



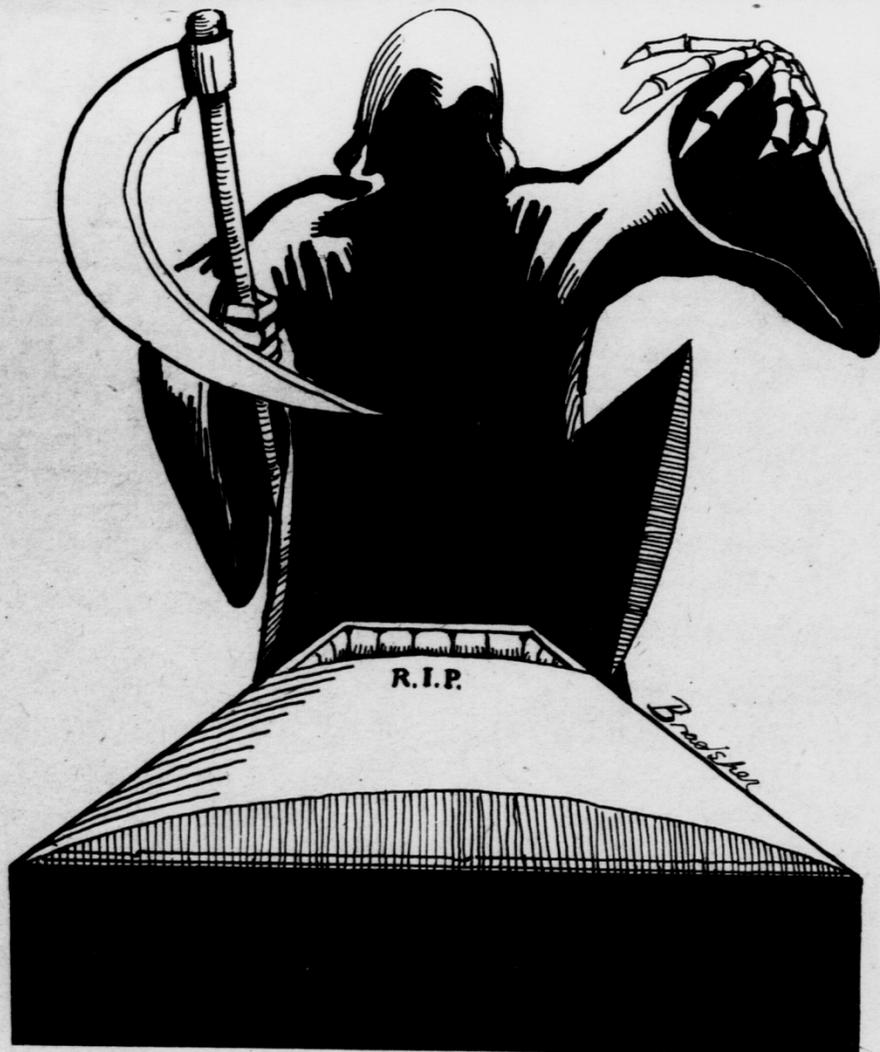
MOUNT HOPE.



Local color
p. 4

Counterpoint

The State News Magazine
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Art/Bill Bradsher

Memories of Room 10

By PETE DALY

Death is an ogre that most people try to bury. Not literally, but in the recesses of their mind. In the hospital where I worked, even official policy was to deny the ever-present existence of death. The "morgue carts," for example, is an element of the anti-death mentality.

The morgue cart is like a stretcher on wheels, with a big sheet on the flat top, dropping down almost to the little wheels on all four sides. The morgue cart's purpose is to look empty at all times. See? No one is lying on it. That way, no one would get upset when an ominous form, wrapped from head to feet in a plastic, disposable sheet, came rolling down a hospital corridor, propelled by an anonymous orderly dressed in white.

It looks empty, but if I were to lift that sheet hanging down almost to the floor on each side...

The payload, you see, is actually underneath the frame. A large, stainless steel receptacle underneath is where the passenger rides in stately privacy. Out of sight, out of mind, they say.

