

The Gravedigger

Jan Kameníček monodrama

I feel calm. Indeed, I have no reason to tell a lie. I feel no sadness, not a trace of fear, just contentment, blissful peace. All attempts, and there have been many, have failed. I blame nobody, I quarrel with nobody. And who is to blame? My Father, Grandpa or the first in our family line to pick up a shovel and excavate a tomb? It happened, and nothing about it can be changed. I am a gravedigger and I can not fight against it. Some people are born with a hunchback, a shorter leg, a harelip, and I am a gravedigger.

This afternoon they brought in a young girl, twenty years old. The funeral is tomorrow morning. The undertakers, as usual, have left the coffin in the chapel. In the evening, when I locked up after the last visitor—a man who was standing at the tomb of the Bauer family—I visited the girl. I lifted the coffin lid and looked into her face. She looks about sixteen. Closed eyes, with glossy eyelids, a small snub nose, deep wrinkles around her mouth. She surely liked to laugh loudly and often. Long yellow hair, carefully combed and spread out on the velvet cushion. Dressed in a pink dress, brand new, hands clasped across her breast. I kissed the hands. I need to have contact with the dead, to enter into a kind of a dialogue. How many times did my Father instil this into me. I simply must know who I am burying. This is difficult for somebody, who perhaps has never been a gravedigger, to comprehend. I simply need this dialogue in order to do my job, otherwise it would make no sense.

The girl had a smile on her face. It perfectly confirmed the conclusion I had come to a few years ago. At that time, I wondered: I know a sad face in many forms, tearful eyes, trembling chin, with the edges of the mouth always directed downwards. There must also be the opposite of this state. Just as there is day versus night, life versus death, there must be a completely different state which is opposite to the face full of sadness. Never before have I come across this state. I am a gravedigger, surrounded by a strong wall, earth and sky, here, among the tombstones. I only come across gloomy faces, and I have never been outside these walls, not until recently.

One more thought: in my youth I was increasingly convinced that outside my graveyard, there were only hundreds of other graveyards and gravediggers. I can tell a gravedigger. He is like me. With a big callus on the thumb. Indeed, a big hard callus grows on the thumb, caused by the shovel I work with every day. In my youth, I tried several times to rip off the callus, but a new one always appeared, even harder than the first one. I looked at the hands of the girl in the coffin. Her fingers were slender, smooth, no signs of a callus...

I cannot remember when I first saw a dead person. It was a time when reason was still overshadowed by instinct, intuition. According to Father, I wept. I must have been three or four years old. When I was six, I still remember washing a dead body for the first time. It was that of a sixty-year-old woman. I detested this task, but my Father explained to me: “If you want to become a good gravedigger, you cannot see me or Mother in the dead, you must not be conquered by your emotions, and, most importantly,” Father pointed out, “you must not see yourself in the dead. If you adhere to this, you will become untouchable. And besides,” he also added, “there is no reason to fear the dead, they can no longer hurt you.”

I was and am still an obedient son of my Father. Of course, I went through a period when I hated my Father and tried to resist his will, I refused food, I even refused to work on the assigned piece of land at the corner of the graveyard, where I was to learn to labour with a shovel and pickaxe. Father was not angry at all with me when he first caught me sitting idly on the edge of a pit, swinging my legs, relaxing, I think he understood me.

After a few months, everything settled down again, to my as well as Father's satisfaction. Only much later, I realised how wise Father's behaviour had been. In his place, another gravedigger would have forced me, at the age of six, to dig a grave big enough for an adult, but my Father, with his foresight, led me to it gradually.

First I dug pretty small graves, rather holes, he did not wish to make me loathe the work. I saw digging holes as a game, just as I had previously played in the sand with a little bucket and spade. How happy I was at six or seven years of age! I had a lifetime before me, I dug holes that even resembled graves, and I felt that I was beginning to resemble my Father. Only a callus on my thumb was missing to complete my happiness.

