

Matters of Life, Death and Laughter



Stories to Make You Laugh, Cry and Think

Joyce Mason

MATTERS OF LIFE, DEATH AND LAUGHTER

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MATTERS OF LIFE, DEATH AND LAUGHTER is a trio of Joyce Mason's most popular short stories and an excellent introduction to her fiction. "Digital" tells a story, as bizarre as it's darkly humorous, about something that turns up where it doesn't belong. You can't help but laugh, even if you think you shouldn't. "The Training Tape" asks you to think about what you say repeatedly and its consequences. "Zoe's Hair" examines the depth of a friendship and how it transcends time and space. As the subtitle says, these stories will make you laugh, cry and think.

DIGITAL



There was a toe in her taco.

Bebe screamed so loudly I thought my girlfriend was having a heart attack or seizure, or maybe she had seen a mouse.

Taco turners, young girls who also knew how to roll a tight enchilada, came running from the griddle to our table at Tons 'o' Tacos.

Bebe kept pointing to the toe now standing upright in a pile of taco stuffing, spread out on the waxy paper along with the circle of tortilla with one big bite ripped out of it. The toe, the taco, the horror of it sat smack in the middle of the table at our booth.

I cursed, knee-jerk, when I saw what she was pointing at—and turning away from—screaming.

"Madre de Dios!"

It was gross. A big fat toe with red nail polish. A toe so ugly, you had to wonder what kind of woman it had ever belonged to, and how the toe and its owner were parted.

"It's a copycat crime, *Querida*," I said. "Just like the finger in the chili at Blabby Burgers."

Same theme, different digit. I am a criminal justice major at California State University, Sacramento. Between my program at Sac State and passion for crime shows, I am onto these things.

Mike, the store manager came, saw, scratched his head and wrung his hands. He ordered his female assistant manager to bring a cloth with ice for Bebe's head while he helped her sit down in a booth several tables away from the scene of the crime. He assured her he had no idea who would do such a sick thing, that TOT met impeccable health and safety standards, and that he would personally do anything it took to make it up to her, including a full refund and a generous gift card to compensate.

"You poor thing," Mike said to her. "What a shock."

He asked his assistant, Molly, a redhead who was about to graduate from Sac State in social work, to take over calming Bebe while he called the cops.

I came up behind Bebe at the end booth and draped my arms around her neck. I kissed her on the top of her head.

"It'll be OK, Querida. Rest with Molly till the cops come. I'm gonna go look at the thing, just like a CSI."

I know I watch too much television, but at least, thanks to it, I knew I shouldn't contaminate the crime scene. However, I couldn't resist poking the toe with a plastic fork to get a better look at it in all its gory. Fat, brown, probably Hispanic, and hairy. Eeeuwwh! They'd have to run a search in that paint match thingy to see what brand of nail polish it was. I was hoping it'd be odd to narrow the search, as if this weren't odd enough.

Staring at the toe, I flashed on the award Mike proudly displayed on the wall at Tons 'o' Tacos: Voted Best Taqueria by Sacramento News and Review this year, a coveted honor.

"Saucy Salsa," I muttered to myself, the name of TOT's nearby rival in Mexican fast food. Could its obnoxious manager have been so envious that he crossed the line, or in this case toed it?

I broke my reverie to look over at Bebe. She and Molly were chatting softly. Suddenly, Bebe burped, covered her mouth and ran for the ladies' room. When she emerged at least ten minutes later, her eyes were all puffy. I could tell she'd been crying as well as barfing.

"What kind of sick could I get from a dead toe?" Bebe asked. "E. coli?"

Thank God, she hadn't actually bitten into it, more like bumped it with her front teeth.

I couldn't resist. "Well, it was the big toe. Toe Main Poisoning?"

Bebe couldn't help but laugh. "You're channeling Tomás."

Tio Tomás, my recently deceased uncle, was a piece of work. A relentless practical joker, Bebe found him less funny than mean, and I'm sure she was irritated at me for imitating his gallows humor, except that I really couldn't. I don't have the edge. Or the evil streak. My poor puns could never hold a candle to Tomás and his meanness. Tomás had faked his death several times for laughs before he finally died for real last month of a coronary. He was in the heat of doing it with some woman he had on the side, not his wife. I was horrified for my auntie. She was a saint who did not deserve that final humiliation.

LATER, BEBE COMPLAINED my enthusiasm for the mystery of her misfortune embarrassed her.

"You were all over the crime scene investigators like an exuberant puppy," she said, "asking too many questions. With your pestering, I can't imagine how they got the toe out of the slop to bag it, much less to concentrate on anything else they were doing."

Bebe was right. The CSIs finally sent me back to the booth where Molly and Bebe were bonding because of the bizarreness of it all. The taqueria was becoming a war zone of dark humor, Tio Tomás style.

Soon after I slid into the booth with the girls, a Captain Holyoke appeared out of nowhere "to ask a few questions." Molly took this as her cue to become scarce and slid out of her side of the booth.