The morgue cart illustrates our society's great fear of the image of death, more so than the actual result. One gruesome episode reflected that mentality exercised to the absurd.

A mom-and-pop store in Lansing had been held up, and the two vermin involved casually shot both the old man and his wife in the head, almost as an afterthought. They got \$40 in the robbery.

The wife lived, but the old man was doomed. After a cursory examination the doctors in surgery shuffled the wasted old storekeeper into the hospital bureaucracy. He was sent up to a ward to be admitted, but died enroute. So I was ordered to trundle the man back down to the hospital morgue, deep in the basement and right

near the cafeteria. He was still on the operating cart, a gory mess of spattered blood and clotted hair. The upper half of his head was wrapped with blood soaked gauze, and his closed eyes were bulging purple with blood. A small scarlet stream trickled from his nose.

Before started that long trip down the corridors and elevator, I looked around the room for a sheet to cover him with.

"Your can't cover him. He's scheduled for an autopsy, and he's not to be touched in any way," an agitated nurse told me. I replied that he would not present a very pretty sight moving through the hustle and bustle of the hospital.

"No, no! Take him down uncovered. If you cover him people will know he's dead. It would upset people more" she insisted. The nurses (and everyone else) were very disturbed over the tragic murder, the most repugnant of all images of death. I ignored the illogical order and covered the man with a sheet. If just the shape of death is going to freak someone out, I thought, they should see the real thing...

As an orderly I became used to death. We were to wash, tag the big toe and wrap the "expiration," which is official hospital jargon for the unofficial event called death. We worked with the raw material and that leads to an intimate and even casual understanding of it. I don't think of that attitude as callousness, but rather unemotional familiarity. A dead person is no longer a person. When life leaves, only a cold mound of decaying matter is left, and that is easily disposed of.

It would hurt us to lose a patient we had become attached to, but death is only for an instant. After our friend was gone, we returned to our job of disposing of the leftovers. Business as usual, while life goes on...



Glad this is over

By G.F. KORRECK

Death.

The last reward.

The wages of sin.

Death is the man in the white nightgown.

I can tell you, I don't mind telling you (I can't wait, in fact), that I've been going nuts these past few weeks. I realize there are maybe two or three of you out there reading this but that's enough. Because I've been going stark raving nuts.

It's the time, the season. It's the way things have been going lately.

And, it's this magazine.

It all seemed so innocent at first. Two guys come in with stories for the magazine and, by coincidence, there is an available motif, death.

Great.

Put them together.

Do a whole magazine on death.

Yeah, do a whole magazine on it.

It was innocent at first, the usual jokes and some bizarre art ideas but it gets to you after awhile. It's not that it is so difficult to talk about, or look at (anyone who has seen pictures of hunger victims or the recent condition of Vietnam has to have some feeling on what it's all about). It's not that it's inordinately depressing.

And yet, it's all of those. There's something about it that grows, that has teeth and constantly gnaws away until all you have left is this picture of yourself, a white, incredibly white, lump of flesh stretched on a slab of marble and a couple of guys in white suits poking and jabbing you.

It's that, and it's the grandfather who used to feed me strawberries and sugar and stick his false teeth out to frighten me; the uncle who tickled me until my stomach hurt; my mother's uncle, who used to give us a new dollar bill in an envelope with a window each Christmas, and how, when he was lying there yellow and frowning, a half-shaven man half his age, throwing him a tear-filled kiss and saying "So long, Willie, this is it."

I thought of Hemingway, who blew his brains out because he could not longer be what everyone, including himself, thought Ernest Hemingway should be; of Nijinsky, who could no longer bring himself to do the only thing that kept him from death. And of Latrec's uncle, who while the painter was lying on his death bed, was in the back yard shooting at bats with a blunderbuss — coming inside just before death to snap his suspenders at flies and complain about how Latrec was taking too long.

It can drive you nuts. It will, if you think about it too much.

