The Death of an Icon

Gregory Turnbull and Marvita Walker sat side-by-side both in trance-like manners staring at the recently embalmed remains in the basement of Turnbull's Funeral Home. With Brahm's Lullaby playing softly in the background, Hector Alvarez, the dwarf embalmer from Guatemala, smoked a joint as he rode his unicycle in circles around the embalming table. This now 26-year ritual, however bizarre it appeared, always helped Hector relax after completing the tedious process of preparing human remains for burial and the afterlife (if it actually did exist). Hector was unquestionably a master at his craft and an accomplished unicyclist.

Hector's boss, the now deceased Earnest Turnbull (commonly referred to as Mr. Turnbull), was the owner of Turnbull's Funeral Home. He was also the current recipient of Hector's latest work due to an unfortunate incident at the golf course. Mr. Turnbull was struck in the head by a misfired golf ball on the tenth green traveling at an estimated 100 miles per hour. The ball smashed him directly in his temple causing him to fall harshly to the ground. After a few minutes of convulsing, his eyes opened insanely wide and he shouted "Joe Pepitone!," then died. The gentleman who hit the errant golf ball felt terrible. When asked about what happened, he replied, "I was trying a new club, a 2-iron, from the ninth tee box and I pulled it badly. I probably should have stuck with my driver. I feel awful about what happened. I yelled 'Fore' but I guess he didn't hear me."

Mr. Turnbull's Celebration of Life

Marvita Walker stood nervously in the back of the silent "standing room only" event room of Turnbull's Funeral Home awaiting her time to sing. Still stunned by the sight of Mr. Turnbill's unforeseen demise, she stared sadly at his remains lying in a casket surrounded by a dynamic array of multicolored flower arrangements. The silence was abruptly interrupted by the

sound of the attending preacher sporadically clearing his throat into the microphone at the podium.

"Ahem. Good evening everyone and welcome to the celebration of the life of this amazing man – Mr. Earnest Turnbull. As you know, he has been the owner and operator of this fine establishment for the past 27 years, and he masterfully orchestrated countless funerals that were always memorable and meaningful for so many deceased's loved ones."

The preacher continued to share praises about Mr. Turnbull's life, his work and his positive impact on the community. Several family members and friends followed with their own personal thoughts on Earnest Turnbull's life. His son Gregory had prepared a rather lengthy verbal tribute, but was overwhelmed with emotion, so he opted to be brief. "I'm going to miss you Pop. Don't worry, your life's work is in good hands. Lisa, Marvita, Hector and I with the help of our whacky but wonderful team will take care of business. I love you Pop."

As a tearful Gregory walked over to the piano, the preacher concluded by introducing Marvita, who was Turnbull Funeral Home's resident funeral singer among other things. Marvita, a confident and stunning woman of 26 years, slowly walked to the front, grabbed the microphone and welcomed everyone in attendance. She then commented, "I have worked here for Mr. Turnbull for the past eight years and he was my hero. I lost both of my parents at a young age, and I felt like a lost soul when I met him. He became my father figure and I'm going to miss him dearly. In his honor, I'm going to sing two of his favorite songs accompanied by my co-worker, my dear friend, and Mr. Turnbull's son – Gregory Turnbull."

Marvita first performed a beautiful rendition of Wind Beneath My Wings, and after a brief pause concluded with What a Wonderful World. As Gregory played the accompanying piano, he was in awe of Marvita's amazing voice, her magnificent presence and her natural

physical beauty. He had been insanely attracted to her since she first got hired, and desperately wanted to start a romantic relationship with her. But, he eventually concluded that they could never be a couple in spite of his borderline obsession.

First and foremost, his father staunchly disapproved of "office romances." Plus, Marvita didn't seem the slightest bit interested in him romantically. He felt that for some reason she viewed him more as a friend or perhaps a brother in spite of the subtle passes he made at her from time to time. Finally, she was African American and he was Caucasian, and he foolishly assumed that was a problem for Marvita which in fact it was not. When she finished the second song, Marvita turned toward Mr. Turnbull's casket, solemnly bowed, and gracefully blew a kiss to him. The preacher then asked everyone to pay their final respects and invited them to join the car pool outside for the ride to the cemetery.

