

A DEATH
IN THE FAMILY

James Agee



PENGUIN BOOKS

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A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

“*A Death in the Family* remains one of the most beautifully written of all American novels. James Agee’s talent was both luxuriant and precise, and the opening sequence is still one of the finest prose poems in our language. He is one of those writers who cause other writers to shiver with pure pleasure.”—Pat Conroy

“People I know who read *A Death in the Family* forty years ago still talk about it. So do I. It is a great book, and I’m happy to see it done anew.”—Andre Dubus

“For as long as fiction is read, James Agee’s *A Death in the Family* stands as an American masterpiece. There is no stronger, more moving document in our literature than this account of a father’s sudden death in the early years of our century. Here are the full spectrum of emotion and resonance, the tensile, perfectly nuanced language, the prayerful inquiry into identity itself, and characters so perfectly rounded that they exist in every specificity of inquiry, acute awareness, dumb love, and sensual arrest. This book has been my Bible; may it bless new generations of readers.” - Jayne Anne Phillips

James Agee

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James Agee was born in Tennessee in 1909 and graduated from Harvard University. His renowned study of Alabama sharecroppers during the Depression, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, appeared in 1941. Agee was known for his movie reviews and screenplays, and published a volume of poetry and a novella, as well. He died in 1955, two years before his major work of fiction, *A Death in the Family*, was published and won the Pulitzer Prize.

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James Agee



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A NOTE ON THIS BOOK

JAMES AGEE DIED SUDDENLY May 16, 1955. This novel, upon which he had been working for many years, is presented here exactly as he wrote it. There has been no re-writing, and nothing has been eliminated except for a few cases of first-draft material which he later re-worked at great length, and one section of seven-odd pages which the editors were unable satisfactorily to fit into the body of the novel.

The ending of *A Death in the Family* had been reached sometime before Agee's death, and the only editorial problem involved the placing of several scenes outside the time span of the basic story. It was finally decided to print these in italics and to put them after Parts I and II. It seemed presumptuous to try to guess where he might have inserted them. This arrangement also obviated the necessity of the editors having to compose any transitional material. The short section *Knoxville Summer of 1915*, which serves as a sort of prologue, has been added. It was not a part of the manuscript which Agee left, but the editors would certainly have urged him to include it in the final draft.

How much polishing or re-writing he might have done is impossible to guess, for he was a tireless and painstaking writer. However, in the opinion of the editors and of the publisher, *A Death in the Family* is a near-perfect work of art. The title, like all the rest of the book, is James Agee's own.

Knoxville : Summer, 1915

We are talking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there successfully disguised to myself as a child. It was a little bit mixed sort of block, fairly solidly low middle class, with one or two juts apiece on either side of that. The houses corresponded: middle-sized gracefully fretted wood houses built in the late nineties and early nineteen hundreds, with small front and side and more spacious back yards, and trees in the yards, and porches. These were softwooded trees, populars, tulip trees, cottonwoods. There were fences around one or two of the houses, but mainly the yards ran into each other with only now and then a low hedge that wasn't doing very well. There were few good friends among the grown people, and they were not poor enough for the other sort of intimate acquaintance, but everyone nodded and spoke, and even might talk short times trivially, and at the two extremes of the general or the particular, and ordinarily nextdoor neighbors talked quite a bit when they happened to run into each other, and never paid calls. The men were mostly small businessmen, one or two very modestly executives, one or two worked with their hands, most of them clerical, and most of them between thirty and forty-five.

But it is of these evenings, I speak.

Supper was at six and was over by half past. There was still daylight, shining softly and with a tarnish, like the lining of a shell; and the carbon lamps lifted at the corners were on in the light, and the locusts were started, and the fire flies were out, and a few frogs were flopping in the dewy grass by the time the fathers and the children came out. The children ran out first hell bent and yelling those names by which they were known; then the fathers sank out leisurely in crossed suspenders, the collars removed and their necks looking tall and shy. The mothers stayed back in the kitchen washing and drying, putting things away, recrossing their traceless footsteps like the lifetime journeys of bees measuring out the dry cocoa for breakfast. When they came out they had taken off their aprons and their skirts were dampened and they sat in rockers on their porches quietly.

It is not of the games children play in the evening that I want to speak now, it is of the contemporaneous atmosphere that has little to do with them: that of the fathers of families, each in his space of lawn, his shirt fishlike pale in the unnatural light and his face nearly anonymous, hosing the lawns. The hoses were attached at spiggots that stood out of the brick foundations of the houses. The nozzles were variously set but usually so there was a long sweet stream of spray, the nozzle wet in the hand, the water trickling the right forearm and the peeled-back cuff, and the water whishing out a loose and low-curved cone, and so gentle a sound. First an insane noise of violence in the nozzle, then the still irregular sound of adjustment, then the smoothing into steadiness and a pitch as accurately tuned to the size and style of stream as any violin. So many qualities of sound out of one hose: so many choral differences out of those several hoses that were in earshot. Out of any one hose, the almost dead silence of the release, and the short still arch of the separate big drops, silent as a held breath, and the only noise the fluttering noise on leaves and the slapped grass at the fall of each big drop. That, and the intense hiss with the intense stream; that, and that same intensity not growing less but growing more quiet and delicate with the turn of the nozzle, up to the extreme tender whisper when the water was just a wide bell of film. Chiefly, though, the hoses were set much alike, in a compromise between distance and tenderness of spray (and quite surely a sense of art behind this compromise, and

