

The Eulogy

By Terrence Booker

“That was a beautiful funeral,” Peter remarked as he poured himself another glass of red wine and filled his plate with more cheese and crackers and little sausage hot dogs.

“Peter, I think you’ve had enough, now, come on, this isn’t a party,” whispered his wife, Lola.

“Honey, there’s plenty here, and nobody’s eating anyway so I’m not letting it go to waste, what is the big deal?”

Peter must have been talking too loud, as was his habit after a few drinks. In response, the distressed voice of Lola’s sister, Lily, the new widow, carried in from across the room.

“Really, Peter, how can you say that it was beautiful? there was nothing beautiful about it, it fucking sucked, it fucking sucks, and, you know what, you son of a bitch, of course nobody’s eating, nobody has any appetite but you, cause you’re the only one who doesn’t give a shit. You don’t give a fucking shit about anything, Peter. Fuck you.”

Everyone in the room undoubtedly heard this, but they acted as if they heard nothing and continued on with their conversations, or, rather, lack thereof.

Whatever rage Lily was holding inside of her when she got the news that her husband had cancer, that he only had a few months to live, that those few months had expired, and that she would now raise her children without a father, whatever rage was born of those moments and then buried beneath the veneer of civility and quiet

desperation was now gone, and it was all pointed right at Peter, her carefree brother in law who so often purported to see only the good and the positive in things that his family sardonically nick-named him Blue Skies.

“Lily, Lily, come on, Peter didn’t mean anything by it,” said Lola as she rushed across the room to take control of the situation, as older siblings often attempt to do.

After a few minutes, Peter followed his wife, finishing the glass of wine he had poured and eating another hot dog pastry.

The two women were hunched over on the floor holding each other when he arrived at the other side of the room. They were trying not to cry. They both scowled at Peter as he approached with crumbs in his beard from the crackers he had been enjoying.

He had no idea what he would say, so, as usual, he just started talking. Lola mouthed the words “go away” to Peter, who pretended to not know what she said.

“You’re right, Lily, it wasn’t beautiful at all, that was bullshit. People say all kinds of crazy stuff at a funeral and especially at the luncheon afterward, when they’ve had a few drinks. I didn’t mean anything by it. Seriously. And I’m sorry. I really am.”

Lily and Lola said nothing, and the other guests pretended to not watch or listen. But this was anything but a private conversation.

Peter continued, “You know, I have never liked funerals very much, and I’m not very good at them.”

“Who the fuck is good at a funeral, Peter?” Lily retorted, wiping tears away from her eyes now, apparently preparing for another battle.

Peter liked it when she swore. It meant she still liked him, he thought. She was still comfortable with him.

“Well, right, nobody, except if maybe it’s for some old son of a bitch that nobody liked, and he had a shit ton of money to leave everyone in attendance, then, well, if we were fortunate enough to have someone asshole like that leave us we’d, well, have to admit that it ain’t so bad,” Peter said with a little laugh.

Lola and Lily hesitantly laughed too, because funerals of young fathers don’t usually warrant laughter.

“But look, we’re not celebrating anything today. There’s nothing to celebrate. It sucks, yeah, I agree with that. It sucks. There’s no explaining why Mike has stepped out of this world and left us here, without him. I don’t know, and that priest didn’t know either. None of us do.”

“No, it shouldn’t have happened. It was wrong. The whole world is wrong.”

“That’s for sure, it’s a fucking unfair shithole we live in, I’ll tell you, I don’t know much, but I’ll fucking tell you that, it’s as unfair as all hell. The sonofabitches I see still walking around, some of those bastards should have been vacuumed up into the afterlife a long time ago, and then guys like Mike who should have hung around for another 70 years, poof, gone, like that. It’s bullshit.”

Lily stood up and straightened her shoulders, looked deep into Peter’s eyes and asked, “who was Mike to you, Peter, who was he?”

“Well, if you want to know, he was not the man described in the eulogy, that’s for sure. That person never existed.”

“Peter, now don’t,” his wife whispered.

“No, I want to hear this, well what was wrong with the eulogy?”
Asked Lily.

“It was all made up. It wasn’t Mike. He was more than those words. That was some stock bullshit they pulled out of the priest manual on how to give a funeral.”

The two sisters looked on. He had his audience.

“Your husband impacted everyone with whom he spoke, and I greatly enjoyed the opportunities I had to talk with him.”

“Really? Everyone always thought he was so quiet, a man of few words, my family said.”

“No, fuck that, maybe because those people weren’t worth his time, or more likely probably weren’t listening to him. No, I always thought, and I told Lola this often, it seemed he had something uniquely interesting, cleverly anecdotal, historically significant, and comically irreverent to say on every subject.

And I know he was much more. Traits that you share and that will live on in your children. An important kind of guy to have in this world, and the world was lucky to have him, no question about that.”

Peter walked over to the counter where the drinks were set out for the mourners and picked up three bottles of beer, walked back over and passed them out to the women and raised his glass.

“To Mike.”

“To Mike,” they replied quietly.

The women took a sip. Peter drank half the bottle, making his toast look somewhat self-serving.

“Look, Lily, the absence is cold, I know. And it’s going to get colder. Eventually, though, I hope that what remains is the beauty of what was. And that Dr. Seuss’s words will ring true -- while you may still cry because it is over, you will also be smiling because it happened.

Lola and I are so sorry, so fucking sorry, for your loss. Though we haven’t been there for you every step of the way, trust me, we are thinking about you and the kids.”

“Thank you so much, Peter,” Lily said. She leaned in and hugged him, which made him uncomfortable. Peter often expressed that he didn’t like hugging people. Outside of a parent hugging a child, there was no point in it, he reasoned. It was obligatory and simply a matter of custom. There were more meaningful ways of communicating love or gratitude and the hug was just a lazy way of doing it.

“You’re welcome, and, you know what,” Peter said as he pulled out a some papers from his suit jacket, “I actually, I actually brought along a couple of my favorite remembrance poems. I read these and some others every year on the anniversaries of my dad’s and grandpa’s passing, and light a candle. I thought I’d share them with you.”

He handed two pieces of paper to Lily, whose eyes were filling with tears.

“No, Peter, you’re right, that eulogy was bullshit,” she said in a very loud voice, handing the papers back, “I want you to read them to everyone in this fucking room, everyone who didn’t really know who Mike was.”

Her voice echoed among the silence of stunned mourners.

Peter climbed up onto the table and, commanding the attention of the room, began to read.

*When I die if you need to weep
Cry for your brother or sister
Walking the street beside you
And when you need me put your arms around anyone
And give them what you need to give me.
I want to leave you something
Something better than words or sounds.
Look for me in the people I've known or loved
And if you cannot give me away
At least let me live in your eyes and not on your mind.
Love doesn't die, people do
So when all that's left of me is love
Give me away.*

Peter's lip tensed. It seemed as though he could not speak further.

Someone handed Peter a glass of beer, which he drank quickly. He wiped the froth off of his beard with his sleeve, and read from the other piece of paper.

*Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glint on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you wake in the morning hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry*

I am not there, I did not die.

The room was silent when he concluded and stepped down from the table, being helped by two men so that he did not fall, as it was quite apparent he was not as stable as he was when he had climbed up.

He put the papers in his jacket pocket and walked outside for a cigarette, where he saw a gardener planting flowers in the freshly tilled soil.