Bebe had already overheard Holyoke, minutes before, grilling the grillers. He had pinned down who had most likely flipped the toe taco. TOT was located within blocks of Sac State and the grill guy in question was a clean-cut, freckle faced kid that looked like Richie Cunningham on Happy Days before he grew up, grew bald and made movies. "Richie" was not smiling. Richie was being lectured by the manager.

Bebe told me she couldn't tell if he had been fired, but she saw the kid walk toward the back of the taqueria, taking off his apron on the way. She felt sorry for him. How could he have known he was dishing up ground beef that wasn't 100 percent USDA Choice?

Captain Holyoke took names, straight out of prime time.

"Jorje Gonzalez," I said.

"Brenda Bradford, but everyone calls me Bebe because of my initials."

Holyoke made notes then sat back against the booth.

"There are two things I have to sort out," he said. "First, was this toe from someone still living when it was severed or are we talking about a dead person? Some of my officers are on that, contacting local funeral parlors and morgues to find out if any bodies are missing a big toe. Second, was the delivery random or aimed at one of you specifically?"

Bebe looked from Holyoke to me, eyes wide. "Who would aim her dead toe at us?"

"Do either of you have enemies?" When Holyoke frowned, deep ruts appeared between his brows. "Someone who'd like to get even with you for something?"

We looked at each other.

"Well, I hate to say it, but Bebe's ex-boyfriend wasn't too happy when we got back together."

"Name?" Holyoke asked Bebe. "And how long did you go with him?"

"Alex Perry," Bebe said without hesitation. "Jorje and I have known each other since we were kids. We needed a break from one another so I started seeing Alex, about eight months ago now. In time, I knew I was still in love with Jorje. We got back together a couple months ago. Six months I saw Alex, tops."

"Any repercussions with this Alex guy?"

"Repercussions?" My voice cracked. "The guy is a freak. He threatened me, he followed and bugged Bebe to the point that we thought we'd have to file a restraining order. Until my Uncle Tomás took care of it."

Captain Holyoke's frown tightened. "Who is this Uncle Tomás, and how did he take care of it?"

So, I told him: "Tomás is my father's brother, Tomás Gonzalez. Tomás died last month."

Captain H. sounded irritated. "How did he take care of it?"

I looked at Bebe and we couldn't suppress our laughter.

"I can't wait to hear what's so funny," Holyoke said, in a tone that dripped sarcasm.

I wiped the laughter off my mouth and went on.

"Tomás worked in a funeral parlor for years. He also had a morbid sense of humor, which he probably got from working there. On top of it, he was an unrelenting practical joker. One night, Tomás broke into Alex's car

while he was lurking around at Bebe's, which he was doing almost every night at dark on the dot.

"Tomás left a dummy in the driver's seat looking shot up like the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Working in the funeral home, he knew how to make fake blood look authentic. He trashed Alex's car in bogus blood, guts and gore. Chicken guts, I suspect. Smashed the windows, too."

"And he left a sticky note on the nose of the dummy referring to me," Bebe volunteered. "It said 'BB Careful.' Alex showed me when he came pounding on my door, screaming."

"I was with Bebe that night," I added. "We wouldn't normally have opened the door, and Alex normally wouldn't have nearly beaten it down, but he sounded so freaked, I went out there to see what happened. He wouldn't let me help him clean it up or drive his car home. I had to call his Mommy to come pick him up."

Holyoke said without taking his eyes off his notes, "And after that?"

"Somebody picked his car up the next day, a friend or relative, I assume. But neither of us have seen or heard from Alex again. I think Tomás scared the crap out of him."

Holyoke scratched more notes. I squeezed Bebe's hand.

"So, this uncle of yours was protective of you and your girlfriend, Jorje?"

"Well, to tell the truth, he was not a warm and fuzzy uncle. His sick humor amused him more than most members of our family, including me. And he did not approve of dating outside our culture, that Bebe isn't Latina. That's why I was surprised when he stepped in like that to help us in his weird way. But Tomás thought Alex was potentially dangerous. "

Holyoke lifted his head. "Then he admitted upfront that he pulled the St. Valentine ..."

“Never. But something you have to understand about Tomás. It was signature. There was no missing his work. He did crazy things. No one else could be so creative and macabre at the same time. I don’t doubt Alex might have had other enemies, but I’d stake my life on it. This was as good as a canvas signed by the master.”

“Okay,” the captain said. “You two have been helpful. I’ll be in touch.”

AS THE DAYS PASSED, many former fans shunned Tons ‘o’ Tacos because the toe story was so disgusting. TOT had been a campus hangout so popular with certain students that it had almost become one of them. While some people soon forgot that a live, human co-ed —my precious Bebe!—almost ate that terrible toe and felt that TOT was wronged, the bad press nearly killed the place, a lot of “poor TOT” and zero customer loyalty.

Then there was me. No one could keep me away from Tons ‘o’ Tacos, not even Bebe, who sometimes almost begged on her hands and knees. I know I was making a pest of myself, asking the manager and staff at least every other day if they had heard anything new on the case. I had already worn out my welcome with Captain Holyoke. He no longer returned my calls.

I admit it. I was obsessed. I took to Googling for news items about the case on my laptop several times a day, regardless of where Bebe and I happened to be at the time.