a quiet deep joy, too real to recognize itself), and the sounds therefore were pitched much alike ~~pointed by the snorting start of a new hose; decorated by some man playful with the nozzle; left empty~~ like God by the sparrow's fall, when any single one of them desists: and all, though near alike, of various pitch; and in this unison. These sweet pale streamings in the light lift out their pallors and their voices all together, mothers hushing their children, the hushing unnaturally prolonged, the me gentle and silent and each snail-like withdrawn into the quietude of what he singly is doing, the urination of huge children stood loosely military against an invisible wall, and gentle happy and peaceful, tasting the mean goodness of their living like the last of their suppers in their mouths; while the locusts carry on this noise of hoses on their much higher and sharper key. The noise of the locust is dry, and it seems not to be rasped or vibrated but urged from him as if through a small orifice by breath that can never give out. Also there is never one locust but an illusion of at least a thousand. The noise of each locust is pitched in some classic locust range out of which none of them varies more than two full tones: and yet you seem to hear each locust discrete from all the rest, and there is a long slow pulse in their noise, like the scarcely defined arch of a long and high set bridge. They are all around in every tree, so that the noise seems to come from nowhere and everywhere at once, from the whole shell heaven, shivering in your flesh and teasing your eardrums, the boldest of all the sounds of the night. And yet it is habitual to summer nights, and is of the great order of noises, like the noises of the sea and of the blood her precocious grandchild, which you realize you are hearing only when you catch yourself listening. Meantime from low in the dark, just outside the swaying horizons of the hoses, conveying always grass in the damp of dew and its strong green-black smear of smell, the regular yet spaced noises of the crickets, each a sweet cold silver noise three-noted, like the slipping of each time of three matched links of a small chain.

But the men by now, one by one, have silenced their hoses and drained and coiled them. Now only two, and now only one, is left, and you see only ghostlike shirt with the sleeve garters, and sobbing mystery of his mild face like the lifted face of large cattle enquiring of your presence in a pitchdark pool of meadow; and now he too is gone; and it has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into the sphere of possession of the trees, of birds hung havens, hangars. People go by; things go by. A horse drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt; a loud auto; a quiet auto; people in pairs, not in a hurry, scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually, the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk, the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber. A street car raising its iron moan, stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past, the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks; the iron whine rises on rising speed; still risen, faints; halts, the faint stinging bell; rises again, still fainter, fainting, lifting, lifts, faints forgone: forgotten. Now is the night one blue dew.

Now is the night one blue dew, my father has drained, he has coiled the hose.

Low on the length of lawns, a frailing of fire who breathes.

Content, silver, like peeps of light, each cricket makes his comment over and over in the drowned grass.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

AT SUPPER THAT NIGHT, as many times before, his father said, "Well, spose we go to the picture show."

"Oh, Jay!" his mother said. "That horrid little man!"

"What's wrong with him?" his father asked, not because he didn't know what she would say, but so she would say it.

"He's so *nasty!*" she said, as she always did. "So *vulgar!* With his nasty little cane; hooking up skirts and things, and that nasty little walk!"

His father laughed, as he always did, and Rufus felt that it had become rather an empty joke; but always the laughter also cheered him; he felt that the laughter enclosed him with his father.

They walked downtown in the light of mother-of-pearl, to the Majestic, and found their way to sea by the light of the screen, in the exhilarating smell of stale tobacco, rank sweat, perfume and dirty drawers, while the piano played fast music and galloping horses raised a grandiose flag of dust. And there was William S. Hart with both guns blazing and his long, horse face and his long, hard lip, and the great country rode away behind him as wide as the world. Then he made a bashful face at a girl and his horse raised its upper lip and everybody laughed, and then the screen was filled with a city and with the sidewalk of a side street of a city, a long line of palms and there was Charlie; everybody laughed the minute they saw him squattily walking with his toes out and his knees wide apart, as if his were chafed; Rufus' father laughed, and Rufus laughed too. This time Charlie stole a whole bag of eggs and when a cop came along he hid them in the seat of his pants. Then he caught sight of a prettily woman and he began to squat and twirl his cane and make silly faces. She tossed her head and walked away with her chin up high and her dark mouth as small as she could make it and he followed her very busily, doing all sorts of things with his cane that made everybody laugh, but she paid no attention. Finally she stopped at a corner to wait for a streetcar, turning her back to him, and pretending he wasn't even there, and after trying to get her attention for a while, and not succeeding, he looked out at the audience, shrugged his shoulders, and acted as if *she* wasn't there. But after tapping his foot for a little, pretending he didn't care, he became interested again, and with a charming smile, tipped his derby; but she only stiffened, and tossed her head again, and everybody laughed. Then he walked back and forth behind her, looking at her and squatting a little while he walked very quietly, and everybody laughed again; then he flicked hold of the straight end of his cane and, with the crooked end, hooked up her skirt to the knee, in exactly the way that disgusted Mama, looking very eagerly at her legs, and everybody laughed loudly; but she pretended she had not noticed. Then he twirled his cane and suddenly squatted, bending the cane and hitching up his pants, and again hooked up her skirt so that you could see the panties she wore, ruffled almost like the edges of curtains, and everybody whooped with laughter, and she suddenly turned in rage and gave him a shove in the chest, and he sat down straight-legged, hard enough to hurt, and everybody whooped again; and she walked haughtily away up the street, forgetting about the streetcar, "mad as a hornet!" as his father exclaimed in delight; and there was Charlie, flat on his bottom on the sidewalk, and the way he looked, kind of sickly and disgusted, you could see that he suddenly remembered those eggs, and suddenly you remembered

