

Sweet Potato
Caroline Bybee

My sister and I have not seen each other in six years and now we are driving in the same car with a one-pound sweet potato in the back seat on our way to a funeral. It sounds like a bad joke. Two sisters walk into a bar, carrying a sweet potato...wait, never mind.

We haven't seen each other because we are busy - ohsobusy - and we don't have time for visits, and definitely not for phone calls. Phone calls are an effort and we are too tired for effort. We work all day, we work hard. We have earned our rest, a break from each other. This much we have earned. Our mother does not understand this and she expects a phone call once a week. We call once a month because we a dutiful but we are not that dutiful. We love her but we don't love her that much.

She called us on a conference call on Tuesday - I remember because Tuesday is my day off and also I was shocked that she knew what a conference call was, much less how to make one. She says that Father Tom taught her. That Father Tom. He is full of spiritual advice and technological knowledge. I should keep him on speed dial, for crisis of the faith or the phone. I said that to my sister and she did not laugh. I think we have different senses of humor. I, for one, think the sweet potato is funny. She does not. It is rolling around - back and forth as she bears left or right like the GPS tells her. I think it's funny that this sweet potato is rolling back and forth, comical because it's giant and also because it's a sweet potato and should we maybe buckle it up and she says - don't let it fall.

When our mother called us on a conference call, my sister cried. I laughed. It was too funny, the conference call set up by the preacher and my mother's voice tinny and distant and high pitched like she'd sucked the helium out of the party balloons (my sister and I did that once) and my sister sobbing all the way from Iowa and what could I do but giggle, chortle, snort. Then I hung up and pretended that it had been the line cutting out. It seemed less rude, but I felt like they knew the truth anyway.

The truth was that my father was dead. My father was dead and I shouldn't have laughed. I did laugh and I pretended it was my cell phone because my mother knew very little about cell phones and surely Father Tom wouldn't tell. That was why we had the sweet potato - my father's death - because dear old dad loved a good sweet potato pie and he loved his girls and what better for the funeral party than a sweet potato pie made by his girls? That was what our mom asked us and that's what got me laughing - haha how funny we will make a sweet potato pie - but my sister in Iowa said yes, oh yes we will make a sweet potato pie one last sweet potato pie for Daddy and oh god that was when I really lost it. That's about when my phone cut out.

Except when I guess there's some pay back for lying because when I hung up I lost my say in this whole negotiation and then all of a sudden there was a plane ticket in the mail and I was flying to Michigan with barely a suitcase and my sister met me at the airport. The first thing we did was rent a car and then buy a sweet potato. We bought the sweet

potato because my sister is practical and she thought that maybe there would not be sweet potatoes for sale in our little home town and I said oh wouldn't that be a shame and she didn't catch the sarcasm so she said yes, yes it would. So we bought a sweet potato at the first supermarket we passed. We stuck it in the back seat, next to my purse and coat and my sister's purse and coat and there were the purses and the coats in the back and the sweet potato.

At the funeral, I wanted to laugh because everyone called my father Timothy and it sounded like they all had twigs shoved up their asses. That's why I wanted to laugh, because no one ever called my dad anything but Tim, not because I'm a bad daughter, and all those fuddy-duddy old women who once maybe taught my fourth grade class or pulled Timothy's tooth were there and they were sad, so sad, dressed in black, mourning for Timothy.

I almost thought I had gone to the wrong funeral.

Afterwards, though, at the party - or the reception, as they called it, because parties after funerals are rude but receptions are traditional - the sweet potato pie was there and everyone was raving and I knew I was in the right place because it was crap, truly crap but they all acted like they loved it. What a sweet idea, they said, his girl made him one last sweet potato pie, oh and it is a sweet idea. It was a sweet idea but not a sweet pie because my sister was so clouded with grief that she poured three cups of salt and not three of sugar and not even the sweetest sweet potato could have made that pie taste good.

In our defense my sister and I had only made the pie once before and it had tasted terrible then but that's because we were seven and we made it without our mother's supervision. It was when she was sick and our father was at work and we thought that it would make him smile if there was a pie on the table when he got home from work. He had smiled but he had smiled because he was laughing at us because we had stuck a sweet potato in the pie pan and stuck the pan in the microwave and it had exploded into orange mush that we had put on the table for him to eat after dinner. He ate it all, every single bite of exploded sweet potato and ruffled our hair and called us little darlings and chuckled the whole time.

When I thought of this Timothy that no one mentioned at the funeral, I was sad and so I giggled a little bit. It was ok to giggle at the funeral reception, even though you're not allowed to giggle at the actual funeral. This seemed silly to me but I didn't write the rules, I didn't even read them, but my sister did. I giggled all the time and that's why people frowned at me.

When I flew home, my flight left before my sister's and so she took me and rental car to the airport and dropped us off. She was just supposed to drive me through the passenger drop-off lane - no parking or standing - but she parked in the parking garage instead. She parked in the parking garage so she could park and stand and throw her arms around me and sob.

She sobbed and sobbed and I sat there, awkward as always. She wiped her snot on my sleeve and I remember when we were little and what we used to tell other people. We're identical twins, we'd say, so we have the

same snot. So really, she was wiping my snot on my sleeve and that was ok. She sobbed into my shoulder and said do you remember, do you remember the potato in the microwave and it exploded and Dad was so mad? I am confused; I tell her I remembered that he laughed and she gets a funny look on her face and she sounds so sad. You always remembered things in an optimistic light, she tells me, and I wonder what that means and I doubt if I ever really knew Timothy.

Then it's time for my flight to leave, or it's actually an hour before my flight but I have to check in and check my luggage and declare my sweet potato. I am bringing one home, even though I don't have an oven, for old times' sake. My sister says this is stupid. She is right. I'm going to do it anyway.

So I untangle from my snotty sister and I get out of the rental car and I have my coat and my purse and my sweet potato. I tell her that I love her because that's what you say to sister who shares your snot and your DNA and who is crying in a rental car. Then I walk into the airport and the woman at the counter asks me do you have anything to declare and I say yes, one sweet potato.