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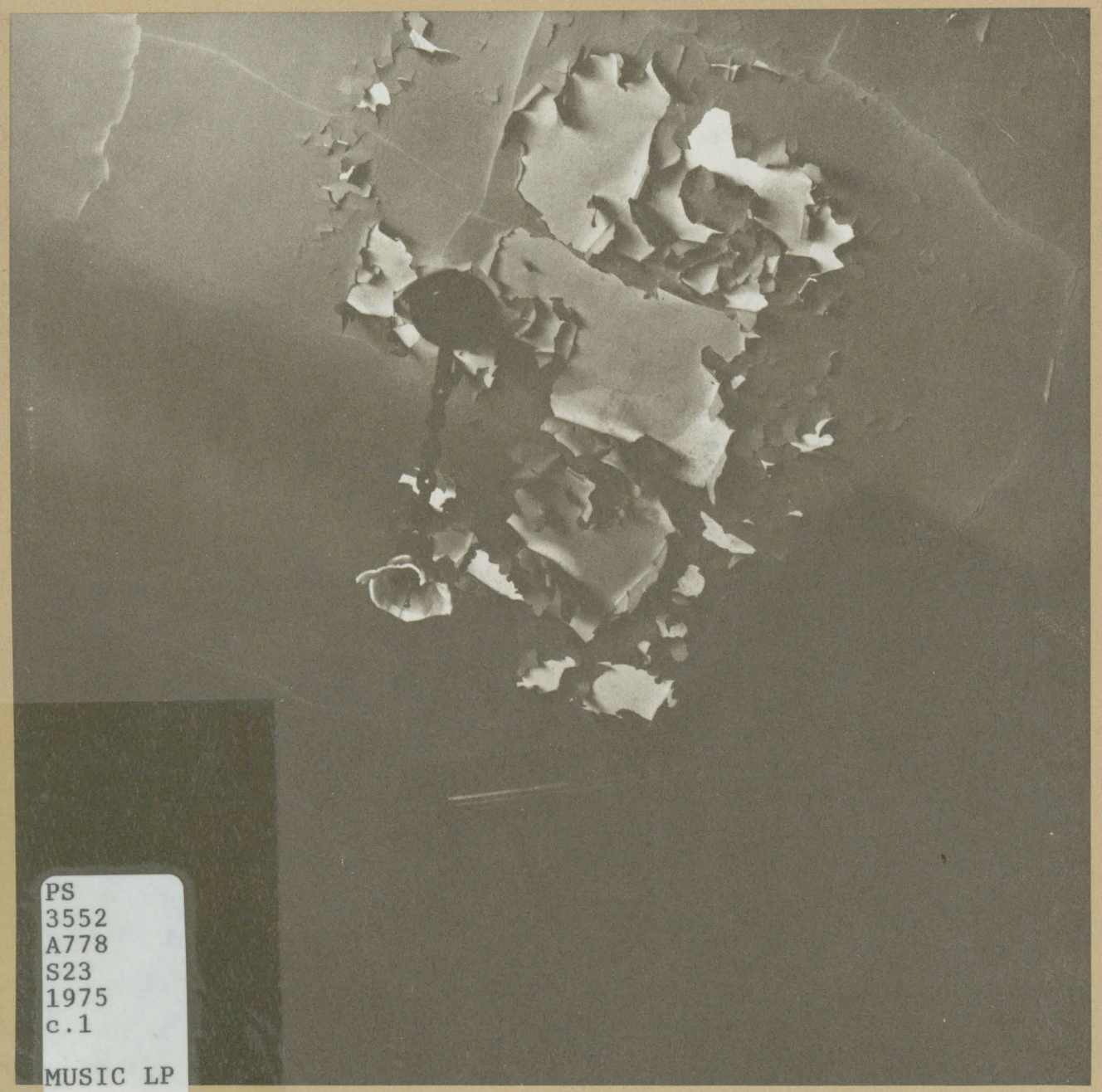
TWO SHORT STORIES OF THE DEPRESSION

WRITTEN AND READ BY BERNARD BARSHAY

THE SABBATH

THE SCAVENGER



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DESCRIPTIVE NOTES ARE INSIDE POCKET

