HOW WE DIE

Stage is preset with Four Chairs—different styles from each other. Each separately lit

Lights fade to black.

First chair is lit. KEITH is sitting in it

KEITH:

My mother used to burn her hair. Not on her head. When she would comb her hair and she would have loose strands in the comb, she would slide the hair off the brush and into a little metallic ashtray she bought at Arlans. Then she would strike a match and set it on fire. The smell was awful, but it somehow stayed contained in the ashtray.

I was fascinated by the way the flames burned continuously, and the hair didn't really burn, so much as melt. I never thought about why she burned her hair. It was just something I always saw her do. I never saw anyone else do it, so I knew it wasn't common practice, but I didn't get freaked out or anything.

Years later, I thought about her burning her hair, and being really upset if my brother left hair on the sink after he had groomed his mustache. They would have screaming fights about it sometimes. Why was she so obsessed with the presence, or absence of hair? Then I figured it out.

My mother grew up in West Point, Georgia. She and her father and mother and two siblings were extremely poor, and all their families were domestics or farmers, 3 or 4 generations removed from slavery. In that particular South, in that particular culture, people believed in women working spells and doing voodoo. Everybody knew all a voodoo woman needed from you was a lock of hair to destroy your life. You were taught NEVER to put your hair in the garbage around a geechy woman. She could steal your man or your soul.

This belief, this superstition, this harsh reality was ingrained in my mother, and it lived side by side with her belief that God will take care of you. The two beliefs combined to make a crazy quilt of reasons why life was out of your hands, and whatever happens to you will happen. There was some room for science, but it was mostly God, a slice of black magic and medicine as a last resort. However, you viewed life somebody or something else was controlling yours. Poor people can't be running to the doctor all the time. That's what Black Draught and Vicks Vapo-Rub and tallow and castor oil and prayer are for.

Doctors were a good resource, but prayer was better.

When my mother's stomach started to swell up, she thought it was just water weight. Because that's what her overworked, understaffed, filled-to-capacity West End clinic doctor told her.

HATTIE:

"Doctor (insert mispronounced name here) prescribed me water pills, so I'm just gonna take these water pills and pray to God."

KEITH:

And she took those water pills and prayed to God until her stomach was so bloated, Anna, Anna, made her go to the ER. And two days later her doctor told her she had peritoneal cancer. Well, not "told" as much as "stabbed her with the announcement of." But more on that later.

I think, in part, my mother's religion killed her. She believed too hard, like her mother and HER mother, and generations before them, that God will take care of you. At least, he better, because we can't be running to the doctor all the time. We ain't got that kind of money. The healthcare system killed my mother, too, by allowing an overworked doctor to misdiagnose hundreds of people each week with "water weight" or being "overtired" or just needing to "move around a little bit" every day.

The neighborhood where my mother lived had a Walgreens that was always crowded, because it was the only one accessible to all the people in the neighborhood who had to walk to Walgreens or get a ride or take two or three buses to one further away. Kroger has a pharmacy too, but the two accessible Kroger's in that neighborhood were closed in the food desert where my mother lived.

Just so you know, this is a play about dead people. How they got dead, who they were before they got dead. Why it's their own fault. Why it isn't. What they leave behind when they die. What they take.

In my mother's case, she got dead because she believed too hard in God, and then ironically too hard in doctors. For generations, all people put too much faith in the omniscience of medical professionals. Marcus Welby and Dr. Kildare fucked us up. Especially black people. Most of the doctors black people saw where white males, so we transferred our "yessah, boss" attitude from slave owners to actual bosses to doctors. The problem is we believed in every doctor, even those that weren't very good, just because "Well…He's a doctor, so…"

My mother was so outspoken otherwise. She was a single mother with, eventually, three children, who worked at Philip Morris almost her entire working life. When she was 18, she got a job in the stemmery, where the tobacco would come in, and women, mostly, would peel the tobacco off the stalks before it was shredded into cigarettes. My mother swept the floor in the stemmery, then peeled stalks, then moved to the factory.

