



Pennsylvania Station, William Faulkner

Pennsylvania Station

THEY SEEMED TO bring with them the smell of the snow falling in Seventh Avenue. Or perhaps the other people who had entered before them had done it, bringing it with them in their lungs and exhaling it, filling the arcade with a stale chill like that which might lie unwinded and spent upon the cold plains of infinity itself.

In it the bright and serried shopwindows had a fixed and insomniac glare like the eyes of people drugged with coffee, sitting up with a strange corpse.

In the rotunda, where the people appeared as small and intent as ants, the smell and sense of snow still lingered, though high now among the steel girders, spent and vitiated too and filled here with a weary and ceaseless murmuring, like the voices of pilgrims upon the infinite plain, like the voices of all the travelers who had ever passed through it quiring and ceaseless as lost children.

They went on toward the smoking room. It was the old man who looked in the door. "All right," he said. He looked sixty, though he was probably some age like forty-eight or fifty-two or fifty-eight. He wore a long overcoat with a collar which had once been fur, and a cap with earflaps like the caricature of an up-State farmer. His shoes were not mates. "There ain't many here yet.

It will be some time now." While they stood there three other men came and looked into the smoking room with that same air not quite diffident and not quite furtive, with faces and garments that seemed to

give off that same effluvium of soup kitchens and Salvation Army homes.

They entered; the old man led the way toward the rear of the room, among the heavy, solid benches on which still more men of all ages sat in attitudes of thought or repose and looking as transient as scarecrows blown by a departed wind upon a series of rock ledges. The old man chose a bench and sat down, making room for the young man beside him.

“I used to think that if you sat somewhere about the middle, he might skip you. But I found out that it don’t make much difference where you sit.”

“Nor where you lie, either,” the young man said. He wore an army overcoat, new, and a pair of yellow army brogans of the sort that can be bought from so-called army stores for a dollar or so. He had not shaved in some time. “And it don’t make a hell of a lot of difference whether you are breathing or not while you are lying there. I wish I had a cigarette. I have got used to not eating but be damned if I don’t hate to get used to not smoking.”

“Sure now,” the old man said. “I wish I had a cigarette to give you. I ain’t used tobacco myself since I went to Florida. That was funny: I hadn’t smoked in ten years, yet as soon as I got back to New York, that was the first thing I thought about. Isn’t that funny?”

“Yes,” the young man said. “Especially if you never had any tobacco when you thought about wanting it again.”

“Wanting it and not having it couldn’t have worried me then,” the old man said. “I was all right then. Until I—” He settled himself. Into his face came that rapt expression of the talkative old, without heat or bewilderment or rancor. “What confused me was I thought all the time that the burying money was all right. As soon as I found out about Danny’s trouble I come right back to New York—”

II

“Who is this Danny, anyway?” the young man said.

“Didn’t I tell you? He’s Sister’s boy. There wasn’t any of us left but Sister and Danny and me. Yet I was the weakly one. The one they all thought wouldn’t live. I was give up to die twice before I was fifteen, yet I outlived them all. Outlived all eight of them when Sister died three years ago.

That was why I went to Florida to live. Because I thought I couldn’t stand the winters here. Yet I have stood three of them now since Sister died. But sometimes it looks like a man can stand just about anything if he don’t believe he can stand it. Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know,” the young man said. “Which trouble was this?”

“Which?”

“Which trouble was Danny in now?”

“Don’t get me wrong about Danny. He wasn’t bad; just wild, like any young fellow. But not bad.”

“All right,” the young man said. “It wasn’t any trouble then.”

“No. He’s a good boy. He’s in Chicago now. Got a good job now. The lawyer in Jacksonville got it for him right after I come back to New York. I didn’t know he had it until I tried to wire him that Sister was dead. Then I found that he was in Chicago, with a good job.

He sent Sister a wreath of flowers that must have cost two hundred dollars. Sent it by air; that cost something, too. He couldn’t come himself because he had just got the job and his boss was out of town and he couldn’t get away. He was a good boy. That was why when that trouble come up about that woman on the floor below that accused him of stealing the clothes off her clothes-line, that I told Sister I would send him the railroad fare to Jacksonville, where I could look after him. Get him clean away from them low-life boys around the saloons and such.

