

# "THE EULOGY"

- A short story

Summer, July 7, 2017

The morning sun was positioned in the eastern sky; peeking, warming, welcoming; slowly repositioning – barely perceptible - a reminder to move quickly, from cars into the sanctuary. Crisp linens, flowing silks dresses - blacks, blues, greens - the Senator's wife stood out, sporting Laura Small design; fuchsia, sleeveless, form fitting. Linen - cotton shirts – occasionally composite blends; consisting of mostly unrecognizable materials, an occasional Patrick Robinson. One of those in attendance intentionally left the tag on his shirt, PASKHO, a stab at individuality and culture, tipping his hat when he passed. Surviving Houston's insufferable summers; attending a celebration, a homecoming, was their purpose and intent. The choir wore all white, enough whites to conduct a baptism

in the large tank located on the western end of the Senator's farm, only this event was to celebrate the Senator's homecoming, at one of the city's largest African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church, Emmanuel A.M.E.

The good senator, Alfonso Zachariah Hughes, was found last week slumped over a Times, pencil cradled in the right hand. The newspaper was neatly folded, near, to the front of his head; the cross-word puzzle was situated under the pencil. Freda, the Senator's Administrative Assistant, determined his answers were right ("Didn't miss a one, didn't miss a one" ...), much the rest of the Senator's life.

Married to the same woman for forty-five years, two children, wealth, privilege, trappings of the Senator's position

in the community; tons of goodwill - a history of contributing; State Senator serving the 230<sup>th</sup> senatorial district for the last twenty years. The last three elections no one bothered to challenge.

Next to the cross-word puzzle was a piece of paper, folded neatly. A concise, hand-written note: "I want Lawrence Thompson to do my eulogy." Signed and dated, well-formed letters; perfect penmanship. No doubt Alfonso Zachariah received an -A- in penmanship.

The Senator grew up three counties over, on a farm, now idle. The farm's history provides the basis of the Senator's parents talking about "she knew", "he knew"; cows venturing into the other pasture - quietly moving away - from the herd; the barn; a known fate. The Senator affirmed his parents' observation - "always, always" - followed by "buzzards overhead, circling." The letter seemed to make the same point - he knew - much like those cows. Reading

the paper, folding it neatly; separating out the cross-word, answering all the questions; writing a simple note, setting it too, to the side, making sure he signed and dated it. The circling lights in front of the church affirmed the act of knowing - circling, circling, circling - affirming death.

The cars coming off the loop seemed inoperable, failed, sitting in place like an electric train set derived of electricity, stilled, backed up for miles across the horizon. The north and south lots were now full, two hours before the start of the funeral; cars flowed much like the water flowed during Tropical Storm Allison in June, 1989, from all directions.

Local and regional news trucks were positioned in the front drive, filming, reporting live, in place since 7:00 a.m. They - the satellite trucks - seemed to occupy every inch, leaving little space for others to navigate; reporters and camera operators camped on the grass, scanning the area -

street, entrances, the church's steeple, the crowd, people mingling - testament to the importance of the unfolding event.

The Mayor stood on the front steps – frozen in place - not because he forgot what he was doing, nor because he was heat tolerant (he wasn't, never spent more than ten minutes out of the air conditioning; never picked a bale of cotton in his life), and surely, not because he was grieving (the Senator was a political opponent; he had every intention of running for the Senator's seat, and had a planned press conference after the funeral).

And the Lord is my witness, not because he didn't want to enter the church. There was no way he would fail to attend any service where ten thousand good citizens were going to fill the church. All the local stations were covering the funeral. He had to show his humanity. Hoping he would be asked to say something, something – a little something - at the funeral. Turning

left, turning right (his good side), wiping his forehead, smiling in the direction of the camera, moving their way, propelled by an inner-will. His darkened berry skin glistened in the natural light, contrasting nicely against his pearly whites (enhanced by the best dental caps the medical center could provide). Shaking hands, moving with all deliberate speed - across the lawn – stopping in place, by the sight of the local congressional delegation; both of them beat His Honor at the game, a game he was still learning.

They had moved across the yard - like lasers – spotting the news crews; detaching from whom they were talking to at the time, reaching for the hands of the camera crews, clearing their throats on cue, talking before it was time to talk, talking when there was not a question asked, through pregnant pauses; daring any gnat, mosquito, red-fire ant to bother, to intrude; possessing super-human traits, capable of

silencing Mother Nature, the ability to freeze traffic in place, stopping the advance of time. Providing enough news feed for the 8:00 a.m., 9:00 a.m., 11:30 a.m.; 4:00 p.m., 5:00 p.m., 6:00 o'clock; 9:30, and 10:00 p.m. news hours; done before the Mayor turned showing his good side.

Everyone still wonders how they - good congresswoman and congressman - were able to live stream their interviews on social media. No one ever saw another camera. No one paid attention to the aides, moving like Michael Jackson's Dancing Machine ("automatic systematic"); slipping through the crowd, clearing space, sliding one feet after the other, showing incredible skill, cameras in hand, pirouetting, recording their bosses every movement.

