

100 Palms

- a - literary - anthology -

2019

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ISBN-13: 9781092117357

SHOVELS AND SONS

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Funerals are sad affairs. Shitty, really. No one ever wants to go to one.

Except me, that is. When my grandfather died, I couldn't wait to go to his funeral.

Not out of malice, of course. I loved that old geezer. In the last weeks of his life, I was the one who visited him daily in the hospital. I took care of him when no one else could be bothered because he took care of me when no one else wanted to either.

But the truth is, a part of me was kind of thrilled when he died. Because his funeral would mean my redemption.

You see, when I was seventeen, I got my girlfriend pregnant. My parents—snobby, rich, fundamentalist Christians—were not exactly thrilled. My act of fornication shamed the family name. To save face in our equally-judgmental small town, they insisted we give up the baby for adoption. My girlfriend was more than happy to oblige after my parents waved a five-digit check in her face. Never heard from her again after the birth.

But when I saw my son for the first time, lying in that hospital crib, crying, all shriveled and pink, I just couldn't go through with it. When the social worker came to take him away, I'm certain I suffered cardiac arrest. Life without him felt like death.

So, I fought for custody, and, much to the chagrin of my parents, won. They disowned me soon after.

And that's how Max came into my life. My son and me. Just the two of us.

Until my grandfather took pity and invited us to live with him. So, then there were three.

For the past ten years, I've worked my ass off to raise my son. My grandfather supported me all the way, funding my college education, babysitting Max whenever I had class. It paid off. I graduated with honors and became a successful architect. Even renovated my grandfather's house to make it bigger and better. It was the least I could do after all he sacrificed for me. He knew I wasn't some stupid, white-trash teen dad.

Now his funeral was my chance to prove that to the rest of the family, too.

In the days leading up to it, I handle all the logistics. Splurge on the grandest, most expensive coffin. Write the eulogy (it's brilliant, of course—everyone sobs). And make sure Max and I look dashing in our matching Ralph Lauren suits.

It works. When I announce that I'm hosting the after-funeral reception, everyone seems pleased. Excited, even. Including my mom and dad.

Back at the house, I mingle effortlessly with the guests. Offer them a delicious selection of French wine and cheese and flawlessly-cooked deviled eggs.

Max is on perfect form, too. Obedient and melancholy. So, when his best friend from next door knocks and asks if Max can come out and play, I say yes. He's just ten after all. There's only so much death and despair a kid can take.

"Go on," I say. "But stay behind the house." That way none of the old fogies will see.

We'll all be heading out there soon anyway. Grandpa wanted his ashes scattered in his beloved back yard. Only one step left to go.

A young, pretty blonde walks up to me in the living room. She's wearing a navy blazer and wholly-inappropriate mini skirt. Impossibly high, smooth legs. "Your son is so adorable," she says. "So well behaved. What's your secret?"

I have no idea who she is. A relative, maybe? Man, I hope not. She's too hot to be a cousin.

From the corner of my eye, I see my parents staring. My mom is wearing a feathered black hat and my dad a pretentiously-thin tie.

"Oh, all it takes is unconditional love," I reply, lifting my chin with pride. "With love, discipline comes easy." I cock my head towards my parents and narrow my eyes. "Too bad that doesn't come naturally for some people ..."

Then a tap on my shoulder. "Uh, Mark," a guest interjects. "Do you know Max has a shovel?"

My stomach plunges to my feet. I walk to the kitchen window. There indeed is Max, with a shovel in his tiny arms, ducking behind a bush.

My face flushes. "He's just playing ..." I mutter nonchalantly before walking past the guests, through the porch, and out the back door. A clamor of footsteps follows behind.

Oh God. I told Max we were spreading Grandpa's ashes, not burying them.

I race to the bush and peer behind. There stands Max with excavated grass and dirt around his feet.

And his best friend Jim, with his pants down around his ankles.

I gasp. "What are you doing?"

Jim jumps six feet in the air, screams, and falls flat on his naked butt. He scrambles frantically to get his pants up before running past me back to his own house.

In his wake lies a shallow hole, and—smack dab in the middle—a long, coiled turd.

I turn to Max. "What the hell is going on!"

Max drops the shovel, and his face turns bright red. He doesn't answer. Behind him stands the hot blonde and my parents, their eyes wide. The rest of the guests flock to the porch windows.

"Max?" I demand.

Finally, he speaks. "Jim really needed to poo."

I am stunned. I have no idea what to say. "Why ... why didn't you tell him to come inside?"

Max looks like he's about to cry. "He said there wasn't time."

I gaze at my son, wondering if I'm dreaming. After several seconds, I grab Max's hand and march him to Jim's house. I pound on the door.

His father answers. "Hi, Mark. How you doing?"

I stand there, mouth partially open, aghast at this improbable situation. At this bizarre, alternate universe I've been sucked into. "S-s-sorry to bother you," I say, "but your son just defecated in my yard."

Jim's dad stares at me. His face is blank. "Oh, God," he finally says. He tilts his head and sighs. "Not again." He turns around and yells for his son to come downstairs immediately.

Jim doesn't comply.

The dad sprints to his kitchen and comes back with a large garbage bag and silver tongs. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry," he repeats as we walk back to my yard and push past the crowd now surrounding the hole.

He bends and scoops up the poop with his tongs.

It smells. Bad.

He fumbles with his other hand to open the trash bag. Before he can chuck the feces in, the tongs split it in two. The now-segmented crap plops back onto the ground. "Jim just joined the Boy Scouts," he says, bending back down to scoop. "He's a bit zealous about some of the ... uh ... outdoor activities."

Eyes are burning into the back of my head. I crane my neck. The guests are blushing; they turn their faces to avoid my gaze. My parents sneer, their lips curled into haughty smirks. The hot girl, meanwhile, is nowhere to be seen.

"Hey," Jim's dad says. "You having some kind of a party?"

I don't answer. I can't. My eyes are glued on Max as he walks into the house and comes back out with an urn in his hands. He smiles at me sheepishly.

"I think Grandpa's ready, Dad," he says.

I nod. Funerals really are shitty.

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"I'm dangerous, too, 'cause I'm drunk driving, too, along boiled
roads bubbling hard, wet with wash water, watching out for stray musical
notes hitchhiking on the freeway..."
from LIKE SHELTER

"I was never wanted; I was two years old when I lost my mother. Barely
walking, looking at everyone's eyes, hoping someone would pick me up..."
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"What Ginnie can't articulate is how grief and curiosity morphed into
obsession as she grew into a woman and realized how much she'd
lost that cold January morning almost six years prior."
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"Atheism offered no solace for death, its weightless, painless nothingness. I
was helpless to offer consolation, and I hated that inadequacy."
from THE GRACE OF THE GINGKO

"It was there on the track, under the lights. This was the university of metal
and rubber and gasoline and most of all speed, lightning speed."
from ALCYON

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