

This Silence

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*O bells ring for the ringing! The beginning and the end of the ringing!
Ring, ring, ring, ring!*

from "The Catholic Bells" by William Carlos Williams

The crack of a church bell splits the crisp Autumn air. Then silence floods over the land, for five seconds... six... now seven. It is a comforting calm, this silence worn easily and often by the dwellers of the Plains. But on the eighth beat, the sexton draws hard on the thick rope rising to Saint Margaret's steeple, and pierces me again with his requiem bells.

I tell you these are the same bells that rang in Mrs. Tostenrude's fifth-grade class. The sound soared to the third story window of Rolfe Elementary and High School, two hundred yards across the playground and catercorner from Saint Margaret's. Once a month or so these bells would summon me to my sacramental chores. The altar boys would gather in the sacristy to don our cassocks and white starched surplices. Then hastily arrange the cruets of water and wine, ready the censor with a charcoal puck, and light the towering candlesticks that flanked the bier. Finally, Father Weingart would lead us down the center aisle to the darkened church vestibule, where we would greet the funeral procession with the solemn, soothing phrases of my Latin childhood, "Subvenite, Sancti Dei, occurrite, Angeli Domini, Suscipientes animam ejus, Offerentes eam in conspectu Altissimi. Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine, et lux perpetua ei."

Come to her aid, O saints of God, come forth to meet her, angels of the Lord. Receiving her soul, presenting it to the Most High. Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her."

But today these bells reach me in the first car behind the hearse. We are following my mother, dead at age seventy-five. Her life was told in today's homily, which seemed only a slightly expanded, more salvific rendering of what the funeral home had printed on last night's prayer cards. Mom's card (with a feathered image of Saint Francis on the front) will join a rubber-banded deck tucked away in my top desk drawer. They are, for our German Catholic

relatives, a trading card that marks the passing of the generations.

In the quarter-century since I left home, the old neighborhood has picked up and moved here slowly over time, from spacious Elm Street where disease has claimed more than the summer canopy. Here lie Russ and Maureen Ranney, our next-door neighbors, he who drilled my teeth and she who filled the cups of the coffee klatsch and were the best of family friends; the Tiernans down the block, who kept rabbits and teased me mercilessly about my big blue eyes; the Zeemans, whose daughter Cathy was struck by a passing motorist as her bicycle veered onto Elm near the tracks where we had played; the Biedermans, who pumped home heating oil, and the Reigelsburgers, who farmed and helped organize the annual spread at Saint Margaret's Turkey Supper. I can almost hear the silverware clinking, the bellow of a "howdy neighbor," the whine of my mower as it pushes through their tall grass or, in winter, a snow shovel that scrapes clean their blanketed walks.

In our waiting, the children assembled a photo album that spanned Mom's life, from her nursing graduation to her wedding, to all the vacations, birthdays, holidays, and reunions that followed, and the visits by her children that slowed to a trickle in recent years. The album told her visitors and nurses that "she is our mother; she is not merely what you see. She was somebody in her life, someone vigorous and strong and big on the rules (except when they applied to her). She is now ruined and decayed, waiting to be raised to her final reward. Just a few days earlier, Rosemary was still her feisty self. Over her practically dead body she was brought by ambulance to the Pocahontas Community Hospital. And from the moment of her admission she muttered, "port, port, oh port." I finally realized that the word was "report," a duty she had discharged for over fifteen years as nursing supervisor after my dad had died. But she knew the jig was up when she could no longer finagle a cigarette from the nurses-her nurses-even with the threat of a hunger strike.

The silences in my life have nearly slipped away. The morning ride to work, the evening meal with my family, the shopping trips and hectic appointment schedules are all filled with news and conversation, noise and chaos. Even during Mass, the "moment of silent prayer" after communion is lost in our rush to a more meaningful liturgy. I still cling to an hour or two each morning, rising before the family stirs, to sit silently in the green glow of my desk lamp. And in this silence I remember my mother most, and the Plains, and the Church.

The death of my mother has changed Iowa's grip on me. I was born here, my

parents say, or at least kept by the good sisters of St. Joseph Orphanage in Sioux City until I was two months old. Then Rosemary and Ed got the papers and brought me home, raised me on the flat rich farmland of western Iowa, where you learn to appreciate straight roads and good schools.

When I was thirteen my dad died, and ever since I dreamed of leaving home. But there is no path that leads away forever. Especially when you are orphaned once, and raised where roots run deep. It is harvest time now; the combines and six-row harvesters are fueled and idling; the grain cars wait on miles of track that service the callosal concrete silos. Here people are wedded to the land, not only by the burden of debt but by their sense of duty to work it, by the indisputable lay of its existence beyond their mailbox, their fence rows, their stand of timber. It cannot be picked up and moved like so much merchandise. Farming is something else again. While I was back, I heard someone say on the radio that "farming is one of those occupations where labor is not counted as a business expense." Those values stick, and I find myself today in a similar profession, my father's career, where the doctor and farmer both come to realize that success depends upon loving what you look after.

The wings of our plane make a low bow to Eppley Airfield as we veer east toward the patchwork quilt that is Iowa-from-the-air. I grope under my seat for the small cache of Mom's belongings. I find her purse. It is hefty; shot-filled with the weight of seventy-three dimes, thirty-seven nickels, seven quarters, and two hundred fifteen pennies. It has, like everything in Mother's keep, that musty smell of stale cigarettes. This is money back from the purchase of untold cartons of Winston Lights and bottles of Extra-Strength Tylenol and rolls of toilet paper that Mom's friends purchased for her on weekly outings from the nursing home. She had stashed this trove in her apartment closet: a classic case of "out of sight, out of mind." But the truth is that Mom was increasingly out of mind during her latter years. And diminished by that fact, and by her broken record of bodily complaints, and by a taste for cigarettes that satisfied her more than her meals.

In the purse also is the letter. Written in 1983, it was the last time Mom attended to matters of the estate. It is addressed "to all my children," with instructions to be read only on the advent of her death. We tore the seal last night at supper, with Mom freshly in the grave, and dwelt upon her deciding line: "Remember that I loved you, and don't look back."

This is her strange legacy. I take it not as some veiled proscription against

searching for my biologic parents (though it may be that, too). It is more. It is about honoring the silences; accepting them as part of the cadence of life. It is about the pain she bore silently: the divorce of her Catholic parents; the early death of her invalid mother; her exodus from St. Louis; her sister's alcoholism and early internment in a nursing home; the untimely death of her spouse and our family's struggle be "normal" in the aftermath. It is about this silence, imposed by her death, and the sorrow it sows in our separate lives. And so, she says, "Look around. Look for the mothers who remain: Mother Church, Mother Earth, and the mother whose stiff blue hair your daughter stroked as I slept in my pillowed repose. Do not leave as an orphan. Remember that I loved you, and don't look back."

I have no doubt that when again I see those puffy eyes, they will sparkle. And not from tears choked back, but from steam rising off the rump roast.

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