I don't know what kind of reaction this magazine will get. The stories are as dissimilar as people's attitudes towards death. Jerry McGuire, whose story account of working as an apprentice in a funeral home begins on the next page, may seem callous to some. But he was involved with a business, a lucrative one, and later worked for a fast food chain. It may have had some effect.

Mark Dixon spent a day with some men few people would probably spend a day with. They, too, are involved in a business. They have a job to do it seems best they keep it in that perspective.

Pete Daly worked at a hospital. He saw death firsthand, every day.

As for me, I'll be glad when this is done with. Reading, and working on, these stories was an experience I am not likely to forget. I had hopes this would be, rather than a column, a coherent discussion with some people on campus who have done research into the psychology of death—two of the people I spoke to, Dr. Norbert Enzer, chairman of the MSU's psychiatry department and Elizabeth Seagull, a clinical psychologist specializing in coping with child death get special thanks.

Mrs. Seagull, who was surprised I did not know where the LifeSciences building is, admits it is a sad commentary on our time that professionals need to step in in moments of personal crisis.

"It is a demise of the extension of families," she suggests. "We live in nuclear families and there is a scattering of the support system that has created a void."

That means the gap has to be filled and, somehow, life has to go on.

And it will.

Tuesday afternoon, this magazine will be winding its way down the streets, its pages fluttering in the breeze, or lying under a footprint in a half-filled classroom. I will no longer be going nuts and everything will be as before.

For most of us.

I was a bicycling mortician



"I had the feeling that, for awhile, I had the inside track on death," says free-lance writer Jerome McGuire. Desperate for work, McGuire answered an advertisement for a funeral director's assistant that he saw in the placement employment office. What follows is an account of the four weeks he spent learning the business, as well as a few other things.

By JEROME McGUIRE

My jeans torn at the seams, I am riding my bicycle through the sunlight, a dark suit hung over my back. I am on my way to work, an apprentice at a major midwestern funeral home.

Becoming an apprentice wasn't all that difficult — I had to know a lot of priests to get hired initially, but once I told them I could work full-time I was in.

"If you are going to work full time, you will need apprentice papers — it's really just a formality but you will be assisting in the prep and state regulations . . . would that be all right?"

"Yes . . . I would be assisting the embalmings then. I would be interested in that, I'd like to try the profession," I said gamely.

We would like you to live in the apartment, there is no rent, a color T.V., kitchen . . . The apprentices take their breaks there in the day and Doug, a student apprentice lives up there, and one of the licensed men (a mortician) who is a State Policeman lives there, too."

"No," I said quickly, "that's quite alright, I can live at home."

He filled my schedule out and quickly explained it "off every other weekend, blah blah." I stuffed the paper in my pocket as I left. Later, I discovered that I had only two days off every two weeks and that I worked 13 hours one day and ten the next with every fourth night on call for odd hour deaths. — If someone dies at four a.m., the funeral home handles it right then.

I began to realize I was in for much more than I had thought.

"Hey sport," Dan, one of three other apprentices, yells as I wheel into the driveway at 8 a.m.

"Yep, its the bicycling mortician" I reply as I slide in through the back door to what I call the backstage area; a small room with a bulletin board, a couple of folding chairs, some yet to be distributed sympathy flowers and, most prominent, a large mirror so you can check out your costume.

The room is where you prepare to go on during a funeral and has all the feeling backstage opening night. The body preparation room (prep room) lies next to it and the scene is equivalent to a vintage Frankenstein movie. White-clad men in gloves pop in and out of white tile and porcelain setting while dark-suited men pace outside, awaiting the final result.

I hang my suit on a rack and head for the garage where my day begins. The limosines, hearses — and sometimes the owner's cars — have to be washed. It gets boring but it is one of the less intense duties of the day. The radio plays Ray Stevens and "The Streak" as we play with the hoses.

Two of the other apprentices are Vietnam veterans. Medics during their tour of duty, they considered themselves too old for med school when they got out and came here. Our status as glorified lawn boys gives us a common meeting ground and a vehicle to come down on Milt, the tire-waisted caretaker who has a terminal love affair with lethargy. Milt, despite the nature, or intent, of his work is close to being our equal on the status ladder.