I come all the way from Florida to see about him. That was how I happened to go with Sister to see Mr. Pinckski, before she ever begun to pay on the coffin. She wanted me to go with her. Because you know how an old woman is. Only she wasn’t old, even if her and me had outlived all the other seven.

But you know how an old woman seems to get comfort out of knowing she will be buried right in case there isn’t any of her kin there to ‘tend to it. I guess maybe that keeps a lot of them going.”

“And especially with Danny already too busy to see if she was buried at all, himself.”

The old man, his mouth already shaped for further speech, paused and looked at the young man. “What?”

“I say, if getting into the ground at last don’t keep some of them going, I don’t know what it is that does.”

“Oh. Maybe so. That ain’t never worried me. I guess because I was already give up to die twice before I was fifteen. Like now every time a winter gets through, I just say to myself, ‘Well, I’ll declare. Here I am again.’ That was why I went to Florida: because of the winters here. I hadn’t been back until I got Sister’s letter about Danny, and I didn’t stay long then.

And if I hadn’t got the letter about Danny, maybe I wouldn’t ever have come back. But I come back, and that was when she took me with her to see Mr. Pinckski before she begun to pay on the coffin, for me to see if it was all right like Mr. Pinckski said.

He told her how the insurance companies would charge her interest all the time. He showed us with the pencil and paper how if she paid her money to the insurance companies it would be the same as if she worked six minutes longer every night and give the money for the extra six minutes to the insurance company. But Sister said she wouldn’t mind that, just six minutes, because at three or four o’clock in the morning six minutes wouldn’t—”

“Three or four o’clock in the morning?”

“She scrubbed in them tall buildings down about Wall Street somewhere. Her and some other ladies. They would help one another night about, so they could get done at the same time and come home

on the subway together. So Mr. Pinckski showed us with the pencil and paper how if she lived fifteen years longer say for instance Mr. Pinckski said, it would be the same as if she worked three years and eighty-five days without getting any pay for it.

Like for three years and eighty-five days she would be working for the insurance companies for nothing. Like instead of living fifteen years, she would actually live only eleven years and two hundred and eight days. Sister stood there for a while, holding her purse under her shawl. Then she said, 'If I was paying the insurance companies to bury me instead of you, I would have to live three years and eighty-five days more before I could afford to die?'

“‘Well,’ Mr. Pinckski said, like he didn’t know what to say. ‘Why, yes. Put it that way, then. You would work for the insurance companies three years and eighty-five days and not get any pay for it.’

“‘It ain’t the work I mind,’ Sister said. ‘It ain’t the working.’ Then she took the first half a dollar out of her purse and put it down on Mr. Pinckski’s desk.”

III

Now and then, with a long and fading reverberation, a subway train passed under their feet. Perhaps they thought momentarily of two green eyes tunneling violently through the earth without apparent propulsion or guidance, as though of their own unparalleled violence creating, like spaced beads on a string, lighted niches in whose wan and fleeting glare human figures like corpses set momentarily on end in a

violated grave yard leaned in one streaming and rigid direction and flicked away.

“Because I was a weak child. They give me up to die twice before I was fifteen. There was an insurance agent sold me a policy once, worried at me until I said all right, I would take it. Then they examined me and the only policy they would give me was a thousand dollars at the rate of fifty years old.

And me just twenty-seven then. I was the third one of eight, yet when Sister died three years ago I had outlived them all. So when we got that trouble of Danny’s about the woman that said he stole the clothes fixed up, Sister could—”

“How did you get it fixed up?”

“We paid the money to the man that his job was to look after the boys that Danny run with. The alderman knew Danny and the other boys. It was all right then. So Sister could go on paying the fifty cents to Mr. Pinckski every week. Because we fixed it up for me to send the railroad fare for Danny as soon as I could, so he could be in Florida where I could look out for him.

