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funeral MUSIC

M. DAVID HORNBUCKLE

In the Pine Branch Cemetery out on County Road 14, the air tastes chalky with a hint of citrus, like children's chewable vitamins. There's a plant a little further down the road that manufactures them. Fifteen-year-old Daniel Birch plays "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" on the accordion as they lower his musical mentor Charlie Woods into the hole.

Daniel is saddened by Charlie's passing, but the death came as no surprise. Lung cancer. As he squeezes out the hymn, he thinks of Charlie's voice wheezing out harmonies when they sang old tunes together on Wednesday afternoons. He looks out at the sober mourners in their metal chairs and suddenly feels as still and flat as a photograph. After the service, Daniel shakes hands with a few people and then discreetly slips away, hops on his bicycle with the accordion strapped to his back, and heads home for supper.

As he bikes away, across the green, Daniel can make out the shape of the widow Ballard sitting adjacent to her husband's monument, where she can be found most evenings (weather permitting), knitting and listening to a battery-powered radio tuned to a nostalgic station. A string of multi-colored Christmas lights, not plugged-in, wraps ivy-like around a stone statue of St. Vincent rising above Dr. Ballard's headstone.

The Ballard funeral was Daniel's first. Charlie was supposed to play it, but Charlie fell ill just before the ceremony, and so his most talented pupil was sent in his stead. Daniel played "Galway Bay" and "The Wind Beneath My Wings." When the service was over, the widow Ballard shook young Daniel's hand and told him everything had been perfect.

Ever since then, Daniel's known throughout the town as the go-to guy for pretty much any type of funeral music. Always bespectacled, his long blond bangs combed back, and wearing on oversized gray suit handed down from his stepfather Dick, Daniel plays bugle at military funerals and organ at church funerals. All the funeral directors in town have his number and will call him. He plays "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" on trombone, "Nearer My God to Thee" on the banjo, and "Amazing Grace" on the harmonica. He gets paid between fifty and a hundred dollars for these performances, and he frequently gets out of school for them.

On a humid Saturday afternoon, Daniel plays piano for the residents at the Village, where his mother works as the social coordinator. He's starting to get used to the antiseptic smell of the old folks home, but he's still struggling to remember all their names. He does enjoy the attention he gets. The old folks ask him questions about all of his instruments. He plays almost anything he can get his hands on, and he loves the same old-



timey tunes that they do. When he plays, the old folks all sing along with him, and the more spry among them dance.

- Do you know that one, "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire."

- Sure do.

He plays and sings, drawing out 'fire' as 'fiyaah,' which makes the old folks laugh.

- What's that thing on your notebook there?

He keeps his sheet music in a folder on which there is a picture of Jar Jar Binks. He learns that most of the old folks have not seen a single one of the *Star Wars* movies, but he can discuss older movies with them, including *Casablanca* and *His Girl Friday*, which are two of his favorites.

When he leaves, as always, Jack Finley jokes darkly with him about where they might next meet.

- See you next week, if not here, at Pine Branch.

Daniel reads the paper over a bowl of Cap'n Crunch, finds out who he might be playing for soon, a way of preparing for his gigs. On his way to the obits, in the regional news, a story catches his eye. In a nearby town, workers were clearing out some abandoned buildings. In one, they found a skull and hands in a refrigerator. In another, there was a corpse whose face had been chopped off with a hatchet. There is something remarkable about that description to Daniel. Perhaps the funeral business is changing him. He's not even sure what it means to have had one's face chopped off with a hatchet. He supposes they mean the skin on the front of the skull, which would include the nose, the lips, and the eyebrows. To have ears, but no lips. Why not take all of me, as the song goes.

Back to the obituaries, he is struck dumb by a picture of a young Italian immigrant named Josephine. She is only nineteen, dark, closely cropped hair. Most of her family is still overseas, but for some reason the funeral is to be here. And she is a beauty, a classic dark goddess with that cow-eyed sense of tragedy that befitted the queens of the silver screen. Instinctively he caresses her cheek through the newsprint murmuring to himself, ah, sweet mystery of life.

