

The Funeral

by C. Thomas Murray

This is a story that had to be written, perhaps not, because what really is required? Nothing. There aren't requirements, only expectations. I'm writing this, because, at the time it happened it seemed strange to me. People might think I'm writing because now, it makes sense, right? It doesn't, I'll tell you that much. I'll also tell you what it's about. It's about a funeral that I went to when I was a kid. It was the first funeral I really thought about. I'd been to a few before, but never really thought about it, never really cared. But this one was different, it was my best friends older brother. He'd got killed off at war sometime. I'd never met him, but they called him a hero. I only went because it was my best-friend, and he was pretty messed up: so pay attention if you want. It's not pretty, or even good. But it happened to me, and kind of changed me, I guess.

When I was thirteen, the summer before seventh grade, I remember being at my best-friend's house, sitting on his front porch, drinking soda from bottles, and talking about the girls from our school. The sky was cloudless, and the air was humid and sticky. Jeff, my best-friend, kept saying 'damn' or 'shit' every other sentence because he'd heard his cousin say it sometime, and he thought it was cool. So did I. I kept thinking about how the day was going great, aside from the sticky air. We were going to go to the pool, and Jeff kept claiming he'd talk to the lifeguard, but she was in high-school, and I knew he wouldn't. Jeff's little sister was riding her bike up and down the sidewalk, going two houses past, either side of Jeff's house, following their mother's strict guidelines to not go past those two driveways. She turned around, back and forth, about a million times. I wondered why she never got bored, biking past the same unchanging driveways and lawns.

After awhile she got off her bike and decided to come bother us. It pissed Jeff off right away. Older siblings have a way of doing that. When they've got some friend over they don't ever seem to want

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-2»

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their little sisters around. Even if everyone else doesn't mind. I didn't mind, his little sister wasn't too annoying. Jeff saw things differently, "Hey, we were here first."

"I know," she said, sitting down on the front step.

"Then leave."

"No thanks," she said loosely.

This made Jeff really mad. He groaned, "Can't you just go play with your dolls, or some shit?"

There was silence. The only thing you could hear was his little sister breathing quickly. It seemed she was getting in more air than she could hold. She spun around joyously, "I'm telling mom," she said, tilting her head as she stood up, a great smile spread across her face; she had also been around the cousin with the dirty mouth.

"What do you mean?" Jeff said, trying to act calm.

"I know you aren't supposed to say that word."

Jeff tried to act like his sister had no idea what she was talking about and what she already *did* know. This was a tactic I had seen before, and it never worked. Jeff would try to persuade his sister that there was 'some kind of misunderstanding,' or 'she hadn't heard right,' or something like that. And it always came across as strange for me, how was he going to talk his sister out of getting him busted?

Jeff jumped off the porch. I could see the distress in his face. They looked like a wild parade: his sister lead the way, and in a frenzy Jeff followed in her victorious wake. I sat on the porch alone for a while. I was the first one to see the car. The car was black, that's about all that I remember about it. Just as Jeff and his little sister were finishing their chase, and I heard them slamming through the screen door that was at the other side of the house, the black car pulled up on the driveway and two men stepped out. One of them was tall, with thinning hair that made a sort of island just above his forehead. The other guy was younger, and his face was grey and pale. They walked up the driveway and onto the porch. They both nodded at me, and the tall one said to me, "Hello, son, is your mother home?"

I looked at them both for a second, and realized they must not have know Jeff's family. Then I told them that I didn't live there and that the lady they were looking for was inside. The tall man forced a weak smile, and I thought they must have been salesmen or something because they were dressed pretty well. The younger guy just stood there, his face looking grey, and his lips tight and thin. They walked past me and rang the doorbell. A few seconds later Jeff's mom came to the door. In the seconds before she came to the door I sat there awkwardly; it's funny how self-conscience you become when you don't know what's going on. I'd like to say it was something poetic, like time slowed down, and the seconds turned to hours, and I thought millions of thoughts, but that's not how it was, not for me.

Before the door opened there were a few rough yells, presumably Jeff's trial had to be postponed. The door swung open, and Jeff's mom stood there, staring through the screen-door. Her face looked grey. I couldn't tell if it was only the shadow of the screen-door. Then the tall man started talking, and I knew it wasn't just a screen-door, or a shadow. He told her that he and the man with him were from the army and that they had very unfortunate news. He spoke with a grim voice, and with each word the air on the porch seemed to get heavier.

A hazy ghost, Jeff's mom stood behind the screen-door. She stood in silence, hiding behind the thin, wire screen, as if it gave some kind of protection. The tall man kept talking. The words kept spilling forward, and I didn't move. It was like an unreality, and I just stared. My eyes meet the screen door, the person hiding behind a wall of false security, our eyes meet. The man kept talking about regrets and duty and country and death. And I watched the forgotten eyes. In that moment I saw true sadness: deep and wanting, fearful and empty. Through the shadow of the porch the sad eyes stared back.

