

John Benner

Other People's Ashes

On a weekend hike alone, Emma saw that a cabin she had admired for more than 40 years was for sale. The tiny home had no room for visitors, which seemed perfect. Without notifying the children, Emma made an offer on the cabin that was accepted. Back home she met with a real estate agent, and soon a red sign appeared on her own front lawn like an accusation.

Shelley called that afternoon. “Mom, what the hell is going on? Deena Rochelle called and told me there was a For Sale sign in front of the house. I told her that wasn’t possible. I told her *my* mom would have talked with me before doing something like that.”

Emma wouldn’t miss Deena one bit. That woman never could manage to mind her own business—yet, she somehow never seemed to know who her own husband was sleeping with. “I don’t need to explain myself. This is something I wanted to do, so I did it. I’ve never done that in my whole life.”

Emma listened to Shelley breathe on the other end of the line for a few moments until it became a contest of who was going to say something first. Finally, Shelley spoke. “I’m sending Marcus over there.”

“Please don’t,” Emma said. But Shelley had already hung up.

Two hours later, Marcus knocked on the door. Usually, he just let himself into the house, so Emma assumed he was trying to make a point. When she opened the door, he stood there with his hands on his hips, looking at her. She rolled her eyes, left the door open and walked into the kitchen to start her dinner. Marcus shut the door loudly and joined her. “Mom, are you okay?” he asked.

“Of course. I feel fine. Better than fine, in fact.”

“That’s not what I meant. Is anything wrong?”

“Wrong how?”

“Did we do something?”

She thought for a long time before answering. The only thing her kids had done wrong was cause her to give up everything. But that wasn’t their fault. They didn’t ask to be brought into this world. And it wasn’t their fault that they had grown up weak and needy. Gordon’s coddling was to blame for that. “No,” was all she said.

“Isn’t this all a little sudden? Are you sure you’ve thought this through?”

How could he really not understand how long this had been in the works? To her, this seemed like the least-sudden decision she had ever made. And how dare he question her ability to reason, as if she were some doddering biddy? She could feel her face turning red as the anger welled up in her. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“But...”

“But nothing. I’m making my dinner and going to bed. I’ll talk to you later.”

During the following weeks, Emma tried to distract and console her aggrieved children by giving them most of her things. She traded in the Lexus for a pickup truck, which would be

considerably more practical in the country. On moving day, the job went quickly as the workers loaded up what was left inside the house, including a comfortable chair that Gordon had never liked, a few paintings that looked like scenes from where she was about to move, several boxes of books that she'd never had enough peace to finish, and a couple of crates of brand new yoga paraphernalia. While they worked, Marcus put the things from the yard into the bed of the pickup and covered it over with a tarp. She hugged him and drove away, following the moving truck west on the interstate, then south on poorly maintained state roads. Shafts of sun cut through the low gray clouds and she smiled at the mountains, color-rinsed a light green by springtime leaf buds.

At the cabin, the men began to unload the truck and she went inside to direct them. When they were nearly finished, one of them asked whether she would like them to unload the pickup as well, and she said yes. When they were done, they collected the moving blankets and drove away with a check and a \$20 bill for each of them, which she assumed they'd spend on beer, the way men always did.

As the taillights of the moving van disappeared in the dusk, she turned toward the cabin and pulled up short when she saw the sundial sitting next to the wheelbarrow and the lawn chairs. Marcus must have loaded it into the pickup when she wasn't looking, even though he had agreed to take it to his house. "Shit," she said to no one, partly to see how her voice sounded in the yard that was hers and hers alone. The mere sight of the sundial drained the remaining energy out of her, and she gave it a wide berth as she headed into the cabin.

The rustic and open floor plan soothed her, even though the cabin was about the same size as her grandfather's tiny house in Arlington, where she and Gordon had lived when they were first married. That house had given them so little privacy it was a miracle they'd been able to produce three children there.

When her grandfather died and was cremated, she thought she'd store his urn at the back of the overfilled hall closet—only to discover it was already being used as a crypt. On a high shelf across the back wall, she had found an urn with her grandmother's ashes and a brown plastic container labeled "Heidi," which contained the remains of her grandfather's flatulent but beloved dachshund.

She recalled how she had sat on the closet floor in a dusty nest of coats, gloves, and scarves, sobbing until Gordon returned home. "Hello!" he shouted as he shut the front door. When she didn't answer he called out again. "Emma?" She continued to weep until he cautiously pulled the closet door open. "Honey? Are you OK?"

