

Grandmas' Other Shoe

By M. Price

Mitchel watched the smoke of the gravedigger's hand-rolled cigarette snake up the man's rough hand, stained brown by dirt, nicotine, and engine oil. The man wore khaki overalls and a plaid, fleece cap with ear flaps to protect against the February wind traveling down the mountain. He sat respectfully silent while his backhoe rested on the frozen ground, hot metal ticking in the cold, the machine exhaling blue diesel-smelling fumes, like the panting of a winded mechanical animal.

At nine years old, Mitchel knew that a grave was supposed to be six feet deep, and he was sure that the earthen hole surrounding Grandma's casket was not nearly as deep as his father, Dwight, was tall. That rough, uneven hole was only part of the funeral director's disdain for these proceedings in the woods of Kasson Brook, in Mehoopany, Pennsylvania, Forkston township. The fellow had been irritated by the request of Mitchel's mother Valerie to have the black minivan which served as hearse carry Grandma's casket up the snowy dirt road to Kasson Cemetery. This plot consisted of Grandpa's new tombstone next to Grandma's grave, and some old stone markers and rocks above people long-forgotten.

The van kept slipping on the icy slope, and finally Mitchel's Dad, Uncle Matt, and others loaded the box containing Laura Mae Kasson's remains into the bed of Uncle Matt's new Toyota pick-up. The men climbed into the truck bed, grinning despite themselves and steadied the casket as Matt put it in four-wheel drive and gunned up the hill in reverse. Everyone agreed that Laura Mae would have thought this mode of transport appropriate, being a Clough by birth, from a long line of simple folk and farmers. Valerie struggled with laughter, tears, and anger at the funeral home director who made rude comments before driving away in his black van.

Mitch averted his eyes as the men used ropes to lower Grandma's casket into the red Pennsylvania dirt. Instead, he stared at the tombstone nearby, adorned with plastic poinsettias. He didn't remember Grandpa, who'd had a heart attack in 1996. Many times he'd heard Grandma tell of how she'd found him sitting in his chair, in the pine-paneled house he'd built for them. Just sitting, gone...with the dog at his feet. Sam, the black lab, had worn a look of inexpressible pain, thumping his tail on the floor as she neared the armchair, to find Grandpa "passed", as she put it.

It was time. The winter sun slanted golden in the pine boughs, sending a shaft of light across the coffin, unmindful of any distinction between the living and the dead. That same luminous ray, lifted by a breeze in the branches, glinted wetly in Valerie's tear-filled blue eyes, and glanced disinterestedly across the clear, dry whites of Mitchel's. People threw flowers on top of the casket, and a frozen clod of dislodged dirt rolled down the inside of the grave to land on the wooden lid with a soft thud. Valerie threw in the red rose she'd been holding, and wailing, turned away, into Dwight's arms. Mitchel felt his insides twist in fear: alarm at the depth of his mothers' pain, and terror at the thought that *she* could die, too, as her own mother just had.

It was a "freak accident"; a term he'd heard over and over since they got the call last week, on February 18th. Grandma had been driving to her job reading to children at the school. It was Friday, about 7:30 in the morning. The newspaper clipping said it was on "State Route 3001 when a 1999 Toyota Corolla driven by Laura Mae Kasson, 65, of

Mehoopany rolled onto its roof and came to rest in a small tributary of the Mehoopany Creek.”

Strange way to put it, “came to rest.” Like Grandma in the ground, being “laid to rest.” No hint of violence, or a struggle, and Mitchel was troubled by not knowing how it happened – was Grandma conscious? Did she try to get out, held upside down by her seat belt? He’d been to that curve in the road with his parents, trying to imagine her car slipping on ice, sliding past the guardrail that could have stopped it. He saw it in his mind in slow motion, rolling down and over, then coming to rest, lying like a bug on its back, with Grandma’s head in six inches of icy water. The newspaper had a picture of the car, upside down in the ditch. That was after the ambulance has taken Grandma to the hospital, “where she was later pronounced dead.”

