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The Box of Death

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I never had any affection for my father. He didn't like me and I didn't like him. But he had guts, I'll say that. He did a beautiful job of dying. And I learned to admire him. He never was maudlin and only complained once.
I guess you could say that my father died of inversion, his and the preacher's. And I guess you could say that he died in defeat.

My father had two goals in life: to outlive my mother, so he could do as he pleased in peace, and to prove that his brother was a thief who had robbed him of $150.00. He got neither of these jobs done. And what's worse he shattered his cherished theory that right-dressers never die before eighty-five.

I suppose R.G. -- I always called my father R.G. -- was a good man in a narrow way. I didn't know him very well. He seldom talked to me until just before he died.

When I was young I thought everything about R.G. was positive. His speech was staccato; he was a door slammer -- an erect, barrel-chested, pigeon-toed, humorless little man with horn-rimmed glasses, a big hooked nose, a fierce scowl, and a bristly moustache.

I never saw him without his glasses until I was a grown man, and I still remember the surprise I felt. He had mild, questioning little eyes.

He was a strait-laced man. He had none of the worthwhile bad habits and vices. He didn't drink or smoke or chew or swear. He didn't chase women or gamble. He didn't even waste his time hunting or fishing. For relaxation he sat in his chair and rocked and listened to my mother nag him, without response, or without even giving her the satisfaction of knowing that he heard her. Except now and then when he would bark "Rats!!" or "Bah!!"

Aside from rocking, the only things that he appeared to enjoy were paying his bills on the first day of the month, watching me in high school days play football.
and basketball and, of course, his church work.

He never said that he enjoyed these things; but if he did business with you and he couldn't pay you to the penny on the first, he would never do business with you again, and maybe never speak to you again, either.

He never talked to me about sports, but he did come to watch me play ball, and after basketball games he would wait for me to come out of the locker-room, hand me a dime and say, "Go have a good time." Sometimes when I had a hot streak and played a helluva game he would even say, "Nice game." He seemed proud of me.

I never found out whether he was active in church work because of the satisfaction it brought him or because it got him out of the house, away from my mother. But anyhow, the church was very big with him. For years he was a Vestryman, Senior Warden, a Lay Reader, and a big contributor of the stuff that proves the point.

The vestry is the elected governing body of the church, and the Senior Warden is its chairman. Our minister retired and the vestry hired a new one name of Father Schramm. He was a round, short, red-faced, jolly man -- an unbearded Santa Claus.

Everybody like him. He called on the old ladies and the sick and was very active in promoting young people's doings. His sermons were good, too. He drove a Willys Knight, and spoke very highly to me of sleeve-valve engines, on account of I am in the car selling business.

The only trouble was that he was a wino and as queer as a three dollar bill. Except that he liked young girls just as well as young boys.

I spotted him as a fairy right off the bat. I
had developed a good eye for this sort of thing from waterfront and prison experience. Furthermore, when I was young and had lots of hair and no middle I was very attractive to homosexuals. I couldn't go into a john alone in a hotel, depot or a theatre without being approached. I even developed a stock answer. I always said, "No, I'm saving myself for the man I marry." I presume they liked me because I was big.

Of course I didn't tell anyone that I thought Fr. Schramm was queer. It's always possible to be wrong in the case of a minister, a school teacher, a Boy Scout leader, or an arty type, and it would be a bitch if I were wrong about our minister.

I didn't know he was a wino right away -- there are lots of reasons for smelling like Sen-Sen. But what the hell, a man in his position shouldn't snicker because he mispronounces Episcopal.

Finally the lovely thing got out. One of the boys, John White, a pansy if I ever saw one, bragged to the other boys, a parent found out, and there was hell to pay: "Marjorie Wallace was such a sweet girl, just twelve...boys and girls both...a drunkard too."

Of course, the whole thing was very hush-hush. Parents had heart-to-heart talks with their kids and meetings with the vestry. It seemed that Fr. Schramm had been a little too active in the young people's groups, gave too much individual attention in the Laying on of Hands, and more.

Naturally even good Christians couldn't be tolerant and forgiving of a thing like this. In fact the vestry felt that some of the young people had already turned their cheeks too often.

It developed that Fr. Schramm was catholic as well as Greek in his tastes and nothing would do but that he had to go.
Of course the Reverend Father denied the whole thing, and according to canon law, the only ways the vestry could put the boot to him were by either proving their charges in an open hearing before the Bishop or by recommending him to another church.

