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Turning Bones

I imagine my grandmother on the last day of her girlhood, the day my grandfather comes to say his wife, Ella, is dying from tuberculosis. This is in 1901, and my grandmother, Stella, is eighteen years old. Ella is twenty-six, married ten years to Will Martin, mother of two children: Glen, age nine, and Mae, age five.

Stella Inyart lives a half mile to the east atop a hill that gently slopes to the fields below. Will Martin has to cross one of those fields when he finally comes to the Inyarts, asking for help. Perhaps Stella sees him as he steps carefully over the corn rows, plants ankle-high. Perhaps she takes note of his narrow shoulders, the way he leans forward as he climbs the hill, his head down, ever mindful, as he is, of the young corn plants. And maybe this is the moment when her heart goes out to him, when he becomes someone she can love.

Already, her sisters have married: Ida and Laura and Della and Fannie. And here she is still living at home. "Near 'bout ripe," her father often teases her. Sometimes she stands a good while studying her face in the looking glass. Her nose is too flat – not daintily tipped like Laura's, and her hair is short and coarse, kept in tight pin curls. How she's always envied Ida's black mane and the way it ripples and gleams when she brushes it. Still, for the most part, Stella thinks herself pleasing. She has full lips, a dimple in her chin, a slim figure, and a grace when she takes a turn at a barn dance. People are always remarking on how willowy she is. Years later, at my father's funeral, a third cousin will take my hand and say, "You put me in mind of Stella. Just the way you walk across the room."

By the time I know my grandmother, over fifty years will have passed since the day Will Martin stepped over the last of the corn rows and into her yard. She'll be nearly blind with cataracts, but still tall, still graceful, her fingers long and narrow. Though she can barely see, she'll cut rags into strips, wind those strips into balls,

and then weave multicolored rugs, creating something pretty from scraps she's been able to salvage.

It's easy for me, then, to imagine her and her mother sitting in the yard on ladder-back chairs that morning in 1901, stitching together reticules, the dainty drawstring purses women carried in those days. I can see my grandmother doing needlepoint on the face of the broadcloth, embroidering the blue petals of forget-me-nots, trailing the curls of their tendrils with green thread.

She doesn't even look up when Will Martin says, "It's Ella. She's bad sick with the consumption."

"I'll come look after her," Stella says. She knows how contagious the disease is, but she doesn't hesitate. "I'll see to your young'uns, too. I'll be there this noon," she says. Then she bites off the thread with her teeth.

On the island of Madagascar, people believe that their dead ancestors have the power to bestow fortune or tragedy on the surviving family. The stone and cement tombs are often in better condition than the clay houses of the living. From May to November, the winter months of Madagascar, people pull the remains of loved ones from their tombs and dance with the corpses in a ceremony known as famadihana, which literally means, "turning of bones."

In my home, when I was a child, there was never dancing, and rarely music. On the farm where I lived with my parents and my grandmother, Stella, there was no piano, no music box, no phonograph. Occasionally my father would try to sing a verse of a song – "Rescue the Perishing," or "Daisy" – in an off-key voice. From time to time, at the end of the mutual news broadcast on the radio, a few bars of dance music would sneak into our house. Saturday nights, we watched *The Lawrence Welk Show* on television; we sat in dim light, the glow from the television screen flickering over our faces. We sat there, rarely speaking, as nimble girls twirled and hale men broke into song. We sang in church, but that was a joyless type of singing, with no music to accompany it since the Church of Christ believed the use of musical instruments during worship services to be a sin. The song leader called out the hymns in a monotone. Plain voices measured out the time of each verse. If we intended to make "a joyful noise," we failed miserably. We went about our worship with a severity learned from the grim forbearance it took to perform farm work. We were, for the most part, quiet and reserved.

We were particularly shy about our dead. Because my family rarely spoke of him, I knew little about my grandfather, Will Martin, who had died in 1941, fourteen years before my birth. I knew nothing of Ella at all. I knew my father had a half brother and a half sister, but I didn't really understand what that meant, and I must admit that I wasn't curious, the way I am now when I am the last of the Martin family, forced to imagine my ancestors from the few clues photographs offer and the public records I find in courthouses. Then, it was as if we had put the dead away from us and didn't mean to disturb them. Their photographs were kept in boxes in my grandmother's wardrobe, the same photographs I now pull out again and again. I study the way my ancestors face the camera head-on, not smiling. They look timid, helpless, as if they know they have nothing more to offer than their modest looks, their homespun clothes. They can't say this, but they look as if they're desperate for someone to get beyond their grim visages to the lives they carry inside them, to finally, please, tell their stories.