“If this is your idea of what to do in the afterglow,” Bebe warned, “you need to get a life. Maybe a new girlfriend.”

I could see that the toe story was beginning to strain our relationship, but it was also hot news. Even though the crime was local, it had a relationship to another widespread story, the Blabby’s finger, which made every fast food customer feel vulnerable. That made it universal,

because who doesn't eat junk food at least now and then? It was ludicrous and darkly comical. Newscasters from coast to coast made horrible jokes. I wanted to put an end to it—to solve the crime—because I felt like the jokes were at Bebe's expense. But Bebe had had enough of it all.

"Jorje," she said, "I don't know what is making me crazier, my national embarrassment, my post-traumatic stress from nearly eating a human toe or you not letting it go for even five minutes. Give it a break. Please?"

That was easier said than done for me, especially when I picked up an important clue from one of my frequent visits to what was left of TOT. Several employees had been fired within weeks before the toe taco incident. One of them was very rough around the edges. He created a big scene when the ax came down. He screamed at Mike, "You'll pay!" The cops were wondering if he axed a toe and planted it for revenge. Any progress toward proving that theory was hush-hush and the suspense was killing me.

I got the name of the disgruntled employee, Andrew Palmer, and started investigating him online and staking out his ramshackle apartment. I was convinced that Palmer was the only reasonable suspect. No one was trying to sue Tons 'o' Tacos like the Blabby's case. This was a vendettoe, a vendetta by an unhinged former taco turner. Plain and simple.

Of course, Bebe didn't have a clue I had gone cloak and dagger. I was quite pleased with myself in my dark glasses and borrowed friend's car, peering around a sunshade on the side window with binoculars. That is, until a rap of metal on metal made me jump three feet out of my seat.

I pulled back the corner of the shade and saw Holyoke.

"Looking for something?" he said.

The captain had his gun unholstered. He had obviously used it to rap me back to reality. Busted and sent home, I was forced to let the cops

do their job until I could think of a new way to worm my way into the investigation.

The next day, Bebe and I were driving past TOT on the way to class when we both caught a glimpse of Alex Perry walking in. I skidded to a near stop and peeled in, almost missing the driveway.

"What are you doing?" Bebe yelled.

"You saw him! Alex Perry just ducked in."

"Jorje, don't do this."

"I'm not doin' anything. I'm just watching."

Alex Perry walked out ten minutes later with the Richie Cunningham look-alike. "So they're friends," I said out loud, the light dawning.

I was convinced I had solved the case. Alex Perry had one-upped them with a practical joke sicker than the best of Tio Tomás. I knew who put the toe in the taco and why, a simple case of love spurned and sweet revenge, using his friend who worked at TOT to plant the toe. I doubted Alex could know it was my uncle who pulled the St. Valentine's, but if he had figured it out, he had even more reason to get back at Bebe and me for my uncle's gory warning.

I fished in my wallet for Captain Holyoke's business card.

"Mr. Gonzalez, " he said when he answered his phone. "I'm glad you called. I have some updates."

Captain H. went onto say the toe had been frozen, making it difficult to determine when it had been severed from its body, which they were quite sure was dead, by the way. The toenail polish was the cheap 99 cent generic red you could find at any drug store, impossible to trace.

"But here's the interesting part," Holyoke said.

Captain Holyoke's punch line was drowned out by wailing sirens and police car bubble tops making a mad dash entrance into the taqueria parking lot.

"I can't hear you," I protested. "This place is swarming with cop cars."

"I sent them," Holyoke chuckled. "They're there to arrest Ryan Keller, the freckle-faced kid that works there. We think he stuck the toe in the taco."

"Richie Cunningham" finally had a name.

"Alex Perry's friend!"

"Yeah, but that's not why we are arresting him."

"Then why?"

Bebe was waving her arms frantically beside me, mouthing "What, what???" It was driving her crazy that she couldn't hear the cop half of the conversation.

I pitched up the volume on my cell to the max, holding it between our ears. She leaned in close.

"Ryan Keller had two jobs. He was also a gopher at the funeral home and the son of your uncle's lover. They knew each other well."

Our mouths dropped onto the car seat. Bebe's eyes grew rounder than tacos grandes.

I told him, "I am completely confused."

"Come down to the station and I'll tell you the rest."

Bebe and I were delighted to see Alex Perry looking bummed as his friend, Ryan the Freckle Faced Kid, was ducked into the back seat of the cop car and dragged off to jail. I followed the car to the police station, once the knot of cop cars untangled to set us free. Free from Tons 'o' Tacos, its tight fitting little parking lot and its bad memories.

At the police headquarters, Captain Holyoke was enlightening.

"Tomás had heart trouble much worse than he admitted to any members of your family. He knew it was just a matter of time. So, he had a deal with Ryan. After he died, Ryan was to cut off his toe and paint the

nail red to stuff it in your taco. He knew you frequented Tons 'o' Tacos, which happened to be Ryan's second job, and it was the perfect practical joke. Ryan delivered the body to the crematorium. He just hacked off the toe, froze it and sent the rest of Uncle Tomás to ashes."

Holyoke chuckled.

