

A QUIET REVOLUTION FOR DEATH

Jack Dann

No other epoch has laid so much stress as the expiring Middle Ages on the thought of death.

—J. HUIZINGA

It is a lovely day for a drive and a picnic. There is not a hint of rain in the cerulean sky, and the superhighway snakes out ahead like a cement canal. The cars are moving in slow motion like gondolas skiffing through God's magical city.

“What a day,” says Roger as he leans back in his cushioned seat. Although the car is on automatic, he holds the steering stick lightly between his thumb and forefinger. His green Chevrolet shifts lanes and accelerates to 130 miles an hour. “This is what God intended when he made Sunday,” Roger says as he lets go of the steering stick to wave his arms in a stylized way. He dreams that he is an angel of God guiding the eyeless through His realms.

The children are in the back seat where they can fight and squeal and spill their makeup until Sandra becomes frustrated enough to give them some *Easy-Sleep* to make the trip go faster. But the monotony of the beautiful countryside and the hiss of air pushing past rubber and glass must have lulled Sandra to sleep. She is sitting beside Roger. Her head lolls, beautiful blonde hair hiding her beautiful face.

“I'm practicing to be an angel,” shouts Bennie, Roger's oldest and favorite son. The other children giggle and make muffled shushing noises.

Roger turns around and sees that his son has painted his face and smeared it with ashes. He's done a fair job, Roger thinks. Blue and grey rings of makeup circle Bennie's wide brown eyes. "That's very good, indeed," Roger says. "Your face is even more impressive than your costume."

"I could do better if I wanted to," says Rose Marie, who is seven and dressed in a mock crinoline gown with great cloth roses sewn across the bodice.

But Bennie is nonplused. He beams at his father and says, "You said that everyone,—even kids,—must have their own special vision of death. Well, my vision is just like yours." Bennie is twelve. He's the little man of the family, and next year, with God's help, he will be bar mitzvahed, since Sandra is half-Jewish and believes that children need even more ceremony than adults.

Rose Marie primps herself and says "ha" over and over. Samson and Lilly, ages five and six respectively, are quietly playing "feelie" together. But Samson—who will be the spitting image of his father, same cleft in his chin, same nose—is naked and shivering. Roger raises the car's temperature to 79 degrees and then turns back to Bennie.

"How do you know what my vision is?" Roger asks, trying to find a comfortable position. His cheek touches the headrest and his knee touches Sandra's bristly leg. Sandra moves closer to the door.

"You're nuts over Guyot Marchant and Holbein," says Bennie. "I've read your library fiche. Don't you think I'm acquainted intellectually with the painted dances of death? Well, ha, I know the poetry of Jean Le Fevre, and I've seen the holos of the mural paintings in the church of La Chaise-Dieu. I've read Gedeon Huet in fiche and I've even looked at your books—I'm reading *Totentanz*, and I'm almost finished."

"You must ask permission," says Roger, but he is proud of his son. He certainly is the little man of the family, Roger tells himself. The other children only want to nag and cry and eat and play "feelie."

Sandra wakes up, pulls her hair away from her face, and asks: "How much longer?" Her neck and face are glossy with perspiration. She lowers the temperature, makes a choking noise, and insists that this trip is too long and she's hungry.

"I'm hungry, too," says Rose Marie. "And it's hot in here and everything's sticky."

"We'll be there soon," Roger says to his family as he gazes out the large

windshield at the steaming highway ahead. The air seems to shimmer from the exhaust of other cars, and God has created little mirages of blue water.

“See the mirages on the highway,” Roger says to his family. What a day to be alive! What a day to be with your family. He watches a red convertible zoom right through a blue mirage and come out unscathed. “What a day,” he shouts. He grins and squeezes Sandra’s knee.

But Sandra swats his hand as if it were a gnat.

Still, it *is* a beautiful day.

“Well, here we are,” says an excited Roger as the dashboard lights flash green, indicating that everyone can now get out of the car.

What a view! The car is parked on the sixteenth tier of a grand parking lot which overlooks the grandest cemetery in the East. From this vantage ground (it is certainly worth the forty-dollar parking fee) Roger can view beautiful Chastellain Cemetery and its environs. There, to the north, are rolling hills and a green swath which must be pine forest. To the west are great mountains which have been worn down by God’s hand. The world is a pastel pallet: it is the first blush of autumn.

The cemetery is a festival of living movement. Roger imagines that he has slipped back in time to fifteenth-century Paris. He is the noble Boucicaut and the duke of Berry combined. He looks down at the common folk strolling under the cloisters. The peasants are lounging amidst the burials and exhumations and sniffing the stink of death.

“I’m hungry,” whines Rose Marie, “and it’s windy up here.”

“We came up here for the view,” Roger says. “So enjoy it.”

“Let’s go eat and put this day behind us,” Sandra says.

“Mommy lives in her left brain, huh, Dad?” says Bennie. “She suffers from the conditioning and brainwashing of the olden days.”

“You shouldn’t talk about your mother that way,” Roger says as he opens the trunk of the car and hands everyone a picnic basket.

