Agnes had decided autumn would be a good season to die. Home for fall break in my junior year of college, I had uncovered my eighty-eight year-old neighbor’s wishes accidentally, finding her living will tucked into the local obituary section of the Bergen Record before dinner. Perusing the death notices was a hobby I inherited from my father, a Sunday morning ritual of questions and answers.

“Hey, Andrea,” he’d usually call to my mother from across the kitchen table, “You remember if so-in-so is from Maywood?”

My mother would stop stirring her tea, consider the question, and then ask, “So-in-so from the ICU?” My father would nod. My mother, an elementary school nurse, first worked in the Intensive Care Unit of Hackensack University Medical Center where my father, a doctor, made his rounds. “Yeah, I remember her,” my mother would say. She would then pause and justify her answer.

“She was always late, used to complain about getting stuck behind the train. Why?”

My father would point to the paper. “Says here her husband died Wednesday.”

My mother’s posture would always sink a bit. “Poor thing,” she’d say. Turning to me, my mother would tell me what a sweet little thing she was, that I would love her if I ever met her. I would always half-smile, shrugging a bit. I didn’t know this woman; this was my strange way of showing sympathy.

Now I too made a habit of leafing through the death notices, scanning the columned lines for surnames that sounded vaguely familiar, towns nearby, the names of relatives I once knew or should have known. It was easy to treat this practice more like
logistical fact rather than sentimental revelation; knowing the delay in printing helped, that by the time announcements came out, the dead were already blessed and buried in some cemetery in North Arlington. Finding Agnes’ living will, however, had shocked me. I recognized my mother’s sad handwriting; she had been a witness to the decision, having read, signed, and dated it three weeks prior. I was never good with pre-announcements; I always preferred an afterthought, a neat little case that could no longer be deliberated. One should only wait until the last minute to decide to die, so that no mistakes could be made. I shoved the paper back into the newsprint.

I was too young to remember the first day when Agnes came into our lives – I was barely one when my family moved to River Edge from a cramped apartment complex in Hackensack. From my mother’s stories, however, I was surprised to learn that she was not the same Agnes who showed up at our back door unannounced to deliver the Sunday paper, the Agnes my family had grown to love. In fact, Agnes was quite the opposite back in June of 1987: quiet, reserved, and much more concerned with sifting seed into the bird feeders she hung on the spruce branches in her front yard rather than welcoming us with open arms into suburbia.

My mother was not offended. Having grown up under the care of much older parents, she knew the importance of property lines, of respecting her elders’ privacy. So my mother did what any good neighbor would do: she would visit Agnes, but only when she was in plain sight, only when she was busy tending to her patchwork garden or sweeping her front porch of falling pine needles.

My mother grew to admire Agnes’ knowledge of the world around her, and they soon bonded over talks of bird watching and gardening. After a couple of visits or so, Agnes, concerned with any sort of ulterior motive, was sure to let my mother know of the conditions if they were in fact to be friends.

“I don’t baby-sit,” she told my mother a month after we moved in. My mother and I, still stroller-bound, had just finished our daily walk threw the park, and returned to find my neighbor watering her lawn with a tangled garden hose.

“Don’t worry,” my mother said, unstrapping me from the
stroller and swinging me over her shoulder. “I don’t go out.”

This honesty won my neighbor over, and soon after, we welcomed Agnes into our home, not only as a neighbor, not only as a friend, but as an extension of our own family, the matriarch to which all questions of life were directed.

Now, don’t get me wrong; I have never doubted my neighbor’s capacity to make decisions for herself. Agnes, made a widow at age thirty-two, had plenty of time to ponder life and death from her front porch on Oak Ave, shielded from the public eye by the overgrown spruce that grew in her front yard. Because she thought of such things, she knew them better, and because she knew them better, I thought of such things more and more. I trusted her methods of deliberation, her decision to stop the blood transfusions, to invite leukemia into her home. She, like my mother, had been a nurse, and knew from experience when living became more of a chore than a cause.

Although my mother had been drawn to Agnes for her mysticism and love of nature, my relationship with Agnes, I guess, grew from an affinity for the local paper. I had developed a love for reading from an early age, and my neighbor, an avid reader herself, began dropping off a plastic-wrapped copy of the Bergen Record at our side door every Sunday afternoon, her notes scribbled all over the articles she found particularly worth reading. Agnes would always save the local section for me, especially the articles that spoke of the way Bergen County used to be, the land brimming with giant white cedars. Don’t read this one, she would write of the historical pieces, jokingly. They age me.

Now, leafing through the paper, I felt guilty being out of touch for so long. We had last spoken before I left for school in August. It was October now, and I could no longer find Agnes across the street. She had since been temporarily moved to a nursing home to receive care, collect her blood transfusions.

My mother, who had been busy in the kitchen frying the pirogue on the stovetop, had noticed the apprehension on my face. “What’s wrong?” she asked. She always knew when something was wrong, despite my efforts to hide it from her. My facial expressions always betray me.

“I dunno,” I said, fanning the edges of the Sports Section, “I
just think it’s kind of weird to leave this out where the kids could find it.” By this, I meant Agnes’s will; by kids, I really meant I.

She leaned over the counter, and motioned to the paper. “The sports section? Why? Another bad article?”

I hesitated. “No,” I said, but then changed my mind. I didn’t want to talk about it. Not then, not now. “Yes,” I said. “You know how I feel about the swimming coverage, the lack of it.”

My mother smiled. “You’re too critical,” she said, turning back to the pirogue.

Sometime after dinner, after I had crawled into bed upstairs to contemplate the magnitude of my finding, my mother would call for my brother, sister, and me to come downstairs for a moment – she had something important to tell us. From my bed, I heard my brother Brian leap down the stairs in heavy bounds, followed by the movement of my sister Allison pushing her chair in from the adjacent room, her footsteps approaching the door. I closed my eyes.

“Chris,” I heard my sister’s voice from the doorway ask, quiet. “Mom wants us downstairs.” I lay still, holding my breath. After a few moments, she switched off the light and softly pulled the door shut. From downstairs, I could hear her tell my mother that I was fast asleep. My mother told my sister not to worry, told her she would tell me later.

