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The Iowa Review

Volume 29
Issue 3 *Winter*

Article 26

1999

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Recommended Citation

Schottenfeld, Stephen. "Obituaries." *The Iowa Review* 29.3 (1999): 121-131. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5208>

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Stephen Schottenfeld

OBITUARIES

It was the name that caught Barb's attention. She was turning past the obituaries and the last name of one of the deceased was that of an old neighbor, and even though it wasn't him, a connection had been made. His life intrigued her—he had been a scientist tied to the bomb—and when she finished with the obituary, she decided to read the others. There was a labor lawyer, a jazz player, and a radio pioneer, and as she read them she noticed they differed from the first man in that they had all left families behind. At first she grieved for the families, but she soon felt sorrier for the man who had died alone. She had her pen nearby, for the crossword. She lifted it and wrote at the bottom margin, "He is survived by his wife of fifty years, Judith, and their two sons, David and Neil."

She smiled. The man's life seemed complete. "I gave him a family," she said.

Marvin looked up from the front section. Barb pointed and he read the addition. "Well, that was nice of you," he said. "A bit noseey, though." He smiled.

They finished the paper by eight, watched some television and played cards on the porch. Barb tidied the house and made a small grocery list while Marvin read a book at his desk. They had a light lunch at noon. The weather was mild, so they took an afternoon walk. Back at home, Marvin napped on the couch while Barb wrote letters and twice answered the phone. They were both solicitations—one from a phone company, asking that she switch her long distance, to which Barb politely declined; the other from the police, requesting donations. They were having some kind of fundraiser. Barb didn't know if the money was going directly to the police or to some other organization, but she thought it would be wise to give because they probably kept track of these things. When Marvin woke, they drove into town for the groceries.

When they returned, Barb cooked dinner while Marvin watched television. Barb had the tv on in the kitchen as well and every so often she'd stop chopping and listen. At dinner, they discussed going to a movie, but decided against it. After eating, they watched more tv. And then they went to bed.

The last two years had been the same day with minor variations—a meal in town, a matinée, a drive into the city to volunteer at a soup kitchen. Today had been the same as all the others, except that a man had no longer died alone, and because of that, today was entirely different.

The next morning, Barb went straight to the obituaries. There was a business executive, a city planner, a Broadway star, and an anchorwoman—and they all had families. But Barb had the pen in her hand and she wanted to do something. She reread them and noticed some elements of their lives that might be sweetened. She bumped the senior vice president to president. She made the city planner a mayor. She gave the Broadway star a few extra Tonys. She gave the anchorwoman two husbands. One husband spoke eighteen languages. The other, an astronaut, had been on the moon at the time of his wife’s death. “NASA has issued a statement, saying Astronaut Zach Pritchard will be informed of his wife’s bigamy only after the shuttle has returned to Earth.” Barb giggled.

Marvin looked up and saw the obituaries. “Oh,” he said. “You’re still doing that?”

She nodded.

“I thought you were doing the crossword.”

“No. Not yet,” she said.

“I heard the pen. Clicking. I thought . . .” He glanced at her writing, which looped up from the bottom and squeezed into the margins at the sides. It was too small for him to read. “What did you write?”

“I gave her two husbands.”

“Who?”

“An anchorwoman.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

He shook his head and looked back at the paper. “I was reading something—the West Bank. The settlements.” He scanned the article.

“Bad?” she said.

He nodded.

She returned to the obituaries.

He stared at her. “That’s strange,” he said. “Complicating her life like that. Her death, I mean. Whatever.”

She shrugged.

“What else did you write?” he said, and leaned over. She paused, then slid the section to him. He read the changes, shook his head, and passed it back.

In the afternoon, after they walked, Marvin fell asleep to his book on the couch. While he napped, Barb straightened the kitchen, penned the grocery list, and returned to the obituaries. The bottom half of the page was filled with smaller obituaries detailing lives less known—a simple paragraph regarding the deceased and the immediate family, the time and place of the funeral, and occasionally the cause of death. As Barb had done with the larger obituaries, she checked for families and supplied them where necessary. Again, she sweetened some things. There were roughly forty names and they took her a good hour to get through. She thought about them on the drive into town. At dinner, Marvin sensed her distraction. Before going to bed, he asked if she was okay, and she nodded.

