



The Red Glove

by Vivian Lawry

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Roy owned the only drive-through funeral business in Maine. It was full-service, with 24-7 viewing hours, burial and cremation packages, and an array of funeral merch that included flower arrangements, grave blankets, Hallmark Lasting Expressions bereavement cards, urns for cremains, and commemorative jewelry. When Roy gave his monthly pep talks to the staff, he always closed by saying something like, "Today's consumers have options for after-death services. We thrive by going beyond cookie-cutter, greet 'n' weep events. Remember our mission: 'One-stop shopping for the bereaved. If we don't have it, we'll get it.'"

Roy paused in the doorway, waiting for an appropriate opening to join his customers.

The one called "Angel" said, "If Pauline'd had the consideration to die in Vegas or Chicago or someplace sensible like that, we'd've had choices."

The other one, Ming, shrugged. "Pauline was definite about wanting a drive-through viewing—and we know the reasons for *that*. We'll just have to deal with this Roy person."

"Well, I don't like it. I don't like it one little bit." Angel puffed up like a pigeon in the cold. "He looks at us like we're freaks."

Roy felt a spurt of irritation. After decades in the business, he should have controlled his reactions better.

Ming laughed. "We *are* freaks. Imagine being called out on a Saturday night and having to deal with The Hottentot Venus—nearly seven feet tall, black as midnight, and armless, accompanied by The Mule-Faced Woman—and both of us next thing to prostrate with grief."

Roy coughed softly into a perfectly manicured fist, and both women turned in his direction. Angel glared. Ming smiled—probably. It was hard to tell, given the shape of her face. Roy said, "Although we haven't done funerals for carnival people before, I'm sure we can accommodate your needs."

"We're supposed to take your word for it?" Angel's voice was sandpaper. Ming elbowed her in the ribs.

Roy feigned oblivion. "If you'll step this way, we can discuss any

special requirements.”

Ming said, “We know what Pauline wanted in general. But as for the details... The company’s one big family. We’ll need to discuss it.”

Angel was already headed for the door. “Just give us your advertising shit or menu of services or whatever you call it. We’ll get back to you.”

Roy cleared his throat and murmured, “There are some decisions that must be made expeditiously. The casket, for example, has a forty-eight-hour delivery time. If you choose something from our showroom, of course, that would not apply. But the decision needs to be made. Plus, you might want personalized accoutrements.”

Ming said, “Personalized accoutrements?”

“Candles, tombstones, lap blankets—we can personalize just about anything with a photographic likeness or initials. We can attach a brass or bronze emblem to the casket, representing your loved one’s special interests—fishing gear, needle and thread, that sort of thing.”

The women exchanged a look. Angel said, “Personal would be good.” She turned to Roy. “We want a snake.”

“A snake?”

“Pauline was a snake dancer.”

“Personal emblems must be selected from those in stock. A snake is not a stock item.” He paused. “However, we could provide a ballet dancer.” Angel snorted and Roy despaired of soothing her hostility anytime soon.

Ming said, “It wasn’t that kind of dancing. Skip the emblem. And no casket. There’s nothing graceful about a rectangle. Pauline wanted a coffin. A coffin with a glass lid. Can you do that?”

Roy considered. *A carpenter or metal worker, a glass cutter, an upholsterer.* He’d call them at home. And tomorrow was Monday. He nodded. “Would you prefer wood or metal? Mahogany is top-of-the-line, of course, but we also have cherry and oak. If you prefer metal, we could provide bronze, chrome with black trim—”

Angel cut in. “Wood. Whatever’s cheapest. We’ll decorate it.”

Pauline started in the business as a punk, when her Snake Woman

mother put the toddler on display outside the sideshow in a big, glass aquarium, with garter snakes and other nonvenomous babies. Townies flocked in by tens and dozens. Pauline grew along with the snakes. As a nubile young thing—when her mother was too old and too fat to perform—Pauline became “Snake Woman Dancing,” the star of the carnival. As Pauline’s physical charms counted down from a perfect ten to somewhere closer to five, her snakes grew more impressive. Her current dancing partner, Bernice, was a twenty-foot albino Burmese python, white with butterscotch and burnt-orange markings.

