The Undertaker's Daughter

Kate Mayfield
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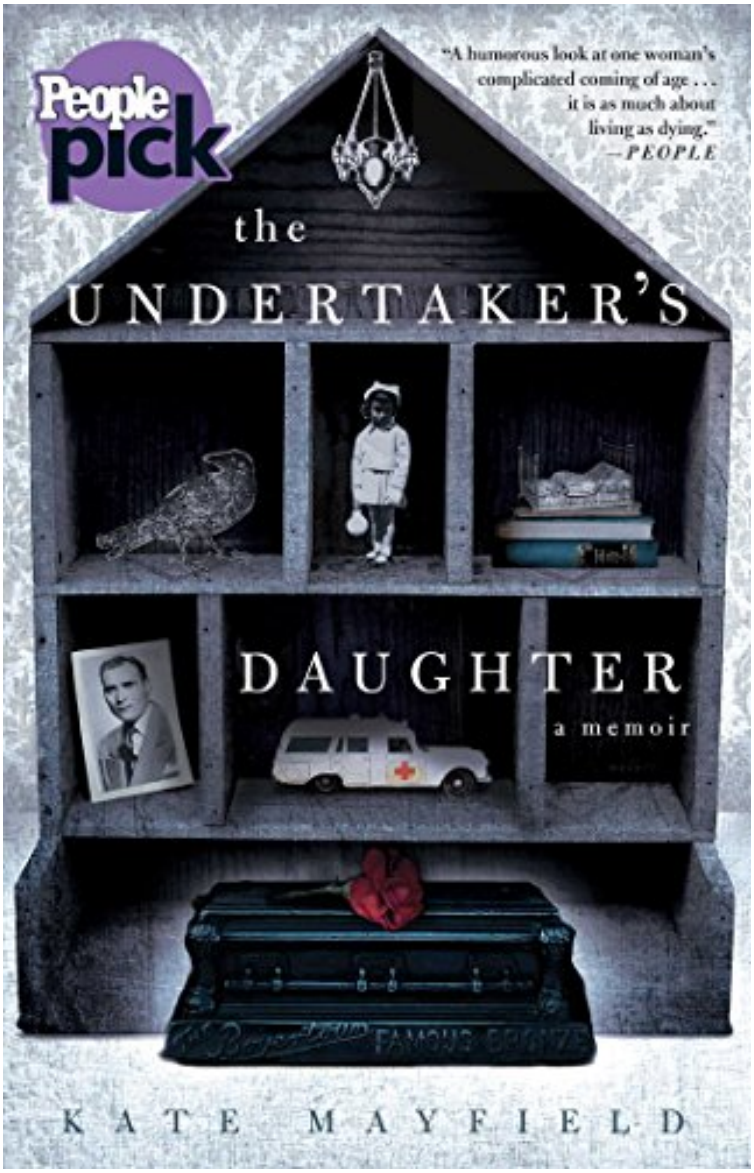

#628572 in Books Kate Mayfield 2015-07-14 2015-07-14Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.20 x 1.00 x 5.30l, .0 #File Name: 1476757291368 pagesThe Undertaker s Daughter | File size: 68.Mb

Kate Mayfield : The Undertaker's Daughter before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Undertaker's Daughter:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A true look at the Funeral Business...By J ThorntonBeing the widow of an "Undertaker" myself, having lived the ends and out of the business for thirty some years, and even living a short time in that funeral home, I found this book very compelling. Even though it was set in an earlier time, the funeral

home stories of today read exactly the same. I'm proud of Ms. Mayfield's work and her shining a light on the dark corner of Veteran's while serving in War Zones...and it's lingering effects when they return State Side. My deceased husband/undertaker returned from Desert Storm and lived five years before he died a Service Connected death. I in turn wrote my book concerning Veteran's .... and how they continue to be in harm's way.I've already recommended this book to some of my "funeral home comrades." I would recommend it to others who have wondered of the mystic of funeral home life.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Small Town Funeral HomeBy Phyllis BrodeA family lives above the funeral home in a small town and life is described through the eyes of the middle daughter. Scandals, gossip, backbiting, treachery along with the good accompany this memoir. I personally identified with this young girl because I had similar thoughts and feelings about life just as she did especially once she became a teenager. I lived with an alcoholic WW2 vet (father) and lived through the first integration of public schools. This book contained many southern sayings and witticisms and dialogues that were well done. It was hard to put this book down. Knowing it was based on a true story also made it speaking. Good summer read!2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. An excellent book, not at all sad or morbidBy Shannon BrennanThis book was about a childhood. The author reflected upon what it was like to grow up in the late 50s to the mid 70s. The touches on segregation, small town values and prejudice, quirky friends, larger than life business men, small, family owned businesses and the conflicts between the latter two. She writes about her friendships, life, death, pecan pie, justice, injustice and falling asleep under a display of caskets while reading a novel. She writes about her family, her father and how she grew up respecting her other alive and dead. She tells her story from a unique perspective as the daughter of an undertaker. It is a lovely and eye opening book.