Finishing their interview, thanking the interviewer for asking them to grant an interview, even though, she never did. She was talking on the phone when they both approached - out of nowhere – in the form

of bright lights, unidentifiable flying objects, across the morning sky, insisting they be granted the opportunity to tell the world of the sorrowful, shocking loss of their friend and colleague. Finishing, shaking His Honor's as walked near.

Alfonso's college professors mingled on the on the steps before entering, visiting, renewing acquaintances. Professor Tanaka was among them, accompanied by his wife. The professor now lives in San Francisco. He saw the announcement of death on a social media feed. Unsure he was reading what he was reading, placing a call to former colleagues, to the Senator's office next, to the airlines, pricing two tickets, before telling the Department chair of the need to absence himself, in order to attend the funeral.

Lawrence Thompson, a childhood friend, was at the south entrance, to the right side of the church, a good forty yards from the front entrance. No brightly colored, not

Lawrence. He wore a Brooks Brothers' suit, a brand he favored in high school and college. We use to joke with him that he was too short for any other brand since none of the other brands made "boy suit sizes". We no longer teased Lawrence about his chose of brands; no longer, there no need.

His was a subdued brown, meaning a conservator brown; flat, dull, like an aged penny. A woman was walking next to Lawrence. I didn't recognize her. I tried, looking closely, staring in fact. This stranger wore a flowing red dress, bright red, the color of freshly mashed strawberries. She carried a black leather duffel bag on her shoulder.

Lawrence grabbed the door, letting the woman enter first. From the distance I was standing, she appeared younger than Lawrence. A white envelope was in Lawrence's left hand. He held the door with the right; twisted up and around, letting her pass through. Pulling, patting his coat in

place, correcting his posture, before entering.

Lawrence and I are life-long friends. He, Alfonso and I became friends in high school, when Alfonso's family moved to Houston. I think we were thirteen – fourteen at the time. We attended Worthy High Senior High, in Sunnyside, located on the south east side, no more than ten miles from Emmanuel Temple. The distance might as well have been the distance to the moon – worlds apart they are. Lawrence is the only one still living in Sunnyside; he went back after leaving Texas Southern. He and the Senator attended TSU at the same time. The Senator graduated, went on to law school (Howard); Lawrence didn't finish; he went back to Sunnyside. I did neither - the service – "Army, 30 years, 28 days, 5 hours, 30 minutes; honorable discharge, Sergeant First Class; Master-Sergeant Lee Simpson!"

May 3, 1989

Professor Yuko Tanaka patrolled the aisles, nodding, twirling; three pencils between his fingers; sharpened to the same length, black number two pencils. Moving slowly, methodically, deliberately - never looking down at the pencils - a habit, substituted for a tick he displayed for years, biting on his lower lip until his mother decided to break the habit by putting Kame's chili oil on the corners. Most think the oil spots on his chin are birth marks - they are not.

Biology [BIOL 132 (3 credits), a required course for majors in the sciences, and taken by non-science majors to complete their science requirements. Professor Tanaka, a native of California, undergraduate and masters' degree from UC-Berkeley (undergraduate and masters' degrees), Ph.D. from the University of California - Los Angeles. His first year at

TSU, sixth year in academia, moving from a junior college in Idaho to a historical black college in Houston - day and night change. Jumping at the opportunity given by TSU, moving to a larger city, anticipating other future opportunities to be near family in northern California was the basis of his presence in the classroom.

Moving clutter off desk tops, instructing the materials be placed on the floor. Observing out of the corner of his eye; providing a reassuring eye when needed. Hoping for the best, praying for the best, observing to others his surprise, "this class has some of the best students I have seen in years."

Concentrating - not concentrating, watching - not watching; mind wandering, seeing a vision of the semester's end, a planned trip to visit his youngest sister in Seattle in late summer, while his mind

wandered, wondering when he was going to finish his research projects.

Pigeons fluttered in the bays of eight windows located on the eastern wall, windows long abandoned, opened years before, now providing safe harbor while they fluttered on the other side. Wings periodically tapping; cooing, moving along the edge, providing a muted refrain against the air conditioner's murmur; sounds somewhat akin to the librarian's siren song directed at those who dare pierce the sound of silence. A movie goer's quiet hushing, extending out and beyond, into the darkened auditorium. A teacher's command, conveyed with a stern eye, scanning students' heads, begetting an unmistakable muted demand by the use of the unspoken word. Twenty one light fixtures, two fluorescent tubes in each fixture, 48" long; fixtures #16 and #20 with bad ballasts, casting a low electric hum. The silence of test taking, not absolute silence, not at all.

Professor Tanaka had grown use to the ballasts' humming, adapting since the very first day.

"Your request is next on our list."

Smiling when remembering the Building Superintendent's response; believing his assurances originally; angry the third time in; learning to laugh at futility. Pointing - at each other - repeating the same words as they passed in the hall, "next on our list".

Moving, watching, scanning seeing not seeing, assured he saw what he saw; instructing others to continue with the test, grabbing the offender by the collar, ushering him up and out of the chair.

"Out!" ... "Out!" ... "Out!" ...

