

An Empty Playhouse

I was in the small rose-lit parlor of the house-converted-into-a-funeral-home with my oldest sister who was having difficulty making arrangements for her husband's service. While the director was reviewing options with her, I was talking quietly in a corner with a good friend who worked for the home in his after-class hours, and he, knowing my penchant for new adventures and that the corpse was my brother-in-law, whispered, "Would you like to see the body before it's embalmed?" I thought it over a few seconds and then said, "Well...I'm not sure."

Homer was an electrician for Otis Elevator Company and I had been told that he had fallen on a live cable and consequently was electrocuted; that's all I knew. Although somewhat reticent, I replied, "I guess so. Are you sure it's alright?"

"Oh, yeah."

He led me down the short, almost-dark hallway and ushered me through the second door. Later I would realize that it was probably a kitchen in years before, but today it was an empty room in which I saw nothing other than Homer's body lying on a metal table. I had not been told that his *face* had hit the cable, therefore seeing part of it missing was a tremendous shock; it was as if a giant blazing coal the size of a 5-pound roll of Kroger's ground beef had literally been burned out of his face, leaving a vacant space from the back of his skull at the top, to his chin in the front.

I am grateful that I'm the only member of the family to have seen this.

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Marie was the oldest of nine children in our lower-than-poor family. I was the fourth from oldest but, for reasons I've never actually figured out, I was raised by an aunt and uncle who were middle-class and provided me with needs that my siblings merely wished for. Marie had left home when she was sixteen in an attempt to escape

poverty and an abusive father who—at least in my opinion—had an intense dislike for my older sisters, the reason for which I would understand later in life. Therefore, she and I were 'away from home' together and developed a very strong bond.

My sister was a petite blonde, beautiful and with a great sense of taste in clothes. She had never dated anyone other than Homer, a very shy Navy veteran, and after six years of dating they married. For the first time in her life she felt secure and loved. They moved into a small house on a numbered street off Charlotte Pike. It was so small and with a ceiling so low that one felt over-sized moving around in it, yet it exuded a feeling of closeness and warmth...a perfect place for a newly-married couple. It looked, inside and out, like a playhouse built in a backyard, and in this little playhouse-for-adults they led a very private life, sharing with perhaps a few peripheral friends.

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I don't remember how I got to their house but I do remember where she was when I got to her: sitting on the bed that she and Homer had occupied for such a short time, with a friend hovering over her whom she introduced as "Ruth".

"It hasn't really happened. I just know it hasn't," I understood Marie to say within the uncontainable sobs.

"Honey, it'll be alright," this Ruth uttered, crowding her by trying to hold her close. 'It'll be alright' seems to be the only soothing greeting most people know and it is probably the least comforting.

Ruth, whom I disliked instantly because of her wide, wide belt covered with jewels which was attempting to hold together flesh beyond its control and her lipstick that apparently had been applied by a paint brush, seemed to be the unwanted candy-striper who refused to leave the room when her services were no longer needed.

"What can I do?" I asked meekly.

Marie controlled her sobbing enough to tell me that she needed someone to get his car. "Where is it?" I asked.

"I think they park behind where they are working, at 5th and Broad."

I took the bus downtown and began to search. When I found the lot, I approached the smiling and almost-toothless attendant at the entrance.

"I came to get Homer Storey's car," I announced, assuming that this was sufficient.

"Whozat, son?"

"Homer Storey," I repeated.

"Ah, son, I got awe sorts of ca's come in 'n out. I don' 'zactly know this Homer."

"Well, I got the keys, and it's a tan Mercury. I'll know it when I see it."

"Now, I can't jist go lettin jist anybody come by and git cars. I'm 'fraid I need the claim ticket."

"Oh, shit! I don't have the claim ticket."

"No claim ticket, no ca'."

"Listen," my agitation showing, "he got killed today on the job, and I don't know where the claim ticket could be. There's no telling."

"No, kiddin'? Killed you say?"

"I'm sure they didn't think about a claim ticket when they discovered him dead."