Is it love or fear or both that impels the people on Madagascar toward such an urgent recovery of the dead? It would be easy to consider this dancing with corpses a gruesome thing, but isn't it also a profound passion, an ardent desire for reunion? For months after my father's death in 1982, he came to me in dreams. I found him sitting in chairs, standing on sidewalks. "You're supposed to be dead," I would tell him, and at the sound of my voice, he would start to fall, to crumple like a scarecrow released from his post. I would grab him, hold him to me, stagger about with his weight, knowing that eventually I would have to let him go, but not for a while, not yet, not while I could feel him against my skin.

My family's dead have crept inside me. I've poked around in courthouse records, handled brittle documents; studied my ancestors' signatures or marks on marriage licenses, land deeds, probate records; seen their names recorded on certificates of birth and death. Their souls have transmigrated through the generations, leaving one body for another, gathering, finally, in my own, a chain of spirits as impossible to escape as the double helix of DNA. The dead surrender to the drift of time. They dance about, all essence now – energy and force – waiting for the living to find them, to take them inside as easily as one would take a breath.

My wife refuses to speak of the time she feared I would die. It was January, 1979, and I was sick with pneumonia, only no one knew it. An emergency room doctor had misdiagnosed my condition as an upper respiratory infection, given me an injection, and

sent me home. Day by day, I got sicker. Even now, it's difficult for me to relive that time – the fevered dreams, the wracking coughs, the way the world had stopped seeming real to me. On the rare occasions when I slept, it must have been easy for my wife to imagine me a corpse – pale and still – to imagine that both my body and my soul had surrendered.

I don't know how sick Ella was the day Stella came to care for her, but by then the tubercle bacilli would have multiplied in the small air sacs of the lungs. I can imagine how they must have choked and suffocated her. I suspect she was coughing when Stella stepped into the log house; I can see her spitting clots of sputum and blood into a rag, a scrap torn from an old flour sack.

Stella takes the rag from her, finds a clean one and soaks it in cool water. She bathes Ella's face – Ella who lies on the corn shuck mattress in the log house, deep in a grove of oak trees.

"It's the consumption," she says. Her lips are dry and cracked. Sweat glistens along her collarbones, gathers in the hollow of her throat.

"I know it is," Stella says. She holds a dipper of water to Ella's lips and lifts her head so she can drink. "Don't worry. I'm here to see to you."

We can trace the presence of mycobacterium tuberculosis back to 2400 B.C. Fragments of the spinal columns from Egyptian mummies show pathological signs of tubercular decay. The disease, up until 1944, when the antibiotic, streptomycin, proved to be successful, was humanity's most dreaded enemy – so deadly that even Hippocrates, well-known for his honorable code of medical ethics, warned his colleagues around 460 B.C. against visiting tubercular patients in the late stages of their illnesses because the inevitable deaths might mar the doctors' reputations.

A succession of effective drugs followed the introduction of streptomycin: p-aminosalicyic acid (1949), isoniazid (1952), pyrazinamide (1954), cycloserine (1955), ethambutol (1962), and rifampicin (1963). From 1953–1984, thanks to these drugs, the number of tuberculosis cases reported in the United States decreased by an average of six percent each year. Since 1985, due in part to the HIV epidemic and increased migration from countries where tuberculosis is common, the number of cases has increased. Still, the disease isn't the feared killer that it was before the advent of chemotherapy treatment. At the time of Ella's illness, particularly in the rural areas where health care was often distant and unaf-

fordable, there was little to be done outside the usual folk remedies (a tea and poultice from the lungwort plant, for example) or superstitious charms such as a ball of the fetid resin from the asafoetida plant worn on a string tied around the neck. The people like my ancestors who settled southern Illinois died of cholera, influenza, summer complaint, tuberculosis. Given the hard labor of clearing woodlands for farming, the coaxing of seed to plant and grain, the fear of Indian attacks, and the brutal isolation of winter's cold and snow, dying was perhaps one of the easiest things one could accomplish.

