



Sepulture South Gaslight, William Faulkner

## Sepulture South: Gaslight

Harper's Bazaar, December 1954

WHEN GRANDFATHER DIED, Father spoke what was probably his first reaction because what he said was involuntary because if he had taken time to think, he would not have said it: "Damn it, now we'll lose Liddy."

Liddy was the cook. She was one of the best cooks we had ever had and she had been with us ever since Grandmother died seven years ago when the cook before her had left; and now with another death in the family, she would move too, regretfully, because she liked us also. But that was the way Negroes did: left after a death in the family they worked for, as though obeying not a superstition but a rite: the rite of their freedom: not freedom from having to work, that would not occur to anyone for several years yet, not until W.P.A., but the freedom to move from one job to another, using a death in the family as the moment, the instigation, to move, since only death was important enough to exercise a right as important as freedom.

But she would not go yet; hers and Arthur's (her husband's) departure would be done with a dignity commensurate with the dignity of Grandfather's age and position in our family and our town, and the commensurate dignity of his sepulture. Not to mention the fact that Arthur himself was now serving his apogee as a member of our household, as if the seven years he had worked for us had merely been the waiting for this moment, this hour, this day: sitting (not standing now: sitting) freshly shaved and with his hair trimmed this morning, in a clean white shirt and a necktie of Father's and wearing his coat, in a

chair in the back room of the jewelry store while Mr. Wedlow the jeweler inscribed on the sheet of parchment in his beautiful flowing Spencerian hand the formal notice of Grandfather's death and the hour of his funeral, which, attached to the silver salver with knots of black ribbon and sprays of imitation immortelles, Arthur would bear from door to door (not back or kitchen doors but the front ones) through our town, to ring the bell and pass the salver in to whoever answered it, not as a servant bringing a formal notification now but as a member of our family performing a formal rite, since by this time the whole town knew that Grandfather was dead. So this was a rite, Arthur himself dominating the moment, dominating the entire morning in fact, because now he was not only no servant of ours, he was not even an envoy from us but rather a messenger from Death itself, saying to our town: "Pause, mortal; remember Me."

Then Arthur would be busy for the rest of the day, too, now in the coachman's coat and beaver hat which he had inherited from the husband of Liddy's predecessor who had inherited it in his turn from the husband of her predecessor's predecessor, meeting with the surrey the trains on which our kin and connections would begin to arrive. And now the town would commence the brief, ritual formal calls, almost wordless and those in murmurs, whispers.

Because ritual said that Mother and Father must bear this first shock of bereavement in privacy, supporting and comforting one another. So the next of kin must receive the callers: Mother's sister and her husband from Memphis because Aunt Alice, Father's brother Charles's wife, would have to be comforting and supporting Uncle Charley — as long as they could keep her upstairs, that is. And all this time the neighbor ladies would be coming to the kitchen door (not the front one now: the kitchen and back ones) without knocking, with their cooks or yardboys carrying the dishes and trays of food they had prepared to feed us and our influx of kin, and for a midnight supper for the men, Father's

friends that he hunted and played poker with, who would sit up all night with Grandfather's coffin when the undertaker brought it and put him into it.

And all tomorrow too, while the wreaths and flowers arrived; and now all who wanted to could go into the parlor and look at Grandfather framed in white satin in his gray uniform with the three stars on the collar, freshly shaven too and with just a touch of rouge on his cheeks. And tomorrow too, until after our dinner, when Liddy said to Maggie and the other children: "Now you chillen go down to the pasture and play until I calls you. And you mind Maggie now." Because it was not to me.

