

# The Eulogist

by

Liz McKinney-Johnson

## ONE

*In death we find eloquence.*

"I was just another little boy with no hair. They'd brought out everybody and plopped us down on the carpet in the therapy room. Except the kids in the wheelchairs. They were parked in the back. I wasn't so special. At least not until Bippo picked me. He wore big yellow gloves, with big yellow fingers like sponge cakes. He pulled a quarter out of my ear and squeaked a balloon into the shape of a wiener dog."

I pause for effect and look around the room. A redheaded woman in the front pew digs in the pocket of her sweater. She's wearing black, but has smuggled in some illicit color: purple rhinestone buttons, an emerald scarf at her neck, a small orange ruffle at the bottom of her skirt. I wonder if she's a clown. It's against the Clown Creed to wear your make-up or costume to another clown's funeral. Clownish hints of color are okay, I guess. No one seems to mind. She blows her nose into a shredded Kleenex. Another few minutes and there won't be a dry eye in the house.

"He made me happy. Normal happy. He probably never even remembered me. There were so many of us that day. So many kids every day of his life, I imagine. But I remember him. I remember Bippo. He made me laugh at a time when there wasn't very much to laugh about. And what more can you ask of anyone than that?"

I hand the microphone back to the minister and look out at the faces: women with unfortunate haircuts, men with wrinkled foreheads, a random collection of bulky purses, shiny loafers and even tempers. They're just average folks who could be your next-door neighbors, a shirttail relative, that kid who works at the dry cleaner. Their sad eyes fill with pride as they silently plead for me to keep saying nice things. I've touched them and made them believe.

It's a hell of a rush. No wonder those TV preachers go nuts with power.

I have *tried* to find something conventional to do with my spare time. I hate gardening. There's so much dirt and squatting. In college, I lived around the corner from a guy who just stuck plastic flowers into the ground around his house. I think he was mentally challenged, because he also rode one of those giant adult tricycles, but on the gardening front, he had the right idea. I can't golf worth a damn. Most people can't golf worth a damn, but they look great in

their matching polo shirts and slacks. I took a pottery class once. After thirteen weeks of study, I created a small, beige coaster. Valiant efforts, but nothing's ever been as appealing as my current pastime. Every morning I read the obituaries. I circle any that sound interesting, and then I show up at the funerals of dearly departed strangers.

Unusual? Sure. But so is square dancing or making mailbox windmills of endlessly sawing lumberjacks. No one has the corner on unusual. Not even me, Charlie Sandors, death groupie.

This morning I've selected Lester Harrison of Park Hills, Illinois.

*Our loving father, husband, brother, son and friend passed away on February 11, at the age of 49.*

It all started about five years ago when Pete Aldrich in Claims Management dropped dead of a heart attack at his desk. I worked in Insurance Fraud, five cubicles down from Pete. We got the day off for the funeral, but somehow I wrote down the wrong address and ended up across town at a funeral for some guy named Arthur O'Malley.

*Lester is survived by wife Marcella, sons Richard and Christian, father George, brother Lyle Harrison, and sisters Lisa Harrison and Linda Harrison Slade.*

However, I didn't know that—yet. Running late, I just grabbed a seat up front. Things were well underway before I realized I didn't recognize anyone.

*Born in Park Hills on August 21, 1958, Lester graduated from Franklin High School. He was a guitar player and singer, performing in jazz and blues clubs from Chicago to Indianapolis.*

I couldn't stand up in the front row and walk out. So, I stayed.

*In 1984, he married Marcella Farrendino, also of Park Hills.*

After Mr. O'Malley's funeral, we had tea and coffee, some of those mini muffins. About ten minutes into the reception, I realized no one questioned my being there. Everybody talked amongst themselves, hardly paid any attention to me at all. A chubby lady in a black velvet hat commented to me in the mini muffin line about how sad it all was. I agreed, and that seemed to make her very happy.

