DAVID ENDRE FEAMAN

Cemetery Flowers

Although Hungarians shudder at the idea of stealing flowers from cemeteries, Matjak Laszuk made it a daily ritual. The belief is that by stealing the flowers the thief has stolen a part of the dead person. The deceased will find no rest, will pursue the thief forever, and dire misfortunes will befall the thief. Matjak Laszuk did not believe in superstition and he was far too cheap to pay for flowers.

The funeral flowers lightened the mantles and dinner tables of his many girlfriends. When one girlfriend died he merely stole away with the vibrant bouquet and offered them to his newest conquest. Each ancient wizened old lady thought the same of Matjak Laszuk: He was so thoughtful, so caring, so generous...

Eagerly, he washed and polished their cars, mowed their lawns, painted their houses, cleaned and cooked. He treated every manner of their property as though it was his own because, in essence, it was... After petting and kissing and caressing the withered old flowers, he made love to them, pretended to love them, touched them in ways they hadn't been touched in fifty years. Spellbound by the ruggedly handsome burly old man, they gushed and cooed and loved and lusted for my grandfather. Once his charms had set them reeling, the ancient ladies abandoned their families, their own children, and spent the remainder of their days in a youthful hedonistic stupor. Each window he washed and wiped was not merely a window. Each car he polished, each lawn he mowed, each cemetery flower bouquet he stole was an investment.

I saw his funeral flowers on Zelda Lansing's nightstand when they pushed me through her bedroom window. The yellow light, dim and spooky, poked through the dull round pink petals and the halo of light surrounding the bouquet was ominous.

The frantic determination with which my mother and grandfather moved that night frightened me, as they shook me awake, dressed me quickly, and sped me off to the house on Walnut Street. Of my brothers and I, I was the youngest, the smallest, the only one of us small enough to fit through a cracked bedroom window. Fearfully, I listened to my mother's instructions, dwarfed by the panicked tone of her voice. When I was hoisted up

the side of the house enough to grasp the brick edge of the window sill, I jerked my legs to the sill and wormed under the huge wood-framed window.

Clumsily, I tumbled to the floor. Bathed in the eerie yellow light of the single lamp on the nightstand, my senses flooded with the dense smell of stagnant perfume, I glanced up and first saw the flowers. Haunted by the strange bouquet, I recoiled, my eyes shot almost autonomously to Zelda Lansing. Zelda was splayed against the ornate antique bed-frame; her shriveled liver-spotted fist clutched the bust-line of her sky blue nightgown. Her cavernous mouth half-gaped as though mid-sentence in a toothless conversation. Through her nearly transparent skin I could see the jutting bones in her skull, the dots of rosy capillaries in her cheeks and neck and chest, and the thick blue veins that spread like spider legs through her body. Zelda smelled musty and dank, like the fallen rotting trees in a forest. I was transfixed, motionless, frozen in the terrifying space between the flowers and the dying woman.

"Hi..." I whispered automatically, as though a reflex of the piercing anxiety I felt.

Her gray glass eyes fixed in place, stared through me, through my own eyes. The only hints of life, of agony, of grave despair I could surmise were those lent by her brief sharp breaths. In between breaths, infrequently, a tiny rattle rose from the depths of the old woman's gut; a conjured word, I thought, lacking the wind to materialize...

"*Yosef!*" My mother cried outside the window. "Go to the front door! Let us in!"

Cautiously, I stood, tiptoed out of the room, ever wary that she might move, might speak, might cry for help, but she did nothing. Even the unformed words that rattled from her throat died and she was perfectly still. Outside the bedroom, I felt lighter, the air was easier to breathe, and I dashed through the hallway, into the living room. As I unlocked the bolted front door, my grandfather burst in, jerked me tightly by the shoulders, and demanded: "*Vere is she?*" I pointed slowly to the bedroom.

In an instance, my mother darted through the hallway into the bedroom. A pang of excitement in his gruff voice, my grandfather called after her, "Is she *dead*?" Without reply, my mother shot deftly to the telephone on the living room wall and pressed the long receiver between her ear and her shoulder. A frantic sense of urgency compelling him, my grandfather rushed to her, yanked her so violently away from the telephone that she shrieked and grunted and the receiver shot out of her grasp. His voice heightened in wild madness, he screamed

in his broken English: "Vut are you *doing*, Gloria?!"

"*She's still alive!*" My mother fired back as she struggled against his clutches.

They fought bitterly; my mother clawed at his thick hands, her eyes shiny with tears, her face contorted with shock, she did not recognize him... Like a furious beast, each blow only enraging him further, my grandfather shook her viciously until her knees buckled and she scrambled to regain her tenuous footing.

