

Stones, by Charles Fergus

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I was laying a stone terrace when the phone rang. I ignored it. With hammer and chisel, I kept shaping the stone before me.

Our house sits in a clearing on a wooded mountain. In 1982, when Nancy and I married, a friend and I framed and roofed the house and sheathed the outer walls with plywood and tar paper. Nancy and I moved in, and over the next five years I faced the walls with stone. I'm a writer, not a mason, but I found great satisfaction in working with stones, fitting their shapes and colors together, bridging the joints between stones as the courses rose, interlocking the corners, building sound, solid walls. Stone walls, I discovered, were like paragraphs, chapters. A stone house was a book.

When our son, William, was born in 1988 I built an addition – which I sided with wood, because the stonework, even though I loved it, took so much time. Now it was 1995. Will was seven, and I was finally getting around to laying an attached terrace, three feet wide by thirty-six feet long, the last stonework on the house.

It was a summery Monday in early September. Nancy – she's also a writer – was in Scotland, researching a book. Earlier that morning I'd dropped Will off at his cousins' house about a twenty-minute drive away.

I picked up a stone the size and shape of a dictionary: it was metamorphosed sandstone, a hard, weather-resistant rock that caps the mountains of Ridge and Valley Pennsylvania. Someone had carried this stone down off a ridge a century and a half ago and laid it in a barn or a house foundation. The barn burned down, the house moldered into its cellar. I had scavenged most of my stones from old slumping, brush-filled foundations across Centre County.

Such sandstone can be tan, lavender, pale green, gray, rose-pink, or brown. It's hard – steel tools ring against it. And it's unpredictable to work: chip away at an edge, and the stone may crack a foot from the chisel. Carefully, gradually, I shaped the stone. I lifted it and set it in place.

The phone rang again. This time I answered it.

It was Rae Chambers, one of my mom's friends. "I'm worried about Ruth," she told me. "We were supposed to have supper together last night, and she never showed up." Rae explained that she had tried phoning my mother several times, and had gone to her house this morning. Her car was not in the carport. Rae knocked on the front door, and no one answered.

"Maybe she just forgot about the dinner," I said.

"That's not like her."

"No." I thought for a moment. I was a half-hour's drive away. I'd seen my mother yesterday, and she was fine. "I'll get the neighbors to check on her," I said.

I called her number and let it ring a long time. Then I called the Goodes, across the street. Mr. Goode answered. He and his wife were my mother's age, in their seventies, longtime friends. I asked if he'd check on my mother and call me back if anything was out of the ordinary. Then I went back to laying stone.

She's probably at a meeting. My mother was a volunteer member of the planning commission in State College, the town where she had lived for almost fifty years. *Labor Day, today is Labor Day. The planning commission wouldn't meet today.*

Maybe she's at church. Maybe she spoke to the organist yesterday, they arranged a lesson, and she's practicing a Bach prelude right now. After my father died, of a heart attack in 1986, my mother became even more active in the University Baptist and Brethren congregation. A few years ago she chaired a committee to get a new organ for the sanctuary. She traveled to churches around the state, listening to organs; she went to cities and talked to organ builders. The committee raised \$150,000 to buy a Holtkamp pipe organ. Last year, she began taking lessons.

I shaped and set a stone, then another and another. I mixed mortar in a steel trough. With a trowel I slapped a bed of it onto the terrace's concrete slab. I buttered the sides of each stone and laid it in the bed, tapping with the trowel handle to seat it, using a level to slope it slightly away from the house. I pointed up the joints between the stones and covered them with wet rags so they'd cure gradually: the day was hot, and I didn't want the mortar drying out too fast, which would make it crumbly.

I tried Mom's number again. The phone rang and rang. Mr. Goode hadn't called back, so I told myself nothing was wrong. Still wearing my dusty work clothes, I drove to my brother Mike's house, in a development outside of State College, picked up Will, and headed into town.

Sure enough, her carport was empty. Strange: the kitchen door stood half open behind its screen. Will and I went inside.

"Dad," Will said, "there's dog food on the floor."

I checked the appointment calendar on the counter between the kitchen and the dining room. The week was blank: nothing written down except for a friend's birthday on Saturday.

Will started down the hallway, calling, "Grandma, Grandma!"

I stared at the blank calendar.

The open door. The dog food scattered on the floor. A drinking glass sitting upright on the floor next to the refrigerator. A glow of light from the family room, which meant the patio door was open. A chair pulled out at an angle from the breakfast counter. Her purse and billfold lying on the counter as if slung there.

Will was halfway down the hall. "Wait," I called to him. In the living room Mom's old gray-faced beagle, Boo, lay in the chair where she always slept (the chair I would never sit

in because it was so covered with dog hair); she wagged her tail as I passed but didn't get out of the chair. I took Will by the arm, led him back to the kitchen, and told him to wait there. I went down the hall myself.

