

Shall Not Perish, William Faulkner

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WHEN THE MESSAGE came about Pete, Father and I had already gone to the field. Mother got it out of the mailbox after we left and brought it down to the fence, and she already knew beforehand what it was because she didn’t even have on her sunbonnet, so she must have been watching from the kitchen window when the carrier drove up. And I already knew what was in it too.

Because she didn’t speak. She just stood at the fence with the little pale envelope that didn’t even need a stamp on it in her hand, and it was me that hollered at Father, from further away across the field than he was, so that he reached the fence first where Mother waited even though I was already running. “I know what it is,” Mother said. “But I can’t open it. Open it.”

“No it ain’t!” I hollered, running. “No it ain’t!” Then I was hollering, “No, Pete! No, Pete!” Then I was hollering, “God damn them Japs! God damn them Japs!” and then I was the one Father had to grab and hold, trying to hold me, having to wrastle with me like I was another man instead of just nine.

And that was all. One day there was Pearl Harbor. And the next week Pete went to Memphis, to join the army and go there and help them; and one morning Mother stood at the field fence with a little scrap of paper not even big enough to start a fire with, that didn’t even need a stamp on the envelope, saying, A ship was. Now it is not.

Your son was one of them. And we allowed ourselves one day to grieve, and that was all. Because it was April, the hardest middle push of planting time, and there was the land, the seventy acres which were our bread and fire and keep, which had outlasted the Griers before us because they had done right by it, and had outlasted Pete because while he was here he had done his part to help and would outlast Mother and Father and me if we did ours.

Then it happened again. Maybe we had forgotten that it could and was going to, again and again, to people who loved sons and brothers as we loved Pete, until the day finally came when there would be an end to it. After that day when we saw Pete’s name and picture in the Memphis paper, Father would bring one home with him each time he went to town. And we would see the pictures and names of soldiers and sailors from other counties and towns in Mississippi and Arkansas and Tennessee, but there wasn’t another from ours, and so after a while it did look like Pete was going to be all.

Then it happened again. It was late July, a Friday. Father had gone to town early on Homer Bookwright’s cattletruck and now it was sundown. I had just come up from the field with the light sweep and I had just finished stalling the mule and come out of the barn when Homer’s truck stopped at the mailbox and Father got down and came up the lane, with a sack of flour balanced on his shoulder and a package under his arm and the folded newspaper in his hand.

And I took one look at the folded paper and then no more. Because I knew it too, even if he always did have one when he came back from town. Because it was bound to happen sooner or later; it would not be just us out of all Yoknapatawpha County who had loved enough to have sole right to grief. So I just met him and took part of the load and turned beside him, and we entered the kitchen together where our cold supper waited on the table and Mother sat in the last of sunset in the open door, her hand and arm strong and steady on the dasher of the churn.

When the message came about Pete, Father never touched her. He didn’t touch her now. He just lowered the flour onto the table and went to the chair and held out the folded paper. “It’s Major de Spain’s boy,” he said. “In town. The av-aytor. That was home last fall in his officer uniform. He run his airplane into a Japanese battleship and blowed it up. So they knowed where he was at.” And Mother didn’t stop the churn for a minute either, because even I could tell that the butter had almost come. Then she got up and went to the sink and washed her hands and came back and sat down again.

“Read it,” she said.

So Father and I found out that Mother not only knew all the time it was going to happen again, but that she already knew what she was going to do when it did, not only this time but the next one too, and the one after that and the one after that, until the day finally came when all the grieving about the earth, the rich and the poor too, whether they lived with ten nigger servants in the fine big painted houses in town or whether they lived on and by seventy acres of not extra good land like us or whether all they owned was the right to sweat today for what they would eat tonight, could say, At least this there was some point to why we grieved.

We fed and milked and came back and ate the cold supper, and I built a fire in the stove and Mother put on the kettle and whatever else would heat enough water for two, and I fetched in the washtub from the back porch, and while Mother washed the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen, Father and I sat on the front steps. This was about the time of day that Pete and I would walk the two miles down to Old Man Killegrew’s house last December, to listen to the radio tell about Pearl Harbor and Manila.