"Well, I did hear some serious commotion 'round this mornin', so maybe we orta check on it. Te' you what, you and me let's go see the Mr. Foreman. I'll have to see 'bout this."

So I followed Dudley Do-Right to the foreman's trailer where it was affirmed that a Homer Storey had actually been killed on the site this morning and it would be alright to let this boy have his car. I trotted around until I found his car and sped out of the unpaved lot, hating, as Homer must have, all the clouds of dust that followed like a giant dragon with mouth agape attempting to swallow up his new car.

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When I returned, Marie was still in the bedroom with Ruth still hovering. Whoever Ruth was, she needed to take her fat ass home.

I reasoned with the expanded jeweled belt that since I was there, I could take care of my sister. Eventually Ruth took her huge set of keys in her left hand and her no-less-jeweled purse in the other, and left, offering her services if they were needed; I turned and asked, "Who is she and where did she come from?"

Marie replied, "Honey, she means well; she just gets a little overbearing at times."

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We sat for a long time without speaking; what does one say in a time like this? Finally, in an attempt to be philosophical, I sighed, "It doesn't get any worse than this."

Gritting her teeth, she said, "I sure as hell hope not!" We both were silent for a while. "How in the world could God let this happen?"

I wanted to sound confident, "Marie, you can't blame God for this; it was an accident."

"An accident," she retorted. "Well, if I can't blame God for this *accident*," she replied with a sneer, "then I certainly can't give Him credit for all the good things either. He is either in charge of things or He isn't."

God, how I wish I could have thought of an answer for that! A pall of silence fell over the room. We sat. She sobbed...and so did I.

"You know," she said, "this morning he dropped me by the beauty shop; he won't do that anymore." Again, she began to sob uncontrollably. Amidst the sobbing, she continued, "And when he got off work this afternoon, he would have come by for me

and we'd have come home together." Shaking her head in disbelief, "He won't do anything for me anymore."

Ours was not a family to support each other; probably no one else but me would feel the need to come to be with. It was the ultimate dysfunctional household before the term became fashionable among the fashionable: a drunken father who almost never worked, a mother who tried single-handedly to put food on the table, and nine children, each trying to keep his own wheels rolling.

I patted her hand and said, "We will get through this."

And get through it we did. I planned most of the funeral, which was well attended with many wreaths expressing condolences; understandably, she wasn't able to function very clearly. Half of her life—the only good part she'd ever had—was gone and irretrievable. Just wasn't there anymore.

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It is obvious that an animal's greatest vulnerability is when it's wounded. That's when it needs protection because predators will sneak in, take advantage of its weakness and eventually devour it. So it was with my sister.

Ruth was, as I had expected, the leader of the pack that first invaded. Under the pretense of being a dear friend and knowing that there were benefits of insurance, she began to help in spending. Marie and I became less and less close because of the invasion of the predators, and before long she became the cash box to which a number of new friends that Ruth brought into the circle returned constantly, until it was empty.

I never knew when the heavy alcohol—and perhaps drugs—became part of her daily needs for functioning, but gradually she traveled a maelstrom downward, downward into an abyss from which she could never completely escape. There was just no energy left to *rage against the dying of the light*.

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Years later, after she had been dragged through two harrowing marriages to hopeless alcoholics, had survived a destructive fire, had almost frozen to death and been in and out of numerous rehab centers, she died of cancer and sclerosis of the liver.

I shook my head slightly in disbelief and found tears easing down my face at her funeral, not because she was gone but because life had been so cruel to a loving, innocent person who just didn't have the strength or the know-how to fight back.

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After her death, it was necessary that someone go through her cedar chest; scarred as it was, it had survived all the catastrophes with her. In it we discovered, tied in rubber bands, all the cards that had been attached to the wreaths sent for Homer's funeral forty-something years earlier. I was reminded that sometime along the way I had acted in the play, "I Never Sang for My Father", in which the final line was: *Death may end a life, but it does not end a relationship.*