I looked right, into the bathroom. Empty. Then left, into a bedroom, also empty. The bedroom door to the right was open by a third. I pushed it the rest of the way.

My mother's legs were stretched out on the floor. They were motionless, a yellowish gray color. I took a step into the room. She lay on her back in a pool of blood. Her mouth hung open. Her eyes were half shut. She was not wearing her glasses. She was dead.

The world stopped. It shuddered into motion again, was now a different place. I wanted to scream, collapse, weep. Instead I went cold and stiff. Thank God Will didn't find her – he came within a step.

She'd been shot: a huge maroon blotch covered her abdomen. Why didn't anybody hear it? She was wearing her favorite pink blouse. Drenched with blood. Blood spotted her skirt. One leg was bruised. Her skirt was hiked up above her knees. Her underpants had not been disturbed, and my mind latched onto that fact for an instant, a flicker of comfort in the face of growing horror.

I knew not to touch her: the crime scene must be preserved. Later, for my own sake, I wished I had laid my fingers against her cheek and said, "I love you."

I went back to the kitchen, picked Will up in my arms, and left the house. I carried him down the driveway.

"Dad," he asked, "is Grandma dead?"

I saw no point in lying. "Yes."

"Did she die of natural causes?"

Where did he get that phrase, out of a book, some story? "No," I told him, "she didn't."

The Goodes were coming along on the sidewalk, with worried faces; they must have seen my car. I put Will down and gave him to Mrs. Goode, who took him by the hand. "Ruth is dead," I said. "Someone killed her."

Mrs. Goode said, "Are you sure she's dead?"

I was sure. But for some reason, maybe because I couldn't believe my eyes, couldn't comprehend that such a thing had happened, I went back into the house.

There was no mistaking it. The pallid flesh, wounds that no longer bled, a fly that circled and landed. A strange, sharp smell that I couldn't identify hung in the air. I began to consider that remaining in the room, looking at my mother's corpse, must be very dangerous to my mind. My eyes took in other details. The silverware box, kept in a blanket chest, now sitting open on the bed, the utensils in their green felt sleeves all jumbled together. Photo albums and old LPs strewn across the bed.

I left the room again. I called my brother Mike using the phone next to my mother's appointment book. I held the receiver in my shirttail, to keep from disturbing any fingerprints. "I'm sorry to have to tell you this," I heard myself saying: the same words my

mother had spoken to me from the hospital nine years ago telling me my father was dead. I told Mike what had happened. He said he would come right away.

I'm not sure why, but I then went outside and crossed the street to the Elliotts' house to use their phone. When I told Mrs. Elliott what had happened, she put her hand over her mouth. I dialed 911 and a man answered abruptly. "I want to report a murder," I said.

A pause, then the man's voice again, pitched higher. "Wh – What?"

I crossed the street and sat on the lawn sloping down from the house. She was gone. I would never see her again. Someone had done this, someone capable of killing. Who could that be? I was not angry at that person, not yet; I was stunned. Murder was a concept I could not approach. Especially the murder of my mother, one of the gentlest people I knew.

My body felt full of frozen gravel. I put my hands behind me in the crinkly grass, leaned back, and tried to draw air into my lungs. I looked over my shoulder at the house. A one-story ranch, red brick and white-painted wood with a flat graveled roof, a bed of ivy and a dogwood tree in front, the brick my father had set beneath the downspout still in place, an aluminum extension ladder hanging from hooks in the carport, mailbox on the wall next to the front door.

Two police cars pulled up and parked at an angle, blocking the street. I told the policemen where my mother was. Two of them went toward the house, while a third, notepad in hand, started asking me questions. I thought about standing, but didn't. I felt vaguely embarrassed to be wearing dirty work clothes until I realized it didn't matter.

Neighbors came out onto their porches and lawns. Policemen strung yellow plastic tape around our property, winding it from tree to tree. Mike and his wife, Alicia, came down the sidewalk. Did we embrace? I don't remember.

We were all standing in the street when a tall, solid man in chinos and a striped polo shirt came up. "Tom King," he said. "Chief of police." I recognized the name vaguely. He put out his hand, and I shook it. His face was open, sober. "I'm really sorry," he said. "I knew your mom from the planning commission. I knew she lived on Hillcrest, and when I came down the street, I was thinking, 'God, don't let it be Ruth.'"

He introduced us to Tom Jordan, the detective who would handle the investigation. Jordan looked a few years younger than I, around forty, with thinning, sandy hair. He was also wearing casual clothes. It occurred to me that these people had been called away from family get-togethers and Labor Day picnics.

