

# Faith of Our Fathers

*Faith of our fathers, living still,  
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword  
Oh, how our hearts beat high with joy  
When'er we hear that glorious word.  
Faith of our fathers, holy faith  
We will be true to thee till death.*

—“Faith of Our Fathers”

Frederick W. Faber, 1814–1863

The only part of the Latin Mass that I understood was the English part when the congregation said three times, very quickly, “Lord-I-am-not-worthy-that-you-should-come-under-my-roof.-Speak-but-the-word-and-my-soul-shall-be-healed.”

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My father said it, though I couldn’t hear his individual voice. I probably said it, too. I don’t remember. Then my father would go up to receive the parchment-papery circle of wafer that was the body of Christ. I didn’t go up. I wasn’t really a Catholic. I just went to Mass with my father for fun. That’s the kind of kid I was.

I liked the holy water in the little holders by the door. It always seemed more slippery than real water, as if its power to bless and to

heal were somehow related to my perception of it as having a special viscosity, not that I would have known to describe it that way.

I liked the genuflecting and the kneeling. I liked the marble columns that had pink veins running through them, reminding me of Beech-Nut Fruit Stripe chewing gum. I imagined taking a bite of one.

I loved the incense. And the mysterious sanctus bells that were rung at apparently random moments throughout Mass. Mostly, I guess, I loved the little memorial candles that flickered willy-nilly in their blue or red glass votives. From time to time my father would let me light a memorial candle for Aunt Alice or Grandpa or for his own father, Pop, who had died before I was born.

My father would give me coins to drop into the metal box that sat next to a pile of thin, wax-coated wicks. I would pick up one of those long wicks, light it from another candle, and then choose the votive I wanted. When my candle's flame began to flicker along with its companion candles, I would drop the wick into a metal tray, and its flame would gradually die out.

After my father died, I used to light memorial candles for him whenever I was in a Catholic church. I imagined him watching me as I set a little tongue of flame into a blue or a red votive cup. I imagined that he saw me lighting it for him, and somehow, in a way I didn't understand and could scarcely allow myself to trust, it made me feel closer to him.

I liked the memorial candles best. But I also liked the hollow sound of the priest's voice over the loudspeakers, echoing throughout the walls of the church—first here and then there—like a ventriloquist throwing his voice. I liked the way the ushers swished the offering baskets on their broomstick handles quickly up and down the pews, twice each service.

That's how you could tell it was a Catholic church. Because they took the collection twice.

In our church—my mother and sisters' church, my church—they took it only once, and it was gathered slowly, the shining brass basin passed from hand to hand by every person.

Our Saviour's Lutheran Church was very different from St. Augustine's Roman Catholic church, where my father went and where nearly all of my classmates—Catholics, like my father—went.

Our Saviour's Lutheran Church was a better church, of course, a more godly church. Somehow I had been brought up to believe that. I'm not sure why we thought we were better. Maybe it was because in my mother's church I was so much more terrified of God than I was in my father's church.

For one thing, in her church there was so little to distract you from the fact of God's awful presence. The pastor was a boring preacher who spoke unconvincingly of a loving God. In our hymns we sang of a God who existed only, it seemed, to menace us so that we should know ourselves as sinners, first and last. We sang "*Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed his blood for me*" and "*Come to Calvary's holy mountain, sinners ruined by the fall*" and "*Go to dark Gethsemane, All who feel the Tempter's power.*"

They didn't sing in the Catholic church. They just murmured responses and kneeled a lot. Maybe the Catholics couldn't carry a tune. I'd never heard my father sing, but my best friend, Denise, was a Catholic, and she was most definitely tone-deaf.

The Catholic kids got to take Communion by fourth grade. I wasn't allowed to take Communion in my father's church because I was a Lutheran.

I wasn't allowed to take Communion in my mother's church either. I wouldn't be able to do that until I was fourteen. This was not only because I wasn't good enough, but also because I wasn't old enough to know just how not good enough I was. I would know a lot more about that by the time I was fourteen.

For some reason I was convinced that the Lutheran church was better than the Catholic church. But maybe that was why: because we *knew* we were poor, miserable sinners and there was no priest or penance to let us off the hook and convince us otherwise.

