

American Tourister

Aunt Betty had passed away just over a week ago, which left me to see to things. She owned a plot next to her husband down in Early, Alabama, but that was seven hours and 500 miles of red tape from Memphis. The local funeral homes wouldn't raise a finger without a cash deposit or credit card, of which I had neither. On top of it all, Shelby County charges a daily fine after ten days if a body isn't claimed. Like she's some damn car in the impound lot.

I'd hit a rough patch after high school and Aunt Betty helped me more than anyone else. My folks had divorced and cared more about their new lives than dealing with the troubles of the past. She got me straight and even helped me move up to Memphis. I was the closest thing to a son she and Uncle Fred ever had. They deserved better.

Aunt Betty had always been a tough woman. She even went to work the same day they buried Uncle Fred. Said she couldn't stand to just sit around and mope. Needless to say, the customers and Spark's Feed & Seed were a bit surprised to see her there that afternoon in a black dress lifting eighty pound sacks of feed. A few years after Uncle Fred passed, Aunt Betty got into a car accident that left her in a wheelchair. A bastard in a suit got her to sign off on an equity loan so she could modify her home with ramps and such. Things were fine for a while, until the payment ballooned up to more than her social security check.

When she finally called me about her house, the time to do anything had passed. The sheriff's department already had the eviction papers so I brought her home with me. The move to

Memphis took something out of her. She spent most of her days on the porch sitting in her wheelchair smoking cigarettes and looking to the sky, speaking to people who were not there.

"I'll tell you one thing, Jerry," she said one night. "Tennessee might be called the South, but it's nothing like Alabama."

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am. People here aren't the same as back home." I lit a cigarette and passed it to her. "Is your oxygen off?"

She pulled the hose down that ran under her nose. "It'll be fine." She took a drag off the cigarette and looked at me. "Promise me one thing, Jerry."

"Anything."

"When I'm gone, make sure you lay me down in Early next to your uncle. That's the only thing that'll give me peace."

"Count on it."

Aunt Betty was a thin, wiry woman who'd been a powerhouse as long as I could remember. She'd worked for Randy Sparks for over forty years. You'd think she owned the place, though. Telling Randy this or that like a misbehaving child. He'd nod and say, "Yes ma'am, Miss Betty." But in Memphis, she was running on fumes. Fire still lived behind her eyes, but it had grown dim and the will to stoke it had left her. It hurt me to see someone I loved give up like that. Even worse, it gave me permission to do the same.

I'd been on the wagon since I left Early, but when Aunt Betty began to slip away I'd taken to going to the bluffs by the river and drinking a six-pack. There had been a time when sitting in the grass and listening to the sounds of the river and night settled something inside me. But as of late when I sit there and listen to folks on the bluffs move about and laugh, sometimes fight, and the sound of the Blues floats through the air punctuated with sorrow and joy, and the smell of

hickory smoke wafts down to my perch over the river, parts of me ache with the loss of something I never had.

The next day the phone rang and I picked up.

"You selling the Cavalier?" the caller asked.

"Yeah."

"How many miles she's got?"

"About 120."

"And you want twenty-two hundred?"

"That's the price."

"Can I come by and take a look?"

I said sure and gave him directions. Selling my car was the only way I could keep my promise to Aunt Betty. An old guy from West Memphis came by and kicked the tires, looked under the hood, and took a peek under the engine.

"She leak any oil?"

"No, but she burns a half a quart every few tanks."

He nodded and we haggled a bit. The market wasn't real hot for a '92 Chevy Cavalier and I ended up with \$1,800 to see to the final arrangements.

I went to the public library the next day to use their computers and found a place located over by the airport advertising cheap funerals on the internet, \$700 for a direct cremation. They said they could pick up Aunt Betty from the county morgue and see to things, but I'd have to

come by and fill out some forms. It'd all be done in forty-eight hours and then I could come by and pick up the cremains.

"Cremains?"

"The ashes. The ashes are called cremains," the woman on the phone said. "After we've retorted your loved one the cremains can be placed in an urn—we have a wonderful selection of to choose from—and then you can take her to her final resting place."

Aunt Betty had never said she wanted to be cremated, but she never said she didn't either. I'm not sure how she would've felt about my choice, but I thought the main thing was to get her next to Uncle Fred down in Early. I couldn't see any other way to make that happen.

