

living viewing the dead, the adult church marched up to the coffin and back to their seats. Their faces, which showed apprehension before reaching the coffin, revealed, on the way down the opposite aisle, a final confirmation of their fears. Watching them was a little like peeping through a window when the shade is not drawn flush. Although I didn't try, it was impossible not to record their roles in the drama.

And then a black-dressed usher stuck her hand out woodenly toward the children's rows. There was the shifty rustling of unreadiness but finally a boy of fourteen led us off and I dared not hang back, as much as I hated the idea of seeing Mrs. Taylor. Up the aisle, the moans and screams merged with the sickening smell of woolen black clothes worn in summer weather and green leaves wilting over yellow flowers. I couldn't distinguish whether I was smelling the clutching sound of misery or hearing the cloying odor of death.

It would have been easier to see her through the gauze, but instead I looked down on the stark face that seemed suddenly so empty and evil. It knew secrets that I never wanted to share. The cheeks had fallen back to the ears and a solicitous mortician had put lipstick on the black mouth. The scent of decay was sweet and claspings. It groped for life with a hunger both greedy and hateful. But it was hypnotic. I wanted to be off but my shoes had glued themselves to the floor and I had to hold on to the sides of the coffin to remain standing. The unexpected halt in the moving line caused the children to press upon each other, and whispers of no small intent reached my ears.

"Move along, Sister, move along." It was Momma. Her voice tugged at my will and someone pushed from the rear, so I was freed.

Instantly I surrendered myself to the grimness of death. The change it had been able to effect in Mrs. Taylor showed that its strength could not be resisted. Her high-pitched voice, which parted the air in the Store, was forever stilled, and the plump brown face had been deflated and patted flat like a cow's odorous dropping.

The coffin was carried on a horse-drawn wagon to the cemetery, and all the way I communed with death's angels, questioning their choice of time, place and person.

For the first time the burial ceremony had meaning for me.

"Ashes to ashes and dust to dust." It was certain that Mrs. Taylor was returning to the earth from whence she came. In fact, upon considering, I concluded that she had looked like a mud baby, lying on the white satin of her velvet coffin. A mud baby, molded into form by creative children on a rainy day, soon to run back into the loose earth.

The memory of the grim ceremony had been so real to me that I was surprised to look up and see Momma and Uncle Willie eating by the stove. They were neither anxious nor hesitant, as if they knew a man has to say what he has to say. But I didn't want to hear any of it, and the wind, allying itself with me, threatened the chinaberry tree outside the back door.

"Last night, after I said my prayers, I lay down on the bed. Well, you know it's the same bed she died on." Oh, if he'd shut up. Momma said, "Sister, sit down and eat your soup. Cold night like this you need something hot in your stomach. Go on, Brother Taylor. Please." I sat down as near Bailey as possible.

"Well, something told me to open my eyes."