Funeral March

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FUNERAL MARCH

SHAUN TURNER

Lois

At the exact moment Nan Paul died in her hospital bed, her thirty-five-year-old daughter Lois stood in the concessions room at St. Mary's Health buying a Diet Coke. She had been hit with the *déjà vu* of being in this concessions room numerous times—with her Grandpa Hughes and her great-aunt—never with Nan. The walls, covered in seafoam green textured wallpaper and trimmed in white plaster, made Lois sick.

Nan had been deep in a coma after a massive heart attack.

She had been fine for the first three hours of her shift at the Rite-Aid, her manager said. But on her break outside, with a Sprite Zero and cigarette in-hand, she began having chest pains. One of the pharmacy technicians was nearby, on the phone with his girlfriend. "Oh my god, I'll call you back," he said, hanging up to call 911. He didn't leave Nan until the ambulance arrived, and half the store was crowded around her.

Lois had taken a short nursing class when she started working as an aide down at Deer Lick Nursing Home, and she knew the science behind what had happened, all of it. While Nan smoked her Marlboro menthol in the shade behind the Rite-Aid, a piece of plaque broke loose and nested in one of her arteries, likely already clogged with more plaque. As she drank her Sprite Zero, her platelets pillowed onto the clot and blocked the flow of oxygen to her heart. When Nan clutched her chest, when she dropped to her knees on the cool concrete next to the pharmacy drive-thru, her heart tissue had already smothered, scarred, and could never be revived.

Had Lois not stopped by the grey hospital gift shop to make small-talk with the cashier, Robert, or had she not walked through the cafeteria—stopping at its wide windows to look out at the parking lot—if she hadn't checked out what the ladies were serving for lunch, she may have been there for Nan's last breath.

Lois knew—from her brief nursing aide experience—that while she was plinking quarters into the soda machine or checking out that day's hot lunch, Nan's weakened heart shuddered. Another piece of plaque had found its home. Lois knew once Nan's heart stopped beating entirely, her brain cells died off in about three to seven minutes. When the doctor pronounced her dead, they covered her body in a sheet. Lois walked into the room with her can of Diet Coke and saw her there.

After talking to the nurse and pulling back the sheet to kiss her mother's cool head, Lois walked out to the street next to the hospital and smoked cigarettes and made her calls on a cracked iPhone.

The hospital had banned smoking on the campus back in 2012, but Lois remembered when her Grandpa Hughes suffered his first heart attack in '83 and the hospital had kept several ashtrays in the ICU waiting rooms. A janitor would empty and wipe them clean every half hour, a schedule Lois had used to keep time.

First, Lois called her brother Junior. His voice sounded odd, strangled, and he said he'd be up to the hospital as fast as he could. She called her father Leroy, Nan's ex-husband. She called her own husband, who was at a construction job three states away. He promised to be right home. Next was Hillcrest Funeral Home for a hearse, and last, her son Benny, off at college in Missouri.

After Lois hung up, she smoked another cigarette then began her walk back to the hospital, 300 feet uphill, to wait for Junior and the hearse beside her mother's body. She took step after step like it was all a dream. She thought, *Those sons of bitches who banned smoking at St. Mary's Health don't know grief.*

■■■

Junior

Lois's brother, Leroy Paul, Jr., spent most of his time hiding from his third ex-wife Janice in his small wood-paneled office in the back of the Fishing Hole, the fishing and hunting store he ran out on Route 87. The building sat in a valley between two hills. Started as an old-time grocery store and post office, and then an auto repair place, it had a wide gravel parking lot and wide, metal doors that rolled up into the ceilings.

When Junior's grandfather had first bought the place, he filled it with bait-and-tackle and the occasional hunting bows and arrows. In the early eighties, Junior's father—Leroy Paul—took over, added the guns and the bullets, the virtual poker machine with a pixelated blonde who took off her top when you got a full house. Junior added security cameras, a website, the eBay account, and two assistant managers.