Clay Davis is directing. Clay is one of the younger funeral directors in town, in his twenties. He inherited the business from his family and started running it straight out of high school. Sometimes the two of them get high afterwards, and then Daniel helps him put the chairs away.

Daniel tears the page out of the obits, folds it gently, and places it in his music folder. He walks to school, still thinking of the brooding pout of the Italian beauty, Josephine. He tries to sketch her face during homeroom, but he's soon frustrated by his incompetence, crumples the paper and tosses it.

Josephine's address, according to the obituary article, is in a quaint subdivision called the Duck Pond—by chance across the street and a couple of houses down from his Aunt Jessie's place. He asks Jessie if she knows of Josephine, if she knows how she died.

- Nope. I never met the people who live in that house. I think they just moved in a few months ago. Military people I gathered.

It's the night before the funeral. Daniel sits on Jessie's front porch and watches Josephine's house, waiting to see what friends and relatives may stop by. Maybe they know some of the same people. But no cars arrive, and around ten, he gets tired of waiting, says goodnight to Jessie and walks home.

He is to play an old hymn called "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder, I'll Be There" and "I Will Always Love You" by Whittless Houston, or more correctly by Dolly Parton. Anyway, it's all wrong. It can't be what she would have wanted. The attendees also are wrong—beehived Baptist women with too much eye shadow and middle-aged men with crew cuts and tobacco-stained

You're in quote unquote lust—with a WOMAN WHO IS NOT ONLY SPOKEN FOR, BUT DEAD.

shirts. The obit spoke of a mother and two brothers in Italy, but he can't identify anyone that makes sense in that role. Especially wrong is the one Daniel presumes to be her father or guardian—a wooden jarhead with squinted eyes. The jarhead sits in the front row, and the preacher keeps looking at him when he speaks about "the loss."

Afterwards, Clay lights up a joint and passes it.

- That wasn't the dad, dude. It was the widower.

- Aw, man. Don't tell me that. He's too old.

- If I'd known you were infatuated with her, I'd have let you see her get embalmed. You could have helped even.

- There's this dream I keep having. I know it's corny, but it's just her face. I'm curled up next to her and I can't see her body, only her face. She says things to me in Italian, and I understand because it's close to Latin, and I took Latin, in the dream I mean, not in real life. They don't have Latin at my school.



- Even your dreams are dorky. So what did she say?
- I don't remember. We just talk, you know, about stuff, about whatever.

It's been a couple of weeks, but he is still obsessed ... no smitten ... no obsessed is more like it.

To think of her name—Josephine—somehow begins to seem too crude. Now he calls her simply “The Face,” which is what they used to call Garbo. He and The Face communicate often through his accordion, his trombone, his banjo. Not the bugle. On the family's upright piano, he sings “They Can't Take That Away From Me” at the top of his lungs while gingerly working around the two busted, dissident, polyphonic keys—the A below middle C and the B-flat above. The mother asks him not to hit the keys so hard. Something in the kitchen smells delicious, but he cannot imagine eating.

He feels the malady of love festering in his heart and stomach, and he is not at all stoic. After he tastes a tear on his lip during “Abide with Me” at the Glen Yarborough service (a drunk driver, no open coffin for this one), he confesses again to Clay.

- Dude, you're not in quote unquote love. Let go of that. You're in quote unquote lust—with a woman who is not only spoken for, but dead. And I suspect the colonel is a force to be reckoned with. She's already buried, man.

- I have to find out her story. I'll talk to him. I'll tell him I'm writing a paper for school. On cradle-robbers or something.

