Instructions for a Burial

Elizabeth Brinsfield

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INSTRUCTIONS FOR A BURIAL

ONLY TWO classrooms sit outdoors behind the main building. Her room and the ex-nun’s.

The sixth graders hold their heads with their knuckles, their eyes blinking at the white paper. Except the boy. He scribbles a few words, brings his arms across his chest, and grabs his sloping shoulders to rock. Susan knows his handwriting: listless swoops like her own. She considers going over to his desk, gently kneeling and asking him to write the definitions this time. She can hope he won’t grab her by the wrist. “I am writing a poem,” he’ll say sharply. “Don’t you want me to write a poem?” The boy often writes about his grandmother—the quirky, even delirious, behavior of an old Navajo woman. He wrote once:

Mutton stew, chamisa in bloom, the lambs going BLEAT! BLEAT!
Nia, the old woman I call Xiola, chucks her shit around the room.

On the nape, his hair is curly before it ends. He reaches to pat the curls, as if he knows those curls, has studied them in the mirror countless times and remarked, “My curls are lovely.” He will be a handsome man: strong cheekbones, long torso, a penchant for making others laugh.

“Hey, Susan!” he yells. “Guess what? I get to make my own dinner.”

“Really?” Susan whispers, because the other students are taking their quiz.

“It’s Nia,” the boy says loudly and raps his chest with his fist. “Almost had a heart attack.”

A basketball rolls from under a desk. “It’s not time for lunch,” scolds Susan, and the ball is bounced off the closet door before being returned under a seat. She asks a girl in the front row, a tiny girl in tiny purple jeans, to collect the papers and runs through her notes. The girl places the stack on the desk. She reaches for Susan’s hair. “So soft. I want to braid it today,” the girl in purple says. “After school, during study hour, okay?” It is not okay. Susan stands up and places her palm on the back of the child’s
head, flat from the cradleboard that carried the girl when she was a baby.

When the child sits, Susan explains, "Today we're going to draw." The class perks. They love to draw. She is going to read, and the children are going to interpret the image from the story that strikes them the most. Dark colors of a barrio fill the room as she reads. The white dress of the Virgin de Guadalupe flows.

The boy shouts: "You don't even know who the Virgin de Guadalupe is, do you?"

She doesn't. "Does it matter?" Susan says, squinting at the boy, still rocking back and forth in his chair.

"She is the patron saint of children," the boy proclaims. He's standing. "She is my saint, our saint. You aren't even Catholic, are you?" He walks to the front and hoots: "Maybe I'll teach today." He clutches the waist of his oversized jeans. It's the same way Susan clutches the waist of her skirt. He draws his shoulders together the way Susan draws her shoulders together, in the same manner she has held herself since she was the age of these girls, hunched because her breasts came in too soon. The children giggle at his movements, the abrupt changes the boy makes with his body—he's almost dancing. They hush when Susan walks to the door and steps out, slamming it behind her. She had told the boy just yesterday she would summon the principal if he behaved like that once more.

When Susan asks the principal, "Can you help scare the Chee boy?" Ms. Francisco nods, as if she were expecting this. They walk to the classroom together, and Susan watches the cream pant leg crease and listens to the high heels on the concrete path. Susan's twenty-three, but, next to Ms. Francisco, she feels eighteen.

When the principal's heels click into the room, she begins: "This belegana," and Susan notices the dust. Sand blows in the door and through the window screens. She plans to clean this weekend, mop, polish the tops of desks and the bookshelf with Murphy's Oil Soap when she hears Ms. Francisco repeating: "This belegana," the voice climbing, "she is teaching you something," and the principal pulls in her cheeks and presses a finger to her lips. Ms. Francisco is trying not to laugh. The children squirm and glance at Susan who stands next to the closet door, her hands at
her sides. She wants to raise her hands and cradle her upper arms, but she notices the way the children twitch and prop themselves up to listen. She recognizes the squirreled-away affection filling the air. Even the boy, she knows, is sorry.

The principal’s voice has descended into a speech so long and hard it seems rote. Susan only understands scant Navajo. She fades by the closet door, down to bone. In these situations, especially because you are a teacher—she has learned—strip yourself of response.

The boy watches. He lifts one hand from the desk as if to signal: STOP! but the gesture is more complete. His pink palm waves.

