

Jeremy

Gerry wasn't just embarrassed when his son arrived at the funeral home wearing that baseball cap; he was mad as hell. Looking back, he should have immediately gotten Jeremy some help. But the kid was so obnoxious so often that it didn't seem out of character. Just more teen-age rebellion.

Several dozen people waited patiently in line to pay their last respects; more were in the foyer signing the sympathy book. Gretchen's casket was banked with flowers – from the teachers union, school staff, PTA, food bank, homeless shelter, battered women's shelter, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, her bridge club. She'd been a beloved part of Middletown; everyone knew her.

Most mourners wore their Sunday best. Gerry was stuffed into a dark suit he hadn't worn in years. If it were someone else's funeral, Gretchen would have let it out; she was terrific with a needle and thread. In fact, Laura and Carol Ann wore dark dresses that their mother had kept for a decade and re-tailored when they went off to college. Both looked so much like her that he had to swallow hard when they arrived. The rest of the family in the reception line, his brother Marvin and Gretchen's brother and sister and their spouses, were all dressed appropriately.

And here comes Jeremy, late as usual, wearing cut-off jeans, a hip-length red tee shirt and a baseball cap, his long hair spilling out of it. Not a cap from the collection pegged by the front door -- Red Sox, Yankees, NRA, Little League -- but one from God-knows-where lettered *Life has no meaning*. At least it was turned sideways, the brim over his left shoulder, so people might not notice the words. He sauntered in and squeezed next to his sisters.

"We're going to miss her," Mrs. Murphy was murmuring to Gerry, "so we know you will. If there's anything we can do . . ."

"Thank you. We all will," he said, trying not to sound hurried. "Laura, this is Mrs. Murphy from the food pantry." Then he stepped behind the girls to hiss at Jeremy: "For God's

sake, take that hat off!”

He should have gone to Jeremy’s left, but it was too late. When his son looked back over his right shoulder, the bill pointed straight out. *Life has no meaning*, gold letters on black, must have stood out like neon. “These people have come to pay their respects to your mother,” Gerry whispered. “Why can’t you be respectful?”

“I didn’t want to be here in the first place,” Jeremy hissed back. “It’s all bullshit. None of this will bring Mama back.”

Gerry turned to Marvin, next in line, Jeremy’s favorite uncle. “Can you try? I’ve got to greet people.”

“Hey,” Marvin said, a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder, “you were good to come.” Laid-back, calm. Gerry wished he was as unflappable as his brother.

When Jeremy turned toward Marvin, more of the quote showed: *Life has no meaning. . . the moment you lose . . .* something. He’d never seen so many words on a cap. Just above the bill was a name: *Jean-Paul* somebody. He’d have to ask the girls what that was all about. It sounded negative.

“Let’s step out of line,” Gerry heard Marvin say. He himself hurried back to the head of the line to accept condolences from Mrs. Wadsworth. “So young. A tragedy. I saw her a few months ago at the women’s shelter, and she looked so well. It was cancer?”

“Yes,” he said. “Pancreatic. It goes very fast.”

“I’m so sorry. I suppose at the end that was a blessing.”

“Thank you,” he said, and handed her on to Laura, remembering how hard those last months had been. Toward the end the girls got Gretchen into a hospice, where the staff helped them all accept the inevitable.

All but Jeremy, who never came once. He began playing video games on the computer in his room with names like *Carmageddon*, *Mortal Kombat*, *Thrill Kill*. When Gerry made him

turn the volume down at night so he could sleep, Jeremy began skipping school and playing all day. Going to the hospice first thing every morning, Gerry didn't know until the school called him. Talking with Jeremy didn't do much good.

The wake went on another hour. Marvin, thank God, talked Jeremy into putting the hat on a chair, although his hair then flopped down like a brown tsunami, and persuaded him to say just "Thank you" to mourners. After a while, he expanded that to "Thank you, it doesn't matter," but few seemed to notice.

At last the doors were closed, the line finished. Jeremy disappeared, taking that cap with him. The undertaker took the casket away, maybe to the refrigerator until the funeral the next day; Gerry didn't want to think about that.

