

Have you ever wondered about the moment of your own death? I never did, at least not consciously, but in the months that preceded mine – I felt as if I had been mortally wounded.

My father died on January 27, 2001 and my own life came to an abrupt end exactly six months later. In retrospect, it was as if his passing foreshadowed my own.

My father's name was Edward Flett and after him, I was the last in a long line of landlocked islanders. My family came from Orkney where my great grandmother's great grandmother had lived with a bear. The animal was a gift, given to her by the Norseman who stayed in her croft for ten years avoiding war. During that time, my ancestral grandmother gave birth to a daughter. Her contemporaries assumed the obvious, but somewhere in the gap that exists between legend and life is a family trait that hints otherwise: my father had a longitudinal trough in his tongue. His mother passed it on to him, and he gave it to me.

When I entered my parents' home the day Ed died, I imagined his staccato voice, its deep brogue, as it was when he told me the story of my Orkney grandmother. Then I thought I heard him talking about books with his own father the way they always had and I remember feeling comforted by the lull of their voices. What I saw when I got to my parents' bedroom was the elegant curve of my mother's back. She had performed cardio pulmonary resuscitation for one hour and ten minutes before I arrived. "A heart attack," she whispered between breaths into my father's mouth as I moved to the other side of their double bed.

The emergency response team stood by at a respectful distance while they waited for me. My mother could not be comforted. The idea of consolation is unfamiliar to Sarah Flett. Her small body was rigid and convulsive movements punctuated her usual fluidity when she was taken gently from the room.

I knelt and cradled my father's stiffening fingers in my hands, kissed his knuckles. "I'll stay," I told the paramedic who came back after taking Sarah away, remembered what my Granny told me about leaving. When he moved into the hallway, I thought I saw my father standing in the corner of the room, but when I looked too hard, he disappeared.

His deflated body lay on its back on Sarah's side of their bed. The toes of his stained work boots pointed towards ten and two o'clock. He wore his navy blue coveralls over a plaid flannel shirt and a pair of muted green work pants. He must have just had the coveralls cleaned. They were spotless. My father was only a few inches over five feet, but at that moment he seemed taller. His cheeks were stretched and his mouth was curved as if beginning an, *Oh*. I smoothed his fingers against the surface of the bed.

I had wondered what the dying knew and the living did not, if our perceptions changed as our bodies shut down, if we adapted as if sightless or deaf, if we accepted the loss of what we had known. I wondered if dying forced us to let go of anger and love, or if death was a like a form of impotence. I didn't realize then that I would learn the answers to those questions before the short, Alberta summer came to an end.

I lay on my side next to my father and placed my hand on his chest. My knees were level with his shins, my head was on the pillow above his broad shoulders, and my long red hair fanned out behind me. I waited expectantly but there was no resonance or renunciation from the vocal chords next to my ear. Digestion and respiration were arrested, blood and lymph immobilized, bladder and bowel were toothless. No more voiding or avoiding, I thought. Then I heard a sigh.

My father's body sighed with relief in the hours after he died. Initially, the sound startled me.

"Natural occurrence," the paramedic said from the doorway of my parents' bedroom.

I listened to the story that the next-door neighbour repeated for the attending police officer. It wafted down the hallway from the kitchen with my mother's sobs and my aunt's endearments. Ed had been carrying a box to the recycling bins. The man next door saw him fall, ran outside, and then called nine-one-one after realizing that my father was unconscious. He and some other neighbours carried Ed from the driveway in front of my parents' semi-detached home, and laid him on their bed. My mother tried to call me, then gave up and phoned my friend Nemit, asked her to find me and bring me home. The paramedics arrived. They couldn't revive Ed. Sarah started CPR.

I shifted my weight, leaned on my elbow, and looked for the gaze that held me all my life, but my father's eyes were dull, the lids half opened, the pupils shrunken, the retinas denying reflection. The vivid blue seemed colorless, and the green splotches that he passed on to me, were vague. I noticed the wedding ring he rarely wore standing dust free on the inlaid mahogany table next to the bed. Sarah cleaned that ring weekly as if it were one of her Lladro figurines. Ed had insisted it was dangerous to wear a ring in his line of work. He was a craftsman and the table was a replica Ed made for Sarah. It was as beautiful as the original that stood on the other side of their bed. The seventeenth

century version was an heirloom, the only thing my mother owned, still owns, that belonged to her English parents.

