

Chipping Granite

by Pamela J. Parker

I sat at the kitchen counter, aware of a heaviness, a numbness, in my flesh, my bones, my mind. My dancer's body -- short, trim and 108 pounds -- felt as huge and unmoving as the granite boulder in front of the town hall. I scanned the room, unable to do anything else. Around me, people who mattered to my family gathered, chattered, whispered, cried, laughed. My mother made coffee, her beautiful eyes flat and dead. Grandma sat, crying softly, shaking her head as Aunt Helen patted her back. Ruby Howland spoke with the pastor, some church business being conducted at the table. Ruby's southern accent over-powered the reserved New English voices. A knock at the door, my mother rushed to answer it. A brief rush of winter touched my ankles, so I pulled up my socks. I swiveled slightly on my stool, saw a neighbor, Patty Johnson, walking in, bearing finger sandwiches, hugs and tears. I turned back, stared at the countertop.

From the basement, my sister's wrenching sobs climbed the stairs and for a moment, silenced the kitchen. Then Ruby asked my mother a question and the talk resumed, the pretense of normality, the groping for distractions.

Numbness continued its residence in my body and mind.

Another knock at the door. Again, a rush past me of Mom, blue turtle neck flashing by, to welcome a new mourner. Winter dove in again, along with my Uncle Hank, Mom's older brother. Her sobs in his arms almost moved me, almost chipped through. I stared at the counter. Mom quieted and headed to the fridge. Uncle Hank said his hellos, hugged my Grandma, waved at Grandpa, grabbed a cup of coffee and sat at the stool next to me. He clearly wanted to connect with me, to help, and I wanted anything but. Numbness needed to recede, to give way to understanding. Across two towns, my father's dead body lay at Cooley Dickinson Hospital. An autopsy was necessary; he was only forty-one. After that, his body would be

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moved to Mitchell Funeral Home. I had heard the words and saw that all these people understood. They felt things while I was granite. As Uncle Hank said something I ignored, Grandpa came up and threw an arm around my shoulder. I smelled a hint of pipe smoke and resisted the urge to lean in to him.

"You're our iron woman, aren't you? You'll be strong for your mother." Grandpa walked away. I realized I could walk away too and wandered to the living room, hoping for solitude. Uncle Hank followed me. He sat on the couch next to me. I noticed his big toe poking from a black sock and thought, leave me alone. I just want to be alone.

He spoke for a while, some rambling nothings meant to help, I know, but they were words, only words. Somehow he ambled on to the fact that my father was a Protestant and what a shame that he hadn't had the last rites. I didn't move my eyes from the gold carpet, but felt pounds dissolving off my body and my muscles remembering their purpose. The satisfying clench of my fingers reminded me I was alive, not a boulder.

"I remember when you were baptized. And you know, sweetie, since you were baptized Catholic, you can get the last rites."

My head rose from gazing at the floor. Slowly, I turned to look at him. The strange sound of laughter leapt in from the kitchen. Ruby had made them smile. Happiness was possible? My neck and shoulder pulled taut as I stared at Uncle Hank.

"And God forbid, but if anything should happen to you and I'm around, I'll make damn sure you get the last rites."

Numbness dissolved. Shattered bits of granite poked my heart. I felt everything.

My good, wonderful, Protestant father had died far too soon. My philandering, cheating, Catholic uncle thought he had anything to say about my father or my death some day?

I knew poison flew from my eyes as I looked at him. His lips were set, his eyes were tired. Venom gathered in my voice. "I don't need your boarding pass to heaven."

Rising from the couch, I stomped down the hall to my room,
closed the door, fell on my bed and wept.

