

New Fiction by R.L. Peterson: “Rules of Dying”



Every work day morning at 8 o'clock sharp, me, Juan, Marcus, and Willard stand at attention with hands over our hearts while the national anthem plays on the loud speaker at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California. While the music plays, resident supervisor, Captain C. T. Wallace, in his Navy Reserve uniform, runs the flag up the pole, ties off the rope, salutes, and goes into his office.

I'm Mike. I ride herd on the crew renovating gravesites here at this place of rest for American vets. It ain't easy work. I speak un poco Espanol, and my crew is mostly Mexican. My rule is when they conversate with each other they can talk Swahili for all I care, but they have to speak English to me.

These guys work hard in full sun most every day, at prevailing wage. I really have three crews, the one working today, the

one that leaves every two, three months, and one in training. Something that intrigues almost everyone is the ashes of cremated vets. Yesterday, the whole crew gathered around so I knew something was up.

Marcus said, "Look at this, Boss. Someone forgot to put a body back where it came from." He handed me an pickle jar filled with what I quickly saw was ground up charcoal and crushed pasta shells. That's not what cremains look like, but I kept quiet.

"How can we get this back where it belongs? There's no name on it?"

"Hell, that's no problem." I fished out a piece of broken pasta and popped it my mouth. "We'll just eat it. No one will ever know."

The crew burst out laughing. Marcos grins. "You're un bastardo inteligente." With this bunch, one minute I'm a mean-ass drill instructor, the next a friend.

Every morning, after the Anthem, a gray Kia Rio drives past. The driver, a young blonde wearing a blue pants suit, low-heeled black shoes, and a white blouse, opens the car's trunk, grabs a green and white folding chair, a yellow umbrella, and a flower, and carries these like birthday presents to her usual spot near the rose bushes.

She sets up her chair, opens the umbrella, then goes to the columbarium, where ashes of cremated bodies are kept, unlocks a niche door, takes out an urn, about the size of a half-gallon of milk-remains of the person she's mourning-holds it a minute, puts it back, stretches to remove yesterday's white geranium from its holder, replaces it with the new flower and goes to her chair.

Often, on the blue San Diego bay below like an art gallery painting, a submarine, or aircraft carrier glides out to sea,

past the Point Loma light house, with sea gulls circling and the sun turning the ocean silver and gold.

The young woman fits her i-Phone buds into her ears, opens a book, and reads, wetting her finger with a pink tongue to turn a page. She's still there at noon when we come up to eat lunch in the shade of the coral tree.

Juan says, "She's here every day, for who? Husband? Brother?" He waves a tattooed hand in the air. "Every fuckin' day, rain, or shine."

Willard asks, "How do ya know ever day? Ya work weekends?"

Juan says, "I bet if the park's open, she's here. A husband probably. Not likely her daddy. She needs a man. Like me."

Juan was paroled from Donovan State Pen last January. His first few days he was edgy as hell when the *Star-Spangled Banner* played. "Part of our job is respect for the deceased," I said. That seemed to work. He's first on the truck every morning and follows directions. That's all I can ask from any worker.

Marcus asks, "Think the lady plays music on her phone?"

Marcus and Juan are kin, second cousins, I think, or maybe they married sisters. Anyway, they ride together in Marcus' Ford Bronco and eat the same thing at lunch. Marcus is broad as sliding door, has a shaggy grey moustache and wears the same green pants and long-sleeve blue shirt every day.

Willard says, "Classy girl like her? Probably religious shit."

He's tall with long blonde hair. Always has a red and blue wool beanie pulled low over his blue eyes. He sits on the ground in the shade of the truck to eat lunch and has more 'tats than an NBA player. He's done no hard time if his application is correct.

Marcus says, "Classy? You mean assy? She wants something hard. *Carne dulce*. I'm her man."

I ignore this and spray paint the grass orange where we're to dig.

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One noon, we've finished our tortas. Marcus grabs the weed whacker we use to barber the grass around markers, lopes across the road and begins to edge the sidewalk next to the blonde woman's chair. *What the hell!*

I run up. Her blue eyes go big, her face white.

"Pardon us, Ma'am. My man's trimming grass that maintenance missed."

"Yeah," Marcus says, "Make it perfect. For you." His eyes scorch her from jeans to tennis shoes..