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE
PHOTO BY PAUL NELSON

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FL 9783

Library of Congress Catalogue Card No. 75-750001

43 W. 61st ST., N.Y.C., U.S.A.

FOLKWAYS RECORDS Album No. FL9783

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BERNARD BARSHAY BIOGRAPHY

The Great Depression brought much hardship to millions of Americans, but it also opened up new opportunities in the arts when the Roosevelt New Deal began subsidizing writers, musicians and actors to take them off the breadlines. Mr. Barshay gratefully acknowledges receiving his start in the theatre this way, starring in two Federal Theatre Project plays, "Autumn Fires' and "The Marriage Proposal." With the depression ended, he turned to radio both as an actor and announcer in New York City.

Then began a career in newspaper work, culminating in his being appointed professor of journalism at Long Island University. He had already achieved national recognition with his famous "interview" with Abraham Lincoln published in 1946 and distributed to more than forty newspapers by North American Newspaper Alliance.

More recently he has been free-lancing, writing for magazines and doing occasional travel articles for NANA which have taken him to more than fifty countries. He also returned to radio with his own "Stories for Everyone" and during the past few years produced television shows, mostly for children.

Folkways has recorded some of Mr. Barshay's syndicated true crime stories in "Four American Murder Mysteries," available both on records and cassettes.

THE SABBATH

by

Bernard Barshay
(a short story)

It was during the worst days of the depression, the first Saturday I could ever recall when there would be no meat for the mid-day meal. And there would be none at night either, as it was traditional on the Sabbath to feast after synagogue services but to have not much more than a snack in the evening. Unbelievable. True, there had been chicken last night; but, as Mama had said, it would be the last until we got some money to pay part of the rent for our dry goods stand (concession) in front of the bakery. If we didn't do that, the little round woman that was Mamma had added, wringing her hands, it would be the end, the very end. Losing the stand meant we would be without any means of support. Then there would be only charity--an ugly word in our family--or, perhaps, "relief" from the city government, which was then in the planning stage later to be known as "welfare." No, anything but that.

The morning had begun, as usual, with Pappa and Mamma going to the orthodox services together. As for myself, I always had excuses lately for not going at all--or, if my parents insisted, on attending the second round of services only, which started much later. Either I had studying to do for high school, which required no writing--forbidden by Jewish law--or reading for a book report in English. Anyway I always managed to delay the painful duty as long as I could, but never failed to leave the house by the time Pappa returned from "shule" so that at least he thought I had been there. Maybe he realized that for me it was just a matter of going through the motions; yet I knew he would be very hurt if he thought I hadn't even put in an appearance at the synagogue.

Mamma would always return home before Pappa to heat the mid-day meal and prepare the table, and if she still found me in would scold me for being so tardy and hurry me off. But her hurt at my delinquency had been steadily growing weaker. Once--and this really was a surprise--she found me playing the radio and actually said nothing, not even urging me to leave the house before Pappa heard the music. (He would have been utterly stupified by my sacrilege.) I felt so embarrassed--especially her saying nothing--that I turned off the set and promptly left for the synagogue.

On this particular occasion, no gas jet had been left burning the entire night in order to heat the Sabbath daytime meal. There would not even be hot water for tea, as it was unthinkable that gas could be turned on while there was still daylight. Thus Mamma served Pappa and me some cold gefilte fish, tsimis (cooked mashed carrots) and compote (cooked fruit). There was nothing to drink but cold water from the faucet.

Not a word was said during the meal; but when Pappa went to his bed to rest as he always did on Saturday afternoon, Mamma for once did not do likewise. Instead she turned to me and said quietly, "Abie, I want you back from the library by three o'clock."

I was puzzled. This had never happened before. Every Saturday I went to the library at two and returned just before dark, in time for the evening meal.

What's up, Mamma?" I asked.

But she only pointed to Pappa's room and placed another finger to her lips. This was strange. Yet she wouldn't allow a whispered conversation and hurried me off to the library, again insisting that I must return by three.