“But mother is old-fashioned,” Bennie says as they walk toward the elevators. “She thinks everyone must conform to society to tame the world. But she is committed only to appearances; she cares nothing for substance.”

“You think your father’s so modern?” Sandra says to Bennie, who is

walking behind her like a good son.

“You’re an antique,” Bennie says. “You don’t understand right-brain living. You can’t accept death as an ally.”

“Then what am I doing here?”

“You came because of Dad. You hate cemeteries.”

“I certainly do not.”

But the argument dies as the silvery elevator doors slide open to take them all away from left-brain thinking.

“Let’s take a stroll around the cemetery,” Roger says as they pass under a portiere which is the cemetery’s flag and insignia. Roger pays the gateman who wears the cemetery’s colors on the sleeves and epaulets of his somber blue uniform.

“That’s *fifty-three* dollars, sir,” says the gateman. He points at Bennie and says, “I must count him as an adult; it’s the rules.”

Roger cheerfully pays and leads his noisy family through the open wrought-iron gates. Before him is Chastellain Cemetery, the “real thing,” he tells himself—there it is, full of movement and life, neighbor beside neighbor, everyone eating, drinking, loving, selling, buying, and a few are even dying. It is a world cut off from the world.

“This is the famous Avenue d’Auvergne,” Roger says, for he has carefully studied Hodel’s *Guidebook to Old and Modern Cemeteries*. “Here are some of the finest restaurants to be found in any cemetery,” he says as they pass under brightly colored restaurant awnings.

“I want to go in here,” Rose Marie says as she takes a menu card from a doorman and holds it to her nose. “I can smell aubergine fritters and pig’s fry and *paupiette de veau* and I’m sick of Mommy’s cooking. I want to go in here.”

The doorman grins (probably thinking of his commission) and hands Roger a menu card.

“We have a fine picnic lunch of our own,” Roger says, and he reminds himself that he’s sick of French food anyway.

As they stroll north on the beautiful Avenue d’Auvergne which is shaded by old wych-elms, restaurants give way to tiny shops. Farther north, the avenue becomes a dirty cobblestone street filled with beggars and hawkers pushing wooden handcarts.

“I don’t like it here,” says Rose Marie as she stares at the jettatura charms and lodestone ashtrays which are arrayed behind a dirty shop-window.

“You can find all manner of occult items in these little shops,” Roger says. “This cemetery is a sanctuary for necromancy. Some of the finest astrologers and mediums work right here.” Roger pauses before a shop which specializes in candles and oils and incense made of odoriferous woods and herbs. “What a wonderful place,” Roger says as he takes Sandra’s hand in his own. “Perhaps we should buy a little something for the children.”

A hunchbacked beggar pulls at Roger’s sleeve and says, “Alms for the poor,” but Roger ignores his entreaties.

“The children are getting restless,” Sandra says, her hand resting limply in Roger’s. “Let’s find a nice spot where they can play and we can have our picnic.”

“This is a nice spot,” Bennie says as he winks at a little girl standing in an alleyway.

“Hello, big boy,” says the girl, who cannot be more than twelve or thirteen. “Fifty dollars will plant you some life in this body.” She wiggles stylishly, leans against a shop window, and wrinkles her nose. “Well?” She turns to Roger and asks, “Does Daddy want to buy his son some life?” Then she smiles like an angel.

Roger smiles at Bennie, who resembles one of the death dancers painted on the walls of the Church of the Children.

“C’mon, Dad, please,” Bennie whines.

“Don’t even consider it,” Sandra says to Roger. “We brought the children here to acquaint them with death, not sex.”

“That smacks of left-brain thinking,” says the little girl as she wags her finger at Sandra. “Death is an orgasm, not a social artifact.”

“She’s right about that,” Roger says to Sandra. Only youth can live without pretense, he thinks. Imagining death as a simple return to nature’s flow, he hands Bennie a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

“Thanks, Dad,” and Bennie is off, hand in hand with his five-minute friend. They disappear into a dark alley that separates two long tumbledown buildings.

“He shouldn’t be alone,” Sandra says. “Who knows what kind of people might be skulking about in that alley?”

“Shall we go and watch him, then?” Roger asks.

“It’s love and death,” Rose Marie says as she primps her dress, folding the thin material into pleats.

“I want to go *there*,” says Samson, pointing at a great Ferris wheel turning in the distance.

Roger sighs as he looks out at the lovely gravestone gardens of the cemetery. “Yes,” he whispers, dreaming of God and angels. “It’s love and death.”

Sandra prepares the picnic fixings atop a secluded knoll which overlooks spacious lawns, charnelhouses, cloisters adorned with ivory gables, and even rows of soap-white monuments. Processions of mourners wind their way about like snakes crawling through a modern Eden. Priests walk about, offering consolation to the bereaved, tasting tidbits from the mourners’ tables, kissing babies, touching the cold foreheads of the dead, and telling wry jokes to the visitors just out for a Sunday picnic and a stroll.

