

# Dancing with the Dead

## Recalling my Granddaddy, A Cemetery Caretaker in Webb, MS

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“All that live must die, passing through nature to eternity.” -Shakespeare



*My Granddaddy, Ira Donald Biggers, born on July 15, 1924, worked as a caretaker at Wood Lawn Cemetery. Before that, he served in the U.S. Navy during WWII. He went on to become a Freemason. Ira Donald died on August 26, 2000.*

Webb, Mississippi is a town in Tallahatchie County that has been reduced to squalor. It is barren, lacking the proper sized population it needs to thrive. With fewer than 600 inhabitants, only around 130 different families, the town is just barely surviving. Webb is full of acres of grassy fields inhabited by golf courses and cemeteries. It is criss-crossed by gravel pathways that stretch out for miles, separating the dwellers with isolating distance. The town is no longer meant for people; it is a place for memories, a place for ghosts.

For me, it has always been a town belonging to the dead. Only twelve years ago, I was a little girl, dancing amongst the gravestones and hosting tea parties with the deceased right there, smack in the middle of Webb. As you can probably guess, my childhood was not strictly typical. I was raised by my Granddaddy, Ira Donald Biggers. My dad knew about me, but chose not to meet me until I was three. His presence in my life was blissfully minimal in those early years. My mother was in the picture. She lived with us in my Granddaddy's house, but she was constantly at Cohoma Community College. My Granddaddy was kind enough to watch over me while she was working towards a degree in Nursing that she never did achieve.



My Granddaddy's central role in my early life was crucial to shaping me into the person I am today. Without him, I wouldn't have thought I was intelligent enough to go to college, nor would I have felt worthy enough to pursue a career. I would have been stuck living a lifestyle that would have roped me to my parents for the rest of their lives. I owe my Granddaddy everything. I give him full credit for all of my successes.

Granddaddy owned a large house, tucked back in the woods of Webb. Bayou Cassidy ran through his property. We only had one neighbor within walking distance, an elderly couple who watched over me whenever I was in need of a babysitter. I spent very little time with them, although I remember them to be kind, loving people. I loved visiting them, but for the most part, I was always with my Granddaddy. Especially if he was working, I would refuse any offer to stay at home or with the neighbor couple. My Granddaddy mowed the grounds of Wood Lawn Cemetery, Webb's largest graveyard, and it was my favorite place to play, while he worked.

The gravediggers were like family to me, and the ghosts that lingered in those graveyards – at least they lingered there in my active imagination – were my friends, my companions. I spent countless hours in those graveyards. They were where I learned to take my first steps and where I trained my muscles to flex and move as I ran from one side of the cemetery to the other, just because I had nothing better to do than run back and forth while my Granddaddy worked. I taught my body agility, jumping from one gravestone to another as fast as I could, and then circling back to apologize to each person's grave I had jumped over so they wouldn't exact their revenge on me in the middle of the night while I was sleeping. Also, so they wouldn't turn down

my next tea party invitation. I spent my entire childhood there with the dead, and the gravediggers, and the mourners, and my Granddaddy.



My parents had gotten married when I was seven, which meant moving out of my Granddaddy's giant house and into my father's tiny apartment in Tupelo, Mississippi. It was a huge change in daily dynamics for me, but being young, I adjusted easily enough. I still felt closer to my Granddaddy than I ever did, or have, to my mother and father. Every summer vacation, I'd spend with him in his new place, miles and miles away from Webb. After mom and I moved out, his house felt too big for him. He sold his house for a trailer in some small town I cannot remember the name of. He chose that town because that is where my Uncle Jack had moved to from Webb the year before, and he wanted to be near his brother.

Granddaddy and I shared his last two summers outdoors. We rode around the neighborhood on the four-wheeler he had bought. We spent hours down at the lake fishing together. He gave me all of his free time, except for when the Braves were playing.



*My Granddaddy and I in front of Bayou Cassidy in 1991.*

I felt like any day we'd pack up the truck and return to the graveyard in Webb. My Granddaddy would go back to work and I'd go back to taking dance lessons from the ghosts. Instead, as summer came to a close, my Granddaddy stayed in his trailer and I went back to Tupelo with dreams of my early years swirling around in my head.



One of the many things I never knew about him was that my Granddaddy had bone cancer. He'd been living with it for years. I did not even know he was sick until he had died. He was such a strong, stubborn man. He never let anyone see him suffering, but I know the pain had

to be immense. His treatment hadn't been going well. After I left him the last summer, he shot himself in the head. If there was a note, I was never allowed to read it. I did get to keep his favorite plaid shirt and a picture of him from his time in the Navy. My mother was up front with me about the whole thing, despite my young age. I knew more about the way he died than most of his adult children did.

The hum of my Granddaddy's tractor still rings in my ears when I think of him, and the smell of freshly cut grass can conjure up his memory quicker than anything else I've encountered. He passed away as summer turned to autumn when I was nine years old, leaving me in the less than capable hands of my parents. His death was a big enough event to change my life on its own, but what made the impact of his death really dawn on me was returning to my childhood home for his funeral.



Going back there for my Granddaddy's funeral was a jarring experience, like seeing your childhood home burnt to the ground. The town seemed to have deteriorated in my two year absence. It was smaller and more spacious all at the same time. The town square was suffocating. The shops were fewer and more rundown than I had built up in my memories. The entire square was desolate and haunting. However, the houses stretched out for miles. Each one was an eternity away from the next. The town felt so empty and abandoned. Worst of all, the cemetery was more like a miniaturized jungle than the well-kept lot my Granddaddy had tended to throughout my early childhood.

My Granddaddy had been a hard worker. That cemetery had been manicured and in tip-top shape while he was in charge of it. Seeing it overgrown cemented my Granddaddy's death in my mind in a way that no number of words had been able to. It made the realization come crashing down on me all at once. It took the breath out of me. All I wanted was to throw open the casket and take one last look at him, but I did not get to look him in the eyes and say goodbye. My aunts' had insisted on a closed casket. A part of me resents them to this day for that. I know it was to preserve everyone's image of him and to keep them from having to see him so violently maimed, but it left me feeling empty. Webb was nothing like I remembered and my Granddaddy's face was already blurring in my mind's eye. My childhood memories were slipping away and I hated it.

Then I saw a familiar face. This middle-aged, African American gravedigger caught my gaze and smiled warmly at me. I looked over at my mother to see if she had noticed. She would not have understood anyway. No one else knew the man's face, but me. He had been my friend, my family, and he was there, sharing the horror of the moment with me. He became an anchor for me, reminding me that the past was real, no matter how much things had changed. I still had a home in that graveyard, and the gravediggers and all the people beneath the ground and now my Granddaddy too would be there waiting for me to visit whenever I needed to return to my little ghost town. That much would never change.