One summer evening, when the blood-red setting sun was shining above the wall of the graveyard, Father locked the gate, looked at the pit which I had dug that day and commanded me not to leave. I was embarrassed. I did not know what his unusual command meant. Did he consider the grave which I had dug during that day, inadequate? I was afraid of punishment. However, not of physical pain, Father seldom beat me. Rather I did not want to cause my Father to experience mental pain due to my bad conduct.

Dear Dad! How I wronged him! After a while, he returned, holding in his hands a dead cat by her back paws. I could not believe it. Alternately, I stared at my Father and at the cat. So this is the day I had often dreamed of before falling asleep? Father put the cat in my arms and advised me to stroke her. I carefully put her down on the grass and caressed her head. I looked up at my father, he stood tall and straight above me, looking like the impressive Giant from *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Put her in there yourself, Father said quietly.

On my knees I gently and - I admit - with some emotion placed the little body into the grave. I straightened up and stood next to Father. We were silent. I felt Father stroking my head and then putting his arm around my shoulders. We stared down into the open pit for a long time. The sun set, the tombstones cast soft shadows on the grass.

"You should bury her," my father said into the silence.

I took the handle of the shovel and covered the cat with earth. I trampled the soil, father gave me his hand and together we slowly walked to the house where we lived in the corner of the graveyard.

On that day I became a man.

Previously, my Mother had looked after my clothes. She took proper care that my clothes were clean. After her death, we were left alone. Father took care of the household, cooked, cleaned and sewed the buttons on my coat. This continued for several years. But then Father fell ill and increasingly repeated that I should marry someone, who, he said, would take care of my laundry and cooking and cleaning in the house after his death.

One day he brought me a bride. She was not at all like my Mother, although her age was nearer to Father's. At first I did not understand, I thought that he had brought the woman for himself. Father made it clear. He took her hand and my hand, joining them. Then he kissed the woman and me on our foreheads. That evening there was a great feast in our home. Father opened a tin of sardines in oil, which he had brought down from somewhere in the attic, put a glass in front of each of us and poured elderberry wine, which he had produced himself, first for my wife, then for himself and me. We normally drank this excellent wine only on All Souls' Day, so the day of our wedding must have been a real celebration for my Father.

And then the wedding night loomed before us. Father, before we lay down, drank a last toast to our health and, in a short speech to both of us, expressed his wish to live to see a

grandson soon, I remember, he used the term pyrethrum (a Daisy). And whenever I recall this little-used word, I feel a sadness.

My Father surprised me one more time that night. Silently, with a strange festive look on his face, he led us to the corner of the room to the double bed where he had slept with Mother for his whole life. Solemnly he announced to us that he was leaving the bed to us and he himself, until his death, would be sleeping on the pew, on which I had slept until then, in the opposite corner of the room.

There was clean new bedding on the bed which smelt fragrant and clean. Poor Dad! How much must he have saved from our two salaries before being able to purchase such a luxury! Father again kissed my wife on the forehead and went to his pew. I remained sitting on the headboard while my wife started slowly to undress. I looked at her, I lifted the candlestick above my head and, standing on tiptoe, I looked at the opposite corner of the room. My father was sitting on the pew, leaning against the wall, with his knees bent up under his chin, his hands clasped around his legs. Motionless, he was watching us. I hesitated. Do I have the right to blow out the candle? I looked at Father and recalled the excellent sardines, his wine, the bedding which he had given us. But I did have a right to be alone with my bride on my wedding night.

I was resolute. With one sharp blow I extinguished the candle flame. In the dark, I fumbled for the bed. I lay down on my back and covered myself with the cold blanket. I lay there, staring into the darkness, when I suddenly felt her hand on my belly. She was leaning over me, starting to fervently kiss my neck. I recalled the vampire Dracula from stories told to me by my Mom. I smelled a pungent odour which was unfamiliar to me. She was breathing excitedly. She clasped my head, pressing it to her big breasts. I pulled away and curiously grabbed her big breasts in my hands. I was mainly surprised that her body was warm and oddly vibrant. She kissed me on the mouth.