The Undertakers Daughter is a wonderfully quirky, gem of a book beautifully written by Kate Mayfield.Her compelling, complicated family and cast of characters stay with you long after you close the book (Monica Holloway, author of Cowboy Wills and Driving With Dead People).How does one live in a house of the dead? Kate Mayfield explores what it meant to be the daughter of a small-town undertaker in this fascinating memoir evocative of Six Feet Under and The Help, with a hint of Mary Roachs Stiff. After Kate Mayfield was born, she was taken directly to a funeral home. Her father was an undertaker, and for thirteen years the family resided in a place nearly synonymous with death, where the living and the dead entered their house like a vapor. In a memoir that reads like a Harper Lee novel, Mayfield draws the reader into a world of haunting Southern mystique. In the turbulent 1960s, Kates father set up shop in sleepy Jubilee, Kentucky, a segregated, god-fearing community where no one kept secretsexcept the ones they were buried with. By opening a funeral home, Frank Mayfield also opened the door to family feuds, fetishes, murder, suicide, and all manner of accidents. Kate saw it allshe also witnessed the quiet ruin of her father, who hid alcoholism and infidelity behind a cool and charismatic faade. As Kate grows from trusting child to rebellious teen, the enforced sobriety of the funeral home begins to chafe, and she longs for the day she can escape the confines of Jubilee and her place as the undertakers daughter. Mayfield fashions a poignant send-off to Jubilee in this thoughtfully rendered work (Publishers Weekly).

"Mayfield's depiction of her Southern Gothic childhood, with its dark corners and eccentric characters, is fascinating, often quite funny and always poignant. I rooted for her from the start." (Wendy Lawless, NYT bestselling author of Chanel Bonfire)The Undertaker's Daughter is a wonderfully quirky, gem of a book beautifully written by Kate Mayfield. Her compelling, complicated family and cast of characters stay with you long after you close the book." (Monica Holloway, author of Cowboy Wills and Driving With Dead People)Mayfield fashions a poignant send-off to Jubilee in this thoughtfully rendered work. (Publishers Weekly)About the AuthorKate Mayfield is the author of The Undertakers Daughter (a memoir) and the coauthor of Ten Steps to Fashion Freedom and Ellie Hart Goes to Work. A graduate of the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Manhattan, Kate lives in London.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.The Undertakers Daughter CHAPTER 1 Weve Got a Body One of the opening shots of my familys 8 mm home movies was of massive funereal flower arrangements, flowers so plentiful and so flawlessly arranged that they did not look real. The camera slowly panned over a casket in which a young woman lay in perfect stillness. Ill never forget how she looked. Her coal-black hair spread over a white satin pillow; her lips, painted a bright cherry red, contrasted brazenly with her gypsumlike skin. She looked like the Disney version of Snow White, except that her thick, black glasses revealed the era of her death to be the 1950s, the grainy film already at least ten years old. Her glasses looked out of placewhy did she need them now? She didnt, but her family needed them. Their last memory of her required familiar and, therefore, comforting details. The first time I saw a close-up of her face, even with her eyes closed she looked so alive and vibrant that I asked, Is she really dead, or were you all just fooling around? I have tried to remember the first time I saw a dead body. There have been many odd firsts in my life, like the first time I touched a dead person. I was too short to reach into the casket, so my father picked me up and I leaned in for that first empty, cold touch. It was thrilling because it was an unthinkable act. But I recall no first viewing because from the time I entered the world there were always dead bodies. When I was old enough to understand what they meant, people told me they felt decidedly creepy about funeral homes. I knew a woman who always ran to the other

side of the street whenever she happened upon ours. She gave a little shudder when she saw me seated in the swing on the veranda. I nodded to her and remained silent, having no need to defend my position, and anyway, sooner or later she, too... But I could understand how one would think it a bit unnatural to spend day after day, year after year, entertaining the grieving and caring for their dead. It could have been a gloomy existence were it not for my father. Whenever I mentioned undertaker or mortician to people whod never met him, I saw in their eyes what they thought. They pictured a dour man, a Uriah Heep sort who wore black, scratchy suits with dull white shirts fading to yellow. Nowadays, people raise their brows when they think of the modern undertaker, who burrows down in courses such as General Psychology and Dynamics of Grief, Mortuary Law, and Death and Human Development. These men are thought of as exploitive, nothing more than ruthless businessmen. My father would have squirmed at being compared to them. Each funeral was an opportunity to imprint his stamp, the details of which bore his personal touch. Not one strand of the corpses hair should go astray, not one of a familys requests should go unheeded. A final perfected image, a memorable experience, was his unwavering goal. He never had to work too hard at being different, he just was. Frank Mayfield was a clotheshorse, an undertaker with flair that verged on dandyism. He thought nothing of driving miles to hunt down a better-quality suit, no easy task given that our little, rural town did not border any large metropolis. My father allowed me to observe as he groomed his dark brown, wavy hair into a matinee-idol sweep. I sat on the sink or stood in the claw-foot bath to gain a little height and squirted the Brylcreem into his palm, but the stuff did nothing to tame the dramatic widows peak that marked his forehead. Long, curly, black lashes accented his hazel eyes, and a prominent