Jordan asked about credit cards. Did she have any? I tried to think. A USAir Visa – she'd urged me to get one, too, so I could build up frequent-flier miles. Where did Mrs. Fergus do her banking? At PNC, out North Atherton Street. What kind of car did she own? A white Ford Escort. What year? Two-door, four-door, hatchback? No one could remember. Where did she have the car serviced? Alicia named a local garage. The car had a bumper sticker for the State College High School boys' basketball team, which my brother coached.

Evening was coming on, the light angled and serene. Street trees stood silhouetted against the glowing sky. I remembered when the trees were spindly sticks; now they were tall, with spreading crowns.

At some point, Detective Jordan told us that my mother had not been shot. She had been stabbed to death. I began remembering other marks I'd seen on her arms and throat. I made myself stop thinking. I looked around.

A plainclothes policeman in a white dress shirt walked slowly down the sidewalk, looking at the neighbors' houses. He had a pistol in a shoulder holster. I was surprised to see a policeman in my hometown wearing a shoulder holster; it was the first one I'd seen other than in the movies. But this wasn't a movie.

In the house someone had turned on a bright light. Policemen went in and out of the kitchen door. It came rushing at me again – murdered – followed incongruously by thoughts of everything I needed to do, from writing an obituary to planning a memorial service to selling the house to dividing up the things inside while preserving peace in the family to taking care of my mother's dog to calling Nancy in Scotland to contacting our relatives –

Murdered? My mother? She lived in a safe neighborhood, in a town where violent crimes were rare. It seemed to me that the thumb of God had come down, singled out Ruth Fergus, and crushed her.

Jordan took our phone numbers and said we could go home. Mike volunteered to take Mom's beagle with him. He said he'd call Brian, our youngest brother, in California.

I trudged toward the Goodes' house. Will was inside, playing with some plastic toys. He wasn't crying. Maybe he was as numb as I was. I hugged and kissed him. I telephoned a friend of mine who is a state policeman and told him what had happened; I could hear him crying on the phone. He agreed to meet us at my house. I had a dog, too, and she needed to be let out of her kennel and fed. Mrs. Goode urged us to stay the night, but I wanted to be in my stone house in the woods.

In the twilight, wood thrushes were calling. John, my state policeman friend, had his pistol with him in a small belt pack, in his hand a long metal flashlight. While Will sat in the car, John and I went through the house room by room. I'd begun wondering about the wisdom of returning. Would the murderer show up here as well? I asked John if he could stay the night. Sure; he'd sleep on the couch.

When I put Will to bed, I hugged him long and close. He wrapped his arms around my neck. His cheek felt soft against mine. I breathed in his scent. I thought about how my mother, if she still existed in any way, was in us, in me and my son, in Mike and his children, in Brian.

I took a shower. I wanted to cleanse myself of what I had seen. Under the rushing water I felt threatened; I couldn't see or hear, someone could come and kill me unawares. I

hurriedly rinsed myself and shut the water off. John was a big man who worked undercover drugs; there could be no better protector. Yet I was trembling with fear.

I unlocked the gun cabinet and got out my shotgun. I loaded it and set it on the floor beside the bed. How I wished Nancy were home. In Scotland it was 3:00 A.M. Even if I could figure out where she was (she'd left an itinerary, but I didn't know where to find it, couldn't remember that it was held down by a magnet on the refrigerator door), I did not want to jar her out of sleep with this.

The night was arm, but I was shivering. I got up and put another blanket on the bed. Outside, the wind had risen. Katydid sounds sounded their ratcheting calls. The full moon stood in the sky. Shadows of tree limbs, swaying in the breeze, played upon the bed. I wrapped myself into a ball. I slept. With the early morning light, nothing had changed. My mother was still dead.

For three days we didn't know who killed her. I passed men on the street and saw them from my car. Men wearing shorts, in suits, college students with backpacks. Workmen. Men whose eyes hid behind dark glasses. Men walking or standing, talking or laughing, oblivious to me or staring back through the windshields of cars and trucks. With each, I wondered: Was it you?

At Mike's house, a detective interviewed us. He asked for names of people who had worked for my mother. The cleaning ladies. The boy who mowed her lawn. The plumber. The carpenter – a man who had helped me on my own house, a man I counted as a friend. I felt guilty giving his name. Would the police call him? Would he think I suspected him? I didn't suspect him. I suspected everyone.

As we stood in Mike's driveway, the detective took our fingerprints. He held my hand in his. He pressed the tips of my fingers against an ink pad, guided them to a sheet of paper, and rolled them gently against the paper's surface. It was a strangely intimate procedure. He printed each finger, then all four fingers together, then the thumb. Kids in the neighborhood were playing; their high-pitched voices reached my ears. School would be starting again in a few days.

"We're going to get the son of a bitch," the detective said.

The next day I picked Nancy up at the airport. She looked strong and beautiful coming off the plane. We held each other tight. I closed my eyes and clung to her. This was my family now. The circle had contracted. I seemed to look at my wife, depend on her, in a way I never had while my mother was alive.