Strangest thing was, she was wearing only one shoe. What happened to the other shoe? They’d looked all around but found nothing. It bothered Mitchel, and his mind kept returning to that shoe, a slip-on tan “pump”, as Mom called it.

Then the ache would start, a bubble of fear and hurt that expanded inside him until it pressed from within on his throat, and the back of his eyes. If he wasn’t careful the pressure would cause hot tears, and he was afraid to cry... afraid he might be unable to stop. He didn’t want Mom to see, to feel worse than she already did.

That’s how he’d felt earlier, in the church. The Forkston United Methodist Church was tiny, and full of worn wood that smelled like the houses of old people. Mitchel smiled at the thought that people called a church “God’s house”... if God was as old as Grandma said, before even Time itself began, then no wonder it smelled old inside!

Aunt Peggy and he were sitting on the walnut colored wooden pew, polished by years of people’s bottoms sliding across it. Aunt Peggy had “been with” (as his mother put it), Uncle Matt since before Mitchel was born. He knew from hearing the adults talk around the fire (all Kasson reunions featured a big bonfire at night) that Aunt Peggy was a “Christian”, as Grandma had been. And Grandma supposedly still was; if what she’d believed was true, she’d be in Heaven with God, right now. Thinking that might be true helped Mitchel feel better, for Grandma’s sake. He’d liked it when Grandma took him to church, and read stories from the Bible. She gave him comic books from Sunday school, improbable stories like David and Goliath, and Samson.

Aunt Peggy reached for the Bible behind the wooden slat attached to the seat in front of them. “You know, Mitch,” she said, flipping to the back of the book, “your Grandma believed this to be the word of God.”

She tilted her head and eyed Mitchel thoughtfully, as though trying to see his thoughts.

“Of course it hurts when someone dies and it seems we’ve lost them forever. People have grieved for the dead since... well, ever since there *were* people. We’re *all* afraid of the power of death. But for those who believe this,” she held up the Bible, “there’s a promise.”

“Right at the very end, the last book... telling about the end of Time as we know it.” Peggy ran her index finger along the line of print, “Here it is - ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”

“It’s like these bodies,” she pinched the skin on her forearm into a fold between her thumb and finger, “there’re shells...something the *real* us, the part that lives forever, doesn’t need anymore and can leave behind.”

Mitchel sat silently, staring ahead towards the wooden rail altar, at the place the casket had been, blue eyes clouded with uncertainty. The early afternoon sun flickered across the stained glass windows as tree branches lifted in the wind, rays brightening a purple cluster of grapes held up by a monk in a dappled brown glass robe. The same light that had played across the faces of those gathered at Laura Mae’s grave now visited the little church. A subtle golden brightness touched Mitchel’s cheek, as if looking for someone, or illuminating a question.

Aunt Peggy’s voice was quiet. “I read something, once. It said, ‘Only love can conquer death.’ As strong and powerful as death seems, it can never make you stop loving your Grandma. If you have faith, you can have hope, and the promise is that death is conquered in the end.”

Matt stood in the little hall beneath the church, gazing unseeing at the clear, cold sunlight outside the narrow window. The church ladies bustled about, bringing bowls of food from the kitchen to the long tables covered with paper tablecloths. These women were in their element, and busied about like hens, trying to convince the mourners to sit down before the food got cold. The heaping, steaming bowls of home-cooked favorites reminded Matt of Grandma Kasson’s meals on the farm his Dad, Clifford, Laura Mae’s “passed” husband, had grown up on. The farm was in Ulster, and Matt worked there two summers, haying and milking for a dollar a day the first year, then twenty dollars a week the year after. On this farm Dad’s brother, Uncle Jerry, had stayed, building a house there and raising his own family while working alongside the old man, Grandpa Ray.

People stood in small groups, talking and laughing. Matt felt irritation at the thought that Peggy, a self-described “Connecticut yuppie”, found these folk amusing...clad in suspended jeans and flannel shirts, planning to get back to “the milking” after the reception. People with names like Floyd, Howard, and Gertrude; a remnant of simple, honest country types who were the last such generation.

