

The Mixed Medium

by Erica Plouffe Lazure

CONTENT NOTE: THIS STORY REFERENCES THE DEATH OF A TEENAGER.

Maybe it wasn't the best idea — making pottery from a dead person's ashes — but enough people called after the ad posted that it evolved from a backyard side project into my sole occupation, and a lucrative one at that. When I moved the Memorabowls studio to a storefront downtown, it really took off. Everyone, it seemed, wanted a piece of pottery made from the remains of their loved ones. Making the pottery was easy — the mixer would fold the ashes into clay, and from there, in a few hours, I could turn it into a vase or platter or bowl ready for the kiln. But what I didn't anticipate was how I would come to “know” my clients — their afterlife longings, their strangest secrets, or their fondest memories — just by handling their remains.

The first vision came one afternoon as I spun a bowl on my wheel: an image of a young man in a green Fiat smoking a cigar, driving down a city street. The next day came a vision of a woman sorting through piles of coupons, clipping and filing, her silver scissors glinting with each snip. Then she stopped clipping and pointed her scissors at a blue accordion

folder and nodded. The visions played out in my mind's eye, like movie scenes, silent and vivid, moving snapshots that bloomed and then faded. At first I was amused by my imagination, but the visions felt too specific to be mine: a woman hiding a key in her pocket as she hung laundry; a sapphire ring in the palm of an outstretched hand, dropped in a gutter; a child crying in a plastic pool. What did these visions, or their owners, want from me?

One day downtown, I ran into Lori, the daughter of the coupon-clipper, and asked after her family. With no hesitation, she went on about her mum's packrat tendencies, the piled-high stacks of clippings that went back thirty years.

“We're still combing through her stuff,” she said. “And we can't just toss it. Apparently she's squirreled some money away who-knows-where.”

I almost said, “Check the blue folder in the kitchen,” but stopped. Part of me didn't want to know for certain that what I had seen at the wheel correlated to the real world. *Let the visions stay visions*, I thought, *and keep it at that*. Because how ridiculous is it to claim an inroad to the network of the dead? There's a reason why cultures keep their departed separate, cremated in urns or buried in cemeteries. But perhaps mixing their physical matter into the objects of the living — my pottery, for instance — somehow kept a part of them alive.

When the grandmother of Cammie Markson came in, asking for a teacup service for two, I began to rethink my skepticism. If the visions were real, then what did they mean? And what was my responsibility to them?

Cammie's murder had been in the news for months — first her disappearance from her morning duty at the town pond, and then the discovery of her remains a few months later, confirmed by her lifeguard swimsuit. They were still looking for clues for her killer, a man in his fifties driving a white car. I accepted Mrs. Markson's commission, but for weeks, my stomach lurched every time I reached for Cammie's ashes. What would I learn? And how would I know if it was true?

Then one day, Lori popped into the studio for a birthday present.

"By the way, we were finally able to toss Mom's stuff," Lori said. "John found four thousand bucks in a blue folder in the kitchen. She'd wrapped a note around it: 'Runaway Money.'"

The vision of the woman pointing her scissors at the blue folder returned, and I smiled to cover my shock. I sat down.

"Are you okay?" Lori asked.

"I'll be fine," I said. "Can I gift wrap that cup?"

A dozen psychics had arrived on-scene after the first broadcast of Cammie's disappearance. None of their leads, according to the newspapers, had borne out.

After Lori left, I heaved a great sigh. It was time. I turned on the mixer to start Cammie's tea set, unable to look at her ashes as they mixed with the clay. The next day, I sat a clump of her before the wheel, to see what she had to say.

At first, there was no vision — my mind stayed clear as I formed the clay, into the first teacup, and then the second. *Maybe this was all just my imagination*, I thought. *The dead stay dead and that's that*.

But as I started on the teapot, it came. An image of a shovel, red-handled, held by a man in work gloves, swinging hard, then harder. A teenager — Cammie, clearly, crying and silent but staring at the man, heavyset in a Bulls t-shirt, white New Balance sneakers covered in mud. The shovel dripped with blood and the last image I saw, before my vision went dark, was a blue metal silo before a cloudless sky.

That night, I couldn't sleep. Cammie's vision looped through my mind, and I almost called her grandmother to tell her. But did I really want the world to know what I knew, or how I knew it? Instead, I wrote down every detail until my brain felt empty, and the next morning, mailed it anonymously to the lead police investigator. I stayed in bed for a week, feeling restless, hopeful.

As the news about the arrest of Ivan Clark on Old Farm Road surfaced a few days later, and a shovel with traces of Cammie's blood was found in his shed, I quietly returned to

work, relieved, and told myself that the tea set for Mrs. Markson would be my last commission. That evening, I sat at my bench, glazing each piece in bright hues of cornflower blue, the color of the silo, of the sky, the last thing her granddaughter saw as she left this world, unaccounted for, until now.

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ABOUT ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE

Erica Plouffe Lazure is the author of two flash fiction chapbooks, *Sugar Mountain* (Ad Hoc Press, 2020) and *Heard Around Town* (Arcadia, 2015), and a fiction chapbook, *Dry Dock* (Red Bird, 2014). Her short story collection, *Proof of Me*, is forthcoming in 2021 by New American Press. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, *The Greensboro Review*, *The MacGuffin Magazine*, *Carve Magazine*, *Phoebe: A Journal of Literature and Art*, *Meridian: An Annual of Poetry and Prose*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Journal of Microliterature*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Southeast Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Flash: the International Short-Short Story Magazine*, and elsewhere.



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