

“ . . . a time to weep . . . ”

Ecclesiastes 3:4

Our little neighborhood gang had tired of *Cowboys and Indians*. We had played *Restaurant*, exchanging Fool's Gold from the arroyos near our home for cold biscuits from the kitchen and carrots and tomatoes from the garden. There was no shade near the woodpile where we stacked logs to play *School*.

Huddled beneath purple-blossomed Chinaberry trees, someone said, “What do you think's in the hen house?”

My sister ventured in among the perches and nests and soon returned with an egg cupped in her hands. We huddled around like students in a surgical theater, while Valura, our leader, broke open the egg. (Having a second toe longer than her great toe, her mother instructed her, was a sign she was destined to be the boss in her family.)

The contents of the egg spread over the ground in the center of our circle. We leaned in and were starting when suddenly, a wrenching, sulfuric odor hit us. We leaped back, grabbed our noses, and made awful faces. After we recovered, we decided what lay before us were the earthly remains of an unborn chick. Without question, it deserved a proper burial.

Funerals were a mainstay of the social life of our village, so we knew what to do. We got the Diamond matchbox from our kitchen for a coffin. Bobby got Papa's shovel from the toolshed. Along the way Helen gathered a handful of tiny white and purple wildflowers. Valura led us single file like a desert caravan across the grass to the alley behind the barn on a warm July afternoon.

The ground was dry and hard. Each of us took a turn with the shovel, whose handle reached above our heads. The instant the hole was deep enough, we placed the matchbox in it and made a mound using the excavated dirt.

We bound two sticks together with stems of Johnson grass to form a cross for one end of the grave. Helen placed her bouquet in the center. We made a circle around the grave and bowed our heads. I said the only prayer I knew:

“Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

We sang heartily: “In the sweet by and by.” Eventually, all must die, but with any luck, we'll meet again “on that beautiful shore.”

We began to look for the nearest shade when someone said, “No one has cried.” We had forgotten this essential element. So, we got back into a circle and began trying to cry. But tears on demand didn't come naturally to any of us.

So we agreed to go around the circle, each one slapping the person on his right, until someone cried. We began by taking turns, one after another. It's hard to slap a friend, so the slaps were more like pats.

Forgetting that Valura, older and taller than me, was on my left, I shouted, "If we're gonna do it, do it and get it over with!"

Valura's arm flew through the air like lightning from a cloudless sky. Her hand blazed a trail across my face and left my jaw stinging. We had our crying. And I ran to the house to tell on Valura for hitting me.