I sat up and placed my hand, palm down next to the wedding band; the dark table surface felt warm. I examined the third finger of my left hand, which had been collapsed by the weight of five wedding rings by then. I turned slightly and skimmed my fingertip along the edge of my father's ear; it was a gesture he repeated tirelessly on mine when I couldn't sleep as a child.

I stood heavily – let go when the priest's black frock invaded my peripheral vision. Nemit came into the room with my mother and my Aunt Jane. I leaned against her as Sarah wept through *The Prayer for the Dead*.

It had been an unseasonably warm January, even for Chinook-blessed Calgary. The wind began blowing from the mountains to the city the week before Ed died. There was little snow left on the ground, and the smell of brown grass permeated the air. Whenever that happened, I experienced a sudden flood of phone calls from affected property seekers. I was showing an acreage, a large river property just south of the city of Calgary, to the ninth interested couple when the doorbell of the home rang.

"Expecting another buyer?" the purchaser had asked me. "My wife and I called you because we thought you were – exclusive."

“I can’t imagine who that is,” I replied clutching the edge of my suit jacket in my hand.

The same expensive navy wool blend occupied my fists as I stood swaying in my parents’ bedroom. I remember Nemit’s hands stroking my upper arms; I couldn’t speak the *Hail Mary’s* when the priest began a decade of the rosary.

I’d left my clients looking across the sloping property that ended on a cliff fifty feet above the Bow River and met Nemit at the door of the Dunbow Road house. She stood there, feet apart, hands on the doorjamb as if ready to charge. “It’s Ed,” she’d managed. Her brown face was streaked with tears. “Your mother called me.” What she said made little sense to me because Sarah often refused to speak with Nemit. Sometimes unpleasantness was all she could manage. “You have to come,” Nemit whispered.

I shook my head slowly from side to side, smelled the fear in my mother’s voice when she asked for *The Last Rites*. Her sobs were harmonized by a low growl. I remember staring at her newly coloured, shoulder length, blonde hair, her blue and white tracksuit, and her bare feet. They were bleeding on the antique rug. She had run outside without her shoes, through the shattered contents of the box my father had dropped on the ground. She wouldn’t let the paramedics attend to her until after his body had been taken to the funeral home.

The priest performed *Extreme Unction* and I heard him say something about anointing – then his words faded into an unnatural sound track. That’s when I realized that the growling sound was emanating from my own chest. I felt weighed down and disconnected from the kind of words that Ed had invested with so much authority. I loved my father, was devoted to him, but I never understood his stoic belief in the Catholic Church.

I watched the priest anoint my father’s forehead and hands with oil and wondered why the deep lines on Ed’s face had disappeared. When the priest slipped communion through the gap in my father’s lips and offered my mother a large crucifix, she kissed its metal feet.

I moved away from Nemit and left the room. I felt skinned, exposed and shivering like a she-bear without her coat.

My life hadn't always been about loss. It used to focus on gain. I was interested in property all my life. From the moment of my conception, I wondered who owned the womb I grew in, wondered at five years of age why Sarah and Ed called me *their* child, wondered at fourteen when I towered over my parents, why they thought I was a commodity they would eventually trade. That's when I began calling them by their first names. My mother, always so very English in her ways, thought it was charming. My father, the rough Scottish-Catholic, never got used to the idea, or so he said, but he always feigned horror whenever I slipped and called him, Dad.

I spent my adult life exchanging houses for money and money for houses. I traded real estate, but I was never the sort whose photograph appeared in the weekend paper. I didn't want my appearance to hinder or help my sales. I was like my father: I liked to do things the hard way.

I operated a private exchange for owners of waterfront properties on the Bow River. That was my focus, my niche. I was licensed to trade from Banff National Park to the place one hundred miles west of Medicine Hat where the Bow comes together with the Oldman River to shape the South Saskatchewan. Those lands were my territory.

The properties I traded during my life included houses, an apartment building, a nursing home, condominiums, a private school, restaurants, single-family dwellings, farms, ranches, cottages, and cabins. I concocted arrangements and ministered betrothals between Bow Terra Firma and people from around the globe, local millionaires, newlyweds, and couples of all kinds. Once, I even followed through on the registration of land to a horse. Giddy-up!

I was a bit of an oddity, even for Calgary, where the sudden changes in atmospheric pressure are matched only by the ebb and flow of oil-inspired fortunes. Maybe I hadn't been unlike my ancient grandmother. People came to me for a specific remedy. They wanted land next to running water in the middle of Western Canada and they thought I was the best person to get it for them.