My mother would never need to explain: I already knew. I could see Agnes now, tucking herself into the unfamiliar bed sheets of a sterile nursing home while her son sifted through her kitchen pantry, taking inventory of the food items she would no longer need. Consumed by darkness, I heaved some strange sighs, tried to imagine what it would be like to be sharing sheets with Death, and wondered how much grief my body could handle on its own.

Although I am uncomfortable admitting it, I find my strange relationship with death to be a bitter inheritance. I was acquainted with death at an early age, probably born with a Polish–Austrian predisposition to always expect death to make its way into my home someway or another. I had sometimes heard whispers of those who passed before us (always followed with a melancholy
“God Bless ‘em!”) at family gatherings, the brief descriptions of my former relatives that sometimes blurred with the still-living in my Polish grandmother’s parlor. I knew, for one, that my mother’s great-grandmother had been shot dead by the Nazis in her Polish home; she had refused them entry, much like my mother now refuses any strangers who smells of danger into her own home. Knew, too, how my father’s great aunt had perished at Auschwitz; how his great uncle, a gifted tailor, had survived a labor camp in Germany on stale bread and sheer luck. I could always see his emaciated figure in my frail Jewish grandfather, could sense his will to live in my father, who always ate as if there would be no food tomorrow.

This is as much as I know; any further inquiry into the lives of the deceased would be diverted or simply ignored. When I slept over my Polish grandmother’s house as a little girl, I used to study the faded sepia portrait of her family that stood on her dresser. Speaking of her tight-lipped mother sitting in the photo, I would ask my grandmother whether she got her eyes from her mother’s side or her father’s side. What I wanted was some picture of what my murdered great-great grandmother looked like, a portrait to commit to memory. Instead, my grandmother would give me a sad smile, or, more often, a love tap on the behind. Later, I would find out that it was not my grandmother’s grandmother who was murdered by the Nazis, by my grandfather’s.

I still wonder why my grandmother never corrected me that day. Whether my family was unwilling or unable to respond to such questions I will never be sure. The lack of details, however, never minimized my emotional response to such deaths. It shook me to think that it could’ve been my own mother they found the next morning, violated and then slumped over a kitchen stool with a Nazi slug in the head, or that it could’ve been my own father’s survival that depended upon countless other souls being thrown into the oven. With such a blood-soaked history, I could understand why they would not want to dwell on the past, to keep silent. For this reason, I chose to respect my family’s wishes, to stop asking questions.

There comes a point, however, in which the punctuated silence no longer suits me. Although my family can seamlessly move from
overwhelming grief to the celebration of life, speaking only of the dead in fragments and never dwelling on their bodies for too long, I have always found such a transition difficult. As much as I try to move on, to appreciate the person that had been, the life that once was, I have realized the necessity to begin understanding death on my own terms, in my own calculated way. As I have struggled to understand death, others have struggled to understand me, to understand my complicated relationship with the passing of life. As much as I try to not to assume the role of mourner, I sometimes find myself working towards it when I write, making me wonder if I fall into some horrible category of using the dead to my advantage.

I was five when my mother took my brother and me to visit her ailing godfather down the shore, an event which would become the first of many “last visits” to our terminally-ill relatives. Looking back, this could seem to be a horrible, frightening practice – especially for a young child – to visit the almost-dead before they became permanently-dead. In actuality, the opposite proves true; Babci, my Polish grandmother, once told me that little ones do not fear the concept of death, as they are only fairly-new to Earth, and still feel God’s overwhelming presence. I was five, but I am not sure if what I was feeling was actually God’s presence. I only remember the pleasure that came with the bright blues and greens that colored my preschool classroom; how I couldn’t understand why James Mani, a boy I knew, wailed on the first day of Kindergarten and buried his face into his mother’s waist, refusing to let go.

The trip from River Edge, New Jersey, down the Parkway towards Toms River would take about an hour and a half, an eternity for any child. My mother knew that my younger brother and I were uncomfortable in the backseat of the cramped Corsica, being motionless for so long. Brian, at age three, was always easily bored and enjoyed punctuating the silence of any ride with bursts of high-pitched cries, wailing that drove my mother crazy. It seemed that my little brother always needed something in his hands, something to keep him busy. Brian soon found my wiry brown pigtails a worthy distraction, ripping fist after fist of my hair with hiccups of laughter. In the Corsica, I would learn my first lesson of
coping with pain and suffering: the art of distraction. I would never resort to shrieking or bawling, the hysterics my mother despised. Instead, I would just bite my lip, divert my attention to the blurred trees outside my window, and wait for the moment to pass. To this day, I still force myself to look away, to postpone my tears until I am alone, without an audience.

After being backed up on the Parkway for some time, we eventually arrived and parked in front of my mother’s godfather’s home. It was late September when we went to visit; the air, warm and cool at same time, was the kind of transitional stickiness that I could never shake, whether or not I had a coat on. Getting out of the car, I noticed that the sky had turned a threatening beige, the kind of sepia color that I now associate with the portraits of my grandparents framed on my mother’s mantle. My mother, after swinging my brother onto her hip and manually locking the car door, took me by the hand to the front stoop, where she knocked, stood outside, and waited.

Strangely enough, I do not remember much of what Uncle Charley’s house looked from the outside. I can assume it was white, probably a one-story cape like many homes down the Jersey Shore. What I do remember is walking into the family room, painted beige like the outside sky, the room lit just enough to warp my mother’s shadows on the wall. A woman shorter than my mother, whom I assumed to be Charley’s wife but whose name I can’t remember, had welcomed my mother in with a kiss on the cheek, and then greeted my brother and me with a pat on the head.

“Look at that hair,” the woman said to my mother, combing her fingers through my bangs, “although I am not so sure about this cut, Andrea.”

Only then did my mother realize the clump of hair missing from the left side of my scalp, and immediately suspected my brother, checking his little hands for remaining strands. “I’ve been trying to break Brian out of this habit of pulling Christine’s hair,” she said, checking his fingernails, “to no avail.”

“Boys will always be pips,” the woman said, which probably merited some comparison to my mother’s troublesome cousin Robbie, a reference which still brings both warmth and grief to my mother’s face. Robbie had recently lost his oldest son Jason,
only ten years-old, to a malignant brain tumor. My mother held my brother closer.

