

we arrived at the rehab center, several of Sy's family members were visiting, and we all gathered around a table in the dining room and watched while a weakened Sy managed to eat half of a tongue sandwich his daughter had brought him from Brooklyn. Then he doubled over in a long coughing fit. When it was over, Sy opened the deli bag, produced a kosher pickle wrapped in wax paper, and gave it to my husband, who hadn't spoken of his craving since we'd arrived. Somehow Sy knew.

**I unsuctioned my sandals** from the mud, handed off my umbrella, and grabbed a shovel from the mound. Over and over I made the iron blade bite into the heavy earth, and I flung the dirt into the hole around Sy's pine coffin. It felt just as good as I'd imagined it would.

And nothing bad happened. The heavens didn't open — at least, not any more than they already had that morning. No one, not even the bearded rabbi, gasped. Sy's older daughter, the Orthodox one I had once dismissed as gruff but now knew to be lovable and kind, stood calmly by with her usual circle of younger Orthodox women swirling around her, all of them endearing in their cloche hats to cover their heads. Then I became aware that Sy's younger, more secular daughter was

bawling and trying to get my attention while her aunt held an umbrella over them both and comforted her. It turned out she was crying because she wanted to help bury Sy too, but as his daughter, she felt even more constrained than I had. Eventually, though, she approached the grave and grabbed a free shovel, and as she dug by my side, her tears mixed with laughter.

(A day or two later I would call a rabbi and ask whether there is a rule against women shoveling dirt at funerals. "I don't know offhand," he'd say, "but I like the question." He'd tell me that there is an obscure mystical tradition that forbids women even going to the cemetery, let alone helping fill the grave. He'd also tell me that the Torah says burying someone is an important mitzvah, or good deed, because it's a favor the person can never repay. But no repayment felt necessary in this case. In the end, neither Sy nor I owed the other anything.)

As I went on shoveling, I got lost in the rhythm and the pleasure of working my muscles, the rare reminder that we are still, first and foremost, creatures of the earth, even here in Paramus, shopping capital of the tri-state area. I dug and dug, and then I handed off my shovel to the next person in line and retrieved my umbrella.

Did I mention that it was big and blue and said, "Lovenox (Enoxaparin Sodium Injection)"? ■

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## What The Dead Don't Need

FAITH SHEARIN

No need for shoes, of course, or closets full of empty dresses. No need for the shade of trees or the approval of parents and friends. They don't care about the objects of this world: a new computer, a house overlooking the sea. The place they occupy may or may not contain a window to all they've left behind. We, the living, think of them without knowing who or what they have become. Ghosts? Dust? Butterflies? Wind? Other mysteries — puberty, sex, childbirth — are the business of life, and anyone can tell their story. On the matter of death: only a closed box and the silence of earth or ashes. When my daughter was small, my disappearance behind a blanket or curtain seemed permanent. How could I exist if I was not visible? When I returned, she was grateful: laughter and kisses, her hand on the roots of my hair.