And I went back to Jacksonville and Sister could pay Mr. Pinckski the fifty cents without worrying. Each Sunday morning when her and the other ladies got through, they would go home by Mr. Pinckski’s and wake him up and Sister would give him the fifty cents.

“He never minded what time it was because Sister was a good customer. He told her it would be all right, whatever time she got there, to wake him up and pay him. So sometimes it would be as late as

four o'clock, especially if they had had a parade or something and the buildings messed up with confetti and maybe flags. Maybe four times a year the lady that lived next door to Sister would write me a letter telling me how much Sister had paid to Mr. Pinckski and that Danny was getting along fine, behaving and not running around with them tough boys any more. So when I could I sent Danny the railroad fare to Florida. I never expected to hear about the money.

“That was what confused me. Sister could read some. She could read the church weekly fine that the priest gave her, but she never was much for writing. She said if she could just happen to find a pencil the size of a broom handle that she could use both hands on, that she could write fine. But regular pencils were too small for her.

She said she couldn't feel like she had anything in her hand. So I never expected to hear about the money. I just sent it and then I fixed up with the landlady where I was living for a place for Danny, just thinking that some day soon Danny would just come walking in with his suit-case.

The landlady kept the room a week for me, and then a man come in to rent it, so there wasn't anything she could do but give me the refusal of it.

“That wasn't no more than fair, after she had already kept it open a week for me. So I begun to pay for the room and when Danny didn't come I thought maybe something had come up, with the hard winter and all, and Sister needed the money worse than to send Danny to Florida on it, or maybe she thought he was too young yet.

So after three months I let the room go. Every three or four months I would get the letter from the lady next door to Sister, about how every Sunday morning Sister and the other ladies would go to Mr. Pinckski and pay him the fifty cents. After fifty-two weeks, Mr. Pinckski set the coffin aside, with her name cut on a steel plate and nailed onto the coffin, her full name: Mrs. Margaret Noonan Gihon.

“It was a cheap coffin at first, just a wooden box, but after she had paid the second fifty-two half a dollars he took the name plate off of it and nailed it onto a better coffin, letting her pick it out herself in case she died that year.

And after the third fifty-two half a dollars he let her pick out a still finer one, and the next year one with gold handles on it. He would let her come in and look at it whenever she wanted and bring whoever she wanted with her, to see the coffin and her name cut in the steel plate and nailed onto it.

Even at four o'clock in the morning he would come down in his night-shirt and unlock the door and turn the light on for Sister and the other ladies to go back and look at the coffin.

“Each year it got to be a better coffin, with Mr. Pinckski showing the other ladies with the pencil and paper how Sister would have the coffin paid out soon and then she would just be paying on the gold handles and the lining.

He let her pick out the lining too that she wanted and when the lady next door wrote me the next letter, Sister sent me a sample of the lining and a picture of the handles. Sister drew the picture, but she

never could use a pencil because she always said the handle was too small for her to hold, though she could read the church weekly the priest gave her, because she said the Lord illuminated it for her.”

“Is that so?” the young man said. “Jesus, I wish I either had a smoke or I would quit thinking about it.”

“Yes. And a sample of the lining. But I couldn’t tell much about it except that it suited Sister and that she liked it how Mr. Pinckski would let her bring in the other ladies to look at the trimmings and help her make up her mind. Because Mr. Pinckski said he would trust her because he didn’t believe she would go and die on him to hurt his business like some did, and him not charging her a cent of interest like the insurance companies would charge. All she had to do was just to stop there every Sunday morning and pay him the half a dollar.”

“Is that so?” the young man said. “He must be in the poor-house now.”

“What?” The old man looked at the young man, his expression fixed.

“Who in the poor-house now?”

IV

“Where was Danny all this time? Still doing his settlement work?”

“Yes. He worked whenever he could get a job. But a high-spirited young fellow, without nobody but a widow woman mother, without no father to learn him how you have to give and take in this world. That was why I wanted him down in Florida with me.”

Now his arrested expression faded; he went easily into narration again with a kind of physical and unlistening joy, like a checked and long-broken horse slacked off again.