I never quite knew what my mother did at the factory. When I was in third grade, Miss Ballew told us to write down what our parents did for a living. I remembered my mother talking about putting boxes of cigarettes into cartons of cigarettes into bigger boxes of cigarettes. So, in the blank that said, "Parent's Occupation," I wrote "Boxer."

I would hear random pieces of conversations when she was on the phone with one of her work friends—Miss Mary Bell or Miss Janell—about get a raise or moving to a better job, using words like seniority. I would catch snippets of what she went through that day at work.

HATTIE:

"I told that man—come here! I told him, you ain't gotta be squeezing through these machines all the damn time, rubbing against me. You do that again, you see what happen. I got a gun in my car. Next time, you walk around. They always think somebody want what they got. Don't nobody want that old fat, white man… Naw, girl, I ain't got no gun in my car…but he don't know that."

KEITH:

If her jobs at Philip Morris hadn't been Union, my mother would have been fired about a hundred times.

When Mom goes to the hospital, she thinks they'll just drain the fluid and send her home with some pills. We all think that, hope it. Instead, they put her in the cancer ward. Do people still say "cancer ward?" My mother's first doc is a terrific East Indian fellow, whose name I don't remember. For clarity I'll call him Dr Kind.

I don't remember any of the names of the docs my mother saw. I try to very close attention to who they are when I meet them and while they're treating her, but once she doesn't see them anymore, I don't keep their names in my heads. There isn't room.

When I say Dr Kind is a fellow, I mean it literally. He is at J. Graham Brown Cancer Center on a fellowship. I ask him to describe what he does, as a fellow. He said he doesn't specialize in any specific type of cancer. He comes in and talks to all the cancer patients—brain, breast, bone. And so on. He suspects my mother had cancer, but he said the tests will tell him more. The tests. The all-knowing, all-revealing tests. Dr Kind is extremely nice. He has a great bedside manner. He looks at Mom when he talks, not me. Sometimes he touches her shoulder or sits down on the bed, like the docs in pharmaceutical commercials. He comes around a lot.

One morning when my aunt is visiting, another doc comes around. He's older than Dr Kind, and shorter and brusquer. This doc, who I'll call Dr Busy, bursts into my mom's room after the perfunctory tap on the door medical people do before they march into your room without waiting anyway, and says, "So what are we going to do about this cancer?"

This is my mother's official announcement. None of us speak. I can hear the blood in my ears make a ringing sound. My aunt manages, "Thanks Little DR. Sunshine."

Then this flood of medical words gushes out of his mouth. The resident with him is trying to get illustrative pictures and x-rays and so-and-so-grams to come up on the computer in the room, that I suspect Dr. Busy doesn't know how to operate. I guess the pictures are supposed to mitigate the flood of information so we could better understand. Dr Busy kept gushing--"specialist", "observation," "treatment plan." I couldn't tell if my mother understands or not. I know suddenly I have a new job—cancer secretary. Now I have to keep track of everything every medical person says, try to understand it, then explain it to Mom. And hold on to all the details so later I can explain it to Anna and my brother, who, by the way, has also been diagnosed with cancer. I know. Bookmark that.

Post cancer announcement and indecipherable prognosis, Dr Busy starts to leave. "Can I talk to you for a sec?" I ask as he walks out the door.

You know that moment when you switch roles with your parents, and you have to take care of them in a way you never thought you'd have to? Like translating for them because you're bilingual and their English is bad, or making sure they don't pay too much for a car? I'm feeling that.

Dr Busy and I step in the hallway.

ME: That was the first time she heard the official diagnosis. You maybe could have eased into that.

DR BUSY: I don't like to beat around the bush. I feel like she needed to know the truth.

ME: She did but not like that.

Dr Busy starts to lean back a bit.