Uncle Jerry’s soft drawl came from the nearest group. All the Kasson men had a understated manner of speaking...a quiet, almost self-effacing hesitancy to draw attention which had the reverse effect of causing listeners to attend more. Matt couldn’t make out what Jerry was saying, but the calm, measured tones brought back a vivid memory of the farm. A memory so real that Matt could almost smell the warm odors of cow manure, and sweet fresh-cut hay drying in the field...

“The bitch got caught, and your Grandpa don’t want any more dogs. Heck, the old man hardly ever hunts anymore with the two he’s got!” Thirteen-year old Matt listened to Uncle Jerry while he stared at the days-old pups crawling around in the manure-spreader. He had been sweeping clean sawdust into the cow stanchions when he first heard the muted whimpering, and following the cries to the far end of the barn, was aghast to find four black and tan coonhound pups struggling to pull their chubby bodies

through the wet manure, heads trembling on feeble necks as their stubby front legs flailed with effort.

“He’s taking a couple each day to spare the bitch suffering with too much milk – there’s four left.” Uncle Jerry explained that Grandpa first flung the pups against the metal side of the manure–spreader truck body, thinking to break their necks. Apparently he’d only knocked them unconscious, and they’d come to. Matt stared at the little bodies, now covered with filth, milky blue unseeing eyes, sightless, yet looking bewildered. He imagined the heavy chains of the spreader rotating on their axle, mercilessly flogging the puppies, tearing their soft bodies apart. Or maybe just ripping a leg off, leaving the pup to die, or smother in cow crap as the chains threw the manure into the field while Grandpa drove it around. Matt didn’t trust himself to look at Uncle Jerry, so he continued staring at the tiring pups as Jerry shook his head and walked up the hill to the farmhouse for one of Grandma Pearle’s plentiful farm lunches.

Matt watched Uncle Jerry’s retreating back and swallowed hard, past the rising, thickening lump in his throat. He followed in his uncle’s steps, along the foot-deep manure trench behind the milking stanchions. Designed to capture the cow’s droppings, the trenches had chains running along their bottoms which moved the manure to the rear of the barn and into the waiting truck bed of the manure-spreader parked below. The barn was set north-to-south in a hillside; coming down the hill from the farmhouse, one entered at ground level, but the far end emerged above a ten-foot slope of packed, rutted dirt. The cows exited down an earthen ramp on the right, and on the left was the concrete overhang which carried the waste into the truck.

Matt walked halfway up the hill, stopping at the first of two large pines. At its base sat the coonhound bitch, attached to a six-foot length of heavy, thick chain, about the same diameter as those of the manure-spreader. Within the chain’s radius was her house, a fifty-gallon oil drum. A dirty flap of burlap hung over the opening cut into the top of the barrel’s end. A stainless steel milk bucket hung on a hook at the base of the tree. This represented a pragmatic act of kindness on Grandpa’s part; preventing the dog’s chain from spilling her water supply and thus avoiding both her suffering and any added chore for him.

The black-and-tan dog sat motionless by the barrel. Only her eyes moved, up to lock with Matt’s. The hound’s eyes were a soft, deep brown, vulnerable in her ancient, knowing, pain. Her eyes moved again to follow Matt’s shaking hands as kneeling, he reached behind the brown burlap cloth and lifted out the furry, warm bodies of the four remaining pups. The bitch’s sorrowful eyes moved again; met Matt’s in helpless yielding as he emptied the water from her pail and placed the pups inside. Again Matt tried to swallow down the knot in his throat, the hurting in his chest swelling up, pressing closer to his thickening, dry tongue.

“I’m sorry, but it’s best...I’m sorry”, he whispered. The bitch whined, a muted pleading in her throat, a sound synonymous with heartache. In her tearless eyes was surrender; to the Truth, to the Power of Man, and Death. Survival mandated yielding; to the age-old mysteries of men and beasts, to the kindness of the hook, and to the cruelty of the chain.