My parents and relatives thought me perverse. Perhaps in some ways I was. I had legally married and divorced five men before I died at the age of thirty-seven. Sarah and Ed were married for forty-three years. I married for the first time at twenty-one and that merger ended before a year had gone by.

The first time I married, I resisted the mock-up of the father *giving* his daughter away. The tradition implies ownership, and when I was twenty-one, I believed that no one had the power to own me. I walked down the aisle in the

Longview Catholic Church, alone. I wore a pale blue skirt, Western boots, and a white cotton eyelet, off-the-shoulder top. My only traditional wedding accoutrement: a headpiece. Sarah thought I had looked like a Stampede Princess.

The first man I married was barely an adult. Domenic Wynn was eighteen, three years younger than I was and already hard at work ranching to pay off the property he had arranged to purchase from his father when he was fourteen. When we met at a rodeo party; I thought he was my match. By my twenty-second birthday, I realized that he was just a counterpart. I divorced him and left his land intact. It was dry and worn out. I moved back to Calgary and my parents' home on the Bow River.

*I thought* I was married a second time for seven days. However, the charming Justice of the Peace who went to great lengths to marry me to Liam Richards at Assiniboine Lodge didn't register the marriage before Liam advised me he wanted to make a quitclaim. I can't blame the event on a Chinook, wrong season. The wind didn't blow the day he told me to leave, but the weight of the thunderhead that had been building from the early morning finally burst into magnificent sheets of purple lightning when he unburdened himself.

After our wedding the JP had taken her time; she was a certified Alberta official and Assiniboine Provincial Park is in British Columbia, situated on the Great Divide. After a five-and-a-half year relationship and seven days of what I assumed was marriage, Liam asked me to remove all my belongings from the house I owned in Inglewood. "Go home to your mother," he said to me, as if we lived in another century and he could cast me off, legitimately, because I was barren. It was September, 1992. I was twenty-eight. I was not barren. I had been pregnant with his child and decided not to carry it to term. I left immediately and walked along the river to my parents' home.

"Does that break any Calgary Stampede records?" I asked Sarah at the time. For ten days in July, the City of Calgary and the City Las Vegas are statistical rivals. Both register a similar number of marriages and corresponding divorces.

According to Sarah, to make sure—absolutely sure—that he had no legal connection to me, Liam went to Saint Bernard's Catholic Church in Bowness, the church in the neighbourhood I lived in most of my life. He spoke to the nun in charge of annulments. She said he should go to a registry office because a priest hadn't married us. He wrote a cheque for four hundred dollars and insisted that she rush the process.

"A rush?" the nun had apparently asked him.

Then he added a four hundred dollar donation to the Sisters of the Perpetual Virgin kick-the-habit fund. The nun searched the Alberta and British

Columbia registries on the spot and found out that the marriage was not registered. A call to the JP was all it took. She did not register the indenture. We had not been married. I was cut to the bone by coincidence, felt as if my heart and gall had been taken.

I legally married and divorced three husbands after Liam, but I don't imagine Lynn, Raj, or Thomas. They – don't inhabit me.

I carry clear memories of Liam and our wedding ceremony at Assiniboine Lodge. They roll backward and fold in on themselves soothing me like the river water that ran over my torn skin on the day I died.

The main floor great-room of Assiniboine Lodge looked crowded when I walked carefully down the hand-cut staircase toward Ed's outstretched hand. My parents were amazed that I asked them to accompany me that day. I walked between them over wide creaking planks to where Liam stood with the JP. Sarah's eyes and lips were parched. Her fingers fluttered on my empty belly while Ed kissed me through his tears.

"Proud of ye," he whispered before standing next to Sarah and resting his head on her sharp shoulder. I wondered through the whole ceremony why he said that.

The JP was married to a local sports announcer. She was vital and loud and looked as strong as a horse in her Alberta Boot boots. Her Smithbuilt sported a feathered band, and the same plumes decorated and extended the length of her thick, grey braid. Her long dress was loose at the waist and whiter than mine was.

“Welcome!” she boomed, extending her arms. Her voice forced its way through the chinks in the log walls and rushed out the open windows. For an instant, I wanted to follow, but the stays in my dress kept me in place.

“Look about you –” she continued. “Take in the spirit of this sacred place – internalize its power – now look inside yourself – and join me in the commemoration of the unity matrimony brings.”

On that day, I imagined I was beginning a marriage that would last. But instead of hiding something old, something new, something borrowed or something blue under my dress and cloak – I kept a secret.

