

## **Stone City**

by Kymberli Hagelberg

A pack of young cousins crowded into the back of the yellow brick chapel. We were hovering behind the last pew near the stained-glass doors, all of us itching to move on to something more interesting. Indoor services take longer, but I was grateful not to have to stand outside. A cold drizzle that bounced off acres of tombstones beyond the chapel doors would have spotted the suede coat I loved to show off and flattened my carefully blow-dried hair.

That's what I recall about the service for Uncle Bob, my mother's eldest brother: my teenage vanity, the green pears on the buffet table at the wake afterwards, and the bottle of gin a cousin commandeered for us when one of the aunties looked away.

Most of my family end up in the lush sections of Maple Grove, a centuries old graveyard that is among the earliest established public places in the Western Reserve. What remains of us lies along funerary roads landmarked by ponds and weeping angels among housewives, factory workers, a freed slave couple we learned about in Ohio History class, and a Gilded Age songbird.

For me, it's more than the place of history and loss. Family business and family duty run together on these streets. Maple Grove is where I saw my father work, scrubbing granite markers with acid that left his knuckles raw. He checked newly poured concrete slabs to make sure the bubble on his level fell just so while I sat swinging my feet on the flip-down gate of our Rambler station wagon.

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Installing foundations and getting markers set upon them before families bring flowers to the cemetery for Memorial Day is the tombstone business version of the Christmas

Rush. People often begin with flush markers that rest so snugly in the ground you might not see them at all if the grass is high. Sometimes they come with a little hole in the middle for a bouquet. My dad used to sell these to people who didn't have much money, sand blasting off the old names of families who went bigger later on.

People do. They move up from flush to slant to the big, two-part monuments with the granite bases like the one my parents have, one side carved with just the family name. Monuments have to be set on concrete so they don't go crooked with time and weather. The big ones call for substantial planting—sunny marigolds, jewel-toned coleus that spread to fill the empty spaces when blooming perennials are spent and trailing vinca that carry on through first frost.

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As my father worked to prepare graves for grieving families, my mother remembered our dead. Before my fingers were long enough to wrap around a hand trowel, I would plant family graves with my mother, her sisters and my older sister. Sorting through the bedding plants, I heard bawdy jokes and betrayed family secrets. We dug memories back to life and then left them to bloom in the dirt. The reward was a girls' lunch at the end of the afternoon where they sipped Tom Collinses. My mother always gave me a straw half filled with her cocktail and the cherry.

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My father, my mother, her parents, one of her children, a peck of aunts and cousins and three of seven siblings were eventually scattered across the tree-lined streets of the stone city at the edge of my hometown.

Gravesites are anchors in our world of grief, graveside services the buoys of obligation to which pain is tethered until it finally washes out, leaving memories worthy of flowers and stories. That day in the chapel without a grave to harbor our loss cursed me to wander the Maple Grove without resolution for most of my mid-20s.

I had lost Uncle Bob.

He was somewhere in the ragged new section of mostly unmarked plots. I hunted for him in the floodplain where slimy mud splattered my calves and pulled my heels out of threadbare sneakers. I searched through overgrown arborvitae and rhododendron at the fence line.

It seems like it rained every year.

I pictured him hiding and laughing.

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I've missed only a handful of the annual visits in decades. The year after my dad died my mother couldn't face the tombstone she watched him design. Instead we planted green onions and daffodils in a long line next to the walkway on the side of our house. I was nine. When they started to grow, she took me upstairs to show me that she could look down from their bedroom window to see the yellow flowers and green shoots popping up, but she never slept there again.

Numb from the loss of her when I was nineteen, my self-exile lasted a season. My sister went out to plant with my aunts and shamed me.

"They're not getting younger, either," she said. "You'll want this time back."

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The nine years that separated my sister and I made her equally my Hector, my idol, and my obstacle, but we grew into grown women friends during those plantings. Then she, who always had a grand way of driving home a point, died before her fiftieth birthday. I overspend for her—plantain lilies, coral bells and a swanky black mulch border. I scrub her pink granite heart the way I was taught.

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I bought Uncle Bob's marker right before I turned thirty, finally locating his unmarked grave in historical society records. The marker was made by one of my dad's old competitors. A sample model, but no previous owner, just wide enough for his full name

and the dates of his birth and death. I planted blue petunias and silver ragwort at one of the corners a week before Memorial Day, still mindful of the deadline.

