

Funerals

“He was a good man. An honest man.”

The officiating Priest’s soft voice belies a commanding presence, one that would hold even a roomful of ADHD-ridden sociopaths at attention. At a funeral, it feels like overkill. No pun intended. I listen as the sobs begin. Around me I watch the weeping people as they fall into the roles they are here to play: the widow, who looks genuinely distraught; the children who will mourn their father amid the piles of money he has no doubt left them; the friends and business partners who sit stoically, doing their duty.

Truth be told, I don’t know any of them. Not one. Sure, I’m dressed the same: a perfectly pressed Armani suit, black button-down shirt and matching tie, shiny loafers and even a tear on my cheek. But that’s where the similarities end.

The officiating Priest finishes his well-worn eulogy and his lips settle into a grim smile. I can almost hear his thoughts as they stampede through his head: *One down, too many more to go....*

The amplifiers scattered through the church hall blare to life now as the Priest steps down off the altar?

Hallelujah by Leonard Cohen.

Around me heads are bowed and tears voyage down tragic faces. Mascara is ruined and men’s “masculinity” is shattered.

Then the moment itself is suddenly shattered as some dumb fuck’s cell phone goes off. One perfect, harmonious thought rings through the hall: “*Who brings a cell phone to a funeral?*” Eight hundred angry glares shift towards the back of the church as a young, handsome man in a \$2000 suit lifts himself from the pew and leaves the hall. He presses the phone unremorsefully to his ear as the heavy oak doors bang shut behind him. To leave it on is bad enough, but to answer it?

What a fucker... I think to myself.

An uneasy silence resumes as the song comes to its end.

My anger quickly washes away and I even feel a bit of moistness in my eyes. Then again, isn’t that the point? I have friends who have never been to a funeral. Not one. Not me, though. I’ve been to many. I’m funny that way.

Well, maybe funny’s the wrong word.

I look around at all the people filling the church and wonder to myself, not for the first time, what brought them all here. Were they friends of the man in the casket? Perhaps family? Will they miss him now that he is gone? Or will they wake up tomorrow and start the day as they would any other?

I know there is no answer. I watch as some men succumb to their humanity and cry with true and overwhelming grief. I watch as some women cry for no other reason than that is what you “do” at a funeral. I watch as both men and women, in business attire, count the minutes until their associate is interred and they can move on to their next dollar.

The widow stands up, defiant in her stance, speech crumpled in her fist, and sets herself before the microphone stand which sits lonely on stage. She holds her head high as she stands beside her husband’s casket.

She stares out at those gathered in memory of her husband. Her eyes speak louder than her voice as she stumbles through the words on the paper. They speak poetically of the life behind her and the life ahead of her, reaching out to those watching her and saying, “I can do this. I am strong.”

And she will be. They always are.

I always feel odd being in a church. I’m not religious -- well, not really, anyway. But the power and grace in a church is always palpable; whether it is something truly divine or something as mundane as tradition, it has always felt right to me to hold a service in the grand silence of a chapel or a church.

Or perhaps the reason is that I, for obvious reasons, rarely attend graveside funerals. The doors to these small gatherings are often closed to me.

She is reciting lyrics now. Something touching. And honest. I don't know the song and I neglected to grab a programme on my way in. I'm always interested to see which songs are selected for ceremonies like this. The songs chosen are so utterly personal and indicative of who the person was and what their relationship with their loved ones was like. But then again, it's not the person in the casket who does the choosing, so perhaps more is told about the family and friends who have made the choices than the lost comrade they honour.

One funeral sticks out in my mind because of song choice. I was surrounded by men, most of whom had large, white beards and wore leather vests. The odd environment was made odder when AC/DC's *Highway to Hell* erupted from the church speakers as the casket was carried down the middle aisle. Somehow, in context, it all seemed to make a strange sort of sense.

The widow is being helped off the stage now. She is blinded by tears, but still manages to keep her shoulders held high, as if silently yelling to the world, "Yes I cry... because I am strong." She is escorted to her pew and seated beside a woman who must be her daughter. They share the same piercing grey eyes, but where the widow's hair is dark as a raven's feather, the daughter has her father's unassuming auburn locks.

The daughter stands and the Priest introduces her. She makes her way to the stage. I wonder what she will say. Does she truly mourn for her father? Or will the obviously substantial inheritance comfort her from any feelings of loss?

Was he a good man? I wonder. Does he deserve to be mourned? The widow's eyes tell me "yes." The man who left the hall on a cell phone tells me "no."

Funerals are a time to tie off loose ends and to find an ending to your relationship with the guest of honour. I find this ironic. Ironic because a funeral to me is the first time I get to know that person. I meet them and learn who they are by listening and watching all those sad people in black suits as they flow past me, in the same way a river splits around a boulder. I listen to the songs played and the eulogies spoken and only in this way do I get a sense that I really know who that person lying cold in the casket really was.

It's funny (there's that word again...) how I find that a person's death is the key to their life. The key to finally viewing their soul. Some people think that a person's being ends with their death. Not me. I know it's only one further step in their journey through existence.

Another song starts now.

Fast Car by Tracy Chapman.

She's dancing now. The daughter. With tears welling in her eyes, she's dancing.

He *was* a good father. I know that now.

The song is over and with it her dance. Silence follows. The Priest's footsteps echo as he once again steps up on to the stage. In his soft voice he tells a story about his brother, who just happens to be the man lying silently in the casket -- a story about a dog they shared as children. Their first pet. It's a simple story, but a happy one. I can see in the brother's eyes that he is not sad; in fact, I can see happiness and joy. He understands what I understand -- not to look towards an empty future but instead back to the joy and life you once shared. In doing so, you let your loved one live forever in your smiles.

The Priest joins the rest of the pallbearers beside the casket and they lift their friend and begin the long trek down the center aisle.

Tears and sobs fill the hall as a final song rings through the heavy air.

The Long and Winding Road by The Beatles.

I wipe a tear from my eye.

Earlier I told you I don't know anyone here. It's true. To be completely honest, I wasn't even invited. In fact, until this funeral, I had never even met the man in the casket.

Yet a tear runs down my cheek.

If you must know... I don't come to these funerals because someone has died. No... you see, I come to these funerals to feel *alive*.