But more than Pearl Harbor and Manila has happened since then, and Pete don’t make one to listen to it. Nor do I: it’s like, since nobody can tell us exactly where he was when he stopped being is, instead of just becoming was at some single spot on the earth where the people who loved him could weight him down with a stone, Pete still is everywhere about the earth, one among all the fighters forever, was or is either.

So Mother and Father and I don’t need a little wooden box to catch the voices of them that saw the courage and the sacrifice. Then Mother called me back to the kitchen. The water smoked a little in the washtub, beside the soap dish and my clean nightshirt and the towel Mother made out of our worn-out cotton sacks, and I bathe and empty the tub and leave it ready for her, and we lie down.

Then morning, and we rose. Mother was up first, as always. My clean white Sunday shirt and pants were waiting, along with the shoes and stockings I hadn’t even seen since frost was out of the ground. But in yesterday’s overalls still I carried the shoes back to the kitchen where Mother stood in yesterday’s dress at the stove where not only our breakfast was cooking but Father’s dinner too, and set the shoes beside her Sunday ones against the wall and went to the barn, and Father and I fed and milked and came back and sat down and ate while Mother moved back and forth between the table and the stove till we were done, and she herself sat down.

Then I got out the blacking-box, until Father came and took it away from me — the polish and rag and brush and the four shoes in succession. “De Spain is rich,” he said. “With a monkey nigger in a white coat to hold the jar up each time he wants to spit. You shine all shoes like you aimed yourself to wear them: just the parts that you can see yourself by looking down.”

Then we dressed. I put on my Sunday shirt and the pants so stiff with starch that they would stand alone, and carried my stockings back to the kitchen just as Mother entered, carrying hers, and dressed too, even her hat, and took my stockings from me and put them with hers on the table beside the shined shoes, and lifted the satchel down from the cupboard shelf.

It was still in the cardboard box it came in, with the colored label of the San Francisco drugstore where Pete bought it — a round, square-ended, water-proof satchel with a handle for carrying, so that as soon as Pete saw it in the store he must have known too that it had been almost exactly made for exactly what we would use it for, with a zipper opening that Mother had never seen before nor Father either.

That is, we had all three been in the drugstore and the ten-cent-store in Jefferson but I was the only one who had been curious enough to find out how one worked, even though even I never dreamed we would ever own one. So it was me that zipped it open, with a pipe and a can of tobacco in it for Father and a hunting cap with a carbide headlight for me and for Mother the satchel itself, and she zipped it shut and then open and then Father tried it, running the slide up and down the little clicking track until Mother made him stop before he wore it out; and she put the satchel, still open, back into the box and I fetched in from the barn the empty quart bottle of cattle-dip and she scalded the bottle and cork and put them and the clean folded towel into the satchel and set the box onto the cupboard shelf, the zipper still open because when we came to need it we would have to open it first and so we would save that much wear on the zipper too.

She took the satchel from the box and the bottle from the satchel and filled the bottle with clean water and corked it and put it back into the satchel with the clean towel and put our shoes and stockings in and zipped the satchel shut, and we walked to the road and stood in the bright hot morning beside the mailbox until the bus came up and stopped.

It was the school bus, the one I rode back and forth to Frenchman’s Bend to school in last winter, and that Pete rode in every morning and evening until he graduated, but going in the opposite direction now, in to Jefferson, and only on Saturday, seen for a long time down the long straight stretch of Valley road while other people waiting beside other mailboxes got into it. Then it was our turn.

Mother handed the two quarters to Solon Quick, who built it and owned it and drove it, and we got in too and it went on, and soon there was no more room for the ones that stood beside the mailboxes and signalled and then it went fast, twenty miles then ten then five then one, and up the last hill to where the concrete streets began, and we got out and sat on the curb and Mother opened the satchel and took our shoes and the bottle of water and the towel and we washed our feet and put on our shoes and stockings and Mother put the bottle and towel back and shut the bag.

And we walked beside the iron picket fence long enough to front a cotton patch; we turned into the yard which was bigger than farms I had seen and followed the gravel drive wider and smoother than roads in Frenchman’s Bend, on to the house that to me anyway looked bigger than the courthouse, and mounted the steps between the stone columns and crossed the portico that would have held our whole house, galleries and all, and knocked at the door. And then it never mattered whether our shoes were shined at all or not: the whites of the monkey nigger’s eyes for just a second when he opened the door for us, the white of his coat for just a second at the end of the hall before it was gone too, his feet not making any more noise than a cat’s leaving us to find the right door by ourselves, if we could.