*Remembrances to the American Lung Association.*

It was a great feeling to be companions for the moment, me and the rest of Art's real friends and family. I belonged. Besides, who wants to throw a funeral and then have hardly anybody show up? You're always glad to see another bereaved face in the crowd—whether you recognize it or not.

*Family and friends are invited to attend a celebration of Lester's life on Saturday, February 17 at 2:00pm at Montgomery Chapel of Roses, 21<sup>st</sup> and NE Broadway.*

I've been house sitting about a week for a nice lady named Opal. Her son bowls with my client Dennis, and Dennis told him I'm a great house sitter. Fine by me. I've done it lots. I make a couple bucks for simply existing and escape my own lousy apartment for a few days.

Opal's bungalow is decorated circa *Father Knows Best*. There are doilies on every surface. It smells like mothballs, steamed vegetables and her cat, Mr. Tippens. The saving grace is the car I've been told I can use while I'm here: a 1964 blue Corvair Spyder convertible. Opal's the original owner and she's kept it in sweet condition. The leather upholstery is as soft and shiny as the day it was born. Thank God neither the vegetable smell nor Mr. Tippens has invaded the car. I think the Corvair makes an excellent statement for Lester's funeral. It's hip without being

kitsch. The same can be said for my black turtleneck and cords with a pea coat. I axed the beret at the last minute. Too cliché.

The parking lot is about half full when I arrive, with plenty of parking spaces near the front. People don't like to park near the front doors at a funeral. They're probably worried if they linger too near the hearse, they could be the next to die. "The ants crawl in, the ants crawl out, the ants play pinochle on your snout."

After that first funeral-by-mistake, I kept thinking about trying another one on purpose. Thinking and thinking and finally, doing. First one, then two, then every week. I liked being part of a group for a few hours, the raw acceptance of it.

I have to admit, apart from this weird hobby nobody knows about, I'm not particularly exciting. I think most people would describe me as "the quiet type," which really means, "kind of a bore." I have not yet been ostracized all the way over into the "scary nerd" category since I don't collect comic books, attend Star Trek conventions, or have a fascination for miniature railroads. At my funerals, I am who I create, and I always create someone way more interesting than me.

I haven't been to the Chapel of Roses before, but the design is identical to a dozen other funeral homes. Dark wainscoting, the paint above a bland yellow-beige. Two faux stained glass windows are stuck to the wall on either side of a tiny stage on which sits a wobbly wooden dais. Padded folding chairs line up in short rows on either side of a narrow center aisle. And there's the faint syrupy scent of air freshener. It's used to cover up other, unmentionable smells. I think it makes it worse, like that mothball reek they use in urinal cakes.

Today, our guest of honor lies up front flanked by sprays of gladiolas and a gleaming Martin 12-string. The casket is solid oak in a rich mahogany finish with bronze corners and accents and full matching handle bars. The family went for the high quality white velvet lining with matching pillow and throw. Very nice. At least three bills.

I had no idea of the variety and excessive cost of caskets before I started going to funerals on a regular basis. It's not something that comes up in general conversation, but it should. Think about trying to make a \$3,000 to \$4,000 decision (\$10,000 and up if you go for the premium copper or bronze Permaseal) when you can't see straight from grief and denial. Most people go way overboard, compensating for what they couldn't give the departed in life by wrapping them up like Christmas presents in death.

Lester looks very peaceful against his Eterna Rest bedding. He was a good-looking guy. A few lines around the eyes, a lot more around the mouth, probably from several decades dragging on cigarettes. There's a tiny horseshoe shaped scar on his right cheek, platinum band on his left hand and a heavy ruby and gold signet on his right. Thick hands with heavy veins. I can't figure out how people with such large fingers play an instrument with such tiny strings. My uncle Dan used to play the mandolin. The guy must have weighed 350 or better. His hands were like two canned hams, but he could go to town on that little thing, fingers flying, notes as distinct as night and day. Amazing.

I'm staring at Lester's hands when a tall, slim woman in a tight black skirt comes up next to me.

"I've never seen him in a suit," she says.

"Not a suit man, that's for sure," I agree. "But he looks good. Don't you think he looks good?"