Let’s just get in my truck, she could mouth to him. Let’s drive off the Reservation, we can get grilled cheese sandwiches and lime drinks. Let’s stand there by the truck. We can use the hood as a table.

Ms. Francisco is making longer pauses, and the children, lulled into compliance, pick up their pens, their rudimentary drawings of girls playing double Dutch on city streets. The children leave for lunch, the older woman showing the way with her long, gaunt arms, and Susan hears the shuffle of shoes. Ms. Francisco hovers, and then turns to ask, “Are you sure you want to stay here?”

“I do,” Susan says and files her quizzes in her backpack and laughs, “I love it here. It’s just the boy, he’s a handful. Haven’t you ever run into a child like him?”

“You need to be tougher,” Ms. Francisco says. “That sensitivity is written all over your face.” She leaves, and Susan breathes carefully. Maybe she’ll take a drive after school—it’s three and a half hours to Tuba City—she can buy lipstick, a plum color.

There is so little in the room, the basketball shoes gone, no longer sticking to the floor. The fragrance of lunch sifts through the screens from one side, and from the other, the Arizona air, like lemons. A row of grammar books, spines never cracked, meet in a shiny sequence of blue. The old desks in rows. Without the students, the desks are so familiar. She pictures a black locomotive crossing the plains of Nebraska, bulldozing winter wheat. The train makes its way from Portland, Maine to Gallup, New Mexico. Her own elementary school teachers stacked the old desks in the box cars.
As Susan heads for lunch, she sees the ex-nun waiting outside. Ellen Barber hitches up her enormous pants. Her lips buckle a cigarette.

“I saw Ms. Francisco reach our little neck of the woods,” Ellen says.

“Great to see you, Ellen,” Susan replies, but the ex-nun is already interrupting.

“Last night I was at the school board meeting. The old Chee woman, Arlets’ grandmother, had walked all the way from her mesa to complain. About you. She says you’re not certified. The boy used to bring home all kinds of poems, and now he brings home nothing.” She takes a puff.

Susan tilts her head to the side and squints. This vying-teacher plot induces ennui, and she sighs, recalling the grandmother’s tidy hogan on the mesa. Aloud, she says: “Nia said I’m ‘good luck’.”

“Nia?”

“The old Chee woman,” Susan explains. “Arlets told me she’s ill. I’m not sure how ill, but you know, she called me.”

“On the telephone?”

“I like old people,” Susan says and steps toward the path to the lunch room.

Ellen calls after her. “Are you sure it wasn’t the boy calling? I see you watch him, inhale his spurious, shy lope. Don’t let him seduce you.”

“You aren’t really an ex,” Susan calls back, “are you?”

Juniper scatters the valley. The sky is clean and blue. Her father had warned her, “The landscape there is so inhospitable.” But red mesas below blush.

*Please use your creativity to complete your assignments,* she’d begged of the boy. *You’ve got to stop writing only poetry, school doesn’t have to be so bad.* She told him she had to go through school once, and she always changed the assignments a little to make them more complex. The boy covered his eyes with his hands. Was he so sensitive?

When his grandmother, Nia, called her—from the pay phone at the one gas station in town, there was the sound of trucks,
and Susan had thought it peculiar, their engines shutting off and turning over. The old woman spoke competent English: *Is the boy okay?* But Nia doesn’t have a phone in her hogan. And it’s right to worry about the boy. He’s precocious. He flirts excessively and can’t follow instructions. One girl, a classmate of his, claimed Arlets pushed her onto the football field, got on top of her, and wouldn’t get off. “The girl is tiny as a twig,” Susan had explained, repeated to a checkerboard of faculty faces: Navajo, Anglo, Navajo, Anglo, “This girl is tiny as a twig, and he wouldn’t get off.”

Susan ascends the path. The boy, Arlets, is standing between the two fence posts in front of the lunch room door. His feet straddle the walkway so she can’t pass. The windows of the lunch room mirror her dragging gait.

“What is it?” she says when she’s only strides away.

“Hey, Susan!” he says. “Xiola wants to trade with you.”

“Who?” she asks, the game wearing on her.

“Xiola, my nai.”

“Your grandmother, Nia,” Susan corrects.