Turnbull's Funeral Home

Turnbull's Funeral Home is located in Milton – a small town in southern Delaware. With Mr. Turnbull's passing, it appeared that his son would begrudgingly assume the role of Funeral Director. It is a small operation with a somewhat dysfunctional, yet determined employee team. In addition to Gregory and Mr. Turnbull, there were four other full-time employees. Lisa the 68-year-old Operations Manager who tended to take charge of things and had been Mr. Turnbill's business confidante from the beginning. Although everyone was cordial at work, the other team members referred to her as Dragon Lady behind her back. Rounding out the team were Hector the dwarf Embalmer from Guatemala, and Marvita the beautiful Funeral Singer who also worked as the Receptionist and Secretary. Finally, there was Tony, the carefree 30-year-old Driver who also happened to be the weed supplier to many.

Because it is such a small operation, each employee had a “whatever it takes” mentality in terms of ongoing tasks such as room setup, clean-up, etc. Mr. Turnbull started the business in 1995 and developed a reputation as a very caring, but very “thrifty” owner. To put it bluntly, some would otherwise characterize him as being cheap. After a few early predictable growing pains in the early years, his business eventually became a profitable and credible institution. His wife passed away a few years ago and Gregory was their only child, but Mr. Turnbill clearly viewed Lisa, Hector and Marvita as family.

Gregory Turnbull

Gregory Turnbull enjoyed a secure and enjoyable upbringing, although growing up in the environment of a funeral home affected him immensely. He was a good-looking young man, but he was gentle, withdrawn and seemed to lack confidence – particularly with women. He had no interest in a career in his father’s business, although he did work there part-time for a few years right out of high school. He inevitably learned about the entire operation “head-to-toe” (pun intended). Being artistic by nature, music to be specific, he did not enjoy the pragmatic nature of working at a funeral home. The most prominent reason was that he never got comfortable being around dead bodies day in and day out.

During those post-high school years, Gregory became a bit of a troublemaker and struggled to get launched in life. As a result of excessive drinking, he faced a few legal issues including a DUI and public intoxication, among others. Several of those incidents required his father to financially come to his rescue in a big way. Being a man who watched his money closely, Mr. Turnbull did not forget the large sums of money Gregory’s various indiscretions cost him, so he made a deal with him. Gregory would earn his Funeral Director/Mortician credentials, work full-time at the business for five years, and pay off his financial debt to his father along the

way. If Gregory was not satisfied working as a Mortician after five years, he could then choose his own path. Well, now at 29 years of age, he just finished year four and his father's death threw him an uncomfortable curve.

Marvita Walker

Marvita's primary motivation to work at Turnbull's Funeral Home was the opportunity to get paid to sing. Although she was an immensely talented vocalist, she was insecure about her vocal abilities and sensitive to criticism, but she had an intense internal desire to perform. She had tried to sing at other outside events such as weddings, but she did not enjoy the experience and vowed to only sing at funerals.

She joined Mr. Turnbull's team shortly after she graduated from high school, and she absolutely loved the people and the atmosphere. Initially it didn't look like she could remain on the payroll strictly as a funeral singer, so she wisely made herself useful in other areas. Her focus and dedication drove her to became a highly dependable employee on Mr. Turnbull's otherwise dysfunctional team. Marvita received a lot of attention from men over the years, but never got into a serious relationship as far as anyone knew. She thoroughly enjoyed Gregory's company and always felt incredibly comfortable when they spent time together, but she viewed him as an older brother. Marvita shared an apartment with a close female friend who frequently joined her at social events.

