

A New White Shirt

by Raymond Abbott

It was a warm day in May, the last day in May to be exact, when he died. But it was more than a week after he was gone that I learned of his death. Indeed it was several days after he was buried. And therein, I suppose, as far as my family was concerned, was the rub with my father's death because not one person in my family knew of his passing. We had to find out accidentally, by chance.

How it happened was that my aunt in Newburyport was at Mass one Saturday evening when a friend of hers approached and offered her her sympathy at the passing of her brother-in-law. Of course it was news to my aunt, not happy news to be sure, because she always liked my father, while a lot of other relatives didn't. Carefully, and without revealing whether or not she knew anything of what she was being told, my aunt pumped this friend for information. It turned out the woman's son worked at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard where my father had been employed for many years and this man had actually attended my father's wake in Exeter, New Hampshire, days before. He commented that the viewing was especially sad because there were so few people there. "Little wonder," my angry aunt said later, "none of us knew he was dead."

My father and mother had not lived together for about twelve years when my father died, although they were still lawfully married. It is probably too simple to say that my father's drinking ended the marriage, but it certainly did not help. He lived in Exeter when he died, about thirty miles from where I grew up in Massachusetts and where my mother still lived. For the past nine years he had lived with another woman in Exeter. Obviously, this woman had buried him without so much as an utterance, a simple phone call, to his family in nearby Massachusetts.

After my aunt heard the sad news she of course called my mother, her sister, to pass on the information she had gleaned at Mass that evening. It couldn't have been an easy call for my aunt, although she said nothing about it later. She knew that my mother still cared for my father, and was still bitter about his leaving her, and even more bitter knowing that he lived with someone else. But still she cared, and we all knew it.

I was away in western Massachusetts when all of this was happening. In those years my mother often relied on me when she had a problem of any kind, although there had never been anything quite like this for either of us. I had spent the weekend in Pittsfield where I was visiting with friends and where I once lived for a year. It was when I returned home that I learned there was trouble. First, my aunt in Newburyport

called, reluctant to tell me what she believed she knew. She said only that I should call my mother soon. "Is she all right?" I asked right away, and she said she was. Then I guessed it. "Does it involve my father?" I asked. "It does." "Is he dead?" I asked next. She thought maybe he was.

With that news I called my mother. She confirmed his death and told me he was supposed to have died the previous Saturday. She said this with a great sadness in her voice, an uncharacteristic heaviness. It was as if she knew the news was true, even though at this point it was unsubstantiated, but such news almost always is true. Who could make it up?

"It was eight days ago," she told me, and he had been buried the Monday following his death. That was all she said she knew. Where he was buried or the funeral home that handled it, she knew none of this. Later I was to consider how difficult it must have been for her to go to bed the night before, not knowing anything for certain, and all the time suspecting the worst while she waited for me to return and unravel the mess. It wasn't that she hadn't tried to get some answers on her own, for she had. She called my father's brother, a local town official where she lived, who should have been able to help her with some information, but he didn't. He seemed unable or probably unwilling to make the calls that were necessary and which I later made. I knew it could not be all that difficult to determine if a man my father's age had died and been buried in a small New Hampshire town. So I made a call to a local funeral home where I knew somebody and got the name of the largest funeral home in Exeter, New Hampshire. Then I called the director of that home.

He told me he had had a funeral for a Milton Bartlett who died on May 31st, the week before. He said this slowly as if he were reluctant to part with this information. I sensed in that moment he was part of a conspiracy to keep this particular death a secret. I just didn't understand why, not then.

"Why weren't we notified?" I demanded to know, my anger rising for what would not be the only time.

"The widow of Mr. Bartlett specifically requested the funeral to be private," the man told me. "She even told us she didn't wish to have his passing printed in the newspaper." I thought, first, the woman wasn't the widow, whatever else she might be, and second, if she were, why keep it a secret? After all, the man had friends, not to mention a large family.