In the off-season Pauline competed in bodybuilding competitions. She’d won her most recent trophy at the age of sixty one. The night the carnival opened in Bangor, she wore a spangled red bikini, red slippers, and red kidskin opera gloves. Her blond curls were piled high, and her sculpted muscles stood out in glistening relief. No one paid much attention to her crow’s-feet and budding jowls as she swayed and turned with Bernice, enticing the two-hundred-pound snake to twine around her body. At first, no one noticed anything amiss. Pauline’s sinuous movements just slowed.

Afterward, Jake (one of the roughies) said he thought she might have tried to say something. But nobody pulled the curtain until she collapsed, and even then no one knew how to get the two-hundred-pound snake off her. Jake grabbed Bernice by the tail, as Pauline had once told him to do, and tried to unwind the python. He’d just yelled, “Give me some muscle over here!” when Pauline’s feisty little mongrel Justine scampered up, yipping and nipping at Bernice. The snake unwound herself and slithered after Justine, her narrow head—with milk chocolate eyes and flickering tongue—swaying gracefully.

Pauline came around slowly, moaning as The Boss called 9-1-1. As soon as Pauline caught her breath, she started talking. She always was a talker. She said, “I didn’t think anything of it when Bernice coiled between my legs. When she looped over and under my body, I started to feel like I was caught in a net or something, but I still didn’t panic. When she circled my chest, scales pressing into me, I realized I was holding my breath.” Pauline inhaled slowly, her face pinched by pain, holding her listeners captive. “Bernice wound around and around, cinching me in like a corset. Every time I exhaled she coiled tighter. I couldn’t breathe in.” The ambulance arrived. Pauline flapped her hand at the paramedics, waving them off till she finished her recital. “I went weak as a kitten—my heart pounded, the sweat popped out. My ribs cracked. I was so confused—so foggy-feeling and sleepy—I swear, I thought I was a goner.” Pauline’s smile was feeble. “I’ve wondered what it would feel like, dying by constrictor. Now I know.” Tears welled up. “Poor Justine. She’s probably nothing but a lump in Bernice’s middle by now.”

The ambulance pulled out, carrying Pauline to the hospital for X-

rays, though she tried to convince them she was fine. Her friends breathed a collective sigh of relief, telling each other it could have been a whole lot worse and turning their attention to dealing with Bernice on the loose. The Boss sent the performers back to carry on with the show and assigned others to search parties. “It’s not like there are many places she could hide.”

One of the roustabouts picked up an elephant gun. Jake said, “Put that thing away. Pauline’ll want her alive and well. Use the acrobats’ nets.”

On the way to the hospital, Pauline suffered a heart attack and was DOA. Once her friends got over being stunned silent, everyone agreed she’d had a good run—and longer than most. The Boss said, “I’m sure as hell gonna miss Pauline. We always made the nut when she was on.”

Pauline’s two best friends gathered the company under the G-Top to settle the details of her funeral. Ming waved one of Roy’s brochures. “Listen up. We’ve got a lot of stuff to decide. If she’s cremated, we could go with a traditional marble urn, like a vase with a lid—amber- or celery-colored—or a carved, wooden shoe box thing with a brass nameplate. They’ve got a biodegradable urn shaped like a big seashell that dissolves when it’s thrown in the water. Or, we could get a paper urn with wildflower seeds that bloom after they’re buried.”

Angel said, “People could keep some of her ashes in lockets and stuff. She could even be made into diamonds.”

Damian (The Strongest Man in the World) belched loudly and popped another Bud. “Who’d want to turn somebody into bling?”

Jake said, “I think mementos of a loved one could be very comforting.”

