

Eminence

by Caroline Casper / from *Carve Magazine*

We once had to make a list of all the things we didn't remember. At first this assignment stumped us. We were rigid teenagers forced into togetherness, and we just looked around at each other. But then we started writing and lost track of where we were. We got the hang of it and eventually, our lists were long.

When we were finished we had to browse our lists, or as the group counselor liked to say, "pan for gold," choose one thing and write a story about it. I wrote about a tornado I didn't remember and told the story backward, like the funnel cloud was unraveling gradually from my memory. I wanted to tell the story like a countdown because that's what was fresh in my mind.

When a kid in the group told me I did the assignment wrong, that I wasn't supposed to do it like a countdown, the counselor corrected him. She said it wasn't wrong at all. She said, in fact, when we know exactly how much time is left, we pay better attention.

Which reminds me.

Twelve years later, I still think about that unraveling tornado in my story. And I think about how starting at the end is like telling someone exactly how much time is left. Or what's more, to reveal at the beginning the distance to a story's end is like telling it backward. It's like cheating, forcing sentimentality. It's like saying pay attention now because look, it's going away, and we fall for it every time, all of us maniacs for what's next, the moment that's always just about to happen. Even when we already know how it all ends.

It's why it's easier to wait in front of the microwave than the stove.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.



Right now the timer on this old answering machine is revealing that there are 19 minutes and 30 seconds left on this tape—19 minutes and 30 seconds of something inaudible. Coincidentally that's also the amount of time left for me to tell this story. And by telling you this detail I'm telling you the end of the story (and its distance from this very second) before it even starts. I'm telling you what I waited for but never found.

Now there are 19 minutes and 13 seconds left.



Somewhere in the middle of Kentucky in my aunt's old Honda, I accelerated over a hill on the two-lane highway. I was driving just outside of Louisville and already the city seemed to be fading into rolling hills at the edges of farms with horses and rows of corn. Occasionally I'd pass a small white-steepled church and that's how I knew Louisville was getting farther away and Eminence was getting closer. In Louisville the churches aren't unadorned chapels next to barns with actual hay. They are mega-domed, concrete arenas with crucifixes the size of the Saturn V moon rocket on steeples that soar hundreds of feet in the air.

I saw a sign that said Eminence was still thirty-two miles east and there didn't appear to be anything in between Louisville and my destination. Or at least, not this way. This was the scenic route.

It was a ridiculous thing to be doing, driving through Kentucky, counting down the miles after all this time to find our old housekeeper, a beloved maid named Suz who occasionally babysat and cleaned to help my mother with four young children and a husband who worked full time. I knew it was ridiculous.

But still I accelerated, only to brake immediately again at the next bend in the road, and while driving I thought yes, it's true. Some things turn out exactly how you expect them to. And by that I meant the grass. At the perfect angle of the late afternoon sunlight (and maybe it was also the haze of rising heat), the grass surrounding me really did look blue. Most people don't expect that when they come to Kentucky they might actually see blue grass.

There's more. As I followed the two-lane road, I thought about my father at home cutting the grass so my nephew could set up a Slip 'N Slide in the backyard—on the same patch of brown grass we murdered decades ago hurling our wet bodies across the slippery plastic. My father was late picking me up from the airport the day before because my nephew had had a swim lesson and my brother had to work. I waited outside the airport in the sweltering humidity, still in my scarf because when I boarded my flight in San Francisco, where the seasons are backward, the fog was blowing through the air like a cold wind.

My father's old truck pulled up to the curb and two enormous golden retrievers panted out of the back window. He got out of the car to help with my bags and called out, "Hi there ladybird," in his country drawl. He kissed my forehead. He smelled like sweat and cigars. In the car, I reached behind the seat and squeezed my nephew's bare feet. His hair was still wet and he smiled at me from the car seat. He said, "So, did you have fun in California?" To him my constant absence to some place called California was just a vacation.

