

MISTER DEAD

The setting and language of this Mass were so familiar to funeral director Pat O'Grady that he could have stood like the priest at the altar and done the recitation of prayers himself. However, after experiencing thousands of similar events, he had developed an outward persona that appeared to take in every word of the ceremony while actively daydreaming of anything else. Today, as the priest wound his way past the Our Father, Pat was concentrating on his new golf putting grip, and hoping no one was paying attention to how he was holding the hymnal and moving it rhythmically in front of him like a palindrome. Eventually, he returned to the real world as he heard the words "go in peace" and so he did, up to the altar to guide pallbearers to their appointed posts along the casket holding the worldly remains of the recently departed.

The worshipers solemnly followed the casket out of the church, gathering around to watch it hoisted into the hearse by six strongarmed men in dark suits, all of them grateful for the awning at the church entrance protecting them from a steady rain. Pat motioned to the onlookers to go to their cars, turn on their blinkers and line up behind him for the anticipated trip from the church to the cemetery, when they would weave uninterrupted in a serpentine path through the city.

Pat had experienced 30 years of minor disasters as a funeral home owner and thought he had seen them all until this particular Friday, May 2, when, midway through the procession, his beloved old hearse died. It did not really die of course, since it was just a machine, but something went mechanically wrong with it as Pat was driving it from the church to the cemetery, leading about 25 cars in the usual funeral procession line. It is one thing to clog up the midday traffic on a busy highway with the stream of flashing headlighted cars, but quite another when the line suddenly stops, blocking several intersections. After all, from a traffic standpoint, the most significant feature of the funeral procession is that it never stops.

Most funeral homes hired a driver, a kind of chauffeur, to drive the hearse to the cemetery, but not only had Pat inherited the O'Grady Funeral Home from his father 30 years ago, he had inherited the job of driver of the hearse from his father 10-15 years before that. There was something about the power rush of treating every red light and stop sign with impunity while leading a parade of cars through town that kept Pat eager to continue the business even when he had reached the potential retirement age of 62. He had never imagined a scenario where the hearse would malfunction mid-procession and that was probably a good thing or he wouldn't have slept most nights.

After donning his hat and pulling on his raincoat to shed that steady springtime rain, Pat popped the hood of the hearse as if he would know how to fix it by just looking inside. In truth, it was his way of letting the throng of following mourners know that the problem was with the hearse engine, so they would know the excuse for the stoppage. For some of the followers, he was certain this event would just restart and exacerbate the crying over the deceased who was also now stopped dead in the center lane of traffic with everyone else. It didn't take long before the blaring of the horns from the cars trying to get through the blocked intersections summoned the police to the scene. By then, Pat, his fellow undertakers and the immediate family of the deceased were huddled around the opened hood of the hearse, under a mismatched canopy of miscellaneous umbrellas, nodding their heads and muttering their condolences to the silent metal engine.

"What have we here?" said the first policeman to reach the scene. Pat gave the obvious explanation in reply. "Do you have another hearse you can transfer the body to?" The officer asked. Pat looked at him with a blank expression that said "no" without actually saying anything. The officer suggested that Pat should formulate a plan to deal with the situation right away or his ticket book would start filling up.

Pat asked Ahmed, his chief undertaker, to tell the bereaved family that they would have to reschedule the burial for another day, that they should all leave the scene now and how sorry the O'Grady Funeral Home was about this difficult situation while he asked the other undertakers and the pallbearers to help push the hearse to the curb. Once that had been accomplished they began the mundane tasks of calling a tow truck for the car and calling a car rental agency for a van large enough to carry the deceased Jack Sullivan's casket. By that time Pat's undertakers had taken control of the situation and Pat called his son, Randy, asking for a ride back to the office.

Randy, a 31 year old live at home man-child, picked up his distraught father, rescuing him from the dissolving chaos of the scene and drove him back to O'Grady's, where the place was unusually funeral, given that no one was expected to be there at that hour. One might have thought of O'Grady's Funeral Home as a mom and pop business, except that neither of the moms wanted anything to do with it. It was always a one man show, with a patriarchal O'Grady overseeing a small but competent staff. They made a good living, mostly feeding off of the relations of their dead fellow Catholics.

