



It's my mum's funeral, so no jokes please, Dad.

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A writer's personal experience while on a motoring trip to his mother's funeral is narrated. The writer' grief was overwhelmed by the mechanical problems affecting his car.

I suppose there are more dignified ways to go to a funeral. When the black Galaxy People Mover arrived from Hertz it looked the ideal vehicle for conveying half-a-dozen grieving relatives to my mum's funeral in Liverpool, but we were no more than half a mile up the M40 when we realised there was no water in the windscreen washer and so we could only glimpse the road ahead if my son periodically knelt on his seat, opened his window, and hurled water from his Evian bottle into the path of the moving wipers.

By the time we'd got to Oxford the strain was telling. The bottle was so low that only droplets of water could now be released on to the screen. "Forget the fucking Evian. It's completely useless," I screamed as one miserable drop trickled down the screen before me.

"Told you we should have gone for the Badoit," said my son, to stony silence. And in the rear-view mirror I saw my sister look up briefly from Palgrave's Golden Treasury, in which she was searching for a suitable poetic epitaph, and shake her head in disapproval.

It would have all been much easier if we hadn't had a family row about funereal attitudes the night before. "You don't seem very upset about our mother going," my sister had complained as I sat writing out the address for the flowers and watching the second episode of the Only Fools and Horses Christmas special (the one in which Cassandra had the miscarriage and Del broke down in tears and Rodney was terribly brave and strong).

"Everyone does grief in their own way," I'd piously explained. "We don't all have the same emotional repertoire."

"But you don't seem to have any emotions at all, let alone a repertoire."

"I'll have my emotions in my own good time. Meanwhile, someone has to send off this address or people will turn up with bouquets at the wrong crem."

"They're not 'bouquets'. They're wreaths. And don't call it a 'crem'. It's a crematorium."

As I turned into the service station I was positively looking forward to having a full windscreen washer and being able to show my sister that once I was freed of such material anxieties I was as capable as anyone of assuming an appropriate funereal attitude. But the fucking bonnet wouldn't open. Hertz had not only delivered the car without any windscreen wash, but had obviously done so because their man had been unable to get the bonnet open to refill the bottle. When the RAC man arrived he had to jack up the Galaxy to search underneath for the right cable. While we popped into the neighbouring Mini-Mart to warm up, my sister resolutely remained inside the car, preserving the correct emotional posture even as she and her book of poems were raised two feet above the ground.

After an hour-and-a-half the man from the RAC finally admitted defeat and we took to the road again armed with three litres of Volvic and a Mini-Mart cassette of popular classical overtures, on which we were hoping to discover something suitably reverential for the next morning's service. As we finally wheeled off the M6 towards Liverpool I realised that my thoughts about my mother and her sad death and her frustrated ambitions and the way she smiled when dad told his terrible jokes would have to remain on hold until we reached the crematorium. It was hard enough constantly slipping back into the slow lane so that my son could deliver more Volvic to the windscreen, but when this had to be done to the loudspeaker accompaniment of the overture to Lohengrin and the sound of my sister embarking on yet another verse from Christina Rossetti, it wasn't so much my mother's demise that became all-absorbing as my own will to live.

When we finally reached home dad was waiting in the hallway. "Laurence," he said, before I could put down my case, "What do you call a wheelbarrow with an exhaust pipe and a steering wheel?"

"Give up, dad."

"A Lada."

I looked around for my sister but she was already on her way to bed.

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