

When the Ground Thaws

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I

Kim Mathews Wheaton,
Ellensburg Evening Glow

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I walk over bones and ashes and wind my way between headstones and footstones in the Carson community cemetery until I am standing over a granite slab, half covered by a snowdrift. B-O-N-O-G-O it reads. My last name.

The only times I come back to North Dakota are when someone dies. The only difference this trip is that my dad is not with me. Being in the cemetery makes me remember him, digging holes in the prairie for his family and gently placing their urns in the black fertile soil.

How many times did he do that? Always in worn jeans and a t-shirt, tennis shoes, baseball cap and aviator sunglasses.

After my quick detour to the cemetery, I drive down the tree-lined gravel road to Uncle Gene's farm and wonder what the hell I am doing. I call him uncle Gene, but he's my dad's uncle. I don't know him very well, only that my dad seemed to love him like a father. On all our trips back to the farm, I could hide behind my dad and observe my unfamiliar North Dakota family.

He was easy to hide behind. When he walked into the room, everyone noticed. He had a red beard and brown hair, ice blue eyes, broad shoulders, and a confident, long stride. He was witty. He didn't seem to be afraid of anything. I was painfully shy. If someone spoke to me, my cheeks flushed.

I stall by taking my border collie, Lena, for a walk around the farmyard. Clouds hang low in the gray sky. The wind bitter, I wrap my wool coat tighter around me and pull down my stocking cap.

Out in front of Gene's house there is a sign listing the four generations of McDowalls who farmed the homestead starting in 1909. Across the drive is the old farmhouse where my father's grandparents, great-grandparents, Gene's son Squirt and his family used to live.

It is empty now, along with the big red barn, the corrals, the pens, the sheds and the fields. Everything is still in good condition. No broken boards. Nothing needs repair. It's just—empty. It feels as if I've just missed someone, like Squirt leaving on the tractor to go plant a field.

I look toward the shed where Gene and Squirt kept the pigs. The wind pushes the green gate back and forth, hinges squeaking. As I walk toward the gate, I remember Gene handing me a hairless pink piglet when I was little. It squealed and struggled to get out of my hands. He told me to hold it tight.

“No, tighter,” he said and wrapped his huge hands around mine. I was worried about hurting it, but the piglet calmed immediately.

I latch the gate. Rabbits dart back and forth under the apple trees in the orchard. Lena half-heartedly chases them until they disappear in the shelterbelt. She prances back to me, proud of her effort.

Like you could ever catch a rabbit, I think, and pat her head.

I walk up the back steps of Squirt's house and test the door handle to see if it is locked. It's not. I consider going in, but I decide against it. I pull the door shut, cup my hands around my eyes and look through the window into the kitchen. Nothing is left.

I remember early one morning when my dad and I stayed overnight with Squirt. I can see my dad standing at the counter, pouring boiling water into the French press coffee maker we brought with us from Montana. Squirt, a huge man who made my father look small, leans against the counter watching the water turn black as it mixed with coffee grounds. I stand off to the side and listen to my dad explain to his favorite cousin why French press coffee is superior to drip coffee.

“Well, I’ll be,” Squirt says and shakes his head in amazement. He had never seen a French press before.

My dad laughed and repeated Squirt, “Well, I’ll be.” We talked about it all the time. “Remember when Squirt saw a French press for the first time?” It was how Squirt had said the word “well,” like he had just seen a deer stand up and start talking to him.

I step off the porch and look toward Gene’s house. Time to go inside. I reconsider my initial idea of staying two nights. Hell, I reconsider staying one night. Lena runs to my car and looks expectantly at the door.

“Nope,” I say, “we’re going inside.” She looks toward the house and back at the car.

We walk in through the garage and down a long hallway. Lena slinks along the wall constantly looking back to make sure I’m still behind her.

Warm, stale air greets me as I open the door to the kitchen. Gene is sitting at the kitchen table. He looks so old, so old that it startles me, his spine curved like the letter C. He is ninety-four and spent his life farming and ranching: shoveling, hauling, fixing, lifting, doing, being. I am immediately ashamed it took me three years to come visit.

I lean over and give him a gentle hug.

“Hello Lexi,” he says.

“Hi Gene.”

“Please don’t be scared if you hear me cry out. My back. It causes me so much pain.” Him saying this scares me.

“Ok Gene.”

“I have a Doctor’s appointment in Bismarck tomorrow...but I wouldn’t mind a visit from Dr. Kevorkian.” He laughs a little.

“I think he’s dead,” I say and then hope he didn’t hear me.