ME: I teach med students how to give bad news and if they did it the way you did it, they'd fail.

It's true. For years I've worked with the University of Louisville Standardized Patient Program. We teach med students how to take histories, give bad news, make diagnoses, etc. But they would not fail. That is not true. But it's dramatic.

Dr Busy looks at me and does this. (Takes a big step back and extends his hand to shake.) I look at him and the residents, their mouths slightly open, waiting for him to take them on rounds. I walk back into my mother's room without shaking. His hand I mean. My adrenaline-addled body is another story. I'm breathless and shaky. I picture the residents going back to their resident dorms, or whatever, talking about DR Busy getting dressed down by the guy whose mom found out she just had cancer. "Then I thought he was gonna punch Doc Busy in the face!" "He was so loud and angry. A bunch of nurses had to calm him down." I'm always much louder when I make myself a hero of a story.

Mom is in the hospital a few days longer. Anna and I switch off visiting her and staying with her, sometimes overnight, just to keep her company. I do not like hospitals. I do not like sanitizing my hands all the time for my sake and the patient's sake. I do not like visiting the hospital so often that I memorize the route to my mother's room. I do not like memorizing the names of my mother's nurses, no matter how nice they are. Side note—nurses love my mother. Any time I ask them for something for her--ginger ale, extra pillow--they'd say. "Oh, are you Miss Hattie's son? I LOVE her. She's so funny!"

At first the docs don't know it was peritoneal cancer. At first, they suspected it's ovarian, then they rule that out because of how it "behaved." That's what they said—"behaved." Doctors give diseases personalities so they can picture an enemy they're battling. It probably helps the patients too— to picture cancer as a rapidly growing army, and chemo and radiation as ammunition. Radiation would be like drones or laser warfare and chemo is a big clumsy bomb, like they dropped on Hiroshima. And just like Fat Man and Little Boy, chemo takes out a lot of innocent bystanders, like bone density and your immune system.

The doc who specializes in gynecological cancers and the like—we'll call her Doctor Susan—is assigned to Mom's case then taken off when they don't think it's ovarian, which is too bad. I like her. Fortunately, Dr Kind can help with the cancer they thought Mom had, so we got to see him a lot. It turned out Mom's cancer was ovarian originally. It started in the one ovary she still had. See, Mom had a hysterectomy in her thirties, back in the "baby with the bath water" days of medicine, when they just

took out everything. Still, they would only take one ovary because they didn't want you to start menopause too early. Or in case you might still want children. My mother was thirty when I was born. She already had three kids and was sure she didn't want any more. The doctor left her one ovary—Just in case. Another incidence of Marcus Welby knows best.

So that one ovary in my mother's 80-something year old body got one bad cell, then another, then a lot, then the army advanced to her peritoneum. I know. I keep saying "peritoneum" and you keep saying, "What the hell is a peritoneum?" Well, I didn't know what it was either. Well I though I did because it sounds like "perineum," more colloquially known as "the taint." For two days I thought my mother had "Taint cancer," two words that should NEVER be next to each other. Worse yet, how would I explain this to people when they ask? "You see my mom has cancer of the 'down under.'" Two letters make such a difference. The peritoneum is actually a membrane that keep your organs and intestines and stuff in place like, a big anatomical SPANX. It has a lot of fluid in it and that's where the cancer was, in the fluid. Because it'as actually in the fluid, she can't do radiation because there's no way to aim at the soldiers in the cancer army. So Mom has to do chemo.

My mother is released. I visit a lot, but Anna takes most of the chemo duty. Driving her, sitting with her after. After the first round, Hattie gets a break from chemo. She seems to weather it like a champ. She still goes to bingo on the regular, hosts Christmas at her house. On the Sunday before her 80th birthday, Anna arranges it so the whole family would surprise her by showing up at church. Afterwards, we take a group picture. That's the last picture she ever takes.