In the mornings, the oldest regular men brought coffee cake and little plastic bottles of whiskey to slip into their Styrofoam coffee cups, the old kind with grooved edges. Junior, not as trusting as his grandfather or as big a storyteller as his father, wired up cameras to keep them from pocketing any of the loose hooks or jelly-colored plastic lures.

Junior once took a business management course at the junior college, and often warned his assistant managers about the dangers of theft, using terms like slippage and creep. Most of the day he sat in his office and watched his employees and the parade of regular customers on closed-circuit television.

The day his mother died, Junior was beating off, watching VHS porn on the grainy wall-mounted CCTV, imagining he was getting serviced by Latisha Pendavis, the roar of the highway in his left ear. If anyone was stealing from the cash register, or carrying fishing poles out by the dozen, he never would have known.

Back before he took over the Fishing Hole from his father, Junior was a trucker. He once knew this foxy lot lizard—Latisha—and he thought about her often. Latisha was clean and sweet, wild for truckers and desperate for money. She'd often climb into his cab and the two of them would spend up to twenty minutes together, making sweaty, impassioned love. Latisha wouldn't let him touch her hair, which was thick as barbed wire and sprayed out in a whorl, but she was quite

the exhibitionist. Once she asked him to drive the rig, so they could even do it while he was driving down the highway.

Sometimes at the Fishing Hole he would watch his porn and listen to his employees talk to the customers just outside the flimsy plywood door. It gave him some sort of thrill, thinking that Latisha would have liked it.

He was just about to finish when the phone rang.

Before he could even say hello Lois told him the news. He quickly pushed away all thoughts of Latisha and turned off the television. When he walked out of his office, he didn't answer any of the regulars' greetings or the cashier's inquisitive look. He just strode out to the parking lot and climbed into his little red truck.

He sat in the driver's seat for a second, his heart beating fast. Then he said, "Goddamn."

Sometimes, especially at that moment, he wished he had never given up his truck or the road or Latisha. He wished he were in some coastal state—North Carolina, maybe—where the air smelled sweet, where Latisha Pendavis waited at some truck stop a few miles away.

He punched a hole in his dashboard, caving in one air vent and bloodying his fist.

■■■

Leroy

On the day Nan Paul died, her ex-husband Leroy was playing golf in South Carolina with his current wife, Torie Parr-Paul, a pale blonde woman younger than his daughter and half the size of Nan—a fact he mentioned often. When Leroy had met Torie, she worked as the golf pro at the Petersburg Golf and Resort clubhouse, which he had joined to network with the bigger fish.

Leroy was a personal injury lawyer. His first office was in the back of the Fishing Hole, where he had dispensed advice to

fishermen and hunters and coal widows. Nan had decorated it in plaids and maple-colored wood.

He still had his own dark hair and chemically-bronzed skin. He liked to say it was because of all the exercise he got from chasing those ambulances, but his coloring actually came from an expensive self-tanner that Torie rubbed on his legs, chest, and back with a yellowed microfiber mitten.

Leroy and Torie were pulling clubs off a chrome-finned golf cart—the Rolls-Royce of golf carts—somewhere near the sixth hole of the Ocean Course on Kiawah Island, arguably the best course in the state if not the entire South. Around the manicured green, long native grasses rooted among beach rock. Past the grass was a narrow strip of sand, then the water and the distant horizon.

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Leroy was about to tee off when his cell phone rang. Torie, who was sitting on the back of the golf cart, answered it. "Hello?"

"Torie, I need to speak with my father." Lois's voice sounded cracked and tired, and Torie wrinkled her nose.

"It's your daughter."

"So hand me the phone, hon," Leroy said, extending his hand out toward the golf cart. In front of him, tufts of sea grass blew against the wind and he could see the slick wash of the ocean running on until it reached the coast of Morocco.

"Lois?"

"It's Mom. She's dead."