Gene taps the chair next to him. I sit down. Lena places herself against his legs, making sure she has a direct line of view to me. A space heater whirs in the corner. The room is warm, at least eighty degrees. There are thick plastic strips in the doorway to the living room, the type they hang in butcher shops to keep the heat in the kitchen and the cold out.

“Lexi, can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Have you buried Tom yet?”

No small talk I guess.

“No...we...no.” Pain starts to whirl through my body and tears form behind my eyes. The words I’m about to say get stuck in my belly.

“Are you planning to?”

Lena presses up against his leg. He strokes her head with his large hands covering her entire head in one stroke. Her eyes close.

My dad’s ashes are in a beautiful, heavy, cylindrical, pure brass urn that he had specially made for him years before he died. Engraved on the outside is his name and the year he was born. We haven’t engraved the year he died on it yet. He kept the urn on the pantry in the house alongside the canned tomatoes and pickles. He was so proud of it, showed everyone who came to visit.

I tell Gene we are planning to bury the urn.

“We have to pick a spot for Tom,” he says.

He sends me to the laundry room to find a neon orange folder in his cabinet where he keeps the Carson Community Cemetery records. Lena follows close behind.

When I grab the folder, I see another one behind it with photos sticking out the sides. I take a quick look and find a picture of my dad, my mom, my sister and me. We are all smiling. My sister and I are around eight and nine years old and wearing frilly Christmas dresses.

Mine is blue. Hers is purple and black. I can tell I'm uncomfortable in the photo, leaning back, arms crossed in front of me, a red tint to my cheeks. I hate wearing dresses.

I take the photo and slide it in my back pocket.

I return to my seat and give the folder to Gene. He takes out a yellow lined piece of paper with a hand drawn map of the cemetery. It's a grid with plots he owns and the names of the people already there. His hand writing looks like my dad's. His hands look like my dad's. His body looks like my dad's, such long arms.

"What about 19?" he asks and points to an empty square. It's a large plot, but not adjacent to my dad's mother, father, brother and sister's.

"Don't you think he'd want to be near Scotty?" I ask. Scotty was his brother and just three when he died.

"You might need more room if your mom and you and your sister want to be here. Tom should be with his family. Have you thought about that yet?"

"No, I haven't," I lie. I have thought about it. My dad always called this the home place. He talked about the old country and the old timers. North Dakota was his home but not mine. I won't be buried there, nor will my mom, or my sister.

"Well, you think about it. We'll keep this right here and when you decide we can mark it down."

He closes the folder, clasps his hands on his lap, drops his chin toward his chest and closes his eyes. For a moment, I think he has fallen asleep.

"When I got that phone call, you could have knocked me over with a toothpick. He was the last person I would have ever thought...." Gene shakes his head. "That wasn't Tom. That wasn't his way."

I imagine my father then, like I have a hundred times before. I see him on a bed. I see the .357 he always carried in his pack. I see his index finger resting on the trigger and the barrel pointed at his heart. Did he close his eyes? Did he take a deep breath before he squeezed the trigger?

I wonder what his last thoughts were. The mind, and guns, work so quickly. Was there a moment of doubt, of regret, though the brain had already told the finger to pull the trigger? Did he think about me or my mom or my sister?

I feel like throwing up. It's too hot in the kitchen. My heart races, my jaw tightens, I can feel my face get red as I try not to cry. That wasn't Tom. That wasn't his way. Gene's words get stuck on a loop in my head.

Gene doesn't know that it was my dad. That it was his way.

"It wasn't his way," he says again.

There is a reason he had an urn made for himself so early. He didn't want to get old, he said. He wouldn't live past 70, he said. He drank too much and couldn't control it anymore. What he did was absolutely him. He tried two times before, that I knew of. If I'm honest, I should tell Gene right now, there was no other way my dad was going to die.

But I don't say this to Gene. It would only hurt him more.

Three and a half years ago, on a beautiful fall day in Montana, I stood in my living room, and my partner Mike put his hand on my arm. He seemed so far away.

He looked me directly in the eyes and didn't look away. My legs got weak and I could feel them starting to give out. He was so far away from me. That moment took forever. I could live in it.

I was standing in the exact spot we put our Christmas trees up in as a child. We'd put a crappy silver plastic star—that I thought was so unique and special—on the very top, and my dad would put Willie Nelson's Pretty Paper Christmas album on the record player. We shut all the house lights off and my mom, my dad, my sister and I would all lay on the couch mesmerized by the Christmas tree lights.