“You would.” Damian lurched to his feet, sloshing beer into the sawdust. “Give her a good old-fashioned funeral, and be done with it.” Nobody said anything as he swayed toward the trailer he had shared with Pauline.

Ming muttered, “So much for the grieving husband.”

Angel hissed, “She should’ve eighty-sixed that drunken bastard a long time ago.”

“Divorce was against her religion—so to speak. But, this isn’t the time or the place. We’ve got a funeral to plan.”

Someone said, "What's all this talk about cremation? If she wanted a coffin, she probably wanted to be planted somewhere." Several agreed that a green burial would be nice—just a shroud, and burial in some wilderness, maybe her name on a nearby rock.

Angel said, "Not an option. She's already been embalmed." Eventually they rejected a theme funeral, opting instead for a traditional service, followed by removal to Roy's banquet hall for a Chocolate Celebration of Life.

Jake said, "I still think Pauline would like to be turned into diamonds." The people who knew her best agreed. The final decision was that, after the Chocolate Celebration, Pauline would be cremated, some of her ashes turned into diamonds for those willing to pay the hefty price, the remaining ashes to be cast in concrete and made part of an artificial reef near their winter base in Florida. As people dispersed Jake lingered near Ming's elbow. He said, "You know about me and Pauline, right? Well, I want one of them diamonds. I got the eighteen thousand. But—to be discreet, you know—maybe you could act like it's for you." His voice quavered. "I heard that, in Taiwan, it's pretty common for people to marry someone who's dead. But here—well, I guess this is as close as I can get."

Ming squeezed his hand. "Sure thing."

When Ming handed over their written instructions, along with Pauline's red slippers, spangled red bikini, and red leather opera gloves, Roy said nothing. But something about the slight pucker of his mouth and the way he held the garments (fingertips only) put Angel's back up. She said, "Just do it. And show some respect."

Roy gravely studied the list. "We have an excellent caterer who will create fifteen to twenty chocolate confections for the Celebration of Life. Do you expect many people to attend? If you need porta-potties, we can provide ones with marble sinks—a very nice line, very dignified. Also, many people think a release of butterflies or white doves is a nice way to end the event." When he glanced up Angel managed a tight smile and a nod of encouragement. Roy said, "You may want to consider having masseuses in a side room during visiting hours. In fact, let's just sit down with our event planner and talk about scripting, staging, and soundscaping."

Afterward, walking back to the fairgrounds with Ming, Angel said, "Roy sure knows how to turn the tip. He'd've made a great outside talker. But damn the cost. We're sending Pauline off in style."

Ming dabbed the corners of her eyes with a lacy white handkerchief. "She deserves it. I swear, that woman was like a

sister to me. Everybody just loved her to pieces.”

“Jake is taking it hard. Poor bastard.”

“Did you hear him talking about keeping Bernice and taking over Pauline’s joint? He wants to be Snake Man Dancing.” Ming was panting.

Angel shortened her stride and slowed her pace. “No way. He’s nowhere near strong enough.”

“Not yet. But, he’s talking about hooking up with Pauline’s trainer when we get back to Florida—says if she can be a bodybuilder, so can he. He isn’t much over forty. He might be able to pull it off.”

“Honest to God, your name ought to be Pollyanna! Damian would break his neck.”

“Well, your name should be Black Cloud! Damian hated Pauline’s snakes. And, if Jake bulks up, Damian might think twice about taking him on just for the hell of it.”

Angel stomped off, biting back an urge to say that Ming’s perpetual ray of sunshine gave her migraines.

So now Pauline’s laid out in her satin-lined coffin, wearing her dancing costume. The coffin looks like a psychedelic throwback, a mixed-media collage of posters, photos, paint, mini barbells, articulated wooden snakes, and other mementos glued or nailed on. The restoration artist and Ethereal Cosmetics have done their duty, and Pauline doesn’t look a day over forty.