Her voice sweet as a phoebe's call, but a bit shrill, she says. "How nice."

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Back at the truck, me and Marcus have a go. "Dude," I say. "What the hell?"

"Wanted her to see a real man."

"That was pretty stupid."

"Oh, yeah? She was all smiles. Liked it."

"Really? Truth is, you scared her shitless. Pull that trick again, I'll write you up."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Count on it."

"Un hombre tiene que hacer lo que un hombre tiene que hacer?"

"Not on my watch, hombre."

At two o'clock every day, the blonde stows her gear and drives off in her gray Kia, going slow as a hearse.

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Soil contracts at night and expands by day. Rain and irrigation water wash away dirt leaving ruts and holes. Gophers and rats dig tunnels. All this causes head stones to tilt or fall over. Sometimes, a casket splits open, showing rags and brass buttons, bones grey as gun powder, some no longer than a chicken leg.

Often, we have to renovate a whole section. We spread caskets and markers on the grass, name side up so we know what goes where when we're ready to close the graves. When this happens, cemetery visitors swarm like yellow jackets around us, push past our yellow tape, take selfies next to the caskets, kick clods into the trenches, pepper us with questions. "Whatcha doing?"

I answer, "Heroes deserve a beautiful and peaceful resting place. We're repairing their graves."

"Every casket has a body?"

"Absolutely. We're careful to see each grave is correctly marked." That's the company spiel. It's a lie. Stones mark where a body used to be, but tree roots squeeze caskets, they disintegrate and flesh rots. When we work, we dig the markers out by hand before the backhoe rips a trench, then we lower a metal box into the ground and pour in reinforced concrete. When the cement is dry enough you can't write your name in it, we re-set the headstone, a man on each side, careful not to leave any footprints, and sink the marker five inches deep, tamp sand and pea gravel around it and replant the sod. That

sucker will stand straight as a soldier for years.

It takes sweat and know-how to cut away stubble with a sharp shooter and pry out weeds with a rough-neck bar or square up a trench with a spade, but it gives me time to think. I screwed things up with booze so bad that eight years ago, as part of my rehab, the VA sent me to culinary school. I had custody of my kids then. I got a job at a restaurant, doing food prep, but the pay was so lousy, I couldn't pay my rent, much less keep two growing boys and a young lady in clothes, so I hired on here. Me and the kid's momma have joint custody. I make \$12.38 an hour, \$18.56 overtime, with an extra twenty-five a week for being crew supervisor. I try to save a little each time the eagle shits so I can open a restaurant someday. Weekends. Reservations-only seating.

I trim the grass around a stone with the weed whipper while my crew digs on a new section. Saturday night Cinda's coming for dinner. If she can find a sitter. She lives in that double-wide across the street and two trailers down at Clariton Estates Mobile Home Park. She has full, red lips, tons of dark curls and dancing eyes. When she smiles, my throat goes tight.

I'll start with an *amuse-bouche*, say a celery-infused beef puree. For the primo, Bibb lettuce and endive, with a little arugula and radicchio for bitterness, tossed with quinoa and mushrooms, topped off with honey-roasted walnuts and organic plum tomatoes and a nice lemon garlic dressing.

What secondo will she want? Fish or chicken? I'll drop by her trailer tonight after her kids are down, say 8:30 or so, and ask her. If fish, it'll be sea bass grilled in lemon butter and almond paste. If chicken, I'll wrap it in foil and smother it under charcoal with parsley, onions, and green peppers.

The dulce? Double chocolate cake. I'll bake it Friday, after work.

This week, my mind wonders from Cinda and Saturday night's

plans. *The blonde in the beach chair by the columbarium? Who's she thinking about?*

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Willard and Marcus are having a lover's spat. They team up on most projects. If Marcus made a sharp turn, Willard would break his nose.

"What 'ya mean, rules for dying? Silliest thing I ever heard." Willard tosses his shovel away and picks up a hoe.

Marcus says, "There's five of 'em, man. When my nephew was offed, the social worker told us about 'em." He grabs a hoe, too.

Willard doesn't go for this. "*Tonterias.*"

"No bullshit. She named 'em. One by one." Marcus turns to me. "Tell him, Boss."

"You mean the stages of grief? Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance?" Marcus nods. Surprised I guess. I learned these when my AA sponsor's Dad died last year. He made certain he touched every base, but other sober drunks told me you'll live with those five mind states forever.