A dozen people had sat down to chat, remembering Gretchen, or praying. He had to thank each of them for coming. "Gerry, it's going to be hard." Mrs. Howarth, next door, Bill Anderson's mother-in-law. It didn't seem fair that she was still so healthy at an age that he and Gretchen had hoped to enjoy. 'Take up golf' had been a favorite when-we-retire joke.

"Thank you," he said. Sitting down would encourage people to linger, but God surely didn't mean a man his size to stand for two hours straight, and the suit was killing him.

"You'll be lonely." Mrs. Howarth put a hand on his knee. "I'll see that Naomi and Bill have you over for dinner. And Jeremy, if you can get him to come." A wise old lady, she'd been a guidance counselor, understood kids better than he ever would.

"I doubt it," Gerry said. "He's probably back home right now playing video games."

"He seems troubled," she persisted. "Does he need help?"

What kind of help is there for an angry kid like that? He wanted to ask her advice, but Marvin had overheard.

"Just a matter of time," he butted in. "He'll get past it. Kids are resilient."

Agnes Hardy had tarried. And Muriel Butler. Both widowed early. When you're the

best mechanic in a small town, people bring their cars for repair, and talk. Sometimes hang around when you're under their cars, feet sticking out. Jack Hardy left Agnes a 1999 Riviera. Charlie Butler left Muriel a newer BMW. Both widows kept bringing their cars to him.

"I'm so sorry about Gretchen," Agnes had said at the garage one day. "Cancer is cruel. Tell me if I can do anything to help. Anything at all."

Muriel had been less subtle. "It must be hard, working all day, spending time with her morning and night, coming home tired and lonely." She called one evening to say her car wouldn't start and she needed it first thing in the morning. He stopped on his way home from the hospice, and ended up spending the night. Sampling what life might be like with a new wife after Gretchen's death. A shitty thing, and he didn't go back, although it was apparent he could have. He wondered if Jeremy had noticed. Maybe not; with his head in those damned games, Jeremy didn't pay much attention to the rest of the world. Gerry was ashamed anyway.

Agnes patted a chair when he reached her side of the room. "I stayed to say again how sorry I am. It will be a difficult time of grieving. And lonely. Call when you'd like a home-cooked meal."

"Thank you," he said, getting up. "Not right away, though," he added. No point in burning bridges.

Muriel must have seen that she and Agnes might be rivals; she was on the other side of the room, and stood as he neared. "Dear Gerry, you must be distraught."

"Thank you."

"A time of mourning. And lonely. You'll call me when the time seems right." She said it more like a forecast than an invitation.

He looked around, wondering if the girls had noticed, glad that Jeremy had left. He said his goodbyes to the rest, then went with the family for dinner at Mario's Ristorante. Marvin had reserved a room. "Where we can be family together. Remember Gretchen," he said. "Celebrate

her life, and remind ourselves that life must go on.”

They’d thought Jeremy might come, but he hadn’t. “Did you see that hat?” Gerry asked Laura.

“I know. It was embarrassing. Poor Jeremy.”

“Poor Jeremy?” She sounded sympathetic, for God’s sake. “What was it all about?”

“It’s a quote from Jean-Paul Sartre. I’m afraid he got it from me.”

“Who?”

“A French philosopher, Papa. I studied him in Twentieth Century Thought, and brought the book home. Jeremy borrowed it. I’d probably bookmarked it. It’s a pretty famous quote.”

“It’s long. I didn’t know you could get so many words on a hat.”

“There’s a shop downtown. They do customized caps and tee shirts.”

“What does the whole thing say?”

“Let’s see. ‘Life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being eternal.’

Something like that.”

“Too complicated for me. Doesn’t sound optimistic.”

“It isn’t, Papa. Jeremy needs help. I wish we could get him to see a psychiatrist.”

“He doesn’t need a shrink,” said Marvin, butting in again.

“I think he does, Uncle Marvin.”

“Give him time.”

If you’re a handsome, successful insurance salesman like Marvin, Gerry thought, driving a Mercedes E-Class, you must think you’re as infallible as the Pope. Laura was probably right, but she was going back to college.

The girls came back to the house. They made Jeremy stop the deafening shoot-em-ups in his bedroom, but he went to sleep instead of joining them in the living room.

“Papa,” Laura said, “maybe you should get rid of the guns.” Gerry’s two rifles and the

shotgun were in a mahogany wall cabinet, one Gretchen had a woodworker make. “You don’t use them any more, do you?”