But this trip to Kentucky was really the vacation, and like I said, I was doing something ridiculous with my time off. I kept my eyes on the road, feeling guilty for not being honest about my visit. Or maybe I felt ashamed for not being "over it." It had been twelve years since my mother had died and for the most part we really were "over it" and coping well. But something had come back that I couldn't explain. I couldn't explain why I was driving to Eminence, why I canceled meetings and dinner dates after I got the call from Suz's daughter, why I dipped into my savings for a last-minute flight and flew across the country with a two-hour layover in Cleveland. I couldn't explain any of it because every time I tried, the truth kept sounding like lies—that I was really there to get that tiny cassette tape from the answering machine we used 15, 16, 17 years ago? That I'd come all this way because somehow I knew my mother left dozens of messages on that answering machine from the hospital? Late at night in the clinical silence of the ICU, I somehow knew she'd think about all the things she'd forgotten to do and call Suz, not us, at midnight and 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. because even at the very end, especially at the very end, she had a checklist; we all do. And until the last second she was polite, compassionate and never wanted us to worry. And if we didn't

get it then, we do now. We're old enough now to know how incredibly impossible it is, no matter how graceful you are, to die politely and painfully at exactly the same time.

There was something missing, something we hadn't yet discovered. It was gradual at first, unraveling backward slowly, but somehow, sure enough, I'd forgotten the sound of her voice.

I should back up. Suz's daughter, the one who owned the hair salon in Eminence, called me a week ago at work to tell me that Suz had fallen down again over the weekend. This time she broke her hip and they had decided to check her into a nursing home. She just couldn't live alone anymore. I paused at my desk; the sadness was unexpected. It was nearly impossible to picture Suz as old and frail. What I remembered was her thick wrists, her biceps, and her strength. On sheet-cleaning day, I'd hide in the mound of linens as she'd pretend to hurl all those sheets and me, curled in a tight ball, into the washing machine. She was always so much stronger than my mother.

"I'm calling because she left a box here that has your mother's name on it." I could tell she was at Suz's sifting through the box as she spoke. "It's just a bunch of junk. Looks like an old photo album, some Christmas cards, an old answering machine, and a few gift certificates to Bacon's she never did use."

We were quiet for a while before I heard myself say something polite like, Thank you, I appreciate your call. It's good to hear from you. I'm so sorry about your mom. But out loud the words felt fraudulent and naïve.

Then like a true Southern woman, Suz's daughter justified her decency, the polite gesture of contacting me.

"I know you're rather far away and I'm sorry to contact you at work, but this phone number is the only one I could find. Maybe you can have your dad come by to pick it up? Like I said, its nothing important but I know she wants you all to have it."

When we hung up I thought about all the ways we try to act like our mothers when nothing else seems so relevant.



Ahead I noticed an updated sign. I had twenty miles left to go. Eminence was only twenty miles away.

I had never been to Eminence but I'd heard plenty of stories about the place, especially when it was hit by that tornado years ago. In fact, on the same day as that storm, I ran away from home. Or I just needed to be alone for a while. I blamed everyone in my family; the entire nuclear family was at fault for making me miss my first ever ballet recital. When I found my mother to tell her I was leaving, she was alone in the master bathroom. She seemed to be balancing herself by holding the edge of the sink, so I didn't say anything. Our eyes met and she pretended to smile.

"I'm going outside now," I said.

"Okay. Stay close."

I left through the screen door carrying a small backpack with my unworn leotard that still had the price tag on it and a small compass key ring. I climbed a huge magnolia tree in our backyard

after dark and sat on the thickest branch. I was only about five feet above the ground, but the spot was perfectly hidden by thick, waxy leaves.

A long while later my mother stepped outside and stopped on the porch. She swept a flashlight across the yard. I held my breath. She stopped again, listened. And there was something about the air that night. It was unmistakable tornado weather. Too humid, too quiet, too still. Then my mother spoke so softly I didn't expect to hear her. She said, "If you're too far away to hear me, my heart will be broken."

I climbed down the tree and followed her back into the house. Less than an hour later we got the loudest warning I'd ever heard. It sounded like a train coming, and all six of us had to spend the night in the basement to wait it out. It was the violent wind, the thrusting branches catching power lines before falling that we heard, and then somewhere in the middle of Kentucky, far away from our house, a funnel cloud hit the ground and flattened the town of Eminence.



This is the halfway point. This story is halfway over.