“That one. Could you stop by the hospital?” he asks and swings a leg toward the other, so there is just room to pass—she’ll have to rub by.

She approaches and rests her hand on his shoulder. It never settles on the bone. He’s a very young boy. She says, “Maybe, we’ll see.”

When Susan first met Nia, the old woman was standing in the door of her hogan, yelling at the truck: “I’m saving my stuff for the Indian Market. Go to the next house!”

It was the last day for submissions to the school literary magazine, and Arlets said he’d left everything at home. “Fine,” Susan said, “We’ll drive to get everything then.”

The hogan looked so little on top of the mesa, its shape that of a beehive, the eight short sides of logs glued together with mud. When Arlets ran inside, Susan followed, her long print skirt blousing. “It’s Ms. Hunnewell,” the boy said, searching through a box of crumpled papers. The grandmother turned off the television and disappeared into a corner. When she came back, she lay four rugs in the light of the door. Susan brushed her hand
over woven strips of cherry and lime. But the rugs were not
interesting, not old chief blankets, and her eyes drifted around
the tidy room. Susan recognized a pale orange sweatshirt draped
over a chair. Arlets wore the sweatshirt almost every fall day.

“I’ll give that one to you for half-price,” the old woman said,
pointing to the rug. “Half, I mean, of the price I could sell it for
at the Indian Market.”

“Not today,” Susan said. She placed the brightly-colored rug
on the floor and looked around for the boy, but he’d already left.

“That one’s not even natural dye,” the old woman hissed.

“And you are Nia?” Susan asked, emphasizing Nia. Susan
thought: I only teach here, it’s not as if you are famous, as if everyone
knows Nia. Nia turned to refold the rugs, and Susan slipped to­
ward the orange sweatshirt and held it to her face. The scent
stung her nose a little, then softened.

“You like him,” Nia whispered, startling Susan and then
shouted: “You should stay!” Her warm breath reached Susan’s
face, and Susan nodded, to avoid a contest. Nia cooed, “So nice,”
drawing out the “so” in the way of the girls at school. She was
beaming at Susan’s clogs.

“Oh, I bought these in Maine. I’m from Maine.”

“Give them to me.”

“These are the only shoes I have,” Susan said. She scruti­
nized one clog, the staples in the black worn-in leather, and her
face flushed. She was still clutching the sweatshirt.

“Give them to me,” Nia repeated. “I’ll give you my loafers.”

When Susan clambered back into the little truck, she wore
brown loafers with worn rubber soles. “You are very still. A still
girl,” Nia spoke from the doorway. Arlets explained he’d told
Nia about Ms. Hunnewell, and Nia had said: The Anglo woman is
good luck, which is what you need.

The rest of the ride, Susan noticed how still she was, the
small movements she made to change the gears, her few attempts
at bare conversation. She watched the boy’s wing-like hand turn
and turn the radio dial.

On Saturday, Susan rises from her bed—a sleeping bag laid out
over a mattress she bought used—and does not look back, be-
cause if she does, she might see the single outline on the bed, the impression of her body left there.

Her truck window makes a box of blue sky, and in the box, the arms of two oil pumps bend and extend, bend and extend. Blue skims the thin strip of red ground.

To the west, a huge black mesa shadows the road. It’s still early morning, and even when the sky is so clear, it could snow. A flash flood might roar over this way. Lightning could hit the desert’s surface, blister small straps of land only hundreds of feet from the truck.

Maybe because she is so alone she woke up this morning thinking about the boy, his firm and nagging request to visit his grandmother. She thought she might write a letter today, to the boyfriend she left to come here, but she’d just be picking at words. She will go to the hospital and ask about Nia’s health. She will explain, *I am looking out for the boy. I may understand what’s wrong.* But it won’t be so easy to just wander in. At first, she might get a look, from Nia, from the nurse. Nia might even yell, “Why the hell are you here?”

The worries fade. She hears, *You are very still. A still girl.*

In Tuba City, Susan first stops at the department store to pick up overalls. That’s all she wears on weekends anymore. What does it matter? She changes into the overalls—they are pink—in the truck’s cab.

The Indian Health Services building squats on the same wide street. She pauses to consider: is she going in the right place? Hospitals usually tower.

