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COSMIC BURIAL

by
C.A. Pickett

The emotional pull of the immense black hole of Clarence's grave curved my thought toward it, even though I directed my will to concentrate on the minister's eulogy. No more true words would be spoken; no more real things would be done. Clarence's genetic disposition would only survive in me.

Like a phoenix suspended on a string, the preacher, who spread his gigantic wings above his head, to span the heavens, and whose bony wrists protruded from the white fringe of his shirt cuffs, expressed my loss incompletely: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die..." And I wondered what time it was now.

Shirtless, muscular men with long hair bound by thin cloth bands, the solemn Egyptian grave builders, shoveled dirt into the black hole. The dirt, directed by the emotional field of the black hole, slammed heavily on the casket top... thump...thump. My knees weakened with the vision of being confined in the casket -- the me in him buried alive.

Within the bubble of the sound of the thump, I struggled for air.

The dirt-drummed thumps on the casket top were the same sound that my shoes made on the hollow wooden stairs of Clarence's old house in Akron, that summer that we came to visit.

The stairs were lit by a single bulb that gave little better light than a flickering, dying candle. At the top of the stairs, through the door, we entered Clarence's and Catherine's part of the house.

My passage through the door gave me the sensation of rising from a black hole. Freed from the bubble of the sound of the thump, I took a deep breath, of not fresh air but of the well lived and musty air of the old house.

My parents had arranged for my father's transfer to the Bermuda Islands to come in the summer of that year to allow me to finish school. We could then spend a weekend at Clarence's on our way.

Although the trip from the railroad station in Clarence's old car had been a strangely silent one and I felt as if I were among strangers in a cab, with only mutual destination in common, I felt that I was among familiar things once I was inside the old house; I had been here before, and the place was one of my earliest memories.

Catherine spoke, her voice quavery with age, regrets, and uncertainty. "Finally, we get to see you! I was afraid that I'd never see you again. People are so busy these days. They don't seem to make time any more."

With luggage strewn on the living room floor, we stood in silence until Catherine turned her moist eyes on me.

"My goodness, you have grown. The last time I saw you, you were small enough to fit under my arm. Do you believe that?"

I studied the tired and worn rug that covered the wooden floor.

"Follow me, my dear," Catherine said to my mother and began to help her with her things. "I'll show you where you can put your things and we'll leave these men to themselves."

My mother followed Catherine down the hall to a room that smelled of old woman; perfumed pouches hid among old clothes in cedar lined drawers, and open medicine bottles.

Clarence sat in his customary chair in the corner. My father, who was tired of sitting because of our long journey that day, stood before a window with his back to us. I sat on the couch. I was very happy to discover, at the time, that my feet rested comfortably on the floor. I was in that between stage when sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't.

Clarence owned the house we were in. He had rented out the floor below because he and Catherine did not need the whole house to live in and because the extra money proved a welcome supplement to their retirement income.

My father looked across the side yard below the window and said, "You ought to sell this old place, Pop. Then you could get away. Come see us in Bermuda. You might even move into one of those new retirement homes, if you wanted."

"I suppose," Clarence said, slowly, as if he were trying to choose the best answer of a multiple choice question. I thought it was a mark of wisdom to display a little uncertainty about things. "But I never did like all those Army-like old folk's homes. Get up at a certain time and go to bed when you're told. This has been my home for a long while, and I ain't lookin' forward to goin' any place else."

For some time, my father had been on his own journey through life. Clarence had hoped that his eldest son would attend college and become a professional man. The Depression had short-circuited that dream. My father never finished high school. Yet Clarence believed that my father could have done it, if he had wanted to, and Clarence was probably right.

Clarence got up and went to the kitchen that adjoined the living room. The kitchen floor was covered with a lackluster linoleum, and the boards beneath it creaked. The kitchen was furnished with a round wooden table and chairs.

I followed Clarence into the kitchen. he took down a large coffee pot from a cabinet above the stove. He filled it with water; he carefully measured coffee into the pot. He put the coffee away, set the lid on the pot, and put the pot on a gas burner.

My father came into the kitchen and sat down in a chair at the table. I moved a chair that scraped noisily on the kitchen floor and sat down. Clarence sat across from me.

Clarence looked at me with curious bird-eyes, soft and shrunken with age. Long ago, he had worked for the railroad.

"Colin's hands were big as hams..."

