

SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 2011

Pass the Potato Salad

By Jennifer Martin

The funeral director and I stood over the open casket of my cousin, Billy. The air in the funeral home was as still and cold as his body. I took in the scent of the white and yellow roses in the spray that sat atop his wooden coffin and glanced at the ribbon affixed to the spray; read the printed words, Beloved Son. I wondered who decided on that wording. Certainly not his mother. No sweet words from those lips.

The funeral director cleared his throat. "I think the mortuary staff did a nice job of covering the bullet's exit wound. I trust your aunt will be pleased with his appearance."

I wasn't sure how to respond to such a question. "How happy can we get over him looking good after he blew his brains out?"

"If I may ask, did he leave a note, sir?"

"Just said he was sorry." I paused to pick a white lint fleck from Billy's red tie. "He lost it all in the market crash. His wife had just left him, took the kids."

The funeral director smoothed his striped tie with one hand. "I sympathize with your family's loss, sir. I always say suicide is harder. It simply has more corners and sharper edges. As far as your cousin's condition, we strive to make our clients happy with how their loved ones look. If I may speak frankly?"

I nodded.

"If the family isn't pleased with how their loved one looks, well, it would be like an ugly cake at a birthday party." The director covered his mouth with one hand, as if he realized he had said something usually reserved for the mortuary-staff-back rooms.

I glanced at the director's brass name tag pinned to his dark lapel, Stephen Smith. "Stephen, I think we're good here."

"Precisely, sir."

About Somos

Somos en escrito, the Latino literary online magazine, invites writers of Chicano, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban and other Hispanic origin to submit manuscripts to somosubmissions@gmail.com. Please read the first posting, [Bienvenidos](#), for more information about the magazine.
Armando Rendón, The Editor

About the Editor



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Stephen nodded and excused himself. I glanced at Billy again. He was no longer the kid with the lavender Kool Aid stains at the corners of his mouth who accidentally dropped the third scoop of potato salad onto the fine embroidery of his mother's linen tablecloth. I touched the sleeve of his suit near the place where I remember his mother pinched the blood up on his arm that Thanksgiving and screamed at him, "Damn it, Billy. I told you earlier to be careful. It's the Meskin in you that makes you so stupid."

No, he wouldn't have to hear her slang version of Mexican crack off the end of her tongue anymore or listen to her say whatever's in her head come out her mouth. I guess it was her way of making herself feel better for being a half-breed. The white kids teased her and her five siblings until they eventually called themselves Meskins. Mostly, it was Aunt Delores who passed on the shame to her children and me, the way she passed her potato salad. But, never my mother. She was the good one in the family. For that, I was grateful. I was also relieved that neither she nor my father was here today to witness what was going down.

I took a seat in the front row and waited for the others, especially Aunt Delores, to arrive for the service. I had written Billy's eulogy and I couldn't wait to see the look on her ugly puss when I told everyone the truth underneath Billy's soul accident.

When the blond woman I didn't recognize concluded singing her discordant version of "Amazing Grace," the priest motioned for me to come forward to offer my brief eulogy. From the pulpit I saw the pews filled to capacity. The overflow of mourners lined the back wall and spilled out into the foyer.

"I want to thank you all for coming today. This is truly a sad day for all of us who knew and loved Billy. If you were a friend of his, you knew he was a passionate man about a lot of things. He loved Armani suits, Jaguars, his two-martini power lunches at his favorite corner table at Joseph's, and long-legged Dallas debutantes."

I saw the crowd soften as a low murmur of laughter filled the room. I smiled a slight smile at the priest who was to my left, seated in a high-back chair. He had cautioned me to be brief and had also asked to preview what I was going to read, but I convinced him otherwise, telling him I was a professional writer.

I continued. "I always like it when someone can make me laugh at a funeral, don't you?" The crowd was silent. I flipped to my next 3 x 5 card. "Not everyone knew Billy the way I knew him. There are things about him that only a few of us knew. The sports cars, fine food, a well-poured martini and women provided him but a brief respite from the ever-present voice inside his head. And that voice would be that of his mother, Delores."

Aunt Delores straightened herself in her seat and shot that look in my direction - her dark eyes focused and her claret lips pursed, the same look she gave Billy every time she'd pinch up the blood on his arm and call him that name. The same way she looked when she'd try to catch me and dish out the same stuff to me when my mother was not around.

