

And Not as a Stranger

George Wesley Bellows.
Portrait of a Young Man,
ca. 1906–1909.
Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 in.
Williams College
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I'M DRIVING DOWN THE ROAD, the last man alive, and who pops up from the backseat but José. This is not a first: José appears out of nowhere, when and where he will.

"I'm going to a funeral," I say in place of, "How did you get into a locked car?"

"I'm going with you," José replies. "I slept in your car, for your information."

I'm thinking it may be a matter of some indifference which car José spends which night in.

We're driving through a neighborhood I hate. All the houses have front lawns, large, flat, and green enough for several soccer games to be played at the same time.

“Don’t drive so hasty,” José says. He does his own thing with the English language. I slow down, which makes it harder to ignore the mansions, each more flagrant than the last.

“What do you think of these houses?” I ask José.

“I think these houses are like oranges, lemons, and limes, and I think they are like grapefruit.”

I look in the rearview mirror, and José smirks. He knows I will have to ask him to explain. He’s clearly got my number. “You know you’ll have to stay in the car during the funeral,” I say, “and then we go to the cemetery, and you’ll have to wait again.”

“This thing will not be a problem for me.”

It won’t, either, I think.

“You sure know a lot of dead people,” José says.

“Huh?” I’m still working on the house—citrus analogy, which I expect will blow the lid off *conspicuous consumption* as filtered through the perceptions of this nine-year-old migrant philosopher, even though I know he’ll give me some crazy, goofball explanation. I also want to know what José means by “all my dead friends,” but this kid’s life has been so grisly that there are only about three questions that do not lead directly down some trail strewn with the stuff of nightmares. Besides, it just hit me: he thinks that all the funerals I do are for my pals.

“I do the funerals for money,” I tell him. José knows more about me than my shrink, way more than my confessor.

“How many dollars do the dead people pay?”

“Depends.” I say. “Not much. Some fifty or a hundred bucks. Once it was \$250, once \$300.”

José whistles. “This is work my family will like to do, I think.”

His reaction makes me ponder. I realize if a whole family picks peaches in New Jersey—the crop that is the best-kept secret in the U.S.—it would take a day for mother, father, and two sons to make a hundred dollars.

José goes on, “Do you need this raiment to get money from the dead ones?”

Raiment? It takes me a minute to tumble to the New Testamentese. It’s Bible talk for clothes. Half of José’s words have not been said aloud outside a church since 1600. José and his family come to my church. They sit near the front, José with a pen and paper taking furious notes. He’s a word freak. He collects bits and pieces of our language the way other kids might stockpile swears.

José asks the question a different way. “What raiment does my family need?”

“Well, it’s not the clothes so much as the training,” I answer.

“You go to school for this?” Jose’s flat hand pounds the seat beside him. “Where is this school?”

“Texas Theological Episcopal Seminary in Austin, Texas,” I say. “For instance.”

“How many days do you stay to learn there?”

I do the math. “1,460,” I reply. All José has to do is crawl into my backseat to make my life look idiotic.

José pauses and asks, “And to take all the money at the 7-12?”

José calls the 7-11 on the corner by the church the 7-12. I swear to God he’s got the most keenly-honed sense of irony this side of the Atlantic.

“The 7-12 university is how many days?” asks José.

“Zero,” I respond.

José is incredulous. “When someone works in this place, 7-12, where they bring in new food every seven hours, and people you don’t even know their names before, come in to give you money and the walls are lined with candy, and that is zero days of university for this? But if you want to wear this dress and wave your hands to make the men drop boxes of dead people into the ground, it is 1,000 days of school and 400 days and 60? I do not think my family will be doing this work at all.”

