**How You Do It**

Linda Joy Pulliam

**Q.** What do you think about on a seven-hour drive alone to pick up the skull of your only child?

**A.** Whether to get new windshield wipers next week or next month. How many apples are left in the fridge at home. Telescopes. The guy at work who took two days bereavement leave when his dog died. Guitars. Your neighbor’s winter solstice party. Skateboards. Roadkill. Where you could have left your favorite pen.

**Q.** What do you do when the Sherriff’s deputy in the tiny mountain hamlet hands you a 12” x 18” brown cardboard box and says kindly, “Don’t open it. Take it to a mortuary and let them open it?”

**A.** You nod and casually put the box in the back seat of your car behind the driver’s seat. You turn the key in the ignition. You drive. You run a stop sign. Fortunately, no one was coming. You head into the blinding setting sun.

**Q.** What do you do when you arrive at the motel on your way home?

**A.** You bring in the box and set it on the bed. You get your overnight bag and the burrito you bought for supper. You take off your boots and get out your slippers. Find your utility knife. Take out your contacts. Put on your robe. Brush your teeth. Put the unopened burrito in the micro fridge. And only then, take the knife and slash open the box.

You lift out the white, seven-foot body bag that is rolled up like a sleeping bag. Slowly unroll it. Take a deep breath. Unzip it inch by inch. This is your reunion with your son who was missing for 18 months, the son - or what’s left of him - who you were so close to for 35 years.

It’s not the whole skull, only the skullcap, the only thing left by the bear and coyotes. Pine needles are stuck in the ragged edges, the bit of bone weathered by two winters of 40-foot snows. You run your hand over the skullcap, recognizing the shape of his head. You curl yourself into a ball on the bed, eyes shut, clutching your newborn son to your breasts, stroking his head. You lay that way until dawn.

**Q.** What do you do when you arrive home on Christmas Eve?

**A.** You find a piece of soft, luxurious black velvet in your box of fabrics. You put it in the center of the small table where you eat. In the gathering dusk, you light a single candle. You take the skullcap out of the body bag and place it on the velvet.

The numbness starts to wear off. You don’t want it to leave. Numbness was your friend, the way you got through those 18 months in order to do what was necessary – getting out the posters, calling the Sheriff’s detective once a week, giving interviews with newspapers, talking to people with search dogs, making trips to the mountains in the summers, bushwhacking through rugged terrain, then going back to work and pretending you’re normal. Numbness protected you through the six additional months that you waited for the DNA test, already knowing the results.

Twenty-four months have ended with a bit of bone, like a saint’s relic, from the person who knew you better than anyone - the one whose mind worked like your mind even though he didn’t look a bit like you. Then you remember the paper in your purse that you signed. It says you are taking the remains to a mortuary. The mortician needs to sign off and return the form to the Sherriff’s Office in the mountains. It says it’s unlawful for an individual to keep remains. You decide you will not take the skullcap to the mortuary to pulverize in a blender and give back to you in a jar.

You sit in the candlelight for a very long time. This is not the ending but the beginning. You are in the deep end of the pool. You will never get out of the pool and can’t imagine the day you will be able to stand up in the shallow end. You cry… at last. You sob and pour your heart out to the walls. After New Year’s you return to work. When anyone asks, “How were your holidays?” you say, “Great, just great.”

**Q.** How do you bring an end to his story?

**A.** You go see the local County Coroner who tells you to keep the skullcap as long as you need to. He will deal with the Sherriff in the mountains. You find out the Forensics Lab on the floor above your office at the University would be interested in the skullcap for teaching purposes. Kurt would get a kick out of that.

In May you tell your department chair you are resigning. A week later you buy a hand-carved wooden chest and sew a pillow with the remainder of the black velvet. As you take the skullcap off the velvet it has sat on for five months, powdery residue comes off, miniscule chips. You roll them up in the velvet and put it in the drawer of your bedside table.

You deliver the wooden box to the Forensics Lab and try not to look around. You empty out your office and notify your landlord. You move to a new town to a cottage with pale yellow walls. Yet you know even Tierra del Fuego wouldn’t be far enough.

After a restless sleep, you get up at 5:00 a.m. Find a pad of paper and a pen. Every morning, every day, you write. You stare out the window. And write.