When I was ill with pneumonia, I never once thought that I would die. In fact, I thought each day that I would take a turn toward the better and start to improve. When I didn't – when it became clear that I was in trouble – I finally said to my wife, who all along had wanted me to go back to the doctor, "All right. Take me." And she did. I was twenty-three at the time, only a few years younger than Ella when she lay dying of tuberculosis. She must have known her days were dwindling because at some point during her illness she put in writing her wishes that her son, Glen, and her daughter, Mae, each receive eighteen dollars and fifty cents after her death. I know this to be true because I've seen the probate record filed in 1906, five years following Ella's death, testifying that the money had been delivered to the rightful heirs. My grandfather's signature is on the document as is my great-grandfather's mark as witness.

I wasn't present at either of my parents' deaths, and this is a fact that causes me both grief and thanksgiving. I'm not sure that I would have been up to the task; I regret that I never had the chance. What must it be like to watch a loved one die? I don't know, but I imagine it must split you in two: one part hoping for a miracle; another anxious for the suffering to be done. Circumstance and distance protected me from this agony. My father died suddenly from a heart attack while mowing the grass in the summer heat; my mother died a more difficult death in a nursing home some four hundred miles from where I lived at the time. In a way, I'm glad I was spared from having to see either death, but at the same time, I feel diminished somewhat because I wasn't there to do whatever would have been required of me: to lay my hand to cheek or brow, to offer whatever I could to ease the soul's passage from the world.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, farm families, when they traveled in search of bet-

ter land, did so together. In the case of my ancestors, the Martins left Kentucky for Ohio and later Indiana and Illinois. They traveled with another family, as was common in those days, a family named Fite. More than once, through the generations, Martins married Fites, owned land in the same townships, attended to one another's births and deaths. Why was it, then, in 1901, that it wasn't a Fite who cared for Ella. Or why wasn't it Will Martin's sister-in-law, Clara? Henry Fite owned eighty acres just north of Will Martin's forty; Charlie Martin, Will's brother, owned forty acres to the south.

But Will turned to Stella Inyart, possibly because his own mother had been an Inyart, or possibly because he had already noted Stella's goodness, had perhaps begun to fancy her. Maybe the Inyarts were known as healers. I remember my grandmother, in her old age, believing in the powers of herbs: horehound, sassafras, castor oil. And her daughter, my aunt, nursing her son through seizures, fevers, infections of the colon and kidneys and bladder. I remember my father's first cousin, Raymond Inyart, digging ginseng root from the woods of Lukin Township. Maybe Will hoped that Stella would come into the log house and find a way to save Ella, but, of course, she can't. It's 1901 in rural southern Illinois, and, when someone becomes ill with consumption, they die. There's nothing Stella can do, but she goes, putting her own health at risk. Maybe she does it because she sees Will ragged with worry and takes pity on him and his two children, who are so sweet-faced, their features delicate like their mother's. Maybe it's Stella's nature; I know it's what I learned from my own father, who must have learned it from his parents: when a neighbor needs help, you give it.

My grandmother, when I was five, was already seventy-seven. She was an old woman in poor health, impatient with a boy like me who was often noisy and rambunctious. Everything about her was so severe: the crinkled pins she wore to hold her hair in a bun, the dark support hose she wore, the sunbonnet that cowled her face when she went outside, the brown bread she ate, the All-Bran cereal, the Black Draught laxative powders she took. For the most part, I found her to be a stifling, joyless presence in our house. I had yet to understand how physical debilitation – my grandmother's cataracts, in this case, her heart disease and arthritis – not only wracks the body, but also alters the personality. How can the essence of a person sustain itself when the vessel that houses it begins to break down?

