

Pack of Lions

By Matthew Benbenek

Three men of varying dimensions walked down the graveyard hill towards the black car at the end of the path. On the hill stood a wide stone cross bearing the inscription “Here Lies Leonore Wolf, 1934 - 2015.” The three walking down the hill, almost side by side but out of tempo, were her sons, the last mourners of the funeral. Leading the trio was the youngest, Dean, followed by the middle, Teddy, and lagging behind was the eldest, Peter. The three brothers had drifted apart over the years but felt as close now as when they were kids. They filed into the backseat of the car and the driver, starting the engine, began the drive to the church where the reception was held.

Sitting in comfortable silence, the three brothers took a moment to reflect. Teddy was the most well-dressed of the three in the backseat. Dean had on his unique style of outfit, flirting with the line of acceptable formality for the occasion and, atypically, Peter was the most disheveled, sitting hunched in an expensive, but heavily wrinkled, suit. To his brothers, Peter had always been the go-to role model for etiquette and the like; his appearance today had been enough for them to take notice.

“You ever hear of an iron?” Dean poked at Peter, referring to his shirt.

“Huh?” Peter looked down at his outfit. “Oh, haha.” he laughed sarcastically, “I spilled coffee on my first one and I didn’t have time to press it.”

“That explains why your tie doesn’t match either.” Teddy joked. It never took long for the brothers to fall back into their old fraternal dynamic.

Peter forced up a convincing false smile. Unbeknownst to his brothers, he was at a low point in his life, having had recently crossed the threshold into the dreaded 50th year and

lonelier than ever, his wife busy with a new traveling job and his kids grown up. In a dark twist of a mid-life crisis he had turned to the extremes of his youth: drinking, a trait he inherited paternally, and gambling, a vice of his own genesis. The real reason for his uncouth dress that day was a bender the night before, leaving him hungover and almost causing a late arrival to the funeral.

As the car cruised through the streets of their childhood neighborhood, they reminisced over the shops that still stood and those that had passed, now with new buildings rising from their proverbial ashes. They each had different stories to tell about the same iconic sites of their youth, creating a portrait of their idealized world as kids when things were always so simple. The nostalgia of the scene brought them all back, lifting their various burdens for a moment.

The three thanked the driver appropriately and walked down the steps into the church basement. They sat down together at a secluded table near the back so one would bother them and conversed in a way that only those allotted with absolute camaraderie could. Initially, their conversation consisted of no words, but of mutual recognition, with Teddy pouring drinks of rye into three glasses, a taste acquired from their father. They drank. Family friends were in a different corner of the room singing badly to the accompaniment of an out-of-tune piano.

Their three pairs of eyes swept the room as one, taking in the confusing but sweetly sentimental celebration of their mother's simple, crucial existence. While they all saw the same thing, their reactions differed. Peter grew even sadder than he had already been, tears seeping from the ducts; Dean looked on with an optimist's interest, happy at the commemoration of his beloved mom and the ritual observance of what, from a universal perspective, is commonplace, but to those around was sacred; Teddy took in the scene and mulled reflectively.

Dean's decidedly un-sombre attitude could have been construed as offensive to some mourners, but his brothers knew him well enough to take none. Ever since he was little, Dean had been more of a dreamer and was adventurer, finding fascination everywhere he turned. While his brothers might have picked on him sometimes for being the youngest, they couldn't help but admire his strength of spirit. That's why when Peter and Teddy looked at him in that basement, wearing his eccentric clothes and sporting a calm smile, they knew that he still appreciated the gravity of the situation, even if he showed it in an unconventional way.

"Remember when we were little and Mom took us to the zoo, when Dad went missing on a binge or something?" Peter broke with, "And the zoo had just brought in that pack of lions from Africa, but the lions just sat there, most of them hiding in their den? And even though Mom was worried and upset, she still worked so hard to keep us entertained, making up conversations between the beasts and their backstories in the heart of the jungle and their life on the savannas? Each lion had their own separate adventure and they all ended up back in the same place, not by chance, but because they had to stick together--"

"A pride," Dean interrupted.

"What?"

"It's called a pride of lions, not a 'pack'."

"Why do you always have to do that? Can't you just let some of them go?" Peter shot back, defensively.

"Oh, calm down. It's a good story Peter." Teddy said trying to play moderator. He knew that Dean was just trying to get a rise out of his older brother.

"Besides," Peter continued, "sitting in that zoo, those lions probably didn't have too much to be proud of. 'Pack' is probably more appropriate for their circumstance anyway."

Dean smiled and poured again into the three low-balls and, lifting the one in front of him and toasted, “To Mom.”

“To Mom.” the other two said in approximate unison.

“To Leonore!” a drunk voice shouted from across the room.

After the pause, Dean began to rattle one of his trademark unbelievable stories from his adventurous life. “Did I ever tell you guys about when I was in Africa on a Safari with that French girl you guys met? Well anyways, we were on this safari that the resort had sponsored and we were going off the beaten path into lion country, to see more of the real wild and--”

“Oh Christ, not another one of your fucking stories” Peter sighed. Peter and Teddy were not easily impressed with Dean’s unbelievable exploits.

“Let me finish.” Dean said with a learned calm, “So we were out in the middle of the nowhere and the guide had just...” Teddy tuned out, as he had for many of Dean’s stories. Not that he didn’t enjoy his kid brother’s company but he had discovered years ago that he could just nod along and achieve the same result. He had, however, liked Peter’s previous anecdote about their mother. He would always admire his mother for that, for her putting her family before her and for raising him with unconditional love. His mother had a type of solidity that people didn’t value anymore. Teddy had missed the second intention of Peter’s reminiscence.