Leroy dropped his driver and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

The last time he had seen Nan was four years ago at Junior's second wedding. She'd gotten meaner and older. Leroy had gotten tanner and even richer after winning a plumb asbestos tort.

Outside, before the services started, Nan had stood at the street by herself holding a pack of Marlboro Menthol Lights and wearing a navy blue dress with too much room in the shoulders. Torie had already eased in to the sanctuary in a short, sequined cocktail dress that had probably cost more than the bride's.

Leroy walked over to Nan and told her she looked lovely.

"You can eat my shit," Nan said.

She lit a cigarette, took two slow draws and drew her hand above her eyes, like she was looking into the sun. "You're looking all bronzed up. Where have you and your woman been? Aruba? The Bahamas?"

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry for how these things ended between us," he began, and that's when Nan took one more long drag from her cigarette and put it out on his right wrist, underneath the bend of his hand.

"Sorry don't pay the rent or bills," she said. After the divorce, she had moved into an efficiency apartment.

She walked right back into the chapel.

After that, Leroy had started wearing wide custom watches, his latest one a high-polished dark wood. People kept asking him if he was left-handed.

"Well, shit, honey," Leroy said, on the phone with Lois. The wind whipped cool sea air into his face and he could almost feel the spray. "I'm awful sorry. Have you talked to your brother?"

He listened to Lois talk and watched the clouds pass right over the sixth hole of the Ocean Course as they drifted out over the calm rocking ocean, perhaps to Morocco. Or perhaps

the clouds would erupt into shades of charcoal, where they would expand one last burst of energy, and dissipate over the Atlantic.

■■■

Lois

Lois, reeking of cigarettes and Elizabeth Arden's musky Red Door perfume, and Junior, his hand bandaged in a white handkerchief, parked outside Hillcrest Funeral Home to pick out a casket.

When their Grandpa Hughes had died, Nan took them both to Hillcrest to plan the funeral. Back then, Hillcrest was just a three-room deal—an office, a bathroom, a small viewing chapel with a fluorescent neon cross. Ten years later, the Gross family added on: the floors were level, redone in expensive-looking ceramic tiles. Smooth Greek columns led to newly-added chapels with padded pews. They had built two enlarged marble bathrooms and hung paintings of Tuscan vegetables. A sleek and solemn office and showroom sat behind the smoking and nonsmoking parlors.

Junior chatted up the secretary, a woman who knew his first wife. The funeral director, Ralph Gross, hugged Lois.

Ralph Gross was a moist man, and Lois felt his forearm sweat on her shirt and she smelled the briefest hint of formaldehyde coming from behind his ear like a lady's perfume sample. He sat her down behind the marble-topped desk, a blue pen gripped between his knuckles.

"How do you want to plan out the parts of the service and internment?" His face looked appropriately solemn.

Ralph had pudgy hands. He rubbed them together as he told Lois that her plans were good, sacred choices. She decided on the visitation hours, the memorial service, the

graveside prayer. Junior used the secretary's phone to call Nan's preacher, Pastor Tina.

Then Ralph stood and asked if Junior was ready. Junior hung up the phone, and then Ralph led them into an L-shaped room. The short arm of the room held shelves of cremation urns, some in plaster and bronze. They boasted names like "The Valentino" and "The Spartacus." A sturdy-looking cardboard box was labeled "Discount Container."

In the long arm of the room, some coffins sat on knee-high pedestals, others on long shelves, all of them wide open. The cheap ones *looked* cheap—Nan would have called them ugly as sin. Lois noticed the "Discount Coffin," nothing but a pinewood box, sitting between the glossy and polished "Mahogany Corinthian" and the small, baby pink "Epistle of Hope."

The least expensive nice one was called "The Homecoming." Ralph had an idea of their budget and kept talking about The Homecoming—listing its restful white sateen interiors, its warranty-secured rubber fail-safe decency liner, its pewter transportation handles.

