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hereby submit this work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

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Take a Picture: A Novel

This work and its defense approved by:

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Take a Picture:
A Novel

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by

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ABSTRACT

The creative component of my dissertation is a novel called *Take A Picture* which tells the story of sixty-seven year old Jack Hoskins, a childless widower and the owner of the last independent funeral home in the fictional town of Dove Point, Indiana. As a large corporation encroaches on Mr. Hoskins’ business, he finds himself questioning the efficacy of his profession and searching for a different way to serve his community. His decision to begin photographing the dead has enormous repercussions for both his business and his personal life. *Take A Picture*, like all of my fiction, operates in the realistic tradition and has been inspired by the works of authors from Herman Melville to Richard Ford.

The critical component of my dissertation is an essay titled “Unfathomable Me: The Privileged View of Nature in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.” My essay argues that Ishmael seeks an unimpeded, unmediated experience of the natural world, and this occurs most notably in the chapter, “The Grand Armada.” In this chapter, Ishmael looks down into the ocean depths and witnesses a pod of whales mating and nursing their young. At this moment, human beings become decentralized in the natural world, and Ishmael is able to see the whales as “subject” and not “object.” Much of nineteenth-century American literature—most notably the works of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman—deals with this desire for first-hand knowledge of the natural world as well as an intense concern with recognizing oneself as a member of the larger human community.
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Author’s note:
For information on funerals and the life of funeral directors
I have relied on two books: *The American Way of Death Revisited* by Jessica Mitford and *R.I.P.*:
*The Complete Book of Death and Dying* by Constance Jones. Any inaccuracies or
misrepresentations are the author’s fault.
All interest in disease and death

is only another expression of

interest in life.

—Thomas Mann
I am a rather lonely man.

My name is Jack Hoskins, and while I’m retired now, I used to be the proprietor of the oldest continually operating funeral home in Dove Point, Indiana, a town of six thousand where I was born and grew up. I still live there today, but I no longer work at my trade. I do some volunteer work and also what wealthy business people would call consulting, but I haven’t formally presided over a funeral in more than two years.

Do I miss my job? My volunteer activities keep me plenty preoccupied, and they provide me with a small measure of the human interaction that a childless widower needs. Could someone miss a job like mine? Better yet, why would someone want the job in the first place? I’ve been asked that question more times than I can count over the years, and it used to bother me when I was young. No one asks the surgeon why he does what he does; no one asks why he enjoys making a living mucking around in people’s insides. The answer to the question seems obvious: a surgeon wants to help people, has some sort of fascination with the inner workings of the human body, and he makes a great deal of money. I’m not naive enough to think that a surgeon’s priorities always run in the proper order, and I certainly know that a funeral director or an embalmer can be motivated in the same way.

It’s possible that at this point my name or the name of my town and its association with my profession are beginning to sound familiar. For a short time a couple of years ago, we all squinted in the kind of unwelcome light that our overly zealous media occasionally shines on small towns and out of the way places. Our story was even picked up by national wire services
and appeared in quite a few newspapers under headings like “News of the Weird” and “Oddly Enough.” I’ve even heard from a reliable source that a major cable news organization devoted a couple of their precious minutes to the story late one night. I’m not sorry to say that I missed it.

Before I tell you about the circumstances that lead to my premature retirement, I think it best to understand how I came to my profession in the first place.

As I said, I have lived in Dove Point my whole life, which means that I attended school here in the same schoolhouse that stands four blocks from my former place of employment. I didn’t have many friends as a child. My family lived a little ways out of town in a large farmhouse that my grandfather built before the turn of the century. My father never farmed. By the time I was born, in the late 1930s, most of the surrounding land had been parceled out and sold off to the big conglomerates that were then just starting to put the family farm out of business. I don’t think my parents ever thought much about the significance of selling off that land; it was the Depression and people did what they had to do in order to make money. That land was worth something, and selling it helped us survive. As a consequence, the land around ours remained farmland, and we never had any neighbors. No neighbors meant no children my age to play with.

I found out years later that my parents had tried to have another child after me. A stillborn. After that, they never tried again as far as I know, probably because they couldn’t take more disappointment, but from time to time over the years I have thought about that stillborn baby and how he would have been my younger brother. It doesn’t seem possible that a person
can miss someone they never knew, indeed someone who never even existed for all intents and purposes, but as the years go by, I miss my younger brother more and more. If he had been born I would have had a companion and so many things might have been different. Easy to think, of course, impossible to prove.

It’s one of the cruel tricks of age that a person can no longer trust their own memories. For instance, I know that my father stood just under six feet tall, two inches shorter than I stand as an adult. But when I think of my childhood now I see the crown of my father’s head scraping the ceilings of our house which were the standard eight feet high. I remember my mother as a tired-looking woman, with dark circles under her eyes, her hair always in some sort of disarray. But in more than one snapshot from my childhood, ones that I have stored in cardboard boxes in my spare closet, mom appears beautiful and young, a wide smile on her face and a shine in her eyes. In one picture, mom has me by the arm in our backyard, and she is swinging me in the air, displaying a strength I never knew she had. The sun comes over her shoulder, a white burst in the black and white photograph, and must be nearly blinding the photographer who could only be my father. My parents were both once young, even if I don’t remember them that way, even if what I really saw and witnessed with my own eyes cannot be called up. And it makes me wonder, now that I’m in my early sixties, if there are things that I remember that never really happened, things that I wish so much were true that they have become my actual memories.

This all began with and centered around, as most things have in my life, a funeral. I’m going back two years here, just before my formal retirement from my profession and five years
after my wife, Eloise, died from pancreatic cancer. I owned and operated the Crumley Funeral Home, the same place where I served my apprenticeship under Ronald T. Crumley when I was twenty-two years old and freshly home from the army. Mr. Crumley taught me everything there was to know about the business of being a funeral director. This was back in the old days when a person learned the funeral trade like an apprentice, before there were these expensive mortuary schools that take a great deal of money from young people without any guarantee that they will ever get a job. I knew that if I stuck with Mr. Crumley, I could one day run his funeral home. He had three daughters, all of them older than me, but neither they nor their husbands wanted any part of the family business. When Mr. Crumley retired, I started running the business full-time, and Eloise and I moved into the family quarters upstairs, a large, comfortable, two-bedroom apartment. Not a king’s quarters by any stretch of the imagination, but the kind of place in which two people could live and not feel like they were constantly in each other’s way.

Over the years, I made enough money to buy Mr. Crumley and his family out, but I left the name of the home the same because in a town like Dove Point, people like to think that nothing ever changes. The people of the town like to believe that even though Mr. Crumley and his father who founded the business, Ronald T. Crumley, Senior, were both long dead and resting in a mausoleum in Blue Pines Cemetery, it was really they who were still running things, and it was they who were doing the important things that a funeral director does, and I was just a flunky pushing a contract across the desk to the bereaved and holding out a pen.

On this particular night in late July, the phone rang just after one a.m., and I knew that the call was going to be work-related before I ever picked up the phone. No one else ever called me. Eloise and I had no children, so the only late-night emergencies I had involved work, and the word emergency was a bit of a stretch for someone who dealt with the dead.
It was St. Michael’s Hospital in Charlesburg, one town over, calling with a pick-up. I wrote the name of the deceased on the pad next to the phone and prepared to go. There was a time when I would have recognized every name that came in, but a lot of people have been moving in and out of Dove Point over the last fifteen years. I’m lucky now if I know one out of every three. At this point, the name that I wrote on the pad--Tyler David Fisher--meant nothing to me except an opportunity to practice my trade, and with business as slow as it had been, the opportunity was most welcome.

The late night calls didn’t bother me anymore. In the early years of my marriage, I dragged myself out of our warm bed, dreading the thought of being away for just a few hours. And I felt bad for Eloise because she was a light sleeper, and the phone call and my dressing always woke her. On a few occasions, she complained, and wondered aloud why she couldn’t have married a person who kept what she called “sane hours.”

“It’s like being a doctor or a fireman,” I would tell her. “When people need you, you have to go.”

“Do those people live in a house with the dead,” she would moan and roll back over, the sheets pulled almost to her eyes.

I stopped sleeping well when Eloise died. We spent more than forty years sharing the same bed, and my sleep habits haven’t been the same since she passed. Those nights when sleep refuses to come and work doesn’t provide its own distraction prove to be the worst. The night of the call from Charlesburg was shaping up to be one of those nights, so when the phone rang I felt a wave of relief pass through my body. I took the time to put on a dark blue suit and knotted a burgundy tie below my chin. I felt that it was important to present a certain image even on a call like this. Chances were I wasn’t going to see anyone but a technician from the hospital, but I
wanted them to know that they were dealing with someone who took his job seriously. I’ve heard that some funeral homes allow the people making pick-ups to go without a tie, but I would never have allowed that in my business.

Charlesburg sat twenty minutes to the east of Dove Point. It was a larger community of about thirty thousand people, and St. Michael’s was a new, state-of-the-art facility that had come to serve the needs of more and more people in our county. They had all the latest equipment including a landing pad on their roof for patients who needed to be airlifted in the most dire emergencies. We had our own hospital in Dove Point called Keller Hyde Memorial which the young people in town had taken to calling Kill ’em and Hide ’em in reference to its declining reputation. Eloise spent quite a bit of time in Keller Hyde during her illness, but whenever she needed advanced testing--scans, MRIs, biopsies--we made the trip to Charlesburg at the urging of our oncologist. There was a movement in Dove Point to permanently close Keller Hyde, and I suspected that at some point it would come to fruition.

During my drive, I listened to an oldies station that played the kind of music that was popular when I was a teenager. Paul Anka, Fats Dominoe, Buddy Holly. My profession allowed me to drive as fast as I wanted, and I could even ask for a police escort if the situation could in any way be labeled an emergency. But I’ve never done that. The crises in my line of work involve the living, and on that night, I was strictly dealing with the dead.

It was summer and hot, so I rolled the windows down and let the warm, humid air whip through the cabin of the hearse. I spent a lot of my time in enclosed spaces and air-conditioned rooms. Fresh air had its appeal. And since most of my hair fell out by the time I turned forty, I didn’t have to worry about the wind affecting my appearance. I have seen thousands of dead men
and women with full heads of hair. It didn’t do a single one of them any good when their time came.

I pulled into the back of St. Michael’s where they had us make our pick-ups. As a funeral director, or an undertaker as some people still call us, I had gotten used to going in through the back door like a servant or a delivery man. New hospitals and nursing homes were constructed in such a way that I could enter and exit without ever being seen by a patient or a visitor to the hospital. After all, they weren’t going to do much business if people saw dead bodies being wheeled in and out the front door at all hours of the day and night. Some funeral directors out west had even taken to using nondescript cargo vans instead of hearses, the better to set everyone’s mind at ease. Someone could pull up next to one of those vans at a stop light and have no idea that it was carrying recently deceased human cargo. Call me a traditionalist, but I preferred the good old-fashioned hearse that made no secret of the business it was carrying out. My own hearse had seen better days, but I wasn’t about to trade it in for something as prosaic as a white van.

I took my time and backed into a slot at the loading dock. I gave my tie a last check in the rearview and eased out of the driver’s seat.

“There he is,” a voice called almost as soon as my feet touched the ground. “The Angel of Death.”

I knew who it was without looking. It was the voice of the hospital’s night mortuary technician, a man that everyone called Spider. He was short, with a pudgy, pockmarked face, and he always emitted the stench of cigarettes. I know that certain jobs by their very nature are difficult to fill, and the hospital has to make do with what they can get, but the thought of this
man handling the remains of deceased fathers and mothers and children always set my teeth on edge. I walked to the back of the hearse and opened the big back door.

“Forget it,” Spider called.

“I’m getting the stretcher.”

“You don’t need it,” he said. “It’s a baby. You can carry it out in a Hefty bag.”

I opened the door anyway and reached for the stretcher. “I’d rather do it this way.”

“Suit yourself.”

He threw his cigarette down on the loading dock, and it sat there, glowing red in the dark night, while I wheeled the stretcher up the ramp and into the hospital. It was unnecessary for me to bring the stretcher, of course, but I wasn’t going to let Spider tell me what to do. Death was enough of an indignity, and it was easy for someone in my line of work to fall into the habit of treating the deceased like piles of refuse. The law already required us to place the bodies in sealed plastic bags, and once a body was wrapped in plastic, it could easily be perceived as a baggy and anonymous mess of bones. I made sure to look at every face before I zipped them into the bag.

I followed Spider down a short hallway and into the office of the hospital mortuary, a small, gloomy space with a couple of standard issue metal desks and a row of file cabinets against the wall. I left the stretcher parked in the hallway, its brake set. Apparently St. Michael’s attempts at creating a modern hospital ended elsewhere because the walls of Spider’s office were painted an anonymous, institutional green. A portable radio played an all-night talk show, and I tried to block out the sound of the host berating a caller who had suggested that America legalize drug use.
Spider handed me a clipboard. We knew our routines well enough without speaking. I signed my name on the appropriate line to indicate that I was taking possession of the body. Once I had taken care of this formality, Spider handed me a few papers, including a copy of the death certificate. The deceased was named Tyler David Fisher, age five months. The official cause of death was “sudden respiratory arrest,” and that was what most people would call Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. In other words, there wasn’t any good reason why this baby died, he just did. And it probably meant that his mother or father found him in his crib yesterday morning, already dead and beyond help.

“I heard The Barr Company bought out Wellington over in Dove Point,” Spider said.

I nodded, but I hadn’t really heard Spider’s words. I was still studying the death certificate in my hands. Spider had told me that the deceased was an infant when I first pulled up, but the reality of it hadn’t sunk in until I saw that official document with the child’s age listed.

“Did you hear me?”

“What’s that? The Barr Company…”

Spider shook his head. “Are you going deaf? The Barr Company bought out Wellington over in Dove Point.”

“Yes, they did.”

Talk of business matters brought me back to the task at hand. The Barr Company was one of the new, upstart corporations that had slowly been buying up funeral homes in the midwest. At last count, they owned twenty-four homes in Indiana, including my main competition in Dove Point, the old Wellington Funeral Home. They operate the same way all big companies operate: first, they buy up as many of the existing businesses as possible. Then they start cutting the
prices on their services as an attempt to drive everyone else out of business. Wellington now offered the same products and services as me, but for ten to twenty percent less.