The grandmother lies on top of the sheets. She wears a blue hospital gown, but has put her woolen jacket over it and fastened the buttons to the top. She stares at the wall, making motions with her hands as if she’s kneading dough or whacking the stick of the loom back when she’s finished weaving a line. “Yes,” she faintly utters when she sees Susan in the pink overalls at the door. “I knew you would bring new clothes to trade.”

The lady in the next bed flips on the television. Susan pushes a chair to Nia’s bedside. The old women appears sedated, and
Susan tries not to stare. She doesn’t know what to say and yawns between the white walls, under the flickering lights.

“So raw,” murmurs Nia. She is holding Susan’s hand. “What are you using these on?”

“Oh gosh,” Susan whispers, embarrassed. Her skin is a sight: red and peeling. “I think it’s an allergic reaction… to chalk.”

“Mutton grease, great for dry hands. Wrap them in plastic too,” Nia says. Her palm, warm and wet—the fruity flesh of an old person. Her grandmother’s hands. Yes, but silkier, like the inside of a peach.

Nia shifts her black eyes from the television and lifts her back from the bed. She outstretches her tiny arms and grabs Susan by the shoulders and pulls Susan to her chest. The old woman’s heart drums. “You will have more time,” Nia promises and sucks in a large breath of air.

Susan pulls back and scratches her neck. Perhaps Nia is exhibiting delirium written about in the boy’s poetry. “You must be exhausted,” she decides to say.

“You are very young. Too tired. Feel your hands!” Nia cries. “His own mother bought him a dog, as a pet. Bad luck! You would never do that. She took him to a funeral when he was unborn. Bad luck! You, I trust.”

“I appreciate how you trust me…”

“Yes, trust,” Nia interrupts and puckers her dry lips.

Susan can’t help but laugh. “Nia…” she starts. She just wants to ask the old woman, why am I good luck?

“That’s another thing: Stop staying my name!”

“Look, I’m going home at the end of this year,” Susan says. She is biting on her thumb nail. She doesn’t bite the nail off, just thins it, sliding the curve through her front teeth.

“Don’t get angry and tell me to go to hell. It might happen. I will instruct you on a couple details. Do you know yet how to make blood pudding? I do it special.” Nia points first at her own chest, then at Susan’s, and extends her arms: Come to me. Susan shakes her head. The blue gown, taut around Nia’s barrel chest, ends at the knees. Susan has never seen such slender calves, except on her students.

“You must be exhausted,” Susan says again. “Why don’t you lie down?”
“I don’t want to die here,” Nia says.

“Are you dying?” Susan asks.

“How much do you understand, anyways? His parents are both gone,” Nia explains. “The rest of our clan have gone to Phoenix. Moved all together like a pack.” Nia shuts her eyes and adds, “When they fire you, you’ll have more time.”

Susan yanks her fingers from the old woman’s grip. She steps into the corridor. The air is so thick, and the nurse is walking towards her, signaling. Susan can’t stand the ardor of the nurse’s pace, and she steps back in the room and slumps into a low chair by the wall. The hospital hums—the weight of all those imperfect bodies. Susan is from a family of doctors and never had trust in medicine.

“I don’t think,” Susan says now very carefully, enunciating, “that you know me.” She pauses and starts again. “I don’t really know you, and I can’t stand... It’s just people. Someone tells me I should leave, someone tells me I should stay. They say, ‘Wear a dress’ and ‘Find a boyfriend.’” She mimics the high voices.

Nia launches into a sermon, her eyes still shut. Susan taps her foot, plays with her ponytail, twirls it. The stuttering vowels and monotonous cadences distend the yellowed walls. Nothing Susan does is going to make Nia’s life, or the boy’s, better. She left Boston, her job filing papers and stamping: approved. The nights with her boyfriend. Two pale ales on the bar. A hockey game on the screen above.

Susan recognizes a few of Nia’s words: Diné, which means “The People,” ajéédishjool, which means “heart.” The gas station attendant in Chilchinbito had kept saying chidi ajéé to her, meaning “car heart”—she needed a new battery for her truck this past winter.

She decides to leave. But when she goes for the door, Nia asks her: when the nurse comes again, can Susan take her home, to the hogan?

“Of course,” Susan says.

