



A WEEK AT WOODLAWN

By Ben Sherwood

...Continued from page 1

This is my fourth day on the job in the cemetery. I am here for a week of hard work and research for a new novel that is set in a graveyard. It is a love story, like my last book, and as a recovering journalist, I am determined to render the details as authentic as possible. So I have humbly asked the management of Woodlawn to put me to work. They have generously accepted, and the union has kindly agreed to let me carry caskets, mow lawns, and whack weeds. Many of my friends are baffled by my wish to spend a week this way – it’s creepy and spooky, they say – but I know the truth. It will be an unforgettable, life-affirming experience.

It has been said that Woodlawn is a City of the Dead. During my week wearing the blue uniform of the cemetery, I discover that it is also a vibrant city of the living. Every morning, we start work before 8 a.m. in the service yard, get our assignments and equipment, and head out into the field. In sunshine or snow, the cemetery is always alive with activity. After all, there are 400 rolling acres to maintain, 20 miles of streets, and 1,200 mausoleums.

My first day is spent with the grave diggers, a spirited gang who bury or entomb almost 1,200 souls every year. We set up tents, arrange lowering devices, and carry coffins from hearses. I learn that it takes 25 scoops of the backhoe to open a new grave. I discover there is more to the work than moving earth as I watch one of the guys push an old woman in a wheelchair up a steep hill to a gravesite. The job also requires respect for the living as well as the dead.

The days that follow are filled with revelations about what really goes on behind the great gates and fences of

Woodlawn. For instance, I learn that Mother’s Day is the busiest holiday of the year here. I see the place where a man comes to clean the statue of his brother with a Q-tip. I watch the so-called cemetery familiars who visit every day. Like the old man who sits in a lawn chair beside his wife’s grave.

At every turn, I am reminded of the fine, fragile thread that ties us to life and how suddenly it can be cut. I see the new monument to a firefighter killed in the World Trade Center attack. I come upon the memorial for a 15-year-old youth who died trying to evade six women who wanted to give him birthday kisses. He somehow fell on an ink eraser and died.

After the initial surprise of working in the cemetery has worn off – when I’m no longer as aware of the hearses, coffins and the crematory – I’m struck that Woodlawn is like a great and historic park and we are its caretakers. The world hums along outside the fences, and a parallel world goes on here amidst the mausoleums and graves.

My week is over far too soon. I have filled notebooks with fascinating conversations about this special place. Right now, the rain is coming down even harder. My notebook is soggy. I smell the air and make a scribble. Why does cut grass smell this way? I’ll have to look that up when I get home. It will become a detail in the novel.

I see the string cutters disappearing over the next hill. I can’t possibly keep up with them. My lower back is almost in spasm. The foreman watches me from his truck. He smiles. I grin back. I know I will collapse if I keep going. In this exact moment, I’m glad that I am a writer. After all, it will take all of my imagination to come up with a good excuse to quit early, rest my muscles, and get out of the driving rain.