My mother helped me veil my vacant body and together we put the finishing touches on my costume. I stepped into crinolines that expanded the folds of my extensive skirt. Then Sarah laced the back of my strapless bodice and draped me, shoulder to floor, in my husband’s tartan.

When the JP asked those present to circle Liam and me with their intent, their strength, and their love, my Auntie Jane, my cousin, Reed, Liam’s mother and sister, Nemit and her partner Joy, and the group of Spanish seminarians who were staying in Assiniboine Lodge surrounded us.

Now I often think I feel the brush of Liam’s fingers the way I had when he raised my chin that day.

“Don’t be afraid,” he’d said, as he stood there in front of me tall and sure in his grandfather’s Black Watch kilt. He mistook my behaviour for nerves. He

thought I was overcome with emotion, which I was, but it wasn't wedding-induced.

He removed the wool cloak from my shoulders and exposed my guilt-laden skin. When he kissed the fingertips of my free hand, I looked past his shoulder and saw Nemit's forehead touch Joy's. They were very much in love at the time and enthralled with their baby son.

The rest of the words intended to bring us legally together had been of the usual kind – promises, assurances, undertakings, warnings, and guarantees.

Ed had shared an overused passage from the Bible outlining why woman leaves her family and takes up with man. Then we began our vows. Only sheer luck disrupted the overpowering solemnity that hung in the air. Ed and one of the soon-to-be priests screamed when the bad-tempered cook roared outside the north windows. She frightened off a grizzly bear with a high-powered boat horn that threatened to rupture my eardrums, and I was never really sure if Liam said, "I do."

The night before I met Liam was thunderous and wet. Freezing rain poured ice on the aluminum lid of his tent trailer. It sounded like a tin basher with a ball peen hammer. I took cover inside, found a down jacket and sleeping bag on the bed, and quickly used them to replace my wet clothes.

Before I arrived, a bear had pawed Liam through the trailer canvas, marked the tent with rancid pee, and ripped the lid off his metal cooler; he'd stored it underneath one of the trailer's wing-like beds. "Banana bread, raw eggs, cheese, marmalade, uncooked bacon, a pitcher of orange Tang, two gel freezer packs, and a whole black pudding—completely consumed," he said the next morning.

I'm the only one who believed his bear story.

Liam was traveling home from the west coast and had stopped for the night at the Kicking Horse Campground in Yoho National Park. After the bear rambled away, he decided that his van was a safer place to sleep. He ran to the rear doors, unlocked them, climbed inside, and stayed there even after he realized that he'd forgotten his sleeping bag and jacket.

I still feel comforted by the dampness of that place, by the smell of the red cedar and hemlock, by the collage of fall colors.

Liam slept on the corrugated floor of the van until he was startled by a thudding noise. He started shouting after he looked through the blurred windows and saw his tent trailer shaking.

I was moving about inside when I heard the guttural sounds he made; they stuck in his dry morning throat. “Get out! Get out of there! Yah—yah!” he yelled, while clapping as if slap-running a horse. He threw the van doors open and saw a red shirt waving through the open tent trailer door. That was when he scrambled to his feet, ran the short distance from the van, and stopped in front of me.

“Rhegan Flett,” I said, extending my hand. I was naked inside his sleeping bag—except for a pair of his thick wool socks. The hood of the mummy bag gaped behind me as I held the top across my chest, while my feet protruded from the section I’d unzipped at the bottom. I stood there motionless staring at the declining peak in his shorts.

His eyes tried to avoid my shoulders while they searched the trailer behind me.

I picked up the down jacket I’d taken off and used as a pillow. “I was biking when the storm blew in,” I continued, sitting on the edge of the bed. “You’re the only cover for miles, not many people come out here in October.” I smoothed the jacket across my lap.

Liam’s bare feet made a sucking sound when they left the ground. He took the jacket, put it on, and stood there arms out between the two wing-like

beds. Then he leaned his six-foot three-inch frame on the edge of the green sink and smirked at me as if I was a regular guest.

“My bike is tucked under that end,” I said, pointing.

He hadn’t noticed it, but he gestured at my helmet and still damp clothes, which were strewn across the bed.

I said I was sorry, took the socks off, and bundled them in one hand before holding them out like a peace offering.

“Liam,” he said taking the socks and putting them in the sink.

“Richards.” He smoothed his hands down the front of his shorts, and held them there one over the other.

