A Funeral in Tranquility

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by Kurt Harthoorn
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I WAS belly down on the floor of my room, and the warm air floating out of the heat vent tickled my ear. I could hear Mom and Dad talking in the kitchen.

"We just can't afford to spend any more than we have to. We need the money Grandpa's leaving us for the mortgage on the farm. If we don't use it for that, we'll have to try to get another loan somewhere. You know your father wouldn't want a real fancy funeral, Peggy. And, besides, you need a new coat. The lower price casket will be just fine for him," Dad said.

Mom didn't say anything for a little while, and when she did, she talked slow.

"I suppose you're right," Mom said. "Dad never was one to let people fuss over him. He probably wouldn't want us to spend more than we should. I just don't want it to look cheap. If only Harry would go 50-50 with us, there'd be no problem."

"You don't have to worry about that. He might have helped before he heard the will, but he won't now," Dad said.

It was quiet again, and then Dad started talking.

"Do you want to take Randy to the funeral? I think he's probably old enough by now, don't you?" he said.

"Yes, I think so," Mom replied.

I was glad to hear that. After all the talk about funerals lately, I didn't want to miss it.

"I'll go into town and make the arrangements for the day after tomorrow, if that's all right?"

"Yes," Mom said. "Friday will be fine."

I heard Mom walk towards the foot of the stairs.

"Randy," she yelled. "Are you ready for school yet?"

"Just about, Mom," I said. "I'll be down in a minute."

We had been at the hospital until it was pretty late, so Mom thought I should sleep a little longer this morning.
We stayed until the doctor said Grandpa was dead. The doctor thought it was a stroke. I didn't know what that was, but I figured whatever it was happened because he was working to hard with his hogs.

Being out of school on Friday made it seem sort of like a holiday, and when we got to church, it felt funny to be there on a day other than Sunday.

"Why is the bell ringing so slow today, Mommy?" I said.

"It always rings slow for a funeral," she replied. "Now, I want you to be a good boy, and don't cause any trouble."

She straightened my good shirt and ran her hand over my white-blond hair.

"Okay, Mom," I said.

This was my first funeral ever, but I knew what happened to people when they died. My dog Maxie and me had run around all the tombstones in Tranquility's public cemetery chasing grinnies lots of times before, but I didn't really know how folks went about getting there.

I'd missed Grandpa already, but I noticed it more at meal times.

After supper he always said, "Want to read the funny's, Randy boy?"

I could read a little by myself now, but it was fun to sit on Grandpa's lap because he had a different voice for every character. He was best doing ladies, but his smoking made my eyes hurt, and my stomach crawled around.

I walked into church between Mom and Dad, and we went clear to the front. After we sat down, I tried to see everyone without turning completely around. It seemed like most of the people there were pretty old. Usually, the stores in town closed while a funeral was going on.

"Mommy," I whispered excitedly. "Look! There's Uncle Harry and Aunt Gladys," I said as I pointed at them across the aisle.

"Don't point!" Mommy said. "Sit down and be good. see them, Randy."
The preacher came in and started talking. He was short and chubby, and he looked almost square with his black robe on. But his arms seemed long when he reached out at the crowd.

He started softly. "Dearly beloved. We are gathered here to commemorate the departure of a man we all knew and respected. Jake Danks was a fine man, and it is a time for rejoicing because his soul has gone home. The hymns of rejoicing are 297 and 324. Let's sing all the verses."

The congregation sang "Blest Be the Tie" and "We Shall Meet on That Beautiful Shore," but I didn't know what a tie or a shore had to do with Grandpa dying. After that, the rest was just like church so I quit listening and waited for the amen. I couldn’t figure out why everyone looked so grouchy if they were supposed to be happy.

There was a small bouquet of flowers on the stage that came from some old men that Grandpa played shuffle board with, and there was another one with my Mom and Dad’s name on it. Mom was crying a lot now, and Dad had his arm around her. Aunt Gladys kept dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief, but it still looked dry to me. Grandpa didn’t look much like a real person in his casket. He looked more like a statue for clothes that you see in big store windows. Finally, the last word came, and everyone walked out past the casket. We were the last ones to go, and after we went by, the man who drove the hearse closed the lid. Some of our neighbors carried him out to the big black car.

