

The Grifter

This story is inspired by the song "I Came Around" from the album *Bitter Drink, Bitter Moon* written by Murder by Death.

About ten minutes off the highway, the town sat tucked between the mountains and the river. Traffic halted on the main road just after they crossed the bridge. Cars idled parallel to the railroad tracks and coal cars. It took Nicholas a few moments to realize they all headed to the same destination.

"I didn't expect so many people. How many funerals do you think they're having today?"

His wife sat up taller in her seat and peered out over the serpentine of traffic. "Maybe it's all for him," she said.

Nicholas let out a harsh laugh.

"It does seem like a lot of people for such a small town. Now I can see why we had to stay thirty miles away. There's not much here," Lori said.

"It hasn't changed much in the last twenty years, at least not from the little I remember. We stayed about an hour before turning around and driving home."

Lori gave him a look that prompted him to continue, but he stared out at the traffic and chewed the inside of one cheek. "What happened?" she asked.

"Not sure," Nicholas said. "All I know is I met my grandfather for the first time and within a few minutes he and my father were yelling about something. Dad called him a liar, accused him of stealing, then he ordered us all back in the car." He finished on a tone that sounded more like a question than an explanation, but she didn't push him for more.

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"Well it's nice of you to come back now, even though no in the family's seen him in so long. I'm glad your father's friend told you about the service."

"I guess." Nicholas looked to her as the road beneath them turned from uneven pavement into rock and dust. "Thanks for adventuring here with me."

"No problem. I always wondered..." She began to laugh as the car bumped around and the noise of the tires overtook the soft background of the radio and her words.

The dirt road sat a couple inches lower than the adjacent grass. Nicholas watched the cars and pickup trucks in front of him turn and crawl up the slope onto the field next to the chapel. He took in a sharp breath and hit the accelerator of his rental car. It bounced, a gritty cloud forming off the rear bumper as it lurched upward and forward in the line of traffic.

He waited for a moment and watched as most of the crowd filed inside.

"I think you should change your shoes," Lori said.

Nicholas glanced down, the shine on his current pair didn't suit the surrounding. "Probably a good idea."

He got out and walked around to the trunk where another pair were set aside for the return flight home. The older brown loafers were faded and matched the dust mixed in with the over grown grass. Lori joined him where he sat leaning against the trunk tying the laces.

"Better?" he asked.

"Much."

"I guess we can go inside now."

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She took his hand, and along with the last late arrivals, they made their way into the church.

The cramped wooden pews squeaked and creaked as more weight piled into them. They took seats in the back-corner Nicholas's eyes scanned the room. They were two of the younger people there save for a few families on the opposite side of the aisle. One woman bounced a baby in her lap while her husband sat next to an older woman whose hand he cradled between his own as she blotted her eyes with a handkerchief. Other folks huddled together, many of the women uttered noticeable sobs that hushed as the priest began the service.

"I would now like to ask Mr. Peter Coleman, the deceased's longtime friend, to share a few words," the priest said.

An older man made a slow walk up to the pulpit. His left leg dragged behind him as he ascended the two stairs. He turned to face the crowd and adjusted his suit coat. It bulged a bit at the buttons and sat too high on his shoulders as though it were tailored for a slimmer man. "Thank you, Father," he said.

He coughed and fumbled with a folded paper from his jacket pocket. After a moment, he looked up, his eyes staring at but not holding those of the crowd. He cleared his throat and began. "Thank you all for coming today. There aren't many words to say, nor would Bill have asked us to recite many. Those who had the pleasure of his acquaintance know very well that he is a man who will be remembered by those lives he has touched..."

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While the eulogy went on, Nicholas stared to the front of the church, to the figure in the coffin. At the end of the mass, he waited his turn in line as everyone made a long slow walk up to the altar to pay their final respects.

"I don't know what I expected." Nicholas whispered to his wife as they walked to the open slot beside the light wood coffin. She squeezed his hand and blessed herself with the sign of the cross.

The old man's dead face looked like thin white plaster stretched over a bone frame. In his hands sat an old rusty flask with the initials WDW etched into the side. Nicholas stared at the man's face. "That's not how I remember him."

"It's been a long time," Lori said. Then she took his arm with a gentle tug.

"Bye, Grandpa," Nicholas said.

They walked along the side aisle to the rear of the church and took their seats again. Once everyone shuffled back into the pews, the priest gave a final blessing, and with a solid thud, another man closed the coffin lid before he and five others lifted it and started outside with it resting on their shoulders.

