

The Stories We Tell

by [Barry Garelick](#) (October 2023)



The Bride (detail), Hyman Bloom, 1941

Story 1. Last Rites

Many people would have stories to tell. In the days following the death of Anne's mother, Angela, there were stories told. Most were more about those telling them than the departed; markers that divided lives into a before and after.

Anne's husband Mark was the first to find out. He drove in to San Francisco to pick up Anne mid-morning when there were few cars on the road and fewer on the street where Anne worked. She stood in front of the building, waiting and when he reached her they hugged and held each other for a moment, not saying a word, the sound of traffic on other streets echoing in the city canyons around them.

"What exactly happened? When did you find out?" Anne asked as

they drove through the city streets on the way to the Golden Gate Bridge.

"I was working from home. A woman from the elder care called and said they took Angela to the hospital," Mark said.

"So she was alive when they took her?"

"She didn't say."

"She didn't say she died?"

"She said I needed to go to the hospital."

"Then she might have been alive when they took her," Anne said.

For one moment the crazy possibility that she may not have died crossed Mark's mind. When the confusion passed he said "I don't know."

He suspected she had died before he even arrived at the hospital. He knew for sure by the way the doctor at first looked away from Mark. The doctor was a young man in his early thirties like Anne and Mark. He looked as if he had been up all night.

"What did they tell you at the hospital?" Anne asked.

"The doctor said she had a heart attack."

"She didn't have a heart problem," Anne said.

"They probably didn't know, I think they have to give some reason."

"I think she had a stroke," Anne said.

"Probably. The doctor was very young. Anyway, I told them I'd get you over to the hospital. I called you after that."

"I knew I should have gone there last night when the nurse

called," Anne said. "She told me she wasn't looking good and that I should come see her."

"How could you have known?"

"By the nurse's voice."

"You're being hard on yourself."

"But I was so tired," she said.

"Yes," he said. "You were tired."

When they were on the Golden Gate Bridge, she said "Have you called anyone in San Diego?"

"No," he said.

"I need to call my Aunt Catherine."

On the highway heading eastward towards Sonoma, passing dairy farms, and open fields, she asked "Do you think she had last rites?"

"I don't know," Mark said. "Knowing her, she probably took care of it."

"I hope so."

And as they headed in to Sonoma she said, "Let's go to the church before we go to the hospital. We need to get a priest."

When they entered the church she said, "I think we should pray."

She lit one of the votive candles at a stand, and knelt down. Anne prayed but Mark did not. He had never been religious. Anne believed in God but had broken with the church after being told years earlier that she could not be forgiven for her sins. Her mother had told her it was just one priest—a bad one. She no longer attended church, but in the weeks

following, she would be searching for one in which she felt comfortable.

Anne approached an older woman who was working in the church. "My mother died this morning," Anne said. "They're holding her body in the hospital. Is there a priest who can come by there?"

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear," the woman said, her hands clasped in front of her. "I'll get hold of Father Parker and send him to the hospital."

At the hospital Anne and Mark were shown into the small room where Angela's body lay. Anne looked at her mother and said "She looks so peaceful."

After a few minutes, Father Parker arrived and introduced himself. He was a young man like the doctor Mark had talked to earlier. He filled a cup with water, and holding the cup above his head, he asked God to bless the water and make it holy. He sprinkled water on Angela, and made a cross on her forehead with his wet thumb, and said a prayer.

"Were those her last rites?" Anne asked.

"Oh, I'm afraid they weren't, no," he said. "Last rites can only be given when the person is still alive."

"So she hasn't had last rites?"

"She may have had them, I just don't know. I conduct services at the elder care home where she was. I offer last rites to anyone who wants them."

"I didn't know you could do that."

"Yes, it's usually a group of the same people; she may have been in the group; I just don't recall."

"So it's like a vaccination," Anne said.

"I never thought of it that way," he said, laughing. "But yes, it is in a way."

"But, if she didn't, do you think she'll go to heaven?"

"I was up all night discussing this very thing with a friend," he said, suddenly very animated. "What do we do for people killed in battle, or in a car accident and there's no one to give last rites? We have to trust in God, that He knows who we are and understands and forgives us."

"I hope that's true," Anne said.

"Was she devout?"

"Extremely. She was a good Irish Catholic."

"Oh, her family was Irish?"

Anne nodded.