"Yeah. That's what I meant."

Willard still has doubts. "When my Old Man took out that eucalyptus with his motorcycle, we knew he was dead. There was nothing to deny. Tore his bike all to shit. Him, too." His face is red, and not just from work. This is the most I've ever heard him talk.

I nod. "Ever play over and over in your head how you could have kept the accident from happening? Feel sad when you think about it?"

"Everybody does, right? That's normal, ain't it."

"I think Marcus' point is our mind goes through various stages when someone close to us kicks off. Thinking how you could have changed things? That's bargaining. Feeling shitty. That's depression."

Willard slices a lizard in half with his shovel. "Hell, I don't drive the street where he bought it anymore. Ain't that the shits?" He shakes his head as if to change the memory..

Juan says, "What *staget*, how you say, stage, is our Little Darlin' goin' through?"

"The blonde? Beats me."

"Is there a dickin' stage? That's what she needs. A good *jugando*."

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A week or so later we're waiting for the backhoe to trench a site. Marcus says, "Boss, I dropped my gloves at lunch. I'll go get 'em."

"Like hell you will. The other crew sees you, they'll say you're diddling around, and I'll have paper work to complete for weeks. I get the big bucks. I'll go."

Marcus clenches and un-clenches his fist.

I ignore this. "Double check our measurements before the 'hoe starts, okay? I won't be long."

Me and the crew eat lunch across from the columbarium because the benches there are in the shade, the rest rooms clean and easy to get to. I go to where Marcus sat. No gloves. Where they on the ground and someone tossed 'em in the trash? Negative. I stoop to look under the bench.

A girl's voice interrupts. "Looking for these?"

It's the blonde in the Kia. She's not blonde any more. Her

hair is pink and blue. She different somehow. She waves Marcus' gloves.

"That wild-eyed guy. The grass trimmer. He dropped 'em. I was taking 'em to Lost and Found. You're the boss, right?"

I nod. "Thanks."

The small gold necklace around her throat says Misty.

"Misty, you're here every day. What do you read?"

"Stuff Tate liked." She holds up a book. "This is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*." She smiles. "I finished Harry Potter. The whole series." She waves her red and gold phone. "I'm getting damn good at Grand Theft Auto, too."

"I'm impressed. Tate was your husband?"

Her face pales. "Yeah. He was Army. An IED exploded near him in Afghanistan. They shipped his body home. I never saw it. We were married one year, eight months and four days. At his funeral, as a testimony to his service, I vowed to visit his grave 609 days straight." She smiles. "Seventy-three more to go. You familiar with the Five Stages of Grief?"

The second time in two days this has come up. "Some. Why?"

She takes off her sun glasses. Big blue eyes. "I'm past denial but I'm still angry. If I could, I'd kill every fucking politician in D.C." Black streaks run down her cheeks. "My support group says we never fully recover, just learn to survive." She tries to smile through the tears.

"Got a job. Waitress at a bowling alley café. To pass the time. Part of survival my group says." She smiles. "I'm nuts, I guess. I talk with my dead husband. And he answers." A half smile. "He says it's okay to date. But I can't. Not yet." She puts a finger to her lips. "Quiet, Misty. Tate says these grounds are sacred. Respect the dead. Don't talk so much."

She smiles. "You agree?"

I nod.

She turns and walks to her chair, without looking back. A small blonde woman living a tortured life.

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I'm Navy, myself. The only one in my crew who served, but my bunch turns over so often, next week I might have four. I was stationed at Subic Bay in the Philippines for 2 years. Me and this Filipino girl, Baby Ruth, shacked up. I fell in love. Not with her, but the sex. I was raised Southern Baptist, taught to love Jesus more than life. My first liberty I had a Manhattan. After that, there was little room for Jesus. An old salt said church is good place to find women. I went with him. Met Baby Ruth. She was short and pretty, with skin the color of coffee with cream. Sex came natural to her. When my tour ended I felt guilty leaving her there. Stateside, my pastor said I could send for her. I did. We got married. She was a real Jesus freak. I was mostly just confused. I didn't love her, but loved our sex. I hated our kids, but loved being a dad. Booze and nose candy made everything better.