them too. The way his face looked, with the lip wrinkled off the teeth and the sickly little smile, made you feel just the way those broken eggs must feel against your seat, as queer and awful as the time in the white pekay suit, when it ran down out of the pants-legs and showed all over your stockings and you had to walk home that way with people looking; and Rufus' father nearly tore his head off laughing and so did everybody else, and Rufus was sorry for Charlie, having been so recently in a similar predicament, but the contagion of laughter was too much for him, and he laughed too. And then it was even funnier when Charlie very carefully got himself up from the sidewalk, with that sickly look even worse on his face, and put his cane under one arm, and began to pick up his pants front and back, very carefully, with his little fingers crooked, as if it were too dirty to touch, picking the sticky cloth away from his skin. Then he reached behind him and took out the wet bag of broken eggs and opened it and peered in; and took out a broken egg and pulled the shell disgustedly apart, letting the elastic yolk slump from one half shell into the other, and dropped it, shuddering. Then he peered in again and fished out a whole egg, all slimy with broken yolk, and polished it off carefully on his sleeve, and looked at it, and wrapped it in his dirty handkerchief, and put it carefully into the vest pocket of his little coat. Then he whipped out his cane from under his armpit and took command of the street again, and with a final look at everybody, still sickly but at the same time cheerful, shrugged his shoulders and turned his back and scraped backward with his big shoes at the broken shells and the slimy bag, just like a dog, and looked back at the mess (everybody laughed again at that) and started to walk away, bending his cane deep with every shuffle, and squatting deeper, with his knees wider apart than ever before, constantly picking at the seat of his pants with his left hand, and shaking one foot then the other, and once gouging deep into his seat and then pausing and shaking his whole body, like a wet dog, and then walking on; while the screen shut over his small image a sudden circle of darkness: then the player-piano changed its tune, and the ads came in motionless color. They sat down into the William S. Hart feature to make sure why he had killed the man with the fancy vest—it was what they had expected by her frightened, pleased face after the killing; he had insulted a girl and cheated her father as well—and Rufus' father said, "Well, reckon this is where we came in," but they watched him kill the man all over again; then they walked out.

It was full dark now, but still early; Gay Street was full of absorbed faces; many of the store windows were still alight. Plaster people, in ennobled postures, stiffly wore untouchably new clothes; there was even a little boy, with short, straight pants, bare knees and high socks, obviously a sissy: but he wore a cap, all the same, not a hat like a baby. Rufus' whole insides lifted and sank as he looked at the cap and he looked up at his father; but his father did not notice; his face was wrapped in good humor, the memory of Charlie. Remembering his rebuff of a year ago, even though it had been his mother, Rufus was afraid to speak of it. His father wouldn't mind, but she wouldn't want him to have a cap, yet. If he asked his father now, his father would say no, Charlie Chaplin was enough. He watched the absorbed faces pushing past each other and the great bright letters of the signs—"Sterchi's." "George's." I can read them now, he reflected. I even know how to say "Sturkeys." But he thought it best not to say so; he remembered how his father had said, "Don't you brag," and he had been puzzled and rather stupid in school for several days, because of the stern tone in his voice.

What was bragging? It was bad.

They turned aside into a darker street, where the fewer faces looked more secret, and came into the odd, shaky light of Market Square. It was almost empty at this hour, but here and there, along the pavement streaked with horse urine, a wagon stayed still, and low firelight shone through the white cloth shell stretched tightly on its hickory hoops. A dark-faced man leaned against the white brick

wall, gnawing a turnip; he looked at them low, with sad, pale eyes. When Rufus' father raised his hand in silent greeting, he raised his hand, but less, and Rufus, turning, saw how he looked sorrowfully, somehow dangerously, after them. They passed a wagon in which a lantern burned low orange; there lay a whole family, large and small, silent, asleep. In the tail of one wagon a woman sat, her face narrow beneath her flare of sunbonnet, her dark eyes in its shade, like smudges of soot. Rufus' father averted his eyes and touched his straw hat lightly; and Rufus, looking back, saw how her dead eyes kept looking gently ahead of her.

"Well," his father said, "reckon I'll hoist me a couple."

