

Deanna Hershiser

Diminishing Lines

After some effort we're down the block. Mom remembered her cane. Directly west a concrete bike path parts a wetland. We used to walk out there together, spying red-winged blackbirds and sometimes a heron's precise movements in the reeds.

Today we've come only far enough to gaze on Amazon Creek, dark between ruddy maples and ponderosa saplings the city planted. Mom's steps have slowed. "I love seeing the water rise," she says. "And the golden leaves! It's my favorite season."

Every autumn she has said so. Near Amazon Creek our valley's damp, tangled grasses emit odors of loam, a promise my parents' strawberries will be sweet next spring. Mom has always depended on Dad to help plant and weed. Now his painful neuropathy prevents their usual fall unearthing of front-yard bulbs. Each previous year they have separated and replanted them, to serve up a tulip color feast in March: sun gold, red matador, magenta Queen of the Night.

"Let's head back," I say, sensing Mom needs to rest but doesn't wish to cut short her exercise or our visit. Sighing, she turns around.

She tells me of a friend whose husband died. "We've known them both since seminary. Anne was driving, thank heaven, when Bradley crumpled over—a heart attack."

"I'm sorry."

Mom reaches a full stop. "Dad and I've been talking," she says. Her palm noodles the top of her cane. "I need you to accept we're going to be cremated. At least, I want to be."

Sunshine has beaten the clouds; where my hair parts heat escalates, prickling. Unlike Mom, I failed to wear a hat. I scuff my left shoe. She knows I don't like the thought of cremation. Just, somehow, I never have.

Pondering possibilities for endings, I used to try and adjust my thinking. What else can we afford besides the urn? Should the dead demand so much space, anyway? Only to give loved ones a destination one three-day weekend, armed with irises and striped peonies, sharp-pointed vases the cemetery offers that get removed the next week before mowing.

But then I discovered alternatives. Friends of mine, retired nurses, offer a natural burial service. They arrive soon after death and bathe the loved one's skin, anointing it, gently readying the vacated abode before the funeral. I would be permitted to read Psalms while they work. Or simply to observe, to weep, to remember. Another friend builds simple wooden caskets.

Months ago, I first broached this subject. Dad sounded interested. Mom not really. She will accept this much: to be buried, her ashes grounded. This despite all her days of nearly constant motion, retrieving and reading the whole newspaper each morning, encouraging church people on the phone and in person, preparing diabetic-friendly meals for Dad. She doesn't require a release into either river or zephyrs, because she needs to remain side by side with her beloved.

His family bequeathed us graves in the pioneer cemetery near Springfield. Four plots, for my parents, my husband, and me. Uphill in the oldest section, slate headstones rise and tilt. Sparrows nest in fir trees whispering secrets near the flagpole. A leaning dwarf maple serves as a signpost. Boots are required in winter, but I could deal with that. The notion of trudging downhill to visit calms me. The ultimate slow. Organic. No violent dependence on the mortuary industry.

"It's your choice," I tell Mom. I hold out hope she'll change her mind regarding her cremation.

A sideways glance, then Mom squares her shoulders, moving forward. "It's not easy for you, I know. But it'll help Anne. She wants Bradley buried, and he didn't leave her much. Dad and I can give her one of our two plots. We'll share the other one, like so many do."

I exhale. The afternoon has indeed turned golden. Lawns, greened from recent downpours, have accepted a dutifully mown and uniform shaping. We pass their mailbox—I picture Dad waiting inside for us in his recliner, fingering his heart-surgery scar. Before I head home, he'll slowly stand to give me a hug.

After six decades he still basks in Mom's smile, beamed on him when he used to bound up the university library stairs to find her in the stacks, the months they were engaged before she graduated from the school of journalism. Until he bought an old Ford, she rode his bike's handlebars or walked briskly beside him all over Eugene.

I figure he has taken her side regarding their burial arrangements; I imagine him joking they'll love sleeping together till the final trumpet sounds.

Nearing their door, Mom and I pause beside the fence. She bends to inspect a nascent shrub, a lilac start my son brought over, now planted in soft soil.

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I'm caught off guard by the curve of her, the diminishing line. I glance away. Above us, a praying mantis clings to the fence's top board. Faded wings and knob head cast a distinctive shadow. Intent on a last fling in autumn sun, precisely set, it bows and waits. Its shared treasure is unassuming, a beauty not so unlike my mother's smile.