I took a cab to Dante's Funeral Services. The cabby pulled up to a sandy colored brick building with tall white columns. It sat between a Mexican grocery and a dry cleaners. "Are you sure this is the right address?"

"5359 Phoenix Avenue?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's it."

I didn't see a sign anywhere. The building didn't fit in with the rest of the shops in the strip mall, but the cabby seemed certain. "Could you come back and pick me up in an hour?"

The cabby was a woman in her mid-fifties who wore a lavender scarf on her head. Her skin was brown and she had a mole on her cheek. She handed me a card and said, "Just call that number and ask for Mable. That's me."

"Okay, thanks." I took the card and paid the fair. I walked into the building and bright green Astroturf covered the floor. Crowded shelves lined the walls with all manner of vases, decorative wooden boxes, and plastic flowers. Beneath the shelves, a variety of stone monuments

and tombstones sat with blank spaces waiting to be engraved. Glass display cases spanned across the back of the room. A large woman emerged through a maroon curtain from the back room.

"Hi there. Can I help you?"

The woman wore her curly golden hair pulled together on the top of her head in a bun, which added at least six inches to the top of her head. Her cheeks were thick with powder and sagged under the weight of years of southern cooking.

"Yes ma'am. I called earlier about my aunt."

"My name's Dora." She extended her hand palm down, as a princess might. it.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Jerry," I said and shook her hand.

She nodded and produced a large binder from behind the counter. Bedazzled glasses hung on a chain around her neck and she perched them on the end of her nose as she flipped through a few pages. She pulled at least a half-dozen forms from the binder and placed them in front of me.

"First off, we'll need authorization to remove your aunt from the county morgue. This one here authorizes us to receive the death certificate from the coroner's office. You'll need to fill out this one if you plan on transporting her across state lines, and these others cover retorting the remains and say you acknowledge there will be no visitation or funeral, your aunt will not be embalmed, nor will she receive hair care or makeup application."

I looked up at the woman. "I see."

"Since your aunt will be cremated without a viewing ceremony, these services aren't needed." She leaned in and whispered, "Besides, it'll save you money."

I nodded. "Aunt Betty never was one for makeup." I filled out the paperwork and paid up. The fees and permits added up to just under a thousand, a bit more than what she quoted on the phone. Still, it seemed like the best solution. Dora tried to sell me an urn too, but I said I'd have

to think about it. I asked to borrow the phone when we were done and called Mable the cabby to pick me up. I waited outside, unable to stay inside surrounded by those urns, boxes, and blank tombstones. The little Mexican grocery next door had a smoker going on the sidewalk and a hand drawn poster advertising *pollos y carnes al carbon*. Smoke seeped out of the grill, swirled into the breeze, and disappeared. The aroma rumbled my stomach, but I felt dizzy and wanted to get back to my apartment. Mable the cabby pulled up and I climbed in.

"Going back home?"

I nodded.

She picked up the radio and told her dispatcher our destination. The back of the cab was stuffy but clean. My legs began to sweat on the vinyl seats. Mable glanced at me a time or two, but didn't say anything as she drove. When she dropped me off, I paid the fare and tipped her a ten. She smiled and nodded. "Call anytime you need a ride."

I walked up the stairs to the apartment and sat down on the sofa once inside. The air hung warm and still and I looked at my aunt's empty wheelchair with its green oxygen tank strapped to the back. The clear tube hung coiled around the closed valve.

True to her word, Dora called me two days later and said my aunt was ready to be picked up. She also mentioned they were having a sale on cremain vessels, everything 20% off. I called Pastor Bob from First Baptist Church in Early and asked if he'd preside over a graveside service. He'd done the same for my Uncle Fred.

"Please accept my deepest condolences for your loss, Jerry. I know how much your aunt meant to you. And you to her. More than once she added your name to our prayer chain. I'd be

honored to say a few words over Mrs. Davis. I can also arrange to have Willy Horton cut the grave for you." Under his breath he added, "He's very reasonable."

I thanked him and said that would be fine. Then I called Greyhound to see if they had a seat on the bus to Dothan, which was about fifteen miles from Early. I got lucky as a bus was leaving Memphis just before six that evening.

"There's a short layover in Birmingham, and a longer one in Montgomery, but you should be in Dothan by noon tomorrow," the woman on the phone said. "And we can get you on a bus coming back on Saturday. Does that work for you?"