“I bet you’re ready to sell, too,” Spider said.

“No chance.”

“They’ll be making you an offer soon. You won’t be able to say no.”

“Really? How much do you think they’ll offer me?”

My question stumped him for a minute. He had no idea how much my business was worth or how much an outfit like the Barr Company might offer me. But Spider was quick on his feet, and he recovered.

“I bet they offer you ten percent more than what it’s worth. Maybe twenty. All they want to do is get you out of the way.”

I admired him the way someone would admire a crafty, misbehaving child. As much as he rankled me, Spider and I had a routine, a give and take that we both might miss if one of us went away.

“You’re probably right,” I said.

“Of course that’s the money they’ll give you if you sell now. The longer you wait, the less you’ll get.”

It did sound like a lot of money, and on more than one occasion I had allowed myself to flush with excitement over the prospect of selling out. It was possible that they would even keep me on in some kind of capacity, a relic of days gone by who had to answer to the new management. Free of debt perhaps, but bound by golden handcuffs. I dismissed the thought every time it entered my brain. I wouldn’t sell as a matter of principle, and because I liked to believe that the people of Dove Point depended on me for something important.
“I think I’ll be fine,” I said. “I still know the right way to treat people.”

In order to get to the refrigerated room where the hospital housed its waiting dead, we had to leave the office and go further down the hallway where I left the stretcher. Spider went to the office door but stopped without passing through.

“I tell you what,” he said. “For every one time you’re here for a pick up, Wellington comes here three. They’re doing some serious business.”

He didn’t wait for a response, but went ahead of me down the hallway, walking at a brisk pace for such a pudgy man, and I had to hustle to get the brake released on the stretcher and catch up.

I didn’t need anyone to remind me that Wellington was cutting into my business, and that if things kept up the way they were going, I might well be forced to sell. I didn’t like the business side of the job to interfere with what I considered the human side, so I made sure to concentrate on my work at hand.

Spider held open the swinging door to the refrigerated room and stepped aside while I wheeled past the two empty autopsy tables and headed for our destination, the rows of large silver drawers that lined both walls. There was a time, as a young apprentice, when I couldn’t walk through a room like this without feeling sick to my stomach. The sour stench of death hung in the air like a cloud, burning my nostrils, and no matter how many times I showered during the course of a day, the smell wouldn’t leave me. But I didn’t even notice it anymore. The squeak of our shoes on the tile and the low hum of the stretcher’s wheels were the only sounds that broke the heavy silence.

“Here you go.” Spider stopped before one of the silver drawers on the left side of the room, his voice echoing off the brick walls and high ceiling. “Number 118. Tyler David Fisher.”
He gave the drawer a quick yank, revealing a small lump under a white sheet. Most of the adults were kept in the drawers without a sheet, but someone, probably not Spider, felt compelled to cover the child as a sign of respect. And if it wasn’t respect, it meant that they simply couldn’t bear the sight. “I think you can handle this one by yourself. I’m going to go finish my cigarette break.”

In my younger years, I was always able to handle the job of moving the bodies from the drawer to the stretcher without any assistance. I handled the heaviest of men by myself, helped immeasurably by the fact that, contrary to what people always say, dead weight is easier to move than living. Dead weight doesn’t resist. But in the last five years or so, my back started to ache, and sometimes I asked Spider or one of the other attendants for help with the bigger lifting jobs. Only Spider seemed to resent it. He took to calling me “Pops” or “Grandpa” whenever I asked for his help.

I unzipped the plastic body bag I had brought along on top of the stretcher and spread the opening wide enough to get the body inside. I never left the house anymore without a pair of rubber gloves in my jacket pocket. I pulled them on, snapping them crisply against my wrist, and drew back the sheet.

The child was lying there, naked, his arms down against his side. His eyes were closed, and his skin had already begun to take on the translucent blue shade of the recently dead. An autopsy incision, sewn up with black thread that looked like it could have come from a home sewing kit, ran down the center of his chest.

I hesitated before I picked him up. I had handled the remains of quite a few small children in my time as a funeral director. They were brought to me as the result of disease, accident, and in more cases than I would care to remember, murder and neglect, but I had never
presided over the funeral of a child this young. When I was still apprenticed to Mr. Crumley, we
handled the funerals of a few infants, but it was Mr. Crumley who did the lion’s share of the
work while I stood back playing the part of dutiful observer. For many years, it wasn’t unusual
for families to forego having a funeral for a stillborn child or a newborn, and only recently had it
become common practice for infants to receive full-blown funerals with all the bells and whistles
that in the past had been reserved only for adults.

I stared at this body that didn’t look much bigger than a child’s toy. I had never held an
infant in my life. When Eloise and I were newlyweds, we had plenty of friends and relatives with
children, and when it came time to pass the baby around, Eloise always took a turn. But when the
children were offered to me, I politely declined, citing clumsiness and unfamiliarity, and as a
man, I was always allowed to slip off the hook.

I didn’t want to just swing Tyler up out of the drawer like a sack of potatoes, and I
certainly didn’t want to run the risk of dropping him onto the hard floor of morgue. I made
several abortive attempts, positioning my hands first one way underneath his body, then another
way, until I felt that I had some kind of a comfortable hold and slowly lifted him out of the
drawer.

I didn’t immediately place him in the body bag. I held him against my chest, and even
through my suit I could feel that his body was unnaturally cold. As I mentioned, Eloise and I
never had children of our own, and back in those days, doctors couldn’t figure out as easily as
they can today what was keeping us from conceiving. I never thought I missed having children.
There was always so much work to do, I suppose, and my job provided me with an outlet for my
nurturing and supportive side. Even Eloise helped out with work. She talked with widows and
widowers, parents and children. She always knew the right moment to show up with a box of
kleenex, or to offer a supportive arm to someone in emotional distress. But on her deathbed, Eloise asked me if I regretted not having children, and I could tell by the way she asked that she did, if only because she was afraid that I was going to be left alone. I didn’t think twice about it then, my own grief was too great, but in that cold mortuary room, I held tight to that unknown infant and imagined him to be many things, most notably the brother and the child that I had never had. He would never comfort his parents in their old age, or be a companion to a brother or sister while he was young. I held him close, and even brought him up and placed a kiss against the soft down on top of his head.

I lost track of time while I held the baby. It couldn’t have been more than five minutes that I stood there, but five minutes can feel like a lifetime when a person is reflecting on things that may be better left alone, the kinds of things that certainly don’t mix with work. At my age, the death of a young person makes me think about the blessing of time that I have received, and whether or not I have used that time wisely. I would have gone on holding him longer, holding him and reflecting, but the door to the refrigerated room swung open, and Spider came in wearing a look that mixed anger and surprise.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

I managed not to jump. I wasn’t doing anything wrong, so I continued with my work and placed the infant into the bag.

“I was just holding him,” I said, zipping the body bag shut.

“Why? Do you know him?”

“No. It’s just the kind of service I like to give. It’s something you won’t get from those Wellington people.”

“It’s something you won’t get from anybody except a ghoul,” he said.
I straightened up, my back radiating painful jabs of protest. I just wanted to go home now that Spider had intruded on my moment with the child.

“Are you sick?” Spider asked. “You’re all sweaty.”

I wiped at my forehead. A fair amount of perspiration came off on my hand, and I wiped it on my pants leg.

“It’s just this heat.”

“You’ve been standing in a refrigerator for ten minutes. How can you sweat?”

“Will you get the door for me?”

He held it open, all the time looking at me like I was some kind of an alien. I pushed the stretcher through, happy to be facing the prospect of the open road and a quiet drive home. I felt the late hour down to my bones, but when I reached the door that lead to the loading dock, I stopped to say something to Spider.

“That sweating in there,” I said. “It will happen to you when you get old. Your body just doesn’t know what to do anymore in certain situations.”

If Spider had anything else to say to me--a cut or a jibe about my age--I didn’t stick around to hear it.
Chapter Two

I was back upstairs in my apartment above the funeral home when the doorbell rang. I had left Tyler in a refrigerated storage room in the basement, the place where we kept bodies before we embalmed them. I assumed that the family would be contacting me in the morning, and I wanted to get a few hours of sleep before I had to face them. I already had my jacket and tie off when the bell rang, and I started downstairs without them. But then I stopped myself. I knew who it was going to be, so I slipped my jacket back on, skipping the tie only because I didn’t want to keep them waiting in the dark.

Downstairs, I moved the curtain aside on my front picture window and saw a young couple, not even thirty, standing on my front porch. The young man had his arm around his wife’s shoulder, and when I flipped the porch light on, they both blinked like startled children.

I unlocked the door and swung it open.

“Hello.”

“We’re sorry to bother you,” the young man said. They didn’t make a move to come inside. “But...”

“It’s okay. I know who you are.”

I gestured with my arm and they came into the house. The woman came in first, followed by her husband, and they both kept their heads down as they passed.

We were in the living room, a comfortable place to sit with a couch, a love seat and two chairs. Off to the right and behind a closed set of pocket doors was the viewing room, and then down the hallway and past the staircase to my apartment there was a second viewing room, a
small kitchen and an office that Mr. Crumley used to call The Arrangement Room, a place where contracts were signed and money exchanged. I had begun to conduct what little business there was out here in the living room where the atmosphere was less official and intimidating.

My guests seated themselves on the couch underneath the picture window, and I sat on the love seat which was arranged at a ninety degree angle to them.

“You’re The Fishers, right?”

The husband nodded. “Yes.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss.”

In the soft light of the sitting room, the Fishers looked even younger than they did standing on my porch. They barely looked old enough to be married. I put their ages at around twenty-two or twenty-three, and I couldn’t imagine that they had been married very long. Mrs. Fisher was thin, with straight brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her cheekbones were prominent, and she wore a small diamond wedding ring on her finger. She held a balled-up handkerchief in her hand, her knuckles white with pressure.

“We wanted to discuss the arrangements,” Mr. Fisher said. He looked tired and pale, but still heartier than his wife. He had a goatee which, instead of making him look older, only served to call attention to the fact that he was a very young man. “We’re sorry to bother you so late.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I was awake.” I paused, allowing them space to say whatever they wanted to say. When they didn’t speak, I moved ahead with the business at hand. “Why don’t you just tell me what you have in mind for the service.”

Mr. Fisher cleared his throat, then looked at his wife as if seeking her permission to speak. She didn’t say a word or meet his eye, so he started talking.

“We’re going to have a service at First Presbyterian,” he said. “On Thursday morning.”
“Would you like to have the viewing here on Wednesday night?”

“Is that enough notice?” Mr. Fisher asked. “It’s...” He looked at his watch. “It’s Tuesday morning already.”

“I can do it. Don’t worry about that.”

“Good.” For the first time that night, Mr. Fisher showed a trace of relief.

I nodded, encouraging him to go on. I felt it best in these situations to just let the family talk about whatever was on their minds. Sometimes this meant that our conversations went far afield. On many occasions I had families lapse into story-telling and reminiscing about the deceased. Eventually every family got around to the business at hand. There was no need to rush them, and I had no place better to go. The Fishers didn’t have a vast storehouse of memories to draw on, and their son would have only just developed the barest traces of a personality, so we moved through the details pretty fast. Mr. Fisher told me that they wanted to have a viewing with an open casket, and they wanted to have a graveside service at Blue Pines Cemetery where they were going later in the morning to purchase a plot. I offered to handle the purchase of the plot myself, but Mr. Fisher insisted on going to the cemetery himself and choosing just the right location for the burial.

“We really want to do it right,” Mr. Fisher said. “We have some insurance that’s going to help us out. We don’t want to cut any corners.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to,” I said.

These negotiations always left me feeling uncomfortable, and this feeling was intensified because of the recent financial pressures on my business. Even someone who has never had children can understand that losing one would be one of the most painful losses of all, and it reminded me of the grief I still felt over Eloise’s death. At the same time, I was glad to hear that
the Fishers wanted to go all out on Tyler’s funeral. I needed the money, and I would have been willing to do a great deal of accommodating in order to get their business. Every funeral director I know, at least the ever-diminishing number with consciences, wrestles with this issue. In my case, I tried to dispatch the unease with a simple application of logic: People who have lost a loved one have to go to a funeral director at some point, and it’s going to cost them a certain amount of money. A funeral director who is fair and honest with his customers should feel no guilt over transacting business and earning a living.

“We brought an outfit for Tyler to wear,” Mrs. Fisher said.

She hadn’t spoken a word since walking in the door, and the sound of her choked, raw voice nearly startled me. She reached into her oversized purse and brought out a small plastic bag. I stood up from the love seat and took it from her. “Is that going to be okay?” she asked, seeking my approval.

I looked at the small, white gown, the kind of outfit that a baby would wear for a baptism or formal portrait. It was probably the nicest they had for him to wear.

“I think this will be great,” I said. “Very nice.”

To my surprise, Mrs. Fisher didn’t show relief. She kept her eyes turned away and took a quick swipe at her nose with the handkerchief.

“What else do we need to do?” Mr. Fisher asked. “Should we look at caskets or something?”

I explained that there were a limited number of selections in caskets that size, but there was one moderately priced and very popular model I recommended.

“I could show you a picture.”
Mr. Fisher looked slightly disappointed at my offer of the picture. He probably knew that some funeral homes had casket showrooms where a customer could see, touch, sniff and feel their loved one’s potential home throughout eternity like it was a used car. I didn’t have the space nor could I afford the overhead for that such a set-up would require.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s see the picture.”

I went back to the Arrangement Room and took a binder off the shelf that contained photographs of hundreds of casket models. I blew a little dust off its cover and thumbed through to the proper page while I walked back to the living room. When I got there, the Fishers had their heads close together, whispering about something that I wasn’t meant to hear. They both looked up when I reappeared, looking like they’d been caught doing something wrong. I ignored it.

“Here it is.” I turned the binder around and handed it down to them. “It has all the features of an adult-sized model. It’s silk-lined and water resistant. When placed in a burial vault, it’s guaranteed to last for eternity.”