Neither way was acceptable to my father. A hearing would mean that the violated kids would have to testify. This is the sort of thing that can ruin lives, especially in a small town. Recommending him to another church was obviously hypocritical, the weakling's way out.

The vestry was split on which way to go, so the decision became R.G.'s.

He couldn't make a decision like this. He was damn quick to choose between right and wrong -- as he saw it -- but these were both wrongs. There were no greys to him, everything was black or white.

He was a real old-fashioned hard-nose, but here he couldn't do what he thought was right and to hell with it. This really twisted him. He didn't even rock in his chair and mutter "Bah!" He just sat. He even quit slamming doors.

He was in a box. Who could he turn to for help? He may have turned to God -- if so, God was fresh out. He couldn't talk it over with a close friend, he didn't have one. He couldn't discuss it with his son or family because he wasn't close enough to them. No one could share his cross with him.

I couldn't see that he had such a tough decision to make. I would have found Fr. Schramm a church in Greenwich Village or Hollywood and everybody would have been happy. But R.G. didn't ask me.

Finally he chose the way that was hardest for him and easiest for the congregation: he found the good Father a church in Ohio and recommended him very highly,
if not specifically.

Father Schramm left town all right, and the noise finally subsided, except for an occasional lewd giggle. But he never left my father. The intolerable decision between wrongs rankled in him until he got an ulcer which turned to cancer -- whether doctors say this can happen or not.

In small towns undertakers provide the only ambulance service and this causes difficult moments sometimes, like when Clayton Oberg came to take R.G. to the hospital for the last time. R.G. never had any tact. He told Clay that he was sorry to bother him and that he would only do it one more time. Of course Clay said, "Hell, Ralph, you're good for years yet, you'll outlive us all," and such guff. R.G. said that he knew this was it, but that he had lived a full life -- which was a damn lie. I never knew such a repressed man.

R.G. liked to have me sit by his bed and wait with him, so I did. He didn't have anyone else he wanted to wait with. He never came right out and said that he wanted me to, but I could tell. He even talked to me about things.

He was worried about what he should do with the evidence that his brother had cheated him. I told him that it would fit fine in the furnace and that if he were such a hell of a Christian that's where he would have me put it.

I said, "R.G., if a man wanted to be forgiving just one time in his life, I claim that he could do it right now and show an awful good sense of timing."

R.G. was some surprised because he had never thought of this. He finally agreed when I reminded him that Uncle Charley had done him a lot more than $150.00 worth of good once when he was down and out, and by
burning the evidence he could kind of pay him off instead of dying obligated to a man he hated.

Even though he gave me the key to his strong-box and had me burn the stuff, he died without telling Uncle Charley that he might have been wrong. He was too bull-headed for that.

When we got Uncle Charley taken care of he seemed at peace and didn't ever mention that he felt robbed because he wasn't going to outlive my mother or because he was spoiling his theory about right-dressers.

I must have had more feeling for R.G. than I thought. When we got near the end he seemed to know it. He asked me and I said it wouldn't be long now. Then he wanted me to shave him and trim his moustache. He was a neat man and had lots of pride. He didn't want to die looking scroungy.

When I started to shave him with a safety razor he didn't like it too well. He always said that no one but a damn fool would use anything but a straight razor. But I guess he figured he could stand it once. I was wringing wet all over before I got through, so I guess I must have been affected some.

After I got him all shaved and trimmed and combed and talcumed he was satisfied and he went into a coma. He never came out of it. He only lasted a couple more days. Sometimes, though, he would open his eyes and look kind of blank and wild, then his eyes would focus on me sitting beside his bed and he would seem satisfied and close his eyes again.

The only time he ever complained was maybe the day before he died, and it would have been funny in other circumstances. I was sitting there waiting, listening to him rattle. His feet and legs and belly were all bloated before now. All of a sudden he sat
up straight in bed, looked around wildly, focused on me, and said, "Son," -- he had never called me son before -- "Son, why should I be taken in my prime?"

Hell, he was seventy years old, and when he was going to the hospital in the ambulance he had told Clayton Oberg that he was only entitled to three-score and ten. But you see, he didn't really believe that old stuff. Even in his dying coma he still had the will to live.

I have seen other men fall apart, become pitiful, when they found out their number was up. But not R.G., he did it well. •