

Reflections at a Funeral

Life had finished with Artie Simms. I always said it claimed him back a couple of times when he suffered minor heart attacks but it kicked him out the door for good when he had the big one watching the NFL game on the big screen at Phillie's Bar downtown. I wasn't there, but I heard.

A dozen or so uniformed, fellow bus drivers crowd into the packed little church for Artie's funeral but I choose not to wear mine, feeling instead a more personal connection to Artie and the times we had together. Instead of the requisite blue jacket and pants, black stripe down the outside leg to emulate proficiency, I am wearing my best grey suit with a red vest and white shirt. Red was Artie's favorite color- any hue would do.

I make my way to the front of the church and line up to view the casket. Someone has placed a pocket watch over Artie's suit coat pocket and I smile wanly at the appropriate gesture. It was his grandfather's, handed down to the oldest male in the

family, but it would stop at Artie. Who wants those gadgets nowadays? Artie was always on time when driving the bus and that watch was his most important accessory.

Artie's gone.

My fingers loop around the outside of the casket, touch the lavender lining tentatively and try to guess where Artie is right now.

What had he thought about when he took his last breath lying in a heap on the floor at Phillie's Bar? Barbara, his wife? His children? Me? Barbara was the gatekeeper between Artie and me- the "you-don't-have-to-go-right-now,-Terry-but-the-kids-are-coming-over," and the "Artie-and-I-were-popping-out-but-come-in-for-a-minute-anyway" type of wife. Her greetings were wrapped tightly in "how-dare-you" packages of resentment. But *he* never turned me away.

A sob bubbles up in my chest and settles in my throat. I turn quickly away from the coffin, square up my tie over my white shirt and make my way over to Barbara to pay my respects.

Except that she is surrounded by her family and the minister, sniffing into a tissue, and I can't imagine permeating *that* barrier right now. Maybe another time.

I make my way down the church aisle, touching and counting each pew for good luck. Something mundane to keep my mind occupied. My co-workers nod in recognition.

They'll think it odd that I didn't wear the uniform. Give them something to natter about over their beer, after the funeral.

I take a seat mid-way down the aisle and stare heavenward at the ceiling fans while I wait for the service to begin. Otherwise, if I look to the front, I'm afraid of what I might do-explode, implode, let out a yell of rage? In a few minutes, the organist stops playing and the minister, with a scrap of hair pulled over his scalp like a halo takes the pulpit, with his bible in hand.

All pomp and ceremony; Artie wouldn't have wanted this. He was a concrete kind of man- if he couldn't see it, it didn't exist. Black and white, not grey.

"Friends and family- welcome," the minister begins. "Arthur

James Simms has left us to meet his heavenly Father. He was a beloved father, grandfather, and husband."

All titles I've never claimed, maybe never will. I was engaged once- a short-lived romance that felt like it should culminate in marriage. Except that neither one of us was in love. After that, I couldn't seem to find my way around normal romantic affairs, so I gave up and wrote about them instead. A few novels hit the Harlequin bookstands, all with my pseudonym firmly emblazoned on the cover. A bus-driver-turned-cheap-romance-author; wouldn't that get a laugh down at the station! My work, my cats, and my friends- my life had seemed to be complete.

The minister's eyes search the congregation and his voice takes on a higher pitch.

"Arthur was a well- respected citizen, friend, employee and volunteer. As we wrestle with feelings of sadness and loss, maybe even anger at losing a dear one, may we be comforted by these words."

Artie's favorite sport to watch on TV was the lady wrestlers. I came by his house one Saturday afternoon, when he was firmly ensconced in his La-Z-Boy, a beer in one hand and his free arm wildly gesticulating in the air. I didn't much care for the sport myself but I got a kick out of watching Artie react to the wrestling moves. I liked to get him going a bit to heighten the excitement.

"The referee's biased," I noted on this particular day. "He's letting her away with anything."

Artie wriggled to the edge of his La-Z-Boy and almost tipped it forward.

Barbara was hosting a Ladies Aid meeting that afternoon and the women were gathered in the front room while Artie and I watched the wrestling hijinks in the den at the back of the house.

"Pull her hair, Pinky! Toss her over the ropes! She's getting up, yes- the head lock, that's it!" Artie sat back in his chair with satisfaction.

Silence in the front room, where previously we had heard low voices. Barbara appeared suddenly at the doorway of the den. Frowning, she laid a finger to her lips and shook her head at

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Artie, then disappeared again.

When she was gone, Artie looked at me and shrugged his shoulders.

"She's not much for sports," he grinned and turned the television up louder.

The organist lays her fingers on the keyboard in readiness and the minister introduces a soloist. A bulky woman with bad acne and a peculiar haircut—thin layers of straight auburn hair combed over short dreadlocks underneath—takes the altar and opens her songbook. She opens her mouth and a voice as sweet as honey, in spite of any distraction her appearance may give, resonates through the church.

"Rivers of living water,

Rivers that flow from the throne."

We were out in Artie's red dinghy on the pond he kept back of his property. He had stocked the pond with a few fish, so we had fishing poles in one hand and cold beer in the other, sitting out on the water waiting for a bite. Except that neither

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one of us much cared about catching a fish; we would probably have thrown it back in anyway. The day was shimmering with heat and the flies thick on the water. Cat tails and long grass hid the view to the house.