"If your uncle were still here, I'm sure he'd pat the kid on the back for a job well done, except for the fact that Bebe took the first taco on the tray, which I think was meant for you."

"But why would Tomás do this to me and Bebe? And how did you find out? You just arrested him."

"Yeah, we just arrested him," Holyoke said. "But when we questioned Alex Perry yesterday, thinking he might be the avenger because of his relationship with Bebe, Alex sang like a lark. Snitched his friend off in a heartbeat. Ryan had confided in him. So there you have it. I'm sure DNA will confirm it. It's your uncle's toe."

"But what about the kid that got fired, Palmer?"

"Never a serious suspect, although we watched him just like you did. Did you find anything?"

Holyoke was making fun of me now, and I knew I deserved it. I had really gotten carried away. I was grateful Holyoke had a sense of humor, considering the man hours wasted on one of my uncle's stupid, morbid practical jokes.

In the end, Tons 'o' Tacos was the victim, just like the regulars complained. Tomás's accomplice, Ryan Keller, was in big trouble. He'd have to pay for damages, lost business, workers laid off and endangering the food supply with my dead uncle's decomposing toe.

Still, I couldn't help but take it personally.

"Why would Tio Tomás do this to me?" I asked Holyoke as if I almost expected him to know.

"You tell me."

Bebe sighed. "We rarely understood his sick humor."

I was clueless at first but offered my only thought.

"Maybe Tomás did not think I acted grateful enough for how he stopped Alex from bothering Bebe. I appreciated his sentiment, but his way of doing it was so inappropriate, not to mention illegal. Imagine busting in and trashing someone's car like that. I hated to encourage him. Tomás made himself hard to love."

"Knowing Tomás, he probably gave Ryan some cock-and-bull story about why he wanted to pull this practical joke on his "favorite" nephew. Ryan probably had no clue that Tomás pulled the dummy massacre on his friend Alex or that Tomás was getting even with me for not kissing his feet for the "favor."

One thing was clear. Tomás was craftier than I ever gave him credit for and original, flipping me off from beyond the grave that way, using a different digit than anyone else.

A DAY LATER, Holyoke called me back into the PD. The fact that he wouldn't tell me about this "new development" over the phone had me really curious.

"Jorje," he said, "I have mixed emotions about telling you the latest, but I'm convinced you'll find out anyway. Ryan Keller is such a blabbermouth; he probably already has a deal with The National Dish. I thought you deserved a heads-up, given your personal involvement in the case and relation to the toe. Thought it might be kinder."

"Captain Holyoke, I cannot imagine what you are talking about."

"His cellmate said Keller had loud nightmares, talking to himself."

What did this have to do with the price of *huevos*?

"We sat him down for some additional questioning and I guess the horror of what he had experienced came gushing out. Truth is, your uncle was not intact."

I started getting sick to my stomach without even knowing what was coming next.

"Your aunt apparently duped Tomás's key and snuck into the mortuary just as Keller was hacking off her deceased husband's toe. She was waving a knife, cussing up a storm—"

I was getting sicker. My "sweet" Tia Dolores?

"She forced him to hack off something else further up."

The nausea started to seize me.

"I guess she planned to do it herself, but she had heard about Ryan Keller, that Tomás worked with the son of his lover. When she accidentally came upon the kid and saw him already hacking, she went bonkers and seized the opportunity to force him to do the job for her."

"Of course, Ryan cremated Tomás afterwards, so there's no evidence. I'm not sure I'd even bother to arrest either one of them for desecrating human remains, even with his confession."

While the Captain treated me with the utmost respect throughout this information exchange, I could tell at times that he was nearly biting the insides of his mouth to keep from laughing. Who could blame him? I was having the same problem on my seesaw between horror and hilarity. I was dying over how the rest of my family would react when they got wind of it, especially my dad.

I could not ask the next obvious question.

"I suppose you're wondering what happened to, well, it," Holyoke said.

"Your aunt wanted to force him to bring it home to his mother. Keller managed to run and ditch Dolores and later bring all of Tomás's parts

to the crematorium except for the toe he'd iced, but the kid has been shaking in his shoes ever since. Your aunt scared the hell out of him."

She had taken so much from that crazy old coot, my uncle, especially his final insult, dying in the bed of another woman. They say couples who have been together many years start looking alike. I have seen it. Whoever thought my aunt and uncle would start acting alike? My angel aunt gone to the devil—

Still, no matter how horrible her deed, there was a part of me so sick of my uncle's pranks, I could not resist giving Tia Dolores a mental thumbs-up.

THE TRAINING TAPE



The train screeched to a halt, brakes screaming and sparks flying. I could hear and smell it, but I could not see much of what was going on for the blinding light out the windows. I could hear the sounds of glass breaking in the distance.

Someone must have pulled the emergency brake. We were in the middle of nowhere—wide open spaces—I sensed between stations. It had to be just past daybreak because the commotion woke me from a dead sleep. But the light was so bright!

More like noon. Confusing.

