

"Hasn't been that long for Tony," Millie said, the cigarette holding in her mouth pointing to the car's ceiling. "I remember reading about it in the Tribune. Ted had took little Tony down to the freight dock to show him off. And you know that trucker bunch. Ted got to nippin' Wilkenson Family and carrying on with them scurvy dock workers, and before you know it, little Tony'd wandered off."

"They say that semi-truck run right over his head, Millie," Fern said with a grimace.

Saviour pulled his red and white DeSoto into the funeral procession, then looked into the rearview mirror. "Was a Peterbilt, Captain. Damn mighty fine long-hauler."

The Captain, preoccupied with some kind of insect that scrambled for its life on the floor-board, did not reply. He lifted his leg and stomped.

"Got'im!" The Captain hauled up the crushed body and inspected it.

"Oh, he's an entomologist now, is he?" Fern said sarcastically.

The Captain shook his head. "There you go again, impressin' us all with them seventy-five cent words." He threatened Fern with the bug and she screamed.

"Goddamn it, Captain, knock it off," Millie shouted. "You're behavin' like one of the grandkids."

The Captain flicked the bug out of the window.

Inez sighed. "And now Ted passing away with one of them cerebral hemorrhages. At least Madge's still got her little Suzie."

"Suzie?"

"Oh sure, Millie, didn't you know?" Cutest little Chihuahua you ever saw. Fits right inside a tea cup."

"Oh, ain't that cute," Millie said. "A tea cup. Hear that, Captain? Madge's got a cute little Chihuahua. Bet it's a far cry better pet than that dirty little Elvis we got."

"Elvis?"

"Yeah, the Captain's oversexed parakeet. Oh God, Inez, you ought to see what that bird does with its plastic swing. Why, I keep the grandkids out of the room when they come to visit."

Saviour let out a howl. "Ernie Banks just got a base hit, Captain. Now they'll show them Phillies."

Inez shook her head. "Baseball. And his best friend's being shipped off to Whispering Meadows."

"That calls for a little nip, Saviour," the Captain said and pulled a flask out of his jacket.

Millie vented a narrow jet of Chesterfield King smoke through her pursed lips. "Captain, you ain't got long. Why it's barely past noon and you're already nippin'."

The Captain took a pull on the flask and passed it forward. "One for Ted, eh Saviour."

Saviour grasped the flask. "Thanks, Captain." He tipped his head back.

"Saviour!" Inez screeched. "The Hearse! Watch out!"

Saviour hit the brakes and his passengers threw up their arms. The car squealed to a stop.

"Captain, you're gonna get us all killed," Millie shouted. "We damn near collided with Ted."

"I ain't drivin', Millie."

"No, but you're distracting Saviour. I'll tell you, Captain, you ain't got long. They're gonna be plantin' you up at Whispering Meadows beside Ted. I warned you about that esophagus of yours. Now you mark my words. A man can't drink at noon like that and not damage the esophagus. Why, Fern, that's a well known medical fact."

"I'm hearing you, Millie," Fern agreed. "Ted's esophagus surely would've done him in if that vein in his head hadn't exploded first."

"Jesus Christ, Millie, I told you it was that damn Wilkenson Family bourbon," the Captain retorted. "That's what got Ted. Why Saviour and me, we're drinkin' fortified. It's made with the heart of the burgundy grape. Anybody who's got any sense at all knows burgundy is good for you. Builds up the blood, don't it, Saviour?"

"Good God, Captain, I've heard it all now," Fern said. "Alcoholics is always making up some kind of excuses."

The Captain rocked his head to one side. "How the hell come you know so much? You some kind of registered nurse?"

"Captain!" Millie shouted. "That ain't no way to talk to your sister."

"Millie's right, Captain, you haven't got long," Fern concluded. "Why, the university's gonna want that pickled body of yours donated to science. You're gonna be put on a cement slab and cut up into little pieces, and you know something, Captain? Every little piece of you is gonna reek of booze."

"I'd rather reek of booze, Fern, than of mental retardedness."

"Captain!"

"That's all right, Millie. My time at Wentworth was very restful. They taught us how to cope with insults from lowlife like this."

"She's still nutty as a fruitcake," the Captain whispered to Saviour.

"You watch that tongue, buster," Millie warned.

"How them Cubbies doing, Saviour?"

"Ernie Banks just stole second, Captain, and a sacrifice got him into scoring position."

"Wouldn't mind being at Wrigley right now, Saviour. Can't say that I cherish the damn funerals."

"You better get used to them, Captain," Fern snapped. "You're gonna be next."

"Shit!" Saviour cursed.

"What the hell's the matter now?" Inez asked.

"Ernie Banks just got throwed out at home."