Rows of white pine benches lined the edge of the cemetery. The sun peaked over the mountains and poured heat down on the crowd. Several fanned themselves as they listened to the final prayers and the coffin lowered into the earth. Sweat pooled on brows and above top lips. The men in hats tipped them as if to gain another centimeter of shade. After the final prayer and a hearty "amen", the men wasted no time shedding their jackets as ladies double fisted fans and handkerchiefs. Crowded together on the benches, a tinge of sweat wafted through the air along with the palatable grief. But no one lingered in

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their seats. All around Nicholas and Lori, people rose and started talking of food and drink.

The two remained seated as the group dispersed behind the chapel.

"Are you glad you came?" Lori asked.

"I guess." Nicholas stared at the uncovered grave and mound of dirt beside it, then back to his feet. Blades of grass clung to the worn shoes and he attempted to clean one with the toe of the other. "I never thought much about the man to be honest, but I needed to come."

"To show you didn't care, or that you did?"

He laughed and shook his head.

"Excuse me ma'am." A middle-aged man stood beside them. "I hate to interrupt, but we're moving these back in the shade for the gathering. Would you mind giving me a hand with this one?"

He motioned to the bench and looked to Nicholas who hesitated for a moment.

"Of course."

Nicholas and the stranger carried the bench over to the grove of trees in the shade behind the building as Lori followed behind. Pairs of men carried others alongside them.

"That'll do right there," the man said to Nicholas. He placed his hand on the bench and tried to wobble it. "Solid right there. Thank you. Earl Nehman, sir."

Earl held out his hand and Nicholas and Lori each shook it.

"Nicholas Weber, this is my wife Lori."

"Pleased to meet you. Weber? Are you a relation to ol' Bill?"

"His grandson."

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Earl leaned forward and squinted as he studied Nicholas's face. "Pleased to meet you both."

"Likewise."

"Hey, Ma." Earl hollered over his shoulder to a group of older women standing beside the nearest tree. One looked up, said something to the other ladies then walked over." This here's Billy's grandson, Nicholas Weber and his wife Lori."

"Cecelia Nehman." She nodded at the couple and looked them over with a smile spread across her face. "It's very nice of ya'll to make it. I'm sorry Billy hadn't introduced us earlier. He was a great man, your grandpa, we'll all miss him very much." Nicholas shifted from one foot to the other. Cecelia's eyes locked with his as she raised her fan and swished it a few times next to her flushed cheeks.

"Thank you, ma'am," Nicholas said. "I thought—we thought...I'm glad we could come."

Cecelia muttered an affirmative "mmm hmm" in the long moment before he continued.

"I hadn't seen my grandfather in some time. I'm glad to see he lived among good folks here. He was lucky to have you."

"It was us, who were lucky to have him." She extended an arm and Nicholas drew nearer. "Come. Let me introduce you around. I'm sure everyone would be happy to meet you."

After introductions, they were engulfed in a group of older men. A bottle of gin passed from hand-to-hand around the circle. Lori passed with a polite "No, thank you" but Nicholas joined in with a responsible, appeasing mouthful as the men began

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talking. One man, who introduced himself as Jim Cooper, smoothed back thin tufts of grey hair back over his ears and began his story.

"I met Bill about twenty-something odd years ago I'd have to say. Must have been the early eighties, my boy was off to work but his momma, my first wife, was still alive. Well, one day I'm walking down Main on the way for a drink after work, and in the middle of the street there's a sock."

"A sock?" Nicholas choked for a moment on a mouthful of liquor and the circle of men let out a baritone chuckle.

"A sock," Jim said. "There I was walking to get a drink when I came across this sock. It was right there in the middle of the road, just sitting on the asphalt. One sock, not two. It was thin and worn so I assumed it had blown off a someone's clothes line. So, I picked it up and put it in my pocket. Then just outside the door of the bar I see another, and I think well, this sock is the match to the other. So, I pick that one up too. Then I go inside and order a drink. I turn to the bartender to order another, all but forgetting that I have this pair of socks in my pocket until I see a man a few stools down, sitting there with his bare feet resting on the bar rail."

"Sounds like Billy." The man to Nicholas's right piped in and passed him the gin once again.

"So, he was drunk?" Nicholas asked the question before raising the flask to his lips.

"No, son...well he may have been getting there. He did still enjoy a drink in those days. Billy had given his shoes to a drunk man earlier who had somehow forgotten his

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own. Billy'd walked him home and kicked his own socks off on the way back figuring he'd pick them up later. That's the type'a man your granddaddy was."

"Oh." Nicholas took another long swing and handed the gin off to the next gentleman on his other side. He looked over his shoulder toward Lori who sat on a bench not far away between Cecelia and another woman. She was listening as Cecelia spoke. Across the lawn stood Peter, who had given the eulogy. Nicholas started to excuse himself when another man began to speak.