swath of dark eyebrows ran across his forehead. I swear he looked like a movie star. He never struggled when dressing. His fingers and hands played with his diamond cuff links as I imagined they might have swept up jacks and a ball, nimbly and quickly. The eye-catching ties did not demand extra time or attention, but magically knotted themselves into place as if he were only there to assist. He had leaned over hundreds of men as they slept the deep sleep of death, slipping their ties under their collars and knotting the fabric one last time. His reputation depended upon the perfection of such a task. On the last day of 1959 my father, the Beau Brummell of morticians, piled us into his green-and-white DeSoto and drove away from Lanesboro, the city in which my older brother and sister and I were born, and toward a small town on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Though only a ninety-minute drive, it might as well have been to Alaska. Gliding into Jubilee, our big boat of a car circled the town square and headed toward the residential section of Main Street. My father pulled over, and our five dark heads turned to face a huge, three-story, slightly run-down house. In this old house he would finally realize his dream of owning his own funeral home. Back in Lanesboro, I had been the first in our family to be carried as a newborn from the hospital directly into a funeral home. Birth and death in almost the same breath. My brother and sister, Thomas and Evelyn, had enjoyed living in a normal house until my fathers employer forced him to move into the funeral home in Lanesboro so that he could be available at any time of the day or night. Well, if were going to live in a funeral home, it might as well be one that I own, hed said upon deciding to move. My mother told me that the first week after our move to Jubilee, I held on to the hem of her skirts and would not let go. Where she went, I followed. You wouldnt let me out of your sight, she said. Then I turned a corner, let go of that familiar fabric, and slowly became fascinated with the funeral home. The front door opened into the office, a space from which traffic seemed to want to flow and not linger. My father kept it simple; he thought a plush office would appear pretentious. His hefty wooden desk nearly dwarfed what was barely a room at all. In front of the desk and against a windowed wall, several wooden folding chairs formed a row into which family members sat to make funeral arrangements. In this room the families of our town made difficult decisions, sometimes numbly asking how this event came about so quickly. Why, just the other day Truman was mowing the lawn... My father would gently steer them back to reality. When a death occurred, an entire series of rituals shifted into gear. My father led each grieving family on a journey as they completed the necessary funeral arrangements. From the office, they first approached a large foyer. On the right, the Hammond organ loomed in a small corner, and on the left, they walked past the large, open entry that led directly into the chapel, where their recently departed would be on view in a matter of hours. Opposite the chapels doorway, a tall staircase flanked by a wooden banister led upstairs to our private rooms. Most people respected the boundary and resisted the temptation, but something about a nice staircase beckons. One night while the people downstairs milled about during a visitation, I lay sprawled on my stomach upstairs leafing through a coloring book. Crayons were scattered on the carpet. I heard the familiar creak of the stairs, which I assumed was my mother making her way up for the evening. I quietly walked toward the top of the stairs, where, in a dull glow that emanated from the lights downstairs, stood a beanpole of a man wearing overalls and a suit jacket. Shocked and suddenly vulnerable in my nightgown, we stared at each other. Who are you? he asked, his mouth agape. Who are you? I took a step back. Then I heard my father racing up the stairs. Mr. Granger, the bathrooms downstairs. Whos that, Frank? Do you see a child? Well, of course. Shes one of my daughters. You mean you and your family live up here? Yes, sir, we do. Now if youll just step down here with me, Ill direct you to the restroom. I aint never heard the likes of that, Mr. Mayfield. Ida never known if I aint seen it with my own eyes, a family on top of a funeral parlor. I swear, I thought I seen a ghost. That happened occasionally, when the rooms downstairs were full of people and it was hard to keep track of everyone. Beyond the staircase, the foyer narrowed into a hallway so dim that a ceiling light burned throughout the day. To the left, a small, humble hospitality room was

comfort enough for those who came to visitations and funerals. Here families and their friends paused for a hot or cold drink and murmured in low whispers. An old-fashioned snack machine stood against the wall filled with packs of Planters peanuts, Nabs crackers, and candy bars that dropped into the tray after the money rattled down. Bright red knobs protruded from the cream-colored frame, and I could almost hear the old machine asking to be touched. Not so hard, my father would say when I pulled with all my might. Farther down the hall to the left was a door that always remained closed. This room pressed upon my childhood, possessing the power to scare the bejesus out of a grown man, conjuring the stuff of nightmares. This room housed the monstrous white porcelain table, the knowledge of which hastened my step when I walked past each day: the embalming room. My father ushered family members past the embalming room where their loved one lay under a crisp white sheet, to the door facing them at the end of the hall. This was the showroom where they would choose the casket. One of the last choices the family made with my father took place in the casket room, my room of cold comfort, the only room downstairs spacious enough to accommodate a large array of caskets. It was, as if by design, the end of the journey. This journey from the front of the funeral home to the back, made with countless