In the lobby, the nurse hands Susan a bottle of pills and whispers, “These old Indian women, they have no idea. They spit their pills into the toilets. Keep her calm.” Susan grabs the bottle. Back East, a hospital discharge could never happen this way. Then
Nia carries only a purse with her to Susan’s truck. The purse hangs flat, and Susan decides it holds nothing. What valuables could it hold? Nia wouldn’t have a key to the hogan, or a book to read. Maybe there’s a thin wallet in there, like a man’s.

The drive to Chilchinbito from Tuba City is two and a half hours. Nia switches on the country station. A bobby pin sits on the dash. Nia wraps her braid into a bun, pins it in place, and sleeps, chin pointing at the truck’s roof.

From the pale sky, snow begins to fall, and Susan turns onto Route 160. She worries about getting stuck once she’s on the dirt, though she has four-wheel drive. The smell of mud—so sweet you could eat some—pours into the cab.

Highways run through this reservation. They connect little cities—Flagstaff, Farmington, Tuba City, Gallup—border towns with identical shopping malls that sell things discount and oversized: bottles of apple juice, T-shirts. The roads go for miles and miles and lead to small and smaller towns. The desert reddens the farther you go in. Mesas redden.

Flecks of white cross the red clay, snow or bits of bone, a powder blown through a straw. The boy had told her in the truck that day, the witches dismember bodies and grind the bones up. Xiola, he said, is afraid when she sees Anglo ladies. She thinks they’re skinwalkers shapeshifting into a white woman.

“Are all Nia’s friends as suspicious as Nia?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I think, at the market, people are avoiding her.”

The desert lies out before it folds into tables. You can see the tops of homes, the tin flickering. Susan’s truck is the only thing on the road. She can’t remember ever feeling so private, except when she was in college. Among the stacks, she felt a damp solitude and believed, I can read all these books. She listened to only the bells, chiming and tolling.
Susan hears Nia stir, mumbling some question, though the words are so distant, she can't tell if they're familiar at all. "I am," Nia then pronounces in clear English, "I am very sorry... to be such a burden."

"It's okay," Susan says. "If I were to have stayed home today, I would have just read. I'm reading a romance novel."

Nia repeats, "Romance," and states, "Romance will not give you time. Maybe love."

Susan thinks to ask Nia about love: *what is it?* She has always revered the answers of old people, her own grandmother and aunts. Maybe she doesn't need to ask anymore. "I love my students," Susan says.

"When is your wedding?" Nia asks.

"I'm not engaged."

"When will you be?"

"I'm not ready—I haven't met anyone. The single people my age all live in Phoenix. You never know. Maybe here I'll find a man." Susan laughs. The thought is ridiculous. She looks to see if Nia laughs.

"There is no love left here," Nia whispers. She has kept her eyes closed. And Susan holds herself there, her elbows out, palms wrapped around the wheel, her long torso leaning toward the dash. Why is this the wrong place?

Sometimes, in class, the boy rocks, the rocking soft but so incessant it's violent. His gaze leaves the room, and he stares at the sky. Susan recognizes—though the desire for variety never became so bodily for her—a sadness. She recognizes the invitation to go to a place, even when you know it's not good for you.

Snow still falls, but only on one side of the road. On the other, sunlight filters through a fog. Susan has never had to pull off one of these highways where crosses dot the shoulder, where the lack of shade is strangely terrifying. What about neat New England pines? Huge maples and oaks? The collecting snow, the red cleavage of arroyos make chairs in curves of rock—places where you can rest. Anyplace.

When they arrive at the hogan, Susan is tired. She shifts in the seat—she's so stiff. The grandmother swings her great legs off
the vinyl and briskly steps towards the hogan. She catches herself, holding her chest, then canters inside.

"Hey," Susan calls. "Take it easy." She snatches the pills from the dash. *Nitroglycerine.* The hogan, once sweet, looks weathered. Some dirty sheep are near. They ruminate and peer at her.

Inside, the old woman is collecting things, making a pile. "Why don't you rest?" says Susan, sitting at the table. Nia keeps collecting and placing. The items appear hit-or-miss: a pair of jeans, matches, a pouch wrapped tight with a string, a telephone book.

