

HAPLESS MALES

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Ithuriel's Spear
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THE THRESHOLD

I didn't tell Sandy I got fired from hospice. Sandy is my mother. Then Grandmum passed away and she had to go down and sign some papers. "Where's Tanisha," she asked. She freaked, as I could have predicted, afraid that I would not be paying my half of cable like I agreed to and she was going to miss Game of Thrones.

Tanisha. People look up when they hear my name and expect a black girl with cornrows like they see on television. None of these hicks has ever seen one in the flesh, unless it was out at the filling station in a car going somewhere else. I asked Sandy why she had given me a black name and she said, "Honey, it's not a black name, it's a beautiful name."

Grandmum was not my grandmother, she was my great-aunt Teresa. My real grandmother, her black sheep sister, was in Phoenix Arizona. Aunt Teresa felt like she had to fill in. She came up with "Grandmum." She thought it was special, queen-ish I guess.

Instead of going off to my shift I was actually going over to Brenda's. She's my best friend. My only friend really, if a friend is someone who can make you laugh. Brenda is the new manager at the Motor Lodge. Now that

is a job with status, as coveted as clerk at the courthouse or dental hygienist. So far Brenda has not lorded it over me.

As happy as I was to get the hospice job, you would have thought some happiness would have made it across the rough patches. The job description made it sound like you would be some kind of angel of mercy to the dying and their loved ones but I knew that was b.s. Basically you cleaned up bodily messes. You can imagine. Brad and Bree, the managers who came up with the name The Threshold, were the only ones who called it that. It wasn't even a separate building, just an extension of the Long Term Care Facility.

But it was a job. Here on the plains, jobs don't grow on trees. Neither do trees. If there is a God, his inbox must be full of desperate pleas from all of us trapped here with no prospects. As you might have noticed, folks around here like to give names to things to give them the flavor of something they're not, the flavor of a better place. Long Term Care. The going wage for the LTC staff tells you how much the community cares. Less than squat. Get the geezers out of sight.

Here's what happened. Henry Z, the coot who lived in a shack down on North Creek, got brought in, yellow as a banana, stomach distended, liver shot, shaking. After a day or two he was in a pitiful way, begging me to get him a drink. Sandy has a liquor stash so I poured a little hootch into a plastic cup and brought it to Henry. What was one drink going to do, kill him? Henry was not somebody to keep a good thing under wraps. I was busted. Brad and Bree blew a gasket. I "violated norms" in an apparently unforgivable manner though no one got hurt and Henry was in a helluva better place. I knew other staff had done similar and worse stuff but I'm no snitch. I only wished one of them had said something to back me up.

Grandmum checked into hospice ten days before I got fired. Up to then, Sandy had been taking care of her at home. Operating a maximum security prison for one. I was warden number two. Grandmum used to be sharp and fun to be around. We were a club, Rebels United Against Sandy. She bought me my accordion, and taught me a few songs, churchy stuff but pretty. Not once do I remember her being pious. When she started losing brain cells, Jesus moved in and furnished the place with guilt and deviousness. By the time Sandy dumped her on The Threshold she couldn't look you in the eye. She didn't know who I was in her head but sometimes in her body she did. She would cozy up to me and our bodies would touch in a way both of us remembered. She would ask if I would kindly open the door for her, she had foolishly lost her key. I was the only one she asked, and maybe if there were woods out there that she could get lost in and get eaten by mountain lions I would have let her go free, but there were only flat fields of stubble where not in a million years could you get lost. She didn't seem to hold it against me that I said I would show her where her key was then take her for a walk up and down the corridor and back to her room.

It seemed like she would go on forever in this condition but three days after I got sacked she pushed off into the yonder. Crossed the Threshold. Went home to Jesus. Sandy, who hadn't visited her once at hospice, took on the role of first-mourner like a trooper. Nothing but drama was required of her. The casket was paid for. Grandmum had picked it out herself. She bought the whole funeral package, embalming, hearse, fifty Masses, and selected her casket-ready outfit, a blue wool suit with long-sleeved white blouse ruffled at the wrists, plus matching blue pumps which would remain unseen but if

I knew Grandmum would be suitable to the surprises of eternal life.