"I'm Mia, Lester's cousin. I don't think we've met before."

She extends a pale hand. Her fingers are long and thin, like miniature versions of her legs.

"My name's Randy. I used to tend bar at one of the clubs Lester played."

I reach out, but we don't really shake. Her fingers simply slide through mine, and before I can catch them, they waft up to brush her blond bangs behind one ear, revealing a line of tiny silver hoop earrings curving from lobe to cartilage. Several people come up behind us and we move to one side to let them see how good Lester looks.

"Are you here with anyone?" asks Mia.

"No. I just happened to see the funeral notice in the paper. I had no idea it had gotten so bad."

"He went from bad to worse after the holidays," says Mia. "Not many people knew. Les didn't want anyone coming around crying over him."

I chuckle quietly. "What a guy."

Mia's blue eyes blur and she blinks. "Do you want to sit with me? I'm essentially here by myself too. The rest of the family usually steers clear of 'crazy cousin Mia.' I'm surprised you've never heard of me." She dips her head and the bangs fall back over her eyes. Her hair smells like fruit punch. I like fruit punch.

"Les and I talked music not family."

"All the better. It takes a lot of energy to be the black sheep. It'll be nice to sit in anonymity for awhile."

Mia gestures at two empty seats in the middle of a row and we walk over to sit down. Memorial folders lie on each chair. I pick up mine and read through it as other mourners file past good-looking Les. The little chapel is almost full. Good turnout. A promising crowd.

When I started going to strangers' funerals, I was just an observer. And then I discovered how much you can learn about someone between the obituary and that little program they hand out at the service. An entire life whittled down to the highlights. Most of us lead relatively dull lives. A few paragraphs are probably plenty.

"So, Crazy Cousin Mia," I say, leaning towards her. "What is it that makes you the black sheep?"

"Too many things to mention, but primarily, it's the fact I'm an exotic dancer not a concert pianist."

"Uh-huh."

The eulogies fill in the interesting tidbits, the snippets that let you know the real person between the lines of the obituary.

"All us Harrisons are musicians of one stripe or another," Mia continues. "Some, like Lester, are more successful than others, but we all can carry a tune, strum, pick or bang something. My weapon was the piano. I was playing professionally by 10, getting paid for it by 12, hating it by 16, which was the same year I ran away from home to become a dancer."

"Are you good?"

"Excellent. An amazing sense of rhythm I'm told."

She smiles slyly and goes back to reading her program.

You'd be amazed what people will tell you when you act like you're interested. My day job as a freelance insurance fraud investigator is perfect for this. I'm always asking questions, looking for a chink in the claims of accident and misery. It makes you a master interviewer, which is really nothing more than being a good listener. After enough seemingly inane questions, people begin to believe you find them fascinating. Pretty soon they're blabbing away, positive someone finally understands just how great/weird/shitty their lives truly are.

"I can't believe your family would toss you to the wolves just for selecting a unique occupation," I say.

"Some of them have come to grips with it over the years. Les was always open-minded. He didn't care what someone did as long as you were a good person. I'm a good person."

Of course, at funerals, I'm not trying to catch them, I'm trying to keep them from catching me. But the same techniques work, and when you're pretending to have been a good friend of the deceased, it helps to have the real bereaved fill you in on important details, like his favorite beverage, what he drove, and whether or not he was a Bears fan.

"Are your parents here?" I ask Mia.

"Of course."

She points several rows up towards a middle-aged woman in a loose-fitting black dress. The woman's head is bowed. Her long graying hair, only slightly contained by a pair of silver barrettes, spills over her face and hangs down into her lap. Her shoulders are shaking gently, which I assume means she is crying. A short, round man in an ill-fitting suit sits next to her with his arm around her shoulders.

"My parents, Dianne and John Harrison. You'd think by the tragic tableau that Mom was the blood relative, but actually my dad was Les' dad's younger brother."