I told her it did and hung up the phone. It was already after four, so I got busy packing. I pulled Aunt Betty's American Tourister suitcase from the closet and packed it with enough clothes for the next few days. I called the cab company and asked for Mable. A car honked in the parking lot ten minutes later.

Mable smiled and waved when she saw me, and then popped the trunk. I put the suitcase in and climbed into the backseat.

"Where to today?" she asked.

"Remember that place on Phoenix Avenue?"

She nodded and picked up the radio.

We drove in silence through the heavy traffic. Commuters, big rigs, and buses crowded the streets and my stomach turned with nervousness, but Mable cut through side streets and alleys and got us there quickly.

I leaned up. "Can you wait for me?"

"Sure."

I went inside and Dora tried to sell me an urn or a box again, but I declined. She gave me a sideways mouth and disappeared behind the maroon curtains with a stiff walk and came back a minute later with a cardboard box that looked like it might contain a dress shirt on Christmas morning. "Here you go," she said and plopped it on the counter.

"That's her?"

"Don't seem like much, does it?"

I nodded.

"At least with an urn you got something pretty you look at."

"You got some tape? I don't want her leaking out."

"The cremains are in a plastic liner inside the box. She'll be fine." Dora reached behind the counter and handed me another form and an envelope. "Just sign here," she pointed. "It just says you've received the cremains. In the envelope there are extra copies of the death certificate for insurance, the IRS, or Social Security. You can never have too many death certificates I always say."

I thanked her and headed toward the door.

"Don't forget to tell your friends about us," she called after me.

I walked outside and pointed to the trunk and Mable opened it again. I popped the latches on the suitcase, moved my clothes around, and set Aunt Betty in the middle. She fit in snugly. I shut the suitcase and pushed in the latches. I was about to shut the trunk when something made me stop. I climbed into the backseat and set the suitcase on my lap.

Mable turned in her seat and looked at it. "Don't you want to put that in the trunk?" she asked.

I shook my head. "We're fine. Can you take me to the bus station on Brooks?"

Mable nodded, grabbed her radio, and pulled out into the busy traffic.

Pastor Bob picked me up at the station in Dothan. "Jerry, my boy. So sorry for your loss."

Pastor Bob stood over six foot, with salt and pepper hair and a voice worthy of quoting scripture.

"Thanks," I said, feeling the sting of tears.

He rested his hand on my shoulder. "It's okay, son. She's with Jesus now." Pastor Bob looked around. "So, if I might ask, where's Miss Betty? Are they still unloading her?"

I shook my head and patted the American Tourister.

He glanced at the suitcase and then back at me. "Come again?"

"I had to have her cremated."

"Oh." He scratched inside his ear with his pinky. "I see. Well, I suppose we should get going."

The graveside service was set for 5 o'clock and when Pastor Bob and I pulled up at the cemetery an old fella wearing a faded ball cap climbed down from a small Bobcat tractor.

"Starting to worry about you two," he said.

"Willy, this is Jerry Stump. Betty's nephew."

"Howdy, Jerry." He reached out and shook my hand and then looked at the suitcase. "You just get in?"

Pastor Bob cleared his throat, rested his hand on my shoulder, and looked at Willy. "Jerry had Miss Betty cremated and the ashes are in there."

Willy's mouth tightened and then he looked from Pastor Bob, to me, to the suitcase, and then back to Pastor Bob. "So no casket?"

Pastor Bob shook his head.

"Well, hell." He caught himself and said, "Pardon me, Pastor Bob. It's just I wish I'd known. I already dug a full grave and set up the lowering mechanism." He pushed his cap back on his head and wiped his forehead. "Alright then." He looked at the Bobcat and shrugged.

"Follow me. I'll show you the plot."

Willy walked a few paces in front of us, muttering.

When we reached the grave, Willy stopped and turned around with his hands on his hips. "How're we going to work this?"

I looked at Pastor Bob and he shrugged. I set the suitcase down in the grass and popped the latches and pulled the box out and set it aside and closed the suitcase. Willy scratched his head and said, "I'm guessing you don't want to just drop her in, huh?"

I stood there holding the box looking at him.

"Okay then." Willy straddled the grave and grabbed hold of the lowering mechanism to brace himself and hopped down into the grave. "Hand her to me, Jerry." I did and he set the box down and said, "Help me out of here." I reached down, grabbed his hand, and pulled. Willy was up and out in a flash and the three of us stood there looking at the white box.

