You’re Not There

Carolyn Dahlin*
You’re Not There

Carolyn Dahlin

Abstract

The organ should have been playing dissonance, pouring out an overwhelming flood of notes that would tear at my eardrums like the sounds of hell and let me scream at the top of my voice and not be heard...
THE ORGAN should have been playing dissonance, pouring out an overwhelming flood of notes that would tear at my eardrums like the sounds of hell and let me scream at the top of my voice and not be heard.

But I sat while the organist played sweet, quiet, mocking notes and the massive coffin stood proudly in front of the altar. Choked voices around me hid sobs that wanted to burst out in convulsive noises but didn’t dare.

I sat with gloved hands folded neatly on my lap with my serene face turned toward the babbling preacher, while death whipped my mind with icy gusts and my body told me to rip away the gold satin and throw the flowers down and trample them and crush them.

It was getting closer now, the time when they’d open the box and I’d have to stand before it reverently and look at a person that wasn’t a person, but a lump of yellow wax. “He looks so real,” they’d murmur fondly, and they’d dab at their eyes with small, white handkerchiefs as they went sniffing down the aisle.

Warren would have laughed at them acting out a lie. “Funerals,” he’d say, “why bother? You live and you’re
gone and the world forgets. It's not you in that coffin, any­
way. You're not there."

He knew, then, that he'd die soon. The paralysis was
taking over his body like a hungry parasite.

"It's not you. You're not there." The words came back
to pound and die away and pound again in my ears. I grew
cold and thought of a huge coffin. I walked around inside
of it looking for Warren and calling for him. But the words
jumped back at me from the unfriendly walls. I searched
and searched and there was nothing more than the heavy air
pressing down on me. Warren wasn't there.

A chord from the organ sounded. The minister had
stopped talking and a slight man with head bowed stood
up to sing. The words of the hymn were almost inaudible
sometimes, but just as the voice was about to die away, it
seemed, the trembling words came out with greater force
and the church was filled with a shaking sound.

Then the hymn was finished, but the organ kept play­
ing. The ushers moved to the front and opened the lid of
the beautifully ornamented box that held death. A chill
began in my shoulders and followed my arms to my finger­
tips. I looked at my hands. They were shaking.

The ushers were coming down the aisle now, slowly.
They stopped. The first row. Lord, and I was in the second!
The dark-clothed figures before me filed to the front, and
the sobs were louder now.

Like an animal in a cage, trapped by dark figures, I
looked around wildly. Escape. But no, they were there now,
by my row, and I stood with the rest. Ten feet. Five feet
away, but my eyes were looking at the stained glass windows
to the side and trying hard to really see the transparent
yellow cross with light coming through and the green hill
on which it stood; trying not to think of what would be
in front of my eyes if I stopped looking at the picture in
the stained glass windows.

I closed my eyes now, and saw blackness. I've got to get
out of here. Then I heard the rustling of people around me
as they turned to go.

I turned too, but my eyes flew open too soon.

There was a crashing of voices in my ears, the voices
of ten thousand Warrens. "It's not you in that coffin. You're
not there."