

LET THE DEAD BURY THEIR DEAD

Mark Konkel

I

The rain stopped an hour ago, but the wooden slats of Mrs. Webster's porch still felt slick and spongy under my feet. I stepped firmly so as not to lose my balance. Water dripped from behind the gutters and plopped onto my hat, so I removed it, then stepped to the side and let the water resume its drip onto the dirty white and grey wood of the porch. Under my watchful eye, Deacon Charles struggled to park the black Cadillac Escalade on the wet pavement in front of Mrs. Webster's house. I never tired of the constant and vigilant evaluation I have to maintain while training a young deacon. Everything must work toward perfection. Men of God, especially black ones, did not have to be perfect, but they had to constantly strive to that goal, even in such a secular and mundane thing as parallel parking.

When Mrs. Webster called me to complain about her electric bill, I knew she didn't expect Deacon Charles also, but I also knew her lament about the electric bill was just a mask for something deeper. Mrs. Webster was still mourning her mother's passing, and Deacon needed to learn how to deal with a grieving parishioner. This was a custom ordered training opportunity.



"I didn't think it would fit in there, Pastor James," Deacon Charles said, closing the SUV's door and walking up the steps.

"Don't slam that door so hard," I said, but in my thoughts, I admired the deacon. He had an exciting presence about him, something that was original, seminal, groundbreaking, the first of its kind, like a world class athlete or actor, but at the same time, he was familiar, comfortable, friendly, as if wherever he happened to be was where he was born and raised, instead of actually having been adopted to and raised by an older white couple in the suburbs. He was powerful, yet deferential, in charge, but ready to serve, a born minister. *For who is greater, he who sits at the table or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet, I am among you as One who serves.* Luke 22:27. These verses flash in my head like something familiar, but spectacular at the same time; like sunsets, the church choir, a new moon starry sky. They are just a part of me now.

"I got it in there nice, though," Deacon Charles said.

"Nicely, Deacon, not nice. Nicely," I said. He was still young, however, unrefined, rash, forceful.

"Yes, Pastor James," he said with a grin, followed by, "I saw her through the window, sitting in a rocker. Rocking."

"Yes, Mrs. Webster's spent her whole life rocking, Deacon. Her own babies and dozens of others." Deacon reached to knock on the door, but I grabbed the sleeve of his charcoal overcoat, just above the gold stitched monogram. He's eager, too eager. It's that smile of his, too wide and too easily lit upon his face, the smile of a boy. "What do we do before we continue, always, Deacon?"



Deacon grinned at his error. "Before everything, Pastor, from the rising of the sun, until the going down of the same, we pray." I released the sleeve of his sally and we bowed our heads. The prayer flowed in a viscous gel from our lips, toothpaste from a tube, one unbroken word, me in the lead and Deacon a quarter cadence behind: Oh-Heavenly-Father-let-the-things-we-do-today-be-in-accordance-with-your-wishes-and-your-plan-and-give-us-strength-that-we-may-glorify-you-in-the-Lord's-name-we-pray. We said Amen in broad normal voices, then Deacon again sallied forth his gloved hand toward the door.

"How long y'all gonna stand on the porch there?" Mrs. Webster hollered from inside her living room. "Doorbell's broke anyhow. Aint worked since Jeffery passed away nigh seventeen year now." We exchanged glances with identical chuckles, having been startled so by her quivering voice, and Deacon pulled the security door open and we stepped inside.

A slight odor of rancid bacon grease permeated the home, as if Mrs. Webster fried some the week before and let the fat sit on the stove. All the lights in the house were off, including the one usually coming from the television. Mrs. Webster herself sat silhouetted in the old dishwater light of the front parlor windows. Several cats slinked out from behind the ancient floor length nylon lace curtains to rub against our woolen pant legs. "Well, are y'all gone sit?" Mrs. Webster asked. There was only the rocker and a small burgundy sofa too small to accommodate both of us. I nodded at Deacon, who promptly fetched a wooden chair from the kitchen to sit on. My huge body sank slowly into the overstuffed imitation leather, air escaping from underneath me in a resistant whistle and whoosh. My eyes caught Deacon's eyes, indicating he could begin.