Funeral notices are routinely published in the newspapers of the area even when the funeral is listed as private. It wasn't a requirement, however. But had the notice been printed even once in the Exeter paper, or the close-by *Haverhill Gazette*, which my family reads, one of us surely would have noticed and the news would have been out. My bet was that the funeral director understood this very well and counseled the person or persons who wished to keep the matter a secret as to how this could be done successfully. I don't think the woman who called herself Mrs. Milton Bartlett could have thought up such a diversion on her own. The undertaker of course would never admit his part in such a deceit, but that it was there, I felt certain. He knew what to do and told her how to do it. It was that simple, or so I believed, and still believe to this day. Later I learned that Mrs. Bartlett, so-called, frequently babysat for the undertaker. That may have been his reason for going the extra mile for her. Who knows, though?

My father's trailer in New Hampshire was small as house trailers go. Frankly, I didn't even know he lived in Exeter. Last time I saw him he was in an apartment in nearby South Hampton, New Hampshire.

When I went to the trailer several days later, I was greeted by a woman who immediately said, after I introduced myself, "You can see for yourself that your dad

wasn't unhappy here." I had met this woman briefly once before, years earlier, and that was in my father's South Hampton apartment. But now she was pretending she didn't know me. Or maybe it was that she didn't recognize me. That initially was a puzzler for me. Why bother with such a ruse? I thought. She looked much the same. She was Asian, probably Chinese, with thick glasses and I mean thick, the thickness of the bottoms of Coke bottles. She was slim and much younger than my father, certainly by twenty or more years. She was not at all pretty, nor was she ever very cordial to me, not that the two have any connection whatsoever.

It wasn't difficult to see that he took pride in his trailer, which was parked on a corner lot (the most desirable lots in many trailer parks). The yard was carefully, meticulously, landscaped. There were rose bushes and rhododendrons aplenty and an attractive fence surrounded everything.

When she told me he had little more than his beer and his color TV when he left my mother, I knew she was right about that. He had given up his drinking pretty much in the last few years, she said. But in the beginning of his separation from my mother he lived alone for nearly three years, in a residency-type hotel in Kittery, Maine. That was before he met Hazel, this woman. I learned over time she was from Canada and had come here with her daughter from an earlier relationship. The daughter was mostly grown by now. That they were not in this country legally soon became apparent. My father paid all the bills, and Hazel and her daughter Cindy only had to return to Canada every so often in order to stay on in the States indefinitely.

"I can see for myself just how happy he must have been in this trailer with you," I said. I hoped I didn't sound sarcastic because that was not my intention. "Indeed," I continued, "your relationship might have been the best in the world but, why in God's name did you not call us when he died? That's only common courtesy." Common decency, I was thinking.

Cindy, who had up to now been silent, piped up and said in a not-very-friendly voice, "You didn't come around and see Milt when he was alive. I never saw any of you. Now you've come to get whatever little he had left."

It must have seemed that way, I thought. And in a way, that turned out to be how things worked out. But for the moment I knew that that was not at all in my thoughts. My purpose was simply to learn, if I could, the truth about what had happened to my father and report back to my family, especially to my mother, who, after all, was still married to him. I wanted to understand, as well as I could in any case, the reason for the secrecy. Why was he buried without a word of notice to us? And then there was the fact that what Cindy was saying was not the total truth, either. Four or five years before when they lived in South Hampton, I visited with my father. It was Hazel who opened the door to me that day. I didn't see a child and I had no conversation that I can recall with Hazel except for telling her why I had come. My purpose was to see my father. She immediately left the room, and my father came in, but he did not bother to call her back in and introduce her, or even explain who she was. Not that he was required to do any such thing, of course. He never was comfortable in explaining another woman in his life, even though we were all very much adults by the time this was happening. So I was absolutely sure of having met Hazel prior to this time. That my sister Kathy visited once and met her too, I learned later (or she at least saw her). Perhaps my older brother Ken met her as well. Everyone remembered Hazel and commented on her thick glasses and, I am sure, on her oriental ancestry. You didn't forget those glasses easily, even if you forgot she was Chinese. My father, by the way, was a Caucasian, from New England. He was very short of stature, sandy haired, and in later years quite stout.