“Is this the price right here?” Mr. Fisher asked.

I was still standing and leaned down to see it. The price in front of the Fishers was probably out of date by a year or more, but I would honor it and give up the hundred dollars difference in order to keep them around.

“That’s before tax,” I said.

Mr. Fisher nodded, all of his attention on the binder. He placed his right hand against the laminated photograph of his son’s casket and let it rest there as if some secret emanation was going to come through the page providing him with comfort. After a few moment of that, he turned to his wife.

“What do you think, Becky?” he asked.
She didn’t respond. She stared straight ahead, her eyes fixed on some point in space that neither of us men could see.

“Becky?” he asked. “Do you want to look at the casket?”

She paused, but when she did speak, she looked directly at me, a mixture of anger and hurt in her eyes.

“What does that stuff really matter?” Mrs. Fisher asked.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Who cares if it’s water resistant? He’s dead, right? My son is dead. What difference does it make if he gets wet?”

“Becky...” Mr. Fisher lifted his hand towards his wife but then stopped as if he had encountered an invisible force field. I could tell, and so could Mr. Fisher, that she wanted to hear something from me.

“I understand how you feel, Mrs. Fisher,” I said, sounding to my own ears like the world’s least convincing salesman. “But you have to ask yourself who this funeral is really for. A funeral isn’t for the deceased, it’s for the living. And you and your husband have to decide what is going to give you the most peace of mind.”

I had said these words, almost the exact same words, many times before, but they seemed particularly empty when directed at a pair of grieving parents. I saw myself for what I really was: a man offering faint, false comfort to the inconsolable. Why did I endlessly extol the virtues of the waterproof casket? I knew that the casket was going to be placed in a concrete burial vault six feet under ground. Unless there was an earthquake, that casket was going to stay dry for the next hundred years. There was no chance of the body returning to the earth, no way the worms were going to do their business. There was nothing natural about the whole process.
“You can’t give me peace of mind,” Mrs. Fisher said.

She was right. Eloise herself had been embalmed, dressed up, laid out and placed in a burial vault at Blue Pines, and there was a spot right next to her for them to put me when my time came. I often went and stared at that plot of ground and headstone, but it didn’t bring me any closer to her. We would always be separated by more than just six feet of earth, concrete and lead. I became a funeral director in order to help people, but I didn’t know if anything I had done in my almost forty years on the job had made any real difference. If it had been doing so much good, wouldn’t the heartbroken and the grieving be lined up at my door to thank me? I had even tried the medicine on myself and found it lacking.

“What do you want me to do, Mrs. Fisher? How can I help you?”

Mrs. Fisher looked at her husband, and a look of exasperation crossed his face. He took a deep breath and gave off the impression that if they were in the privacy of their own home he would have rolled his eyes at the ceiling. But he didn’t say anything to stop her.

“We’d like to see him again,” Mr. Fisher said. “Just the two of us, before the funeral. We didn’t get enough time at the hospital.”

“That’s no problem,” I said. It was standard to give the family some time with the deceased loved one before and after the crowds of mourners paid their respects. “We can arrange some private time before the viewing.”

“I want to do it now,” Mrs. Fisher said. “That’s why I agreed to come here tonight.”

“Honey, I don’t think we can do that. It might be...”

“Upsetting,” I said.

“Tonight. I want to see him tonight.”

“I don’t think that would be advisable,” I said.
“Why don’t we come back in the morning?” Mr. Fisher said.

“Yes,” I said. “In the morning we can settle all the paperwork.”

“Tonight,” Mrs. Fisher said. “Or we can take him somewhere else. We came to you over the other place in town, but we could just as easily change our minds.”

Her words hit me like a slap. I looked to Mr. Fisher, but he didn’t appear able to offer any help. His face showed weary resignation, an indication that he had tried his best already, and couldn’t sway his wife.

I was at a loss. The only thing I knew for certain was that I had no intention of letting them go.

“Okay.” I made a placating gesture with my hands, but I might as well have been surrendering. “You’ll have to give me a little time. Maybe just twenty minutes or so to prepare. You can wait right here, and I’ll start coffee in the kitchen.”

Mrs. Fisher’s face showed neither triumph nor relief. She simply nodded her agreement to my offer and sank back against the soft cushions of the couch, lost in her own private thoughts. Mr. Fisher met my gaze and gave a half-hearted shrug. He looked like a man being forced to walk a tightrope.

I went down the hallway to the kitchen and started the coffee maker. I opened the refrigerator door on my pathetic widower’s spread and confirmed what I already knew: I had nothing to offer them in the way of food. Hot coffee would have to serve as both sustenance and stimulant.

Before I went downstairs, I took a last look into the sitting room. Mrs. Fisher held the same position as when I left, her lips taut, her eyes distant. Mr. Fisher had his hands folded in his lap, looking very much like a lost boy waiting for someone to tell him what to do. Before I went
downstairs, he picked up the casket binder again and began flipping through, the plastic pages crackling in the quiet night.

The staircase came out into a large, finished room that I mostly used for storing extra chairs and tables. It looked like the basement of any residential home, and once during my one of my sleepless nights, I came up with the idea of purchasing a ping-pong table to pass the time. I found a used one in the classified section of the Dove Point Ledger for ninety dollars, picked it up in my hearse, and only when I got the thing home did I realize that ping-pong is much more fun when there are two people to play. Nevertheless, I tilted one side up at a ninety degree angle and have spent more hours than I would care to admit smacking that little white ball back and forth, the rhythmic pocking of the paddles soothing and mesmerizing me until I am ready to return to bed. My assistant Jim and I have even played a few times during breaks from work, both of us overdoing it like eager teenagers until our breath comes in puffs and our ties fall askew.

On the right side of the room is a wooden door marked “Employees Only,” and beneath that sign there is a yellow and red HazMat sticker indicating that dangerous chemicals may be in use. The Embalming Room. I went in and flicked on the overhead fluorescent lights.

I had one embalming table in the center of the room, a cousin of the autopsy tables used in the hospital, and to the left a collection of instruments and a silver sink. Everything, including the white tile beneath my feet, gleamed under the lights so that I had to squint my eyes.

The refrigeration unit was at the back. I had just wheeled Tyler into there, stretcher and all, so it was easy for me to prop the door open with my body and pull him back out. There was
room enough in the refrigerator for six bodies, but I had never used all that space. I moved the stretcher to the embalming table and unzipped the bag. The Fisher’s presence upstairs and the time constraints it imposed kept me from indulging in my private reveries. I picked Tyler up, my hands easily encircling the tiny girth of his chest, and laid him on the table face up. I shoved the stretcher out of the way and set about my work.

There naturally wasn’t time enough for me to perform the entire embalming procedure, so I settled for doing the cosmetic work that would make Tyler look as much like he did when he was alive as was possible.

I used store-bought superglue to keep Tyler’s eyelids shut. That’s one of the first things I liked to take care of, the eyelids. No one wants a corpse opening its eyes during a viewing. Tyler’s mouth wouldn’t require any work for the moment. In adults, we sew the mouth shut with thick black thread, again to prevent the jaw from dropping open during a service, but his small mouth didn’t seem to be an issue.

Then it was time for the make-up. I spread a coat of base on his face to cover up the blue, oxygen-deprived pallor of death. It’s easy for this kind of thing to look unnatural, so I used small, subtle strokes and a very light shade, just trying to bring a little bit of life into his face again. Babies have a naturally rosy glow, so I made sure to add a nice dose of blush onto his puffy, soft cheeks. It didn’t take long for Tyler to look alive again. A lot of funeral directors don’t take this part of the job seriously, but I have always taken pride in the fact that I do a nice job with make-up and hair. I’ve taken numerous refresher courses over the years to stay current, and I even buy women’s fashion magazines to pick up pointers. I added the same color that I used on Tyler’s face on his hands and feet, taking care that they matched and looked even and natural. It’s an easy detail to overlook, but the kind of thing a mother might notice.
I then moved on to dressing Tyler in the gown that Mrs. Fisher brought. Most people think a body gets stiff and stays stiff once a person dies, but that’s not true. Rigor sets in after six to eight hours, less obviously for a child, and it only lasts for a day. After that first thirty-six hours is up, a body regains some flexibility and is really quite easy to work with. Patients who have been bed-ridden or suffered strokes take quite a bit more time, but with some determined massaging it is possible to have even the most gnarled body laid out in peaceful repose. Tyler presented no such problems. He easily slid into his white gown, and I was able to place his little arms at his side so naturally you would have thought he placed them that way himself.

By the time I was finished, forty minutes had passed. I didn’t think it mattered much to Mrs. Fisher who had come to the house determined to fulfill her mission. The forty minutes may have felt like an eternity to her, or maybe they passed like a heartbeat.

Bringing the Fishers downstairs was out of the question. Only funeral home employees were allowed in the embalming room, and it was hardly the place for a mother to spend her last private moments with her child. For the second time that night, and for the second time in my life, I gently scooped Tyler up, tucked him in against my chest, and headed back upstairs. I took my time at first, stepping as carefully as a man negotiating a minefield, but by the time I reached the top of the stairs, his weight felt quite natural in my arms, and I began to understand some of the attraction of holding an infant. It felt natural and soothing in a way I hadn’t expected.

When I entered the living room, the Fishers both looked up. They had both helped themselves to mugs of coffee, and the sight of me carrying their child broke whatever tension had been slowly welling up between them. They both put their drinks aside and stood up as if on command.

“Here he is,” I said.
Mrs. Fisher gave her eyes two serious wipes, then held out her arms. It was awkward switching the baby from me to her, but we managed by taking it slow. I was very aware of the danger of dropping him, but Tyler settled into his mother’s arms and both of the Fishers began to cry. Mr. Fisher moved in closer to his wife and ran his hand over the crown of his son’s head.

“He’s beautiful,” Mrs. Fisher said. “Thank you.”

She clutched her boy to her chest and rocked slightly as if she was trying to put him to sleep. I stood in front of them, watching the scene unfold.

“Thank you,” Mr. Fisher said. He made brief eye contact with me before turning his attention back to his wife and child. I knew from his look that it was time for me to go and give them their time alone.

“Can I do anything else?” I asked.

“No,” Mr. Fisher said. “Thank you for everything.”

“I’ll be in the other room,” I said, but I doubted that they heard me. They were in a private place, the narrow confines of a family’s grief. They had closed ranks, and I didn’t have any place there. And I didn’t want to be in a place where I didn’t belong.

I went down the hallway to the kitchen, my steps muffled by the thick carpet, and poured myself a cup of coffee. Normally I avoided the stuff like the plague, but I was so awake and wired by that point that some caffeine wasn’t going to hurt anything. I took a seat at my round kitchen table, alone with my thoughts, and listened to the occasional sniffle or cry that reached me from the other room.

Most nights, the house grew so quiet that I had only the sound of my own heartbeat to keep me company. Many is the night that I rose and wandered the house like a ghost, peeking out the windows at the quiet streets of Dove Point, shuffling through paperwork in the Arrangement
Room. I read some nights, trade magazines or mystery novels, hoping that overworking my eyes would bring on drowsiness, but on more than one occasion, especially in the days before I bought my ping-pong table, I would succumb to televised inanities. Baseball games emanating from the West Coast, the palm trees swaying beyond the outfield fences, or decorating shows that wanted to convince me I could redo my house in two days and for under a thousand dollars.

Eventually, late into the night, sometimes just an hour before sunrise, I would doze off, but never for the amount of time that doctors and health experts prescribe. But those same health experts also say that as a person gets older, they require less sleep, and I wrote my insomnia off to the fact that my body was still adjusting to being over sixty years old.

The nights I rose and wandered weren’t the worst nights of all. There were other nights when I stayed in bed, and the stillness of the house seemed to pass right through me and inhabit my body. It felt like my heart stopped beating. The rushing of blood in my ears and the contracting in my chest stopped. But I didn’t panic. Instead I laid there quite still, wondering if this was what death was like. I have heard it said that in the moment just before death clarity comes and a person sees this world and understands it in some way that they hadn’t before. So on those nights I waited for the clarity, but drowsiness always overtook me soon after the stillness did, and more often than not I would sleep through the entire night without dreaming. But I never woke up feeling rested, and perhaps it was because on those nights when I imagines that my heart was stopping, I thought I was getting closer to something that never actually came.

My yellow kitchen clock kept time while I waited for the Fishers, but I didn’t pay much attention to it. An old Sunday paper was sitting on the table, the news two weeks old, the pages beginning to stiffen at the edges, and I occupied myself by reading articles about the prices of corn and soybean and who might decide to run for town council in the fall elections.
The Fishers must have sat with their infant son for an hour and a half, while I stayed in my kitchen chair, uninterested in rushing them along. They were fortunate to have found a funeral director who was both insomniac and struggling businessman.

After I had gleaned every useless factoid from the Sunday paper, I stared out the kitchen window. There was a halo of moonglow in the sky, and the leaves from the big oak in my back yard showed against it in stark relief. When I first started working at my profession, doctors and hospitals were less sympathetic to the needs of grieving parents. I’ve asked a number of doctors over the years and the older ones have all assured me that in a case like my parents the hospital staff would have whisked my stillborn brother’s body away as fast as possible so as to prevent my mom from becoming too upset. Nowadays, hospitals and doctors bend over backwards to accommodate the grieving, all of us being well-versed in the stages of grief and dying. The Fishers, for whatever reason, didn’t feel as if they received enough time with their child. It’s unlikely that they were the victim of an unsympathetic medical staff since along with our advanced understanding of grief we have also developed a knowledge of lawsuits, and I doubt that any doctor or nurse would risk violating the rights of a grieving mother.

I had no idea, of course, if my own parents had held a funeral service for my stillborn brother. I was alive, but I have no recollection of the events. I would have been just under two years old when my brother was born dead, and those events have, like so many others, disappeared into the fog of memory. I suspect that they did have a small service, probably with a small, closed casket. They would have let my mom and dad have a moment alone with the baby before they sealed the casket lid, but it’s unlikely they were able to pick him up. As for me, I have no idea where I was during all of these proceedings. Most likely, they packed me off to someone in town, an old widow lady maybe, someone who liked to look after other people’s
children. Or perhaps a relative stayed behind with me at the house, distracting me with a shiny toy car while my parents went out the back door in their dark funeral attire. From time to time I try to picture the scene, but the images elude me, like trying to catch a butterfly. I can’t even be certain anymore of the difference between what really happened and what was imagined.

