

A Death in the Family

One of the most unsettling and discomposing events of our lives as we were growing up, was probably that of death and the ensuing funeral. No one in our vicinity availed themselves of the services of a funeral home. This meant there were no death certificates and no ready made caskets. Instead rough sawn boards were stored at somebody's house for making the coffins. Self appointed carpenters made a diamond shaped box, the ends of which were lopped off at the length sufficient to accommodate the remains of the departed. Measurements were taken from head to toe and elbow to elbow and the box was graduated from these measurements. Since no cosmetics were applied, the corpse looked just as death had rendered it, pallid, ashen and wan. The whole affair left us afraid of the dark. We could visualize the death look on the faces of the departed and the mystery of death spawned a sure possibility of visits of revenging ghosts.

On one occasion, our uncle's family and we were called to the bedside of a relative who had suffered a stroke and was near death. We arrived just as she was gasping for her last breath. We were chosen to make the casket.

The house was far back into the woods. Hardly a road led to the site and the place where we were told to go make the coffin was a mile farther back into the woods. Only a path led to the designated spot where was stacked a pile of sweet gum lumber, rough sawn and extremely heavy. In due time, we had built a box but it was much too heavy for the two of us to carry. It was finally decided that we would stay with the coffin while our uncle went for help.

Darkness was settling in and our fears began to manifest themselves. There we were in an unsettled stretch of dense forest, no doubt with wild beasts of all sorts, and the very present possibility of a ghost or maybe a whole posse of ghosts. There sat the coffin, open and ready to entrap any mortal who had the least blot on their record. The lid sat leaning against a tree. Had it been blown down by a puff of wind, we're sure a heart attack would have resulted.

All too soon, the night cries of the forest filled the air with screeches, wails, cries and groans. We sat on the ground with our backs to the awful object of our own creation. The coffin, the sounds, the isolation, the loneliness, along with visualizing those last gasping moments wrought fears almost too esoteric to be endured by mortals.

Some hour after nightfall, voices could be heard coming down the trail. Never in our life have we heard sounds more welcome.

We returned to the house where lay the deceased, and the rough box was fitted with black and white cambric and lace and the corpse put inside.

-Columbus Vaughan