And a Tear Ran Down My Face

Rick Stigstrø

I remember when Wilma Martly died, of pneumonia, poor girl. We all went over to the house, my sisters Jean and Berta and I. How Berta cried, the tears just a' pourin' out those downslopin' eyes of hers. Kind of dumb lookin', those eyes of hers, with those tears runnin' off like you was holdin' two dishrags a' drippin'. I always said Berta was a slobby crier, her face all pourin' out of the corners like that.

And then Billy, my younger brother, died of the pox, poor child. My mother stayed by his side, bawlin' the whole way through. My, that was sad! We laid the body out in the parlor, didn't have any funeral homes in those days. My mother cried such a lot that week, she nearly dehydrated right there next to the body. Her tears just a' flowin' all natural down, like a seep out in the swamp. She shed such a puddle on the floor that when summer came around a moss grew up. We never could get that moss out of the carpet.

Mother died just a year after that. That dear woman passed on from the sorrow of Billy's death. The whole clan of us start to cryin' then—Father with his silent face and watery eyes; Wallace, he bein' about seventeen then, his eyes rimmed up like fire and the tears went a' streamin' down his face and dripped upon his shirt sleeves; and Amy with her deep sobs usin' up those handkerchiefs till they got all crusty with tears. Then all us younger ones, blubberin' away cause we didn't know what was goin' on, and Jean with those dainty rivulets of hers tricklin' like a gentle spring rain; me with just kind of saturatin' round the bottoms of my eyes, then soakin' my face; little Tommy with his diggin' his fists in every time the tears welled up; and Berta with her downslopin' dishrags just a' runnin' in a stream off the corners of her eyes, round the sides of her face, soakin' down around her collarbone. Those tears not comin' straight down like a normal person's.

Years later when Jean died, she was fifty-seven, and me, Tom, and Berta was the only ones left. She died of a brain aneurysm, poor girl.

Here we were, in the funeral home, all the relation and
friends comin’ in. There sat Jean’s husband, Dan, and their kids. They were holdin’ up pretty good, considerin’. Them greetin’ people in their type of quiet, dignified sadness, thankin’ them for comin’, just a light, reserved stream a’ tricklin’ down their faces—so like their wife and mother, Jean.

Me, sittin’ in the front row of chairs with my tears that kind of gathered about the bottoms of my eyes, seepin’ down on a wide path where I kept it dabbed upon my cheeks.

Tommy, standin’ in the lobby. He was no small boy any more. He must a’ weighed close to two hundred and fifty pounds. Him there, with those cowboy boots and that polyester shirt he always worn to funerals and weddins’. Him, cryin’ with the tears just a’ runnin’ off that big ruddy face and diggin’ his fists into those eyesockets like he did when he was a little kid, with his hands all damp. He was goin’ about blub­berin’ and shakin’ everyone’s hands and givin’ them great hugs so as to be leavin’ little damp marks on the backs of their coats. Those folks were discreetly takin’ out their hankies to wipe their hands and act as if they were dabbin’ their dry eyes.

The undertaker kept Berta off to the side in a big cushiony chair. The attendants kept a watch on her, often checkin’ up. Each time they did, it brought on a fresh bout of cryin’, with her mouth in a slobberin’ wail. Berta still had those great downslopin’ eyes. With age they became lost in the folds of skin, makin’ them look twice as long and droopy.

There she sat a’ wailin’ with the undertakers whisperin’ about her, sizin’ her up for a casket. Her, with those darn tears just a’ pourin’ out of the corners of those disrag eyes, just a’ channelin’ out along those saggin’ creases and off the sides of her face, drippin’ down upon those lumpy pillowcase breasts. She looked like a toad sittin’ there. And a thought came to me: “Boy, I hope she dies before me. I sure don’t want her breakin’ down and cryin’ that god-awful cry of hers over my casket.”

What a terrible thought to have—when you’re supposed to be sittin’ there mournin’ your sister, Jean.

Well, Berta hung on and she didn’t die before me. My poor ticker stopped, heart failure. Those undertakers fixed me up right. They laid me out in this here casket, real nice with its padded, satin sides and under my head. I laid here, though gnarly, just a’ waitin’ for Berta to come.