And for me, that’s the tricky part. I have a picture in my head of my mother holding a baby that I presume to be my little brother. I don’t know where this image came from, nor can I say how long I’ve been seeing it. My entire life, perhaps. It’s possible that over the years I’ve imagined the scene so many times that it has become a part of the fabric of my memories, in the same way that when I think of Eloise and I first dating, I remember the passion and the promises as being white hot, while the fights and low moments have faded into blackness.

Sometimes, I even see that moment between my mother and brother as a photograph, a black and white snapshot with a white border. I could swear that I once held that picture in my hands, and like most pictures from my childhood, I knew that my father was the photographer. I’ve gone through the boxes of artifacts left over from my parents’ lives, and I’ve never found such a picture. As an only child, I had sole claim to my parents’ belongings, so everything they owned in that house passed through my hands before it was thrown away or kept. If such a picture existed, I would have found it. Did such a picture ever exist, and if it did, what comfort did it bring my parents?

When enough time had passed, I pushed myself up from the kitchen table, my knees and back creaking in protest, and made my way slowly back to the living room. When I entered, Mr. Fisher was already standing as if he had been looking forward to my appearance.

“Is everything okay in here?” I asked.

“Fine.”
“Would you like some more time?” I asked.

“No,” Mr. Fisher said. “I think we’re just about done.”

Mrs. Fisher stayed on the couch, her infant still cradled against her chest, and she gave no indication that she was ready to get up and go home. Mr. Fisher leaned down and touched her shoulder, but she leaned away ever so slightly, her grip on the baby tight and defensive. Mr. Fisher rose and turned to me, an embarrassing silence falling among the three of us.

“You can take all the time you want,” I said.

Mr. Fisher shook his head. “We really need to go.” He bent down to his wife again, his voice just above a whisper. “Becky, we’ve put Mr. Hoskins out enough for one night. It’s late.”

Mrs. Fisher continued to hold the infant against her chest as if she expected one of us to snatch it away.

I sensed an awkward scene developing, and rather than try to head it off with my words, I allowed my instincts to take over. I excused myself and went back out to the kitchen. Six months earlier, after a heavy rainstorm, the basement of the funeral home flooded, causing some damage to the ceiling and carpeting in one corner of the basement. My insurance company instructed me to take pictures of the damage, and since I didn’t own a camera, I bought a disposable one at Walgreen’s. It turned out that the deductible on my policy was too high for me to pay, so the film and camera remained in my kitchen drawer, undeveloped. I found it right away, and brought it back to the sitting room where Mr. Fisher was now on the couch next to his wife, whispering in her ear.

“Mr. and Mrs. Fisher,” I said. They both looked up like children being summoned by an authority figure. Neither one of them seemed to notice the camera in my hand. “If it might make
it easier on the both of you, I could take a picture of you with Tyler. It might be a way for you to remember him better.”

Mr. Fisher looked uncertain, as if he thought I might be playing a joke on them.

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Mr. Hoskins,” he said. “We just came to-

“His six month picture would be coming up,” Mrs. Fisher said. “He’s changed so much since the last one.”

Now it was Mrs. Fisher’s turn to be on the receiving end of her husband’s look of incredulity, although her attention was directed at the baby, and she didn’t notice him.

“My wife died a few years ago,” I said. I got the distinct feeling that I was speaking only for Mrs. Fisher’s benefit. “Sometimes I think about her, and I have a hard time picturing exactly what her face looked like in the last years we had together. Things get fuzzy sometimes...pictures don’t always help, but I wish I had taken a few more.”

Mrs. Fisher raised her head and fixed her eyes on me, taking my full measure. I felt uncomfortable under the intensity of her gaze and was about to look away when she spoke.

“Would you mind?” she said.

She adjusted the baby on her lap so that his face showed toward me and the camera, then she used a free hand to brush a stray strand of hair out of her face. Her movements were efficient and assured, a contrast to her husband who was standing with his hands deep in his pants pockets, looking like an actor unsure of his lines.

“Are you really sure about this?” he asked.

It wasn’t clear to me who he was addressing, but his wife spoke up without hesitation.

“Let’s do this, Brian, and then we can go home.”
Her words acted as a spell, releasing her husband from the grip of inaction. He sat back down on the couch next to his wife, running his hand over his hair in preparation for the picture.

I studied the camera, making sure I knew which button to push and which hole to look through. It seemed idiot proof, even for someone like me who had held a camera only a few more times than I had held a baby. But there was still one problem when I looked up.

“You may want to go to the bathroom and fix your make-up,” I said. “Your mascara.”

“Oh.” I told her how to find the bathroom down the hall. “I’ll be right back.”

An awkward moment descended during which Mrs. Fisher acted as if she didn’t know what to do with the baby, then she handed him over to her husband who held the baby away from his body as if he were a hand grenade. I moved forward and smoothed down the baby’s hair.

“He’s a fine looking boy,” I said.

Mr. Fisher nodded. He brought the child a little closer to his chest, but not all the way. He stared at his own child as if it had fallen out of the sky unexpectedly and landed in his arms. We were like two men waiting for an overdue bus.

“We haven’t lived in town very long,” Mr. Fisher said. “I teach at the high school. My first job.”

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Plainfield,” he said. “I haven’t even told my parents about this yet. I’m afraid that people will think Becky’s a bad mother because of this.”

“Not to worry. People are very understanding.”

Mr. Fisher gnawed on his lower lip.

“Do you think this is a good idea?” he asked, his voice dropping close to a whisper. “This picture thing. Do most people do it?”

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“I don’t think it’s abnormal at all,” I said. “I think you’ll both value this memory.”

He didn’t need to know that I had never done this before, that we were making the whole thing up as we went along, like actors improvising a scene. Mr. Fisher didn’t strike me as the kind of man who was looking to venture out on his own and set new precedents for the way that people grieve. I didn’t tell him a lie exactly, I just told him what I thought he wanted to hear at that moment, a necessary skill in my line of work. If somebody’s mother or brother died of a stroke that so gnarled their features that no amount of massaging and make-up could hide the damage, I would still stand at the side of the casket and agree with the bereaved that their loved one looked peaceful and at rest. My physical skills only went so far. Sometimes my mouth had to make up the rest.

“I think I’m ready.”

Mrs. Fisher appeared in the doorway, her face freshly washed, her hair pulled back tighter than before. I wouldn’t say that she looked happy or eager to be coming back into the room with us, but she did look determined. She made no eye contact with me as she walked through the room and took her seat on the couch. She smoothed her skirt out, taking the kind of time that indicated that this was no ordinary snapshot being taken, and indeed it wasn’t. The stakes were quite high for this one because it would help determine the way she would remember her son for the rest of her life.

When Mrs. Fisher had arranged herself to her satisfaction, she wordlessly held her arms out to her husband who placed the infant gently back into her care. Mrs. Fisher adjusted the baby on her lap, straightening his clothes and making her own attempt to smooth down his hair. Mr. Fisher inched closer to his wife and draped his arm across her shoulder. They looked like any family posing for a portrait, young and strong, their entire future before them. My basement
handiwork enabled their deceased child to appear as normal and healthy as any other sleeping baby, maybe more so, and to the casual observer this family had nothing to worry about.

I stepped forward with the camera and located them in the viewfinder.

“Mrs. Fisher? You might want to tilt his head up just a bit.” She did, and her baby’s face, eyes closed, was completely visible to the camera. “Ready?”

I counted to three and snapped the picture. Neither one of the Fishers smiled, and in fact it looked as if both of them tried to put on the most solemn and dignified expression they could summon up.

“I’d like you to take a few, if that’s alright,” Mrs. Fisher said.

“No problem. But you both might want to relax a little bit. I know that’s easier said than done, but you both look a little stiff.”

I regretted my choice of words as soon as it came out, but neither one of the Fishers showed any reaction to it. They began to slacken their facial muscles and loosen their shoulders in an attempt to follow my advice. I couldn’t change the behavior of a roomful of mourners at a traditional funeral service, but in this strange circumstance, where just the three of us were present, I felt as if I suddenly had more control of my role as funeral director.

I ended up taking about ten pictures. Over the course of the ten pictures, the Fishers began to relax a bit, and they even forced half-smiles on the last couple of pictures. While the pictures were being taken, a thought passed across my mind as quickly as one of the camera flashes. What exactly was I getting myself into here? When the Fishers came to my door, we were all expecting to participate in a garden variety funeral service, the kind of business I had been transacting for most of my working life. Mrs. Fisher’s displeasure and my own desire to please her had worked together to take us off into a direction that I never would have anticipated
and one that I wasn’t sure was such a good idea. I had acted out of a desire to keep their business, and I hoped that after tonight, we could settle back into our traditional roles. No more surprises, no more detours.

I took pictures until the roll was finished, then I slipped the camera into my jacket pocket. Mrs. Fisher held her position even though she knew as well as I that the picture taking was over.

Mr. Fisher broke the spell.

“It’s time for us to go, Becky. And Mr. Hoskins has to take Tyler back.”

It was late by then, after three o’clock, and I was beginning to feel the hour in my eyes and in my bones. It turned out that I wasn’t as wired as I thought I was. Hard work and human interaction might be better insomnia cures than cable cooking shows.

Mrs. Fisher’s eyes were staring straight ahead, apparently fixed on nothing. I feared for a moment that she was reaching some sort of breaking point, and the evening was going to devolve into an unpleasant scene. But Mrs. Fisher, to her great credit, handled herself well. She brought Tyler up to her face and gave him a gentle kiss on the head, then squeezed him tight. She looked at me.

“You’ll take good care of him.”

It was more of an order than a question.

“Without a doubt.”

She hesitated before starting to hand the baby to me.

“Why don’t we place him here on the couch while I walk you to the door,” I said.

It went against every instinct in her to leave her child unattended, and then to leave him behind altogether, but it was the first step toward letting go.
She placed Tyler on the couch and stood up. Mr. Fisher rose and shook my hand, looking like a man who had just received good news from the doctor. Everything was going to be okay.

I showed them to the door.

“Call me tomorrow if you need anything else,” I said.

Mrs. Fisher paused in the doorway and turned back to me. I thought for a moment that she wanted to give me a hug, but instead she just spoke.

“You’ll take care of developing the pictures,” she said.

“I’ll take care of it.”

She turned without saying anything else, and while her husband held the door open, the two of them walked out into the calm, silent Dove Point night.
I managed to sleep for five uninterrupted hours after the Fishers left that night. My time with them had worn me out so that I barely remembered setting the alarm clock for eight a.m. and then falling into my dreamless sleep. The alarm brought me out of my sleep clear-eyed, and I showered and dressed quickly. For the first time in longer than I liked to think about, I was a man with several missions ahead of him, and I relished the excitement of having something to do. I put on a light-colored, summer weight suit and red paisley tie for my morning errands and remembered to pick up the disposable camera from off the kitchen table.

When I hit the switch on the garage door opener, a sunny morning greeted me with the promise of afternoon heat. I considered, very briefly, the idea of just walking the five blocks downtown to take care of my business, enjoying the summer weather on the way, but the Walgreen’s was a little past the heart of Dove Point and a walk that far down and back might be too much for me, so I opted for the car.

There was talk in the city council and chamber of commerce meetings of putting a bypass around Dove Point so that the truck traffic could go through faster on its way to South Bend, Fort Wayne, Gary and Chicago. Most of the old-timers, including me, opposed the idea. Sure, there’d be fewer trucks rumbling through the heart of our city, damaging our roads and disturbing our peace. And before long, we’d have our very own Wal-Mart, megaplex movie theatre and every kind of fast food known to man. The downtown would slowly die, leaving a lot of empty storefronts and space for parking lots. I didn’t make any vocal opposition of my own to the plan. Since Eloise’s death, I had become less and less involved in the inner workings of the town. I
paid my chamber of commerce dues on time and read the newsletter when it arrived in the mail, but I no longer attended meetings or sat on committees. I just didn’t have the interest. If they didn’t make the town over today, they’d do it tomorrow. Eventually the people like me will die off and the opposition will disappear, and the town will decide that a bypass and a new way of life will make sense, all in the name of progress.

I drove downtown in my personal car, a dark green Ford Tempo. Most of the homes along Center Street had been built back before World War Two, and they were slowly losing their attractiveness and All-American splendor because they no longer passed from one family member to another. Over the years, the For Sale signs appeared, new people bought the houses, and the details that were once so carefully accounted for--a fresh coat of paint, trimmed hedges, raked leaves--were now ignored. It made me wish that I could see the town today the way I remembered it from my childhood.

It was a Monday morning, and there wasn’t a great deal of activity in the streets. Traffic around the courthouse square was light, and a few clusters of men and women in business suits roamed the sidewalks, cell phones and briefcases attached to their bodies like parasites. I parked in the middle of the block on the south side of the courthouse, halfway between Indiana Avenue and Grant. A sign on the curb reminded me to limit my parking to two hours, but there was no parking meter and no real threat of ever getting a parking ticket.

