

A Fireman's Funeral

by Robert M. Grossman

He didn't die fighting a fire. It isn't that he hadn't fought many of them in his ten years on the force. But Miguel's death came while he was off duty. It came while his three young children slept and Melanie, his wife, stewed in silence after yet another argument, one that saw him charge out of the house and screech off on his motorcycle. He had done that before and each time she waited for him into the late hours. Upon his return, he would always beg her forgiveness.

But not this time. They found his body seven hours later, smashed to a helmetless death after apparently losing control of himself and his cycle. Nobody knew what he'd been doing since his angry departure and until he was hurled over a retaining wall at one in the morning. Nothing was subsequently said about whether there was alcohol on his breath. The police informed the department the moment they determined he was a fireman. From that point on, it was a fireman's funeral.

The fire department's chaplain rang the family doorbell at 3:30 that same morning to tell Melanie and the awakened children that their Miguel was gone. They all stood there numbed. Somehow they went back to sleep, the children not yet fully sensing what

they had heard and Melanie too tired and overcome to believe it. Later that morning an assigned detail of the department's administrative staff set the time, date and place of the wake and funeral service after briefly conferring with Melanie and the parish priest. It sent flowers to the family, arranged for death notices in the local papers, determined to have the body embalmed and placed in an open coffin at the department's designated funeral home. It also guaranteed all the funeral costs, ordered a marching band of bagpipers -- dressed in green kilts and paisley sashes -- to perform immediately after the service, and made sure that an entire battalion of firefighters and two fully equipped fire trucks with ladders were at the funeral home and ready to lead the way to the cemetery. A burial plot had been purchased for Miguel, but Melanie resisted the funeral home's entreaties to purchase her own plot next to his.

I arrived at the service in my dark suit along with several other lawyers who had ties to Melanie's side of the family, the Wasp and Jewish element of this mixed American enterprise. I had never been to a fireman's funeral. There were at least a hundred members of the battalion there, all in uniform, standing erect and grimfaced. Prior to the service, they all passed the open coffin, which was surrounded by an honor guard. Each whispered a few words to Miguel -- most making a sign of the cross in their Irish manner -- then took a seat. The chaplain next conducted the service, reciting the familiar prayers and speaking movingly of Miguel's valor and dedication to the force. Finished, he stepped down and approached Miguel's three young sons sitting with their mother in the front row. He told the boys that their father was a good man and a great fireman and that is how they should remember him. They smiled, liking the attention, then looked at the

coffin.

When the service ended, the members of the battalion once again passed by Miguel, only this time they were followed by a train of tattooed motorcyclists as well as a large contingent of Spanish-speaking friends of Miguel -- many of whom wept uncontrollably throughout the service -- and finally the lawyers. Everyone assembled outside while the coffin, now closed, was carried to the waiting hearse as the bagpipers intoned an Irish funeral ballad. The bereaved then took to their vehicles as the motorcyclists charged off toward the burial plot, blocking each side street along the thoroughfare as the procession moved uninterrupted towards the cemetery. The fire engines, first to arrive, formed an arch with their ladders at the entrance as the procession reverently passed beneath and on to the gravesite. Miguel was lowered into the sun-drenched ground as the mournful sounds of the bagpipes accompanied his burial.

Firemen have a variety of lives. They are on call from 24 to 48 straight hours, most of that time spent at the assigned firehouse-- training, polishing their equipment and playing cards. They may then be off for several days during which many pursue another livelihood. Miguel spent his off days as a pipe fitter. In his on days he fought more fires than most because he wanted the action. For him the action was at a station in the heart of the black community where there are more fires. And when he wasn't fighting fires and fitting pipes, he was riding in the pack with his motorcycle buddies.

The night he raced to his death had been one of those off days when he was

working on other people's pipes but not his own, the ones Melanie had urged him to fix time and again. That's what led to his angered departure -- his anger largely at his own failure to attend to the needs of his family. All his wife really wanted was to have the exhaust tubing from the clothes dryer fixed.

The tubing did get fixed. So did the loose paneling on the walls and all the broken pipes. His brethren on the force flocked to the house after his death and did everything that had to be done and more. The firemen's code is to take care of their own.

It's been a good while now since he died. An uncle of Miguel's three sons brought them over recently. Our place has a wooded area and children love to escape into the forest and play hide and seek. Soon after the boys arrived, I took them off to play there and I was pleased that they seemed as rambunctious and eager as boys their age should. As they worked their way deeper into the woods though, the youngest boy hurried to my side and began to pull at my arm, wanting me to assure him that he would be able to find his way back to our house. He watched his brothers race further into the brambles and brush, and once again sought my assurance. I clearly sensed that it was time to reach an opening where the house would be in sight. We had not yet reached that point when the boy suddenly stopped in his tracks, again pulled at my arm and plaintively asked,

"Will the firemen give me a funeral, too?"