A Splendid Day

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All along the bus route the streets and sidewalks had been swept clean of the loose gravel and dust from winter, and all at once it was spring, finally, and a splendid day for a funeral. Sunny, but not too hot, the grass a calming deep green, the lilacs and tulips in glorious full bloom in the parks. Even the time of day for the funeral, 1:00 P.M., could hardly have been more perfect. The last funeral had been too late in the afternoon for Connie, much too late. She should have known better. It had been all she could do to not fall asleep in the middle of the service. A discreet pinch on the arm, another on her thigh, then back to the arm. A week later and she could still see the red marks on her skin, like little bug bites. That’s what people would have thought if they had seen them, if they had been given half the chance. Lice and chiggers and nits and they would never let you come near them again. And then when the service had finally ended she had felt too weak to stay for the reception, except for one or two tuna sandwiches, no crusts and cut in perfect triangles, just the way she loved them. Or were they egg salad? She had written a note to herself after she had returned to her room, and placed it on the door of her tiny refrigerator, a little reminder to not make that mistake again. Avoid anything after 3:00 was what it said.

She didn’t want to assume the bus driver would stop where she wanted to get off, so she reached up and pulled the cord well in advance. And then she pulled it again, just to be sure. You could never be too certain, not these days. She knew if she missed her stop and had to walk the extra two blocks to Parkview Funeral Home she’d be late for sure, and then when she stepped into the foyer everyone would already be seated in the chapel and it would be impossible to simply slip into the crowd. The funeral was at Parkview wasn’t it? She reached into her coat pocket and lifted the neatly trimmed obituary she had cut from the newspaper and scanned the print at the bottom, her heart now fluttering. She sighed in relief. Yes, she had gotten it right, this time: Parkview Funeral Home, not Evening Tide, not Serenity Chapel, or All Saints, or Sunset Estates, or Eternal Springs, though she would never go back there again. Not after that rude usher had twice shown up on the other side of the serving table at the last reception, staring down at her, ruining everything. She had come within a hair of having to pull one of her Sorry I’m Deaf cards from her pocket as a last resort. That always caught them off guard. But the card was always a last resort, for if she used it they’d never think of her as just another old lady in the crowd. And besides, she always felt a little guilty whenever she was forced to use the card. How often had she been to Eternal Springs? A handful of times? Maybe six or seven funerals at best, but she was sure they’d recognize her the moment she walked in. She wouldn’t be caught dead in that place now. The slightest of smiles crept across her lips. Caught dead in a funeral chapel. If she had been in her room she would have laughed out loud at how witty she could be sometimes. Such a devilish mind. But she wouldn’t laugh right now. She had to be diligent. She’d save her little laugh for later. Yes, that made sense. For when she really needed a bit of a pick-me-up. She must not get distracted.
How long had it been since she was at a funeral in Parkview? She closed her eyes to concentrate. Was it the teenaged girl in the car crash? No, not a car crash but a … oh what do they call them? They were everywhere this time of year…she must have seen ten of them since leaving her room…a motorcycle, that’s it, yes, a motorcycle accident. The snow barely gone and they were already racing each other to the grave. Or was it the young mother with breast cancer? Both funerals had been close together, just a few days apart, she remembered, probably too close. She knew she was taking a chance at the time, but she couldn’t stop herself, not after seeing the young mother’s picture in the obituaries. Such a plain looking woman, with short, flat hair, and a face that reminded Connie of a raisin pie, and overweight too. It made Connie think of a police mug shot. Thankfully there was no chance of a photograph like that appearing in the paper when her time came. She knew the pictures the families selected for the newspapers often had nothing to do with what the dead person really looked like. They tended to pick what they thought were flattering photographs from university graduations or wedding anniversaries or birthday parties or from Sears. And if this mug shot was the best they could find of the young mother, well, you couldn’t help but wonder.

Connie thought of herself as somewhat of an expert regarding obituary photos. Sometimes the picture of the dead person had been taken years or even decades earlier. Over the years she remembered seeing several photographs of young adults, yet the dead people had all been over 50 years old when they had passed on. Connie was certain this was because no one had liked who the dead person had become later in life, and more than likely the person hadn’t been in anyone’s good books long before he or she died. Perhaps the dead person had become a drunk or a criminal, a wife beater, a molester or adulteress. Or maybe a drug addict or a mental case. They seemed to be everywhere these days. And sometimes the family had to go a very long way back in the person’s life to find a time when they had no idea of the trouble heading their way. Back to when the dead person was still an innocent little Johnny or Sally, and love was offered without hesitation. She opened her eyes and touched a different finger as she counted backward, finally settling on four weeks. Yes, four weeks since she had last been to Parkview. They must have buried a dozen people since then. As she breathed another sigh of relief the bus began to slow down.

