

Story 10

Revelation

Look. See here. It's a funeral home. The reviewal room and chapel are one and the same. There are pews, so it feels like a church, except for the tissue boxes at the ends. Crying is not only expected, it's encouraged.

The walls are beige, nondescript, like in an apartment that receives tenants of all tastes. Only here it's about receiving tenants of all faiths, or no faith, and they call it nondenominational – a final church for the unchurched.

Funeral pyres are illegal, unless you want to enter an oven, where an enclosed flame will tickle you to the bone, dusting you right on down to the marrow, 'til you're no more than an eight-by-ten glossy and a baggy of asthma-inducing ash. In this state you could perhaps be added to coffee and no one would be the wiser, although ash might not have that non-dairy creamer sweetness.

The whole oven and death thing? That wasn't Leroy's way. He wanted to leave something more tangible behind, something exhumable and potentially archeological, maggots and beetles be damned. They would be welcome to the formaldehyde cocktail that had replaced his blood, if they could get through the cement vault and sealed casket.

There's Leroy now, being wheeled in by two crisp men in dark suits. You'll see him in a moment, once they lift the half-lid of his shiny silver box. The men are placing him at the front of the room, where he'll be easy to spot. The man

of the hour.

You'll notice that his head is cricked at an odd angle, not for his eternal comfort, but for the viewing pleasure of the audience. It stands out against the pink satin lining, only it's not real satin by any means. That'd be too expensive to bury in the ground for all eternity. It merely has the appearance of satin and, if Leroy was alive, he'd be sweating all over its polyester sheen, what with the full military uniform he's wearing.

"He looks so natural." You'll hear that aplenty as the visitors drop in for the reviewal. You may even say it yourself. "So natural," as if it's the best compliment someone could pay the dead. The pancake makeup and blush sure beat the hell out of looking at a mottled purplish blue corpse, even though postmortem lividity is the height of true naturalness for Leroy at this juncture of his life. He never did care for keeping up appearances.

The crisp men in dark suits move about the room with practiced solemnity. It's getting too close to visiting hours to crack jokes, even though they have a million of them they're willing to share with you over a beer. But now's not the time or the place. A rude remark about the deceased overheard by unexpectedly early and sensitive ears would certainly squelch business. Instead, they busy themselves with accepting floral arrangements from the various local florists and quietly remark to each other about the unanticipated volume the Tin Man is getting as they pull extra plant pedestals from storage and jostle vases and pots around to make room for them all. "Who'd a thunk a bum could be so popular?" is the sentiment they'll share with each other when it's all over.

Leroy waits patiently through the commotion, which promises to increase shortly.

Here they come, his family. Many of today's visitors will be surprised to find that the Tin Man has familial attachments, that he didn't sprout all of apiece from a dark void of random atoms or crawl out from under a cabbage leaf.

There's Stella, his niece, and her husband, Frank, his nearest living relatives, his parents and siblings having passed from this earth before he did. While Leroy has a number of nieces and nephews, Stella is the closest to him emotionally. The others thought him too kooky to get to know. Mind you, they won't say that here in his presence. They'll make excuses for distancing themselves. "We were too busy. We live too far away." What they are really saying is, "We were afraid the kookiness would rub off."

Stella and Frank are carrying items for an impromptu memorial display. Their children, Julie and Leroy, are assisting as mini pack mules. Stella juggles a small animal trap, a beaded bag of American Indian origin, and a vase of red, white, and blue carnations. Frank clutches a hinged bulletin board full of snapshots of Leroy. Stella put it together after finding an old cigar box full of photos in Leroy's footlocker. As they open it up, you'll see Leroy at different life stages.

There's one of him as a baby, sitting in his mother's lap, looking somber in his white, gauzy dress, which is a luminous counterpoint to his dark face. There are several shots of him as a kid grinning for the camera while playing the violin at dances. Yes, he really could play, although you've probably only ever seen his violin case, *sans* violin, open on a street corner to collect change. He gave up the instrument long ago, when arthritis knotted his knuckles. His great-niece, Julie, is carrying that case and inside is the violin, now stringless. It's no Stradivarius, even though rumors to that effect have circulated about Greenville for years. That, and stories of Leroy's hidden wealth. But, there is no wealth. He was merely a guy trying to get by, and while he did pick out and pay for a burial plot in the Greenville Cemetery, Stella and Frank are subsidizing his funeral.