How to describe Ruth Fergus? Independent and wise, with a wry sense of humor. Her college degree was in English literature, begun in Kansas and finished at Penn State after my father started teaching there and before they started a family. For as long as I can

remember, Mom did freelance editing, of articles, theses, and grant proposals, mainly by engineers and scientists for whom English was a second language.

She liked watching sports on TV, especially Pittsburgh Pirates baseball games. She worked in her yard and walked Boo throughout College Heights. She was short, an inch or two over five feet, and had become somewhat stout in her later years. Walking, she took small, toed-out steps. Her smile was warm and genuine, and her face gave off a beautiful glow. I've been told that, in the face, I look like her.

I know there's a tendency to sanctify the dead, but I have to look hard to find the flaws in my mother's character. She could be self-righteous. Sometimes she snapped at me, "You're too intolerant." Once I made her mad by replying, "*You're* too intolerant of people who are intolerant."

My mother offered her trust and friendship readily. She took me to task because I was sometimes suspicious of people and their motives – "You didn't get that from me or your father," she said. I knew where I'd gotten my outlook. I had come of age during the Vietnam War. I was one of the fortunate ones who could attend college, so I escaped being drafted. I had watched as our society became more complex, divided, impersonal, violent. When my brothers and I were little, our parents let us run around through the neighborhood, playing. If I lived in town today, I wouldn't turn Will loose like that.

If my mother thought I was cynical, she also supposed that she herself was naïve. She'd grown up in a small college town, gone straight from a stable home into a happy marriage in yet another sheltered academic community. She once told me that when they were younger, my father sometimes teased her by calling her his "Pollyanna."

Her maiden name was Foote. A forebear named Nathaniel Foote was a farmer who brought his family from East Anglia, in England, to the Massachusetts Bay colony in the early 1630s. Over the generations the family moved west, through New York State to Wisconsin and then to Kansas. Males of the line were farmers and shopkeepers who wed within their kind, women with names like Elizabeth Babcock, Electa Osgood, Sarah Gleason, Grace Grecian. In New England the Footes must have been Puritans, but by the time my mother's grandfather, Addison Osgood Foote, homesteaded in central Kansas in 1871, the family had embraced the Baptists, a church of the American frontier.

Winifred Ruth Foote was born on February 6, 1922. She grew up in Ottawa, Kansas, a town with a small Baptist college. Her father managed a J.C. Penney store on Main Street. Leonard Fergus was a student at the college who boarded with the Footes. He and Ruth married in 1942, and he went away to serve in the war, on a navy gunboat in the Pacific. When he came back, he earned a doctorate at Penn State in botany and plant pathology. The university hired him to the faculty. Our family grew up in College Heights, a neighborhood near the university. Dad bicycled or walked to work. When I got home from school, my mother was always there.

We held the memorial service for Ruth in the Baptist and Brethren Church, my parents' church – and mine, though I rarely attended it anymore.

People filled the sanctuary and the choir loft in back; they listened over the sound system in the fellowship room in the basement. As a prelude the organist played a medley of my mother's favorite musical pieces, including several she had been learning. Her three sons spoke: the writer, the basketball coach, the music teacher. A group called the Silver Chorale sat in front. They were not from the church; they were a company of old people who liked to sing, and my mother played the piano for them. The director announced that the chorale would sing "Love Me Tender." She drew a big laugh when she explained that Ruth always griped about having to play that sappy song. "Love me tender, love me sweet, never let me go . . ." The words, sentimental as they were, rang true.

So many people. I found myself wondering how often funerals in State College drew so many mourners. The display of mourning came, I believed, from two sources: respect for Ruth and sympathy for her family, and a sense of affront that such a crime could have happened in State College. Perhaps the mourners sensed, as I had, that State College was no longer a small town. It had crossed some vague boundary and become a less humane and a more dangerous place: it was a city now.

At the preliminary hearing held twelve days after my mother's murder, the man accused of killing her wore a floral-patterned pillowcase over his head so that witnesses would not be able to identify him later. Eye slits had been cut out of the pillowcase. The cloth over the man's mouth moved in and out as he leaned sideways and whispered to a lawyer. What I mainly looked at were his hands: small, pudgy, blunt-fingered, darkly tanned. They had stabbed my mother twenty-five times and slit her throat seven times.

A year and a half later, in June 1997, the case came to trial in the Centre County courthouse. I had to wait in the hallway until I was called into the courtroom. I entered the room and took the witness stand. On my right sat the jurors. I was pretty sure I had never seen any of them before in my life. They looked like people you might see shopping in a Wal-Mart, except that some of them, mainly the women, were dressed up. Half the jurors were women, half were men. Some were old and some were young. None of them avoided my gaze.

