

Rooted

by

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DESCRIPTION

When Irishman Addison O'Riley buys a cemetery plot for himself, he does not know that it sits next to Minerva O'Riley's, the black groundskeeper for the cemetery.

CHARACTERS

- MINERVA O'RILEY, female, African-American, head groundskeeper for the Sunset Ridge Cemetery Association, late-40s/early-50s; speaks with a soft drawl
- ADDISON O'RILEY, male, white, mid-40s/early 50s; speaks precisely but not too fussily and with a very lightly Irish-accented voice

NOTE: The two characters are not related.

SETTING

- A cemetery plot at the Sunset Ridge Cemetery Association

MISCELLANEOUS

- Lawn chair, large umbrella, and book for ADDISON. He also wears a wedding ring.
- Overalls with sewn patch on the left breast, work boots, etc. for MINERVA
- Sound effect of distant thunder
- Sound effect of rain and thunder

* * * * *

ADDISON sits in a lawn chair, a furlled umbrella next to him, reading. He takes a deep, satisfied breath. MINERVA enters.

MINERVA

Hey.

ADDISON

What? Oh, hello—

MINERVA
You can't—

ADDISON
I'm sorry—

MINERVA
You can't be sitting there.

ADDISON
I was told I could.

MINERVA
Down at the office?

ADDISON
Yes.

MINERVA
The pencil-necks down there don't know the schedules up here,
so they get a bit confused. I have to bring the backhoe through.

ADDISON
Through here?

MINERVA
Yes.

ADDISON
To dig—

MINERVA
Right. Swing low, sweet chariot, and all that. So you have to
move.

ADDISON
Right across these graves?

MINERVA
Yes. Right across here. So you have to move.

ADDISON

That doesn't sound right.

MINERVA

Right or not, this is where it has to go. A regular Highway to Heaven through here. And the bereft are expecting a hole when they get there, so, you have to move.

ADDISON

I don't see any tracks. On the grass.

MINERVA

Very springy grass.

ADDISON

It must be.

MINERVA

You know the plots're better down by the pines—

ADDISON

I don't hear it.

MINERVA

What?

ADDISON

The backhoe.

MINERVA

Not yet. But it's coming. It's scheduled.

ADDISON

I'll move when it comes, then.

MINERVA

You need to move now.

ADDISON

What is the big hurry?

MINERVA
Are you the groundskeeper here?

ADDISON
No.

MINERVA
(indicating the patch on her overalls)
What does this say?

ADDISON
Minerva O'Riley, Head Groundskeeper.

MINERVA
I know what they don't know down there—

ADDISON
O'Riley.

MINERVA
—and I know what you don't know, and I need to bring the
backhoe through here. Now.

ADDISON chuckles.

MINERVA
What?

ADDISON
How strange the ways of the universe.

MINERVA
Meaning what?

ADDISON
You and I have the same last name.

MINERVA
You can't—mean that.

ADDISON
Addison O'Riley. American by way of the potato famine.

MINERVA
(Irish accent)

Faith and begorah, and Erin go bragh. Now—

ADDISON

You don't look native to the Emerald Isle.

MINERVA

I'm Alabama by way of Kansas City and Chicago. I don't drink green beer, and I've never been Irish on any day of the year. Now—

ADDISON

So, I take it you won't be coming to the O'Riley reunion this year?

MINERVA

You have to move.

ADDISON

Not until I hear the backhoe. Until then, I think I'll just take in my view.

MINVERA

So you already bought—

ADDISON

I just signed, half an hour ago. The beginning, middle, and end of the plot. Which is funny—the word “plot”—

MINERVA

Buried here? How strange the ways of the goddamn [universe]—you know who your next door neighbor is going to be? I just paid off the last installment this month.

ADDISON

Huh.

MINERVA

Hear him say “huh.”

ADDISON

It's just that—well, it's not every day one meets the person they'll be spending eternity with. By the way—I don't hear the backhoe.

MINERVA

There's no backhoe.

ADDISON

Ah.

A moment of silence.

MINERVA

Your wife—

MINERVA points to her left ring finger to indicate his wedding ring.

MINERVA

—why isn't your wife up here with you?

ADDISON

She's already taken her turn.

MINERVA

(sotto voce)

Shit—

ADDISON

Her “plot” is a metal urn over the fireplace. I'll probably take her with me when I do the “six-foot” shuffle.

MINERVA

You won't take the fire?

ADDISON

She hated the thought of wasting away—which was funny, given what— Well, anyway, she wanted to go with a whoosh. The slow melt back into what I am made out of—doesn't bother me. “The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out—”

MINERVA

So, it'll be the three of us.

ADDISON

My only ménage. Sorry. This is her journal. Written over her last year.

MINERVA
How'd she die?

ADDISON
Page by page.

MINERVA
And this place?

ADDISON
We used to picnic right here, early on, sunsets and cheap jug wine. Then came page 70. She wanted one long last look. So, the old picnic basket with food I knew she couldn't eat, a jug neither of us would touch, and right here, here, a sunset that just paralyzed us. I don't think I had a choice.

MINERVA
Man—

ADDISON
What am I sensing here, with no backhoe coming?

MINERVA
Man!

ADDISON
What?

MINERVA
Do you know who your other neighbors are?

ADDISON
No.

MINERVA
Do you care to know?

ADDISON
I care about a lot of things.

MINERVA

(indicating the plots as she speaks)

They all worked here at the Sunset Ridge Cemetery Association and paid for this “benefit” out of their own pockets. Just like me. People like me. We’re all the same here. The man who gave me a job and taught me—what’s his patch say?

ADDISON

Septimus Verdon.

MINERVA

Septimus—because he was the seventh generation to make it through the darkness. His wife.