She carefully folded and returned the ad to her pocket and waited for the bus to come to a complete stop before standing. The drivers these days all seemed to stop with a jerk and if you weren’t careful you could end up knocking your head on one of the steel poles or fall in the aisle and break a leg. Ahead of her a nice young man in a suit had his face buried in a newspaper, no doubt checking his stocks, or looking for a job, she thought when she got closer and noticed how wrinkled his suit was. Just ahead of him two rather rough looking teenagers, a boy and a girl, were crammed against each other on a seat, their legs and arms tangled together like knots. And they were kissing. No, not kissing. There must be some other word to describe what they were doing. Their mouths were gaping wide open. Kissing was too polite of a word. You couldn’t help but see their tongues sloping in and out of their mouths. It was a shameless display, the kind of thing she kept seeing everywhere, in the malls all winter, on park benches and sidewalks now that it was spring, and it was enough to make a person glad to have not had any children at all. The boy wore a black sleeveless t-shirt that made his arms look ridiculously thin, like spindly sticks, and he had a huge hickey on his neck for the whole world to see, as if advertising his lack of character. She could make out the girl’s teeth marks along the edges. Everywhere she looked there was a tattoo, on an arm, a leg, any patch of bare skin. What kind of parents do these children have? She would have liked to have said something to them, tell them to look up the word *decorum* in a dictionary. Or *propriety*. That would have taught them something.

As she edged her way to the front she realized the bus driver was a woman. Imagine that! Why hadn’t she noticed when she had first gotten on? Connie wasn’t sure what to think about that. Such a monstrous vehicle, and that huge steering wheel, well! She hoped they made the women
drivers pass some sort of strength test before they got the job. It made her think of all those
television shows where the young women are almost naked and the men are covered in big baggy shorts, and they square off against each other, boys versus girls, swimming in pig manure and eating maggots and she knew she would get ill if she thought about it any longer. The driver was watching her in the mirror, staring right at her, not even trying to hide the look of impatience Connie had to contend with more and more each day. She wanted to tell the bus driver she was a fool to think she would never age and fear a fall or feel indifferent to the way everyone ignored you or wished you would just hurry up and disappear...and that the bus driver was a fool to think everyone lived in a world where you could choose to become a bus driver or a lawyer or have a husband and a family, or ... She had stopped walking and both her hands were wrapped tight around the steel pole by the open door. Everyone, even the teenagers were looking at her. A flash of heat began to rise to her face as she stiffened and turned her back to them and quickly stepped onto the sidewalk.

... Less than a block from the funeral home she made her way to an empty sidewalk bench under a tree. Nothing wrong with a little rest. She checked her watch. There was plenty of time, and these things always started late, never early. She was sure there would be a good turnout on such a lovely day, neighbours and friends and family from out of town, the old and the young all mixing together, one big happy family, and all that food. A nice get-together. It was the least they could do for such a homely mother. She took out the obituary ad to refresh her memory one last time. Confusion gripped her as she stared at the photograph of an old lady at the top of the ad. She closed her eyes for a second then looked again, and for a moment Connie thought she was losing her mind. Then she realized she had gotten the previous funeral for the young mother mixed up with this one. She shook her head and wanted to laugh and cry. She wasn’t loosing her mind, but she often forgot where she put it. It was frustrating and funny at the same time. Of course it would be a disaster to get all muddled once she was in the funeral home. She pulled herself together and focused on the ad again: Margaret Anne Lee, age 86. Yes, Margaret Anne. How could she have possibly gotten Margaret mixed up with the young mother with cancer? The woman in the photograph had no resemblance to the chubby mother with the raisin pie face. This woman was very dignified looking, with a long, slender and wrinkle-free neck and the most beautiful crop of silver hair flowing to her shoulders, not the expected nest of tight curls most older women had. Connie could tell the dead woman was obviously someone special and would have insisted on being referred to as Margaret Anne, or perhaps Margaret, but certainly not Marg, and never Marge, or even worse, Margie, which was a name for a waitress or a cashier.

