Flesh and Flowers

The funeral home in my mother's hometown, Portland, Tennessee, is respectably old-fashioned, just like my grandmother. When we walked into the warm parlor, we were greeted by a hunchbacked, elderly man all dressed up in Sunday best with slicked back hair and an overused suit. He greeted us kindly and smiled but did not push his luck as he understood the tense mood we were all in. He quietly led us into the back room, often involuntarily pushing his thinning hair over his bald spot with his huge, callous hand.

The room where my grandmother's casket seemed to be overflowing with what seemed like hundreds of allergy-inspiring bouquets, but my eyes quickly sorted through all the mess right to the magnificent metal casket housing my grandmother's tall body. The casket was an overpriced Death trap, a mordant mixture of flesh and flowers. My great aunt helped my grandfather struggle over to see his fallen love, and he immediately began to slouch over and sob pitifully as if the realization of Death struck him full force in the back.

First laying eyes on a corpse is a frightening and confusing experience. I could not make myself believe that this wax dummy lying in this box was my grandmother. Everything about the corpse's appearance was too unrealistic: every hair perfectly placed, not a wrinkle in her dress. The emotions associated with what I was supposedly looking at, however, burst out as fast as a popped balloon. The whole room was now full of predominately sobbing relatives, drowning out the happiness and beauty of the abundant flowers. The strikingly vibrant blue dress my Nana was wearing caught my eye, and my mother asked if she looked beautiful.

I did not know what to say or how to view this inappropriate depiction of my grandmother, but I nodded my head at my tear-stricken mother just the same.
For the rest of the day, Nana’s casket became this normal presence in the odd scene of the visitation. Random folk would come from all corners of the small town of Portland to pay their respects. They would come up in their long black dresses and suits with solemn faces and teary eyes, attempting to stutter out meaningless phrases like, “She looks so pretty. Yes, Anne was in my Sunday School back in 1941. She was such a pearl. I never knew she was so sick.” My mother would smile and inform these distant friends that my grandmother had been suffering for longer than twenty years. Many close friends and relatives came to help give a proper end to my Nana. Seeing and talking to them brought up all the feelings I felt since her death: pain, confusion, depression, and awkwardness. We both knew what the other felt so our meeting did not help to ease the pain like one may think, but it instead magnified the impact of her loss.

The day dragged on, and the mourners ate the mediocre food and drank the stale drinks out of kindness for the people who toiled away in their kitchens to spare us the trouble of cooking. Our refrigerator was full for a week and a half. More and more people came through the line, and the more I longed to just run out into the sunshine and escape my pain: I could have run for miles and never free myself from the shackles of pain because acceptance is the only way to replace the emptiness. The line finally ran dry, and night came after the sun, too, bid its farewell to the great lady. The worst had come: the closing. The relatives gathered around the casket, and the more distant relatives said goodbye and left their flowers and tears as they left. After five minutes, my family and my uncle’s family were left. My uncle walked up to the casket and silently cried as he held the tiny hands of his baby boy and six-year-old girl. He placed his beautiful rose and the walletsize family picture of the three right next to my grandmother’s chest and stepped back slowly, trying to let go. I was wondering what I should say to her. I did not know how to express my never-ending gratitude
to her for all the love, all the gifts, for being a great grandmother. I quickly forgot those problems, however, as my mother came to her mother’s side.

My mother had been so brave through my Nana’s illness, helping to deliver her into the arms of God as she saw her through her death. She rarely cried and learned to accept death, but when she walked up to Nana, she broke down like a little child on the knee of a parent. Her emotions exploded like an overdue volcano. She claimed she could never be as good of a mother as her Mama could. Mom said she wished she could have the same amount of faith as Mama had. She talked to her about how my Nana’s life had made such a profound impact on all of us, especially her. Once she finished her part and emptied the Kleenex box, my brother and I walked up.

He is not an expressive kid, naturally, but I know he loved her as much as any of us. He stared blankly at Nana’s corpse, whether grasping the death or struggling for words, and he calmly put the flower in her hands. I did the same, but with a little more baggage. The rest became a blur as I fell victim to emotional grief. The words came, and I felt partly relieved that I was able to tell my Nana just what I needed to say.

When we were done, we took my sobbing mother out of the building before the man would actually close the coffin. My mother wanted the man to take off Nana’s shoes and put on her snow white “footies” something she had come to enjoy during her last few days. We drove home to my grandmother’s house and slept there for the night. I know my mother did not sleep easy because I caught her at random times in the night looking at different parts of the house and quietly reminiscing. She was replaying the good times in a sort of amazing but pitiful way. That night we all tried to remember all the good times Nana gave us.

My grandmother was one of the greatest people I have met. She was born into a poor family with big dreams. She treasured the educational opportunities available for her, though
limited, and she tried to soak up every little tidbit of knowledge. She loved her family with an unending love. She, like most other mothers, loved to see her family do well. Unlike the others, however, she almost lived to see us do well. When I proudly walked into the hospital and declared I finally won that national championship, she lit up like one of those gigantic bulbs you see on the Las Vegas casino signs. I was told that she bragged about my petty debating extravaganza to her nurses that day. She was a hard working woman who struggled from her country girl ranking to a highly specialized Pentagon secretary. She was greatly disturbed by the recent Bin Laden attacks because of the tumultuous times it threw the world into, but also because her desk would have been the one incinerated by the explosion as she worked in that wing nearly a half of a century ago. She died without any regrets, my mother says. She definitely wanted to stay around to see my little cousins grow up, but she knew it was her time as she frankly put it on the way to the hospital, “If it’s the Lord’s will.” She had an unmatchable faith in her Savior, and my mother knew her passing was a time of joy for Nana because she was at total peace and ready to meet her God. Watching her slip into the coma slowly was traumatic because I knew the long relationship we had fostered and tended to was going to be shot down with this incurable monster in one blow. Seeing her but not knowing if she understood me when I told her I loved her was enough to kill me. That amazing person that was once so much died pitifully later in the night.

We all awoke the next morning with very little sleep, being haunted by Death all throughout the night’s course. Looking at my bed the next morning was a disaster, the quaint yellow sheets were rolled up so many times from all the turning that they looked like burritos and the other faded covers were doubled up over the top of the roll up bed as if a tornado touched down on the mattress. There was no joy in revisiting my grandmother’s house because my grandmother was the joy, the house was not special in and of itself. My mother
tried to lighten our loads by saying, "Today’s about happiness. To celebrate her life."

The funeral service was uplifting in the sense that it was entirely my grandmother’s. Everything about it was dedicated to her: the sermon, the songs were her favorites, and the people there all had a special bond with her. My mother’s eulogy was a true testament to her uncle[1] life, with all the extra baggage included. We sat quietly crying in the pews watching my mother trying to sound out her love for her Mama and the amazing life Nana lived in between the sobs and the laughs.

The funeral itself was not what Hollywood makes it out to be. The movies portray the lowering of the casket as a powerful ceremony[2] but the day was cold so the occasion was sped up, and my family did not even stay for the most part because my mother was in too much pain. We came back after the ground was covered, and we found spots amongst the dirt to place our bouquets. The breeze was nippy, and we all clung together to maintain heat. The end had come so anticlimatically. I stood there wondering what to do now. My mother broke down again as expected. "It’s really over," she said. So many years and so many lives touched. We left emptier than we began, but with a dismal resolution to live as fully as she did. I never knew how much of a plug my grandmother was in my life until she was a hole.

We had to go on because she was happy that she could actually run and be free again. No more disease. Rest easy, Nana. One day we will meet again.