Four years later, two squalling kids running around, my wife preaching Jesus to me, my head splitting, hands shaking, desperate as a convict on death row, I'd swear every morning I'd had my last drink. One night wasted on booze and drugs, I wrecked my truck on the 805. It took the doctors at the Veteran's Affairs hospital 42 days to put me back together again. I joined AA. Three years later I got straight. Lost my job as a heavy equipment mechanic and tried small engine repairs but the drugs made my hands shake and the detail work gave me a head ache. The VA said they'd send me to culinary school. They did. I finished a 3-month course.

I visit AA rooms most weekends. Last night, the speaker talked about the 3rd Step, where you make a decision to turn your

will and your life over to God. Six years ago, I told my sponsor I'd like to do that. He asked, "If two bull frogs sit on a lily pad and one of them decides to jump, how many bull frogs are on the lily pad?"

"One," I answered.

"No, dummy. Two. Decidin' to jump ain't the same as jumpin'."

So, I jumped. Did all the fuckin' steps. The whole nine yards. That's why I'm sober today.

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Getting ready for Cinda's visit tonight, I clean the kitchen, wash my DAV Thrift Shop dishware, shine both settings of silverware, spread a red and yellow beach towel on the table and put Martinelli's in the frig. I'll buy a cake since I didn't bake last night. I clean the bathroom and change sheets. Mrs. Chase from the single-wide next door- I call her Mrs. Scuttlebutt-bangs on my door.

"Isn't it romantic? Cinda's husband brought her the prettiest bouquet. Spend the night. He wants them to try and make a go of their marriage again."

Suddenly I'm tired, really tired. It'll be chicken for lunch this week.

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Sunday morning. I wake up empty. *Haven't seen Misty or her Kia this week. What gives?* I slam a Nine Inch Nails CD into my truck's player, grab a 5-Hour Energy and drive to Fort Rosecrans.

What the fuck? Willard's beat up pickup's in the parking lot. Why? Not what I expected. Misty's next to the roses as usual. Williard's headed toward her. I run across the grass toward him.

He sees me. "Stay out of this, Boss!"

"Where ya goin'?"

"Juan says she wants a man. That's me."

I feel his body heat. The smell of bourbon. Sweat. He needs a shave. His beanie hides blood shot eyes.

"You can't just grab her."

"You didn't say shit when Marcus bragged what he'd like to do to her."

"No, but I should have. Think it through, man. Don't do something today you'll regret tomorrow." Talking Program to adrunck is a waste of time, I know. *Get 'em when they're sober. And shaky, the Big Book says.*

Willard's breathing hard. Sweat glues his shirt to his back.

"I could take ya," he says, squaring up in front of me, fists doubled.

"I know." He's one tall dude.

I'm breathing fast. I don't want to fight. "Walk away, my friend, and it's over."

He sways like a weeds in the wind. "Fuck you."

He steps toward me. I don't move. "We gonna fight?"

"If we have to."

"What if I walk?"

"That's the smart thing."

"You gonna fire me?"

"I have to. Don't come in Monday. HR will send what you're

owed.”

“Fuck.” He doubles his fists again. “I could beat the shit out of you.”

“I know. All that would prove is you’re tough. You’re a smart guy. Go sleep it off. You’ll be glad you did tomorrow.”

He glares at me, takes a deep breath, turns, and weaves off toward his pickup.

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“That looked pretty intense.”

It’s Misty.

“Nah. Work stuff. No big deal.” I force a smile. “Didn’t see you this last week. Where you been?”

“I won’t be here as often as before.” It’s her turn to force a smile. “I met someone. It’s not serious, but my support group says it’s time I moved on. I’ll try.” The smile works this time.

I nod. “ I understand.” Maybe it’s time I move on, too.

Misty sticks out her hand. “Thanks for being my friend.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.” I come to attention and salute. She laughs and walks toward her car, ready to meet life on life’s terms.

Monday morning after the Anthem, a black Nissan drives slowly by and parks. A man in a dark suit takes two chairs from the trunk and carries them to a fresh-dug grave under a tarp. He goes back to the car and escorts a small lady wearing a black hijab to the chairs. They sit.

On the San Diego bay below, sea gulls circle and the sun turns the ocean silver and gold, like an art gallery painting. An

aircraft carrier glides past Point Loma Light House, going off to war.