“Haven’t hunted in years,” he admitted. “I keep up my dues, but haven’t even been to target practice in a long time.” He looked up at the cabinet, so cleverly made that an intruder might think it held teacups. “It’s locked, though. So is the night table where I keep the pistol.”

“Papa, if someone really wanted the guns, they could bust in with a screwdriver.”

“I get your point. I’ll think about it.” He hoped Jeremy wasn’t listening at the head of the stairs the way he did when he was little.

The funeral service next day was awful. The parson went through the usual religious stuff about her being in a better place now, which Gerry would have liked to believe but didn’t. Then people were invited to come to the pulpit to say a few words. Laura, going first, made him teary saying what a good mother she was, and then remembering the time the cocker spaniel ate all the Easter eggs she’d carefully hidden, which made him laugh through the tears. He wished Jeremy had come.

Carol Ann made him laugh and cry some more, and then a half-dozen people came to the pulpit. By the time they finished he was blowing his nose so hard that no one expected him to go up there too. He wished Gretchen could have been there to hear it all, which reminded him that she wasn’t.

Most people at the church came to the burial. It was a blue-skied fall morning, leaves just starting to turn. The parson read more scripture, the casket was lowered, and he and the girls went first to throw handfuls of dirt with a mournful *thunk!* on the casket. After others who wanted to had thrown some dirt, the parson ended the ceremony and led them away so they wouldn’t see the cemetery workmen fill the grave.

Walking back through the depressing hundreds of gravestones, Gerry glimpsed a young

man standing with head bent at some other grave. Then he saw the cap. Jeremy, obviously waiting to say his own goodbye. Too bad he hadn't come to the service. God knows what was going on in that mind.

After another family dinner at Mario's, all the relatives gave Gerry and the girls hugs and got started back to wherever they'd come from. The three of them came back to the house, where the girls began doing what he'd dreaded, putting Gretchen's clothes in boxes for the women's shelter. They would divvy up her best earrings and brooches and necklaces to wear in remembrance and pass on as family heirlooms.

"Papa," said Carol Ann, "why don't you just deal with those guns now, while we're doing this?" So he took the guns out and unscrewed the cabinet, put it all in the trunk, and took everything down to Herb's Sport Shop to be sold on consignment.

Herb, an old friend and hunting buddy with a 2009 Accord, offered condolences and said he'd take care of the paperwork. "Jeremy was in the other day," he added. "They grow up so fast. He takes after his mother."

"Jeremy? Did he buy anything?"

"No. He didn't stay long. Wearing a baseball cap with weird lettering, but very respectful. If he wants a gun, why aren't you just giving him yours?"

"I'm not sure he should have a gun. He's a little unstable sometimes. You saw that hat."

"Gotcha. If he buys from me, he'll have pass a background check."

"I guess." Gerry hadn't thought about Jeremy's wanting a gun. "How good are those?"

"Hard to say. Every now and then the report comes back that I can't sell someone the gun he wants."

"Seventeen-year-olds can buy guns?"

"Anyone can have a long gun, Gerry. Twenty-one to get a handgun or a carry permit."

"Listen, if he comes back, have a little conversation. Like, ask where he's going

hunting.”

“Sure, Gerry.”

“And give me a call, will you?” He wished again that Marvin hadn’t interrupted his conversation with old Mrs. Howarth. He should go visit her.

By the time he got back, the girls had found a huge painting to cover the faded place where the gun cabinet had been. An autumn maple with white birches and dark pines that Gretchen had bought on impulse at an auction the time they vacationed in Vermont. Once home, she decided it was too big, and consigned it to the attic.

“It’s as though she knew we’d need that huge painting some day, Papa,” Carol Ann said. “It’s perfect.”

It wasn’t really perfect. Gretchen had been right; it overpowered the living room. But it reminded him of her, enthusiastically bidding for it in Vermont that day, which somehow cheered him.

Jeremy didn’t get home until they had the boxes piled by the door for the shelter people, and were in the living room with cheese and crackers and a bottle of red wine Laura had gone out for.

“Come join us, bro,” Carol Ann said.

“You took down the gun cabinet.”

“Papa’s starting a new life. He wasn’t using them.”