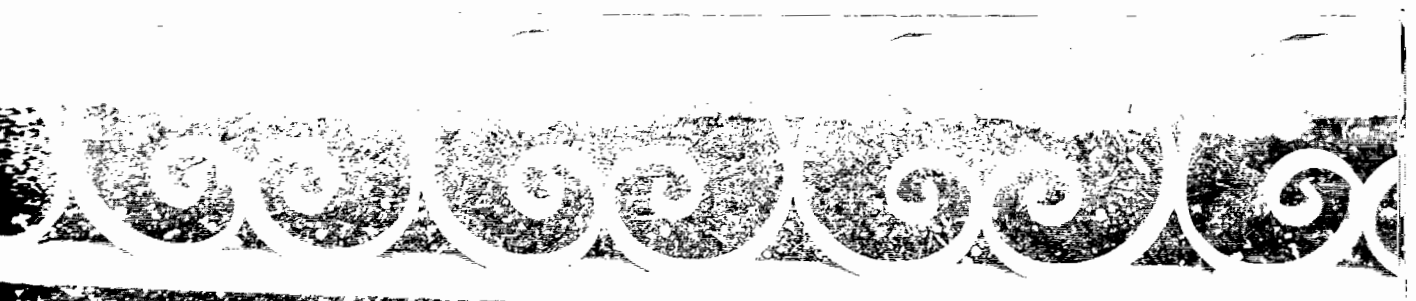
Weeks pass during which Daniel does little but study and rehearse, and nobody new dies. The now crumpled Face lives in a desk drawer, but within arm's reach of the bed. An unfortunate incident with a bottle of grape soda nearly destroys it, so he makes a few backup copies from the microfiche at the library. In a temporary lapse of good judgment and taste, he wastes one of them, using it as receptacle and tissue. The others he safely tucks away in a manila folder.

Clay calls to request his services for the Finley funeral. Bone cancer. They've requested “We'll Meet Again.” Vera Lynn. He already has the sheet music. No problem.

- By the way... saw your girlfriend's husband last night at Poplar Head. He's got a new one already. This one's Asian.

- Hmph.

He walks in the late afternoon by the duck pond in the eponymous neighborhood, and he sits emptying his thoughts into the water. Ducks become accustomed to him and consider him one of their own, duck-like. At times, one will stand next to him staring where he is staring, puzzling over what he puzzles over, but offering no answers.



On returning homeward, he passes her house, although to him it was never really her house. It's just where some retired army colonel lives with his young Asian wife.

The Finley funeral is a morning service, so he misses his first three classes. However, he has to get back to school for a trig test in the afternoon, so Clay gives him a ride in the hearse.

- Dig this. They're digging up your girlfriend. Someone suspects foul play. There might actually be some story to this story after all.

***Above, the sun is not yet awake,* AND THE SKY IS DAMP, RED, SWOLLEN, INFLAMED.**

- Who told you that?

- Coroner.

He searches his vocabulary for a response. It's so much easier knowing what to say when the song has already been written for you. Now he's simply stunned, stung, stumped.

The workers dig in the night like robbers because he goes before school the next day to check, and the hole is unfilled. There is a ladder, and he climbs down, lies on his back, breathes. He can only smell dirt, but he imagines that there is some other essence there, a connection.

Above, the sun is not yet awake, and the sky is damp, red, swollen, inflamed. The moon is white, not at all like a big pizza pie, but more like the pus-filled head on a pimple or boil. His lovesickness is coming to a head. He lies—horrified, fascinated, relieved—beneath the infected sky until he hears morning birds and then thunder. Fearing discovery more than the rain, he lets the mud, her mud, wash over him. The rain will soak his soiled clothes and cleanse him. He emerges from the grave, prepared to begin anew.

Across a thick fog, the widow Ballard softly warbles “Embraceable You” with an arm around Harry's headstone. She's probably been there all night.

M. David Hornbuckle is a writer and musician, originally from Birmingham, Alabama. He currently lives in New York City and is the leader of the M. David Hornbuckle Dixie-land Space Orchestra. His novella *The Salvation of Billy Wayne Carter* is due to be released in October (Cantarabooks, 2007).

