

HATE

By Dave Gardner

Hate. It was not a word Denise thought about very much. But now, sitting in the back seat of the car on the way to the cemetery with her mother and father, she did. Hate. She saw the word form on the blackboard of her mind and she studied it, trying to coax meaning out of it. She knew she hated some things. And some people, too. She hated Rafferty. He picked the wax out of his ears and ate it! That was so disgusting. And she had to sit next to him in Mrs. Ferguson's class at school. She hated spelling bees. She hated them because she was terrible at spelling and she was always the first one to sit down. She hated it when the kids made fun of her. She thought of other things she hated: rhubarb, going to the doctor, being told by an adult, "You'll understand when you're older."

She hated today and everything about it: getting up early on a Saturday to attend her grandfather's funeral, missing her favorite cartoons, having her hair combed. As always, it was full of snarls and tangles. Her mother wouldn't hear of her getting it cut short, though. Mother prided herself on her own hair, long and straight and black like crows are black, and she wanted to be just as proud of her daughter's hair, so Denise couldn't get it cut. "You'll understand when you're older," her mother had said. She hated that.

She had hated the funeral. Everybody was dressed in black and most of the women were crying. It was curious, though, how people cried differently. She had sat in the front row, next to Aunt Rose and had watched her big bosom heave and shake with her silent sobs. Denise wondered what that must feel like and gave a little shudder. Aunt Catherine was crying louder than anybody, so loud she sometimes drowned out Reverend Hawley's voice. Aunt Grace just dabbed her eyes.

She had looked up at her father, sitting next to her, and was surprised to find a smirky little smile on his face. It disappeared as soon as his eyes found hers. Only her mother's grief seemed . . . what was the word she was looking for? Real. Her crying was soft and gentle, soothing in a quiet way.

She hated the heat, she realized, as the jolt from a bump in the road returned her to the back seat of the car. She felt all sticky, particularly where her dress didn't come down far enough and her thighs were pressed against the yellowing plastic seat cover and every time she

moved it felt like her thighs were being peeled from the seat. She hated that.

She looked at the back of her father's head. There were wrinkles there. She'd never noticed them before. Her father's hair was white and he always wore it cut short. It reminded her of the bristles on her toothbrush. She tried to imagine her father's head covered with toothbrushes. She giggled a silent giggle. A drop of sweat appeared on the back of her father's neck and Denise watched as it gradually swelled and then rolled down under his collar. She hated that.

The trip to the cemetery was taking forever! She hated it! Why couldn't they just go home? Then she could turn on the TV and drink lemonade and forget all the things she hated. She closed her eyes and tried playing her favorite car game. With her eyes closed, she tried to imagine the car traveling backwards instead of forward. She had to imagine the fields and the trees and the pavement and the phone poles and everything else suddenly reversing direction. If the car turned left, she had learned to imagine it turning right, going backwards. The sounds of cars passing in the opposite direction had to be imagined as cars that she was passing in her car. Sometimes she succeeded, convincing herself that the car was moving in reverse and then, when she opened her eyes, there was that sudden jolt back to reality. She hated that she couldn't make it happen today.

She looked out the window. They were passing recently plowed fields, as yet bare and unplanted. As the car sped by, it seemed that the long, straight furrows stretching away into the distance were racing along with them. Each furrow was a long leg and collectively, it looked like they were running. She'd never noticed that before. Denise was fascinated. They were passing strawberry fields just now and the legs looked as though they were wearing green pants. She almost said something to her mother but decided not to. She probably couldn't explain it and make her mother understand. On the other hand, though, she might be able to tell her mother, "You're too old to understand." Better not, though. Her mother would think she was being sassy. Her mother didn't like sassy.

The hot wind coming in the car window blew Denise's hair across her face. She pushed it back, trying not to think how her grandfather used to stroke her hair. And how much she hated it after what she had seen. A raw iciness swept through her as she remembered the time she had walked into the house after school and found Grandfather bending over her cousin Leslie on the couch in the front room. He had roughly ordered her to leave, but not before she had seen that Leslie was wearing nothing but her panties and that she was crying. Later, when she

tried to console her cousin, Leslie ran from the room, sobbing.

“I hated that! I hated it!” She clenched her teeth and her little fists beat against the car seat. And she had had to pass alongside his dead body. Her mother had told her she was to kiss her fingertips and then touch them to Granddaddy’s lips. She had hated the very thought, but mother had been right behind her as they walked past his body and she had to do it. Thinking about it, she felt like she was going to throw up right here in the car. She felt like she did when she saw Rafferty eating his ear wax. Or the times when Granddaddy stroked her hair and whispered how pretty she was. A tremor of revulsion rolled through her. She hated that. Better think of something else, something she didn’t hate.

The car made a long slow turn to the left and Denise’s thighs peeled away from the plastic. They were at the cemetery. A lot of cars were already there and Denise saw people standing and talking in small groups. Black! She hated the black clothes all over again!

She and her parents got out of their car. Almost as if that were the awaited-for signal, the crowd began to move slowly toward a low stone building sitting on a small rise. As they neared it, an attendant came out and asked the crowd to follow him.

“Where are we going, mother?” asked Denise.

“To the gravesite, Denise, now hush!” Her mother’s voice was strained, almost harsh.

Up ahead she saw the grave, a neatly dug rectangle (she knew it was a rectangle because they had been studying geometry in Mrs. Ferguson’s class) and she knew that’s where Granddaddy was being taken. She saw his coffin being rolled graveside. Denise was surprised to see that Reverend Hawley was there. He’d already done his job, Denise thought, why does he have to be here, too? Denise hated not knowing.

Everything else that happened was just a jumble in Denise’s memory: lowering the coffin into the grave, a few words said, dirt thrown down into the rectangle by the Reverend Hawley. At first Denise thought they’d be there for *hours* if Reverend Hawley had to fill the hole himself by throwing handfuls of dirt into it. She was very relieved to see a man in a tractor begin to push a big mound of dirt into the grave. People were crying again and then afterward coming up to her and telling her how brave she was and how grown up she was and what a big girl she was. She hated that.

People began to move back toward their cars. Denise’s parents were about to start in that direction when Grandma Alice came up, escorted by Uncle Jed and his wife, Aunt Kristiana. Grandma Alice’s eyes were red and she was still crying. She blew her nose into a tissue she

carried discreetly in one gloved hand and then bent over, patted Denise on the head and with a wan smile asked, “What did you think of all this, my dear?”

“I hated it,” said Denise.

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