Clarence turned his own hands palms up and looked into them as if he were glancing into an incomprehensible past, denying to himself that his hands had ever measured up, and denouncing them silently for their conspiring against him in his struggle to get ahead in the world.

The coffee was ready. Clarence set three cups on the table and poured the coffee. He set the pot on a low burner and sat down again.

Clarence continued his remembrance of an Irish railroad detective with whom he had once worked.

"When I knew him, Colin's face was big and round, all scarred up for a title shot. I don't know. He was working same as me then, keepin' those hobos out of boxcars.

He sipped his coffee.

His voice rose as he ended the story, "Drank too much, though. Micks always do. Finally killed him. If only I'd had those hands."

"...and each of us is in His hands." I tried again to concentrate on the minister's words; my willful mind recalled how much Clarence hated all ceremonies and formalities. Above all he hated church services. Yet Sundays weren't all bad because there was a big newspaper that he could leisurely read as he sat in his favorite chair.

He could not avoid hearing Catherine moving about in the next room. She was dressing. Every Sunday she taught the adult Bible class and attended the worship service.

After a moment before the mirror above her bureau, to adjust the belt that bound a loose-fitting, flowery dress to her bulky frame, she came out of her room to stand by Clarence's chair. She stood as close to his chair as she could without making it too obvious she was begging a compliment, that, for his own reasons, Clarence never gave. Always she asked Clarence to come to church with her; just as invariably, he said no.

"No" is what I wanted to say to the service and the preacher who did not know how to end his eulogy. Abruptly, the preacher just stopped. And the men began to lower the casket.

I thought of the attic of the old house again, a half way place between Heaven and earth, which served as Clarence's bedroom. Once Clarence let me spend the night there in some blankets spread on the floor.

I was then remote in time and space, that feeling I get when the outer edge of my body seems to tingle in accord with the risk that I am taking; what I am doing and what I have done are real, but the actions are another's and I dream.

The aroma of tobacco from Clarence's pipe was intoxicating. The smoke wove a leafy crown about Clarence's head. He sat on the edge of the bed as on a huge throne. The purple spread hung to the floor. The arms of the throne rose to large golden orbs atop which his hands lay. His eyes too dreamed.

I closed my eyes tightly to hold the vision and fend off time.

When I opened my eyes, only dark smoke and the attic as it really was remained. I was as full of sadness as the volumes of romance and crime stories encased in the wooden shelves in the attic corner.

The attic was where Clarence and Catherine had placed everything that was too old to use anymore. The worn rug that I sat on had been removed from the living room. Except for the remnant of a corner, its once elegantly knotted fringe was lost now to decay. Clarence perched on the edge of the bed; the brass, head and foot, in the smoke, was leaden. Clarence's skin sacked his brittle bones.

Clarence asked a question that I did not hear, so I guessed.

"I don't know yet what I want to be."

They always want to know the same thing as if not to be something, a doctor or a lawyer, is to be nothing.

"I don't know what I'm going to be," I said a little louder the second time. I hoped I wasn't answering the wrong question.

"That's all right."

I could tell he was disappointed, so I made something up.

"Maybe I'll go to West Point and be an Army officer."

"That's the spirit."

I was happy that he was pleased. He was attentive again.

"I worry a lot about what people think of me. I don't want to disappoint my parents."

"Rubbish! No sense worrying about that. When all's said and done, the only person that's goin' to care about what you did is you."

All that now remains is a vision of a vast sea and a lonely shore. I look across the calm sea, a huge mirror that reflects all the starry moments of time and space, forever exploding and ranging through the Heavens, a vast congregation of wary non-seeing eyes.

Just off shore, in a small boat, is the hooded Charon, who eternally sets sail on watery time. Clarence stands next to him.

"I'll throw you a rope, grandfather."

"No, go back. It's too dangerous. Too late. I am not afraid."

"Then let me come, too."

"No, boy, you must stay. Wait your time. There's nothing to fear. Unhappiness is just the vibration of the poorly constructed housing of your soul. You'll be rid of it soon enough. Look! The seven light-clad maids rise in the east. Together they form the Orphic harp. Unless 'soul clap its hands and sing,' you know?"

I could see the seven maids, but not as stars. They were seven suns. I hoped that eternity would prove a better friend than time had ever been, as Clarence and the shadowy figure vanished.

