

ME AND MRS. JONES

I attended another funeral this morning. I found my dark-blue banker's suit hanging in the closet in my office; black wool tie still wrapped around the hook of the hanger from the last funeral I'd attended. Or maybe it was the last wedding...

I watched the service from the back of the church. It was someone I didn't know well. A reading from Ecclesiastes: "a time to gather stones together." A bright spring sun shone through the 14 enormous stained-glass windows above us—and I felt the juxtaposition of the hopefulness of nature burning outside and the weight of sadness within.

Lately, it's hard to feel hopeful when every time I turn on the radio, the first words I hear are, "The death toll continues to rise..." We're counting up the bodies again from the latest natural disaster in some faraway city (now rubble) or from the human-engineered brutality aimed at a different faraway city (also rubble.)

Yet hope endures: heroically, irrationally. Yesterday was Valentine's Day. I went food shopping at Wegmans. Even in the parking lot I saw shoppers of every age and gender emerging with bouquets of roses or helium balloons decorated with hearts. Entering the store, up front where the clementines, avocados, and asparagus are usually piled, there was nothing but red roses. Hundreds of bouquets (\$22.95 apiece). I looked at this wall of flowers and held in my heart both an embarrassment at the shameless marketing of sentiment—and real emotional resonance with that same sentiment. It was hard to feel prickly when I saw a white-haired man, hardly able to walk unassisted, clutching a bouquet of yellow flowers. He was also buying what looked like eight gallon-jugs of Poland Spring Water, four cans of cat food, and one sprig of parsley. That was his entire cart as he headed to the register.

When I got home WFUV was taking requests and dedications for love songs. The first one I heard was:

Me and Mrs. Jones
We've got a thing going on.

I thought: Who on earth requested *this* one? Certainly not *Mister Jones*, who was probably in the supermarket right now, buying yellow flowers and cat food....

My Valentine's Day remained pretty uninspired. (Lynn was out of town.) I wanted to work on the newspaper, but I had a headache that wouldn't leave me. I ended up going for an early dinner with my plumber friend Mennuti. We decided on Anthony's Brick Oven Pizza because it wasn't the kind of place you'd take a date you were trying to impress.

"People are going to think we're a couple," Mennuti said.

I shrugged. "They'll be nobody there."

And, indeed, we sat among a fairly melancholy array of silent, shopworn couples sharing their Valentine's Day pizza. Mennuti told me how much he hated Valentine's Day. Years ago, he'd given a girlfriend jewelry, flowers, and a fine meal—and she ended the evening by saying, "Where's my card?"

"*Where's my card!*" he repeated in disbelief.

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I ended Valentine's Day by watching *Small Soldiers* on television. It's a lunatic anti-war comedy of G.I. Joe toys gone mad, and in its own demented way, the film actually has something to say about the possibility of hope. The chief G.I. Joe (voice of Tommy Lee Jones) is destroyed through his own savagery, and the gentle lizard warrior (voice of Frank Langella) survives with his compadres to sail up the river in search of their homeland...which may not even exist.

For some reason I stayed to end of the credits—with the feeling there might be some final hidden joke—and, sure enough, when the credits ended, the screen cut to a close-up of the late Phil Hartman, who had a small role in the

movie. It was an outtake. Hartman bobbled a line; we heard the director, Joe Dante, crack up off-camera—and then the final title card appeared—in large yellow letters: TO PHIL.

Hartman had died during the film's completion. It was the film's dedication; its final salute to one more life that had briefly enriched our own.