

Delta Dead  
By Erick Maia

It was a hot summer day, and my sister sat across from me on the patio of our childhood Brazilian home. I could hear the clinking of the dishes through the open window as my mother cleaned the kitchen after breakfast.

“Okay, then, I know you have something to tell me,” I said as I took a sip of my coffee and leaned back in my chair. “I can tell by the way you went to bed early last night and have been avoiding me this morning. Cat got your tongue?”

I put my elbows on the glass-top table and leaned forward; now, I had her all to myself.

“I never could keep a story from you, even as kids,” she said, as she finally looked me in the eye. Our family is known for telling stories, and she and I were always trying to top each others’ tales. But there was something different this time, as if she was haunted by even the thought of this one.

I brushed it off as nerves and winked at her. “Go on, then, let’s hear what you’ve got.”

My sister leaned back in her chair, took a deep breath, and began.

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She had just finished the last appointment at the clinic when a boy came running to the door.

“They are asking the doctor to go to the funeral.”

My sister was the only doctor in a 40-mile radius in the small town of Jaguaruana on the Jaguaribe Delta in Northern Brazil. In those days, she saw her share of undernourished children turning into obese teens, and eventually pregnant ones. She followed their gestations and delivered their babies. She saw women presenting with breast tumors the size of a baseball and wondered why it had taken them so long to find help. She saw boys turn from football to girls, then drop high school to work at the fields. Her clinic staff, a moody lady in her fifties who protected the doctor as a cat protects her litter of kittens, tried to shoo the boy away, indignant that a child had been sent to call for the doctor. My sister was leaving her office and heard the boy pleading his case.

“What’s going on?”

“They told me to call you, Missus. They said you have to come.”

“What happened?”

The boy opened his eyes, stared at my sister for a moment with his mouth open, and replied, “They said Mister James, the dead man in the coffin, is alive.”

My sister had given plenty of diagnoses in her Delta practice she had never seen in medical school: goiter, pellagra, methanol poisoning, intoxication with all sorts of pesticides, and even a patient with Klinefelter’s syndrome. The methanol poisoning was particularly important in establishing her as a doctor, as her prompt diagnosis and treatment cured a man’s blindness. Suddenly she was no longer a nurse, but revered as the best doctor ever to work in the Delta.

Now, would she have to examine a dead man?

“They said only you can say if he is dead, and they would not bury him without your saying so.”

“Please tell me what happened,” Sister asked the boy.

“People came to the funeral, then Mister Walton said he saw Mister James blink. They paid him no attention cause he is old and blind in one eye, but then Miss Everett said she saw him move his mouth. Then everyone was afraid, and others said he did look different now.”

My sister knew better then to doubt the boy. He would not dare to make anything like this up.

She told the boy to get in the car.

The house where the funeral was being held was off a narrow dirt road, off the main gravel road. A number of people stood outside, a few were inside, the funeral home van parked on the side. They looked at her, the only doctor most of them had ever seen, and parted the crowd to make room for her passing. The newly widowed woman stood to greet her at the entrance.

In center of the small room the coffin lid was open from the chest up so people could see the face, surrounded by flowers. It was in that face that someone had noticed a blink, and another had noticed a feeble smile. A thin man stood in the corner. He greeted my sister with a sweaty cold handshake and alcohol breath.

The widow took my sister aside and, after everyone had moved out of the room, asked her, “Is he dead?”

The sheer pain in the widow’s eyes made the reality of mourning and grief yet so present even veiled by the thin hope of signs of life. My sister faced those searching, hopeful eyes and tried to place herself back at the comfort of the ICU at the University Hospital, where death was a daily diagnosis. She tried to breath deep, but inhaling the smell of dead flowers and burned candles almost made her faint. She stood her ground and asked to examine the body.

The woman looked at her with hope one more time and then looked at the man left in the room. He moved out of the somber corner and said, "Now, Mrs. James, let me get you a cup of tea to help calm you down."

"I don't need no cup of tea, Mr. Jones! My dead husband just smiled to someone! In his own funeral!"

Someone came and took the widow away from the room. It was now only my sister and this man.

“I can help you, Doctor. I’m Franklin Jones, the coroner and also the funeral director.”

The coffin seemed to float in the stale air, elevated by four thin iron pedestals.

As Mr. Jones removed the flowers from the neck and around the face he said under his breath, “He is dead, Doc. I am sure he is dead.”

My sister was recollecting her ICU thoughts when those words hit her. He was dead. He looked dead. He was possibly starting to smell dead. She just needed to confirm it.

Now that the flowers were gone, he looked even smaller. He was pale, his eyes were closed, his mouth slightly open with the tip of large yellow teeth showing. She palpated the neck. The skin was cold, eerily cold, the temperature living human beings never have. She looked for a pulse, a beat, and the arterial rhythm the heart transmits to the body. But the drums were not there. He had to be dead.

With her ever-present stethoscope she auscultated his neck, and then she moved her hand skillfully under the man’s coat and pressed the chest piece over the man’s skin. The silence in her ears felt strange, as if she had pressed her stethoscope, not on a chest, but on a piece of wood or a cement wall. Nothing moved, no sound under the cold skin. He had to be dead.

“I told you he was dead.”

For a moment she thought she was hearing her own thought, and then she realized it was the funeral director that had moved closer to her.

She fumbled through her pockets and got her flashlight out. Another test, light reflexes. She took a deep breath and held it, as she moved her face close to the coffin, her other hand propping the right eye open. The eye, usually so moist and shiny was now glassy, empty of its natural live tone.

She turned the flashlight on and the pupils remained, as they were, indifferent to the invasion of light into the tiny chamber of the eyeball.

He is dead, she thought to herself, finally making her diagnostic conclusion.

She opened the door and faced the widow, who waited outside.

“He is dead.”

As if on cue, the widow started to sob. Relatives moved to her side, in support. Other wept.

My sister left the house, left the funeral, drove her car back to her house, where she poured herself a drink hoping to forget this story, so she would never have to tell me about it.

I looked at my little sister, noticing her hand tremble slightly as she took another sip of her coffee. Suddenly my sister looked older than she did earlier this morning, as if the telling of the story had somehow aged her. And I realized as she finally looked into my eyes that, unlike the chauvinisms our parent's Brazil, there are some stories that never leave us no matter how much we will them to. And my sister, whose hand I held as the big brother of a little girl, had now delivered babies herself, cured the blind, faced prejudices and even death. My little sister had been a doctor all by herself in the desert of the Delta. I, the big brother, could let go of her hand.