"Stephen, the funeral director, told me earlier that he thought the mortuary staff did a fine job of covering the bullet exit wound in Billy's head. And, I have to say I agree. You see, the mortician who embalmed Billy's body didn't find his soul wound, didn't need to repair

it with flesh-covered vinyl, but it was bigger and deeper than the self-inflicted hole he made with his .357 Magnum.”

I had already noted Stephen the funeral director's position, standing to the right of the open, double doors in the back room. Now he folded his arms across his chest and looked at the male colleague to his left, then back at me. He couldn't stop blinking his eyes and his facial expression was what I might expect to see if he'd just received notice of his termination as funeral director.

“But you see, it was the scar in Billy's soul that brings us all here today, all the pain and shame inflicted by his mother that caused him to choose self-deliverance to God on the eve of his 40th birthday. I always urged him to get therapy. God knows, he could have afforded it. I got help. That's what saved my ass. It was an odd choice, my choosing a Mexican psychiatrist from the yellow pages when my problem revolved around being shamed for being part Mexican. But like I thought at the time, if I had a bad heart, I'd find myself a good cardiologist.”

The priest rose from his high-backed chair. “Mr. Sanchez, please, conclude.” echoed through the funeral home's public address system via his body microphone.

“Thank you, Father. I'm wrapping it up.” I focused my gaze on Aunt Delores' flushed throat and neck. Her chest rose with each sharp breath “And lastly, for Billy's mother, Delores, I say just a few simple words. You have the heart of a scorpion. My psychiatrist had a different name for you - patron saint of psychiatry.”

Aunt Delores who was in the front row rose to her feet. She did exactly what I knew she'd do. Come after me. When she reached me, I looped one arm around her waist, grabbed her free arm and pinned her other arm and body to mine. She jerked but was unable to move.

“You bastard!” she said, loud enough to be heard throughout the room. There was a hushed gasp from the mourners. I looked at her and smiled.

“Mr. Sanchez, enough!” The priest was next to me with his hand over the microphone. I let him free Aunt Delores from my grip. An usher reseated her. On my way out I stopped to hand a copy of my published memoir, *Children of the Dust*, to Aunt Delores. She refused it. A large artery pulsed on the left side of her neck.

“One last thing,” I said to her. “The journal I kept at the advice of Dr. Chavez turned out to be a good thing. My memoir was just published. It's dedicated to Billy. You know I loved him like a brother.”

Again that look from her. “I've even autographed it for you, right here on the front page. I opened the book to show her. “See, ‘Thanks for the memories.’ I thought it was real white of me. Least I could do. Book signing's next Thursday at five at the Torn Cover on Broadway. You come and bring some of that good potato salad you make. I always loved your potato salad.” I winked at her. She tried to slap me but she missed.

Stephen the undertaker and a male associate hustled down the red carpeted center aisle and escorted me to the back of the funeral home where they both stood on either side of

me like soldiers through the remainder of the service. At the close of the mass, I watched the priest spread his robed arms outward, in crucifix fashion and tilt his head toward heaven. I heard him say, "May the angels open wide the gates to paradise for you."

"Amen," I whispered. "Billy's free."

Jennifer Martin, of San Antonio, Texas, is one of three children of a Mexican mother and a Caucasian father. She recalls there was a lot of struggle and shame in their young lives due to their mixed heritage. "One of my aunts managed to pass her shame on to me as a young child. I was 32 years old before I was able to let all that go and claim the beauty of my heritage. Now when I meet people, one of the first things I proudly say is, 'My grandmother was Mexican. She read tarot cards and made some of the best homemade tortillas and beans.'" This story also seems very liberating as well. She is the author of *Star Child: A Mother's Journey Through Grief*, and is currently at work on a mystical thriller that takes place in Mexico.

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2 comments:

[Luanne](#) said...

Beautiful, heartfelt story, Jennifer. I have three grandchildren that are half Mexican, a quarter Scandinavian, and a quarter pretty much everything else. We are proud of all their 'parts' and hope they never suffer like you and your family did. I'm sending your wonderful story to my daughter and son-in-law. Congratulations on your success as a writer.

[March 20, 2011 2:30 PM](#)

[Jacquelyn](#) said...

Powerful, many layers of lessons in few words - thanks for sharing your gifts of soul-touched compassion and sensitive writing... I look forward to reading more of your work very soon!

[March 20, 2011 2:44 PM](#)