer than people normally cough, so I asked him if he'd get the checked out. He said he would. Then he told me to get my car out of the driveway so he could pull out the riding mower and have a go at the grass. I did, and I was off to L.A.

I thought of this as I pulled into the driveway nine months later. I'd come home from California to help my mom around the house for a week. She was taking care of my dad 24/7, and despite both my sisters being around, she had no one to help out. As I pulled up the first thing I saw was the long, unkempt grass and I knew immediately that things were worse than I thought. We had four acres, and every moment we lived in that house, the grass was cut. This was the first time I had ever remembered it being this long—about mid-calf. I knew Dad couldn't cut the grass himself anymore, but the fact that he hadn't gotten anyone else to do it—that was surely a sign that my mother wasn't being totally honest with me about his condition.

And I was right. I thought I had a week to make an attempt at some closure—to say whatever it was that I needed to say, to listen to whatever it was that he needed to say, to ask the questions that I needed to ask. I would be visiting the hospital the following morning. I hadn't seen him in four months. I spent the plane ride and the drive from the airport trying to arrange things in my head from most important to least. My driver even asked if I wanted to stop by the hospital since it was on the way. I said no—I didn't want to put any undue stress on him by showing up unexpectedly. He was a proud man, and I knew he wanted to be prepared. As I got out of the car, the grass rippled from the far side of the yard towards me and I knew that everything I had to say would go unsaid. I wished I had stopped by.

Prior to learning that my father was dying, I didn't truly understand the point in having religion. I'd spent most of my life claiming uncommitted agnosticism and had, for the last few years, been steadily moving into atheism, so by the time my father got sick, I had nothing to lean on. It seemed that this was the time that crutch was made for. What do you do when you have no hope and the situation is out of your hands? You pray.

I had been thoroughly tested up to that point; my life was a tangled mess of disastrous decisions made in my ill-informed youth that had amounted to a tightly drawn knot in a noose. My neck wasn't in it yet. I simply crouched inside the knot watching execution after execution of my confidence, my esteem, my ability to care about my life—this consisted mainly of eating, sleeping and receiving a variety of abuses from my boss and my boyfriend.

I worked for a tile company up in the hills of Topanga Canyon, where I made the glaze from scratch and where illegally hired South Americans hand painted customs-made tiles for the rich and sometimes famous. My boss, Bob, was a combination of painfully stupid and horribly cruel. It didn't matter that I was a citizen of the country and spoke perfect English—he would yell at us all like dogs that shit in the corner.

My boyfriend was a talented film student who came across and quiet and shy. I learned quickly after moving 3,000 miles away from my friends and family that the closer he got to someone, the worse he would treat them. He didn't feel comfortable venting on people he didn't know well, and he didn't know many people well. So, whatever his frustrations were, he'd take them out on me. It began with him pushing me down into beds and couches, which was just humiliating—but over a relatively short period of time it moved on to pushing into walls or onto the ground. Once he had me down, he'd kick me in the ribs. Punches and smacks to the heads followed, but never in the face. I learned that in order to stop someone from choking you while standing up, you should go limp. He wanted to choke me, but he didn't want to have to hold me up while he did it. Unfortunately, that led to more assaults on my ribs, and ultimately banging my head off the hardwood floor and furniture. All of this was accompanied by the yelling and the screaming. I was worthless, I was useless, I was trash, I would never be anything, I would always be nothing. He hated the sound of my voice, hated looking at me. I bought all of it. I took it, I fought back, and I took it some more. Then, I went limp. The last thing my father had said to him in the driveway before we left was "take care of her." He took care of me, alright.

I had become so numb and apathetic that when it came time to deal with my father's mortality, I was surprised by the wild desperation it conjured. And I tried to pray, an attempt that lasted all of two seconds before I felt ridiculous. I figured it'd be more effective to pen a letter to Santa for a cure in time for Christmas.

I called my father often during his stays in the hospital, and as much as I could when he was home. More often than not, though, he was not able to talk. He was sleeping, or he was just too sick at the time. He was on numerous medications—Amethopterin, Procarbazine, Temozolomide. The nausea from the chemo made it impossible for him to eat and he lost weight at such a rapid pace that my mother feared he'd starve to death before the cancer ever killed him. But before the cancer spread, he was still pretty jovial. He meant to kick it. He had every intention of kicking it. He didn't quit smoking for nothing. My father lit up doctors' offices, keeping nurses and patients in stitches. These waiting rooms were choked with sadness, despair, and hopelessness, but not when it was my father who was waiting. By the time his name was called for his check-up, the room was howling with laughter.

When he was confined to the hospital for lengthy periods of time, I would try to devise ways of keeping things cheery when he couldn't. I sent him a small toy pig catapult, and he used to torment nurses with these diminutive pink plastic piggies, which drove my mother crazy because she'd have to collect them from various corners and under chairs so that he could shoot them again. Similarly, when we learned it spread to his brain, I wrote to tell him that it probably wasn't the cancer at all...I insisted that when the doctors operated they would probably find that they had indeed found the

defective part of his brain that made him so weird. I followed it up with a small toy brain—the kind you immerse in water and it grows. I told him it was a replacement and sent detailed installation instructions with it. The next time I talked to my dad, he told me I was sick, and then laughed wheezingly into the phone. My mother later told me that he showed it to everyone who visited—including the doctors who he insisted follow the instructions carefully.