She loved it when we'd go to church with her, because all her children stopped going. I'd go on Christmas and Mother's Day to "represent." (Raises his hands in the air)

Then, at the beginning of the year, came the second round of chemo.

Mom gets much weaker this time. She goes from needing a higher toilet seat in the bathroom to needing a portable toilet in the bedroom to needing help to get there to needing adult diapers. I visit my mother more often than Anna, but Anna stays longer when she visits. I don't know if my brother comes or not. I know he calls. It was just as well because he doesn't have a key to the house and Mom can't get up from the bed to answer the door.

My mother can't get out of bed without assistance---then not at all. When I visit, she just lays there and says the occasional phrase. "You look tired," she says a lot. "Come here and lay down." She tries to scoot over to make room. "I'm okay," I mutter, as I nod off on a hassock at the foot of the bed.

When I was a kid, after my brother and sister had grown up and left, I slept with my mother sometimes. I didn't really like it. She made me stay in bed until she was ready to get up, because she said I made too much noise. My mother was really a light sleeper.

I didn't figure out until after she died that she wanted me to lay with her that day like I did when I was a kid. She missed me.

Anna and I hope she just needs a break from chemo or more physical therapy or to drink more ENSURE. We arrange for home health to come out the next week to visit with her if that's okay with her. She agrees. Now I think that was only to please us. We didn't know physical therapy wasn't even an option as this point. Or maybe we knew but just didn't want to believe it.

One night, I go to visit her, which is really just sitting the hassock by her bed, nodding off to GOLDEN GIRLS or BLUE BLOODS or some other syndicated show with an alliterative title.

I'm supposed to shoot a scene the next day in a Hallmark movie in Somewhere, Kentucky with James Caan. I'm playing a county official and I had two lines. James' character says, "Can I talk to you for a second." I say, "Yes Sir." James: "Look I need some help to make this go away." Then I imagine he'd hold some folded money between two fingers and offer it to me, in a bribery kind of way. "I can't take that," I say. James would slide the money into my shirt pocket, then pat it as if to say, "Don't be silly. By the way, now I own you." That moment was gonna make me an official member of SAG.

I tell Mom about the film and that I won't be back the next day. "Ok. I love you," she says. "I love you too Ma."

I feel like I should go back to her house early next morning to check on her, so I do. "Ma. It's me. Don't shoot." Our joke. I said it whenever I'd let myself in. I walk into her bedroom. She's on her back. She never slept on her back. Shit. I touch her. She's cold. She's stiff. Shit.

I don't cry. I just sit there with her a second. And look at her. Her eyes and mouth are still open. I try to do that thing where you close the dead person's eyes, but it doesn't work. I'm trying to think what the people who find dead people on BLUE BLOODS would do. On those shows you never see them call anybody. There's just a dead body, then the next scene—police and caution tape and hubbub.

I call 911.

911: What's your emergency?

ME: My mother is dead.

911: Is she breathing?

ME: No. She's dead.

911: Can you move her?

I try but she's too heavy—literally dead weight. Plus there's rigor mortis so when I try to move her something cracks, so I stop.

ME: No, I can't.

911: Have you tried CPR?

ME: No. I have not. Cause she's dead.

911: We'll send the police, sir. What's the address?

So now the police and the coroner are coming.

Now I have to call Anna.

ME: Hey Sis. Uh…She's gone.

SIS: Oh. Okay. Well, I'll just meet you at the hospital—

ME: No. She's gone. She's dead

SIS: What!?

Silence. Then sobs.

And my heart cracks. In all 55 years of my life, I had never heard Anna cry. She's so distraught she can't drive. Charolette, her partner, has to bring her to Mom's house. I call my aunt and my brother and his daughter.

Minutes after the phone call, EMT 's arrive and the police. And the coroner. The coroner askes what funeral home Mom needs to go to. I tell him. Fortunately for my siblings and me, my mother had pre-planned her funeral. She set it up with AD Porter and Sons—one of the "black" funeral homes most of my family had used for decades.

