

DADDY AND ELLEN ARE UNDER THE STAIRS

by May Cotton © 2022

My sister Ellen died three weeks after 9/11, three weeks after the World Trade Center fell and our world was forever changed. To comfort my parents, I told them God needed extra angels because so many had died in the disaster. Ellen's grave marker says "Angel Unawares" — I hope that says it all.

The moment I got the phone call, I made travel plans on Amtrak, the first of many trips by train through the Rockies that fall and winter and into the following year. Gradually my fear of flying lessened, and by the time Ellen went to her final resting place, I was traveling by air once again. However, I will never again fly with cremains.

On my second trip back to Denver after Ellen's memorial service, I asked my mom what she had done with Ellen's ashes. She held her finger to her lips to silence me, and carefully looked around to see if my father was still napping in his chair. She drew me quietly into the kitchen and whispered, "Don't tell your father, but Ellen is under my desk. I didn't know what to do with the container they gave me, so I left it the bag and hid it under my desk."

"Where?" I wanted to know.

"In the back corner against the filing cabinet," she replied. Later that night I slipped from my bed on the sofa and tiptoed into my mother's office, closing the door before turning on the light. I pulled the dark blue bag from behind the boxes and inspected the container that held the remains of my sister. I fantasized about taking a small vial of her ashes with me, but knew my mother would need to be asked; and of course the next day she firmly told me "No."

It turned out that wouldn't matter, because eventually both Daddy and Ellen would end up under my stairs.

In spite of my many trips back to Denver, my father continued to deteriorate from what was originally diagnosed as Parkinson's and later clarified as a rare Parkinsons-like condition known as Progressive Supranuclear Palsy or PSP. Only my father would contract such a rare disease; his hypochondria had finally outwitted him.

After Daddy fell and cracked his pelvis, he was moved to the nursing home across the campus from the senior apartment my parents had occupied for the past few years. My mother grew weary of the trip across campus twice a day to see him, and she was frightened by the expense of keeping their large apartment. She understood by now that he would not be coming home again, and together we decided how to manage the remaining money and move her to a cottage just across the street from his wing of the nursing home.

As we cleared out her office in preparation for the movers, my mother fretted about what she was going to do with Ellen's ashes. It didn't seem right to her to put them on a truck to be handled by strangers. "Don't worry, Mamma," I said. "I'll take them over to the cottage

myself.” It was only a short walk across the parking lot and through the garage tunnel to Mom’s new place. When I brought them in, my mother was standing in the kitchen, confused by the chaos around her. She looked up, saw the bag in my hands and looked aghast. She had sold the big desk from the old apartment and was momentarily panicked about what she was going to do with Ellen. “I’ll put her in the linen closet,” I said with a reassuring smile, and that was where she stayed.

Five years later I set the bag containing Daddy’s ashes on the floor of the linen closet next to my sister. Mamma seemed to fade a little after that, deflated by the loss of the love of her life followed three weeks later by the death of her best friend, who for the past few weeks had been just down the hall from my Dad. Libby had been in Mamma’s life since she was 8 years old; Daddy had come along 18 years later, and together they were the last of her generation to have known her so long.

She began to ask me now and then when we were going to take the ashes back to Ohio to be buried, but I was busy with my own crises as it became apparent that Dan and I were going to move to Spokane very soon, and I had to have another surgery first. I also had some very lucrative clients to let down gently and graciously as I helped them find new bookkeepers, and I had to let go of a part-time teaching job that I held near and dear; it was the one part of moving that was almost too hard.

In the midst of all this chaos, Mom asked if she could move to Spokane with us, and when Dan agreed, I found myself faced with the daunting task of helping him find an appropriate house for all three of us to live in, moving our belongs from California as seamlessly as possible, and 4 weeks later flying to Denver to begin the task of moving my mother. Naturally the question came up about what we were going to do with Daddy and Ellen. When the mover rejected the idea of taking the ashes with him, due to some mysterious liability issue which he failed to enumerate, I put them in the backseat of Mom’s car. They sat on the floor behind the passenger, who turned out to be Mom the whole way. Now 88 years old, there was no way I was letting her drive.

Off we went to Spokane, every night carrying the two bags of cremains into the motel, lest something dreadful happen. Mamma was putting on a brave face, but I think she was frightened by the idea of the move, and Daddy and Ellen gave her something to focus on. By the third day of our road trip, Mamma was joking with me about moving Daddy and Ellen to Spokane, and where we were going to put them this time.

With the reality of moving the furnishings of Mom’s 2-bedroom apartment into our 4-bedroom house — which we had already filled nicely with the contents of our 3-bedroom, 2-storage-unit life in California — the question took on a new twist. I certainly wasn’t going to put them under my own desk, where I normally stored my own projects, and there was no room in Mom’s bedroom after we removed the bars from one of the closets to accommodate her four filing cabinets.

