

THE VIEWING

The woman standing next to me at the casket says, “He looks at peace,” then dabs the corners of her eyes with a small handkerchief. “So sad, only nineteen. Sad.” She moves away shaking her head. “Sad, sad, sad.”

At peace? The boy looks dead to me. You know, waxy, lips a little blue. But she tagged it. Sad. Yeah. Real sad. A kid OD’ing on heroin won’t leave anybody happy.

I’m in a viewing room at Sexton and Sons Funeral Home in Macon, Georgia. It’s a large room, half-again bigger than a two-car garage. There’s a dozen or more people here in clumps of two or three, talking low, and Merry’s not one of them. Where the hell is she? She was already gone when I woke up, and this is her do not mine. The only connection I have to the kid is seeing the tattered snapshot Merry keeps in her wallet of herself and the boy taken fifteen years ago at her daddy’s funeral. She ain’t seen the kid or family since.

If I’d clicked on the fact Merry wasn’t in the room when I got here, I never would’ve come in. I took the woman at the casket for her. From behind they look alike, henna rinse, a healthy butt, and flat shoes, same as Merry wears so she won’t top me and most guys. Halfway across the room I knew I’d goofed when the casket lady turned a mite sideways, and I saw she didn’t have Merry’s rack. I’d have left, but people were giving me the gander. I would’ve come across as a yo-yo if I’d whipped around and walked out.

To my right, about twenty feet away, two women, one a penny or two over forty and the other circling seventy, are planted on a blue sofa, the short kind with only room enough for two. Hanging over them is that painting of Jesus floating up to heaven, arms stretched out, standing on a small cloud that’s boosted up by those baby-type angels. Below them, a gang of guys, his disciples I reckon, look blown away by it all.

Two dudes stand to the left of the sofa. The one on the end, the one I'm nearest to, has been giving me the fish eye ever since I walked in. Maybe he's a cop, a narc looking for the kid's dealer. The other one is a huge dildo that reminds me of Dudley Do-Right from Rocky and Bullwinkle. His big dimpled chin juts out like a snowplow, and he stands as if he's got a ramrod shoved up his butt. If frowning was money, he could open a bank. Must be Merry's brother-in-law. His left hand grips the shoulder of the younger woman who's gotta be Merry's sister, Trudy. She raised the boy. Her eyes are red and puffy, and she's hugging a small, beat-up teddy bear that's losing some of its stuffing.

The older woman, I take to be Merry's mother, sports a large silver cross dangling from a chain around her neck. She clutches a Bible and has a face like Washington on Rushmore: gray, tight-lipped, and granite hard. She's gussied up in a black dress, and lacy black gloves that run up to her elbows. Kinda creepy, nobody wears gloves such as them anymore.

This whole gig seems tricky to me, and I'd just as soon be fishing for alligators, but Merry is one tough bird. You'd think nothing would get under her skin, yet news of the boy's final needle-nap really whacked her. She traipsed back and forth, mumbling to herself, near wearing a hole in her only rug. She kept it up all night.

Just before sunup, I asked, "Why don't we get some sleep?"

"Richie—we're going to the funeral."

That sounded heavy, so I hedged, "Why the 'we'? I don't know your people."

"Fuck my people. It's my baby."

I thought, *your baby?* Not so's anybody'd know it. But I kept my yap shut.

She went on, "My sister's husband is an uptight ex-marine asshole. He'll probably try to stop me, but if you're with me, he'll show more respect."

That threw me some. It usually took three cops to wrestle Merry into a squad car. Why she'd back off for one jarhead sounded more than a tad funny, until today when I saw the size and cut of him. I must've looked ready to throw in another cop-out, because Merry nailed me with, "Do you like living here?"

And that was that. She fronts the rent.

Merry corralled enough dough for the trip, so here I am, a mutt at a dog show. And I've got the whips and jingles from last night and need a drink real bad. I could hit the street and cadge two bucks for a bottle of Mad Dog, but Merry'll be ticked off if I ain't here when she finally shows. I seen the kid, now I don't know what to do with myself. On the right side of the casket, an easel holds a picture of the boy, and under it some personal things are laid out. I can busy with them while I wait for Merry.

In the photo, the boy wears a cap and gown, which I figure is his high school grad outfit. There's a zit on his chin. Seems as if the photographer could've done something about it. Prob'ly the biggest day of the kid's life, and he's got a three-day zit pasted to his chin forever. On the floor is a skateboard, a stuffed owl, and a framed crayon drawing of a stick-figure boy standing on a rounded green hill. There's a big yellow sun in a blue sky, and the boy has a smiley face. At the top left, spelled out in big letters, "TO MOMMY." At the bottom right, "BOBBY." The Bs are all turned backwards.