My aunt and brother and sister all come and stand around with neighbors and people on the street who are curious about the ambulance and the police.

Anna arrives. She won't come in. She won't see my mother dead in her home. She waits in the backyard while the funeral home people take my mother out the front door on some collapsible guerney thing. They wore even suits to the house. Always in uniform. Anna walsk around to the back when they come out.

The coroner asks me if I want an autopsy. I chuckle and decline, thinking about BLUE BLOODS again.

The policeman says he'll stay until everyone is gone. I told him I'll be okay. He says they always stay in case people try to rob you while the house is open, or in case families get into fights because of grief or blame.

Finally, everyone goes, my family, the neighbors, the policeman.

I'm in the house where I grew up, by myself. I've been here alone before, but never this permanently. It's suddenly so dark. And quiet. And cold. My mother always kept the heat high. Now there's no need. No one lives here. I strategically leave lights on so people will think someone is in the house at night. I walk out the back door and lock it and the storm door.

I don't remember when I cried, but I know I must have. I have memories of big wailing sobs. I just don't know when they happened. Grief compresses memory.

So, at 55, I'm this grown-up, this orphan. My father died when I was 25. My parents were divorced, so I didn't know him very well, but still. It's strange being the next in line, the eldest generation--in my immediate family anyway. My aunt is still around.

Now Anna and I are doing the shit I knew people had to do but had never seen them do. Shit like cleaning out drawers, planning funerals.

A few days later, Anna and I sit down with a lovely middle-aged, well-dressed black woman named Penny (I think) at AD Porter and Sons. Neither of us have money for a funeral but fortunately, my mother had life insurance for all her kids so we could use that money for the funeral in anticipation of the insurance company paying out.

Once we work out all the financial stuff with Penny, a guy in a pinstripe suit takes us to the "casket room." I'm sure if has a classier name but I can't remember what that is. Probably something like "remembrance room" or "final resting place warehouse" or something.

The casket my mother had picked out was discontinued, so Anna and I had to pick a new one. Pinstripes leaves us in the casket room to make a decision on our own. We couldn't believe the price range for caskets. The grief business is a growth industry it seems. They have everything from plain ol' wood to caskets with gold leaf. Some have angels you can add to the sides, fancy embossed handles. Some have decorations you can put inside the lid of the casket, so the dead person has something to look at for eternity, I guess. There are blankets you can buy to "tuck in" the deceased, so they don't get cold on their "journey." You can get a special embroidered pillow, or a poster with a picture of your loved one. Even a casket with a titanium shell, in case somebody decides to bomb a graveyard.

We go simple. A nice casket in the price range Mom had originally set up, in an eternally restful shade of blue. No blanket, no lid décor.

Anna writes the obituary, something she has done a lot. Family members and friends often ask her to write them. I think because she was the oldest grandchild and the first to go to college, she became the official writer of official things, like letters to faraway relatives and obits.

The funeral home calls us and says we can look at Mom's body and see if it fits our dead mother standards. Anna has bought her a really nice blue suit, since it was Hattie's favorite color. My brother Kenneth asks me to take a picture of it and send it to him. I do.

A few days later, Mom has a "wake," the black people name for a public viewing. It's different from, say, an Irish wake, where there's lots of drinking and it's after the funeral. This kind of wake is people coming by to tell you how sorry they are, and how great the dead person was.

Diane, who grew up next door to us, tells Anna and me about my mother taking her in when she was strung out on drugs and her own mother refused to let her in. Hattie fed her and gave her some money and talked to her and let her stay for a couple of days.

Anna and I had no idea. None. My mother never talked about it. She did that kind of thing all the time evidently. When Anna and I cleaned out her drawers, we found hundreds of canceled checks from united Way and Salvation Army and March of Dimes. She gave these people thousands. In fact, after she died, the phone would still ring with charities reminding her to give generously again as she had last year. It was sad when I had to tell them she died.