“That was what got me confused. I had already sent the money for him to come to Jacksonville on and when I never heard about it I just thought maybe Sister needed it with the hard winter and all or maybe she thought Danny was too young, like women will.

And then about eight months after I let the room go I had a funny letter from the lady that lived next door to Sister. It said how Mr. Pinckski had moved the plate onto the next coffin and it said how glad Sister was that Danny was doing so well and she knew I would take good care of him because he was a good boy, besides being all Sister had. Like Danny was already in Florida, all the time.

“But I never knew he was there until I got the wire from him. It come from Augustine, not any piece away; I never found out until Sister died how Mrs. Zilich, that’s the lady next door to her, that wrote the letters for Sister, had written me that Danny was coming to Florida the day he left, the day after the money come. Mrs. Zilich told how she had written the letter for Sister and give it to Danny himself to mail the night before he left.

I never got it. I reckon Danny never mailed it. I reckon, being a young, high-spirited boy, he decided he wanted to strike out himself and show us what he could do without any help from us, like I did when I come to Florida.

“Mrs. Zilich said she thought of course Danny was with me and that she thought at the time it was funny that when I would write to Sister I never mentioned Danny. So when she would read the letters to Sister

she would put in something about Danny was all right and doing fine. So when I got the wire from Danny in Augustine I telephoned Mrs. Zilich in New York.

It cost eleven dollars. I told her that Danny was in a little trouble, not serious, and for her to not tell Sister it was serious trouble, to just tell her that we would need some money. Because I had sent money for Danny to come to Florida on and I had paid the three months for the room and I had just paid the premium on my insurance, and so the lawyer looked at Danny and Danny sitting there on the cot in the cell without no collar on and Danny said, 'Where would I get any money,' only it was jack he called it.

"And the lawyer said, 'Where would you get it?' and Danny said, 'Just set me down back home for ten minutes. I'll show you.' 'Seventy-five bucks,' he says, telling me that was all of it.

Then the lawyer says that was neither here nor there and so I telephoned to Mrs. Zilich and told her to tell Sister to go to Mr. Pinckski and ask him to let her take back some of the coffin money; he could put the name plate back on the coffin she had last year or maybe the year before, and as soon as I could get some money on my insurance policy I would pay Mr. Pinckski back and some interest too. I telephoned from the jail, but I didn't say where I was telephoning from; I just said we would need some money quick."

"What was he in for this time?" the young man said.

“He wasn’t in jail the other time, about them clothes off that line. That woman was lying about him. After we paid the money, she admitted she was probably mistaken.”

“All right,” the young man said. “What was he in for?”

“They called it grand larceny and killing a policeman. They framed him, them others did that didn’t like him. He was just wild. That was all. He was a good boy. When Sister died he couldn’t come to the funeral. But he sent a wreath that must have cost \$200 if it cost a cent. By air mail, with the high postage in the . . .”

His voice died away; he looked at the young man with a kind of pleased astonishment. “I’ll declare I made a joke. But I didn’t mean—”

“Sure. I know you didn’t mean to make a joke. What about the jail?”

“The lawyer was already there when I got there. Some friends had sent the lawyer to help him. And he swore to me on his mother’s name that he wasn’t even there when the cop got shot. He was in Orlando at the time. He showed me a ticket from Orlando to Waycross that he had bought and missed the train; that was how he happened to have it with him. It had the date punched in it, the same night the policeman got killed, showing that Danny wasn’t even there and that them other boys had framed him.

He was mad. The lawyer said how he would see the friends that had sent him to help Danny and get them to help. ‘By God, they better,’ Danny said. ‘If they think I’m going to take this laying down they better—’

“Then the lawyer got him quiet again, like he did when Danny was talking about that money the man he worked for or something had held out on him back in New York. And so I telephoned Mrs. Zilich, so as not to worry Sister, and told her to go to Mr. Pinckski.

Two days later I got the telegram from Mrs. Zilich. I guess Mrs. Zilich hadn't never sent a telegram before and so she didn't know she had ten words without counting the address because it just said You and Danny come home quick Mrs. Sophie Zilich New York.