Mike and Alicia sat in the gallery thirty feet away. They planned to leave for home after my testimony. They had moved to the suburbs outside Philadelphia, where my brother had gotten a new job. I had never asked, but I wondered if part of the reason they had moved was to get away from a place tainted by what had happened to our mother. With them sat Brian and his wife, Maggie, who had driven cross-country for the trial. Nancy didn't think she could bear to attend, and we agreed it would be good for one of us to stay shielded from the emotional storm. We had sent Will to stay with Nancy's parents in

Florida. We were glad the trial was happening in the summer, when he didn't have to hear about it at school.

In front of me, Detective Jordan sat next to Centre County's district attorney, Ray Gricar. To their right, separated from them by a long table, sat three defense lawyers – two men and a woman – and the defendant, Walter Chruby.

Everyone wanted to mispronounce his name: Chuh-ruby, like "cherubic." In fact, the *Chr* received a hard pronunciation, like "crude" or "cruel" – so I observed with bitter satisfaction. He was not from central Pennsylvania. He came from East Chicago, Indiana.

After I was sworn in, the D.A. stood and approached me, a lean, erect man with a prominent nose and a full head of graying brown hair. He began by asking me the questions I imagined he asked every witness in every trial. Questions about me – my name, age, occupation. About my mother – where she was born, when she and my father married.

Then he changed his line of inquiry. "Did you ever meet an individual by the name of Walter Chruby?"

"Yes, I did."

"And if you see him in court, could you point him out, please?"

I turned toward Chruby. He was wearing a suit and tie. He was white, about five feet, seven inches, a paunchy 170 pounds. Round-faced. Balding in front, his brown hair clipped short. His mouth was thin-lipped, with almost no upper lip at all. His lower jaw jutted out. Behind wire-framed glasses, his eyes were close-set, with one eye slightly higher in his face than the other. His face seemed collapsed in around his eyes.

We stared at each other. It crushed me to know that his was the last face my mother had seen.

Later, the D.A. told me I sounded "like an author" when I pointed at Chruby and said, in a clear, loud voice, "*That* is Walter Chruby, seated next to his attorney, wearing eyeglasses." Chruby's face reddened. His eyes blinked hard, again and again.

My testimony lasted for over an hour. I was asked to describe how I had found my mother. The position of the body, the wounds as I had observed them. I couldn't say everything I knew about Chruby because the judge had ruled that certain areas of fact were irrelevant, inflammatory, or incapable of being corroborated by other witnesses.

I had no opportunity to tell the jury how different Walter Chruby and Ruth Fergus were – although the D.A. would demonstrate that masterfully over the next several days. I had no chance to say how tragic I found it, that my mother's life had intersected with Chruby's. Or how ironic it was that several times I had stood next to the man with a loaded shotgun in my hands.

I keep a springer spaniel to hunt grouse, woodcock, and pheasants, and I had met Chruby at a local shooting preserve, where I sometimes practiced with my shotgun, breaking clay targets thrown by a machine. Chruby worked as a dog trainer at the preserve. He had helped to train two spaniels – puppies my dog had whelped and that I'd sold to friends.

From the start I had been put off by Chruby's loud and boastful manner. I'd heard he could be cruel to dogs. He was a liar. He had swindled the preserve's owner out of money. He tried to talk a friend of mine into giving him four thousand dollars to buy a dog that, Chruby claimed, he would then train to become a field trial champion. Chruby had dropped out of sight soon after I'd met him, in the spring of 1995; I was unsurprised to hear that he was in prison for trying to obtain prescription drugs illegally through the mail.

Mom had met Walter Chruby in a very different setting. In March 1995 one of my mother's College Heights neighbors had hosted a benefit dinner in her home, the proceeds going to support a shelter for battered women. Chruby came to the dinner as the guest of his estranged wife, who managed a local hotel – the wife's friend had backed out of the invitation at the last minute, so she'd invited Chruby.

A few days later, Mom and I attended a banquet for my brother's basketball team. During our conversation, she told me she had met someone who said he knew me: Walter Chruby. I told her how distasteful I found the man. Typically unjudgmental, all she would say about him was that he was "strange," though his wife seemed very nice. According to my mother, no one at the benefit dinner had much in common with Chruby; she'd ended up talking with him about dogs.

Six months later, three days before my mother died, she took Will and me out for pizza. Nancy was in Scotland, and my mother had watched Will for me that afternoon while I was at the shooting preserve. We sat together in a booth. Will was coloring his paper placemat, using crayons the restaurant gave to kids. I said to Mom, "Remember Walter Chruby, the guy who went to prison? He's out of jail. He called up his old boss and tried to get his job back."

The next day I was talking to her on the phone, and I told her something I hadn't mentioned at the pizza place because I didn't want Will to hear it. I told her that Chruby had told his boss he'd been raped in prison and had tried to commit suicide by swallowing razor blades. I said this offhandedly; it was idle conversation about an unsavory person I never expected to see again. "Of course, it could all be a bunch of lies," I said.