Repeating the same words, when ten feet from the desk. Never hearing the student say one word; never doing anything - except walk – save turning, giving him, the completed test.

No explanation, never saying Professor Tanaka didn't see what he thought he saw; never a plea – absolute silence.

Sweat filled the void, pouring in a profuse quantity, coating the student's forehead, arms, back; remaining in place from seat to door (30 steps), out the door, accompanied with a slight push.

“Out!” ... “Out!” ... “Out!” ...

Proceeding down the hallway, collecting his thoughts, incapable of collecting those thought, fleeting, disjointed, scattered. Exiting the old Science and Technology building, using the east exit, abruptly changing direction – heading south – down Cleburne; head down, moving farther and farther away dreams, normality, a new life; a life different from the life he had when growing up in Sunnyside, not the studying part, always been a good student.

Never uttering a word, withdrawing further with each step; sweat made an initial appearance; accompanying, and burdening

each step. Never a tear however, never appearing, recessed, hidden, absent.

Passing Frenchy's Chicken, never looking up, refusing to acknowledge his name being called out, or never hearing his name – no one knows. Passing Wheeler Avenue Baptist (he attended the Sunday church service the week before and was thinking about making the church his church family) – seeing angels - flat out refusing the angels' offer to intercede, brushing them aside. Alfonso Zachariah finished the test about the time Lawrence refused the angels' attempt to intervene; moving toward the front of the room, personally handing Professor Tanaka the now completed test, after taking a stab at – his best guesses, when answering the last two questions.

Counting steps, in control, out of control; never noticing his mind marching in a different direction, taking flight; oblivious, to the mosquitoes, joining the journey ten steps in. Two attaching and laying claim

down Cleburne Street, abandoning him at Wheeler Avenue, less than a half mile away from the school. Replaced by those which alighted at Wheeler, remaining in place for the duration of the walk; gleeful, feasting, celebrating, their good luck. The sun tracked each step, intensifying the occasion, dissolving clarity – if there is such a thing – assaulting the brain much like heat applied to butter, separating, liquefying – on this occasion not providing a clarified substance (pure butterfat, minus water and milk proteins), instead begetting a state of opposites: confusion - clarity; separated - disjointed voices; time erratic passage – a clear image of Professor Tanaka's approach.

Nearing Maggie Street, he ignored a collective of cockroaches scattered by his steps, kicking a dead and rotting branch lying across the walk, disintegrated by time, history, neglect.

Only two questions remained ten minutes before Lawrence was touched. He

didn't want to finish too quickly, not wanting to disturb his classmates. After answering the remaining questions, the Professor's distinctive voice was heard. Lawrence found himself abruptly moving toward the exit. Knowing, in his hearts of hearts, he didn't cheat. Seeing Alfonso sitting to his left, where he always sat, eyes extended onto his desk, watching movements, markings, every marking.

The University sent two letters. The first letter sent by regular mail, the second, certified. Lawrence never bothered to open either; never attended the initial meeting, nor the hearing; allowing the Professor to see what he thought he saw.

Withdrawing – to his room, eating little, bathing less – to Harris County's Psychiatric Hospital - never, ever, never, ever dancing again. Becoming a recluse, escaping his parents' eyes, escaping to the bridge, to vacant lots; seen during the daytime on the side of the side of the Scott

Street. He appeared to talk to himself, when observed from a distance, actually talking to the cockroaches. Knowing personalities of each, distinguishing each, assigning names, swearing to anyone who would bother to stop, “they are smarter and more honest than ninety nine percent of the population”. Most never allowed him to demonstrate their tricks; Lawrence never called them tricks, never did.

American cockroaches live for approximately one year to one and half years. Not Lawrence’s, his living twice as long. No one believed him when he identified one by name, age. Always closing their ears during the introduction, “This is ...” Moving away when he summoned the rest of the collective, seeing their numbers, like an invading army, climbing up his arms, ten at a time, coming to rest, paying close attention to his every

command; antennas flaring, back stiffened, awaiting the next command. Lawrence’s visitors never saw when the cockroaches retreated, permitting the birds to move in, alighting on Lawrence’s arms, shoulders, head; covering him much like an umbrella – they would have been long gone. Hovering – alighting - picking him clean - removing parasites, dirt and grime; flapping, brushing aside worries, akin to healers, a persistent ritual, over the course of 25 years - as Lawrence - laid flat, with arms extended, laughing.

Lawrence entered the church looking fifteen years younger than the rest of us. The morning sun dance was now more intense, as if it too was surprised by the numbers in attendance, reflecting happily off the bounty of colors; happy to see Boogaloo, welcoming his attendance.

None of the former classmates at Texas Southern understood why Lawrence was asked to give the eulogy. The political class was astonished. A low, persistent rumble moved with Lawrence's every step, their eyes attaching when he exited the vehicle, following him into the sanctuary, looking for his location when they too entered. Truth be known - the Senator visited with Lawrence a month before his death.

"I hope you don't think I'm a crazy man. I dreamt the other night I was going to die soon. The dream was clear: the day, the time, what I was wearing."