My uncle was a neat, small man who wore a bow tie with his striped uniform shirt every day that he pumped gas at the Standard Oil across the street from my house. Uncle Bob appeared for lunch most days that I was in elementary school along with his sister, my Aunt Tootie, who worked as a secretary at an auto parts store uptown. We all ate whatever my mother cooked and drank small glass bottles of fizzing Sprite and Coke he brought from the gas station vending machine.

Robert preferred his full name. Aunt Tootie, maker of his favorite green pears, hated her full name, Ethel Mariah. She was the oldest girl, the one we had to be especially well-behaved around. I remember her giving me sticks of Doublemint gum after lunch, but only if I didn't ask for the treat.

At our table, the three of them seemed like giddy survivors. Six of the seven brothers and sisters were born in a tiny house on Chestnut Street with an outhouse in the back and chickens in the front. My aunt worked full time at a rubber factory and turned over almost every dime to my grandparents. By the time she was a teenager, the money she kept for herself was just enough for a carton of cigarettes and a new tube of lipstick. Chesterfields with bright red rings around the unfiltered ends piled in an ashtray were lifelong proof that Aunt Tootie had been around. When they all still lived together, my grandmother would send Uncle Bob to pick out a chicken and hack off its head for dinner. From the day he was old enough to work outside the house, my mother said he wore a starched collared shirt, no matter the job, never again to be mistaken for someone dressed for chicken killing.

Aunt Tootie planted the graves with my mother for as long as she lived. She's buried at a cemetery across town with her husband—our version of a sacrilege, a place where there are no granite markers. A family story goes she had the plots long before my dad died, but kept quiet about it out of respect for him.

I visit the rest of the family almost every year in order now, working my way back to the main road. Uncle Jimmy, who always told me he had a glass eye (he didn't) and wore a Viva Las Vegas pompadour well into his dotage is closest to the tall trees that mark the north border of the cemetery. Uncle Bob is off to the right, in those new sections that are filling out now.

At the edge of my parents' section is a classmate's tall gray marker the size of early loss. He smiles down from a faded photo embossed on porcelain, ever a handsome sophomore. The mother and father of the second boy I had sex with are buried next to my parents. I sometimes split what's left over to plant in front of each one.

Grandma Ruth is nearly hidden by overgrown lilacs—to find her, you have to count plots over from the corner where the largest weeping angel kneels. Her grave is planted with the deep red geraniums, despite my mother's complaint that they “smell like a dog in the rain.”

My grandfather has a gray unpolished slant two drives down. John Ross was an orphan who danced in long floppy tap shoes on the Loews vaudeville circuit—and was a known laggard once his time in the spotlight was over. Ants marching in and out of the crevices of the carved letters of his name always look to me like the brush and strike of a shuffle step.

More family lore is that my dad offered to move my grandparents together when a double plot was found open near my parents. My mother was emphatic: My grandmother would not want to move.

When I found Uncle Bob, we also gained the location of the grave of my grandfather's—news to us—first wife. Maybe my mother always knew why distance would suit my grandparents.

She often told of the lavender smell of my grandmother's snow-white hair. But I also remember her telling me about the panic that gripped my grandmother when she knew her death was near. "Her arms were around my neck and she kept saying, 'Betty, don't let me die'."

I think I blocked out that story for years until it returned in a nightmare as I cared for my own mother. On her deathbed, Mom was also panicked, but too tired from the eternity of a battle with cancer to scream and clutch my neck. She pretended not to notice the schefflera plant on the back porch with marijuana climbing through it that I clipped into the box brownies I baked for her on Fridays. At the end it was the only thing that gave her an appetite for pizza and movie night with her youngest sister. I'd come home after midnight from running with my friends to hear them laughing.

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Graves multiply. Families grow and wane like flowers and their memories live in stone. Even in the isolation of a global pandemic their voices call to me most clearly in the planting, and there is never enough time.

I last set foot in the yellow brick chapel for my sister.

Months later I planted her grave when the pink granite heart was already in place and the sun was shining. She's near a shade tree and her neighbors' names are all familiar.

I stood a while to mark its spot then walked a dozen yards east to Uncle Bob.



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