My two sisters and I had been baptized at St. Augustine's. That had been part of the deal my mother had had to strike with the priest

to get married to my father: she had to promise to raise her children as Catholics. But somehow I think it was always understood that she would have the final say about our religious upbringing.

She had grown up a Methodist. I don't think she had been much of a Methodist. The only thing I ever remember her telling me about her girlhood church life was that her pastor had tried to kiss her—and it had not been a holy kiss.

It was after she was married and had children that she started going to Our Saviour's, a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church.

As a child I didn't know much about what it meant to be a Missouri Synod Lutheran. Or why, for a church in upstate New York, it seemed necessary to be identified with such a faraway and clearly backward state as Missouri. The "Show Me State." It wasn't even subtle; they might as well have called it the "Show-off State."

Nevertheless, being Lutheran in a town full of German and Irish Roman Catholics seemed very exotic to me. It was almost as exotic as being Jewish.

"Lutheran." I liked to say the word. And I liked Martin Luther, too, except for his haircut.

Luther seemed to struggle with the same thing I did: ever since I could remember, I had wanted to be good. And I certainly did not think I was.

I was a sinner.

Unlike the Catholics, we didn't tell our sins in secret, as if somehow we could be told to say a few "Hail, Marys" and get off Scot-free. We announced our sins in front of one another. Not the specifics of each sin, of course—that would be rude and would take too long. So rather than bother with individual peccadilloes, we simply announced our general total depravity.

First the pastor would say:

*Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word, and deed. Wherefore we flee for refuge to*

*Thine infinite mercy seeking and imploring Thy grace for the sake of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Then the congregation spoke in unison the scathing admission of our human worthlessness:

*O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserve Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor sinful being.*

I didn't know what God's grace and mercy would look like or feel like. But what was clear to me was that I was not good and could not be good and if I did manage to do something good, I would soon enough find out I was still not good enough. Nevertheless, I was expected to try to be good because the alternative was my justly deserved temporal and eternal punishment—a.k.a. hell. Hell in life and hell in death.

Hell would be like our basement only much, much worse because most things about our basement I rather liked. My father's woodworking shop was down there. My mother held our Camp Fire Girl meetings down there. All of those things took place in the finished part of the basement.

But there was another part of the basement, the part on the other side of the black sewer pipe.

That part was vast and dank and dark. Hell would be something like that—damp and underground. The stereotypical fiery furnaces of hell never made much sense to me.

I mean, in my favorite Greek story of Orpheus and Eurydice, Eurydice was given that blessed shot at trying to make it out of Hades, relying only on Orpheus's self-control that he not turn around to look at her until they were both once again aboveground.

But Eurydice was not trying to escape *flames*. She was trying to escape a dank prison, an underworld oubliette of bone-rattling chill that never warmed up, never dried out, never saw the sun.

Even though I knew Greek myth was all made up and Lutheran hell was a real place, I still feared it could be like the Greek version, and I really did not want to go there. I needed to keep close track on the number of things I did wrong versus the number of things I did right.

So, in an effort to track my status, I ranked my sins. In this respect it would have been helpful if I could have gone to confession at my father's church. That way I'd have known for sure which were the lesser sins and which were the greater sins. Lacking the priest's advice, I improvised my own ranking system.

For example, disobedience to one's parents was bad, but kind of inevitable. Thinking bad thoughts was bad, but inevitable. These were lesser sins.

Talking about somebody behind their back was very wrong. That was called being deceitful. The French-Canadians who lived across the river were deceitful, my mother always said. Yet she managed to talk behind people's backs quite a lot and somehow we were not supposed to consider it bad when she did it. I never understood how that worked, but I accepted it. She wasn't really being deceitful. She wasn't even French-Canadian!

Lying was definitely a greater sin, maybe the worst of all, except for stealing and killing. Lying was the really bad thing to do. Even though lying was a really bad thing to do, there were lies of lesser and greater consequence.

Little white lies were okay. Like the kind my mother would tell about Christmas presents or birthday presents or letting my Aunt Marion think my mother really liked her even though she couldn't stand her and talked about her all the time behind her back.

White lies were okay. Real lies were bad.

My first lie, the lie that haunted me for years, was about the butter cookies.

They were the round, thin cookies my mother made at Christmas. And apart from the fact that they had little pats of colored sugar on them, they could have passed as thick-cut Communion wafers. They

were tiny. And one time before dinner I asked if I could have some cookies and my mother said, yes, just a couple. And I took five.