Junior shifted from one foot to another and Lois wanted to cry in her car and smoke a cigarette.

"How much is it going to be, Ralph? Altogether." She rubbed her temple.

"Let me do a little arithmetic." Ralph Gross took Lois and Junior back to his desk. Pictures of his children and his wife were turned out toward Lois, and she studied their faces. He turned on the little Tiffany-style lamp in the shape of a cross and bent over a piece of lined paper. His pen scratched against the faux leather desk blotter and Lois thought, *cigarette*.

"Six." Ralph finally said, rubbing a hand across his fat chin.

"Thousand?" Junior finally said.

"Yes, thousand," Lois snapped. She finally broke, cried—really cried— about Nan dying while Lois was getting the

damn Diet Coke, about her son off in college, about the funeral and work and juggling it all.

Junior pulled out his checkbook.

Ralph Gross offered her a tissue and Lois got another whiff of the formaldehyde. She pictured him leaning over Nan's body, the shine of his gloved hands smoothing Nan's brow.

Then Lois threw up all over Ralph's nice brown suit. Junior tore his first check out and began to write another.

■ ■ ■

Junior

At the visitation, Junior was drunk enough to be both talkative and civil, but he was one drink away from complete belligerence. Lois had made him wear a pair of nylon driving gloves to hide the spiderweb of cuts on his knuckles. To numb his pain, he took three shots of the Old Grand-Dad that Ralph Gross kept in the accordion drawer of his desk.

In their chapel—Riverview—thirty or forty people milled around the aisles, crowded around the guest book, and sat in the pews. Some twisted their whole bodies to talk to others, the noise of their conversation a steady hum. Junior's head hurt.

At the front of the room, underneath a velveteen cornice and wooden cross, Nan nested in "The Homecoming." A flat-screen TV flashed through pictures of her life: Nan with big hair and eighties makeup at some lawyer event; tired Nan holding her only grandson in the maternity ward; Nan in a visor, golfing; Nan smiling behind the counter at Rite-Aid.

Flower arrangements and quilts and wind chimes sat on tripods, stretching from one side of the room to the other. Some people walked a line from arrangement to arrangement like they were in an art gallery or museum, pausing occasionally to read a condolence tag.

Lois stood dutifully next to the coffin. Junior lined up next to her, his hands behind his back. According to Lois, things were going well. Her husband arrived five minutes before the doors opened. He held court in the foyer, welcomed in church friends and work friends, Nan's co-workers from the Rite-Aid.

"You can circulate if you want, June," she said. "You can stand here later."

In the smoking parlor, Nan's family members from Pike County drank coffee and told stories about growing up poor. The six great-aunts, Nan's sisters, huddled with their grandchildren on the sturdy nylon sofas. They ashed their cigarettes into half-empty cans of pop. Junior hugged the cousins he hadn't seen since his third wedding and smoked all the cigarettes offered to him.

Nan was the first of the seven sisters to go, and Junior could tell that the rest were withdrawn and afraid. Nan had

Flower arrangements and quilts and wind chimes sat on tripods, stretching from one side of the room to the other.

been the big-talker, and without her, none of the others broke the silence to gossip about their kids. Some of the great-aunts' hands shook so bad that they dropped cigarette ashes on the glass tabletops. Two of Ralph Gross's sons—assistant funeral directors—cleaned the tables every half-hour or so, managing to keep their tailored suits spotless.

In the nonsmoking parlor, Junior greeted some of the regular men from the Fishing Hole. One, Tommy Roe, who Junior had only seen in khaki overalls and a blue tractor supply hat, wore a plaid suit and brown shoes. The old man

said, "Your mama was a good lady, Junior. A fine lady. Shame Leroy's not here."

