

ROY'S FUNERALS

By Marco Etheridge

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A flawless performance on every level: story, voice, character, style, prose. Listen to this for perfectly realized regional dialogue:*

Morning, are you Roy?

A-yuh, that I am.

I'm Amos Knightly. Was wondering if you could help me out. Got the wife's old mother in the back. Promised the wife I'd get her planted proper.

A-yuh, I can probably help you. What did you have to trade?

Times is lean, as ya know, but I've five gallon of diesel, a little less of gas, and some ammo. Just a dite, I know, but like I said.

The whole thing is, like, fucken deadly. Five stars.

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Roy owned the only drive-thru funeral business in what used to be the state of Maine. He hadn't planned it that way, but a fella needed to be adaptable in this world. The troubles come up from all those cities down east and they come up fast. Gangs of Cutters poured out of the big cities after everything went to hell. What with the flatlanders running north, and the Cutters chasing them, corpses started

stacking up like culch at a lawn sale. Roy largely disagreed with all the killing, but it was happening one way or the other. The days of well-dressed folk standing around freshly dug graves vanished along with the rest of what they called polite society. Where others saw tragedy, Roy saw a business opportunity.

He set up shop in an old warehouse with a big fenced yard out back. It was a sweet arrangement. The customers could drive right on in through the double-wide rollup doors. The corpse got unloaded after Roy rolled down the steel doors for the security of the bereaved. Once a fair barter price had been struck, Roy would commence the service, such as it was. Folks could choose from one of the three prayer options posted on the wall. For vestments, Roy wore a black felt hat and a clean set of coveralls with his name embroidered on the front. Headstones were concrete pavers done up with spray paint shot over a stencil kit. He used the same stencil kit to make a plywood sign. Roy posted that sign down at the end of the hot top drive:

Roy's Drive-Thru Funerals

Secure Graveyard

Cremating Done

Honk Twice

Late-morning sun washed over the graveyard behind the warehouse. The dogs were busy working the fence-line, running it in sections. The beasts stopped now and then to sniff the air. Roy scratched at the stubble on his jaw, pondering the sky and the weather. Spring was getting on, a slow business here in Maine. This was the first morning of the season without a hard frost. The ground was probably getting soft enough to dig. Roy would need to be getting to work. Some of them winter corpses were thawing out quicker than the ground. They'd be plenty ripe if he didn't plant them quick. He nodded his head at the bright sky. Tomorrow he'd fire up the old backhoe and give it a go.

Wintertime the ground was froze too hard to dig. Roy could wail on that icy earth until the backhoe bucket was stove in, and still not make so much as a posthole. Folks were pretty understanding for the most part. Once they helped wrestle the body onto the cart, Roy would run through the service. At the end he'd intone one of the three prayers from the menu, and that was that. The formalities observed, there was nothing to do but shoo the bereaved back into their rig. Everyone got a complimentary air-freshener as a parting gift. As soon as the customers drove out of sight, Roy wheeled the dearly departed outside. With the hard bite of a Maine winter on his skin, Aunt Mabel or Uncle Ernie would get stacked with the rest of the frozen stiff.

* * *

Roy saw the lead dog drop into a crouch. He was already reaching for his rifle as Blackie broke for the rear of the graveyard, the rest of the pack hot on her heels. The dogs hit the back fence in a storm of snarls, but there was naught to see. It was probably just a rabbit hopping along the verge. Still, a man couldn't be too careful these days.

He'd had some trouble over winter. A few of them Cutters tried to sneak into the place. The thirty-thirty had taken care of two of those old boys before they made it into the graveyard. The third one, he got inside the fence. Real quick he wished he hadn't of. The dogs took him down wicked fast, the big black bitch leading. Roy left them dogs to have their way. It was a good thing to keep them hungry.

The dogs swung away from the fence, alerted to the sound of a vehicle on the road out front. Roy walked to the back door of the warehouse, the old lever-action rifle cradled in the crook of one arm. He locked the back door behind himself and crossed the interior of the warehouse. Standing beside the heavy steel front door, he squinted through a small square of a reinforced glass. One quick look, then he swung his head away from the window.

A pickup was idling at the end of the hot top next to the plywood sign. The driver honked twice. Roy opened the door and stuck out an arm, waving the driver up. He watched the rig ease up the driveway. It was an old Ford, nobody in it but

the driver. There was a blue tarp thrown over something in the bed of the truck.

Roy stayed behind the protection of the steel door until he could get a good look at the driver. When he felt sure of things, he stepped outside.

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D'you have any thirty-thirty?

Sorry, no, but I do have two boxes of twenty-two mag, a hundred rounds I reckon. That and the fuel.

'Taint much, not meaning to be hard.