families over the years, became the rhythm of my childhood. One of the first things my father did when we moved to Jubilee was to contact Southern Bell to make sure we had enough telephones. The telephone, which brought news of tragedy and death, was our lifeline. At that time funeral homes also operated as an emergency service. As the worlds surgeons became more skilled, the reasons to bring doctors patients to the hospital increased. Funeral-home ambulance service began as an outgrowth of their need to transport human bodies supine in their long hearses. When a citizen needed to go to the hospital, or just wanted a ride to the doctors office, they called the funeral home of their choice. The telephones in our new house were sacred objects, and one could be found in almost every room downstairs and upstairs. They rang at all hours of the day and night, the volume cranked as high as it could go. Every time they rang, it sounded like a house full of alarm clocks going off. Two of them sat importantly on the corner of my fathers desk. On each of the flesh-colored telephones a row of clear-plastic buttons lit up whenever we received a call. I couldnt keep my hands off them and played with the buttons when no one was looking, intrigued by how the light flashed first and the tone came afterward, like a warning strobe lightdeath calling, death calling. I still can never hear a phone ring without thinking that someone, somewhere, has died. When a death call came the entire atmosphere in our home changed instantly. My father ran out to the three-car garage in the back of the property and revved up his Henney-Packard ambulance. What a piece of fast-rolling machinery. The Packard ambulancea smaller version of our black hearse, which had the sharp, sleek lines of the later-model Cadillacslooked like a long, fat cigar. It was known for its disturbingly named suicide doors: the back doors were rear-hinged and susceptible to all manner of dangers. If one of them opened accidentally, the force could cause the ambulance to swerve either into oncoming traffic or onto the side of the roadand that wasnt the half of it. Do you remember the undertaker in Mullen County? My father loved to tell this story, erupting in peals of laughter before he began, which anyone listening echoed. This undertaker, Fred Bowles was his name, picked up a patient at his home to take him to the hospital. It wasnt an emergency; the man just needed a comfortable ride. Well, the patients doctor was at his house, too, and wanted a lift in the ambulance. Fred told the doctor to sit in the front, but, no, this old crank just had to sit in the back with his patient. I remember Fred said he was pretty hot under the collar about it. You know, everybody thinks they can just sit back there, go for a ride like they know what theyre doing. Anyway, this doctor got real hot sittin back there and took it upon himself to open the window on the passenger side. Well, hell, what did he do? He opened the damn door by mistake. I tell you what, that wind got ahold of that suicide door and it flew back, and it was like the wind just sucked him out and that old crank fell out of the ambulance. And you know what else? The door came swinging back and gave him a good smack before he hit the ground. And here, my father finished between fits of laughter, Fred wasnt going fast, the doctor was all right, a little bruised, but he never asked if he could ride in the back again. Whenever my father set out to bring a body home to us, my mother became the noise police. She marched through the rooms upstairs like a sergeant major, her solid frame following her headfirst walk, spreading the word to her children. Weve got a body, she clipped. And you know what that means, so get to it! I sighed. Another one? A dead body in the house meant we would be sequestered. Even though many of Jubilees dead rested with us over the years, we were the ghosts of the house. Our family learned how to disappear with those four words: Weve got a body. From the time the family of the deceased first entered the door to make arrangements until days later when the last person left after the funeral, our family became invisible, nonexistent. We tiptoed around upstairs and whispered to each other when it was necessary to communicate. The sound of music or the television would not be heard in our house until the last mourner walked out the door. Foods that emitted strong odors were out of the question so that we wouldnt offend the bereaved with a reminder of life going on above them. The volume of the chiming phones was lowered to a softer, duller ring. The days and evenings of visitation culminated in the funeral service. The chatter of the visitors halted, the movement of people downstairs calmed, and now, during the actual funeral service, we werent even allowed to speak or walk upstairs. We created a hush and the house fell silent. Funeral services were usually held in the afternoons when Thomas and Evelyn were at school. Thomas was already in junior high school and Evelyn was two years behind him at the end of a less than spectacular grade-school career. They were more occupied with new teachers and friends than the business of death. Thomas was particularly industrious and soon became familiar with

