

KARL HARSHBARGER

*The Funeral*

The wind almost blew Peterson's hat away.

Holding his hand over it so as not to lose it, he ran down the dirt path of the *Allee*, across the cobblestones of the courtyard and up the steps of the church. As he pulled open the heavy wooden door, the rain broke in waves behind him.

Inside the vestibule a woman holding the programs waited for him as he shook off his coat and hung it on one of the pegs along the wall.

"*Danke sehr*," said Peterson taking a black-edged program.

The interior of the church looked similar to other churches Peterson had seen in Germany, long and narrow with high-arched pillars and benches squeezed between the pillars.

He lowered himself into one of the benches at the rear, studied the people in the rows ahead of him and finally found the back of his wife's head. He slipped out into the aisle, walked up it, paused at the entrance of the correct row, waited until the people there readjusted themselves and threaded his way through. As he sat down, he happened to look at his shoes and saw they were covered with mud.

"Your shoes," whispered his wife.

"Yes, I know," he whispered back.

She reached in her purse and produced some tissues. "Here."

He bunched the tissues together and tried to clean his shoes as best he could, and when he was done, looked up to the front of the church. The polished, brown wooden casket with its brass metal railings seemed as if it were almost floating in a cushion of flowers which spread outward to even more flowers and tropical bushes with broad leaves—so that the whole mass of foliage resembled an exotic forest. Tall, white candles flanked the bushes on each side, and the brass candleholders matched the brass of the casket railings and even the metal of the organ pipes spreading upwards on each side. Beyond this, just below a tall, golden and red stained-glass window, the figure of Christ hung from the cross.

Suddenly Peterson heard the beating of the rain on the roof. The organ must have been playing all this time, he realized, filling the church, then the music had stopped, and now the sound of rain had replaced it.

His wife reached out and took the dirty tissues out of his hand.

Peterson stared at the casket seemingly floating among all those flowers. He didn't know the deceased and had only come along to this funeral in order to keep his wife company. Still, each time Peterson went to these ceremonies he found himself wondering if the body was really up there in the casket. Perhaps it had been hidden away some other place. Or, even more absurdly, perhaps the person wasn't dead at all but had gone off somewhere—maybe to South America. Of course, in most funerals in the United States they left the coffin open until the very end so that when you came into the church you could actually see the person you used to know. But, even so, even in those cases, he remembered still wondering if that thing up there wasn't somehow a fake, maybe fashioned out of paraffin.

Organ music flooded the church again just as a door at the side of the altar opened and a minister in a black gown and white bib, carrying a Bible, walked in front of the flowers and the casket over to a raised pulpit on the other side. He was a small man with a round, flushed face, round glasses and popping eyes. Now that he stood entirely behind the pulpit Peterson could only see his shoulders and his round face and round glasses, making the man appear something like a puppet thrust up over the lip of a stage.

This time Peterson heard the organ stop and so anticipated the beating of the rain on the roof. The minister said something in German over the sound of the rain and everyone around Peterson, including his wife, reached for a hymn book. His wife offered to share her book with him, but he signaled a "no" with his hand.

The organ began again and everyone stood and sang the hymn, most people singing uncertainly, but two or three women singing loudly. After three or four verses, the organ stopped playing, everyone sat down again and Peterson's wife replaced the hymnal in the back of the bench in front of her.

The minister pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket, wiped his mouth, and began to speak. He had one of those bellowing voices, surprising in such a short man. And, of course, he spoke in German. Peterson didn't understand all of the individual words, but he was

able to get the drift of most of it: We are here today to mourn the loss of our dear, beloved Insa Kaufhold, nee Schmidt, born on November 14, 1938 in Borgentreich, who passed away last Thursday at her sister's home in Munich after a long and painful illness.

Peterson's attention moved away from the minister towards the casket floating in the crush of flowers. Again he saw the brass railings on the casket and the deep hew of the polished wood. And again he found himself wondering if this woman wasn't really in South America.

*"Furcht, ja Furcht,"* the minister boomed. *"Ja, Furcht und auch Schrecken."*

These words caught Peterson's attention because *Furcht* translated as "fear," and *Schrecken* as "terror" or "dread." That, and the fact that the minister had raised himself to a higher position by pushing down against the pulpit.