Often, during the few years my grandmother lived in our house, she lay in bed – "too puny," she said, to get up. In those days, doctors in our part of the country still made house calls. Doc Stoll came regularly to see my grandmother. I was fascinated with the black satchel he carried, the one that opened like a valise, and the stethoscope he wore around his fat neck. One day, as he examined my grandmother, I peeked around the door jamb and saw her sitting up in bed, her nightgown undone, Doc Stoll's stethoscope between her naked breasts. I had, of course, never seen my grandmother's breasts, and I was, at once, embarrassed and entranced – not from any erotic instinct (at least, none that I was conscious of) – but because the skin I was seeing, in comparison to the wrinkled and age-spotted flesh of her face, was so smooth and white. So young. So like my own.

At that moment, my grandmother became more real to me, more complete. Her life, I sensed, stretched back through years and moments I was incapable of imagining. That afternoon, I got into bed with her, and she put her arm around me, and in a soft voice she told me stories about my father when he was a boy. I remember the feel of the quilt over me, the way the ticking of the feather pillows smelled. It was raining outside, and as the afternoon went on, the light grew dim in the room, and, finally, I slept, curled in close to my grandmother, who once, long ago, had been kind to a woman who was dying, a woman whose death made my own life possible.

When does Will Martin know that Ella is nearly lost to him? Maybe it's a day when he's outside scattering feed for his chickens, and he hears Stella in the house, singing to Glen and Mae. She's singing "They're Gathering Homeward," and her voice is so sweet, Will starts to cry. Or maybe it's an evening when Stella sits by Ella's bed and shows her the reticule she's made. "I've brought it for you," she says, and Ella, in a weak, gasping voice, says, "Oh, I won't be needing that."

But Stella insists. She fetches Ella's worn reticule from the wardrobe and transfers objects to the new one, the one embroidered with forget-me-nots. Will watches her handle Ella's leather coin purse, an old penny stick of peppermint candy, a handkerchief, a mother-of-pearl button that fell from her dress on one of the last days that she was well.

They had made the ten-mile trip into Sumner to get their portrait made at Ronald's Studio. Will wore a suit and necktie. He fastened only the top button of his coat as was the fashion of the day.

Ella wore a long, dark dress, the pleated frill of a jabot rippling down the front to the belted waist. She had dressed the children: Mae in a white shift with ruffles at the collar and the cuffs of the sleeves; Glen in a double-breasted suit with a white cavalier collar, trimmed with lace, falling over the shoulders, a watch dangling from a fob stretched from pocket to buttonhole.

I have the photo now. Will sits on a ladderback chair, his hands on the tops of his legs. Glen, to his right, and Mae, to his left, rest their small hands on him. Ella is behind him and to his left, her hand on his shoulder. It's as if the three of them are consoling him, bracing him for the sadness that's soon to come.

I've made the button fall from Ella's dress, a pure act of imagination, because, if the button falls there in the photographer's studio and Will retrieves it and presses it into Ella's hand, they come alive for me. They step from the frame of the camera's lens and begin to move – my grandfather and his wife who must feel so handsome in their best clothes, so proud of their darling children, the dropped button is only an inconvenience, something Ella will sew back on her dress quick as she can.

But here it is again, the button still in her reticule, fished out by Stella, and when Will sees it, he nearly breaks down, the sight of that pearl button too much for him, thinking, as he is, that it wasn't so long ago that Ella took it from him, and neither of them knew that their time together was nearly gone.

"It's funny, isn't it?" Stella says to Ella. "You and me having nearly the same name."

"Phoebe," Ella says. "My real name is Phoebe."

Will thinks of morning light, and birds singing, and how fresh the world once seemed to him each day when he first opened his eyes.

She was sixteen when he married her – Phoebe Ellen Preston – a slim-waisted girl, her hair curled and piled on top of her head. They were married on May 30th by a justice of the peace. Ella's mother, Elizabeth, certified that she approved the marriage; my great-grandfather scratched an "x" where the county clerk instructed him, signifying that he accepted Elizabeth's consent as genuine.

I can imagine Will and Ella, there at the beginning of their married life. Ella, if the photograph I have of her from this time is a fair indication, is timid, a bit cowed by how fast her life is changing. Married – my word. And Will, only twenty-two, is young enough

to marvel over the fact that whatever happens from then on will be linked to this girl who is now his wife.

