Like Clay

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Abstract

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THE SMALL boy leaned, stomach first, against the meat display case, traced circles with the toe of his left shoe behind the braced right leg, and peeked through the glass at his father, who was methodically chopping meat. The shiny blade leaped high, then dropped deliberately with a whack to split the bone in the side of beef. Images of the French Revolution, the guillotine blade, and the heads that rolled paraded before Mark's eyes; then each piece of meat that fell became another head falling into the basket.

Mark fingered the rough wool suit, strange to him still, and wondered when his mother would be ready to take Grandma to Des Moines to the bus. He chuckled to himself as he pictured his third grade pals bent over their desks in school, while he was free to roam and travel all day. The telephone jangled shrilly from its perch in the rear of the store, then rang again insistently, nearly shaking the receiver from the black prongs which held it. Mr. Morrison laid the beef down on the chopping block. Wiping his hands across the white store apron, he turned and strode toward the telephone. Mark pattered behind the former “guillotine executioner,” now transformed into Captain Video's Ranger.
about to receive a message from outer space for Mark and his
two cats—one black, one white, like the miniature magnets
of scotty dogs.

Mr. Morrison lifted the receiver and repeated in a busi­ness-like voice, “Morrison’s Grocery. . . . Yes. . . . Just
a moment.” He covered the mouthpiece with the palm of
his hand, leaned to look toward the front bench, and yelled,
“Bernice, it’s for you. Long distance!”

Mark’s mother left his grandma standing near the suit­cases and hurried to the telephone. She voiced a “hello,”
then unconsciously raised her tone to make her words heard
across the miles. “Yes, Al.” Silence. Mark sensed an unea­siness creeping over him. Her face turned chalky white as
she broke in with, “Oh, no!”

“What’s the matter, Mommy?” Mark plucked at her
arm.

“We’ll come right away.” She hung up, swallowed hard,
and fought the mistiness which crept into her blue eyes.
Mark followed close behind with a puzzled look as she hes­i­tantly walked towards her mother. She placed a hand on
the elderly lady’s shoulder. “That was Al. I’m afraid I have
some bad news.” She blurted out, “Daddy has passed away.”

The woman stared an instant at her daughter in dis­belief. “No!” Then the flood gates lifted, letting grief pour
out. Mark found himself suddenly in the back of the store,
peeking down the long aisle of soap, cereals, and flour sacks
at the pair of wailing women. His skin was crawling un­comfortably and his insides churned. His mother sobbed
phrases of “a heart attack at work this morning” and “there
wasn’t any pain” accompanied by his grandma’s insistent “I
shouldn’t have left him. I should have been home.”

Mark yearned for this eternity of sadness to end, when
he could see his “gramma” as she had been that morning at
breakfast, laughing and shaking her waistlength braids not
yet wound in an angelic circle on her head, as Snowball and
Blackie had sat like duplicate bookends, one guarding each
side and pawing at the dancing snakes. She had whispered
in her merry Scandinavian brogue to Mark, “I yust don’t
know about t’ose two littl’ dickens.”

Mark now looked to his father behind him, who had
been pacing back and forth with hands in his pockets
beneath his apron, a frown on his face. "You'd better run on to school. We'll take Grandma home, and one of the sales girls can bring you later."

At his desk, Mark sat in still amazement and repeated to himself, "Grandpa is dead. He isn't alive anymore." He glanced around with contempt at his chums who were not paying enough due respect and awe to one whose grandfather had just died.

He returned home that night in time to be promptly shipped by Janice, head sales clerk, to his grandparents' home for the funeral.

Mark entered his grandma's house a bit leerily, anticipating another scene of sadness and crying people. To his surprise his uncle Al greeted him with a cheery, "Hi, little Mark! Give me a hand with your suitcases, will you, boy?"

Mark struggled into the hall with one cumbersome piece of luggage, as a drone of serious voices vibrated softly from the living room. In the dining room, at the head of the table where Grandpa had reigned over every meal, sat his grandma, a stony mask on her usually bright face. She stared straight ahead as a middle-aged man in a dreary black suit voiced in regretful tones the prices and styles of head markers. Mark's mother sat at Grandma's elbow, suggesting this selection, then that one, and receiving from Grandma a quiet, "Yust whatever you t'ink is best, Bernice."

Mark squatted unobtrusively on a foot stool, scratched a persistant itch on top of his head, and surveyed the mass of relatives. Grandpa's chair that had always eased his tired body into a lulling snore every night after work, looked strange with Uncle Lars occupying it. Mark remembered, "But Gran'pa isn't here. He's dead. He's dead." His lips formed the word soundlessly. "Dead."

His parents soon came over to take Mark to see Grandpa for the last time.

At the funeral home, Mark spied first the baskets and vases filled with blotches of flowers, then their suffocating fragrances reached his nose. Around the room stood a few mourning figures of people unknown to Mark; he almost resented their intrusion into his private experience. A glance at his father turning from a large, smoothly-polished
box, not quite hidden behind the flowers, caused Mark's heart to quicken and his stomach to flip over. His father brusquely brushed a tear from the corner of his eye and squeezed both eyes tightly shut to waylay any other signs of emotion.

Mark's mother led him to the box that had upset his father; yet curiosity did not stop Mark from standing on tip toe to look into its mysteries. There lay Grandpa in his Sunday suit, hands folded as he had always slept with them crossed on his stomach; but something troubled Mark. Grandpa's skin had the texture of the clays at school, and his lips and eye-lids were fused shut. Mark darted toward the door, then waited impatiently for his mother to follow, weeping as she had that morning — so long ago.

After the funeral, when the Morrison car at last pulled in front of their store, Mark leaped out of the vehicle before it stopped, receiving a fleeting reprimand from his mother while he galloped into the building to greet the sales girls.

"Hi Jan. Where's my cats?"

"Whoa, boy." Janice placed a hand out before the kinetic bundle of energy. "You're going to have to take this like a little man. Blackie swallowed some poison last night. We buried him in the back yard."

"No! No! Blackie, come here. Here, Blackie! Here, Snowball!" The boy tore into the backyard, stumbling over Snowball as tears blurred his vision. The cat meowed a painful disapproval. Mark blindly reached down to scoop the white cat into his arms and ran to a freshly-dug mound of earth near the building. Kneeling abruptly beside the grave, he sobbed his misery into the soft fur of an indifferent cat.