*"Ja, wir wissen, wir begreifen, und wir werden erfuellt mit Schrecken."*

Peterson now tried harder to follow the minister's words, translating to himself and guessing at what he didn't know: When we look in front of us at this casket, we see the reality of death. That death ends everything. That death is nothingness. That all vanishes. And let us be honest with ourselves. We are horrified. Terror and horror. Because each of us understands it is only a matter of time, probably years, but, who knows, perhaps some months or even days until it will be "me" up here in a casket in front of the rest of "you" sitting out there.

But—and now the minister began to swing his arms around in front of him—we are not to fear. No terror. No horror. Why? Because God has given us his only begotten son, Jesus Christ, so that we might win everlasting life. Death is an illusion. We all will return home to God.

The minister had undergone something of a transformation by now, his face even more flushed. He held the Bible up, turned it this way and that, and suddenly thumped it down on the pulpit. "God will not fail us!"

But Peterson's attention was riveted beyond the minister. Seemingly out of nowhere, six men in formal attire, top hats, tails and white gloves appeared standing in a row behind the coffin and the flowers and bushes. Startled, Peterson wondered where these men had come from. Had they been sitting behind the flowers and

the bushes all the time, or had they come in through some hidden entrance from the back of the church? And why the top hats?

Peterson watched these six men advance on the casket, three on each side, until two stood at the head of the casket, two at the middle, and two at the end. One of the men gave the other five men a head signal and they took hold of the railings along the edge of the casket with their white-gloved hands and lifted the casket several inches off its foundation.

The minister bowed his head, everyone around Peterson bowed his head, and Peterson bowed his head. "*Vater unser im Himmel, Geheiligt werde dein Name. Dein Reich komme. Dein Wille geschehe....*" Peterson heard it, and knew it was the Lord's Prayer. He found himself following along, saying the prayer out loud in English as those around him said it in German, amazed as he said it that he remembered it at all.

When Peterson looked up he saw that the six men had already carried the casket down the steps of the altar towards the aisle, leaving a hole in the mass of flowers. The minister, stuffing his handkerchief back into his pocket and picking up the Bible, descended from the pulpit and followed the six men. The people in the front row, then those in the second, then those in the third, stepped out into the aisle and also followed along. When it was their turn, Peterson and his wife fell in behind the other people. Ahead of him down the aisle, Peterson could see the black top hats of the six men carrying the casket.

In the vestibule people stopped to put on their coats. Beyond the door of the church the rain splashed against the cobblestones and the wind groaned in the trees. Peterson's wife handed him his umbrella and as the two of them stepped out into the rain Peterson pushed his umbrella against the wind in the same direction as all the other umbrellas in front of him.

Strangely, he somehow had the sensation of now being pulled down the path towards the wall of the cemetery. It was as if the six men in top hats and white gloves carrying the casket out in front of everyone else were pulling the minister, and the minister, in turn, was pulling the people just behind him, and those, in turn, were pulling the people behind them, back to the very end of the line where a few couples were still coming out of the church door, opening their umbrellas and pushing them against the wind.

Peterson couldn't see too much from under his umbrella, the way it was tilted down, but he knew he was going along a red path that was neither quite dirt nor paved, that his shoes were covered with mud again, and that he was passing plots with gravestones, each plot done-up with flowers. He and his wife turned to the left when the people in front of him turned to the left, then turned right when they turned right again.

A side gust of wind caught Peterson's umbrella and snapped it upwards. He stepped to the edge of the path and as he pulled at the ribs of the umbrella he felt cold water coming through his hair onto his scalp. He reached up to pull his hat back into place, but his hand only passed over his hair. No hat. Where was it?

He was still checking his head with his hand when his wife reached out and pushed her umbrella over him. He got the ribs of his own umbrella back into position, popped it open again, and aimed it against the wind. Ahead of him he saw the cluster of umbrellas sheltering the rest of the people as they stood next to a rectangular hole in the ground. A large mound of red earth bulged beside the hole. As he and his wife propped their umbrellas up against the other umbrellas, he saw that the rain had turned the pile of earth into slimy mud. He passed his hand over his head again, not quite believing that his hat had disappeared.