As her memory faded, Mamma would ask me time and again where the boxes of ashes

were stored. And each time she laughed anew when I replied, “Daddy and Ellen are under the stairs.”

After a few months in Spokane, Dan and I were preparing to go a wedding in the Chicago area. As we talked about the plans for this trip, I realized we were going to have to take Mom with us, or at least send her ahead to Ohio where I could meet her following the wedding while Dan returned to Spokane. The days leading up to the trip were a nightmare as I attempted to decipher the rules for what could be taken on airplanes. Everything had changed after 9/11. It was six years later, but the country was being rocked by home-grown terrorists like the Shoe Bomber and such international events as the Madrid train bombings and liquid explosives being carried on planes from the UK to the U.S.

Mom was scheduled to leave for Columbus the day before Dan and I would fly to Chicago. I took her to the airport and checked her in, but the 2 boxes of cremains would not fit in her luggage and she lacked the paperwork necessary to take them as carry-on items. We came up with a new plan, and a short time later, I left the airport carrying the two bags. After several frantic phone calls, I found myself searching for the crematorium where the owner had agreed to open the urns and certify the contents.

At the airport the next day, we passed through the security gates with no problems. The crematory was well known in Spokane, and the paperwork was considered flawless. The wedding was lovely, and we enjoyed the reunion with our son, who was officiating for his old friends.

The following Monday I attempted to go through security at Midway Airport where the cremains were rejected by the TSA agents despite the letter certifying their authenticity. These fellows had never even heard of Spokane, let alone the crematorium on the letterhead. I begged and begged and was finally told to go to the restroom where no one would see me remove the plastic bags from the wooden urns. I was then to return with the containers open and the cremains set beside each box. It was a good thing each was in its own shopping bag, or I would not have been able to accomplish this feat.

The security line was long, the restroom was a long way off, and it seemed disrespectful to open the containers in a lavatory. So I ducked behind a column, squatted on the floor, and opened the boxes. After pulling out each plastic bag and nestling it next to its box, I returned to security. It was necessary to go through the same line to see the same agents, or it would have taken even longer, and my flight was leaving soon. I watched as the man inspected the empty containers, then lifted the plastic bags out and set them in a tray with coins under them. As long as they could see the coins through the ashes, he explained, they would pass them through. His plan succeeded, but I have never been 100% confident that the plastic bags were returned to the correct urns!

I suppose it doesn't really matter. After a couple of days in Mount Vernon, my mom and I made the hour-and-a-half trip to Maple Grove Cemetery in Mechanicsburg. Three of my cousins went with us, and a fourth met us along the way with two of her grandchildren. Once we

found the cemetery, which took the better part of an hour in spite of the size of the tiny town, the caretaker met us and took the cremains off my hands. We followed him to the family plot and had a short ceremony before he put the two wooden boxes into the hole he had prepared.

On the way back to Mount Vernon, I told my cousins the story of how Daddy and Ellen went from the linen closet to the back seat of the car to under the stairs; then to the airport, a different crematorium, and back to the airport; for a short jaunt in Chicago where I hid them in the closet of our friend's condo, and finally back to the airport one more time. I said I didn't think other passengers knew we were flying with cremains in the overhead bin. And I was happy with the ending, that Daddy and Ellen were now buried together in the ground. The response from my cousins was a combination of chuckles and horrified sounds.

When my mother died four years later, I picked her up from Neptune Society, looked in the bag holding the wooden box, and conferred with the fellow who handed her over to me after I paid the remaining \$35 due on her contract. We discussed how I could get this box of cremains back to Ohio without jumping through the hoops I had faced with Daddy and Ellen. A few weeks later, after Mom spent her own time under the stairs, I packed up a large box with the wooden urn securely embraced by bubble wrap, and went to UPS, where I shipped my mother directly to the cemetery.

Eleven years later my brother died, and I jumped through the necessary hoops to get his body donated to science. Six weeks later I received a phone call asking where I wanted the cremains to be sent. I gave them the address of the cemetery in Mechanicsburg and called the caretaker to tell him the package was coming, asking how much to send him to cover the cost of opening Mom's grave. Not long after, I receive a letter detailing the organs studied and what was found, but no indication of Tom's cause of death. Nothing was said about his unusual skeleton, crippled by scoliosis, kyphosis and suspected marfan syndrome, the reason I thought they would want to dissect him in first place.

I've never been back to the cemetery. I doubt I will ever go there again. I don't plan to be buried there myself, and I hope one of these days the caretaker will call to say someone wants to buy the remaining six empty plots. My grandfather bought 10 originally and my dad used two, one for each of his parents. I used two more for the other four members of my family.

I've told my son I don't care where my ashes end up, but I don't want them in Ohio. Truthfully, I feel sort of cheated by not being able to visit my family's graves. In the end, I hope my ashes will be mingled with Dan's to keep us together forever, so that death will not really "do us part."