I was not only the oldest but a boy, the third generation of oldest son from Grandfather's father; when Father's turn came it would be me to say before I would have time to think: Damn it, now we'll lose Julia or Florence or whatever her name would be by that time. I must be there too, in my Sunday clothes, with a band of crape on my arm, all of us except Mother and Father and Uncle Charley (Aunt Alice was though, because people excused her because she was always a good one to run things when she got a chance: and Uncle Rodney too although he was Father's youngest brother too) in the back room which Grandfather called his office, to which the whisky decanter had been moved from the dining-room sideboard in deference to the funeral; yes, Uncle Rodney too, who had no wife — the dashing bachelor who wore silk shirts and used scented shaving lotion, who had been Grandmother's favorite and that of a lot of other women too — the traveling salesman for the St. Louis wholesale house who brought into our town on his brief visits a breath, an odor, a glare almost of the metropolitan outland which was not for us: the teeming cities of hotel bellhops and girl shows and oyster-bars, my first recollection of whom was standing at the sideboard with the whisky decanter in his hand and who had it in

his hand now except that Aunt Alice's hand was on it too and we could all hear her furious whisper:

"You cannot, you shall not let them smell you like this!"

Then Uncle Rodney's: "All right, all right. Get me a handful of cloves from the kitchen." So that too, the odor of cloves inextricable from that of whisky and shaving lotion and cut flowers, was a part of Grandfather's passing for the last time from his house, we waiting still in the office while the ladies entered the parlor where the casket was, the men stopping outside on the lawn, decorous and quiet, still wearing their hats until the music started, when they would remove them and stand again, their bare heads bowed a little in the bright early afternoon sunshine.

Then Mother was in the hall, in black and heavily veiled, and Father and Uncle Charley in black; and now we crossed into the dining room where chairs had been arranged for us, the folding doors open into the parlor, so that we, the family, were at the funeral but not yet of it, as though Grandfather in his casket now had to be two: one for his blood descendants and connections, one for those who were merely his friends and fellow townsmen.

Then that song, that hymn which meant nothing to me now: no lugubrious dirge to death, no reminder that Grandfather was gone and I would never see him again. Because never again could it match what it had once meant to me — terror, not of death but of the un-dead.

I was just four then; Maggie, next to me, could barely walk, the two of us in a clump of older children half concealed in the shrubbery in the corner of the yard. I at least did not know why, until it passed — the first I had ever watched — the black plumed hearse, the black closed

hacks and surreys, at the slow significant pace up the street which was suddenly completely deserted, as it seemed to me that I knew suddenly the entire town would be.

“What?” I said. “A deader? What’s a deader?” And they told me. I had seen dead things before — birds, toads, the puppies the one before Simon (his wife was Sarah) had drowned in a crokersack in the water-trough because he said that Father’s fine setter had got mixed up with the wrong dog, and I had watched him and Sarah both beat to bloody shapeless strings the snakes which I now know were harmless. But that this, this ignominy, should happen to people too, it seemed to me that God Himself would not permit, condone.

So they in the hearse could not be dead: it must be something like sleep: a trick played on people by those same inimical forces and powers for evil which made Sarah and her husband have to beat the harmless snakes to bloody and shapeless pulp or drown the puppies — tricked into that helpless coma for some dreadful and inscrutable joke until the dirt was packed down, to strain and thrash and cry in the airless dark, to no escape forever. So that night I had something very like hysterics, clinging to Sarah’s legs and panting: “I won’t die! I won’t! Never!”

But that was past now. I was fourteen now and that song was woman’s work, as was the preacher’s peroration which followed it, until the men entered — the eight pallbearers who were Father’s hunting and poker and business friends, and the three honorary ones who were too old now to bear a burden: the three old men in gray too, but of privates (two of them had been in the old regiment that day when, a part of Bee, it had fallen back before McDowell until it rallied on Jackson in front of the Henry House).

So they bore Grandfather out, the ladies pressing back a little to make room for us, not looking at us, the men outside in the sunny yard not looking at the passing casket or us either, bareheaded, bowed a little or even turned slightly away as though musing, inattentive; there came one muffled startling half-hollow sound as the bearers, amateurs too, finally got the casket into the hearse, then rapidly with a kind of decorous celerity, passed back and forth between the hearse and the parlor until all the flowers were in too: then moving briskly indeed now, almost hurrying, as though already disassociated, not only from the funeral but even from death too, around the corner where the carryall waited to take them by back streets to the cemetery so they would be there waiting when we arrived: so that any Southern stranger in our town, seeing that vehicle filled with black-clad, freshly shaved men going at a rapid trot up a back street at three o'clock on Wednesday afternoon, would not need to ask what had happened.

