

# Gandy Dancer Archives

---

Volume 10 | Issue 2

Article 2

---

5-1-2022

## Waterworks

Matthew Ineman  
*SUNY Binghamton*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ineman, Matthew (2022) "Waterworks," *Gandy Dancer Archives*: Vol. 10: Iss. 2, Article 2.  
Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/gandy-dancer/vol10/iss2/2>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gandy Dancer Archives by an authorized editor of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact [KnightScholar@geneseo.edu](mailto:KnightScholar@geneseo.edu).

# Waterworks

Wakes are the best part of Lynne's job. They're a lot better than the services. Services are where most of the dirty work is done. There's a lot more crying at a service. Wakes, typically, are far less drab. At least wakes have free food. The hors d'oeuvres at the Weston funeral are the best meal that Lynne's had since the last wake, and the best she'll have until the next one. She spoons up cocktail sauce with a shrimp while Marianne, a gray-haired woman with Coke-bottle glasses, asks her how she knows the deceased.

Lynne gives a variation on her usual answer: "We were in the same yacht club." She's noticed sailboats are a decorative motif of the house (the miniature on the mantle, the painting in the foyer) and just decided to go with it. Lynne isn't really too sure what a yacht club even is. She pictures grown men playing with bathtub toys.

"He did love that yacht," Marianne says.

"Did he ever take you out on her?" Lynne asks. She snags two more bacon-wrapped scallops.

"No," Marianne says, dissolving into tears.

At all the funerals she's attended, Lynne has seen people burst out crying over nearly everything. What should've been said, what should've been done. There's a lot to learn from the things that trigger mourners tears. This is the second time she's seen someone cry over the missed opportunity of going out on a yacht. Lynne summons a few tears herself to perform a gesture of sympathy. She asks Marianne if she's okay as she dabs her own eyes with a handkerchief. Marianne insists she's fine and accepts a glass of water offered by the deceased's wife, who sneaks a thumbs up in Lynne's direction.

To Lynne's right there is a sweaty man with a red face who is waist-deep into recounting a story about the deceased. His captive audience collectively leans in closer as the man reaches the story's climax: "So, there we are, me and

Frank and our boy Johnny, untied from the pier and finally setting sail. And then, *BANG*,” he says, slapping his palms together, delivering an acoustic jolt that ripples across the room, “we hit something.”

The Weston home is this huge McMansion that to Lynne looks like the option on a house-hunting show that is \$100k above the buyers’ price range and that they end up choosing at the episode’s end. The epilogue would show the new homeowners smiling to the camera three months later and ignoring their crippling debt. Lynne wonders how long it took Frank Weston to pay off his mortgage, or if he went to the grave before being unburdened of his debts. Was it worth it, to own a piece of property where half an acre of lawn separates your home from the neighbors’ homes, which are exactly as picture perfect as your own? She’s heard that Frank made a fortune doing something related to the stock market. He probably had no worries at all.

Lynne excuses herself from ongoing conversations in the living room and makes her way over to the kitchen, hoping this isn’t a dry wake. The kitchen, with its glistening marble countertops and stainless steel appliances, looks like a model from an upscale store. You never really know how dirty your own kitchen is until you see a clean one, Lynne realizes. She doesn’t see any alcohol, but she does smell more of the really good crab cakes baking in the oven. That anticipation alone should hold her over until the end of this thing, she expects.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” whispers a voice from behind Lynne. She jumps. When she turns, she realizes it’s just Michael. She elbows him amicably and calls him an idiot. They haven’t run into each other since the Gregson funeral two weeks ago.

“I didn’t know you would be here,” Lynne says. Her eyes dart back out in the direction of the living room, making sure no one is in eavesdropping range.

“Just got the call this morning,” Michael says. “Damien needed a sub, and I couldn’t say no to the money.”

“What happened to Damien?”

“I don’t know. Said he was going to a funeral.”

“Huh.”

“Anyway, you see our old friend out there?” Michael asks, pointing back out towards the living room, where a woman in her mid-sixties stands by the piano, sobbing. A congregation of consolers has gathered around her.

“Tamara,” Lynne says. She is filled with the particular disdain you feel when you recognize that someone you hate is really good at something you also do.

“I don’t know how she does it,” Michael says.

Frank Weston’s oldest goes and embraces Tamara, lamenting that she never realized how many lives her father had touched.

“Quick, pretend I just said something sad,” Lynne says.

“What? How?”

