

Evergreen

I'm lost. I've driven from the suburbs of New York City to Sumter, South Carolina, and spent more than an hour criss-crossing the grounds of Evergreen Cemetery, but still cannot find my parents' grave-site. I follow my sister's directions, "off to the left, just inside the iron gates, not far from a tall, stone cross." I find the landmarks but cannot locate the plot. The lilies I carry in the crook of my arm occasionally make me sneeze. I'm allergic to flowers but want to bring my mother a gift. My eyes burn, and my neck aches from craning to decipher the bronze plaques that lie flush with the freshly mowed grass. Every now and then, I bend to see the name nestled beneath a bronze vase filled with fresh flowers. No headstones, mausoleums or markers remind the living that this is a graveyard, not a park, so I'm not surprised by the number of elderly men and women in pastel-colored jogging suits who walk the serene pathways.

Where have my parents gone? Why can't I find them? My father first disappeared from my life before I could remember his face, and there were no pictures of him in the house where we lived. I fanned the embers of the memories my older sisters tried so hard to drown. Sometimes, after bouts of begging, they would paint me a picture of Daddy, using our bodies as reference points: my oldest sister's lips were full, like his; our brother's high forehead was a perfect replica; my piano playing sister's slender fingers rivaled his own. And me? I had inherited his gift of gab. They also said he drank too much, and we were better off without him.

Some summer evenings, I'd catch my school-teacher Mama dreamy-eyed, adrift in a sea of passion that made her fair skin flame. If I asked what she was thinking about, she'd say, "Your daddy. One day, he'll come home for good, and we'll be together."

"I don't blame him for staying away," I said. "Nobody in their right mind wants to stay in a place like Sumter. They treat colored people terrible. We ought to move up north with Aunt Susie."

"Sumter is my home," Mama said. "I was born here and nobody's gonna run me away from my home. Nobody." I really think she stayed so Daddy would always be able to find her, even though, more than once, I'd heard her say, "I should have let that Bea Sanders have him. I might be better off." I always wondered who Bea Sanders was. A rival for my Daddy's affections?

When I was about 15, Mama found a brochure showcasing a newly planned cemetery at the edge of town. "Evergreen Cemetery. Perpetual care available on the installment-plan . . . Special offer, two-plots-for-the-price-of-one."

"I've always wanted a house," she said. "Spent my whole life living on somebody else's real estate." It didn't seem to matter that her house would only be habitable after she died. I wondered whether the second plot was for Daddy. Mama quickly signed on the dotted line and religiously made the monthly payments. Two years later, shortly after paying the final one, an asthma attack took her life.

My three sisters, brother and I first entered Evergreen 21 years ago, to bid farewell to the portal through which we had entered this world. A funeral director ushered us out of a black limousine to stand beside my mother's new home. We each placed a long-stemmed rose on her bronze casket and cried while it was lowered into the ground. Since we didn't know my father's whereabouts, we couldn't tell him Mama was dead. Then, nine months later, on New Year's Day, a phone call brought news of him. Southern tradition has it that if your first caller on New Year's Day is a man, you'll have good luck all

year long. So, even though I considered myself a sophisticated college co-ed, I savored my coming good fortune when a deep male voice said "Hello." His next words dampened that optimism. "May I speak to Larry White, the son of Bill White."

"Who is this?" I asked.

"You won't recognize my name. I need to speak to Bill White's son Larry. Is he there?"

"I'm Bill White's daughter, Sarah. My brother's only thirteen. Why do you want to speak to him?"

"I beg your pardon, Miss. My name's Pete Mosley and I'm sorry to be bringing you bad news. Your daddy, God rest his soul, died yesterday. He had a stroke."

Daddy. Dead? "Where?" I asked.

"Kissimmee, Florida. We was working in the groves at the Donald Duck Orange juice company. He was always talking 'bout his son Larry. We thought he was a grown man."

I dropped onto the cold naugahyde covered chair beside the telephone. My father was dead; yet, I didn't feel anything. How could I? I'd only seen him once in my life – when I was nine.

"Miss, Miss... are you alright?" the voice in the phone said.

"I'm alright," I said. "But maybe you'd better talk to my sister." I stood up and handed the phone to my oldest sister Connie. "It's a man calling to tell us Daddy's dead."

I hovered near as my sister slumped into the same chair I had just warmed. She listened intently for a while, then recorded information on the back page of the phone book. "Thank you for calling," she said. "I'll let you know when someone will be arriving to accompany the body home," then hung up. Connie ignored my suggestion that we leave Daddy in Florida since he had left us alone all those years. "No matter what, he's still our daddy," she said, "and Mama would want us to do what was right." So, we took the train back to Sumter, and the same undertaker who buried our mother brought our father's body home from Florida.