And we did — the rich man’s parlor that any woman in Frenchman’s Bend and I reckon in the rest of the county too could have described to the inch but which not even the men who would come to Major de Spain after bank-hours or on Sunday to ask to have a note extended, had ever seen, with a light hanging in the middle of the ceiling the size of our whole washtub full of chopped-up ice and a gold-colored harp that would have blocked our barn door and a mirror that a man on a mule could have seen himself and the mule both in, and a table shaped like a coffin in the middle of the floor with the Confederate flag spread over it and the photograph of Major de Spain’s son and the open box with the medal in it and a big blue automatic pistol weighting down the flag, and Major de Spain standing at the end of the table with his hat on until after a while he seemed to hear and recognize the name which Mother spoke; — not a real major but just called that because his father had been a real one in the old Confederate war, but a banker powerful in money and politics both, that Father said had made governors and senators too in Mississippi; — an old man, too old you would have said to have had a son just twenty-three; too old anyway to have had that look on his face.

“Ha,” he said. “I remember now. You too were advised that your son poured out his blood on the altar of unpreparedness and inefficiency. What do you want?”

“Nothing,” Mother said. She didn’t even pause at the door. She went on toward the table. “We had nothing to bring you. And I don’t think I see anything here we would want to take away.”

“You’re wrong,” he said. “You have a son left. Take what they have been advising to me: go back home and pray. Not for the dead one: for the one they have so far left you, that something somewhere, somehow will save him!” She wasn’t even looking at him. She never had looked at him again.

She just went on across that barn-sized room exactly as I have watched her set mine and Father’s lunch pail into the fence corner when there wasn’t time to stop the plows to eat, and turn back toward the house.

“I can tell you something simpler than that,” she said. “Weep.” Then she reached the table. But it was only her body that stopped, her hand going out so smooth and quick that his hand only caught her wrist, the two hands locked together on the big blue pistol, between the photograph and the little hunk of iron medal on its colored ribbon, against that old flag that a heap of people I knew had never seen and a heap more of them wouldn’t recognize if they did, and over all of it the old man’s voice that ought not to have sounded like that either.

“For his country! He had no country: this one I too repudiate. His country and mine both was ravaged and polluted and destroyed eighty years ago, before even I was born. His forefathers fought and died for it then, even though what they fought and lost for was a dream. He didn’t even have a dream. He died for an illusion. In the interests of usury, by the folly and rapacity of politicians, for the glory and aggrandisement of organized labor!”

“Yes,” Mother said. “Weep.”

“The fear of elective servants for their incumbencies! The subservience of misled workingmen for the demagogues who misled them! Shame? Grief? How can poltroonery and rapacity and voluntary thralldom know shame or grief?”

“All men are capable of shame,” Mother said. “Just as all men are capable of courage and honor and sacrifice. And grief too. It will take time, but they will learn it. It will take more grief than yours and mine, and there will be more. But it will be enough.”

“When? When all the young men are dead? What will there be left then worth the saving?”

“I know,” Mother said. “I know. Our Pete was too young too to have to die.” Then I realized that their hands were no longer locked, that he was erect again and that the pistol was hanging slack in Mother’s hand against her side, and for a minute I thought she was going to unzip the satchel and take the towel out of it.

But she just laid the pistol back on the table and stepped up to him and took the handkerchief from his breast pocket and put it into his hand and stepped back. “That’s right,” she said. “Weep. Not for him: for us, the old, who don’t know why. What is your Negro’s name?”

But he didn’t answer. He didn’t even raise the handkerchief to his face. He just stood there holding it, like he hadn’t discovered yet that it was in his hand, or perhaps even what it was Mother had put there. “For us, the old,” he said. “You believe. You have had three months to learn again, to find out why; mine happened yesterday. Tell me.”

“I don’t know,” Mother said. “Maybe women are not supposed to know why their sons must die in battle; maybe all they are supposed to do is just to grieve for them. But my son knew why And my brother went to the war when I was a girl, and our mother didn’t know why either, but he did.