"Reminds me of the school fundraiser, back in, ah eighty-six, wasn't it?"

"No, Chuck, that was eighty-five. I remember because they kept playing that damned Statlers Brother's song on the radio 'round that time."

"That's right," Chuck said. "'My Only Love' if I recall. That one gave you a whole heap of trouble, didn't it, Don?"

The six older men let out a hearty laugh and Don stepped forward to reach for the flask muttering, "Don't recall, at least I care not to." Don shook the flask and shrugged. "I'll go grab the bottle."

"More gin?" Nicholas asked. "I have to say, I expected whiskey down here."

"That's a different story," Chuck said. "And also, about your grandpa. Anyway, there was a fundraiser that year, to replace the roof on the school, but when summer came, and they didn't have enough to pay for the repairs. Your granddaddy somehow got involved. He decided the best way to get money was for the kids themselves to show folks the importance. He set up a long table all the way down the walk of this very church and lined it with school children. As everyone walked in for mass that Sunday the kids talk to folks about things they'd learned: a passage from their favorite book, some

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math theory. No one made it into mass that day. We held court right out there on the front lawn, everyone in awe of those young ones and all the things they wanted to share."

"That's amazing," Nicholas said.

"That it was. It was a sight to see."

Everyone stood there in silence. Then Don reappeared with an arm full of bottles and distributed them amongst the crowd.

"To Billy," Chuck said. "The best damn man I ever met."

Several of the men echoed his cheers.

Nicholas joined in with a whisper. He looked up to the sky where the sun beat down from its highest point above their heads. It caused him to stumble and he muttered something about checking on his wife. His feet knocked into each other as he weaved through the crowd to where Lori remained engrossed in conversation with Cecelia. The older woman carried on with her story as he approached.

"They all joined Billy on that picket line, even the foreman. The company had no choice," Cecelia said.

"That's wonderful, to fight for the community like that," Lori said. She looked to her husband who stood beside her sweaty and off kilter. She patted his arm and studied him for a moment.

"For you," Earl said. He clapped Nicholas on the shoulder and thrust a bottle into his hands.

Nicholas tried to refuse as Earl walked away.

"Come on, sweetie," Lori said. She rose and took his arm. "We should say goodbye before we go."

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He nodded, and they walked back toward the gravesite.

"Such amazing stories," she said. "How come you never told me any?"

"I didn't know."

They arrived at the patch of fresh dirt that now covered the coffin. Nicholas fell to his knees, which sunk into the soft mound.

"I didn't know," he said. "I didn't know him at all. No one did."

Lori knelt beside him and watched as he uncorked the half-empty bottle and raised it to his lips. She placed a hand on his shoulder as he gagged on the gin and swatted at tears rising to the surface of his eyes.

"It seems these people knew him quite well. And they loved him. That's something."

He shook his head in response.

"Your family just lived so far away," she said. "You never had the chance to know him."

"I never thought I'd miss him." Nicholas sat back on his heels, dropped the bottle on the ground, and wiped his face. "But I already missed him. I just didn't know it."

They sat there for another few minutes and agreed it was time to leave. Then Lori helped him to his feet. As they brushed the dirt off their clothes, Cecelia walked up to them.

"This is Peter Coleman," she said. "He was a dear friend of your grandfather's."

"Yes." Nicholas wiped his sweaty palm on his pants and extended it to the man. "Thank you, Mr. Coleman. You gave a beautiful eulogy this morning. I appreciated your kind words."

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Peter looked Nicholas up and down as they shook hands. "You say you're Billy's grandson?"

"I am. I'm Dave's eldest."

Peter watched him for a moment more. "You the family down in Alabama? I recall him mentioning he had family down there outside of Birmingham."

"No. No, we were in—"

"Strange," Peter said. No hint of recognition crossed his eyes. He blinked and mumbled something incoherent as he raised his glass a final time and walked away.

"Thank you very much Cecelia," Lori said. "Unfortunately, we have to leave so we can catch our flight. It was wonderful meeting you."

"It's been a pleasure," Cecelia said. She leaned in and wrapped her arms around Lori in a solid but brief hug before turning to Nicholas.

"Nicky, it's very nice to meet you." She embraced him and gave a good squeeze before resting her hand on his cheek. "I'm happy you were able to make it."

"Thank you, me too." Nicholas waited until she turned to rejoin the party then handed his wife the car keys.

They walked to the car in silence. With each uneven step, Nicholas stomped his feet harder into the ground. He flopped into the front seat and kicked off his dusty shoes as Lori started the car. By the time they returned to the main road, the cold tears on his face turned hot. "They're both thieves," he said. "Him and my dad."