Surely, there's a shivaree that night. Neighbors and relatives from Lukin Township sneak down the lane to Will and Ella's house after they've gone to bed, and there in the dark they strike up a din by firing shotguns into the air, banging on washtubs, ringing cowbells, blowing on horns. And Will, as is the custom, steps outside in his nightshirt and offers everyone apples and coffee and crullers. Perhaps there's even a jug of corn liquor that the men will pass around in the shadows. And then the fiddles come out and the Jew's harps and the squeeze boxes, and all night, by the light of pine-knot torches, Will and Ella dance. He puts his hand lightly on her slender waist and twirls her about in a glorious reel. She tosses back her head and sees the stars shining through the canopy of trees, and maybe she thinks she's never been as happy as she is now, and wishes that the music and the dancing and the feel of her husband's hand on her waist could go on and on.

Now in the log house, as night deepens, the only sounds are the rasp of Ella's breathing, the squeak of Stella's rocking chair, the gentle click of her knitting needles. She sits near the hearth, relying on the light of the fire to see. Will, who has put Glen and Mae to bed in the loft, stands at the bottom of the ladder and looks beyond Ella's bed to Stella by the fire. In the shadows, she can be anyone he chooses. She can be Ella, young and healthy. He has to fight an impulse rising in him, one he hates himself for having – a desire to go to Stella, to kneel at her feet and lay his hand in her lap as if he were no older than Glen or little Mae. He wants to feel Stella's hand stroking his face, the way it does Ella's after she's changed her night dress or braided her hair. He's gone beyond worry into the first dark days of grief, and now that he's convinced that Ella will die, he wants nothing more than for someone to comfort him – wants Stella to comfort him. So kind she's been to Ella, to Glen and Mae – so gentle – he hasn't been able to stop himself, though he doesn't know this yet, from falling in love with her. He only knows this nearly irrepressible urge to be near her, an urge he covers over with gruffness.

"You ought to go on now and sleep," he says to her now.

She doesn't lift her head from her knitting. "Not tonight," she says in a hushed voice. "Tonight I mean to keep awake."

Will knows that she's telling him that tonight may be Ella's last. He marks it in his mind – July 22, 1901. He doesn't know that in a little more than a year, he and Stella will marry, will live together

in this log house where he and Ella first lay down as husband and wife. He doesn't know how, at the same time, he will love and resent Stella, feel himself simultaneously drawn toward her goodness and repelled by her association with Ella's dying.

In the years prior to 1882, when Robert Koch discovered that a bacterium caused tuberculosis, some people believed that the ailment was the result of vampires feeding on the living. The patients gradually wasted away even though they had an increased hunger. After they died, their relatives often got sick, presumably because the vampires knew where to find them. To put a stop to this feeding, people began to disinter the bodies of their dead relatives – to burn their hearts or to place the skull on the chest with the leg bones crossed below it, believing that these drastic measures would kill the vampire.

Will Martin will never be able to rid himself of the haunting sensation that he has somehow caused Ella's illness. He took her into town, let the photographer make their picture, and something in the powder flash crept into her lungs and began to destroy her. Fantastic, I know, but this is the way of my family – this capacity for self-blame. Whatever goes wrong is somehow the fault of our own flaws. We look for causes, culpability, refusing to accept the fact that sometimes chance and circumstances collide. Someone coughs – it may have happened anywhere – and Ella breathes in a tubercular bacterium, and at that moment, in 1901, everything is determined. I can't change that aspect of the story; all I can do is speculate on these last days when Ella and Will and Stella are inextricably linked, then and forever.

Perhaps, on this last night, Ella rallies for a moment. Maybe she sits up in bed and says, "I'm just about starved to death."

In the milk house, kept cool by the double walls lined with sawdust, there are pieces left from the chicken Stella fried for their supper. She has wrapped a drumstick, a wishbone, a wing in cloth and closed them up in a tin pail. When she goes to fetch it, she carries an oil lamp. Despite the heat it throws up into her face, she shivers inside the milk house. She remembers how Will looked at her the morning he came to say Ella was sick – like he was lost. She knew, then, that she could have whatever she wanted from him. She understands now – and this strikes her with such force she feels faint – that the rest of her life is about to begin. Ella will die, and she – Stella – will marry Will, and no longer will she have to abide her father's teasing or look with envy at her sister's long, black hair. She doesn't know yet how some people will gossip, talk

about what must have been going on in that house between her and Will Martin – and his wife dying from consumption.