I walked west to the corner of Center and Indiana, and entered Domino’s. This is not the pizza place I’m talking about. Domino’s is a Dove Point institution, a sort of combination restaurant, old boy’s club and smoke-filled room. Breakfast was the big meeting time when all the town big shots--the lawyers, the bankers, the city councilman and county officials--had their eggs and coffee, cutting deals and exchanging gossip. It used to be that women weren’t allowed
in Domino’s, but that certainly wasn’t the case anymore. We had two women on city council now, and the county auditor was a woman who went to high school two years behind me. On any given morning, I’m sure a person could find them in here eating and gossiping with the big-bellied men. I used to eat at Domino’s almost every morning, almost out of necessity. It served as a way to remind everyone in the business community that I was one of them, that if they had need of my services, I was there. But over the years, most of the men I knew and shared coffee with had died or retired, and the new crop of young business people with their cigars and cell phones had taken over, no doubt sending emails back to their college friends telling them all about this rustic little “authentic” diner they went to in Dove Point. I stopped in there once or twice a month these days, but I felt certain that no one really missed my presence.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust when I stepped inside. Domino’s was a dark, wood-paneled room, with a row of booths running along one side and free-standing tables in back. There was a counter up front where men sipped coffee, read the newspaper, or played grab-ass with the waitresses. There were even a few old-timers--and I do mean men older than me--who actually still played dominos in the morning, which is how the place acquired its name when it opened in the 1930s. I spotted Jim Heilman sitting alone at the counter, the Dove Point Ledger folded into a quarter in his right hand. I walked up and took the empty stool next to him.

“Morning Doc,” he said. We shook hands.

“Morning Jim.”

I had known Jim most of my life, and he still called me Doc as if I was a physician or professor. Thirty or forty years ago, I tried to explain that I wasn’t a doctor, and I know that Jim understood that, but he still called me by that name out of habit and deference. At first Jim’s name made me uncomfortable, but over the years I had grown to like it and, in my prideful heart,
had grown to like the air of authority and respect the name conferred on me, even if it was just between two friends.

“Haven’t seen you in awhile. How’s business?”

“I’ve got one tomorrow. That’s why I’m looking for you.”

I didn’t have enough business anymore to keep and pay a full-time staff. Even in the last years of Eloise’s life, the two of us did almost everything ourselves. Jim retired from the fire department about ten years ago, and he helped me out whenever I had a funeral and he had the time. He was a little shorter than me, but stockier. When he rolled his sleeves up at work, a series of tattoos depicting his naval service in the Korean War were revealed. He drove the hearse or the limo, handed out the magnetic funeral flags, kept the coffee going. I couldn’t do the job without him.

“Is it Oliver Jenkins?” he asked.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“He died yesterday afternoon.” Jim looked down at his coffee cup. “I figured you would have heard by now.”

“No.”

Oliver Jenkins was a classmate of mine from high school, and while we weren’t close, he had helped me with a handful of tax questions over the years. He had talked to me, informally, on more than one occasion, about handling the arrangements for he and his wife when the time came. I assumed I would be.

“Maybe they’ll still call,” Jim said.

“Probably went with Wellington.”
While the thought of handling two funerals in a week made me dizzy with excitement, I knew that there was no way we could have pulled it off. I simply didn’t have enough staff to do two jobs in a timely fashion, and I told myself to be content with the Fishers’ business which had come my way unexpectedly. It still bothered me to think of Oliver Jenkins’ funeral being handled by another home, and it wasn’t just because of the lost income. Chances were that old Ollie had every intention of using my services, but once he was dead, his family got into the mix and Wellington offered prices that I couldn’t touch. A share of the blame fell on me as well for not doing something as simple as sticking my head into Domino’s once or twice a week. I made a silent resolution to increase my visibility in the community and prevent any more Oliver Jenkins from slipping through my hands.

“Well, you’ve got some work anyway,” Jim said.

“Right. It might be a big one. It’s an infant.”

Jim shook his head. “That’s terrible. Who?”

“The Fishers.”

“Don’t know them. They new to town?”

“I think so. He teaches at the high school. They’re young kids. Probably just married. They don’t know which way to go.”

“I’ll ask around. See if anyone knows anything about them.”

Jim knew almost everyone in town, and if he didn’t know them personally, he knew someone who did. He kept me informed of the town’s gossip and news in a way that the papers couldn’t.

“I think they’re going to want to do it Wednesday night. It’ll be in the paper tomorrow.”
Mention of the Fishers reminded me of my other mission for the morning. I felt my coat pocket to be certain that the disposable camera was still by my side.

“I’ll be there. Usual time?”

“Maybe a little earlier.” I had something else to say to Jim, but I wasn’t sure how to go about it. I cleared my throat. “I know I still haven’t paid you for last time, but I’ll get something together for you.”

Jim held up his hand. “I know you’re good for it.”

“You deserve to be paid for your time.”

“I have a pension. Don’t worry about it.”

A pension. The word had talismanic qualities for me. Here was a man who didn’t have to worry about his retirement since something had already been put aside for him. Eloise and I had argued on more than one occasion about our lack of retirement savings, and I dug my heels in and promised that the future would take care of itself, assuming that nothing out of the ordinary happened. Her illness had come along and depleted what little we had saved. How foolish is it that death and illness would sneak up on someone in my profession?

“No. I’ll come through for you.”

I once offered Jim a free funeral as compensation for his work, but his retirement package and life insurance provided for all of that.

“Is it going to be too much for the two of us?” Jim asked. “It might.”

“Is your niece around?”

“I was going to give her a call.”

My niece, actually Eloise’s niece. Rochelle. A student at Indiana University. She helped me out in the summers when she was home from school. I think she liked to help just because it
allowed her to go back to school and casually drop into conversation that she sometimes worked in a funeral home. Who could tell how many dates my profession had helped her get, or how many overzealous suitors it had helped to turn away.

“Give her a call. We’ll be busier than one armed paper hangers if you don’t.”

“I know.” I put my hand back into my jacket pocket. “Do you know how long it takes to get film developed at Walgreen’s?”

“They can do it in an hour, I think.”

“Really? Does that cost a lot more?”

“No. They have a machine that does it right in the store.”

“A machine?”

Jim smiled. “You need to get out of the house a little more Doc.”

“Maybe I do.” We shook hands, and I stood up. “I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“You need to eat a little more, too. You look like you’re wasting away.”

I looked down at my midsection. My clothes hung looser on my body, but I didn’t think anyone else could notice.

“Hopefully, I’ll be too busy to eat,” I said.

He waved and went back to his newspaper. I went out onto Center Street wondering why I kept offering work to a man I knew I couldn’t pay.

At Walgreen’s I needed a clerk’s assistance to fill out the necessary paperwork for getting the film developed. The form offered several options that I wasn’t sure about. Matte or glossy?
Four by six or three and a half by five? Would I like a copy of the prints on a cd? Once everything was explained to me, I decided to splurge. No sense skimping. I went for four by six, double prints. The Fishers certainly might want an extra set, and I also thought I might want some copies for myself lest I forget the details of what struck me as an extraordinary night. I put the camera into the envelope and sealed the sticky flap.

But before I handed it over to the clerk, I hesitated. If someone saw what was on that roll of film and understood what they were pictures of, how would they respond? Would they ask questions or notify the authorities? Would anybody care?

The clerk had her hand out, and she looked at me with her head cocked slightly to the right. She looked to be about twenty, and her red smock did little to hide a pregnancy that looked to be in its sixth month.

“Sir? Did you have another question?”

“Will they really be ready in an hour?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. One hour or it’s free.”

“Well, I guess I’ll be seeing you in an hour.”

I handed over the envelope. The clerk tore off my claim ticket and gave it back, wishing me a happy day. I bid her the same, tucked the ticket into my wallet and started back to my car.

I considered going home to call my niece, Rochelle, but she lived with her parents about a half a mile from downtown, and if I went home, I knew I could create a million and one excuses for never making the call. I needed her help with the Fisher funeral, so this was no time to be concerned about familial awkwardness.

Rochelle’s mother, Leslie, was Eloise’s sister, and they lived in a newer subdivision northwest of town called Rolling Glen. I had been there a number of times in the past, although
only three or four since Eloise died. It wasn’t for lack of effort on Leslie’s part. Every Christmas and Thanksgiving I received a phone call from her, and even after Eloise died I made my way out there for a few holiday meals. But over the last couple of years I began to make excuses concerning work and tiredness in order to avoid the whole ordeal. There was only so much forced small talk that one person could endure before choosing to spend Christmas dinner alone in his own house.

I parked on the street in front of their two-story, brick and siding house that looked kith and kin to every other structure on the street. It was Eloise’s idea that Rochelle help me out at work. When Ellie first became ill, and when Rochelle was still in junior high, I bemoaned the lack of a feminine hand to help me with work.

“Someday,” Eloise said, “Rochelle will be old enough to help you.”

Eloise’s advice did me little good then, but two summers ago, when I found myself in need of extra help, I turned to Rochelle who was then between her senior year of high school and her first year of college at Indiana University. To my great relief, she provided the caring, feminine touch that my business needed and had lacked since Eloise’s death. Rochelle had worked a total of five funerals for me during summer breaks from school, and she never failed to throw herself into the work with the enthusiasm and relish of youth.

It didn’t look like anyone was home at my in-laws’ house. The blinds were closed, the driveway empty. A plastic bag of grocery store flyers dangled from the doorknob like a surrender flag. I rang the bell expecting nothing, but in a matter of seconds, my brother-in-law Bill answered. He blinked his eyes a couple of times against the bright sun. He took a step back as if to get a good look and make sure it was really me.

“This is a surprise.”
Bill wore a crooked grin that hovered between joy and mockery.

“Hello, Bill.”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all,” I said. “I wanted to talk to Rochelle about some work.”

His grin disappeared. “She’s asleep.” He hesitated and probably would have closed the door in my face except that he would then face the wrath of his wife. “You want to come on in?”

He held the door open for me, and I stepped into their cool, clean house. From the shaded light of the entryway, I saw pristine furniture perfectly arranged in the living room and dining room and not a hint of dust, disorder or clutter. I followed Bill back to the kitchen where he had the morning paper spread out on the table, a glass of orange juice sitting nearby. The kitchen smelled faintly of burnt toast.

“You want something to drink or eat?”

“I’m fine.”

He pointed to a chair and we both sat down. I didn’t like my brother-in-law very much. He had acted friendly enough toward me over the years, but I always suspected that his friendliness covered up some deeper disapproval of me and what I did for a living. I imagined it started with the fact that I made his wife’s sister live above a funeral home for all of those years. Our conversations never moved beyond the most pedestrian topics: weather (which didn’t interest me), politics (on which we completely disagreed), and sports (of which I knew nothing.) We were civil enough to each other, but never became close as some brothers-in-law do, and I always confided to Eloise that I thought Bill was a narrow, unimaginative man, and I had no idea why Leslie had ever married him.

“How’s business?” Bill asked. “People still dying?”
“Apparently. I’ve got one coming up that’s going to be big.” I tried to make my voice brim with confidence, sending the message that business was good, but it sounded forced to my own ears. I was never good at playing the big shot. “That’s what I need Rochelle’s help with.”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t look me in the eye. One advantage I held over my brother-in-law was the fact that he had begun to bald prematurely when we were still in our early thirties, and now his hair was entirely gone, revealing that the top of his head came to a subtle point, something like a mountain peak. “She’s working at a clothing store over in Charlesburg, forty, sometimes fifty hours a week. She may have to work already.”

“Well, you can just ask her to call me.”

I started to get up.

“You don’t have to rush off. She may be up soon.”

“I’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Leslie never gets to see you. Tell me what’s been going on in your life for when she asks me about you.”

Bill was one person in town who had almost as much unstructured time on his hands as me. A few years ago, the orthopedic company he worked for, Peabody, was bought out by a German firm that promptly laid off fifty managers and executives. I suspect Bill received a handsome going away package, and now he spent most of his days tending to a garden and doing volunteer work around Dove Point. Leslie went back to work as a nurse, maybe because they needed the money or maybe because Bill was around the house most of the day. His interest in talking to me came as a surprise and perhaps indicated the level of his boredom. While I understood where he was coming from, I wished I had the guts to decline the invitation. I took my seat again and tried to think of something the two of us could talk about.
“Nothing’s new with me,” I said. “The roof leaked a few months back. I have to get that fixed.”

“Are you close to selling out or retiring?”

“No. And don’t ask me about Wellington. I don’t want to hear about them.”

“Okay.” He shrugged at my defensiveness. I anticipated the descent of an awkward silence, but Bill rushed to fill the dead air. “Did I tell you that Leslie and I bought plots out at Blue Pines? We got a hell of a deal.”

I’ve heard doctors complain that they can’t go anywhere without having someone ask them about a malady, real or imagined, and in my line of work I have experienced the same thing. Whenever I tell someone what I do for a living, there is the initial moment of discomfort, a quick appraisal on the other person’s part in which they try to figure out if there is something obviously wrong with me. But within a few minutes I know the conversation will turn to the burial arrangements of themselves or someone they loved who had recently died. What’s your opinion of cremation? Hate it. Should I have a living will? Talk to your attorney. Do you really sleep in a house with dead people? It’s cheaper than having a pet.

“We thought about calling you and asking your advice, but—”

“But the offer was for a limited time only.”

He looked surprised. “It was. We had to make a decision.”

“Did you buy a plot or space in a mausoleum?”

“Mausoleum space. It hasn’t even been built yet, but we’ve got time for that. It’ll be ready in five years.”

It was a standard sales pitch that Bill and Leslie had gone for. Blue Pines had plans to build five or more mausoleums in the next ten years, the latest trend in the burial of the dead.
worked on the same concept as real estate--someone had figured out that it was more efficient to stack dead people vertically than it was to keep putting them in the ground. Cemeteries sold these mausoleum spaces to consumers as a cheaper, more modern alternative, although they still charged ridiculous fees for upkeep and perpetual care which no longer involved cutting grass and trimming weeds, but was now just a matter of wiping off the faux marble or granite hallway that housed the burial vaults. One person could tend to a flock of mausoleums as opposed to the team of landscapers and laborers who were needed to tend to traditional burial space.

I didn’t object so much to the method of burial, although as a traditionalist, I wasn’t thrilled with it. What bothered me more was the method of presentation that these places chose to sell their product. Bill and Leslie almost certainly received a glossy circular in the mail or else a phone call from a telemarketer delivering a pitch about the urgent need for securing a home through eternity before it was too late or before prices went through the roof. Space was going fast, they would say. Except that it wasn’t. Blue Pines would never run out of space in the lifetimes of Bill and Leslie’s great-grandchildren, and there was no need for them to try to save money by buying themselves a drawer in a wall for all eternity, something that struck me as unnatural and depressingly without character. The cemeteries played on people’s worst fears, and then tried to sell them burial space like it was long-distance service or Girl Scout cookies.