She was like a spider, how many times had I seen a floundering fly caught in a web, I would liken myself to this. I do not even know how I found myself on top of her body, and at that moment it happened: someone struck a match and lit a candle on the table. After a while, I felt someone's breath on the back of my neck. I was helpless, weak, shaking from cold. I collapsed next to the body of my wife and quietly whispered: *Father!*

After that night I slept on the pew again as before. I still think that I finally had my revenge on Father. He did not get any grandson from me.

Since then, we lived in our house in this strange fellowship. I cannot say I felt dissatisfied. As Father reminded me: "You can not imagine what horrors are experienced in other families." I said nothing and did not doubt anything. Doubting would mean not quite believing Father. And somehow that was not possible. In my imagination, I even imagined those other families, devised specific cruelties that could be happening and immediately I felt more normal. I did not reject the woman, even though I never stopped suspecting that, by marrying me, she had definitely improved her position. According to Father, and according to random remarks, it was clear that our graveyard was actually one of the best, just as Father had always told me.

She reputedly was the daughter of a gravedigger, she came from some insignificant graveyard. How many times did we just sit on the bench in front of the house. Agreeably together, all three of us. Wife darning socks, I, for example, trimming a new handle for a shovel or pickaxe and father narrating. He spoke long and with a certain pride about his graveyard.

"All this," he always said, "will one day belong to you. You will care for the trees which I planted in my youth, clear the sand from the paths and let the famous dead come through the main gate." After this speech, which he repeated and developed in many variations, Father would begin to weep. But there were also times when he emotionally

described the famous funerals of important personalities. Our graveyard is the final resting place of many giants—writers, scientists, actors, painters. I did not know what these people had achieved, I'm a gravedigger, but my Father instilled in me a respect for these people. And I appreciate, honour them.

My Mother always said: "Your wealth is in those you serve. You do not serve just anybody. You serve the greatest persons that this Earth has given birth to." And Mother reminded me of one more truism: "Remember that being a gravedigger is not only a profession, but a mission." Are these the words of truth? Is the peak of human endeavour indeed to serve others? I believe so. After all, Father also served without complaining even once in his lifetime. And if my Father served without complaint, it is my duty to serve too...

When I was left here alone, everything belonging to me, I gradually became used to ownership. The table was mine, the matrimonial bed, I was the master of my graveyard. There was no obligation to share anything.

When I buried my Father, nobody came to the funeral, except for two of Father's old colleagues. I remained alone in the house with the woman. Just for a fortnight. I could not bear her next to me, I could not even touch her, I was convinced that she still only belonged to Father. How disgusting she was to me. The never-ending flirting. The voluptuous twisting. She pouted her lips all the time and stuck out the tip of her tongue. Since the funeral, she had begun to take care of her cleanliness. Every evening she stood at least for two hours in the cracked bowl and forced me to wash her back.

On the fifth day after my father's death, just as on every evening, I was lying on my pew, when she apparently carried me, fast asleep, to the matrimonial bed. In the morning I woke up beside her. The following night, I crept back on to the pew and pretended to be asleep. But in fact, I had a sleepless night. Of course, she came. My alertness paid off.

It was a summer night, the moon was peeping into the room through the small window. I saw her as she quietly stood up, nightgown rolled up to the waist, and leant over the pew. At that moment I suddenly threw off the blanket, began to hiss loudly and fenced her off with my arms and legs. She squealed in panic, covering her face with her hands. The hem of her nightshirt slipped down to her ankles. Crouching, with hands protecting her head, she withdrew back under her duvet, covering herself up completely. "I don't care if she suffocates!" I thought.

She wept through all the following nights. I have nothing against crying, but her endless sobbing disturbed my sleep. Fourteen days after Father's funeral, I chased her from my graveyard with a shovel. I ran behind her and followed her to the main gate, before stopping there. I could go no further.

