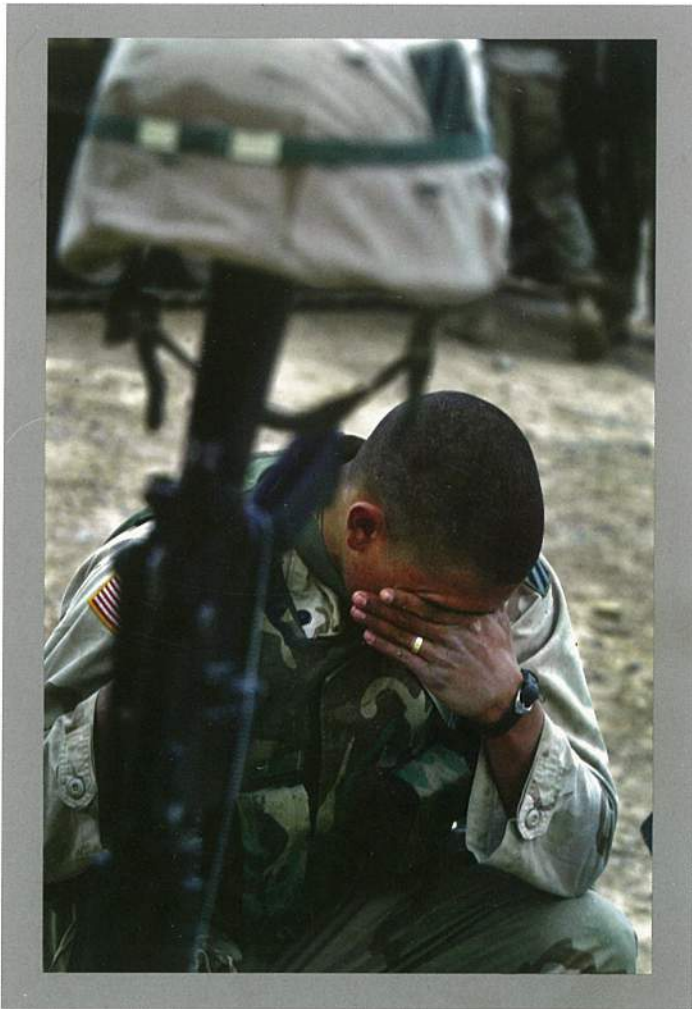


 CTREVIEW



SPECIAL TRAUMA SECTION includes Cathy Caruth, David Leeson, Grace Cavalieri • CSU and IMPAC award winners • Andrei Voznesensky • One-act comedy on marriage

Settling Matters

“Mrs. Sanfield?”

It was the young man from the city morgue calling again. His voice was all business this time, not as tender as yesterday, Myrna noticed, no chatty questions about the deceased, no small talk about grief; it was as if overnight he had grown impatient with the indecisive old widow.

“We’re running out of time, ma’am,” he said. “I’m sorry to be so blunt, but we need an answer.”

“Answer?” Myrna said. The hard plastic of the phone, unused since yesterday, was cool against her ear.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Our storage limit is two weeks.”

“Has it been that long?” Myrna said. “Two weeks?” She was sitting alone in the wooden booth of her small kitchen watching the first snowflakes of the year smash purposefully into the windows. Melting upon impact, these intricate, one-of-a-kind kamikaze figures left no mark, no reminder on the thick glass. “I thought I had longer,” Myrna said.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “You have until today. More precisely, until five o’clock this afternoon. We called to find out what you’ve decided.”

“It’s not up to me, at least, not entirely,” Myrna said. “I need to find his note.”

“His note?”

“That was his way,” Myrna said. “He was particular about certain things, no rhyme or reason, mind you.” She saw eyeglasses on the shelf above the sink, wedged discreetly between two coffee mugs. For days, her husband Alexis had puzzled over where he had put them, and now they seemed so obvious. “I just know he would have told me what to do. About something like this.”

“In the interim, that is, until the note surfaces, perhaps there’s someone else I should talk to, a family member, a relative,” the young man said. “Someone with the authority to make a decision.”

