

Eric Waggoner

## Butcher's Dog

After three hours of attempting to treat the funeral as a somber affair, our ruse finally broke down when the rear passenger tire of the hearse bearing my aunt's body skidded completely off the narrow, rain-washed dirt road halfway up the mountain to the cemetery, and three of the pallbearers had to coax it back on by pushing from behind, while a fourth gunned the engine and the remaining two smoked cigarettes and looked mildly put out. My aunt had been a woman of a certain size. The occasion being what it was, however, everyone had agreed in a pointedly tacit way not to refer to this in a spirit of levity until my uncle, staring at the groaning men trying to reorient the hearse by straining against its rear fender, their dress shoes sliding in the muck, said quietly, "I kept telling her to lose weight."

Aunt Louise was not my aunt. She was my father's. But in my family we make no such distinctions when it comes to storytelling. Great-aunts are aunts; great-uncles, uncles. Second, third, and distant cousins are simply cousins. Even ex-spouses are sometimes still referred to as *my husband* or *my wife* in conversation, depending on whether or not the speaker wants to explain their private business to the assembled audience, which normally we don't.

My family doesn't run much to sentiment. I once called my mother after two or three weeks of not speaking at all, not because we were angry with one another, but because why bother people on the phone if all you're going to tell them in the end is that everything's fine.

I asked what had been happening. "Nothing," my mother said, and then she said two or three things more, and then she said, in exactly the tone of voice of a person who's just remembered something:

"Oh, your father and I were hit by a car."

"When?"

"Last Wednesday. No, Tuesday."

Apparently my parents, exiting a parking garage, had been t-boned in the driver's side when a distracted young motorist blew a red light. The car had been totaled and they'd been hurled into a corner traffic light pole, which still bore a violent slash of dark blue paint from the impact of the right rear panel. But no one had been actually killed, and so that event merited the same importance as a persistent light illness or having the kitchen windows re-screened—anecdotally

interesting, but not really worth reporting until such time as we were catching up anyway. When my mother dies, I'll likely find out about it from a cousin, a second or third one, texting me to ask where he should send flowers.

I always forget how odd this looks from the outside. Often I've had to explain to bewildered friends or romantic partners that what appears to be cold detachment is mostly a determination to mind one's own business, and a strict zero-tolerance policy on other people minding ours. When I was three years old, my father and mother moved from one house to another house three blocks away. When a co-worker asked where they were moving to, my father replied, "You taking a census?" This default privacy setting doesn't arise from rudeness, but rather from a baseline assumption that most people, generally, prefer not to mix in. I've since realized this assumption is mistaken: it was certainly true in my family, but I've never known it to be the standard procedure out in broader Appalachia. Last week I was at the grocery store, and the young woman at the register told me quite breezily all about her upcoming week-long trip to Las Vegas; her brother was footing the bill for her and her mother so that they could babysit her brother's child while he and his wife took an extended vacation and played the slots. I was mortified by this level of openness. I'd sooner hand my opened bank statement to an enemy than tell a perfect stranger I was going to be gone from the house for a week.

"You want something to drink?" my grandmother would ask when you visited her in her modest home. If you responded in the affirmative, she'd say, "Well, you know where the refrigerator is." This was how we expressed care and concern: roundabout, by pointing to what you might need instead of getting it for you. If you really needed it, better you know the path to satisfaction yourself than rely on the generosity of others.

The one exception to this pattern was food—prepared, cooked food, not food that was store-bought and came in bags or thin cardboard boxes or plastic containers, which you were perfectly welcome to go into the kitchen and open up yourself, you're so hungry. Not that sort of food, but food that had been made in the home and brought out into the world. To churches and to hospitals, to cemeteries and to houses, came an endlessly renewable parade of containers—glass, plastic, and foil—into which had been packed an assortment of meats and vegetables, and which were brought on site by the women, always the women.

This is the part in most descriptions of rural American childhoods in which the writer makes some kind of observation regarding the everyday magical link between love and cooking. But the truth is that funerals and weddings are simply impossible to endure without at

least some mild form of physical restorative, assuming you can't get drunk, which is obviously preferable. Hospital visits, let alone stays, are equally interminable, even without taking into consideration the perpetual tastelessness of institutional fare.