A-yuh, 'taint much. But the fella that sent me up here, he said some tobacco might sweeten the thing for ya. I got some cigars to offer as well. Don't know nothin' about 'em, but I got 'em.

How many cigars d'ya figure?

There's ten here, which is all I've got.

That'll get the job done for you. It is a bit lean, like you said yourself, but

you're the only customer today. Let me just roll up the door and you can drive her in.

The tarp over the bed of the truck stuck up at funny angles. When that fella Amos yanked it back, Roy saw an old biddy stiff as dry sticks, looking like she had been toppled out of her chair. Which, as it turns out, is exactly what happened.

Odd, ain't it? Found her just so in her rocker, like she was froze up solid. Musta died sitting up some time of the night. I pushed and pulled, but it weren't no good. I couldn't straighten her out. It were gawmy getting her into the back of the truck. The wife didn't care for it much.

Yeah, the rigor mortis will do that. Makes them right awkward to handle. A warm room, that will speed it up.

Funny, I always thought it was made up, like for the movies.

A-yuh, it's real all right. Here, you get her by the prayer handles and I'll take her arms. Set her right here on the cart.

They laid the old thing on her side, her forearms sticking straight out, hands reaching for nothing. Her bony knees were bent at ninety degrees, pushing a worn housedress out like a tent. Roy stifled a laugh as best he could. Judging from the expression on the old girl's face, she looked a might bit peeved about the joker what swiped her rocker.

Which words would you like me to say over her? I got them up there on the

wall. Most folks go with the Number One. They seem to like it, but it's your choice.

The fella just shook his head.

To tell the truth, the old girl had enough words for everyone while she was living. I don't believe she needs anymore now that she's gone. If it's all the same to you, I'll just get you your barter goods and be on my way.

Amos Knightly wrestled two fuel cans from the bed of the pickup. He reached through the window of the cab, fishing out two fifty-round tubs of twenty-two rimfire and a fancy-colored cigar box.

I can't promise nothing on these cigars. They were in this box; leftover from her dead husband I suppose. Like I said, I don't know nothin' about them.

A-yuh, I guess a man will just have to smoke one and find out. Let me get you a couple of empty fuel tins to replace those.

Appreciate it, Roy.

* * *

Roy sat out back of the warehouse, smoking, thinking, and counting his blessings. It was a good thing for a man to take stock from time to time. The fence gleamed in the starlight; a silver line etched in the darkness. The new moon was leaving the stars to do all of the work.

He puffed on the dead man's cigar. Roy smoked slowly, with no reason to be in any kind of hurry. He marveled at the stillness of it all. It was deadly quiet of a night anymore. There weren't no airplane noises, no trains far off, no traffic whining down the road. A whip-poor-will mourned in the woods past the fence-line. The sound of it would scare a fella if he believed in ghosts. Roy was past all that now, having seen what he'd seen.

Closer at hand was the sound of the dogs gnawing bones. There hadn't been much meat on Granny Knightly's old gams, but it was all the dogs were going to get. When he couldn't straighten her out, Roy nipped off her legs with the chain saw. It wasn't like anyone was going to miss those bony sticks. He'd bury the rest of the old gal in the morning.

All in all, it had been a pretty fair day. Sitting there, smoking a decent cigar, Roy felt almost civilized. After he finished his smoke, he would turn a few of the dogs loose inside the warehouse before he tucked himself into the little office apartment. It was the only heated room in the place. By now it would be snug and warm.

Tomorrow would be a busy one. There were holes to dig and corpses to plant. A busy day was a good day. A man couldn't help but have a spark of hope, what with spring coming on and all. Yessir, it looked to be another fine day at Roy's Funerals.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I love writing 'normal-world' people into an abnormal world. Flush Toilets! Running Water! Guess what? I believe that whatever cataclysm humans final concoct, the aftermath will be folks trying to fix the plumbing. "Roy's Funerals" is an example of this: Where do you bury Granny after the world goes to hell? The backstory is kept to a bare minimum. Who cares how society died? Regular folks still have to deal with ABC problems and super-heroes are super-boring. I guess that's the theme: The Post-Apocalypse Proletariat tending to the tasks at hand with a minimum of fuss about moral quibbles.*

BIO: *Marco Etheridge lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His short fiction has appeared in Literally Stories, Dime Show Review, Five on the Fifth, Storgy, Inlandia Journal, Manzano Mountain Review, Every Day Fiction, Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Literary Yard, Mobius: A Journal for Social Change, Czykmate, and Cleaning Up the Glitter. His non-fiction work has been featured at Route 7 and Bluntly Magazine. Marco's third novel, "Breaking the Bundles," is available at fine online booksellers.*

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