Weep No More, My Lady

For the last three years Mamie had been in a nursing home in my hometown, right around the corner from my mother’s house. All day long, over and over, she would cry “Momma, Papa” and talk with people four generations gone. The last time I saw her, tiny and shriveled in her bed, completely blind and almost wholly deaf, she took my hand and said, “Is that the boy? My boy always was a rascal.” In her final lucid moment she whispered to my mother, “Put me in the ground next to Percy and close the gate behind you. I want to go home.” She was weeping when she died.

She was 97, the repository of vanished times for me. Although she would not have understood had I told her, she helped me to have feeling for the few things that matter. I was nourished in the echoes of her laughter.

When I was a boy, she and I took long walks around town in the gold summer dusk, out to the cemetery or miles and miles to the Old Ladies’ Home, talking in torrents between the long silences. All about us were forests of crape myrtles and old houses fairly ruined. Widow ladies and spinsters sat on the galleries of the dark houses cooling themselves with paper fans, and we greeted each lady by turn, and then she told me who they were and what had happened to their people. We must have been an unlikely pair on those long-ago jour-
neys, she in her flowing dress and straw hat, I barefoot in a T-shirt and blue jeans, with a sailor’s cap on my head, separated by our sixty years. Only when I grew older did I comprehend that it was the years between us that made us close; ours was a symbiosis forged by time.

What are hills? How old are horses? Where do people go when they die? She always tried to answer me. But mostly she told me stories. Since she was the seventeenth child, she told me, her mother was so ashamed that she hid her as a baby under the blankets of the wagon when friends approached on the road. During a race riot after a political barbecue, five or six Negro men asked her to hide them, so she kept them in a deserted chickenhouse for two days and fetched them cornbread and butter milk from the kitchen. One autumn twilight she took me to the old family home, sold to pay taxes long before, and under the house she sighted a beautiful white pebble, quite large, and she told me she had found it down by the town well when she was ten years old.

To my grandfather Percy, who made potato chips at the potato-chip factory, she was the sustenance of life; she was ever patient also with my two outrageous old maid aunts, who in their blindness peregrinated about the house at all hours, carrying on conversations with garbage cans or brooms standing in corners or the hall furnace, waiting for the food to be served. One hot summer night many years ago, she went to get me a glass of water, and in the darkness broke her big toe on a rocker.

To ease the pain until the doctor came, she smoked the only cigarette of her life, a rolled-up Bull Durham, saying to me, “I could get addicted.” When I had my tonsils out in the hospital, I fought my way from under the ether, spitting blood on the bed, and then I saw her next to me, whispering, “My poor, poor boy.” At nights, half asleep on the couch, drowsy in the cadences of the katydids, I absorbed in a reverie her aimless talk with her.
sisters—disasters of the flesh, people long forgotten, her Momma and Poppa—and heard the big clock on the mantel chime each quarter-hour.

She made her first trip to New York, to see me, when she was 87. It bemused her that the magazine I edited bore her family name, Harper, though she deemed it the Northern branch. She and my mother and I sat one evening at a sidewalk café in Greenwich Village; a number of racially mixed couples strolled past us, hand-in-hand. “I’ve never seen people carry on like that,” my mother said. I attempted a reply. Then, quite gently, Mamie said, “It’s a long way from home, son. You know that.” Then she paused for a moment, looking across Sixth Avenue at nothing in particular, and added, “Maybe when we all get to heaven, they’ll be white and we’ll be black.”

When the call came to me on Long Island that she had died, my son David and I rushed to LaGuardia and made the last flight back. It took us just eight hours to be in Yazoo, although we seemed in many ways to have traveled considerably farther than that.

Spring was on its way; the jonquils and burning bushes and Japanese magnolias were in bloom, and out in the delta the black land hummed with motion. But we were immersed in a web of death, for death in a small Southern town is like death in no other place. Everyone knows right away when someone has died, and there is a community apparatus to deal with the situation, old bonds of institutional grief almost primal in their unfolding. Having lived away so long, I had forgotten how they cope with it, death every day, death everlasting.

But they do. They bring food and they talk among themselves about this death and others. They hover close in the web of death; they try hard to make mortality natural. Here in Yazoo, at the age of 39, I looked death in the face with stark comprehension for the first time.

In the funeral home she lay in the next room. I watched my son looking furtively from time to time in her direction. It was his first funeral. The sight of him there made me remember my first one, and looking at him now helped me know my son better. He lurked now in corners watching the whole town come through, my mother’s church ladies, my father’s fishing and domino friends. “He looks just like you did,” they said. “He favors you.” They admired his Yankee accent.

Later, when Mamie’s funeral procession approached the church, turning east at the courthouse, a black policeman stood in the center of the street at attention, holding his cap over his heart. We were to bury her in Raymond, fifty miles away, and now only five or six cars followed us, a meager parade, as we drove past the suburbs and shopping centers of old Mississippi, a lovely terrain of abrupt hills and green vines being ripped away whole, and mammoth new expressways making something else entirely of the land she once knew.

We reached the old section of the Raymond cemetery before the hearse, and everyone got out to look around. Desolation awaited us. On this isolated and forlorn hill, the people who had settled her town were buried. I saw my son strolling among them, and among the older graves across the way, and a few moments later he walked up to me carrying a small broken tombstone, wordlessly laying it at my feet: “To Richard Edwards, 1828–1863, From His Friends the Confederate Soldiers.” He was upset when I told him he could not take it back to New York.

“I hate to leave her in this awful place,” my mother said; as she said it the hearse arrived. The men put the coffin and the flowers on the open grave, and we gathered about against the heavy wind and said “The Lord’s
Prayer.” It was over in moments.

Yet people stayed, as if riveted to that place and time; they moved a distance from the grave to talk. I saw my son with the undertaker, watching the coffin slowly descend into the ground. In the crowd a tall, angular man I did not know, a local man, caught me by the arm. “By God, you’re Ray.” Not Ray, I said. “Yes, by damn, you’re Ray. You’re the image of your father. You’re Ray’s boy.”

I walked away from this strange lingering, and drifted alone up the hill. Wisps of clouds cast the terrain before me in gloom. Far below stretched the streets of the old town. The bell on the courthouse struck four, and, in a lane beyond, a child ran after a car tire that was rolling along. A dog barked in pursuit of the child; from near the grave there was laughter, and the minglings of a dozen voices.

In a rush I knew in my heart the sweetness and simplicity of her days on this earth. Alone on the hill, in a February wind, I grieved for Mamie.