"You know, I almost left her once," Artie said suddenly as we drifted along.

I startled. "When?"

"The kids were still at home then. It was one argument after another and we talked about separating, off and on, as the conflict got worse. Sometimes now, I wonder what life would have been like..."

"You mean, if you had a new partner?" I said.

Artie shrugged. "I guess that's possible."

We sat in silence for a while sipping and looking out over the pond. I sensed a camaraderie between us that I couldn't explain.

Artie reached out to grab a beer from the cooler and I felt the wisp of a touch along my thigh, just below where my shorts stopped. My skin quivered and retracted but the feel of Artie's fingers was not disagreeable. Artie drew his hand back quickly.

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"Damn hornet, could have stung your bare leg."

Now, sitting in the church pew watching Artie's funeral service unfold, I wonder if there really had been a touch at all. Perhaps I imagined it. Now it's too late to ask about it. As if I would.

Artie's brother gets up and gives a short talk about Artie when he was young, what kind of sibling he had been, the tricks they had played together, how he enjoyed his company in adulthood. I had met the brother once-David was his name- when they had a birthday party for Artie at the house. Artie was the oldest in the family- the take-charge kind of guy that everyone looked up to. Clearly David is struggling with the eulogy; his voice falters and he draws out a handkerchief from his pocket and swipes at his eyes several times during his speech. When he

is finished, the minister takes the pulpit again, raises his arms heavenward and fixes his eyes on the assembly in front of him. He must be new and hoping to stir up fire and brimstone rather than offer peace and forgiveness. He doesn't know Artie at all. He only went to the church suppers to placate Barbara.

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Placate. Peace and forgiveness.

The minister clears his throat. "Numbers 21, verse 6. 'The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.'"

Another shimmery summer's day at Artie's place. When I had popped in to visit, Artie commissioned me to help him inspect the dinghy for leaks.

"Safety first," he always said.

The dinghy was a great love of Artie's. It sat and held court over the pond for three seasons a year. I asked him once why he had dubbed the craft, "My Funny Valentine."

"It's in the Frank Sinatra song," he had answered, grinning. "'My favorite work of art.' That's what the old girl is to me."

We had just brought the craft up from the water that afternoon when Artie reached into the cat tails and pulled up a wriggling black snake.

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Artie had to have known. I had told him the snake story from my childhood days. I let out a howl and ran, speeding around the pond with Artie in hot pursuit, the snake writhing in his hand.

"You bastard!" I cried over my shoulder.

We were two men in our late fifties, shouting and screaming and dashing around the yard like school boys.

Barbara's Aunt Phronia was visiting from Kingston and sitting on the front porch, yards away from where the play was at hand. Her thick glasses were never more than ornamentation but her hearing was sound. She shuffled to the edge of the verandah when she heard the racket and croaked:

"You boys stop that screaming or I'll tan both your backsides!"

Artie tossed the snake in the water and he and I collapsed on a grassy knoll above the pond, shaking with laughter. I had wished that day would never end- Artie and me lying out on the grass in the sun, half drunk, laughing about the silliest things in the world.

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The service ends, finally and the congregation rises and files outside. I wend my way slowly to the back of the church where I know the minister and Barbara will be waiting to shake hands and receive blessings.

And there she is, resplendent in a black suit with Artie's pearls at her neck. I was with him at the Sears store when he bought them. A trophy for all the years she put up with me. That's what Artie had said.

Barbara takes my right hand in her own two and limply pumps the entire hand-sandwich up and down in greeting. Her mouth is set in a taut line and her hands, cold as castle stone, clasp mine for a moment longer before she speaks.

"Artie thought the world of you," she says, treacle-voiced. "He certainly valued your friendship. I know he wanted you to have the dinghy. Feel free to come and get it anytime."

What can I say to that? I thank her quietly, leave her with fervent words of sorrow for her loss, then excuse myself and slip back into the church. I have left my suit coat hanging over the pew and I swing it over my shoulder and turn to leave again when I notice the picture at the front of the church. It had to be there when I leaned over the coffin but somehow I missed it.

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It's Artie with his Scout troop. All fifteen boys and Artie and another leader, grinning into the camera, with their camp supplies scattered about them like a child's building blocks after play. I lean in closer and try to glare at Artie but the tears come full force like those of a jilted heroine in one of my Harlequin novels.

"You idiot," I sob. "What did you think I was going to do with a dinghy in my little townhouse- pin it to the wall?"

And then, despite my unintended waterworks, it strikes me.

"Some of those boys have never been out in the great outdoors for any good length of time," he had once told me.

"They think they've died and gone to heaven when you take them camping for a couple of days."

It doesn't take me long to locate the District Commissioner for Artie's Scout troop and let him know I'm donating the dinghy. He's surprised and thrilled to accept it on behalf of those kids. And- I'm a little ashamed to say it-the big picture of Artie with those Boy Scouts takes center stage in the hallway of my townhouse. How I got it out the back door of the church on the day of Artie's funeral, without being noticed or questioned, is beyond me.