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Funeral

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Funeral

by Justin Kemp

People dressed in black with white faces line up to lay their contrition before the coffin. *Piano keys*, I think from my seat on the mossy bench a little way from the mourners. *Piano keys danced upon by Familiar Fingers. Who will play it best...?* I note my observation in the little black notebook that I always carry in my coat pocket.

A burst of sobs draws my attention back to the funeralgoers. A plum shaped woman with gray curls swarming around her head trembles on her knees beside the coffin. The young man behind her bends over stiffly, yanking a handkerchief from his suit pocket to shove into her shaking hand. The Plum wipes her face gratefully and allows The Stork to pull her to her feet and guide her away.

Is grief only appropriate so long as it is conveniently expressed? I write. Do we stifle other's grief when it does not resemble our own? Do we stifle our own grief when it does not resemble other's? Do we—

A tap on my shoulder interrupts me. I snap my notebook shut, slip it back into my pocket, and turn to a stranger looking over my shoulder. His disheveled gray suit—*matches his hair, must remember to write down*—blends into the foggy field behind us. The old man's face sags as much as his brittle frame, with only a cane supporting his spine. Nothing catches the sadness sliding down his wrinkled cheeks. His eyes remain glassy even as he looks at me. I tug my hat brim lower, hoping recognition won't spark them to life.

"Can I help you?" I say with a wan smile.

The Drooper points to the coffin with a grunt. "How did you know him?"

"I never did," I say truthfully enough. *Is avoiding an uncomfortable truth as bad as selling a falsehood?* Guilt pricks, prompting me to amend my statement. "But we were acquainted for eighteen years or so."

"Ah." The Drooper nods. "He was my son. I never thought he'd go first."

"Accidents are a terrible shock."

"Yes. Yes, they are."

We hold our positions in silence. I stroke yesterday morning's stubble, occupying tensed hands in seemingly calm repetition. The Drooper lets the stillness between us hang for a few seconds, then sighs and begins creaking toward the Funeralgoers. The left leg, the one supported by the cane, buckles. I leap from my bench and grab him by the coattails before he can sink into the mud.

"Thank you," he gasps. "My knees. Not what they used to be."

None of us ever seem to be, I note but refrain from saying.

"Good thing I was here to catch you, then."

He nods. "Would you mind helping me over to the coffin?"

I blink slowly. I had not planned on approaching the coffin. Hovering in the Funeral's background seemed fitting to my relationship with the deceased. But how can I refuse to help an old man, even *this* old man? His son was not—*what, not his fault?* A stupid question. But even if I refuse, he probably won't make it over. I think I don't want to refuse, regardless.

"Of course," I say, painting on a smile. I was never as good with brushes as I am with pens.

The Drooper's labored breaths warm my neck as he hobbles on my arm to the end of the piano keys. I adjust my collar with my free hand. I cannot in good conscience address the itchy stain growing in each armpit. I should have refused his request. Too close for comfort. Far too close. So many years. Time. Slipping away into the mist and now frozen almost as still as my eyes on the coffin. We inch forward for an eternity. Then we arrive.

"Goodbye, my son," says The Drooper, dropping a withered rose on the lid.

Once he finishes, I pass off the Drooper to the Plum, and they totter away together into the mist. The Stork shoots me a glare before disappearing after them. *Pay them no mind. They play their grief their way, and I will play it mine.*

I kneel until I can press my nose against the slick side of a black box. It smells like him. Somehow dark and plastic all at once. Perhaps a hint of the cologne he dashed on his collar every morning before work. A complicated smell for a complicated man. Complicated as my relationship with him, even in death.

"Goodbye, Father," I whisper.