

“Natural Causes”
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The church wasn't like ours. Ours is bigger and nicer. I didn't know anybody except Mom and Dad. A man was standing beside a coffin, talking about Mr. Reynolds. Mr. Reynolds was in that coffin. I saw him before when the lid was open. He looked asleep to me but no one sleeps in a coffin but vampires. I asked my Mom what Mr. Reynolds died from.

“Natural causes, Billy, just natural causes.”

Mom had tears in the corner of her eyes. Mr. Reynolds lived next door to us my whole life. He fixed my bike and made stuff for people out of old Christmas trees. He could whittle anything; he'd sit on his front porch in an old wood rocking chair and whittle. Sometimes Mom would go over at supper time and say,

“Sam, I got plenty fried chicken.”

Then Mr. Reynolds would fold up his knife and come eat dinner with us.

I was thinking about “natural causes” while the man in church was talking. How could anyone die of natural causes? People die on television from getting shot or from being sick. No one ever dies from natural causes.

I never saw a dead person before. I saw a dead cat. It belonged to Freddie Wilson. Me and Abe found it in the street. It was tore open; guts were spilling out. Abe poked at it with his Louisville Slugger.

“Its eyes are bubbling,” I said.

Abe pushed at my shoulder.

“You dork, those are maggots.”

After the man talked, the music started. Some men picked up the coffin and started walking out of the church. Other people followed behind. Mom took hold of my hand and we followed.

Mom and Dad disagreed about me going to the cemetery. They didn't see me sitting on the stairs.

“He’s eight years old, Ed,” Mom said.

“Margie, Billy’s known Sam Reynolds since he could walk. Probably knew him better than us. He’s going to learn about death sometime.”

Mom didn’t argue more. She sniffled and wiped her eyes with a Kleenex.

I wondered what I was supposed to learn about death.

When we got home from the cemetery, I looked at Mr. Reynold’s house and wondered what would happen now that nobody lived there. This time of day, Mr. Reynolds would be sitting up on his porch rocking and watching the neighborhood. I climbed the steps. I sat in that old chair and started to rock.

I thought about Freddie Wilson’s cat. It ran away and got hit by a car. That’s a good reason to be dead, but I couldn’t figure out what Mr. Reynolds was dead for.

Natural causes.

I felt cold and rocked harder.

Mom, Dad?

I ran to my house. Mom and Dad were sitting in the front room drinking coffee.

“Mom?”

I couldn’t say my question. I stood there not wanting to look like a baby.

“Come here,” Mom said.

Mom put her arms out and I ran into them. I hugged her and hugged her. I felt her shaking.

“Billy, Dad and I are not going anywhere, not for a long, long time.”

I don’t know how she knew what I was going to ask.

After that, I would go to Mr. Reynolds’ house in the afternoon and sit in that rocking chair. I asked Dad if I could get a pocketknife and learn to whittle. He said maybe when I’m older.

A couple weeks later, people showed up and took Mr. Reynolds’ stuff away. Mom went over there and talked to them. She came back with that old rocking chair and set it on our porch.

New people moved in. I walked over and watched while they carried things into the house. The woman said her name is Betty and did I live next door. I asked them did they know Mr. Reynolds. Betty shook her head.

I sat on the steps and told her. I told her all about Mr. Reynolds and how I was going to learn whittling some day. I told her I'd make her something like Mr. Reynolds.