Both of us tiptoed down the stairs; and although Mamma hadn't said a word but had motioned me to follow, I knew that Pappa was still sleeping and she didn't wish him to know what was going to happen. When we reached the vestibule, she gave me the key to the basement and in a moment I had unlocked the cellar door and was hurrying downstairs. "Just a few small boxes," she had said, so it wasn't long before I had brought up a half a dozen. These she began to open and soon socks, shirts, underwear and other merchandise were on display. Our dry goods stand was ready for business at 3:15, three hours before dusk and the usual opening time at this season of the year.

Saturday was the busiest day of the week in Borough Park, even though it was mostly a Jewish section of Brooklyn. Department stores in the neighborhood did a thriving trade; but we didn't get any of it until sundown, and then had to close after nine o'clock when people stopped shopping. But not today. Hesitantly, and on a very smallish scale (usually we had ten times as much merchandise on view for passersby), Mamma was going to compete with Rothstein's Mart next door and other dry goods establishments.

Many shoppers didn't relish being smothered in the crowded stores and preferred buying from stands. Also, it saved much time as they could thread their way, spider-like, from one web of outdoor concessions in front of stores to another web of makeshift pushcarts huddled together at the curbs. Furthermore, prices were much lower at these stands and carts, as overhead costs were considerably less.

At sunset Pappa came down. His expression revealed all there was to say about how he had spent the past three hours. I knew he hadn't slept all that time. He never did. He probably had been surprised to find no one in the apartment, then possibly opened the window and peered down to see if Mamma or I were in the street. Then he must have noticed the stand, very inconspicuous with our few boxes but nevertheless there--on the Sabbath. He must have shut the window abruptly and prayed to God that He forgive his erring wife who thought a few extra dollars of greater importance than observing the Lord's day.

Once at the stand, Pappa said nothing to Mamma, merely motioned for me to bring up more boxes from the basement. I went down quickly, fearful of witnessing the confrontation between my parents. I knew that we had done very well in the time since we had opened for business, in fact more than the entire day before--enough, as Mamma said, to insure that we would have meat on Sunday.

By the time I had finished carrying the additional boxes upstairs, Mamma was gone. She had been on her feet since mid afternoon; and now that Pappa was in command, she was going to eat and rest awhile. At about seven o'clock she would come down again and I would be free to do as I wished, only I must return at nine-thirty to carry the boxes down again.

Much to my surprise there was no arguing the next day about Mamma's breaking of the Sabbath. Pappa kept to his room and refused to eat the lamb chops Mamma had fried for Sunday dinner, the first she had bought in more than a year. After studying all morning and then wolfing down the excellent meal Mamma had prepared with special care to celebrate, I suppose, her deliverance, I took a long walk feeling that perhaps they wanted to be alone "to have it out." I would give them their opportunity and wished it would be over with by the time I returned. Better one big quarrel and have it finished, resolved one way or the other, than many little bickerings and recriminations--for I knew that Pappa would insist that never again should Mamma repeat the experiment. His rejection of the lamb chops was the straw in the wind. He didn't want "treifer" (unclean) food bought with money earned against God's commandment to keep the Sabbath.

I never learned what transpired while I was out, but on my return felt that the issue had been unresolved; and it was with much trepidation that I feared the coming of the next Sabbath. Although my parents had spoken civilly to each other during the week, a great change took place on Saturday. Neither even so much as looked at one another. I kept praying for rain, hoping that Mamma would take it as a sign that God frowned on her repeating her performance of the previous week. Business was never good on a rainy day, and maybe she would feel it wasn't worth the effort and strain in fighting Pappa to open the stand again in mid-day for a few pennies.

But the sun was bright that morning when Pappa left for "shule" alone and without a word to either of us. As soon as he was gone, Mamma said quietly, "Be here at three." Pappa had lost.

The next few weeks saw a gradual but steady turning back of the clock from 3:15 to 2 P.M., when we would open for business on Saturday. Also, more boxes were brought upstairs from the basement, with the result that we had almost a full store of merchandise to sell. This, of course, meant additional trade and profit.

We now had meat almost daily for dinner, but at what a price! Pappa seldom spoke to Mamma in my presence and then it was matter-of-fact--not curt but simply, briefly and to the point. Inasmuch as he still ate meat only on Friday evening, as we had done just before the change effected by Mamma's breaking of the Sabbath, it was the only way he chose to protest.

