

The Lifework of Juan Díaz, Ray Bradbury

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Filomena flung the plank door shut with such violence the candle blew out; she and her crying children were left in darkness. The only things to be seen were through the window—the adobe houses, the cobbled streets, where now the gravedigger stalked up the hill, his spade on his shoulder, moonlight honing the blue metal as he turned into the high cold graveyard and was gone.

“Mamacita, what’s wrong?” Filepe, her oldest son, just nine, pulled at her. For the strange dark man had said nothing, just stood at the door with the spade and nodded his head and waited until she banged the door in his face. “Mamacita?”

“That gravedigger.” Filomena’s hands shook as she relit the candle. “The rent is long overdue on your father’s grave. Your father will be dug up and placed down in the catacomb, with a wire to hold him standing against the wall, with the other mummies.”

“No, Mamacita!”

“Yes.” She caught the children to her. “Unless we find the money. Yes.”
“I—I will kill that gravedigger!” cried Filepe.

“It is his job. Another would take his place if he died, and another and another after him.”

They thought about the man and the terrible high place where he lived and moved and the catacomb he stood guard over and the strange earth into which people went to come forth dried like desert flowers and tanned like leather for shoes and hollow as drums which could be tapped and beaten, an earth which made great cigar-brown rustling dry mummies that might languish forever leaning like fence poles along the catacomb halls.

And, thinking of all this familiar but unfamiliar stuff, Filomena and her children were cold in summer, and silent though their hearts made a vast stir in their bodies. They huddled together for a moment longer and then:

“Filepe,” said the mother, “come.” She opened the door and they stood in the moonlight listening to hear any far sound of a blue metal spade biting the earth, heaping the sand and old flowers. But there was a silence of stars “You others,” said Filomena, “to bed.”

The door shut. The candle flickered.

The cobbles of the town poured in a river of gleaming moon-silver stone down the hills, past green parks and little shops and the place where the coffin maker tapped and made the clock sounds of death-watch beetles all day and all night, forever in the life of these people.

Up along the slide and rush of moonlight on the stones, her skirt whispering of her need, Filomena hurried with Filepe breathless at her side. They turned in at the Official Palace.

The man behind the small, littered desk in the dimly lit office glanced up in some surprise. “Filomena, my cousin!”

“Ricardo.” She took his hand and dropped it. “You must help me.”

“If God does not prevent. But ask.”

“They—” The bitter stone lay in her mouth; she tried to get it out.

“Tonight they are taking Juan from the earth.”

Ricardo, who had half risen, now sat back down, his eyes growing wide and full of light, and then narrowing and going dull. “If not God, then God’s creatures prevent. Has the year gone so swiftly since Juan’s death? Can it truly be the rent has come due?” He opened his empty palms and showed them to the woman. “Ah, Filomena, I have no money.”

“But if you spoke to the gravedigger. You are the police.”

“Filomena, Filomena, the law stops at the edge of the grave.”

“But if he will give me ten weeks, only ten, it is almost the end of summer. The Day of the Dead is coming. I will make, I will sell, the candy skulls, and give him the money, oh, please, Ricardo.”

And here at last, because there was no longer a way to hold the coldness in and she must let it free before it froze her so she could never move again, she put her hands to her face and wept. And Filepe, seeing that it was permitted, wept, too, and said her name over and over.

“So,” said Ricardo, rising. “Yes, yes. I will walk to the mouth of the catacomb and spit into it. But, ah, Filomena, expect no answer. Not so much as an echo. Lead the way.” And he put his official cap, very old, very greasy, very worn, upon his head.

The graveyard was higher than the churches, higher than all the buildings, higher than all the hills. It lay on the highest rise of all, overlooking the night valley of the town.

As they entered the vast ironwork gate and advanced among the tombs, the three were confronted by the sight of the gravedigger’s back bent into an ever-increasing hole, lifting out spade after spade of dry dirt onto an ever-increasing mound. The digger did not even look up, but made a quiet guess as they stood at the grave’s edge.

“Is that Ricardo Albañez, the chief of police?”

“Stop digging!” said Ricardo.

The spade flashed down, dug, lifted, poured. “There is a funeral tomorrow. This grave must be empty, open and ready.”

“No one has died in the town.”

“Someone always dies. So I dig. I have already waited two months for Filomena to pay what she owes. I am a patient man.”

“Be still more patient.” Ricardo touched the moving, hunching shoulder of the bent man.

