

## **Traveling Companion: Secret to the Grave**

### **Fr. Michael Tracey**

I stood and watched her casket being carried from the church to the funeral coach. The morning mist cast droplets of rain on it as it carried her ninety-four year old frame to its final earthly resting place. A wreath on top of her casket served as a tangible goodbye from a confused family. Inside the casket, she carried a terrible secret.

A confused and incomplete son of fifty-seven years walked behind the funeral coach with his wife and two daughters. Neighbors and friends filed in behind family and cortege on their way to the local cemetery.

The priest prayed the final commendation prayers. The crowd dispersed and went their own way. Her son and his family went to her house in search of answers. The house yawned in its emptiness and hollowness. No one had lived there for at least five years. His mother spend the final five years of her life in a local nursing home. Desperately he searched for the missing link in his life. He knew some pieces of the puzzle but not the most vital and all he could do now was live with the incompleteness.

Some of the pieces build a thread through his life's journey but its foundation sat on shifting sand. He was born out of wedlock to a mother and a stigma. She disappeared from the local scene with the shame of her pregnancy and its secret locked deep within her. She found work in a hospital thousands of miles away and eventually gave birth to her son in the same hospital. As an unwed mother, working in a strange environment, she nurtured her son temporarily. He was placed in various foster homes. When he was nine years old, she severed ties and returned to her original home environment and began to live with her secret.

Meanwhile her son moved from foster home to foster home, wondering if he would ever see his mother again or discover his secret. He eventually graduated from college; found the love of his life and got married. Years later, now having his own family, he searched for his mother. She too searched and found him happily married approximately two hundred miles away.

Her neighbors noted that she would "disappear" for a few days every few months. Obviously suspicious, they inferred she may have got to visit some relatives.

Years later, she married a man whose wife was deceased. He had an only son. Both had dated decades earlier but broke up and each went their separate ways. Her marriage lasted a short time and they broke up again. He died a few years later and was buried with his former wife.

During her five years in a local nursing home, her son visited her frequently hoping to learn the secret. Just a few days before she died, he visited her again, hoping to discover the secret. Even on her death bed, she refused his request and he left.

Now, as he rode to his home, he was haunted by his incompleteness. A maternal bond was finally severed. The only physical attribute that remained was that he would carry her maiden name with him as his surname for the rest of his life.

He wondered about the agony and shame his mother experienced as a young women and how she carried the secret to her grave, locked in a maternal mind.

He wondered if the man she finally married was his real father because they had dated years earlier. He also wondered why his mother married this man decades later. Were they living a secret? Were they trying to ease a confused, if not guilty conscience? Could he have a step-brother who also attended his mother's funeral? But most of all, he wondered why a mother could not ease her conscience and tell him the secret?

Life seems so cruel at times especially when bridges cannot be built, reconciliation embraced and secrets shared.