Jubilees various neighborhoods when he began a paper route. He delivered the Nashville Tennessean, a daily afternoon paper that occasionally reported on a few counties in Kentucky. Jubilees newspaper came out only once a week, filled most prominently with the news of lost cows, ice-cream-supper locations, and, most important, the obituaries, which my mother proofread with a magnifying glass like Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Kindergarten was held only in the morning and I was home by lunchtime. I was funeral-home trained from the beginning. When school closed for the summer break, Thomas and Evelyn climbed into the cloth seats of the Greyhound bus for the trip to Lanesboro, where, once there, they parted ways and visited cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. So for the first few years I bore the brunt of the daytime silences alone. When death came visiting and I was forced into silence, it felt like a lock had been turned and I was shut off from the world for a period of time, isolated from any living thing. It was difficult in the beginning, like jumping high, both feet off the ground, and trying to pause in midair. With my arms folded and my face screwed up in a stew I sat quietly, swelling with resentment and irritable that yet another person had died. But as I grew older and death continued to claim our citizens, I learned why silence was necessary: Respect. This is the word I heard consistently during my childhood. When a life fades and ends, the family deserves a quiet place to mourn. I gradually made peace with a life that demanded to be lived in quantities of silence. Resentment flickered to acceptance, and boredom fell away, replaced with a curiosity about what went on downstairs. My mother, intolerant of noise at any time, was perfectly suited to this line of work. Childish expressions of emotion irritated her. She must have invented the phrase If you dont stop crying, Ill give you something to cry about, which she threatened whenever she spanked me. She was the disciplinarian of the family. My parents must have agreed that her job was to relieve him of the burden of attending every scrape, fight, tug-of-war, disobedience, whine, and moan that three children were sure to muster. Although she often threatened us with Im going to tell your father, he rarely stepped in. I blamed sour-faced Bretta West for my mothers ability to slip so easily into funeral-home mode. Bretta, my mothers mother, was a strict Southern Baptist. She and her husband had settled on a small farm in western Kentucky, where she was a Bible-reading, churchgoing, no-nonsense woman who didnt believe in dancing or music other than hymns and who insisted on modest dress. Two things Bretta would especially not tolerate were noise in the house and sassing. I never saw Bretta laugh, and on the few occasions when she smiled, her eyes crinkled up and narrowed as if she were in pain. I thought her face would crack from the effort. My mother was accustomed to being on her own. By the time she was ten her older brother and sisters had already married and were living in Lanesboro, the largest city near them. No other children her age were within walking distance, so she entertained herself with a few wooden toys, a doll, and her pet squirrel, Fuzzy, who lived outside in a nest at the corner of the house. My mother doesnt remember ever being punished. You never got in trouble for anything? Nothing? I once asked. No, not really. Nothing serious. You dont get in trouble when you mind your parents. We always had our evening meal together as a family, but like her mother, my mother had expectations for our behavior that were positively Victorian. She demanded our elbows off the table, polite passing of the food, napkins in our laps, and a minimum of table talk. This was exactly how her meals with her parents must have been, except for one thing: I enjoyed a good supper conversation. Daddy, if you were arrested right now, the sheriff couldnt take your fingerprints. Hush, my mother said. Cause if they did, all they would get is a picture of your wrinkled fingers. Thats enough. A clear warning was in her voice. But its true. Look how wrinkled his fingers are. Hed just sat down to dinner having embalmed a body, and his fingers were prunelike from the tremendous amount of water he used. He never wore the ghastly rubber gloves that hung from the handle of a storage cabinet in the embalming room. They were actually old-fashioned autopsy gloves hed bought from the hospital. They dangled in the air, an awful brown color, swollen, larger than a big mans hand. When he made the effort to work in them, they were so thick and heavy he became annoyed, pulled them off, and flung them on the floor. This was long before the fear of disease and the invention of latex gloves. My father never interfered with my mothers constant quest for silence, but the slight lift at the corners of his mouth told me that he was sometimes on my side. You do not talk about this subject at the table. Now be quiet. She passed the mashed potatoes. But of course she and my father spoke of nothing else. It looks like Mr. Simmons will be dead by morning, my father would say. I dont know, Frank. Elsie told me that he should have died last month. His heart is barely thumping, she told me, but hes still hanging on. I worked on a fried chicken leg for a while, then thought aloud, You know, Totty has a chair what sings and That, Thomas offered. A chair that sings. Uh-huh, Totty has a chair that sings. Its a little wooden rocking chair and Youre so stupid, Evelyn said. Thats enough, my mother intervened. Shes so stupid. Evelyn had to have the last word. My mother knew absolutely that children could be trained to be still and silent. Her mother wasnt the kind of woman who had the time or patience to teach her youngest how to cook or clean, nor did she invite her to sit with her at the sewing machine while she made her clothes, nor into the garden to plant beans and tomatoes. Like me, my mother turned to her father for attention, and there, too, she met lessons in silence. Charles West, my mothers father, worked the land-based oil fields in western Kentucky during the 1930s. After the roughnecks had drilled the wells, hauled the supplies, and laid the pipelines, they relocated to the next potential oil field. Charles was a pumper, the man who stayed behind after the others moved on. He monitored and maintained all the equipment, working as a caretaker of a producing oil field. During the summer, my mother would clamber up into his pickup truck and accompany him to work. She stood a safe distance from the heavy equipment in the humid summer heat, a solitary figure in her brown leather lace-ups. Black ringlets of hair fell

