

In St. Louis Cemetery No 1

Years ago in New Orleans, a woman wearing an eye-dizzying floral-dress placed a cellophane bag in front of a tomb. Inside the transparent package were three large purple polka-dot bows.

The woman glanced at my face of silent confusion.

“My grandbaby needs surgery.” She didn’t owe me any explanation, but kindly continued, “A gift for the gift of his health.”

I cocked an eyebrow and slowly studied other offerings lying on the gravel.

I understood putting flowers on a grave, but bobby pins, barrettes, and bouquets adorned this tomb for Voodoo Queen Marie Laveau in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1.

“Unique gifts,” I said.

Ms. Floral-Dress was busy tidying the area, giving her bows front-and-center seating. “Widow Laveau was a hairdresser. She appreciated the tools of her trade.”

“And she’ll help from the other side of ... wherever she’s at?”

“She was a very charitable Catholic.” Ms. Floral-Dress fanned her hand at the weather-worn brick vault that was the size of a small walk-in closet. “The bones of eighty-four relatives and friends are in there with her. If a person couldn’t afford a gravesite, Madame Laveau allowed them to rest with her. She helped where she could.”

“Very generous. And that’s all you have to do for the ritual?”

Ms. Floral-Dress frowned. “Folks used to break a small piece of brick from any nearby tomb and use it like chalk to scratch three X’s onto Madame Laveau’s walls. They believed it strengthened their wish. Cemetery officials put a stop to that. Now, we just knock.”

Faded X’s running vertically and horizontally, scratched in different sizes, covered the Voodoo Queen’s upright vault. So many hopes and requests.

“I apologize for asking this,” I said, “but ... will your gift work?”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “Answers come, but it requires patience. It may not happen *when* or the *way* a person hopes.”

That was enough woo-hoery for me. I thanked her, wishing good health for her grandchild, adding, “I hope no one takes those lovely bows.”

The whites of her eyes grew large. Her mouth puckered into a horrified “o” as she drew a breath, wagging a bejeweled finger. “No. No. No. Stealing from a grave attracts bad juju. *Nobody* is going to risk that.”

I dry-swallowed my guilt, calculating how much bad juju I’d collected.

She turned away and palmed the bronze plaque affixed to the tomb. After murmuring a few words, she knuckle-rapped her wishes to Madame Laveau. *Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Neither of us moved. When enough respect-time had passed, I turned to leave, thanking her and adding, “My mom made me decorate graves.”

“Your mama taught you right.”

“Well, It’s Mom’s tradition. I don’t expect anything will come from doing it.”

Her eyes narrowed. She leaned closer, framing me in her stare. “Oh, yes, you do. You expect a gift. You just don’t know that’s what you’re asking for. But you’re asking all the same.”

I left, questioning for the umpteenth time, what possible benefit, if any, came from decorating a grave? This internal angst was my mother’s doing. Because of her, I’d become a tadophile, a person interested in funerals, gravestones, and cemeteries. Mom was adamant about decorating our relatives’ and friends’ graves—every year.

Her ritual began weeks before Decoration Day, dragging old vases and beat-up foam crosses studded with plastic flowers out of the barn. With a glue gun, duct tape, and stapler, she Frankensteined together tired floral arrangements, resurrecting them into service again.

She also planted Sweet Pea Vines because they reliably bloomed by the end of May. Stuffing quart jars with flowers and moss filler, she’d scrutinize her homebuilt creations, saying, “They’ll look okay if we hide the bare gaps against a headstone.”

On Friday before Decoration Day, other families were headed to the lake, their cars full of tents and coolers of Coca-Cola and Coors. Not us. Mom drove my brother and me to graveyards, the back of our fin-tailed Ford station wagon crammed with flowers like a hearse headed to a funeral.

It took us all day to make the rounds to four cemeteries because the folks on Mom’s list had the rudeness to be buried throughout two counties.

Grave decorating was not a quick task. It involved a lot of walking, yelling, and apathetic coordination among leaning, missing, or weather-worn headstones.

“Where’s Uncle Lambert?”

“Maybe he got up and moved. He was always looking for a drink.”

“He’s near a marker that has grapes on it. Look for vines.”

“Don’t walk on anybody’s head! You know better!” (From my mother)

One time, we arrived at the family plot and found a teenager with a chisel and hammer, trying to break off the lamb-sculpture standing atop great-granddad’s headstone. Mom chased him, shouting. I pointed out that she paddled us for the same behavior of running through graveyards and yelling, “loud enough to wake the dead.”

She said she was the “law” of our plot, and thereafter, each year, on our way to perform our “grave-gifting” service, we heard the tale of the lamb-chiseling outlaw.

It wasn’t enough for us to distribute flowers, we also became landscapers, tidying the area. Not just our family plot, but the surrounding plots as well. Always a generous-hearted kid, I asked, “Why doesn’t their family take care of their own darn graves?”

Mom said, “The relatives were too old to get on their hands and knees” or “They’ve moved away” or “They don’t care, but someone needs to remember the dead. Why not us since we’re here?”

Only the crows cawing from the pines and firs agreed with her. My brother shoveled and smoothed-out gopher-humped dirt. I snipped weeds around headstones of kin not even Mom had been born in-time to meet. Eventually, my brother and I would abandon our duties to hide behind trees, or see how many prickly pine cones we could wedge into pyramids and stack on tombstones

Because money was tight, five days later, we returned and picked up our decorations. “Somebody will steal them if we don’t collect them,” Mom said. And once again, we’d hear about the failed lamb-heist as evidence of graveyard piracy.

As I trudged to plots, I wondered why anyone would thief our homespun, glue-gunned handiworks. The live flowers had dried up. The tattered plastic ones looked like they’d been used to whip ghosts. The foam wreaths were sometimes missing—not stolen. Breezes out of the Gorge blew them all over the cemetery.