Amid the good-spirited conversation, a seventh hand reached out and filled the trio of glasses far above the acceptable line. Its guiding body imposed itself upon the table. Looking up, the three saw their Uncle Norv, their father’s sister’s husband, a man none of them were very close to, but who felt inexplicably close to them. The heavy man pulled up a chair, inviting himself down to the brothers’ level at the table. He began to tell early memories of Leonore, years before any of them had been born. They were curious but, at the same time, uncomfortable

at the idea of their mother as a regular person beyond the maternal role. The devoted never wish to see The Saint unsanctified.

After what was close to an hour of monologuing, their uncle left and once again the three brothers were left alone. Only then were they undistracted enough to feel the half handle of whiskey, plus Norv's gifts, filling their senses. Peter, who had fatigued a few more rounds than the others, was at the tipping point, but even he, while looking around, realized his mother's last gasp had faded. The brothers then noticed the priest, strategically placed under the purple labarum by the stairs to the door outside. The guilt of his presence sobered up the three. They each mustered their final respects: to their beloved, to the 'I.N.R.I.' bust on the south wall, and to the Father by the steps. They exited the church basement.

The exhausted three parted home, knowing their next meeting would not be for a while, but not showing it. Dean left with Peter, blotto in a cab, and Teddy waved goodbye to his best friends. Despite the emotions of the night, none of the brothers knew more about any of the others' lives. After all, this had not been a night for catching up, but for looking back. Peter did not let his problems or new, ugly personality slip to his brothers, nor did they burden him with the many struggles of their imperfect lives. Their family connection was not built on complete honesty, but mutual understanding.

Teddy walked down Claybourne St., from the church on 43rd to 29th where he lived in a modest apartment on the seventh floor. The weather was cold, but, with the whiskey blanket he had been building the past few hours, he didn't notice, enjoying taking in the static sights of the sleeping city.

He reached his apartment and took the elevator up to the seventh floor where his neighbors had long since gone to sleep. Unlocking his door, Teddy entered into his apartment,

hanging up his coat and popping off his shoes. He checked his watch; it was ten after one but Teddy decided he was not in the mood to go to bed. He turned on the radio, tuning in to the classical station where a pianist was playing a collection of Rachmaninoff romances.

After about a minute of casually listening to the delicate melody, Teddy wandered back to his own thoughts. He couldn't decide if the serene music was suitable for the occasion, or, for that matter, what the appropriate emotion might be. Embracing the carefree attitude of his brother Dean seemed more appealing and painless, celebrating his mother's life and moving on with acceptance. His mood changed with the radio.

A new piece came on: Faure's requiem mass. With the opening solemn drones, Teddy reconsidered. Maybe, he thought, the less pleasant emotions were sometimes necessary for recovery. He certainly was saddened by his mother's passing, even if he was not surprised. Teddy thought his mother had been ready for a while, but he was not.

So Teddy grieved internally, controlling his more primal emotional instincts. He understood the potential release given by sobbing but found a more holistic form of coping, mixing the positive and negative aspects of his mother's death. Teddy knew that both Dean and Peter, if he was still conscious, would be reflecting on similarly powerful, although differently oriented, thoughts for their mother.

The requiem changed character in its closing moment, with the holy refrains of the "In Paradisum," for a moment catching Teddy off-guard and almost making him cry. His subconscious recalled one of his favorite memories with his mother. Teddy liked it, not because the moment was happy, but because they talked the way they did when it was just the two of them; on some certain wavelength they connected better than either of them did with anyone else.

The two were in the kitchen. His mother at the sink, washing, and Teddy sitting at a glass table. Neither of them were talking. Teddy was 25 at the time, and only his parents were left at the house. He had stopped by for supper, without warning. The three ate supper, catching up. His father had gone out to walk the dog.

“What’s eating you?” she asked him while scrubbing the grease from a nice plate.

After contemplating, Teddy replied, “It’s not going the way I thought it would go, Ma.”

“It rarely does” she replied, finishing scrubbing the grime off and then joining her son at the table. “You know about my life, or, at least, most of it. I’m sure you could guess that when I was young I had wilder dreams.” She looked into her son’s eyes with complete understanding.

“So you don’t ever regret it? Don’t you ever wonder what could have, you know, been different?”

She laughed. “Of course I do. And that hurts sometimes, sure. But I know that if I hadn’t married your father, and I hadn’t gotten to know all of you kids, that I would have been just as tormented every day of my life. You can’t have everything you ever wanted, son. You know that. As long as you’ve got something important to you, that’ll be worth it all.”

As the memory faded, Teddy sat on his own couch, thinking of his own ‘important’ things and if he was proud of what they amounted to so far. The music had changed once again, switching from the requiem to the ambitious late-night DJ’s voice that was outlining Berg’s violin concerto to follow. The unconventional fifths commenced, but, unwavering, Teddy pursued his thoughts. He knew he would have to move past this death, like he moved past his father’s; both complicated and both completely different.

Teddy recalled every second of her until exhaustion stopped him. His memories pieced together a portrait of the person only he knew, a slightly different person than his brothers knew and a completely different person than his father knew. After recalling all the memories he could muster, he finished with his grieving. Crying like Peter couldn't help him and neither would Dean's sanguine approach. Teddy got up and went into his room, laying down on his bed. He drifted peacefully off to sleep, leaving the radio playing, and after the disharmonious chords of the concerto's ending had reverberated through the apartment, a new piece began.