"Let's say a prayer, Mrs. Webster," Deacon said, and the same prayer flowed from his lips again, while Mrs. Webster's lips mashed back and forth over her dentures, unable or unwilling to pick up Deacon's rhythm.

"He goes right along, don't he," she said, looking at me, when Deacon finished.

I grinned. "He do. He do." I looked over at Deacon.

Deacon cleared his throat and leaned forward in the kitchen chair, which was of ancient bowed dowels and smoothed oak that shifted under his body. He spread his feet apart to settle the chair and set his elbows on his knees, then looked Mrs. Webster in the eye. "Mrs. Webster, we got a message about your electric bill. They're—"

"Well, they aint shut off my power yet, but they's threatening to do it soon, if'n I don't pay their bill."

I remained quiet. "You have to pay their bill, Mrs. Webster," Deacon said.

"But they don't have to send me mean and heartless letters, like this one here," and she held up a tri-folded white sheet of paper with lime green edging – the stationary of the local utility. Deacon reached forward to take the letter so he could read exactly what it said, but Mrs. Webster kept wav-

ing it around, her arm flying up like the handle of a stepped on rake, then down again, so he couldn't grab it. She began to recite, apparently having read it enough to memorize it. "They's regret to inform me that I need to call and apply for aaass-ssistance. I'll give 'em aaass-ssistance," she said, "I'll give 'em a whupping on their aaass-ssistance."

"Now, Mrs. Webster, if you're trying to shock me with those words—"

Mrs. Webster crossed her arms and looked at Pastor James. "I used them words plenty when you was growing up here, James, didn't I?"

I chuckled again, a laugh I used to defuse emotionally charged situations. "I always said, time and time again, Mrs. Webster, you got me on the path to holiness."

"Yeah, you was holy all right. A holy terror," Mrs. Webster said with a laugh. "Did I ever tell you, Deacon, about the time he —"

"Mrs. Webster, you don't need to go into that —" I sighed internally, wondering which story it would be. She delighted in telling them all.

"—the time he tied fishing string around my two of my cats' tails and let them run around? Them two toms nearly killed each other."

Deacon smiled widely again, but didn't say anything, just stared straight ahead. I appreciated his response, which acknowledged Mrs. Webster, but didn't sow her responses into a fertile conversation.

"Mrs. Webster, why haven't you paid your electric bill? You have money, I know you have money. Jeffery left you the life insurance and then there's the city pension and Social Security," Deacon said, taking gentle control of the situation. I released my held breath.

Mrs. Webster started rocking faster and her voice got softer, "The brakes on my car, you know, they been squeaking."

"Mrs. Webster, brake repair shouldn't be much more than a few hundred dollars," Deacon said.

"My brakes is squeaking. Squeaking in G-flat." All three of us laughed softly and unexpectedly at this. "Whenever I stop and they squeak, I start singing Number 121, *Blessed Assurance*, cuz that's in G-flat, you know, Pastor James," she said. "I can use my brakes, you know, even though they're squeaking in G-Flat. I can use my brakes." Then she stopped rocking and looked out the window. "I can still see my mother flying through the air from in front of that car," she said, no emotion in her voice. "He couldn't use no brakes and my mother went flying. She made it to be ninety three year old and walking to church every Sunday still and then—" She paused and brought her hand up to her mouth. "She was walking to *church!* Aint nobody should get run over walking to *church.*"

Deacon took Mrs. Webster's ramshackle hand in his. Again her lips mashed back and forth over her dentures. She looked past Deacon to the kitchen behind him.

Deacon spoke precisely. "Mrs. Webster. This isn't God's fault. You know that in your heart. It's the fault of that driver. Drunk at 8:30 in the a.m." Her hand flitted over her white, permed hair. "You can't lose your

faith," he said. "God's God. If you lose your faith, who will you believe in?"