“Chief of the police.” The digger paused to lean, sweating, upon his spade. “This is my country, the country of the dead. These here tell me nothing, nor does any man. I rule this land with a spade, and a steel mind. I do not like the live ones to come talking, to disturb the silence I have so nicely dug and filled. Do I tell you how to conduct your municipal palace? Well, then. Good night.” He resumed his task.

“In the sight of God,” said Ricardo, standing straight and stiff, his fists at his sides, “and this woman and her son, you dare to desecrate the husband-father’s final bed?”

“It is not final and not his, I but rented it to him.” The spade floated high, flashing moonlight. “I did not ask the mother and son here to watch this sad event. And listen to me, Ricardo, police chief, one day you will die. I will bury you. Remember that: I. You will be in my hands. Then, oh, then.”

“Then what?” shouted Ricardo. “You dog, do you threaten me?”

“I dig.” The man was very deep now, vanishing in the shadowed grave, sending only his spade up to speak for him again and again in the cold light. “Good night, señor, señora, niño. Good night.”

Outside her small adobe hut, Ricardo smoothed his cousin’s hair and touched her cheek. “Filomena, ah, God.”

“You did what you could.”

“That terrible one. When I am dead, what awful indignities might he not work upon my helpless flesh? He would set me upside down in the tomb, hang me by my hair in a far, unseen part of the catacomb. He takes on weight from knowing someday he will have us all. Good night, Filomena. No, not even that. For the night is bad.”

He went away down the street.

Inside, among her many children, Filomena sat with face buried in her lap.

Late the next afternoon, in the tilted sunlight, shrieking, the school-children chased Filepe home. He fell, they circled him, laughing.

“Filepe, Filepe, we saw your father today, yes!”

“Where?” they asked themselves shyly.

“In the catacomb!” they gave answer.

“What a lazy man! He just stands there!”

“He never works!”

“He don’t speak! Oh, that Juan Díaz!”

Filepe stood violently atremble under the blazed sun, hot tears streaming from his wide and half-blinded eyes.

Within the hut, Filomena heard, and the knife sounds entered her heart. She leaned against the cool wall, wave after dissolving wave of remembrance sweeping her.

In the last month of his life, agonized, coughing, and drenched with midnight perspirations, Juan had stared and whispered only to the raw ceiling above his straw mat.

“What sort of man am I, to starve my children and hunger my wife? What sort of death is this, to die in bed?”

“Hush.” She placed her cool hand over his hot mouth. But he talked beneath her fingers. “What has our marriage been but hunger and sickness and now nothing? Ah, God, you are a good woman, and now I leave you with no money even for my funeral!”

And then at last he had clenched his teeth and cried out at the darkness and grown very quiet in the warm candlelight and taken her hands into his own and held them and swore an oath upon them, vowed himself with religious fervor.

“Filomena, listen. I will be with you. Though I have not protected in life, I will protect in death. Though I fed not in life, in death I will bring food. Though I was poor, I will not be poor in the grave. This I know. This I cry out. This I assure you of. In death I will work and do many things. Do not fear. Kiss the little ones. Filomena. Filomena . . .”

And then he had taken a deep breath, a final gasp, like one who settles beneath warm waters. And he had launched himself gently under, still holding his breath, for a testing of endurance through all eternity. They waited for a long time for him to exhale.

But this he did not do. He did not reappear above the surface of life again. His body lay like a waxen fruit on the mat, a surprise to the touch. Like a wax apple to the teeth, so was Juan Díaz to all their senses.

And they took him away to the dry earth which was like the greatest mouth of all which held him a long time, draining the bright moisture of his life, drying him like ancient manuscript paper, until he was a mummy as light as chaff, an autumn harvest ready for the wind.

From that time until this, the thought had come and come again to Filomena, how will I feed my lost children, with Juan burning to brown crepe in a silver-tinseled box, how lengthen my children’s bones and push forth their teeth in smiles and color their cheeks?

The children screamed again outside, in happy pursuit of Filepe.

Filomena looked to the distant hill, up which bright tourists’ cars hummed bearing many people from the United States. Even now they paid a peso each to that dark man with the spade so that they might step down through his catacombs among the standing dead, to see what the sun-dry earth and the hot wind did to all bodies in this town.

Filomena watched the tourist cars, and Juan’s voice whispered, “Filomena.” And again: “This I cry out. In death I will work . . . I will not be poor . . . Filomena . . .” His voice ghosted away. And she swayed and

was almost ill, for an idea had come into her mind which was new and terrible and made her heart pound. "Filepe!" she cried suddenly.

And Filepe escaped the jeering children and shut the door on the hot white day and said, "Yes, Mamacita?"

"Sit, niño, we must talk, in the name of the saints, we must!"