The hot, midday summer sun pressed silence and heat over the farm. Matt’s legs felt curiously both weak and light as he stood and turned toward the barn. He strode heavily down the hill, compensating with weight for knees that seemed made of air instead of

flesh and sinew. Passing the woodpile, he picked up the hatchet stuck in the huge oak stump used for splitting the logs burned in the farm's woodstoves.

The cool darkness of the cow barn was blinding after the fierce noonday sun outside. In the stillness Matt could hear his sneakers on the concrete floor, and the futile, muted scratches of the four pups' nails against the metallic sides of the bucket. The pups' pink claws were surprisingly clean...so soft and new-looking as they pressed on the relentless steel.

Matt emerged into the bright heat as he descended the cow's walk-way and neared the manure-spreader. His heart began thudding heavily in his chest. This frightening, visceral slamming in his insides seemed to mark a new span of Time; clocking an event just conceived, yet rushing upon him with an inevitable Power. His freckled face was pale and emotionless as he moved woodenly, placing the pail and hatchet on the baked, dry earth, reached inside the truck body, and pulled out the limp, faintly mewling bodies covered with manure.

Kneeling, Matt lined up all eight pups side-by-side on the parched dirt, heads aligned toward the spreader, tails nearest him. He picked up the hatchet in his right hand, and quickly, without hesitation, used his left hand to pull each pup nearer by its stubby tail, and chopped off its head. He moved rapidly, from pup to pup. Eight tugs, eight chops. It was over in a nauseous rush of a moment. Matt stared at the silent heads, each with its own tiny pink tongue hanging out, eyes already filming over with dust, and death. The severed necks offered a startlingly scant amount of darkening red blood which the thirsty earth drank up immediately.

Matt picked up the nearest limp body to place it in the bucket. He was struck by a sense of wrongness, a perversion of something so basic he'd never even thought about it before. The mother dog drinking from the bucket which held her pups mutilated bodies was some kind of insane twisting of everything else that was normal in the world- the cows grazing in the field, birds calling in the woods, sun high in the sky. All oblivious to the drama of Death in which he played the main agent, the tool of this Power.

Matt laid the little headless corpse gently on the dry earth. The maroon gash of flesh on its neck reminded him of the raw venison steaks Laura Mae would fry with onions and potatoes. He went back in the barn and emerged with a red manure fork in hand. The close metal tines were narrow enough to effectively carry all sixteen pieces of the pups into the spreader. He carefully tilted the fork into the bed of the spreader, sliding the pup pieces into the manure. Matt picked up the hatchet and bucket in one hand, and placed the fork against the concrete wall in the barn. He stumbled through the darkness as his eyes filled with hot tears. They streamed down his face as he fought back deep, wracking sobs. Clear viscous strands of snot ran down his upper lip, tasting strangely sweet as they mixed with the salt of his tears.

At the other end of the barn Matt stopped at the water spigot. Lifting the handle, he let the stream flow into the bucket as he washed his face with the cold well water cupped in his hands. He rinsed the metal pail several times, and filled it with the clear water, pushing the handle down to close the valve. Wiping his face on the back of his sleeve, he tried to control his heaving breaths as he made his way to the woodpile.

Matt sat on the oak stump, shuddered a last sigh, and blinked, squeezing final tears to dry with an itching, crawly sensation on his cheeks. He regarded the hatchet in his hands. The very earth which so eagerly accepted the pups' blood had wiped the blade which

provided the liquid as the edge sank into the cleansing soil. He drove the hatchet into the stump with a sudden rage, and with the same burning anger he scuffed his sneaker toe into an anthill, then used his heel to crush the legions of tiny insects as they hurriedly streamed out of their home.

Matt thought about the Power of Death, and realized that death itself was as natural and inevitable as the Sun shining in the sky, and just as unconcerned and impersonal. What gave it the power to hurt was anyone caring; like in loving and missing the dead. Like the hound bitch, or people at a funeral. The only way to avoid the pain was to protect yourself from being vulnerable. Why have a dog, only to chain it up and kill its babies? Why get married and have kids, just to end up divorced, with the ones you supposedly loved becoming the unconsenting casualties of your caring?