They both emitted uncomfortable laughs; jagged laughter, accompanied by too thick sputum, hanging on the tip of tongues, lingering too long on the rim of lips, falling

short of the intended mark; laden, heavy, loaded by the word, "crazy".

Five years had passed since Lawrence's return, his eyes now cleared; the fright which resided in the recesses was no more. The hollow images of strangers walking about in his pupils were no more.

I was able to repurchase his parents' home. Instructed by Connie, "We have to get him back to the familiar." I did what I could do. Clearing out bush, invading his space, partly out of collective-shame; partly out of the fact he now allowed us to participate in helping in his return. Strangely, Lawrence began baking tea cakes the day after he got gas in the kitchen. He said something about a dream.

The dream was actually a young girl, who was ten when he first retreated; riding over on a bicycle, asking him questions, in a

manner only children are able to do, leaving tea cakes on the side of the road, in a plastic bag, so that he could see what she was leaving, so that he wouldn't starve to death. Made by her grandmother – then her mother – then she – ignoring her was not an option; sharing, feeding him what she could safely secret food away from the house. She was never consistent on the days which she could deliver food; she was always consistent with the teacakes, delivering them twice a week – Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Charles Jones, a classmate at Worthy, paid for the utilities' deposits. Connie co-signed the lease on the first shop on Scott. Two years later, a second shop on Old Spanish Trail; year three, Connie encouraged Lawrence to open a shop on Montrose. Word was she was influential in arranging a distribution deal with H.E. Butt Grocers out of San Antonio.

“The best cookies, both east and west of the Mississippi” was the motto,

followed by “blessed by the dirt, sun, the rain”... Never ever mentioning butter in the advertisements. No reference to the type of flour, nuts, any other ingredients, unless you bothered to look on the side of the package. At the wake last night, we stood in the middle of the room laughing our butts off - if they only knew – seeing Lawrence in worse days- refusing help, except allowing prayers - up until the time his friends reappeared from out of the tree stump. Telling me once, “Zoo-too, my favorite, loves my boogers”, digging deep, extending a finger to the biggest, brownish cockroach I have ever seen. I don't know whether he was joking – pulling my leg – or whether he was serious. All I saw was a damn roach. I slapped the shit out of Lawrence, across the back of his head, and then went after the roach.

Moving as fast as I could, striking, hitting, kicking, stomping – natural reactions

- pushing limbs to the side, mumbled words, incomplete words, frantic behavior.

“What, what, what, what” were my initial attempt at talking, followed by, “Are, are, are, are, you doing? Are you crazy?” Cursing more than I care to admit, happy I was no longer in the service, having no concept how I was going to explain my behavior to others. Screaming, yelling, jumping about, kicking the tree, at real and imaginary roaches, seeing both scatter. Sprinkling profane words down the walk like gasoline. Boogaloo did nothing. He said nothing.

“What the hell is wrong with you, introducing me to a roach, letting roaches run up and down your body ... You ain’t that damn crazy!”

Erratic, possessed movement, attached to out of control arms; frenetic, hopping about, attempting to rid the feeling of being possessed, as if they were moving in my clothes. Every sight, movement,

touch, became suspect; itching, screaming - a guttural scream - “AWWWWWWWWWWW”! Losing control, sweating, peeing, seeing images grab hold of me - in my bed, under the sheets, causing me to jump about, screaming, “AWWWWWWWWWWW”!

“Are you crazy ... What the hell is wrong with you”!!!

Part of me remains sorry for my behavior, remorseful in fact; the other part, not at all so. I had never seen so many roaches so comfortable on the body of a live human being, without a whimper on the human’s part. Mine was an inbred reaction: roaches and rats are enemies. Their collective appearance is never a good sign. When stationed in Georgia, we had a rat problem on the base. We were required by our superiors to search them out; cleaning inside and out, removing paneling, ceiling tiles, brush, until the lair was found. Hundreds of rats came out of nowhere - running, moving under and over us -

requiring each of us to move as fast as we could, not allowing any to escape. I did act the way I acted the day Lawrence introduced me to Zoo-toe. I don't know why.

Growing up in Sunnyside, the community was a mixture of rural and urban. Never the inner city, part of segregated Houston, established at a time when Houston's boundaries were smaller, more contained. Cullen Street in the white neighborhoods was known as Cullen, when you crossed into the Sunnyside, the road changed to Chocolate Bayou Road. The Priest over in St. Francis protested this distinction, everyone down at City Hall acted like they didn't know what he was complaining about. The same reaction existed when the community complained of placing a dump in Sunnyside, sicknesses and illness followed; no one outside the community seemed to care. They never understood what we were complaining about again. I say all to say, I know what a

cockroach is, seen them before that day. That is not my point however - my parents lived next to people who kept farm animals. We always had a problem during certain times of the year with mice, cockroaches and flies. They say cockroaches will probably outlive the rest of us. I get that. This knowledge doesn't mean I have to succumb to their superiority and survival skills. I killed Zoo-toe. Strangely, my reaction didn't kill Lawrence. I did slap him as hard as I could.

"I think I will excuse myself."

"Will you be back tomorrow?"

"If you want to me to come back; I'm sorry for hitting you."

"No, it is okay... it's getting close to my time to leave."