I straighten up. *Damn*, if Merry don't get here pronto, she'll owe me a big one, a really big one. But—I owe her big just as well. We met up in a Memphis bar about a year ago and binged on the spot. There's things we got in common starting with vodka, pot, hot wings, and not enough dinero. But more important, Merry had a place, which worked out great because the eviction time had wound down on me. I moved in with her the next day.

Sharing space ain't my nature. I never knew my parents, and I moved from an orphanage to a group home that I skedaddled from at sixteen. But there's times I get awful lonely. I married once for about five years. Agnes was her name. She worked hard, cried a lot, and said she couldn't make it without me. That made me feel worth my salt, but she left when I got sent up the second time.

Bunking with Merry has been mostly okay. She's the only gal I ever been with that has real smarts. She got her GED and works crossword puzzles with a pen. Also, she gets disability checks, plus some cash from pay and tips when she fills in at a diner near Graceland. I pick up odd jobs here and there. We have our shag times, but could be I'm a temp. There's no talk of anything beyond next week, and I get dodgy when she changes the sheets.

Christ, c'mon Merry. I can't look at the kid again. That'd be freaky and rocking from foot to foot makes me look as if I gotta pee. I spot a couple of people holding cups and saucers. On a table, across the room from the sofa, there's two coffee pots, cookies, and some little-bitty sandwiches. I make my way to the table, pour a cup of joe then put my back against the wall where I can keep watch on the door.

I sneak a peek at Merry's people clustered under that picture of a suspended Jesus. I know the feeling, up in the air, not totally here or there.

A couple comes in and walks over to the family. The man and woman lean over, both shaking their heads while giving sympathies to Trudy and her mother. They straighten, still shaking their heads, and speak with the men then go to the casket. That guy standing next to Dudley eyeballs me the whole time, which makes me schitzzy. What's his game? I'm dressed okay. The dark suit I got from St. Vincent's is a little baggy, but fits nice enough with my belt pulled tight, and the blue tie don't have spots. The pants' seat is a bit shiny, but the coat covers it. I wanted black shoes, but brown ones fit better.

He starts in my direction carrying his cup and saucer. I'm trapped. To get out the door, I'd have to go past him. He comes close and says, "I don't believe we've met. I'm Orville Lewis, Bobby's uncle."

Whew. Not a cop, just Merry's brother.

I say, "Name's Richie Duckett. Nice to meet you." That sounded dumb, so I add, "Well... maybe not *nice*, you know... considering everything."

Orville says, "You knew Bobby?"

I shrug. "Not really, I'm a pal of his mother. She oughta be here. She left the motel before me."

Orville jerks back as if I'd slapped him. First time I ever saw sweat actually pop out on a guy's upper lip. He says, kinda squeaky, "*Merriam's here?* You and Merriam are together?"

"Yeah, I guess you could call it that."

His face freezes like the kid in the coffin.

"Came down on the bus."

No response, except a little twitch at the corner of his right eye.

"Twelve hours. Seemed longer. From Memphis to Atlanta, the gal behind us had a poopy baby and was short on diapers."

Orville's cup rattles in the saucer, so I try to steady him. "We changed buses in Atlanta. The leg here was okay."

He settles the cup with his other hand. "Well... Thank you for coming." He starts away then turns. "There's a lot of grief here. We don't want... well... any trouble."

I nod. "Me neither." Trouble's trouble, and I don't have a pony at this track, anyway.

Orville moseys back to his group and says something. They look at me, but I avoid them by inspecting my cup as if I found a fly in it. The old woman's too weird for me. I swear if you could choose your mother that one'd be left for a clearance sale.

Merry told me she got herself knocked-up at fifteen and wanted the baby, but her mother said she wasn't Christian-fit to rear a child. When the boy was born, her old lady took him and gave him to Trudy, who was church-married but didn't have kids of her own. Shortly after, Merry hooked up with a guy that wheeled into Macon on a motorcycle run. He wrote country, picked guitar, and reckoned he had the makings of a big-time star. They hit the road as far as Nashville where the S.O.B. decided he was gay. He bailed on her and boogied out to Frisco to be a poet. She set to waitressing and wandered from place to place and guy to guy.

Merry says she only returned home the once. That's when that photo was snapped with her boy. Her daddy had been killed in a hydraulic press accident, and nobody would spill the details. No details and a closed casket left Merry thinking her old man ended up as road-kill. She's never told me exactly what happened on that visit—just bits and pieces. I do know she put somebody in the hospital and jumped bail. Whatever the full skinny, it totally ripped the family stitch.

Between needing a drink and the spooky vibes in the room, I got worms wriggling under my skin. Enough's enough. I gotta shuck this place. I park my cup on the table and turn to split.

Then THUMP! Merry bounces off the side of the doorway and wobbles into the room. She staggers forward then stops and steadies herself. The back of her red dress is hiked up under the belt and a big hunk of black slip shows. I suppose the black's for mourning.