She felt her face grow old because the soul grew old behind it, and she said, very slowly, with difficulty, "Tonight we must go in secret to the catacomb."

"Shall we take a knife"—Filepe smiled wildly—"and kill the dark man?"

"No, no, Filepe, listen. . . ."

And he heard the words that she spoke.

And the hours passed and it was a night of churches. It was night of bells, and singing. Far off in the air of the valley you could hear voices chanting the evening Mass, you could see children walking with lit candles, in a solemn file, 'way over there on the side of the dark hill, and the huge bronze bells were tilting up and showering out their thunderous crashes and bangs that made the dogs spin, dance and bark on the empty roads.

The graveyard lay glistening, all whiteness, all marble snow, all sparkle and glitter of harsh gravel like an eternal fall of hail, crunched under their feet as Filomena and Filepe took their shadows with them, ink-black and constant from the unclouded moon. They glanced over their shoulders in apprehension, but one cried Halt! They had seen the gravedigger drift, made footless by shadow, down the hill, in answer to a night summons.

Now: "Quick, Filepe, the lock!" Together they inserted a long metal rod between padlock hasps and wooden doors which lay flat to the dry earth. Together they seized and pulled. The wood split. The padlock hasps sprang loose. Together they raised the huge doors and flung them back, rattling. Together they peered down into the darkest, most silent night of all. Below, the catacomb waited.

Filomena straightened her shoulders and took a breath.

“Now.”

And put her foot upon the first step.

In the adobe of Filomena Díaz, her children slept sprawled here or there in the cool night room, comforting each other with the sound of their warm breathing.

Suddenly their eyes sprang wide.

Footsteps, slow and halting, scraped the cobbles outside. The door shot open. For an instant the silhouettes of three people loomed in the white evening sky beyond the door. One child sat up and struck a match.

“No!” Filomena snatched out with one hand to claw the light. The match fell away. She gasped. The door slammed. The room was solid black. To this blackness Filomena said at last:

“Light no candles. Your father has come home.”

The thudding, the insistent knocking and pounding shook the door at midnight.

Filomena opened the door.

The gravedigger almost screamed in her face. “There you are! Thief! Robber!”

Behind him stood Ricardo, looking very ruffled and very tired and very old. “Cousin, permit us, I am sorry. Our friend here—”

“I am the friend of no one,” cried the gravedigger. “A lock has been broken and a body stolen. To know the identity of the body is to know the thief. I could only bring you here. Arrest her.”

“One small moment, please.” Ricardo took the man’s hand from his arm and turned, bowing gravely to his cousin. “May we enter?”

“There, there!” The gravedigger leaped in, gazed wildly about and pointed to a far wall. “You see?”

But Ricardo would look only at this woman. Very gently he asked her, “Filomena?”

Filomena’s face was the face of one who has gone through a long tunnel of night and has come to the other end at last, where lives a shadow of coming day. Her eyes were prepared. Her mouth knew what to do.

All the terror was gone now. What remained was as light as the great length of autumn chaff she had carried down the hill with her good son. Nothing more could happen to her ever in her life; this you knew from how she held her body as she said, “We have no mummy here.”

“I believe you, cousin, but” —Ricardo cleared his throat uneasily and raised his eyes—“what stands there against the wall?”

“To celebrate the festival of the day of the dead ones” —Filomena did not turn to look where he was looking—“I have taken paper and flour and wire and clay and made of it a life-size toy which looks like the mummies.”

“Have you indeed done this?” asked Ricardo, impressed.

“No, no!” The gravedigger almost danced in exasperation.

“With your permission.” Ricardo advanced to confront the figure which stood against the wall. He raised his flashlight. “So,” he said. “And so.” Filomena looked only out the open door into the late moonlight. “The plan I have for this mummy which I have made with my own hands is good.”

“What plan, what?” the gravedigger demanded, turning.

“We will have money to eat with. Would you deny my children this?” But Ricardo was not listening. Near the far wall, he tilted his head this way and that and rubbed his chin, squinting at the tall shape which

enwrapped its own shadow, which kept its own silence, leaning against the adobe.

“A toy,” mused Ricardo. “The largest death toy I have ever seen. I have seen man-size skeletons in windows, and man-size coffins made of cardboard and filled with candy skulls, yes. But this! I stand in awe, Filomena.”

“Awe?” said the gravedigger, his voice rising to a shriek. “This is no toy, this is—”

“Do you swear, Filomena?” said Ricardo, not looking at him. He reached out and tapped a few times on the rust-colored chest of the figure. It made the sound of a lonely drum. “Do you swear this is papier-mâché?” “By the Virgin, I swear.”