And my grandfather was in that old one there too, and I reckon his mother didn’t know why either, but I reckon he did. And my son knew why he had to go to this one, and he knew I knew he did even though I didn’t, just as he knew that this child here and I both knew he would not come back. But he knew why, even if I didn’t, couldn’t, never can. So it must be all right, even if I couldn’t understand it. Because there is nothing in him that I or his father didn’t put there. What is your Negro’s name?”

He called the name then. And the nigger wasn’t so far away after all, though when he entered Major de Spain had already turned so that his back was toward the door. He didn’t look around. He just pointed toward the table with the hand Mother had put the handkerchief into, and the nigger went to the table without looking at anybody and without making any more noise on the floor than a cat and he didn’t stop at all; it looked to me like he had already turned and started back before he even reached the table: one flick of the black hand and the white sleeve and the pistol vanished without me even seeing him touch it and when he passed me again going out, I couldn’t see what he had done with it. So Mother had to speak twice before I knew she was talking to me.

“Come,” she said.

“Wait,” said Major de Spain. He had turned again, facing us. “What you and his father gave him. You must know what that was.”

“I know it came a long way,” Mother said. “So it must have been strong to have lasted through all of us. It must have been all right for him to be willing to die for it after that long time and coming that far. Come,” she said again.

“Wait,” he said. “Wait. Where did you come from?”

Mother stopped. “I told you: Frenchman’s Bend.”

“I know. How? By wagon? You have no car.”

“Oh,” Mother said. “We came in Mr. Quick’s bus. He comes in every Saturday.”

“And waits until night to go back. I’ll send you back in my car.” He called the nigger’s name again. But Mother stopped him. “Thank you,” she said. “We have already paid Mr. Quick. He owes us the ride back home.”

There was an old lady born and raised in Jefferson who died rich somewhere in the North and left some money to the town to build a museum with. It was a house like a church, built for nothing else except to hold the pictures she picked out to put in it — pictures from all over the United States, painted by people who loved what they had seen or where they had been born or lived enough to want to paint pictures of it so that other people could see it too; pictures of men and women and children, and the houses and streets and cities and the woods and fields and streams where they worked or lived or pleasured, so that all the people who wanted to, people like us from Frenchman’s Bend or from littler places even than Frenchman’s Bend in our county or beyond our state too, could come without charge into the cool and the quiet and look without let at the pictures of men and women and children who were the same people that we were even if their houses and barns were different and their fields worked different, with different things growing in them.

So it was already late when we left the museum, and later still when we got back to where the bus waited, and later still more before we got started, although at least we could get into the bus and take our shoes and stockings back off.

Because Mrs. Quick hadn’t come yet and so Solon had to wait for her, not because she was his wife but because he made her pay a quarter out of her egg-money to ride to town and back on Saturday, and he wouldn’t go off and leave anybody who had paid him.

And so, even though the bus ran fast again, when the road finally straightened out into the long Valley stretch, there was only the last sunset spoking out across the sky, stretching all the way across America from the Pacific ocean, touching all the places that the men and women in the museum whose names we didn’t even know had loved enough to paint pictures of them, like a big soft fading wheel.

And I remembered how Father used to always prove any point he wanted to make to Pete and me, by Grandfather. It didn’t matter whether it was something he thought we ought to have done and hadn’t, or something he would have stopped us from doing if he had just known about it in time. “Now, take your Grandpap,” he would say. I could remember him too: Father’s grandfather even, old, so old you just wouldn’t believe it, so old that it would seem to me he must have gone clean back to the old fathers in Genesis and Exodus that talked face to face with God, and Grandpap outlived them all except him.

It seemed to me he must have been too old even to have actually fought in the old Confederate war, although that was about all he talked about, not only when we thought that maybe he was awake but even when we knew he must be asleep, until after a while we had to admit that we never knew which one he really was. He would sit in his chair under the mulberry in the yard or on the sunny end of the front gallery or in his corner by the hearth; he would start up out of the chair and we still wouldn’t know which one he was, whether he never had been asleep or whether he hadn’t ever waked even when he jumped up, hollering, “Look out! Look out!