Eminence was just over the train tracks. After the caboose passed and the guardrails rose, I crossed over. The cement road broke into gravel just outside a welcome center with Christmas lights running up two white columns. Magnolia trees lining the road grew out of the dirt and a couple of kids ran barefoot beneath them. Within seconds of crossing the city limit, I was in downtown Eminence passing through a small town that could have been a 1950s movie set in California. The entire place seemed to be trapped in another time period. It's a hard thing to explain but trust me, it was just so. Everything was named exactly what it was—The Diner, The Hair Salon, The Post Office, The General Store, The Baptist Church. When I caught a red light in front of the Wal-Mart parking lot, I felt a peculiar sense of relief, like I was glad to be back in the present time. In this part of the country, progress often means a new strip mall.

But in spite of its disquieting resemblance to an old movie set, Eminence was actually quite new, completely rebuilt after the twister had upended hundreds of buildings and homes here nearly twenty years before. I've thought a lot about tornadoes since then and how they always have a way of demolishing the poor. They seem to track down the homes without basements, the ones with the weaker foundations. It's like they can't move forward without tracking them down and demolishing the petite, the delicate, the easily affected ones.

All of the phone lines within ten miles went down that day too, and Suz couldn't call to tell us that her car was under a tree, that her son had suffered a concussion, that she had lost everything, that she just wasn't coming in to work. And she didn't get a single message, not even when the phones were working again, because she didn't have an answering machine. That's why my mother gave her ours.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

None of that damage was evident in Eminence now and still the entire place felt stuck in time, somewhere else.

I drove slowly, looking for 175 Windmill Avenue, but the map on my phone was confusing. I found the street but it zigzagged and then discontinued at a field with brown grass and an overturned metal trash can. I stopped in front of the field to check my directions again. 175 Windmill Avenue was on the map, but there was no house there.



My father had a mother and three sisters named Mary, and they were all named after the mother of Jesus Christ. Mary Margaret was my grandmother and her three daughters were named Mary Agnes, Mary Louise, and Mary Margaret (otherwise known to us as Grandma Marge, Aggie, Lu, and Maggie), and not a one of them was religious.

When I walked over to Maggie's (the youngest of the Aunt Marys) to borrow her car, she was having lunch on the back deck with Aggie and Lu. They were laughing at something when I arrived, and when they saw me they all stood up.

Well I'll be. Look who it is.

Look at you.

How'do?

Look at me.

Do you still like it out there in California?

Now tell me.

Look at me. Will. You. Look. At. Me.

Do you still love your job?

Look at you.

Who did your hair?

Look at me.

Well I'll be.

Then they poured me a fresh cup of sun tea out of a glass jug and I collapsed in a lawn chair.

The women on my dad's side of the family, these particular women, are sturdy and vivacious. At holidays they stand close together like stone pillars, and when they laugh their shoulders shake and they nudge and elbow each other when they see something funny or ridiculous. They have a good time. They tear it up something awful. They ride bicycles with baskets around the neighborhood and holler yoohoo when they open the screen door of someone else's home.

I'm not saying they're invincible; to me they've just always seemed so unshattered by the impossibly hard things they've endured. They're all in their seventies and live fiercely and true to the saying it's not denial, it's survival. What I mean is, Aggie has lost two husbands to cancer. Lu has been hospitalized multiple times for depression and has been known to stare motionless at the wall in her bedroom for hours upon hours, even with visitors waiting. And Maggie's youngest daughter, a beautiful and dangerously empathic cousin of mine with a drinking problem, shot herself in the head just after her thirtieth birthday. And yet they charge on.

I'm told they learned it from their mother.

My grandmother, Marge, was poor as dirt at the end of her life. Her husband, a quiet man who owned a Catholic church goods store, went blind after their fifth child was born, then stopped working and took to sitting in the dark all day. After he died fifteen years later from what they told me was “old age,” Marge adamantly refused any financial help from her children and moved into a low-income high-rise retirement community in downtown Louisville called the Puritan.

At seventy-five she started over again, and for the next two decades she lived in a tiny studio apartment with an old couch and a single bed behind a curtain. The Puritan was a historic building, built in the early 1900s, and was, for some reason, known to attract a disproportionate number of residents legally referred to (back then) as midgets, many of whom were Marge’s closest friends. She was popular at the Puritan, always telling jokes and carrying on with all the little people, and when my brother, sister and I would visit she’d nudge and elbow us in the lobby and always say something horribly embarrassing like, “Look at that little fella over there. He’s fifty-two and the same size as you.” Then she’d burst into hollers of laughter. It was so inappropriate and yet so overtly true it seemed everyone within earshot couldn’t help but smile.