I have never done well, jolted to consciousness. I could feel everyone around me dialing 911 on their nervous systems. But soon it all faded—their bustling to see what was going on and lining up, toes tapping impatiently, to try to get out of the train. I found myself having the strangest sensation. I became very calm, as though in deep meditation. I did not want to move.

That's when it started to happen—my life was flashing in front of me, like the near-death experiences I had heard of. I came to a complete stop—much more gently than the train. I went from 60 to zero in a heartbeat. Everyone and everything buzzed around me like a swarm of gnats, but for me alone, the director of this film pressed the pause button.

My mind, though, kept going—like crazy. Images of my past burst into my inner screening room in haphazard sequence, landing and mixing with other pieces of my life like chunks of glass from a kaleidoscope. Maybe that was the glass I heard breaking.

Jeremy is screaming at me, raising cane! OK, crutch, if you want to get literal. He is leaning on one crutch, raising the other with his fist clenched around it. He is shaking his crutch and fist at me. He emits a stream of

swear words so foul; I start to smell sulphur. He heaves his crutch at the china cabinet and glass shatters.

Maybe that's the glass I heard breaking.

I knew what I was getting into when I married Jeremy—I thought. High highs and low lows. When I first met him right out of college, I still thrived on high drama. After 14 years together and the car accident that left him a paraplegic two years ago, there were few elements of comedy left, not even comic relief. I was sick of my life in this melodrama. I was a giver to an extreme, but Jeremy was emotionally abusive and a troubled man, way before he was trapped in a body that wouldn't work for him. Now I was both his closest confidante and scapegoat.

"I don't know if I can live like this. I'm not sure I want to. I can't promise you I will."

I hid his gun.

Still, in his more tender moments, Jeremy was so kind and sensitive; when he went to live on the Dark Side almost full-time, it broke my heart.

Maybe that's the glass I heard breaking. My heart was big and fragile.

I'M WITH MELODIE, my closest friend who knows everything about me, things I can't or won't tell Jeremy.

"I'd rather die than make this decision, Mel."

It's the End of My Rope Conversation, the one where I am faced with two untenable choices—leave Jeremy and live with the consequences of abandoning a handicapped husband and all the judgment it will wreak upon me and possibly drive him to suicide—or save my own life.

"I'd rather die than make this decision."

My interior movie by the unknown director is showing me the endless times I have said these words in the past year and how desperate I feel.

NEXT, A MUCH EARLIER memory: My sickly mother is in bed, as usual. She is crying. My father has left us.

"Promise me you will never do this to someone. Abandon him in his hour of need."

"I promise, Mommy."

I'D RATHER DIE than make this decision. This cross-country train trip is my timeout to figure out what I should do. Three days from California to New York with my own sleeping compartment, a luxury I saved up for in loose-change increments for years. I never expected to take it for this reason. It's a moving getaway, a meditation in motion that I prayed would somehow result in The Answer. Either answer was horrible, but maybe there would be some magical, metaphysical aha that could make the bitter pill go down more easily, whichever one I'd have to swallow.

FLASHBACK FROM THERAPY:

"What I fear most is that he will kill himself. No, I fear just as much that I won't ever really live. I don't fear death; I fear not living long enough to do what I came here to do. There's something bigger I'm supposed to give, not just to Jeremy. I know this marriage is killing me."

I'M IN THIRD GRADE, writing in a notebook.

"Once upon a time a little girl grew up to write stories. She made people feel better."

The primitive figure I drew looked just like me, wearing my favorite polka dot dress. I grew up to be a nurse, but I always wrote on the side, not necessarily in a polka dotted dress. Writing was my passion, and when I could write and heal—write for emotional catharsis, I was in heaven.

THE REVERIE SNAPPED to a halt, just as quickly as it had popped into motion. No one was left onboard but me. The train was an abandoned ghost town. I never heard such loud silence.

There was nothing else left to do, so I got up and headed toward the door, carrying my small tote bag with me. As I neared the top step to detrain, I was faced with the blinding light again. I shaded my eyes with my free hand and walked down the steps very carefully, since my vision was impaired.

The platform in the bright light also was abandoned, except for two children. They waved at me like long lost relatives and beckoned me to join them.

The first child was about six. She looked familiar.

"Do you remember me?" she asked, twirling and nearly doing a dance in her patent leather shoes. She was dressed in a vintage 1950s winter coat and hat.

I looked at her blankly. What kind of place was this? A time warp?

"We were on the train together from Miami to Chicago. 1953."

I stared. I remember that trip and the child I met onboard as if it were yesterday. How could this be? It's 1982, and she was my age, give or take a little. She'd be 35 like me. Have I landed in the place where time stands still?

"Yes, I remember, but how can this be happening? You're still a child."

"Maybe you remember me," the older girl said. She looked ten, Hispanic, and had straight hair with no intentional style. "We met crossing a street with our moms in the Loop one day, and we talked about what we wanted to be when we grew up."

I never forgot her, either. "You wanted to be an undertaker like your uncle. I thought it was the weirdest thing I ever heard."

She put her arm around me and led me to a bench where we all sat down. Surprisingly, this was a station after all. The lights were sure bright.

The older one started the next leg of the conversation.

"Do you know why we're here?"

I was truly clueless and apparently looked it.