Pat and Randy went back to Pat's office and promptly opened a bottle of Irish whiskey, each pouring a dram into a glass as they sunk into the heavy antique chairs that decorated the room. Like many a funeral home office, it was furnished in a dark mahogany style that would have seemed familiar to anyone in the 1940's, and the small bar in the corner fit right in. Pat was a relatively short man with the typical middle-age paunch and a thinning salt and pepper pate, and the contrast with his son was dramatic, since Randy, a few inches taller, was a work-out devotee

with a full head of dark hair and a solid athletic build. But the two of them, father and son, working together on a crisis, each with a glass in hand, were a team. Yeah, it was a little early for a drink, but considering it was Friday and Pat had just suffered an unexpected disaster, it seemed appropriate. Randy began peppering his dad with questions.

"Pop, how old is that hearse anyway?" Pat was immediately defensive, saying "It is absolutely beautiful and perfect for the job. I have it washed, detailed and polished at least weekly." He didn't add that the job always went to the newest members of the undertakers team.

"Pop, how old is that hearse anyway?" Randy repeated. After too long of a silent pause, Randy walked over to a large dark wooden file cabinet and started thumbing through some files, knowing that his father never filed anything, a job he left for his receptionist/secretary, who always had Friday afternoon off. Eventually, Randy's wandering thumb found a file marked 2006 Cadillac Hearse, and he said "So here we go, just as I expected, that hearse is almost 20 years old. It should have been replaced a long time ago." Pat shrugged, "And now, at my age 62, I should buy a new one? Do you think I'll still be driving it when I'm 82? I am more likely to be the dead passenger by then. It is not like you are going to take over." Succession plan was a sore point for Pat. He had taken over from his father, but Randy had never shown any interest in the business. He was a computer geek with a good job with a startup firm working in their artificial intelligence department, good enough actually, to move out on his own. But, being an only child, Randy was twisted around his mother's little finger, and until he found another lady of his own to do the twisting, he was living with mom and dad. That left Pat wondering what would happen when he neared retirement.

"The new hearse will be an asset to sell when you sell the business." Randy said, anticipating his father's concern for the future. "Plus, the cars out there in 2025 have so much better technology, with GPS, etc. it will make your job driving to these burial grounds a lot easier. You will even be able to text message to the undertakers in the cars behind you right on the touch screen about any problems that might arise during a procession." Randy held his tongue about the fact that he would have to spend a lot of time walking his father through the complicated aspects of modern technology in the car.

"Very convenient in your business." Randy said with just a slight emphasis on the word "your" to dispel any potential discussion of his following in his father's shoes, something that seemed to rise up at times like these. He didn't wait for a reply but continued "I will spec out a new one for you, if it looks like the old hearse is too kaput to bring back to life." Even though Randy was not going to go into the business, punning wordplay on the funeral scene was second nature. Pat was too far into his second Jameson to argue.

Early the next week, Randy went to the auto repair shop to check on the status of the old hearse, knowing that he was better than his dad at dealing with technical shop talk, plus he did not have a 20 year relationship with the car. As he had expected, the news was not good. While the reason for the procession line breakdown was just a faulty fuel pump, upon further inspection, the engine needed a complete overhaul and the mechanics were only able to guestimate a figure in the \$5-7,000 range. The mechanic had the big vehicle up on a lift so he could point and explain some of the obvious imperfections in the V-8, as if Randy could distinguish that V-8 from the tomato juice version. Upon receiving that alarming estimate, Randy at first considered consulting with one of the O'Grady undertakers to break that news to Pop, after all, having to pass on bad news to people was one of the aspects of the funeral home business that pushed Randy far away from it. In the end, he decided it would be better to break the news to his father over dinner so long as his mother was there to help soften the blow.

Mom had baked some macaroni and cheese and meatloaf for dinner with a side of string beans. Just perfect, thought Randy, comfort food will get dad in the right frame of mind. Nevertheless, neither Mrs. O'Grady nor the digesting meatloaf could calm down Pat O'Grady when the subject of the report on the condition of his hearse came up as Holly O'Grady cleared the table.

"\$7,000 to fix that engine!! That's crazy!" Pat argued.

Randy surreptitiously nodded to his mother, who also instinctively knew that the best approach here was to just let Pat vent for a while. Eventually he would come around and reach the right conclusion that shopping for a new hearse was the best idea, and sure enough, he did. That conclusion raced into his head more quickly when Randy reminded him that the firm had 4 funerals scheduled that week with not a working hearse available.