No, I hadn't lied, *per se*. I had disobeyed. But I had also omitted to tell her that I was disobeying her, which was, implicitly, a lie.

She had trusted me to do as she had said. To do otherwise was dishonest. I had taken five cookies. So what if they were small—they still counted.

Not that I would have owned up to it if she'd asked (and she wouldn't have; if Mom understood anything, it was a sweet tooth). I just kept quiet about it. For years.

One time I asked her how many "a couple" was. "Oh, maybe two. Or three," she said. I said, "Could it be four, maybe?" And she said, "Yeah, *maybe* it could be four."

Then I said, "Do you think it could be five, even?" And she said, "Well, no. I don't think there is any way that you could say 'a couple' meant five."

She had no clue how guilty I felt. She had no clue because I had never told her what I had done.

I wasn't good at owning up to individual sins, and in that way I was not a real Catholic, in spite of the baptism. Imagine having to tell the priest about the butter cookies. Or the Barbie shoe.

I was five when the Barbie shoe episode happened. And if intention means anything at all, I never intended to *steal* the Barbie shoe. I really only meant to give a stray a home.

I was at the five-and-dime where my mother worked, and there was this table of assorted junk—perfume bottles missing their caps, stockings in ripped boxes, teddy bears missing buttons. And there were some Barbie doll outfits, too, with packages half-opened so that they were missing some of their component pieces. Things had simply fallen out, like a Barbie clutch purse that was supposed to go with the fur-trimmed, red and white satin evening ensemble or a thigh-high boot intended to go with the psychedelic-print skirt and matching Nehru jacket.

I would never, ever have taken one of those half-opened packages. If I had wanted one, I would have asked my father to *buy* it for me and then have been content with his answer.

Nor would I ever have reached inside to take out one of the pieces that belonged to a complete outfit. Either action was unthinkable.

But—fallen like grace from one of the packages was a single red Barbie mule.

Just the one. One was all I needed.

Early Barbies didn't have a lot of different shoe styles. They had those unnaturally shaped feet with their permanently flexed toes that were designed for high heels and high heels only. And the heels Barbie wore were always the same—stilettos with a tiny band of plastic across the instep. Classic Mattel mules. And they came in different colors to match the many different outfits.

I didn't have many different outfits—my family was not one to overwhelm us with toys—so I took great care with those that I had. Only it happened I was missing one red shoe. And here it was, as if provided by the generous hand of Providence: a single red Barbie shoe.

So, making sure nobody saw, I slipped it carefully into my pocket, grateful to God for having seen to my needs. And Barbie's.

I figured I was not so much stealing as I was bringing back the missing, giving a lost shoe a purpose. Who else but I would have the heart to care so much about a little red Barbie shoe?

I brought it home and set it next to the other red shoe in the little wooden wardrobe my father had made for my Barbie clothes.

But I knew, deep down, what I had done: I had stolen.

And I just did not have the guts to bring the shoe back to the store and slip it back onto the sale table of damaged junk. Besides, I needed it more than the store did.

Oh, there were lots of sins I remember, lots of ways in which I was a disobedient kid. I put my feet on the sofa without taking my shoes off. I was noisy and hyper at the Camp Fire Girl meetings held in our basement. I didn't do a good job on my fire prevention booklet because mine was never picked as the winner anyway, so why bother? After a



while, Smokey the Bear saying “Only YOU can prevent forest fires” meant very little to me. We didn’t even live near any forests.

And there were more sins, as well. The biggest one, though, was clearly a sin of the flesh; I recognized that right away. Even though I had discovered it quite by accident, I knew immediately, as sensations ran through my body that made me want to point my toes just like Barbie’s, that what I was doing *had* to be a sin.



My father died when I was nine. He died suddenly, though not “suddenly” as in a car wreck or a heart attack. He died over the course of a few weeks. Even so, that’s sudden enough: he was healthy and in his forties. And then it was as if the script for his life had been exchanged with someone else’s. His dying had no narrative setup to it. It just happened.

It began with stomach pains while we were vacationing in Maine. When we returned home, his doctor told him they needed to do “exploratory surgery.” Even then surgery as means of “exploration” must have been a questionable concept. But that’s what my mother called it. Exploratory meant that they might not find anything. I had explored beaches and never found beach glass.

