

A Wake

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It's good to see the body, to know the difference. This bruised shell, with the jaw wanting to flap open, is not she. This prim mouth slightly agape, this delicate chin giving in to gravity. Notice the look of concentration around the eyebrows, a sign of hard, intent dreaming. This is not Bernadette, who was always so devil may care. It's good to see the body, knowing that she is free.

Long before she got sick, Bernadette told me her grandfather, a French rabbi, had witnessed it many times in his Alsatian village. The tipping point, when the soul no longer fits within pitiful flesh and bones. And now here is the very bottle missing its genie. The spark of life that is Bernadette is gone baby gone.

The women in her spirited clan have wrapped this dry husk in raw champagne silk and an indigo sash. A braid of sweetgrass and a clutch of peacock feathers rest loosely in her hand on her flat silken belly. At times the soft wind lifts the feathers and a scent of lavender and rose rises up. Bouquets of creamy white mums flank her sides in the gussied up rowboat, propped up waist high out on the back lawn of the community rec center. White folding chairs march down the slope to the lake where we once made love by the cool morning water.

I stand there mesmerized by my beloved friend transfigured, until the woman behind me in the viewing line lightly touches my shoulder. I turn and mumble, "Sorry." I look up at the hawk catching thermals and move on.

It was ovarian cancer, a two-year albatross tethered around her tiny waist. Flapping and clawing at her once strong body. Devouring her chances to bear children of her own. When we were together, just before she met Alex, she taught rock climbing to kids and danced as if music itself grew in her very cells. She'd throw parties where everyone would gather in the side yard of her tiny shack house and take turns spidering their way up the climbing wall she had installed. Sometimes I'd wake with her fingers searching for handholds to the next level of love, climbing me with strong, hungry limbs.

There is a lull in the wake as the musicians go off for a smoke. As mourners arrive, they first seek out Bernadette's parents, well known in town for their sporting goods store. Or they head straight to Alex the widower in his brocade kung fu jacket and jeans. In between testimonials or songs, we all mill about by the buffet and fortify ourselves for the next round of remembrance.

I stuff a corn fritter in my mouth without tasting it, working my tight jaws. I feel suddenly old. Bernadette's dad Warren plops another fritter on my paper plate and dollops some pepper jelly next to it.

"Sean, my boy, try this. My Nathalie's specialty." I put the plate down to give him a manly hug and a pat on the back. Warren is one of the kindest men I know, soft like well-worn boots and his eyes changeable like the surface of the lake. I scan the crowd and see Nathalie unexpectedly laughing with a cluster of Bernadette's sister friends. When I suck my fingerful of maternal pepper jelly, my salivary glands ache and make me go, "Augh!" If a million things had been different, or maybe just one, Bernadette would have been my beautiful

dead wife. I would have called Warren “Grandpa” and eaten Nathalie’s confections without a pang at family dinners, spotting our kids as they literally climbed the walls. Instead, Warren is my chess partner and favorite older friend.

Always the storyteller, Warren reminds me of that long ago visit in the hospital, when Bernadette was first kept overnight for unexplained exhaustion. We two had frantically told morbid jokes in the cafeteria, laughing like idiots until tears squeezed out of our eyes at IV drip rate. Tear, tear, tear. Plop, plop, plop. Hugging him again, he doesn’t feel like a man about to cremate his little girl. I mean, he doesn’t shatter or fall the way I do. He is a man of faith.

Bernadette believed in magic, and it certainly believed in her. For one thing, when a false positive of the pink pee stick made clear I wasn’t ready for kids, she went right out to the deep woods and cast a home brew, super juju breakup spell, which led to a quick and uneventful transition into calm and easy friendship.

A few days after her diagnosis, Bernadette literally bumped bellies with a pregnant woman named Rana Jackson outside a coffee shop in town. They talked a bit about their exalted states, this one swollen with a tumor about to be delivered and that one hoping this baby this time would make it through. Typical Bernadette encounter. The women took turns placing blessing hands on each other. Right there on Pine Street, surrounded by a cloud of aromatic French Roast. Without a drop of envy, Bernadette sent love and luck through her quivering fingers to the little fishy inside the four month bump. The lucky stranger then gently gave blessings for complete healing on Bernadette’s pre-surgical swelling. It worked like a charm, at least for a while.

This gathering feels like one of Bernadette's parties, with her many anarchist guests knowing just when to grab the spotlight. Rana takes the microphone and tells the crowd, "That day we welcomed in new life for Bernadette's womb. Her fallopian branches had to be pruned, but we both believed that new healthy growth was on its way. The fact that her oncologist was named Dr. Payne should have been the tip off that something else was coming." People in their white folding chairs made world-weary half-smiles.

Rana retrieves her bump, now a boy, from Nathalie in the front row. He splays out dozing in her grateful arms. The passage from mother to mother is seamless. Someone else gets up to sing some of Bernadette's favorite songs, and I go walking down by the murmuring lake. Alex is there, and I stick my hands in my pockets, not sure if there's anything to say that I haven't told him already. My left fingers find a temporary tattoo, just a slip of papery nothing. I hand it over, explaining that Bernadette and I got the image of the all-seeing peacock feather at the state fair, a funky booth run by friends where every item could fit in the palm of your hand.