They turned through the swinging doors into a blast of odor and sound. There was no music: only the density of bodies and of the smell of a market bar, of beer, whiskey and country bodies, salt and leather; no clamor, only the thick quietude of crumpled talk. Rufus stood looking at the light on the damp spittoon and he heard his father ask for whiskey, and knew he was looking up and down the bar for men he might know. But they seldom came from so far away as the Powell River Valley; and Rufus soon realized that his father had found, tonight, no one he knew. He looked up his father's length and watched him bend backwards tossing one off in one jolt in a lordly manner, and a moment later heard him say to the man next him, "That's my boy"; and felt a warmth of love. Next moment he felt his father's hands under his armpits, and he was lifted, high, and seated on the bar, looking into a long row of huge bristling and bearded red faces. The eyes of the men nearest him were interested, and kind; some of them smiled; further away, the eyes were impersonal and questioning, but now even some of these began to smile. Somewhat timidly, but feeling assured that his father was proud of him and that he was liked, and liked these men, he smiled back; and suddenly many of the men laughed. He was disconcerted by their laughter and lost his smile a moment; then, realizing it was friendly, smiled again; and again they laughed. His father smiled at him. "That's my boy," he said warmly. "Six years old, and he can already read like I couldn't read when I was twice his age."

Rufus felt a sudden hollowness in his voice, and all along the bar, and in his own heart. But how does he fight, he thought. You don't brag about smartness if your son is brave. He felt the anguish of shame, but his father did not seem to notice, except that as suddenly as he had lifted him up to the bar he gently lifted him down again. "Reckon I'll have another," he said, and drank it more slowly; then, with a few good nights, they went out.

His father proffered a Life Saver, courteously, man to man; he took it with a special sense of courtesy. It sealed their contract. Only once had his father felt it necessary to say to him, "I wouldn't tell your mama, if I were you"; he had known, from then on, that he could trust Rufus; and Rufus had felt gratitude in this silent trust. They walked away from Market Square, along a dark and nearly empty street, sucking their Life Savers; and Rufus' father reflected, without particular concern, that Life Savers were not quite life saver enough; he had better play very tired tonight, and turn away the minute they got in bed.

The deaf and dumb asylum was deaf and dumb, his father observed very quietly, as if he were careful not to wake it, as he always did on these evenings; its windows showed black in its pale brick as the nursing woman's eyes, and it stood deep and silent among the light shadows of its trees. Ahead of Asylum Avenue lay bleak beneath its lamps. Latticed in pawnshop iron, an old saber caught the glare of a street lamp, a mandolin's belly glowed. In a closed drug store stood Venus de Milo, her golden body laced in elastic straps. The stained glass of the L&N Depot smoldered like an exhausted butterfly, and at the middle of the viaduct they paused to inhale the burst of smoke from a switch

engine which passed under; Rufus, lifted, the cinders stinging his face, was grateful no longer to feel fear at this suspension over the tracks and the powerful locomotives. Far down the yard, a red light flicked to green; a moment later, they heard the thrilling click. It was ten-seven by the depot clock. They went on, more idly than before.

If I could fight, thought Rufus. If I were brave; he would never brag how I could read: Brag. Of course, "Don't you brag." That was it. What it meant. Don't brag you're smart if you're not brave. You've got nothing to brag about. Don't you brag.

The young leaves of Forest Avenue wavered against street lamps and they approached their corner.

It was a vacant lot, part rubbed bare clay, part over-grown with weeds, rising a little from the sidewalk. A few feet in from the sidewalk there was a medium-sized tree and, near enough to be within its shade in daytime, an outcrop of limestone like a great bundle of dirty laundry. If you sat on a certain part of it the trunk of the tree shut off the weak street lamp a block away, and it seemed very dark. Whenever they walked downtown and walked back home, in the evenings, they always began to walk more slowly, from about the middle of the viaduct, and as they came near this corner they walked more slowly still, but with purpose; and paused a moment, at the edge of the sidewalk; then, without speaking, stepped into the dark lot and sat down on the rock, looking out over the steep face of the hill and at the lights of North Knoxville. Deep in the valley an engine coughed and browse couplings settled their long chains, and the empty cars sounded like broken drums. A man came up the far side of the street, walking neither slow nor fast, not turning his head, as he paused, and quite sure not noticing them; they watched him until he was out of sight, and Rufus felt, and was sure that his father felt, that though there was no harm in the man and he had as good a right as they did to be there minding his own business, their journey was interrupted from the moment they first saw him until they saw him out of sight. Once he was out of sight they realized more pleasure in their privacy than before; they really relaxed in it. They looked across the darkness of the lights of North Knoxville. They were aware of the quiet leaves above them, and looked into them and through them. They looked between the leaves into the stars. Usually on these evening waits, or a few minutes before going home, Rufus' father smoked a cigarette through, and when it was finished, it was time to get up and go on home. But this time he did not smoke. Up to recently he had always said something about Rufus being tired, when they were still about a block away from the corner; but lately he had not done so and Rufus realized that his father stopped as much because he wanted to, as on Rufus' account. He was just not in a hurry to get home, Rufus realized; and, far more important, it was clear that he liked to spend these few minutes with Rufus. Rufus had come recently to feel a quiet kind of anticipation at the corner, from the moment they finished crossing the viaduct; and, during the ten to twenty minutes they sat on the rock, a particular kind of contentment, unlike any other that he knew. He did not know what this was, in words or ideas, or what the reason was; it was simply all that he saw and felt. It was mainly, knowing that his father, too, felt a particular kind of contentment, here, unlike any other, and that their kinds of contentment were much alike, and depended on each other. Rufus seldom had at a sharply the feeling that he and his father were estranged, yet they must have been, and he must have felt it, for always during these quiet moments on the rock a part of his sense of complete contentment lay in the feeling that they were reconciled, that there was really no division, no estrangement, or none so strong, anyhow, that it could mean much, by comparison with the unity that was so firm and assured, here. He felt that although his father loved their home and loved all of them, he was more lonely than the contentment of this family love could help; that it even increased his loneliness, made it hard for him not to be lonely. He felt that sitting out here, he was not lonely; or if he was, the

