The Obituary Habit

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Evelyn Crory pulled down the shades of her gray-toned apartment and sat in the wicker chair next to her dining room table. She couldn't decide whether she wanted to gather enough energy to get her morning paper or just stay in her chair and vegetate. Not a major problem for any other person, but to Evelyn, it was the basis for her whole day. She chose to get her paper and was richly rewarded when she turned to the obituaries and saw someone's death had earned a whole page. Her eyes began to shine wildly and she actually ran to her black and white television. There it was! Grim Harper stood in front of a small house, his voice in a low monotone as he related the suicide of a local newspaper writer. Evelyn clapped her hands in joy and flicked off the t.v.

Her closet was a fashion show of gray, black, deep navy, and dark brown. But since this was a special occasion, she chose to wear the new gray suit that she had just bought from JC Penney. It was double breasted and had to be the nicest one in her closet. She didn't want to wear it the whole day, though. She had bought the suit for a special occasion and she didn't plan to wear it just anywhere. After laying the suit neatly on her bed, she scanned the obituaries and found that a man named Edward Zipperhuffle had died of a stroke. Evelyn laughed to herself; that one would definitely be a riot. She could just guess what the rest of the family would look like. She would wear her best brown for good old Zipper.

But for now, she had to hurry. They were burying him at two-thirty and it was approaching two o'clock. The brown would definitely do. She tucked the obituary paper into her black plastic purse and mourned the fact that so few people had died over the weekend.

She was in the midst of choosing a handkerchief to complement her drab outfit when the phone rang. Evelyn could have sworn that she had forgotten to pay the bill and even if she had paid it, she couldn't imagine who would be calling her.

"Miss Crory, this is your doctor from Morbidside clinic. My secretary informs me that you have made an appointment for Tuesday. You are not sick, all your tests have come up negative. There is no reason for your to come here again."

Evelyn stared at the phone as if it was possessed and responded haughtily, "Don't be ridiculous. Of course I'm sick! My money will be just as good at another office that can tell me the truth."

"You want to hear that you're on your last leg! Well, I'm sorry, Miss Crory, but I can't tell you what isn't true. Why you have this obscene obsession I don't know, but I refuse to placate
you any longer! You are NOT dying, you probably won't be for a hundred more years! Be happy that you're healthy. I have so many patients who would pay any amount of money for a clean slate of health every now and again and I--"

"I, sir, don't pay you to hear about the world's problems. I think that finding a new M.D. would be profitable to us both. Good day, Doctor Broen." Evelyn slammed the phone down and unplugged it. She began humming the Death March and holding the brown dress up to her body as she waltzed around the room.

Evelyn waited until the Zipperhuffle family and friends were seated in the front pews, then quietly slipped into the back of the church. The funeral was slow and almost no one showed any emotion. Evelyn began to feel impatient, wanting to shake the dull minister who couldn't even glorify old Zipperhuffle in death. She left as soon as it was over and didn't stay to give the family her condolences. Usually, she just said that she was a friend of the deceased party and no one thought any differently. Anyway, the woman she assumed to be Eddie's wife had a sour face; he had probably died of grief over his marriage. Evelyn snickered to herself over her joke.

There was an hour wait until her next funeral and she had no idea of what to do. The church was on a desolate, colour-barren street that showed no signs of movement save the occasional rustle of an autumn leaf. Although it fit Evelyn's mood, she wasn't too enthusiastic about sitting around for hours in a cafe with noisome and irritating people. She walked along the sidewalk and kicked at an ant carrying a crumb of someone's yesterday treat. She laughed when it struggled on its back with a broken leg. Then, in a moment of pity, she smashed it. Instead of regret she felt a rush of joy that gave her enough energy to jump in her car and make the fifteen minute drive into Coffer, where the funeral for the reporter was being held.