"That's perfect, man. Did you see her feathers there?" Alex makes a gesture, closes his right hand and waves it a little.

"Sure did. Those girls did a good job. The peacock is her favorite." I'm puzzled when he takes a clean handkerchief out of his back pocket and soaks it in the lake's lapping edge. He squeezes it out and swings his head at me. I follow the man who took my place, the one whom I don't envy, as we go up the slope to the lavish barque.

"Hey, Bern, how about a final decoration? Sean brought this for you."

I am embarrassed when he talks to the cast-off shell of the woman we loved. Alex peels off the backing and hands the useless scrap to me.

He leans over and applies the temporary tattoo on the body's third eye, using slight pressure and the wet handkerchief. He is careful to get it right the first time, to not mar the shrunken face before him. It's the missing final detail.

He smiles sadly at me, then walks off to greet some more arriving mourners pouring from the back door of the rec center. I circle back to Warren and explain about the peacock eye tattoo. Warren is crazy about symbols and world mythology and once hiked Taos Mountain with Joseph Campbell. He brightens some and enthuses, "Did you know, my boy, that peacock feathers are sacred to Quan Yin? Bern-a-bee loved Quan Yin. She told me she wanted to come back again as a bodhisattva to save others. That's what she said the day she died."

I don't know about saving others, but Bernadette did favor Quan Yin. People kept giving her these statues, big ones, little ones, some looking like mustached men, some long willowy maidens. They filled her whole coffee table, packed closely together forming a strange cityscape. Bernadette claimed that calling on Quan Yin helped her, since she'd had no choice but to turn every indignity to her body into fuel for compassion towards herself.

Even before she got sick, Bernadette burned and yearned to be a force for good in the world. No one who knew her could believe her disbelief in the healing power of her own love. In the hospital, nurses from different floors would come to check in on her, because they would feel so much better after seeing her.

As Nathalie rings the meditation bell, we all gravitate back to the chairs. I sit next to Warren and some of the rock climbing kids, behind Alex and Nathalie. As one of Bernadette's sister friends leads

some Sanskrit chanting, I watch the bat tattoo, a permanent one, flap on the back of Alex's shaved head as he sings along. I don't know what we are singing in this call and response way, but the sounds moving out of my chest and throat soothe me. Warren whispers to me that the bat is a Mesoamerican symbol of rebirth and renewal. The signs may be everywhere, but I don't know. Bernadette seems just plain gone. I wonder what tomorrow will be like for Alex, when he watches them put the body in the giant oven and the flames take even the husk away. Out of their foiled plans—a child and a long life of creative genius among their friends in the place they loved—came what? A dead wife, a young widower, broken hearts all around. Who is saved?

After the chanting is over, I want to go home. I kiss Nathalie on the cheek and ask her to call me if she needs anything. Warren nods and waves from across the way. I take one more look at the body. A climbing friend I don't know feels under Bernadette's body in the dry-docked boat. He roots around under the mums, under her thigh, and I look at him quizzically. He looks up, feeling my question. "Dry ice. Just checking."

Bernadette would have liked all the fuss. She is, was, a beauty junkie. Her clothes so funkadelic and saucy. She once told me she first noticed Alex because he dressed up like her, every day special.

Anyway, it's good to see the body, the vessel, the husk. That's not her, just a costume she used to wear around. We all just got used to it. Those tiny hands, her dancing hips, and that lopsided smile burned in my memory.

Warren tells me about the cremation. I don't know how he can be

so calm. His faith maybe, that thing I don't have. His words bounce off my eardrums and fall out onto the chessboard. And yet when I go to sleep, I hear my own bones popping and sizzling, see the flames all around the bed.

My attention span is very short since the wake, and I find myself forgetting what I'm doing. The guys this morning found me fingering the rebar and dropping off mid-sentence. Luckily, they know what they're doing on the foundation. They give me free rein, although I did hear Joe the new guy complaining, "It's not like she was his wife," and the others letting him know the score.

Still dark night. No bed flames tonight, just thick sleep. Rain splatters on the skylight above my bed. The urgent sounds catapult me to the kitchen. I stand there in my boxers, listening to the refrigerator hum and wondering if it holds the answer to my unknown hunger. I look inside, nearly blinded by its glow and make a grab for the milk.

Over the stove, the clock reads 3:21. Countdown to what? On the shelf to the right rests the tightly lidded Japanese tea tin. It's the color of ripe persimmons. Running late in the morning, I see it without seeing. The hour is now, better hurry.

I retrieve a hand-carved wooden bowl and spoon from the dish rack. The tea tin makes almost no sound when I gently shake it, for there's just a tablespoon or so in there. Alex and Warren and Nathalie had split the rest right after the cremation, taking the larger pieces that must be broken down with mortar and pestle. I try to picture Nathalie and Warren in their kitchen, pulverizing their daughter's bones.

The bereaved have been traveling, so already the wife and daughter and best friend is scattered in ancestral France and the

Yucatan she loved and who knows where else. All this, while I have been standing for eternity here in my kitchen. I pour the cornflakes in the bowl and upend the tea tin carefully. I want the last of Bernadette to stay with me forever, and as I pour the milk I see her particles float and sink and know it's not possible. □