One detail she didn't account for was flowers. Sandy saw no need for them. "If she wanted flowers, she would have arranged for some." That didn't sit well with me. Grandmum was optimistic, thinking her friends would lavish flowers on her grave but all her friends were dead and the ones who weren't were no more likely to put flowers on her grave than she was on theirs.

She had to have at least one bouquet. I had a final paycheck due from hospice though I wasn't sure how many nights it covered. The cable bill would figure itself out. I had the right to choose how I spent my last paycheck.

People are always saying how weird the weather is but there was nothing weird about the weather when I went over to Nadine's Nest to buy some flowers. It was November and the north wind bit like a mad dog. Nadine's is the only game in town for flowers although the supermarket sometimes has hydrangeas which people buy and take home to murder.

Nadine was a senior when I was a freshman. She was homecoming queen, and since her ascendancy, her hips have annexed a duchy or two. I liked Nadine though most people didn't. She was somebody who subscribed to the newspaper and had even been to Europe and seen Ludwig's Castle and tulips in Holland. I doubt she made money in her shop but she didn't need it. Her husband Burt was a rancher with ten thousand shorthorns and a drinking problem. The shop, I guessed, was Nadine's way of getting away from him. One that was not completely successful as it was obvious she was pregnant again. This would be number four or five.

I liked the smell in the shop. I couldn't imagine who in town was into scented candles but you never know.

People have their mysteries. Nadine was polishing some brass thingee and looked at me with her saintly eyes and said, "I am so very sorry about the loss of your grandmother," which I took as a good sign since I would be buying on credit and everybody knew I lost my job. I didn't answer. When you're quiet people fill in whatever they want. It wasn't that I wasn't sorry for Grandmum being dead, but sad was only one thing of a heap of things, pretty much on the bottom. I was kind of relieved too, relieved for her.

Nadine showed me her inventory. Mostly roses, red, yellow and orange. I tried to picture the warm, fragrant place they came from. They were like spit in the eye, advertising the unfairness of life. And jiminee, were they expensive. If I drove into Salina and went to Wal-Mart I might find the same roses at half the price. I knew I wasn't spending twenty bucks on gas to do that. I asked Nadine to show me what else she had. "I have these," she said retrieving a bucket from another refrigerator. "Mums. Appropriate for the fall funeral."

Cheaper is what she meant. I oohed and aahed, pointing out how we called the deceased "Grandmum," how it was all so appropriate and meant to be. With that Nadine let me take the rust red bunch on credit. Even these cheap-o mums came to nearly twenty bucks. At home I saw that a couple of the flowers smooshed together were moldy and I got pissed that I hadn't noticed before she wrapped them in paper and tied the string.

Most of the mums lasted okay until the funeral. Brenda, Brenda's boyfriend Jason, one of the altar boys and I were the pallbearers. Just us four. Grandmum was tiny. Carrying the coffin I wondered how much weight was the body and how much the casket. I put the bouquet on top of it before the doors of the hearse closed.

I had the idea that I would hand out one stem of the bouquet to whoever was at the grave and we could drop it into the hole but the cold wind hadn't let up for days and everybody got out of the cemetery as fast as possible. I threw the whole bunch in thinking, I'm sorry to admit, what a waste of money.

It used to be that there would be lunch in the church basement after a funeral but this got overlooked too. Maybe the Altar Society remembered Grandmum as a heathen, before Jesus took over. I wasn't a bit hungry, so it wasn't like I missed the jello salads. Brenda and her boyfriend Jason and I went back to my house where we found a hot dish, it was not hot anymore, sitting on the back porch. A casserole, macaroni and tuna smothered in Campbell's mushroom soup is what it smelled like. I gave it to Jason, making him promise to bring the dish back but first I looked at the bottom where there was a piece of masking tape with the name Shirley. I promised myself to be nice to Shirley next time I was at the post office.

Once the funeral was over, I had time on my hands, more than I knew what to do with. I was going to miss cable as much as Sandy. Especially old movies. Sandy wouldn't budge: if I didn't pay my half, it was going to be unplugged. I had to come up with some money for that and for the mums, and maybe even save some to get me out of here though I wouldn't know where to go. I could babysit if it wasn't such a signal you were a total loser and couldn't make a go of life past high school. Brenda said she'd put me on the clean staff of the Motor Lodge. We both cackled at that. That was lower than emptying bedpans. Barely better than babysitting. Then Brenda came up with a better idea.