Terrified, I escaped into the bedroom, knelt beside the skeletal dying old woman. I heard the two tussle in the living room, curse each other, and finally my grandfather's maniacal voice thundered over the din: "I'll take everything avay from you, Gloria! *Everything!* I'll disown you and your children! You'll live the *gutter*! Is that vut you vunt? She has to die, Gloria! *That old bitch has to die!*" Seconds later, all fell silent.

Zelda's vacant gaze met mine and the tears swelled at the corners of her eyes. The quick sharp breaths grew heavy, strained, and she whimpered. I could feel the old woman's heart break... The warmth washed over my body that usually occurs before crying, but I couldn't cry... The rattle in her gut began again and grew into a moan, a storming anguished howl. As though the act would make me disappear, I cupped my sweaty hands over my face, my eyes still staring into hers over my fingertips.

"Matjak..." She growled in the long exhalation that was her last.

Her dead pearl eyes rolled back in their sockets and her teeth gnashed together, her lips curled back into a tortured scowl. Frozen, my entire body silent, my faculties arrested, I knelt at her side and stared into her cold white eyes seemingly forever until my grandfather stormed into the room.

My mother sobbed wretchedly in terrible staccato dry-heaves at the doorway.

"She's dead." My grandfather said matter-of-factly. "*Now* you can call the ambulance, Gloria."

"You're a son-of-a-bitch..." She disappeared from the doorway at once. I heard her footsteps race through the hallway, her dry-heaves became heavier and uglier.

Triumphantly, my grandfather smiled, puffed his chest out, rounded his shoulders, and dusted his tweed blazer. He marched past me, his eyes studying the furniture, the antique dresser, the old vanity mirror, the paintings that hung over the bed. Before leaving the bedroom, he reached out and plucked the pink flowers from the vase on her nightstand.

Eight years after Zelda Lansing died; Matjak Laszuk amassed a small fortune of houses, cars, and money. We were all ensnared in the web he'd spun. We all dangled helplessly in the threads as he skittered over us, from end to end, ever broadening the breadth of that web, ever extending and expanding its reach. My mother, my brothers and I lived in his tiny house on two acres of wooded land in Woodbridge. My grandmother, his ex-wife, pressed under his thumb, lived in one of his larger houses in Lake Valley and her mother lived next door in a considerably smaller house. Owning these houses allowed my grandfather the freedom to appear at random. It was only after he'd turned the key and slid through the door that he'd shout: *"Hallo!"* The few times he'd intruded while my father was watching television at the kitchen table, he erupted, threatened to disown my mother, and thundered down the driveway in his station wagon. We were possessions to him, no different than the houses and cars. Our lives were bent to his tyrannical will by merely squatting in his houses, utilizing his cars, and accepting his money. We were an extension of his small fortune.

Maintaining things, houses and cars and antiques, became a lifestyle for him. The process of 'maintaining' had no tangible end as far as he was concerned. The houses he'd collected were ancient with rusting pipes and fraying electrical wires. The ceilings were water damaged and the wood beams were creaky. Dutifully, he split his time living in one house long enough to repair clogged sinks and wash basins and tear down yellowing wallpaper then he would moved into the next long enough to replace exposed insulation and rip up a moldy old carpet.

His obsessive 'maintaining' would cease abruptly for the death of a girlfriend. Fastidiously, he donned the funeral suit, black and square, stiff, a red kerchief folded into a triangle, peeking through the lip of the left breast pocket, and shiny polished black loafers. At viewings, he stood in line, amidst the grieving, the mourners, the sons and daughters, his square head high, his hands folded over a small bouquet of colorful flowers. The shrewd callousness of his demeanor caught their eyes and turned their wailing to curiosity. At the casket, he placed the bouquet on the painted waxy hands of the dead woman inside. As the church dinned with "Amazing Grace" or "Nearer My God to Thee", they watched him quizzically as he adjusted his suit and wiped his bifocals clean with the red kerchief. At funerals, he loomed over the casket at the priest's side. As the priest commenced a long monotonous prayer, my grandfather checked his gold watch and coughed casually into his fist. He never spoke. He never embraced the weeping sisters or daughters. He

never shook the eager hands of the brothers and sons. He was merely there. He was a dark presence, unfamiliar to the families, who floated from the funerals to the will-readings. Bewildered and flustered, Matjak Laszuk was openly confronted at the start of the will-readings: Who are you? How did you know my mother? Why are you here? Unfazed by the interrogations and far too proud for shame, he said nothing, clamped his fists at his sides, and stood statue-still. After the will-reading, when he obtained yet another house and car and several hundred-thousand dollars, he marched out of the room with soldier discipline while the mourning relatives still reeled from the reading, before shock gave way to rage. By the time rage set in, my grandfather was pulling out of the parking lot in his green wooden-paneled station wagon, already undoing his black tie and yanking the red kerchief from his breast pocket.