It was difficult to accept that this person was soon to disappear. This was the man who adopted my sister and me when he married my mother and never once treated us any differently than he treated his own. This was the man who disowned much of his family because they couldn't accept that he married a white woman and did his best to protect us from the constant bombardment of racism from local whites. This was the man who worked for the Department of Defense as a Quality Assurance Specialist and, regardless of the financial difficulties we occasionally had, repeatedly turned down bribes that ran into tens of thousands of dollars each. He simply said that he wouldn't be able to sleep at night if he knew that one of our boys' planes went down because of a faulty component. While I know Dad had some faith, I was never sure how much he had. He wasn't an outwardly religious person, and we didn't go to church growing up.

The day after he died, my mother told me how he went, and while I know she just needed to tell someone as a mechanism of her own grief, I wished she hadn't. He drifted in and out of consciousness. He held up his hands in front of his face as if something struck out at him. He kicked, he swore. He'd only calmed when my mother spoke to him, soothing him, telling him it was okay to just...let...go. And he eventually did, though still fighting. Afterwards, my mother had to push his arms and legs back down. Wouldn't someone with faith go willingly? Wouldn't they just accept it? It seemed as though he didn't accept it and he certainly wasn't ready to go. He was scared. Did he pray? Did he beg? To whom did he pray and beg? As an atheist, I know I have no one to appeal to and I don't think he did either. And this is what makes it hard. It's one thing to lose someone with the belief that you'll see this person again, or that this person will somehow watch over you, is always with you—but this road seems much harder. I do not feel my father's presence, and I know that I will never see him again. But what I do have is this...

My father's viewing was six days later. He had prepared everything before he died, up to and including writing his own obituary. The funeral costs were taken care of, everything was in order. All that had to be done was to call the florist to get a spray for the casket, which I did. We spent the rest of the time sitting around the house boomeranging back and forth between reminiscing humorously about my dad and staring numbly into space. Between the short spurts of laughter and bouts of sobbing, the house was dead quiet—we thought we would go crazy.

Finally the day had come and my mother, sisters, and I arrived at Lantz' Funeral Home. Muriel Lantz and her nephew Aaron greeted us warmly. They were close friends of our family. As I entered the parlor, I could imagine my father vacuuming. Michael had a normal cleaning staff, but sometimes a person would die quite unexpectedly and for whatever reason the service was rushed. On those occasions, my father and mother would make the quick trip up to Uniontown to help clean the viewing area and chapel. The hallways were long and lined with comfortable chairs and loveseats. The ceilings were low.

I pulled Aaron aside and asked how he looked. I hadn't seen him since Christmas and at that time he was relatively healthy looking. I was acutely afraid of seeing him after this terrible disease had ravaged him. Aaron assured me that he did his utmost, considering my father promised he would haunt him if he didn't.

We arrived before everyone else, and we each spent a little time privately at the casket. When it came my turn, I, of course, had nothing to say to him. He was gone. He couldn't hear me. I could do nothing but contemplate his body and think what a great job Aaron had done, and make a mental note to thank him later. My father lay in this powder blue silken box. His face shaved, his color good, though his lips were a little pale. I thought of his false teeth, which were in a box in the kitchen and had been for quite some time. There came a point when he became so thin and wasted that he could no longer wear them. Growing up, the only time we saw him without them was first thing in the morning when he'd wander downstairs in his blue robe, hair standing straight up like Don King, to get a cup of coffee. Today, he wore a sober blue shirt and tie, which he had selected himself. He didn't look like a sick man, let alone a dead man.

Soon, people were arriving. Some I knew, some I didn't. There were friends of my little sister, who was then a high school senior. Even a few I myself went to high school with, including Eric Wilson, who actually worked with my father for a time after graduation. They signed the book, they made their way through the receiving line—faces laughed and cried, looked joyful one moment, as they remembered him, and sorrowful the next, when they remembered he was dead. The nurses who had taken care of him arrived and cried openly and red-faced. One of them specifically I had sent a thank you card to a few months previous because she really went above and beyond to provide the care my parents needed. She hugged me and cried and told me what a wonderful man he was. I thanked her and told her that Aaron had done a beautiful job. I didn't know what else to say. The room was filling to capacity and I eased away from everyone to get a better view. The room was full. People who knew my father in high school, in the Navy, when he lived in Washington, DC and California, people who knew him from the many offices in which he worked, people who knew him from his time in Kuwait, people whom he counseled, people for whom he either found a deal or got a deal, people who worked at the local grocery—and more, so many more.

And this is what I had, and what I still have. I don't believe we live on. I don't believe there's an afterlife. I don't believe that we're watched over and waited for by our loved ones in some blissful state of grace for all eternity. But it's obvious to me now that we don't just simply disappear. If we touch enough people and we do enough good, we live on in their happy memories—and maybe even the not-so-happy ones. It's a little place in all our psyches, a place reserved for this very purpose, the place where we store all the good times we had with our loved ones who have left us. And we can access it anytime we want and when we do, that's when they exist again, just for us. This is what I thought of when the reverend began to give the eulogy, and I cried like a baby.

CHRIS CROFT

run-up-the-hill windmill

The tv flashes ironies
of complacent celebrities
where faces are named
and people framed
in posturepedic flashcards
headdresses for headcases

I've got headaches
dripping from the ceiling
of this boileroven
I've got people shouting
in retroactive chatter spasms
humdrum highways

Sorry for the miscue
I never know when to act
recording my waves
in a late night tumble
spurning the ivories
harrowing of hell

I need a lyric
Or a sonnet to sing
A drive for the ages
tickle my instincts
deflect the jargon
heading for home