She peered at him. He cupped her hand in both of his. She began to rock slowly.

"Mrs. Webster," he said, "we don't know why things happen as they do. It's not for us to know. Now, many years later, we know why Jesus had to die on the cross, but the apostles, they didn't know at the time," Deacon said. "And it pierced their hearts, just as yours is pierced now." Tears dripped from Mrs. Webster's chin. Deacon stood so he could rest his cheek near the top of her head, and sway back and forth with her rocking. She started singing, in G-flat, "*This is my story, this is my song, loving you, Jesus, all the day long.*" And they sang softly together for a while, and I joined in, then sang harmony.

When we got ready to go, Deacon turned on the parlor lamp and the room was filled with a soft yellow glow. "Mrs. Webster, I will place a call to the electric company and get your bill paid up to now, all right? And then you need to make sure it stays paid, all right?"

"All right, Deacon."

Outside, after we were in the SUV and just outside of the city, the cell phone rang. "Pastor James," I said. I listened silently, then said, "We'll be right there." I pointed to the next exit ramp. "Get off here, right away."

"What's the matter, Pastor James, you look as though you know the date of the Second Coming," Deacon said.

"Head back to the church. There's been a shooting. Dan Carver's been shot in the church parking lot."

"Oh, my God."

II

I hear someone say, "Mrs. Carver?" and it takes me a moment to focus on the voice. It used to be against the rules for policemen to need glasses. I know because my brother wanted to be a police officer, but his eyes weren't any good and he was denied. The very next year they relaxed the rule. He would have been such a good cop and might have tried again, but he already had his garage on 75th Street open and was doing a good business. Still, he was so disappointed. I used to be disappointed for him. But not anymore. Because if they hadn't relaxed the rules, this policeman with glasses wouldn't be standing in front of me right now. He'd be standing somewhere else. He'd be standing somewhere else and wouldn't be telling me my husband was dead.

Both of the policemen lean over me then and I see the ceiling fan behind their heads, which float in the air like huge dust motes wearing police hats. Pain stabs my cheeks when I feel the floorboards on the back of my head.

Ma'am, ma'am, I hear them calling, loud and soft and far away and close, as if I'm the candle in the bottom of a pumpkin and they're trying to blow me out. The hinge of my lip cracks when I say, my son, call my son,

but they don't hear me and I feel weightless, and then a pillow under my head and the soft smooth nap of the couch under my bare heels. I don't remember lifting my arm, but I see my fingers reaching out to the policeman talking on his radio while the other one leans over me again. Fainted, he says and I think yes, so faint, I can hardly hear you, and my lips brush against the curl of his ear when I say again my son, call my son. And to find my cell phone, he's emptying out the contents of my purse onto the coffee table, my wallet, the utility bill that needs to be mailed, my spare keys, my book club copy of *A Million Little Pieces*. And I know things aren't right when my spare tampon tops the pile and I'm not embarrassed. No one should go through a woman's purse, not even her husband and especially not a stranger wearing glasses and a gun and a blue tie the same color as his shirt.

The VCR clock shows 7:45. I put the bread in just before seven, I think, so it's been a half hour since Dan called, which is about the time it takes for him to get home after he calls, so he should be walking in now and my ear trains itself on the door. He usually works later in the evening and I appreciate the time alone to write a few emails, cook some supper and relax. And we have a quiet dinner in front of the TV set and I talk during the commercials and he listens and I read interesting things from the paper to him and we talk. My ear still listens for the door, like an amputee still feeling his toes itch, and the policeman holds my cell phone in front of my eyes. I whisper "Steven" and the policeman beeps through my address book. The phone dials. Ma'am, the other policeman says, we'll get your son, Steve, here as soon as we can and then he says her pulse is good, her skin is warm and her pupils are okay, so it's just mild shock. And I know he means shock in a medical sense, in a sense that I'm not dying which is amazing because I always thought that I would if anything ever happened to Dan. *Mild?* I try to say aloud, but the fragrance of bread on the edge of being burnt forces its way through to my nostrils and my hands signal slowly but desperately about blackened crusts and wasted dough. One policeman disappears before my eyes and then reappears in the dining room with his hands wrapped around two potholders and a loaf of sooty and smoking bread, which he lays on the table trivet. The dining room clock, which has always been five minutes behind the VCR clock, now shows quarter to eight, as if time hasn't passed at all. I start to cry, not for Dan, not for me, not for Steve, but at the thought of time staying here forever.