The next day, Marvin heard the pen clicking and he remembered the obituaries. He looked up. Barb was hunched over the page, her head tilted, her writing filling the margins. He noticed there were cross-outs within the type. “Copy editing?” he said.

“I’m just changing some things.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing.”

“What do you mean nothing?”

“Just some details.”

“Oh, you’re fact checking. I see. Barb, what are you doing?”

She continued writing. He watched her.

“You always seem to raise them,” he said. “Why don’t you go the other way? Say, ‘George left his family in debt.’”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Maybe if you knocked them down a peg, you’d get closer to the truth. They tend to puff those things up, you know.”

“These are obituaries, not eulogies.”

“Oh, I see.” He shook his head. “Barb, what . . . You don’t know them. You never knew them.”

But she *did* know them—not just who they were, but what they might have been.

In the afternoon, while Marvin slept fitfully on the couch, Barb returned to the smaller obituaries. She liked how they revealed so little, how they provided so much elbow room. When they neglected to mention a career, she supplied one. She described their upbringings, recounted their successes and failures. “She was raised in Brooklyn and loved to play stickball with the neighborhood boys.” “He was a high-school teacher. ‘He made math come alive,’ a former student said. There were others who did not share this sentiment, but one must expect this. To be sure, he was a fine teacher. The students were lucky to have him.” “She never held a job. One could argue that she didn’t do much of anything, really. And yet, there certainly was something extraordinary about her.” Barb could barely cram the words into the margins.

She heard footsteps and swiveled. Marvin stood in the doorway.

“I thought you were sleeping,” she said.

“Why aren’t you done with that?” He stepped forward.

She looked at the obituaries. “I am,” she said, and closed the paper.

The next day, Marvin feigned reading and watched Barb. A Russian émigré had died and Barb decided that the woman had been a prima ballerina with the Bolshoi. She lowered the pen and Marvin said, “Those people are dead, Barb. It’s a little late for that stuff.”

She folded the paper. She stood up and carried it into the other room.

He banged the table. “What’s wrong?” He shook his head, then followed her into the living room. Barb was sitting on the couch. The obituaries were spread out on the coffee table, and she was writing. When Marvin entered she covered the paper with her hands. The gesture frightened Marvin and embarrassed Barb. She withdrew her hands and looked away.

“Let’s go into town,” he said. Barb glanced at the obituaries. Marvin wanted to scream, “Those people are not going anywhere,” but instead he said, “Please, Barb, let’s do that.” She nodded. She wanted to appease him, but she also knew that the drive might allow her more time to ponder these people.

In the car, Barb was silent. Besides the Russian ballerina, there had been a civil engineer, an army officer, and a circuit judge, but Barb couldn’t tend to them because Marvin had the radio on.

At the restaurant, they sat in a booth. They chatted with the waitress, ordered without menus, and waited for their food.

"I should cancel the paper," Marvin said, forcing a smile. He reached over and touched her hand. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head.

"Tell me," he said. "What is all this?"

"We are very old," she whispered, as if she did not want the other tables to know.

"No we're not."

Barb shrugged.

"Fine," he said. "So we are. Bound to happen, right?"

She looked at him. "I still have the loveliest longest lashes."

"Yes, you do."

She batted her eyes, then shook her head.

"And . . . you have me," he said.

"Yes," she said and smiled.

He nodded and his eyes watered as he cupped her hand.

The crowded sidewalk unsteadied Barb; she pressed close to Marvin. They came to a stationery store and Barb stopped. "Cards," she said, and she stepped inside. Marvin followed and stared at the giftwrapping tubes and the mini gift bags and the card carousels—everything pink and red and festive. Barb started for the cards, then spotted the newspapers stacked beneath the counter. She stepped towards them and lifted the *Post*. Just seeing her thumb through a paper scared Marvin. "What you looking for, Barb?" he said, but he knew.