"The Irish are wonderful," he said. "They're the backbone of the Catholic church. They keep it going; God bless them."

Anne looked at her mother. "Look at her," she said and they all looked.

"Isn't it nice with her here? I feel like her spirit is in this room. Right here with us."

Story 2. A Jar of Water

Most of Angela's family was from Iowa and had settled years ago in San Diego which is where her funeral would be held—two weeks after she died. The day before the funeral, Mark and Anne had arrived; Anne carrying the box of her mother's ashes. Anne's Aunt Catherine, Angela's sister, picked them up at the airport and drove to the church where the funeral would be. "We'll just meet with the Monsignor," she said. "I told him we

would come by with the ashes."

The Monsignor was a short man with ruddy complexion and an Irish brogue and what Catherine called a wicked sense of humor. "This is my niece Anne and her husband Mark; they just flew in from Sonoma," Catherine said. "And these," she said, pulling an envelope from her purse "are notes about her that people sent us."

"Ah, I see, yes, I will be reading those, thank you. And this is Angela, I presume?" he said pointing to the box Anne was carrying.

"That is she," Catherine said.

"We also have this," Anne said handing over a piece of paper to the Monsignor certifying that Angela was Catholic.

Monsignor looked at it. "*Oh my God!*" he said. "I haven't seen one of these in years! We've done away with those. We're a trusting bunch, and we'll take your word for it, now."

Anne laughed at this. "My mother used to tell me, 'You're either Catholic—or you're not.'"

"Oh, now that's good, I'll have to work that in to one of my sermons. Excuse me one minute, please," he said, and disappeared inside the church. He came back with the holy water sprinkler. "Well now, let's let those upstairs know she's on her way?" With that, he blessed the ashes, and sprinkled the box with holy water, making sure he sent a few drops Catherine's way.

When they arrived at her house, other relatives had already gathered there, including two more of Angela's siblings, Mary and Tom. Conversations came and went while Catherine's husband Dave, a jovial man who enjoyed being host brought people drinks. "Here they are," he said hugging Anne. "You look like you could use a drink." he said.

"That's exactly what I need," she said and followed him into a small niche in the living room that had a sink and a stock of various beverages. "What will it be?"

"A vodka tonic."

"Coming up," he said and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "How are you doing?"

"Hanging in there. I guess. It's been a pretty rough time."

He mixed the drink and both were silent. "It won't be easy," he said. "But try to fill in the time you would have spent with her doing something else. And whatever that is, it will be as if she's with you."

He put his arm around her shoulder, and they both walked out onto the patio. It was late afternoon and it was starting to cool down – so much so that Mary stopped fanning herself with the paper fan she carried in her purse. She was in her sixties, had bright red hair, and almost always wore lipstick.

She greeted Mark and Anne warmly, and sighed a world-weary sigh. "Oh my God, it's been a hectic week or so, hasn't it?" she said.

"That it has," Catharine said.

"Well, so there we were, Tom and I. In Iowa after I don't know how many years it's been, and we got your phone call about Angela," she said, taking a tissue out of her purse and wiping her forehead. "I said to Tom, 'Well we better get back there, Tom.'"

"He said 'We'll leave right after the picnic tomorrow.' I wasn't exactly in the mood for a picnic anymore but I wasn't going to argue with him." Mary began coughing and Catherine got up but Mary waved her to sit down. "It's just a cough," she said.

"So anyway, that night I was at Rita Mae's. I was sharing a room with her."

"Good Lord," Catherine said. "Rita Mae must be ninety nine years old!"

"She's seventy five," Mary said, matter-of-factly.

"I lay in bed, trying to get to sleep. It was a hot, awful, humid night; it was supposed to thundershower, but it just took its sweet time coming. Lots of lightning but no rain. And Rita Mae couldn't shut up."

"Yes, that sounds like her," Catherine said.

"I had this cough that just settles down in there, and I start coughing. And she says 'You really need some water. I'll go bring you a jar of water.'"

"A jar of water!" Catherine said. "I haven't heard that in years. Remember when Leo used to say that? 'Get that man a jar of water!'"

"Well anyway," Mary said, "Rita Mae off and runs to the kitchen, and comes back with some water. And it was in a real jar. With a screw-on lid and everything. And she said 'I put it in a jar so this way, you take a drink, and screw the lid back on, and it'll always be fresh.'"

"I was in no mood to talk about it, so I said 'OK, Rita Mae.' And then she started to talk. Again. Good Lord, she can talk."

