

Death In Colma

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"We are gathered here today," Father Domingo muttered against the rain, "to pay our last respects to a father, a brother, and a friend, Miguel Angelo Rodrigues." He paused to look around at the three people huddled under umbrellas, wondering why he agreed to do this today of all days. Across the park past Colma Creek another funeral was taking place at the Greek Cemetery at Cypress Lawn, though at that ceremony perhaps fifty people stood solemnly behind a small woman dressed in black, crying with silk handkerchiefs into the rain. Later they would all give their contribution to Father Nikolaides, curse him and his Mercedes. Up the road the trees of Lake Merced Golf Club, Colma's most exclusive wedding venue, sneered at him. The club had canceled his membership the previous week due to some minor disparities with his finances. *Dammit*, he thought, *it should be illegal to bar a priest from playing an innocent game of golf. It's blasphemy at the very least.*

Father Domingo sighed. "Alright boys, let's just get this one underground."

"Yes, Father," one of the mourners mumbled. The three hired mourners for the Holy Cross Cemetery and Burial Services

(\$35 per hour, \$4 extra for suit jackets) put down their umbrellas, shed their tatty jackets to reveal faded green and brown groundskeeper uniforms. They picked up their shovels and scooped mud over the painted balsa-wood box that now contained the wet Mr Rodrigues. His sister, his only living relative, had declined to attend the service in the rain.

After a few minutes their duty was done and the three groundsmen thrust their shovels into the mound of sand of the adjacent open grave and walked away, mumbling about the cost of cigarettes these days.

Father Santiago Domingo stood in the rain next to the open grave, wondering if it would ever be filled, wondering if his diminishing parish would ever recover from the encroaching multinationalism that saw twenty cemeteries relocated to his town, creeping up almost overnight and pushing his cemetery out of center stage. They even had a Japanese cemetery now! The audacity of it. Next week he would have to lay off James Gordon and the lovely Emily at the office. The two groundsmen would not be happy about extra digging duty as well as making their own coffee.

As he sent his thoughts up to heaven a woman approached; he heard her high heels squelching in the soaking grass before he saw her, a different sound from the clumsy workman's boots he was used to.

"May I help you?" Father Domingo held

aloft his umbrella to shield her expensive suit from the rain.

"Father, they told me I would find you here. My name is Catherina. I wish to hold a service for my boyfriend's mother, only he is away on business and won't be able to make it back in time to arrange it himself."

"I am certain I can accommodate you. Do you have a card?"

"Of course," she said, fumbling in her purse to produce a neat silvered business card with delicate lettering.

"A doctor? Interesting. I am so sorry for your loss. Tell me, do you have a large family?"

"Oh yes, we are many uncles and aunts and cousins. Is that a problem? Perhaps I should inquire at another cemetery if there is not enough space."

"It will not be a problem, we will make space. It will not cost much more to get some extra chairs and maybe some snacks." Father Domingo smiled at her, looking her up and down to admire the cut of her suit.

The woman pretended not to notice him and sniffed at the rain. "I see now that this cemetery is too small. I'm sorry to have bothered you."

Domingo couldn't believe his luck. The woman had appeared just when he had prayed. God had perhaps answered his prayer immediately and for that he was grateful. But he was losing her.

"Wait, don't go," he implored, clutching at her sleeve. She shrugged him away and strode along in the rain past the fresh grave. Domingo did not hesitate, he pushed her into the open grave and picked up the shovel. Raising his hands high above his head he brought the shovel down just as she tried to stand up, sending her down with blood gushing from her head. He worked furiously to scoop mud over her until she was completely covered and only then slowed down to fill in the rest of the grave.

When he was done he walked to his office at the entrance of the cemetery and pulled out Doctor Catherina's beautiful card.

It would be a long afternoon, he had a big funeral to arrange.