A quick look over at the family, and I'm toot-certain I don't want to be here. Orville, eyes shut, wags his head, and Trudy buries her face in that worn-out teddy bear. Old Granite Face looks like she took a dose of Drano.

Merry straightens and lurches the last few steps to the casket and grips the open side to brace herself. With one eye on her, I inch along the wall toward the door. I'm almost in the clear when she spots me and makes a get-over-here motion with her head. I glance at the sofa bunch. They glare at me. I figure an apology's owed and smile. They don't smile back.

Merry stands there at the coffin, swaying, and staring down at her boy.

The worms under my skin feel big as snakes. But I'd pass for a two-inch dingus if I left now. I sidle over to Merry and put my arm around her shoulders, real easy, and say, "Sorry, Babe."

She smooths the boy's hair then strokes his cheek. "He's so cold. I could've done better than this."

I hold her tighter.

"They should've got help for him."

"He sure was a handsome kid."

"Why didn't they shave him?"

The boy's got some scraggly hairs dressing his upper lip. "Guess he was trying to grow a moustache."

Her voice rises. "They should've shaved him. Find me a razor."

Others turn our way. I squeeze her. "It's okay."

"This damned coffin's wood. They should've got him a metal one. A bronze one. I could've chipped in on the cost."

To me the casket is uptown, polished redwood or some such. It ain't knotty pine.

I hug Merry closer. "Let's go to the motel, Babe. I need a drink, and we got the funeral tomorrow." I try to steer her to the door, but she twists away and weaves toward her family.

I start after her and trip on the skateboard, knocking over the owl and crayon drawing. I set them back up, and then sorta tiptoe toward the group, stopping a few feet behind Merry. She stands teetering. I've been where she is, trying to clear a booze fog and keep it all together.

Trudy clamps her eyes shut and caresses the bear. The old lady opens her Bible. The others in the room are zeroed in like those people in Time's Square waiting for the ball to drop.

Seconds pass. It's quiet as a stump, until Dudley, who's puffed up to the size of a hay baler, pops the silence, "Why are *you* here?"

"Why the hell *not*? I'm his mother."

Orville tries to smooth things. "Glad you're here, Sister. How did you know about Bobby?"

"I called her," says Trudy, almost whispering.

Dudley snarls, "Bobby was *our* son."

Merry glares at him. "Then why the *fuck* didn't you watch out for him?"

The other people begin slinking out of the room. I want to climb in the casket with Bobby.

Rushmore chimes in. "Your sins killed him."

Merry hunches as though somebody pulled her bowstring. "Did you damn my baby, too?"

"Jesus heard that. He *heard* that. Honor thy mother or suffer the fires of Hell."

I glance up at the painting of Jesus. He don't seem all that unfriendly.

"I want a *real* coffin for my son, not a cheap wooden box!"

Orville says to me, "Maybe you should take Merriam out of here."

She snaps him a look. "Shut the *fuck* up, Orville."

I give a palms-up shrug as the last of the others ooze out of the room.

Dudley pokes his big chin in. "You've got no right..."

Trudy pulls on his arm and says, "Please...please."

Her mother waves the Bible. “First Corinthians. Fornicators shall not—”

Merry grabs that Bible and slings it across the room then hovers over her mother, “When I was little you told me God was love. Did love take my baby and put him in that coffin? What kind of love does that, Mother? *What?*”

The old woman blinks, and Merry stands there clenching her fists, looking down at her. The granite softens, looking more like gray putty. She seems to shrink and mumbles, “God is...is...by and by...we’ll know.”

Merry’s wound tight, shivering, moaning.

I pull back thinking explosion.

Trudy gets up and pushes that teddy bear against Merry’s chest. “Take this. It was Bobby’s.”

Merry grips that raggedy bear and holds it out, staring at it—then seems to wilt.

Dudley yanks the bear away. “That belongs to us!”

I oughta say something, but I don’t know what. I move up and wrap my arm around Merry’s waist and pull her across the room, shuffling and stumbling, out the door into the hall.

“I was a kid...just a kid, Richie. You think it’s my fault?”

“Forget it, Babe. Forget it.”

Merry leans against me. “I should’ve kept him.”

I tug her down the hall to the entrance and push through the double doors into the sunlight. There’s a bench near us, and I sit Merry on it so she can collect herself. I want her to stop hurting. “Let’s go home, Babe. Let’s go home... next bus.”

She slumps and looks up at me. Her eyes are teary. “He was mine. I could’ve raised him.”

I didn't think Merry could cry. I stand a moment feeling helpless, fiddling with the ends of my tie, then hitch up my pants. "Wait here, Babe. Be right back."

I go inside, up the hall. Screw Dudley, he can keep the bear. I'm after the crayon drawing that Bobby drew for his mommy.