“Where did you get that horrible picture? It looks like the cemetery.”

“Mama bought it in Vermont. She didn’t like it either, so it’s been in the attic.”

“Now it’s a remembrance,” Laura added. “You and Papa will have to cheer each other up.”

“Sure,” Jeremy said. “See you in the morning.”

The girls insisted on making bacon and waffles, like the Sunday breakfasts Gretchen used to make. “Oh, Papa,” Carol Ann said as she gave him a second waffle, “you’ll have to tell Grandpa. Do you want one of us to stay another day to come with you?”

Just at that moment Jeremy dragged in, still in pajamas. “It won’t matter,” he said. “The old man won’t get it anyway. He’s like totally out of it.”

Which was essentially true. Harry Peters was in the locked wing at the convalescent home, although he was too frail to wander even if he tried. The nurses had to drag along his oxygen, a rolling coatrack with tank and tubing, when they got him up every day to walk down the hallway and back.

“That’s not true,” Carol Ann said. Harry had been her favorite grandparent. She wanted to be an architect because he’d been a carpenter building houses. At one time he understood and appreciated that. “He snaps out of it sometimes, asks how school is going, knows who he is and where he is.”

“Not for long,” Jeremy said.

“I think when he comes to like that, he remembers Grandma,” Laura said, “and deliberately lets his mind slip away because he can’t stand thinking about her. Denial.”

“He’s despondent,” Carol Ann said. “We read about it in Psych One. He’s lost hope.”

Harry’s wife Myrtle died at almost exactly Gretchen’s age, and he never got over it. His mind went first, and then his lungs and legs. Gerry worried: Would he deteriorate like that? Maybe taking up with one of those widows would prevent that. Or both of them. No, neither. God! What was he thinking about, at a time like this? He had to catch up with the girls’ conversation.

“Maybe you could go with Papa,” Laura was saying to Jeremy. “Help explain. He ought to know.”

“Okay,” Jeremy said.

No one had expected that. “That would be wonderful, bro,” Carol Ann said. “Papa will need a little moral support.”

“You should go before lunch,” Laura said. “when he’s sometimes more alert.”

“Okay,” Jeremy said. “Let’s go today.”

Maybe Marvin was right, Gerry thought. Time, and the resilience of youth. He wished his daughters could stay longer. Like Gretchen, they’d always been able to cajole Jeremy into a better mood. But he seemed okay today.

“We can take you to the airport,” Jeremy said, “and then go from there to – what’s its name?”

“Rose Garden Convalescent,” Laura said.

“Yeah. As though anyone there was going to get better.”

“Some do, I think.”

“Promise them a Rose Garden,” he said. The grin on his face was almost cheerful.

An hour later they’d left the girls at the airport and were on their way to the convalescent home in the 1996 family Camry. He’d thought about letting Jeremy drive – he had a learner’s permit – but didn’t want to spoil the mood with a lesson. It wasn’t a long drive, but the silence made it feel long. He wanted to make small talk, but couldn’t think of anything. “Take off that goddamn hat,” he wanted to say, but that would be worse than saying nothing.

The parking lot was almost full; they walked a long way back to the front desk to ask about seeing Harry, and were let into the long corridor of what was called the Memory Wing. Most of the residents at this hour were dressed, slumped in wheelchairs that the staff had parked in their doorways so they might talk to one another, although they rarely did.

There may have been visitors in other sections, but not here. Gretchen used to come back

saying how sorry she felt for these people. “They almost never have anyone come, Gerry,” she’d tell him. “I try to brighten their day by making eye contact and smiling and saying good morning.” Gerry tried to smile at them as he and Jeremy threaded past the wheelchairs to reach Harry’s room at the end of the hallway. A few smiled back, but mostly he got back vacant stares.

Harry was parked in his doorway too, half-asleep, slouched in a wheelchair to which his oxygen tank was strapped, tubes over his shoulders and into his nose. Jeremy woke him.

“Hello, Grandpa. I’m Jeremy.”

“Who?” Harry had macular degeneration.

“Jeremy. With my father.”

“I knew a Jeremy. Younger than you. Used to come with my daughter.”

“That was me, Grandpa.” Jeremy looked to Gerry for help.

