1984

On the Death of the Winemaker's Widow

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"Oh, I can explain that if you like," whispered the man with the pipe to the young, traveling priest, who thought he must have missed out on a fine joke after hearing laughter issue from the fog. Indeed, the very fact that he was a priest helped him to receive an explanation. The people of Lunette never would accept strangers, and the man with the pipe, the glow of which being the only visible thing about him in the fog, was certainly no different.

"You see," he began, his hand twisting in a vague, but unseen, gesture, "the crazy man came on a Tuesday. I know it was Tuesday because that's the day old widow McGlish died. Well, actually, no one really knows for sure when the old lady cashed in, but they found her on Tuesday, lying face down and fully clothed in the shower with the cold water running. Dr. Travall, our coroner and taxidermist, said he couldn't tell how long she'd been dead because the icy water tended to preserve her, like carp or something. Even so, she had a closed casket at her funeral, although I must admit we all wanted to have a peek at her. We didn't see too many dead people here in Lunette—not until the crazy man came, of course.

The widow's wine made the funeral festive, its bouquet wafting through the room with the tittering of the womenfolk. Gorman Garrote leapt atop the casket and led us all in a lively rendition of a popular two-step while Cabal Endicott, bedecked in his pin-striped suit and college ring, accompanied him on the mouth organ. Gorman and Cabal were the town's big-game hunters, but Cabal often complained to his friends at the Lunette Tavern about Gorman's obsessive hunting habits. 'At least I,' the wealthy Endicott would declare, 'can provide my trophies with a better home.'

Shockingly enough, it was in the midst of these festivities that we first saw the crazy man. He just sauntered in with the fog, stood in the middle of the cavernous room, and laughed at the top of his lungs. Now, we usually don't take too kindly to strangers here in Lunette, but when one strolls into a funeral and yucks it up, you can start to understand why. Gorman Garrote, who would shoot a stranger and then exclaim he had never existed anyway, was the first to approach the crazy man. He pulled himself to his full height and boomed so that spittle flew from his lips. 'What the frig are you doing here?' or something to that effect.

'The crazy man shrugged, broke into a crescent smile, and said something like, 'Why, I'm always here.'

'Always here? You've never been here! We've never seen you!'

'The crazy man shuffled his feet once or twice and, winking at Gorman, asked, 'Why did you kill her?' Gorman looked as though part of his lunch found its way back to his mouth, and we all had a pretty good idea of just what old widow McGlish looked like at the time. 'You're drinking her wine, aren't you?' Gorman's cheeks shook, spittle glistened on his chin, and wine sloshed out of his glass and onto his hand. 'You were always drinking her wine.'

'I'm not the only one,' blubbered Gorman, his free arm flailing about. 'Everyone drinks her wine.' The crazy man looked around the room at the men in their best Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and with red-stained smiles curling hideously up from the corners of their mouths. Some of the women from the
Ladies' Social Quilting Club set their glasses down quickly—one dropped hers and stared accusingly at Gorman.

"Yes, yes," nodded the crazy man passionately, "but who will make the wine for you now?" No one said anything then—Gorman wasn't even listening—and we just stared at either our own or some else's feet.

"Come now, friend," articulated Endicott at last. "Certainly you can't believe that our drinking her wine led to our murdering the poor woman. It was merely fate." He made the last statement with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Fate?" laughed the crazy man. "I hardly think fate had anything to do with it. No, you killed her all right. Just as you drank her wine, you killed her. Oh, sure, you'll blame Gorman, and the whole town will secretly blame Gorman, but in voice they will all blame you, and, finally, you all agree to blame fate." He turned his face to the ceiling and shook his head, eyes closed. "What is fate to you? Some blind, evil shadow that strikes haphazardly? Oh, it's you who are blind. You grasp blindly for that evil fate, and when your fingertips touch it you clutch it to the neck and squeeze, never realizing that you're at each other's throats."

"The crazy man stepped to the door and, opening it, allowed the thick, quiet fog to spill into the room. 'It really is a pity that you had to kill her,' he sighed, and then, shaking his head, he left the room.

"'Outrageous!' cried Gorman, finally recovered and standing once again on the widow's casket. 'We cannot allow a mad stranger to disrupt our town this way! I will not allow it!' He brandished the nickel-plated, pearl-handled .45 that he wore at all times, usually in full view, and disappeared into the fog after the crazy man.

"Cabal Endicott, never to be outdone by Gorman, pulled his dull, army-issue Colt from the inside of his pin-striped vest and left soon afterward.

"It was a couple of minutes, I suppose, before Gorman—first saw the dark, almost shapeless silhouette moving slowly in the fog. Endicott, who marched off into the opposite direction, probably observed a black shadow at about the same time. Anyway, neither of them wasted any time. They lined up those hazy silhouettes in their sights and fired away—we heard both shots almost simultaneously—and both of them, we discovered later, hit their targets.

"When the final repercussions of the gunshots echoed away into the fog, we heard that same, crazy laugh you heard just a few minutes ago, Father. Some of the oldtimers around here say that on a foggy night like this you can still hear that crazy man laughing, as if he were right next to you.

"Well, we found Gorman the next morning. He was all curled up like a kitten, only his face was shorn off and little pieces of him were lying on the sidewalk like squashed bugs. Endicott was a little way down. He caught Gorman's bullet in the chest, but he didn't make as much of a mess. It wasn't much different than if a schoolboy puked on the sidewalk or something.

The young, traveling priest, anticipating a joke all along, questioned the man with the pipe about the story's validity.

"Of course it's true, Father. I swear. I was there, for Christ's sake—pardon me, Father—but it's the truth." They walked along a short way, following the glow of the man's pipe. "What?" exclaimed the man, startled. "Yes, it is true! I just told you that I...Huh? Than why did I just do what? But, Father, I swear, I didn't laugh. I thought it was you..."