The Damnation Of Grandfather

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Johnny had squeezed himself tightly into a corner of the back seat of the car. He wanted to feel all alone with his grief. And he was a little angry because he felt so bad and still could not cry. The old farmhouse looked cold and lonely as they approached it. The trees were barren, and the entire landscape was dirty and grey. No breeze lifted a fallen leaf or stirred a dead weed. There were many cars gathered under the massive old oak tree — more cars than Johnny could ever remember seeing there, even for a family dinner. Everything seemed to have changed. The old wooden steps groaned louder; the large country kitchen was colder; and though the house was filled with people, it lacked any of the warmth of a crowd.

Johnny's grandmother groaned and held out her arms to him. "He's gone," she said, crying softly and rocking Johnny in her arms. Then, finally, he cried. "He's gone," she repeated. "Now, I won't have a home any more."

With the wisdom of his eight years, Johnny did not feel the need to say anything consoling. After a few moments, his parents gently pried him from his grandmother's arms. When his mother had embraced and attempted to calm her mother, they led him slowly toward the room where he had played simple chords on the old organ while his grandfather had played the fiddle with more zest than accuracy. Johnny knew what lay in that room. He wanted to pull back, but it was like a bad dream in which he had no will. He lifted his eyes slowly to look at the lifeless thing lying in the pink satin box.

"He doesn't look natural without his glasses on," said his mother.
"Mom wanted to put them on him," said Johnny's Aunt Inez, "But that wouldn't have looked right either."
"Touch him, Johnny," commanded his father. "Feel how cold he is."

Johnny would have protested, but he knew that his father always got his way when he invented these small tortures. He touched his grandfather's hand lightly and would have drawn quickly away had not the sensation been so unusual. It was like nothing he had ever felt before and certainly like nothing that had ever been alive. After a few minutes, he was allowed to escape. He ran outside where he perched himself on the stump of a tree which had fallen within the time of his memory. He sat and stared at the garden where he had guided the horse while his grandfather had plowed.

He was still seated there, thinking about these things when his mother called him. Loaded into the cars, they were driven slowly to the church. The church was one of those depressingly severe and graceless white buildings still common in the rural Middle West. Not here was to be found the privacy of an ante-room for the relatives and closest friends. The family was ushered to the front rows of pews. Johnny felt a mounting hostility toward the people whose furtive glances caught him looking at them. But his grandmother knew what was expected of her. She leaned heavily on the arm of the least emotional of her daughters-in-law; yet, she had a dignity. Once seated, Johnny had a feeling of people working
behind the scenes. Try as they might, those self-effacing people who were charged with seeing that this last rite went smoothly could never quite melt into the floral decorations.

Wedges between his father and his Aunt Inez, Johnny felt stifled. He wanted to sneeze; he wanted to scratch; he started to reach for a fan and then thought better of it. Then the rustling ceased and the minister said something which Johnny did not understand. Johnny looked at him curiously. He had heard his mother say that her father would sit up in his casket if he could know that the Nazarene minister was preaching his funeral. It was quite a puzzle for Johnny. He could well remember his grandfather’s talk about the Nazarenes. “They,” the old man often said, “wear their dresses so long they hide their ankles and look the other way when they pass a swimming pool, and then they get the spirit in church and roll in the aisles with their dresses up to their necks.” And, he was also fond of observing: “Half the first-born children in the neighborhood have been conceived behind the Nazarene Church while three-quarters of the other half owe their birth to the soft sod of the Baptist Cemetery.” Johnny remembered these things but did not understand them. And he was much too young to comprehend the difference between Nazarenes, Baptists, Presbyterians, Catholics or Jews.

But despite his grandfather’s easily interpreted wishes, his sister—Johnny’s Great-aunt Sarah—could not be denied her preference when the Baptist minister was very conveniently attending a state conference. Because of all these things, Johnny regarded the minister with a more than average interest. He was dour and had a sinister look to a child of eight years. Johnny saw that his grandfather was, indeed, right. The Nazarene minister and Great-aunt Sarah had been cut from the same piece of cloth.