There's nothing obscure about the importance of food to such ritual moments, I think. Most truly exceptional human joys and sufferings are beyond the capacity of language to comment upon them adequately, which is why "I hope you feel better soon" always sounds stupid and empty, while "Here, have a beer" at least makes a valid attempt at establishing some level of meaningful connection over another person's troubles. If you're going to fill your mouth with something, in other words, better whiskey than wishes. In my family I've only ever heard "Congratulations" spoken unironically when it was followed by "on your divorce," which when you think about it is both very sweet and exactly the right thing to say under the circumstances.

Aunt Louise—my father's Aunt Louise—was buried at the top of a hill in rural West Virginia where most of my father's family are planted, in a small graveyard adjacent to a one-room church. My mother and father already have their own plots bought and paid for, but this knowledge doesn't impact on any of us in a somber or even terribly contemplative way. There exists a photo of my parents squatting by the cheap black plastic place markers where their headstones will eventually be installed, looking up at the camera and grinning maniacally while they bide their time above ground, the grave looming for them as it is for all of us, but not exactly near enough to be worth looking anxious over.

That photo was taken on the same day as Aunt Louise's burial—we were all already there, so why not?—and after it had been taken, after Louise's interment, we retired to the sheltered picnic tables arranged on the long poured-concrete pallet on the other side of the church.

One of the unexpected benefits of a young life spent eating potluck meals near churchyard burial grounds is that cemeteries hold no unhappy connotations for me. Often as not, I merely get peckish. For a few years I found myself driving semi-regularly through Gilroy, California—"The Garlic Capitol of the World!"—and I used to find myself wondering whether living in Gilroy's constant aroma of growing and cooking garlic would so desensitize a person that they couldn't ever appreciate that smell again. That's as terrible a fate as I can imagine. Then, woolgathering, I'd try to explain to my traveling companions my own olfactory association between graveyards and fried chicken, and they'd look at me as though I were nuts. Oh well. Go explain your childhood to people.

I've said the women always brought the food. And they did so

now, after Louise's funeral, arranging and placing and uncovering and reorganizing the squat square and oval containers for sensible sequence and ease of plate-filling. The women in my family have, almost to a one, been caregivers of some sort or another—mothers, lunch ladies, food drive volunteers, nurses, teachers—and they have this part of the buffet spread down to a firm protocol. They're the sort who value efficiency over emotive expression. My Aunt Shirley, who was actually my own aunt and not my father's, became a phlebotomist in her middle age. Her bedside manner was prim and clinical, but she took a calm pride in never having had to stick at a vein more than two times. "I can find them," she said. "Like a dowser. Turn that elbow up and slap twice. They don't cry, not even the little ones."

Shirley removed the foil from a rectangular pan of string beans and chuckled lowly to herself as she crumpled it. "Lord, Louise. Nearly sent your dad and them off the side of the mountain."

Yet another corollary benefit of our lack of sensitivity to the concept of death is that we understand the perverse pleasure in making a joke at the funeral of one person about the near-death experience of another. These close misses seem to happen in my family with some frequency. My mother's cousin Don asked to have his ashes scattered on the inland waters of his hometown of Savannah, Georgia. He got his wish at a speedier pace than planned when the canoe carrying his brothers and sister overturned, spilling all three corporeal siblings and the canister containing the fourth powdered one into the waters before they'd made it ten feet away from the jetty. I must have heard this story once a year since it happened, usually at Christmas.

My Aunt Jody peeled back the clear plastic wrap from a ceramic bowl containing pasta salad with broccoli florets, sliced olives, and shredded carrots. With her hands she smoothed the peeled wrap so it clung to the outside of the bowl, creating a half-moon opening into which she inserted a clear serving spoon. "Louise," Jody laughed. "Stone the crows."

I'd heard the phrase "stone the crows" since I was small. No one ever explained to me that it was an expression indicating incredulous, head-shaking wonder at the sight of some bizarre event or situation. But as most of us do, I'd been able to work out its general meaning through consistent repeated contexts. Most of my family's idioms in some way referenced the animal world: *stone the crows*, *dumber in the head than a hog in the ass*, *raining hard as a cow pissing on a flat rock*. And that last one came to me now, as a distant groan of thunder moved me to look up at the sky, where a thick curdle of dark clouds had come in from the west.