"I wonder if different people die in different papers. Locally, I mean."

"No, don't do that."

"I want to," she said.

"Put it down, Barb. Please." He stepped over and reached out his hand, but she pulled away. Again, she was embarrassed, so she faced him. She started to return the paper, then stopped. She smiled slightly, not to mock him, but rather because she had to have the paper and she wanted to make light of it. "No. No . . . I want to," she said, and she lowered it gently onto the counter.

Marvin looked at the cashier and thought, "If you are a decent person . . ."

Barb stared at the paper and realized how well this would fill her afternoons.

The next morning, there were two papers on the stoop.

Marvin brought them into the kitchen and waved them like evidence.

"I'll pay for it," she said.

"That's not the point." He smacked them down on the counter.

"You have your books. I do this."

"You want a book, I'll get you a book," he said.

"No, I want this."

"But I don't like this."

"I'm not listening to you," she said, and she lifted the *Times* off the counter and sat down.

Marvin walked to the cabinet and grabbed a bowl and some cereal. He stepped to the fridge and opened it. "We should get groceries today."

"We're fine," she said, turning the pages.

"No, we're not. We need things." He pulled the milk from the fridge and shook it. "The milk is low." He walked to the table and sat down.

Barb read the first obituary: "Bauer, William." She started writing. "Raised in Passaic. Lots of brothers and sisters around. And yet . . ."

"You only do the smaller ones now?"

She nodded.

"Why?" he said.

"Please."

"Why do you do any of them?"

She didn't answer, so he stood up, walked to the counter, and grabbed the car keys.

"Where are you going?" she said.

"I'm eating in town." He left the room. She heard the front door slam, his footsteps fade. The car started in the driveway.

She stared back at the obituaries. "And yet . . ." She added, "William kept to himself." She paused. "It's a shame what happened. I think the last years were his happiest."

Barb looked at her writing. She remembered what Marvin had said about it being too late for all this stuff. She decided that it wasn't—that by the simplest alteration, lives could be spared. "Died" became "has not died" or "nearly died," as in "Broder, Sharon, 59, nearly died October 9, at Mercy Hospital. Mock internment will be held at Calderton Cemetery." "We regret and mourn the passing of Ethel Cowper" became "We celebrate and give toast to the

near-passing of Ethel Cowper, who had been suffering from lung cancer until she miraculously hacked up her entire malignancy. She has returned to smoking two packs a day.” To the line, “Devoted mother, Audrey will be greatly missed,” she added, “Audrey will be missed because she is moving to a secluded area of Idaho, and does not plan to have a phone.”

In the afternoon, Barb watched for Marvin at the living room window, then returned to the kitchen and switched papers. The smaller obituaries were under the heading, “Death Notices.” There were five names. The left margin was an inch wide and spanned the length of the page. Barb wrote back and forth eight times before she ran out of room. Two obituaries remained.

There was a stack of loose-leaf in a drawer beneath the counter. She walked over, opened the drawer, and removed a sheet. She sat back down. She filled one side of the page and kept writing. She quickly preferred the loose-leaf; the obituary page had movie listings and the crossword on the right-hand side, and she found this distracting. She wrote until Marvin came home.

“Where did you go?” she said.

“I drove, I sat, I ate. Let me guess what you did.” He walked upstairs.

The next morning, Barb opened the front door and found that the stoop was empty.

She walked into the kitchen. Marvin was at the counter, pouring milk into his cereal. He ignored her as he carried the bowl to the table. He sat down and felt her stare. “I canceled them,” he said, and he immediately realized how futile that was. Barb stepped to the counter and grabbed the car keys.

“No, Barb,” he said. He stood up. “Stop it.” He banged the table repeatedly. “Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!”

She shook her head and left the room.

Marvin sat down. He decided to phone his brother in Florida. He dialed, but there was no answer. He couldn’t eat, so he carried the cereal to the sink and dumped it. He ran the disposal and listened to it grind.

