Father’s Coffin

Don Wolfe*
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Abstract

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I never knew my father very well. When I was a child, he held various jobs that seemed to keep him busy. Or maybe I wasn’t at home much. I spent most of my time playing army with the jillion boys who lived in our neighborhood, or sitting alone in the cellar. So perhaps he was gone a lot, or perhaps I was, but one way or the other I don’t remember being around him for more than ten minutes at a time. But I do remember one thing most clearly about him. Only it doesn’t really have anything to do with Father. Or maybe whatever it has to do with him isn’t clear to me. My brother would know if I ever asked him, I suspect, because he was 18 when Father died. I was only ten.

I remember my mother well. My brother left for college the day after Father’s funeral, so Mom and I had eight years alone—or she had eight years alone, I should say, while I was out playing army, then playing with cars, then girls, and Father was resting in his coffin under the ground.

The coffin was made of ebony. From the day Father and my brother hauled it down into the cellar to the day of the funeral, I must have scrutinized every detail on it, from the handcarved symmetry of the inside panels to the shiny gold rings on the handles. I can still feel, lodged in my fingertips, the smooth weave of the black satin lining. I can still hear the ominous creak of the lid hinges. But most of all I can see the faces of the gargoyles perched on the four corners of the lid, casting their judgmental stares across the
cellar like the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. I must have spent hundreds of hours sitting by the coffin, staring into those faces until my eyes were bloodshot and my neck ached so badly I could hardly stand it. Every time I stared at them, I was in a trance. When my eyes got bloodshot and my neck ached from craning over the side of the casket, and when the strain of kneeling over to get a closer look made me dizzy, a solemn peace engulfed me and I knew I was getting closer to whatever it was I looked for in those faces. The aches would get worse and worse, and I'd notice them less and less, until finally, if I stared long enough, I'd discover something new in those expressions every time. No matter how many times I peered into them, I'd always see something new—perhaps little circles on the eyes that made me shudder as I sensed the gargoyles glaring through me, or perhaps a single prong on a claw which seemed to prick some hollow shell in my unconscious. I was not disturbed as much as fascinated.

In a way I associated Mom with the coffin more than Father. Many of the times when I sat in the dank, musty basement examining the casket, it was Mom who got me out of the trance. I usually didn't hear her coming down the stairs; then she would startle me with a hand on my shoulder. I would glance up at her and she would frown. "Come to dinner," she'd say. And as I'd follow her up the steps to the kitchen, still pondering some feature on a gargoyle's face, she'd add, "Why don't you read or something? I wish your father would store that thing somewhere else." Then she'd look at me and shake her head.

At the funeral, as I was kneeling by the grave to place my flowers on the casket, Mom startled me that same way. She placed her hand lightly on my shoulder and I shuddered. I looked up at the vague face behind the black veil and thought I saw a smile. It was a sorrowful smile which reminded me of the doom-like grin on one of the gargoyles' faces. As I stood by her and we watched the coffin being lowered into the earth, I wondered if she knew how sad I
was too. Only I wasn’t thinking of Father. I started crying when the coffin touched the bottom of the grave.

One day, about two years before Father died, I was in the backyard playing army with two friends, Gary and Dave. I was merrily firing away at Gary’s head as it popped up and down over a bush when I glanced up and saw Father watching us from the kitchen window. He grinned at me for a moment and turned away. Suddenly, under a strange compulsion, I leaped out from behind a tree and made a rush at my playmates. ‘‘Pow! Pow!’’ they shouted, and I fell on my face, playing dead. Two plastic gun-barrels poked my ribs as I rolled over and peered up into my friends’ laughing faces.

‘‘You got me,’’ I said. ‘‘Let’s quit.’’

‘‘What do you wanna do?’’ Gary asked.

‘‘Let’s go inside. I wanna show you something.’’ I had only recently begun to take my daily trips into the cellar to examine the coffin, but I had never shown it to my friends.

The three of us entered the back door and deposited our guns on the freezer. Mom was standing over a pot of stew as we marched in. She looked at me for a moment and asked, ‘‘What are you boys up to?’’

‘‘We’re just gonna go look at the coffin,’’ I answered. I saw my father’s shadow cross the living room floor beyond the kitchen as I followed my friends down the steps into the cellar.

‘‘Hey, look at that!’’ Gary shouted, running across the damp concrete floor to the table on which the coffin lay. Dave strode after him, laughing and pointing. Both of them craned their heads to look into the open casket.