he felt on good terms with the loneliness; that he was a homesick man, and that here on the rock though he might be more homesick than ever, he was well. He knew that a very important part of his well-being came of staying a few minutes away from home, very quietly, in the dark, listening to the leaves if they moved, and looking at the stars; and that his own, Rufus' own presence, was fully indispensable to this well-being. He knew that each of them knew of the other's well-being, and of the reasons for it, and knew how each depended on the other, how each meant more to the other, in the most important of all ways, than anyone or anything else in the world; and that the best of this well-being lay in this mutual knowledge, which was neither concealed nor revealed. He knew these things very distinctly, but not, of course, in any such way as we have of suggesting them in words. There were no words, or even ideas, or formed emotions, of the kind that have been suggested here, no more in the man than in the boy child. These realizations moved clearly through the senses, the memory, the feelings, the mere feeling of the place they paused at, about a quarter of a mile from home, on a rock under a stray tree that had grown in the city, their feet on undomesticated clay, facing north through the night over the Southern Railway tracks and over North Knoxville, towards the deeply folded small mountains and the Powell River Valley, and above them, the trembling lanterns of the universe seeming so near, so intimate, that when air stirred the leaves and their hair, it seemed to be their breathing, the whispering of the stars. Sometimes on these evenings his father would hum a little and the humming would break open into a word or two, but he never finished even a part of a tune, for silence was even more pleasurable, and sometimes he would say a few words, of very little consequence, but would never seek to say much, or to finish what he was saying, or to listen for a reply; for silence again was even more pleasurable. Sometimes, Rufus had noticed, he would stroll to the wrinkled rock and press his hand firmly against it; and sometimes he would put out his cigarette and tear and scatter it before it was half finished. But this time he was much quieter than ordinarily. They slackened their walking a little sooner than usual and walked a little more slowly, without a word, to the corner; and hesitated, before stepping off the sidewalk into the clay, purely for the luxury of hesitation; and took their place on the rock without breaking silence. As always, Rufus' father took off his hat and put it over the front of his bent knee, and as always, Rufus imitated him, but this time his father did not roll a cigarette. They waited while the man came by, intruding on their privacy, and disappeared, as someone nearly always did, and then relaxed sharply into the pleasure of their privacy; but this time Rufus' father did not hum, nor did he say anything, nor even touch the rock with his hand, but sat with his hands hung between his knees and looked out over North Knoxville, hearing the restive assemblage of the train; and after there had been silence for a while, raised his head and looked up into the leaves and between the leaves into the broad stars, not smiling, but with his eyes more calm and grave and his mouth strong and more quiet, than Rufus had ever seen his eyes and his mouth; and as he watched his father's face, Rufus felt his father's hand settle, without groping or clumsiness, on the top of his bare head; it took his forehead and smoothed it, and pushed the hair backward from his forehead, and held the back of his head while Rufus pressed his head backward against the firm hand, and, in reply to that pressure, clasped over his right ear and cheek, over the whole side of the head, and drew Rufus' head quietly and strongly against the sharp cloth that covered his father's body through which Rufus could feel the breathing ribs; then relinquished him, and Rufus sat upright, while the hand lay strongly on his shoulder, and he saw that his father's eyes had become still more clear and grave and that the deep lines around his mouth were satisfied; and looked up at what his father was so steadily looking at, at the leaves which silently breathed and at the stars which beat like hearts. He heard a long, deep sigh break from his father, and then his father's abrupt voice: "Well..." and the hand lifted from him and they both stood up. The rest of the way home they did not speak, or put a

their hats. When he was nearly asleep Rufus heard once more the crumpling of freight cars, and de
in the night he heard the crumpling of subdued voices and words, "Naw: I'll probably be back befo
they're asleep"; then quick feet creaking quietly downstairs. But by the time he heard the creaking an
departure of the Ford, he was already so deeply asleep that it seemed only a part of a dream, and b
next morning, when his mother explained to them why his father was not at breakfast, he had s
forgotten the words and the noises that years later, when he remembered them, he could never be su
that he was not making them up.