*Should you stop? Better not, much too busy
You're in a hurry, my how time does fly
In the distance the ringing of laughter
And in the midst of laughter he cries*

“Your dad shot himself,” Mike said.

I had two thoughts.

The first is, “why would you say something like that to me?”

The second is, “yes, of course he did.”

Back in North Dakota, Gene pretends not to notice I am crying and instead looks at some photos I brought him. Finally, he turns in his chair and reaches for a box of Kleenex.

On the wall is a large framed photo of Gene and my dad in the Carson cemetery. I took that photo ten years ago. My dad holds an urn with his mother’s—Gene’s sister’s—ashes in it. Gene leans against a shovel. They stand close, shoulder-to-shoulder, not smiling but gently leaning against each other.

I take a breath and recalibrate my expectations of what Gene can help me understand. Even if I learn something new, the end always turns out the same; he’s always laying on a bed in a shitty apartment with a massive gunshot wound in his chest and an exploded heart.

Gene and I stay up late talking. We don’t move from the kitchen. A bathroom and a bedroom adjoin it. The rest of the house—two bedrooms and a large living room—lie behind the plastic strips in the doorway. That part of the house, where I’m staying, is dark and quiet. Gene spends all of his time here now, sitting in his spot at the kitchen table with six empty chairs circled around.

He drinks Mountain Dew in a pint glass with a shot of vodka. I have a beer. I ask him questions about our family, about my dad, about my grandparents, about him. He never once cries out in pain from his back. I am grateful for that. He says his pain lessens when he has company.

We talk about farming, about soil, about sheep and goats and cows and pigs. We talk about the Great Depression and World War II. He tells me that my dad and grandfather bent the rules so much they broke. I have never heard anything truer, I think. He starts to get tired and confuse my grandfather for my dad.

They were very similar, and Gene was close to both of them. They were fighters. They didn't respect authority. Irreverent is what I always called my dad. I loved that about him. They got in trouble. They did what they wanted. They were always running away from something. They died alcoholics.

The stories Gene is telling start to feel like a dream. I stop asking clarifying questions and correcting him on names.

As he tells me stories of my grandfather, I wonder how much Gene actually knew him. He speaks of him with such fondness. I search for any feeling I have toward my grandfather and can't find anything other than anger at how he treated my father.

He made my dad box older kids in the neighborhood for entertainment. He took him hunting with his friends and forgot him in the mountains overnight. He made him work at the tire store he owned from the age of 12. He made him think all he was good for was work.

When I was a kid, in the middle of the night, my grandfather called my dad from Three Forks, Montana, and told him he was going to shoot himself. My dad drove three hours to my grandfather's house. He got back home mid-morning with the handgun my grandfather was planning to use and then went straight to work.

I don't tell Gene this story.

But my grandfather didn't die from a gunshot wound. He died at the age of 78 from organ failure from a lifetime of alcohol abuse. My dad and I brought his ashes back to North Dakota where we buried him.

My dad cried. Gene cried. I didn't.

The next day, when Gene goes to Bismarck for his doctor's appointments, I return to the cemetery. I stand at the small metal gate. In some ways, it is the place I feel most connected

to. A small square of land, donated to the community out of someone's farm field. A right turn off Highway 21 onto a gravel road and then a left turn and there you are, overlooking rolling hills that are impossibly green in the spring when the wheat comes, gold in the summer, and then finally, white in the winter when they are covered with snow. The cemetery is the only place where there are trees. The pines and cedars keep the wind from making it completely unbearable.

On the way to the cemetery, I pass two abandoned farmhouses: windows shot out, paint peeling off, a mixture of grass and weeds starting to engulf the first floors. I wonder if that is what will happen to Gene and Squirt's houses when Gene dies.

I unlatch the gate and step inside.

Lena and I make our way back to my family's plots. She wanders around the graves, sniffing and occasionally putting eyes on me to make sure I am not going to leave her. I planned to sit against one of the pine trees until answers came, but the North Dakota cold convinces me otherwise.

In this cemetery lies the remains of most of my dad's family: His father, mother, grandparents and great-grandparents on both sides, his still-born sister Nira Zane, three-year-old brother Scotty and his other little sister, Becky. At the age of 50 she took some pills and drank some vodka, enough so she wouldn't wake up.

Her ashes are not here though, just a footstone. Gene made sure she had one even if she didn't want to be buried in North Dakota.

"It is important," he told me, "to have a marker. To let people know you existed."

Before I walk back to the car, I find Squirt's grave, the son that stayed to take over the farm. He died from an aggressive, untreatable brain tumor which made it so the McDowall family's farming life on the northern Great Plains would be over with Gene. Squirt's family left, and Gene had to sell part of farm and lease out the rest.