Junior was about to go back to the chapel and stand with Lois when he saw the backside of a woman walking into the lady's restroom. Latisha Pendavis. The last time was at a Flying J's in South Carolina. He'd bought her a pizza, and by the time he had gotten out of the shower and bought a new pine-tree air freshener for the cab, she was gone, having climbed into some other man's truck.

They had kept a shaky Facebook correspondence that snowballed into the end of his third marriage. Of course, it had been ten years since he saw her in person, but he knew the profile of her hair, the dangling earrings.

Sweat popped up on the back of his neck. He could feel the tension building at his temples, the whiskey at the back of his throat. The woman walked out of the bathroom and turned toward him, her hair close enough to touch.

And she was not Latisha at all.

It was Janice, his third wife, her hair spread big above her head, her neck. Janice, who still loved him despite everything, and that fact, mixed with the Old Grand-Dad, made his stomach sick.

"How you been, shug?" she said. "I've been thinking about you."

He swallowed once, and said, "Okay."

He folded his gloved hands behind his back.

Janice pulled him in for a hug, and he didn't touch her.

■ ■ ■

Leroy

Leroy sat alone in first class, a Delta flight from Charlotte to Lexington. He usually preferred the window seat. Torie always liked the aisle for her small bladder.

"You need to spend this time with your children," she had soothed that morning, rubbing tanner on his legs. He didn't return the ticket until it was too late, hoping she would reconsider. She had decided to stay back at the resort in South Carolina. The land was small beneath him.

At 6:00 p.m., a stewardess passed around a basket of snacks and another wheeled carts of hot sandwiches. Leroy took a lukewarm cheesesteak and a plastic cup of rum.

This, for a thousand dollars, he thought.

If Torie were with him, she would have ordered *a la carte* and requested champagne.

Leroy nursed his rum, chasing it with orange juice to numb his headache.

Torie was probably at the Kiawah Island Resort's seafood restaurant, the Atlantic Room, sitting next to one of the wide windows with a view of the ocean and eating regional seafood—little-neck clams with sofrito and gnocchi and spicy chorizo. Later, a white chocolate bread pudding. She would charge it to the room or pay with a credit card. And then?

Across the aisle, a young man typed on his tablet with two index fingers. The stewardess asked Leroy if he would like more orange juice.

Fifteen years ago, he had been younger and hungrier. Both his kids had left home, and there was Nan, who snored so loud she shook the bed. After he confirmed his pending fee from the asbestos settlement, he filed for divorce.

Outside the window of the Canadair Regional Jet, the trees and mountains of Appalachia spread around like moss, broken occasionally by the slicks of water or patches of farms and houses.

Leroy and Torie kept homes in a few places—a studio in Queens with exposed brick and a service elevator, the beach house in Saint Augustine, the cabin in Scotland for frequent

golfing trips. Torie was young and smart and ambitious. She'd graduated from college with an associate's degree in sports management. She had long legs and a white smile, and he knew he would fall for her when the first thing she said to him was, "I like to take what I can get."

Nan had kept the family home after the divorce but had to sell it when she couldn't afford the property tax. Now she was dead. The kids were the last thing that bound them together besides the burn mark on his wrist.

Leroy looked at his watch—a white ceramic Michael Kors that Torie had bought in some boutique.

Leroy had married Torie at the Petersburg courthouse. One of their witnesses had worked for the County Clerk. The second was a bailiff who used to come in regular at the Fishing Hole but stopped when Junior took over. Leroy did not ask Torie to sign a prenuptial agreement.

The visitation at Hillcrest was scheduled to end at nine, and Leroy hoped he would be able to make it before they locked the doors. He had prepared himself—he wanted—to see her one last time before they closed the casket for the funeral that would follow the next morning.

Leroy Paul had married Nan Hughes straight out of high school. They had raised two kids together. Lived in three houses together. Went to two different churches.

Leroy looked out the window. He knew that in fifteen years, he would likely be dead like Nan and that Torie would still be younger than his kids.

He knew that, underneath his watch, there would still be a faint and itching mark. ■