“If you’re happy with what you got, then I’m happy for you. You don’t need my advice.”

“We’re going to be facing a pond. I know that’s stupid, but it will be nice for the people who come to visit. Rochelle. Her kids.”

“I think that’s important to think about.”

“Obviously you have some opinion you’re not sharing with me. What is it?”
A better brother-in-law would have just offered his support and left it at that, but I felt too strongly about the transformation of my profession into something akin to selling used cars.

I sighed. “I just think people should be buried in the ground, the way they have been for a long time. Ashes to ashes and all that. In one of those vaults you’ll have strangers on top of you and next to you. It’s not private. We’re crowded enough in life, in death we should get our own space. It’s a shortcut so that they can do less work and make more money.” I waited for Bill to reply, but he just stared down at his newspaper. I wished I’d kept my mouth shut. “I’m sorry.”

“I just thought that we should save money now. We have a child to think about.” He emphasized the word we. “I want Rochelle to get that money and not some cemetery or funeral home.”

“What are you two talking about?”

It was Rochelle, standing in the doorway, sleepy-eyed.

“I was just telling your Uncle Jack about the burial plots your Mom and I bought.”

“Gross.” She shuffled into the kitchen, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, and got a glass of water from the tap. “What are you doing here, Uncle Jack?”

“I came to see if you were free to work Wednesday night.”

“Wednesday?” She leaned back against the sink, the water held in one hand in front of her chest. A stray lock of her black, curly hair fell over her face, and for just a quick, passing moment, she looked like a younger version of Eloise, the one I had met and married all those years ago. I looked away.

“I told him you were working a lot,” Bill said.

“I can’t pay very much,” I said. “But I know you like to help out sometimes. We’re going to need the feminine touch. It’s a funeral for a baby.”
“How sad.”

She took a long drink of her water. She had somehow managed to inherit most of the good qualities of her family, the same qualities that Eloise had in abundance--compassion, generosity, thoughtfulness toward others--qualities that somehow had skipped her father. She also possessed Eloise’s keen eye for business, a sort of no-nonsense way of cutting through the layers of crap and quickly summing up a situation. Rochelle occasionally offered me business advice, information that she picked up in her classes at IU, but most of it was lost on me. “I can do it. I’m off Wednesday night.”

“Good. The earlier you can be there the better.”

“I’ll try to be there by five.”

“Jim’ll be there to help me early on.”

“Who’s kid is this?” Bill asked.

“A young couple, the Fishers.”

He nodded. “Is there going to be a viewing?” Bill asked. “Open casket?”

“The whole works.”

“It’s probably good for the parents to go through that,” Rochelle said. “It will make everything more real for them.”

“Closure, right?” Bill stood up. He took his empty glass to the sink. Rochelle moved out of the way. “Everybody wants closure. Well, let me ask you something Jack. This funeral, how much is it going to set this couple back? A few thousand dollars at least?”

“It’s not all final yet, but probably in that neighborhood.”

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “Dad.”
“Now just a minute, we were talking about something before you came down, and I want to finish it before Jack leaves.” He leaned back against the sink next to Rochelle, aping her pose.

“For the viewing you’re going to do the embalming and the cosmetics and the casket and all of that, right?”

“Right.”

“And you’ll put the kid under lights in an outfit he’d never wear if he were alive, right? And once they bury him it’ll take about a thousand years for him to decay.”

“I’m not going to listen to this.” Rochelle took her glass of water and left the room. “I’ll see you on Wednesday, Uncle Jack.” Bill didn’t break off eye contact with me.

“I’m going to do all of that because the family wants it,” I said.

“But you’re trying to tell me that how I want to be buried is unnatural.”

I stood up without answering him. I straightened my coat. “It was good seeing you again, Bill.”

“No offense, Jack, but you don’t have anything to say to that, do you?”

“No I don’t.” I walked back out toward the front door with Bill trailing along behind like a bad memory. When I stepped outside, I stopped and looked back at Bill who was standing in the doorway, squinting against the sunlight. The day already felt hotter, and I wished I had taken a glass of water while I was in their kitchen. “I’m not going to argue with you about anything you said because I’m not so sure that I disagree with you.”

Bill looked puzzled, his mouth curled up into a wiggly line. He looked like a little kid who had been denied a chance to play.

“You can’t say that,” he said. “That’s your work.”
I buttoned my coat and made a secret wish that I would never have to see my brother-in-law again.

“How do you feel about your profession?” I asked.

He didn’t answer right away, but the wiggly mouth line straightened and his jaw set.

“I’m retired,” he said finally.

I nodded, my point made.

“Like I said, it was nice seeing you, Bill.”
Despite the unpleasantness with Bill, I drove away from their house feeling good about my morning. I had my team in place, and things were shaping up for the Fishers’ funeral. It felt good to be out in the world again and working, to begin the day with a list of jobs and mentally check them off as each one was accomplished. I checked the digital clock on my dashboard. It hadn’t quite been an hour since I left the camera at Walgreen’s, so with a small measure of relief, I headed for home.

As I drove back to the house, the air-conditioning on high and every vent directed at my face, I thought about everything that could go wrong with those pictures. I imagined a nosy clerk, one who made a habit of looking through other people’s snapshots, would see them and decide that something unsavory was going on. I hadn’t broken any laws, and the Fishers had consented to what we did, but in a business like mine--one dependent on the public trust--any hint of scandal or disreputability would sound my deathknell. All I needed was for the state board to be alerted or the media to start sniffing around and the ship I hoped to keep afloat would slip beneath the waves.

But I suspected that Jim was right, no human being would ever see those pictures during the developing process. In this case as in so many others, Jim knew and understood how the world worked, and I decided to place my faith in his instincts. There wasn’t much else for me to do at this point since the pictures were out of my hands. And if I was half as good of a funeral director as I thought I was, little Tyler would look as alive as any other baby. To hedge my bets, I decided to call the Fishers and see if they wanted to pick the pictures up themselves.
Once back in the cool quiet of home, I went to the Arrangement Room to knock out some of the tasks I had before me. I began with a call to the casket distributor and ordered the model that the Fishers wanted. They had the model in stock, and once I gave them my account number, they promised delivery by the next morning. I was fortunate to do business in Indiana because one of the nation’s largest manufacturers of caskets was located in the southeast portion of the state, in Batesville. I could have almost anything I wanted in less than a day. Wellington, on the other hand, had recently expanded their building to include a casket showroom, and everything they had in the showroom they also had in stock. No waiting. It didn’t really matter in terms of the service provided, since I could get anything I needed in time for any customer, but it did matter in terms of presentation. A family could walk through the casket showroom and see for themselves their loved one’s “home through eternity.” They could touch it, smell it, kick its tires, even climb inside and lay down if they wanted to. It was like being in a fancy car showroom.

My next order of business was to call the Fishers, and I looked their number up in the phonebook. In all the hubbub of the night before, I had forgotten to ask them for it. I had just turned to the first page of Fs when the phone on my desk rang. It was Mr. Fisher, checking up on me.

“Yes,” I said. My voice sounded too cheery, and I tried to modulate it. “I ordered the casket this morning. So you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Good.” I heard murmured conversation in the background on Mr. Fisher’s end of the line, and a whine of portable phone interference. “We picked out a nice plot this morning,” he told me. “It’s actually for all three of us. Becky and I won’t have to worry about that now.”

“It’s good to have that peace of mind. Costs are just going to go up over the years, so you made a good investment.”
“You think so?”

Like Bill, he wanted my confirmation of his instincts, and unlike Bill, I was more than happy to provide it for the Fishers because they were my clients and I was getting paid to tend to their needs. I could have rained on their parade with my worldly wisdom and explained that Mr. Fisher couldn’t know how the death of this child would effect his marriage, and that in a few years he might not even be married to the same woman anymore, let alone wish to spend eternity buried next to her, but that wouldn’t have given me much pleasure. Or I could have told him that he couldn’t know how soon one of those plots might need to be used, that being prepared was no guarantee against disaster. The Fishers were going to walk down the path of grief together, and even I couldn’t tell them what they were going to find. I opted to play the role of the supportive undertaker.

“Absolutely. Is it in the new section of Blue Pines?”

“Yes. It’s all very open, although they say they’re going to plant trees soon. Shade sounds nice, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does, especially on a hot day like this.”

I knew that Mr. Fisher and his family didn’t have a snowball’s chance of ending up in the shade of anything. The new section of Blue Pines wasn’t a cemetery, it was a memorial park, which meant that it was flat and green with bronze plaques in the ground instead of headstones. A tree would only interfere with perpetual care. It was something to maneuver a lawn mower around, an inconvenience. I’m sure they weren’t lying when they said they were going to plant some trees. They’d plant a nice stand of ten or fifteen in some corner of the park and call it something like the “Reflection Arboretum.” They counted on someone like Mr. Fisher forgetting
all about any promises that the cemetery made on this day in the heat of his grief. Once his son was in the ground, he wasn’t going to ask for a refund. Cynical perhaps, but also true.

“Did you take care of those pictures?”

Mr. Fisher sounded more assertive on the phone today, more confident than at any time the night before. Something had shifted in our relationship. He had become the paying customer, and that meant he was a little more comfortable making demands.

“I dropped them off at Walgreen’s this morning. They should be ready any minute.”

“Can you pick them up for us? We have a lot of family showing up today. My parents. Becky’s parents.”

“I can. I thought you’d want to pick them up and see them right away.”

“I thought I’d come by and pick them up later. I can bring the deposit.”

“Okay. I can do that.” I couldn’t argue with a man who wanted to bring me a check.

“I’ll be by around four. Everyone should be settled in by then.”

“There’s no rush. I’m pretty much always home.”

“We made the right choice with Blue Pines, didn’t we?” he asked.

“Sure. My parents are buried there. My wife, too. They’re in the old section, of course.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were married.”

“Yes. She died five years ago. Five years this November.” I cleared my throat. “It’s not easy.”

“I’m sorry.”

Again we settled into silence. I don’t know why I felt compelled to mention my own grief to Mr. Fisher. We were kindred souls, I guess, united by loss. I thought we could commiserate a little bit, share our tales of woe, but he spoke up before I could say anything else.
“I better be going. We’ll have that company soon.”

“Right. Sure. I’ll see you later today.”

“Four o’clock. Good-bye.”

I walked into Walgreen’s holding my receipt for the pictures. I switched the receipt from my left hand to my right so that my sweat didn’t make the ink run. The same clerk who had taken the camera from me an hour earlier stood behind the counter ringing up a young kid’s order, a bored expression on her face. I walked down one of the aisles and tried to interest myself in the price of pens and remembered that there was something I needed to buy. I walked over and picked up three boxes of kleenex to have as back-ups for Wednesday night. I made sure to buy the good stuff, the ones with soothing lotions and balms built right in, not some cheap store brand knock-off. When I came back to the front of the store, the clerk stood alone behind the counter, working on a wad of chewing gum. I put my purchases down.

“Is that all for you?” the clerk asked.

She was a bottle blonde, about forty, her hair pulled back into a tight pony tail. She kept working on the gum while she talked to me.

“I have some film to pick up.”

She took the receipt and started digging through the rows of envelopes on a shelf behind the counter. At the end of the counter, the photo processing machine hummed along, spitting glistening color snapshots down a chute and into a catching tray.

“Are you sure they’re under this name?” she asked.

“You said they’d be ready by now.”
She turned to look at me. “Oh, I remember you.” She walked down to the processor.

“They’re just coming up now. See?” She picked up the pictures that were already finished.

Another one slid down the chute and sat there face up for all the world to see.

“They were just sitting there?”

“We got busy. I tell you, they won’t give me any help. I’m doing it all myself.”

A cool panic swept over me. I looked back and saw a middle-aged man approaching the register, a magazine in his hand.

“Can I see those please?” I said to the clerk.

“Sure.” She picked the pictures out of the tray and began looking at them. “Let me get you an envelope.”

“Can I just have them? Please?”

“Fine.”

She placed them into my shaking hand. I slid the pictures into my coat pocket without looking at them. The clerk took her sweet time ringing up the order and gave me the total. I handed her a twenty.

“Is that your grandson?” She placed the change into my open hand.

“Beg your pardon.”

“The baby in the pictures. Is that your grandson?”

I patted the pictures in my coat pocket. The woman kept her eyes on me, an insistent gaze that forced me to speak.

“Yes, he is.”

“He’s adorable. How old is he?”

“Five months. I think.”
She gave me a quick, suspicious look, then shook her head.

“Men. You never know the answers to the simplest questions.”

I forced a smile and waited for my change. When our transaction was finished, I walked out of Walgreen’s with my bag full of kleenex and my pictures, just like anybody else.

Back at home, I put my purchases away and hung my jacket on the back of a kitchen chair. I knew the pictures were there, burning a hole in my jacket pocket. I had been aware of them during the entire drive home, and I fought the urge to pull over to the side of the road and look at them before I made it back to the house. I resisted, both in the car and at home, by reminding myself that this was a matter of privacy and trust. The pictures belonged to the Fishers, and it was their right to view them first and to never let me see them if they so decided. It frustrated me, and I tried to rationalize just taking one quick peek, but I knew that would trigger an avalanche, and I might just stare at those pictures until Mr. Fisher knocked on the door at four o’clock. And that’s what got my mind back on track it needed to be on--the work I had to do for the Fishers.

I unknotted my tie and left it on the kitchen table, checked the doors to make sure they were locked and went down the basement stairs. It was time for me to embalm Tyler’s body.

It used to be that the funeral director and the embalmer were the same person, and the serious, supportive face that discussed cost with the bereaved and handed them the contract was also the person who prepared the deceased for burial. Most of the big funeral operations now had broken their work down into specialties so that one or more people handled the embalming while others handled the more public role of dealing with the families. They also had bookkeepers,
secretaries and in the case of the biggest of the big, their own staff of drivers to handle the hearse and the limos. I disapprove of this compartmentalization for a couple of reasons. Embalmers have become free agents in a way. It’s not unusual for one embalmer to do contract work for several different funeral homes in an area, an arrangement that is sweet for the embalmer, but means that he or she feels no particular loyalty to any one community or establishment. The highest bidder at a given time gets their services. It also means that the funeral industry has produced a generation of employees who have never left the basement embalming room, people who never have to address or come into contact with a living human being. I have met several of these men over the years, and every one of them had narrow, pinched facial features, greasy hair and eyeglasses that didn’t quite fit. I don’t claim them as a member of my profession.