When Gene talks about him, he looks how I feel when I talk about my dad. A tightening. A gathering.

The night before he told me about the last time he talked to Squirt, I thought about telling him about the last time I talked to my dad, the day he died. Instead, I let it be. I didn't feel

like crying anymore. He finished, and we sat in silence.

Four generations that will never be five. Once Gene dies, it is over. It's already over.

I turn to leave the cemetery. Lena is already at the gate waiting for me.

I return to the farm exhausted. Gene and his daughter won't return from Bismarck for another couple of hours, so I wander around the house. Every room has the same large framed aerial photo of the farm and dozens of photos of family and kids and grandkids and great-grandkids. All people I'm related to but don't know and never will.

Lena jumps up on the couch and immediately falls asleep. It's the same couch I slept on during my first trip to North Dakota. I was seven. My great-grandmother died in a car accident at a gravel four way stop in the middle of the tiny nearby town of Leith at the age of 97.

My dad and I left Billings after he got off of work on a Friday afternoon. We listened to Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson the entire way. Kris, Willie, Waylon, my dad called them, like they were old high school buddies. We got to Gene's house late. All the rooms in both houses on the farm were full of family, so we slept in sleeping bags on the couches.

I have a photo of my dad and I right after the funeral. I am standing on the hitch of the old brown Ford econoline van in stone washed jeans and a striped turquoise t-shirt with my arms crossed in front of me. My white-blond hair is down, not up in a ponytail like I liked it. My dad didn't know how to do my hair. He is standing next to me in an ill-fitted gray suit he co-owned with his best friend Bruce. They shared it. The last person who had to be a pallbearer in a funeral was the one that kept it in the closet, hanging there until the next friend or relative died. Dad is holding a Budweiser and his moccasins. We both stare at the camera and lean against one another, neither one of us smiling.

I curl up next to Lena. She sighs as she lays her head on my thigh. I wish my dad was here to help me understand this place. I never asked enough questions. He would be happy I am here with Gene, I know this, but it doesn't make it easier.

That evening, Gene returns from Bismarck. A day of doctor visits was hard on him. The doctors tell him he has no cushioning left between his vertebrae, just bone on bone. Tonight, he lets me make him his Mountain Dew and vodka, and we take our spots at the kitchen table.

I tell him about my trip to the cemetery and that plot 19 looks good. He nods, opens the folder and writes "TOM" in the square. His mood lightens, and I realize how much it burdened him that my dad didn't have a marker in the cemetery. It shouldn't have taken me three years to come see my dad's favorite uncle and settle this. I didn't even call him when he died.

Gene starts reading the names of my family and pointing on the sheet until he gets to Scotty's grave where his finger lingers.

"You should know about what happened to Scotty." He taps the square and then closes his eyes.

My great-grandfather Giles, Gene's father, was driving a tractor, using it to spread manure around the fruit trees in front of the house. My father was eight. His sister was eleven. They were sitting in the front bucket of the tractor.

My great-grandmother Margaret and my grandmother Lillian were in and out of the house hanging laundry on the line.

Scotty, my dad's little brother, was three. He was inside with his mom but wanted to be out with his brother and sister in the tractor. It looked like more fun. He was fussing. They gave in and took him out front.

"And my mother felt so terrible because she had carried him out. She handed him up to my dad on the tractor."

Giles put Scotty on his lap, but Scotty still wasn't happy. He continued to fuss and reach for my dad. He wanted to be in the bucket with his brother and sister. Giles stopped the tractor and my dad jumped out to grab him. Giles handed Scotty to my dad. My dad handed Scotty to his sister and climbed back into the bucket.

In my mind I see all of these people. I see Margaret hand Scotty to Giles. I see Giles hand Scotty to my dad. I see my dad hand Scotty to his sister.

“That was one of those half-way old fashioned loaders, it had a mechanical trip, not a hydraulic cylinder to help it. The clutch was rough. The tractor jerked forward. The trip on the bucket released.”

It feels at this moment as if Gene and I are standing outside watching this unfold. Press play and watch a little boy fall to his death, watch a family fall apart.

The tractor lurched forward, the bucket dumped. My dad, his sister, and Scotty tumbled to the ground. Scotty was in the middle.

“It was a tractor with two wheels close together in the front.”

Giles couldn't stop it in time. He felt the front wheels lift off the earth. He heard screaming. That moment probably lasted forever.

“He got the tractor stopped before the back wheels got the other two.”

