The Grave

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Abstract

DAVID reached up, pulling his favorite card from the stack on top of the desk. It was white, with gold letters above the picture of Jesus. He couldn’t read the words, but he knew what they said. “In Sympathy.” He said it out loud, enjoying the sound of the long word, and proud that he could say it correctly. He looked at the rest of the cards, then turned to his mother. “There must have been a lot of people who liked Gran’pa.”
DAVID reached up, pulling his favorite card from the stack on top of the desk. It was white, with gold letters above the picture of Jesus. He couldn’t read the words, but he knew what they said. “In Sympathy.” He said it out loud, enjoying the sound of the long word, and proud that he could say it correctly. He looked at the rest of the cards, then turned to his mother. “There must have been a lot of people who liked Gran’pa.”

Mrs. Brown put down the card she was reading and drew her small son close to her. She lifted him to her lap, smoothing his wrinkled shirt and kissing the short blonde hair. “Yes, a lot of people are going to miss Grandpa. I’ll miss him, but then I have my first-grader and his daddy to keep me from being lonely. Grandma doesn’t have anyone.” They both thought about that for a minute, then David’s mother added, “Why don’t we go see Grandma this week-end? Would you like that?”

David nodded vigorously, pleased with the thought of making his Grandma happy. He would show her his new book that was all about dogs. He glanced up. His mother was looking at the cards again.
Through the window by the desk, David could see Mark walking along the garden that separated the two yards. He slid off his mother's lap and ran to the back door. As usual, he forgot to hold it, and it banged shut.

“What ya got?” he demanded, peering at the object Mark had cupped in his hands.

“A dead bird.” Proudly, Mark revealed his treasure. This time, he had something his older friend didn’t know about. He placed the bird in the grass, and the two boys squatted down to examine it.

“Let’s have a funeral for it!” David suggested, looking at his friend for approval.

“OK!” Mark had never seen one, but he had heard enough about the one David had just been to to be enthusiastic about the idea.

“You get some leaves an’ grass—an’ stuff like that. I’ll get my shovel,” David ordered as he raced to the garage. He returned in a minute with the bright red tool, and began digging a hole at the edge of the garden. He worked furiously, but in spite of his efforts, he wasn’t quite finished when Mark came over. Just like he always did, Mark made a fuss about it being his turn. As usual, David gave him the shovel and let him finish the hole. “Cry-Baby,” he taunted as his neighbor started to dig. Mark ignored the insult.

The tiny grave was finally finished, with David closely supervising. Then, he found a cardboard box in the garage which they lined with the grass and weeds. They gently placed the bird in its coffin and carried it over to the back steps.

“Now what do we do?” Mark wanted to know.

“Shhh . . .” David was disgusted. “Don’t you know we’re in church? Now . . . you sit down and I’ll be the minister.” David stepped back, facing his friend and the bird. “This was a good bird—he would sing an’ fly an’ make people happy. He was good so he’ll go to heaven. Let us sing a song for him . . . We’ll sing ‘Jesus Loves Me’.”

“I don’t know that one,” Mark protested.

“What do you know?” David asked. Mark never went to Sunday School, so he didn’t know any church songs. They
argued for a while, then sang the only one Mark knew.
"From the land of sky-blue wa . . . ha . . . ters, comes the
beer refreshing . . . Hamms . . . the beer refreshing."

"Now I say a prayer." David struggled with the Lord's
Prayer for a while, then gave up and said the one he knew.

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray the Lord my soul to keep
If I should die before I wake
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
Amen.

"Now we walk around an' look at him," David informed
his friend. When they had circled the box a few times, he
poked Mark and they carried the box to the grave. They put
the lid on it, then put it in the hole. "Now you say a prayer,"
David ordered.

Mark said the one he had learned at David's house.
"Thank you for the food we eat. . . ."

"Amen," said David as he grabbed the shovel and cov­
ered the grave. Mark started to fuss, so David told him he
could stomp the dirt down. As they finished, David's mother
called him to supper. The two boys decided to make the
cross sometime the following week, and David went in.

During supper, David was quiet and serious, thinking
again of the funeral he had been to, three weeks ago. "Why
do people cry so much? I didn't cry." He looked at his par­
ents.

Mrs. Brown tried again to answer the now familiar ques­
tion from her son. "I know you didn't cry, David. That
was brave of you. Some day you'll know why people cry, but
for now . . . well, I might cry if Daddy had to go away for
a long time, or if I thought I'd never see my Davy again . . . .
People just knew they were going to miss Grandpa."

"But we'll see him when we go to heaven. And you said
he was happy there 'cause he's not sick anymore." David
couldn't understand.

His father answered this time. "Yes, David, he is happy
now. But we miss him, so we're sad and we cry. Why, when
you were a little boy, Mother and I couldn't even leave you
with a baby-sitter, you would cry so much. We tried a couple
of times, but you missed us so much, you’d still be crying in your sleep when we got back. Do you see?”

David nodded. They had told him the same things before, but he felt there was more to it than what they said. He didn’t know what, but there was something. Maybe heaven really wasn’t as good as they said it was. . . .

David watched television, then went to bed early at his mother’s insistence.

The week-end was a long one for such a small boy. A long, hot drive to Grandma’s—and he had to be so good when they got there, no one to play with, everyone so quiet. Grandma’s eyes were pink and watery—she didn’t seem to like his dog book.

Nobody played with David. His mother pushed him in the swing, but even that wasn’t much fun. Everyone was quiet. He wished that Grandpa was back.

David fell asleep in the back seat of the car on their way home, Sunday, and didn’t wake up till the next morning. The sun was making yellow spots on the floor of his bedroom, and he could hear the washing machine making its funny noises. He looked out the hall window, and saw the wash hanging on the line. His mother was already working in the garden, so he knew it must be late.

He used the toilet, then pulled on a cotton shirt and some faded blue shorts, and ran outside.

After a while, he got tired of helping, and began digging roads and tunnels for his cars. Mrs. Brown helped him build a bridge out of some sticks and string, then went inside to fix lunch. David made his road longer, making mountains and deep ditches for it to go over and around.

He took a couple of big shovelfuls, then looked in surprise. There was the cardboard box they had buried, all soggy and soft from the rain on Sunday. He wanted to open it—to see the bird—but some fear, something unknown, stopped him. He drew back, afraid, yet curious. He poked it with his shovel, then slowly—suddenly—flipped the lid off the box and looked in.

The bird—oh, the horrible bird. Its body was decaying—dead, yet crawling with tiny forms of life.

David choked, he couldn’t breath. He knew, he saw—the “why.” And the tears came, in great racking sobs.