ADDISON

Leda.

MINERVA

Her branded slave name, Jefferson. These two—

ADDISON

Joseph—Isaac—Verdon

MINERVA

Brothers, died in the war together. Septimus and Leda’s sons—their only children, but they got no special fraternal dispensation, not for their kind. No, ordered off to fight in some “action.”

ADDISON

Junius Lodge?

MINERVA

House nigger—he was the Association’s accountant and made it real clear to us that his collar was white. But he’s up here, too. He’s one of the family. So, your neighbors.

ADDISON

And you.

MINERVA

And me. Right here.

ADDISON

And Addison and Carmel O'Riley—right here. Good company.

Muted thunder in the background throughout the rest of the scene.

ADDISON

So. Your name—

MINVERA

We had white birch among the black oak a long time back.

ADDISON

No, the Minerva.

MINERVA

My father. Look—

ADDISON

He read—

MINERVA

Self-taught in the classics—believed Aristotle was black and that western culture owed its ass to Africa. Look—

ADDISON

The goddess of wisdom.

MINERVA

Don't [use]—

ADDISON

I'm not going to give up the space.

MINERVA

No one asked you.

ADDISON

Not directly.

MINERVA

Because you'd expect decent people to know these things.

ADDISON

I have strong ties here, just like yours.

MINERVA

No, you don't. You don't have "ties" here.

ADDISON

How can you even judge?

MINERVA

We're not equivalent.

ADDISON

We have a competition?

MINERVA

What you have is a nostalgia. Like a fever, or a phantom limb. It'll pass.

ADDISON

That's not fair.

MINERVA

That's not what this place is for us. This is our final resting place.

ADDISON

We watched—

MINERVA

This is not about your homesickness. This is about our sanctuary.

ADDISON

Carmel and I watched the sunset with her body dying every inch it lived.

MINERVA

Please stop—

ADDISON

Nothing remains ordinary after a thing like that.

MINVERA
Please—just—stop—

ADDISON
Why?

MINERVA
One useful thing my father taught me—always been very useful to me—never put up with that kind of sentimentality.

Their eyes lock. ADDISON slips the journal into his pocket.

ADDISON
I think it's time to go.

MINERVA
Do you even know what I'm talking [about]—

ADDISON fumbles with the lawn chair.

ADDISON
It doesn't matter—just—

MINERVA
Journal, wedding ring, urn hugged to your chest—angels'll weep!—leave that alone!—greeting card companies'll knock down your door—leave that—

ADDISON
Just stop!

MINERVA
I want to keep this as safe haven—listen!—as a safe place in a dark world that barely had any use for us after it used us up. I do want you gone, I do, I can't make you go, but I do want you gone, I'm sorry for your pain, as I am for any pain—but not “brethren” on this. I've got to work.

ADDISON
Why like this?

MINERVA
Like what?

ADDISON bangs his two fists together.

MINERVA

I don't have any hate for you.

ADDISON

No?

MINERVA

I said I've got to go.

But MINERVA can't quite make herself go.

MINERVA

And that's another thing—you would think it's about you, that I don't like you—that's your frame. I have hate for many things spring-loaded in me, but not for you because you don't mean anything. Right now you're an obstacle, an accident, a circumstance. Nothing personal. I'm going.

ADDISON

I don't want us to leave it like this.

MINERVA

What could you possibly say?

ADDISON

I can say this: that you're wrong.

MINERVA

You can say that all you want, but "you're wrong" is still wrong—I know what I need.

ADDISON

Carmel—in her journal—there are no differences between us, really, not deep down.

MINERVA

One of your O'Rileys my O'Riley?

ADDISON

Listen—if we go to the molecules, the DNA—blood is red, no matter who bleeds it.

MINERVA

And skin color's just pigment?

ADDISON

Or out to the stars. We're all made of the stars—all come from the same place. In the end—

MINERVA

In whose end?

ADDISON

We're the same stuff—especially when you look at where we're standing right now—

MINERVA

And I should be saying “brother” to you—

ADDISON

Same stuff, Minerva O'Riley—

MINERVA

Don't use—

ADDISON

It's the same stuff.

MINERVA

Clearly you like believing that “stuff”—comes with your privilege. I don't have, and I don't believe.

MINERVA bumps her two fists. Thunder and heavy rain. ADDISON opens his umbrella, gestures to MINERVA to join him. She hesitates, does.

MINERVA

You call this in?

ADDISON

It'll pass.

MINERVA

Storms do.

ADDISON

Look at how the rain spins in. You have enough of the umbrella?

MINERVA

You always carry such a tent with you?

ADDISON

Only when I get advance warnings from Noah.

MINERVA

My lucky day—two by two. You'd like to think that death's got a smooth equality to it—

ADDISON

It does.

MINERVA

Democratic.

ADDISON

I do.

MINERVA steps out into the rain.

MINERVA

I don't. I'd like to, but I don't.

ADDISON

Come back—

MINERVA

Death does not change some things in life.

ADDISON

Come on back—

MINERVA

Care for the dead goes on, even in the rain.

ADDISON

Minerva—

MINERVA

Have you noticed that not once have I called you by your first name? Not once. There's a reason, why, if you'd only get around to thinking about it. The dead beckon. Gotta go.

ADDISON

You—you deserve—

MINERVA

What?

ADDISON

Nothing.

MINERVA

What do I deserve?

ADDISON

Nothing—forget [it]—

MINERVA

What? Say it. Say something. Say it—last chance.

ADDISON says nothing.

MINERVA

Of course.

MINERVA leaves. Sound of rain.

ADDISON behaves as if he wants to crawl out of his own skin, as if he'd very much like to break something. He paces back and forth over the graves. Thunder. Rain. End.