And then I'm standing and hugging Steve. I don't remember him coming in. "Oh my God," Steve says, "Oh my God," followed by "Mama, Mama." My legs have no strength. Steve is holding me up while his body is wrapped around mine and his tears stream down the back of my neck. I run my fingers through his hair and let him whisper everything will be all right, Mama, everything will be all right.

Steve lifts his head. "What happened? I mean, how...?"

"Your father was sitting in a church parking lot in his car when a bullet

came through the window," the cell phone policeman says. "Appears to have been random."

"Random? That means you won't be able to catch him, right?"

"Well, actually –"

"I mean, that's police code for you might not be able to catch him, right? Tell me the truth now."

"Actually, Mr. Carver, there's a very good chance we'll catch him. It's very likely that we will have forensic and ballistic evidence."

"What you do mean, forensic and ballistic evidence? Somebody was riding in the car with him?"

"No, nothing like that."

"It's likely that the medical examiner will be able to recover the slug from his, uh, body."

"Oh my God," Steve says again, then, "Don't worry, Mama, at least they can catch him. At least they can catch him."

"But it would help, Mrs. Carver," the policeman says, "if you could sit down. We'd like to ask you a few questions now if that's all right." He's trying to be soothing, but his voice is much too naturally gruff, too full of bluster and bravery. That's okay, though, policemen need it out there dealing with what they deal with every day, threatening criminals, abusive husbands, dangerous killers, hysterical housewives. Steve releases me from his hug and motions for me to sit down. A box of tissue appears on my lap and Steve sits down next to me and clasps one of my hands in his. When he was born, my mother said, you must have made this baby all by yourself because he looks just like you and nothing like Dan. And she was right. Steve has my pale ruddy cheeks, the shape of my face, the beak of my nose, the round of my eyes and the glide of my cheeks, all of which always made me so proud, and all of which I would trade now if I could see Dan in him now, just once, just once.

"What was your husband doing in that neighborhood at this time of night, Mrs. Carver?" He has a small notebook in one hand and a capless black pen in the other.

Steve pauses, then says, "He worked there, at the church. Divine Word. For about the last ..."

"Since you were fourteen." My voice wavers and sounds full of fluid, but I hold onto Steve's arm. If you had told me those would be the first words I would speak after Dan's death, I would have laughed.

"For the last eight years," he says. "Almost nine." Steve is quiet while the policeman writes in his notebook. "It's the biggest black church in the city," Steve adds.

"I know," the policeman says. "That's where I go." And he keeps writing, then says, "We'd like you to come down to the station and identify the body." I feel him look at me. "It's only necessary for one of you to come."

"Mama? You don't have to go if you don't want to," Steve says.

I look at him and I can taste tears dripping past my lips and my voice

is full of water again and I hug him tight. Why don't you change clothes, Mama, and we'll go together. I pull my body away from his and go into the bedroom.