Many days, after the reading, he returned to the cemetery, to the fresh grave, the footprints of dozens of friends and relatives still imprinted in the glossy grass, and he would collect the flower bouquets. The back seat of his station wagon blanketed in purple, yellow, and white flowers, some wrapped in sashes that read "Dearly Departed", he revved the engine and drove to the next old lady's house.

In early autumn of 1992, my grandfather was living in Matilda Price's house. She died in that house in late August and the hot humid viewing and funeral were far less heated in temperature than the will-reading was in intensity. With a simple stroke of the pen, Matilda Price scratched her entire family from her will and bequeathed everything, including family heirlooms and antiques and priceless China, to Matjak Laszuk. Rage set in very quickly, every angry eye turned to him, the entire jilted family had bolted to their feet, and he barely escaped the reading without punches being thrown. As he rushed to his station wagon, my grandfather could not escape the curses and threats. Curses and threats meant nothing to him though, and only served to savor that bounty which he'd worked so diligently to obtain.

By early autumn, he had long forgotten the ugliness of the Price will-reading and simply inhabited the house, slept in the same bed in which Matilda died. The evenings grew darker and his visits from house to house and girlfriend to girlfriend became longer. He pulled the station wagon into the garage of Matilda Price's house, one evening at six o'clock, and already the streetlights buzzed on and the street was still. The car idled for a while as he reached into the back seat and grabbed a bouquet of "Dearly Departed" flowers. He would carefully snip the

sash off the bouquet, gently polish the petals, and trim the stems before presenting them to his newest girlfriend. As he stepped out of the station wagon, bouquet in hand, before he could even slam the door shut, a masked figure dressed in black leapt out of the shadows and punched a whirring drill into his eye, through his thick rectangular bifocals. While he clawed his way to the garage door, yellow blood-stained flower petals clinging to his fingers, the masked attacker dropped the electric drill and disappeared into the approaching night. Nothing was taken and the house was undisturbed. He had three-hundred dollars in cash in his wallet and wore a two-hundred dollar gold watch. The only thing the attacker wanted was his eye. The police investigation yielded nothing. All the members of the Price family had alibis. The attacker vanished like a ghost in the mist, never seen or heard from again, leaving Matjak Laszuk blind his left eye.

I recall the gooey pink eye-socket, a glossy mess of soft tissue that contracted and relaxed as his eyes shifted. My brothers and I were morbidly curious and the fact that he refused to wear an eye-patch only deepened our curiosity. My mother would scold us before his visits: "*Don't stare at it!* It's not polite..." The old man would burst in, rattle off in Hungarian, expect a Hungarian reply, but we were drawn to the missing eyeball. We elbowed each other, dropped our gaze to his black loafers, and offered a volley of forced and automatic responses in Hungarian. After a hearty snort of approval, he'd rustle my hair roughly and smack by older brothers' shoulders.

As he slipped out of his heavy wool coat, plopped his tall fur hat on the kitchen table, he bantered with my mother, exchanged small talk. Her hands in her pockets and her posture stiff, she nodded awkwardly with each banality, merely waiting for the precise moment to broach the subject of the eye-socket. Never one for subtlety, once my mother broached the subject; she forced the subject to full steam by digging a giant black eye-patch from her pocket and shoving it into his hands.

"You can't walk *around* like that, dad. *You look like a monster*. You scare the kids whenever you come over. Do you *want* to look like a monster?" She gripped his shoulder and stared at him with pitying eyes. "Do you want your girlfriends to think you're a *monster*?"

Deliberately, the stern old man removed his bifocals, his questioning eye still trained on my mother; he worked the strap of the eye-patch over his head, into his gray stubbly buzz-cut, and adjusted the patch into place. The eye-patch was enormous and visibly tight against his cheek and nose.

"You look *better*." My mother stated gloatingly.

Stone-silent, still, my grandfather glared at her suspiciously, flared the muscles of his jaws, and ticked his lips. When he rose to leave he said nothing. He twirled the wool coat over his shoulders as though it was a cape and pinched an edge of the fur hat in his fist, callously, silently. Even as my mother swung her arms around his meaty neck, he remained silent and moved out of her embrace with the sleek motion of an eel. His back straight, fists swaying like pendulums at his sides, he marched to his station wagon without a final glance and sped down the driveway out of sight.

