

Elisa Molina
“Strangers at the Funeral”
10th grade
Word Count: 1,990

My father died in a way very similar to that in which he was born: naked and scowling, with his mind a billion light years away from the here and now. He passed in his sleep, the doctors had said, reading from a sorrowful script that I knew they had memorized and reiterated a hundred times over. He felt no pain; he was in peace.

If he *was* in bliss, his face showed little to no proof. When they found him in the bath tub, the water lukewarm and foggy, the Sunday afternoon sun bleeding in through the window, his face held that same familiar expression. Cutting, defiant jaw, locked beneath papery skin, withered with the sun and so inexplicably soft. His faded pink lips, cracked with too many jokes and too many stories and too many remarks laced with worry, turned down in a frown; the perfect parabola. A critical curve so fluid, one would think it exaggerated, purposeful. But that was my father's favorite mask. And he wore it quite well, I should add.

I regretted agreeing to the open-casket at the wake. The imbeciles at the funeral home had coated my father's cold skin with all that orange plastic, and I had had to refrain from complaint; they hadn't even tried to yank that scowl into an expression that near resembled tranquility. Now that he'd been boxed up, I idly wondered if any of that synthetic crap was melting off his face. It must have been hot as hell in that mahogany box of his. It was plenty hot out here, in the west section of Dignity cemetery, the sun blaring down on the small group of mourners with brilliant, merciless fury.

It was an odd crowd that had gathered. A pair of short women I didn't know in long, gossamer dresses of lavender; a tall, dark man in a three-piece suit of emerald green, a faded red fedora pulled down over his eyes; and a few other strange people, all dressed as though they had come from some extravagantly joyous costume party.

Looking around at all of them, I could only think *“Who are these people?”* I wondered where my relatives were; I wondered where my mother was. I didn't like sweating beside all these strangers, who had seemingly forgotten that dark colors were more appropriate for occasions of grief.

Adjusting my black dress with finicky discomfort, I peered down at my father's casket and found my sneering reflection in the glossy wood. My face immediately relaxed into an expression which I hoped looked morose; I had caught myself being hypercritical. I looked half decent for all of the crying and sweating I'd done. There were several reddish curls sticking with sweat to the side of my face and I could feel that uncomfortable sensation of sweat pooling on my upper lip.

But I did not fuss with my appearance and instead turned my attention to the priest addressing the funeral party from the head of my father's pre-dug grave. He had been droning on for quite some time now, his head bent into the little book in his hands. I was waiting for my cue, when I'd finally get to make use of the flower riding in the crook of my palm. It looked pretty crummy by now, its red face wilting with the heat. I smiled, thinking I could just hear my father now.

“Look at that flower, Joan. You're gonna put that on my grave? Dress it up a bit, geez.”

But that was dear ol' dad. He cared a lot about appearance, always worrying over the house, his family, himself. I supposed that was what made my mother run away; she simply didn't care about those kinds of things, which was made more than evident by her bird's nest of red hair and her generally untidy appearance. Art had brought my parents

together and eventually tore them apart. My father was refined in his taste and mother was...well, she was mother. She liked the mess.

It was strange; she had left her marriage only after I had packed my bags and hurried off to college as fast as my feet could carry me. That hadn't been when the problems started. No, those icky, festering arguments had sprung up years ago. I suspected my parents had stayed together all those years for my sake; so I wouldn't turn into a neglected, depressed loser or a raving maniac.

Ha! All that hard work for nothing, I thought, grinning bitterly, Look at your daughter now: still struggling for that PhD in psychology, living in a box of an apartment and romantically invested in a wild man. Cue tears of pride.

At the thought, I eyed Gregory, who stood beside me, rocking back and forward in the only pair of half-decent shoes he owned. I stifled a laugh. He looked so ridiculous in the monkey suit he had managed to rent. The collar was too tight around his neck and he kept huffing and yanking at the starched fabric. He was pouting more than usual this morning. I liked to think he looked like Marlon Brando when he fixed his face with that pout. But that might've been me being optimistic.

I had met Gregory at the university. He wasn't a student-he was what we called a "subject". I'd been assigned his case for study; he and crime weren't necessarily best friends, but they were on a first name basis. He had been booked for some petty theft – okay, mostly grand theft auto. And I knew from the beginning he was trouble.