The rest of the event passed in a blur, running together with every other moment, as the tall man kept talking. Sometime along the

way Jeff's mom started to cry. And all the man said was, "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I'm sorry for your loss. Your son was a hero. I'm sorry." And somewhere in there Jeff and his sister came to the door, and no-one thought about Jeff and his dirty mouth.

After awhile the men left, first the tall man followed by the short one. They both nodded at me as they went by. The young man walked stiffly, his face still ashy-grey, and I heard the tall man say to him as they got into their car, "Not bad for your first time, soldier. Not bad." The young man stepped into the car and closed his eyes.

I stayed fixed to the porch, unable to move, or talk. I just sat there for awhile as the three of them cried, and no-one noticed me.

pt. II

So this is the second half of the story, the story about the funeral, the actual funeral. I hope you don't feel cheated by the first part, because the title seems misleading, but someone told me that there was truth in that, whatever that means. I don't know much about truths or lies, the whole business seems rather vague. People always seem to be blabbing or harping about the morality of someone else, and when you think about it you kind of laugh to yourself, at least I do, sometimes, because those guys (are [full of crap] fools) really have no idea about what they're saying or what they mean. I heard someone whining about the immorality of 'our day and age' and how bad it was, and I sort of laughed to myself because this guy had divorced his wife and gotten remarried to some girl who was way better looking. He always made excuses about why he really got divorced, but you could never believe them, and then he'd sort of smile, a kind of fake, dejectedly humble smile, but you could tell he was just happy because he had a sexy wife. "Our day and age", he really said that. It made him sound like an old textbook or something. And that got me to thinking, why does everyone act like the world is getting worse? I think it's always been pretty bad, or at least for a long time it's been equally bad.

Just look at the Bible, God made people and they screwed it up right away. The world's equally bad.

But I've gotten way off topic; this is the part of the story right after the first, that's why it's called part two —

Jeff and his sister and his mom stood there crying, I just sat there. I wasn't sure if I should say something nice, or apologetic, or express my 'grave sympathy'. I'd really thought about saying the last one, but ended up not saying anything at all. It's questionable how long I sat there — I really couldn't tell, but some time later they were done crying, or at least ready to look at me. Jeff looked at me, his eyes were a pinkish red and sort of swollen. I just looked at him and tried to mumble something about how I was really sorry for his loss and I could imagine how he must have felt, "Terrible, terrible," I remember muttering over and over many times, constantly shaking my head. That was one of the dumbest things I've ever said — I didn't realize it at the time, but I did later that night — how could I know how horrible it was or how bad he felt? His brother had just been shot to death or blown up. I didn't even have a brother.

They all stood there rubbing their eyes and I stood up with them, awkwardly mumbling. After awhile I couldn't take it any more and said that I heard my mom calling. So I said goodbye and began walking down the street in the direction of my house. My mom wasn't even home.

All that night I felt awful. When my mom got home I told her what had happened, and she said that it was a tragedy and she would go see Jeff's mom the next day. It was weird for me, having to tell someone that someone else had died, and then I thought about Jeff and wonder they had called to tell his dad or waited until he got home from work.

The rest of the night I couldn't stop thinking about Jeff. As I was brushing my teeth I kept thinking about what it would be like to have someone close to you die, and it made me think about all of the attention and sympathy you would get from other people, and you'd

be the kid who 'suffered such a tragedy', and everyone would notice you. That was one of the most selfish things I ever thought, even though I didn't mean it.

And that made me feel even worse.

The next morning I woke up with the first cracks of dawn. Hazy sunlight fell through the window panes and onto the floor — it was cloudy outside.

I went downstairs and sat alone. My mom came down an hour or two later — I'm not sure which, because I had turned on the TV but wasn't really watching it.

She didn't ask me why I was up so early, because it was Saturday, and a cartoon had just started. She told me that she was going to see Jeff's mom later that morning, sometime after breakfast, and wanted to know if I wanted to come, too. I said that I did, mostly because I felt bad for leaving the other day, not because I really wanted to.

It was still cloudy outside. We didn't talk much on our way to Jeff's house. My mom talked a little about how sad it all was, but for the most part we didn't say anything. Besides, it wasn't very long to go.

When we got to Jeff's house, walked up the porch steps, I remember thinking to myself that even the house looked sad, (and then I thought I was going crazy.) The little military flag still hung in their living-room window. It seemed to hang very sullenly, like it was self-conscious, the little flag, like it knew that it stood for something very different than it had a few days ago. I wondered to myself if they meant to leave it up, or if they just couldn't take it down yet.

My mom knocked lightly on the door. I stood off to the side, looking back up the street in the direction of our house. The door clicked, opening from the inside out; I turned my eyes to the porch floor.

A small ant ran haphazardly across the wooden floor, precariously carrying a dead ant twice its own size.

"Hey," Jeff said in a slow monotone.

I looked up and tried to smile.

"Jeffery, I'm so sorry," My mom said with a sympathetic look.

Jeff nodded, a distressed, tired look in his eyes, "I'll go get my mom."

"What a shame. It really is," my mom said, shaking her head at the empty doorway.

Jeff came back, "She's coming," he said from behind the screen door, "you can come in if you want." He opened the screen door and we went inside. As I walked by I tried to smile at him. He tried to smile too, but neither of us really did.

