

My mother died nine years ago today and her gravestone always looks as newly cut as a fresh sliced loaf.

I went to trim the grass, tend the primroses that cover her plot, and of course, to think about the mother I love but barely remember.

The monkey-puzzle tree that grows across the path from her graveside had recently been trimmed. Discarded branches had been piled high in the corner of the cemetery near the back wall. They were a dark brown, nearing black, whereas the ones on the tree were a full-bodied green. I thought that the curls of the black branches made them look like a mound of writhing, fornicating snakes.

My mother's plot is near a distinctly Catholic-Italian section of the cemetery. They have the grandest tributes to their loved ones. Size really matters, particularly if you're talking rosary beads. The latest fashions are gravestones the size of home cinema screens with carved stone beads slung dramatically across the top. Each bead of the rosary is the size of a coconut. One grave had an Italian flag planted proudly in the middle of its plot.

On my walk back to the car I made sure that I passed through the area of children's graves. I always find this stretch of the route most interesting. I enjoy looking at the cute gravestones in the shapes of teddy bears, the birthday helium balloons secured with stones once a year in order to last only days if lucky, the favourite toys and the gaudy excesses that love and grief provoke. Some graves are decorated with windmills that you buy at the seaside to place on sand castles. The waste-bins in this area are the most heavily used, overflowing with dead and dying bouquets.

I paused by a bench, to spy on a young couple tending one child's grave; the most lavish of shrines. The couple arrived with a bin bag full of equipment. A spade, shears, more toys and flowers. The man knelt, kissed the palm of his hand then placed it flat down in the centre of the plot. The woman stood and watched

with tissues. Then the man unhooked a lantern from its stand next to the headstone and began to unscrew the glass case from its base. He reached into the bin bag, brought out some lamp oil and continued seriously with his business. By this time the woman was also on her knees, rooting about in the jungle of offerings, identifying wilted flowers, weathered tokens of love.

The closer I came to the beginning of the cemetery, the older the graves got. Then a small red object caught my eye. The graves there had the fewest flowers on them but one bore a large red and white cross, constructed from carnations and sporting two names:

N
MAM
N
A

Did Mam and Nana send the cross, or was the person buried both Mam and Nana to the grieving? The grave was fresh. This must have been a recent burial in an old family plot. I know about those. Dad intends to be buried flat on top of Mum. He said that there would be room for one more corpse after that. Sally and I would have to discuss the possibilities for ourselves. I think I would like a new grave. I fell back to musing over Mam and Nana, how one person could be both? On my mother's grave we are told that she was a mother. What else? Nothing much. How did Dad come to pick only the word mother? Of course, it was probably such a distressing experience that he found it hard to think properly. If I was him I would have added 'wife'.

Near the entrance of the car park I noticed something that I hadn't before on my countless journeys. A green plaque embedded in the freshly turned soil. It read:

THIS STONE IS PLACED BY
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CARDIFF
IN MEMORY OF THOSE

WHO HAVE GIVEN THEIR BODY FOR MEDICAL TEACHING

The plaque was made of the sort of metal that gets greener with age. What is that metal called? I stood next to it for some time in an emotional fug. The simplicity of its design, the dignity of its small but ample size left me moved. It took me to thinking about Mum's body. Dad never mentioned whether he gave any of her away. I suppose that's not the sort of thing you discuss with a six year old. I've never felt the desire to fill in a donor form and I don't feel guilty about it at all. But staring at the plaque I did feel grateful that others would give and that in some small and almost secret way they were being thanked, there in the cemetery.

Inevitably, my mind turned to musing over the parts of my mother that may still be alive – out there in someone else. Which bits might they have taken? I know that you can choose whether to give all or something more specific, 'organs only' for example. A while ago, I thought it would be funny to carry a card saying I would donate my handbag in the event of death. What if Dad chose to donate her corneas? That would be the strangest thing. My mother's eyes that I barely remember staring at me in the face of another. How would I feel? I wouldn't recognise them exactly but I would sense some warm glow. Maybe I would think that I liked the person's smile or manner. Perhaps I would attempt to get to know them, we would become friends and neither of us would ever know who we were to each other, in truth. I will keep a look out for unusual glints in people's eyes, small pulses of light.