

The Mother of a Queen, Ernest Hemingway

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WHEN HIS FATHER DIED HE WAS ONLY A kid and his manager buried him perpetually. That is, so he would have the plot permanently. But when his mother died his manager thought they might not always be so hot on each other. They were sweethearts; sure he's a queen, didn't you know that, of course he is. So he just buried her for five years.

Well, when he came back to Mexico from Spain he got the first notice. It said it was the first notice that the five years were up and would he make arrangements for the continuing of his mother's grave. It was only twenty dollars for perpetual. I had the cash box then and I said let me attend to it, Paco. But he said no, he would look after it. He'd look after it right away. It was his mother and he wanted to do it himself.

Then in a week he got the second notice. I read it to him and I said I thought he had looked after it.

No, he said, he hadn't.

"Let me do it," I said. "It's right here in the cash box."

No, he said. Nobody could tell him what to do. He'd do it himself when he got around to it. "What's the sense in spending money sooner than necessary?"

"All right," I said, "but see you look after it." At this time he had a contract for six fights at four thousand pesos a fight besides his benefit fight. He made over fifteen thousand dollars there in the capital alone. He was just tight, that's all.

The third notice came in another week and I read it to him. It said that if he did not make the payment by the following Saturday his mother's grave would be opened and her remains dumped on the common boneheap. He said he would go attend to it that afternoon when he went to town.

"Why not have me do it?" I asked him.

"Keep out of my business," he said. "It's my business and I'm going to do it."

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," I said. "Do your own business."

He got the money out of the cash box, although then he always carried a hundred or more pesos with him all the time, and he said he would look after it. He went out with the money and so of course I thought he had attended to it.

A week later the notice came that they had no response to the final warning and so his mother's body had been dumped on the boneheap; on the public boneheap.

"Jesus Christ," I said to him, "you said you'd pay that and you took money out of the cash box to do it and now what's happened to your mother? My God, think of it! The public boneheap and your own mother. Why didn't you let me look after it? I would have sent it when the first notice came."

"It's none of your business. It's my mother."

"It's none of my business, yes, but it was your business. What kind of blood is it in a man that will let that be done to his mother? You don't deserve to have a mother."

"It is my mother," he said. "Now she is so much dearer to me. Now I don't have to think of her buried in one place and be sad. Now she is all about me in the air, like the birds and the flowers. Now she will always be with me."

"Jesus Christ," I said, "what kind of blood have you anyway? I don't want you to even speak to me."

"She is all around me," he said. "Now I will never be sad."

At that time he was spending all kinds of money around women trying to make himself seem a man and fool people, but it didn't have any effect on people that knew anything about him. He owed me over six hundred pesos and he wouldn't pay me. "Why do you want it now?" he'd say. "Don't you trust me? Aren't we friends?"

"It isn't friends or trusting you. It's that I paid the accounts out of my own money while you were away and now I need the money back and you have it to pay me."

"I haven't got it."

"You have it," I said. "It's in the cash box now and you can pay me."

"I need that money for something," he said. "You don't know all the needs I have for money."

"I stayed here all the time you were in Spain and you authorized me to pay these things as they came up, all these things of the house, and you didn't send any money while you were gone and I paid over six hundred pesos in my own money and now I need it and you can pay me."

"I'll pay you soon," he said. "Right now I need the money badly."

"For what?"

"For my own business."

"Why don't you pay me some on account?"

"I can't," he said. "I need that money too badly. But I will pay you."

He had only fought twice in Spain, they couldn't stand him there, they saw through him quick enough, and he had seven new fighting suits made and this is the kind of thing he was: he had them packed so badly that four of them were ruined by sea water on the trip back and he couldn't even wear them.

"My God," I said to him, "you go to Spain. You stay there the whole season and only fight two times. You spend all the money you took with you on suits and then have them spoiled by salt water so you can't wear them. That is the kind of season you have and then you talk to me about running your own business. Why don't you pay me the money you owe me so I can leave?"

"I want you here," he said, "and I will pay you. But now I need the money."

"You need it too badly to pay for your own mother's grave to keep your mother buried. Don't you?" I said.

"I am happy about what has happened to my mother," he said. "You cannot understand."

"Thank Christ I can't," I said. "You pay me what you owe me or I will take it out of the cash box."

"I will keep the cash box myself," he said.

"No, you won't," I said.

That very afternoon he came to me with a punk, some fellow from his own town who was broke, and said, "Here is a paisano who needs money to go home because his mother is very sick." This fellow was just a punk, you understand, a nobody he'd never seen before, but from his home town, and he wanted to be the big, generous matador with a fellow townsman. "Give him fifty pesos from the cash box," he told me.

"You just told me you had no money to pay me," I said. "And now you want to give fifty pesos to this punk."
"He is a fellow townsman," he said, "and he is in distress."

"You bitch," I said. I gave him the key of the cash box. "Get it yourself. I'm going to town."
"Don't be angry," he said. "I'm going to pay you."

I got the car out to go to town. It was his car but he knew I drove it better than he did. Everything he did I could do better. He knew it. He couldn't even read and write. I was going to see somebody and see what I could do about making him pay me. He came out and said, "I'm coming with you and I'm going to pay you. We are good friends. There is no need to quarrel."

We drove into the city and I was driving. Just before we came into the town he pulled out twenty pesos.

"Here's the money," he said.

"You motherless bitch," I said to him and told him what he could do with the money. "You give fifty pesos to that punk and then offer me twenty when you owe me six hundred. I wouldn't take a nickel from you. You know what you can do with it."

I got out of the car without a peso in my pocket and I didn't know where I was going to sleep that night. Later I went out with a friend and got my things from his place. I never spoke to him again until this year. I met him walking with three friends in the evening on the way to the Callao cinema in the Gran Via in Madrid. He put his hand out to me.

"Hello Roger, old friend," he said to me. "How are you? People say you are talking against me. That you say all sorts of unjust things about me."

"All I say is you never had a mother," I said to him. That's the worst thing you can say to insult a man in Spanish.

"That's true," he said. "My poor mother died when I was so young it seems as though I never had a mother. It's very sad."

There's a queen for you. You can't touch them. Nothing, nothing can touch them. They spend money on themselves or for vanity, but they never pay. Try to get one to pay. I told him what I thought of him right there on the Gran Via, in front of three friends, but he speaks to me now when I meet him as though we were friends. What kind of blood is it that makes a man like that?

The End