“All right,” Sandra says as she tears a foil cover from a food cylinder and waits for the steam to rise. “Soup’s on. Let’s eat everything while it’s hot.” She opens container after container. There is a rush for plates and plasticware and the children argue and fill their dishes with the sundry goodies. Then, except for the smacking of lips, a few moments of silence: a burial is taking place nearby, and everyone is caught up in profound emotion.

“It’s a small casket,” Roger says after a proper length of time has passed. He watches two young men clad in red lay the casket down on the grass beside the burial trench. “It must be a child,” Roger says. A middle-aged man and woman stand over the tiny casket; the man rocks back and forth and rends his garments while the woman sobs.

“You see,” Bennie says after he has cleaned his plate. “That kind of crying and tearing clothes is for the old left-brain thinkers. *I* wouldn’t mind dying right now. Death is wasted on the old. Look at Mommy—she’s haunted by silly dreams of immortality. Old people are too perverse to joyously give themselves back to nature.” Bennie stands up, looking ghoulish and filthy in his death costume.

“And where are you going?” Sandra asks.

“To dance on the fresh grave.”

“Let him go,” Roger says. “It is only proper to continue great traditions.”

The sun is working its way toward three o’clock. There is not a cloud in the sky, only the gauzy crosshatchings of jet-trails. A few birds wing overhead like little blue angels. Roger sits beside his lovely Sandra, and they watch Bennie as he dances stylishly with the two young mourners clad in red. Roger is proud and his eyes are moist. Bennie has stolen the show. He has even attracted a small crowd of passersby.

This is a sight that would have made Jean Le Fevre turn his head! Roger says to himself as he watches Bennie work his way through a perfect *danse macabre*. The mourners are already clapping. Bennie has their hearts. He has presented a perfect vision of death to his spectators.

“Wave to Benjamin,” Roger says to his family. “See, he’s waving at us.” Roger imagines that he can hear the sounds of distant machinery. He dreams that God has sent angels to man the machinery of His cemetery.

And with the passing of each heavenly moment, the noise of God’s machinery becomes louder.

But God’s machines turn out to be only children, hundreds of noisy boys and girls come to join in the Sunday processions. They’re here to burn or bury innocents and bums and prostitutes, to learn right thinking and body-knowing, and share in the pleasures and exquisite agonies of death’s community. The children seem to be everywhere. They’re turning the cemetery into a playground.

As Roger watches children playing bury-me-not and hide-and-seek between the tombstone teeth of the cemetery, he thinks that surely his son Bennie must be in their midst. Bennie might be anywhere: taking a tour through the ossuarium, lighting fires on the lawns, screwing little girls, or dancing for another dinner.

“We should not have permitted Bennie to leave in the first place,” Sandra says to Roger. “He’s probably in some kind of trouble.” She pauses, then says, “Well, *I’m* going to go and look for him.” Another pause. “What are you going to do?”

“Someone has to remain with the children,” Roger says. “I’m sure Bennie is fine. He’ll probably be back.”

Sandra, of course, rushes off in a huff. But that's to be expected, Roger tells himself. Bennie was right: she is perverse. After a few deep breaths, Roger forgets her. He stretches out on the cool grass, looks up at the old maple trees that appear to touch the robin's-egg sky, and he feels the touch of God's thoughts. He yawns. This bounty of food, fresh air, and inspiration has worn him out. He listens to the children and dreams of tractors.

A fusillade echoes through the cemetery.

"Daddy, what's that noise?" asks Rose Marie.

"The children are probably shooting guns," Roger says. He opens his eyes, then closes them.

"Why are they shooting guns?"

"To show everyone that death must be joyous," Roger says. But he can't quite climb out of his well of sleep. He falls through thermoclines of sleep and dreams of tractors rolling over tombstones and children and trees.

"When is Mommy coming back?" asks Rose Marie.

"When she finds Bennie," Roger says, and he buttons the collar of his shirt. There is a slight chill to the air.

"When will that be?"

"I don't know," Roger says. "Soon, I hope." He watches the rosy sunset. The western mountains are purple, and Roger imagines that rainbows are leaking into the liquid blue sky.

Another fusillade echoes through the cemetery.

"Maybe Mommy was shot," Rose Marie says in a hushed tone.

"Maybe," Roger replies.

"Maybe she's dead," says Rose Marie, smoothing out her dress, then making cabbage folds.

"Is that so bad?" Roger asks. "You must learn to accept death as an ally. If Mommy doesn't come back, it will teach you a lesson."

"I want to ride on the Ferris wheel," Samson says. "You promised."

"If Mommy doesn't return soon, we'll go for a ride," Roger says, admiring the cemetery. Even at dusk, in this shadow-time, Chastellain Cemetery is still beautiful, he tells himself. It is a proud old virgin, but soon it will become a midnight whore. It will become a carnival. It will be

Ferris wheels and rides and lights and candlelight processions.

Lying back in the grass, Roger searches for the first evening stars. There, he sees two straight above him. They blink like Sandra's eyes. He makes a wish and imagines that Sandra is staring at him with those cold lovely eyes.

In the evening haze below, the candlelight processions begin.

The End