

Mr. Jones' Burial
by Cianna Garrison

Harold Jones was a salesman. That was what I had been told. I had been briefed a little on the background of this man from my boss, who was a family friend of Jones' wife. I went into this particular service knowing far more than I usually did. His bread and butter were convincing unsuspecting souls to buy things that they did not need. He had graduated high school back in '72—but only by the skin of his teeth—and spent six months at university before dropping out. Jones then proceeded on a path of exponential failure—which included managing mom-and-pop restaurants, repairing shingles on rooftops, and working as a laborer at a meat-packing plant—until he stumbled upon his talent for swindling people into emptying their pocketbooks.

Success in his field didn't much please his family, but that never seemed to phase him. Though he had achieved some level of success, his expectations were shockingly low. Thus, in the eyes of others, he could pay to keep the utilities on and his family fed but remained an indolent schmuck.

Mr. Jones skated through life with a nonchalant arrogance that thwarted his relationships with others, including his disgruntled wife and two ambivalent sons. It was these three individuals I saw maundering about the boat in some make-shift performance of grief until it seemed they could no longer bear the charade.

Consequently, over my eight-month stint on the unhappy vessel we called Pearl, I had seen some displays of grief that were authentic and had begun to easily pick apart those who were falsely boasting a tear from the corner of their eye. The number of these individuals was appallingly high.

To tell how I began assisting with burials at sea as my main source of income is in of itself inconsequential. You see, like Harold Jones, I was stumbling through life at a meager pace, unable to hold down employment because of an “authority complex,” described to me in painful detail by my therapist. Unlike Jones, I had a rather useful skill set and opportunities were not always scarce, but I had recently exhausted these and in desperation, took the first job I could find. My wife and I were separated. She took our two children, who were slowly forgetting about their father, sometimes at light speed it seemed. So, I was on Pearl, acting as what I can only describe as concierge, wait staff, and assistant to the funeral director, all the while wishing my own existence was much more than it was.

And there she was. Mrs. Elaine Jones was walking about the boat, playing the part of the distraught widow. I had come aboard in the early hours of the morning to set up for the service with the others. Because our team took care of catering for guests, including a bar, there was much to do. The guests, including Mrs. Jones and her sons, arrived at noon sharp. Before we set out to sea, I had the pleasure of providing martinis and hors d'oeuvres to the freshly widowed woman.

The captain asked that the staff only engaged in small talk, essentially nothing more than paid flies on the decks. A professional, reserved attitude as that of a *Maître D* was a prerequisite. Observe, serve and withdraw.

To my dismay, Mrs. Jones seemed to have other ideas of what an appropriate conversation was with waitstaff. I had just served her an appetizer and instead of being allowed to excuse myself to serve other guests, I was held in an uncomfortable gaze.

“Would you tell me what’s in this?” She had caught not only my eyes but had reached for my elbow before I could retreat.

“I believe it’s kalamata olive, feta, and prosciutto, ma’am.”

“No gluten?” she eyed it like a buzzard, hungry and loathing.

“I’m sorry?”

“There is no gluten I hope.”

With composure, I explained that if she’d asked for specific dietary requests prior, they would have been met. Although I saw her soften, I had seen no speck of remorse in her eyes or her manner. In fact, I was certain she was more concerned about whether or not the wind would dislodge her little black hat from atop her head. I nodded to her, smiled, and began to turn, but again, she caught me with a ferocity of temper akin to a lioness.

“You’re a dear. May I ask what the staff gets paid for a trip like this?” Superiority was lurking beneath her taut smile. There was a curious blend, though. It was as though I was a tawdry excitement, a fresh plaything—as she was, after all, “back on the market” now that her husband had passed.

In this confusion, I had all but forgotten there were other guests. I glanced at her coolly and said, “I’d prefer not to say.”

Mrs. Jones, displeased with my answer, responded with a smirk, “I was just making a guess with my sons as we came on board. I can’t imagine this job is all *that* lucrative. Unless, of course, you own the boat.”

I changed the subject. “And who are your sons?” Somehow, my efforts to step away from the conversation were failing. I found myself giving in while I watched two of the other staff members flit about with drinks in tow.

She pointed to the two younger men standing near the railing. “The taller one is Thatcher, my oldest. The shorter is Frank.” Both men were in their twenties, slender, well-manicured, and altogether disinterested. I watched them while she asked me about my children and my marital status, at which point I excused myself with the pretext that her boys had neither drink nor hors d’oeuvre.

It was not that I minded the attention of Mrs. Elaine Jones; I found myself flattered. Perhaps, even, on another day I may have welcomed it if it were not for the knowledge that we were all working to provide her with outstanding funeral services for her late husband. This particular service was causing a very distinct kind of indigestion for which I did not care for.

“May I get something for either of you?” We’d just left port, and while most of the other guests had been served and were already on a second drink, they were empty-handed.

Thatcher Jones pushed his sunglasses from his face. “Yes, bourbon would be nice.”

When I came back with their drinks a moment later, I could hear the two brothers remark on how slow the service was.

Frank gulped his down and said, “Shame my father gets such a nice send-off.” Looking straight at me as he said this, he then ordered me to get him a second drink.

His older brother laughed in response, saying, “I was wondering when he would finally decide to give up. He knew he was a failure. All of us did.”

I excused myself before the two of them could keep me going back and forth to the bar, leaving them for someone else to handle.

The service began at 1:00 p.m. and went off without an issue. The Jones family did their best to keep up appearances, but no one on board had been spared the real truth. They were unapologetically blunt about what they had felt for the man.

Despite this, together, we spread Mr. Harold Jones’ ashes. I watched as they flew in ribbons, the sound of sandy grit gracefully departing with the sea air and resting easily on the water. I had an unusual lump in my throat. We let some flower petals fall on the surface where he’d been laid to rest.

After we’d concluded, the guests had gathered in clumps, while we served them bourbon, manhattans, and dry martinis.

“What do we do with ourselves now that Jones is gone, eh?” A stout man laughed, elbowing his coworkers.

All I heard was cold laughter, muffled as though I had gone partially deaf.

“I outsold him by a third last quarter!”

“Can’t say I’ll miss his mug at the meetings.”

“I wonder what Elaine ever saw in him. Always wish I’d met her first.”

“The bastard owed me money for a year.”

I listened, wishing for a quiet moment to fall again. But the trip back to port was not quiet. Instead, it was a cacophony.

My co-worker Karen soon came up behind me. She was silent at first. Just watching. Then she turned to me and whispered, “They all hated him, didn’t they?”

“What gave you that idea?” I winked.

She had only been with the crew for a short time, saw only a few trips, got lucky with those she’d dealt with. Eight months and I had seen more than I ever bargained for.

Her eyes widened. “Is it always like this? Doesn’t anyone care?”

I thought about this for a moment. Knowing what I did about Harold Jones, I couldn’t say much against the man, except that he was a two-bit salesman with an overblown self-esteem. He was a family man who had fallen short. An average Joe. Perhaps he never cared to try as hard as other men, but did that deserve this response?

I gave her a soft tap on the shoulder and denied nothing.

I left her there to think while I went about the boat, bringing fresh drinks and watching the crowd, in their raucous laughter, as they stood in some bizarre brotherhood, oblivious to their own inhumanity.

Cianna Garrison is a writer based out of Southern California. She received her BA in English from Arizona State University and works writing online content. She was awarded ASU's Homecoming Writer Award in Poetry in 2017 and plans to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing. This is the first time her fiction has appeared in a publication.

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