to her shoulders; her homemade dress caught an occasional breeze. The air smelled nothing at all like gasoline or tar; the odor of crude oil registered as something sweeter, softer, as it filled her lungs. She followed his movements as he walked down the pipeline to the tune of a whole field full of equipment; the pump-jack sang a steady song, the cling-clang of tubing, rods, and valves its chorus. They lunched together in the shade of the truck with crinkled paper bags in their laps, biting into thick-bread, roast-beef sandwiches and sharing a thermos of iced tea. On Saturdays her father often took her fishing, but she couldnt sit still in the small boat. She squirmed, rocked the boat, stood, and leaned over one too many times, until Charles scolded her and threatened to leave her at home in the future. She learned to sit still. She learned to be quiet. Then she lost him to the final silence. On one of those unpeopled oil fields, surrounded by the pumping, grinding equipment, something went wrong. A piece of equipment fell. He didnt die immediately, but later, in his home, of internal injuries. It was hard to prove in those days that his death was caused by an accident on the job. There was no compensation. She was fifteen when her father died. My mother may have been a seeker of silence, but I wasnt. Living in a funeral home was unnatural to me. During the funerals and in the evenings when the townspeople filed through the front door for visitation, I often felt I couldnt sit still for another second. Out of sheer boredom, I crept to the landing at the top of the stairs, from where I heard the sounds of the people below. This was risky. One only need look up to see my loose hair hanging down and my nightgown floating in the air, my mischief a distraction from their mourning. It being so vital that the scene downstairs not be disturbed by our presence upstairs, my mother grew overly sensitive to our movements. One night I leaned over the railing and peered down at the row of ladies with violet-rinsed hair who sat just below me. Among the elderly women sat a young girl who suddenly burst into song. The song had no words; a light la la la rang above the ladies low hum. The sound of her voice rose up into the air to the exact spot where I stood. My mother, convinced I was the culprit, came toward me with her lips pressed tightly together, her eyes narrowed into angry slits. She grabbed me by the arm and spanked me before I had a chance to proclaim my innocence. In a tense whisper she asked, What do you think youre doing? Before I could say anything, she clamped her hand over my mouth so that I couldnt respond. I tried to wriggle away, but she held on with a strong hand that smelled of Jergens lotion. The child sang again and my mother knew shed made a mistake. You should never have been standing there in the first place! she hissed. The apology I awaited did not materialize. My mother didnt like to be wrong. My legs stung for a second or two from her spanking, but my feelings... they were bruised for days. Small, weepy hurts like this later snowballed into disagreements that ended at an impasse with my mother and drove me downstairs to my father, where I felt more accepted. On the days when she wasnt around, I crept back to the spot, where I would close my eyes and listen to the rhythm of it all. Everyone grieved differently. Some mourned in silence; I thought maybe they cried silently inside or saved up their tears, too embarrassed to weep publicly. The first time I heard a wailer, I jumped from my seat on the stairs. Its hard to forget the sound of someone wracked with sobs. It scared me to deathI thought she was dying. I was relieved to hear the notes from the Hammond organ. My soon-to-be piano teacher, usually chatty and mischievous, was on her best behavior as she played the mournful hymns. Totty Edwards was a musical woman who had slipped right out of her nuns habit when she found love in the form of Victor. She told me Victor was from the plant, as if he had sprouted from the earth. An explanation from my parents revealed that he was a business executive the local toolmaking company had recruited from The North. My mother thought she was crazy. What she really meant was that Totty was different. She was different because she, too, was from The North. Somewhere in Michigan, my mother said, as if it were near the Arctic. Tottys scatterbrained and silly. How many times has she told the same old story about the time Perry Como kissed her on the cheek? And shes always late. Your daddy asks her to be here fifteen minutes before the funeral starts, but she never is, we have to call her, and then she waltzes in wearing those tall boots, all apologetic, smiling at everybody like nothings wrong, while were on pins and needles. He doesnt need to worry about things like that, she should just be on time. I tried to understand what this had to do with being from The North. As far as I could make out, people from The North were bad timekeepers, wore tall boots, and played bridge quite atrociously. These things made them crazy and not to be trusted. But I liked Tottys Northern accent, which sparked my imagination. She spoke so quickly, like short flashes of lightning. I imagined everyone in The North raced about their day, speaking in clipped spurts while we walked through molasses elongating our vowels. One day after a funeral, I noticed Totty had placed a strand of beads on the organ. I asked to hold them. My mother overheard me and was furious. It was as if I had intentionally betrayed the Baptists. The next time you ask to see her rosary beads, I will smack you into tomorrow. I had no idea what rosary beads were. I thought Tottys string of black and silver beads was a necklace. I didnt take the huge silver crucifix hanging from it as anything other than decorative. Good Lord, the sign of the cross jumped out from all sorts of places all over town, most prominently in the jewelry section of the drugstores, on sympathy cards, and church signs of every denomination. None had anything to do with Catholicism; how should I know that Tottys was a Catholic cross? Despite being a Catholic from The North, Tottys music must have soothed the wailing woman downstairs because she soon caught her breath and quietly wept. As I listened to Tottys hymn playing, I waited for the clinkers. I often heard her shoes struggling with the pedals, as if shed caught the heel of one of her tall boots in the cracks. Sometimes the music swelled when it should not. My father made concessions. Totty was available when most other musicians were not, and there werent many in Jubilee, anyway. He forgave her shortcomings as an organist when she played his favorite hymn. He always said that Totty

