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CEMETERY DAY

by Paul Rawlins



We're late getting up to the cemetery this year. Usually we're up early in the morning, Grandma and my aunts bustling around the kitchen between arranging flowers and getting dressed while the rest of us finish breakfast. This year it's two o'clock before we even start up town where my Grandpa Rawlins is buried in the Lewiston City Cemetery.

I was only two when he died, so I never knew him. He knew me, I suppose. I've seen his picture. But I know his grave. I've visited it probably every year since he died—I know I've been there in May every year I can remember. Memorial Day in Lewiston is a funny thing. I see relations I don't see any other time of the year, and the whole town makes it out to the cemetery. My grandma's there, and she used to talk for hours when I was little, when hours

were longer. My dad sees old school buddies. He tells them no, he's not in the tire business anymore, says this is his wife LaJune, this is his boy—Mike, Paul, Robert, whoever's around. And we go grave to grave, trying to make sense of who is related to whom and how. Only my grandma knows it all. She could probably tell you something about almost everybody in the cemetery, or at least their families. I believe small towns are like that, kind of close-knit, nosy in a concerned, family way. I don't know—I'm not from a small town—but that's what I believe.

And I hear stories about the people I came from. I know I'll wish I remembered the stories some day. They're supposed to be a part of me somehow—somehow, whether I know them or not.

The cemetery sits on a bluff sort of overlooking a river, surrounded by a partial ring of trees. I suppose they used to run round full circle. Now there's a gap—maybe for the living to come and go. We come in on the west side, and we drive a loop all the way around to the east side to start over at my grandpa's grave. His isn't far from the edge of the bluff and the river. You can see the old sugar factory across the road. My dad used to work there. My grandpa probably did, too. He worked a little bit of everywhere.

We don't have peonies from home this year. We always used to have peonies. We still bring roses from our yard, though. And there's columbine, in a glass jar, from out front of my grandma's house. My aunts have a nice store-bought arrangement and a wreath in fall colors that work well. Somebody from out of town has left lilacs. The wind's blowing, so we anchor everything down with little shepherd's crooks bent from hanger wire. They're always too long or too short, and the ground's always hard. But we finish, and everything stays up.

I have the camera this year, so I take the picture. My aunt's pulled handfuls of grass from around the headstone, and she's going to dump them over the fence. My other aunt's saying something about the guy who mows the lawn.

Then we start the loop. The cemetery's full of Talbots, Ponds, Van Ordens, Leavitts, Lewises, with a good handful of Rawlinses, too. The Rawlinses go back to Harvey M. His grave makes the far end of the loop; he's to the north, kind of in the center.

The faded white stones mark children's graves. I pass a row of them along the east side for children who died in Decembers and Januaries. I think the winters in the valley were hard on children; I have a tendency towards the dramatic. Dad says a Rawlins would have been the first newborn in Lewiston, but it was too cold, and the parents wintered in a warmer house in Richmond. The children in these graves weren't even newborns. The older two were nine and eleven; the younger two were three and five.

My aunt points out the grave of one of my uncle's best friends. She tells me someone in the family had a fit about his grave being so close to his mother's. And he was a tall boy, she says, and he should have a flag. He was killed in Vietnam, stepped on a Claymore mine. It was one of those things—the point man got through.

A couple of kids horsing around get a talking to.

"Do you know what reverence is?" Their dad is being strict. "This is sacred ground."

No chasing and stepping on headstones. No being disrespectful. I used to worry about stepping on the dead. I could never keep straight which way the graves ran. And I used to feel sorry for undecorated graves and put a spare flower here and there. My mother, my grandmother, they still right tipped bouquets. My aunts take care of the family headstones, clean off the bird droppings, trim the grass, raise them when they start sinking.

The dad asks the kids if they understand. They look sheepish. They'll nod their heads, but it's an adult thing, death and memorial. Cemeteries are just scary places to be alone or at night to kids, like the one in my hometown where the statue looks at you if you walk around it three times at midnight. There's nobody here for them yet.

We stop by the grave of mom's dance teacher. This is new to me. Barbara Monroe. A beautiful lady. Handsome husband. She died in 1968, the year my youngest brother was born. I've seen a picture of my mother sitting in front of the old house on Liberty Avenue with her ball gown spread around her on the lawn like a pond. Barbara Monroe wasn't teaching in Lewiston when my mother took dance. My mother isn't from northern Utah, but everybody knows somebody from Cache Valley. I could go to the end of the earth, I think sometimes, and mention that my dad is from Cache Valley, Utah, and someone would say, "My grandfather was from Smithfield" or "My wife's folks are in Cache Valley."

Maybe that's what dad means when he calls it God's country. It's some kind of Eden, some source. Dad insists on being buried here. He comes as close to looking forward to it as you can without being morbid. He talks about being buried under a tree for shade, maybe one down by the stream along the south side of the graveyard. My mother says he'll have to be buried with his heavy cotton sheets, or he'll be complaining about the cold. Maybe a reading lamp. He says he'll come back to haunt us if we bury him anywhere but up here, especially if we leave him in the city cemetery down in Ogden. Too much traffic, too noisy.