Carloads of carnies pressed for time and a few old-timers confined to wheelchairs visit the drive-through, under a white canopy that lights up at night, to see images of Pauline on a twenty-five-inch screen. Lines of vehicles fill Roy’s parking lot with chirps, meows, barks, and babies’ cries—but at least his system eliminates dogfights. The carloads and busloads snake slowly past the viewing area, pausing to sign the guestbook tucked conveniently beneath the speakerphone. One busload of AARP-eligible mourners has to drive down, back up to turn around, and then come back in the opposite direction so people on the other side can see. That snarls traffic something fierce, and one of Roy’s underlings spends the better part of an hour getting them moving again.

Pauline’s image goes black after three seconds, although visitors can push the button for another look. Jake hauls a flatbed trailer carrying Bernice’s cage. He stays for half an hour, pushing the button again and again. People in the queue behind him complain

that they could have parked, walked past the coffin inside, and been back on the road quicker than this. Jake says, “Bernice recognized her. I know she did.”

Angel and Ming see it all. Angel says, “Pauline knew this was the only way Jake could grieve her. It’s not like Damian would let him hang around inside.”

Day and night, viewing traffic is like rush hour at a crawl. Roy’s elaborate system of relays, switches, and timers allows as many as a dozen bodies to be displayed. The week’s been busy. Plus, all the media covered the death of Snake Woman Dancing. Angel and Ming suspect that some of the people viewing Pauline came to see someone else but stayed to gawk. The local motorcycle club roars through, wearing their colors, leather, and chains. Angel complains that it feels like a three-ring circus. Ming says, “Seems about right for Pauline.”

The funeral is closed to the public, but the names in the guestbook read like a who’s who of carnival people—all of their traveling troupe, plus several from other companies: the Elephant Man; the Puppet Woman; the Lion-Faced Man; the Texas Giant; the Armless Fiddler; Darwin’s Missing Link; Tom Thumb and Thumbelina; the Dog-Faced Boy; the Human Caterpillar; Hobbit; Toewinkle; Smiley. Ming leads the mourners in singing “The Show Must Go On.” Damian weeps ostentatiously. The Human Torch spits jets of flames behind the coffin. Pauline’s women friends wear red hats and red gloves, though Angel, being armless, has to settle for the hat only. Before the glass lid is closed, the women erupt into a conga line around the coffin, weeping, singing, and dropping their gloves onto Pauline’s body. Other mourners file past, paying their final respects. Some squeeze her hand or kiss her forehead. Bringing up the rear of the line, Jake stealthily grips the top of Pauline’s right glove, peeling it off like a long, red snakeskin and stuffing it into his pocket.

As the Seven Dwarfs carry the glass-topped coffin from the chapel, mourners toss flowers at their feet. Ming sees Damian look from Pauline’s bare alabaster arm, glowing in the midst of red leather and white satin, to the ribbon of red hanging out of Jake’s pocket and thinks, *There’s gonna be hell to pay now*. Damian attacks Jake, pummeling him about the head and shoulders, until Jake curls up like an armadillo. Roy summons two minions to help separate the brawlers and emerges from the melee with scuffed shoes and a torn jacket pocket. Ming convinces the police not to arrest the two men, claiming their basic good natures were overwhelmed by grief.

After the police leave Ming slaps Jake and Damian soundly. Roy fears yet another unfortunate incident. But Ming says, “What’s got

into you? Brawling like drunken sailors! Show some respect!" She hauls them off to the Celebration of Life.

The red leather opera glove lies abandoned on the sidewalk.

The guy who took it must really care. Roy picks it up. Maybe he can find a way to slip the glove to the Mule-Faced Woman at the Celebration. Let her do what she thinks appropriate.

Roy inhales deeply and strives to be one with the moment, but he can't help muttering, "Thank God it's nearly over. This has been our worst event since the mayor tried to ban the viewing of that nudist." He turns back toward the chapel, stepping daintily over the trampled blossoms littering the parking area and imagines the media reports. He sighs. This is not the image he's been trying to cultivate.

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