There had been a strange hum in the room, which I had thought to be the air conditioner coughing up fits of cool air. It was only when my eyes had adjusted to the dim light that I realized that the hum was in fact breathing, and that the woman was not the only stranger in the room. In the far back corner sat a decrepit man wrapped in blankets and slumped over his Lazy-Boy recliner, the drool collecting on his shoulder.

My mother, after a few moments of exchanging words with her aunt, took us over to the sleeping man, and put her hand on his shoulder. The man coughed up a bit of spit, opened his eyes, and then faintly smiled at us.

“Uncle Charley, do you remember who I am?” my mother asked the man, as if she always played this guessing game.

I found this a silly question – how could an uncle forget his goddaughter? – but I kept quiet and watched. This was not a time for protest. Uncle Charley lifted his head a bit and squinted his eyes, straining to see something that I guess he didn’t recognize in my mother. After a while, he gave up, dropping his head back onto the pillow.

“Who?” his weak voice muttered, barely moving his lips.

“I’m Waller’s daughter, Uncle Charley,” my mother said, rubbing his shoulder. Waller was my Polish grandfather’s nickname, my mother’s father. She kneeled down to get on his level. “I’m Andrea, Waller’s daughter.”

The woman chimed in, “Your goddaughter, Charley. You know her!” I couldn’t tell if she was upset or angry.

After a few minutes, Uncle Charley had a moment of what I thought was lucidity, saying my mother’s name once, then twice, then three times, then more. Andrea, Andrea, Andrea, Andrea.

I became frightened of the sounds coming out of this man’s mouth, and dug my head into my mother’s waist. I did not want to see, did not want to hear any more. Eventually, Uncle Charley’s voice faded into silence, and I felt my mother shift towards the chair, although I still refused to let go. I heard her kiss his forehead, tell her godfather that she loved him and would see him again very soon. She then mentioned to the woman that he was probably
dehydrated, and to ask the visiting nurse for an IV when she came.

After a while, I gathered enough courage to lift my head. Uncle Charley’s eyes were closed and he was silent now. His lips, however, had not changed; they were still moving, mouthing the syllables of my mother’s name.

Although I did not understand what death was then, my mind would substitute this image of the slouching Uncle Charley for the word itself, and, with the chant, made some strange association that my mother brought out the best in death. I cannot explain it, but each visit to a sickly distant relative to whom my mother was close but whom I hardly knew would always echo the same harrowing chant as poor dead Uncle Charley — Andrea, Andrea, Andrea — as if filling the room with her name had some cathartic purpose to it, did some good in this world.

Sometime later, in my early teens, I would find my neighbor Agnes this way, sleeping on her porch, her skin clammy-looking, her head slumped over the back of the chair. Such a familiar yet buried image of any body in this position had a profound effect on me; my stomach dropped, triggering an overwhelming sense of panic I could not put a name to then. For some strange reason, all I could think about was my mother — my poor mother! — having to learn from me, of all people, that I had found my neighbor dead in this way, surrounded by a puddle of drool. I ran up to Agnes, but hesitated at first to touch her. Just before I would muster enough courage to shake the living daylights back into her, Agnes opened her eyes, looked at me, and smiled.

“I knew you were coming,” Agnes said, content with herself. She had pulled one on me, and for the first time in my life, I didn’t mind being fooled.

I let out a sigh of relief.

“Not funny,” I said, “not funny at all. You know how I hate to be startled.”

She reached down to pick up the paper that lay beside her feet, then re-adjusted herself in her seat.

“You worry too much,” Agnes said, adding as she flipped to the Local Section, “you’re just like your mother.”
I was fifteen when my grandmother, having been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, moved into our home to live out her final weeks. A few hours before Babci would arrive on our doorstep, my mother busied herself with repainting the downstairs bathroom. It was not odd to find my mother doing touchups around the house before company arrived. She hit the high-traffic areas: the light switch plate near the kitchen door, the wall opposite the banister on the stairs, the corner near the fireplace where Casey, our Shetland Sheepdog, liked to lie against the family room. The smudges of dirt that I had thought to be signs of life were seen by my mother to be signs of demise, something to be quickly blanketed by broad brushstrokes. There has always been this running joke in the Polish community about how Polish women are constantly washing their windows for the company that will never come. The same held true for my own household, where I found my mother constantly mopping and vacuuming and dusting for the same friends, the same relatives who would never come when she was best prepared for their company. Of course, I told my mother that the people who loved us and mattered most in our lives would still come, whether or not the house was clean. When Dziadzi – my Polish grandfather – was well, both my grandparents would drop by the house to visit unannounced. My brother, sister, and I would always get excited when we saw Dziadzi’s bright blue eyes peering through our window over a bag of fresh rolls from the Lyndhurst bakery, the short curls of Babci’s brown hair being brushed up and back by the Estée Lauder travel brush she always kept in her purse. As much as my mother enjoyed their visits – she loved her parents, and was just as guilty in dropping in unannounced as they were – she hated the fact the our house was always in shambles, no matter how hard she tried.

One source of my mother’s own frustration had to have been her upbringing in my grandmother’s home in Rutherford, New Jersey. Rutherford, when she was little, was a tight-knit Polish-Italian ethnic community which prided itself in being impeccably clean and well-kept, a fact that would prove a source of aggravation for my mother as she struggled to maintain her own household. She usually blamed the shoddy condition of the house (and, consequently, the lack of social functions held within its walls)
on my father, an Irish-Austrian mix who grew up too busy to realize that home improvements do not just happen on their own. I, on the other hand, had found the constant disheveled state of our home to be indicative of what was to come. Death, in Polish tradition, is the kind of dirt that never comes clean.

Despite her predisposition for crisp paint jobs and cleanliness in general, it was strange to see my mother take on an entire room just hours before my grandmother was to arrive. I found her balanced on the toilet seat, clenching the handle of her paintbrush between her teeth as she began taping the corners where the room’s ceiling met the wall. I peaked my head into the room.

“Do you need any help, Mum?”

“Nah,” she said, as she smoothed the tape and took the brush out of her mouth. “You’ve already helped plenty.” This, of course, was a reference to the week prior, in which I flung my mother’s bottle of Clinique liquid foundation off the sink in a moment of haste, splattering it onto the walls. I was only fifteen, and still growing into my awkward frame. Despite my tendency to make messes, my mother’s comment was in fact genuine; I had spent nearly two hours wiping the walls with 409 and scrubbing the crusts of dried foundation in the grout with an old toothbrush. I was my father’s daughter, genetically predisposed to making messes, and I felt guilty for it.