Nevertheless, it did not alter Mamma's determination to continue doing as she had begun. Evidently she felt that eventually he would capitulate--if not to work on the Holy Day himself, then at least to condone her doing so. But when would he begin to eat meat on Saturday, a sure indication of surrender?

The spring gave way to early summer, which meant that Mamma would again suffer attacks resulting from high blood pressure. School would soon be over and I'd be able to help Pappa at the stand every day, allowing Mamma to go to the beach whenever the thermometer reached the nineties. It was truly essential that she do something to cool off; otherwise she would collapse, and then the ambulance would have to come and take her to the hospital. In her case, heat prostration and even worse, death, hovered constantly over her. Going to the country for several weeks in July or August was unthinkable, due to our poverty. And what would she do about Saturdays in very humid weather?

Although Pappa was opposed on religious grounds to working on the Sabbath, there was also another reason. Services at the synagogue ended about twelve-thirty, and many of his fellow-worshippers passed by Thirteenth Avenue where we had our stand. Soon, unless Mamma stopped pushing back the clock, they would know all. Yet, despite the increasingly sweltering heat of June, Mamma opened our stand earlier and earlier until it was one o'clock, right after the mid-day meal which had been moved up for the two of us. In addition, she had stopped going to the synagogue on Saturday although insisting that I do so.

The crisis--the real crisis--would be early July, when opening the stand nearer twelve-thirty than one would come very close to the time when Pappa's intimates at "shule" would be returning home from the synagogue and passing by our stand. Also, the temperature had climbed recently until it had reached a sultry eighty-five the last week in June. Mamma had already begun to complain of the withering heat. How could she bear being outdoors in the broiling sun all day from one until early evening? I could never handle the business at the stand myself, and Pappa would not come down to help.

Even though Pappa had not shown by a word or glance that he approved of what we were doing, he had weakened in one respect. If Mamma were in doubt about the cost of an item, or whether she should lower the price of an article (in those days standard pricing existing only in stores), I would take the goods up to Pappa. He would then either give the information requested or make a decision on the bare minimum price at which it could be sold.

Now to me, this seemed a kind of hypocrisy, for although he wasn't actually in the street and selling directly, he still was participating in the process--albeit ambiguously. Yet to him it must have seemed perfectly consistent with his religious scruples. He was merely answering questions put to him by Mamma, who was doing the work--making her burden easier.

Pappa tried in another way to mitigate the effect of the heat on Mamma's physical condition. On Sunday they had always gone together to the big wholesale dealers in lower Manhattan, to buy merchandise for the week's business. They came home late in the afternoon and I always met them at the subway station, to help carry the heavy load of new goods the half mile to our apartment, which was just above the stand. Now, however, he insisted that I go with him and Mamma stay home to rest up from what was becoming an increasingly arduous Saturday of business. It did not become dark at this time until after eight-thirty, and only then would Pappa come down to take charge of the stand. But that meant she had been on her feet for seven hours or so.

As my summer vaction from school had begun, I didn't mind too much spending one day in New York, as we used to call Manhattan. I still had Monday through Friday to play, and half of Saturday free from work at the stand. Of course, if during the week Mamma felt worn out from the heat, I would take her place at the stand. But this didn't occur too often, and in any case I had plenty of time for handball or softball.

I still awaited the sign that meant that Pappa had really weakened--eating meat on a day besides Friday. Lamb chops any other time indicated luxury--something he could not afford on "honest" earnings. Yet even when Mamma prepared chopped steak, a much less expensive meat, the result was the same: he wouldn't touch it.

Once I thought of suggesting that she prepare chicken for the middle of the week. Perhaps its association with the Sabbath (chicken often being served Friday night) might do the trick. But I hesitated to do so, primarily because I, too, had begun to believe that Mamma would win the battle--not only of the meat but also of the Sabbath.