Evelyn was glad that she had arrived early when she realized how large the ceremony was. That usually meant that the priest would be so encouraged by the size of his audience, he would give an excellent eulogy. Evelyn remembered a funeral where the priest had been slightly hung over and had no idea what to say. He had given the best eulogy she had ever heard. The family had been pleased and no one, including Evelyn, left the church with a dry eye. She hoped that this funeral was better than Zipperhuffle's. But how much could be said about a reporter? Going to a seat in the back of the church, she passed an elderly woman with a cobwebbed smile plastered to her face. Evelyn couldn't resist the urge to poke the old lady in the arm. When she got no response, she thought that there would be another funeral to go to soon. Evelyn almost laughed out loud.

Unfortunately, the sermon was terribly boring; Evelyn couldn't believe that a news reporter could lead such a dull life. Her mind began to drift as she envisioned the several funerals she had attended in her bleak lifetime. Her favourite moment in macabre history was when she had managed to sneak a peek at an embalming, but she didn't think the people showed the proper
enthusiasm for the occasion. In view of all her experiences with death, she loved to envision her own. The only thing that saddened her about this was the fact that no one would come to her funeral the way she had gone to theirs. But then, the prospect of actually being dead thrilled her and she couldn't wait to meet Zippy and all the others.

As fascinating as death was to her, she never considered committing suicide. Taking her life seemed degrading and unsatisfactory. She had gone to a funeral where the departed had hanged himself, studying the reactions of the crowd. They were equally stunned and saddened but the greatest emotion was disgust. No one viewed suicide as the "noble" thing to do anymore.

Evelyn had totally forgotten where she was and when the people began to mill around with whispered gossip, she was shuttled back to the world of the living. She stood and stretched as one does after a pleasant dream and wondered if there was anything else on the agenda. She consulted her list as she passed the same comatose old woman. Nope, there was nothing else to do. She hated the thought of going back to her apartment, yet there was nowhere else to go. Sometimes she wished that she had a family or friends to visit, but solitude was good for the soul. Or so she believed. Her landlord was sitting on the steps of the ruined brownstone, emitting the smell of stale food and Ben-Gay that Evelyn called the nursing home smell. Evelyn wide-stepped her and ran up the stairs. Her apartment was a haven now. And there, discarded on the table, was her morning paper. Having nothing else to do, she lay on the bed and read. The paper was so depressing: someone was celebrating her husband's successful heart transplant, oh joy. The only interesting thing in the rag was the front page story of a Mafia hitman who had skipped trial. But even that couldn't hold Evelyn's interest for too long. She threw the paper down the garbage can and watered her three plants. They were dying from overkill. Dying... killing.... Evelyn ran back to the garbage and pulled out the paper. The man's name was Dominic Muerto. She grabbed her hat and scrambled down the stairs.

Evelyn had never been into a sleazy neighborhood before. Even her apartment was on a respectable street. She hoped that she was in the right area. Her next door neighbor had said that "those types" of people usually hung out on 7th and 3rd. Sure enough, when she looked in the phone book under Muerto, the address had been 7th street. She was aware that Muerto was not a common name and decided to give this one a try. When she glanced up from staring at her toes, she was appalled to see the number of prostitutes and drunken men lining the streets. If this Dominic was here, she wasn't sure that she wanted to have anything to do with him.

The hallway was rank with the smell of stale beer, dirty laundry, and general uncleanliness. Most of the ceiling lights were missing and the only light came from the dirty window at the other side of the hall. Actually, the dreary setting almost appealed to Evelyn. It took little time to find the apartment, especially since Evelyn was more than eager to get out of the place. She knew that someone was home when she heard mumbled
curses as she knocked on the door. But she had to bang several more times before she heard heavy footsteps stop in front of the door.

"Yeah?" a deep voice questioned.
"I'm looking for Dominic Muerto," Evelyn replied timidly.
"Who wants him? You the police? Or are you one of them women looking for money? 'Cause if you are, I can tell you right now that he ain't here. There's been about five of you by here already."