Marge died in a nursing home when she was ninety-five. I had just turned ten and was there, standing off to the side with my father, when I saw something that I knew, even then, was remarkable. She lay on top of the sheets, unconscious yet awake enough to be agitated as a priest sprayed her with droplets of holy water. Her atrophied legs were exposed and contorted under her nightgown, and her long white hair was splayed on the pillow. I swear I heard her moan. It was so unrefined, so raw and just unapologetically real. All three of her daughters clung together around her bed like they were forming a wall or something, like they were expecting her to jump out of bed and run from it. Her breaths were strained and slow and they knew what was coming, of course we all did, but they just stood there and braced themselves.

It’s a remarkable thing, watching someone finally let go—to literally see hands unclench for the first time.



My mother was different. She was a little more fragile, somehow delicate and affected by everything she experienced. What I mean is, she felt everything. She accepted all that we gave her and held it in. And when she got sick, really sick, she held that in too. When she finally told us, it was too late. And I thought, Of course. We knew it was true, that unmanaged love will sometimes show up as illness, as leukemic white blood cells like jagged puzzle pieces. We resented her for it.

I wasn’t there when she died. But I’ve done the math and can say with near certainty that I was in an eighth grade history class trying to remove a breakfast stain from my uniform skirt with my pencil eraser when she stopped breathing.



Once when Suz was on her way out, I saw her pause by the door as my mother slipped the answering machine into her shoulder bag. They studied each other and then suddenly, like an explosion, they started laughing. They laughed so hard my mother had to steady herself on the door handle. They laughed so hard I thought they’d both stopped breathing.



I was lost.

Ahead I saw a woman walking with a limp on Windmill Avenue and my heart stopped beating. From the back she looked exactly like Suz. She seemed like she had no real direction, like she was just strolling, enjoying a final walk on the street where she'd lived her entire life.

I pulled up to her slowly. She must have heard my car coming because she stopped walking and turned around. As if on cue, we both leaned forward when I lowered the window.

It wasn't Suz.

"Are you lost?" the woman asked. Her eyes surveyed the inside of my car.

"Yeah, I think so. Do you happen to know how I can find 175 Windmill?"

"You looking for Suz's place?" She perked up.

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Honey, you can't get there this way. There's a field in the way. You've got to go back around and pick it up on the other side. Windmill, that is."



Earlier on the day of the storm—before I ran away—my dad honked the horn in the driveway. My baby sister pulled at her diaper and called for my mom from her playpen. My older brother and sister were fighting over a video game, but my mom and I were distracted and frantic. My recital was in thirty minutes and I couldn't find my leotard, the purple one with the tutu that all the girls in my class were expected to wear. We had just upended everything in the kitchen when my dad honked again, twice in a row this time. I looked up at her. "I can't go without it," I said, as though realizing it for the first time, and then it was too hard to see through the tears, though I heard it all clearly. My brother threw something that hit at a lamp. My little sister took off her diaper and wailed for someone to pick her up. And my dad blew through the kitchen door with a red face.

"She's going to miss the recital!" he called out to no one in particular.

None of us expected what came next, but still we paused like we were waiting for something. My mother glared at the ceiling and said—I heard it. I definitely did—"Fuck all of this." And I remember it because it was the first time I had ever heard her speak without a Southern accent. It didn't even sound like her voice. And then she cleared the kitchen counter and sent the answering machine and a ramekin of bobby pins crashing to the floor.

I guess as you get closer to the end, something is always about to explode or give way.



I could still smell the woman's perfume lingering in my car when I found the other side of Windmill Avenue. I drove past a row of small, decrepit houses, and a few of the owners waited on their porches, in the sweltering heat, for nothing in particular. They just watched me pass by like the seconds, unaffected by my presence. Many of them looked old enough to be retired and I wondered if they had lived on Windmill Avenue for as long as Suz. I wondered if they knew her. Did they know she was leaving? I drove slow, suddenly nervous about what was next. I never expected the visit to be so visceral, as something so stuck, so wracked in my gut when I arrived. As I

passed by the descending house numbers—183, 181, 179—I couldn't stop myself from repeating something I didn't expect: please be home, please be home, please be home.



