

'Three up, two down' - by James K Walker

When the vicar talks it makes me laugh. He is nothing but a religious salesman prepared to work weekends. He towers above the gathered masses and nurses his bearded chin for comfort. I want to throw rotten apples at him and tell him to get off the stage, or shout 'Next' like I am Jerry Sadowitz. Life must be so pleasantly simple when you are silhouetted by a large statue of Eagle-Eyed-Action-Jesus on the cross.

He does remarkably well recounting my friend's life in his sermon; considering he never knew him. Perhaps it is time for true friends to bury the dead, to bless the grave and say the prayers. It would make a more dignified event.

On the organ is a crazy spinster who looks remarkably like Gary Oldman in Dracula, with her pale skin and white bouffant. Every now and again she slips and plays a wrong note. What thought is it that filters through that distracts her concentration so? She has long fingers like spiders legs that can reach each key without moving her hand. I wonder what will happen to the church when all the virgins become extinct.

After the funeral I make my way out to the graveyard. In the distance is a monkey-puzzle tree and it is the most complex thing I have seen today. I can see ghosts swinging from its branches or perhaps its just mist. I read a couple of gravestones but it's nothing but a big telephone directory for the dead. The foot of the graves are overgrown with grass. An empty whisky bottle sits nonchalantly at one where usually there would be flowers. A plane leaves a trail across the sky and a passing car beeps, the world is far too preoccupied to worry about such things.

As the coffin is lowered into the hole I can see hands going white as they take the strain. It is not right, my friend was a stupid bastard who fell down the stairs and broke his neck. He would never have entered the ground as gracefully as this; they should just tip up the coffin and throw him in so he is buried as he lived.

When the crowds have dispersed the vicar walks over to me. He starts to rub his chin and this conjures out words.

'Weddings and funeral eh'

I consider his comment and add 'Sunday services as well'

'More weddings and funerals than Sunday services' he counters.

Then he pulls out a cigarette and offers me one. As he smokes I notice the tip of his beard is slightly stained from nicotine. He also has incredibly large feet and a bit of hair growing out his ear.

'That was my 2000th funeral'

'Did you give them a discount?' I sarcastically retort.

The vicar smiles and rub's his chin and is silent for a minute or two.

'Do you know that the man who invented the crossword puzzle is buried here?'

I reply 'no' a little too quickly.

'No-one ever visits his grave'

'Which one is it?'

He points in the distance, 'It's three down, two across'

I look and then realise he has made a joke. Suddenly I find myself smiling for the first time in weeks and remember that death isn't anybody's fault.

Before I can thank him he has already walked off. Rubbing his chin whilst congratulating himself that it's 'the 2000th time I've used that one at a funeral and it works every time.'