My brother and I slogged between headstones, picking up gust-strewn decorations, often from other people’s graves, not caring whether we’d gathered our property or someone else’s.

“Why do we do this?” I whined. “They’re dead. They’ll never know we were here.”

Mom's reasoning was simple. "It's Decoration Day. A day for remembering. It's what we do."

During one of my sulky teen years I announced, "I'm *not* continuing this stupid habit when I grow up. Don't expect me to put flowers on your grave."

Mom didn't say a word, but at the car, when I handed her vases, her cheeks were streaked with tears. This seemed like an over-reaction, but I'd rarely seen her cry, not even when she fell off the ladder and cracked several ribs while patching the roof. Guilt squeezed my conscience.

I was also sure I could logic her out of this silly ritual. "Mom, I love you, but I don't see the purpose in any of this. You'll be dead. You won't know if I put tomato plants, acorns, or nothing next to your headstone. And you won't care because you'll be where 'every tear is wiped away.'"

She didn't answer.

It was a long drive home. It was also the final year I helped her decorate graves. For the first time in my self-focused life, I realized that words can't be reeled back in. No matter the debate. No matter the apologies that come later.

It was in 1971 that the name of the holiday officially changed from Decoration Day to Memorial Day. With fly-overs and gun-salutes, emphasis was placed on honoring those who died in military or law enforcement. Wreaths and memorial decor faded from stores.

By 2023, seventeen million Americans celebrated the weekend by flying or driving somewhere fun. The National Retail Foundation reported that sales for hotdogs, pool chemicals, and sunscreen increased 109 percent that weekend. Ninety-five percent of people indicated they'd hail the holiday by "doing some grilling."

It seemed my logic had won. Few people saw the benefit of gussying-up a grave. And yet, some grave-gifting continued. Honoring tradition, stones were still left on Jewish markers. Coins were placed on military graves, from a penny, signifying "I remember" to a quarter, meaning "I was there when this soldier died."

At our local cemetery, at the foot of an old grave, I discovered a clear, plastic box, the type a kid would use to store crayons and pencils. Inside of it, I could see three rabbit paws. Each little furry foot had a silver top with a beaded chain so it could be carried for good luck—for everyone but the bunny.

I found the groundskeeper in his work shed and asked about the rabbits' feet. He shrugged. "Just a piece of weird that people leave behind."

Throughout the years, he'd found other "gifts."

- A full bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken—no biscuits.
- A charm bracelet with trinkets from fifty states, adorning a marker.
- One-pound box of See's Chocolates, each Mother's day on a certain grave.
- Dead cats, stiff dogs, or old pet collars laid out beside headstones.

"Once I found thirteen pencils stuck in a new grave, Unsharpened. Eraser-end up."

"What's the story there?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Everybody's got their reasons."

It took fifteen years after visiting St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 to discover the "reasons." Wiser people than me already knew, but I blame my lack of insight on the bad juju I'd garnered from pilfering grave decorations that didn't belong to us. Or maybe I'd simply needed more years of living.

Mom had passed. I'd moved away. When I returned and visited our plot, I walked familiar paths to long-gone relatives. Mom's marker was crowded by a few upstart blackberry vines the mower had missed.

Just as she'd taught me, I tidied her spot, using the spade and clippers "you should always carry to a cemetery."

Tending gravesites as an adult was different than doing it as a kid running, yelling, or hurling pine cones. To the east, Mt. Hood stood as a sentinel, snow-capped against blue skies. A cool breeze rolling from the Gorge, picked up the cemetery's bittersweet scent of cut grass. The soughing firs and birdsong around me were calming. Both the joys and the emotional barbwire embedded in my memory floated upward.

Graveyards did that to people. Something about the eternal shook out our pasts. I also discovered Ms. Floral-Dress at Marie Laveau's tomb had been right. Unknowingly, I *had* wanted a gift.

Perhaps Mom had been aware that decorating graves opened the gates to our murky hinterland of memories. Remembering, allowed me to connect with her again. A chance to

reexamine my actions. An opportunity to forgive myself and her for the situations that caused pain.

- Gardening with her, and pulling up all her tomatoes, thinking they were weeds.
- Laughing until we had hiccups when she shared the details of her awkward first date.
- Screaming, “Get out of my life!” in our battle about university instead of community college so I could “be free.”
- Shining eyes for both of us during her last days. Mine were tears. Hers were anticipation as she asked, “And ... who are you?”

All those life-sculpting moments of emotions and dramas erased—for one of us.

It had taken years, but I finally understood that grave-gifting was the last act in saying,

“I’m sorry” or

“I love you” or

“I miss you” or

“I’m worried and need help.”

The pencils, flowers, and rabbits’ feet were not for the dead, but the living. Our wordless expressions of pain.

Nowadays, a visitor to St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 cannot enter without a tour guide.

There’s been too much vandalism to the crumbling tombs.

Mom wouldn’t be surprised. I imagine her sitting on her headstone with an I-told-you-so smirk. The audio of the lamb-stealing teen plays through my head again—in her voice, of course.

I wonder if she’d been able to patch up her own past when she’d visited the graveyards or had we clod-throwing kids kept her from meeting her memories?

I remove the old floral arrangement and work on securing a new bouquet of red silk flowers into her vase. It helps with missing her and realizing that she had wisdom, but I’d never told her so. “Sorry I was such a handful.”

She’d be surprised I was following her tradition. She be even more shocked her flowers hadn’t blown away or been stolen.

I palm her name. “Rest, Mom. All those unspectacular, unobserved kindnesses you sent into the world are still quietly rippling through me and the lives of others. Thanks.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I leave, my heart feeling lighter.

An unexpected gift.

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