

Write It In Stone – Rita Plush

Just shy of 60, my son died last year of ALS. He left a wife and two teenagers. And he left me. He'd left me before. The first time for pre-school—the separation harder on me than on him. To day camp he went, "on the bus like a big boy." Years later he left for sleepaway camp, then college, his first apartment. Milestone leavings, all. But this one goodbye was the parting of no return.

We'd had a good relationship. Mostly. After he married and had a family, a maturity seemed to come over him. Or maybe it was I who had matured. In any case, we learned how to talk to each other. How to tamp down the little jabs and missteps that took us away from the moment, and into the dredge-up of who says, and who does. We accepted each other. After he became ill the acceptance turned to mutual approval and admiration. I recognized his generous spirit. He admired my determination. Something opened between us. "I never knew you felt that way," I said when he told me about an incident between us long gone. He spoke about the limited time he might have—no one recovers from ALS—and how important I had become to him. He developed a clarity of thinking; my hot-headed son was now the voice of reason, yet his sense of humor remained intact.

I don't know if he started it—he must have been in his late teens then—or if I was the one who came up with it. But we had this *bit* going between us for the longest time. Whenever we heard of a politician who promised a preposterous cut in taxes, or an entertainer who said he had found his true love after four failed marriages, one of us would say, "Write it in stone, buddy. Write it in stone." Even deep into his illness, his voice a whisper, "Write it in stone, buddy..." he'd rasp in a jokey way when I ended a phone call with, "Talk tomorrow."

My heart buckles to think of it now.

On his last day I sat beside him, held his cooling hand as life seeped out of him. Whatever we had been to each other we would be no more.

At the funeral home, I stared disbelieving at the raised casket on the chapel's platform. *He's in there. Oh my God, my son is in there!* In the hearse I sat tugging at the sleeve of my blue sweater I'd chosen to match his eyes. At the family plot, following Jewish custom to honor the dead by helping to cover their grave, I took up a shovel from a nearby pile of dirt and dug into it. The scratch of soil on blade, the thud as the load of earth hit the casket. *Scratch. Thud. Scratch. Thud.* I sat *shiva* (seven days of mourning following burial) with my shattered heart and sorrow. Accepting sympathies from friends and family, a deli platter, specialty cookies and chocolate-dipped fruit, I wanted the callers to leave so I could be alone with my thoughts. I wanted them *never* to leave so I wouldn't *have* to be alone with my thoughts.

I drove to synagogue every day and said *Kaddish*, the daily Jewish memorial prayer that honors the dead. Every day *Yiskah-dol v'yiska-dosh...* When Covid struck and my rabbi shut down in-person prayers, I joined an online prayer group. Not the same as in-the-flesh attendance, but it was something. For months, I opened cards and letters of condolence, certificates showing donations made in his memory. I responded with thanks and appreciation.

I was involved. I was aware. I was engaged in the process of mourning. My son had died and I knew it as well as I knew my own hands. But how well did I really know it?

Months later, I set out to his *unveiling*, the Jewish graveside ceremony that commemorates one's life and death and *unveils* the memorial stone. I'd been to the family plot many times. For my parent's funerals and unveilings, for my husband's, and recently for my son's funeral. Not more than 200 yards from the entry gate, it was a right down to the cross road, a left, and a quick right. Shouldn't have taken more than five minutes, but for twenty, around and around I drove through the narrow, winding, convoluted roads of the cemetery, lost. A wild buzzing in my head, a sickening twist in my stomach.

I fought to unimagine the monument. As if without the stone set in place, my son might fling aside the casket lid, stretch out his kinks—he'd have some kinks cooped up in that box for eight months—hoist himself up, and body intact, walk back into the living world. Crazy, right? Well, you lose a child, it makes you crazy. But there it was, the family plot. And there was I, in my grief clothes. And there was my son, in his grave.

I did not want to look at that memorial stone taking possession of him, his name lasered into it, as it would laser into my brain. And yet I knew I had to. Had to look, had to see, and had to listen to his voice in my head. The horrible finality of it. Our little joke gone bad. *Write it in stone, buddy. Write it in stone.*

*Rita Plush is the author of the novels, *Lily Steps Out* and *Feminine Products*, and the short story collection, *Alterations*. She is the book reviewer for *Fire Island News* and teaches creative writing and memoir at Queensborough Community College, and the Fire Island School. Her stories and essays have been published in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *MacGuffin*, *The Iconoclast*, *Art Times*, *The Sun*, *The Jewish Writing Project*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Potato Soup Journal* and are forthcoming in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.*