

## Dies Irae

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He drove along in silence, guiding his car along the highway with the fingers of one hand. The evening air, cool and refreshing, sucked through the passenger cabin and pulled long wisps of his hair askew.

As the miles piled up, his mind drifted from tangibles to intangibles and back. He slipped a compact disc into his car stereo and reviewed the day. He supposed that he cared about his family and friends, but it was pleasant to be riding in peace, away from them all.

"I love you," she had told him when he left. Why couldn't he use that word? Was it because he didn't mean it, or because it was too common? *People fit meanings to words instead of words to meanings*, he thought, *so I suppose that I could at least say it.* His left hand summoned a few of the tangled hairs back into place.

He became aware of the music, and wondered how he could be taken in by something he'd heard hundreds of times. Couldn't something become too familiar? The choir, backed by chamber orchestra, attacked the piece with more fervor than he could summon.

A curve lay ahead.

**Confutatis maledictis** *From the accursed and rejected*

**Flammis acribus addictis** *Doomed to fiery flames convicted*

**Voca me cum benedictis –** *Call me forth with thine ejected –*

*What would happen if I just held the wheel straight?* he wondered. He would jump the curb, of course, and reduce his car to junk. The drainage ditches were deep, he knew. If he wasn't crushed, he'd probably drown. His mind kept chasing the dark. *Who would come to the funeral?* Somehow, he didn't think her 'love' extended that far; she wouldn't come, he decided. His dear brother Joe would show up – late, of course – reeking of whatever two-dollar booze his disability check was covering these days. Joe's blowzy wife Louise would be there, with the scruffy kids in tow. She would force the kids to go up and look at his body – presuming it wasn't too badly mangled – and maybe even touch it. Louise would be the type to tell the kids that their uncle was just sleeping. They would run around asking, in the bellowing way that kids ask, when their uncle would wake up.

**Oro supplex et acclinis** *Lo, I pray, a supplicant sighing*

**Cor contritum quasi cinis** *Dark remorse my heart up-drying*

**Gere curam mei finis –** *Heed me at the hour of dying –*

He grimaced at the thought. His dad would be so embarrassed, he'd probably skulk out the door. A small convenience store passed on his right, one of those 'Stop 'n' Rob' places that made life easy for drunk drivers. A creaky-looking truck with stock racks and a few bales of hay in the back squatted by the gas pump. The grill sagged in a grin, quite like the one he imagined one the haggard old man leaning under the hood. Likely as not, the guy was gassing himself up as much as the truck. Meanwhile his wife probably sat at home trying to keep a pork roast from drying out. *Common*, he thought sadly.

**Lacrimosa dies illa** *Ah! What weeping on that morrow*

**Qua resurget ex favilla –** *when man's ashes from shall borrow–*

He wondered what the old man would think when he read about the accident. He would spot it in the weekly paper over watery coffee and greasy

eggs. It would come in just below the grain prices: Man killed in one-car accident. He would remember that night, and grouse about the truck. His wife would mumble 'How terrible' or 'What a shame' or 'He was so young' or some other platitude, and the old man would move on to the classifieds.

***Judicandus homo reus***

*Judgment guilty shall declare him*

***Huic ergo parce, Deus –***

*in thy mercy, Lord –*

A pair of headlights peered around the curve. From the height, he guessed that they belonged to a semi-trailer or maybe another grain truck. He felt his adrenaline rise, and he moved both hands onto the wheel. The rhythm of his breathing sped up. There was a smell in the air, a moldering. His skin took on pallor in the rear view mirror. He gripped the wheel tightly, and his breathing escalated to a crescendo.

***Pie Jesu Domine,***

*Gentle Jesus, Gracious Lord*

***Dona eis requiem.***

*Grant them Thy eternal rest.*

The headlights became too bright to bear, and he was transfixed. His hands locked into a death grip. The semi moved past him as he rounded the curve. Its wake sucked at the car, and the rocking brought him back.

He shifted in his seat, looking for any position that might be comfortable, but comfort escaped him. He ejected the compact disc, thwarting the denouement of the chorus and the final accusation of the orchestra. *Taking the Mozart a bit too seriously*, he thought. He cleared his throat, and said aloud, "Maybe the radio instead." His voice was distant and as empty as the fields around him. He hummed for a while, until there was a spark of life in the tone, and returned his eyes to the road.

There was another curve ahead.