The owners, there are four of them, coexist similar to feudal lords — theirs is a big business and on certain days they seem barely able to tolerate each other.

After washing the cars, we all head downstairs for coffee. Gregg is sent for rolls, another apprentice job, and he usually gets tasty ones. He considers himself a man with a touch of class.

"I want a funeral home all done in burgundy — burgundy suits, white shoes and white carnation. Hearses, too," he says.

Three of the guys have motorcycles and conversation shifts to them, then to other areas of mutual interest.

"Who was that cookie I saw you with Doug? Good stuff."

"Hey Jerry, how does your girlfriend like your new job?"

Only one of the owners comes to the break room for donuts. It's Bill, whose own funeral homes was bought out by the parent company a few years back. Though financially well off, Bill seems obsessed with the details of monitoring a funeral. Today, he comes in upset as usual.

"What the hell is Jerry doing on flowers?"

"It's all right, Bill . . . he can handle it," Dan tells him.

And Dan tells me "He always gets pissed off before a funeral — too nervous."

I am listed for the ten and two o'clock funerals. There are also funerals at 11:30 and 1:00. One is at the suburban chapel and another at a small branch chapel outside town. This is a typical day.

I am assigned to flowers this morning. My job is to run into the chapel when the service is over and help load the flowers into a

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East Lansing resident, Jerome McGuire, spent a great deal of his time in places like this one as a mortician's apprentice. The hours were long and the work, well . . . the work spoke for itself. Actually, it didn't speak for itself and that was one of the reasons McGuire, who later worked at a hamburger stand, gave for hanging up his flags.

photos by
Dale Atkins

Walking through a small town cemetery gives you a feeling different than you might get elsewhere. There is the feeling that you know everyone here, and you probably do.

There is history engraved in each stone and sometimes in places where there are no stones. Gardeners will tell you about the family that was lost in a fire and, too poor to afford a stone, they are "somewhere over there . . . the markers rotted away a few years back."

Most of the founding fathers are found here — who they are is readily evident by checking the names and seeing how many there are of each. Often, entire sections of the grounds — which are not large to begin with — belong to members of a single family.

Friends are revisited here, too. Someone who put you and your family up during the flood or who helped build the addition your house needed when an unexpected child came.

It is unlike a metropolitan cemetery, where you can walk for what seems like miles and see only tombstones and hear cars and trucks winding by — it is surrounded by silence, except for an occasional bird, and by small forests where the people buried here grew up and built their homes.

State News photographer Pete Daly recently spent a morning in such a place and the photographs on these pages are a few of the endless impressions he received.



It seems unlike a place where people would be brought after they die. The air is fresh and noiseless — the setting more one you might expect to enjoy, rather than study the designs of death.



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As in life, each family has a singular image about itself. The size, or ornateness, of a stone does not always suggest wealth — it may just mean the person was a highly-regarded member of the community.



will be as before. The grass will grow over the spot and it will return and cover it with a rich, black healing

..She bought herself a grave, put her name on a headstone and has her coffin and vault stored away someplace. She even paid to have the

Young rolls a clod of earth over the edge. It falls soundlessly and crumbles on the vault below. Dirt rains down the sides and disappears

No old gentlemen but...gravemakers

By MARK E. DIXON



A few friendly hands of poker end in a shooting match. Two are dead. A day later, it is three.

A freckle-faced third grader was flattening pennies on the tracks. He slipped, or tripped, or did not hear, or, well, nobody really knows. He was seven.

She was 92 and alone. The cops said she had been dead a few days, maybe a week when the meter reader found her.

The gravediggers, shod in rubber work boots and wrapped in several layers of worn, woolen clothing, stand and silently curse the earth-hardening cold that came during the night.

The machine grasps for a handhold, a way in. It scrapes away a few inches of topsoil, then a few inches more until the frozen surface is past and it plunges into the soft earth beneath.