At first, Myrna thought the young man was irritated, his voice was so firm, but then she realized that what she heard was simply youth, the urgency to move on to the next thing.

“No,” she said. “There is no one, it was just us, Alexis and Myrna. The Sanfields.”

The young man paused politely before saying, "I'm sorry," and then, "we have until five o'clock to decide."

"We?" Myrna said. It was the pronouns, the we's and our's, that were the hardest to overlook, to let pass by without comment.

"I mean you," he said. "We must know your decision by this afternoon, Mrs. Sanfield."

"When you called before you told me your name, but I've forgotten, forgive me," Myrna said.

"Billy," the young man said, his voice softening, but not much, as if reminding her that a name doesn't offer connection. "And it was yesterday," he said, correcting her. "We called yesterday because of our urgency to know, ma'am, how we should treat the body, that is, is it to be cremated or buried?" His sentences were unequivocal, carrying with them such momentum, such possibility of closure.

"What do you think, Billy?" Myrna said. "What is your preference? Because, you see, I'm stuck."

"Excuse me," he said, breathing more deeply into Myrna's ear. "I don't understand."

"Which would you choose, cremation or burial?" Her fingers combed and untangled the purple fringe of a worn placemat.

"It's personal, ma'am," he said.

"Yes, I know," Myrna said. "But what if." Still sitting in her booth, Myrna lifted first her left thigh and then her right and swiveled her hips around so that if she wanted to get up, to look at the list of things she had written down, matters that needed her attention, household chores she normally tackled without a reminder, with a dedication and interest that others, friends of hers and even acquaintances, found remarkable, she was now in the correct position.

"Cremation is more definitive," Billy said. "The body is truly gone."

"But I've heard it's like incineration," Myrna said. "Like what they do to garbage."

"I shouldn't really be doing this, ma'am," Billy said. "Offering opinions. It's not my area."

"Area?"

"My job is storage and transport," Billy said. "Nothing more."

"But if it was your area," Myrna said. She touched the half corn muffin, buttered and toasted, in front of her. It was no longer warm. "What seems

better, more respectful, more human?"

She could hear that Billy was fiddling, messing around with the supplies on his desk, perhaps refilling a stapler or flipping the unnecessary pages of his daily planner, Saturday and Sunday, the weekend days being so useless to a workweek. Then he began picking at one thing in particular, Myrna could sense the focus, his determination to unleash a linoleum desk cover, a misplaced decorative sticker, something stuck askew on his faux maple civil servant desk.

"There are advantages to both, I guess," Billy said.

"Advantages," Myrna said. "I can't seem to see any."

"Mrs. Sanfield," he said, his accent, relaxed British or maybe even Boston, the two linked by short A's and ancestral longing, grew stronger, more formal, as he made his pitch: "We need to know sooner rather than later."

"Yes, I know," Myrna said.

"Do you?"

"Has anyone you loved ever died," Myrna said, wandering back to the kitchen. The journey between the two rooms, kitchen to bathroom, bathroom to kitchen, was her daily pilgrimage.

"I think so." Myrna found Billy's pattern of inhalations and exhalations nearly hopeful. She lifted herself up and walked the short distance from the kitchen to the guest bathroom. In the rectangular mirror, she saw how chapped her lips were, her face narrower than she had ever seen it, her hair translucent, and her brown eyes receding into their sockets. "I'm disappearing," Myrna said.

"Ma'am?" Billy said. His voice, anticipating a conclusion to all this, startled her.

"He just disappeared," she said, turning on the cold water and then the hot, just to hear the sound of something moving. "Alexis. One minute here and then gone."

"He didn't disappear, ma'am," Billy said.

Myrna said nothing and put the phone gently down on the sink rim. She turned off the taps, squeezing each one forcefully to ensure its closure and watched the skin on her hands whiten with the effort. When she picked up the receiver, she said, "Billy? Are you there?"

