



EDWARD A. WILSON

LAST RITES

by M. L. Graham

"Did a nice job on his face, didn't they, Fern?" Inez Zapano said. "Couldn't even see them purple veins in his cheeks."

"Good God, he looks just like paraffin to me," Fern Sinclair replied. "Them alcoholics never learn until it's too late."

"Shhhh!" hissed a woman in the pew ahead. She wore a hat laden with plastic fruit and represented a platoon of obese women who cooled themselves with hand fans. "Pay attention to Reverend Lamperly's service."

Oh, these goody goodies burn me up, Fern said to herself. Ted barely under the effects of the embalment and they've got to make him out like he's on his way to the pearly gates. She sighed. That Wilkenson Family's claimed another one.

"We all knew Ted, and we grieve for his soul," Reverend Lamperly intoned. "He was not a religious man, but deep down, where it really counts, he was a good man. One of God's children."

"He can't be talking about the Ted we knew," Inez whispered to Fern. "Still owes my Saviour ten dollars."

"I think he reads from a script," Fern said. The plastic-fruit lady again turned and scowled.

"The devil's elixir!" thundered Reverend Lamperly. "I have seen it at work in our fair community. It will drive a good man to the depths of despair and ruination."

A curtain behind the casket rustled suddenly and Reverend Lamperly looked up from his volume of scripture.

"Oh my God, Fern, look," Inez whispered. "It's the Captain. And, oh, he's drunk. How embarrassing for Millie."

The two looked at the woman who sat beside them.

Mildred Shook clung desperately to middle age. She wore thick-lensed, though fashionable rhinestone glasses, pointed at the corners, and her thin face featured a product mix of Revlon ware, in a number of places overly applied. She screwed her mouth into a frown, leaned to her right and whispered to Fern, "That silly son-of-a-bitch, I'll kill him."

Dressed in a worn pinstriped suit and carrying a dusty and sunfaded fedora, the man who had interrupted the Reverend's evangelism pushed his way through the curtain, paused, and looked philosophically into the casket. "Why you old piker, I told you that Wilkenson Family was gonna do you in, now didn't I?"

"Sit down!" a pelting voice from the congregation yelled. The Captain looked up, surprised.

Millie stood and snapped her fingers. "Captain, over here, and watch those flower sprays, damn you."

The Captain sidestepped the casket as if he was walking on rain-sodden turf. When his foot tripped on a tripod stand that held a wreath, the wreath tumbled off and rolled down the aisle spilling carnations left and right.

"Horse's ass!" he snapped as he bent over and gave chase. He caught up with the wreath in the third row of pews and hurriedly returned it to its tripod, which, naturally, collapsed.

Reverend Lamperly's rolling eyes searched the ceiling for God's kindest understanding.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders, wobbled down the aisle and flopped beside Millie.

"Gee-zus Christ, Captain," Fern lamented, leaning across Millie's lap. "You ain't never gonna make the grade, you know that?"

The Captain crossed one leg over the other nonchalantly and set the fedora in his lap. "Why the hell didn't you tell me Ted's service started at noon, Millie?"

Millie pushed out her bony chin. "I did tell you Ted's service started at noon."

The Captain stroked a wayward wing of his hair. "Could least've told me the service was going to be here in the Rose Room. Chrissakes, I been sittin' for the past twenty minutes through some old beet farmer's funeral next door."

Millie shook her head in disgust.

Reverend Lamperly interlocked his stubby fingers and rested them reverently upon his chest. "We shall now hear an arrangement from Brother Merton. He will be accompanied on the Regency pipe organ by Sister Buchanan."

"This ought to be good," the Captain mumbled and recrossed his legs.

A rangy man with deeply-sunken eyes walked to the front of the chapel and began to sing "I Walk in the Garden Alone." Midway through the first verse the Captain's hat tumbled off his knee. He bent over to retrieve it.

"Quit your squirming," Millie whispered.

"I ain't squirming," the Captain retorted, his voice a scratchy growl.



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The organist hit a flat C, and the fruit-hat woman turned with a glower. "Must you continue to disrupt?"

The Captain closed one eye defiantly. "How'd you like that hat of yours harvested?"

"Well!" the exasperated woman huffed. "I never!"

"I'll bet you ain't," the Captain replied.

Millie thrust a sharp elbow into the Captain's side. "Pipe down, you're making a scene."

"Ted would've liked that Millie," the Captain said defensively.

When the lugubrious music ended, Reverend Lamperly reclaimed the pulpit. He advised those traveling to Whispering Meadows to do so with their automobile headlights turned on. Pallbearers then collected around the copper-tinted casket and carried it to a Hearse.

Millie and the Captain, Fern and Inez climbed aboard Saviour Zapano's 1957 DeSoto.

"Why the hell didn't you come to the service, Saviour?" the Captain snarled as he stumbled into the back seat. "Pay your last respects to Ted?"

"I got my reasons, Captain," Saviour said. He bent forward and adjusted the car's radio dial. "Me and funerals, we don't get on so good. Gives me the creeps, the way they always got them damn fat sopranos singing. And besides, the Cubs are at Wrigley. Got 'em on the radio right now."

"He's a card, Millie, this guy, I tell you," Inez complained as she rummaged through a red saddlebag purse. "Where the hell's my Old Gold's?"

Millie unzipped her purse, found a Chesterfield King and inserted it into a black cigarette holder. "Captain, be a gentleman and light me and Inez up."

The Captain searched one of his sagging coat pockets, pulled out a cigarette lighter and peeled the top back. He thumbed the spark wheel half a dozen times until the lighter lit, and he pushed the flame into Millie's face.

"Good God, hold it still. You nearly got my eyelashes," Millie grabbed the Captain's wrist and steadied the lighter, then inhaled deeply. She launched a towering plume of Chesterfield King smoke into the air. "See you got them morning after shakes again. Hasn't Ted's passing been any kind of a lesson to you?"

The Captain extended the wavering flame to Inez's searching Old Gold. "Sure it has, Millie. I quit that Wilkenson Family bourbon weeks ago. Stick to Jubilee port now." He chuckled, snapped shut the lighter and put it back into his pocket.

"Poor Ted had a hard life," Inez said, blowing out a puff of smoke. She reached forward and turned the radio volume down.

"But what about poor Madge?" Fern countered as she rolled the back window down. "Living with Ted must've been hell. You know them alcoholics."

Millie and Inez exchanged subtle glances.

"What's the score, Saviour?" the Captain asked.

"Phillies got 'em by a run, Captain. Bottom of the sixth."

Inez rolled her eyes and looked ahead at the Hearse. "Oh it must've been hell for Madge, what with losing her little Tony. Now Ted."