“I couldn't make nothing out of it and we talked it over and the lawyer said I better go and see, that he would take care of Danny till I got back. So we fixed up a letter from Danny to Sister, for Mrs. Zilich to read to her, about how Danny was all right and getting along fine—”

V

At that moment there entered the room a man in the uniform of the railway company. As he entered, from about him somewhere — behind, above — a voice came. Though it spoke human speech it did not sound like a human voice, since it was too big to have emerged from known man and it had a quality at once booming, cold, and forlorn, as though it were not interested in nor listening to what it said.

“There,” the old man said.

He and the young man turned and looked back across the benches, as most of the other heads had done, as though they were all dummies moved by a single wire. The man in uniform advanced slowly into the room, moving along the first bench. As he did so the men on that bench

and on the others began to rise and depart, passing the man in uniform as though he were not there; he too moving on into the room as if it were empty. "I guess we'll have to move."

"Hell," the young man said. "Let him come in and ask for them. They pay him to do it."

"He caught me the other night. The second time, too."

"What about that? This time won't make but three. What did you do then?"

"Oh, yes," the old man said. "I knew that was the only thing to do, after that telegram. Mrs. Zilich wouldn't have spent the money to telegraph without good reason. I didn't know what she had told Sister.

I just knew that Mrs. Zilich thought there wasn't time to write a letter and that she was trying to save money on the telegram, not knowing she had ten words and the man at the telegraph office not telling her better. So I didn't know what was wrong. I never suspicioned it at all. That was what confused me, you see."

He turned and looked back again toward the man in uniform moving from bench to bench while just before him the men in mismatched garments, with that identical neatness of indigence, with that identical air of patient and indomitable forlornness, rose and moved toward the exit in a monstrous and outrageous analogy to flying fish before the advancing prow of a ship.

"What confused you?" the young man said.

“Mrs. Zilich told me. I left Danny in the jail. (Them friends that sent him the lawyer got him out the next day. When I heard from him again, he was already in Chicago, with a good job; he sent that wreath. I didn’t know he was even gone from the jail until I tried to get word to him about Sister), and I come on to New York. I had just enough money for that, and Mrs. Zilich met me at the station and told me. At this station right here. It was snowing that night, too. She was waiting at the top of the steps.

“‘Where’s Sister?’ I said. ‘She didn’t come with you?’

“‘What is it now?’ Mrs. Zilich said. ‘You don’t need to tell me he is just sick.’

“‘Did you tell Sister he ain’t just sick?’ I said. ‘I didn’t have to,’ Mrs. Zilich said. ‘I didn’t have time to, even if I would have.’ She told about how it was cold that night and so she waited up for Sister, keeping the fire going and a pot of coffee ready, and how she waited till Sister had took off her coat and shawl and was beginning to get warm, setting there with a cup of coffee; then Mrs. Zilich said, ‘Your brother telephoned from Florida.’ That’s all she had time to say. She never even had to tell Sister how I said for her to go to Mr. Pinckski, because Sister said right off, ‘He will want that money.’ Just what I had said, you see.

“Mrs. Zilich noticed it too. ‘Maybe it’s because you are kin, both kin to that—’ Then she stopped and said, ‘Oh, I ain’t going to say anything about him. Don’t worry. The time to do that is past now.’ Then she told me how she said to Sister, ‘You can stop there on the way down this afternoon and see Mr. Pinckski.’ But Sister was already putting on her coat and shawl again and her not an hour home from work and it snowing. She wouldn’t wait.”

“She had to take back the coffin money, did she?” the young man said.

“Yes. Mrs. Zilich said that her and Sister went to Mr. Pinckski and woke him up. And he told them that Sister had already taken the money back.”

“What?” the young man said. “Already?”

“Yes. He said how Danny had come to him about a year back, with a note from Sister saying to give Danny the money that she had paid in to Mr. Pinckski and that Mr. Pinckski did it. And Sister standing there with her hands inside her shawl, not looking at anything until Mrs. Zilich said, ‘A note? Mrs. Gihon never sent you a note because she can’t write,’ and Mr. Pinckski said, ‘Should I know if she can’t write or not when her own son brings me a note signed with her name?’ and Mrs. Zilich says, ‘Let’s see it.’