Once again, we sat on the front pew at Mt. Pisgah AME Church, facing a casket. But this time, no tears blurred my vision. Before the service began, we stood around Daddy's casket as the minister gave the final blessing and the attendants prepared to close the coffin. I stared at my daddy's face, longing to touch him. He looked so calm and dignified. His hair was beginning to gray at the temples and his high, strong forehead seemed elegant. But I was afraid to mar the powder that separated us, so I simply tried to memorize his face and wondered whether he went willingly, not caring that he was leaving behind a daughter who wanted to love him.

As he was lowered into the grave beside Mama, my sister said, "At least they're together in death." As if that made everything alright. Was I the only one who recalled evenings on our front porch, when, shielded by darkness, Mama voiced regrets, while I nursed dreams that Daddy would come home, go back to teaching and banish the shame we felt? For years after Daddy's funeral, I stayed away from my birthplace. Afraid of love's power, I never married or had children. Then, in my 40s, I yearned for answers to questions that, until then, my youthful self-centeredness rendered un-askable. Breaking my

self-imposed exile, I returned to Sumter, eager to decipher the whys of my father's absence and pay my respects at my mother's house.

My Daddy's contemporaries were all too willing to talk about their friend. One even called him a martyr, saying that White folks made an example out of him, to make other colored men toe-the-line. They also told me stories about Daddy's singing abilities, about his skill at concocting embalming fluid for the local undertakers. . . and about his inability as the eldest son, to protect his young, widowed mother from the ire of a new husband who squandered the fortune his father had left behind.

"Your daddy was a real gentleman," one of my Mama's old friends said. "A smart, stand-up-for-what's-right kind of man. But if you really want to know about him, you should go talk to Bea Saunders. She was engaged to him before he up and married your Mama."

So Bea Sanders had been my mother's rival. Since Mama was dead, I saw no disrespect in talking to her. "Your Daddy was a soulful man, too big for his time," she whispered to me as we sat on her front porch, just out of ear-shot of her husband. "Jim Crow got the better of Colored men like him. Ran them all away from here, leaving the women behind to raise their children. Your Mama should have gone with him, maybe he'd still be alive today. Seems you've turned out well, though. Guess your mama did a good job raising y'all." She sat back on the porch swing, and I saw in her eyes the same yearning I had seen in my mother's eyes. "You ought to ask your Daddy's people about him. My memories will only sound like sour grapes because I'll love your daddy till the day I die." I couldn't believe what she was saying. More than 50 years after he jilted her, this woman still loved my father.

I'm supposed to meet my father's cousin for dinner, but first I have to find Mama's grave. As I search, I wish for a North Star to guide me, or better yet, to lead me to the story I am really seeking. The sun sinks low and I finally give up my search. I lay the lilies upon a just-filled grave and leave. At the entrance, I look back. Several walkers are deep in conversation around the grave where I left the flowers. When I arrive at the home of my father's elderly cousin Ruby, I recite the details of my search for my parents' grave.

Ruby asks a few questions, then laughs. "Child, you were in the wrong cemetery."

"But the sign said Evergreen," I argue.

"You were at the white folks Evergreen. The colored folks' cemetery is further down the road. It's called Hillside Memorial Park."

"But it looked just like the one where we buried Mama."

"They're identical," she said. "Identical, but separate."

Slowly, I understand the cemetery walkers' inquisitive stares. They'd probably been wondering why a black woman put flowers on a white person's grave. "I guess the poor soul who's grave I put my flowers on is the subject of big speculations tonight," I say to Ruby.

She laughs with me. "No doubt. Folks down south spend a lot of energy speculating on what people are doing now or did in the past. They just can't let go and live their own lives."

Ruby was right. Here I was asking questions about my long dead father's long-ago actions. As if the answers would take away the fear that made me keep life at bay. I had left home but carried with me all the restrictions my mother was forced to endure.

"Just follow your heart," Mama often said. When I chided her for loving a man who repeatedly abandoned her, she said that one day, I would understand the power and strength of love. On this trip, I have finally begun to understand what she meant and can now see my parents' lives through grown-up eyes. Despite their imperfections, they loved me and armed me with the tools I needed for survival. Mama even taught me how to keep house under harsh conditions. My life may be different from her's, but I am still my mother's child, and her lessons are imprinted on my heart. They just need a little adjusting. As I leave Sumter and turn north onto Interstate 95, I realize that I am no longer lost. I know where home is. And how to get there.