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“Pearly Gates”

9th Grade

1,947 words

I never embarked upon life with the mindset that I now hold. I never wished for this job, this morbid profession that none will ever find endearing. When I was younger I dreamed of writing stories, conjuring up magical wonders from the unknown realms of my imagination and hoping to inspire all with my fantasies. But instead, I was granted the gift of speaking for the dead, and wrapping up lives in sweet little packages—empty boxes with cliché colored wrapping paper and ribbons of equivocation.

The issue I suppose, one that I was forced to learn early on in my short career as a fiction writer, was that I never truly understood rejection until I grew up. By this time though, it was much too late. I wrote my first novel in my early twenties, gleefully submitted it to various publishing companies, and was ignored for months on end. Finally, I received a courteous email informing me that my book had been an utter failure, I would continue to be unknown to the world as an author, and it was hoped that I had a nice day. *This*, my friends, is rejection.

I received similar responses from other establishments over the coming years. The last refusal I received was from a publishing company known as Pearly Gates, an endeavor that represented the culmination of my entire writing career. In my mind, this disapproval was the end of my long coveted vocation, and ultimately thrust me in search of a new calling.

Yes, I know as a writer I should have more faith, more childlike belief that if only I try again I will succeed, for that should be as easy to believe as any of my fantastical stories. But, for me, no such thoughts occurred. I instead wallowed in my sad little apartment, drowning in my own self-pity and utter failure until an old family friend died. Then life, with its twisted wonders, dropped a token of opportunity right into this beggar's hand.

The Garcias were an odd family, full of eccentricities and disorganization. They lived just down the street from us in our small suburban neighborhood in Colma, California. Our families continued to remain in contact after I went off to college. They had a son my age, Michael. We hadn't spoken in years until he called me up, telling me somberly that his mother had recently passed. He then proceeded to ask me an odd request: would I help him write his mother's eulogy?

It had been well known at our school that I was the writer; I was the girl with the words. It was also true that Michael was notoriously known for being unable to write a decent sentence

if his life depended on it. Furthermore, I knew there was no way in hell that the remaining members of the Garcia family could put together a respectable eulogy. So, despite the unusual entreaty, what else could I say but yes?

I ended up writing the entire speech from scratch, putting in what little information of Mrs. Garcia's life I was given, and filling in the rest with inconsequential memories I had of her. By the end of my speech, there was not a dry eye in our small memorial, and it was then that I realized the satirical gift that I possessed.

I had never seen myself living in this sleepy old town, but I guess I never saw myself writing eulogies either--a fitting occupation in an area with more citizens residing in cemeteries than walking the streets. I had just started up my small eulogy business after deciding to stay in this dreary place. I was greeted with gazes of disgust and discomfort, rude remarks from the more devout members of the community, and lastly, job opportunities. You see it isn't so popular to immortalize those deemed the lesser members of society, but at some point everyone deserves to have their story told and most need help with such an action.

I hadn't quite realized how many people die each day, how many tears are shed for loved ones, and how many once harbored words finally reach the air until I plunged into the responsibilities of this job. Once I really started to live death, life got a little more solid, and joy began to pool at my toes, just like the blood of an all too common corpse.

I was reading the paper one day when a knock sounded at my door, quickly followed by the familiar flow of sobs.

"Come." I said silently, a sweet croon against the tormented tears on the other side. It was a tedious event, meeting with the family members of the recently deceased, especially since I was to soon write a glorious ending to the life of the aforementioned. I had to put myself in the mindset of one that has lost, so as not to say something untimely and rude.

An older woman appeared before me as I set my newspaper down and stood to greet her. She was a small woman, shrunken down by grief and age, but not so old as to appear fragile and inattentive.

“Please, take a seat.” I said, mechanically moving through my well-rehearsed speech. “Hello. I’m sorry for your loss. I understand you’re in need of assistance during this time of mourning. I would be honored to help write the eulogy, the commemoration of the life of your beloved.”

The woman sat, quietly. I could see the look in her eyes. I could see the view of nothingness; the view of everything, her mind lost in endless thought. And as always, I continued with my work, ruthlessly forcing the rooted being to consider the next course of action.

“Our next step is to discuss what is to be said at the memorial.” I spoke quickly as if to rip the Band-Aid from the fragile skin of an infant. “Would now be a convenient time to start the process?”

I looked on at the woman for many moments after that, waiting impatiently for a response. I was usually greeted by a somber ‘of course,’ or even the simple nod of a head, but this woman seemed to have other thoughts in her mind.