“Good morning, Harry. It’s me, Gerry. Gretchen’s husband. Jeremy has grown since you saw him.”

The old man looked up, one eye squinting, the other once-bushy eyebrow raised like a thin question mark. The quizzical look dissolved into a scowl. “Where’s Gretchen, then?”

“That’s what we came to tell you, Grandpa. Mama is dead.”

“That’s why she didn’t come with you?”

It hadn’t sunk in. “We buried her yesterday,” Gerry said. “In the family plot with your wife Myrtle.” This was harder than he’d expected. “We came to tell you.”

“Dead?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

The old man closed his eyes, and his head fell to his chest. His shoulders sagged, then rose and fell. He looked up. “Myrtle and Gretchen are both dead?”

“Yes, Harry. They’re in a better place.”

“If you believe that,” Jeremy said.

Gerry didn’t believe it, but wanted to. “They’re both with God,” he said.

“What kind of God is that?” Harry demanded. He looked away, down the hallway.

“Take two good women in the prime of life, and leave me here like a useless vegetable?”

“We love you,” Gerry said.

“They’re both dead?”

“I’m afraid so,” Jeremy said.

“And why am I still here?”

“Beats me, Grandpa.”

Too blunt. You don’t say things like that, even if you think them. “There must be a plan,” Gerry said lamely.

“Some plan,” Harry said. He fell silent. “Why didn’t Gretchen come with you?”

“She’s dead,” Gerry said. “That’s what we came to tell you.”

“Oh, yes.” The face was gray, stubbly. They must shave him later in the day, Gerry thought. A sodden lump of flesh in which nothing works very well but hair still grows. Keeps growing even after death, he read somewhere. He pushed that thought aside.

An aide appeared with a trolley cart of wrapped sandwiches and cartons of milk and juice. “Lunch, Mr. Peters. Milk or OJ?” She deftly released the brakes and pushed the wheelchair into the room and under a bed-table.

“Milk, I guess. Just leave it there.”

They should stay and help him – Gretchen would have -- but Gerry couldn’t think how to help a man eat a sandwich. “We’ve got to get along, Harry.”

Jeremy was obviously more than ready. “Later, Grandpa.”

The rheumy old eyes seemed to focus. “Okay,” he said. “Why was it you came?”

Gerry couldn’t say it again. “Goodbye, Harry.” All the wheelchairs had been pushed

into rooms for lunch, and he strode down the long hallway quickly. There was only one Gretchen, no lonely widow could take her place, and he couldn't stand the thought of ending up as far out of it as Harry Peters.

"That was a bitch," Jeremy said when they got outside. "Do you really believe in God?"

"I'm not sure," Gerry said. Maybe he could find common ground with this rebellious son.

"Not me. No God worth praying to would leave people like that. Inmates. Rotting."

"I know what you mean," Gerry managed.

They drove in silence until he stopped for burgers at a drive-in. The girl at the pay window recognized Jeremy. "I'm sorry about your mother."

"I guess," he said. "Thanks."

"Girl from school?" Gerry asked as he pulled into traffic. "You weren't very friendly."

"No. I was thinking about Grandpa."

When they got home, Jeremy took his burger and shake to his room to eat while he played a video game at blistering volume. Thinking they'd made progress that day, Gerry didn't want to make an scene. In the bed table drawer were some earplugs he'd used long ago on the firing range. He took a sleeping pill, poured himself a bourbon, and managed sleep.

He woke early, thinking for a moment he would go to the hospice, then realizing that was over. The center of his life was gone. Easy for Marvin to say that 'life must go on'; he still had his wife.

He let Jeremy sleep in. Saturday, so it didn't matter. He stopped for donuts and was at the garage by eight, putting on coveralls, losing himself in a car on the lift. It was good to have something to do, to occupy his mind. Focus on the torque wrench in his hand. Give it full attention, not to screw up someone's engine. He couldn't imagine life without Gretchen. What

was the word Carol Ann used? Despondent.

At noon he turned on the radio to hear the weather. Instead, there was a bulletin. A rampage at a convalescent home. The shooter killed six people in an Alzheimer's wing, but saved the final bullet for himself. Reporters on the way; details soon.

Gerry sat down heavily. He didn't have the stomach for another funeral. Two more. He wondered if the gun was still in the night table drawer.

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