So none of what Cindy was saying, and she was saying so loudly, that we weren't ever around, was true. Maybe it was true that we were not around as often as we could or should have been, that may well be correct. But also true was the reality that my father was not particularly welcoming of anyone, family or friends. He had become a bit of a hermit. But then he had always been pretty unsociable a person unless he was drunk.

Then he might become loud and even violent. My father had worked most of his life in heavy construction as a pipe fitter, and he had a bit of a reputation (in barrooms I suppose) as a scrapper, and a tough one at that. I had seen him come home drunk and beat-up severely. I know it all must have put a strain on the marriage. When he finally left my mother I guess I was about sixteen.

Here now was this woman Hazel insisting that she didn't know me, not any of us. "I have never laid eyes on you." What could be going on? I wondered. I reminded her of my visit in South Hampton several years before but she said she had no memory of any such visit.

She repeated it: "I never met any of your family, none of you. I didn't know Milt had any family. You say you knew your father pretty well" (actually I hadn't said that, but no matter), "then you must know he was a very private man. He got his mail at his own post office box at Hampton Falls. He put his mail away and never told us anything about what he received or where it came from."

I have already described my father as private but not that private. No woman could possibly live with a man for nine years and know so little. She was lying, obviously, but why?

"I suspected he had family," she went on, perhaps realizing how ridiculous her claim must sound.

"I mean a man fifty-four years old just doesn't come out of no place with no history. Still, he never spoke of any of you and I didn't ask because he didn't want to be asked. With Milt he didn't talk with you unless he wanted to. He'd get mad if you pushed him to talk. And none of you came around to see him, so how was I to know you even existed? Milt told me if anything happened to him I was to cremate him and not to tell anybody. I just couldn't bring myself to burn him up. Maybe you would have liked it better for me to do that." Anger, even outrage, flashed in her eyes.

But which of us should be outraged? I wondered for a brief moment. I wasn't certain, not then anyway. I could believe my father harbored such bitterness. I can understand better now that I am older that he didn't feel understood or appreciated. His occasional kindnesses were not always recognized. I recall one summer when I had started college at a nearby community college, he left a used car in our driveway for me to have that summer. I doubt if I wrote him a simple thank you note.

"He didn't like churches, so we had a simple Unitarian service for him. No prayers, just a short little service and that was that. Then we buried him." I knew he didn't like church. He was brought up Congregationalist, I guess, but I never knew him to attend church.

"I'm not going to quarrel with you about when or if we met," I said next. "I am certain we met, and I think you remember meeting me in spite of your denial now."

She shook her head indicating I was wrong. I wasn't, though. She was not going to concede to having met me, that was clear, not even once.

"You just can't expect his family not to want to know more about his passing. That's only natural. There are just too many of us for that kind of behavior." I thought, for that kind of bullshit. But I held back my annoyance.

"Funny you should take an interest now when you didn't care at all when he was alive," Cindy said again, standing in the small kitchen where she was making herself

a sandwich. She was a dark-haired girl who was seriously overweight. The level of hostility coming from the two of them was not easy to accept, but I tried to behave calmly and rationally.

“Ma, they just came to get what there is,” she said next, speaking to her mother and ignoring me.

“They don’t care a damn about Milt. If they did they would have come a long time ago, not after he’s gone.”

“I don’t really care what either of you think of me or my family.” I had suddenly lost my cool and was damn near hollering at them. “There are things I must know, things I must be told and you know them. I am not interested in what my father has in the way of assets. I am interested in learning what happened to him aside from the obvious, that he died. We, and I mean my family now, need to know when and how he died and especially why you didn’t feel it was your obligation to call us. We want an explanation! Can’t you understand that? We have a right to know. It was a pretty incredible thing you did.” Oh, I was fairly worked up by now.

“I told you before,” Hazel persisted. “We didn’t know you existed.”