My mother must have sensed my embarrassment, and soon offered me some sort of penance. “You can go through the cabinet, get rid of the stuff we don’t need. That would be a huge help.”

I nodded, and began rummaging through the medicine cabinet, checking expiration dates on prescription bottles. I appreciated a good cleansing, but at the same time, it seemed rather strange to be so meticulous about something my grandmother probably wouldn’t care much about, anyway. As my mother cracked open the can of paint, a salmon color, I asked her why we were focusing on this little room. My mother paused for a moment, then dipped her brush. “To give her a place that is her own.”

My mother was convinced that Babci would move in with us after Dziadzi died. I think my grandfather planned on it, too, as if he had some insight into how life would unfold after his own death. I remember my mother once telling me a story about Dziadzi’s
first visit to our house in River Edge after the major renovation. Our home had originally been a shallow two-story Cape with four partitioned rooms and a kitchen on the first floor. My parents had decided to take down the wall separating the dining room and the playroom in efforts to make one long open space, I guess to mimic the Federal Home appeal they wanted. After its demolition, Dziadzi came by to check out what had been done to the house. He was a quiet, yet stoic man who never felt inclined to say much. But there was something in my grandfather’s face after seeing the demolished wall that shook my mother. For some reason, she saw his concern over the newly enlarged dining room to be some sort of psychic weight, to be a question of future care. My mother immediately regretted destroying the room that could have – should have – been my grandmother’s.

Now, Dziadzi had been dead for three years, the house in Rutherford since cleared out and sold, and my grandmother shipped to Bald Eagle Commons, an “active adult” community just down the road from my Aunt Gigi’s house in West Milford and forty-five minutes away from our house. Gigi, my mother’s oldest and only sister, would be dropping off Babci onto our doorstep at any moment, and my mother still did not feel ready. While my mother finished up in the bathroom, I joined my father, brother, and sister in the empty space of our dining room, trying to figure out how to best reconstruct this makeshift living quarter.

Although my mother had thought it best for Babci to sleep in her own bed in our house, she could not bring herself to drive up to West Milford and bring back Babci’s bed frame. The finality of breaking apart the bed and stripping the mattress, I think, would’ve emphasized my grandmother’s mortality, a realization I don’t think my Babci could’ve handled at the time. It was hard enough to convince her to move in with us “temporarily;” illustrating that she would no longer need a bed in her own home because she wouldn’t live to see it again would only fracture her spirit, the only thing Babci had left living in her. Instead, I was sent downstairs to retrieve the extra bed frame we kept in our basement; my brother Brian, now twelve, offered his full size mattress without any hesitation. At the time, I wondered if Brian knew the ghostly implications of surrendering his own bed to a dying woman. Although I claimed
to not believe in ghosts, and had offered to share my sister’s and my room with my grandmother, joking – perhaps inappropriately – that Babci, Allison, and I would have the best sleepover ever, I was relieved to discover that my grandmother was too weak to climb stairs any more. I still have a hard enough time sitting in our dining room now, knowing that my grandmother had struggled for breath and died only a few feet from where I eat. If my grandmother had chosen to die on my own mattress, I know I would never be able to sleep again without imagining her death, without feeling her cold, sad body against my own.

Although I often try to convince myself that this tendency to imagine death is a recently-acquired hobby, the truth is that visions of death have preoccupied my thoughts for most of my life. As I remember, I first had such thoughts as a quiet first grader at St. Peter Academy, a dingy red-bricked Catholic school on the main stretch of road in River Edge. Although I was somewhat aware of something called death in Kindergarten – the sights and sounds of my dead Uncle Charley still frequented my dreams – it was not until the first grade that I realized that death was a permanent absence, a body that I knew should’ve been there, but no longer was. Mrs. Lane’s first grade classroom triggered many of my earliest real visions of death, mainly due to the location of the room in relation to the rest of the school. While the preschool and kindergarten rooms rested on the south side, with windows facing the parking lot of the senior citizen’s residence next door, the first grade room was located across the hall on the north side of the school, its windows facing the giant oaks and white ranches that lined Fifth Avenue. I had a seat next to the window, and found myself enjoying the art of people-watching, imagining myself to be the noisy parishioners just let out of church next door, or as the stray cat pawing at the dandelions that grew in the grassy nook of the Blessed Virgin Mary statue. I appreciated the art of simple changes, the people that came and went, but appreciated too the stability of the setting, that the houses, the trees that would always be there.

There was one morning, however, when the view outside looked incredibly different to me, and yet I could not figure out
what had changed. I studied the landscape intently for two days, trying to compare the outdoor scene committed to my own memory to the one that now faced me. Then, revelation struck; one of the thickest oaks on the corner had somehow gained a charred color of wood, and the tree trunk in turn had become frayed and splintered. From my window, I watched people I had never seen before come visit the tree, placing flowers and paper crosses at the base. Although I did not speak much at that point in my life, my mother must have sensed my concern when she came to pick me up later that afternoon; she had caught me staring and looking back at the tree after crossing three blocks down Fifth Avenue to get to our car.

“The poor kid,” my mother said, heaving a deep sigh. I must have given her a confused look; I had not seen any kids there. “Here, Christine,” she said, extending her hand to mine, “let’s go pay our respects.” I took her hand. I always did what I was told.

The area around the tree smelt strange to me, a cross between the logs my father threw into the fire during Christmastime and the smell of the car after my mother ran a few errands. The closer we got to the block where the tree was, the more overwhelming the scent would become. I would later learn the name of this scent — gasoline — from my Dziadzi, who manually filled his Honda Civic with gas he kept in the garage. When we finally reached the lawn where the tree lay, my mother stopped on the sidewalk, gripping my hand a little stronger than usual. I tried to get a little closer, to try to sound out the words written on the crosses and cards, but my mother stood firm, and I gave up.

We stood there in silence for a while, just enough to watch the crowds of people change shifts at their vigil. I am not sure whether my mother stood silent to allow me to watch what was going on there, or whether she could not find the right language to describe what had happened. After seeing a man who looked my father’s age light a votive candle, my mother spoke.