There are more snapshots to peruse. Here are some showing him with his Marine Corps buddies. This one is especially handsome. You can see the men in their dress uniforms. Leroy is fourth from the left. Leroy and the other guys had to pay for their own dress uniforms, fifty-four

dollars a piece, because they weren't standard issue. While considered pricey at the time, the outfit has worn well and makes for inexpensive, yet formal, funeral attire. It's a bit loose now, but the funeral director artfully snugged it up so that it appears to fit properly.

Did you know that Leroy was a fish breeder after he got out of the military? Here are pictures of him and his crew on the Mud River netting and releasing fish. Those in the business call themselves fish squeezers because they literally squeeze the females to strip them of their eggs. The males are squeezed, too, their sperm getting mixed with the eggs. It was an enjoyable job for Leroy, right in line with his fur trapping ancestors. He got to be outdoors and meet a bunch of good guys, including one Mr. Tom Twist. You remember Tom, don't you? He owns a bar in downtown Greenville.

The picture board makes a great diversion. If you meet someone you don't know at the funeral and don't want to talk, you can turn to it and concentrate hard, pretending not to notice the stranger. If said stranger insists on launching into conversation, the photos provide subjects appropriate to small talk.

You can discuss how much or how little Leroy resembles his family, using the random pictures of his brothers and sisters or his parents' wedding portrait for comparison. You could even speculate on Leroy's love life, but you'll have to look sharp in order to spot the locket-sized portrait of his love, Pomeline Foil, tucked like a "Where's Waldo?" cartoon into the fabric of the photo collage. What might pass for gossip when Leroy was living is fair game now that both parties in the saga are gone.

Stella has finished arranging items by the picture board, with the exception of the things being carried by Young Leroy. The family calls him Young Leroy in order to distinguish him from the older Leroy because calling him Leroy Junior doesn't make sense in terms of the familial relationship. Inside Young Leroy's suit jacket pocket are his great-uncle's medals. He's a conscientious kid, so he keeps

shoving his free hand into his pocket, checking to be sure the medals are still there. Crooked in his other arm is a framed portrait of Uncle Leroy in his dress uniform. Stella takes the portrait first and adds it to the memorial. Then she asks for the medals, which come out one-by-one. There's a World War II Victory Medal, a Legion of Merit Medal, and a Purple Heart, for when Uncle Leroy took shrapnel from a landmine in the rear end. Uncle Leroy used to say he didn't deserve the Purple Heart because he should've moved more carefully in landmine territory. "Damn stupid," he'd say when he talked about the incident. Embarrassment at where he was wounded was partially to blame for his feelings on the matter.

Young Leroy's legs are fidgety, wiggling and tapping as much as he thinks his father will allow. He would very much like you to notice his feet, specifically his shoes. After a good deal of searching, he finally got his brown Mary Janes, or as he publicly likes to call them, his Christopher Robins. His mom had to special order them over the internet from a company in England. He endured a bit of teasing at school for the first couple of weeks, until one of the popular kids decided the shoes were cool, particularly the fact that they had come from England, and suddenly there was a rash of brown Mary Janes appearing on the feet of kindergartners and first graders in Greenville.

The make-shift memorial is finished, minus one critical item - Leroy's pocket watch. It rests in Frank's interior jacket pocket, too precious for Frank to allow it to be put on display now that it is officially his. Leroy, aware of Frank's penchant for pragmatism and precise timekeeping, willed the watch to Frank, who had no qualms about accepting it, despite his feelings for the man in the coffin.

The funeral home attendants direct the Budsbanowski family to a back pew in order to confer with them about the details of the day. Young Leroy glances nervously at his great-uncle in the coffin and wonders if he can overhear their conversation.

The minister arrives, a young gal from the Greenville United Church of Christ. She gathers anecdotes from the family in order to weave them into a standard celebration of life service. While she was only marginally familiar with the living Leroy Jarbeau, she is adept at personalizing services such that today's visitors will think that she was a life-long friend of the decedent. The anecdotes are her salvation, although her kindness and genuine concern for all human beings, no matter how flawed, transmit the warmth of closeness that the family will cling to in order to get through the ordeal. She makes it clear that smiling and laughing are as appropriate to the occasion as are tears.

The family is given a chance to say last words to Leroy, who has always been a good listener, but is displaying the skill in especially fine fashion today. Frank doesn't have much to say. He hadn't been fond of Leroy in life and he isn't going to make a hypocrite of himself by being fond of him in death. He is here for his wife and that's reason enough for him to follow the adage, "If you haven't got anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Instead, he studies Leroy's makeup job and uniform for a respectable amount of time and quietly says, "Goodbye, old man," before making a study of the botanical specimens on display. Their intrinsic beauty isn't the attractant, but the practicality of making room for all of them in the Blazer is. Frank likes solving practical problems.