My father's Uncle Hoyt also looked up, an expression of unsurprised disappointment screwed on his face. "She *would* die in the

rainy season.” Still, no one got up. We ate with relentless good humor, like people who were determined to do the right thing whether the skies should open or not.

The hands of the men in my family played instruments and held tools. They strung guitars and mandolins, turned tuning pegs, tapped and glued and filed down frets. They wrapped around hammer handles and squeezed vise grips, set nails and snapped chalk lines on drywall. They dug holes for water lines and wrapped pipes for winter. The items they touched were fabricated and man-made, and this was how they knew and shaped the world of which they found they were a part.

When I think of the women’s hands, I find it’s not comparative distinctions in shape or strength that come to mind, but the fact that the women’s hands moved the organic elements of the world, not the artificial. They snapped and clipped the string-ends of beans. They sliced fat from the edges of meat and dropped the flabby scraps into plastic bags for the garbage. They punched wet dough into glass bowls, let it rise, and pounded it flat on floured boards. They carried hot trays and pans of food from cars to tables, then washed them in the sink until the skin of their fingers reddened, then dried and replaced them in the cabinets and cupboards.

There isn’t anything mystical about any of this, either, or there wasn’t in the way my family talked about it. Work was work, and what you did with your hands was all the same sort of work, whether you helped to build a stair railing or sliced potatoes for casserole. The only true shame was in being ungrateful—ungrateful either for the work others did on your behalf, or the work you were permitted to perform to improve the general quality of life for those around you. Although there was a clear practical division in forms of labor between the men and the women—the men built and tore down, the women prepared and maintained—an unspoken understanding insisted that this division was largely a matter of functionality, not value.

I never heard the phrase “women’s work” when I was a kid. No man in my family would ever have said it, and if he had, every woman in the family would have been on hand to assist in his brisk refresher in the basics of polite discourse. But I saw it done. The men bore our dead into the side of the mountain. And after them, always, came the women, whose skills and creative work were reserved for the living—who were, after all, still here, still going, still in need. The work was prosaic, common, so ordinary it seemed automatic though above all else, and in addition to everything else it was, it was deliberate, chosen, an act designed for the preservation of the self, of all of us together, all of us left.

It wasn't mystical. Or, if it was, it was the sort of mysticism that inheres in the bones and muscle of the hands. Which my family had no language for, no direct interest in.

In the church at the top of the mountain was a small stand-alone cabinet in the corner, a tall slender box with a single door and four shelves, and taped on the door of that cabinet was a single sheet of paper on which had been handwritten the words "KEEP CLOSED FOR RATS – THANK YOU." When I was small I spent years thinking the cabinet was designed to keep the rats in, not out, and that if anyone opened the door a torrent of rats would overrun the one-room church. It was all I could do not to open that door. When I finally did, I saw it was filled with napkins, picnic cutlery, and canned goods.

After the funeral, after the meal, the rains came and we went inside to wait it out. At the front of the church, near the pulpit, were three guitars in cases stacked against the back wall. Of course the guitars were retrieved, and the men formed a small clutch of folding chairs, upon which they now sat, running through a series of songs. Clockwise, each would start a tune, and the rest would fall in.

"Look at them," said Jody. "Happy as the butcher's dog."

"The what?" I said.

She repeated, "Butcher's dog. You ever seen a dog in a butcher's shop? Fat. Sleepy all the time. Until the butcher starts cutting up the meat. Then he gets rowdy." She looked back at the men. "He don't know where it comes from, really," she said. He knows it comes from the butcher, that's all. He's fat and happy. Happy as the butcher's dog. Fat and happy and fartin' like thunder."

Inside was music. Outside it was raining, and the hillock of earth where we'd buried Louise would be sinking under its weight, leveling off, and next year the new grass would cover it. Louise's baby, the one who'd died in 1953, the same day he was born with his heart outside his body, was buried there too. She was next to him, finally. The cars between the church and the graveyard were full of covered pans of half-eaten food we'd eat on for the next several days.

An hour later the sky cleared and we filed out, headed for our several homes, the ones we lived in day to day. The road was winding, twisted. But the tires gripped the mud this time—firm, true as anchors, delivering us back to the common, the broken, the hungry world.

