A Stranger’s Funeral

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Abstract

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Tom Culley shuffled slowly along the cold, dry pavement that went across the little bridge and toward main street, still wearing the dark suit and black oxfords that he had worn in the afternoon just past. He was almost home, but turned and headed back along the streets he had just walked. His mind kept going back to the white gloves he had seen on the past two nights, and again that afternoon.

"God, why Rog?" He asked the question half aloud. "Why should it have been him?" The white gloves were the first thing Tom had noticed two nights ago, when he went to Hoffmueller's Funeral Parlor, and they were the last thing he had seen that afternoon at the church. He had noticed them before he saw the red, white and blue flag hanging stiff and smooth, before he saw the thick glass seal across the gray metal casket, even before he saw the gray-blue face, with the strangely twisted lip, that he used to know as Roger Alexander.
Tom plodded along the sidewalk that led through the good section of town; "Snob Hill," the gang had called it in high school. He passed fine old homes with tremendous peaked roofs and deep lawns, not seeing them; wondering if the stranger whose funeral he had gone to was really Roger or just someone using Rog’s name. Roger wasn’t like that, Tom thought. Roger wouldn’t go off and join the Navy just to get killed. That wasn’t the Rog that Tom knew.

Tom crossed the west end of the business district and went into the small cafe on the corner.

"Evenin’, Tom. What’ll ya have?” Mr. Hanratty put down the Evening News and stepped up to the counter.

"Coffee. Black."

"Purty quiet tonight," Mr. Hanratty said. "Guess folks’re mostly home after the funeral. Sad ‘un, wasn’t it?"

"Yeah, sad," Tom replied into his cup. "And who knows what it’s all for?"

"Eh? How’s that?” Mr. Hanratty looked puzzled.

"Never mind."

Outside the cafe a group of teenagers was laughing. Three of them came in and sat at the counter. "Hey Tom, where ya been? To a funeral?" a gangly looking redhead squeaked. The other boys howled with laughter.

Tom turned. "Jesus Christ yes I been to a funeral!” He screamed at the redhead. "Now shut your damn mouth!” The redhead paled and the boys took their Cokes to a booth in the corner.

"Thanks, Mr. Hanratty.” Tom paid for his coffee and went back into the street. The blinking red neon sign above the cafe still read, “HANRATTY’S C FE.” Tom remembered how he and Rog had shot out the “A” hunting sparrows when they were in junior high. "We were afraid to go in there for two weeks afterwards," he thought to himself.

Tom trudged aimlessly on toward the south edge of town, past houses with icicle-bearded eaves and staring lighted windows that watched as he passed. Far away, on the hill behind old Mrs. Derrick’s bungalow on Fourth Street, he heard children playing on sleds. He remembered the hill; he had been a child on a sled. But he didn’t remember when.

The white pines edging the Belleville cemetery at the
edge of town cast dark witching shadows across the gravel road that crunched beneath Tom's dusty shoes. On a low rise toward one side of the graveyard was an old truck. Tom turned through the open gate and trudged toward it.

"Hello, Mr. Weiss," Tom said quietly.

"Why, hello there, Tom." The old man was throwing the last shovels of dirt onto the mound. "God, ya know, this is the saddest kind," he said. "The old ones I don't mind, but like this. . . ."

"Like this it's not fair," Tom interrupted. "Why should it have been Rog? Mr. Weiss, you were at the funeral this afternoon. Did it seem right to you?"

"Now ya know, boy, it never seems right to me, and I been doin' this work for more'n 40 years." He threw on another shovelful and slapped it down with the back of the blade.

"All he'll ever get for it is a posthumous purple heart," Tom thought aloud. "Mr. Weiss, that guy was a stranger this afternoon. Roger wouldn't make a good dead soldier!" He was half crying, half pleading for something the old man couldn't give him. "Rog was a guy to play football with and go hunting with, or just mess around. But he wasn't supposed to be a dead soldier!" Tom's voice trailed off. "... especially with white gloves." He sagged down onto the running board of the old pickup. "God, why'd Roger have to go and die?" Tom shoved his face into his open palms. He leaned back against the door and his shoulders shook.

Mr. Weiss pushed the shovel blade into the soft earth of the grave and sat down beside him. "Boy, let me tell ya something I know 'bout your friend. 'Bout a week afore he left he come over and talked to me while I was workin' up here." Tom turned his face, listening. "Well," the old man continued, "Roger come up here and he says, 'Mr. Weiss, ya know, it's somethin' I gotta do.' He says ta me, 'I'm gonna be a medic an' do what I kin for them guys over there.'"

"But for Christ's sake," Tom exclaimed, "Rog sure as hell wasn't ready to go over there and die for 'em!"

"Now you jes' shut up and listen ta me, boy, and lemme finish. Roger told me that he was ascared ta go. He says ta me, 'I'm scared as hell.'" The old man paused, remembering. "But he says, 'Mr. Weiss, it's what I gotta do.' An' then he
says, 'If'n I don't make it back, you see that ya do a good job o' takin' care o' me, 'cause I'll be ready an' I'm expectin' it of ya.'"

Mr. Weiss stood up, gave the mound a final pat with the shovel, and gently laid the tool in the back of the truck. "Don't ya see, Tom, he decided fer hisself. We can't judge what's right for him or nobody but ourself. It's what he wanted and he was ready."

Tom raised his face and slowly stood up. "Mr. Weiss . . . thanks for talking to me." The old man climbed into the truck.

"Want a ride back inta town?"

Tom shook his head. "No thanks. I think I'll walk."

"Suit yerself." The truck clunked out of the cemetery. Tom stood over the grave for a moment, silently. Then he walked back, quickly, onto the gravel. Toward town, the street lamps lined the road like rows of transforming angels, lighting it. Tom started toward them, knowing the stranger and feeling greater peace.

**Snap**

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I know what I must do, snap goes another aerial. It really is funny how easily they break. Walking down the street, I reach out and grab another and, with a twist of the wrist, snap another aerial.

It's a beautiful morning. The sun is shining between billowy white clouds. There is a gentle breeze from the south that cools the earth as it sways the trees. And just think, soon I'll be with my friends again. Snap another aerial, and I move on down the street toward the next car.