Two girls were approaching her on bikes and as they went by Connie gracefully yet discreetly raised a hand to catch the girls’ attention and then feathered her fingers through the flowing strands of hair that brushed across her shoulders. The first girl giggled as she peddled past, then they both stopped further down the sidewalk and looked back at Connie, whispering, no doubt astonished by such a luxurious display of hair. Connie tilted her head toward the girls and gave them a coy smile before turning back to the ad.

Her eyes fell on the line that mentioned the dead woman’s “courageous battle with cancer.” Connie hated the word “cancer.” Hated the word because it made everybody suspicious of everything: milk, pepper, air, sun, tap water, laundry detergent, cooking pots, forced air heating, radios. There was no end to it. And she doubted all its victims were as courageous as the obituaries always claimed, just as she doubted every soldier who died, wherever it was they were sent these days, was a hero. What Connie remembered of the soldiers she had met during the war was very different from the way they were always being described in the papers and on television. She couldn’t imagine the military had changed that much. She felt a familiar rumble from below her stomach as she stood. The claim of courage would have most certainly applied to a woman like Margaret Anne
though, but it seemed everyone who died was never allowed to have ever been foolish or naïve or scared or selfish or a bully or insecure or normal in the most normal of ways. It angered her sometimes to think that fewer and fewer people had the gumption to look life in the face. The whole country seemed afraid to hear anything that didn’t lead them to think of saints and heroes. She didn’t want to think what they would say in the papers if the boy with the hickey and tattoos joined the army next week and then accidentally shot himself in the head while cleaning his rifle. She glanced up and down the street, saw that the girls on the bikes had somehow managed to completely vanish, then, leaning forward, she carefully relieved herself before continuing down the block.

A man dressed in a black suit was steering traffic away from the parking lot of the funeral home, directing the cars further down both sides of the block to park on the street. People stood in clusters at the door and on the steps and sidewalk, facing the entrance but not moving, and Connie’s heart sank. There are too many people, she thought. Well of course there are. A woman like Margaret Anne was one in a million. Dignified. Gracious. Wealthy. Beautiful. A legend in the community. Connie should have known to arrive half-an-hour early to have had a chance of getting in. Parkview could handle only 250 people, which was nothing for a woman of Margaret Anne’s stature and influence. The family should have had the funeral in one of the bigger cathedrals downtown, in one of the churches with a choir and a pipe organ. She was certain there would be smoked salmon sandwiches at the reception in the basement.

She stood on the sidewalk at the edge of the crowd. More cars and people kept arriving. The women were all graceful and beautiful in their black sleeveless dresses and bare white legs and high-heels, the men equally sharp in their dark suits and ties. Such a beautiful day and all this preparation to celebrate the life of our dear Margaret Anne. It made her want to weep for joy. And then her stomach growled once and the man closest to her turned and glanced down at her, his thick eyebrows forming a single and severe-looking line above his eyes. The man forced some air through his nose, it was almost a snort, then turned to say something to his friends. But Connie was already moving down the sidewalk, away from Parkview Funeral Home, her back to the man with the thick eyebrow, away from the eyes she would not let spoil her deep affection for her dear friend Margaret Anne.

She was already busy making plans. She would get a bus transfer so she could stop along the way and buy herself a bereavement card. She’ll go to one of the larger stores this time, one of those big-box drugstores where they sell bicycles and lawn mowers and furniture and camping equipment and televisions and eggs and milk, and where they install cameras in the ceiling instead of hiring more employees and you could spend an hour going through hundreds of cards in the “Comfort and Peace” section alone, and never once be asked if you needed help or told to leave the store. She would read them slowly. In this time of sorrow…This time of need…For your loss…Sympathy in your hardship…and never once have to come upon the words “dead” or “death.” She would need more time than usual to find the perfect card for Margaret Anne. Perhaps with a waterfall on the front, or a mountain scene. It will have to have gold or silver lettering, the kind that looks as though it was written by hand, with a feather quill, yes, of course! And an inside verse that rhymes this time. She could already see the card. And she had just the place for it on the shelf next to her bed, right at the head of the line. The perfect place for such a dignified woman.

The End