The first time I raised my hand to volunteer a eulogy was John Moller's funeral. I'm not sure what moved me to action; maybe I was seized by the spirit, like those snake charmers. Whatever it was, I summoned the courage to get up and relate a very moving story about what an inspiration John had been to me. About how, as a lowly copy machine repair boy, I'd been in and out of John's office quite a few times, and every time, John had a smile and a kind word of recognition. "Hey man," he would say. "You're not runnin' off a bunch of copies of your bill are ya?" Then he'd laugh that big, ol' laugh of his and clap me on the back. I told John's friends and

family that John had made me feel like a real member of the team and inspired me to start my own copy machine repair business.

"It's really not worth trying," Mia whispers.

Her statement makes no sense, until I realize she must have been wondering why I was staring at her father so intently.

"Where's the family resemblance, right?" she asks. "Give it up; my dad and Uncle George do not look like they came from the same litter."

"Wait a minute," I say. "Your uncle's name is *George Harrison*?"

"Les never mentioned that? I'm shocked. It was one of his favorite jokes. He loved to tell people he was the bastard Beatle."

Mia laughs, and when she does, several people in the front row turn around and glare. She stifles her amusement and leans in closer.

"That's Uncle George over there. The one in the front row with all the white hair."

Mia cocks her head in the direction of an impeccably dressed man with tortoise shell half glasses hanging around his neck. He does indeed have a wild amount of pure white hair.

At John Moller's reception, at least a dozen people came up to thank me for giving such an uplifting eulogy. We chatted about John and agreed the world would be a lesser place without him. His sister, Claudia was particularly moved by my sentiments. We talked until the funeral parlor workers started picking up the chairs. Claudia told me all about her big brother. Then she told me all about herself. I told her she had incredible eyes. Claudia was my first funeral fling. But before you label me a total social deviant, you have to understand that just like the funerals themselves, the funeral flings were completely serendipitous. I did not attend John Moller's funeral expecting to deliver a eulogy or expecting to get laid by his sister. Sometimes things just happen. But it was an interesting side benefit with potential for development.

"Your uncle looks like that guy from the Bugs Bunny cartoons. You know, the crazy orchestra conductor."

Mia chuckles again, but much more quietly.

"He *is* a conductor. Retired now."

A man steps from the audience and approaches a small organ on one side of the stage. He glances at maestro Harrison, who nods. The man places his hands on the keys, closes his eyes and begins to play.

"That's Lyle," says Mia. "Lester's brother. You might recognize him if you can look past the suit and tie. He played with Lester off and on over the years."

Organ music fills the little chapel. I watch Lyle rock backward with the force of the crescendos then roll forward as if to protect the keys as the tone softens. His hair is pulled into a tiny ponytail that dips behind the collar of his suit coat, which is a deep parrot green fabric that shimmers amongst the rest of dowdy brown and black flock.

"Were you that good?" I ask Mia.

"I was on my way."

"What a shame you gave it up."

"I suppose, but then, you've never seen me dance."

"I'd like to."

Mia places her hand on my knee and I cover it with my own. We sit silently through the rest of the performance. At the conclusion, Lyle stands and returns to his seat next to his father. No one makes a sound. This is one thing that always bothers me about funeral services. No one claps. It seems rude, and everybody always looks a little uncomfortable.

A minister enters the room through a door behind the dais. His white clerical collar bites into the flesh of his neck, creating an abrupt dividing line between head and torso. He adjusts the microphone, which sends out a few painful blasts of feedback, and looks out at the assembled group. His lips are huge and pink, like cherry puff pastries.

"Thank you all for coming," he says, and I expect crumbs to fly out over the audience. "We have gathered here to remember the life of Lester Harrison. To celebrate the time he spent with us and to rejoice in his new life with our heavenly Father. Let us pray."

Mia withdraws her hand from beneath mine, clasps it with her other and bows her head. I do the same. The minister drones on about life everlasting. I shift my gaze from my shoes to Mia's. Her calves are slender yet muscular. I imagine them in a pair of thigh-high black patent leather boots. I am going to have to deliver one hell of a eulogy if I want to see those legs wrapped around my own.

An *amen* ripples through the crowd and heads bob back up to attention.

