

In Memoriam

by Pat Pujolas

One by one, cars filed into the cemetery, pelted by the summer rain under a gun-metal sky. The procession moved slowly, a series of brake lights and headlights, too close together, too far apart; there were sedans and SUVs, mini-vans and pick-up trucks, shiny new vehicles and rusty old ones, held in common only by the small, purple “Funeral” flags atop their hoods.

Inside the cars, the people too were moving slowly, as if drugged or dulled by the weight of it all, the occasion of human death. Drivers and passengers wiped tears from one another's cheeks; some smoked cigarettes or listened to music on low volumes, careful not to betray their composure, the gravity of the moment.

Soon the lead hearse stopped at the foot of a grassy knoll adorned with tombstones and grave markers; at the crest of the knoll stood a rented white canopy; its canvas buckled and swayed in the wind, ballooned against the aluminum frame.

The line of cars stopped; drivers turned off ignitions; headlights and brake lights went dark; windshield wipers froze in place.

For a moment, there was just the sound of the rain, sizzling across the pavement, crackling atop the roofs and hoods of the cars.

Then a door opened at the front of the procession, the lead hearse; the funeral director emerged, raising a massive black umbrella. He waved his hand, signaling the others to get out and come forward.

Umbrellas blossomed from open car doors in various shapes and sizes and colors; beneath the umbrellas came the funeral-goers, wearing dark suits, long dresses, formal shoes; they trudged alongside the line-up of parked cars, occasionally bumping

umbrellas, shuffling in a single file line.

The people gathered around the hearse, waited patiently for instruction, while the rain blew in at them from the sides.

At last, the funeral director spoke, "Can I have my pallbearers, please?"

The men came forward, surrendered their umbrellas; these men resembled one another; they were brothers or cousins, blood relatives; the slight differences in size or age could not mask the stark similarities: the wavy black hair, the bulbous noses, the sunken brown eyes.

The pallbearers, standing shoulder to shoulder, eased the coffin from out of the hearse, and found their grip on the brass carrying handles; the funeral director whispered directions to them, then addressed the crowd calmly.

"Everyone, please be careful going up the hill. Some spots are slippery."

And with that, the man led the march up the grassy knoll; the pallbearers followed closely behind him, their suits already soaked by the rain; they struggled against the weight and bulk of the coffin.

From somewhere in the crowd, an elderly woman began to wail; her husband held her closely but could not contain her sobs; the cries became contagious; others began shedding tears as well, men and women equally, as they trudged up the slick, grassy hill.

Nearer to the top, one of the pallbearers slipped and fell to one knee; he got up quickly, wiped a smear of mud from his pant-leg; the other pallbearers paused and re-adjusted their grips on the wet handles; then, with a nod from the man who slipped, they continued

on to their destination beneath the white canopy.

Following signals from the funeral director, the pallbearers positioned the coffin above the burial plot and its framework; finally, the pallbearers rested; they huddled together and waited for the others to join them.

The priest was among the first to arrive; he wiped the raindrops from his glasses then removed a magnificent book from a plastic bag; it was a gilded Bible, sheathed in red leather with glimmering gold pages.

The funeral-goers pushed forward, but the canopy wasn't large enough to shelter everyone; so some of the men excused themselves to the perimeter of the crowd, steeling themselves against the rain and the wind.

Employees of the funeral home circulated, distributing freshly cut flowers to those in attendance. Tulips. Roses. Daisies. Carnations. One flower for each person.

From inside the tent, the priest welcomed the funeral-goers with open arms; he asked the people to bow their heads in reverence, then opened the Bible and began reading.

"Let us pray."

As if on cue, the rain began to subside, then cease entirely; the men outside the canopy were the first to notice it; umbrellas were collapsed; people murmured and shrugged.

The priest's voice was louder now, in the absence of the rain; his words carried easily to the most distant of listeners.

"For as much as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to

take unto Himself the soul of our dear sister here departed, we therefore commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body, that it may be liken unto His glorious body, according to the mighty working, whereby He is able to subdue all things to Himself.”

Silence.

Then, a gasp. A woman's gasp, pleasant and distinct. Followed by another, a man this time, from outside the canopy. Someone in the crowd pointed upward, toward the sky; and one by one they all saw it: sunshine! Two massive, gray rain clouds were parting, allowing radiant beams of sunlight to pass through unfiltered.

A woman blessed herself, motioning the sign of the cross. Others followed her example; curious men and women excused themselves toward the perimeter, still carrying the freshly-cut flowers; they strained to get a better look. Some people murmured aloud; some smiled; some merely closed their eyes, wondering what this could mean.

Was it a sign? A message of some sort?

The priest waved his hands in the air, tried to regain their attention. “Ladies and gentlemen, what we are seeing here today...” he said, pausing for dramatic effect.

Crack!

A deafening noise.

Like a small explosion.

One of the pallbearers slumped to the ground, his face missing;

behind him stood a man dressed in black, holding a gun.

A few feet away, the priest froze in shock, his white robe and glasses now spattered with blood.

The gunman pointed the barrel downward at the fallen pallbearer, and pulled the trigger once more.

Crack!

People screamed; people ran.

Chaos.

In the confusion that followed, some would swear it was the funeral director; others would say it was a dark stranger, or the devil himself; the only thing they would all agree on: the man came from nowhere and left the same way.

People slipped and fell in their struggle to escape; they scrambled to their feet and they ran again, pulling relatives by the hand, by articles of clothing; they took shelter behind grave markers; they hid behind cars and trees; they huddled with family members, protecting them; they prayed and made promises; they survived.

The priest crawled to the fallen man, the pallbearer, and tried in vain to give CPR; it was useless; beside them, all around them in fact, were colorful flower petals and long green stems, trampled into the damp earth.

"Call 9-1-1!" a man was shouting from behind the hearse.

"Somebody call 9-1-1!"

"Where is he?" shouted another voice in return. "Where the hell did he go?!"

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