"I'm still here," Billy said, sounding a bit unsure why he was. There

was no sound from his office, no street noises, no co-workers chatting, and Myrna imagined him in the basement of a federal building on lower Broadway or Chambers Street, somewhere out of the way, yet official. "I know this is hard, Mrs. Sanfield."

When she found Alexis dead in his desk chair, his coffee mug overturned, his white shirt stained with brown dribbles, he had just been alive. It was mid-afternoon on a sunny cold Sunday. There were no keyboard strokes tapping like a metronome, keeping pace with her needlepoint, pull, pull, push, pull, pull, push. It was probably an hour, Myrna guessed later when asked by the EMT medic who responded as if it was an emergency, as if there was someone to save. It was probably an hour, Myrna explained, before she dropped a stitch and saw the hole in her needlework. "Alexis," she had called out, no longer hearing the tapping. "Alexis," she said again. And then, leisurely, she said to the medic, without any hurry, she walked into the study and saw the coffee pooling by her husband's foot, the sound of it soaking into the thin Oriental rug seemed overwhelmingly loud. Piles of books were on the floor, his leather chair needed emptying, Myrna remembered nothing, there were so many of Alexis's clothes gathered there. "Alexis," she said. "Your coffee." Slumped was the word she used to describe his body, though the medic had looked at her quizzically, which made Myrna wonder if it was a word, slumped, or if a better word choice would have been dead. He looked dead, was probably what the medic wanted, but to Myrna, he was still living at this point, he was just resting. Slumped. "Have you ever lost anyone?" Myrna said.

"Excuse me?" Billy said.

"Has anyone you loved ever died," Myrna said, wandering back to the kitchen. The journey between the two rooms, kitchen to bathroom, bathroom to kitchen, was her daily pilgrimage. Standing in front of the stove, she looked briefly at the unlit burners, covered with casseroles, pies, paper plates of cookies with their small hand-written notes attached, the crusts and sprinkles old and rigid, ready to be heaved not eaten. The snow had stopped suddenly, and the sunlight made her arms and legs look checkered, awash in black and white squares, reflections from outside that had no beginning or end. She hadn't talked to anyone for this long since Alexis died. "I have."

"Yes, I know," Billy said. "My grandmother died when I was little, but I guess that doesn't count since I don't remember any of it."

"It counts," Myrna said. "What did you do with her?"

"We buried her," Billy said. "I remember that part."

"Was it satisfying?" Myrna said.

"I was too young to know," Billy said. Myrna could sense his drifting back to his hometown, remembering an old tree behind his house perhaps or the dinner bell from a neighbor pealing out the lateness of the day. She traveled with him.

He said nothing for a few moments, and then with a salesman-like decisiveness, Billy said, "I assume it was in a way. Satisfying, that is."

"He was a stress expert," Myrna said. "Alexis. Isn't that funny?"

"I have scientist written down," Billy said.

"Of buildings," Myrna said. "He was a scientist of buildings."

"Then I would definitely opt for the burial ceremony," Billy said. He was chewing gum now, his teeth snapping the red or yellow or perhaps peppermint-white stick against his molars rhythmically, sounding out the tempo of imminent victory, a case closed.

"But you see," Myrna said. "I've searched everywhere, overturned things, thrown them upside down, shaken them, still, I haven't found his note." She wandered down the hall towards their bedroom. "He would have told me what he wanted. That was his way. Giving precise directions about the most peculiar things, water plants to this line, throw away milk when there's this much left, never touch a dead battery. This would have been his domain, death, bodies. It just would have been."

"You'd be surprised," Billy said, sounding much older than he was, "how little we know about our loved ones."

Myrna listened to the water leaking from the bathroom faucets and to Billy's rhythmical breathing, the gum tucked away inside his mouth.

"I just haven't looked hard enough," she said.

"It seems that, given your husband's background, science and all, he would prefer to be in the ground," Billy said with an assumption that he would get no argument from her. She wondered how long he would stay on the phone to fill a quota.

