

Easter Sunday

- Lee Martin

"Junior," my mother says, "Slow down. You drive like a maniac. You always have. You're a madness to society."

Don't listen to her. She tangles words. The truth is, I'm a careful man, not a menace at all. It's just that here on this spring morning, the roads are rough, full of pot holes from where the asphalt has thawed and heaved after the winter freeze. We've hit a few bumps, which have jostled my mother enough to convince her that I'm determined to — Lord, have mercy — get her killed.

"We're fine," I tell her. "Everything's A-okay. We're on our way to the cemetery. Remember? To put flowers on Dad's grave."

The flowers are on the seat between us — white silk lilies that I bought at Wal-Mart after my mother insisted last night that we hadn't taken flowers to the cemetery, and here it was Easter. I tried to get her to recall that earlier that afternoon we'd driven to Haven Hill with a silk arrangement of daffodils and lilies, but she wouldn't listen. "No, no, no," she kept saying. "Your own father, Junior, and you want to do him this way."

She's at the point of her Alzheimer's where she often accuses people — even me — of doing horrible things. She's convinced that the women who work at her assisted-living facility sneak into her apartment and "walk off" with her belongings — bananas, pencils, paper towels — when the truth is she hides them somewhere so no one will steal them and then forgets what she's done. Earlier, when we stopped by the cafeteria to tell the cooks she wouldn't be there for lunch because I was taking her to the Lakeview for the Easter buffet, one of them remarked on how nice it was to have a considerate son who would bring his mother an orchid corsage and help her pin it to her best dress and then take her out for a fancy Easter dinner. "Him?" my mother said. She eats and eats these days, forgetting she's had meals, snacking on ice cream and cookies, calling me to bring her more lunch meat and cheese. "Old skinny flint? He'd let me starve. He wouldn't even throw me a bone." I know I'm supposed to ignore such baloney, but even now, as I turn off Walnut into the cemetery, I'm still smarting,

because the truth is I take care of my mother as best I can. I bring her medicines each Friday evening to refill her pill reminder. I drive her to the doctor. I buy groceries, run errands to Wal-Mart — where I even buy her brassieres and underpants — and take her to Haven Hill when she wants to go, like we're doing today, even though we did exactly this yesterday afternoon.

The cemetery's gravel lane is rutted and, once again, my mother, jarred, accuses me of risking her life. "But that's all right," she says. "I still love you. I do, Junior. I really do."

When she tells me this, which she does frequently these days, I can't help but hear what lurks just beneath the surface, which is that I don't deserve her love, but, good soul that she is, she won't refuse me. I know she wants me to tell her that I love her, too, but, because I feel accused, thought unworthy, I can barely manage to say the words.

Let me tell you a story. In our home, when I was growing up, my mother couldn't stand to see a door closed, not even the bathroom door, because she was convinced that if she couldn't see someone — if they were hidden away in a room — they might very well be plotting something against her. None of the doors to the rooms in our house had locks on them. She'd pound on the bathroom door and shout, "What are you doing in there?" Then she'd push open the door, and there I'd be. That's all you need to know about what it was like to be my mother's son. Friends? I didn't have any. Who would have wanted to come into a house like ours?

"Dad's grave is over here." I point beyond a stand of cedar trees where the lane curves. "These white lilies are pretty, don't you think?"

But she isn't paying any mind to the lilies. She's biting her lip, chewing something over in her head. "My dad?" she says.

I'm supposed to let it go, the fact that she's confusing my father with her own. The experts say it's best not to correct her, but sometimes, like today, the history between us makes it difficult for me to hold my tongue. I keep remembering how, time and time again, she opened that bathroom door. She made me afraid of my own home. She called my father a little man, spoke up once at a neighbor's Christmas party where we'd all been singing carols, and said, "My life could have been something if not for Leland." As a young woman, she had theatrical aspirations, but instead of going off to New York, she married my father, a timid man, who, for reasons of his own, worshipped her no matter how much she resented him and the life he gave her in our small, Midwestern town.