"Think about how you met us."

I scratched my head, which feels lame in retrospect. Maybe I thought I could scrape out some answers.

After what felt like an hour's silence, I said, "Well, the little kid has something to do with my first train ride and how I came to love trains. It was a very positive experience. You have something to do with vocation ... and maybe ..."

"Go ahead, say it," the ten-year-old encouraged.

I couldn't bear to say the D-word.

"... how we all end up."

After a two-beat pause, the light dawned.

"Oh, Jesus—I'm not dead ... am I?"

They both smiled at me sweetly. They didn't say yes or no. The silent smile was creepier than if they had spat it out and told me outright: You just made your last stop at the end of the line. You punched your ticket.

"Why here—like this. Why now? I'm not done!"

The six-year-old spoke. If I ever knew her name, I had long forgotten it. She had made my first train trip with my parents something special, because I met a pal onboard. I remembered her always and how she stamped travel for me with friendship. This indelible combination had made me quite the adventurer till Jeremy's accident rendered us both homebound.

"Where, when—it all happens according to your thoughts and emotions."

"What do you mean," I demanded, sensing I had really blown it in a big and final way.

The older child picked up the thread. "You kept saying you'd rather die than make the decision."

"And you love trains," the little one chimed in.

Duh. So I get to die on a train and never have to make the decision. Swell. I had no idea God, the Universe—whatever— was so literal.

"But what about the other people on this train? Surely, I couldn't be the only one who died. Did they die because of me?"

"Lots of people like trains," the little one said.

"BUT I'M NOT DONE!" I yelled, hearing the echo of broken glass somewhere in the back of my memory. By now, I knew this was a literal train wreck.

"We can help you with that. Let me see your bag."

The big one pulled out my tape recorder, my note-taking gismo for many a writing project and my multi-purpose memory jogger. I never went anywhere without it.

"You get to tell your story," the little kid said, smiling ear to ear.

This had to be a bad dream. "But if I'm to believe you two Ghosts from Kismet Past, I am deader than a doornail. How am I supposed to tell a story to anyone?"

They broke out into a giggle fest that reminded me of many a pajama party in my `tween-age years.

Older Kid finally calmed down long enough to say, "It's really true what you've heard about time. It's not linear. It's sort of all happening at once."

They suggested I sit down and ponder this information a while, and when I was ready, I should tell what happened into the tape recorder—everything I remember from the moment the train stopped—I guess crashed.

SOON I WAS DRIFTING OFF again into one of those kaleidoscope reveries where pieces of experience came drifting in, only these bits were not immediately familiar.

I see a lot of white and hear people talking around me. I cannot move. Beeps are the prominent sound besides the voices I recognize of loved ones. Jeremy! Mel! Jeremy's brother Ben who stayed with him when I took the train trip. My sister Signe.

Signe is whimpering, and Jeremy looks pale—frowning and shifting in his wheelchair. He looks tense.

I hear the weak blips surrender to the final, uninterrupted beep of flat lining, a familiar sound from my days working in the cardiac intensive care unit. Jeremy screams my name, "Kristine!" A woman in a white coat walks in and tells them, "I am so sorry."

"But she came out of the coma for two days! She talked to us, even into her tape recorder," Jeremy yelled—no, pleaded.

"Quite honestly, with the extent of her injuries, I never expected her to come out of the coma at all, much less to regain so much function, even for a short time. I really can't explain it, except to say it was some kind of a miracle. I wish it could have lasted."

I snap out of it, back on the train platform where my two angels of transition—or whatever they are—have returned to my side. Sensing my confusion, the older girl says, "You don't realize it, but you left behind a huge legacy."

I am dumbfounded, and I am dead. I am not too happy about either.

"Now people will know the power of what they say to themselves with great emotion."

"It works for better or for worse, depending on your point of view," says the little one, sounding very precocious for her visual age.

"I'd rather die than make the decision."

“I don’t want to die until I do what I’m supposed to do.”

Since time is apparently more like Silly Putty than anything as static and mundane as calendar squares, you may already know some of this—or not, depending on where you are in the time/space continuum and your state of consciousness at the moment. My relatives transcribed my last tape, resulting in the little book you’re holding, *The Training Tape*. It was or will be a best seller around the world, translated into more languages than early Sodom and Gomorrah. The kids claim I really comfort people about death and help them overcome their fear. Better yet, I help a lot of others reprogram their psycho-spiritual computers for a better life and last ride.

Many people study this book as if I were a direct channel from On High. I guess I am, but the study groups and near religious fervor over my simple story and easy directions embarrass me. I wonder if Jesus feels the same way.

Jeremy actually got his act together after I died and he could no longer blame things on me. He got so sick of himself; he stayed home from his own pity party.

Now I get to help people in a whole new way. Who knew it would border on corny and *It’s a Wonderful Life*? I like it when they send me on transition missions. Some even involve trains.