“Christine,” she said, still looking at the tree, “God has a reason for everything that happens here on earth, and for some reason,” she paused, her voice cracking a bit, “God let this poor boy crash into a tree.” She then knelt down on one knee, and cupped my face into her hands, away from the scene. “I want you to know,”
she said, looking into my eyes, “that this boy no longer feels pain, and is living in Heaven with God. Do you understand?”

Lying, I nodded my head. Like our visit to Uncle Charley, I didn’t really understand what my mother meant at that moment, but gained perspective the next day in school, witnessing the window landscape shift once again. From my desk, I had watched a long black car slowly come to a stop, and saw six stone-faced men reach into the trunk, pulling some heavy body from its space. Nearby, a woman in black, who looked much like my mother except more haggard around the eyes, let out a gasping cry that shook me. Although my teacher Mrs. Lane had pulled down the window shades at that moment, I did not need a view to understand why the sobs were so loud and barely discernable from my own.

That night, I started having reoccurring dreams about the funeral processions that stopped in front of our school, nightmares that still plague me to this day. Over time, my mother’s dead body phased itself into the nightmare, instigating anxiety that would follow me to school. I would become so panicked by thoughts of my mother’s death that I would burst into tears in the middle of a phonics lesson, or have my sobs interrupt the Glory Be during morning prayers. I heard it took Mrs. Lane a good month and a few phone calls home to learn how to calm me down, to reassure me that my mother was not dead outside of our classroom window, but was in fact still alive, boiling cabbage for a golabki, or stuffed cabbage, dinner that night.

Although I thought my fears founded and my grief genuine, my classmates could not help thinking something was wrong with me. By the third grade, I had developed the dreaded reputation for being a “cry baby,” and by grade six, my classmates’ patience had worn thin. After beginning to silently weep for Alex Kemp, a friend of mine, after learning her father had died of a heart attack the day before, I remember the girl next to me poking my arm with the sharp end of her pencil, hissing at me to stop my crying, that I barely knew the guy. I, in response, bit my lip, and stifled my own grief.

After my father fit the mattress into the frame, and Allison and I
tucked the freshly-laundered sheets and made the bed, my father and my brother worked on angling an extra set of drawers to block the bed from the window view, to give the “room” a sense of privacy. Wiping the sweat from our brows, we all stood, taking in what we had just done.

After a few moments of silence, my father spoke. “This looks good,” he said, smoothing the wrinkles out of the comforter. “She’ll be comfortable here.”

“Yeah,” my brother said, “this would actually make a pretty sweet room.”

“Be sure to tell Babci that,” my father said. I guess he was thinking what I had been thinking: how could we convince anyone that this was a permanent living quarter? We should’ve just brought her own bed; the same harm has already been done.

My mother, who had stopped by the dining room to take her first break since she started perfecting the house the night before, took one look around, and in a last effort to be strong for the family, tried to choke her grief. I did not realize she was weeping until I heard the first sharp intake of breath, the kind of breath, after hearing, you can feel in your own chest. Brian was the first to wrap his arms around her shoulders – he had grown – and eventually, all four of us had my mother in an embrace, for that moment allowing ourselves to share in that grief. Realizing that I was the only one not crying, but knowing I was on the verge of tears, I swallowed hard, and made up some excuse to get out of the situation. Although everyone was crying, I felt uncomfortable unleashing my emotions like that; I still had a reputation for being ultra-sensitive, and felt my own crying had lost its meaning years ago.

I bounded upstairs, inhaling for five, exhaling for five to normalize my breathing. I walked into the first room that was opened – my brother’s – with my hands on top of my head, thinking of nothing but stabilizing my respiration. Brian’s room seemed a lot larger now without his bed; brighter, too, as the shades were drawn open to let sunlight into the space. Trying to redirect my attention to thoughts of the living, I unlatched the window and threw it open, introducing crisp autumn air into the room.

Outside, my aunt was leaning against her car, arms crossed, as
my jaundiced grandmother pulled herself out of the back seat in a slow, calculated motion. Across the street, I noticed Agnes bent down to retrieve the paper. She glanced at my aunt’s car, but chose not to call attention to herself. She knew better than to remind my grandmother that, despite being the same age, Agnes was still in good health. Instead, she looked up, and I could’ve sworn that we made eye contact before she turned and disappeared back behind her spruce, and then she was gone.

I’ve committed this literary scene to memory: the Parson, of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, describing in detail the black-robed, wailing mourners who infiltrated village funeral processions, chanting *placebo Domino in regione vivorum. I will please the Lord in the Land of the Living*. We, as readers, soon realize that these grieving citizens are not actually a part of the procession, but are rather frauds, trying to come off as members of the grieving party. As all those who attended the funeral mass and procession would be invited to the repast dinner, provided and paid for by the members of the deceased, it would seem only natural to take part in the festivities only to enjoy the best food and wine that came with it.

At first, I got a kick out of envisioning these crowds of professional mourners plaguing the streets, especially if they were as fun as the chanting monks from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Even if they were all liars, I could not convince myself that their intentions were all that bad. In fact, it would seem that only the best of intentions would pass them off as authentic, allow them to seamlessly blend into the crowd of mourners. I’ve always felt that the most successful actors have to have a natural sense of empathy, anyway, in order to relate to the characters they portray as realistically as possible. These placebo singers, these fakes would have to do their homework, would have to actually care for death and understand what it stood for, regardless of who had died, in order to be believed. I once thought that professional mourners, in some strange sense, actually helped with the grieving process. Grieving, after all, is about filling the voids left after a loved one’s death; what better way to fill it than with people?

I wonder if Chaucer just considered professional mourning a fad of the times, to be challenged by church reform, stronger virtues,
and eventually rubbed out of existence. Although it is rare now to find black-garbed actors blubbing ancient lines of Latin as they trailed funeral processions on Route 17, traces can still be found today in modern mourning practices. My ailing grandmother, for one, had only been with us a week when the floods of phone calls began, introducing themselves as family members who knew me but whom I did not remember, asking how Babci was feeling. At first, I found the calls nice, considered them kind gestures. My parents, being more aware of this systematic method of mourning than I was, recognized the ulterior motives of such calls, and quickly put coping mechanisms into place.

One weekend, as my grandmother dozed off in the other room, my father devised a screening system for the entire family to separate the “meaningful” calls from the not-so-meaningful. We had been told not to answer the phone, not to talk to anyone, not to divulge any details surrounding Babci’s illness without my family’s consent.