At the trial, I had no opportunity to tell the jury how I'd felt when the police told us who they'd arrested. We had been asked to gather at Mike and Alicia's house. We were sitting in the living room. I fell back in my chair like I'd been clubbed over the head. I knew Chruby was guilty the moment the detective said his name. My next reaction was that it was my fault, that I'd somehow led him to my mother. He knew I was a writer. He knew I had published books. Probably he thought I was rich. I remembered the times I had stood next to him, holding my double-barreled English shotgun, the fancy expensive one my friends liked to razz me about (of course he'd concluded I was rich). If only I had stumbled and knocked the safety off and accidentally pulled the trigger.

After testifying, I left the courthouse, in Bellefonte, the county seat. The courthouse is six blocks from the small brick hospital where my mother, a young faculty wife, had given birth to me in 1951. I was extracted from her body, so I was told, through the use of forceps by our family doctor – pulled squalling from my mother’s womb. The murder, and finding my mother’s body, had hauled me out of another kind of womb, a scream frozen on my lips.

I walked downhill toward the business district, a half-dozen or so blocks of brick and stone buildings with dormers, cornices, and gingerbread trim. Some of the buildings were of limestone, with thick walls and precisely cut cornerstones. Before I started working on my house, I had walked around Bellefonte looking at all the stonework. I noticed how the masons had treated the joints between the stones. In many instances, a flat chisel had been used to dress the cornerstones, to remove bumps and to square up the edges.

I decided to look at the stones again. Peace and permanence resided in stone walls.

On the other side of the street a television cameraman was striding along, his camera at his side. He got beyond me, stopped, raised his camera, and aimed it at the courthouse façade. Then he quickly panned toward me. I turned and started back uphill.

Before the trial, with the D.A.’s approval, our family had offered Chruby a chance to plead guilty to first-degree murder in exchange for a sentence of life in prison without parole. Otherwise, the state would seek the death penalty. Chruby had an answer, relayed by his attorney: “Tell them to go pound sand.”

The police investigation had uncovered a large amount of evidence. During the initial phase of the trial, some fifty witnesses testified for the prosecution.

Three days before the killing, a telephone call was placed from a motel room in which Chruby was staying to Ruth Fergus’s number, listed in the State College directory. The motel’s electronic monitoring system picked up the call.

Less than an hour after my mother was killed, a man of Chruby’s height, weight, and build used her credit card at a clothing store in the local mall. He bought a pair of Levi’s jeans, thirty-four waist, thirty inseam. Nike Windrunner running shoes. A Ralph Lauren long-sleeved dress shirt, size large. The bill came to \$192.97. The transaction took place just before quitting time. Was that why, in their rush to close the store, the clerks hadn’t been suspicious of a man using a woman’s credit card?

When arrested at his parole supervisor’s office in Harrisburg four days later, Chruby was wearing a pair of Levi’s, thirty-four waist, thirty inseam. Nike Windrunner shoes. A Ralph Lauren shirt. The clothes were of the identical brands, styles, sizes, and colors as those bought with the credit card. The keys to my mother’s car were in Chruby’s pocket, along with an entry stub from a nearby parking garage. Police found the car in the garage. Hidden on top of the left front tire were a pair of bloodstained brown cotton gloves. Inside one of the gloves was Ruth Fergus’s Visa card.

On the evening of the murder, a garbage collector found a bag of clothes in a gas station dumpster. Because the dumpster had been filled to overflowing, he'd first thrown a couple of bags into the truck by hand. One of the bags fell open, and he saw some bloody clothes: blue jeans, running shoes, a white T-shirt with a canoe design and the words "Susquehanna Blues" on the front.

Other witnesses had seen Chruby wearing a "Susquehanna Blues" T-shirt. The gas station employees testified that a man answering Chruby's description had changed clothes in the restroom. Forensic analysis matched DNA from the blood on the discarded clothes with DNA from Ruth Fergus.

During a recess I was talking with one of the police detectives outside the courtroom. Twelve hours after I had found my mother's body, a call came in to the police command post set up in the street in front of her house. It was from the Pennsylvania State Police. They had just been contacted by the garbage collector who had discovered the bloody clothes.

"We were amazed when that call came in," the detective told me.

I nodded. "An incredible piece of luck."

He shook his head. "I don't think it was luck," he said. "I think it was divine intervention."

If it was divine intervention, I thought, why hadn't it happened four hours sooner?

Chruby was not obliged to testify in his own defense. His attorney emphasized that the state's evidence was all circumstantial. No one had seen Walter Chruby kill Ruth Fergus. No murder weapon had been found. None of Chruby's fingerprints or hairs had been recovered from the Fergus house.

