

CENOTAPHS

A Novel

by Rich Marcello

“Better to illuminate than merely to shine,
to deliver to others contemplated truths
than merely to contemplate.”

—Thomas Aquinas

A SORTING

BEN

The parts recur—the son, the lover, the husband, the father, the friend, the citizen. They come in whispers and fragments, in the unwinding of memory. They come in your smile, in the laughter of our children, in nightmares, in bursts of violence against once precious objects. How do you gauge the parts of a life? Did I perform any of them well? How do you summon them into an unfettered whole?

I am old now. I'd hoped I would've figured out a few answers by this point, but the truth is I spend more time each day watching the Red Sox than thinking about such things. In the summer and fall, the games are on every day, often twice a day, and watching them gives Zeke and me something to do. Something zen exists about the game, something appealing to me as I age, something about the stillness, the waiting, the bursts of energy, all mimicking the best and worst times in life. And I like the red, blue, and gray uniforms. They remind me of a more structured time.

Zeke, a big black, brown, and white mutt I rescued about ten years ago, keeps me company in our cabin. When I first got him, he liked digging holes in my yard, searching deep and dirty, with only a rare unearthing. His record: twenty-two holes. Twenty-two! In one of them, he found an empty wine bottle, message-less. Now, Zeke mostly sleeps in the same worn spot on the living room rug. I'm not sure which one of us will die first.

The small cabin is often filled with the smell of burning oak from stoked wood stoves in the living room, bedroom, and music museum. I bought a wood splitter a few years ago to split red oak cut from the surrounding woods after I decided chopping wood with an ax was too violent.

The splitter does the job.

I still drive. I have an old 2002 pickup purchased at auction for \$960. It runs pretty well. I take it to town for supplies: home-repair stuff, too many expensive prescriptions, fifteen-dollar thirty-packs of Budweiser. Those sorts of things. Sometimes I take it to breakfast with the other old men in town. I love them like brothers. We talk about their families, about politics, about sports, football lately. Of them all, Scott and I are closest.

Sports mean more to me now than in my youth. My friends say it's because we can no longer run, jump, or hit, though I suspect it's because I finally see beauty in any kind of movement. The truth is I like watching *Dancing with the Stars* as much as I like watching the Red Sox. I regret never learning to glide through life.

Sometimes we old men talk about pretty young women in town as if we're not old men. I won't repeat some of our more sophomoric lines here, but I will say my go-to line remains: she takes my breath away. The other day, while standing in front of a mirror combing my thinning hair, I imagined I'd been trapped in a doorless white room for years. I thought, what had happened? I thought, if only I could forgive myself, would a door appear?

Some of my friends still have wives; some have family in the area. Though they like to talk about pretty women, the guys adore their wives and families. Every year, one or another invites me for Thanksgiving or Christmas. I went to Scott's once. After dinner, I was sitting on the sofa napping when one of his grandchildren crawled up on me, pushed on my nose and eyes, and tugged at my ponytail. Then she said, "Are you dead?"

The law of flipping keeps me on the tracks. If I'm going through a bad stretch, I flip it over and see what I can learn. While this approach is much harder to practice than it sounds, it's worked

often for me through the years. It's especially useful when people die.

My closest friend for many years was a woman named Marianne. I loved her. During our ten years of friendship, she was my most trusted confidante, and I was the one who saw her clearly underneath her beauty. On the friendship scale, I peaked with Marianne. She was a good woman, and she thought I was a good man. We helped each other laugh and bide time. She died unexpectedly one fall night, but I still talk to her often. I don't know if people you love leave you when they die. It doesn't seem so.

I collect musical instruments: violins, cellos, keyboards, drums, guitars. I can't play guitar anymore because of the arthritis in my hands, but I keep a few on stands in the museum as a reminder of a different time. Once in a while, I'll pick one up and rest it on my lap.

I taught my children to play, and they turned out to be more skilled than their once-competent dad. Passing down what you know is part of being a good father, assuming it's worth passing. Some fathers in town passed down unworthy things like killing animals for sport, maltreating women, or winning at all costs. Music was a non-violent choice.

Most of the things in the cabin are old, purchased at yard sales, or removed from the take-it-or-leave-it-pile at the town dump. Between social security and what's left of the profits from selling my old house, I have enough money to live my remaining years in this place. It's cheap. Plus, since moving here, I've rarely paid full price for anything. If you look hard enough, a whole world exists out there filled with still-salvageable used stuff.

I do have a few pieces of technology. A satellite dish on my roof lets me watch the Patriots, Red Sox, and Celtics on my brand new flat-screen television and lets me surf the internet for political stories and podcasts. A powerful class-A amplifier, a perfectly balanced turntable, and vintage

Magneplanar speakers enliven my thousand-record collection. I'm glad vinyl is making a comeback.

I worked for a long time in a white-collar job outside of Boston as a so-called expert in artificial intelligence. I did it for the money; though to be clear, I didn't dislike the work. It was intellectually stimulating trying to copy the way humans think, but I don't remember much of it now, and I don't miss it. Back then, it seemed much more important than it turned out to be. That's the nature of work you don't love. A big part of what it takes to be a good man and citizen is to do the work you're meant to do, to love. Though our world rarely enables such work.