Sooner or later Pappa would give his tacit approval of what she was doing, if for no other reason than that I had just graduated from high school and would need money in the fall for textbooks and college fees of one kind or another. It was clear that my high marks would enable me to enter one of the municipally owned colleges, where tuition was free. But funds would have to be raised for other expenses, and the only sure way of doing so apparently was to keep the stand open on Saturdays.

What I didn't know, or even suspect at the time, was that Mamma was aiming for a greater victory. She wanted Pappa at the stand with her as soon as synagogue services were over and they had eaten their mid-day meal, for together they could earn more on Saturday than during the entire week. He was a much better salesman than either of us, and his constant presence at the stand would probably double our earnings. Yet it meant a complete break with Pappa's intimates in the "shule," who would learn about it ultimately. They would never forgive him for spending three hours or more every Sabbath praying in the synagogue, then going home and immediately breaking the Lord's commandment.

Pappa must have considered that philosophically he might be able to rationalize this action in clear conscience; but it took moral courage to face the rabbi, the sexton or the cantor. Mamma respected his desire to be a good Jew, but thought he could still be one even if he did take in a few extra badly needed dollars on Saturday. Temporizing was one of his weaknesses, and if only he would act forcefully for once in his life--no matter what the consequences--she would feel that she was married to a real man.

The red tinge of sunset the previous day had augured poorly for the luckless people of Brooklyn. The windless night presaged even worse weather than the Friday had been, hot and humid but at least with a ten-mile-an-hour wind. It had been in the upper eighties yet almost tolerable. Forecasts for Saturday, however, predicted that the thermometer would reach ninety or more.

Mamma had risen several times during the night to get ice from the wooden, delapidated but still useful icebox. I had watched her put several pieces in a handkerchief, then hold it against her temples. If only there would be a thunderstorm the next day, I prayed, something, anything to either cool off the streets or delay taking out the boxes. I did not relish what I thought might happen tomorrow to Mamma.

By three o'clock that morning Mamma apparently had dozed off, and I went back to my troubled sleep.

I knew when I awoke that it had not been the light filtering through the torn window shades that had roused me. No, it was my heavily perspiring face and neck. And my pajamas were streaked with sweat. It could be a scorcher, all right, and it was only morning.

Mamma, apparently relieved of her nighttime discomfort, was cheerful, possibly contemplating that she would make up on Saturday what she had lost in business the previous day. Friday had been a real loser. Twelve hours at the stand had netted only about two dollars in profit. But today--yes, today--she could earn many times that much. People would be coming to buy bathing suits, bathing caps, sandals, towels and all the other accessories incidental to beach wear. Summer had really made its appearance, and now--with Friday pay envelopes in hand--shoppers would be strolling along Thirteenth Avenue.

By one o'clock and time to open the stand, I was aware that we were in for a true roaster. This is the kind of afternoon that newspaper reporters break eggs on the sidewalk, I thought, then take pictures of the omelette for the edification of readers and confirmation of the fact that it had been "one of those days."

Mamma, to ward off the effects of the blazer, had come down with a bucketful of ice. Yet within the hour it had dissolved into a container of tepid water. But the customers kept coming, and for the next few hours it was the busiest day that I could recall. Evidently people were anxious to shop early and be off to the shore.

At four I believed that the worst was over. The sun had reached its zenith and was lowering for its descent to the west. A slow but steady breeze had arrived at last. Only the oppressive humidity remained--a sticky, almost gummy kind of wetness that soaked you despite the searing rays that did not abate in intensity. But the slight wind signalled, perhaps, some cooling of the atmosphere. Yet I had forgotten something: the effect of such a day had to be cumulative.

Even if Mamma and I had been resting, as Pappa had been doing that afternoon, we would have been uncomfortable. But bustling around all day, bending to remove merchandise from a box, straightening up, bending again to choose another size or color--all this had combined to made even me, who fortunately had low blood pressure, very tired and a trifle dazed. Mamma, however, had not even bothered to get more ice from upstairs. The money was rolling in, and she had ignored the first symptoms of heat prostration.

Strangely enough, it was during a slackening of business, with no shopper in sight, that I first noticed a slight unsteadiness of her gait, a faintness in Mamma's voice and an increasing paleness of her skin. It was as though she had given her all for the show, as an actress might have done, then had begun to collapse after the last curtain call.