I consider explaining to him how it wasn’t my plan either, how my inner-city parish is a sinkhole, how the bishop is a dope, and how I myself am not paid enough to live on, working as it’s called, half-time. I couldn’t make the payments on this car were it not for about fourteen different undertakers who have my name and number penciled beside their heavy, black, smelly telephones, to call me—a whole lot more often than you’d think—to do funerals for people who have spent whatever life God loaned to them to avoid Him like the plague, who run screaming or pick ugly fights, or worse, whose eyes glaze over whenever anybody mentions, or even seems about to mention, Jesus. And I am supposed to stand over their dead bodies and slightly sway and say,

I am the resurrection and the life, he that believeth in me though he were dead, yet shall he live and whosoever liveth and believeth on me shall never, never die,

and then soothe the grieved with sentiments that denigrate and contradict and crash headlong into the Gospel. They pay me \$50 or \$200—the price of a nice pair of shoes or a piece of fish cooked just right and washed down with some adolescent wine—to read to them and to intimate the dead guy was a peach. And I am intended to pretend that even though everybody knows that God, and Jesus, and the Bible, and the Church, say that if you sin, you’re going to hell if you don’t raise your hand at least one time when Jesus says, *I died so you*

don't have to; are you interested at all? that God was joking. *What a kidder.* Wink, wink. They want me to drop hints that the crucifixion was a prank, the incarnation a diversion from The Truth: that man is just fine as he is, thank you very much, and God is optional, at least until the undertaker calls my number, and there is some sudden and insistent interest in what God may or may not have on offer—running the gamut from comfort and assurance for the bereaved, to life eternal for the dead guy.

“Did you ever pick peaches?” José’s voice is conversational, small talky.

“No,” I say. “Did you ever stand up at a dead person’s funeral and make a total ass of yourself, and a cheap sleazy joke of God, and Jesus Christ, and the whole Gospel, and every single thing you stake your life on?”

“No,” José says. “I never did, and I do not think we will be doing this at the 7-12.”

I leave José in the car with enough threats to last two hours. I warn him of this ritzy neighborhood as though any exposure to the wealth might contaminate his soul—which it could. I see him safer in the squalor he inhabits, sleeping in his family car parked in abandoned lots in neighborhoods that seemingly God Himself abandoned long before José was born.

“Stay in the car,” I say for the ninth time. I give him my stash of carbs I carry in the car to combat low blood sugar. If all goes like this day has gone so far, I will faint just as they lower the polished mahogany into the ground.

I look down as I pull open the undertaker’s back door—I always sneak in this way, a dog collar at a funeral is like wearing a sign that says, *come get me*. Then I notice that on my black jacket is something that looks and feels remarkably like egg yolk. I get myself directed to a large sink in what I imagine is the main embalming room; although, for all I know, it may be where they eat Philly steak sandwiches and play canasta between events. Two life-used ladies over by a table in the corner forebear to acknowledge me. People either glom onto a priest and attempt to inhale him, or else they avert their eyes and pretend he isn’t there. I’m a big fan of the latter.

“I’m not getting any younger,” one of the ladies announces as though she just received the information in the morning mail.

“You’re not,” her friend agrees.

I have to stop myself from spinning around full circle to take a gander at a woman who imagines she herself, by contrast, might be . . . getting younger. I love people who imagine that the laws of nature do not apply to them. José comes to mind, although I’m not sure why.

“I have to think where I will want to be living twenty years from now,” says the one who has determined she will not arrest the aging process.

“You do,” her friend agrees. “You definitely do.”

“When you live alone, you have to plan.”

“Absolutely.”

Absolutely, I mutter as I walk out into the corridor, as egg-yolk-spatter-free as I am going to be.

The next part is the hardest. I need to go one-on-one with the bereaved. They always want something from me, something they refuse to own or name. They want me to forgive them for their lives, to grant a grand do-over, not just for themselves and the deceased, but sometimes for several generations of their kind. They want me to design a God for them who’s useful in the moment, who is inclined to miracles on demand, who will perform when summoned, then stand, quiet, in the corner, until required again. You’d think this would be easier after forty years. You really would.

I must say I am more awkward, and nervier, at cocktail parties. At least here there’s no expectation in small talk. We have all been handed little scraps of paper that tell us the parts we’re cast to play—the roles, newly-assigned for the bereaved, unpracticed, unacceptable, unsupportable almost without exception. My role is long studied, too often rote, stiff, and amateurish at the same time.

I walk into the chapel space. There’s money in the room. A lot of it. Not well-concealed. I bristle. Even Jesus didn’t hold out much hope for the rich, young ruler. But, at least, he looked on him with sorrow as he walked away. At least, *He* loved him. Unlike me. I can’t stand people who have money. In my heart it isn’t the love of money that’s the root of evil, but selfishness. I feel righteous, violent fury against anyone who has a lot of it and doesn’t give it to the poor.