“Just let the machine pick it up,” my father said as he lowered the volume of the speaker, making the feminine computerized voice barely audible. “This way,” he added, deleting the messages we had received the previous day, “we can call them back when we actually have the time.”

*Or ignore them until they stopped calling*, I thought. *Same thing.*

Of course, I had found this practice questionable at first. I was infuriated when I got in trouble for telling a family friend from swimming that my mother hadn’t been able to make my meets lately because my grandmother wasn’t doing too well. Of course, this information quickly got back to my mother, and the fact that she found this woman utterly nosy and annoying did not help the situation.

“Why should I be punished,” I remember telling my mother, “for telling the truth?” If someone was to ask me how I was doing, I reasoned with her, was I supposed to lie? Was I supposed to remain tight-lipped about my own worries and anxieties as my grandmother grew more jaundiced, wasting away in her little makeshift bedroom? My mother, frustrated, just looked at me. She was tired, and I immediately felt guilty for lashing out against her. Only after the phone calls became more and more frequent
did I realize the importance of such secrecy. We were defending ourselves from the placebos, those professional mourners out to profit off of our grief.

My grandmother had grown more anxious as the calls accumulated. Even though we had muted the answering machine, she was lucid and well-aware of whom the calls were about. She couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable; she knew what they were doing, as she too had once made these calls. They were looking to set up a time and place to have a last visit, to witness the deterioration of her own body, her eventual demise.

“I don’t want them coming to look at me,” Babci told my mother one night at the kitchen table. We had been eating my mother’s spaghetti and meatballs when my Aunt Gigi called my mother’s cell phone, and told my mother that she would be making the trip down to visit with my cousins Jackie and Caitlin the next day. Why Aunt Gigi made visiting sound so arduous, I do not know. They only lived thirty-five minutes away from our home.

“It’s just Gigi,” my mother said, twirling the lines of pasta on her plate, barely looking up. “She’s coming tomorrow. She’s bringing the girls.” I saw my sister tense her shoulders for only a moment, and then relaxed. There had been a time when we would be thrilled of news of a visit from our cousins. Now, we dreaded it. They were the placebos we could never stop from coming.

My grandmother could not help getting upset, covering her face with her hands. “What’s going to happen to me?”

My mother rubbed the small of her back. “I’m going to take care of you.” She looked at all of us. “We’re all going to take care of you.”

It is November of my junior year, and my struggles with preparing a poem for workshop the next day are interrupted by a call from my mother. My mother never calls me during the week unless something tragic has happened. I pick up the phone. I already know the message.

“How are you?” I hear my mother’s voice on the other end of the line, sounding more tired than usual.

I get to the point. “How’s Agnes?” I already know the answer.
“Agnes passed away yesterday afternoon.” No response from me. Quickly realizing her mistake, she rationalizes why she waited so long to call me. “I didn’t want to get you upset,” she tells me, as if delaying the news of death curtails the grieving process. Silence. After a moment, she asks, “Are you okay?”

I tell myself that I am in control of my emotions. I tell myself I will not cry in front of my mother, not again.

“It was all her decision,” I say in a dry voice. I am convincing myself that this is what I actually believe.

My mother sounds sad, but is calm on the phone. “It’s still hard to deal with, sweetheart.” Pause. “I know how upset you are.” Pause. “You want to talk about it?”

“No,” I said. I recollect myself. “When’s her funeral?”

My mother is silent. I assume the call dropped.

“Mom, are you still—”

“I’m here,” she says. “I was with her when she died.” Her voice is breaking now. “She told me she was ready to go, but that we… we made her life worthwhile.” I can hear her weeping, “She told me she was going to miss our family most.”

That was the kicker. I didn’t know what to do with myself. I covered the speaker of my phone and let out a huge sob, just enough to release some of the building tension, but not enough to be considered an outburst of emotion. This was a sick and twisted practice of mine, my inability to share my emotions with my own mother.

Now my mother is wondering if I’m still there. I give her a yeah and ask again when Agnes’ wake and funeral will be; I’ll need to make arrangements with my professors to get extensions on my papers.

My mother tells me that Agnes did not want me to come. Agnes knew how upset funerals got me.

I tell my mother I have to go. I keep my phone off for the rest of the week. I don’t feel like talking.

Being my father’s daughter, it seemed only natural to undergo training to become a certified lifeguard at my town pool. I had aspirations to study medicine back then, unrealistic dreams of joining my father’s internal medicine practice in Teaneck, and so I
looked for any opportunity to set me in the right track. From the stories he told of his youth, I knew that his love for emergency care had manifested from his experience as a lifeguard and water-safety instructor at a boy scout camp outside of Holdenville, Oklahoma. From there, he joined the Red Cross Disaster Team, and was flown anywhere between Ohio and Texas to set up disaster relief tents and provide care to victims of tornadoes that ripped through their towns. Oklahoma had inspired him to become a doctor, to take care of people. I, too, wanted this inspiration, so desperately wanted to share this love of emergency care with my father. What he was doing with his life seemed right to me. I wanted to follow in that trajectory.

Since I had no way of getting out to Oklahoma, I decided to take on step two on the path leading to the Hippocratic Oath: lifeguarding at the local pool. It was a strange coincidence, really, how well I got along with the water. My father, a strong but clumsy athlete in his day, can still hold a steady freestyle stroke despite the aches and pains in his knees. My mother, who as a young girl nearly drowned after falling into a lake, insisted that all of her children take swim lessons at the Ridgewood YMCA so we would never share her fear of the water. My brother and I had both grown to become especially strong swimmers; as a sophomore, I had qualified for Nationals in the 100 and 200 Breaststroke, much to the surprise of my mother’s friends, who were sure that I would’ve inherited her anxiety about the water. I thought lifeguarding to be a natural extension of my passion for the water; if I could swim six days a week, over six miles a day with additional hours of dryland and weight conditioning sessions scattered throughout the week, I certainly thought I could handle the stress and pressure of life saving and revival. At fifteen, I knew I was strong enough to drag an active drowning victim to the gutter, and knew I had the aerobic capacity to complete CPR on a cardiac arrest victim, no matter how long it took.