“Okay, have it your way, lady,” I muttered more to myself than to her as I got up to leave. Then I stopped and sat down again, attempting to collect myself. Anger would get me nothing, I surmised.

“Tell me again how it happened. How did he die?”

“He was out mowing the lawn like he usually does on Saturday, only it was a very hot Saturday and I said to him, ‘Milt, why don’t you wait until tomorrow when it cools off?’ But no, he couldn’t wait. He was like that. He said it was going to rain the next day and so he began to mow the grass and I went to town to get him a new white shirt. He wouldn’t wear anything else as you may know, only white shirts, when he was going out someplace. He’s buried in that white shirt.”

I did remember as a child how he was about his shirts. Never a colored shirt for dress up, not that colored dress shirts were that common in those years. He would only wear a white starched shirt when he didn’t have on a working shirt. I supposed he had mellowed a bit and accepted ordinary laundered white shirts now that starch was out of style and everything was permanent press. I do know he used to wear those starched white shirts every place that was even remotely considered formal or dress-up. Even going to my aunt’s house in Newburyport for dinner on a Sunday required a starched white shirt and tie. In this way he was very traditional, but soon I discovered things about him that challenged this sense of tradition.

“Milt was going to go to Cindy’s baccalaureate service that Saturday night. It wasn’t so easy getting him to agree to go. He didn’t like anything connected to churches, and he would go, he said, only if he had that new white shirt. Fitting him for a shirt wasn’t that easy either. He had a neck about as thick as a bull but I found one at Bic’s Department Store and then I came on home. He was finishing up mowing the grass and was about to put away the mower and then he dropped without a sound or a word. We called the ambulance, of course, but it was already too late. The doctor said it was a massive heart attack. He went just like that.” She snapped her fingers as she said it.

“Eight days ago today,” she said sadly. I could see that she cared. “It happened about 2 p.m., after lunch anyway. Is that enough for your family?” she asked with some sarcasm. I didn’t answer.

There was more. Always in such matters there is more. The next day I took my mother to the Portsmouth Naval Station in New Hampshire, where my father worked for a lot of years and must have hoped soon to retire from. We went to the personnel division to discover why we’d heard nothing from them about his death. After all,

I thought, my mother was the widow. I knew there had to be nearly twenty or more years of records on file. And in those records someplace was my mother's name and address. So why didn't we hear from the Navy Yard, I wondered? I said nothing to my mother about the fact that Hazel was going by the name of Mrs. Milton Bartlett, as if she were married to my father. I figured that bit of information would serve only to upset my mother further. It was something she didn't need, added aggravation. She often said she didn't resent Hazel for living with him (although she didn't like it), but burying him without telling family she could not forgive.

The lady in personnel was polite but a little on the cool side. Perhaps she didn't like the additional work our sudden appearance represented for her.

"I'm sorry," she told us at the outset. "The widow has applied for the benefits. Mrs. Bartlett made out the papers five days ago." I saw my mother redden in embarrassment and anger. She said nothing, though. She wasn't exactly up to a fight with the bureaucracy, but I was.

"But my mother is the actual widow," I told the woman politely but with growing insistence. I was getting tired of this messy business. Everywhere I turned the unexpected popped up. "And she has a marriage license to prove it. Did the other widow have a marriage license?" I asked a bit smugly, knowing the answer beforehand. She could not have such a license because my father and mother were not divorced.

"We didn't ask for one," the woman replied, her confidence receding. "I'm sure she said she had one, though. I really don't know what to do now. Of course we will file a benefit for your mother and let Washington decide who is the legal widow. Never have I run into anything like this before. This is a first for me." It was hardly an everyday occurrence for us either, I wanted to shout, but I didn't of course.

"You sure there isn't something about common law?" the woman asked next. It was a stupid question and I think she knew this as soon as she had spoken the words.

"He never divorced my mother so how can common law count for anything?" I said. "How can he be married under common law to another person when he is still married to his first wife?" I hated having this dialogue in front of my mother but it had to be done.