Five graves will be dug today. Each will be carefully measured so they do not disturb the next grave, a foot or so away. The standard size is four feet by eight feet and six feet deep.

The earth is scooped up and dropped into a waiting truck. It is surprising how much dirt the hole yields. The mound of earth is overflowing the truck by the time the grave is deep enough.

Bending, the gravedigger puts a gloved hand on each side of the hold, swings into mid-air and drops neatly to the floor below.

With shovel and boot, the brittle pieces of earth are broken down, spread about and stamped smooth.

One of the clods will not be flattened. The gravedigger frowns and bends from view. A moment later, a stone the size of a softball arches over the rim and nestles in the growing mound of displaced earth.

And they are finished for now. One pulls some rough planks that were once painted green over the hold.

"That's to keep people from falling in," he explains. "There are always people running around in a cemetery.

"Especially when it's warm out, you'll have lovers coming back in here to park."

They withdraw to dig elsewhere and, like the newly dug grave, to wait.

"Some of these guys will read the obituaries," says Walter Ransom, "and then talk about the people while we're working: who they were, what they did, how they died."

A man reaches a gloved hand under the rack cradling a coffin. A light touch sends it into the earth with a whir and it settles with a jolt on the concrete slab below.

"I don't read 'em as a rule," he adds. "I turned to it by chance one evening and there was a picture of a girl I went to high school with staring me in the face. Car accident.

"I haven't looked at the obituaries since."

The straps are released and the rack lifted away.

"Actually, we almost never see a body," Ransom says. "It's just a box. That's all.

"One time, though, they shipped an old rabbi here from California. One of the pallbearers dropped his corner. Damn thing broke right open."

The earth mover moves forward, then back, maneuvering. The vault twists clockwise, then counter-clockwise on its chain. A faint shadow moves across the snow, creeping toward the grave, casting itself over the box below.

"You have to use a vault," Iwan Starobranski explains. "These boxes won't last forever by themselves.

"Without it, the box will collapse in a couple years and Whoosh! you'll have the ground sinking under your feet."

The claw drops lower, depositing its burden. It scrapes down one wall, sending a shower of dirt and new snow cascading into the pit below. One of the men grabs a pole and pries it away from the wall. It sinks once more.

"Vaults also makes it a lot easier if somebody comes back later and wants to move the grave," Ransom says. "That happens about six or seven times a year.

"A couple years ago they had us open up one from 1910 with no vault. Wasn't much left but a few bones. You could have put it all in a coffee can."

The coffin is gone from sight as the concrete housing comes down around it with a thud. The chain is released and swung away.

"Usually it doesn't bother me," says John Young, "especially if it's an old person. I mean, if they're 80 or 90 years old, I figure they were pretty lucky to have such a long life.

"I guess you get a little callous after awhile." But it does bother them sometimes. The children, the old people who have no one and the soldiers all have an effect and the men work a little more quietly as they remember.

"A couple years ago, a little boy drowned up in the river," says Howard Cannady, superintendent. "His mother just wouldn't leave.

"The men would come down off the hill at night and tell me she was up there again. I'd call the funeral home and they'd have her husband come out and get her."

And there are the old ones who die alone. No relative, no friend, no neighbor comes to grieve or say goodbye.

"You'd like to do something for them but what can you do?" Cannady asks. "When nobody comes to the funeral, all we can do is take the box out and dump it in."

And the soldiers. Gerald Starr did not see the honor guards, the snapping flags or hear the rifle volleys. He remembered the gun-metal GI coffins.

"Back during the war," Starr draws, "we'd get kids in here. Just kids. Some of 'em 18, 19, 20 years old. All shot to hell. Made you want to

Though the sequences in this story were shot during late winter, the job does not change much over the course of the year. Gravediggers at this cemetery bury close to 700 coffins each year and most of them say they are not going to end this way — calling cremation a more sensible solution. "It's too cold in the ground," one of them says.

photos by Mark E. Dixon



cry."