When I reached 175, I saw a For Sale sign in a beautiful garden of peony bushes. They were orange, white and pink, and the house behind the peonies was small but modern with dark red bricks. It was obvious someone had put a good deal of money into its maintenance. A cobblestone path lined with freshly manicured bushes led to a blue front door.



I had forgotten about that answering machine until I got the call from her daughter. Of course we'd had many over the years—those little machines were miraculous, really. If someone tried to reach you and missed, for the first time, you'd know. As kids we'd run to the machine like a pack of dogs when we'd come home to see the red light flashing—the anticipation drastically more exciting than the actual message. But this one, the blue answering machine that sat next to the ramekin of bobby pins, meant more than the others. It was the machine my mother flung across the kitchen on the day of that tornado, and after my brother put a few parts back in place and repaired the tiny cassette tape (penance for breaking the lamp), my mother gave it to Suz, who lost everything when the storm upended her house a few hours later.



I'm running low on time but there's so much more to say. In an effort to keep it simple, maybe I should just say this. It was a ridiculous thing to do—to fly to Kentucky looking for a cassette tape with the sound of my mother's voice—but you'd do it too. Maybe not at first. You might not do something like this right away, because at first it would be too hard and you'd still remember the images that would seem so impossible to forget. So you'd stay away. I'm talking about the gasping for air when the tracheotomy would falter, and although it was only a pause, a tenth of a second when pressure somehow blocked the air in her tube, it felt like the end every day that it wasn't. Think about it. Every day it ends and then it doesn't.

You wouldn't go back to a place like Eminence right away because some things would be too hard to revisit. Like the time she looked at you dead in the face after a new shot of morphine and said something like, "It's miraculous. My body is giving out, sinking like a ship, and I'm here, little old me, still stuck in it."

When she said it, you could almost see her face, submerging slowly under water with her eyes still open.

But I'm telling you, as more time passed, you'd go back too because eventually you'd find yourself in a moment, completely stuck in whatever it was just about to be, because you'd have questions, so many of them, that needed answers and you'd be stuck waiting, sometimes for long periods of time. You'd go back. Because, I don't know, she's your mother. You go back for your mother. Because eventually you'd find yourself trying to remember not just the answers she'd give to everything you'd forgotten but the sound of them too.

Suz's daughter left me a key under a potted cactus plant on the porch. She said the box with our things was in the foyer, just behind the blue door.

Allow me these last 98 seconds to say that when I finally got inside, no one was home. Suz had already moved out. The curtains were closed, the carpet still held the tracks of a vacuum cleaner and white sheets covered all of the furniture in the living room. I peeked under the sheet on the couch to see if I could tell what it used to be like, the life in this beautiful little house, but it was just beige. The couch, I mean.

I sifted through the box that said Deborah in faded letters and reached for the familiar answering machine. I plugged its cord into an outlet and sat on the floor. The machine's lights turned on green and then red to indicate it was working, but before I pressed play, I waited, suddenly realizing I had no idea what I expected to hear. I'd spent the last two weeks counting down the hours, the minutes and even the God forsaken seconds to this very moment, to the end of this story. But I had no idea what I was waiting for.

Our bereavement counselor always said hospice, the final days of life, is like the ultimate countdown. How even at the very end, there's so much anticipation in a countdown. She said don't worry though; we keep track of the things we don't remember. She said, "You're constantly tracking them down. Your whole life, you don't even know you're doing it."

When I finally pressed play, the tape of the old cassette unraveled and rolled slowly to reveal nothing but the muffled static of white noise. The tape was too old, too damaged, you see, and there was nothing left on it but 60:00 of static.

I surveyed the room again, suddenly aware of something aloof and lifeless in its pristine corners. I watched the countdown on the answering machine and listened to the static like there was something in it, something just about to be.

Caroline Casper is a freelance writer of short fiction and nonfiction who also works in marketing & sales for a new health and wellness website based in Brooklyn, NY where she is currently living. She has an MA in Journalism from Columbia College in Chicago and is currently working towards an MFA in Creative Writing. 1st place - 2014 Million Writers Award Nominated for Pushcart prize