"He wouldn't leave the matter unsettled," Myrna said. "Without telling me what to do, how could I possibly decide for him? He just wouldn't do that." How foolish she must have looked, a small-boned woman who despite her white hair looked younger than sixty-three, looked positively good for her age, for any age, really. How foolish she must have looked, shaking such a big man, a dead man, in fact, urging him to wake up, practically lifting him

out of the chair, she was, at one point, shaking him so hard. “Your coffee,” she had said to him and then walked over and righted the cup and saw drool leaking from his mouth. “Wake up,” she said or something like that, something just as silly, just as naive. How much drool, the medics asked. Not a lot, she told them, just a little, enough to seem odd. His head was turned to the side; his eyes were shut; miraculous, the medics had said, for his eyes to shut.

She took hours before calling the EMT. How many hours, they asked her, why did you wait? Myrna didn’t know; she wasn’t aware of any time passing at all. She found him and it was light out, the sun was shining off the white buttons of Alexis’s shirt. When the medics arrived, they followed emergency protocol. They ripped his shirt, those white buttons falling to the floor like hail stones, and then they pulled him to the ground, felt for a pulse, a heartbeat. They almost did CPR, but chose not to pretend any longer and merely pronounced him dead of a massive coronary at 8:07 p.m. Sunday night. How did she find him, they asked her, and she told them the story of the coffee and the drool and the relentless shaking. She didn’t tell them about how she waited for a fact, scientific evidence, physical proof, for his skin to suddenly turn from warm to cool. A discernible sign of death, Alexis whispered to her once in a movie, explaining a scene.

That happened after the sun had gone down. She was sitting on the floor next to him, holding his hand, when she noticed the temperature of his fingers had changed.

“It could be years before you find a note,” Billy said.

“Or moments,” Myrna said. She had competently filled out the papers permitting an autopsy, donating his organs and registering his body with the morgue. They wanted to know where and when the deceased was found, in what condition. In the Dead Condition she wrote. Dead, dead, dead. Everything about him was gone, she continued writing in the report, without response, inert, inactive, no longer smiling at her, his wife, his poupee, he used to call her, his doll. “I just need more time.”

“I know this is hard,” Billy said. “Perhaps the hardest thing you’ll ever do.”

“Compared to what?” Myrna said.

Billy was quiet. She imagined the phone stuck between his mid-twenties clavicle and chin, his fingers busy erasing something or tuning in a pop station on his radio, his mind imagining the woman he’s dating. He said finally, quietly, “Compared to living.”

Myrna squeezed a tissue from the arm of her cardigan and wiped her eyes, her nose. "You've been very patient." She alone had watched as they pulled the sheet over Alexis's head and prepared to transfer him. She had listened to the small talk of the ER residents, talk of dinner plans, girlfriends, lives in progress. She wanted to say "wait" in a voice both urgent and apologetic. She wanted them to wait before pulling the sheet over his forehead, the place she loved most to kiss, the place Alexis would point to, almost child-like, waiting for her lips to touch him. But she said nothing. It wouldn't be the same, now, would it? Nothing's the same, now, is it? "Let us know your plans," the medical examiner had told her, touching her hand with the coolness of marble, of confidence, of attempted compassion. "I don't make these sorts of plans," Myrna said. "He does." The same examiner had smiled as if she was joking.

"So we will hear from you later today?" Billy said. He stopped chewing and picking. There was silence. Myrna could feel that he was poised, pencil point waiting to circle an answer, a standardized test oval, the proper shading of the blank space so crucial to the end result, the final score and the direction a life can take.

"I will look for the note right away," Myrna said.

"Or we will have to give your husband the common city burial."

As she listened to Billy resume his chewing, she longed for that sense of relief, which he seemed to have just then, the relief of having something nearly completed and far behind you. "Excuse me?" she said.

"A city burial," he said. "You wouldn't want that, Mrs. Sanfield, trust me."

"I will find something," Myrna said, knowing that that was impossible, that there was nothing to be found. But still she looked.