“I thought you were a good actor.” This seems to do the trick. Michael’s eyes go red as water streams down his face. Lynne grabs him a cocktail napkin and rubs his back, saying that everything will be okay and loss is just a part of life. Then she grabs more of the really good crab cakes.

Lynne rarely cried as a child. Once when she came out of the womb, once when she broke her clavicle falling off her bike at seven years old, and by all accounts, that was it. Some of Lynne’s school teachers and counselors expressed concern to her family about stunted emotional development. Lynne became self-conscious of this and one evening when she was in the third grade, she stared at herself in the bathroom mirror until she could cry on command. The next day she started to show everyone. Lynne’s mastery over her tear ducts became her signature, an intriguing talent often exploited as a party trick. At the age of ten, Lynne was cast in a TV commercial for Champs, a local supermarket chain. “The prices at other supermarkets are so high, they’d make a little girl cry,” the narration announced and the camera cut to Lynne sobbing. The director of the commercial was so taken by her abilities that he nicknamed her “Waterworks,” and would invoke the name whenever he needed her in position or asked if her makeup was ready. The nickname somehow spread to talent agencies, throughout the local acting community, and even to her own family. For years her mother has called her “Waterworks” with glee. “Hey, Waterworks, come help your mother with the WiFi.” And so on.

The Champs commercial played in syndication for five years before the company’s marketing team launched a new campaign that pivoted to an emphasis on health and freshness. The residual checks stopped coming in around the time Lynne finished school, an unfortunate correlation that left her free falling into adulthood. It was only after the fourteenth audition went poorly (and this one for, of all things, regional theater) that Lynne came to realize that there was more to acting than just crying on command, and perhaps it was a vocation she wasn’t cut out for. Then the CEO of Champs died (early heart attack attributed to a poor diet), and suddenly Lynne was receiving a call from a desperate widow asking for the Waterworks girl and offering a gig that would pay handsomely. One thing led to another, and Lynne discovered that perhaps there was a use for her talents after all.

As the final mourners make their way out of the Weston home, Lynne silently hangs back. She hugs the corner of the foyer, waiting her turn to thank the host on the way out. Once the door is closed behind Mr. Turner and his wife of fifty years, Eloise (Lynne exchanged contact information with her, just

in case), Mrs. Weston approaches Lynne with a money clip in hand. Not even a wallet, Lynne thinks, a fucking money clip.

“Now, what was it we agreed upon?” Mrs. Weston asks. “Two hundred, was it?”

“My going rate is two twenty-five,” Lynne says. She likes saying it that way, *going rate*. To be able to say you have a going rate, Lynne thinks, marks some sort of accomplishment in life. She doesn’t feel good about her work often, but getting to say those two words, and mean it, is blissful. “You gotta pay, if you want the best.”

From the coat rack, Tamara scoffs. Lynne hadn’t realized she was still there.

“Of course, you’re the girl from that commercial, aren’t you?” Mrs. Weston says.

Lynne forces a smile, nodding. “Been crying for years.”

“Here,” Mrs. Weston says, counting out three bills. “How about three hundred?”

The apartment smells of the fishery, which means Ma’s home from her shift. She sits on her recliner and, as Lynne comes in, says, “Oh, she’s wearing it again!” The *it* referring to Lynne’s dress, the one dress she owns, her funeral outfit. It is black and tasteful.

Bernard steps out of the kitchen, wearing the scorched oven mitt. “How much you pull in this time?” It used to be that the first thing he asked about was whose funeral, but after enough anonymous names, it no longer seems to matter. Better to cut right to the chase.

“Three hundred.”

Bernard’s lips form an O-shape, but let out no distinct syllables.

“Wake and service both,” Lynne says.

Ma scoffs. She swivels the recliner away from the game show on television and watches as Lynne stuffs the cash in the top drawer of the bureau, her usual spot. “Three hundred *dollars?*”

“Yes, Ma.”

“And you still can’t take that thing to the dry cleaner’s?”

Lynne rolls her eyes. “You know I can only afford to once a month.”

“And yet you just made three hundred dollars in one day? You know how many times in my life I made that kind of money from one day of work? I’ll give you a hint, it’s a number that starts with the letter Z.”

Lynne’s mother has never been understanding of her career. It doesn’t matter how often Lynne gives her the same talk. It’s a legitimate profession, Ma. I’m a moirologist. That’s right, there’s even a fancy term for it. People have had this job since ancient Egypt. They even do it in the Bible. In the Bible, Ma.

“First you say I’m not pulling my weight, now you’re on about this? You know I only get, like, one or two of these a week, right?”

“Oh, yeah, two days a week, your life must be so hard. Get a real job.”