Giles jumped off the tractor. Scotty was lying there motionless. Was he already dead? Gene isn't sure. My dad and his sister crouched over him, screaming and crying.

“I remember I was cleaning the chicken house when it happened. I was right by the door. I looked out, and I saw Giles carrying Scotty. I knew something had happened. I met him by the gas pumps.”

Giles handed Scotty's limp body to Gene.

“Was he alive?” I ask.

“No.” Gene shakes his head. “I probably shouldn't tell you.”

“It's ok. I want to know.”

“The pressure. It broke his eardrums. There was blood....” Gene's voice trails off. “From his nose and mouth and ears.” I see a tear form and flow down his cheek. One of his hands is on the table and he slowly taps his middle finger.

My grandmother came out of the house. Gene handed Scotty to her, and they got into the car. Gene drove as fast as he could to the hospital in Elgin.

I can see Giles handing Scotty to Gene. I can see Gene handing Scotty to my grandmother. I can see my grandmother handing Scotty to the Doctor. I want to ask if my grandmother was crying. I never saw her cry. Not once.

“It is something that is a part of all our lives. It must have ruined my folks’ lives. It must have ruined your grandparents’ lives. It will always be there.” Gene says.

“Did anyone ever tell my dad it wasn’t his fault?” I ask.

Gene shrugs. “It was a terror on your dad. And that’s the best I can do for you. That’s the last time I’ll ever tell that story. It’s yours now. You can tell your family, if they’d like to know.”

He pauses and looks up at the newscasters speaking mutely on the TV.

“I think we missed the weather,” he says

“I think we did.”

The change in topic startles me but Gene is done talking. It’s time to move on. It’s time for bed.

My dad wrote an essay in college about the death of his dog Rip that I found after he died. In it, he mentions Scotty but not his mother or father. He did write about an uncle had told him what a “brave little man” he was when Scotty died.

Emotional stoicism runs through our blood apparently, inherited from my ancestors who immigrated to the windy northern plains of North Dakota to farm.

The next day, I don’t know how to leave, so I take an extra-long time cooking us breakfast.

My mom calls to tell me a snowstorm is on its way to eastern Montana. I need to get out ahead of it. I load my bags in the car and take Lena for a walk around the farmyard before our drive home.

When I go back in, I can hear loud music playing from the kitchen.

Gene is in his chair at the kitchen table, sleeping, his chin resting against his chest. I look up at the television. The Willie and Friends Sirius station is playing, "For The Good Times," by Kris Kristofferson. The volume way up. It was one of my dad's favorite songs.

Don't look so sad.
I know it's over
But life goes on
And this old world will keep on turning

Gene's chest rises, falls. Out the window, the orchard trees are bare and Squirt's house, empty. The past doesn't seem so far away at the moment.

But life goes on
And this old world will keep on turning.
Let's just be glad
we had some time
to spend together

I lean my back against the wall and slide to the floor.

there's no need to watch the bridges

Lena lays down next to Gene's feet.

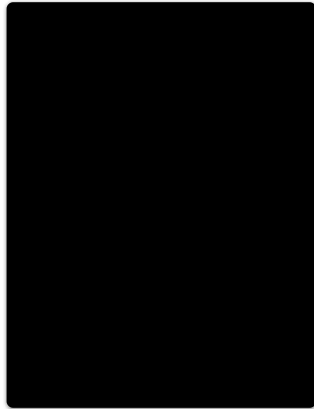
that we're burning

And we wait for him to wake up so I can say goodbye.

I don't have time to stop at the cemetery, but I do anyway. I try to remember where Scotty's grave is and start shoveling the snow out of the way with my gloveless hands. Lena tries to

help by digging next to me. I need to take a photo of his footstone. My dad would like it if they matched.

I told Gene I'd be back when the ground thaws.



Alexis Bonogofsky is a fourth-generation Montanan, community organizer, goat and sheep rancher, and freelance writer and photographer, who lives and works along the Yellowstone River in southeastern Montana. Her writing and photography can be found on her website East of Billings and various news outlets and magazines including *Mountain Journal*, *Montana Quarterly* and *Truthout*. For ten years she managed the Tribal Lands Partnership Program for the National Wildlife Federation. She received her B.A. in International Studies from Gonzaga University and her M.A. in International Development from University of Denver's Korbel School of International Studies.

Her anti-coal organizing work was featured in the book and movie, *This Changes Everything*, by Canadian journalist and author Naomi Klein and in the recent National Geographic coal documentary, *From the Ashes*. In 2014, Alexis was awarded the Cultural Freedom Fellowship from the Lannan Foundation in Santa Fe.