They found an intestinal tumor of some sort, removed it, stitched him back up, and were going to send him home. It was getting on toward September, soon time for Daddy to pick all the tomatoes and make chili sauce. It was time for back-to-school preparations. It was time for my sister, Jackie, to start college, the first in our family ever to do so, and for me to start fourth grade.

He was not supposed to get sicker. The stitches were not supposed to break. The bile was not supposed to rush from his intestines and poison his whole body.

But it did. People from the hospital called us and told us to come right down. He had taken a turn for the worse. That was the expression my mother kept using when she would tell people: “Dick has taken a turn for the worse.”

For the next three weeks, while Jackie and my mother visited my father, I sat in the lobby of Albany Memorial Hospital. I read a lot of books. Usually somebody—a relative or an adult family friend—sat with me. But I liked it best when I sat there alone.

Often I would go outside to the flagpole in front of the hospital. There were some blue spruce trees out there, like the ones Daddy had planted in our yard. There was a concrete sidewalk that encircled the flagpole and the trees. And there were petunias all around the edges of the sidewalk. White, purple, red, fuchsia petunias. They were pretty and they had a strong smell.

We had lots of things planted in our yard, which was big and well cared for. We had quince bushes and mums and a flaming Japanese maple. We had purple lilacs and white lilacs. We had honeysuckle and forsythia and lily-of-the-valley and some kind of wild cherry tree. We had apple trees and elm trees and lots of pine and juniper. We had tomato plants and Japanese lanterns and tiger lilies and rosebushes. And that year my mother had also planted dahlias. She had been bringing my father little bunches of dahlias as they blossomed.

But we didn't have petunias. And I thought they were the loveliest flowers, exotic and profuse compared with our yard that was so carefully terraced and tastefully landscaped. I almost felt guilty for preferring the riot of petunias to the gardens and lawns my father tended with devotion.

I walked around and around the circle of concrete sidewalk, and I sat in the waiting room every day for a week while upstairs, where I was not allowed to go, my father hung onto life.

Finally, so that she could stay at the hospital all day and night, my mother sent me to stay with my father's sister, Aunt Marion, who apart from her other failings had married a Jewish man only four months after her husband died. We were never supposed to mention that Chuck was Jewish, but surely both Aunt Marion and Chuck knew that. And what was wrong with being a Jew, anyway?

I also didn't understand why there had been this terrible outrage when they got married. And not because Chuck was Jewish but because he and Marion had married so quickly. Four months seemed like a long

time to me, but my mother assured me that it was completely improper for her to have married so soon after her first husband's death. She seemed to think that maybe Marion had been seeing Chuck on the side.

The other problem with Aunt Marion and Chuck was that they lived in an apartment, as my best friend, Denise, did. For some reason I didn't fully understand, I knew that it wasn't good to live in an apartment instead of a house. It meant you were lower class.

Of course, technically speaking I suppose you could say we lived in an apartment, though my mother always said we lived in a duplex, meaning, I guess, that there were two apartments side by side, unlike two apartments stacked one on top of the other. Besides, we owned our house; we didn't rent. And it was a new house, not an old flat with speckled linoleum and a sink with a skirt to hide the pipes and metal cabinets.

But I always loved apartments. And I especially loved my Aunt Marion and Uncle Chuck's apartment.

Even though my father was in the hospital, staying at Aunt Marion and Uncle Chuck's was magical. I slept in a bunk bed in my cousin Pammy's room. I slept in the top bunk. It was like being at summer camp, which was something I had never done. I read Trixie Belden books and played with Pammy.

And I played with the wiggly little dachshund, Alfie. I asked the Eight Ball question after question. I ate in the kitchen with the speckled linoleum floor and watched a portable TV that had rabbit's ears on it. This was also supposed to be lower class, somehow—the rabbit's ears, I guess. Our television was an enormous clunky black-and-white console, which meant we had good taste, apparently. But Aunt Marion's was a color TV, and because of that any possible class distinctions were lost on me.

While I was staying at their house, my aunt and Uncle bought me a one-year diary. It was a pink leather book just a little bigger than my hand. It had a latch, as if it could lock, which I don't think it really could. It had lined pages edged in gold, and on the front in gold letters it said "My Diary."