I rushed up to our apartment, but the last of the ice was gone. Still, I had to bring down something and found some smelling salts that a doctor had once told me to use for Mamma in case of a threatening attack. Yet it had taken me longer than I planned, and when I dashed downstairs I knew from the jubbub around the stand that it was too late. Mamma had collapsed.

My salts were immediately applied to her nose, and did some good. Her eyes opened and she smiled at me weakly. But then her head, which she had slowly raised, fell backward. There could be no further delay--an ambulance had to be called.

Things happened so quickly afterward that to this day I cannot place the sequence of events in any kind of logical order. I only remember that there was the usual rush to get to a phone booth, the usual crowd around Mamma's prostrate figure, the usual policeman

who barked, "Stand back! Give her air!" then the screaming siren of the ambulance swiftly approaching, Mamma being placed on a stretcher, and then my being alone--dreadfully alone at the stand.

Where was Pappa? He must have heard the siren, must have known what it signified. I roused myself from my stupor and raced upstairs. But he was gone. Had he come down during the confusion? Why hadn't he spoken to me?

I fell into a chair, indifferent to the fact that the stand was unattended and that thieves could easily plunder it. For a moment tears welled up, then the call to duty reasserted itself. I had been trained from childhood, both by precept and example, that one did one's job, no matter what. The stand represented the barrier between us and charity. I had to go downstairs to my post.

Fortunately--though Mamma would not have agreed that it was a good thing--business continued to slacken off, and I was glad. My legs were wobbly, fear clutched at my throat. And where was Pappa?

An hour later he was at my side. "She's all right," he said softly. "I've just come from the hospital. They'll bring her back when it cools off--sometime tonight."

"Pappa," I said in bewilderment, "how. . . how'd you get there?" He replied without emotion, "I took the subway. How else?"

He had broken the Sabbath! Never in all his life had he ridden the BMT on a Saturday, even for the most important reasons. When his nephew had tried his first mock law case in school on a Saturday morning, Pappa had reluctantly given up the pleasure of witnessing his presentation. Once he had suffered terribly from a toothache Friday night and all during the Sabbath, but had borne the pain heroically until Monday morning when he finally got to a dentist. To have taken the train either for an affair of honor to the family or for the alleviation of physical agony was unthinkable.

But today, concern for Mamma had prevailed over every other consideration. Now what?

"Abie, go upstairs and lie down. You've been alone at the stand for a long time and in the heat all day. I'll be here the rest of the afternoon."

I scanned the sky, still streaked with red. There were at least two more hours of daylight. Then I forced myself to look at him. The tears were in my eyes, not his.

He had crossed his Rubicon, and come what may, would never turn back.

THE END

THE SCAVENGER

by

Bernard Barshay

(a short story)

Aloysius J. Crombie yawned as he settled back in his seat in the trolley car--a yawn not the result of insufficient sleep but one of boredom. Glancing about, he noted the alert look of the businessman, the easy strength of the day laborer, the dolled-up pertness of the stenographer. Crombie, however, felt more as though he were in the land of the dead than of the living. For that matter, why shouldn't he, Aloysius J. thought. Wasn't his living eked out by the never failing law of statistics that every single day in the city between 200 and 300 people would pass away, and that it would be his job to note these names in his obituary column for the Gazette?

Crombie yawned again--a twenty-year yawn. Yes, two decades of reporting items like "John W. Smith, lawyer, heart attack," and the names of his survivors, together with the time and place of burial, etc. Colorless work which any schoolboy in a high school journalism class could do!

Aloysius J. pictured the scene fifteen minutes later. He would stride slowly, like a pallbearer, to his desk in the editorial offices of the Gazette. There, waiting for him, would be dispatches from the various press services describing the deaths of the more prominent citizens of the metropolis. He would read them quickly, sift out the more important names, edit a dozen or more--brief, terse sentences about each of the deceased--and then bring the copy upstairs to the pressroom for the first edition.

The excessive warmth of the trolley made him more and more drowsy. He glanced wistfully at the closed window at his right, but felt too lazy to open it. He yawned again, trying hard to keep his eyes open.

