

Light, Like the Sun

by Frances Newton

Father was 87 when he died. And I, at 41, had never before seen death, knew nothing of funeral rites. My husband and I sometimes argued about “what one did” when death came. He believed in cremation. I refused even to think of such an end. It was bad enough to die without becoming a bonfire, I thought. And I liked the idea of returning to the earth and becoming part of nature.

We had come out from New York to visit Father on his birthday. He seemed more alert and active than he had for years. And then, just as we were leaving, he fell and broke his hip. The doctors told me frankly that recovery was unlikely. And they warned me that in any case I should “make all arrangements.”

Fiercely, I set myself against death. I knew what the doctors meant, but I was still unwilling to face the issue. By the end of the second week, however, I knew that the time had come to make preparations. So, with heavy hearts, we started out to find a burial plot. All the country churchyards nearby were full or reserved for parishioners. Only the city cemeteries were left. We went to one of them.

It was a cold, wet mid-December day and, as we looked at plots, a feeling of utter horror swept through me. There, in that manufactured park with its ghoulish artificiality, with its interminable monuments to bad taste, wealth and social position, we were planning to place the body of a beautiful and dignified old man who had lived generously and loved beauty.

“Is there no place where he can be alone, without being crowded like this?” I asked. The young man who was piloting us about shook his head. “This is the most desirable burial ground in the city, and it is almost filled.”

We passed open graves ready to receive the dead—mounds of rain-drenched earth wet and

sodden on the smoke-begrimed snow. When the young man quoted price, my heart sank further. I hadn't realized that it was so costly to bury one's dead. The only plot I would consider cost \$1,700. Gently, the man reminded me that I was seeing the cemetery under the worst possible conditions, that it was beautiful when the trees were out, that many of Father's old friends and associates were lying there. But finally, noting my silence, he said, “If I had to do what you're doing today, I'd choose cremation. “Never, I said.” Then I looked out at that dreadful panorama of soot-stained stones. “Tell me about it,” I asked.

“I think it would be better if you went to our crematory,” he said. “You might find there what you miss here.” He directed us to a friendly and unpretentious Gothic chapel. My husband explained to the verger in charge that we wanted to learn about cremation —about what actually happened. “Tell me everything,” I said. “I can stand what I know. It's what I don't know that frightens me.”

The old verger seemed to understand. In front of the high altar, in the tiny chancel, lay a catafalque of dark-gray stone. There were flowers, and a lovely rose window threw warm colors on the stone floor. “The casket is brought in and placed on the catafalque,” explained the verger. “The pallbearers stand on either side and the usual service for the dead is read. At the words ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust,’ the casket is sprinkled with ashes and with dust. I press this button, and the casket sinks a foot below the floor, leaving only the flowers showing. The priest gives the benediction, and the service is over.”

“What happens when we go away?” I asked. He took us into the receiving chamber, beneath the chancel.

“When the congregation has left the church,” the verger said, “a friend of the family accompanies me and the undertaker to this room. I press this lever and the catafalque bearing the casket is lowered into the retort.”

“What is the retort?”

We passed into another vaulted room, white like the other. In the center was a small brick structure, with square gilt doors. The verger opened these revealing an inner door. He raised it and we looked into a long, white tiled chamber. The verger explained how the casket was placed in the retort, the door electrically sealed for four hours. “Afterward the ashes are gathered and sealed in a container to be placed in a niche in the chapel or given to the relatives.”

I was still not satisfied. “Does it burn?” I asked. “Like a bonfire?” The thought of flames touching someone I loved, charring his beauty, was insupportable.

The old man asked, “Have you ever looked into the sun? You know how bright and clear it is. That is what surrounds the body and consumes it. Light, like the sun.”

Light, like the sun. A sense of triumph came over me. Sunlight over Father working in his garden. Sunlight on his white head as he sat on the terrace reading. The warmth of sunlight bringing life to growing things, falling benignly on the aging, “When his time comes, I shall bring him here.”

But, as we drove away, my husband was not satisfied. “All your life you have wanted burial. I may have over-influenced you. Tomorrow I want you to go to some friend of your father, someone nearer to his own generation, and tell him of your decision.”

“But you still feel the same, don't you?” I asked.

“More strongly than ever. Burial in modern urban surroundings is even more barbarous than I had realized. And to me there is something monstrous about spending a couple of thousand dollars on a lot of ground and a stone when the same amount would provide a living memorial to your father.” “Why not take the difference between the cost of cremation and the expense of burial and establish a scholarship — or some sort of revolving loan fund — at his old university? Your father

always believed in youth, has served youth all his life. Why not create a memorial that will be a living influence among those he always tried to help?"

More than anything I had heard, this last suggestion seemed to alleviate the pain the afternoon had brought. I went to the provost of Father's university, a man kindly and sympathetic, but well aware of the world he was living in.

"To me there is no question," he said. "Burial is part of an outworn social order. In building highways, it is often necessary to cleave through some little country cemetery, leaving a few forlorn stones on one side of the road and a few on the other. Or workmen, when excavating, disturb a skull, a handful of bones, someone's dearly beloved of 70 or 100 years ago. To me that is real desecration. And yet the dead cannot hold back progress. Perhaps eventually it will no longer be possible to be buried. Cremation may become obligatory. And think what all this real estate and stone masonry would mean, translated into scholarships. We could then take care of the brilliant youngsters who have little money. The dead, then, would truly enrich the soil."

Father died a week later. I sat beside him for a little while. My plans were made. I felt no grief—rather, a strange sense of elation, a feeling that all was well with all of us.

The following day, they carried him down to the university chapel. There, in a glory of sunlight and flowers, with his old friends around him, the Episcopal service for the dead was read.

On the drive to the crematory, we passed the cemetery with its soot-stained stones and snow, its uncovered ugly clay where the earth had been freshly broken, and I had a great singing thankfulness that we were not to lay him there. Inside the little chapel, sunset light gleaming through the windows fell on the casket covered with yellow roses, daffodils and iris. Warmth and color, Light and beauty.

"And so we commit his body. . ."

The casket sank out of sight, but in the aperture there were flowers, vivid, gay and strong.

And so we left him. Not for me the agony of knowing that his frail body lay in the cold earth. All I knew on the empty journey home was that around the gentle, kindly old man there was **light, like the Sun.**

Father's memorial does not lie in a mound of earth and a stone. To me, he has not died. For I know the fruits of his labors are being used to help students, such as he was once himself. To these unknown students he is bringing **light, like the sun.**

As the trend continues, the cemeteries of the future may become green and open parks, with appropriate buildings harboring inscriptions about each person whose ashes are sheltered within. Thus, the character of our cemeteries would change from places of death to places of life.

Those of us with deceased loved ones know that they will be with us always—their memories aren't locked in the graveyards where they are buried. For me, my father lives on in the straight furrows of the Kansas fields he plowed. My mother still lives in her remembered laughter.

The soul is not anchored to a tombstone or a tiny plot of ground. Let us seek the ways to honor our dead not because they died, but because they lived.

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