The Captain chuckled. "Well, they'll get 'em next inning, Saviour." He took another nip, sputtered his lips and corked the flask. "Poor old Ted. Should've stuck to fortified. Had he done that, might've got that twenty-five bucks back I owed him."

Millie sucked in on her Chesterfield King and exhaled. Smoke steamed out of her flared nostrils. "Madge never forgave you, Captain, for taking Ted to that spaghetti feed at St. Patrick's and coaxing him to have a glass of wine. She says that's what got him back on the sauce. You ought to be damn proud of yourself."

"Well, there you go again, Millie."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"You're jumping through conclusions. That wasn't my fault. One of the nuns poured him a glass of vino. Catholics! Should'a seen what those pikers charged for a plate of that wormy stuff." He tapped Saviour on the shoulder. "And you think Jews is the problem of the world."

Now what's wrong with Catholics," Fern demanded.

"Spaghetti dinners for one. That and them holier-than-thou nuns. Why, it's the trouble of the world today, ain't that right, Saviour?"

"Saviour's a Catholic, you damn fool," Fern said in disgust.

The Captain shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I don't hold that against him. Hell, he's a Cub fan, ain't he?" He hauled out a crusty handkerchief, hawked, then spit into it.

Did I tell you, Fern? He's spittin' up blood again," Millie said. "Want him to see Doc Fornbrusher, but you know this goon."

"Probably the liver," came Fern's laconic conclusion.

"Chrissakes, Millie, there's another damn Catholic for you. I'm an old merchant sailor and I don't need to see no Doc Fornbrusher. I'm healthy as a bull." He nudged Millie and winked. "As virile too."

Millie jammed her elbow into his ribs. "Knock it off, Captain. This here is Ted's last rites and you ain't suppose to be clownin' around." She turned to Fern. "I tell you, they're gonna come for him soon. They'll take him away in a padded van. Haul his crazy ass off to the booby hatch."

"It's his brain cells, Millie," Fern said. "A man who drinks at noon loses them fast. Well known medical fact."

"Shit!" Saviour cursed. "They walk Green to get at the pitcher, and what does Sanford do but hit a homerun." He reached for the dial and flicked the radio off.

The Hearse wound its way down Route 17 and crossed a one-lane bridge.

"Well, I can smell the clay banks of that putrid Surps Canal," Millie said sardonically. "It's a wonder this bird here ain't down there fishin' today instead of attendin' Ted's funeral."

"What do you suppose Madge's gonna do now without her breadwinner, Millie?" Inez asked.

"Probably what I've been doing the past two and a half years. Skimp."

Inez looked down at her lap. "I hear you, girl. Take a look at the dress I'm wearing. Christ. Looks like I'm on relief."

Saviour glanced over. "There's nothing wrong with that dress. Besides, I gotta make payments on the DeSoto."

"Fine automobile, Saviour," the Captain said. "Of course it don't stack up to a Packard."

Millie laughed. "You can't compare that wreck of yours to Saviour's car. If I don't look like something, Inez, sittin' on that damn orange crate he's got me for a seat."

Saviour looked into the rearview mirror. "What did happen to the front seat, Captain? How come only half of it's there?"

"The accident, Saviour. Easier to just cut half the seat off. Junkyard Floyd wants twenty-five bucks for another one. No way."

Millie shook her head. "I tell you, this bird's gone around the bend. Who the hell ever heard of a car with half a front seat?"

The Captain turned to Millie. "You don't know a damn thing about automobiles and you know it."

"I know enough to know yours is a wreck."

"Why don't all of you just quit your arguin'," Saviour said. "This is Ted's procession and we ought to be thinkin' about him."

"He's right, Millie," Inez said.

The Captain fished around in his coat pocket for the flask. He uncorked the cap and took a long swallow.

"You're a despicable lush," his sister, Fern said.

"And you're as loony as a hoot owl. Pop always said that."

Millie ashed her cigarette on the DeSoto's floorboard. "Captain, shut up before I knock you flat. And you, Fern, sister or no sister, you can't call my Captain a lush. Who the hell you think you are? Some kind of counselor?"

The Captain crossed his legs, trying to get comfortable. "Thanks, Millie." He sniffled. "Sure gonna miss fishin' with old Ted. Him and me solved a lot of the world's problems at the old Surps Canal. A real shame he had to die. Felt this way when Pop died." He dropped his head and began to sob.

Millie turned and looked out the window. Inez found a handkerchief and wiggled her nose with it. Fern looked at her brother with disgust. He was going to end up the same way as their father, dead of cirrhosis at age fifty-one. The Wilkenson Family saga, she called it.

Saviour reached forward and turned the radio back on. It was the seventh inning stretch and the fans at Wrigley were singing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."

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LOUIS-LEOPOLD BROILLY, "PERFECT BLISS" (1826)