I had been taking the Red Cross training course at the YMCA for three weeks when I heard a great thump one morning, followed by a muffled cry for help. I was always alone on Monday mornings; my father usually left early to make rounds at the hospital, and my mother would run quick errands after dropping my brother and
sister off for school. As I had study hall first period on Monday mornings, I was allowed to stay home until second period, granting me time to catch up on sleep or homework from the night before. This particular morning, I had been struggling to balance chemical equations from a chemistry lab – something I would have to master if I intended on going to medical school one day – when I heard the thump. Having only one other person in the house beside myself, I immediately suspected my grandmother, who I found near her bed, face-down on the hardwood floor. Apparently, Babci, the autonomous and strong woman that she was, had tried to get out of bed by herself to use the bathroom, but had tired and lost the will to maintain her balance.

I surveyed the scene, and saw the rise and fall of her chest. She was alive; this was a good thing. I placed my hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?” I asked her, concerned.

“Don’t bother,” she said, the clarity of her voice muffled by the hardwood floor she spoke into, “I ain’t worth a dime no more.”

I laughed. It wasn’t the first time I had heard her describe herself in that way. “Babci, you know you’re worth more. The American dollar is falling, you know. You’re worth more here than you’re worth in Poland.”

For the first time in a long while, I heard my grandmother laugh. I was lucky we both shared my mother’s warped sense of humor. “Here,” I said, extending my hand to her, “as comfortable as this floor is, Mom probably shouldn’t find you having too much fun in this house.”

From there, I went through risk-assessment protocol. I asked my grandmother if she had any pain, if she couldn’t move a part of her body. No and No. Sure that she didn’t have a spinal cord injury, I pulled one hand to her stomach, the other hand straight above her head, and then slowly rolled her onto her side, bending and bringing her outer knee for her to lean on for support. From there, I got behind her, and – rolling Babci onto her back – braced my arms underneath her armpits in a lifesaving position and pulled. At that moment, I wished I had the water’s buoyancy on my side. Babci was frail, yes, but my perception of weight had been warped by lifesaving simulations which involved dragging my three-hundred-pound lifesaving instructor to safety. My grandmother
had a weight to her, and I felt her get heavier and heavier as I struggled to lift her.

It took a few tries to get her completely onto the bed. Babci, all the while, was rooting for my own failure. “Just let me go,” she said, “I’m not worth the fuss.” Of course, I would tell her that she was worth the fuss, and absolutely meant it, only fueling my drive to get her back onto the bed. After one final squat, I leaned back onto her mattress, and my grandmother followed, falling on top of my own body.

“You okay?” I asked my grandmother through the curls of her hair, out of breath.

“I think I can take it from here,” she said. Oddly, we both laughed.

After helping my grandmother settle upright in her bed, I waited for my mother to return and help my grandmother use the bathroom before telling her what had happened. I had grossly understated the events of my grandmother’s fall – for both my mother and grandmother’s sake, or perhaps maybe my own – although I think my mother would’ve been just as concerned if her mother had gotten a splinter. Returning to my chemistry lab, I found no force driving me to complete these equations; they didn’t seem to matter much now. Instead, I turned to the next page of my lab book and began scrawling what I had failed to tell my mother – the complicated feelings of grief for my grandmother’s vision of what she once was, that autonomous self.

Despite having trouble swallowing one July morning, I had forced myself to go to work at the River Edge Swim Club, a decision I grew to instantly regret. Despite popping a few painkillers with a swig of water right before I went on duty, I only grew sicker as the July heat thickened. Fortunately, I had lucked out with the lifeguarding schedule that summer; as a college junior with five years of lifeguarding seniority, I would never have to hit (slang for relieve) a high-volume chair during the peak hours between noon and two. Since I had such a long lull in the schedule, I decided to hide out in the guardhouse, where I would not be bothered to fish out hairballs from the kiddie pool, and would be justified just this once to milk my seniority on the staff; after all, there were plenty
of younger guards to suck up to my manager now. Once settled into a lounge chair, I tucked myself into my towel, the murmur of the guard’s conversation around me luring me to a hazy sleep.

The quick blasts of the air horn, the warning that a save was in progress, did not wake me; rather, it was the shuffling of lounge chairs and the futile attempts to bust open the garage door from inside the guardhouse that shook me from a fever-induced sleep. Unable to prop open the rusted garage door, all eight of us guards pushed through the tiny side door, rushing out as if some dam’s floodgates had been opened, hurdling over chairs and patrons that stood in our way. While many of the guards had begun chucking chairs away from the back gate, where the ambulance would have access to the pool deck, I had run with my brother and two other guards to the corner of the pool, from where the air horn was blown. There, we saw Joe, the six-foot-five guard only a year ahead of me in school, bobbing up and down in the five feet, grasping Avery underneath his armpits with his rescue buoy.

At that moment, it would have been easy to think that Joe had made a mistake. Avery, after all, was a legend at our pool, a brass, seventy-something year-old who was always in the water by eleven A.M. sharp to swim his laps. He wore his sunscreen like war paint, dabbing lines underneath the circles of his eyes, and swam like a warrior, chopping the water and any recreational swimmer who swam in his way. To the untrained eye, Avery’s form in the water could easily be mistaken for convulsions; he always had this defining stroke, alternating a straight arm with an awkward jerk of the head for breath, thrashing his face into the surface of the water. Although he was not overweight, he did have a certain force to him, a force I was used to after crashing into him swimming laps. We both tended not to look where we were going.

The whole scene mimicked a crash with Avery, too, except this time Joe was the one screaming for help; Avery was too heavy. Without any hesitation, Connor, the blonde-haired guard next to me, dove into the water to help Joe out. Knowing we were going to have to perform CPR, I ran to get one of the first-aid kits from the now-vacant lifeguard chair and assembled the face mask, my brother working right beside me, fumbling to put on his rubber gloves.
By then, Joe and Connor had dragged Avery to the gutter, and had managed to pull him onto the deck. Sprawled out on the concrete, Avery had turned blue, and some whitish, viscous liquid was bubbling out of his mouth. He had either stroked out or asphyxiated a large amount of water.