On the drive into town, Barb thought about the obituaries. The smaller ones were beginning to bore her. Always the same details, the same phrases—“Beloved wife of . . .” “In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to . . .” She recalled the small, three-columned box which listed the names of the deceased in alphabetical order. She would stare at these names and imagine their ages—wonder if they had families, spouses, something. Then she’d check the

obituary to see if she was right. When she imagined someone living alone and, upon glancing at the obituary, learned otherwise, she felt somewhat misled. The obituary seemed wrong. This had happened too many times yesterday and Barb decided that from now on, the names could tell her enough.

She picked up the papers in town and drove home. Marvin was upstairs at his desk. She entered the house and called to him, but he didn't answer. She walked through the hallway and set the *Times* on the table. She grabbed some loose-leaf from the drawer and sat down.

She wrote a different name at the top of each page. She mouthed each one a few times and their lives unfurled. "Dawkins, Thomas. What can we say about Thomas? I met him once, in the city, on the street. He remarked that it had been a good year, business-wise. But then he leaned in and said that he was feeling a bit stranded. I asked him what that meant, but he went on about his profits."

"Dwyer, Susan. The first thing Susan said to me was, 'Tell me about Thomas Dawkins.' 'No, no, let's talk about you,' I said. And she did. She told me everything. She asked why all this was so important and I said, 'Well Susan, I might just save your life one day.'"

"Felder, Nancy. She lives quite far away. I forget which state, but it's not one you'd name so quickly. There's a river that flows by her house—her cabin, I mean. From this cabin, the river is not seen, but always heard, a constant wind. And at night, she walks down to it. She walks for miles along the bank, until she arrives at a bridge. A truss bridge, I think. She remarked to me once that from each railing you get a different feel of the river. Staring upriver, the current involves you somehow. But when you walk to the other side, where the river withdraws, you feel much more conscious of loss. 'Which railing do you lean against more?' I ask, and she smiles and says, 'Guess?'"

Marvin was at his desk. His book was open but he was thinking about Barb. He was remembering the day a few months ago when Barb had said, "The early morning is a holy time to die. It's been said." "By whom?" he asked, but she didn't answer.

He heard a thump at the stoop. A chair scraped against the linoleum. He heard Barb's footsteps in the hallway, the front door opening. He walked downstairs. Barb was holding the local county paper. He shook his head, stepped past her, and walked outside.

“Where are you going?” she said, but he didn’t answer. “You’re in your slippers.”

She was right, but he ignored her anyway. She watched him walk down the street. She returned to the kitchen and found the obituaries. There were ads for funeral homes, paint supplies, and banks. There was a list of twelve names—one or two from each town in the area. She copied the names onto the loose-leaf, set the newspaper aside, and wrote.

That night, Marvin couldn’t sleep. He heard a truck outside—brakes hissing, footfalls, and the newspaper thumping down on the stoop. She must have called in town, he thought, and he pictured her at a phone booth reordering the papers—the same phone booth from which he had canceled them the day before. He walked downstairs and brought the *Times* inside. In the kitchen, he grabbed a pen and spread the obituaries out on the counter. He gripped the pen and scrawled across the page, “This person is dead. End of story.” Across the next one, he wrote, “Also, dead.” And another, “Ditto.” He filled the page with, *Dead. Expired. Croaked. Done. Kaput. Time’s up. Strike Three. Next. Bye-Bye. Gone to seed. Good riddance. Had it coming. Not soon enough. What took you so long, geezer? Not much to mourn with this one.* At times, he wrote so hard the paper tore.

He refolded the section, slipped it back inside, and returned the paper to the stoop. He went back to bed.