She nodded and sniffled as a slurry of snot and tears dripped off her upper lip. Gordon ducked into the bathroom, returned with toilet paper spooled around one hand, and gently wiped her face. She wasn't certain why she was crying so hard. Maybe it was because her grandfather's passing meant she would inherit the crummy little house and would have to keep living in it. And maybe it was because any world in which your life could end with your ashes stored in a metal vase in a closet was too futile to endure.

Emma had been a light sleeper and got up at 3 a.m. most days, wandering the tiny house, watching Gordon and the children sleep and tiptoeing around so as not to wake them – because then they might need something from her. She sat sometimes in the chair in the nook in the living room, staring at the pictures of her parents and communing with them silently. Her father had been killed while fighting in North Africa and her mother had been in charge of the steno pool at the Pentagon during the war and for a few years afterward until she died, and Emma was sent to live with her grandparents. Her mother had been buried at Arlington Cemetery in her own plot next to her husband when real estate there wasn't so scarce. These days, spouses were buried on top of spouses, the headstones updated with an inscription on the reverse side explaining that two people would share the same space for eternity whether they liked it or not – many of them closer in death than they had been in life.

The closet of ashes had established with fearful clarity the way life repeats itself as it circles and draws tighter like a noose. One early morning Emma suddenly found it hard to breathe. The house simply was too small to hold them all, too many generations and too many memories.

She'd retrieved her clothes from the bedroom and dressed quietly in the hallway. In the closet she found a duffel bag and placed into it her grandparents' urns and the plastic container of dog ashes. She got the trowel from the bucket she kept under the sink and put it into the bag. She considered leaving a note for Gordon but decided against it. If he awakened while she was gone, it would do him good to wonder where *she* was for once. She put on her coat and gloves, opened the front door as quietly as possible and pulled it shut behind her until it clicked.

A full moon made it easier for her to find her parents' graves among the endless ranks of white headstones at Arlington Cemetery. It was a mild night for late January, and she was barely able to see her breath as she passed under the street lamps that lit Grant Drive. At Section 12, she stepped off the roadway and onto the grass. Partway down the hill she located them, side-by-side and oriented toward the Washington Monument in the distance. She looked around but saw no one. She hoped soldiers didn't patrol the cemetery at night, because if they discovered her, she would have difficulty explaining her errand.

She'd selected a spot midway between the graves, used the trowel to punch a circle ten inches in diameter in the turf, lifted a cap of sod and set it to the side. She dug a careful hole nearly two feet deep and set the three containers of ashes into the ground. She filled the hole with most of the dirt, replaced the sod and tamped it into place. She scattered the extra dirt, gathered her things, and walked quickly back to the road and toward home.

Emma pulled sheets and a blanket from a moving box and made up the bed in the cabin. She slept fitfully in the silence of the countryside and got out of bed before dawn, after finally giving up on the idea of a full night's sleep. She parted the living room curtain and looked out at the sundial, which she had hoped someone might have mistaken as a thing of value and had run off with in the night. Instead, it sat as if it had always been there, having an effect on her that was likely the reverse of what Marcus had intended.

Gordon had had a heart attack at work and his boss had called to tell her to go to the hospital. When she arrived, he was on a breathing machine and a young doctor told her to prepare for the worst, which came before any of the children could get there. Emma knew Gordon would have been unhappy that she alone had attended his death, but there was nothing to be done about it now.

The boys had accompanied her to the funeral home to make the preparations for the service. The funeral director handed her a catalog of possibilities, including a dozen styles of wooden caskets that looked much too nice to bury, and urns like the ones her grandparents had ended up in. She leafed through the pages, not really listening to his presentation, until Marcus lifted the book out of her lap. He and Jimmy talked with the funeral director as if she weren't there and ended up selecting a sundial that Gordon's ashes would be inserted into, with hers to follow one day. This all seemed cramped and disquieting to her, but she felt too numb to object. At the funeral everyone had cried except her and she hoped no one noticed. The children each gave tear-filled eulogies that included recollections of Gordon teaching them to ride bikes, to swim in the neighborhood pool, and to conquer the basics of algebra. The stories all had the same thing in common: She was not in them.

