

A Grief Contained

When death came like a thief in the afternoon, we were unprepared. Hearts and souls, we were not prepared. Our hearts were irrevocably broken; our souls shattered almost beyond repair.

This unpreparedness can be explained. No one expects a healthy four-and-a-half-year-old child to die suddenly after a minor fall from a familiar workbench. He was the fifth child of my parents' six children.

That Sunday, March 28th, 1943 was a lovely one in south Texas. Our family had had cake and punch that afternoon. Afterward, Jimmy had gone with our dad to the workshop. While my dad shaped an axe handle, Jimmy sat on the thick sturdy workbench hammering nails into a board.

Without warning, Jimmy toppled to the rough cement floor, a mere thirty-eight inches below. With his back turned, my dad didn't notice. Then he heard a whimper. He picked up Jimmy and carried him to the house. My mother rushed to the phone to call our family doctor some twenty miles away.

The doctor came; he walked quickly into the house. A few minutes later he returned. He was carrying Jimmy in his arms. He left a chorus of wailing and weeping and shouts of frantic denial. He delivered his precious burden to the local funeral home.

Two days later the undertaker phoned. He reported, "Jimmy is ready. You can come now." We all went to Hondo to the funeral home. The little white casket rested on a small bier.

My mother, aunt and grandmother fell upon each other and wept. The desperate weeping of the ages, of infinite untold losses flowed into that room, and like a tidal wave, swamped them in their grief.

The burial: our family sat near the grave. We heard and saw the cold clods of winter-hard earth falling on the small defenseless casket. And the unending hopeless weeping began again.

Our friends, neighbors and extended family gathered us close and held despair at bay. They held us up despite our strong efforts to be cast down.

Life went on as it must. Our grief was poured out over time. Eventually over time, this rampaging torrent of sorrow became a river with boundaries, then an even

quieter waterway, and finally it seemed to disappear underground altogether.

My mother always remembered her lost child. When she was ninety-one years old, she came to live with my family. She brought Jimmy's last photo, a chubby smiling unforgettable child.

Her grief, the sorrow she carried for decades, was a grief contained, but only just barely.

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