Chapter 2

DEEP IN THE NIGHT they experienced the sensation, in their sleep, of being prodded at, as if by some persistent insect. Their souls turned and flicked out impatient hands, but the tormentor would not be driven off. They both awoke at the same instant. In the dark and empty hall, by itself, the telephone was shrilling fiercely, forlorn as an abandoned baby and even more peremptory to be quieted. They heard it ring once and did not stir, crystallizing their senses into annoyance, defiance and acceptance of defeat. It rang again: at the same moment she exclaimed, "Jay! The children!" and he, grunting, "Lie still," swung his feet thumping to the floor. The phone rang again. He hurried out into the dark, bare-footed, tiptoe, cursing under his breath. Hard as he tried to beat it, it rang again just as he got to it. He cut it off in the middle of its cry and listened with savage satisfaction to its dead rattle. Then he put the receiver to his ear.

"Yeah?" he said, forbiddingly. "Hello."

"Is this the residence of, uh ..."

"Hello, who is it?"

"Is this the residence of Jay Follet?"

Another voice said, "That's him, Central, let me talk to um, that's ..." It was Ralph.

"Hello," he said. "Ralph?"

"One moment please, your party is not connected ..."

"Hello, Jay?"

"Ralph? Yeah. Hello. What's trouble?" For there was something wrong with his voice. Drunk, he reckoned, he thought.

"Jay? Can you hear me all right? I said, 'Can you hear me all right,' Jay?"

Crying too, sounds like. "Sure, I can hear you. What's the matter?" Paw, he thought suddenly. I bet it's Paw; and he thought of his father and his mother and was filled with cold sad darkness.

"Hit's Paw, Jay," said Ralph, his voice going so rotten with tears that his brother pulled the receiver a little away, his mouth contracting with disgust. "I know I got no business aringin y'up this hour of the night but I know too you'd never forgive me if ..."

"Quit it, Ralph," he said sharply. "Cut that out and tell me about it."

"Hit's only my duty, Jay, God Almighty I ..."

"All right, Ralph," he said, "I appreciate your callin. Now tell me about Paw."

"I just got back for this, Jay, this minute, hurried home specially to ring you up ... Course I'm gonna be right back, you ..."

"Listen, Ralph. Listen here. Can you hear me?" Ralph was silent. "Is he dead or alive?"

“Paw?”

Jay started to say, “Yeah, Paw,” in tight rage, but he heard Ralph begin again. He can’t help it, he thought, and waited.

“Why, naw, he ain’t dead,” Ralph said, deflated. The darkness lifted considerably from Jay: coldly, he listened to Ralph whickering up his feelings again. Finally, his voice shaking satisfactorily, he said, “But O Lord God, hit looks like the end, Jay!”

“I should come up, huh?” He began to wonder whether Ralph was sober enough to be trusted; Ralph heard, and misunderstood the doubt in his voice.

His voice became dignified. “Course that’s entirely up to you, Jay. I know Paw n all of us would feel it was mighty strange if his oldest boy, the one he always thought the most of ...”

This new voice and this new tack bewildered Jay for a moment. Then he understood what Ralph was driving at, and had misunderstood, and assumed about him, and was glad that he was not where he could hit him. He cut in.

“Hold on, Ralph, you hold on there. If Paw’s that bad you know damn well I’m comin so don’t give me none of that ...” But he realized, with self-dislike, how unimportant it was to argue this matter with Ralph and said, “Listen here, Ralph, now don’t think I’m jumping on you, just listen. Do you hear me?” His feet and legs were getting chilly. He warmed one foot beneath the other. “Hear me?”

“I can hear you, Jay.”

“Ralph, get it straight I’m not trying to jump on you, but sounds to me like you’ve had a few. No ...”

“I...”

“Now hold on. I don’t give a damn if you’re drunk or sober, far’s you’re concerned: point is this with Ralph. Anyone that’s drunk, I know it myself, they’re likely to exaggerate ...”

“You think I’m a lyin to you? You ...”

“Shut up, Ralph. Course you’re not. But if you’re drunk you can get an exaggerated idea how serious a thing is. Now you think a minute. Just think it over. And remember nobody’s goin to think you bad of you if you change your mind, or for calling either. Just how sick is he really, Ralph?”

“Course if you don’t want to take my word for ...”

“Think, Goddamn it!” Ralph was silent. Jay changed his feet around. He suddenly realized how foolish he had been to try to get anything levelheaded out of Ralph. “Listen, Ralph,” he said. “I know you wouldn’t a phoned if you didn’t think it was serious. Is Sally there?”

“Why yeah, she ...”

“Let me talk to her a minute, will you?”

“Why I just told you she’s out home.”

“Course Mother’s out there.”

“Why, Jay, she wouldn’t never leave his side. Mother ...”

“Doctor’s been out, of course.”

“He’s with him still. Was when I left.”

“What’s he say?”

Ralph hesitated. He did not want to spoil his story. “He says he has a chance, Jay.”

By the way Ralph said it, Jay suspected the doctor had said, a good chance.