Young rolls a clod of earth over the edge. It falls soundlessly and crumbles on the vault below. Dirt rains down the sides and disappears.

The sea of graves spreads all around. Some stir memories, like yellowed photographs in an album. They pause and point them out.



"Back in '70 or '71, some guy went into a jewelry store downtown, hit an old woman over the head and took the salesgirl hostage.

"About four days later they found her body down near Mason. She's over in there someplace."

They push the shovels deep in the pile of soft, loose earth next to the grave, turn and empty them.

"Then there was the time they found two babies in the river. Never did find out who they were.

"They've got 'em over there. All the stones say is 'Baby X.'"

The earth mounts around the burial chamber and, bit by bit, it disappears from view.

"See that plot over there?" says Ransom, pointing off to the northeast. "I met the woman who owns it and she is absolutely nuts.

"She bought herself a grave, put her name on a headstone and has her coffin and vault stored away someplace. She even paid to have the grave opened and closed.

"In the spring and summer she's out here all the time: weeding, trimming the grass, planting flowers. She just can't wait to use it."

But gravediggers, too, are mortal. Many have determined not to follow the 700 or so people they bury every year.

"Nobody's going to do this to me," says Ransom. "Cremation. That's the way I'm going. My wife, too, if she goes first.

"Besides," he says, "by the time you've bought the plot, the coffin, the vault and everything else, that's a lot of money and it's not going to do you any good. Somebody else could make a lot better use of the money."

The hooded heads nod assent. Smitherman, fist on his hip, leans on the handle of the broad-bladed shovel and adds, "It's too cold in the ground."

The final few shovelfuls are dumped in. The grave is sunken and uneven. In the spring they

will return and cover it with a rich, black healing topsoil. The grass will grow over the spot and it will be as before.

They pick up their tools and stomp the mud from their boots.

"What did you bring for break?" they ask each other.

"Couple apples."

"Popcorn."

"Cheese popcorn?"

"Yeah."

Starr lifts a bundle of flowers from behind a bush and drops it on the heaped earth. A card dangles from the yellow lilies. "All our love. The Kids."

"Anybody feel like a game of euchre?"

"Yeah. OK."

"Not me. You guys are cheaters," complains Starobranski and they clamber into the truck, laughing.

"Hell, you say that every time you lose."

The battered old pickup drifts slowly down the rutted road and fades from sight in the driving snow that will cover the newly turned earth.



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waiting van. Then I drive (quickly if it's close by) to the cemetery and follow the markers to our grave site. Each funeral home has its own color marker. I arrange the flowers around the grave as if they had dropped from heaven, hide the truck and stand by the grave like the eternal guard. When the procession comes by I give a signal designating how to bring the body up. The head must be placed in a certain direction in the grave (either north or west.)

Strick order is kept in parking the cars, closest family next to the procession, lesser relatives and friends behind.

People get upset if they feel slighted in the procession. Explicit directions are left on how to park each funeral. It is important to move the cars out smoothly, both because the people pay for it and it saves problems at consecutive funerals.

My parking partner this morning is Greg, a college non-grad with over 180 credits. He looks like a Mafia hit man in his dark suit, style sunglasses (everyone here has style sunglasses) and icy expression. I walk towards him carrying up the flags for the cars in the procession. He tells me these people didn't have many people view the body and laughs. He has a strange sense of humor.

This funeral is one of about 700 the company will handle this year at two locations, one downtown and the other in the suburbs.

The ten o'clock funeral was small — a retired Bell Telephone worker — and it is typical of a midtown service. The people drive a variety of beat-up cars and seem quiet and self-conscious around us, letting the minister handle the spiritual details and thanking me politely for my parking directions. For many of these people it will be their first ride in a limousine.

Occasionally, a large funeral is set up downtown and these clients are also characteristically poor. They seem to want only to be accommodated and often the services run up an extravagant price tag.

By contrast, services at the suburban chapel tend to be less involved and less expensive. Clients here are usually more affluent and do not walk in awe of either the ceremony or us. They sometimes seem annoyed with parking instructions, one woman nearly cost me a limb as she sped off while I was trying to attach a flag to her car.