In front of him the six men had somehow managed to place ropes under the coffin. Now Peterson watched each man ease out his end of the rope as the coffin, the rain running off its top and the ropes under it digging into the mud at the edge of the hole, sank out of view.

The ropes went slack, and the six men threw out the ends of their ropes, all of which quickly dropped into the hole. Then each of the men took off his white gloves, pulling at the ends of the fingers, folded one glove over the other, held them out over the hole, and at a head signal from one of the men, dropped the gloves in.

The minister walked toward the mound of earth, no umbrella, took a little shovel, really no more than a child's shovel, pushed the shovel into the mound, and, retrieving some mud, held the shovel in front of him.

*“Erde zu Erde, Asche zu Asche, Staub zum Staube.”*

Peterson said it silently to himself in English and watched the minister turn to the grave and saw the mud drop into the hole.

Then the rest of it, people going forward to the hole and throwing flowers in, and finally Peterson and his wife stepping forward. His wife passed him a single flower, and Peterson, looking down at the brass railings and the tangle of rope and white gloves and flowers, dropped his flower and watched where it landed.

By the time they backed away from the grave, most of the people were beginning to walk up the red path that led along the wall of the cemetery to the church. The rain seemed to have stopped, at least for the moment, and some of the people were already closing their umbrellas. The wind kept pushing through the tops of the trees.

Peterson's wife slipped her hand into his arm and gave him a little tug.

As they walked behind the others, Peterson tried to sort out the matter of his hat. One thing was certain. He definitely remembered holding on to it when he ran down the *Allee* toward the church as the storm broke. And since he didn't have it on now, it made sense that he'd hung it on a peg in the vestibule of the church at the same time he'd taken off his coat. Then, after the service when he'd put on his coat along with everyone else, he must have forgotten to take his hat. Surely that explained it. And therefore his hat was still hanging on one of the pegs in the vestibule.

As he and his wife reached the *Allee*, for some reason Peterson remembered that the pegs along the wall of the vestibule were all made out of wood.

"I'll just go get my hat."

"Shall I come with you?"

"Why should you come with me?"

"Well, to help."

"No need," he said, "I know where it is."

He crossed the *Allee* and walked through the courtyard. Pulling open the heavy door of the church he saw that he had certainly been right. Inside the vestibule all the pegs were wooden, thirty or forty of them.

But, on the other hand, no coats, no umbrellas, and, most importantly, no hat.

Peterson wasn't quite sure he believed this. He almost felt like going out the door into the wind and coming back in again, as if this action might restore his hat.

And then the revelation came to him. He had not hung his hat on a peg at all, but had unthinkingly carried it with him to where he first sat down in the back of the church. Then, when he'd seen his wife in front of him and he'd gotten up to join her, the hat had slipped off his lap onto the floor. That had to be it.

Peterson pushed open the swinging doors to the interior of the church.

Empty. No flowers, no tropical bushes, no exotic forest—just the figure of Christ hanging on the cross.

How was this possible? Everything gone? Vanished?

"Excuse me," said Peterson.

A cleaning lady in a plain, blue dress-uniform and a kerchief over her hair had just entered from the altar door. She carried a bucket and a mop.

"Excuse me," Peterson repeated. "I left my hat here."

The cleaning lady looked at him, and Peterson understood by the blank expression on her face that she didn't understand English.

Nevertheless, he went on. "You see, I was sitting here. Right here." Peterson pointed to the bench beside him. "But I didn't stay here. No. I saw my wife up there." He pointed to a row in the middle of the church. "Right there. On the left. I got up and joined her. Because that was where she was sitting."

Peterson stopped talking, partly because of the way the cleaning lady kept looking at him, but also because he now saw the mud he had tracked in on the floor, right there, going up the aisle towards Christ.

"Sorry," he said.

He backed out of the swinging doors, glanced at the empty wooden pegs on the walls of the vestibule, and went outside where the wind throbbed in the branches of the trees.

"Did you find your hat?" asked his wife holding her coat closed against the wind.

"Vanished."

"Well," she said. "Never mind. These sorts of things happen."

"Never. Not ever. Not to me," said Peterson.