Julie is next up to say her goodbyes. She and Young Leroy tussled a moment ago over who was not going to go first. Dead bodies have a high creep factor for their tender souls, Uncle Leroy being their very first real live dead body. His silence and woodenness do nothing to alleviate Julie's discomfort. What do you say to someone who doesn't acknowledge your presence? She follows the course of her father, examining her uncle closely, waiting for him to twitch. When he doesn't, she turns to her mother and says, "Is he still in there?" Stella replies, "No, sweetheart, Uncle Leroy's soul has left his body. He'll be going up to heaven soon, but

he's probably hanging around watching all of us. Go ahead and tell him what you want. He'll hear you, I'm sure."

This news, the idea that Uncle Leroy's soul is still hanging around watching and listening, unsettles Julie more than the experience of a dead body. It is having the opposite effect on Young Leroy, who wishes Julie would get moving so he can talk. Julie murmurs a few general words about how much she liked coming to visit Uncle Leroy and winds up with a soft, "Love you," all the while imagining her uncle peering down at her and divining her true opinion of him. She has one foot in the camp of relatives who believed that Uncle Leroy was kooky. If you watch her closely during the rest of the reviewal and service, you'll notice that she keeps observing the air above her head, afraid to find her uncle hovering there.

Now that Young Leroy thinks the old Leroy can hear him, he marches up to the coffin and pays no mind to his uncle's stiffness and formality. He's got things to say and there'll be none of that whispering that everyone else engages in out of some misguided respect for the dead. If Uncle Leroy is only going to be around for a little while longer, no sense in speaking so quietly he can't hear.

"Hi, Uncle," he says. "Did you see my new shoes? I hope you like them. I wore them 'specially for you." He lifts his heel, preening unconsciously. "You sure look snazzy in that outfit. Mom let me try on your hat. I hope you don't mind. It didn't look right on me 'cause it's too big, but I bet it's perfect on you." Young Leroy turns to his mom and asks, "Why is his hat in his hands and not on his head?"

"Darling, it wouldn't sit right on his head with him lying down."

"Oh, okay. . . . Anyway, Uncle, I want you to know I'm gonna miss you. And I'm gonna miss sharing pop with you and all the candy you gave me. My favorite was that one time you had jawbreakers. I know you couldn't eat them because of your teeth, but they looked so pretty and colorful in the candy dish, and I know you got them because of me

and Julie. That was awfully nice of you.

"Mom's not gonna want me to say this because she thinks it's rude to talk about money, but I really, really like the silver dollars you gave me. They're so heavy, not like quarters. I wish all money felt that way 'cause it'd be hard to lose out of your pocket. Mom made me put them in the safe in our closet. I bet they're worth more than a dollar, aren't they? Otherwise, why would she make me put them in the safe?"

"Anyway, Mom wants to talk to you." Young Leroy leans closer to his uncle so his mother won't hear this next part. "She's getting impatient, so I gotta tell you this quick. I'm glad you wore two different shoes, even if people thought you were strange for doing so. It makes me feel not so weird about my shoes. I love you, Uncle. I'll miss you. Have fun in heaven. Here's Mom now."

Stella takes her time bidding farewell to Leroy and finishes by kissing him on the cheek, which leaves an imprint on Julie's mind that will bother her like a menacing shadow seen from the corner of an eye. Young Leroy remains unfazed by the display of necrotic affection. He wishes he had thought to give Uncle Leroy a kiss, too.

People are starting to drift in now. Frank and Stella take their places by the entry, greeting friends and family and the merely curious, who believe they personally know the Tin Man because he was such a regular fixture on the streets of Greenville. Like the sudden removal of lamp posts or stop signs or an unusual tree in the park, the death of the Tin Man has caused the merely curious to realize that they can, indeed, miss that which is normally overlooked.

Perhaps this is how you feel as you sift through the crowd looking for recognizable faces. While you've gotten pretty familiar with Greenville during your stay, there are plenty here who do not register with the memories you have on file. In fact, individuals you meet today may not properly register later should you run across them, the volume of new faces being too much for your overworked dendrites

to latch onto. Instead, you focus on those you do know and make polite, but inconsequential conversation with those you don't, opting for the role of observer whenever humanly possible.