Most of the direct family is over to the west. Harvey MacGalyard Rawlins was the first of the family to come out West. He's here. And Jasper Alphonzo and Cora Mae Burbank, dad's grandparents. My great uncle still lives in their place up town. There is a string of small cement squares here, too. They're numbered, and they

sink and get lost in the grass along the roadside most of the year. They mark babies' graves, babies my great uncles lost. They don't even have headstones, but every year my aunts hunt up the graves. They tug back the overgrown grass and talk about whose child each was and how they died.

Ruth is here, too. Ruth's grave always got a little metal basket of flowers, but the silver was starting to show through under the paint, and this year my aunts have a new arrangement. They never miss her grave, and I wonder if anybody here even saw her, except maybe my grandma. Ruth was my grandpa's baby sister. She died on Armistice Day, "while the rest of the world was celebrating," my grandma tells me.

My aunt says that once my grandpa let my uncle shoot a cow they were going to slaughter. My uncle asked about the convulsions the animal went through as it died, and grandpa said that death was just like that. My uncle was being smart-alecky and said, "How do you know?" Grandpa said, "I watched my baby sister die." That's all he ever said to anybody. He always said he couldn't remember, when people asked.

I know that Ruth died of influenza. Ruth's mother, Cora Mae, grieved until her own mother came back from the other side and told her to stop, that she had Ruth and that the baby would be fine until Cora Mae got there. The day seems right for telling these stories, and my grandma and aunts tell me more. Ariel talking with Horace after he went, Lynn having visits from his mother and father, my uncle and my own grandfather—I think it must run in the family, this closeness to the other side.

Here and now, these aren't ghost stories; they aren't tabloid stuff. They belong because the family is here. We think about those on the other side, they worry about us over this way, we all talk. But I tell my dad he can write me a letter if he has anything urgent to say after he's gone. I don't want him tapping me on the shoulder.

We walk back to the car, gathering up stray members of the family, finishing the loop. "I know more people here than I know alive," my aunt says. I guess time will do that to you.

All this from the cemetery will come back later this afternoon when I'm standing on an old spreader in a corner of the field. I've seen the spreader from the road on the other side of the ditch every time I've walked by, but I haven't been out on it for years. It's a long box on wheels with a lip sticking out along the top edge, and the wood is white like bone and cracked like dry clay. The lever on the right-hand side is frozen tight with rust. You can squeeze the handle, but the cogs won't move. I won't stand on the wood for fear of its giving way. The tires aren't flat. I'll find that hard to believe. And I'll wish I knew my grandfather.

I heard once that my grandfather was a good wrestler. His brothers used to gang up on him, and they still couldn't take him down. I don't know if he ever wrestled like I did in high school or if it was just roughhousing, but I wish he had been around to give me any pointers he might have had. I wasn't a good wrestler. He might have had a trick or two. Who knows.

I know from talk that my grandpa was a short man, with arms half again as big as my dad's—and his arms must be two or three times the size of mine. I'm long and narrow chested. I'm not even wiry. I'm not the kind that works twenty-four hours a day like dad says my grandpa did. I'm not a farmer. I think there's some morality tied up in the country and farmland, and I don't complain about the smell of silage, but I was born and raised in the city. I had a paper route instead of a milk route, and the ditches I dug were for sprinkling systems in residential lawns.

But I'll think this afternoon that there comes a time when you need to come to know the dead. To know what of being a Rawlins is or isn't tied up in my father and my grandfather and another

father on back past James Mason, who changed his name (we think) during the Revolutionary War. I owe them things. If it's only growing up in Utah and in my faith and with my name and lifestyle. Or I might even look something like somebody back there.

And I'll want to lay a claim on these people. I respect the grandpa I didn't know because he could work my dad into the ground. I can't, but I'm thinking I must come from solid stock. I come from small farmers on both sides of the family, and they're the only ties to land and soil I have left. And I come from pioneers who trekked a thousand miles into the American wilderness for their religion. And I hope we had a horse thief back there somewhere along with our seventeenth-century governor. I don't care much whether royal blood is in my veins, but these days, a bit of something passed down from a freebooter probably couldn't hurt. And I like the glamor.

My great-grandfather, Jasper Alphonzo Rawlins, had a solid reputation in the valley from what I've heard. A couple of his sons needed to get their car pulled out of the mud one night, and the farmer they asked for help held back until he found out they were Alf Rawlins's boys. Then he got his horses, hauled the car out, and told them to make sure to mention to their father who had helped them. I belong to Alf Rawlins somehow, too. And to Owen, my grandfather, and to LaVere, my dad. And they belong to me. Out there on the spreader, something in me will be glad for all this, and something in me will want to know just what it means.

I'll walk through the field as the sun goes down behind the mountains on the far side of the valley. I've heard jokes about the family waiting for Jasper Alphonzo's and Cora Mae's good looks to surface again one of these generations. Maybe in some of my kids. Maybe I'll have a boy named Alf someday. And we'll come up to Lewiston in May and decorate the graves, make the loop.