I saw a movie once about love and quantum physics. The basic idea was we are all connected at some deep, unseen level, so we should all love each other. Recently, I tried to remember the name of the movie. For over an hour, I tried every trick I could think of to remember, but none worked. This kind of memory loss seems to happen more each year, and, unfortunately, a remember-pill doesn't exist. A few years ago, I tried, without luck, to flip my mental decline into a positive. I had a long, drawn out conversation between my conflicted parts, the gist of which was something like: maybe it's a positive thing to forget your life? *Why?* Because you won't feel so much loss when you die. *Who said feeling loss was a bad thing?* But you're going to forget anyway. *Not the loss.*

My wife left me long ago, and I never remarried. My children live far away in cities doing things you do in mid-life: kids, houses, jobs, divorce. When my wife left, she didn't say much. One morning, she woke and packed her things in silence as I watched, not a single thread left between us. Our children had unnested, the youngest leaving a week earlier. I could tell by the look on my wife's face there was no chance she would reconsider staying without a child in the house. At the front door, suitcases at her feet, she looked right at me and said, "You're not a good man."

I haven't been with a woman in a long time. After my wife left, my children, when they were speaking to me, tried to marry me off. I think they were worried they might have to take care of me in my old age. Some of the women I went out with were kind, but I didn't feel like I could tell them the truth, and after four or five women, some whom I dated for months, I sold our family home and moved to this mountain cabin in Hasman, Vermont.

I imagine being filmed close up as I read these pages out loud—head only—like in one of those foreign movies Marianne used to love. That way, people will see I'm telling the truth.

People come to talk with me. Men, young and old. Women, young. Not many: a couple of dozen a year; and not frequently: most only for a chat or two. I don't seek them out. I think they come because I listen well, don't judge, and don't want anything in return. Honestly, I expect nothing from people and haven't for a long time. That's not to say I don't care about the people who come to visit. I love them fully for the time they're with me, and I try to see them as clearly as any one person can see another.

I saw a female therapist for years after I divorced. A month after I finished, I wrote her this:
These days, you are the cloudless blue sky or the pitch-black night, and I can't help but be thankful for the years we had together, the ones where you taught me to navigate from within, without the benefits and pitfalls of clouds and stars. I'd never written a poem until hers.

I have tried writing prose before, but I never got this far. They say each of us has at least one story in them, but I don't know if that's true. This feels more like a sorting than a story.

A brief interlude about words. Here are two of my touchstones now—generative and workable. Generative because creating all kinds of things is what we're meant to do here, and workable because things rarely go as planned.

I often have nightmares. They've invaded for years, and I rarely remember them, though I know they're nightmares because I wake up in knots or worse. Sometimes I think I have them because I sleep alone. Though Zeke sleeps on the foot of the bed with me, so, strictly speaking, I'm not alone.

I do remember one dream. In it, I was sitting across from my wife near the end, and she was eating cherries slowly. After she finished each one, she put the pit in a bowl between us. When she was done with her cherries, she pulverized the pits and then put them in a smoothie and told me to drink it. Next thing I knew, I was falling toward a giant ice sheet. Time slowed enough for me to imagine my bones shattering when I hit the ice. How would I live with shattered bones? When I woke, my bed was wet, at first I thought from sweat—the fluids your body unwillingly discharges in old age.

I believe part of being a good man is accepting it's okay to get lost for a time. I had a young man come to see me once. He asked me to help him stop drinking. He didn't believe in AA or any of those organized approaches, but he did want to stop. He was drinking a lot at the time, mostly vodka. His family had tried to do an intervention, but it hadn't gone well. He drank more afterward. After an hour with him, I knew he was searching for an unorthodox approach.

"It seems to me you need to get the flu and struggle through it," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"When you described trying to stop before, your withdrawal symptoms seemed flu-like."

"Oh . . . I never thought about it that way before."

"Okay, so maybe you could try this. Imagine you are deathly sick with the flu and for the next four weeks act precisely the way you would if you had the flu. Get lots of rest and fluids, and when the pain and urges come, say the following: It's only the flu. I need to go through it, and it will pass in time."

I saw the man walking in town years later with his wife and children. I like to think he

was still sober.

A woman came to see me for almost a year. A decade ago now. During our last meeting, she returned to a familiar theme, asking if she should take care of herself or her family. She couldn't do both and had to choose. I listened to her talk, as I had, and after she said she needed to take care of herself one last time, I said, "Now is your time. You should take care of yourself." Then she smiled at me in a way I hadn't been smiled at for a time.

"Would you like to sleep with me?" she asked.

"How old are you?"

"Forty."

"I'm twenty-five years older than you."

"I know, but this is what I want."

Then she came over to me and kissed me, and soon we were naked in my bed. That was the last time I had sex. The following week I rescued Zeke.

I like listening to a Buddhist nun's audio recordings. She says we should accept that things fall apart in life, and we should learn to be comfortable with uncertainty. These seem like solid ideas, conceptually at least. Here are the things that have fallen apart in my life—my marriage, my family, my job, my health. Par for the course at my age. Here's an uncertain thing I'm comfortable with these days: someday soon I will die.

I'm going to come back as cool, sweet rain, so when you look my way, I'll wash the weight off your face.