"Dad," I said. "Is this the first time Grandpa ever rode in a Cadillac?"

Dad thought a while. "I don’t know," he said. "I hope not."

I didn’t quite know what he meant, but he didn’t have time to explain because we had to go to the cemetery.

The neighbors lowered Grandpa into his grave and covered him up. There was lots more crying, and it made me cry, too.

The next day was warm, and I was out in the yard playing with Maxie when I saw Uncle Harry’s old Buick
coming down the road. I hurried into the house.

"Mom," I said. "Uncle Harry's car is coming."

"Oh," she said calmly. "Randy, you'd better go get your father. He's grinding feed."

I shot out the back door and ran around the shop. Dad saw me coming so he shut off the machinery.

"What's wrong, Randy?" Dad said.

"Uncle Harry's comin', and Mom wants you to come to the house," I said.

We headed for the house, and we reached the yard just as Uncle Harry pulled in. Aunt Gladys was with him.

"Hello, Harry," Dad said. "Care to come inside?"

"Yes, I would, John," Harry said. "Come on, Gladys."

Dad didn't look at me on the way to the house, but he told me to go to my room for a while. I ran upstairs to my room and laid down on the floor by the heat vent. I could hear all the voices clearly. Uncle Harry and Aunt Gladys came in and said hello to Mom. I heard our old wooden chairs squeak when they sat down at the table.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Mom said.

"No thanks, Peggy. We just had some," Harry answered.

Uncle Harry's voice sounded jerky, and it was quiet for a little time when he didn't know what to say.

"I'd rather not beat around the bush," Uncle Harry said. "This isn't a social call."

"We didn't figure it was, Harry," Dad said. "What do you have to say?"

"Nothing that you don't expect," Harry said. "We're going to contest the will."

"On what grounds," Dad said calmly.

"That Dad was incompetent when he had it drawn up," Harry said.

Mom shouted, "Harry, how could you say that about our father? You know it's not true!"

"Oh no I don't," Harry said. "You know he was getting a little soft in the head. You can't say he wasn't. And Dad's lawyer sides with me. He advised Dad to leave
us equal shares. He told him it would only cause trouble if he didn’t, and he was right.”

I didn’t like to hear Uncle Harry say that about Grandpa. He was lying. I wanted to quit listening, so I started to pull the rug over the vent, but I couldn’t make myself do it.

My Dad started talking and his voice was getting louder. “That’s all that really bothers you, isn’t it Harry? You’d make your own father out for a nut for a few hundred bucks, wouldn’t you? If you’d treated him decent when he lived with you, you wouldn’t have this problem. You let Gladys treat him like a dog.”

“What do you mean?” Aunt Gladys screeched.

“You know, Gladys,” Dad said. “Stuff like makin’ him eat a cold breakfast if he overslept and makin’ him do your housework all the time.”

“That’s enough, John,” Uncle Harry broke in. “What makes you any better? We didn’t baby him, but you played up to him, and he did just what you wanted, didn’t he? You’re real smart, John, but it’ll never hold up in court. You even used the kid to your advantage because you knew a kid’s something we ain’t got and can’t have. How big a cut are you givin’ him, John? I’d say he ought to get at least 50 percent of the extra take, wouldn’t you?”

They all kept yelling back and forth at the same time about how Grandpa was crazy and that he left my Mom and Dad more because of me, and it all made me so mad that I started to cry. The things they said weren’t true, and I’d listened long enough. I jumped up, wiped my hand across my face, and ran downstairs into the kitchen. They quit yelling when they saw me.

“Didn’t you like Grandpa at all?” I said.

Nobody else said anything. They stared at me, and it didn’t feel good so I went to the magazine rack and jerked the funny section out of the paper. I hurried to Granpa’s old chair, threw myself in it, and put the paper up in front of my face to hide my tears.