He was at the edge of asking whether it was a good chance or just a chance when he was suddenly overcome by even more disgust for himself, for haggling about it, than for Ralph. Besides, his feet were so chilly they were beginning to itch.

“Look here, Ralph,” he said, in a different voice. “I’m talking too much. I ...”

“Yeah, reckon our time must be about up, but what’s a few ...”

“Listen here. I’m starting right on up. I ought to be there by—what time is it, do you know?”

“Hit’s two-thirty-seven, Jay. I *knowed* you’d ...”

“I ought to be there by daylight, Ralph, you tell Mother I’m coming right on up just quicks I can get there. Ralph. Is he conscious?”

“Awf an’ on, Jay. He’s been speakin yore name, Jay, hit like to break muh heart. He’ll sure thank his stars that his oldest boy, the one he always thought the most of, that you thought it was worth yore while to ...”

“Cut it out, Ralph. What the hell you think I am? If he gets conscious just let him know I’m coming. And Ralph ...”

“Yeah?”

But now he did not want to say it. He said it anyway. “I know I got no room to talk, but—try not to drink so much that Mother will notice it. Drink some coffee fore you go back. Huh? Drink it black.”

“Sure, Jay, and don’t think I take offense so easy. I wouldn’t add a mite to her troubles, not at this time, not for this world, Jay. You know that. So Jay, I *thank* you. I *thank* you for calling it to my attention. I don’t take offense. I *thank* you, Jay. I *thank* you.”

“That’s all right, Ralph. Don’t mention it,” he added, feeling hypercritical and a little disgusted again. “Now I’ll be right along. So good-bye.”

“You tell Mary how it is, Jay. Don’t want her thinking bad of me, ringing ...”

“That’s all right. She’ll understand. Good-bye, Ralph.”

“I wouldn’t a ring you up, Jay if ...”

“That’s all right. Thanks for calling. Good-bye.”

Ralph’s voice was unsatisfied. “Well, good-bye,” he said.

Wants babying, Jay realized. Not appreciated enough. He listened. The line was still open. The hell with it, he thought, and hung up. Of all the crybabies, he thought, and went on back to the bedroom.

“Gracious *sake*,” said Mary, under her breath. “I thought he’d talk forever!”

“Oh, well,” Jay said, “reckon he can’t help it.” He sat on the bed and felt for his socks.

“It is your father, Jay?”

“Yup,” he said, pulling on one sock.

“Oh, you’re going up,” she said, suddenly realizing what he was doing. She put her hand on his.

“Then it’s very grave, Jay,” she said very gently.

He fastened his garter and put his hand over hers. “Lord knows,” he said. “I can’t be sure enough about anything with Ralph, but I can’t afford to take the risk.”

“Of course not.” Her hand moved to pat him; his hand moved on hers. “Has the doctor seen him?” she asked cautiously.

“He says he has a chance, Ralph says.”

“That could mean so many things. It might be all right if you waited till morning. You might hear from him, he was better, then. Not that I mean to ...”

Because, to his shame, he had done the same kinds of wondering himself, he was now exasperated all afresh. The thought even flashed across his mind, That’s easy for *you* to say. He’s not *your* father, and besides you’ve always looked down at him. But he drove this thought so well away that he thought of himself for having believed it, and said, “Sweetheart, I’d rather wait and see what we hear in the morning, just as much as you would. It may all be a false alarm. I know Ralph goes off his trolley easy. But we just can’t afford to take that chance.”

“Of course not, Jay.” There was a loud stirring as she got from bed.

“What *you* up to?”

“Why, your breakfast,” she said, switching on the light. “Sakes *alive!*” she said, seeing the clock.

“Oh, Mary. Get on back to bed. I can pick up something downtown.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, hurrying into her bathrobe.

“Honest, it would be just as easy,” he said. He liked night lunchrooms, and had not been in one since Rufus was born. He was very faintly disappointed. But still more, he was warmed by the simplicity with which she got up for him, thoroughly awake.

“Why, Jay, that is out of the question!” she said, knotting the bathrobe girdle. She got into her slippers and shuffled quickly to the door. She looked back and said, in a stage whisper, “Bring your shoes—to the *kitchen*.”

He watched her disappear, wondering what in hell she meant by that, and was suddenly taken with a snort of silent amusement. She had looked so deadly serious, about the shoes. God, the ten thousand little things every day that a woman kept thinking of, on account of children. Hardly even thinking, he thought to himself, as he pulled on his other sock. Practically automatic. Like breathing.

And most of the time, he thought, as he stripped, they’re dead right. Course they’re so much in the habit of it (he stepped into his drawers) that sometimes they overdo it. But most of the time if you think even a second before you get annoyed (he buttoned his undershirt), there is good common sense

behind it.