I told him that I lived in Calgary, that I’d been riding back from Takakkaw Falls after visiting Nemit at the Whiskey Jack Hostel when the storm blew in. I said that the freezing rain had made me take cover, that it was too treacherous to peddle for Banff, or back up the Yoho Valley Road.

When I asked Liam where he was from he said, “Cypress Hills – quiet and dry.”

I’d smiled then, noted his ponytail and the small print below the logo on his well-worn, University of Dalhousie sweatshirt that read, *Faculty of Architecture and Planning*. I felt his eyes on my skin, an inch below the notch between my clavicle bones.

“My family runs an outfitter’s cabin on the Highwood,” he went on, crouching until his eyes, which were almost black, were looking up at mine.

I shook my head. “Thought you were from Cypress Hills.”

“You asked where I was from – now we ranch between Longview and Kananaskis,” he said.

I wondered then why he wasn’t more cautious about bears, but I apologized for intruding through the distraction of his shampoo: mint and an herb that I still can’t name. I told him that I knew he was sleeping the in the van, that I’d checked it when I arrived, and decided not to wake him until morning.

“That fridge behind me has a pack of coffee, a carton of cigarettes, and a jar of my mother’s jam in it,” he said.

I grinned at Liam’s offer of breakfast and looked at the faded avocado door while he explained about the bear and his missing cooler. When his story was complete I stood, clutched my clothes to my chest, lifted the bottom of the sleeping bag, and squeezed through the doorway, back exposed.

When I came back from the log built outhouse, he was humming Dvorák’s, *Furiant*, one of the Slavic Dances. I was unsure if it was number one or number eight. I felt nervous and underdressed in my padded cycling shorts and fitted neoprene shirt. I knocked on the metal body of the ancient trailer and stuck my head back through the door.

He'd made coffee; the aroma was uninviting, but I accepted a hot mug when he offered it and remember letting it brand my palms red while picturing my hair mixed with his on a damp pillow.

Liam had called three weeks later. I was at home, reading about a property for sale in Inglewood, a neighborhood, which at the time, was one of the least sought after in Calgary. My mother, who often arrived at my apartment unannounced, pretended to re-arrange dishes in my kitchen cupboards while we spoke.

"Is that one of Jane's outfits?" I asked her when the call was over forty minutes later.

Sarah ignored my question; she didn't always approve of the way her sister dressed. It was late in the afternoon and she'd already suggested that I get out of my pajamas several times. She was wearing wide, brown gabardine trousers and a matching vest over a coffee colored silk blouse. I remember because the clothes weren't hers. They belonged to her sister, Jane. The outfit meant that rather than spend hours coaxing Ed out of his workshop to dye her hair for her, Sarah had driven out to my auntie's place: her hair was freshly tinted ginger-red. She constantly tried to reproduce my dark auburn version, but I could tell from her scalp that there was too much purple in the mix. The outfit also meant that my mother had gone through her sister's wardrobe that day.

“Who telephoned?” Sarah asked while closing the glass and cherry cupboard doors gently, a sign that she was trying to practice restraint.

I set the November 1987 *Real Estate News* down, and stretched out on the wicker chaise in front of the ceiling to floor windows, where I watched snow whirl in the air before telling her that the caller was someone I met when I visited Nemit at the Whiskey Jack Hostel.

She looked at me over the frame of her silver glasses and asked whether the caller was female while she trailed her left hand along the marble-capped breakfast bar and climbed onto one of four tall stools that sat in front of it.

“Male,” I said, fascinated by the snow that rose on gentle updrafts. I was looking west from the twenty-first floor of Tower One at Point McKay on the Bow River. The mountains were obscured by cloud. I lived on the edge of Bowness, my parents’ neighborhood, in a neighborhood called Parkdale. My apartment was about five and a half kilometers east of downtown Calgary.

Sarah wanted to know all about Liam while she sat, hands between her thighs, gripping the rounded edge of the seat. Her feet were on the horizontal bars, knees jutting out like butterfly wings. This is an image of my mother that I love. There are thousands of others in my flow of memories but many of those are – unpleasant.

Instead, I told her that I was thinking about using more of my trust money from my Granny to invest in a house. She moved her hands to the sides of her body, gripped the edge of the seat again and held her legs straight out in front,

toes pointed, before slipping off the stool and striding into the living room where she stood uncomfortably close to me.

Sarah hated that I didn't answer her questions, declared that she loved me when I introduced her to Liam, and pretended to be horrified when we told her the story of how we met.