He didn't explain what he meant by getting close to his time to leave and I didn't ask. Moving toward the car, looking back across Scott - towards him - seeing him reach down, move dirt around, rise to his

feet, appear to administer a prayer before walking towards the curve. A young woman in a black Mustang pulled up to the curve, reached out and handed Lawrence a package. She waved, passed me by, moving further down Scott.

When the Senator came to visit Lawrence, they didn't talk much about what happened 28 years, 27 days ago; some 10,254 sunrises and sunsets before. Sunrises and sunsets where Lawrence existed in an unknown place, while the Senator celebrated graduations, marriage; running for political office less than sixty days out of law school. Driving by Lawrence when campaigning; seeing him on the side of the road; never stopping, pretending not to know who the strange man was, always knowing the 5'3", Milk-Duds colored, Tootsie-Roll built-man squatting under the sycamore tree, covered by birds and dung, was Lawrence. He knew. He never stopped.

"Don't bother. No need to apologize" - were Lawrence words. Extending a hand, telling the Senator he had to travel to San Antonio for a meeting, and he didn't have long.

"I need a little bit of your time. I had the dream the other night."

"What about ... What do I have to do with your dream?"

"You don't. Yours is what happens after I die."

"Look Alfonse, I don't want any blame for you killing yourself."

"Man, I'm not going to kill myself. I am going to die. I am not sick, went to the doctor last month. They hooked me on all those machines at the Medical Center, told me I was in perfect health. My baby girl is getting married in the fall; I want to be there, I've been told I have a different appointment."

Lawrence moved away, taking two, three, four steps back, before correcting his

course. Moving out from behind the desk, moving forward - two, three, four steps - reaching out and touching his former classmate's/friend's face, moving over the contours, closing his eyes, feeling, seeing, smelling death. Much like the death he smelled the day before prior to Zoo-too dying. Tears forced their escape, outlining Lawrence's nose, remaining in place in the well of his eyes, pooling, clouding his vision, but not his ability to smell.

"You're right. You are going to die."

"I know. ... I know. ... Strangely, I have made my peace, except..."

"Except what, you do know I died and stayed dead for years? I was part of the living dead. Except what? What do you want from me now?"

"I want you to do my eulogy."

"Are you crazy?"

"Maybe...maybe..."

"You are crazy. And say what to the world? You want me to tell them what actually happened on that day. Is that what you want? Or do you want me to bless your soul and tell the world how wonderful the good senator was, never speaking up, never telling the truth, driving by, never stopping, always and forever, my good friend. My good friend, yes you're crazy!"

Lawrence had taken the long path to making peace with the world. Incremental movement – if 10,254 sunrises and sunsets could be considered anything other than incremental – back from another place – a place where he constantly saw images, never fully recognizing anything, anyone, before running back to the secure recesses of his mind; a place he invited no one; not the doctors, not family members, not strangers, no one.

Connie decided to stop one day, refusing to listen to her husband's assurances, "No, Dear I don't recognize

him". Driving back, stopping, seeing what she saw, demanding that Lawrence talk to her, telling him she was sorry for what happened; admitting to him what she knew and what she didn't now – if that makes sense. His eyes remained distant, hollow, he moved backward, as was his habit, to his world.

"This is Zeek."

"Hello, Zeek", Connie responded with a smile. Refusing to flee, instead taking a seat on the ground beside Lawrence, calling him by her pet name – "Boogie" - introducing herself to every other living creature he cared to share. Visiting every Wednesday - for ten years – through every molten stage, every rain storm, bathing in Houston's godforsaken heat and humidity, watching his friends shed, rebirth, die. Never telling her husband; dressing comfortably for each visit; moving Lawrence from one place to another; taking

it slow; incremental, imperceptible progress, but progress nonetheless.

Connie was why I came back, calling, demanding, "You have done your time. You are needed back in Houston. I need your help." Reestablishing trust - boyfriend and girlfriend up until the day she heard he walked out the classroom, accused of cheating; assured by Lawrence's best friend – "He was in fact cheating."

"I married Connie," were the next words out of Alfonso's mouth, in a matter-of-fact manner, with little emotion, showing no facial expressions.

"I know," was Lawrence's response, with little voice inflection, in just as matter-of-fact, non-telling manner. Standing, counting time, wondering why "Alfonse" (what we called him from 10<sup>th</sup> grade on) was standing in front of him, and *why now, the 101 Confessions?* Lawrence never said anything else about what or why he knew. Standing in place, much like the way I

trained men and women in the military; resolute, in control. In hindsight Lawrence was more in control, in both his worlds, than Alfonso Zachariah Hughes was ever in his.

Living a lie, perhaps; telling a lie, never correcting the litter of lies which followed his every step. Knowing the lie existed, never stepping forward, proceeding fast forward through life's successes, leaving an un-erasable stain of disgrace, accompanying him, no matter how successful. The light-brown freckles on the honey-colored face of the Alfonso Zachariah told his pain, never self-correcting, burrowing, bending, smearing – malleable dots – floating, incapable of erasing the years, aging more than he should have aged.

“I want you to do my eulogy. I want you to tell the truth.”

