

# On the trail of a speeding hearse

May 14, 1986

Howard's last ride was probably more exciting than any ride of his life.

It was a dreary day — gray, cloudy, slightly sticky — morbid enough for any funeral.

My parents and I drove to the service on the Cape more to comfort Ruthie, Dad's cousin, than to grieve over Howard.

None of us had known him well. I don't think many people did.

Always a quiet man, at reunions, he never took part in our loud family discussions. He sat back, downed a cup of coffee, and snuck out back for a smoke, if he was lucky.

The atmosphere at the funeral home was like another family reunion. People came in, and groups of relatives who hadn't seen each other in months formed to gossip.

"You coming up to York Beach this summer?" one of my uncles asked everyone in turn. "Plenty of room. Pray for good weather."

"I heard you're going to be the school paper's editor next year," he said playfully to me — jabbing at my shoulder.

Ruthie stood quietly near typically silent Howard at the front of the room.

She was calm, but she looked like she wasn't quite sure what had hit her, and her smile was strained.

One by one guests approached her, murmured sympathetic words, and passed on to say good-bye to Howard.

Chairs scraped across the floor, a hush fell over the room, and the service began.

A woman moaned and wailed from the back of the room. I learned later she had introduced Ruthie and Howard more than 30 years earlier.

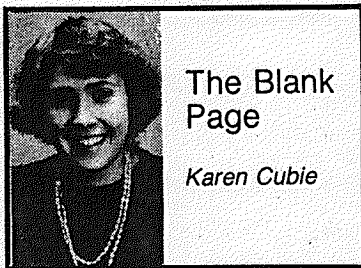
I sat back and thought how weird it was to be in the same room with a dead man, to understand the grief of the mourners, but to feel nothing myself.

The eulogy ended, prayers were said, the guests stood up to file out the door, and the casket lid was slammed shut.

I remembered my grandfather's funeral when each grandchild had to lay a single red rose in the casket before it closed, how my grandmother wailed, and how we all tried not to cry. I'd never seen a tear in my grandmother's eye before. We were sobbing by the time we climbed into our car, and my sister, twin cousins and I bawled all the way to the cemetery.

After Howard's funeral, we walked out to the parking lot, and gathered around Ruthie to hear what the next move was.

"We're going to my house first," she said. "I have some refreshments set up."



The Blank Page

Karen Cubie

But we rode the few miles to Ruthie and Howard's home in Dennisport, and watched Ruthie roam through the large downstairs rooms, quietly greeting people — the same stunned expression still on her face.

A half-hour later we climbed into our various cars and a procession formed behind Ruthie.

Howard's hearse didn't head the

procession. It was to meet us at the cemetery.

We had driven a few miles along the expressway when Dad looked at the gas gauge. It was lower than he realized. We had to stop for gas.

He had no idea where the cemetery was, so once we broke away from the procession and headed to a gas station, we figured, we'd missed the graveside ceremony.

We pulled over at the nearest station and filled the tank.

A few minutes after we were back on the road, I looked ahead and saw the hearse.

"Look, Dad," I said, pointing down the road. "If we can catch it, we can follow it to the cemetery."

He stepped on the gas and sped up to keep it in view.

The hearse rose over the crest of the next hill, and raced on.

I pictured the casket bouncing and sliding across the back of the hearse, and I held my breath, a little afraid the back doors would fly open, depositing Howard onto the expressway.

Dad drove a little faster, and the hearse grew a little smaller.

It rose over the next hill, and Dad pressed on the gas again.

The hearse flew farther ahead.

I looked at our speedometer — the needle wavered at the 85 mph mark. Howard was moving much faster than that.

The hearse grew smaller and smaller, and Dad maintained our speed.

Soon it faded away into the distance.

We never found out where Howard was going. He got there faster than we did.

"THE ONES AT THE BOTTOM ARE AWFULLY FAR GONE"