I’m starting to understand why I would have rather died

ZOE'S HAIR

Darryl touched her lifeless forehead, and then ran his fingers through her hair. He ruffled her locks, just as he'd done when she was alive, once a month for 25 years. He loved to mess with her hair before he worked on it. It was thick, full-bodied, and pliant to his touch. Zoe had ideal hair, a hairdresser's dream come true. He always felt like a kid up to his elbows in Playdoh. Zoe's hair also transported him back to his old Kentucky home, growing up at his grandma's knee, messing with the remains of the cookie dough. Zoe was such a good sport about his silliness, his tactile



need. If they hadn't been so close, it would have been inappropriate. Darryl was relieved to find her hair didn't feel much different, dead or alive.

He had never imagined the first time she plopped into his chair that Zoe would become one of his dearest friends. They bonded over colorings, highlights, haircuts, makeovers, experiments with perms, and every type of 'do from shoulder length to pixie. Mostly, they bonded gossiping about their relationships. Somewhere along the line, maybe even in the first five seconds they met, they adored each other. If he weren't gay, he'd have married her.

Zoe and Darryl had laughed about this moment for years, how she'd arrange her will so that he would have permission to do her hair one last time at the funeral home after she died. "I don't want some stranger messing with my head after I'm dead," she'd say, her peals of laughter dispersing in the salon, far sweeter to the ear than hair spray to the nose.

They had talked about it many times, this crazy last request of hers. Darryl was more than willing to fulfill her wishes, even if it sounded a little creepy at first. He was willing, mostly; because he always figured, he'd die first and be spared actually having to do it. He was a few years older, and women usually live longer than men ...

... but here he was, and there she wasn't. Zoe had a fatal stroke at 50 years old, out of nowhere. Her name—Zoe—is Greek for life. She was Greek-American and had the zest for which she was named to an extreme. Darryl figured her for one of those women who'd still be rockin' in her nineties. He couldn't get his head around this loss, and he wasn't the only one. Zoe was engaged, just three months from her wedding. She had droves of friends and loving family who were in and out of the funeral parlor with one arrangement detail or another, all bawling their eyes out. Darryl had commiserated with them while he was out front talking to the funeral director, before he came back to the embalming room. If he hadn't had such a good cry himself before he got there, Darryl wouldn't have been able to see what he was doing. He was wiping a tear from his eye when he found himself doing what Granny would have called "wool gathering."

"WHAT DID IT FEEL like when you woke up one day and found out you were gay?" Zoe asked him wide-eyed when Darryl shared his "announcement," not long after his divorce from a two-decade marriage with three children. Zoe had huge eyes to begin with, and when they popped with wonder or curiosity, they lit up the room. Most of all, they lit up his heart. That's why he was always willing to tell her everything. He felt very safe with her. It was easy for him to come right out with it.

"I can't believe I'm in love with a man."

"I think it's great."

Zoe was a champion of *Free to Be You and Me*, as the old Marlo Thomas kids' book title goes. In fact, she rather looked like a shorter version of her with enormous eyes—eyes now closed—for good.

Next, he remembered Zoe's frame-by-frame telling of her seduction by her chiropractor, ultimately her fiancé, and a much younger man, who was fresh out of Pop Doc School. Zoe was terminally entertaining, no pun intended. She could tell a story like a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production in Technicolor and Panavision. They were two girlfriends; giddy with the thrill of it all, dishing like there was no tomorrow.

Now, there wasn't—at least not for Zoe.

Gathering more wool, his thoughts drifted off to their countless conversations about the nature of God, spirituality, and what it means to be a good person in a sometimes-crazy mixed-up world. Once she commented to him about people's bigotry against gays, "People should worry more about how they hate, not how others love."

These kinds of pearls that rolled off her tongue so naturally were one of the things Darryl would miss about her most. Zoe was all about peace on earth and saving the planet. He knew exactly why Billy Joel's song, "Only the Good Die Young," kept ringing in his ears.

Darryl also knew why Zoe was his only choice to officiate when he and Michael had a commitment ceremony at an enormous celebration. Zoe was always into every kind of esoteric art from tarot cards to astrology. He almost expected it when she told him, "I'm already a Universal Life Church minister." So what, if it was mail order, Internet-order or whatever. It didn't matter anyway, since gay marriage wasn't legal. But if it were, he'd like her signature on the dotted line of the official record. Zoe walked the talk of loving kindness more than anyone he knew. She was a high priestess in a direct line to the divine, as far as he was concerned. Zoe was good at the

thresholds in life, even this one—death. The funeral director confided in Darryl that Zoe actually died with a smile on her face.

Just as he was starting to blow-dry Zoe's hair, a ringing sound started to develop in Darryl's hand-held dryer. It kept increasing in pitch to the point of severe annoyance. It was getting louder and louder ... he was looking at it every which way, trying to figure out what was wrong ...

THE WOOL GATHERING stopped abruptly. The sound was an alarm—a loud alarm that begged a fast grab of the clock on the bedside table and a hard punch of the snooze button. Zoe was confused and more than a little creeped out. She wiggled her toes, realizing the last time she saw herself; she was dead on a slab in a funeral parlor. Once she was sure she was still alive and the drama she had witnessed was a nightmare, Zoe took a sobering look at the time. She couldn't believe it was that late. She wiped the sleep out of her eyes and dragged herself to a cup of coffee.

