

JOINING THE FUNERAL PROCESSION

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By James Collins

Death took Owen's good friend and neighbor Luigi. They lived side-by-side in a small New Jersey town for almost 40 years. Owen and his wife attended the wake and funeral mass and with their car planned to join the funeral procession. There were about 40 cars of relatives, friends and neighbors in various cars lining up for the procession. The lead car, the hearse, was followed by the flower car, followed by two large limousines for the large Italian family whose patriarch was Luigi. The plan was that all the rest of the mourners who attended the burial used their own cars. All the cars lined up, turned the headlights on and followed the cortège to the graveyard. The funeral home was in charge of all the arrangements and all of the alignments. A number of burly Italians in dark suits made up the drivers for the cortège and the pallbearers. The latter were all family related.

The day was overcast, very appropriate for a somber occasion. The subdued note of the day permeated the feelings of the mourners. Everyone was sad and it seemed like everyone was moving slowly except Owen. He was always a vigorous, high-energy person with a great sense of humor and at times could be outrageous. His wife Marie was the counterbalance to his life who kept him on the straight and narrow. She made sure he dressed appropriately, acted appropriately, and did not speak out of turn. Today Marie warned him to be on his best behavior.

Luigi, his good friend, possessed a similar personality and would have pooh-poohed all the morbid sayings and sorrowful looks. He and Owen would have been off together plotting something to make everybody laugh. It was their nature. It was their history, and it was expected.

The cortège started to line up. Each of the limousines the hearse and the flower car got one large Italian chauffeur. A group of four other burly Italians, frantically waving their arms, pulled cars out of the parking lot and put them in order behind the limos. The order was very arbitrary. If you were sitting in the driver's seat of your car and looked like you were ready to go, they waved you into line. If you had parked farther back in the parking lot you had to wait. Unfortunately, Owen had parked in the rear to keep his new car from damage. This put Owen fairly far back in the cortège.

To Owen's mind, all the burly Italians in the tuxedos, waving their arms around, made the operation look like the Keystone cops. He chuckled to himself and tried to figure out what he might do to lighten the mood. Marie heard the chuckle and knowing her husband realized his mind was trying to come up with some kind of outrageous scheme. She warned him.

"Owen, behave yourself. These are our friends and it is a very sorrowful occasion for them. If Luigi were here, you and he would be up to something outrageous. You cannot do anything to disrupt this occasion. I know Luigi would agree with whatever you are planning, but I do not. I am here, he is not, behave yourself."

"Marie I hear what you're saying and I will not do anything to cause any problem. However, this Italian circus run by these funeral bouncers have put us so far back in the line of the cortège that we may never get there. Luigi was my good friend. If he was here and someone else in the family had died, he would have made sure that you and I would be up in the front of the cortège. He considered us family just as I considered him part of our family."

The funeral cortège, with all the lights on, slowly wound through the small towns of New Jersey on its way to the graveyard. They did not stop for any traffic lights and stayed relatively close together so that no interlopers would cut into the cortège. Owen was 25 cars back in the line and was getting edgy. They entered a section of road, two lanes wide and about two miles long. Owen decided to go for it. He pulled into the left-hand lane and raced the engine.

"Owen, what are you doing? Get back in line. Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going up closer to the front where we belong. If Luigi were here, he'd make sure that's where our car was placed."

"Luigi's dead! He is in the car up front. He is not in charge of setting up the funeral. He is the main attraction. Get back in line now!"

It did not happen. Owen kept trying. However, every time he tried to get into the right lane, whoever was driving that car pulled up closer to prevent Owen from entering the cortège. Luckily, the cortège was moving quite slowly because Owen kept increasing his speed moving further up to the front of the procession. He was finally side-by-side with the extra-long limos holding the immediate family members. They all knew Owen but were locked in their own grief and were not looking out the window of the limousine. The driver however did not know Owen and did not care who he was. The driver's job was to prevent anybody from entering the funeral procession. Owen looked ahead and saw about half a mile further the road was narrowing back down to one lane in each side. Therefore, he sped up and ended up in front of the hearse.

"Owen what are we doing up here? You are in front of the entire funeral possession. Now instead of us following the hearse, they are following us. Do you know where we are going?"

"No, I have no idea. However, I do not want to be here. I was trying to get back into the funeral procession, but nobody would let me."

"That's because nobody knows who you are. To them you are just an interloper trying to move up in traffic. There is no way that you were going to be able to get back in line. Since you don't know where we're going, what are you going to do?"

"There is nothing I can do. I'll just keep driving at 40 miles an hour and hope the graveyard is straight ahead, and I'll see a sign."

About three miles ahead Owen drove through an intersection. The hearse immediately behind him made a hard right followed by the entire procession. Owen had to go ahead, make a U-turn, come back, and add himself to the tail of the funeral cortège. Instead of moving up to the front of the cortège for some form of status, Owen ended up at the very end. The tale of the little journey still reverberates through northern New Jersey and will always generate some laughs at a party. Owen is sure Luigi is laughing up there somewhere.

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