Least I wouldn’t have Tommy’s fists in his eyes and cryin’ all over that they buried him in going on the collapsed there at Tommy’s funeral so bad that the undertaker had an awful time around she was. She was belle. They were takin’ her out of Tommy’s vowin’ to never stand again again she was to sorrow.

So, here they were a’ wheelin’ and I can hear her whimperin’ and dirge. It had been soon after Jean undertaker made, especially for that pad, cause she had wrecked his that wake. So, now I can hear the quiet wishh of her wheelch material.

I can hear her whimperin’ with “Ohh! My poor Dehlila (sob). Dehlila the undertaker comin’ up over the pathy for the poor dead me to hear sobbin’ and a’ moanin’ over her. Wanta see my Dehlila. Mrs. Reily you just stay put.” And my sister starts a’ hollerin’ gotta see my Dehlila. I just got they bury her in the ground!”

And I can hear this creakin’ and a’ gruntin’ and a’ moanin’ of Berta i
Jean's husband, Dan, and their pretty good, considerin'. Them quiet, dignified sadness, a light, reserved stream a' tricklin' for wife and mother, Jean. of chairs with my tears that kind of my eyes, seepin' down on a pad upon my cheeks.

by. He was no small boy any close to two hundred and fifty e cowboy boots and that to funerals and weddings'. Him, pin' off that big ruddy face and pockets like he did when he was small. He was goin' about blub­

unds and givin' them great hugs marks on the backs of their feet takin' out their hankies to they were dabbin' their dry

ff to the side in a big cushiony mat on her, often checkin' light on a fresh bout of cryin', lil. Berta still had those greaty became lost in the folds of long and droopy.

he undertakers whisperin' ket. Her, with those darn the undertaker comin' up over the casket with that look of em­

pathy for the poor dead me to have such a' creature as Bertha sobbin' and a' moanin' over her. I kind of cringe inside myself, here in this casket, when I hear her start to cry. And I can imagine those huge eyes of hers just a' pourin' out like those wrung out dishrags, just a channelin' down them gullies she has eroded into her face from the years of sorrow. Her, with them tears just a' splashin' down that mountain of a body of hers, gettin' bigger ever since she's been in that wheelchair. Those tears, just a' cascadin' down over those monumental breasts and a kind a' poolin' in the vinyl seat of that chair.

Then I hear the undertaker get real agitated and say, "No. Mrs. Reily you just stay put."

And my sister starts a' hollerin' and a' screamin', "I just gotta see my Dehlila. I just gotta see her once more before they bury her in the ground!"

And I hear this creakin' and a' groanin' of the chair and the grustin' and a' moanin' of Berta in her last great, sorrowful

with its padded, satin sides and these pillows they propped up under my head. I laid here, though, all squeamish and gnarly, just a' waitin' for Berta to have her turn over me.

Least I wouldn't have Tommy bawlin', with him diggin' his fists in his eyes and cryin' all over that damn polyester shirt that they buried him in going on two years ago. Berta had collapsed there at Tommy's funeral. Her cryin' was gettin' so bad that the undertaker had an ambulance on call just when she was around. She was bellerin' and screamin' so, when they were takin' her out of Tommy's funeral, and she was vowin' to never stand again she was so destroyed by her sorrow.

So, here they were a' wheelin' her up towards my casket. And I can hear her whimperin' and a' warmin' up for this great dirge. It had been soon after Jean's funeral that the undertaker made, especially for Berta, this white, absorbent pad. cause she had wrecked his carpet with her pourins' durin' that wake. So, now I can hear them pushin' her up close by the quiet whishh of her wheelchair wheels on that thick material.

I can hear her whimperin' with a' ever increasin' volume, "Ohh! My poor Dehlila (sob), Dehlila!" And I see the head of the undertaker comin' up over the casket with that look of em­
struggle. Then I see that big bullfrog face peerin' up over the edge of my casket with the tears just a' streamin' out of the corners of those great downslopin' eyes, round the edge of her cheeks, and on to those giant breasts. And it reminds me of the first time I saw her like that, way back with Wilma Martly.

So, inside of me, cushioned deep in the casket, the laughter wells up. And when I hear Berta crash back into that poor wheelchair of hers, exhausted by the effort, there squeezes out of the corner of my dead eye an ornery, yellow tear of laughter.

The undertaker was the one who saw it, though, and he dabbed it with his handkerchief—prob'ly thinkin' he had pickled me too much in the formaldehyde.