Yes, processional: the hearse, then our surrey with Mother and Father and me, then the brothers and sisters and their wives and husbands, then the cousins in one and two and three degrees, diminishing in nearness to the hearse as their connection with Grandfather diminished, up the deserted street, across the Square as empty now as Sunday, so that my insides swelled with snobbery and pride to think that Grandfather had been this important in the town. Then along the empty street which led to the cemetery, in almost every yard of which the children stood along the fence watching with that same terror and excitement which I remembered, remembering the terror and regret with which I had once wished that we lived on Cemetery Street too so that I could watch them all pass.

And now we could already see them, gigantic and white, taller on their marble pedestals than the rose-and-honeysuckle-choked fence,

looming into the very trees themselves, the magnolias and cedars and elms, gazing forever eastward with their empty marble eyes — not symbols: not angels of mercy or winged seraphim or lambs or shepherds, but effigies of the actual people themselves as they had been in life, in marble now, durable, impervious, heroic in size, towering above their dust in the implacable tradition of our strong, uncompromising, grimly ebullient Baptist-Methodist Protestantism, carved in Italian stone by expensive Italian craftsmen and shipped the long costly way by sea back to become one more among the invincible sentinels guarding the temple of our Southern mores, extending from banker and merchant and planter down to the last tenant farmer who owned neither the plow he guided nor the mule which drew it, which decreed, demanded that, no matter how Spartan the life, in death the significance of dollars and cents was abolished: that Grandmother might have split stovewood right up to the day she died, yet she must enter the earth in satin and mahogany and silver handles even though the first two were synthetic and the third was german — a ceremony not at all to death nor even to the moment of death, but to decorum: the victim of accident or even murder represented in effigy not at the instant of his passing but at the peak of his sublimation, as though in death at last he denied forever the griefs and follies of human affairs.

Grandmother too; the hearse stopped at last beside the raw yawn of the waiting pit, the preacher and the three old men in gray (with the dangling meaningless bronze medals which didn't signify valor but only reunions, since in that war all the men on both sides had been brave and so the only accolades for individual distinction were the lead ones out of the muskets of firing squads) waiting beside it, now carrying shotguns, while the pallbearers removed the flowers and then the casket from the hearse; Grandmother too in her bustle and puffed sleeves and the face which we remembered save for the empty eyes, musing at nothing while the casket sank and the preacher found a place to stop at last and the first clod made that profound quiet half-hollow



sound on the invisible wood and the three old men fired their ragged volley and raised their quavering and ragged yell.

Grandmother too. I could remember that day six years ago, the family gathered, Father and Mother and Maggie and I in the surrey because Grandfather rode his horse — the cemetery, our lot.

Grandmother's effigy pristine and dazzling now out of its packing case, tall on the dazzling pedestal above the grave itself, the undertaker, hat in hand, and the Negro workmen who had sweated it erect, withdrawn to one side for us, the family, to look at it and approve.

And in another year, after the tedious carving in Italy and the long Atlantic ship, Grandfather too on his pedestal beside her, not as the soldier which he had been and as I wanted him, but — in the old hard unalterable tradition of apotheosis' apogee — the lawyer, parliamentarian, the orator which he was not: in frock coat, the bare head thrown back, the carven tome carved open in one carven hand and the other extended in the immemorial gesture of declamation, this time Mother and Maggie and I in the surrey because Father was now on the horse, come for the formal private inspection and approval.

And three or four times a year I would come back, I would not know why, alone to look at them, not just at Grandfather and Grandmother but at all of them looming among the lush green of summer and the regal blaze of fall and the rain and ruin of winter before spring would bloom again, stained now, a little darkened by time and weather and endurance but still serene, impervious, remote, gazing at nothing, not like sentinels, not defending the living from the dead by means of their vast ton-measured weight and mass, but rather the dead from the living; shielding instead the vacant and dissolving bones, the harmless

and defenseless dust, from the anguish and grief and inhumanity of mankind.

The End