So Matt promised himself that as much as he could, he'd make sure he wasn't part of the senseless stupidity he saw all around him. He wouldn't grow up to buy into the lies everybody must tell themselves to make it seem that what they were doing was OK. What they thought was normal- families, a dog, Little League, vacations – all seemed wrong to him. A dangerous trap he wanted to avoid. And the nameless, hated hurting which had risen up earlier, causing his tears, receded inside. Shrank like a deflated ball, diminishing until he imagined it a little cold globe; a cold star, fixed inside him.

Walking to the pine tree, Matt hung the water pail on its hook. The hound bitch was in her barrel. The heavy chain led to the inside, stopping past the cloth flap like an unfinished sentence. Silence. Matt didn't speak or move aside the burlap. There was no comfort for either of them in the stroke of his hand. He realized he was very hungry, and turned to go up to the house. Grandma would've saved a plate in the oven, and she'd ask no questions.

“I have this hermit crab at home – in a glass bowl. I took it home from school last summer. It lives in a shell and I feed it dried worms. I change the water every week or it gets cloudy and stinky.”

Peggy watched Mitchel in the mirror of her visor. They were going back to Laura Mae's house after the church reception. Mitchel had elected to ride with Matt and Peggy, easily folding his thin frame into the back seat of the extended cab. The church ladies were also enroute to the house built by Cliff, to cover the pine table and counters with aluminum foil pans full of leftover food: pasta, coleslaw, beans and desserts. Tonight there'd be the bonfire, and everyone would stare at the flames as the firelight flickered across their faces. The grownups would talk, and as usual Uncle Matt, Mitchel's dad Dwight, and Aunt Peggy would discuss God, and Truth.

“The day Grandma died, the day of the (in his mind he'd always insert the word 'freak') accident? For the first time, the crab came out of his shell. He stayed out for two days.”

Mitch recalled that the tan crab body had looked soft, and vulnerable. Mitchel had been careful to shut his bedroom door so the cat couldn't get at it. It had made him strangely nervous, feeling the crab's lack of safety.

“Wow. Kinda like a sign, of what we were talking about at the church, huh?” Peggy waited for a response, but Mitchel just looked out the window. His pensive profile evoked a wave of emotion in Peggy...something so vulnerable about pre-pubescent boys. She recalled the same sense of helpless protectiveness seeing her own sons at that age. The tender fullness of yet un-kissed lips, this momentary pause between boyhood and puberty, before the onslaught of raging hormones and ensuing confused, nameless yearning.

Mitchel's eyes widened, mouth open as they neared the curve where the accident had occurred. Peggy watched in the mirror as the boy craned his neck.

“Slow down, Uncle Matt! This is the place!”

There were no other cars on the narrow, twisting road, so Matt pulled over across the way on the shoulder near the guardrail. Mitchel scanned the stream bed intently.

“There it is! I see it!”

Peggy hurried out of the passenger side as Mitchel unbuckled his seat belt, jumped out of the truck, and ran towards the water. Mitchel bent down and picked something up from the muddy earth, disturbed from the crash, leaves mixed with snow and frozen dirt. Matt and Peggy watched incredulously as the boy held up Laura Mae's tan pump. They walked over as Mitchel stared at the curiously clean, dry shoe. No one spoke.

They stood there, watching Mitchel regard the shoe, his look of amazement turning into a satisfied smile of discovery, and a yet undefined understanding. And that aching inside him, that heavy ball of hurt which would expand and press on him from the inside...that ball was there, but it was getting thinner as it grew, it was expanding into nothing, dissipating like a bubble fading away, not with a pop, but with a soft sigh, he could feel it going... Now, in its place, there was a clear, empty space that was airy, and light. Mitchel realized that he suddenly, unaccountably, felt different – a kind of gladness.

The February sun slanted through the pine branches, dappling across Mitchel's cheek like kisses. A ray rested on the tan vinyl pump, warming the soft plastic. So warm it felt like flesh in Mitchel's hand, holding Grandmas' other shoe.