Ma turns again to face the television. The woman on the game show is wagering double or nothing on the bonus round. Ma inches forward to the edge of the chair.

“I *have* a job, Ma,” Lynne says, repeating the same script as always. “A job that really helps people.”

“Rich people.” Ma winces in sympathy and slaps the armrest of the chair as the game show contestant misses her question, something about the top-charting song of 1984. The host consoles her as the money ticker starts flashing zeroes across the board.

Lynne grumbles and glides over to the kitchen, where Bernard is finishing dinner. Meatloaf again. “Can you believe her?”

Bernard shrugs.

“Is this still about Grandma?” It’s been six months since Ma’s mother, their Grandma Doris, died. She had been pushing ninety, and Lynne and Bernard had long been prepared to lose their grandmother. The same couldn’t be said for Ma.

“She says she’ll never forgive you for that.”

“She hasn’t forgiven me since the day we stopped getting the Champs residuals.”

“Have you been to Champs lately? They totally revamped the bakery, so they’ve got this incredible selection of pastries now.”

“Not the point, dumbass,” Lynne says. When Grandma Doris had been on her deathbed and they visited her in the hospital for the last time, told she wouldn’t make it through the night, Lynne didn’t cry. She gave no indication of inner turmoil as she muttered her goodbyes and left as her mother stayed the night. At the funeral she shed no tears. For Lynne, tears were a lie. She couldn’t have lied over her grandmother’s grave. It would have torn apart the fabric of the universe.

“Hey, Ma, supper’s ready!”

“About time,” Ma shouts back, without turning around. “Waterworks, get me a beer, would ya?”

Lynne grabs one for herself as well and carries them over to the table where she plops down in the chair beside her mother. Bernard comes out with the food and sets it down as Lynne realizes she’s not hungry. “Filled up on hors d’oeuvres,” she explains.

“Three hundred dollars *and* fancy food, huh?” Ma says.

“Give her a break, Ma,” Bernard says, dishing out her plate. “She’s pulling her weight, just like the rest of us.”

“If only we could all pull our weight by throwing fits all day,” Ma says.

"Throwing fits?" Lynne says. "Really, Ma? I'm an actor, you know this."

"Oh, an actor, of course. I forgot that my daughter is Laurence Olivier. Except when it's someone in her own family, of course. Then *she's* the one who looks like a corpse."

"You wouldn't have believed it if I did," Lynne says, choking on the words of the same tired argument. It wasn't like Lynne had had a poor relationship with her grandmother. Though they hadn't exactly been close, either. Birthday cards, holiday visits, out-of-the-blue phone calls. That kind of thing.

"No tears when your father left, either."

"I was eight," Lynne says. "And why would I cry for that asshole anyway?"

"I cried," Ma says. "Seven days and seven nights, I cried. The wailer of Bunker Street, they called me. We didn't even live on Bunker Street then, that was just how far away they heard me. The whole neighborhood heard me. Where was my three hundred dollars?"

"Ma," Bernard says. "Food's getting cold."

Lynne slouches back, her eyes nearly seeing the back of her head. She sticks her tongue to the roof of her mouth, still faintly tasting the remnant crumbs of those bacon-wrapped scallops. She thinks about the woman Marianne, how Lynne had helped her grieve. At least, she thought she had. "Ma," Lynne says. "What do I have to do to make this right?"

"Oh, Waterworks," Ma says. "You shouldn't care so much what other people think of you. Don't you actors know that?"

"How did you know Jack?"

"Jack, who?" Lynne says. The man returns a look of crooked eyebrows. Lynne has never been so careless before as to forget the deceased's name. "Oh, *Jack*," she says. "Right, uh, he and I golfed together." She has noticed golf memorabilia.

"Oh, you golf?" the man says. Lynne nods, doubling down. "Funny, I don't remember Jack ever mentioning you. Say, what's your handicap?"

"Uh, eight?" she says. Lynne worries that she's walked herself into an interrogation. How could she have forgotten the deceased's name? It's Jack Hoffman, she reminds herself. It *was*.

The man's eyes widen, impressed, and he nods. "Maybe you and I should play sometime."

"Oh, I haven't really played since my injury," Lynne says. "Hip," she adds, and then excuses herself in the direction of the bathroom. The Hoffman house is awfully similar to the Weston house, and the house before that one. The Hoffman wake doesn't have much in terms of food, though. Hungry guests make the general mood a lot more somber.