A crisp autumn day followed and the trees rained yellow and red leaves that carpeted the ground, piled on marble head-stones, and saturated the quiet cemetery. The dead brittle leaves crunched under his feet and gathered on his shoulders and fur hat. They obscured the wreaths and bouquets of flowers on the graves so much so that he kicked at the heaps of leaves first with his loafers before digging through them with his hands. It was a small haul that day... There were only three salvageable bouquets of flowers amidst the withering blackening bunches. The groundskeeper hadn't replaced them for at least two weeks. Nonetheless, he hurried through the graveyard cradling the bouquets in his arm.

One bouquet in particular captured his attention and he held it gently at eye-level to study it occasionally as he drove. They were dull pink flowers with round petals and moist stems. The stems were recently trimmed and the dull round petals recently polished. At a red-light, my grandfather broke, whirled the bouquet in both hands and stared mystified at the flowers. As the mystique slowly ebbed, he thought of Ginger Hornsby... Ginger had been dying for five years and for five years hadn't so much as mentioned her last will and testament. Doggedly, he returned to her modest three-bedroom cottage, clipped her long yellowed toe-nails, read her poetry, fixed her meals, had sex with her, and, hard as tempered steel, the old lady gave him nothing in return. Stopped at the light, his eye fixed on the flowers, he knew this bouquet and well-crafted romantic banter would win her over.

The light changed as he stared contemplatively at the flowers. So deeply in thought was he that it startled him to glance up and see the green light and he impulsively stamped the gas pedal. A sudden jarring jolt rolled up the left side of the station wagon, tugged the steering wheel out of his control, and, through his right eye, he saw long cracks splinter the windshield and blood darkened his view. When he instinctively stomped the brake, the

boy mashed into the hood and windshield rocketed to the street and rolled limply for several yards. The boy's bicycle was still tangled in the wheel-well of the station wagon, its frame mangled and the back tire, jutting up against his window, spun furiously.

We waited in the driveway for my grandfather's arrival. My brothers and I only knew that he'd been in an accident. We were still completely ignorant of what kind of accident it was and whether or not he'd been injured. We watched the street outside at the bottom of the long driveway with reserved decorum while envisioning the same gory notions: Had he lost his other eye? Would he proudly walk around disfigured? Would he be able to walk around at all? Our gruesomely curious eyes met from time to time and as the smiles compelled by childish mirth began to crack on our lips, we immediately glanced at my mother and resumed our reserved decorum. My mother's eyes were thin and severe under her sharp black-framed glasses. Her lips were tight and we couldn't surmise whether she was contemplating the horrors as we were or whether she was smiling. Arms crossed and feet slightly splayed, she waited with a steely patience we'd never seen before.

The station wagon finally appeared, rattled and wheezed up the long driveway, a perfect indentation of a boy's body hammered into the hood, pounded into the windshield. My brothers and I stood wide-eyed, shocked, as he pulled the station wagon to a stop. I remember the blood, thick like paint, coating the entire dented hood, seeped into every crack and splinter of the windshield, contouring the very shape of the boy's body as though outlined by an artist.

"It still runs." He chuckled enthusiastically as he stood in the open car door.

Inside, the five of us sat at the kitchen table, my brothers and I stared dreadfully at the old man as he told us very casually about running the boy down. His hands folded easily on the kitchen table, a cocky smirk on his lips, he said the boy he crushed with the station wagon was in the ICU at Saint Joseph's Hospital. An angry mob gathered as the paramedics strapped the boy into a gurney and whisked him off. The mob grew belligerent when the police officers tipped their hats to my grandfather and returned to their squad-car. "He *had* the right of the way. The boy was crossing *against a green*. There's nothing we can do. You folks go home." The police officer replied when confronted. My grandfather chortled and waved his hand as he mimicked the police officers' dismissive response. The mob began to yell and curse, their ire directed entirely on the police officers, allow-

ing my grandfather the opportunity to escape without reproach.

"If that boy dies, the family can *sue you*, dad." My mother said gravely. She leaned close to him; her eyes were black slits in her scowling face. "They could take *everything* from you... You could be out in the *gutter*, dad... You could *lose everything*..."

"*Bullshit*." The old man hissed. "Vut are you *doing*, Gloria?"

"It's called *'wrongful death'*, dad... You think you can just go around *murdering* people and get away with it?!"

"*Shut your mouth, Gloria!*" He pounded his fist on the table so violently we all flinched with a start and a tense silence ensued.

"Dad, I'm only trying to protect you." Her voice sweetened, her face softened, and she grasped his hand in hers. "Richard worked with the courts, dad. He can help you. He knows how to get around law suits like these."