But it hasn't been that way at all. They've rarely even spoken and only to say the necessary things – to talk of food and chores and Ella and the children. Stella has slept on a pallet by Ella's bed. She has risen time and time again in the night to fetch Ella water, to help her to the chamber pot. She has washed her fevered body, has cooked whatever foods Ella has requested. Her appetite seems boundless. And there have been the children to see to, and Will – his clothes to mend, his spirits to try to maintain.

Just the other day, when she went out to the cistern, she found a robin's egg. It was so small, no bigger than the end of her thumb, and colored such a pale blue. She put it on Will's plate, and when he came to breakfast, she said, "Looks like the hens are getting uppity." And he laughed: a loud, sudden bark – Ha! – and then silence.

Now she feels guilty about causing that laugh, letting that brief moment of joy into the house. She wonders whether she did it – whether she has done everything for Ella and Will and their two young'uns – not from goodness alone, but also from want. If this is true, she refuses to feel ashamed. She understands that at the heart of everything – even death – beats the desire to love and to be loved in return.

I have inherited my grandmother's photographs and mementos. Included in them is the portrait Will and Ella had made just before she fell ill. There is also the one of Ella as a young girl, and another of her and Will and Glen as a baby. Nowhere is there a photograph of Will and Stella together, and something about that fact suggest to me an emptiness through all their years together. After Ella died, was it too painful for him to ever again step into a photographer's studio? How much joy went out of him when Ella died? More than his marriage to my grandmother could ever refill?

When my wife and I married, she was seventeen and I was nineteen. We married because I was about to leave for college, and we couldn't bear the thought of being apart. I don't know whether that's what love is – this urgent longing for someone's presence – but our original impetus for marriage has sustained us now nearly twenty-seven years, has seen us through some perilous times; no matter how tenuous our relationship has become, an elemental truth has always existed; neither of us has been able to imagine a life apart from the other. Perhaps this is what frightened my wife most of all the winter she feared that I might die – the notion of the

space my leaving would create, the thought of my spirit a wave somewhere in the universe, undulating around her, a presence she would sense but never be able to touch.

I suspect that when you attend to someone's death, as Stella did Ella's, you bind yourself to that person forever. Some part of them goes inside you, and even if you want to expel it, you can't.

Perhaps on this night, when she stands in the milk house, Stella realizes that her true intimacy has been with Ella – that this is what she and Will are going to share, are going to look for in each other all the thirty-nine years they will be married: the memory of Ella and how, when she finally slipped away, she filled them forever.

When Stella comes in from the milk house, she sets the oil lamp on the table beside Ella's bed, and there in its glow, she opens the tin pail and unwraps the chicken. She watches Ella eat, her teeth tearing at skin and meat. She licks her fingers; her chin is shiny with grease. She eats the drumstick, and the wing, and finally the wishbone. Stella takes the bones from her, holds them in her palm, aware that from across the room, Will is watching her, that above them Glen and Mae have awakened and crept to the edge of the loft where they kneel and look down on their mother.

"Do the wishbone with me," Ella says. She takes one of the clavicles, and Stella takes the other. When she pulls, she feels little resistance from Ella. The wishbone snaps, and Stella is left holding the longer fragment. Ella holds a splinter of bone on her palm, holds it up to the light from the oil lamp. "Just a little hank of bone," she says. "That's all I could manage. Sakes alive, it looks like you get your wish."

The splintered bone is nearly transparent in the light. Such an airy, insubstantial thing, Stella thinks. She's aware of Will moving toward the bed, his footsteps shaking the floor planks. He starts to take the bone from Ella, but before he can grab onto it, it slips from her hand, tumbles down to the floor where a gust of wind catches it and sends it skittering off into the dark shadows at the corner of the room.

Will starts to go after it, but Ella grabs his hand. "We'll find it come morning," she says. "Don't fret about it now."

Will reaches out his other hand for Stella, but she can't take it because both her hands are holding the chicken bones, and she's afraid that, if she tries to put them in one hand, she'll end up dropping them all. She can't bear the thought that this might be the last sound Ella hears, the clacking dance of the bones as they fall.