

Five Stories From a Funeral

by Gerry Schramm

1. Premonition

"He had a premonition," Agnes, the widow, said. "He said he was going to die."

"Ma," Gregg said, "he always said he was going to die. He was the Fred Sanford of Central Ave."

"But this time it came true."

"Jeez ma, it would have to come true eventually, wouldn't it? Everybody has to die, so if every day you say you're going to die inevitably it will come true. I mean Jesus, ma. He was 75, after all."

"But he was right! I should have listened to him."

"But Ma..."

The funeral director touched Gregg's elbow. "A word, please?"

The director led Gregg to his office. "I understand your need to make sense of this terrible tragedy," the director said in that emotionless funeral director voice that somehow conveyed every conceivable emotion, "but the first rule of comforting a widow is never contradict that which helps her get through her loss. So lay off. Got it?"

2. The Joke

The three men stood to the left of the coffin trading stories about the deceased.

"He was always late for everything," James, the deceased's best friend, said. "I used to give him a grace period. I called it The Smith Half-Hour. I wouldn't get pissed until he was over a half-hour late."

"Yeah," said Gregg. "My Dad always said he'd be late for his own funeral."

They all smiled.

"But it was really the fault of the hearse driver and the mortician," said Sam, the deceased's neighbor. "Your Dad really wasn't to blame."

3. The Smallest Among Us

James and Sam found the coffin showroom while searching for the bathroom.

"Oooh," said James. "Look at this baby. Solid cherry, pewter handles, silk lining, lace pillow, down-stuffed cushions."

"Nice way to go to your eternal reward," Sam said. He walked around the room, touching caskets.

"Sure," James said. "If you gotta go, might as well travel in luxury." They both laughed.

Then Sam saw the miniature caskets hidden at the far end of the showroom, where no one but those who needed them would see, and he stopped laughing.

4. The Awful Truth

Father Jinder addressed the mourners. He was wearing a wireless microphone, which freed him from standing behind the lectern. He could walk around, make eye contact, really connect with the assembled.

"As a Catholic, Wallace believed in eternal life," Father Jinder said. "He knew the path to God lay through Jesus Christ, His only son. A life of faithful devotion is rewarded with eternity in heaven, and Wallace was devoted."

Agnes cried. In the fifty-five years she and Wallace had been married she could not remember him ever willingly going to church. She guilted him into attending services on the big holidays—Christams, Easter—by claiming he set a bad example for their son. But Wallace never took communion. He never went to confession. He made a special point of eating meat on Fridays during Lent. He disagreed with the pope on every matter. He was by all definitions an awful Catholic, even though he wore a scapular like a talisman, like it would be enough.

She cried because she knew that despite what Father Jinder was saying about her husband's eternal soul being in heaven, if Catholicism were true—which she believed it was—then Wallace was burning in Hell right that very moment. And she cried because whatever lay waiting for her after death would be unbearable, but for different reasons.

5. The Noise of Eternity

That shovelful of dirt must have harbored a stone, because it made a terrible knock when it hit the coffin.