"Maybe you can answer one of my questions," I asked. "You clearly have a thick folder on my father. Doesn't it ever occur to you folks to look inside and notify family when somebody dies?"

"Not really, sir. Your father listed a person to contact in the event of his death. Since your father died at home and Mrs. Bartlett, or Hazel, or whatever her name might be, maybe not Mrs. Bartlett after all, called to report his death. So we naturally thought there was nothing more needed to be done in contacting survivors." She had a point, I had to admit, although I didn't tell her so.

A few days later I visited Hazel again to ask her about the pension application she had filled out. She had said nothing about such an application in my earlier visit with her. It was a major omission considering everything that had been said. After all, she was now posing as the legal widow, something she knew very well she could not possibly be.

"I went to the Navy Yard the other day with my mother," I told her. I looked for some sort of reaction from her but there was none. Hazel didn't seem concerned. "They told us you had been in to apply for the widow's benefit."

"That's not true," she snapped at me, suddenly very defensive. "They sent out an investigator. He brought Milt's personal tools and other things and asked a lot of questions and then made out the papers for the benefit. I never thought we could get the pension because I am going back to Canada and I could never have gotten it there."

The woman in personnel at the Navy Yard never mentioned sending out an investigator but it must have been true, I decided. It made one wonder though how thorough anyone was in dealing with this matter of my father's death. Nobody was going to any great lengths surely.

"Didn't it occur to you, Hazel, that posing as the legal widow you were complicating matters? They said you told them you were married to my father and could produce a marriage license. Why did you say that if you are as truthful a person as you have been telling me you are? I mean, you've been saying over and over again that you did not know about the existence of family, even when I can clearly remember meeting you, and now you go and say you are legally married to my father. How do I know what the truth is?"

"I didn't say I was married to your dad. The man asked if I had a marriage license and I do."

"To my father?" I was shocked. "How's that possible?" My mouth was suddenly dry. I knew my father was unmistakably married to my mother, and I knew as well there was no divorce, and Hazel had to know the same in spite of her denials. So what was going on here?

"How was I to know? I didn't know he had a wife," she said next. "I have been telling you repeatedly that I didn't know his family, didn't know any of you. I told you that, didn't I?"

Clearly she had, and I was beginning now to understand why.

"Milt just said he wanted to get married a couple of months ago, and so we did. That's all there was to it."

"You have a marriage license to prove this, you said?"

She said she did and she produced it and later I ordered a copy for myself. They were married in Bangor, Maine, March 21, 1975. He died about two months later, on May 31, 1975.

Her tactics were suddenly much clearer and understandable to me. They made some sort of sense at last. For Hazel to admit she knew I existed, or any of us for that matter, was to admit she was knowingly entering into a marriage with a man who was already married. That is bigamy in most states. I am not sure, however, who would be called the bigamist. Surely my father was guilty since he was the married party, but he was beyond punishment. So that left only sad but difficult Hazel to do the explaining, to clean up the matter. Probably she feared some kind of legal consequence if she had told the truth in the beginning. But I do blame her in a moral way for entering into a marriage she knew was with an already-married man. She ought to have had better sense, and for the life of me I cannot figure out what good it did her. How was she protected in any meaningful way? Surely she wasn't, but I knew too my father could be insistent and really put on the pressure.

In time my mother's lawyer and Hazel's lawyer dealt with the estate, such as it was. My mother as the legal widow got his Navy Yard pension, which she deserved, and I like to believe my father would not have wished to deny her this benefit (although I'm not sure of this either under the circumstances). My mother was, after all, then well past sixty and Hazel, a couple of years past forty. And my mother had many more years with my father than Hazel did, if that counts for anything in such a situation. There were four children in the equation too, I being one of them of course. More importantly though, Hazel could not collect the pension. There was no legal relationship with my father, and she was by necessity returning to Canada. She was awarded the life insurance, \$16,000 in total, the contents of the trailer, his car and things probably

we never knew about, such as cash or government savings bonds. He used to like to put away bonds and probably still did at the end of his life.