As soon as I open my closet door, I can't remember what I should do next. I call for Steve, who comes pounding down the hallway. Steve, Steve, I say, I don't know what to do next. Mama, don't worry about that now, we don't have to figure out everything right away. No, no, I say, I don't know what I should be doing *right now*. Mama, he says, you're in your nightgown. You have to change into some pants and a blouse. I look at him. Steve? Yes, Mama? I can't remember how to put my clothes on. Oh, Mama, he says, and then reaches into my closet and pulls out a sweatshirt and a pair of pants for me. If I tell you how to do it, can you put your clothes on? No, I don't think I can. And he tells me to raise my arms over my head and he pulls them out of the sleeves of my nightgown, and then pulls the whole garment over my head, the fabric rubbing on my nose and hiding me from the world in a blurred sight and sound of soft cotton and I'm there, in front of my son, naked, soft puffy flabby all skin except for my panties. I look up at him and he is looking at the ceiling. Cover up your chest with your arms, he says, and I do it. He pulls the sweatshirt down over my head, then to my torso and helps my arms through the sleeves. Then he kneels down in front of me and holds my pants open and I step into the legs, leaning my hand on his shoulder for support. I stand and he pulls the elastic waistband over my behind and up under my sweatshirt, which he pulls down. He slides my feet into soft knee socks. Then he asks, where are your shoes? For some reason, I remember they are by my recliner. And they are.

He brings them and kneels down in front of me to put them on. I say, while he is lifting my foot by the ankle, I never liked your father working at that place, being the only white person in the whole place. He wasn't the only white, Steve says. Almost was, I say. He could've worked any other place, I say, instead of down there with those people. Dad had to make his own life, Steve says. He did what he thought was right for him. Now it's not right for anyone, I say.

At the police station, there is a short clanking metal stairway down to the medical examiner's waiting room. An assistant in a lab coat greets the police officers and then explains to us in a very quiet but strong voice that Dan will be rolled out on a gurney behind the glass window. She'll pull back the sheet and we should just signal if we recognize him. We don't have to actually say anything, just a signal is enough. Which is ironic, I think, because Dan and I had many signals back and forth, as married people do. I knew when he was angry and when he was horny and when he was sad and when he was lying and when he loved me. And he knew the same about me. That's my Dan, I'd say, and he'd respond, that's my Janet. All of those signals were him, and they were me, and now, just one more signal to say yes, that's him, that's Dan. But it won't be Dan. It won't be. Even if it's his body, it won't be him.

While we're waiting for the gurney to be rolled out, the two cops mumble softly behind us. I can't hear what they're saying and out of instinct, I turn from Steve's arm and look at them both. And one is black. I don't remember him being black in my house. All I can see is the cell phone at his ear, but I can't see him, his skin, his hair, his lips. I recognize the ear of the other one, the white one, the one my lips brushed, and I want to ask him where's your partner, but it doesn't feel quite right, like I've eaten off the wrong plate at a fancy dinner party, so I don't say anything.

The gurney noisily rolls in front of the window and I turn my face into Steve's shoulder and grab his arm and wait and shudder. I feel Steve gasp and his head fall onto mine and I look up. Dan lies there softly for a second before she covers him again and I grind my fingers into Steve's arm and wail. I know I'm being as loud as I can be, but I can't hear it, like I can't hear my own snores.

Then both policemen are standing in front of me again, just as they did in my living room. And I reach out to the black police officer and start to hit him. Not just once with a little tap of my lady fingers, but with a closed fist and on his head and I scratch and kick his shins and pull his hair before Steve and the white police officer can lift me away from him. Even then, I'm punching, reaching, clawing for him, yelling, "You...You fucking *nigger*! You fucking NIGGER! You killed my husband! Take all your goddamned nigger ways and guns and crime and hatred back to *Africa*! Take it back. Go back. Go back. Leave us here alone. Leave us alone." And I'm on the floor, sobbing, wet tears dripping into a puddle on the floor. Dan. Dan. Dan.

III

Even before I was a deacon, I could get people to do things for me. Things that they wouldn't do otherwise. I don't mean to sound like I'm bragging, but I could. I once convinced two drivers, right in the middle of a fist fight over a fender bender that they should give up the fight. They did. It wasn't very hard. And this was after one's nose was bleeding and probably broken. I stood on the side of the road, along with about a dozen other drivers caught behind the accident, when I realized that these two men knew each other before their cars smashed together. So I waited until they broke apart for a second to rest and I rushed in and grabbed one guy's arms and said, "Hey! Where do you two guys know each other from?" And they told me. And there were no more punches.