As a young mother, she had waited to feel the deep motherly attachment for her children that she'd read about in magazines and heard about incessantly from neighbors and her two chubby sisters-in-law—who never really warmed to her no matter how polite she was to them. The years slid by at an astonishing speed as she tended to her family and rarely took time to do anything for herself. Instead, she staged a seemingly endless parade of family gatherings for birthdays, Christmases, graduations, and summer vacations.

And whenever the kids acted up, Gordon somehow got the play the nice guy while she was forced to apply the discipline. When Jimmy turned 16, he wrecked the family car while goofing around with some friends on a road that ran along the golf course. Jimmy called Gordon after the accident, interrupting him at work rather than calling her. Gordon raced to the scene and somehow persuaded the superintendent of the golf course not to call the police even though the car ended up on the 16th green, causing a great deal of damage and expense. She made Gordon demand that Jimmy take a job to earn the money to repair the golf course and the car, only to discover a few months later that Jimmy quit the job after a week and Gordon secretly paid for everything himself, working overtime to do it. In her opinion this made him a bad father, but the kids certainly seemed to see things differently.

A few years later, in early fall, they had driven three hours away to drop off Marcus at college, which would leave them alone for the first time in more than 20 years. Outside the dorm, Gordon hugged Marcus and wept openly while students and parents smiled at the spectacle. Before the onlookers' eyes swept to her, she moved away from the pair of them and stood near a bench, watching and waiting for Marcus to pull away in embarrassment. But his face never reddened, and when Gordon finally released him, Marcus waved casually at her and strolled away to start his new life.

The fresh tears on Gordon's face, rather than spurring sympathy in her, had the opposite effect. He seemed to save his most emotional moments for when he had an audience. On the way home, she struggled with how to tell him she wanted to leave him. She couldn't remember when the thought of leaving had first occurred to her. Honestly, she couldn't remember *not* having the thought. She knew her words would devastate him. After 100 miles of false starts and stammering that he mistook for her composure being stripped away because they'd just left their youngest kid at college, she discovered that she lacked the courage to say what she wanted to say—to say the words that would finally free her.

When the sundial arrived a few weeks after the funeral, Marcus had slid the container of Gordon's ashes inside and placed it in a prominent spot in Emma's yard where it was visible from the kitchen window. She planted a rose bush in front of it, and after two years it was hidden from view. Emma had asked Jimmy to take it to his house two weeks ago, before the move.

"Don't you want it in your new yard?" Jimmy had asked.

"Let me get moved in and pick a spot for it first," she had responded, though she'd had no intention of doing that after finally being rid of it. Either Marcus and Jimmy had got their signals crossed or Marcus had hoped she'd change her mind and had loaded it into the pickup truck for the move.

She dressed and headed into town to buy groceries at the 24-hour supermarket and make good use of her early rising. She parked the pickup under an overhead light in the parking lot, got out and stopped short when she saw that the bed of the pickup truck was dusted in a gray powder. She stared at it for a moment until she realized that Gordon's ash canister must have come open inside the sundial during transport. As she leaned over the side of the truck she coughed and wondered suddenly whether she was inhaling his ashes. The thought of him invading her body this way infuriated her.

She drove back onto the highway. A mile down the road, she saw what she was looking for and pulled into one of the bays. She dropped the tailgate, fed money into the machine, grasped the water wand, and rinsed the gray dust out of the truck's bed and into the drain at the car wash. Soon her truck looked clean again and she could feel the tension leaving her shoulders. She did her shopping and returned to the cabin. As she steered the truck onto her property, she considered for a split second pressing down the accelerator and smashing the sundial to pieces with the grill of her truck. But Gordon had done nothing to deserve such violence. He had never beaten her, he had simply suffocated her slowly with his stupefying concern and his perpetual need for her time.

She found a screwdriver in one of the moving boxes and removed the plate from the bottom of the sundial. From the cold and confining metal cylinder she slid out the cracked container that held the rest of Gordon's ashes and put it into a plastic trash bag. She tossed the bag and the sundial into the bed of the pickup and drove toward town again. At a pretty spot along the highway downwind from her property she scattered Gordon's ashes, taking care not to breathe him in again. She dropped the sundial into a dumpster behind a gas station. She would

need to make up a lie for the children about what had happened to it, but she'd worry about that later.

Back at her cabin, she hiked across the fields and tipped her face up to feel the warmth of the sun. She followed an ancient footpath for half an hour until finally, satisfied that she was alone, she stopped and stood in the tall grass to savor the silence and enjoy the exquisite lightness of an indifferent sky.