Now that she's sick, there's no reminding her of all the reasons I have to walk away from her, to turn a blind eye. If I told her, she'd say it wasn't so. She'd say, like

she does sometimes, just out of the blue, "I had a good husband. He treated me like an angel. And I know I was good to him. He was my Romeo; I was his Juliet." If I told her the truth — if I said, "All your life, you made people feel small." — she'd start to cry, she'd say, "Junior, why do you want to tell those lies? Why do you want to hurt your mother?" And, of course, I'd feel guilty. I'd be the miserable excuse for a son she often claims I am. Maniac, old skinny flint, a madness to society.

Today, I can't keep quiet. "Not your father," I tell her. "Mine. Your husband."

She narrows her eyes, squints into the sun. "I can't recall if my husband's living or not. Do you know?"

"Mom, why would you be living alone if Dad was still alive?"

We hit another bump, and the silk lilies start to slide off the seat. My mother reaches over and grabs them. "They almost went," she says. "It's a good thing I wasn't here."

I try to gently correct her. "A good thing that you were here."

"Yes," she says, in a dull, distant voice. "Exactly."

But I know she's not hearing me. She's mulling over what she just said about not being here. I can't help but believe that she senses somewhere inside, that all her life she's been lucky, that at the drop of a hat my father — and maybe, when I was old enough, I might have followed — could have walked away from her, left her alone in a house where all the doors would have stayed open, and the only sounds would have been her own footsteps, and the muttering in her head, suspicions that somewhere in rooms she couldn't visit, people were treating each other with tenderness and respect, the way we're meant to do.

If on that long ago Easter morning, when the angel rolled the stone away from the sepulcher, the two Marys had found Christ's body still there instead of risen from the dead, there would have been no miracle to redeem us. Would we have loved more fully then, left on our own to save ourselves? I know it's a wicked thought to have, especially today on Easter Sunday. Who am I to wonder whether we might have been better off without the resurrection? But let me tell you one thing more. I'm a shy man, an only child never married, and though I have acquaintances, I wouldn't call any of them friends. The point is, I've never relied on other people's kindness. I stick to myself. I have my mother and the things I do for her. I don't say this for pity, only to state the facts.

I help her from the car. I let her take my arm, and I lead her down the slope to my father's grave, each of us carrying a bunch of white lilies.

"This isn't the right grave." She waves her lilies at the headstone. "This is someone else's. Look, Junior. There are already flowers here."

I haven't thought to come out earlier to remove the daffodils and lilies we put there yesterday, and now here they are, their silk petals ruffling in the wind.

"Look at the stone," I tell her. "What does it say?"

She stoops and traces her finger over the etched letters. "Leland," she says. "Yes, he was my husband. I always loved him. I did, Junior. I honestly did."

Then she says he was a good man. She says he adored her. She looks up at me, and I can see the uncertainty, the pleading, in her eyes.

I could let it stay there, but always, even when I was a kid, my faith was stronger than my anger. I kept hoping, as I do now, that someday my mother would change, and we'd have a kinder life. Now, standing beside her at my father's grave, I assure her that, if anyone were to ask me, I'd tell them, yes, it's all true. Yes, my father was a good man. Yes, he adored her. "Trust me," I'd say. "I was there."

My mother, satisfied, adds our lilies to the flowers already in the vase. She stuffs them in until the vase is nice and full. "Whew," she says, and dramatically swipes the back of her hand across her forehead. "It almost wore me out, but I finally got them in there."

I ask her if she's hungry. She takes my arm again. "I'm starved," she says, and, as I lead her back to the car, I tell her I am, too. "We'll have a feast," I tell her. "The two of us. Just wait."

"A feast of burden," she says, and this time I don't correct her. I just nod, feeling the two of us begin to lean forward, the wind pushing at our backs. For just a moment, I get the idea that we might lift and rise into the bright sky, but, of course, that's silly. It's just us, my mother and me, here on the ground, our bodies straining as we climb the slope back to the car.