“Well, then.” Ricardo shrugged, snorted, laughed. “It is simple. If you swear by the Virgin, what more need be said? No court action is necessary. Besides, it might take weeks or months to prove or disprove this is or is not a thing of flour paste and old newspapers colored with brown earth.”

“Weeks, months, prove, disprove!” The gravedigger turned in a circle as if to challenge the sanity of the universe held tight and impossible in these four walls. “This ‘toy’ is my property, mine!”

“The ‘toy,’” said Filomena serenely, gazing out at the hills, “if it is a toy, and made by me, must surely belong to me. And even,” she went on, quietly communing with the new reserve of peace in her body, “even if it is not a toy, and it is indeed Juan Díaz come home, why, then, does not Juan Díaz belong first to God?”

“How can one argue that?” wondered Ricardo.

The gravedigger was willing to try. But before he had stuttered forth a half-dozen words, Filomena said, “And after God, in God’s eyes, and at God’s altar and in God’s church, on one of God’s holiest days, did not Juan Díaz say that he would be mine throughout his days?”

“Throughout his days—ah, ha, there you are!” said the gravedigger.
“But his days are over, and now he is mine!”

“So,” said Filomena, “God’s property first, and then Filomena Díaz’ property, that is if this toy is not a toy and is Juan Díaz, and anyway, landlord of the dead, you evicted your tenant, you so much as said you did not want him, if you love him so dearly and want him, will you pay the new rent and tenant him again?”

But so smothered by rage was the landlord of silence that it gave Ricardo time to step in.

“Grave keeper, I see many months and many lawyers, and many points, fine points, to argue this way and that, which include real estate, toy manufactories, God, Filomena, one Juan Díaz wherever he is, hungry children, the conscience of a digger of graves, and so much complication that death’s business will suffer. Under the circumstances are you prepared for these long years in and out of court?”

“I am prepared—” said the gravedigger, and paused.

“My good man,” said Ricardo, “the other night you gave me some small bit of advice, which I now return to you. I do not tell you how to control your dead. You, now, do not say how I control the living. Your jurisdiction ends at the tombyard gate. Beyond stand my citizens, silent or otherwise. So . . .”

Ricardo thumped the upright figure a last time on its hollow chest. It gave forth the sound of a beating heart, a single strong and vibrant thump which made the gravedigger jerk.

“I pronounce this officially fake, a toy, no mummy at all. We waste time here. Come along, citizen gravedigger. Back to your proper land! Good night, Filomena’s children, Filomena, good cousin.”

“What about it, what about him?” said the gravedigger, motionless, pointing.

“Why do you worry?” asked Ricardo. “It goes nowhere. It stays, if you should wish to pursue the law. Do you see it running? You do not. Good night. Good night.”

The door slammed. They were gone before Filomena could put out her hand to thank anyone.

She moved in the dark to place a candle at the foot of the tall cornhusk-dry silence. This was a shrine now, she thought, yes. She lit the candle.

“Do not fear, children,” she murmured. “To sleep now. To sleep.” And Filepe lay down and the others lay back, and at last Filomena herself lay with a single thin blanket over her on the woven mat by the light of the single candle, and her thoughts before she moved into sleep were long thoughts of the many days that made up tomorrow.

In the morning, she thought, the tourist cars will sound on the road, and Filepe will move among them, telling them of this place.

And there will be a painted sign outside this door: MUSEUM—30 CENTAVOS. And the tourists will come in, because the graveyard is on the hill, but we are first, we are here in the valley, and close at hand and easy to find.

And one day soon with these tourists’ money we shall mend the roof, and buy great sacks of fresh corn flour, and some tangerines, yes, for the children. And perhaps one day we will all travel to Mexico City, to the very big schools because of what has happened on this night.

For Juan Díaz is truly home, she thought. He is here, he waits for those who would come to see him. And at his feet I will place a bowl into which the tourists will place more money than Juan Díaz himself tried so hard to earn in all his life.

Juan. She raised her eyes. The breathing of the children was hearth-warm about her. Juan, do you see? Do you know? Do you truly understand? Do you forgive, Juan, do you forgive?

The candle flame flickered.

She closed her eyes. Behind her lids she saw the smile of Juan Díaz, and whether it was the smile that death had carved upon his lips, or whether it was a new smile she had given him or imagined for him, she could not say. Enough that she felt him standing tall and alone and on guard, watching over them and proud through the rest of the night.

A dog barked far away in a nameless town.

Only the gravedigger, wide awake in his tombyard, heard.

The End