‘‘Don’t touch it,’’ I said. ‘‘You can only look.’’

Gary pouted at me. ‘‘Aw, come on. Let me get inside.’’

I just stood there for a moment, hands on my hips, gazing into the seemingly infinite darkness of the satin lining. I almost fell into a trance, until Gary repeated, ‘‘Aw, come on.’’

‘‘Okay. But take off your shoes,’’ I said nervously, listening to Father’s creaking footsteps above us.
Gary crawled in as I stood panting and watching the stairs. When I turned back to the coffin, Gary was lying in it with his eyes closed. Dave giggled. He poked at Gary's "dead" body.

"You better get out," I said, glancing up at the ceiling. Gary didn't move. Dave jabbed his ribs again.

"Get out, Gary!" I whispered angrily. He didn't move.

"What'll your dad do if he finds us?" Dave asked.

"I don't know. Be quiet." I was shaking. "Get out, Gary." I pulled at his arms. "Get out! Get out!"

"Okay. Okay. Damn."

"Don't say that!" I yelled. "Not in there." Father's footsteps echoed from the kitchen overhead. "Hurry, get out," I croaked.

Gary climbed out of the coffin. He looked at me sideways. "Come on, Dave," he said. "Let's go down to Marty's."

I followed Dave and Gary up the stairs. Dave opened the door, and, as I stepped into the kitchen, I saw Father kissing Mom. I stopped in the doorway and they looked up.

"You boys were making an awful lot of noise down there, weren't you?"

I just stood there staring at her, open-mouthed.

"What were you boys doing?" Father asked.

"N-no-nothing," I stuttered. "We were just looking at the thing." I looked around for Dave and Gary, but they had already picked up their guns and left. Turning back to face Mom, I must have looked like I would faint.

"What thing?" Father asked.

"The cof-coffin," I muttered.

Father chuckled. "Well, that's all right. You don't have to be so nervous."

Mom looked up at him. He seemed to hover over her like a twilight shadow. "Do you think it's good for the boys to look at the coffin?" she asked him.

He smiled as he drew his arm from her tiny waist. Then he laughed. "Sure," he said, and passed into the next room.
Later that night, when Father and Mom had gone to bed, I slipped down into the cellar and wiped Gary's footprints off the satin.

During the next two weeks I didn't go into the cellar at all, until one night I had a dream. All I remember about the dream was that it was about my father, only he wasn't my father—he was a gargoyle. That night I got out of bed while everyone else was asleep and crept into the basement. I lay in the coffin until daylight and imagined I was Father.

At Christmas-time every year Father used to invite his ten brothers and sisters and their husbands, wives, and children over to our house for dinner. That tradition began long before I was born, but after Father put the coffin in the basement when I was six, the annual reunion became a dreaded event for me. On the Christmas after the coffin came, Father told my aunts and uncles about it and suggested that they all take a look. So they paraded down into the cellar while I, barely old enough to know who these people were, trailed helplessly behind. For some reason I wanted to shout. I was near tears.

I remember how, when all the relatives were gathered in a circle around the casket, Father slowly raised the lid. Suddenly one of my aunts screamed. Then everyone laughed as my brother sat up in the coffin and grinned. It was one of my father's jokes, but I began crying, unnoticed in the corner. Then my uncles climbed in, one after the other, to "try it out" while their wives laughed nervously. Finally Mom heard me squawling and picked me up.

Almost four years later, those same relatives gathered in their circle again at Father's funeral. When the graveside service ended, my brother, Mom, and I stood in a line while all of them came by to offer their condolences. I recall how Uncle Bill squatted down in front of me and patted my cheeks with his hankerchief. He smiled at me.

"You don't have to cry," he said. "Your father is in Heaven now."

I pointed at the grave and looked at him questioningly.
"Oh," he said, cocking his head and squinting at me, "only his body is in there."
"But where's the coffin?"
"In the grave."
"Always?"
"Sure."

He watched me as I walked to the side of the grave and stared at the black box. Mom came to my side. I glanced up at her and clutched at her waist. With tears in my eyes I whispered, "Why did Father build the coffin?"
"For today."

Mom put her arm around my shoulder and turned me back toward our relatives. They were all standing silently, watching us. As we talked away from the grave, I imagined the four gargoyles dancing on the top of the coffin.