Here they come!” He wouldn’t even always holler the same name; they wouldn’t even always be on the same side or even soldiers: Forrest, or Morgan, or Abe Lincoln, or Van Dorn, or Grant or Colonel Sartoris himself, whose people still lived in our county, or Mrs. Rosa Millard, Colonel Sartoris’s mother-in-law who stood off the Yankees and carpetbaggers too for the whole four years of the war until Colonel Sartoris could get back home. Pete thought it was just funny. Father and I were ashamed. We didn’t know what Mother thought nor even what it was, until the afternoon at the picture show.

It was a continued picture, a Western; it seemed to me that it had been running every Saturday afternoon for years. Pete and Father and I would go in to town every Saturday to see it, and sometimes Mother would go too, to sit there in the dark while the pistols popped and snapped and the horses galloped and each time it would look like they were going to catch him but you knew they wouldn’t quite, that there would be some more of it next Saturday and the one after that and the one after that, and always the week in between for me and Pete to talk about the villain’s pearlhandled pistol that Pete wished was his and the hero’s spotted horse that I wished was mine. Then one Saturday Mother decided to take Grandpap.

He sat between her and me, already asleep again, so old now that he didn’t even have to snore, until the time came that you could have set a watch by every Saturday afternoon: when the horses all came plunging down the cliff and whirled around and came boiling up the gully until in just one more jump they would come clean out of the screen and go galloping among the little faces turned up to them like corn shucks scattered across a lot. Then Grandpap waked up. For about five seconds he sat perfectly still.

I could even feel him sitting still, he sat so still so hard. Then he said, “Cavalry!” Then he was on his feet. “Forrest!” he said. “Bedford Forrest! Get out of here! Get out of the way!” clawing and scrabbling from one seat to the next one whether there was anybody in them or not, into the aisle with us trying to follow and catch him, and up the aisle toward the door still hollering, “Forrest! Forrest! Here he comes!

Get out of the way!” and outside at last, with half the show behind us and Grandpap blinking and trembling at the light and Pete propped against the wall by his arms like he was being sick, laughing, and father shaking Grandpap’s arm and saying, “You old fool! You old fool!” until Mother made him stop. And we half carried him around to the alley where the wagon was hitched and helped him in and Mother got in and sat by him, holding his hand until he could begin to stop shaking. “Go get him a bottle of beer,” she said.

“He don’t deserve any beer,” Father said. “The old fool, having the whole town laughing. . . .”

“Go get him some beer!” Mother said. “He’s going to sit right here in his own wagon and drink it. Go on!” And Father did, and Mother held the bottle until Grandpap got a good hold on it, and she sat holding his hand until he got a good swallow down him. Then he begun to stop shaking.

He said, “Ah-h-h,” and took another swallow and said, “Ah-h-h,” again and then he even drew his other hand out of Mother’s and he wasn’t trembling now but just a little, taking little darting sips at the bottle and saying “Hah!” and taking another sip and saying “Hah!” again, and not just looking at the bottle now but looking all around, and his eyes snapping a little when he blinked.

“Fools yourselves!” Mother cried at Father and Pete and me. “He wasn’t running from anybody! He was running in front of them, hollering at all clods to look out because better men than they were coming, even seventy-five years afterwards, still powerful, still dangerous, still coming!”

And I knew them too. I had seen them too, who had never been further from Frenchman’s Bend than I could return by night to sleep. It was like the wheel, like the sunset itself, hubbed at that little place that don’t even show on a map, that not two hundred people out of all the earth know is named Frenchman’s Bend or has any name at all, and spoking out in all the directions and touching them all, never a one too big for it to touch, never a one too little to be remembered: — the places that men and women have lived in and loved whether they had anything to paint pictures of them with or not, all the little places quiet enough to be lived in and loved and the names of them before they were quiet enough, and the names of the deeds that made them quiet enough and the names of the men and the women who did the deeds, who lasted and endured and fought the battles and lost them and fought again because they didn’t even know they had been whipped, and tamed the wilderness and overpassed the mountains and deserts and died and still went on as the shape of the United States grew and went on.

I knew them too: the men and women still powerful seventy-five years and twice that and twice that again afterward, still powerful and still dangerous and still coming, North and South and East and West, until the name of what they did and what they died for became just one single word, louder than any thunder. It was America, and it covered all the western earth.

The End