"Mr. Crombie! Mr. Crombie!" The strident voice of the conductor roused Aloysius J. from his stupor. "Here's your stop. Aren't you getting off?"

"Yes, yes. . . . Thank you so much." And with a strong effort, Crombie arose from his seat and left the trolley.

Fifteen minutes later he was at his desk. Hanging up his hat and coat on the near-by rack, Aloysius J. automatically brushed the dust off his desk with an old newspaper and then suddenly stopped. For the first time since entering the room he noticed that his desk was completely bare.

"Willie!" Crombie called to the gangling, bespectacled youngster neatly picking his teeth with a toothpick.

"Yep," siad Willie, sauntering over to him.

"Where's the copy?"

"There ain't none yet."

"What? Why, I never heard of such a thing."

"Strange, ain't it?"

"Do you mean to say that not one single person in the city has died during the past twenty-four hours?"

"If they have, the wires haven't carried it."

"Why, why, this is unthinkable. Here, give me that phone." Crombie clutched the mouthpiece frantically. "Operator, get me Ross Connally's home right away."

There was a slight pause, after which Aloysius J. almost shouted into the telephone. "Is this Mr. Connally's home?" Then in a subdued tone, "This is Mr. Crombie of the Gazette. Could you kindly tell me about Mr. Connally's condition? . . . You say he's still in a coma? . . . No, that won't be necessary. That's all I wanted to know. Thank you very much for the information. Good-bye."

Crombie wiped his brow with a handkerchief.

"Still alive! Can you beat it?" he said to Willie, who by this time had disposed of the toothpick and now was shifting a huge wad of gum from one side of his mouth to the other. "With two bullets in his stomach and one in his liver!"

Then, as though having an inspiration, he began dialing again. "Emergency ward? Yes, this is Crombie of the Gazette. How's that Johnson girl, the one who jumped from that five-story building last night?. . . What! She's still alive? No, no, I'll call later. "Willie, this can't happen! How will I be able to fill up the space in my column?"

"Yeah, it's goin' to leave an awful big blank, won't it?" from one side of Willie's inflated mouth.

Half an hour later Aloysius J. was pacing the floor between his desk and the teletype room. He had made a quick check of the city hospitals. Apparently all the critical cases had pulled through the night. Willie, watching him carefully, had been amazed at the figure of the usually placid little man biting his fingernails, rumpling his hair, and buttoning and unbuttoning his shirt collar.

It was now almost ten o'clock--just an hour away from the deadline for the first edition--and still no obituary dispatches had been delivered to Crombie's desk.

"Willie--" for the upteenth time.

"Sorry, Mr. Crombie, there's still nothin'."

"But surely someone must have died during the last half hour."

"Nope, nobody did," replied Willie nonchalantly.

"This--this is preposterous."

There was a long silence.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking, Willie. I'm afraid I never really appreciated the dead before. Do you know, they're frightfully important."

"Nope, are they?" are they?" and Willie looked at Crombie quizzically.

"Willie, did you have eggs this morning?"

"Yep, and bacon, cereal, bread and butter, milk, coffee and cake."

"Never mind all that--no, wait a minute. You had bacon, you say. Now there is a case of living on the dead. Did you ever stop to think that just a few months ago, or perhaps even a few weeks ago, that bit of bacon you chewed on so voraciously was a perfectly good live hog. . . . And the eggs, who knows? One or two may have turned out to be perfectly good, healthy, normal chickens--if you hadn't decided to eat them," he said reproachfully, with a vicious glare at the hapless boy.

"Yeah?" said Willie, stupified.

"Now this afternoon you're going to have fish for lunch, today being Friday. And so once again you'll feast on the dead . . . Take that wallet you have. It's genuine cowhide, I take it--again stripped from the carcass of some poor animal. And that belt you're wearing --also from the skin of some deceased creature."

"Are you sure you feel all right, Mr. Crombie?" asked the bewildered boy.

"No!" thundered Aloysius J. "And do you know why?"

"Why?"

"For twenty years I've been living on the dead myself --living on the law of averages that so many will die each day. Now if statistics should fall off and, let's say, only five or ten people pass away every day, I'd soon be out of a job because it would require only half an hour's work daily. One of the other men in the office could do my work in a very short time."