He had this tangible charm, this childlike quality to his smile. And when he laughed, the blackness of his eyes held all the roguish mirth in the world. I think that was

what attracted me most to him; I wanted what I saw in his eyes. And I had gotten it, despite all the disdainful muttering of my classmates and professors.

Gregory was holding my hand, the one that wasn't clutching the ugly flower, and I tried not to notice how sweaty his palm was. He had never liked being in this kind of formal situations. But he was here nonetheless, although I knew my father would have disapproved of me bringing Gregory to his funeral as twisted as that sounds.

The clash between my father and him had been spectacular. They despised each other from the night I introduced them. I couldn't see why though; they were so alike. They both liked to cram their own ideas and opinions and thoughts down my throat, never mind that I refused to swallow them. They both liked to yell and laugh and drink. And they both scowled like champions; it was a damn talent.

But I supposed father never did agree with any of my decisions. I could recall coming to him at a young, foolish age and telling him I wanted to be a writer; he bluntly told me I would starve to death. I hadn't minded. In fact, all his disapproval only fueled my passion for literature. I had written countless miniature pieces, many of which were never seen by eyes other than mine. And I had always been fascinated with the mind and coincidentally, that brought me to a decision my father *did* agree with; he had always wanted me to be a doctor.

And though I enjoyed my studies and all that they had brought me (Gregory included), there had been an idea festering in the back of my mind—a little spark of inspiration that had long since been smothered with text book definitions and psycho-analytical thinking. It had started some days after my father's passing. I had gone to visit

my childhood home and stepping through that threshold, I remembered everything I'd forgotten.

All of the stories, all of the experiences my father had shared with me, passing each word like a chief would pass a peace pipe until the smoke of his memory clouded my mind. All of the tales behind each painting that hung on the walls of the living room, where my father would sit and read the paper and complain. All of the jokes he'd tell and all of the innocent pranks we pulled on mother, until we finally could get her to laugh along with us.

I had managed to remember the cold, distant father of my adolescence. The side of him that I blamed for all of the problems I faced in adulthood. The reason I was such a cynic, why I liked to laugh at things that were far from funny, and why I couldn't seem to click with anyone except an attractive criminal. Just bad genes I supposed and not enough love from dear ol' dad. But I had forgotten all that I loved about him-his charisma, his blunt affection, all of the precious, irreplaceable knowledge he had entrusted to me.

I recalled going out to breakfast one Sunday with my father, some months before his death. He had loved to start the day with a hearty breakfast and end it with a bath. I found it somewhat ironic that that was how he would end his life. But that morning, he had unexpectedly proposed that I write his biography. I had nearly choked on my coffee.

He had always disapproved of writing and had always fervently encouraged me to seek out other hobbies. I had never in my life even imagined that he would ask me to write something for him personally. I had thought he was joking. But he had seemed completely serious, as I stared at him over our matching plates of short stack pancakes.

A decade ago, I would've jumped at the chance to compose my father's memoir. But now the task seemed daunting. How could I properly document his life? To be completely honest, I hardly knew him. Beyond the man he chose to show me and the countless charming stories of questionable truth he had retold a million times, my father was practically a mystery.

But now, standing here with all these strangers, holding Gregory's sweaty palm in one hand and a wilting token of goodbye in the other, I vowed that I would know him. I would get to know my father. I'd ask whoever I could – mother maybe or any one of the colorfully dressed people who were now moving in a single file line towards my father's casket for their turn to lay a hand upon the lid and say their goodbyes.

Gregory nudged me somewhat roughly to set me into motion and I looked to him, coming out of my thoughts. He smiled and I remembered why I never objected to his boyish, clumsy affection. We took our place at the end of the line.

I felt the burning sensation along my lashes that only tears can bring and a lump in my throat. Gregory patted my father's coffin as though he were thumping a buddy on the back after a loss at the ballpark; sympathetic and yet loving in his own rough hewn way. I fought quiet tears as I approached my father's casket, the last of the mourners to say goodbye, and very slowly, laid the rose across the lustrous surface of the lid.

I will know you, I promised once more, my fingers lingering around the flower's stem, I promise. Even after the end.

I turned away then, before I could watch myself cry in the reflection on the casket, and went to resume my place beside Gregory. I nodded to the strangers around us, each of whom had thrown me a look of compassion as I retreated from my father's grave.

And together we watched as he was lowered into the hard packed soil. I nestled into the comfort that Gregory offered and I knew that even though I was saying goodbye, this could only be the beginning.

Word Count: 1,990