Shaking a lost friend's hand, reciting, “please, please”; pleading words, demanding words, never assured the plea or

demand, had been heard, or accepted. He departed before hearing an answer; parting ways for the last time. Abruptly turning and leaving Lawrence's office, leaving Lawrence standing in the middle of the room; now firmly committed, refusing to leave to another place.

Senator Alfonso Zachariah Hughes passed on the morning of May 30, 2017 at 8:30 a.m., reported by the Houston Chronicle, told and retold in all other mediums, oral and otherwise. His time had come. The morning of his death - as was his habit - he still read the entire paper, and completed the cross-word puzzle. Making one last command – as was his wont – picking up a piece of paper, writing out the written note Lawrence carried, reaffirming his request. Not until then, not until he did what he normally did, he died. No one understood why ten buzzards were sighted in the parking lot; circling, circling, circling.

Her small chest wall revealed the power of the human spirit, and our bodies (at least hers)

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The air inside the church seemed visible, circulating, blowing much like Mother Nature's breath, making its presence known, causing those in attendance to reach for shawls. Extended arms, wrapped around others in an attempt to ward off the incredible efficiency of the turbines turning in the physical plant.

This funeral seemed different, larger, more intense than most. Security moved in and out, looking under seats, examining packages, scanning, nodding at those they were familiar. Connie and her children sat on the front row, the camera in the church scanned the audience, like a sporting event, except no one waved back, shared a kiss; remaining solemn, to pay homage to their family member, friend, colleague, senator.

Giving grace to God they proclaimed, standing, sitting, standing,

sitting; praying for their salvation, the neighbor's salvation.

Lawrence sat five rows back, on the right side with the same woman he entered. They periodically glanced at each other, talking. She kept control over the bag, at times reaching in, moving the contents around. Officials from the University sat eight rows back, with other public officials, elected office holders, state and federal officials who earlier took their turn saying "okay, if you insist", to the reporters. Professor Tanaka sat with his former colleagues, looking around, seeing former students, remembering the Senator's wife. Connie had taken the same course the next semester. Scanning - seeing both the familiar and the unfamiliar; the Professor looked to his right seeing Lawrence,

recognizing the face, not able to fully place the face.

Standing, sitting, standing, sitting ...  
“This occasion was a celebration of life”, so declared the Clergy.

The wind continued to play havoc, moving up and under, causing legs to cloister, arms to remained tuck, going back to protective positions, after dutifully reciting the prescribed homilies, Prayer of Comfort, readings from the Old and New Testaments, followed by song.

Singing to a throng of ten thousand, inviting the wayward toward a different path, professing the grace of the Lord was the path trodden.

Lawrence stood, moved into the aisle, walked ten steps toward the side door, waving for his companion to follow; she refused, emphatically pointing downward, summoning him back to his seat. Connie looked over at the same time, immediately standing. Her children – thinking her

standing was part of the service – stood also, until they were instructed to take their seat. Connie stood in place, looking, instructing with eyes only, caring little what others thought. Lawrence retraced his steps, resuming his seat.

The program read, “Remarks – No more than three (3) people, 2 minutes each”, followed by “Obituary Reading”, the favorite song of the deceased, and then the “eulogy”. At the time Lawrence returned to his seat, Professor Tanaka finished scanning the obituary, it then hit him - the same Milk Duds color, Tootsie Roll shape, remembering the day, time, words spoken. “Out!” ... “Out!” ... “Out!” ...

Never really sure he saw what he saw, receiving his affirmation by absence, not from certainty - when Lawrence didn’t appear. Driving down Scott Street years later, seeing a man he thought might be Lawrence, convincing himself it wasn’t. The Professor had no business in Sunnyside.

No family in Sunnyside, no need to visit a shop in the area, no acquaintances. He drove that way because he heard. He wanted to know for sure. He didn't know for sure, looking from a distance. He too didn't stop. Professor Tanaka moved two years after he failed to stop - to San Francisco, nearer to family, assuming a new job.

Now nearing retirement, the Professor's hair was no longer exceedingly black, fine lines branched off both eyes, his lids seemed heavier with age, grief, providing a much more pronounced slant. I couldn't tell which.

The singer reached skyward. Standing, sitting, standing, sitting ... We did.

Connie moved again out of her seat, navigated the stairs, and approached Pastor Slaughter, moving across the stage, leaning over, whispering. He nodded, holding both her hands in his, stood and approached the podium.

"Amen. Sister Hughes has asked to introduce Mr. Lawrence Thompson, who will give the eulogy today. Sister Hughes."

It took less than three seconds for Connie to move from the Pastor's side and say her first word. During those three seconds, thousands of thoughts flooded Professor Tanaka's head. The only one of importance was "it's him." Watching Lawrence move from his chair - like the old Lawrence, bounding the steps - rebirthed - across the stage, kissing Connie on the cheek, expressing to her his blessing.

Actually, he was a new Lawrence, much different than the one of many sunrises and sunsets passed. The lady who accompanied him, who told him to sit down, followed across the sanctuary, moved up the stairs, with bag in hand, standing three to four steps back.