“You’ll want to meet the mother,” the undertaker grabs my arm and gestures toward a private space, a little alcove where a woman stands supported by a gray-haired man. She doesn’t look a day over thirty. I’m thinking that with enough money you can redress the damage wreaked by entire decades of decay. My guess is she has paid, and paid well, for the erasure of a good twenty years, and even then, this man, who must be her husband, has a running start of, I bet, a quarter of a century.

I want to go back to the embalming-canasta room and tell the ladies, *Au contraire, there is youth on offer if you’re sufficiently bankrolled to pay for it.*

“He was just nine years old,” the undertaker is whispering to me.

“Who?” I say.

“The boy. Her son.”

"Whose son? What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Paul Andrews, the boy who died."

"Boy?" It comes out sounding like a word I just made up.

"I had a devil of a time with the face, he was all cut up. What's wrong?" says the undertaker.

I drop into a chair. I look down at my chest. There's still a shiny shadow of egg yolk on the lapel. "There's a nine-year-old boy in my car," I say to him.

The undertaker is concerned. "What's wrong with you? Are you ill? You need to meet the mother."

"Call someone else," I say. This guy knows very well I do not, cannot, have not ever buried children. He knows not to ever call me when it is a child who's died.

"There is no one else," he says. "That's why I called you. I told your secretary the whole thing. Everybody else who's on our list said no, for one reason or another. I told your secretary."

I don't bother saying she did not tell me. She most assuredly knew I would not go.

"I'm glad you're here." An elderly woman is bending over me. For the smallest part of a second I think it is my mother. "You can talk to her," she says.

She takes me by the hand—she thinks she is my mother too—and leads me unresisting to the thirty-year-old mother, who is not an old woman after all or wasn't until today. Frail, she stands, composed of little bits and pieces of a person loosely held together by nothing. Looking into the future takes us out of the moment.

"I have a nine-year-old boy out in my car," I say in place of a greeting.

"Then you understand." The mother names the curse and calls it understanding.

I shake my head.

"What is your boy's name?" she says.

"José," I answer.

"Don't ever let him die," she says.

"I won't."

"Where's Jesus?" she says with a Spanish pronunciation as if she thinks José and I may call God's son that? Then she repeats the question in English.

"I don't know," I say.

"Where's Paul?" she says. "Where's my little boy?"

The muscles in my face clamp shut. They close me down.

"I'm ready now," she says. "I'm ready to die. I wasn't before, but now I am. Will you stay with me?"

“I will.” What I mean is that I will die with her if it should come to that.

“But what about your little boy who’s waiting in the car?” she says.

“He’ll be fine.”

“You can’t keep him alive,” she says, as if she is breaking news to me. She concentrates her face into a tight frown. “We can’t do a funeral for my baby.”

“No,” I respond.

“You tell them,” she stands like a statue, like a guard.

I walk over to the undertaker and tell him to send the people all away. “We can’t do much,” I say, “but we cannot do this.”

No one objects, not one person in the place. They would stand on their heads for the afternoon, if they even suspected it might be of comfort to the mother. One by one, they drift away, until I am left with the body of a little boy and with the mother, a skeleton search party scouring the universe for Jesus.

“You can’t make Jesus up.” The mother’s voice is made of metal. “You can’t invent him. And my Paulie has gone off with him. He grabbed him like a thief. I hate him with all my heart. I’m going to have it out with him, right here. You’re sure you want to stay?”

“I’m sure,” I answer.

“I hope that Jesus wins this one.” Her harsh gaze pierces the air. “I pray to God he plays to win.”

There’s a little mouse scratch noise over in the corner, and I look up to see José, a bit ruffled perhaps but resourceful-looking for all that.

He says, “I come to see if you need help.”

“Yes, we do,” I and the mother chorus chant together as though we’ve practiced it.

“Okay, well then,” José says. “I will tell you of when I died and what it is like there, and when you know that about it, I will tell you what the people there tell me to say. And you will ask the question.”

The mother takes in a long, smooth draught of air, then lets it out, eyes closed. She opens up her eyes and touches José’s sleeve. He sits down on the padded bench and folds his bony fingers.

And just like that, for the first time in a hundred lifetimes, I’m liking Jesus’ chances.