Not so with bill collectors, and scammers.

KEITH: Hello.

BOILER ROOM PERSON: Hi! This is David with AT and T. Can I speak to Mrs. McGill?

KEITH: She can't come to the phone right now.

BOILER ROOM PERSON: Are you sure? I'd hate for her to miss out on this great opportunity to save even more by switching to AT and T. It'll just take a second.

KEITH: It'll take a lot longer actually. She's dead.

BOILER ROOM PERSON: Oh…um…I'm so sorry to hear that...Um…Okay then…

Click. Dial Tone. Delicious.

Mom also regularly tithed to the church. Even when we could barely eat, God got ten percent off the top. We found boxes and boxes of offering envelopes, embossed with the dates of every Sunday for the year, plus special ones for Easter and Christmas. Because she was such a regular tither, a deacon from the church, Brother Benson, stopped by the wake to hit Hattie up one more time.

BENSON:

How are you Brother Keith? I know you are grieving at this time, and I want you to know that you always have a church home, even if you haven't visited that home on a regular basis. I wanted to extend the condolences from the church as well as let you know we are praying for you and your family. We will miss Sister Hattie and her generosity. Oh…speaking of, I did want to ask you if is Sister Hattie made any…final provisions for the church?

(Final provisions? Already? Well, strike the iron is hot, I guess.)

KEITH:

No Brother Benson. She didn't mention you or the church. Not once. Maybe fighting for her life pushed it right out of her mind.

No. I didn't. At least, not right then.

On the day of the funeral, I basically just show up at the church. My sister and my aunt handle all the funeral prep—notifying the church, talking with the reverend. My partner, Jim doesn't ride with me because he knows he won't be able to handle all the post-funeral stuff—interment, fried chicken for dinner. I absolutely get it, but I'm sad he's taking the bus there and back. Buses to me are just inherently sad vehicles.

Jim and Hattie got on really well. They would call each other up and talk about politics all the time. And they made each other laugh.

At the funeral, the choir sings. "Precious Lord" or "Going Up Yonder" or one of those spirituals that is supposed to make the congregation feel better about the dead person being dead, because they're going to a "better place." It does help me to know that my mother had such a strong faith, because it gives me hope that she was less afraid to die. And with all those tithes, I'm sure she hedged her bets pretty well.

Commented [KM1]:

Then they ask if anybody in the family wants to speak. Much as Anna is the designated writer for the family, I'm the designated speaker. I generally get called upon to read bible passages at funerals and pray at family dinners.

I say the usual "thanks to everybody for coming", "my mother loved this church", blah, blah, blah. Then:

KEITH:

One of my Mom favorite things was Bingo. She'd go a lot with my aunt, and sometimes let me tag along. (My aunt is PISSED that I mentioned her going to Bingo to everybody in the church, who also all went to Bingo.) My mother also liked to play the occasional lottery ticket, so in her honor, I stopped and got three scratch-offs. I won three dollars Ma! And don't worry Brother Benson, I will be donating it to the church." That was my big funeral closer. Good night everybody! Tip your ushers.

Months later, Anna tells me that Mom had asked her to lie down with her too. And she did. And she told Mom that, if this life was too hard right now, it was okay for her to let go and try again on the last go-round. What I didn't know is she had that conversation with Mom the day before Mom asked if I wanted to lay down with her and I said I was okay. She wanted to be sure her children would be alright if she died. I guess she decided we were.

About a week before my mother died, I had a dream that she came outside in her night gown and sat on the steps of her porch. It is really sunny, I remember, and she smells the roses that are still in front of her old house, that miraculously seemed to bloom most of the year. "What are you doing outside," I ask her in the dream. "I got tired of laying in that bed," she says. "It's time to get up." I guess she got up.