Lynne slips into the bathroom and locks the door behind her. She notices the trash bin by the sink, filled with crumpled tissues. It's an inadvertently touching memorial to one's life, Lynne thinks. The residue of one's brief time on the planet represented by a trash bin of tissues in the downstairs bathroom.

Like most breathing beings on Earth, Lynne has experienced what she would call her own brushes with death. Nothing serious, she knows, just light brushes, but enough to mean something. Last winter she had a gig on the same afternoon as the worst ice storm in a decade. She had borrowed Ma's Buick that day, which in retrospect was an obvious mistake, as that old hunk of metal has shit brakes. Lynne's route that day took her to the aptly named Hillside Drive, a steep motherfucker of a thoroughfare that's a pain in the ass even on a clear day. Despite riding the brakes from the top of the hill, Lynne found herself skidding. Skidding and skidding, and across that thin sheet of ice atop the concrete, she just kept going. Down she went, thinking, well, shit, I guess this is it.

As the car slid down that hill like a 3000-pound metal penguin with no sense of direction, Lynne foresaw the wreckage of a crash, a whole heap of metal against a cracked telephone pole on the side of the road. Like the aftermath of a fight that the telephone pole decisively won. As the paramedics carried away her body, she saw Ma surrounded by cops and she said she hoped that the insurance she paid an arm and a leg for every month didn't fuck her over when it came to getting a new car. The cop asked her how she could pay an arm and a leg every month, she only has two of each, and Ma said, "Exactly."

Then Lynne saw her funeral, where she was being laid to rest at the Catholic cemetery. She would've preferred a more secular cremation, but she knew it was out of her control now. They were burying her next to Grandma Doris. As the minister spoke the garden variety eulogy, Lynne walked among the attendees of her own funeral, of which there were not many. She was happy to see Michael there, since she had never considered him that close a friend, but when she approached him he said, "Oh, your mother is actually paying me two hundred dollars for this, and it worked with my schedule, so, yeah."

Then she went over to Ma, who watched her daughter's burial with a steely gaze, eyes as dry as the Mojave. She will not cry for me, Lynne thought, she knows she owes me no tears. And then, there were the tears, and they spread across Ma's face like a wildfire. Ma tried to contain herself as she flailed in sorrow and said, "What kind of woman wouldn't cry at her own daughter's funeral? What kind of woman would I be?" Lynne reached out and brushed an ethereal hand across Ma's face and said, "I'm sorry," but she knew Ma couldn't hear. She gave her a hug that she knew she wouldn't be able to feel. Lynne held her close. Ma smelled of the fishery.



The minister finished his words. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, so on and so forth. Lynne backed away toward her own grave as the dirt pounded down on the roof of her new home. She watched as Bernard put his hand on Ma's back, told her everything would be all right, and no, no one was judging her for her hysterics, it was okay to grieve. Lynne watched the two of them standing there together and knew they would be all right without her.

Then Lynne was back in the Buick, stopped on the right shoulder of Hillside Drive. The brakes must have kicked in as she came to the bottom of the slope. She stopped the engine for a second as she looked around her. There were no headlights in either direction, and for some reason, that induced a deep sigh of relief. She started the car again and drove off.

The funeral that day had been kind of a bummer, she remembered, even as far as funerals go. The ice storm cut the expected attendance at least in half, leaving a relatively sparse group of mourners, several of them fake, and most of the family members already knew who the actors were. It was a tough sit, but the low attendance meant that Lynne got paid a little extra, by a family grateful to feel a little less alone than they otherwise would have been. There had been no trash bin of tissues at that funeral, and now Lynne doesn't even remember the family's name, only that they had been one of the nicer ones.

Lynne unlocks the door and walks out of the Hoffmans' bathroom. She politely apologizes to the woman waiting outside and then walks back into the living room. There she sees Tamara, drawing as much attention to herself as she always does. "Jack was the most beautiful soul," Tamara says, and she's cried so much that her eyes are red. She keeps rubbing her face, which Lynne has noticed is kind of her signature. It's a really nice touch. "He was such a giving man. You never met anyone as generous as Jack," she says, and she's drawn an audience of at least a dozen mourners around her, and not one of their eyes is dry.

Lynne gently pushes herself through the small crowd and approaches Tamara. "He really was," Lynne says, even though she never knew the man. There's a good chance he was just a rich asshole, but in that moment she really believes what she is saying. Then she throws her arms around Tamara and hugs her tightly, and she realizes she has not hugged someone honestly in a very long time. "He was so wonderful," she says. She lays her head on Tamara's shoulder, and, for a moment, feels the weightlessness of a soul who has been forgiven. Cue the waterworks.