Susan looks around the place, the wood stacked in a pile by the door. Does Nia tend the fire? Susan can just imagine Nia strolling outside to see a line of black ascend the bowl of sky. Mornings, maybe the boy walks to the gas station and pays 50¢ to take a shower.

"Well, what about Arlets?" Susan turns to ask, but Nia has taken off her clothes. Her stomach, her breasts and thighs appear a lighter tan, almost milky. Susan looks away.

"Look here, still girl," Nia says. "You keep the overalls." Nia has thrown on a skirt of red crushed velvet, a blue velveteen shirt.

"Maybe you can borrow them another time," Susan says.

"No, I'd have to give you my skirt. Then you would get all my good luck. You can't have all mine." Nia fastens her concha belt. The medallion of her necklace swings forward as she bends to slip on the clogs.

This might be a dream—Nia, dressing for one of those sepia portraits they reproduce on postcards and sell at tourist shops. Susan was once told the prints of Geronimo aren't even of Geronimo. That the man in the portrait was a stand-in. Nothing is fact, nothing intimate. Susan's got to fix on something. "Here are your pills." She sets them among Nia's possessions, between a jar of cornmeal and a videotape.

*I'll leave the grandmother for now,* she thinks, *drive to check on her tomorrow. There's nowhere Nia can go.* But, the old woman is so busy, kneeling to finish her work. She is smoothing over corners of the room with her eyes, searching into shelves. She bends to gather the folds of the rug, and Susan catches her hand. The heavy bracelets clink. "Hey, Xiola," Susan tries. "Xiola!"
“Don’t use that name either,” Nia says, her black eyes smaller. “Maybe it was the dog, you never know. When he was little, his mother bought him that dog. Bad luck! So small. You could step on it. Carried it so close like a baby. His uncle—he’s gone now—picked up that dog and kicked it. Arlets loved that dog.”

“Listen,” Susan says. “I am trying to help. I tried to explain to the boy. He can get through school. If he makes some concessions. If he gives in a little…” And Susan remembers the principal’s slap: *Are you sure you want to stay here?*

Nia is still folding corners of the rug. She is arranging each corner on top of her belongings, so the corners meet and cross over. She is pulling up the load by the ends she’s brought together. She is making her way out the eastern door.

“Where are you going?” Susan demands. The old woman mutters, but keeps hiking down the path to a row of cottonwoods, a cliff. Susan tries to stand in the door, but it’s too short. She leaves the hogan to shout: “You only speak to me in Navajo because you have nothing else to say!”

Nia, halfway down the path, drops her bag. Things have fallen out anyway. She holds herself—two hands on her chest. “You have got to remain calm,” Susan says, running to the woman’s side. “Come back to the hogan. You need to stay there.”

“If I stay there, you cannot live there,” Nia says.

“Where are you going to live?” Susan asks. Her arms hang at her sides. She’s a white flag.

“I am not going to live, I am going to die,” the old woman plainly states, the having to instruct so tiresome. “Right over here on this ridge. It’s a nice place. Great view of the sun setting. Listen, if I die in the hogan, no one can use it again. My ghost would be there.”

Susan holds her cheeks, tugs the skin there. She can only think of blame. Her family will have to send money. “To begin with,” Susan hears her mother scolding, “you should not have gone to the hospital.”

Nia reassembles her sack, gathering the fallen items. Susan is helping. She picks up a belt with a turquoise buckle. “You left this,” she says, folding up the leather and tucking the belt back into the skirt of the rug.

“Yes, I know. It was my husband’s,” Nia murmurs. “I almost
pawned it. I forgot to put it around his pants before the burial. Now—I won't say anymore.”

“Okay. All right. Well.” Susan quivers, and she nods. “Good luck,” she says, and she keeps nodding.

The old woman, in her nicest clothes, is leaving. Before she turns to go, she points at Susan, with her chin, “Don’t cry. You’ll get bags under your eyes.” Nia marches off as if she has just finished a long, put-off chore, pulling the pin out of her bun with one hand.

A slight breeze crosses the mesa, and Susan sways there. She makes out two shapes kicking dust on the road. A thin, taller figure holds a paper bag to his chest. Susan recognizes the wily lope, the sloping shoulders. It’s the boy. And ahead of him races a tiny animal. It’s yipping. A tiny dog.