I was excited to have a diary and assumed I would write in it every day, that I would write down everything I did. I soon realized that a diary is a time-consuming undertaking, and I was having fun doing other things, so my entries were shorter than I had intended them to be.

On top of that, I also had to leave lots of time to pray. I prayed for my father. “Lord, please let Daddy get well.” “Dearest Lord Jesus, please *make* Daddy get well. Please *make* him.”

But maybe I didn’t really keep my thoughts enough on him. Maybe I was having too much fun. Because when my mother stopped by sometime during the week I spent at Aunt Marion’s, I didn’t ask about him right away.

Instead, I told her what I had been doing. I was having a good time. I was excited. But she just looked at me, and in a few minutes I realized I had made a big goof: I had not asked about Daddy first. I had just been going on and on about all the fun I had been having.

I stopped talking. I tried to look serious and concerned. I really *was* concerned. I really *was* worried. And I really *had* been praying.

So I asked, in a calmed-down voice, “How is Daddy doing?”

But she didn’t answer. She just looked at me. We were standing in the doorway between the kitchen with the speckled floor and the living room with the portable color TV. She looked at me hard and sarcastically, a way I had never seen her look at me before.

She waited. Her silence hurt like a slap.

“You are such a faker,” she said, speaking slowly, each word pregnant with disdain.

I felt my face flush hot and red, my stomach wrenching. I went deaf with shame, hearing only *You. Are. Such. A. Faker.* and nothing else, over and over again. My mother was saying something, but I couldn’t hear her. And I was sure my aunt could hear what I did: *You Are Such a Faker.*

I was worthless.

And my mother was right. Still, I just kept on asking my mother about Daddy, pretending to be interested and concerned rather than undone by my shame and worthlessness. I kept up that screen of words

until my mother and Aunt Marion got to talking about whatever it is grown women who didn't like each other much talked about. And when it was safe to retreat, I returned, full of self-loathing, to Pammy's bedroom and the shadowy recess of the lower bunk.

After a while my mother came in to say good-bye to me. I was crying, but I didn't know if she believed my tears were real or not. They *were* real. It was *all* real.

I knew I had been a bad daughter. That I had not written Daddy enough notes—not as many as he had written to me when he was still well enough to write them. And now I wasn't concerned enough about him. Why had I ever thought I could leave this all in God's hands? Why had I ever thought that I could pray for him and that would be enough?



Back at home a week later, I found out that it really wasn't enough.

My Aunt Millie had come to stay with me and my oldest sister, Leslie, who was mentally retarded, while my sister Jackie kept our mother company at the hospital. Leslie and I were in our beds one night when my mother and sister came home. I could hear them talking to Aunt Millie in the living room, but I couldn't hear what they were saying, only that their voices were low and sad. What else could it have been but my father's death that made them return home so late and speak so softly? And yet I couldn't imagine that. As long as they stayed in the living room talking to my aunt, it would be just another night when I couldn't get to sleep.

Then my mother came into the bedroom and turned on the light switch. It was the light switch that turned on silently, as if padded with velvet. My father had put it in when he had painted our bedroom. My mother had made new curtains from fabric printed with images of dancers styled after the paintings of Degas's ungainly ballerinas. I had never liked their thick calves and crooked arms.

But I had loved the light switch. It was the light switch that I would turn out each night that my father carried me into bed, pretending I was a princess and he my adoring lord. We would stand at the head of the hallway and I would sing *Dunh-da-da-da-da-da-DAH!*, as if a curtain were opening to reveal the two of us. Then I would curtsy to the imaginary crowd, and he would bow and then he would sweep me up, princess style, and carry me down the hallway.

At the entrance to the bedroom he would pause, bend down a bit, and let me flick out the light using the silent, velvet-padded light switch. And he would carry me across to my bed and tuck me in, along with all of my stuffed animals—Pokey the bear, Casper the ghost, and Flathead the bunny. And I would say three prayers with Daddy—“Jesus, Tender Shepherd”; the Lord’s Prayer; and a Hail Mary. I didn’t say a Hail Mary when my mother tucked me in. It was a Catholic prayer, and it wouldn’t have been right. But I loved it.

*Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord be with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, please pray for our sinners now and at the hour of our death.*

“Please” was my own addition. It seemed rude to order the mother of God to do anything.