In the morning, Barb walked to the front door and Marvin got some cereal and sat down at the table. She entered the kitchen carrying the papers. She had the *Times* on top. She set the *Post* down on the counter. She handed him the front section. He watched her turn the pages and he knew that he had done a terrible thing. “Barb . . .” he said. He felt nauseous. She kept turning the pages. “I did something,” he said, but she didn’t hear him. She found the page and when Marvin saw his writing, it scared him even more than her. “I’m sorry,” he said, and he stood up and reached out to cover the paper, but she was already shaking and stepping away.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he said, and he stepped between the paper to screen it from view. “I just want you to snap out of it. I just want you to stop.” She shook her head and he nodded, “Yes, yes.”

She pointed to the paper. “Those people . . .”

“Are dead. They are dead.”

She left the room.

“I’ll buy you another one,” he said, and he reached behind him and grabbed the keys. He followed her into the hallway. “I’m sorry.” She looked away. “Will you drive with me?” She didn’t say no; she just stood there, so he left.

She returned to the kitchen. The *Post* was on the counter. She sat down with it. She started to write, but her hand hurt. She massaged it and tried again, but she quickly had to stop. She lowered the pen, closed her eyes, and repeated the name. “Atkins, Rachel. The woman lives . . . the woman is walking . . . the woman’s hands . . .”

She opened her eyes and looked at the next name. “Drayton, Robert.” But when she closed them, the name became Marvin’s. She opened her eyes again.

“Felder, Joseph.” She whispered the name. But again, when she closed her eyes, she saw Marvin’s name.

“Eichler, Marvin. He is survived, will be survived, by his wife Barbara of forty-eight, no, fifty-eight, no, seventy-nine years . . .”

She opened her eyes. “Fried, Jessica.”

But again, she saw Marvin. “His life, their life—because his life was certainly hers—and she was pleased to have it this way, even when their life, his life, did not reach what she, they, had hoped for—he came so close, though.”

“Kesner, Robert.”

“And if she dies, if she survives him, and if his life had been hers, and hers his—as in ‘here, take this, please’—what does one possibly do, after forty-eight years, in which one would change, would certainly change, so little?”

Marvin returned with the *Times*. “Here you go,” he said. He set it down beside her and walked upstairs. Barb glanced at the next name. She looked out the window and closed her eyes.

The next morning, Barb stared briefly at the obituaries, then turned the page. Marvin looked up. She was reading something in the Metro section. He didn’t care what it was. He didn’t say a thing. He just stared at the front section and thought to himself, “Please don’t turn back.” And she didn’t.

They finished the paper by eight and watched some television. Barb walked out to the porch. Marvin followed shortly and sat in the adjacent wicker chair. He lifted the playing cards from the table. “Not right now,” she said, and he nodded. He played solitaire. Barb stared out at the yard. She mumbled something. “What’s that?” he said, but she shook her head.

They ate a light lunch at noon. Marvin went upstairs to read his book. When he came down, he saw Barb at the kitchen table. He approached her and saw the grocery list. And yet, the paper was nearby.

“Do you want to take a walk?” he said, and she nodded.

They walked around the block. Marvin held Barb’s hand. She stared away, then mumbled again. “Barb?” he said. She didn’t answer. “Barb?” She looked at him.

They drove into town for groceries.

Barb cooked dinner at home.

She’s fine, Marvin thought, at the table.

After dinner, he heard her again. “You’re a chatterbox today,” he said, with a half-smile.

And as they lay in bed, he heard her yet again—this time more clearly. “Watki . . . Je . . .” she said, and now he knew what it was. He waited for her to sleep. He walked downstairs and found the obituaries. He scanned the box of names. “Watkins, Jeff.” He cupped his mouth. He stood up quickly.

He walked upstairs—fast through the hallway, into the bedroom, to the bed. He knelt down beside her. “Barb?” He tapped her shoulder. She twitched and he tapped her harder. “Barb?”

She opened her eyes.

“It’s okay, you know that,” he said. She stayed silent. “Everything is okay. Just stop doing this—everything will be fine.”

She nodded.

“Just stop. Okay? Stop, please.”

“I am so scared,” she said. She spoke so suddenly, it was as if she were shouting.

He hugged her. She stared at the window. The curtains gaped in the wind. Outside, a car drove by—a life proceeded.