Embalming is perhaps the least understood part of my job, and also the one that most validates the reason for my existence. If a family could simply take a loved one, lay them out and then transport them to the church and the cemetery, what would I be needed for? Someone has to embalm the body as well as provide the shiny black hearse and--for a small fee--a limousine if the family wants it. And they almost always want it. Most funeral directors I know--myself included--sell embalming as if it is a necessary job, an important requirement before a loved one is laid out for viewing then buried. Not true. There’s not a single law in the United States requiring embalming before the viewing or burial of a human body. Not one. It’s an expensive bill of goods that funeral directors--myself included--continue to sell and the grieving public continues to buy.

That’s not to say that embalming doesn’t have a purpose. If someone dies far from home and has to be shipped across a vast distance for viewing and burial, then it becomes necessary to
embalm the body to prevent putrefaction and decay. Likewise if someone dies and the funeral gets delayed because relatives have to travel a great distance for the funeral. But your garden variety funeral where Aunt Agnes drops dead on Tuesday evening and is safely in the ground by lunchtime on Friday simply doesn’t require it. A little make-up, a nice dress, a visit from the hairdresser and Aunt Agnes is ready to move into her home through eternity. No one will be able to tell and certainly no one will care if she wasn’t embalmed.

Why do we continue to carry out this practice? The answer should be obvious even to a child: money. For my work on Tyler’s body the Fishers will pay me $450 which is not bad for about an hour’s worth of work. Even if they opted not to have the body embalmed, I could charge them the same amount for storing the body in my refrigerated storage facility, a “refrigeration fee.” (In the 1800s, families simply packed their loved ones in ice until it was time for the viewing, an alternative that modern families--aided by ice makers and grocery stores that sell ice by the bag--might be wise to reconsider.) I could have attempted to talk the Fishers out of the embalming; Mrs. Fisher seemed like she may have been open to the possibility, but in the end I chose the money and tradition over breaking new ground. I made the decision for them that they wanted to have a traditional funeral that didn’t deviate from nearly every other one I had presided over, with the exception of our impromptu photography session.

Downstairs, I went to the refrigerated storage room where I had returned Tyler the night before. It had been late when his parents left, and I hadn’t bothered with removing the white gown that his mother had brought along to dress him in, so once Tyler was on the embalming table I undressed him, taking care not to wrinkle or damage his nice clothes.

I began my work by washing Tyler’s body with a combination cleanser and disinfectant. This served two purposes. It made the body clean for the viewing, and it provided a matter of
protection in this day of paranoia over infectious diseases. Most people didn’t die of infectious
diseases anymore, and Tyler no more had one than I did, but it was a standard practice that the
Fishers were going to get charged for whether I did it or not. I gave them their money’s worth. I
used a soft sponge and scrubbed him over his entire body. I used a Q-tip to swab inside his nose
and ears. When that was done and the body was as clean as it was going to get, I ripped a cotton
ball in half, inserting each piece up one of Tyler’s nostrils in order to keep embalming fluid from
leaking back out once it had gone in. His nostrils were so small and narrow that I had to use
another Q-tip to get the cotton to go in far enough. I placed some cotton in the ears as well, but
this went in easier. That left only one other place that embalming fluid might leak. Embalmers
have been using the same type of plug for years. I often imagine the man or woman who
invented such a device, and the amount of money that they have hauled in over the years by
patenting something so simple. I rolled Tyler onto his stomach and inserted the plug as gently as
I could. They made several sizes allowing for the deaths of infants and small children.

I stepped away from the table and stretched. My lower back began to ache and lock up if
I spent too much time hunched over. It was time for me to change my clothes anyway. I went
over to a cabinet on the wall, opened the door, and took out a surgical gown. I tied it around my
back and the back of my neck. The law required us to cover our entire bodies from head to toe,
but I didn’t go to those extremes. These laws had only gone into effect in the last twenty years,
and I didn’t think it was necessary to completely change the way I did my job. Over the years, I
had made small concessions to the bureaucrats and law-givers. I wore the gown and the gloves
and, when the mood struck me, covered my mouth and nose with a surgical mask. When I would
forget where I left my keys or my reading glasses, Eloise kidded me and said that years of
breathing embalming fluid had turned my brain soft. She may have been right. When the state
funeral inspectors break in and catch me not wearing the proper footwear for an embalming, I’ll shake my head, slack-jawed, and let them figure out that my brain had been pickled from years of sniffing fumes.

Once I was gowned and gloved, I rolled Tyler onto his back again, took up my scalpel and made an incision in his lower neck at the spot where the major circulatory vessels came together, the carotid artery and the jugular vein. An incision in the carotid artery allowed for the insertion of the tube from the embalming fluid pump. I notched another small incision in the jugular and inserted a drain tube. It was a simple principle. Embalming fluid would pump through Tyler’s body with the flick of a switch, forcing his own blood out the jugular and down the drain tube. Elderly patients often had blood clots and narrowed vessels that blocked the flow of the fluid, and if that occurred, the embalmer injected fluid directly into the blood vessels at the spot of the blockage. Tyler was far too young to have any problems like that. When I flipped the switch, the fluid coursed through his body as if it was meant to be there. An adult usually required three gallons of embalming fluid, but in Tyler’s case, a little less than one full gallon would do the job. His blood came out dark and red and filled the receiving vat like wine.

When all of that was done, and in Tyler’s case it only took about fifteen minutes to drain and fill his arteries, I removed the tubes and sewed up his incisions. His little gown would cover the stitches as most clothes did, but an embalmer had to be careful these days with women, especially young women, who sometimes wore dresses with low necklines. My sewing didn’t have to be as precise or neat as a surgeon’s since there was no concern on the patient’s part about scarring, but I still took my time and care. My hands shook a little when I tried to do fine detail work these days, but I had found that by reminding myself to slow down and take my time, I could minimize the effects of the shakes.
The next step involved the embalming of the abdominal and thoracic cavities. Since Tyler had been autopsied, a decent amount of that work had already been done. Still I used a trocar to make an incision in the soft flesh above Tyler’s bellybutton. Using an electric suction pump, I removed any blood and other body fluids that remained in his abdominal and chest cavities. After the fluid was removed, it was simply a matter of injecting embalming fluid into the two cavities that housed most of the body’s major organs. It was important to treat the major organs because they were the first part of the body to decay. Again, I closed the incision with needle and surgical thread, and the invasive part of the preparation procedure was done. I gave his body another rinsing to wash off the remaining fluids and blood that may have leaked onto the body during the procedure.

By this point, it was time for me to take a break. The air in the room had become close and stifling. I stripped off my gloves and untied my gown, leaving Tyler’s little body to air dry on the embalming table. At the big, stainless steel sink, I washed my hands and forearms with hospital strength disinfectant soap that smelled worse than the embalming fluid. I wasn’t hungry, and I hadn’t been to the grocery store for a few days, but I trudged up the stairs to the kitchen for a glass of water and a change of scenery.

Of course, the pictures had been in the back of my mind the entire time I worked on Tyler’s body. When I entered the kitchen, my eyes went right for my jacket, and I knew that I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off of them.

I took a glass down from the cabinet, filled it with water from the tap, and took a seat at the table within easy reach of my suit coat pocket.

The nine pictures on top of the stack were of the water damage to my ceiling from various angles. The damage didn’t look that bad in the pictures, just some brown stains on the
drop ceiling and a stain on the basement wall. It didn’t bother me because I didn’t have the money to get it properly fixed. The next owner of the house and the business could lose sleep or money over it.

In the first picture of the Fishers, they looked stunned, as if the flash had taken them completely by surprise. Both of their mouths formed little ohs, and their eyes were spread wide and glassy. In the second picture, they looked a little more composed, more natural. Tyler looked the same in both. A sleeping baby. Peaceful. I flipped through all of the pictures quickly, not sure exactly what I was looking for or what I expected to see. By the end of the roll, the Fishers looked almost at ease, and to outside eyes that didn’t know the circumstances, they could easily have passed for normal. Not the happiest family in the world, but not one that had just suffered tragedy either. The pictures served their purpose. They provided the Fishers with a token of memory.

The previous night had taken on a strange, fuzzy quality in my mind, almost as if it were a dream that I half-remembered. I had the pictures as evidence, but that didn’t stop me from questioning why and how things had gone as they did. The idea of getting out the camera had popped into my head unexpectedly, as if some different part of myself had stepped to the forefront and began conducting business with the Fishers, but looking back, I could see that my motivation lay in my own memory of--or desire for--a photograph of my mother holding my stillborn brother. I wanted to recreate that scene as much if not more for myself as for the Fishers, and now that I had, I could ask myself what good it had done me.

To be honest, the pictures didn’t do much for me. I’m not sure what I expected from them. A satisfying completeness and closure of my own, a glorious strumming of some mystic chords of memory. Instead, the pictures were what they were: photographs of people I barely
knew, a closed circle of grief that left me on the outside. The pictures did nothing to capture the intimacy and strangeness of the night before; they were copies of an event that would never come around again, just as my work with Tyler merely created a copy of a person who was no longer there. Neither a photograph nor an undertaker could really bring someone or something back to life.

I separated the pictures into two neat little stacks on the kitchen table. One for the Fishers and one for myself, a keepsake of our evening together. I wanted to hang onto them so that I could examine them at a future date, a time removed from the immediate hubbub and chaos of the Fisher funeral. They might offer me a new perspective somewhere down the road, and since I had paid for the double prints, why not? I put them away in a drawer, leaving the Fisher’s set out on the table.

My water glass was empty, so I placed it in the sink and started back downstairs to finish my work. It was possible that I was just being too hard on myself. The ultimate test of my work could only be measured by the Fishers and their response to the things I did.

All I had left to do was to put Tyler back in his little gown, arrange his body properly and reapply his makeup. It took a little massaging on my part, but before too long, Tyler’s arms slipped into his gown easily. I’ve never helped a living child dress, but I always imagined that it would be a lot more difficult than dressing a dead one. There was no need to bother with undergarments of any kind, and the Fishers hadn’t provided me with any. They also hadn’t left any kind of footwear--shoes, socks, booties--but that didn’t matter either since the gown was long enough to cover Tyler’s feet. The gown snapped up the back, and except for the unnaturally bright pink glow caused by the embalming fluid, Tyler looked ready to go off to church.
It felt good to take my time with the make-up. The night before I had felt rushed by having the Fishers waiting upstairs for me, and it wasn’t my best work. I followed the same steps, but went heavier on the base in order to compensate for the embalming fluid’s pink tint. In half an hour, I finished his face, and Tyler looked as rosy cheeked as any healthy baby. I concluded my job by coloring his hands and even his feet to match the rest of his exposed skin. Chances were good that no one was going to pay any attention to his feet, but I wanted to cover all of my bases. I wanted my work to be flawless. I decided to add one more touch concerning the position of his body. I worked on his lower legs, massaging until they moved under my touch, and I arranged his feet so that they were crossed ankle over ankle, the way I had seen the Christ child depicted in certain Renaissance paintings and Nativity scenes. Again, I didn’t expect anyone to see this arrangement of his feet, but adding that little touch made my work feel nearly complete.

I stepped back from the table again and contemplated my work. Tyler looked better now than he did in the pictures on my kitchen table, which wasn’t saying much. Three dimensions would always have the advantage over a measly two, but eventually the pictures—and their fallible, human memories—would have to do everything for the Fishers. Mrs. Fisher had been right when she pointed out that all of my flimflammery and false assurances really didn’t do her or anyone else any good. Even the picture taking had been a placebo offered to a terminally ill patient.

As if to prove this to myself, I stepped to the table and picked Tyler up again.

His body was cold, very cold. I had drained whatever real, natural life had been left inside him. He felt heavier in my arms, more rigid. The full effects of rigor had set in, and as I adjusted him in my arms, his neck didn’t move or flop like I had seen infants do when held by an
adult. I moved a few, careful steps across the room, Tyler’s body pressed against the front of my shirt, and sat down on the padded, rolling stool that I sometimes used in the embalming room. The cushion let out a little whoosh of air when we sat down, and I took a moment to adjust my weight and settle onto the seat.

Once I was comfortable, I brought Tyler closer to my chest. I held him the way I had seen mothers hold their babies many times--his face toward my body, my arm hooked through his legs, the right side of his body angled away slightly so that I could see his face. I even began to rock him by moving by body back and forth just a bit, the way parents did to keep a baby from crying or waking. His make-up might get smudged, but I could always touch that up at the last minute when we finally placed him in his casket.

The effects of my work lasted about a week at best. I had tried to picture it in my mind many times, but despite my years in this trade, I still had no idea what happened to a body after many years in the ground. I had not been privy to any exhumations, since they just didn’t happen very much here in Dove Point, and if they did happen, they were more the province of the coroner’s office and the police. But I did know people in the business who had been witness to such events.

My mentor, the late Mr. Crumley, once described an exhumation to me. As with all of his stories, this one was meant to impart a lesson, a pearl of homespun wisdom I needed to absorb before embarking on a career as a funeral director.

An old woman was inadvertently buried with a valuable ring, a family heirloom, still attached to her finger. The family was rather prominent here in town--I won’t mention their name--and they insisted that the body be exhumed and the ring returned to the family. They had the money to do it, too, and so they applied the requisite pressure to Mr. Crumley and the proper
authorities. The oversight about the ring wasn’t discovered until seven months after the burial, and Mr. Crumley tried to convince the family that perhaps it would be best to let the ring go and imagine it resting in the ground along with grandmother. But the family wouldn’t be swayed from their mission. When they pried the sealed casket open....well, I won’t go into all the details. They’re rather unpleasant. Suffice to say that the combination of the sealed casket and the natural gases that an organism produces as it decays were enough to bloat and mold the body beyond recognition. When Mr. Crumley went back and explained to the family that the ring would be impossible to reclaim because of the effects of time, the family reacted with horror, claiming that the embalming should have preserved their mother’s body exactly as it was on the day she died. An unreasonable expectation perhaps, but one that my profession doesn’t dissuade people from holding. Legal action was threatened, feathers were ruffled. Eventually Mr. Crumley managed to remove the ring by contacting a surgeon who simply cut the woman’s finger off. Mr. Crumley never told the family how he recovered the ring, just as the family managed to keep the unpleasant details of the exhumation quiet, and by doing so they joined the funeral directors and embalmers and coroners in a conspiracy to keep the practice of embalming and sealed casket burial alive for everyone else.