We sat down at their kitchen table. There didn't seem to be any lights on in the house; the same hazy light came through the windows and lay in splotchy patterns on the table. The patterns jumped and moved with the swaying of the trees outside.

My mom kept saying how sad it all was, and how hard it must be for their family, and if they needed anything just to let her know. Pretty soon Jeff's mom came into the kitchen and she and my mom went to sit in the living-room. We were left alone, Jeff and I. Neither of us said anything so we just sat there for awhile.

"Look. . . Jeff. . . ." I began, breaking the silence.

"No. Don't. Let's not talk about that."

"Oh. . ." I mumbled, and we slipped back into silence.

Neither of us said much after that, and we never talked about his brother. Jeff talked some, but he never once looked at me when he said something.

Our moms walked back in, about a half-hour later; they had both been crying, but were trying to act like they hadn't.

"See ya," Jeff said absently as I got up to leave.

"Alright, see ya."

Jeff's mom followed us into the hallway, and opened the door. I stepped onto the porch while my mom was saying to Jeff's mom: "Please let me know if there's anything I can do."

"Okay," she said, closing the screen door.

My mom and I walked down the porch steps. I remember looking back at the sad house as we walked away, through the screen door I could (still) see Jeff. He was still sitting at the kitchen table; covered in a dark, patterned shadow: there weren't any lights on in the house.

"The funeral is in two weeks. We've been invited. . . ."

"Oh. . . ."

"Mrs. Mortes said that it would mean alot to their family."

"Okay," I mumbled in agreement.

"Jeff's having a really hard time and. . . ." she began, not finishing.

"I know," I said, filling the silence.

We got home and the next two weeks went by pretty normal for me. The only thing that was different was that I didn't see Jeff very much. He would come out and play baseball if a bunch of kids from the neighborhood were out playing, but only because one of us would go tell him we were playing. He'd play, but he almost never said anything, and he was almost always by himself.

Not much else happened in the days between then and the funeral, and like I said, I didn't see Jeff very much. So there isn't much point in telling you about it.

As we drove into the church parking-lot you could see little ripples of heat coming off of the cars. The sun was baking down. I stepped out of the car and looked across the parking-lot; over the roofs of the cars the church started to bend, swimming in a murky

kind of heat. The air was humid and hung on my clothes, and made me feel heavier than I was.

We walked into the church; the lobby was full of somber people. It smelled musty, like every old church seems to — at least every old church I ever remember.

Everyone just waited around in the church lobby for the memorial service — that what they called it. It made it sound nicer than 'funeral', I guess that reminds people too much about death.

We waited around in the lobby for awhile and people talked in low voices, like they didn't want to disturb anyone, or have anyone hear them. Jeff's family stood at the side of the room, against one of the walls. Groups of people would sift past them and talk about their son.

Some doors were opened and people started to file into the main part of the church. There was a flag laid over the casket; it looked very formal; and the whole scene was almost elegant: all the people dressed in black, and the casket looking distant and multi-colored in front of all the pews.

We slid into one of the rows. The wood benches were dull in places where the glossy polish had worn off, and you could tell where little kids had kicked the kneelers because there were dints and nicks in the wood.

Some men in full military dress were sitting in the front row with Jeff's family. From the choir loft an organ started to moan. Everyone stood up and sang 'Amazing Grace' and then 'Come Thou Font of Every Blessing':

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;*

I stood there, singing along to the words. Long shadows draped across the floor, surrounded by hallows of freckled light; deep blues and reds stood motionless on the alter. The hymn marched on, the congregation of mourners sang:

*Here I raise my Ebenezer;
Here by Thy great help I've come;*

*And I hope, by Thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.*

The organ wailed, pounding out the tempo. Dark silhouettes sang optimistic words with mournful sorrow:

*How His kindness yet pursues me
Mortal tongue can never tell,*

Everyone stood still, blank faced. It was like a death march, but no-one was moving. I looked across the crowd of shadowed faces, and saw Jeff; his shoulders were sunk in, and he covered his face with his hands. The whole front row had sat down awhile ago, except for the three soldiers; they were trying to be stoic, but even they cried, a little:

*Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

Everything was covered in a grave shroud; the limp flag was like a death-mask. I stared at the tile floor, not wanting to see anything else. I had seen enough:

*Come, my Lord, no longer tarry,
Take my ransomed soul away;
Send thine angels now to carry
Me to realms of endless day.*

The organ moaned on, not paying attention to the melancholy. I stared from the tile floor to the scuffed tops of my shoes and back again. I started to feel angry, or something like angry, but to this day I'm not sure why. I felt angry for the dead man, alone in the dark casket, the lonely brother, the grieving mother.

The dusty atmosphere hung, still and lifeless, just like the stained-glass shroud and the ridiculous hymn. I felt angry, like I had been tricked, as if by some strange illusion, some wicked magic trick. The hymn ended and the pastor started talking. He talked about life and death, but he didn't call it death he called it sleep, and I thought, "but to me, dead is dead."