“Sister hadn’t said anything at all, like she wasn’t even there, and Mr. Pinckski showed them the note. I saw it too. It said, ‘Received of Mr. Pinckski a hundred and thirty dollars being the full amount deposited with him less interest. Mrs. Margaret N. Gihon.’

And Mrs. Zilich said how she thought about that hundred and thirty dollars and she thought how Sister had paid twenty-six dollars a year for five years and seven months, and she said, ‘Interest? What interest?’ and Mr. Pinckski said, ‘For taking the name off the coffin,’ because that made the coffin second-handed. And Mrs. Zilich said that Sister turned and went toward the door. ‘Wait,’ Mrs. Zilich said. ‘We’re going to stay right here until you get that money. There’s something funny about this because you can’t write to sign a note.’ But Sister just went on toward the door until Mrs. Zilich said, ‘Wait, Margaret.’ And then Sister said, ‘I signed it.’”

The voice of the man in uniform could be heard now as he worked slowly toward them: "Tickets. Tickets. Show your tickets."

"I guess it's hard enough to know what a single woman will do," the old man said. "But a widow woman with just one child. I didn't know she could write, either. I guess she picked it up cleaning up them offices every night."

Anyway, Mr. Pinckski showed me the note, how she admitted she signed it, and he explained to me how the difference was; that he had to charge to protect himself in case the coffins ever were refused and become second-hand; that some folks was mighty particular about having a brand new coffin.

"He had put the plate with Sister's name on it back onto the cheap coffin that she started off with, so she was still all right for a coffin, even if it never had any handles and lining. I never said anything about that; that twenty-six dollars she had paid in since she give the money to Danny wouldn't have helped any; I had already spent that much getting back to see about the money, and anyway, Sister still had a coffin—"

The voice of the man in uniform was quite near now, with a quality methodical, monotonous, and implacable: "Tickets. Tickets. Show your tickets. All without railroad tickets."

The young man rose. "I'll be seeing you," he said. The old man rose too. Beyond the man in uniform the room was almost empty.

“I guess it’s about time,” the old man said. He followed the young man into the rotunda. There was an airplane in it, motionless, squatting, with a still, beetling look like a huge bug preserved in alcohol. There was a placard beside it, about how it had flown over mountains and vast wastes of snow.

“They might have tried it over New York,” the young man said. “It would have been closer.”

“Yes,” the old man said. “It costs more, though. But I guess that’s fair, since it is faster. When Sister died, Danny sent a wreath of flowers by air. It must have cost two hundred dollars. The wreath did, I mean. I don’t know what it cost to send it by air.”

Then they both looked up the ramp and through the arcade, toward the doors on Seventh Avenue. Beyond the doors lay a thick, moribund light that seemed to fill the arcade with the smell of snow and of cold, so that for a while longer they seemed to stand in the grip of a dreadful reluctance and inertia.

“So they went on back home,” the old man said. “Mrs. Zilich said how Sister was already shaking and she got Sister to bed. And that night Sister had a fever and Mrs. Zilich sent for the doctor and the doctor looked at Sister and told Mrs. Zilich she had better telegraph if there was anybody to telegraph to. When I got home Sister didn’t know me.

The priest was already there, and we never could tell if she knew anything or not, not even when we read the letter from Danny that we had fixed up in the jail, about how he was all right. The priest read it to her, but we couldn’t tell if she heard him or not. That night she died.”

“Is that so?” The young man said, looking up the ramp. He moved. “I’m going to the Grand Central.”

Again the old man moved, with that same unwearying alacrity. “I guess that’s the best thing to do. We might have a good while there.” He looked up at the clock; he said with pleased surprise: “Half past one already. And a half an hour to get there. And if we’re lucky, we’ll have two hours before he comes along. Maybe three. That’ll be five o’clock. Then it will be only two hours more till daylight.”

The End