A few minutes passed and Pastor Bob checked his watch, looking solemn. A car door slammed and we all turned toward the parking lot. A tall man in a red-checked shirt and jeans with an uneven gait walked towards us. It was Randy Sparks.

"Hey there, Jerry. How you holding up, son?" He shook my hand and nodded toward Pastor Bob and Willy.

"Okay, I suppose."

"Miss Betty sure was proud of you when you got things straightened out. You know that don't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, she'd said as much."

"And I'm proud of you as well for doing right by her."

I hung my head a bit, as he clapped me on the back.

Pastor Bob cleared his throat again. "I suppose we should get started."

Randy looked at the grave, saw the empty lowering mechanism, and then searched the faces of the other men. No one met his eyes. "Aren't we missing something?"

Pastor Bob pointed with his eyes toward the grave and Randy leaned over and took a peek. "What the hell is that?"

The next day I headed back to Memphis. While sitting in the Montgomery Greyhound station waiting out my layover, a woman wandered about, seemingly searching for something.

"Jesus," she said, as if calling a puppy.

"Did you lose something?"

She turned toward me and looked, but she seemed to be staring at something beyond me, as if we were both in a dark room and she could hear my voice but not actually see me. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five. Her eyes were so wide they could've swallowed the world. She wore a blue polka-dot dress that reminded me of one my mother had on in a picture from high school. She looked lost, out of time and out of place. Something tinged under my ribcage and whiteness spread through me as if I'd been dunked in ice water.

"Jesus," she said again.

"I don't think you're going to find him here, miss."

Her eyes met mine.

"Do you know Jesus?"

I searched her eyes, trying to find a firm piece of ground, a place to work from. I took a leap of faith. "Yeah, I've talked to Jesus before."

As soon as I said it, I had to think of the last time I had prayed. Over the last two weeks I had no shortage of times when I could've knelt down and bowed my head, but I knew no answers would be forthcoming so I didn't bother. Even during Aunt Betty's funeral when Pastor Bob said, "Let us pray," at the end of the service, I just stared at the fake grass and the shirt box in the dark chasm of the grave.

The young woman took a step close enough for me to see a few crow's feet about her eyes and creases around her mouth. "What did you say to him?"

"You want to know what I prayed for?"

She nodded.

I told her if she sat with me, I'd tell her. Being around her made me feel better for some reason. We sat down on the bench that felt more like a church pew than something you'd find in a bus station, and I brushed away the hair sticking to my forehead. "The last thing I remember talking to Jesus was about a dozen years."

She leaned in a bit.

"Well," I said. "What's your name?"

"Samantha, Sam." She smiled. "So, you were saying."

"The last thing I prayed for was to die."

"I don't think Jesus would want that."

"Nice of you to say, but you don't know me."

"True," she said. "But Jesus does." Her smile didn't waver.

I ran my hand through my hair and leaned back. "Back in high school I let my girl Tina go, knowing she'd be better off without me. It's a long story. My folks split-up and went in opposite directions and I stayed in Early with my Aunt Betty. After Tina left I wandered about for months with an empty place in my chest, trying to fill it with the wrong things."

I looked around the bus station. A little girl squealed as she chased a big blue ball bouncing across the tiled floor. Other people were chatting, eating bags of chips and drinking sodas, all reasonably waiting. A bus pulled into the station and people around us began to stir, gathering their belongings. The bus' airbrakes let out a whoosh as it came to a stop. The driver opened the door and hitched his trousers before he opened the luggage compartments. With mechanical swiftness, he unloaded backpacks, suitcases, trunks, and two black duct-taped garbage bags from the belly of the bus. Passengers streamed off and raised their faces to the sky, stretching out backs as they became accustomed to daylight angling in under the broad awning in front of the station.

"I drank way too much at a party one night and they took my car keys. I called her. I knew she'd come to get me and she did. She wasn't angry with me, at least she didn't act like it, which made it all a bit worse—her coming for me and then, you know, not judging."

A crackling voice came over an intercom and announced, "Bus 3861 to Tupelo and Memphis will be departing at 2:30."

I checked my watch and looked over at Sam. "Are you headed to Memphis?"

She didn't say anything at first, but her eyes moved from side to side like she was reading. "I am," she finally said and looked around. "Where can I get a ticket?"