Chruby's two sisters, older than he, one from Florida and the other from New Jersey, testified that he had never been a violent or even a disagreeable person. The sister from Florida looked like Chruby, with the same thin lips and prognathous lower jaw; her bright blonde hair was set in ringlets. The other sister was darker, more subdued looking.

The sisters testified that Chruby had been an altar boy at Saint Stanislaus Church in East Chicago. While he was in high school, it was discovered that he lacked an important enzyme: his body produced kidney stones and could not break them down. One sister characterized Chruby as a "stone cripple." He underwent kidney surgery and was in and out of hospitals for years. He became addicted to the painkiller Demerol, and his addiction got him in trouble with the law. But Walter Chruby was a gentle man, they said, who could never commit murder.

I wondered what it was like for Chruby's sisters, seeing their brother on trial for brutally killing a helpless seventy-three-year-old woman. With all the evidence arrayed against him, were they not convinced? I wondered what they thought, seeing my brother Brian, his wife Maggie, and me.

We had sat there throughout the trial. It felt like we were bearing witness for Ruth Fergus. I wanted the jurors to remember that she was a mother and a grandmother and a friend. The murder had stripped away her privacy, her dignity, her individuality. She was “the victim,” “the deceased woman,” an “elderly lady.” How pathetic her shoes looked, small and soiled and blood-spattered. Her bloody blouse and brassiere were items of evidence that the D.A. took out of numbered brown-paper bags, held up and showed to witnesses and the jury, and slid back inside the bags again.

As points of law were argued, as legal skirmishes were lost and won, as I found myself heartened by yet another revelation that should surely damn Chruby in the jury’s sight – I would find myself jerked back to reality. At the root of all of the arguing and posturing and truth-seeking and truth-obscuring was one undeniable fact: My mother had been murdered. She was never coming back.

Chruby was burglarizing my mother’s house when she came home and surprised him. He knew she could identify him and send him back to prison. Either he had a knife or he found one in the kitchen.

The D.A. finished his summation by acting out the attack. He placed a mannequin on the floor. He delivered the blows one after another, the thump of his fist sounding out each impact. On the mannequin, slivers of red tape marked where the knife had gone in. Scarlet slivers on arms and hands and thighs and buttocks and abdomen.

I tried not to look but couldn’t help it. The D.A. kept raining down blows. Finally he paused, breathing audibly, and said, “I’m running out of places, but they are there.” He commenced stabbing again. He drew his imaginary weapon across the mannequin’s throat, five, six, seven times. The D.A. let go of the mannequin, straightened, and ran a hand through his hair. Each wound, he told the jury, represented “a specific intent to kill.”

Next to me, Maggie was crying silently. I sat there stoic, numb. Since the day I’d found my mother’s body, I had been unable to cry, to break down and flush the grief and pain out of my mind.

Three hours later the jury brought in its verdict. Nancy had joined us; it was the first she’d been at the trial. Many of my mother’s and my own friends were present. As the jury filed into the courtroom, the buzz of conversation quieted. My heart hammered in my chest, and my tie felt tight around my neck.

I looked at the jurors. The decision of those twelve men and women would either redeem, in some small way, my sense of what was right and wrong, moral and immoral, or it would dash that sense forever. The D.A. had told us, “You never know what a jury is going to do.”

The judge asked if the jury had reached a verdict. The foreman rose and said, “Yes, your honor.” He was a middle-aged man with curly brown hair. During the trial, when his shirtsleeves were folded up I’d seen a faded tattoo on his forearm.

He held a paper and read some preliminary verbiage I hardly listened to. From the way a woman in the first row was looking at me, I knew what the verdict was. I heard the foreman say: "First-degree murder, guilty. Robbery, guilty. Burglary, guilty. Criminal trespass, guilty. Theft, guilty. Credit card violation, guilty."

A moment of silence followed, and then Chruby's sisters stood up. The blonde one screamed, "You're all fucking liars, he's my brother, he wouldn't have killed!" Chruby's other sister shouted at the D.A., "Your cheap theatrics have won you an Academy Award and a place in hell!" Police officers picked up the curly haired blonde by the wrists and the ankles. They herded the other sister and her husband down the row between the seats. They had to pass in front of us. The second sister, the darker one, stopped and stood over us. She yelled at Brian, Maggie, Nancy, and me: "I feel sorry for you people, because the killer's out there and he's going to kill again!"

Nancy was sobbing. I had my arm around her shoulders. I stared at Chruby's sisters. I saw in their faces the same belligerence, the same resentful self-interest, that I had sensed in Chruby the few times I'd been around him. It was a force that terrified me and was beyond my understanding and outside of my experience. It came, I imagined, from a family that did not function in any way like mine had. How I wished I'd recognized that force for the truly dangerous thing it was.