“His name was Carl.” She spoke, the words uttered so quietly through such unmoving lips that I hadn’t been completely sure she’d spoken.

“Excuse me?” I asked, leaning forward in an attempt to discern her soft speech.

She quickly shook her head, clearing her throat as if waking from a deep sleep. “Carl.” She said with a bit more force this time around.

“His name was Carl. And I’m Ruth Miller. I wasn’t sure if you’d asked. I wasn’t sure if you’d cared.”

“Excuse me?” I asked again, this time my confusion stemming from her words, not the lack thereof. It took me a long moment to wipe the surprise off my face from this comment. Sure, I knew this comment to be accurate; it was a dilemma that weighed on my conscience every day in this profession, the feeling of apathy. Still, it stung nonetheless.

But, the woman just chuckled, shaking her head yet again.

“Sorry, I’m just a bit out of sorts today.” She sighed, closing her eyes as if to recall memories of her years with Carl. “He was my husband of fifty-two years, and what a fine man he was...”

I quickly grabbed my laptop, frantically clicking at a blank document to begin the scribing of this man’s life. Oh, how I wrote, how I conjured such words! My fingers sped across

the keys of my computer like fire across an arid landscape. My words cascaded together like water-color across a blank canvas, mixing to form some oddly magnificent and perfectly muddled design—a depiction clear enough to discern beauty but strategically blurred so as not to give way to an actual image.

Ruth had been about a half-hour into the account of her husband's life, having already spoken of his childhood in some other small town in California, and their meeting at some friend-of-a-friend's dinner party. She was now embarking on the subject of his job.

“Well, *this man*, he had a way with words.” Ruth said, her posture revived as certain playfulness touched her voice. “He could write tales so beautiful and outlandish, you would've either thought him genius or insane...”

“So he was a writer?” I asked, perking up as well. It always seemed to make my job a little bit easier if I could relate to that which I was describing. I yearned to give the deceased a voice besides the questions of *what they would've wanted*.

“Oh, no...” The woman trailed off, the light in her eyes fading ever so slightly to a look of indignation provoked only from the words upon my lips. “He *wanted* to be a freelance writer, but writing isn't such a steady job, you see. He became an editor for a publishing company, bringing other people's dreams to life instead of his own. It always bothered me so...” The woman sighed, her sudden fit of passion slowly fading back to the initial sadness as she added, “But I guess it doesn't matter much now.”

Tears ran down Ruth's cheeks as silent sobs racked her body once again. I became guiltily curious as to the publishing company of Mr. Miller.

“Mrs. Miller,” I treaded carefully through her shaking sighs. “I think I may have a nice addition to our piece. How about we use some of Mr. Miller's writing in the eulogy as a tribute to his work?” I could hardly keep the delight from my voice, the excitement to read an editor's unpublished writing. I yearned to see the works of a man with a realization similar to my own—the understanding that perhaps writing wasn't the be-all-end-all—while somehow gleaming satisfaction from bestowing comfort upon a grieving woman.

Mrs. Miller's sniffles slowly dissipated as she pondered the thought for a moment.

“Perhaps...” She said quietly, though I knew her answer to be yes as soon as a smile began to spread across her cheeks. “Yes,” She said, “That would be lovely!”

“Perfect!” I said, smiling as well. “Now, why don’t you go home, get some rest, and come back by this afternoon with some writing that you feel is his most inspired work. I’m here until seven.”

Ruth nodded, taking a tissue from my desk as she stood to walk out the door. As she was leaving, something irked at my mind, some little bit of information that the storyteller in me hungered to know.

“Wait!” I yelled, the volume of my voice making Ruth jump as she turned to look at me with concerned eyes. “What publishing company did you say your husband worked for again?”

“Oh,” She said, exhaling as she smiled. “Why, he worked for Pearly Gates.” And with that, she left.

I sat there for a few more moments, contemplating her words and my current situation. I had pitied myself for so long, hating the life that had not gone exactly to plan. Sure, I’d faced a series of setbacks, but I shouldn’t have let that get the best of me; I shouldn’t have fallen into such deep dismay.

I realized something important that day: sometimes you don’t get to choose your path in life, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t find fulfillment in other ways. I had cursed the world for not allowing my dream come true, but this odd encounter with Mrs. Miller had made me realize that perhaps I *can* find satisfaction in something other than self-success, just as Carl had.