

Reason and Purpose

This was the funeral.

This was the room filled with people dealing with the loss. Asking the questions. Getting no answers. What answers could you, would you expect? He was a man who had a wife and a son and he lost his job and it all seemed useless, pointless, hopeless and so, he killed himself. There's your answer.

Which was not an answer at all.

Here was the funeral. Here was the bar after the funeral where they all gathered to drink and tell stories of the man who was now in a box, now under the ground, now covered with dirt. He was a good father. He was a good friend. He was a good driver. He will always be remembered. But always is a very long time. In that always others will go, others will feel the weight, the loss, the hopelessness and they will end it. So, he will always be remembered rings hollow, rings false. For now, it's fine. It's a watch cry, a rallying point. They will sit at tables, lean on the bar, drink round after round and toast his name. He will always be remembered. His wife will sit in the corner, inert, pale, lost. She will accept the hands thrust at her, the words spilled on her. The sorrow, the grief, the understanding but, none of it will get through. She is and will remain, ten million miles away. She is trapped in a snap shot of a sea side, a hotel room, a bar table in some other place where they first met. Where they first kissed. Where they first ...

Young Josiah stands at the end of the bar, hiding in plain site. Camouflaged by his age, by his awkwardness. His father's friends move about. To the bar, back to tables, back to the bar. Now and then, one of them sees him. One of them feels him there, his heavy presence. They approach, equivocate, tell him what a great man his father was. What a good friend. What a great driver. Maybe they will share some story. Some myth.

"One time, your father and I ..." the story would start and Josiah would listen, for a moment, struggle to stay present, urge himself to listen, to learn something about his father that he didn't know. Which, basically, was everything. The man he had eulogized, the man in the box, who he'd just dropped a hand full of rich, dark earth on, was a stranger to Josiah. Now, he was gone. So, there he stood, at bar's end, listening to stories. Receiving the endless stream of encouraging pats on the back. Accepting a drink from well wishers. He held his ground at bar's end as the night moved on.

"How're you holding up," Tracy asked him. She had been at the church, she had been at the grave. She was there, unobtrusive, like furniture or sorrow. "you need anything."

“I need to know who the fuck my father was,” he snapped and immediately regretted it. She took it in stride and smiled. She placed a hand on his back, between his shoulders and he felt. Simple as that, he felt. The first time all day, he felt something besides numb, besides lost, besides incomplete. He felt warm and present. He wanted to tell her to touch his chest, touch his face, touch his whole body. Not sexual. He wasn’t there, not then. He had been and was sure he would be in the future but, right now, at that moment, it wasn’t about sex. It was simply about being touched. Feeling.

“Your mother doesn’t seem right,” Tracy said and they both looked across the room to where she was sitting. She was right, his mother did not seem ...right. She was still and distant.

“I think she died,” Josiah said. Tracy looked alarmed. “no,” he said, “not like that. She died when he did.”

“She must have loved him terribly,” Tracy said and Josiah admired her for her ability to see romance. To conjure it up from a finger full of what ifs and this should be. He smiled.

“She hated his living guts,” He said and her eyes got wide, started to edge with tears, “now, don’t get all girl on me,” he said, “simple truth. They fought like cat and dog. They couldn’t stand each other.”

“That’s not true,” Frank said, stepping to them, handing Josiah a glass with amber liquid in it. “They understood each other.” Josiah accepted the glass, put it to his lips and drank it off in one throw. He coughed. His eyes blurred, his face got red.

“Understood each other,” Tracy said to Frank, “that doesn’t sound very romantic.” Frank laughed.

“It’s not,” Frank said to the girl, “not even a little bit romantic. But, that all falls away. That’s just ... Icing. That’s just pretty veils. That poor woman isn’t sitting there, lost, destroyed, because she’s not going to get any more hearts and flowers or trips to fancy restaurants. She’s devastated because she’s lost her other half. Not in a romance novel manner. In the nuts and bolts of it. Someone to make the money, someone to field the shit storms, pardon my French, that come every day. Romance is fine, when it all starts, after that, when it gets real, when you’re talking day in day out, you find something better, something stronger than romance.”

She went silent. She looked at Josiah. She longed for romance, from him. From this quiet, brilliant, introverted boy that she couldn’t stop thinking about. He was a mystery and that was romantic.

“I think there’s more,” she said, defiant. She took the half full pint glass from Frank’s hand and drank it off. He nodded. Josiah looked on in shock but, wonder as well.

“Your father was a good man,” Frank said to Josiah, “we all believed that, we all stand by that. I promise you, we’re not, none of us, going to sit back and let this go unnoticed.” Josiah nodded to Frank and put the words into the bank with all the others that had been spoken to him that day. He paid no real attention to them. He didn’t care anymore. He wanted to go home. He wanted to sit in his room and work in his computer. He wanted to be done. Frank put his hand on Josiah’s shoulder and forced the boy to look in his eyes. Josiah felt something in the man’s gaze. “I will be seeing you again, son, don’t ever doubt that.” Josiah nodded and knew, in ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, he would not remember the man’s face or his words. Frank walked away. Tracy moved in close and took his hand. That, he would remember.