How should a man be punished who kills a seventy-three-year-old woman so he doesn't have to go back to jail? So he can make off with a car, a few dollars, and a credit card. A man who murders his victim slowly – over a period of from two to five minutes, or so the pathologist concluded. A man who uses a knife to cut, not only to kill but to cause pain, for whatever twisted reason only he, and maybe not even he, can know.

In Pennsylvania the death penalty can be applied under certain aggravating circumstances: the murder of a child, or when murder is committed along with another felony such as robbery or burglary, or when it is committed "by means of torture" – which, the assistant D.A. told me, includes the inflicting of pain, anguish, and suffering above and beyond what is required to take a life.

I had thought long and hard about capital punishment. I knew it would not bring my mother back. I did not want to be present if and when a death sentence were carried out, although, as a member of that curious class of citizens called "survivors of homicide victims" I would have had the right. If Chruby had taken the stand and admitted to the murder, and if, in listening to him, I had believed he was truly sorry for what he had done, I do not think I would have wanted a death sentence. But as the penalty phase of the trial unfolded, Chruby let his lawyers do the talking. He sat there silent. Even now he refused to accept responsibility for his actions.

I did not particularly care if the state took Chruby's life with a needle or if they took it incrementally in a cell. But I wanted to see him emphatically condemned for what he had done, and a sentence of death would do that.

The jury sentenced Chruby to life in prison without parole. Perhaps they felt that, from a legal standpoint, certain mitigating factors – the notion that he had never before been violent, or his health problems or drug addiction – made him less culpable. Or maybe a few jurors simply could not bring themselves to sentence a man to die, even though the law called for it.

When the judge confirmed the sentence I expected him to look down from his high seat and tell Chruby that his crime was loathsome and reprehensible. But all the judge did was to briefly explain the appeals process and advise Chruby that if he could not afford legal counsel, the court would appoint a lawyer for him free of charge.

Chruby was manacled and led out of the courtroom. Five minutes later he was telling reporters, "We'll see them in appellate court."

It can be a debilitating thing, being related to a person who has been murdered. Before, you were able, autonomous, strong; now you are someone to be pitied, even shunned. In the weeks after the murder, people I knew would cross the street in town to avoid talking to me. Friends who lived in other parts of the country failed to call or write, even though I had written to them telling them what had happened. Murder made them mute. Murder required a new, unsettling language, difficult to achieve if you had never been in a similar plight.

When my father died, suddenly of a heart attack, I could cry for him, for me, for my mother. My grief gradually withdrew, leaving me with good memories of his lessons and his love. But after the murder, when a thought came to me about my mother and an image of her appeared in my mind, it would suddenly go from light to dark as if a fast-moving cloud had covered up the sun. I would see instead her killer's face.

It can be a writer's curse to have an active imagination, to be able to inhabit the mind of another human being – to be unable *not* to inhabit the mind of another human being. I am in the house. I see him coming for me. The jut of jaw, the close-set skewed eyes. He has a knife. He can't mean to do what it is that he is doing. I try to fend off the blade with my hands, my arms, I feel the burning heat of the cuts as they come, I fall jarringly, I twist on the floor. Do I cry out, knowing that my sons cannot hear me, knowing my husband is gone? There comes a time when I submit to him, and he crouches over me, and his hands work the knife that rises and falls, nicks and slashes, swarms and pummels, plunges between the ribs, the blood, all the blood, and I know now that this sordid unforeseeable unbelievable way is the way I am going to die.

Release, quiet, an abating of the storm.

Do I come, finally, to God?

After my mother was killed, I received in the mail some two hundred cards and letters, many from people I did not know. Day after day they kept showing up in the mailbox, and only after I reread them months later did some of what they said sink in.

A letter came from a man who had published a novel that I had written. He had recently lost his wife, in her late forties, to a heart attack. Of my mother he wrote: "She has become geology. Stones. The Jews bring stones to the cemetery and leave them. The Buddhists inscribe small stones and cast them out in a special place as untethered headstones. I think it is literal. Stones join you to her now."

A friend, an Icelander living in America, sent a poem by a well-known Icelandic poet. A line in it went something like this: You turn your head and look where there has always been a mountain, and it is no longer there.

I had deluded myself, thinking I had waived my mother's optimism. Unknowingly I had borrowed her sense of God as rightness in the world and a shield against evil. Her murder had left me shattered. It showed me how completely I am my mother's son.

What would she have me do, live my life in bitterness, hatred, and fear? She would want me to love life, love my family, love the world. As she did. She would want me to understand that the life of Ruth Fergus cannot be defined by the manner of her death.

It's been three years, and I haven't gone back to working on the terrace where I was laying stone on the day I found her. This morning I searched in the tall, dew-damp grass until I found just the right one: a chunk of lavender sandstone, with lichens on it like pale flowers, not too big – small, really – a simple slab from the mountaintop.