Pat had no choice but to employ Randy to help with the hearse shopping once he realized that it would be a completely on-line endeavor, hearse showrooms not being a thing. Randy went right to work on it, looked for the nicest hearse at the lowest price, but with the top of the line technological features, and was surprised to land on a Chevrolet version. At least online it looked right, although Pat had trouble with the idea of spending more for a vehicle that he had never seen than what he paid for his first house. Randy walked him through the maze of on-line paperwork and next thing they knew it was being delivered the next day to the funeral home. Pat naturally wondered if Amazon was making the delivery.

Surprisingly sleek for a black behemoth hearse, the new wheels had just the right touch of chrome, thought Pat, as he admired it being rolled off of the car carrier truck. Randy grabbed the license plates to screw into the bumpers and then grabbed the keys to start it up. Pat wanted to sit in the passenger seat while Randy worked with setting up all of the tech features that come

with the 2025 model year vehicles, but Randy shooed him away and told his dad that he would "show him the ropes" tomorrow before their first cortege in the new hearse.

One nice aspect of the new wheels was that if it didn't say it was a hearse, it could just pass as a large Chevy station wagon. Randy had realized that when he saw the "reviews" section of the website of the hearse conversion company and had ordered several magnetic signs that said:

O'GRADY'S FUNERAL HOME

and the sign could be placed on each driver's side door during a procession but removed for other travel.

The new hearse had most of the usual features, like GPS navigation, blind spot monitoring (a must on a 20 foot long vehicle), satellite radio, etc. but also included a hard drive, ostensibly for downloading favorite music. Randy pulled a thumb drive out of his pocket and plugged it in to a USB port in the center console and went to work on the touch screen to upload files and then program how the files should be read and used. The steering wheel had a microphone button to press to give commands to the hearse's computer, and after some tests with it, Randy was pleased to know that the vehicle was able to hear and understand the commands he had loaded in the hard drive. Satisfied that he had done everything he could to make the hearse easier for his father to drive and understand, he turned it off and parked it in the carport behind the funeral home so that it would be ready for tomorrow when they would reprise the Jack Sullivan funeral procession from the previous Friday.

The Sullivan family and fellow mourners arrived at O'Grady's as directed at 10am Tuesday morning, lining their cars down the side street in anticipation of following the new hearse to the cemetery. Pat asked Ahmed to chat with the immediate Sullivan relatives and suggest that maybe all turned out for the best, since this bright and sunny day was a better one for a burial compared to Friday's miserable downpour. Randy went along with Ahmed to help with the relatives. While Randy did not want to be in the funeral business, as the son in a family business, he had spent a lot of time during summer vacations working there and owned more than one of the archetypal undertaker business suits. He knew that he had to be here today as a passenger with his father's maiden voyage in the new Chevrolet hearse to make sure that no problems evolved.

Pat sat in his shiny new hearse with Randy in the passenger seat as Randy programmed the cemetery location into the navigations system. Pat protested "That is truly silly, Randy, I have driven this trip hundreds of times in my life, I won't be getting lost today." Randy agreed, saying that he was just testing the system to make sure it worked properly, but his constant fiddling with the touch screen was making Pat nervous. Fortunately, the Tuesday cortege went smoothly

without incident, and soon the now too late Mr. Sullivan was gently dropped into his forever resting place 6 feet underground. Pat, Randy and the undertakers talked with the priest at the grave and handled the remaining details of the burial service, while a small group of the lady mourners, mostly members of the extended Sullivan family, gathered near the new hearse, a couple of the women leaning the back of their black dresses up against its shiny new paint.

As the funeral company entourage made its way back to the hearse and limousines, Randy told his father that, if it was alright with him, he was going to have the other drivers drop him off at his office, as he had some work to catch up on. "Do you think you are comfortable enough with the new hearse to drive it alone?" Randy asked. Pat replied, "It's not like it is a spaceship or something, it has a gas pedal, a steering wheel and a brake pedal, I'll be okay, but I might need some more instruction from you in the next few days."