"I don't need some nigger to help me." His eye wandered and the corner of his mouth tightened. When my mother squeezed his hand, he tightened his fingers around hers. "Besides, that *little bastard's* still alive."

For three days in the ICU the boy fell in and out of consciousness, breathed, ate, and urinated through machines, until at last he flat-lined. For those three days and for several days after, my grandfather holed up in the house where he lost his eye. A grave sense of impending disaster filled my brothers and me, as we sat motionlessly in the backseat of the car. My mother and father were silent too, but their silence was less ominous... My father smiled crookedly as he drove. It was no secret to us that my father and my grandfather bitterly hated each other. My mind raced with the perils ahead... I wondered if my father brought his rifle. I craned my neck over the seat, my eyes scanning my father's double-breasted suit, trying desperately to ascertain whether or not the tell-tale bulge of his pistol's grip could be seen. When we arrived, my father strode in first, his hands in his trouser pockets, cocky and confident. The two stood face to face, each rigid in their stance, unmoving, unblinking, they glared at each other, neither man so much as breathing.

"It's been a long time, Matjak." My father smirked. "A long, long time..."

"Richard." He returned dryly.

The house was littered with cemetery flowers. Entire bouquets were crammed into the trashcans and colorful petals were strewn across the kitchen floor. Tiny "Dearly Departed" sashes dotted the countertops and sink.

Everything was in disorder, including my grandfather. He hadn't shaved in a week and his eyes were

heavy. His face was wrinkled and haggard. Slowly, he moved through the living room with the lumbering difficulty of an old elephant and plopped into the recliner by the television. When my mother and father sat in the sofa opposite him, he pointed anxiously to a letter on the coffee table. My mother read the contents of the letter and their eyes fixed on him grimly. In frustration, he scratched at the stubble of his cheek and flipped up the eye-patch, revealing the gruesome socket. "*Vut do I do?*" He demanded.

My father snickered and pushed his thick plastic-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose. "You're not going to win, Matjak."

"*Vut do I do?*" He repeated in the same demanding tone as he shook his tightened fist in the air.

"Dad, they can't sue you if you have nothing. You have to sign over power-of-attorney to me. You have to sign over the deeds to the houses, the titles to the cars, *everything*. If they find out you have *one piece* of property to your name, they'll sue you and they'll win." My mother held out the letter and her face lit with subdued elation.

"No." He bolted to his feet, stroked his forehead roughly, and paced slowly. "This is mine, Gloria! *Mine!* Do you *understand*?! No. I'll get a lawyer. *I'll fight it*. That little *fucker* hit my car! The police *said so*! *I'm right!*"

"Are you *crazy*? The boy was *fourteen-years old*... You go to court and you'll lose your houses, your car, that *fancy ass watch*. You won't have a nickel to your name, Matjak Laszuk. *Not a single nickel.*"

"There's no other way, Dad." My mother slapped the letter in her lap resolutely and the two grinned slyly at the old man.

We stayed well into the evening, as my grandfather hesitantly gathered up all the documents. Under the white light that dangled over the dining room table, my grandfather reluctantly signed every deed, every title, and a power-of-attorney form. Patiently, her face thinly concealing her satisfaction, my mother signed each document. We left the house that night several houses, several cars, and several hundreds of thousands of dollars richer. In the car, my mother and father cackled wildly, cursed the old man, and plotted on what extravagance they would first spend their money.

Matjak Laszuk withdrew the last ten-thousand dollars to his name from the only bank account he hadn't turned over to my mother and closed the account. The next day, he donned his funeral suit, slipped on his shiny black loafers, and boarded a plane to Hungary.

Nearly a decade later, long after I enlisted in the mil-

itary and left St. Louis, I received a phone call from my mother. “Papa’s dead.” She said, her voice lilted with sorrow. Confused by her tone, I was dead-silent for a moment. “Huh...” I finally replied absently.

In the middle of the night, my grandfather suffered a massive heart attack. He was living with his brother, in his brother’s house, at the time. Awakened by the thud of my grandfather falling to the floor, my granduncle leapt out of bed and rushed into the bedroom. As he held my grandfather’s head in his lap, my grandfather clutched the old man’s shirt in terror and tried breathlessly to speak. In the final throes of death, my grandfather muttered something, a single mysterious word my granduncle couldn’t comprehend.

My mother said he died months before she received the fateful black-edged envelope. The envelope was addressed to the old house on Walnut Street where Zelda Lansing died and ping-ponged through the postal service until at last it reached her. When she opened the envelope and unfolded the death letter, a single dull pink flower with round petals floated to the floor.