Pastor James says it's my smile, my easy manner, my charisma. He also says it's something I can't be too proud of. *When pride comes, so comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom*, he says, quoting Proverbs 11:2. At least I think that's the right verse. I wish I knew the Bible as well as Pastor. So I try to be humble, but it's hard. Because I can get people to do things for me.

I don't know where I got this ability. My father said it's from how I was

raised. An adopted black boy, child of some almost forgotten and probably dead drug addict, raised in a white suburb by two ministers, husband and wife. That means I don't really belong anywhere, I'm not a child of any one culture. But instead of isolating myself or seeking out other transplants, I acted as if I belonged everywhere, as if I were comfortable everywhere. And people sense that. They take comfort in my comfort.

But now, I have an assignment that will test even me. I have to arrange for a funeral to be held in our church. Normally, this isn't difficult, but this is a special situation because the family of the deceased, well, they don't want to have the funeral here.

The human resources manager of our complex, Dan Carver, was shot and killed in our parking lot two days ago. According to the policemen who were first on the scene, the crime was probably an accident because Carver wasn't robbed or even disturbed at all as he sat in his car alone in the parking lot. It was just a stray bullet, an errant incident, an unlucky event, one of these things in life that just happens. Three months before this tragedy, one of our parishioners, a ninety-three year old woman, was struck and killed by a drunk driver. These things happen. People say there's a reason for everything, but when the life you've been riding suddenly leaves you like a dropped see-saw, it's hard to believe in any sort of a Grand Plan from God or anyone else. Why do senseless tragedies happen? I don't know. I don't try to figure it out. I just know those affected need comfort.

And they need to grieve, Pastor told me when we discussed it, like Mrs. Webster, the woman whose mother was killed by the drunk driver. Then he strongly suggested that I visit Dan's widow to offer our condolences. And to offer to have the funeral here.

I looked at him.

I'd like to have the funeral here, he repeated, well aware of what he was saying and seeing if I knew too.

I did, and told him so. No way could we have the funeral here. Dan wasn't a parishioner and didn't even socialize with anyone from the church. He worked here a long time and got along with everyone and everyone liked him, but it made no sense to have the funeral here. Don't take his funeral away from his family, I said, but Pastor insisted he wasn't taking it away from them. They will have a funeral. It will just be here, he said in his voice of finality that energized me to argue more passionately.

But Pastor, I said, the widow *attacked* a black police officer at the police station. Called him a nigger and everything. And you want to take that woman and her husband's body lying in a casket and put them that in a room full of black people, knowing full well she blames each and every one for his murder?

What better way to show we are not all murderers than to show her our sorrow and anguish at his death? His tone was genuine, but muted, as if he were trying very hard to cover up how much he was affected by Dan's death. I'd seen something in his eyes and didn't realize it was grief until right then.

We need to grieve, he said, just as they do. Dan spent as much of the last nine years with us as he did with them. We deserve a chance to say goodbye. And Pastor James' eyes were tired and his cheeks were flat and I said, all right, Pastor, even as I wondered about his wisdom in this case. I'd been around him enough to know that he was usually right, so I let things lay. He said, call the widow and tell her we'd like to come see her.

So I called Mrs. Carver's home and asked her if we could come by to see her and express our condolences. She just said no and hung up. When I called back, a man who identified himself as Steven answered. This is Deacon Charles from Divine Word Church, I said in my best voice. Are you a member of the Carver family? He said he was. Dan was my father, he added after a pause when I didn't say anything. I said, on behalf of everyone at Divine Word Church, I'd like to express our sincere condolences at your father's passing.

After another short pause, he said, "We appreciate that."

"I'd like to send flowers," I said, "and to speak to your mother, if I could."

And another silent pause. I just waited, resisting the urge to say "hello?"

Finally, he explained that flowers weren't necessary, meaning they were a waste of money, and that the family preferred if we sent a donation to Dan's college alma mater. Then, he added quickly, his mother really didn't wish to speak to anyone, meaning that she didn't want to speak to anyone from Divine Word Church now or ever again.

