

Mercies: Or, the Mostly True Tale of a Narratively Assisted Death

By Paula Holmes-Rodman

What is the last story you would want to hear? And what if you could choose the teller and the tale?

Three o'clock pm, a given time, a chosen day, after lunch on the patio of fresh bread, sharp cheddar, a tomato that tasted like summer, and Bailey's chocolate mousse. Mom and I had talked about what she would wear for her last act. She swore it would not be a hospital gown, but it had to be something with short sleeves. So, reluctantly, she removed her jean jacket and folded it carefully on the dresser. Later, I unclipped the pewter eagle pin that her mother had purchased on a trip to the West Coast, then added the jacket to a pile of clothes to be donated. Mom's jeans were baggy around her depleted legs. We had joked that she had no bum anymore. A faded blue and white striped t-shirt draped her exhausted chest. It was always blue and white stripes for her --t-shirts, button-downs, she loved them. She shakily removed her yellowed oxygen tubing, her despised, essential leash, and placed it on the door handle. Altogether, it was a well-worn, ill-fitting costume, a patchwork of loved and hated things.

The storytelling part was unplanned, unscripted, but not unintended, and it sprang from deep in my bones. I knew this story. I knew this place. I grew up there too.

We hadn't blocked out our last positions. After all the preparations and all the rehearsals, neither of us had practiced this part. She lay, fully dressed, on top of a neatly made embroidered blue comforter on the side of the bed she had always slept, still in reach of her book, reading glasses, and water cup. I leaned against the headboard, awkwardly cradling her head and shoulders, wanting to envelop her birdlike self entirely, needing to surrender full access to both arms.

She kicked off her worn slippers, the ones we both bought at Costco. "I guess I won't be needing these anymore." And her socks didn't match.

I begin to weave my story. I give her old brown cowboy boots, tugging them on her younger feet. I fold my hands and boost her up onto the broad back of Rob Roy, the horse she had as a teenager, at a time when her family spent weekends in a small cabin in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. If there was a God, she had told me, for as long as I was old enough to ask about the matter, then He existed in the tall grasses that brushed her knees when she rode horseback through the Alberta summer.

So, I begin there. On a Saturday, maybe she's 16. With the sun on her back, her favorite jeans, the mountains to the West, the muscled freedom of youth, and a body a long way from betrayal.

I give her a long afternoon of riding. A few close friends maybe, but really, it's just her, that clear blue sun that only the Prairies can do, and the saddle she kept long into her later years, carefully stored over a water-stained humidifier.

Hot, dusty, but far from tired, after the ride it's a quick wash and she puts on her pressed Wranglers and cleanest shirt, scrapes the horseshit off her boots, and hopes the

neighbor boy has the keys to his dad's pickup tonight. Everyone is off to the dance at the old round dance hall.

Nestled by the river, the spruce log hall is decades danced already, with a tall center post and benches around the edges where the old women from the reserve sit. Their moccasined feet tap to the music while they keep an eye on the kids. There is a small stage off to one side and a bowed planked floor, worn free of paint a generation ago. Every Saturday night, Freddie and The Something or Others (because memory is like that) polka, waltz, and swing the whole little town almost into Sunday.

"Do you remember, Mom, you told me how Freddie was always three sheets to the wind, playing the sax with spit just flying? And how he once blew out his false teeth?"

They are almost my memories.

I weave on. A lean-to canteen offers cold Cokes outside when the sweated energy bursts the seams between the old hewn logs. Mrs. Eldson, from the trading post, runs a tight ship, and there's no booze allowed at the dance. But someone always brings a small bottle of something in a bag in their truck.

I laugh, "Mom, your life is a country song!" But she's already asleep. The first needle is plunged. The first string clipped.

Right. Breathe. The round dance hall.

Oh, I swing her around in the rosy arms of a handsome boy. I make the Elbow River sing its icy rush, the pines give their black-green scent, and cast all the trucks and teenagers, gossipers and grannies, lovers and dancers in their remembered parts.

I keep her there way past curfew, in the sparkly licorice-black night, sneaking cowboy kisses and whiskey sips and dizzying swings and twirls.

Then, on Sunday morning, I bring her to her church and let the tall grass brush her knees again.

I wept as I spoke. My nose ran freely, but the scant cast gathered in the audience at the end of her bed to bear witness to this last act-her family doctor and the palliative care nurse-seemed stunned, quieted. I briefly moved my arm and wiped the flow of tears and snot on the inside of my shirt. I had to ask for a tissue. I never wore that shirt again.

It took all my strength not to look at the impossible needles, impossible in their number, breadth, and intent. But, of course, I knew they were there. And he was there, the gentle orchestrator, conducting his terrible, merciful melodies, drawing the curtain closed. The doctor's last line, with eyes locking mine, was, "Your mother has died." Whatever I answered was a loss, I'm certain. And gratitude, I hope.

When the doctor's role was over, I storied on. I had more lines. Mine was a soliloquy and cry of home and motion, spit against the stillness.

I don't remember the end of my story. Except that I hope it was, "I love you." And "Thank you."

All spent, audience and orchestrator. Only I remained, the supporting role, nose running, throat cramping, my last words as light as the kiss-blown tops of dried grass.

It was a terrible mercy for her. It was a terrible mercy for me

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