"Paying Honor to God, Pastor Slaughter, the clergy, colleagues of Alfonso in the Senate, elected representatives of the

State of Texas, congressional representatives, my children, my family, friends, thank you for coming and honoring us with your presence. Alfonso predicted his homecoming, seeing in a dream his demise. When he told me what he dreamt, he scared me. I was no longer scared when he recited to me Dr. King's "I've been to the mountaintop" speech given on April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee; knowing of his demise, predicting his demise, not fearing death, having reached the mountaintop."

There wasn't a dry eye in the house. No one had to elicit an Amen. No music was necessary, grieving in unison - for her, her family, themselves - seeing the death of love ones, the persistent and long struggle of a people, raising their hands upward, skyward, to provide support to both Connie and themselves.

She wasn't much longer ... "So I believed him and began preparing for his

homecoming, on an anointed date, and time; preparing the clothes he would wear, making plans, awaiting the call. The call came. He was dead. A natural death, the coroner reported. Not fully understanding, 'there was nothing wrong with him, he just died.' God understands, my husband understands, Dr. King understood, I understand, my children understand."

Connie reached down, retrieved a tissue from the box, wiping gently, looking out in the audience, seeing Professor Tanaka crying. She understood the importance of his presence, nodding, assuring him *it will be alright*. Looking with her eyes and heart towards her children, reassuring them; they nodded back.

"Alfonso told me one other thing - outside of saying how much he loved me - he said he wanted Lawrence Thompson to do his eulogy. When we were children, Lawrence was known as Boogaloo. I called him Boogie. He is still Boogie to me. He

didn't tell my why he wanted Lawrence to do the eulogy; strangely, I knew why and needed no convincing. Ladies and Gentlemen, our long lost friend – now he is found – Lawrence Thompson.”

Measurements of time are unfair and imprecise; incapable to tracking accurately events the way the human mind can. Measuring in units, assigned by mathematicians, physicists, derived from a single unit - seconds, a method of expressing duration; not capable of fully documenting, things the brain sees, between the seconds; memories, thoughts, relationships and time; never capable of placing these variables into the equation.

Turning away from the podium, grabbing Lawrence, looking into clear eyes, reminding him, “Tell the truth”, Connie said. “You have to tell the truth.”

“The truth can be told in different ways”, Lawrence responded. Holding onto Connie’s shoulders; a slight tremor flowed

outward, down her arms, conveying Lawrence’s nervousness. She felt it. She sensed it.

“I know Lawrence. I know. I’m going to take my seat, if you get into trouble, look my way. Zeek is watching.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Stepping to the podium, scanning the audience, seeing strangers and his few friends; nodding my way; trying to remember the public speaking skills he learned at Worthy High; straightening his spine, before smiling. He never introduced the woman standing beside him.

“Life is never a straight line. Never is.”

She reached down, moved the zipper back, the sound of the zipper’s movement was picked up by the microphone, making the pulling and tugging all the more dramatic. Retrieving a red balloon, blowing, pulling, stretching, it, until straight. Then another, then another, then another –

all done while Lawrence seemingly ignored her, continuing the eulogy.

“We naturally assume life will be perfect, a straight line to our destiny. Love, hate, failure, success - it never is, it never will be.”

The balloons were released at that time, floating upward in the air, moving over the crowd, suspending themselves as if held in place by a guided wire.

“My name is Lawrence Thompson. I was born in Houston. I have lived in Sunnyside my entire life. Sunnyside is not too far from this Temple – in distance – but it is worlds apart, isolated - neglected – a forgotten people and community.”

Scanning the crowd, looking out at the City’s finest, telling truth to power, wisdom obtained from the side of the road, isolated.

“I use to be the Senator’s best friend. We lived in the same neighborhood, even though our parents were at different stations

in life. His family lived in the Robinson Addition, mine in the Dump Road area of Sunnyside. Existing at a time when Houston had distinct black neighborhood and schools. Phillis Wheatley, Kashmere, Jack Yates, Evan E. Worthy. We have seen a lot of our tradition destroyed, lost. A number of these high schools are not the same. Our neighborhoods are disappearing as I speak.”

“Our differences didn’t matter, we were friends. Visiting his family’s farm on holidays; summers; riding horses, fishing in tanks, eating the plums we were told not to eat. We both attended Texas Southern University together. I went to TSU, wanting to be a scientist; Alfonse wanted to be what he became: a lawyer, a symbol of success, a representative of our community. I need not reread his obituary – no finer accomplishment, no finer life’s work, no greater contribution to our society.”

“We studied together wanting to realize our dreams, planning our future. Plan we did.”

“In geometry, a square is a regular quadrilateral, meaning it has four equal sides, four equal angles.”

The sounds radiated - a slightly built woman blowing, tying ends together, creating two green squares - filling every corner of the sanctuary, occupying every ear – SQUEAK, SQUEAK, SQUEAK – pulling, tugging, stretching the balloons to their limits, completing two squares by the time Lawrence explained, “life is never so perfect; four equal sides, four equal angles, is an accurate description in the geometric world, not so in real life.”