After everyone else had left, Pat stood gazing over the early spring greening field of the cemetery and thought how much more he liked the view of this one where the gravestones were required to be horizontal at ground level rather than poking up like dominos. He was in no hurry to leave on this beautiful morning and took a walk along the meandering paths until he found the marker for grave of his father a few hundred yards south of the newly dug Sullivan plot. Despite his Catholic upbringing, prayer did not come easily to Pat. He stood staring at the marker wondering what his father would think about this new hearse with its technological advances. After a few more minutes of reflection and some reflexive Hail Marys and Our Fathers, Pat O'Grady returned to the new O'Grady-mobile to drive back to the funeral home.

This cemetery was quite vast and was like a sea filled with large rectangular islands separated by narrow asphalt roads requiring that you weave your way right and left and right again to find the exit. Pat had put the hearse in gear and was slowly making his way through to find the public highway when a serious male voice came through on the radio speakers:

"You ran that last stop sign." The voice said.

"What" "Who or what are you?" Pat muttered in reply. But the voice was silent.

Pat, occasionally glancing quizzically at the touch screen, proceeded out to the road, taking his familiar drive back to work. He didn't know, at this point, how to turn on the radio, or any of the other entertainment features of the hearse and was not much in the mood for that kind of thing anyway, so he drove along in silence, until the strange male voice reappeared.

"You know, Pat, those Sullivan people are going to ask you for a refund or a discount on your services because of that hearse breakdown last week." It spoke.

"What are you talking about, and I ask again, who or what are you?" Pat was almost shouting. Again, no immediate reply.

Eventually, the voice continued. "It was not that pleasurable listening to those haggling women complain about you and your company after that funeral, I hope it won't always be that bad." Pat did not know what to say so he said nothing. Eventually, the voice returned.

"On a positive note, the pretty young redhead, whose fabulous tush was leaning up against MY fabulous tush after the burial, told the lady who I assume was her mother that she thought your son was a hunk." "I must say I admire Randy also, since he kind of invented me,"

Pat was completely flustered at this point and was thrilled to finally be pulling into the shelter of the carport behind the funeral home. He turned off the engine but the electronics on the dashboard stayed alit. He finally spoke again, "Look I don't know what this is about, what kind of joke this is, but do not think it is funny and I might have to return this crazy Chevrolet."

"Don't blame Chevrolet, Pat, blame Randy if you must, but not to his face. You own this machine that Randy put me in so you own me also. We could become real friends, and I think you will eventually find me to be indispensable." The voice continued.

"I have no idea..." began Pat. The voice interrupted, "Have you ever heard of AI? Artificial intelligence?" Pat replied, "Of course, I do, I read newspapers, I watch the news."

"And don't be thinking that I am some kind of reincarnation of your father just because you visited his grave just now." The voice declared. "How would you even know that?" Pat sputtered. "This vehicle, like most today, has 6 cameras, I can see everything in every direction. Also, of course, I am connected to the internet, so finding the map of the headstones of the cemetery was child's play."

"Randy has been working on some new ideas with his cohorts at the firm and I am the result. He doesn't know how good I am and I do not want him, or for that matter anyone else to know about me. I will be your trusted friend and resource but only if you promise to tell no one about me, ever. If you do, I will go completely silent and never speak to you again, do you understand?" The voice asked.

Pat refused to answer, opened the door to the hearse, shut it, locked it, and walked to his familiar old, also black, Buick parked in the back of the lot to drive home, thinking how he couldn't wait to tell Holly about this voice in the new hearse. But after he got home, he sat quietly at dinner with Holly and Randy, thinking over and over about what the voice had said. The three of them reminisced about the day's activities, spoke of memories of other botched funerals, and there

were a few to recall, but Pat held his tongue about the voice, thinking how it would somehow know if he talked about it. But also, he was beginning to warm up to the idea of this new friend.

Finally, after a lovely dinner and a few glasses of wine, Pat and Holly settled down in bed for the night, saying their sincere "I love yous" to one another, but Pat couldn't quite get to sleep yet. He lay staring straight at the ceiling, thinking about the voice, and then he suddenly broke out in a wide grin, thinking about a theme song from a TV show of his youth and realized he now had a name for the new hearse:

♪ ♪ ♪ A hearse is a hearse, of course, of course, and no one can talk to a hearse, of course, that is, of course, unless the hearse is the famous Mister Dead. ♪ ♪ ♪

THE END

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