After a performance, we all let off a little steam in the break room — the tension of trying to maintain perfection having worn down everyone's nerves.

A less typical day, or night, goes back to the initial conversation I had with one of the owners when I signed my apprenticeship

papers. The scene was something like this:

I am jarred from an exhausted sleep.

"Good morning Jerry, this is Jack. Can you be down at the chapel right away? George will meet you."

"Uh, huh, I'll be right there," I reply, sounding like a football player to his coach.

And so, at 2:15 a.m., dressed in my gray suit, I am standing outside the funeral home as George stalks up the driveway. I shiver in the cool spring breeze and feel more like Florence Nightingale than the all night disposal service I've been seeing myself as.

"Good morning", George croons with a big smile (too big I think). George is in his mid-thirties with hair that creeps away from his forehead. He is usually quite pleasant and honestly calm — a welcome change from the owners.

"Have you been out yet?" he asks.

I mumble "no", starting to feel nervous and morbidly fascinated. By "out" he means to pick up a body and embalm it with only the mortician and myself. I have assisted at embalmings before but it was mainly to learn the procedures and observe.

"Well, you will learn from the best," he says chuckling. And I am thinking that I had to drop biology last term because of the labs.

"We're going to General Hospital," George says as The Cadillac hums along, the cops waving to us.

"Who is it," I ask.

"An older woman — 77. The family has made prior arrangements."

"Oh, how did you get in this business anyway," I ask, changing the subject.

"Well, I remember meeting the undertaker at home when I was little. It may have been my uncle's funeral. I can't remember wanting to be anything else."

At the hospital we park at the emergency entrance. It is a new building — all fluorescent and light, square, brick. I follow George through the corridors that look like the Hubbard Hall lobby and keep running the stretcher into the walls.

"Jesus, no wonder you took the mirror off (referring to my running the van into the garage door this afternoon), just park it there."

He steps to a window where a bright-eyed woman asks "are you here for Mrs. Johnson?" I am tempted to say "no, you lady." George signs a few forms and gives the latest news of his dog.

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grave maker's appren- tice



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The body is in the intensive care unit. We got here fast. Usually the bodies are moved to the morgue where a name tag is placed around a toe. The nurse is very quick and quiet as she shows us to the body. The door is closed and the mood is somber as George motions me in.

Following strict procedure I move the stretcher up alongside the bed. There is a vinyl case, zipped along the top attached to the top of the stretcher.

"O.K. open the bag and spread the flap back and come beside the bed. Get under her lower back and legs and then lift her up with me."

She is a small woman with white curly hair and very thin legs. She is still warm and her face has that "straining for a last breath look", and the unmistakable odor that says dead. I zip the bag over her head and fold it just so and then secure the belts that hold the body on the stretcher.

We bring the body right back to the funeral home to embalm (some mortuaries won't embalm until morning when they have an ambulance service pick the corpses up.)

I wheel the stretcher into prep room: white tile walls, terrazo floors, two autopsy tables sloping down into large toilets, cabinets full of chemical supplies and quasi-surgical instruments, a sink and a cosmetic counter.

Once inside the prep room I take my coat off, roll my sleeves up and nervously go to work. George calls "one, two, three, ho" as we put the corpse on the table.

"Let's give her a change of clothes," he says as he pulls her gown off. "First thing we do is cover her tu-tu."

We both have hospital gowns on that tie in the back — with the blue stripes of course. George hums along with Buddy Rich on the radio. I wash the stretcher out and mix two cups of pre-capillary wash into a gallon of water. I pour the mixture into the pumping machine on a stand adjacent to the embalming table.

The corpse has rubber blocks placed under the head and elbows to facilitate the embalming fluid circulation and prevent damage to the head. The blood becomes more purple and settles in splotches at the bottom of the corpse. The skin is easily impressioned and wrinkled — waxlike — especially at the back (but nobody sees that).