"And now," says the minister. "I'd like to ask Lester's family and friends to come up and share their memories and stories."

One by one they approach the podium, nervously at first, and then more eagerly as the crowd warms up. There's a beefy guy in an embroidered biker vest who's slicked back his hair for the occasion, an elderly woman in pearls who was "little Lester's" piano teacher, a stringy young kid, swimming in a white dress shirt with a wide tie. This is the part of the funeral where the veil of solemnity lifts. The assembled crowd is allowed to show emotions other than grief. There are several very funny stories about Lester, and I collect and catalog key details: wild in school, devoted to his family, liked to drink and smoke, loved life on the road, had a soft spot in his heart for animals, had a soft spot in his head for motorcycles, wrote songs that could sweep you away.

The procession of eulogists begins to thin. The minister surveys the crowd and asks if anyone else has something to share. I raise my hand. Mia looks surprised as I stand, smooth my trousers and slide past several pairs of knees to reach the aisle. I hear whispers and murmurs. This is normal. People are trying to figure out who I am. I smile as I walk up to the podium, then I turn to face the expectant crowd.

"My name is Randy McDonald. Lester and I got to know each other during his set breaks back when I used to tend bar. I'm not as talented as all you folks out there, and I'm not used to talking in front of a crowd."

I stop and take a breath. As a bartender, I think I need a tougher personality, a harder edge, even a little vulgarity. I begin again, deepening my voice and stepping in closer to the microphone.

"I bet none of you knew that Lester Harrison saved my life."

A few gasps float up from the audience. I glance at Mia. Her lips are curved into a little "o" shape and her eyes are wide. She crosses her legs and leans forward in her chair.

"He wouldn't have mentioned it to anyone. Les was real proud, maybe even a little obnoxious when it came to his band – and his family."

I stop and smile at the front row.

"But he wasn't one to brag about *his* good deeds. So, now that he's gone, I'll do it for him."

"It was summer. A weeknight and the place was pretty light. Lester was sitting with me at the bar, taking an extended break. Nobody was complaining since it was really too hot to do much of anything. He was telling me about his newest motorcycle, the Indian rebuilt. I was only half listening. I'd done some pretty heavy drugs before my shift and the world was still a little artificial. Les knew I was wiped out and asked what was going on. He said I'd been messed up nearly every night that week. Of course, I told him *he* was crazy, that he was the one fucked up."

With this well-placed profanity, I immediately grab the attention of anyone left not listening.

"I asked him if he didn't have anything better to do than accuse people of being stoned. That's when he hit me. I didn't even see it coming. Nailed me right across the nose. Hurt like Jesus, and he was just sitting there with this big ol' grin on his face. I asked him what the hell he did that for. Actually, I screamed it at him, but he just sat there. Nobody else even bothered turnin' around. It was just too damn hot."

"Finally, Lester took a swallow of beer and wiped the smile off his face with the back of his hand. He looked right at me and said, 'Listen, shit-for-brains, either get your sorry ass together now or you'll be standin' in this same spot five years from now, staring at some middle-aged barfly's tits, thinkin' you gotta get you some of that.' Then he stood up, walked up front and started back playin' before the rest of the guys even got up on stage."

I look around the room. They are in the palm of my hand, listening to me, believing in me. Attention is addicting.

"I listened to that song and when he finished, I clapped."

I clap for a few seconds to show my audience what I mean.

"I was the only one clapping, but I didn't stop. I kept clapping until I couldn't get any more sound to come out of my hands. Then I walked out of that bar and never went back. I've been clean for two years now and I'm goin' to school. I'm goin' to be a chef. But if Les hadn't busted my chops, I'd still be slingin' juice—more'n likely, I'd be long dead from the shit. So here's to you, Lester."

I start clapping again. A few seconds later Mia joins me, then Lyle, and then George Harrison. Even Mia's mother stops crying and puts her hands together. When the whole room is clapping, I step down, walk out the doors, through the foyer, back out into the parking lot and lean against the Corvair, waiting for Mia.