She sat down, dreading the day, rereading Darryl's obituary in the morning paper. She could not believe that after 25 years, she was going to his funeral this morning. Darryl's partner Michael had died first of AIDS—now Darryl. It wasn't fair. He was family. He meant so much to so many people. She'd miss the way he messed with her hair—and that was just for starters. What did he do, touching her head like that? Somehow, he got inside her in a way that no other friend had ever done. She knew she was a very mental person. Maybe that's why. Head and heart—direct pathway.

Darryl was always there for her. He even did her hair in that weird dream she just had. It was so like him to give her anything she wanted, including some hokey last hair-do in a funeral parlor that probably gave him the shivers and thickened his Southern drawl, which only happened when he was nervous. She was on the brink of bawling—again. "Love y'all," she heard him say in her head.

“Love y’all,” she said back aloud in playful imitation, as always.

Who would ever do her hair or get inside her head and heart like that now?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



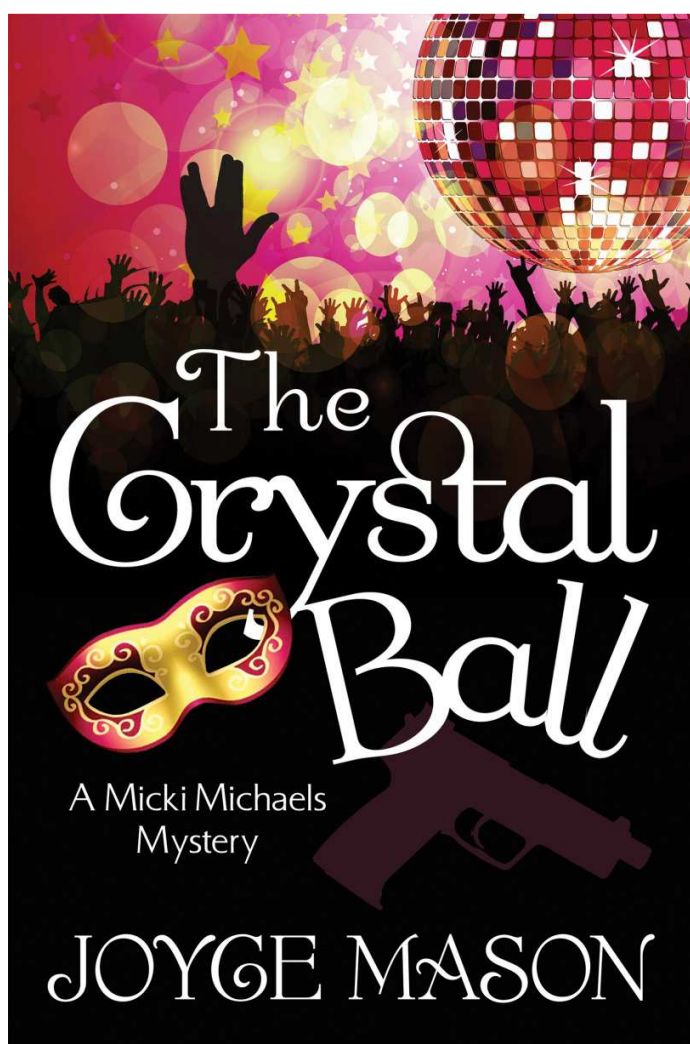
Joyce Mason is a prolific writer and astrologer, author of numerous e-books and hundreds of articles on astrology and related topics. She’s taking the leap into fiction, starting with this small short-story collection, an appetizer to the main course, her debut novel. *The Crystal Ball*, will be available in late 2013. It’s the first of the humorous, Micki Michaels Mystery series. Early readers call it “a hoot” and “a real page-turner.” (See next page for details.)

A passionate blogger, Joyce will soon launch her newest offering on writing and creativity called Joyce Mason’s New Inkarnations. Watch for it. She has contributed to several mystery short story anthologies, and Joyce watches every crime and mystery show she can pack into her busy life. Mystery is her connecting thread. Even astrology and metaphysics delve into the mysteries of life.

Joyce lives near Sacramento, CA with her husband, Tim—they’re reunited childhood sweethearts—and their very vocal cat.

Available November 2013

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An astrologer and her ex-FBI boyfriend are mismatched except for their hot chemistry. Micki Michaels and Curt Stern are forced to apply their beaker of volatile love chemicals to a good cause—busting crimes in progress at The Crystal Ball. The Ball's an outrageous costume party, the theme: "Come as

you'll be in the future." The Crystal Ball is also the 25th anniversary and New Year's celebration of the Immortalists on Planet Earth Association. Micki is president of these [Right to Long Lifers](#). She and Curt have to smoke out a threatening madman who wants to steal the group's "secret" of immortality. Is he hidden in the costumed crowd? How will Curt and Micki stop a kidnapping, maybe even a murder, without derailing San Francisco's ultimate celebration of life?

One-of-a-kind costumes, characters, crime fighting techniques and gadgets will keep you mesmerized during this fast-paced 24 hours that changes everything for the stars of the show—and you'll start the New Year out right with them, laughing all the way.

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