The squares floated above the crowd, moving among the lights. His companion held her head back, her arms up, watching her creations’ movement. She seemed satisfied. Maybe, she was catching her breath.

“In geometry …let me see if I can get this right, ‘A pentagon is any five-side polygon.’”

The audience laughed before Lawrence completed saying, five-sided, watching the woman’s slight chest wall, inhaling deeply, accompanied by a knowing smile, blowing, blowing, blowing, moving fingers - at the speed of light - defying measurements of time, human mortality, capturing everyone’s attention, working fast, ignoring Lawrence, standing a mere three feet away. He continued to explain, “A pentagon is much life, complex, except life has both right and left angles, and we know, all of the angles never seem to be equal, and oft-times are unequal, unfair. I looked up the source of the quote, ‘life is unfair’ before coming here. Actually no one knows the source. However, the one authority cited was John F. Kennedy, our former president. During a press conference on March 21, 1962, he said, ‘There is always inequity in

life. Some men are killed in war and some men are wounded, and some men never leave the country, and some men are stationed in Antarctic, and some are stationed in San Francisco. It's very hard in the military or in personal life to assure equality. Life is unfair.' President Kennedy's statement suffices, reminding us, it is what we do with our lives."

"I sat on the side of the road, lowering myself to the lowest point of life - for years - withdrawing, wanting to die, but the Gods would not let me die. Communicating to me through every means necessary - dirt - sky - bugs - birds - cleaning the soul with her rains, replenishing me by shining the Sun's light on me. I wanted to die because I saw my dream leave me, told to me in three words, 'Out!'... 'Out!' ... 'Out!' ...

"Only God knows why I remained quiet, electing a path I never saw me taking,

wondering how my best friend was living with his silence, wishing him the best."

An audible sigh rang out from the audience. Not Sister Maurice's song of joy. Not the pastor's wife. Not any of the members of the faith. No a different voice - a low persistent hum, unwittingly emitted across the aisles. Knowing what he didn't know then; seeing now what he didn't actually see; as one of the multi-colored pentagons previously floating above, almost if intentionally deflated and guided downward, landed in the good professor's lap. Lawrence permitted the angels to help this time.

"The Senator is here - at this celebration - both as a physical being, a lifeless body, and in spirit. Listening, watching, smiling; happy that each of you came to celebrate his failures and triumphs. Praying you will give comfort to his family, his wife and children. Sometimes losing his way, at times lost for a long time; to me

always remaining a friend at heart. I firmly believe his heart sent his best, Connie, to help me, to save me, helping me back from another place. Every Wednesday, for ten years; sitting in the dirt on the side of the road, talking with me, refusing to leave, coming back at the same time, bringing pictures of her children, talking about Lawrence, pulling me back; talking about insects – and to insects – talking about life and cookies.”

When Lawrence said “cookies” he emitted a low laugh, a mumbling cry into the microphone; something he didn’t plan. Talking about it brought him back in place and time, dropping a tear on the podium, unloading years of tears he never cried. He refused to quit however.

“Life is a circle.”

We all knew what the small frame woman, with auburn curls, chocolate-chocolate skin had to do. Standing in unison, cheering her on; raising our hands,

believers and non-believers, while she reached down, grabbed, stretched and blew; her small chest wall revealed the power of the human spirit, and our bodies (at least hers), blowing and creating perfect circles, one by one, until she reached twenty eight in number, holding each in place by a ribbon, smiling, looking upward, before releasing them into the sky. The monitors lit up around the church, showing the Senator’s face, smiling, looking down as the circles floated above. That part was not planned. No one in the Information Technologies (IT) Department could explain how this happened. It just did.

“Life is a circle. Sometimes a big circle, sometimes a small one, calling us away at times, bringing us back; bringing the Senator back, apologizing, not apologizing, recognizing both of our mistakes. I admit it is as much my fault, never giving the professor, our classmates the full story; abandoning my family,

friends, my faith, my community - dreams – and most importantly myself - protecting a friend was my sin. Forgive me. Sometimes life is unexplainable. I'm sorry, I can't explain everything. I won't explain everything. I don't feel there is a need."

"A circle is a simple closed shape in Euclidean geometry. Life is simple, containing a constant, 'the curve traced by a point that moves so that its distance from a given point is constant.' Life is equalizing, always containing a radius, the distance between any of the points and the center always being equal. Alfonso Zachariah Hughes, Senator Alfonso Zachariah Hughes, came back to apologize, completing life's circle; a testament to the man, the Senator, the husband, father, my found friend; a testament to our lives. Rest in peace my friend."

The twenty-eight different sized circles were now afloat above Lawrence's head, levitating in place, never deviating in

height. His companion kept her head back, hands skyward, smile affixed, while he moved away from the podium, mouthing the words "thank you" to Connie, then to the audience, then to his companion. He moved off stage, holding the bag in one hand, her hand in the other, exiting the church by the same door through which he came. In their walk to the car – a black Mustang - I detected a hitch in Boogaloo's step, not a dance move, a life bearing hitch. The birds remembered him, remaining in place – overhead - circling, swooping, downward; circling, swooping, upward; providing cover as they drove away, assuring him he had done his part.