"The dead are so important, Willie. Take Miss Daniels, who used to be our society editor. For years we worked side by side. She used to make fun of me, saying all I wrote about was dead people--that I probably dreamed about them at night. Well, she talks differently now, I'll bet, since her aunt left her that seventy thousand dollars when she died. She doesn't have to work anymore. . . And, further, I hear she's even going to get herself a husband now--with that bait--and at her age!"

In the midst of Crombie's discourse the elevator doors across the hall swung open and Travis Dudley, city editor, entered the room.

"Hey Cromb," (it sounded strangely like "Crumb") "got that column ready yet?"

Aloysius J. shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Column? I haven't even written a line."

"What'd you say?" and Dudley walked quickly over to Crombie. "Look here. Jack's waiting for the copy upstairs, nad you know how slow he is with the linotype. Better step on it."

"Mr. Dudley, I've some bad news for you."

"What is it? Typewriter out of order?"

"No. I must inform you that not one single person has been called by the grim reaper since yesterday. In a word--and it's frightful to contemplate--there's no one ready for the obituary page."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Dudley. "Willie, are you sure you gave Mr. Crombie all the dispatches in the teletype room?"

"I did, Mr. Dudley."

"Crombie, have you checked all the city hospitals?"

"There were seven miraculous operations, I was told, with all the patients surviving--so far."

"How about Ross Connally? His doctors said he didn't have a chance to live through the night."

"The doctors were wrong."

"That--that Johnson girl, the one who took the dive. Don't tell me that with a skull fracture, a punctured lung, six broken ribs and two broken legs she pulled through?"

"Streptomycin, aureomycin and penicillin have kept her alive thus far."

"Astounding, simply astounding," said Dudley. "I can't ever remember this happening before."

"The Department of Records informs me that not once in the city's recorded history--which goes back eighty-seven years--has a twenty-four hour period gone by without a single death in the community."

"How are we going to fill up your page? I've already drawn up the make-up sheet. . . I guess I'll simply have to leave a note there saying, 'Sorry, but nobody died yesterday or this morning.' . . . Oh, this is ridiculous."

Crombie shivered as he trudged along the river on his way home. The cold, raw November day had sent a chill down his spine, and he wrapped his coat collar more tightly around his neck.

It had been a strange day at the office. Dudley, after waiting until the very last moment for some obituary news, finally had given up in disgust. He had written a five-paragraph story to the effect that for the first time in the city's recorded history not one person had died during the preceding 24 hours.

As for the obituary column, a brief note in its accustomed place said, "Please see story on Page 3."

As soon as the final edition had gone to press, however, word had been received of the deaths of Connally and the Johnson girl. In addition, two of the critical hospital patients had passed away. Exactly 24 hours after the last death, the city apparently was reverting to normal insofar as vital statistics were concerned. Nature had reasserted herself.

Aloysius J. breathed a deep sigh of relief. His job, at least, was secure again. But then a twinge of guilt disturbed his mood of thankfulness as he recalled earlier thoughts of the day. "I'm a scavenger, that's what I am," he told himself.

At home Crombie began pacing up and down, trying to rationalize the situation so he could live with himself again. "I shouldn't have criticized Marjorie Daniels for living on the money left her by her aunt," he reflected. "Wasn't that poor old woman suffering constantly from cancer? Why should I wish her to live with gnawing, unceasing pain? And what about all the other old, sick people for whom death is really a release from misery?

"I was berating myself for calling it an awful day because nobody was dying any more, thinking that was what everyone wanted--life. But it's not really true, is it? Besides, if no one passed away, there'd be so many people on the earth in a few years, there wouldn't be room for all."

Crombie sat down at his desk, relieved that he had at last squared himself with his conscience.

"So I was wrong when I told Willie we were all scavengers. I'm not one anyway. Someone has to write the obituaries. And it might as well be me--I should say I."

"What was I thinking back in the trolley this morning? Yes, I was so bored with the job. Well, I did have some excitement for awhile, didn't I--my most exciting day in twenty years."

THE END