She hadn't been in the bedroom during the day since Alexis died. Everywhere she looked, there were couplings: combs on the bureau, her lamp and the old brass stand-up of Alexis's, shoes thrown under the chair, some his and others hers, hers and his, Alexis's and Myrna's. The streetlights were on now, and it looked as if gray fabric had been pinned to every window.

Myrna turned on the light in Alexis's closet.

She took out a few suits and stretched them carefully over the bed. He had five good ones, Alexis would say, and three suits saved for sentimental reasons: his first, his marriage, and the one that belonged to his father. Myrna just took the five good ones and then chose various shirts to go with

each one. The blue button-down was more casual and went nicely with the navy blue pinstripe; the flamingo pink plaid was racy and popped out of the black double-breast; the rest of the shirts were starchy white with small monograms on the chest pockets, and with their versatility, they looked fine with the remaining brown tweed, green tweed, and summer seersucker.

If he was to be buried, he should look good, she thought. But if it was cremation that he wanted, then it didn't matter what she chose.

Although she had meticulously searched through everything of his, she once again opened Alexis's drawers. She took out underwear, socks, and even the soft handkerchiefs that began their days pressed in Alexis's jacket and ended in a ball in his pants' pocket. Though he rarely wore the suits anymore, the handkerchiefs would always be in his pants when she checked before laundering.

She was sitting on the floor next to him, holding his hand, when she noticed the temperature of his fingers had changed.

She dumped every drawer and stripped every hanger and emptied duffel bags of lost socks that Alexis believed, with a fervor that both frustrated and intrigued Myrna, would return to their mates. Even when she had tipped over every box, bin, tray, container that held anything of her husband's, she found, as she knew she would, nothing.

"Damn you," she said to the suits, feeling something in her resist and then finally cave as she said the two words again and again. How unlike herself she had become! She imagined Alexis watching her in her undershirt, the cardigan removed, the skin on her upper arms and chest exposed for the first time in days; she bent down to adjust a coat button or straighten an arm. "Damn you," she said, first to the pinstripe and then to the dull black one that Alexis had begun to wear only to funerals of friends and colleagues. She picked up the jackets and stuffed her hand in each pocket, even the tiny breast ones inside the lapel that were designed only for pens.

She watched the spit spray out of her mouth as she cursed the tweed, her saliva landing on the wool and beading there for a moment before sinking in and vanishing completely. She searched the pockets of everything, pants, sports jackets, the pea coat, the old jean jacket that never really fit properly, and, of course, the sheepskin full-length coat they had bought on their trip to New Zealand. She found only matchbooks, toothpicks, some in cello-



phane, others worn down from use.

So, you old kook, she imagined Billy muttering under his breath while waiting for her to call him back. You were wrong; he didn't leave a note; he left nothing; now, what do I do with the body?

"You were right," Myrna said when Billy answered. "He wants to be buried."

"Did you find something then?" he said.

"Yes," Myrna lied. "I was right about that."

"My condolences, ma'am," Billy said, "on your loss of Alexis."

"Thank you, Billy," Myrna said. "I know I was out of the ordinary for you."

"May he rest in peace, ma'am," Billy said, neither agreeing nor protesting.

"May he," Myrna said.

Like a director who suddenly yells "Action," Billy set in motion the funeral production, and Myrna read her lines, accepted condolences from all of Alexis's school friends and his colleagues, men and women whom she had never met, but had heard about for years. She performed her part and rode with Alexis's body as it traveled in a hearse through lower Manhattan, up the west side highway towards the Catskill Mountains where Alexis was born.

There, she watched as two men dug a hole, a duet of dirt rising and then falling, a sound as familiar to her as Alexis's breathing, his body coiled in sleep and his heart pumping tirelessly. They counted to three, heaved the casket on their shoulders and then gently lowered Alexis down, using ropes that seemed to Myrna so old and worn and archaic, nothing like Alexis when she last heard him tapping at his desk. One of the men gave her a handful of dirt and instead of throwing it into the hole and saying her good-byes, Myrna quietly pocketed the mound, nodded to the men, signaling that she was finished, and thought, this is what they'll find in my clothes.