

[Reprinted with the permission of Tom Chalkley from "Grave Circumstances."]

No one leaves candy for Filippo Marino.

The marker for young Filippo, dated 1899-1903, stands alone beside a footpath in the woods of Herring Run Park. For years it lay nearby on the forest floor, but recently a thoughtful passerby took the trouble to stand the little monument up and brush it off. It's obvious that the stone doesn't belong here in the woods. Months ago, one of our neighborhood leaders told me that it came from a graveyard in Clifton Park. I've since learned that there used to be other gravestones piled here as part of a rubble fill. After neighbors complained, the city plowed soil over them.

It took a little detective work to confirm that, indeed, this stray headstone came from the St. Vincent de Paul Cemetery, which occupies a windswept hillside in the midst of the Clifton Park golf course. According to *The Very Quiet Baltimoreans*, the indispensable guide to Baltimore cemeteries, this modest plot--listed in the book as a "vanished cemetery"--used to hold so many Italian and Portuguese immigrants that some people called it the "dago cemetery." The entry notes that "little remains but a few stones around a small stand of trees," and that "tombstones removed in the mid-1980s were reportedly dumped in Herring Run." According to records at St. Vincent de Paul church, Filippo Marino was buried on Jan. 4, 1903. No word about his baptism or parentage--but that's not the end of the story.

Father Richard Lawrence, pastor at the church, was surprised to hear the ethnic slur about the cemetery, but he snorted when I told him that the standard work on Baltimore cemeteries lists it as "vanished." He told me to look all the way around the old polo pony barn that serves as a park utility building. Sure enough, I found about 30 gravestones, piled or laid flat in four distinct clusters, all overgrown with weed trees and rough turf. Many Italian names are represented among the stones, some of which have oval-shaped cavities where photographs used to be affixed.

Lawrence explained that in the 1960s and '70s, the cemetery was subjected to vandalism, much of it inflicted by a teenage gang with a ghoulish initiation ritual. Would-be gang members had to sneak into the graveyard at night and remove a body from one of the mausolea (Lawrence's correct plural for mausoleum) that used to line one edge of the property. The corpse would be dumped on the ninth tee of the golf course, adjacent to the cemetery. Finally, the candidate was required to spend the night in the very tomb that he'd robbed. "Many a time I got calls out there to reclaim bodies from the green," Lawrence recalls. He confesses that he fantasized about hiding out among the tombs with a portable P.A. system, waiting until one of the miscreants settled in for his gruesome nap, then booming out, "What are you doing in my house?" and watching the fun.

For years the church and the city (which owns the golf course) had wrangled over selling the property, disposing of the bodies, and squelching the vandals. Conditions worsened. Some human remains were set on fire. In the late seventies, a golfer was horrified to find

a recently-buried infant on the eleventh green. After more fruitless meetings with the city, Lawrence says, the church got the authority to tear down the mausolea, bury the bodies, and stockpile the gravestones so vandals and thieves wouldn't know where to dig.

Lawrence himself did much of the work, but he also got a last laugh. One day, he says, he was digging a hole for one of the evicted corpses when along came a pair of youthful trespassers. "I'm stripped to the waist, covered with sweat and dirt, and these two kids were taking a shortcut, which they knew they weren't supposed to. They came up and said, 'What are you doing, mister?' I looked up real blankly and said, 'Diggin' a grave.' They asked, 'Who's it for?' and I looked straight at 'em and said 'I don't know, I haven't decided yet.' They gave me one of the scariest looks I've ever seen on a face, and took off," Lawrence chuckles, "I don't know, the devil made me do it."