Greenville's mayor, Tallulah "Loofah" Lufkins, manages to stop by, as well as several city council members. Somehow they've arranged to come in shifts so as not to give the appearance of conducting an unofficial meeting. Through a bit of artful eavesdropping, purely defensible behavior when done at a public funeral, you manage to gather that Leroy Jarbeau attended city council meetings at least twice a month for years, going back as far as anyone can remember. Oftentimes, other than a reporter from the *Greenville Gazette*, he was the only citizen in attendance – the sole persistent voice speaking on behalf of Every Man.

This is not the only thing you learn about the Tin Man. The owner of Spolvero Meats, Dan Spolvero, reveals to his sister, Nancy, and her husband, Rudy, that the Tin Man used to come into the store regularly, mostly to chat. If he had enough cash from his Social Security check or from recycling aluminum cans, he'd buy a few sausages or a rib-eye steak. For Christmas, he'd get a jar of pickled herring. Dan admits that he felt sorry for the old guy, which led him to slip a little extra into the butcher paper packages he wrapped up for the Tin Man. The happy result of this small action made Dan feel generous, like he was doing his part in alleviating hunger, and added a few much-needed calories to the Tin Man's diet.

You ask after Rudy and Nancy's daughters and discover that they are at home with a sitter. Nancy explains that the girls are too young to attend a funeral for someone they did not know. Dan, Nancy and Rudy excuse themselves in order to view the body and you continue to mingle at the edges of small conversational clusters.

Maureen Lestico is telling Mayor Lufkins that Leroy's house belongs on the National Register of Historic Places while she balances a toddler on her hip. Those museum

types, they're always trying to save buildings. She does make a good point when she says that the houses of ordinary people are rarely deemed worthy enough to save. The houses of poor people, like the Tin Man, are considered even less worthy, but by saving only the impressive homes, society's picture of history gets skewed. This is part of Maureen's argument and you know that it's going to take far more convincing to get the city council to buy into her plan of making the house an informal tourist attraction. As you listen to her explain how this can happen in a practical, low-cost manner, you wonder about the child she holds. Is this the one she fished out of the river?

Behind you, sitting at the end of a pew, a woman startles you by responding to your question. "No, that's not the same child." You didn't think that you had uttered your question aloud.

"Sorry," the woman says, "I didn't mean to pry, but I'm in scanning mode and happened to catch your thought. People are more open to the other side during funerals, less guarded in general, because of all the emotion." Before you can muster a reply, she says, "Maureen is a foster mom now. Dolly is her first foster child."

Ah, yes, how could you forget? This is the librarian/medium with the exotic name – Araminta. It's time for a test. You think: *What happened to the river baby? What was its name again?* And you wait for an answer.

"Maureen called the baby Reed, but that wasn't his given name. The mother doesn't want his real name released for privacy reasons. She has him back and lets Maureen visit when she likes. Aunty Momo, she is. It was a desperate situation that got out of hand, but seems to have straightened itself out well enough." She looks at you with a gaze that could drill for oil and says, "You know, playing a game of 'Test the Medium' is old hat. Why don't you ask me directly?"

It's your turn to apologize and you do so, following up with another question. This time you ask aloud. "Is he still

here?" You gesture toward the casket.

"Oh, sure. Why wouldn't he be? You don't have to be a medium to feel his presence in the room. All of us are carrying some of Leroy's energy with us. He'll stick around as long as a bunch of us are gathered and concentrating on him. See that girl over there?" She points to Leroy's great-niece, Julie, and says, "See how she keeps glancing at the ceiling? She thinks he's up there, but he's really surrounding us. The soul does not stay the same size as the body, but expands and diffuses after death."

Suddenly, Araminta sits up and eyes the entry. You follow her attention. "I've been expecting him," she says, and stands to go join a young man who is giving his condolences to Frank and Stella. It's Monroe Dobbs, the sound healer.

There was quite the hubbub in Greenville when he decided to stop his healing sessions and move in with his sister. You watched the story closely in the *Greenville Gazette*. His church and his manager, Sheldon Rhodes, tried to sue him for breach of contract. As it turned out, there were plenty of contracts, but not one specifically with Monroe, even though one was produced. As the case progressed, it was revealed that Emanuel Dobbs, Monroe's father, in cahoots with the manager, had drawn up a contract after the fact in order to bolster their case and had forged Monroe's signature to make it look legitimate. The contract wasn't the real issue. Unpaid employment taxes and child labor laws were. The judge ruled that the church, manager, and Emanuel had been taking advantage of a minor, and found all parties guilty of tax evasion. The requisite penalties and interest were tacked onto the back taxes. Emanuel and Sheldon were fined for the forgery and the church was directed to start a trust fund for Monroe using proceeds earned from the healing sessions. Further, the judge appointed Monroe's sister Jenna as his guardian.

