

Grahame Watt
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A Parting Glass

The wine bottle was half empty before the church bells announced the start of the service. It was raining, not hard, but enough so that they had chosen the table against the wall, under the faded blue awning that had been there as long as the pub had been. There was a bottle of whiskey on the table as well, but they were saving it for the service, and so it had remained unopened while they drank the wine and made small talk. There were four of them, and they were not strangers to the church, the town, the pub or each other, so they had plenty to talk about. They all wore a hat and a black wool coat, though the style depended on the preferences of each man. One of them, the youngest, had a white flower stuck in his lapel; his eyes were blotchy and red and his companions made sure that his glass was always full. They were the only ones on the porch; inside there was only the owner and the sheriff, who kept a wary eye on the crying young man outside.

When the bells started to ring, one of the men went inside, returning a few moments later with four glasses, which he set in a row along the table. While the others watched, he poured out the whiskey into each one and resealed the bottle. The glasses were distributed in silence, and they said nothing while they waited, finishing their wine and watching the road below. They could see the church across the river, an ancient stone building from the days of swords and chivalry. The bell finished ringing in the tower, the notes still echoing around the valley. As it faded from memory, a procession of people appeared out on the road, dressed in black, a casket held between six of them. The young man wiped his hand across his face, and they all stood, glasses in hand, and walked out to the edge of the balcony.

Some of the members of the procession looked over at the men, while most simply walked along, completely lost in the act. The men did not wave, and the walkers did not acknowledge their presence, but continued along the path up to the church. The eldest made a toast, and then they clinked glasses and drank. They stood there in the wet a moment longer, and then retreated inside, except for the young man who stayed in the rain, hat in hand.

They left him there, alone with his tears and the bottle until the church chimed seven. Then the eldest came back and led his friend out of the rain, gently taking the bottle and the glass from him and leaving them on the table. The young man shook hands with his companions and the owner, and then sheriff put his hand on the young man's back and led him out of the warm, dark interior of the pub, while his friends looked on in silence.