The Post-Funeral Gathering

After putting Mr. Turnbull to rest at the cemetery, Lisa (the Office Manager) invited about thirty family members and friends back to her home to enjoy some food, drink and fellowship. Gregory and Marvita drove together to Lisa's place, and they were amazed by what they saw when they arrived. As always, Lisa took charge of the situation and arranged a massive

spread of food – much of it lovingly provided by neighbors and some catered by a local restaurant. She set up an open bar and had the two resident stoners Tony (the carefree weed dealing driver) and Hector (the dwarf Guatemalan embalmer) tend the bar. That was a highly questionable decision to say the least.

Gregory and Marvita went to the bar and got much-needed glasses of wine – Marvita a Chardonnay and Gregory a Chianti. Marvita, who had a great rapport with Hector, stayed at the bar and chatted with him for several minutes. Standing a few feet away was one of Mr. Turnbull's golfing buddies with a drink in hand. He approached Gregory and expressed his condolences. "So sorry about your loss Gregory. I'm going to miss your father. He was a great man."

"Thank you sir. I know how much he enjoyed golfing with you and the guys, not to mention your great friendships. It must have been horrible for you standing right there when he passed."

"It really was. It could have been any one of us in the foursome. With his hearing issues, I don't think he heard the guy yell 'Fore' after he hit the ball." After a tearful pause, he continued, "It happened so quickly."

"Did he say anything before he passed? I'm just curious."

"Actually, he did. After the ball struck him in the head, he fell down on his back and went into convulsions for a few minutes. The convulsions stopped abruptly, he quickly sat upright with his eyes wide open, and shouted 'Joe Pepitone!' real loud. Then he passed."

"Joe Pepitone? Who is that? And why would he shout *his* name?"

"Well, we always grab a quick drink in the clubhouse at the turn after the front nine. There was a trivia game going on at the bar and we overheard them ask a baseball question. And

you know your father is a baseball trivia aficionado. It was something about a former New York Yankee who became a hair stylist after retiring from baseball. Your father snapped his finger and jokingly said he knew it but couldn't immediately recall his name. Anyway, we finished our drink and headed out to the tenth hole. I googled it up, Joe Pepitone was the correct answer to the trivia question."

Looking a bit dumbfounded, Gregory said, "Damn, ain't that some shit? Fucking Joe Pepitone. Oh, I'm sorry about my language."

"No worries Gregory. This is a difficult time for you."

His father's friend hugged Gregory and mingled into the crowd. Gregory did his best to interact with as many people as possible which was a bit strenuous considering his introverted nature. Recognizing Gregory's social dilemma, Marvita stood by his side which made this 'required' etiquette situation much easier to handle. A while later, Lisa, who had a beautiful grand piano in the corner of her parlor, asked Gregory and Marvita if they would be comfortable performing a few songs. Seeing this as an opportunity to get away from the seemingly countless interactions, Gregory eagerly agreed to do so as did Marvita.

Their performance was exceptional as they were fueled by the emotion of Mr. Turnbull's passing. As they performed, Tony and Hector were capably working the open bar, and enjoying a few "adult beverages" of their own along the way. Those drinks combined with the extremely potent joint they smoked on the drive over, placed them in righteous states of mind so to speak. Basically, they were ripped and a bit stupefied to put it mildly. Due to his short stature, Hector stood on a small stool behind the bar which was just a tad wobbly. Marvita announced that she would sing one final song – another of Mr. Turnbull's favorites – My Way.

Most of the people in attendance, including Hector, knew the words and enthusiastically sang along. As they were singing the final chorus, Hector let go of the bar which he had been holding to keep him steady. He then raised his hands in the air and loudly sang along with the chorus until fate stepped in. The stool gave way causing Hector to fall sideways right into Tony and they both rolled from behind the bar with Tony lying on top of Hector. That unfortunate tumble sparked a fairly abrupt and awkward ending to the gathering.

Life Changing News

After folks said their farewells and departed, Lisa walked over to the bar area with her husband. “Are you guys okay?”

Hector and Tony both nodded affirmatively as they stood side-by-side in their inebriated states.