He shook out his trousers. His moment of reflection and light-heartedness was overtaken by a shadow, and he felt a little foolish, for he couldn't be sure there was anything to worry about yet, much less feel solemn about. That Ralph, he thought, hoisting the trousers and buttoning the top button. And he stood a moment looking at the window, polished with light, a deep blue-black beyond. The hour and the beauty of the night moved in him; he heard the flickering of the clock, and it sounded alien and mysterious as a rat in a wall. He felt a deep sense of solemn adventure, whether or not there was anything to feel solemn about. He sighed, and thought of his father as he could first remember him: beak-nosed, handsome, with a great, proud scowl of black mustache. He had known from away back that his father was sort of useless without ever meaning to be; the amount of burden he left to Jay's mother used to drive him to fury, even when he was a boy. And yet he couldn't get around it: he was so naturally gay and so deeply kindhearted that you couldn't help loving him. And he never meant her any harm. He meant so well. That thought used particularly to enrage Jay, and even now it occurred to him with a certain sourness. But now he reflected also: well, but damn it, he did. He may have traded on it, but he never tried to, never knew it gained him anything. He meant the best in the world. And for a moment as he looked at the window he had no mental image of his father, nor any thought of him, nor did he hear the clock. He only saw the window, tenderly alight within, and the infinite dark leaning like water against its outer surface, and even the window was not a window but only something extraordinarily vivid and senseless which for the moment occupied the universe. A sense of enormous distance stole over him, and changed into a moment of insupportable wonder and sadness.

Well, he thought: we've all got to go sometime.

Then life came back into focus.

Clean shirt, he thought.

He unbuttoned the top buttons of his trousers and spread his knees, squatting slightly, to hold them up. Fool thing to do, he reflected. Do it every time. (He tucked in the deep tails and settled them; the tails of this shirt were particularly long, and this always, for some reason, still made him feel particularly masculine.) If I put on the shirt first, wouldn't have to do that fool squat. (He finished buttoning his fly.) Well (he braced his right shoulder) there's habit for you (he braced his left shoulder and slightly squatted again, readjusting).

He sat on the bed and reached for one shoe.

Oh.

Yup.

He took his shoes, a tie, a collar and collar buttons, and started from the room. He saw the rumpled bed. Well, he thought, I can do *something* for her. He put his things on the floor, smoothed the sheets and punched the pillows. The sheets were still warm on her side. He drew the covers up to keep the warmth, then laid them open a few inches, so it would look inviting to get into. She'll be glad of that, he thought, very well pleased with the looks of it. He gathered up his shoes, collar, tie and buttons, and made for the kitchen, taking special care as he passed the children's door, which was slightly ajar.

She was just turning the eggs. "Ready in a second," he told her, and dodged into the bathroom. Ought to get this upstairs, he reflected for perhaps the five hundredth time.

He thrust his chin at the mirror. Not so bad, he thought, and decided just to wash. Then he reflected after all, why had he worn a clean shirt? He could hope to God not, all he liked, but the chances were this was going to be a very solemn occasion. I'd do it for a funeral, wouldn't I? he reflected, annoyed at his laziness. He got out his razor and stropped it rapidly.

Mary heard this lavish noise of leather, and with a small spasm of impatience shoved the eggs to the back of the stove.

Ordinarily he took a good deal of time shaving, not because he enjoyed it (he loathed it) but because if it had to be done he wanted to do it well, and because he hated to cut himself. This time, because he was in a hurry, he gave a special cold glance at the lump of chin before he leaned forward and got to work. But to his surprise, everything worked like a charm; he even had less trouble than usual at the roots of his nostrils, and with his chin, and there were no patches left. He felt so well gratified that he dabbed each cheekbone with lather and took off the little half-moons of fuzz. Still no complaints. He cleaned up the basin and flushed the lathery, hairy bits of toilet paper down the water closet. Do I? he wondered, as the water closet gargled. Nope. He reached for the collar buttons.

When Mary came to the door he was flinging over and noosing the four-in-hand, his chin stretched and tilted as it always was during this operation, with the look of an impatient horse.

"Jay," she said softly, a little quelled by this impatient look, "I don't mean to hurry you, but things'll get cold."

"I'll be right out." He set the knot carefully above the button, glaring into his reflected eyes, made an unusually scrupulous part in his hair, and hurried to the kitchen table.

"Aw, *darling!*" There were the bacon and eggs and the coffee, all ready, and she was making pancakes as well.

"Well you got to *eat*, Jay. It'll still be chilly for hours." She spoke as if in a church or library because of the sleeping children, unconsciously, because of the time of night.

"Sweetheart." He caught her shoulders where she stood at the stove. She turned, her eyes hard with wakefulness, and smiled. He kissed her.

"Eat your eggs," she said. "They're getting cold."

He sat down and started eating. She turned the pancakes. "How many can you eat?" she asked.

"Gee, I don't know," he said, getting the egg down (don't talk with your mouth full) before he answered. He was not yet quite awake enough to be very hungry, but he was touched, and determined to eat a big breakfast. "Better hold it after the first two, three."

She covered the pancake to keep it hot and poured another.

He noticed that she had peppered the eggs more heavily than usual. "Good eggs," he said.

She was pleased. Not more than half consciously, she had done this because within a few hours he would doubtless eat again, at home. For the same reason she had made the coffee unusually strong. And for the same reason she felt pleasure in standing at the stove while he ate, as mountain women did.

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