"We're completely booked this weekend with pheasant hunters. Why don't you bring your accordion

over and we can set you up over by the bar with a tip jar and you can give them a little show. Maybe wear something clingy. Show some boob. Worth a try.”

I’m not really good at the accordion but I know a few songs. My Darling Clementine. This Little Light of Mine. Edelweiss. I had a day and half to practice. I was rusty as all getout.

Forecasters are addicts for disaster but when I drove over to the Motor Lodge I wondered if they might have gotten this right. The snow was whipping past like it had a grudge to settle. I wondered if the blizzard might have discouraged the hunters from their sport but the parking lot was so full I had to park on the edge of the pasture. I walked in the lobby with my squeeze box. There was nobody at the front desk. I pinged the little bell. A sign taped to the desk read in big red letters: *PLEASE DO NOT USE THE ROOM TOWELS TO CLEAN YOUR TRUCKS, BOOTS, DOGS, GUNS, OR ANYTHING ELSE MUDDY OR BLOODY.*

“There you are,” Brenda said coming through the doors of the lounge area. “I was in there warming up your audience. A captive audience. You are going to clean up. Bitch of a blow outside. Let me look at you. Take off your coat.”

I took off the coat, showed her the jeans that were tighter than they were last year at this time. The red pullover with the scooped neckline. Clingy. “Perfect,” she said.

Brenda led me into the lounge like I was some kind of celebrity. The hunters applauded us just walking in. I could tell they were half-drunk already the way their voices were too loud. Brenda had put a stool in the corner in front of the curtains and rigged up a desk lamp like a spotlight. I never thought I would be so nervous. TIPS was written on a sign taped to a galvanized bucket, as if it wasn’t obvious what the bucket was for. It crossed my mind I could use it if I needed to puke.

My audience didn't mind or couldn't tell when I played a G chord instead of F. I had some moments when I was really motoring and other times when I went from one ditch to the other. Nobody seemed to notice the difference. Nor mind that a lot of my repertoire had a churchy bent although somebody, I couldn't tell who, shouted out, "Sing something dirty." I never thought of The Battle Hymn of the Republic as a drinking song but they really got into the glory hallelujahs. During a break Brenda swanned over with a drink and gave me a wink, nodding toward a scruffy, wiry guy in shiny brown cowboy boots sitting by himself at a table. My benefactor. I raised the glass, took a swig, gave him a smile, and Brenda passed the bucket. The harvest was bountiful. Glory Hallelujah. I noticed how Brenda took out all but a few bills which she left in as seed money. This Brenda, she had sides I never saw before. She'd go a long way in the world.

The drink, something rummy, helped my playing. Melisma is the word that comes to mind, though I'm not sure what it means. We got a little carried away. Brenda had to come in and ask us to tone it down. Other guests were complaining. By then the horses were out of the barn, so after another half hour Brenda gave up and told us she was going to have to shut us down. Not a minute too soon. I had resorted to doing Edelweiss in a fake German accent. The guys stamped and applauded. Encore encore.

I shushed them and said that if they would be real quiet I would sing an encore, a song I wrote myself. "They say the heart is a lonely hunter. This song is for all you hunters out there," I said and almost busted out laughing at myself. I made up the song on the spot. D-minor, G-minor, A. The key of heartbreak.

*You're lost and lonely
You want to come up
But you can't come up
Cause you're muddy and bloody
No you can't come up
You say you got roses
And your daddy owns the bank
but you're muddy and bloody
And your breath kinda stank
No you can't come up*

I sang this with a ton of feeling but what I was thinking was, what a bunch of losers, miles from home tromping around frozen dirt fields shooting at poor birds that don't have enough meat on them to be worth the bother to take out the buckshot. They applauded anyway and some dropped more greenery in the bucket. For a second I kind of felt sorry for them, though what it was I was sorry about I couldn't say. By the time I put my accordion in its little casket they were up and stretching and glancing at me like I was somebody foreign. I could see why someone would want to keep on doing this. The wiry guy in the brown cowboy boots, the one who bought me the drink, hadn't gone anywhere. I should have expected that. He didn't have a gut; that could be said for him.

"A blizzard going on," he said watching as I put on my coat. "Don't think you should be out in it."

I didn't think I should be out in it either, but then it was only a four-mile drive home.