played a mean Nearer, My God, to Thee. As I sat on my secret perch waiting for the service to begin, the heady, concentrated odor of the flowers in the chapel found its way up the stairs. It took some time for the flowers to warm up; they stood in buckets in the refrigerator of the local florist and arrived with a chilled, subdued aroma. Soon the lights and the warmth of the people who filled the rooms summoned the fragrance of roses, carnations, chrysanthemums, and gladioli, and the marriage of their scents gathered strength as the day progressed. Occasionally a ladys eau de toilette drifted through the air to merge with the perfume of the flowers. These were the days and nights of mourning; the funerals I heard and smelled. I recognized my fathers footsteps during the funerals, which wasnt difficult because he was usually the only person allowed to walk around during a service. Even so, his slow, deliberate stride was distinctive. He was in his elementmaster of the grand finale, directing families through the hardest, most uncomfortable forty-five minutes of their lives. My admiration teetered when I faced the world without him. One of the teachers in our school always sniffed when she passed me in the halls, as if I carried the odor of the dead. Suddenly the warmth of a blush rose from an understanding that his profession was offensive to some. Then her mother died and my father was called upon to bury her. The teachers sniff was replaced with a little nod. Oh the glee of that comprehension, the little skip in my step, the satisfaction I felt. I was filled with an awareness of his unique duty in this little scrap of a town. He and his employees communicated with eye contact and barely noticeable hand motions. They never spoke to each other during a funeral. If my father looked at one of his men during the service, that man knew exactly what he should be doing at that particular moment. A quick glance to one of them meant to seat the latecomer. The slightest nod of my fathers head to another was a cue to move toward the front. A subtle hand motion toward Totty and he became the conductor of music. At the end of the funeral the men dared not move toward the casket without his signal. In the beginning, my father hired a few part-time men to help out during the funerals and visitations, but he also took on a full-timer who knew nothing about the funeral business. Sonny was a Beacon County boy, hired because he had connections. He knew everyone outside Jubilee who lived on the farms and in the little one-street towns in the county. And my father badly needed a Beacon County representative. Sonny was a big oaf of a man whose large, protruding ears looked as if they might help him take flight. He often placed his fists on his thick waist and looked down at me, frustrated by my mere presence. Sonny and I were never going to be friends. I sensed his false civility immediately, which was easy to decipher by the way he became bossy in my fathers absence. Leave the mail alone. Go on upstairs now, he would say. I dont have to. I live here. I would pretend to read the latest embalming supply catalog to solidify my existence. Sonny lumbered through the hallways in stereophonic thuds, but somehow managed to quiet his footsteps during the funerals. He would station himself in the back of the chapel, his rounded shoulders only slightly squared by his rumpled suit. In stark contrast, my father, immaculately dressed, stood in the front to one side of the casket, alert and present during the entire service. Whatever awkward emotions squirmed in the minds and hearts of funeralgoers, my father was at ease with them. While he conducted funerals, he was as comfortable in his own skin as he was in his beautiful clothes. And that was a thing of solace to those who were grief stricken. His task was to close the door on the messy sight of death and open another to the heavenly ever after. Some people thought their preacher opened that door, but from my balcony seat, it always looked to be the undertaker, whose smooth orchestration made saying good-bye a less difficult task, a more assured journey. Especially when the preacher was Brother Vince. Oh Lord. After Totty attempted a couple of hymns, Brother Vince, who was todays Representative of Gods Word, stepped up to the podium in front of the casket. He began with a prayer that blessed everything from animals to tractors and finally wound down to the deceased. Then he took his glasses off, placed them on the podium, and reached into his back pocket for his handkerchief. While he cleaned his glasses, he began his dry-bones eulogy. This funeral sermon was full of imagery of the gruesome Bible story of Ezekiel. He relied on this sermon when he didnt personally know who lay behind him in the casket. He varied it, but the basics were always there. Brother Vince was off and running and wouldnt draw breath for another fifteen minutes. Following a long piece wherein Ezekiel walked on the bones while conversing with God, the preachers tinny voice headed for the home stretch with a hypnotic repetition of the promise of life everlasting. So you see, Gods gonna breathe life into that graveyard of dry bones, hes gonna create anew, and it says right here in the Bible that God put sinew and muscle and flesh on those old dry bones, and hes gonna join all these rattling, brittle bones together and create an army. God commanded old Ezekiel to prophesy and to tell those dry bones to live. Dry bones can live! Restored to life. Hallelujah. Praise the Lord. Restored to life. Restored to life. Do not despair; the bones can live again, as does our Hessie. She lives again with Sweet Jesus in heaven. Everything has all come together for her, just like those dry bones, and she now lives forever. Her spirit will be with us always. Let us pray. Cue Tottys heavy foot upon the pedals as her fingers searched for the final notes. At the end of the service my father stood in front of the casket and without uttering a word made the slightest gesture with his palms up, just a small movement right in front of his chest, and as if by magic, the congregation stood. He offered his arm to the grieving sister, which she took gratefully. His head bowed, he led her to the funeral car. He was never accused of showing false sympathy. When it was all finally over, my fathers friend Billy, who helped out during the funerals, climbed the steps to where I sat waiting, fists on cheeks. Is it over? I whispered. Yes, you can come on down now. I ran. I ran anywhere I could, just to feel what it was like to move again. The silence downstairs was abruptly broken, the rooms were vibrant with action all around like a circus ring with each