"You've never done this before?" George asks, referring to the apprentice's job of making the incisions.

"Nope, but there is always a first time."

"Well, we will use the carotid and the femoral (artery and vein respectively). The carotid is next to the jugular vein at the base of the neck and the femoral is at the inside point above where the leg meets the trunk. "Here," he says taking my hand, you can feel the ridge right there where the femoral runs, cut right there. Feel that?"

I take the scalpel and make a light mark on the skin, afraid to mutilate the body. My courage mounting, I manage to cut through the skin and into a layer of fat below. George is busy wiring the jaws shut and putting caps and glue on the eyes. He stops, leaving the wire dangling like a fish hook and supervises:

"Go ahead, cut right through, just don't cut the vein."

With another tool I scrape away the fat and muscle fiber, looking for "a flat-tube-thing."

"Just get your fingers right in there and dig."

"Uuchh, I won't even help my mother cut the chicken, Is this it?"

"Nope."

"This?"

"Yeah, that's it, now just clean it and tie it off."

I have less trouble with the carotid and I am starting to feel like Ben Casey.

"Its lucky she's thin, the fat ones are a greasy mess."

Generally, licensed men see the embalming process as a waste of time and money — most say they will be cremated, that it is more economical and makes more sense.

The next step is to drain the blood and inject the embalming fluids. The capillary wash opens the blood vessels and the blood pours into the toilet.

While George washes the table down I am busy mixing up a few gallons of Flextone, a formal dehyde based embalming fluid, and some warm water.

"Get that cream and rub it on the arms, massage the arms and legs, that will help this circulate. See all the solid junk in the blood? It happens a lot with arteriol cases — especially old people. Push the legs right up. That's it."

After the blood is drained the fluids injected, the internal organs are embalmed with a trocar: a long hollow tube with a sharp end. It is jabbed into the abdomen just above the navel and the organs are lanced and the fluid drains. The sound is atrocious: glub, thunk, schlup.

"How do you know what your hitting?", I ask as George moves quickly around the table, making very vigorous thrusts.

"It just takes practice. Get a trocar button and the needle and you can suture her up."

The trocar button is a little plastic screw that seals the trocar puncture. It is twisted in with a little tool.

"Now, get some compound (a powder that looks like lye that dries the incision) and suture it up. Make the first stitch right above it."

"Shit, I keep sticking myself! Am I doing this right? I never was any good at stuff like this."

"No, look, you're pulling too hard. Start over. You pulled the string out. And don't make the stitches so close together."

The needle feels clumsy in my hand but I start to get more adept. The second incision is much easier (maybe I should try pre-med).

George inspects the work. "You're a good man Jerome. You've got the makings of a first class mortician."

We clean the body off, trim the fingernails, put cream on the skin and cover it (except the head). Of course we took care to rest the hands in the traditional manner — which is often rather difficult. The look of peaceful repose is a lot of work.

I clean all the instruments and rinse off the gloves. Daniel told me, "gloves are just for convenience; there is really no danger of infection — just messes."

"Well, three o'clock, less than an hour — not too bad. Lucky it wasn't a post," (post-mortem autopsy), George says as we turn off the lights.

An autopsy case is much more work to embalm — the internal organs have to be embalmed separately. Organs are all cut up even the brain missing. The body cavity looks like a macabre punch bowl into which a trash bag full of the organs is trown back into and the skull stuffed with material. Autopsies are a real anatomy lesson.

One mortician told me: "Doctors like to press the autopsies. It's hospital policy — autopsies are important to their reputation. Hell, they usually know the cause of death, especially on old people, they just like to practice."

It is a source of friction between doctors and the funeral business, although autopsies have been performed by doctors at the funeral home where I worked.

As I left the funeral home that night I said, "See you tomorrow George, eight o'clock." He replied "nope, I am off — going to Rose Lake with my kids."

I had worked seventy hours that week. Soon I became one of 50 apprentices that came and went during the course of a year. I stayed a month, others lasted less.

"I don't even help my mother cut chicken."