This was unexpected, so I took a new path. I asked if he and I could meet. There was another pause. It wasn't exactly what Pastor wanted, but I had to start somewhere. Something like this had to be taken slowly. The problem was, there wasn't a lot of time. According to the obituary, the funeral was in just two days.

And then, Steve said yes, he would meet me wherever I would like. I knew from the way he talked that he had no influence over the funeral arrangements, that he was meeting me more to satisfy his own curiosity than any other reason and that we were absolutely not to meet at his mother's house. But he agreed to meet, so that was something.

"Can you come out to my church?" I asked. Another pause and then he said yes quickly, as if trying to erase his hesitation. I called Pastor on his cell phone to let him know that the widow would not allow us to come to her house, but that I was meeting with the son. Keep working it, Deacon, was all he said.

The next day, I greeted Steve at the door of the church with my smile and two handed shake, not overpowering, just friendly and inviting. Comfortable. His eyes were red, but clear, and he looked older than the twenty two years he said he was. I figured he'd aged a lot over the last two days. He looked around at the wide expanse of our sanctuary (we have seating for three thousand plus) and commented how large it was and we listened to his voice echo for a moment.

"Come and sit in the front pew, Mr. Carver?"

He told me to call him Steve and started to say Mr. Carver is my father, but stopped himself and I was embarrassed for both of us. "How do you like our church?" I asked quickly. "Come in and sit down." I gestured lightly with my hands at the huge empty space.

He followed me up to the front and then sat for a moment, not too close to me. After a minute, he stood and started pacing slowly back and forth in front of me.

Our entire church family wants to express our deep sympathy over this tragedy, I said, and he slowly said, thanks, as if he had to think about it. He held his hands in his pockets and looked away from me and toward the altar. He kept up his slow motion pacing.

"Have you made plans for the funeral?" I asked.

He spoke, but never looked at me or stopped sweeping his eyes around the expanse of the church, saying the funeral was going to be on Friday because they had to allow time for relatives to come in from out of town. They had relatives in San Francisco and Texas.

"And it's going to be at – your father's church?" I asked and he shrugged. Until right then, it didn't occur to me I didn't know if Dan was religious at all. Then Steve said his father – he called him Dad – really didn't have a church and only went because Mom made him go, but yes, that's where the funeral was going to be. And I could tell from his voice that the divide between his parents over religion was deep and longstanding.

"This terrible tragedy has really stunned us all," I started. "We can't believe it. It's terribly unfair how accidents happen sometime. Why does one person live when another dies?" And he sort of smiled, the smile that people give when, in the midst of a debacle, you say to them, "you'll laugh about this someday."

I smiled sincerely, hoping that I'd made some sort of connection. "We'd like to have the funeral here," I said, and he looked at me, questioning, and gave a surprised chuckle. I looked back at him, silently encouraging him to answer. He started pacing again, slowly, his hands in his pockets, and said, well, arrangements were already made, meaning no way before God and all his angels would the funeral be here.

"Perhaps if we had a second funeral here after the one at your church?" I suggested. Pastor wouldn't be happy about that compromise, but I thought he'd come to understand.

And he stopped pacing and for the first time looked at my eyes. "Did you know my father at all?" he asked and his voice was forceful, defiant. I did, I said, but not as well as I would have liked. And his eyes relaxed and he was clearly uncomfortable at having challenged me so. And he said, you know one of the reasons my father got this job was because Pastor thought him completely unprejudiced. I told him I knew that.

"And my mother, do you know her at all?" he said softly, adjusting for his earlier tone, and I confessed that I didn't. "If you knew my mother," he

said, "you wouldn't ask your question."

"But, Steve," I said, "this is a horrible accident that has affected all of us, your family and ours, our church family. We should come together during --"

"An accident? Is that what you think this was?" he asked.

I nodded. "The police said it wasn't intentional. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Yes, wrong place, wrong time, but no accident."

I looked at him, encouraging him to explain what he meant. "I'm not sure I understand what you mean," I said.