Then my father would kiss me and tell me he loved me and say, “See you in the morning” (my mother always said “see you in the a.m.”) and I would say it back—“see you in the morning” (though with my mother I said “a.m.,” which I preferred because I thought it was more intellectual sounding).

That night, though—that September night when she and Jackie got back from the hospital—my mother came into the bedroom and turned on the light with the silent switch, woke us up, and said, “Girls, your father passed away tonight.”

*Passed away* is what she said.

I knew then—and it still seems so today—that it was better to say “passed away” than “died.”

*Girls, your father passed away tonight.*

Immediately Leslie burst into a fury of loud wailing and crying. I was astonished. She cried instantaneously, as if she had been cued, as if she had been shocked. I didn't know whether to be jealous or irritated.

I cried second. I cried slowly. I didn't know what any of this meant. A dead father. A father who had passed away. No Daddy anymore?

I couldn't even remember the last time we had walked down the hallway like princess and lord. I hadn't singled out the last time we had done that, thinking, "This could be the last time we will do this," because it never, ever had occurred to me that it *could* be the last time.

I had thought Daddys were forever. Death had never occurred to me.



What I remember most clearly is the tolling bell at St. Augustine's on the morning of the funeral. I can never hear a tolling bell without thinking of my father and feeling the heavy sound inside my chest.

We sat in the huge black car that had driven us from the funeral parlor to St. Augustine's church. We waited as they unloaded my father's casket. And all the while I heard the bell—the slowest, deepest, most hollow sound I had ever heard. It made my heart beat like something trapped. It thrummed against my skull.

I didn't learn that it was called "the tolling bell" until I went to seminary. The tolling bell is only used at funerals. But I didn't know anything about that the morning they lifted his casket out of the hearse and rolled him into St. Augustine's. I did know that this was the last Mass we would ever attend together. Though you could scarcely say we were together.

He wasn't with me. He was in that box. I had seen him lying in it. I had touched him lying in it, had kissed his stone-hard forehead. I had put one of my little stuffed animals in it with him. My father had bought me a pair of them, Augie Doggy and Augie Daddy, named after cartoon characters. They were supposed to represent him and me: I kept Augie Doggy with me, but Augie Daddy I sent on with him. Or maybe it was the other way around. I don't remember.

I do remember my grandmother at the funeral parlor, speaking more loudly than she must have realized, “Joey doesn’t look too broken up about her Daddy passing away.”

It made me wonder what I was doing wrong. I had been crying. I would cry some more. But all of these people kept coming up to see my mother and my sisters and me, and though it was a sad time, there were smiles and laughter too.

I tried, though, to be more appropriately, or at least more visibly, grieving.

But I didn’t have to try when I heard the tolling bell. I heaved with sobs I hadn’t summoned, sobs I couldn’t stop.

The bell made its single, hollow, low sound, more solemn than the September day was bright. It was followed by another single hollow toll, diminishing again into silence. And again. Again, again.

I don’t remember anything other than that. Nothing about the Mass—whether it was in Latin or in English. I don’t remember whether or not they called him Richard J. Page or Dick Page, though I expect it was Richard. I’m not sure the priests really knew their parishioners.

I don’t remember the priest celebrating Communion—which, as Lutherans, we would not have been allowed to take anyway.

I don’t remember the trip to the cemetery or the interment there or the priest’s words or who stood around the rose-pink granite cross that marked his grave just up the hill from a small and lovely pond.

*In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our brother, Richard, and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him and keep him. The Lord make his face to shine on him and be gracious to him. The Lord look upon him with favor and give him peace. Amen.*

The priest must have said these words, standing on the rickety planks that surrounded the grave that had been dug. Maybe he took a ceremonial spoonful of dirt to toss on the coffin. Maybe he sprinkled some holy water. I don’t remember.



I don't know what happened as we moved away from my father's grave, either. It just seemed that soon we were back at our house and I was wondering why there was a party, for God's sake. There was white-frosted cake that had sprinkles. There were orange and grape soda. Neighbors were bringing casseroles.

I remember hearing laughter and wondering why it was that if I hadn't cried enough at the funeral home, it was now okay for people to seem so lighthearted now. My father remained dead, and now he was buried underground, besides.

This seemed to me no cause for laughter.