“Roll him on his side!” I heard someone scream, and so we rolled Avery over, the strange liquid now leaking onto the concrete. For some odd reason, I immediately thought this liquid to be his soul, an association that may seem crazy now but made perfect sense to me at the time. Realizing that his airway needed to be cleared, I used my gloved finger to scoop out as much of the liquid from his mouth in a sweeping, but gentle motion, praying that I would not break his soul in the process. Although I would find out later that night that I had a one-hundred-and-four degree fever due to strep throat, I am still convinced that what I saw that day was not a hallucination, but the remnants of his being, the leaking of some sign of life onto the pool deck.

Mrs. Daly, the mother of two four year-old twins that I had taught swim lessons to last session, had since joined us on the pool deck. Identifying herself as a registered nurse, she and Joe began CPR: Joe giving thirty compressions, Mrs. Daly, two breaths.

At this point, I just stood back and watched. Although I had been in this situation before, in the active role of saving, I had never seen real CPR being performed from such a distance, had never been able to solely focus on the victim’s face rather than on the number of compressions or breaths I completed. Avery’s blue goggles were still on; the July heat coupled with his cold face had created condensation on the lenses.

Unable to stare death in the eyes anymore, I cried out in desperation, “How can I help?”

Mrs. Daly, her back turned to me, said, “Find my sons. Keep them away from here.”

I found it a strange request – what was there to hide? – but I sprinted to the upper deck anyway, parting the crowds of people in search of her two sandy-haired boys. I soon found them huddled outside of the girl’s bathroom, their faces blotchy from bawling for their mother. Somehow, I picked them both up and flung each of them over one of my shoulders and ran them to the picnic area,
where they would not be able to see Avery.

Placing them down on a picnic bench, I lied, telling them that everything was going to be alright. I was the anti-placebo, the one that hid from death when it came. Zach, the one with freckles, cried for his mother.

At this point, I realized that they had no clue as to what was going on with Avery; the boys were only concerned for the well-being of their mother, had realized her absence. I wondered whether they had any concept of death like I did at their age, but soon realized I was different, that my upbringing was strange and different. And, for the first time, I don’t think it made me any better equipped to deal with it, death.

Mrs. Edelstein, another patron of the pool, said she knew the boys, and would take care of them for now. Relieved to see a familiar face, they both ran into her arms, bawling into her bosom.

Avery would eventually be revived that day. Joe would be praised as a hero, and would enjoy telling his lifesaving story to all those who asked, using great hand gestures. My brother, too, had even told the neighborhood how there had been a save, and how he had done his part to save Avery, the man who almost died at the pool that afternoon. Throughout the week, I would be asked by friends and strangers alike if I had been there, if I had done anything to save the man, if he would live. I, trying to maintain this epistemic distance from the complex emotions that welled up inside my chest, would tell them that I wasn’t allowed to talk about it; pool regulations, you see. Still, I found myself, for the first time, wanting to relate to these people, tell them that I was there, that I had recognized the mortality in this man’s eyes, much like I had seen it in the previous eyes of loved ones who have passed before me. For the first time in my life, I wanted to share my grief.

It is winter. I am twenty and home from school for winter break. The house is too quiet for me. My parents are at work, Brian and Allison are at school, and here I am, alone, restless in my own home. Our area had been hit by a bitter ice storm that Saturday, which has since been blanketed by seven more inches of snow. The streets are a mess. The town is a mess.
I go outside. My mother and I had worked on the driveway just enough to be able to move the cars the next morning. The driveway looks even worse now, with all of the cars gone. Large patches of spots we missed; no way to easily get cars back onto the driveway. I decide to make myself useful. Grabbing the metal shovel I used the night before, I start at the bottom of my driveway, working in vain to expose the black pavement buried below. The rock salt doesn’t do much to help. It takes a good half-hour to clear five yards; I am tired, and don’t feel like shoveling anymore.

Using the handle of my shovel for support, I find myself looking at Agnes’ house. She’s been dead for a month now, which is still hard for me to believe. The spruce looks so pretty in December, the snow filling in the gaps in its branches. It upsets me that her house is the only one that doesn’t look lived in. Her driveway is the only one on the block that hasn’t been shoveled. We always shoveled her driveway when she was alive; why stop now?

I scan the block to make sure I’m the only one around. I don’t want to be seen shoveling my dead neighbor’s driveway; I still feel guilty for not going to her funeral. I start with the walkway to her porch first, scraping what I can off the cement and piling it underneath the spruce. The ice is too thick, and has bonded itself to the stone. I clear just enough so the mailman can deliver her letters. I wonder if he knows she is dead. Frustrated, I move to her driveway by the entrance to the side door. I’m digging into the ice – more like chipping – and my shovel’s getting beat. I find myself getting angry, and now I’m just driving my shovel into the ground, I’m furious, I just keep slamming the metal to ice again and again and again.

Afraid of being seen in this way, I leap down her stone steps, shake open the gate to her backyard, and find the dogwood we used to read the paper under during those hazy days of summer so long ago. I find that my brother had already been there – he had kept a promise to her, carving BF + AS enclosed in a heart. I am cowering beneath its empty branches, am weeping and blubbering my own grief, not just for Agnes, but for everyone. I am grieving for my murdered great-great grandmother, for my dead Uncle Charley, for that kid who crashed into a tree, for my Polish grandparents, for Avery and the rest of the nearly dead, but
now I am especially weeping for my mother, for my father, for my brother, for my sister who are constantly in mourning but never find solace in sharing their grief with me because I only make it more pronounced, more complicated, worse. I am embarrassed, breaking and entering into my dead neighbor’s backyard just to wail. I tell myself that I missed the funeral, that I missed my place in line with the other placebo singers, that there is no real reason to mourn now. I lay my head back, close my eyes, and focus on my breathing.

I wake up, startled. I can’t tell if I feel any better or worse. After thumbing my temples for a few minutes, trying to massage this pressure out of my head, I pick myself up out of the backyard, lock the gate behind me, and climb back up the steps to the driveway. I pick up my shovel. I contemplate going back to work, finishing what I had started. But then, two houses down, I see Mrs. Hardiman struggling with her own driveway. We make eye contact for a moment. She waves, I wave. My mother’s words echo in my head – *Take care of the living. Take care of the living.*

I swing my shovel over my shoulder. I am walking. The further I get from my dead neighbor’s house, her driveway, her overgrown spruce, the better I feel. My soul is thawing, shaking its protective winter layers, exuding some familiar warmth. I welcome this warmth, but know, too, that its presence will be fleeting, like the friction of bodies shifting in the grave.