As settlements go it was fair enough. I was the one left to hammer out the understanding, with the lawyers involved, of course. There was no one else around to make the decisions. My mother seemed totally unable to do the job. So I did it, for better or for worse.

What troubles me now, many years since, is not the settlement. That was certainly small and hardly worth much notice all these years later. It is instead the many unanswered questions. Why, for example, would my father, married for so many years to another woman—my mother—and he being a man by all accounts who valued convention, even propriety, go out and suddenly marry another woman without first divorcing the woman he was still married to? Not an easy question to answer. I have asked myself that same question for more than three decades. It goes against everything I thought I knew about my father, quiet and secretive though he was. Was he merely thinking of his own demise? If he was planning for the future, how did marrying this woman Hazel do anything to protect her? It simply did not. It could not.

Then I considered and more or less rejected the remote possibility that she could have haunted him to get married for some unfathomable reason that only another woman might appreciate and comprehend. I suppose it could have happened that way. But he wasn't the kind of man to tolerate well such pressure. So it seems unlikely to me that it happened for that reason. Still, there are the facts to consider. He lived with this woman for nearly ten years without feeling required to wed her and then, presto, out of the blue he goes out and marries her one weekend. Kind of on a whim, I am asked to believe, he enters into a marriage, a man who does not do things impulsively, and then he is dead. So in my mind crept a suspicion that he might have been deliberately put down. Killed, that is.

It may mean nothing at all, but I will mention this incident anyway so that nothing is left out of this story. Hazel told me in one of our several conversations (never very friendly, but sometimes long), and I noticed she grew agitated in the telling, that my father had been diagnosed with high blood pressure at a recent Navy Yard physical and that news had considerably shaken him. He immediately began taking the prescribed medication, she said.

But now into the picture comes a mystery woman. Hazel claimed that he drove a hundred miles to see a certain woman, not identified by name, and that he informed this woman of his illness before telling Hazel.

This mystery woman was apparently someone of significance to my father, and I can only speculate that she provided support and understanding that was lacking in his relationship with Hazel.

It was evident that the discovery of this relationship pissed Hazel off. And Hazel somehow didn't learn that my father had gone to see this woman until after he died. Then this mystery person sent a floral arrangement. Was there a card or a phone call at some point that alerted Hazel to the knowledge of the existence of another woman? And why tell me about it? I think I can answer the second question better than the first: She just couldn't quite hold in her anger at the betrayal she felt, even to me, a virtual stranger, if indeed it was a betrayal. So I ask, did Hazel believe my father had another woman in his life? Indeed, was he planning to leave her for this other woman? If he was, what might she be capable of doing to head him off? Kill him? Possibly, I suppose, probably not likely. I'm expressing no doubt the ramblings, the sometimes incoherent thoughts, of a suspicious mind. Yet I keep remembering what she said early on in one of my visits, and that was that my father wished to be cremated and she just

couldn't bring herself to do it. I can recall even as a child hearing him say he wanted to be cremated. If she had something to hide, I long ago determined, she could well have had him cremated, and all evidence of foul play would be gone forever, gone with the flames. I thought this until a couple of years ago when I met an ex-coroner who lives in rural Kentucky. He is a retired coroner from southern California. He told me that in most states a death such as my father's—a suspected heart attack or stroke—would require an autopsy before cremation in order to rule out foul play. There was no autopsy, I know that much. On his death certificate were these words: "cardiovascular accident." So it turns out, after all, that Hazel could not have had him cremated—not easily—even if she wished to do so, not, that is, without an autopsy, a requirement I am sure, that the savvy funeral director advised her about early on.

So what it comes down to all these years later is that I can't quite shake the feeling that his death may not have been as natural as we were told. Of course I have no way of following up on my suspicions short of having his body exhumed and that's more than I care to consider. I don't know what I would do with the information, if indeed I found that it existed in real life, as it sometimes exists in my suspicious mind.