That had been months ago. The early days. The plan forming. Now, Frank stood on the hill by the highway and watched the traffic move by. The road were different now. The mechanical drivers didn’t honk to a brother trucker. They moved forward. They carried their loads. They delivered. That was all. Frank could feel the loss of a certain humanness as the rigs rolled by. The red and green lights blinking, flashing, filling the cabs with an eerie, sick, dead feeling. These auto drivers didn’t sit at diner counters and drink coffee. They didn’t know the counter girl’s names. They didn’t look forward to a certain kind of pie. They didn’t swap stories, show pictures, celebrate birthdays. They didn’t stay on the CB, talking, howling, keeping some other lonely guy awake on a long distance run, making sure he made it on time, alive. They moved in silent streams. Electronic eyes, blinking. Computerized brains. Lacking heart. The highways were different now. But, not for long, Frank thought. He was putting his crew together. He was making his plans. He was rallying the troops that would, someday, take it all back.

“Muscle and blood,” he said as a rig went by, doing the speed limit. Programed to arrive on time. No worries, No fears. “muscle and blood and skin and bone.” He said to himself. There was no substitute for it. No substitute for heart and soul. He would prove that to all of them. To Briggs, to the scientists, to the company men who worked the numbers and smiled their personal, sure, safe, it’s all under control smiles. That would soon change.

“You Moses,” a voice came out of the dark. Frank didn’t turn, didn’t even acknowledge that he had heard the voice. Silence. Frank could still feel the man there. “I’m Larson,” the voice said, “I used to drive.” Still Frank looked out onto the highway and said nothing. “I got replaced by one of those ... machines. Thing is, two nights ago, I was sitting in my living room, deep into my second bottle of jack, shot gun between my knees. I was all set to paint the walls, check out of this life. I used to drive, you know ... I used to ... Anyway.” Silence again. Frank gave the faintest of nods, let the poor man know he was listening at least. “It was all I had. It was everything. And now ...” he went silent.

“What happened then, Larson,” Frank said.

“Then, well, hard to explain,” He said.

“Try,” Frank said and turned to him.

“I heard a voice say to me, stop, don’t, put the gun away ... Moses is coming.” The man looked at Frank and his eyes were all hurt and fear and something else, something rare these days, what was that, small, distant, struggling spark? Hope? “Sounds crazy but ... It’s true.”

“Then what,” Frank said.

“Then, I was in this bar and that fucker captain Briggs was about to get his clocked cleaned and this guy stepped in and saved his ass. I asked one of the drivers who the guy was and they said ...”

“Moses,” Frank said and the man nodded. Again, silence, the highway crying was all the sound between them.

“Sir,” the man said, “I’m kind of at the end of it all here, if you’re Moses, I’d like to join up. If you’re not then, could you please, please,” the man’s voice began to shake, crack, the tears, the sadness, the hopelessness under the words were breaking through and Frank could see it, “Please tell me where I can find him cause, I need to get my life back.” The cracks split and the man started to weep. There, in the dark against the staccato lights of the highway, this man dropped to his knees and he wept. Frank pulled him up and shook him, hard.

“I don’t need that,” Frank said, shaking the man again, “I don’t need you weak and afraid. If that’s what you’re bringing to the table, you can just take it back.” The man got control of himself. Swallowed his tears and nodded. “Good,” Frank said after Larson was calm, after he was solid again. “Son, I am the man you’re looking for,” he said and then Larson sighed deep, heartfelt relief. “we have a few more to gather, there’s work to be done,” Frank said, “but, I give you my word, change is coming. We’ll all find reason and purpose again.”

Many miles away, in a dark house, captain Briggs sat on the edge of his bed. His body a sheen of sweat, his mind a jumble of hate, loss, wish, hope. His M9 service pistol in his right hand, a picture of his wife in the other. He looked at his reflection in the mirror above the dresser and laughed at himself. Her words, seared in his mind, causing his right eye to twitch. The rage was building. The hate was all consuming. He was losing control. Losing his mind. He howled with anger and pain, his left hand came up to his head, trying to keep his skull from cracking open. It was coming, he knew it, it was going to happen. Then ...it happened. He flung the picture into the air, his right arm came up and he fired nine rounds into the photo, shredding it, turning it into confetti before it hit the ground. He stood, panting, over the pulp that was a photograph of his wife. He was feeling better. The cracking in his skull had almost stopped. Almost. He turned to the mirror and fired off five rounds, sending shards flying. A small chip sliced across his cheek

leaving a pencil thin line of blood. Fourteen rounds used. He calculated. The M9 holds fifteen. He had one round. He had one last chance to stop the cracking. He dropped to his knees, crunching bits and piece of mirror. He pressed the hot muzzle of the pistol against his temple. Pressed it hard, burning the skin. Leaving a dent. He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth. He held this position for a long, long time. Then, he opened his eyes. There, on the floor, in front of his right knee was a large piece of the mirror. He saw himself. He saw the blood. He saw the pistol, he saw his life and the cracking stopped. He dropped his hand to his lap. He pulled the slide back and the final round in the pistol flew up. He reached out his left hand as the shell descended, it hit the outside of his palm and tumbled to the ground at his knees. He knelt there, looking at the round.

“Certainly would have been much cooler if I had caught the fucking thing,” he said to himself and then, he laughed. He picked up the shell, put in his pocket and stood. He surveyed the destruction in the room. “She can have the house,” he said and walked out.

To Be Continued ...