While an ugly old man with a quavering voice sang a song about “dew on the roses” and “hearing voices,” Johnny became increasingly inattentive, for he was experiencing the waking nightmare of not being able to move. This song and another song were interminable. Then there was an equally oppressive silence while the minister waited to be certain of absolute concentration on what he was to say. Then he began.

“In the presence of God, we are gathered here to commit to His care the soul of George Wainwright Crawford. Let us hope that we can find something which will be of comfort to his family. George Crawford lived all his sixty-five years in this county and is well-known to all of you. You all know that he was an honest man, hard-working and responsive to the needs of the community. He was a good family man. Yes, he was all these things. But he was not a deeply religious man.”

The minister paused for effect. There was a small disturbance in the back of the church—a buzz of conversation. Johnny noticed that his mother was fanning herself energetically and distractedly. Then the minister continued: “No, George Crawford was not a religious man. We might say he ‘got it honest.’ His father before him was not a religious man and had none of his children baptized.” The minister allowed a note of pathos to come into his voice. “I wonder what to say to his family? The Bible says about this—” And he began to quote liberally from the Bible. Johnny sensed something wrong. Not even his grandmother was weeping. The minister pushed home his point at great length. But Johnny was accustomed
to Bible stories told in greatly simplified modern English, and the minister's words were going over his head. Finally, the minister was finished with his text. He was closing when Johnny began to follow the words. "...that all men are sinners. We can only hope that God, in His infinite goodness and mercy, will forgive this sinner." Sinner! If he could have managed it, Johnny would have bounced out of his seat. He would have disgraced the family by shouting at the minister: "You're lying. My grandfather isn't a sinner. My grandfather is a good man. You're a liar. You're a liar."

Over and over he repeated it to himself. He gnawed on his clenched fists and began to weep in small, frustrated sobs. Insignificantly crowded between his father and his aunt, he was rendered incapable of movement and he was also incapable of speech. His Aunt Inez, seeing what she thought to be grief, patted him gently on the shoulder and began to weep too. Then Johnny saw that the minister, looking strangely triumphant, had finished and was standing in the pulpit.

People began to file past the coffin, making little remarks to one another and glancing at his grandmother who was weeping again. The storm of elemental anger began to subside; and in Johnny's mind, there was only despair. But already he was beginning to wonder. His grandfather was good, that he knew. It was a lie what the preacher said, but Johnny had always been taught that preachers did not tell lies. If a preacher could tell a lie, anyone could.

Finally, it was the family's turn to file past the coffin. The women were all weeping, and at the coffin, Johnny's father had a little fit of choking, but it passed. Then his grandmother, weeping profusely, went to the coffin and folded the cold hands, rearranged the pink coverlet; and when she finally turned away from it, the coffin was quickly closed. The pallbearers took their posts and, trying not to reel under the weight, carried the coffin from the church.

It was at the cemetery that the final blow came to Johnny's faith. The coffin had been lowered into the ground and the minister had said his few words, and stooping to gather a handful of earth, he let it fall on the coffin. Each dull thud of the barbaristic ritual echoed in the pit of Johnny's stomach until he was ill. He thought the meager handful of earth would never cease to fall. And when it finally did, he rushed back to the car.

The next Sunday, when his mother called him to go to Sunday School, he realized that he did not want to go. He lay there, thinking about it.

"Aren't you out of bed, yet?" his mother called, and her voice was sharp. "Hurry up or you'll be late for Sunday School."

He struggled out of bed and went to face her. "I'm not going to church," he announced. "I don't believe in God, and I'm not going to church."

His father's newspaper fell with a crash. "What's that? What's that?" he said. And then he pulled his scattered attention together. "We'll have no nonsense out of you this morning. Get in there and get dressed before I blister your rear-end for you."

Johnny threw him a belligerent look, but he obeyed. When he left the room, his father rattled the paper in annoyance. "What do you suppose has got into him?" he asked his shocked wife.