“What’s wrong with you idiots? That was so embarrassing.”

Hector and Tony simply lowered their heads in shame like two Catholic schoolboys getting chastised by a nun. The ever-domineering Lisa looked at her husband and commanded, “Honey, please drive these two knuckleheads home. I need to talk with Gregory and Marvita. It’s important.”

“No problem honey. Let’s roll fellas. If one of you assholes puke in my car, I’m going to kick your ass.”

That motley crew departed and Lisa asked Gregory and Marvita, “Are you two doing okay?”

They both nodded and smiled as Lisa continued, “I really need to talk with you about an urgent matter. Are you up for it tonight? Or would you prefer to wait until tomorrow?”

Gregory and Marvita looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and nonverbally agreed. Gregory said, “Sure, let’s talk.”

Lisa said, “I wasn’t able to get anything to eat and I’m starving. How about you?”

Gregory and Marvita were in the same predicament, so they all made plates of food, poured fresh drinks and sat together at the dining room table. “I hope you’re okay talking while we eat.”

Gregory and Marvita again nonverbally expressed their agreement. “I’m going to share some very important, perhaps shocking things with you, so buckle up.”

Gregory took a long sip of his Chianti and slyly responded, “Okay Lisa, you have our attention.”

“The first thing concerns Marvita.”

Marvita took a deep nervous breath and said, “Okay.”

“As you know Marvita, Mr. Turnbull loved you like a daughter.”

That caused her to bow her head and break into joyful tears. “I know.”

“Well, he added you as a beneficiary on his will which is a big deal. And you earned that Marvita. Good for you.”

Still in tears, a speechless Marvita placed her hand over heart and nodded to Lisa.

Lisa continued, “He also included Hector as a beneficiary which he also earned over all those years of hard work. I’ve never been fond of that weird shit he does down there after each embalming, but each to his own I guess. I didn’t ask him to stay for this discussion after that clown show that he and Tony provided earlier. I’ll talk with him tomorrow.”

Gregory interjected, “Are *you* doing okay Lisa? I know this entire scenario is putting a lot of stress on you.”

“Thank you Gregory, I’ll be fine. Having said that, we have to make a big decision. As you both know, the business has been very profitable over the past several years. Well, your father recently reached out to a corporate entity to discuss selling the business. Gregory, he left you out of the loop because he could sense that you were being a loyal son, but that your heart wasn’t in the business.”

“I get it and he was right. I loved him and I wanted to make him proud, but I’ve been looking forward to meeting my five-year commitment and moving on.”

“So, your father had his eye on full-time retirement while simultaneously taking care of the three of us and Hector. The good news is that the corporate group made him a very generous offer which would have enabled him to retire comfortably and easily ensure that we were all financially set. The bad news is obvious, your father passed away and won’t get to enjoy his hard-earned retirement.”

Lisa paused and broke down into tears. She regrouped and continued. “I’m sure you have a million questions, so I arranged for us to meet with the family lawyer tomorrow morning at the shop at 10am.”

Gregory reached over and held Lisa’s hand. “You’re amazing and I know how much my father valued you.”

He paused and made close eye contact with Lisa. “Thank you for sharing that interesting news with us Lisa. The 10am meeting works out perfectly as we have to prepare for the upcoming Robinson funeral. But, I would like for the three of us and Hector to huddle before the lawyer gets there. I need a night to sleep on this and I think it would be wise for us to be on the same sheet of music. How about talking over coffee tomorrow at 9am?”

Lisa and Marvita each gave a thumbs up.

The Big Decision

As planned, the four met for coffee and they were all in agreement. Barring any unforeseen obstacles, they would accept the corporate offer. Lisa informed Gregory, Hector and Marvita that Mr. Turnbull emphatically included a clause that all existing employees are guaranteed at least one-year of continued employment if they chose to do so. Lisa stated that she would go ahead and retire. Gregory said that he would leave the business and take a hiatus to figure out his next steps. Marvita and Hector were uncertain and said they would like to meet the new owners before deciding.

