

SUNFLOWER BOOKSHOP SHORT STORY AWARD – FIRST PRIZE

THE COFFIN- by Carol Middleton

The coffin would only need to be small but, to be authentic, it would have to have six sides. That would be harder to make than a box with four sides. The image of a coffin was clear in her mind's eye: two short sides, two long sides and two end pieces. He, the mathematical one, drew a hexagon on a sheet of paper and did some calculations.

The workshop was set aside from the farmhouse that belonged to their architect friend. For the moment it was a refuge from the pity in the house. The sawdust and silence helped deaden the pain. The architect showed them the tools to use. "I can make it for you. It is easy for me. Let me do it." But it was their job. They needed to do this. He marked out the sheets of pine and she helped him cut them out with the bandsaw. The architect hovered as they contemplated how to join the pieces. The joints had to be strong enough to take the weight and keep the box together as it was lowered into the grave.

The previous day they had visited the village undertaker, who assessed the situation. Like most of his customers, these people were ignorant and uninformed. And, like the rest, they would not have any choice in the matter. He delved into an ancient filing cabinet and retrieved the relevant documents. He offered them a funeral package that included a miniature coffin lined with swans'

down. He slid the price list across the smooth surface of the mahogany desk. They stared at the long numbers and the cherubs blowing trumpets in the margins, then walked out of the airless office into the bright spring day. Their mind was made up.

No-one could tell them if it was legal. They knew they couldn't bury the dead in unconsecrated ground. So digging a grave under the oak tree at the farm was out of the question. There was an old church on top of the hill with a graveyard overlooking the valley. That would be fine. Normally, the undertaker took the body from the morgue to the funeral parlour and then to the grave. Could they cut him and his hearse and his swans' down coffin out of the proceedings and take a home-made coffin to the churchyard themselves in their old Morris Traveller?

They drove to the council chambers and persuaded an official to look up the regulations. Confronted by the couple with their worn clothes and long hair, the man was scathing but, intrigued by the novelty of the request, pulled down several volumes of byelaws from the shelves. He was surprised to discover the law was in the young couple's favour. He turned the closely printed book around on the counter, so they could read the verdict for themselves. There was no mention of undertakers or third parties in the legal description of burying the dead.

They parked the Morris in the hospital car park and took the box out of the back. Every passer-by turned to stare. It was the shape of the box. And the size. And the young man who carried it under his arm. And the young woman beside him. The onlookers stood until the spectacle went down the ramp out of sight.

The morgue was in the basement of the hospital complex. The cold air hit them as they pushed open the glass doors and walked up to the desk, where they set down the raw wood coffin. The attendant had been told to expect this couple acting on their own behalf, and registered no surprise. He scrutinised the official form they had prepared and took out a set of keys. He walked down the second row of metal cabinets and unlocked one of the large drawers. He checked the tag on the contents, took out the small plastic bundle, returned to the desk and placed the package in the coffin. "Sign here."

As the young man lifted the box, he could feel it was a little heavier, by a few pounds. He hoisted it on to his shoulder, as they closed the glass doors behind them, preparing themselves for more stares of disbelief in the car park. But it was deserted. There were no witnesses, no judge and no jury. Just them, the three of them, and that was all that mattered. They had made their decision and now they would do whatever else there was left to do. When they arrived home, he left her alone.

The mother waited, frightened of unwrapping the bundle, but finally took a pair of scissors and cut a neat slit in the white plastic. The baby was clothed. She was wearing a white paper dress and bonnet. Some other woman must have done this for her. Her face was the same: peachy skin with high cheekbones and her lips still pink. The mother touched the face, but it did not give. It was rock hard, frozen. The eyes would not open. She kissed it, but it did not move.

She lined the coffin with an offcut of soft cotton, laid the child in this nest and carried it to the parked car. She opened the back doors of the old Morris and set the coffin on display inside. The car was parked in front of the farmhouse, next to the driveway, where everyone left their cars, so her friends could admire her daughter when they arrived for the funeral.

He made tea. Her old school friend gave her a crystal "for the baby to hold". Some brought daffodils and crocuses. They embraced her briefly, not sure if she would collapse in their arms. They didn't say much. No-one looked in the coffin. Her baby lay out there alone and ignored. *Look at her. She is perfect. You must look. I think of nothing but her perfection and the bliss of giving birth to her. When she lay on my lap I was a woman at last. That woman is no longer me. I am still here for her but she no longer needs me. Look at her. Please look at her.*

In the evening she put the lid on the coffin and shut the back doors of the Morris. The mother and father drove up the hillside in their best clothes. The vicar met

them at the churchyard and they carried the coffin to the grave. There was a deep hole, and a man leaning on a shovel. Ropes straddled the hole. They set the box on the ground and held hands. The vicar was kind and the words he spoke were respectful. She watched the trees move in a hilltop breeze. It was a good spot.

The men in the party took hold of the ropes and balanced the little box on them. "Slowly" said the father, but the coffin rolled off the ropes just before it hit the hard clay at the bottom of the grave. There was a thud. She pictured the crystal rolling out of the child's folded hands. The mother and father exchanged a wry smile. They threw a bunch of hedgerow flowers into the hole before the earth was shoveled back.

The milk surged in her engorged breasts and leaked through her white dress. *I should have taken you in my arms straight away. When I held you the heat flooded me. I would have kept you warm and held the life in you, but they took you away, wrapped you in cloths and pads.*

He put his arm around her: 'We'll have to make a cross to mark the grave. We'll be back.'