

## Death by Beulah Gross

I sit in the darkness, listening. I am on the floor in the laundry hunched into the corner of the washing machine and the back wall. The door is closed. The dog cowers at my side. I'm not proud of being a coward but cannot stay and watch.

I hear the ambulance arrive. The officers walk into the flat. Their voices are deep but subdued. My brother's replies to their questions are almost inaudible. I hear the half-moon table scraping on the wooden floor as it's moved to make space, then heavy footsteps and the susurrantion of rubber wheels. The stretcher is being manoeuvred into the bedroom. I cover my ears with balled up fists. I don't want to hear anything but it makes no difference. I can hear it all too clearly.

My sister says, quite loudly, 'I want to see him one last time.' A loud sob, then, grunts and bumps as they lift his body.

The dog whimpers and digs his head deeper into my lap. He is shivering and so am I. My eyes are shut tight but hot tears leak out.

Someone asks, 'Do you want the rings and the chain around his neck? If so, you must remove them yourself. We're not allowed to.'

'Yes,' says my brother, quiet and unemotional. I know he feels things deeply but am amazed at his supreme self-control. He grunts and the attendant says something about the fingers being stiff already. I'm horrified. How can he bring himself to remove the two rings from our father's lifeless hand? The wedding ring which has never been off his finger and the turquoise one which he wore for years and was promised to me but never given. 'I'll give it to you soon,' he would say but 'soon' never came. I know I'll never accept it now.

The stretcher is wheeled out, bumping on the passage walls.

My sister says: 'Goodbye, Daddy,' and begins sobbing.

Mom is silent. She wouldn't add to her children's grief by exposing her own but I know she's crying inside. She, the one who should be comforted most is, as always, calm and controlled, thinking only of others. She is the eternal earth mother.

'Shush, my dear', she says. 'It's better this way. He's out of pain now.'

The sobs become gulps.

The floor, the wall, the washing machine, are cold. My tears run faster - silent, hot, uncontrollable.

The dog whimpers again and tries to bury himself under my arm and in my lap. I clutch him close, his shaking body warming me. My body is racked with painful shudders.

Then, at last, the ambulance motor starts and they leave. My brother opens the laundry door.

'You can come out now. They've gone.'

The dog leaps up and shoots out through the front door and down the street 'Sunny!' I scream. 'Sunny! Come back!' and run out after him. He's racing madly down the road, yelping loudly, deaf to my cries. I stand in the middle of the road, staring after him, wondering if he'll come back. I can't lose him too.

My mother takes my arm. 'Don't worry. He'll be back. He also loved Dad,' she says, and leads me back into the flat.

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