"Isn't that the truth," Catherine said.

"Rita Mae started to go on about how she had just got the windows clean and here it was going to rain. 'That's the way of it, I suppose,' she says. Then she starts describing how they cleaned the windows. She says 'You ever see those little squeegee things they use with a rubber blade and how they go back and forth in a zig-zag, catching every drop of water?' I

said 'Yes, Rita Mae, I've seen them,'" Mary said, sighing.

"So, on and on it went until she dropped off to sleep."

"Thank goodness!" Catharine said.

"Well, but then she snored. And I thought, my Lord, I'll never get to sleep. I thought if it would just rain I might be able to sleep, but it never did. And I couldn't stop thinking about all the people I knew in my high school class, and who I had run into the past two days. Then I started thinking about Angela and how poor Anne was taking care of her all that time and then getting her in that home. I remember Anne getting her on that waiting list and working with her to walk, because they only took people who were ambulatory. Of course that changed eventually, but we didn't know it would. I remember how she struggled to try to walk, and I thought 'There but for the grace of God go I'. And on and on, all these thoughts are going through my head and I'm thinking my gosh, I'll never be in shape for this picnic tomorrow, and who knows how much longer we'll be here, depending on whether Tom can get us on a flight."

Mary started coughing, and Catharine went in the house and brought out a glass of water. Mary took a sip.

"Thank you," she said. "Well, somehow, I got to sleep. And thank goodness for that. I don't even remember falling asleep. It was a nice sunny day the next day, and Tom got us a late flight, so we went on our picnic and I felt just fine and saw a lot of people there. And then me and Tom went to Sioux City, got on the plane and came home."

"And here you both are," Catherine said.

"And here we are. With all of you. Except Angela, our sweet sister."

Story 3. The Space We Fill

The Monsignor stood at the pulpit looking out at the people in the church. The box of ashes was placed in front. "I didn't know Angela," he said. "But I have come to know her just a bit from the memories shared with me; from Dave who if not for Angela telling Catherine to marry him his life would have been quite dull, from Verna her bridge partner who said she played a mean hand of bridge, from Fran who went to auctions with her to 'upgrade her junk' and many more lovely stories, and of course from her loving daughter Anne who said that Angela was her guiding light and taught her about faith." He paused and ran his hand over his eyes briefly.

"Hearing these stories, I wish I had known her to have stories of my own to tell," he said. "I am reminded of Seamus Heaney's poem *Clearances* about the death of his mother: '*The space we stood around had been emptied into us to keep, it penetrated clearances that suddenly stood open.*' "

"And isn't that the way it is when someone leaves us; there is an unfilled space in our lives. We become the caretakers of that space, filling it with stories of the departed and then our own. The departed live on through us; through our memories and our own lives."

At Catherine's afterward more stories were told at Catharine's, on into the late afternoon until early evening when one by one the guests and relatives left and only Dave and Catherine, and Anne and Mark remained.

Later that night Anne and Mark lay in bed in the guest bedroom. "Night is the worst for me," Anne said. "That's when I miss her the most. I have all these thoughts about her. Good and bad. Things I wish I could take back that hurt her. I remember telling her I hated her; it was after the divorce. It was a terrible thing to say. I was so hard to handle."

"Who hasn't at some time told a parent they hated them? Or was hard to handle?" Mark said.

"I guess. Though she could be mean sometimes." After a moment she said "Do you remember her laugh? I'm trying to remember it. Do you remember what it sounded like?"

"I think so, yes," he said. "I remember it."

"I wish I had recorded it," she said.

"It was a nice gentle laugh."

"I miss her," she said. "I miss her so much." No more was said that night. She cried silently for a moment and fell asleep.

Mark lay very still and thought about his own parents and wondered as he did sometimes what it would be like when they died. The excerpt from the poem, and the Monsignor's sadness-tinged words had stayed with him for the rest of the day and on into the night; they would remain with him for years. Mark imagined what some of the stories might be told when his parents died. There would also be stories that he hadn't heard. He didn't know what they would be. But they would be all be beautiful, he decided.

[Table of Contents](#)

Barry Garelick has written non-fiction pieces that have been published in *Atlantic* and *Education Next*. His fiction has appeared in *The Globe Review*, *Cafe Lit* and *Fiction on the Web*. He lives in Morro Bay, California with his wife.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)