They met with the family lawyer at 10am who reviewed Mr. Turnbull's will, and answered all their questions about the possible corporate buyout. After an involved and productive discussion, it was decided. They would sell Turnbull's Funeral Home and the transition would begin immediately.

Epilogue: What About Gregory and Marvita?

The next several weeks passed by uneventfully and the transition was moving along with relative ease. Although sad about his father's passing, Gregory found himself feeling liberated and hopeful. In a month or so, he would be financially secure with an endless list of future options. Two things in his life became crystal clear – he wanted to play the piano for a living even if it was only part-time, and he had to at least try to romantically pursue Marvita. Having said that, he was insecure about that endeavor because his courting skills were limited to nonexistent. Plus, she has never showed any signs of interest in him over the years which he found to be frustrating and confusing.

As planned, Lisa would retire when the transition was complete. Marvita and Hector really liked the new ownership group and decided to stay on and be part of the new team.

Marvita enjoyed her multiple roles and would be able to continue sing at funerals which was very appealing to her. Hector would be able to continue the work he loved realizing that he may need to adjust his post-embalming ritual, at least for the time being. Unfortunately, Tony (the driver) got fired early on. Mr. Turnbull's clause to retain existing employees for one year was included in the contract. However, it did have a performance/behavioral sub-clause based on well-defined standards. Tony's constant marijuana-enhanced state of mind was easily discovered which clearly violated the previous mentioned standards.

Late one Thursday afternoon, just days before the transition would be finalized, Gregory called Marvita and asked her if she would like to join him for dinner which she happily agreed to do. She told Gregory, "Great idea. I have two really amazing things to share with you."

Marvita certainly planned to keep in touch with her "brother in spirit" and she saw this as a nice time to reminisce and talk about their futures. Contrarily, Gregory was hoping to initiate his first assertive romantic advance toward Marvita.

They agreed to meet at Giovani's Italian Restaurant which was one of the more upscale restaurants in the area. A sharply dressed Gregory arrived early and secured a table in the back corner. Marvita arrived a short while later and, as always, looked magnificent. She wore a black sleeveless mid-thigh cocktail dress with a lacy white shawl and high heels, and her hair was styled in shoulder-length micro braids. Gregory's jaw dropped in complete admiration as she slowly glided toward him. In awe, he stood up and greeted her with a careful hug and a genuine smile. During their brief hug, he had a strong desire to kiss her, but then was not the time. He handed her a colorful bouquet of roses and orchids. The colors were soft and the fragrance was pure. "These are so gorgeous Gregory. Thank you so much."

After another brief hug, their waiter came and took their drink and appetizer orders. Marvita ordered a sweet vodka martini and Gregory had his usual Chianti, plus an order of calamari. When the drinks arrived, Gregory proposed a toast in an unusually confident tone of voice. “To you Marvita, *the* most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. And that rare beauty is not only physical, it’s also inside your caring heart. Cheers.”

“Why thank you Gregory.”

They continued to talk, laugh and cry throughout the meal as they reminisced about their experiences over the years. One important topic was the incredibly positive impact Gregory’s father had on them. As they awaited for their desserts to arrive, the conversation shifted to their respective love lives. Knowing that Marvita recently broke up with a guy she was casually dating, Gregory carefully asked, “How are you feeling about that. Are you doing okay?”

Marvita sat in reflective silence for a moment and then responded, “I feel fine. He was a real nice guy, but he lacked the gentle and caring nature I’m looking for. Actually, like you have Gregory.”

“Thank you, I’m flattered. If that’s the case, why don’t you date me? We know each other well and I’m only a couple of years older than you.”

Marvita smiled as if she just heard a clever joke. “Gregory we both know why that’s not possible, but thanks for the offer.”

Her response confused Gregory, but he let it slide and responded, “So Marvita, my curiosity is killing me. Please tell me the two amazing things you said you wanted to share with me.”