I pointed to the ticket counter and she stood up without another word. She didn't carry a purse and, as far as I could tell, didn't have any pockets in her dress. She walked over to the counter and chatted with a short woman behind the service window. The woman in a grey and blue company uniform began to shake her head. I stood and thought about the money I'd stashed in my shoe. I had an extra forty dollars I could lose for a good cause. It might not get her to Memphis, but it couldn't hurt. As I got close the woman in uniform stopped shaking her head *no*. She cocked her head to the side and a moment later her hands were offering a ticket to Sam.

"Is everything alright?" I asked.

The woman behind the counter placed a tired wooden block that read *Next Window* in the opening and ducked into a room for *Employees Only*. Sam turned to me with a bright smile and said, "Yes. Everything's fine."

Sam sat next to me on the bus and we talked as farmland and small towns passed outside the window. She was from South Carolina. "Rock Hill," she said. I told her all about Early, Alabama, the only place that ever felt like home.

"So what happened with Tina," Sam finally asked.

I shook my head, shying away from the image in my mind. If I kept it tucked away somewhere deep I could go days without having to think about it, but on the bus, sitting next to Sam, it felt okay to bring it out into the open. "She died the night she came to pick me up from the party. As she drove me home, I told her I loved her and that I'd made a mistake. She began to shake her head. "You're drunk," she said. Then something dashed out in front of her truck. That was the last thing I remember before waking up in a hospital two days later." I turned away from Sam and looked out the window. Tall pine trees lined the highway. On one I saw a small white

cross adorned with orange and pink plastic flowers. The tree had its bark chewed up around the base. "Her daddy came to see me in the hospital. It wasn't long afterward that I began to pray for Jesus to end me." I looked at her. "Sometimes you cause so much pain it feels like it's the only thing you can do."

We rode in silence for a bit. Sam was a slender wisp of a thing, all alone but at ease with it, like she had no past, no future, just a now.

"When you talked to Jesus, did you only ask to die?"

"I told him I was sorry too."

"And what did he say?"

I shifted in my seat a bit. "He's still thinking about his answer."

She seemed to accept that for the moment and gazed out the window. I felt myself floating, like on the Mississippi, spinning with a current here and lulling in an eddy there, but flowing down, all the time heading toward the end of it all.

"Sometime the answer is silence," she said.

I nodded. "Dying's too easy."

Sam shook her head. "It's not that—"

"I killed my aunt."

Sam leaned back in her seat and blinked at me.

"She'd been in a wheelchair and on oxygen since a bad car wreck. I brought her to Memphis after her house was foreclosed."

Sam watched my hands as they balled up into fists.

"I knew her canister was low but didn't order a new one." I shook my head. "She had Medicaid. Five bucks to deliver a new one. I bought a six-pack instead and went out to the bluffs

overlooking the river." At that moment, I wished our bus ride wouldn't end, that we'd stay on the highway, driving past cars, trucks, and homes and churches, and everything else that makes up this world. "When I got home I thought she was just sleeping." The steady hum of the diesel engine buzzed my insides like a horde of bees.

After we reached Memphis and pulled into the station, we sat there a moment as everyone else made a move to get off the bus.

I put out my hand. "Sam," I said. "It's been a quite a trip."

She smiled and took my hand in both of hers. They were warm and soft and heat tingled up my arm and into my chest. Buried knots that had bound me up—so old they simply felt like a part of me—loosened. I felt that sensation like one of those dreams where you're falling. Just falling through space, not knowing from what you've fallen or how far down it is before you hit bottom, but there was no fear mingling with it. Instead, it was a sort of peace. Her hands slipped away from mine and I let them go, though something desperate inside wanted to hang onto her.

She stood up and walked off the bus without looking back, and I sat in my seat and watched her. I sat alone, the distant humming of the diesel engine murmured under me and I felt the vibrations travel through my feet and up into my legs. For a moment, I hovered above myself, looking down on my body sitting in a blue bus seat. Outside the bus I could see people gathering their belongings as the bus driver unloaded luggage. The passengers picked up backpacks and such and spread out in separate directions, some alone, some running toward a lover, and others hugging family. And my body just sat there in the bus, still as a corpse. The driver straightened up and placed his hands on his hips and looked about. A lone suitcase, an old forest green American Tourister, sat at his feet.

I slipped back into myself like a heel finding its home in a pair of too-tight dress shoes, and almost felt a thud when it happened. It was solid, like something clicking into place.