And he started pacing again. "Let me put it to you this way, Deacon Charles. If you jammed your hand suddenly into a bucket full of roofing nails," he said, making a hard downward thrust with his open hand, "what's going to happen?"

"Your hand will be cut to ribbons, I said, "roofing nails are sharp and --"

"Exactly," he said, "and if you did so, getting cut wouldn't be an accident, would it?" And he made the downward thrust again with his hand.

"No, it wouldn't."

Then he waved his hand in a circle, pointing to everywhere in the sanctuary and the world around us. "And this here," and he looked around at whole sanctuary, "all this here and beyond to the whole neighborhood, is all a bucket of roofing nails. And my father thrust his hand into it. And he got cut."

I opened my mouth to argue with him and then stopped. He walked toward the door and opened it, then stopped. "And it's your fault, the leaders of your *community* that allow this to go on!" He was shaking with rage. And he left, leaving the echo of the slammed door behind. And I felt clumsy and out of place. I knelt down to pray and did so for an hour, tears flowing over my cheeks and slipping between my lips.

Later, Pastor said it was a valiant try and he appreciated my efforts. We'll have a memorial service at the same time as the regular funeral, he said, as if this was our plan all along.

I started to say that would be fine, but then I could see what to do. I *knew* it. Just as I knew what would keep those two men from punching each other after their car accident. This was a different situation, of course, but I could see it just as clearly. "Pastor," I said, "we need to have a memorial service and then go to the cemetery."

He looked at me with surprise and I said, please, Pastor, I know what to do, and he said, Deacon, are you moving too fast again? No, I insisted. And if I am, you can stop it anytime, Pastor. And he said, all right Deacon Charles, repeating the all right as a skeptical mother would to a mistrusted child.

On the day of the funeral, about two hundred of our parishioners showed up for the memorial service, many more than I thought would come. Pastor gave a wonderful eulogy. Afterward, we traveled en mass, with funeral flags on our cars and our lights on, but without a mortuary limousine, to the

cemetery for the burial service. The burial was scheduled for 11:30 and we planned to arrive about 11:40.

At the cemetery, I saw the family gathering around the casket. Even with two hundred of us, we had to be discreet, we had to be quiet, we had to allow them their grieving process. The plan was to spread out single file and form a ring around the casket, but about fifteen yards away from it, so we could see the proceedings, but not interfere at all. We had to have several large gaps of people so that mourners could come and go without having to walk too close to us. And we had to be completely silent. Anyone who couldn't be quiet, couldn't come.

And so we did, standing in among the gravestones and trees in the cemetery in a huge circle around and away from where Steve and his mother and the rest of their family and friends stood. We could hear the minister orating slowly, his words a mush like warm oatmeal, and we could hear some people crying and others saying prayers. Every few moments, someone would look up and notice us, but we stood impassive, hands folded, eyes straight, heads slightly bowed. I picked a spot directly in Steve's line of vision, so that when he looked up, his mouth opened a little in greeting *and* surprise. I nodded. He took his mother's hand and squeezed it.

I thought how this juxtaposition looked to someone who didn't know the situation. To them, we'd be second class citizens, waiting our turn at the grave, letting our superiors mourn first, before being allowed to mourn ourselves.

But it wasn't like that at all. We stood back out of respect for Dan's widow. We were the givers, not the scavengers of whatever scraps passed to us. This wasn't respect for her hatred and prejudice, but for her right to sadness and mourning and grief. And we gave her this respect, even when she looked at us with disgust and anger, before lowering her head and keeping it down.

When everyone except our congregation and the family was gone, we moved forward, silent again, closing our circle of people, mixed with their people, around the gravesite, and watched the caretaker lower the casket and fill the hole with earth.

After a few minutes, the family started to move away from the grave and head to their cars. Some stopped and exchanged glad greetings and sincere condolences with more than a few members of our congregation. I shook hands with two people, someone who said he was a childhood friend of Dan's and an older man who identified himself as Dan's uncle. He said he was glad we could make it. I said I was glad, too. We both smiled.