Amazing Item #1

“Ah yes. Gregory I know that you’ve always been very private about the people you have dated and I understand that. I also know that your father was a firm presence in your life and at times may not have approved of certain people.”

“Yeah, he certainly was a force in my life, and it’s always been a weird thing being a Mortician’s son. I dated several people who were a bit freaked out when they found out and eased their way out of our relationship. I guess being around dead bodies tends to make people uncomfortable.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that anymore – right?”

“That is most correct and I’m about to be more public and more assertive in my dating life.”

Marvita smiled coyly and responded, “So, the first amazing item is that I know someone who finds you very attractive, and recently became available after a difficult relationship.”

That was not what Gregory was hoping to hear. “So, who may I ask, are we talking about?”

“Do you remember the dinner party I had at my place last year during the Holidays?”

“Yes of course, it was great. Lots of interesting people.”

“Well, the gay couple that was there – Joseph and Bernard – they broke up. Bernard is completely into you and he’s been begging me to hook you two up. What do you think?”

Gregory sat and stared as if he was just informed he had a terminal illness with only one week to live. His face turned beat red from embarrassment and he began sweating. He abruptly stood up. “Excuse me for a moment Marvita. I need to use the Men’s Room.”

He aggressively headed to the Men's Room and leaned over the sink when he arrived. He then splashed cold water on his face, stared into his own eyes in the mirror, and thought, "What the fuck was that? Marvita thinks I'm freaking gay. Oh wow, that explains a lot about her."

Another gentleman walked up to the sink next to Gregory and looked at him with concern. "Are you okay man?"

After a brief moment of delay, Gregory turned his head toward the other man as if his hypnotist just snapped his finger to get him out of a trance. "I'm good. Just feeling a bit warm. Thanks for asking."

Amazing Item #2

Gregory took a few minutes to regain his composure, cleaned up and left the Men's Room in an emotional haze. He headed back to the table and was surprised to see that Hector (the dwarf embalmer from Guatemala) was sitting at the table next to Marvita.

Gregory reached over and welcomed him with a handshake, "Hey man, good to see you."

Marvita explained, "I hope you don't mind. I invited Hector to join us for an after-dinner drink."

"Not a problem, always great to spend time with my favorite unicyclist."

The waiter came around to check on them and they ordered a round of drinks. Hector excused himself and headed to the Men's Room. Taking advantage of that opportunity, a now flustered Gregory grabbed Valerie's hand and emphasized, "Valerie, just so you know. I'm not gay. And I'm certainly not interested in dating that guy you had in mind."

"Oh my God Gregory, I'm so sorry and all this time…."

Gregory interrupted and implored, "Can't you see that I want to be with you Valerie. I have for years. I think I'm in love with you."

“I’m sorry Gregory, but that’s not possible. On that note, the second amazing item I want to share with you is that I’m pregnant.”

Gregory was stunned and sat silently. This was all a bit overwhelming and this night is not even close to going as he had envisioned. Hector returned to the table and sat down, “So, did I miss anything important?”

Marvita and Gregory did not respond and nervously stared at each other. Hector asked, “Are you two okay?”

After a long moment of awkward silence, Hector continued, “Marvita, did you share the big news with Gregory yet?”

“Yes I did, at least part of it.”

She took a deep breath and continued, “Gregory, as I mentioned, I’m pregnant and Hector is the father. He’s going to move in with me next week and we plan to get married.”

They say that the third of anything “is a charm.” Well, Gregory was quite far from feeling charmed with that final piece of devastating news. At that moment, their waiter approached with the check and handed it to Gregory who was truly dumbfounded. Before he left, the waiter looked at Marvita, “Can I asked you something Marvita?”

“Yes of course, anything.”

“You once told me that you only sing at funerals. I’m curious, why is that?”

Marvita stood up and looked directly into the waiter’s eyes, “Honey, I only sing at funerals because the dead don’t bitch!”

The End