You wonder at the sort of conversation that might take place between a medium and a sound healer. As your imagination gets going, it's short-circuited by the sight of a man

doing an impression of a tattered rag. He's faded, holey, and frayed around the edges. The chapel isn't big enough for him to hide in, but he's doing his best to tuck himself into corners where no corners exist. Unkempt though he is, with his long, kinky graying hair, full beard and moustache, he reminds you of the western world's stereotypical image of an old Biblical character. He's already got the sandals; all he needs is a robe.

Sandals. Current weather conditions, six inches of the season's first snow accessorized by a plunging thermometer, preclude the use of sandals for anyone in their right mind. Ah, but you've heard that this guy isn't in his right mind. The sandals have tipped you off. This is the man that everyone calls Johnny Jesus Boots. Until this moment, you have not encountered him in the flesh, but you've heard plenty about him. He's known as a street crazy, but boards at a group home. He is let out often enough to cause perpetual anxiety in those wearing masks of comfortable sanity. He does this by inflicting them with his peculiar brand of religiosity, but he doesn't do it directly, like an evangelical preacher would. He does it by means of an interior monologue that rambles forth, vocalized in such a fashion that it draws you in, enchanted.

Johnny Jesus Boots has found himself a chair at the back of the chapel, where he is rocking and maundering. As you move closer to him, you hear him proselytizing.

"Gotta accept Christ, gotta accept Christ. Too much sin, repent, repent. Forgive me Father, for I have sinned."

You are not certain that he's aware of the event going on around him, of the dead body at the front of the room, until you catch his next words.

"Going to our Savior. Tin Man. Going to our Savior. Holy, holy, holy Lord. Uh oh. Tin Man. Forgive him Father, for he has sinned. It's not the sinner; it's the sin. Sinner. Sinner." He sees that you are staring at him and finishes with, "Sinner."

You back away. Your own mask of comfortable sanity

has slipped and you search the room for a means to reattach it. You find it in the form of Lenore St. Cyr and Sully Clark, who are moving gracefully amongst the crowd, talking with acquaintances, admiring the flowers, and telling Leroy Jarbeau that he looks so natural. They interact with one another in such consonance that some might assume they have long been married. This is not the case. They are simply friends who are leading each other back to the path of fruitful living. Sully is drinking less and Lenore is taking courses that will allow her to finish her teaching degree – small maneuvers that grow a yard of hope and a foot of happiness. Their joy is enough for you to shake the apprehension caused by Johnny Jesus Boots.

A commotion that you cannot ignore erupts near the coffin. One of the crisp men in dark suits is directing some heated words toward a group of children. You can't make out the words, but you can tell they are heated from the creases in the crisp man's face. You and much of the rest of the crowd push forward to ascertain the reason for his annoyance. After bobbing and tiptoeing to get a better view through the heads that separate you from the action, you recognize the children. It's Chris Dickle and her merry band of buddies. They appear to have a large, black garbage bag filled practically to bursting. Chris is waving a smashed pop can in one hand, trying to convince the crisp man that she has every right to leave her group's collection of cans for the Tin Man. The room goes silent, everyone suddenly struck mute by the unfolding drama.

"You'll do no such thing," says the crisp man. "Now turn around and take that filthy bag out of here before I throw you all out. It's disgraceful."

Chris replies with, "It's not disgraceful and we're not leaving. It's the Tin Man's funeral, not yours, and the Tin Man would appreciate the gesture."

"It may be the Tin Man's funeral, but I work here and what I say goes. Where are your parents?"

"Our parents have nothing to do with this."

"They will when I get through with you."

"Excuse me?" Stella roars from the back of the chapel. With her hands on her hips, she cuts through the crowd, elbows promising to jab whoever gets in her way. "Are you threatening these children?"

"No, ma'am, I just . . ."

"You just nothing. I'm paying for this funeral and these kids have my permission to leave their bag of cans for Leroy. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." The crisp man sulks off.

"Go ahead now, children, find a good place to put your bag," says Stella. "Make sure everyone can see it."

Chris asks, "Can I put some on the coffin, please? If it's not too many?"

"Sure, darling. Knock yourself out. Leroy would've gotten a kick out of it."

Few eyes remain dry in the chapel as Chris reverently places four crushed pop cans in a line on top of the Tin Man's coffin. Even Tom Twist, that tough old fish squeezer, grabs a tissue from the box sitting next to him on the front pew.

Are you surprised to see him at the funeral? You shouldn't be. If the Tin Man could speak, have a few final words with you, he'd say, "Tom's a good man. He did the right thing."