performer soaring at the height of his or her act, an organized chaos. As my father led the cortege to the cemetery, the employees rushed around in unison. They carted flowers out, maneuvered chairs to clear paths, cleaned as they worked, loaded the flowers into the van, and rushed to the cemetery so that the flowers would magically appear at the burial site before the slow procession arrived. Totty gathered her music and tidied up the hymnals. My mother manned the all-important instruments of the tradethe phones. She raised the volume, because no one knew when, but the ritual would begin again at any moment. I wondered why my father chose to wake up every morning to take care of dead people. But I never asked, for as the years passed, I could imagine him doing nothing else. He grew up on farmland during the Depression, a place called Red Hill, not far from my mothers family, with fertile land that produced a bounteous supply of food and goods. They were free from worry about their next meal when so many others suffered. His mother, Katie, a statuesque, handsome woman, was quietly proud that she bought only sugar, coffee, tea, and flour at the general store owned by her sister, Marybell, and Marybells husband, Wallace. Everything else was at their doorstep. My grandmother Katie was industrious and created her own little business by selling her top cream at the store. My mother said a surprise spot-check of her mother-in-laws house would produce less than a teaspoon of dirt. Katie wore dresses on the farm, great flowing things that whipped around her legs as she moved about. She loved big hats and coats with huge fur collars. Her husbands idea of dressing up, on the other hand, was a fresh pair of heavy cotton work pants, and though I never saw him wear a suit until the day he was buried, I was given photographs to prove that he did. My fathers childhood was full of noise, a completely different home life from my mothers. His brother and sister were not much older than he, and the three were a raucous trio. A slew of cousins, among them Marybell and Wallaces children, often visited the farm, where they roamed the countryside unbridled. As quietly behaved as we were at Bretta Wests house, when we visited my fathers family, we were free to be as noisy and playful as he had been. Being older, Thomas and Evelyn were more accustomed to visiting our grandparents farm. On the weekends, with the congregation of the cousins in full session, they took turns riding the ornery horse and fished in the farms expansive lake. They played football and cowboys and Indians. Too young to be included in such games, I was unaccustomed to farm life; to me it felt like visiting another country in which there were countless miserable tasks like cleaning the chicken coop and hauling water from the well. If not for one vivid detail, I would scarcely remember the house before my grandfather installed indoor plumbing: the outhouse terrified me. The wind whipped around the wooden shack and banged the door open and shut. It was so dark inside I groped to find the seat, which was too big for me. I closed my eyes and prayed that I wouldnt fall in and that no spiders would crawl up from the depths of the pit. I worried about splinters. Good grief, I pleaded, take me back to the funeral home. My father was the youngest of the three, and although his father was quite straitlaced, his mother indulged him. Aware he was not inclined to work the land, his parents never forced him. He gravitated to the city of Lanesboro, which overlooked the Ohio River, originally known as Yellowbanks for the color of its soil. The action of the river town spoke to him, and the buzz of people made him feel alive. He enjoyed wearing the kind of clothes that were out of place on the farm. It was no surprise when I learned that he spent his high school vacations working in the menswear department of J. C. Penneys. The management placed him in the mens glove department, hardly a hub of excitement in the hot summers, but it was a natural fit and better than the fields. On a late summers day in 1942, Frank sat with his elder brother under the big shade tree by the lake on his familys land. Everyone called him Jimmy, but of course he was James Maple to my father. As the two skipped pebbles into the quiet water, he discovered that James Maple had no intention of being a farmer either. Sitting on a spot of land that offered so much life, James Maple told him that when he returned from Europe, he was going to be an undertaker. Frank had laughed. My father could have told me himself that it was first his elder brothers dream to become an undertaker. But the war intervened and sent the brothers on two entirely different paths. Frank served on the ground in C Company of the 137th Infantry Regiment of the 35th Division. James Maple spent the war in the air, on the underside of a B-17 as a ball-turret gunner. When his plane was shot down over Germany, he was captured and held prisoner. James Maple never became an undertaker, or anything else. Years later his bones were sent back to Kentucky in a sealed box. My father, suffering the effect of his own war wounds, received the box on behalf of his grieving family from the hands of an undertaker.