Evelyn rolled her eyes. "No, sir, I'm not looking for money and I'm not the police. If you're not Dominic, can you tell me where he is? This is a death situation sir, and I need his help. Can you--sir? Sir, are you there?" Evelyn began to pound on the door again. "Listen, sir, I need Dominic to help me with a killing. If he can't do it, I need him to refer me to someone who can. Are you sure he isn't there?"

"Lady, do you think he'd be stupid enough to come by here? Get serious."
Evelyn was plenty annoyed now. "I don't care! I have a lot of money and I'm willing to pay any amount for this job." There was a long silence on the other side. "Sir? Oh, hell!" She kicked at the door and her foot was halted in mid-air when the door opened. A gnarled hand holding a white piece of paper poked from between the chain and air space. Evelyn shrieked and jumped away from the door.

"Here is where he is. You better tell him that Franconi sent you." Evelyn took the paper as the door slammed quickly.

"This is weird stuff! Jesus, lady, do you know what you're asking me to do? I can't believe this! I'm already on trial here!" Evelyn reached the apartment that he was staying in. It was in a much better neighbourhood and Dominic Muerto was not as imposing as Evelyn had been led to believe. He was a nice looking young man in his early thirties with perfectly sculpted, thick, dark hair that at the moment he was ruining by running his fingers through it with a fervor. Evelyn sat patiently in front of him while he paced back and forth and occasionally shook his fist in her direction.

When he finally seemed to be calming, she approached him with her brown briefcase in hand. "Mr. Muerto, I--"

"Dominic, please." Evelyn nodded her head. "Dominic, then. I have a case here that holds enough money to get you out of the country and set you up quite nicely in a dwelling of your choice. How hard can it be to kill one person for all of," Evelyn opened the case and Dominic's eyes widened, "this?"

"This is heavy duty! Now we're talking business. But are you sure you want to do this?"

"I've been sure since the day I was born." Dominic looked at her for a while and then sat her down on his sofa. "All right, then, let's work this out."

Evelyn climbed the stairs of her apartment with a feeling of satisfaction. Dominic, after much reluctance, had figured out a way to get the job done quickly and blamelessly. Evelyn cleaned
her apartment methodically and packed all of her ceramics away. She took off the JC Penney suit to re-iron it and stood at the bay window in her gray slip. Although the view wasn't stunning, it was comfortable with the handy-dandy shopping mart in the center of tall oak trees. There was no visible sun and the wind beat protests that shook the walls. All in all, it had been a perfect but long day and she was happy that it was almost over.

She dressed and left a copy of her will on the table. Taking a final look around her apartment, she closed the door and descended the stairs.

Dominic revved up the motor of his car and slowly approached the street where he had told Evelyn Lynn Crory to cross. He was charged with excitement and couldn't wait until he saw her blue feathered hat bobbing in the air. And there she was. He pulled out of the car space where he was waiting and backed up to get full momentum. Evelyn turned to see him speeding down the street. She saw the barrel of the gun sticking out of the window and ran to the curb so he could get a clearer shot. There could be no chance for survival. A passing car blocked her view just before the gun went off twice and a loud scream echoed from the street.

The funeral was held at two p.m. on Sunday afternoon. The church was packed with people; there was barely standing room. However, the lady in the long black dress managed to squeeze up to the coffin. She cried at her loss and touched her fingers to the metallic cold. A tall gentleman escorted her to a seat near the front. Franconi Lissonar stepped to the podium and sighed. "Dominic Muerto was a good man. His unfortunate death by suicide left us all deeply sad."

The lady in black scoffed at his words. He hadn't committed suicide; a car turning the corner had knocked the gun barrel back into the car just as he fired. The bullets had lodged in his brain instead of hers. That loss was more than she could bear. Evelyn Crory lifted her veil and stared at the corpse of Dominic Muerto. "It should have been me," she whispered. "It should have been me."