



New Thoughts on Patsy Cline and Living

by

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So many versions of her existed, I don't think she ever settled on one. People called her the Patsy Cline of Posey County. I called her my mother, Momma, and Della Louise when I was mad. Others called her a whore. Momma, she called herself a legend on the good days and a failure on the bad days.

A cedar box containing her ashes sits buckled in on the passenger seat of my truck. Now, my mother, at just 42 years old, is reduced to one box. I keep glancing over to the box uncomfortable in its presence.

Before she died, Momma asked me to go to the Smoky Mountains with my sister, Dakota and spread her ashes. She said it would help us. Maybe bring us closer again, like we used to be.

She said, "When you go there on vacation with my grandbabies, I'll already be there, waiting for you."

A few years ago, we went on vacation there, Momma, Dakota, and I. It was the first and the last vacation, we ever took together just the three of us. She loved it there. Said it was "peaceful" and called it "God's country." Dakota complained the whole time. I tested out the wineries and kept us stocked up on the best tasting wines. We all had fun though.

I can almost hear Momma's loud laugh that carried for miles. The vivacious Della Louise with red lips and romantic arched eyebrows, dark hair and dark eyes. Wider eyed than Patsy Cline and less in control of herself. Nevertheless, the woman drew in attention and turned all eyes on her by simply sauntering on stage and saying, "Hello." When she opened her mouth to sing, people held their breath, afraid to disrupt the sound. Under her attention, a person felt like the most important person thing in the world, no matter how fleeting the moment. If a person was lucky enough to catch her attention, they basked in its glow.

Then, there were those days, where it seemed she lost contact with herself and the world. She seemed despondent and desperate. Those days, she hid mostly locked behind her bedroom door with blinds drawn, the lights out, and the radio playing low.

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At work today, the lady with the fake happy voice called me. I instantly recognized her. She's the tall lady with the short blonde hair and the painted-on smile that walked us through the process of Momma's funeral and cremation, the morning after she died. Lisa Grayson the Assistant Director of Grayson Funeral Home, wife of Tom Grayson owner. The Grayson family had owned the funeral home as far back as my great grandmother's mother's funeral. Our families knew each other. Lisa went to school with my mother. She knew Momma as the pretty one who got knocked up in their senior year and she had a full scholarship to some music school. She also knew my Momma as the woman with the voice that got too drunk to perform most nights at Jack's. Of course, most of the old families in this town know who's who and what's what in a town this size.

If anyone knows the real dirt in families, though, it is the funeral home family in a town. They not only deal with the dead, they deal with the family and all the scandal that come with it. This family member is mad at that one or sleeping with that one and they can't be in the funeral home at the same time. Or so and so is banned because he stole Grandpa's guns. Then there's the tragedies where death is sudden and unexpected the ones that are emotional wrecks. The ones that stick together, the ones with the money and without, and the ones with friends and without.

She had a whine to her voice, one that led you to believe you were an irritant she quickly needed to rid herself of.

"Hello. Is this Amber?" She didn't give me time to answer. "Your mother's cremains came in today. When will you come and pick them up?"

The word "cremains" bothered me. It didn't feel real, felt like some made up word used in a movie or cartoon.

"I'll be in later today. I'm at work right now so I —"

"That'll be fine. We close at five. Have a nice day." I could hear her hang up before I had a chance to say thank her.

I didn't trust the woman after the way she treated me when we were planning Momma's funeral. She didn't really say or do anything. It was the way she made me feel smaller than her, even when she was smiling I could see her eyes looking down at me.

When my sister Dakota and I went to go plan Momma's funeral, it was a circus. My sister Dakota was all hopped up on the meth just twitching and picking imaginary lint off her legs, her son Dylan climbed over the chairs.

Dakota yelled, "I'm gonna spank your little ass if you don't sit down. Don't you understand your mamaw is dead. God!"

I grabbed him up, gave her a sideways glance, and put him on my lap. She announced to the room she was going to go smoke a cigarette to compose herself because she's endured "all she could handle."

The woman smiled and kept on talking. She got into the finances of it all and asked me three times throughout her coverage of the costs if I understood they had to have so much upfront before anything is done. I told her I did each time. The last time she asked I told her it would be paid in full that Momma had life insurance. She was taken back that my mother had life insurance. I guess she figured my mother a savage that didn't have such things.

She quickly regained her composure and said, "Well, good."

The woman even tried to talk me out of getting flowers for my mother's casket since she would be cremated after the one day of open visitation.

"It's completely up to you...but others will probably send a few flowers and things. Since she'll be cremated... well, there will be no burial service. No real need for flowers. So if I was concerned about costs, I wouldn't worry about flowers. They can be pretty expensive. But that's just my opinion."

"I'm not concerned about costs ma'am," I said.

I didn't want to leave my mother there with her any longer than I had to. I didn't want to keep Momma waiting either. I didn't want her to be there on some shelf alone, or worse among other left behind "cremains." Are there "cremains" left there at the place never to be retrieved by anyone who cared? If I didn't go to get her, no one would. Dakota might eventually go get her, once someone finally got in contact with her. She moved around so much it was hard to get in contact with her to tell her Momma had passed.

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I left my office in the west wing of the mansion and went downstairs through the Gallery to my boss's office to let him know I was leaving early. He's seventy and has a Ph.D. in philosophy, among several other degrees. Momma said he came from "old money" which means "his shit doesn't stink." He likes to be called Dr. Walters. He's an overgrown child of a man with gray hair, a large red-faced, and a god complex, who regularly busts staplers and phones or really anything in his sight when something goes wrong with his precious "Plan," which includes a nine-hundred-page book entitled *New Thoughts on Achieving a State of Equilibrium* and a series of lectures to be hosted by him at his sprawling mansion in serious need of repair.

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I can't help but feel loyal to him though. When Momma got sick, he let me work mostly from home and still paid me my full-time pay. We wouldn't have been able to get by without that money.

He calls me his "apprentice." He likes the word and uses it frequently. Maybe he thinks it makes the job more desirable somehow and justifies the ridiculously low wages he pays me. Really the word is completely out of context for the work that I do which is to write what he tells me to and find recruits for his lectures he's planning. An apprentice learns from a skilled tradesman.

Dr. Walters is a very intelligent man, but he is so isolated from the real world that he doesn't realize his New Thoughts, ideas that were groundbreaking and new when he was popular in the 1970's, are not new anymore. I have seen some of the things he discusses in his books talked about on various blogs and numerous books. The only difference is the way it's dressed up. I only know this because I've worn out the self-help section of the bookstore and the web trying to fix me and my family. Most self-help theories and practices can be traced back to philosophy and psychology.

So I make a good fit for Dr. Walters. I applied online and got hired right after the interview. I think the only reason he hired me though, is because I had a Master's degree and I'm a good listener. He doesn't like to be interrupted, although he wasn't very pleased when he noted that I studied psychology. He thought philosophy to be much more superior.