



MY WORD

my grandparents' garden

RETRIEVING RELATIVES' ASHES FROM A SLICKLY MODERN CEMETERY, JULIE PERRIN DISCOVERS THAT SOME RESTING PLACES ARE NOT AS FINAL AS SHE HAD IMAGINED.

MY MOTHER AND I are entering the precinct of the cemetery. I am driving slowly, but not slowly enough. I hear her small gasp from the passenger seat as we go over a speed hump. Signs on both sides of the central driveway alert us to Expired Memorials.

I always thought a memorial was something enduring, but here they have a use-by date. The family has received a polite letter telling us the tenure for my grandparents' ashes has expired. We need to pay up or collect them. And we are not paying \$2000 for perpetuity.

In the commodious foyer of the administration building I let the receptionist know we have arrived for our ashes-collection appointment. We are shown into a small room. My mother sits quietly upright; her composed posture is a cue for me – now is not the moment to discuss my opinions on expired memorials. Our attendant is dressed in the cemetery uniform. It is a sympathetic pastel shade of polo shirt and a dark skirt – blending sweet-pinkness and brisk business.

The shelves on two sides of the room hold urns, for those who are prepared to pay. Not us: we've got the no-label cleanskin version. Two plastic-sealed boxes inside miniature shopping bags with the cemetery logo on them. I prod around inside one of the bags; it's heavy. There is a plastic canister, a brass plaque and a certificate assuring us we've got the right ashes.

My uncle has arranged for my grandparents' names to be inscribed in a Book of Remembrance. He has asked us to view it. The inscription is under December – the month my grandparents were married in 1916. This

date, apparently, means we must look in the Summer House.

When I ask for directions our attendant declares without a twitch, "It's in The-Garden-of-No-Distant-Place." She sounds like the announcer in the drive-through at McDonald's with that all-joined-up-no-variation-intonation. In my confusion, I have to ask for the directions again. I almost expect her to say: 'Will-you-have-fries-with-that?' But the pastel-pink attendant repeats the instructions slowly, which adds to the gravitas of the faux poetry.

Once we find The-Garden-of-No-Distant-Place we must go to the Summer House and look for the gardener. If he is nowhere to be seen, we are to press the intercom and he will appear. The instructions have a biblical weight. It feels like a bizarre take on the Gospel of John, the part where Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener.

At The-Garden-of-No-Distant-Place there are lawns, ponds, bridges; it's very neat – someone's been at work with the clippers. My grandparents were farmers and gardeners, prolific, productive, proud – but there is no abundance here. I wonder what they would find to admire in this garden. We stare out from the glazed walls of the Summer House. When the gardener arrives, we eye him curiously. He removes his gardening gloves and presses his hands into white cotton gloves. Under a glass cover he turns the pages of the Book of Remembrance with both hands.

My mother and I gaze at the tiny inscription. It hardly seems grand enough.

Other people have clearly paid a premium for their calligraphy. Never mind; my grandparents would not have been offended by the lack of gold leaf. During the Depression they turned their farmhouse into a guesthouse. Gran baked three square meals a day for 20 years for paying guests while Papa kept the farm supplying the kitchen. He's the one who taught me to make compost, his big farmer's hands holding the friable soil, letting me feel the heat under the mulch.

In January, we host a picnic in their honour. The family gather by the bend in the river where my grandparents ran their guesthouse. We spread their ashes there, digging a shallow patch of earth and covering them over lightly. We stand around in a gaggle and don't quite know what to say. The oldies struggle into and out of folding picnic chairs that collapse at the wrong moment. We have all brought too much food. We recall recipes and stories and habits of speech. Someone repeats the grace my grandfather used to say before meals. We marvel at the memory of the spreads Gran used to put on. One uncle has carefully documented photos, another tells rambling anecdotes that make us smile.

On the way home, in the passenger seat, my mother tells me she is glad we rescued the ashes from expiring at the botanical cemetery.

Julie Perrin is a storyteller who can be seen performing from podiums and stages in town halls and universities, and from little chairs in kindergartens.