She halted after several steps, knowing that I would not pursue her. "Go to your graveyard" I shouted, "and never return to mine! I don't want to share with anyone, I want to be alone at last!" She turned and slowly walked away. I did not look after her. "And the keys! Give me back my keys!" I yelled after her. I saw her reaching into the pocket of her skirt and throwing them at me. I had to dodge them, she aimed so precisely. I locked the gate and looked around.

For the first time, for the first time in my forty years, I felt something I could call wealth. All this is now mine. I do not have to share it with anyone, do not have to listen to anyone. There is only one master in this graveyard. And that's me.

I felt at peace, at ease. It was on a whim that I decided—and the decision took only a few seconds—not to touch the shovel that day. I took some prepared ropes from the morgue and cut out a board about three feet long from an old coffin. I found the strongest tree and firmly tied the rope to one branch. I made a small loop at the other end. I did the same with the second rope. I fitted the board into these two loops. For the whole afternoon, for four or five hours, I swung. I managed to swing for almost another three whole days.

Then came the first qualms, I heard the voice of my Father: "Work is waiting for you, son. Don't you want to be a gravedigger any longer?" Yes, I knew that I had some work in the chapel. It was the end of the fun and games. I do not remember, I might be lying, but I think I knew it then already: I will be swinging once again on my ropes.

I began to dig graves, everything was fine. No, it's not true. Everything was not fine. It was just the loneliness, which I had wanted so much, that took me by surprise. Can a man find integrity without solitude? Is it even possible to unite with a graveyard and become a single and complete whole? I achieved this. I remained in this blissful state for only a few days, when I realised that there existed only the graveyard and I, that we existed together. How much I had longed to rule! To rule myself at least. And that rule had slipped from my hands.

I got to know Christina not because I fell in love with her, or maybe that I wanted to make love to her, but because I needed to rule over someone, to prove my integrity to someone. If she had not existed, I would have had to make her up.

But she really did exist, she came regularly, every Wednesday, to the tomb of the Dekker family. I had long ignored her presence in the graveyard. She was also a stranger, as indeed were all the visitors who came to my graveyard. I do not know when it happened, when the miracle occurred that I was able to single her out from the crowd of other visitors. Something attracted me to her. I often asked myself at that time how Dad would have liked her. I was surprised: her walk, posture, the gesture with which she adjusted her hair above her forehead, none of these things resembled my Mother.

I longed to meet her. This desire became increasingly stronger day after day. My original foolish ideas of ruling someone had totally dissolved. On the contrary, Christina now ruled me. I did not feel like working. Of course I worked, it was not possible to do otherwise, but it took a lot of effort. Where were the times when I had put all my energy into a single pickaxe swing, when I had enthusiastically scooped out the sweet-smelling clay with a shovel? I worked with reluctance, and what's worse, I did not miss work at all.

By Wednesday morning already, I was standing hidden behind a tree, staring intently at the gate. I knew that she would usually come after lunch, at about 3 o'clock, but I did not mind waiting for a long time; I had to take into account that she might well come before noon.

It was three o'clock when she entered my graveyard.

My heart started beating rapidly. I stared at her intensely. Again, she had come without a watering can! She went to the Dekker family tomb and with a small broom, which she pulled out of a bag, began to sweep the leaves from the marble slab.

Now was my moment.

I picked up the watering can, which I had already filled that morning, and slowly walked up to Christina. When she heard my footsteps in the sand, she turned her head in surprise.

I stopped.

Apparently embarrassed, she swiped at the hair above her forehead with her fingers. How I loved that gesture! Later we played a kind of game: I would comb out Christina's long hair all over her face and she had to, strand for strand, comb the hair back out of her face.

I put the watering can down on the sandy path, several steps away from her, turned and ran into the house where I shut myself in. Crouching, with my nose at the window sill, I watched her.

The hour passed very swiftly.

Christina put the empty watering can down at the tap in the middle of the graveyard, stood for the last time that day beside the Dekker family tomb and then, without once looking towards my house, departed.