And what was Mr. Crumley’s lesson to me? To always be mindful of the limits of my profession, and to understand the difference between the many promises I made to my customers and the few I could really keep.

I rocked with Tyler for about fifteen minutes, but felt none of the intimacy of the previous night in the hospital morgue. In the hospital I at least felt like I was holding a real baby. Now, I was holding a marble statue.
I finally looked at the clock, aware that Mr. Fisher would be arriving soon. I carried Tyler back to the cooler, holding him with one hand and pulling the door open with the other. A cloud of cool steam puffed across my face. Metal shelves, large enough to hold adults, lined the walls on either side, making room for at least six bodies. I had never had so much business that I filled all six shelves at one time, but back in the old days, when Mr. Crumley was still alive, we often came close. I felt certain that the folks at Wellington had a bigger cooler and that it was often filled to capacity.

I placed Tyler on the shelf closest to the door on the right side. He looked more alone and pathetic and, simply, dead on that shelf than at anytime since I had first seen him in the hospital. I felt an odd stab of guilt about leaving him there, as if he was a living child I was abandoning, but what choice did I have? This is what I did.

When I straightened up, something caught my eye, a brown mark on the side of Tyler’s head, just below his ear. I bent closer to look, even though I knew what it was going to be without looking. Embalming fluid had leaked out of his ear when I held him against my chest. There was a trickle that ran down from his ear and onto his neck, making a track through the make-up that I had so carefully applied.

There was a trickle that ran down from his ear and onto his neck, making a track through the make-up that I had so carefully applied.

There was no need for me to fix it now. I could go back later and use super glue to seal the cotton into his ears more completely, just in case anyone else decided to pick him up and hold him one last time. I’d do a last check of Tyler before we laid him out for the viewing, and at that time I could do any last minute touching up that needed to be done. For now, I thought it
best to leave him alone. His body had already been through enough for one day. He needed to rest, and so did I.
Chapter Five

The knocking came from someplace far away, persistent and steadily increasing in volume. I stood in a refrigerated crypt, low-ceilinged so that I had to duck my head, and there was one casket pushed against the wall, old and molded from years in the ground. I knew Eloise was inside, and that’s where the knocking was coming from. I went to the casket, its surface cool to my touch by the refrigerated atmosphere of the room. I tried to lift the lid up, but it was sealed tight, the air locks engaged by me at the time of Eloise’s funeral with a simple turn of the wrist. I searched my pockets for a coffin key, the mechanism that sealed and unsealed the air locks. One had been there just a minute ago. I knew it. The knocking became louder and louder, more insistent. Desperate. I looked on the ground for the key. I always lose things these days.

“Hold on,” I shouted. “I’ll find it. It’s here.”

The knocking changed in pitch, and I sat bolt upright in my chair, my hands gripping the armrest. I was in my kitchen, asleep, my chin drooped down to my chest and a thin sliver of drool leaking out of the corner of my mouth. Someone was knocking on the window behind me. I stood up, wiping the drool away. The face outside was obscured by the curtains and I didn’t want to look. I thought it might be Eloise, but I didn’t want to see her face after years in the grave.

“Mr. Hoskins?” The face pressed against the glass, grew darker. “Hello?”

“Who’s there?” I stood still.

“Mr. Hoskins?”
I checked my watch. Four-fifteen. It came back to me, a slow seeping of memory. Mr. Fisher with the deposit. I reached up to straighten my tie and came up with nothing. My tie was on the back of the chair, hanging there like a dying vine.

“Just a minute,” I called.

I took the tie with me to the bathroom. In the pale fluorescent light, my skin looked sickly and gray, my eyes puffy and red with sleep. I ran the tap and splashed some cold water on my face, then got my hand wet and tried to make my hair look presentable. It didn’t make much difference. I still looked like a tired old man cursed with bad dreams. I threw the tie aside and went out to the front of the house. When I opened the door, Mr. Fisher was just coming up the porch steps.

“I was afraid you had forgotten,” he said.

“Oh no. I was working in the office.”

“I knocked a long time.”

“It’s possible I dozed off,” I admitted. “You had me up past my bedtime last night.”

He broke off eye contact. “Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. It’s me. I’m not able to bounce back the way I used to.”

I held the door open for him, and he walked in ahead of me, stopping in the center of the living room as if he were lost about what to do next.

“How is everything going for you and your wife?”

“We’re doing okay.” He kept his eyes directed at the floor. He looked fresher than the night before. His hair was neatly slicked into place, and his skin gave off the red glow of someone newly shaved. “The doctor gave Becky some pills so that she can sleep.”

I nodded, inviting him to go on, but he didn’t say anything.
“That’s probably a good idea,” I said. “You need to make sure you’re sleeping enough, too.”

“I brought you the deposit.” He took a folded check out of his pants pocket and waved it in the air between us. “Becky’s parents offered to help us out with it, but we wanted to do it ourselves.”

“I’m sure you’ll feel better about that.”

He raised his eyes a little. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“I have those pictures for you. Why don’t we talk in the kitchen? We can sit at the table.”

I held my arm out to show Mr. Fisher that he should walk ahead of me, but he didn’t move. His eyes were fixed on a spot someplace between my head and the floor. He might have been on the verge of tears.

“Did you hurt yourself?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

He pointed at my shirt. A rust-colored stain the size of a half dollar darkened my shirt just above the belt line. It marked the spot where Tyler’s head had rested and where the embalming fluid had leaked out of his ear.

“That looks like blood,” Mr. Fisher said.

“Yes, it does.” I brushed at the stain. It was crusted and beginning to dry. “I cut myself earlier. I forgot to change my shirt.” His eyes, as cool blue as robin’s eggs, regarded me with a curious suspicion. He looked like a man trying to assemble a complicated puzzle.

“Let’s go talk,” I said, and this time, he moved down the hall ahead of me. “It’s on the right there.” I followed Mr. Fisher into the room where he took a seat on the far side of the
kitchen table near the window. “Would you like something to drink?” The coffee maker sat empty. “I can put coffee on.”

“I don’t want anything. Thanks. I need to get back home as soon as possible.”

“I have the contract in my office.” I pointed to the pictures on the table. “Why don’t you look at these while I’m gone?”

His eyes went first to the pictures then cut back up to me.

“You looked at them?” he asked.

“I did.” He kept staring. “I wanted to make sure they turned out okay.”

We locked gazes for so long that I heard the clock on the wall behind me distinctly tick off a few seconds. Then Mr. Fisher nodded and reached for the pictures.

But I didn’t go to get the contract. I went straight upstairs as fast as my sore knees could move me, unbuttoning my shirt as I went. By the time I got to my bedroom, the shirt was off and I was down to my tank-style t-shirt. I threw the soiled shirt on the floor and kicked it under the bed. It caught on my foot and I kicked it again. I didn’t want to see it. I yanked the closet door open, my heart thumping in my chest like it wanted to jump out. My hands shook so that I couldn’t work the buttons on the new shirt and get it off the hanger.

“Enough,” I hissed to myself.

I steadied myself against the closet doorjamb. All those nights of worrying that my heart would stop and now I found myself with the opposite problem--the fear that it would swell so full with blood that it would explode. I waited another moment, my armpits slippery with sweat.

My heart returned to a normal rhythm. I started to feel better, as if control of my body was coming back. I slipped my arms into the shirt and got the buttons fastened, my hands moving slowly so as not to make any mistakes that would cost me more time or call more
attention to myself. I tucked the shirt in and made sure everything looked straight, then I reached for the tie. Before I went back downstairs, I kicked the last visible part of the shirt under the bed and out of sight.

In the kitchen, Mr. Fisher had the pictures stacked neatly by his elbow and his hands folded like a man about to pray. I expected that he would still be studying them, perhaps showing some kind of emotion. Regret, sadness, tears. But he looked up when I came into the room as if he had been expecting me sooner.

“Are the pictures okay?” I asked.

“They’re fine.” He looked at my hands. “Where’s the contract?”

I held my hands out, palms up, as if they had suddenly grown on the ends of my arms. “I still have to get that.”

“If we could move this along...”

“Of course, of course.”

I went to the office and picked a sheaf of papers from off my desk. When I came back into the kitchen, Mr. Fisher had a check unfolded on the table next to the stack of pictures.

“Here we are.” I hated the sound of my voice at those moments. I tried very hard over the years to avoid the use of the third person plural, the royal “we,” when dealing with a client because it made me sound like a condescending pediatric nurse. But Mr. Fisher had put me on guard. His eyes were narrowed and searching me up and down. “This shouldn’t take but a minute.”

“You changed your shirt,” he said. “Is that what took you so long?”

I looked down the front of my shirt as if I was seeing it for the first time.

“Why, yes. I did change. No one wants to sit in a dirty shirt.”
He didn’t say anything, but his narrowed eyes continued their appraisal of me. Rather than give him a chance to say anything else, I plowed ahead with my explanation of the service agreement and everything that I promised to do for the amount of money the Fishers would be laying out. It was all standard stuff, things that I had said so many times over the years I could repeat them in my sleep, and I probably did.

There were some hidden costs that I explained to Mr. Fisher. A fee for picking Tyler up at the hospital. The difference in price between a graveside service and a service in the cemetery chapel, graveside being more expensive. If I had been less scrupulous, I could have charged the Fishers for the double application of make-up, not to mention the cost of getting the pictures developed, but I mentioned neither of these. The Fishers would more than repay me over the years with word of mouth which still held sway in a town like Dove Point.

For his part, Mr. Fisher didn’t ask any questions. He listened to me intently, his top front teeth biting down ever so slightly on his bottom lip. When I needed him to sign, he signed, the ballpoint pen squeezed tightly between his thumb and index finger. A left-hander. When he had signed his name for the last time, Mr. Fisher capped the pen and handed it back to me. I fastened it to my shirt pocket.

“Here’s the deposit.” He slid the check across the table. “It’s five hundred dollars. That’s all we’ve got right now. Will that work?”

“That’s fine.”

I clipped the check to the top of the paperwork. The handwriting was erect and clear, like someone had taken their time to make it look neat. Even Mr. Fisher’s signature was easy to read, not like so many signatures that look like squiggly modern art.

“The insurance company is going to send the rest. They said they’d send it right to you.”
“That’s the way it’s usually done these days.” I gave him a reassuring smile. “It used to be, we didn’t even require a deposit. I could just say to someone, ‘Pay me when you can,’ and they would.” Mr. Fisher shifted in his chair. “Do you need this check back?” I unclipped it. “You can pay me later if you need the money.”

“It’s okay.” He waved the check off. “The insurance company requires us to pay the deposit. We have some savings.”

“Right.”

I clipped the check back in its spot. A smart couple, the Fishers. Even on a young teacher’s salary they had managed to save up for the kind of emergency they were now faced with. The rainiest day imaginable.

“Is everything going okay? With the preparations?”

“Yes,” I said. “We’ll be very ready for tomorrow.”

Mr. Fisher’s mood appeared to be undergoing a subtle shift, away from all business and efficiency toward something tentative and less assertive. When he didn’t speak up, I attempted to keep the conversation going.

“I expect there will be quite a turnout.”

“Everyone at school knows. They’ll all be there.”

I thought of Eloise’s funeral and the crowds of people who at first brought me comfort. But by the end of the night, I had grown tired of talking to people. They couldn’t take my place, they couldn’t know what I was going through. I forgot what I was even there for, and felt more alone than ever. Eventually, everyone else went back to their homes and their lives, and I had to go upstairs to my empty living quarters.
Mr. Fisher may have been having the same sort of revelation. He may have been realizing that getting through the next couple of days wasn’t even going to be the half of it, that his grieving would continue for a long time, likely a lifetime, and there was very little in the world that would make it easier. I wished there was something I could do to make his load lighter and easier.

“Would you like to see Tyler again?” I asked.

“No.” He shook his head as if it wasn’t even an option. “No. I don’t want to do that. What made you think I’d want to do that?”

“I thought it might help. It seemed to help your wife last night.”

“No.” He gathered up the pictures while he stood. “I need to be going.”

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t.”

I pushed myself up and out of my chair. “Let me at least walk you to the door.”

He went ahead of me but stopped and turned back in the kitchen doorway.

“Was that Tyler’s blood on your shirt?”

He didn’t sound or look angry. He looked instead like a man trying to get his brain around some larger and complex issue that he was having a large struggle with. He held the stack of pictures gently in his left hand trying not to leave smudges.

“I think it was, yes.”

His lips pursed together and almost disappeared.

“How did that happen?”

“Well, the embalming process is something of an invasive procedure....I guess, I did part of it without a gown on. I really didn’t intend for you to see any of it, but I fell asleep in the
Mr. Fisher’s look softened. “I think it’s important for you to remember Tyler however you want to remember him. Try not to think of all the other aspects of this process.”

He shook his head.

“I don’t know.”

He started down the hallway and towards the front door, his pace quick like a man late for an important meeting. I followed along behind, trying to catch up and part ways on a decent note. What I really wanted to do was ask him for one of the pictures, something that I could hold onto to remember all of this, but I didn’t think it would be appropriate given the circumstances.

“Call me if either one of you needs anything else.”

He stopped at the front door, his hand on the knob. He didn’t turn to face me.

“You know, I’m not going to say anything to Becky about that blood stain on your shirt.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” I said.

“She’s got enough opinions about this whole funeral process. I don’t know where she gets them from, but I don’t want her getting anymore. It slows everything down, you know?”

“She’s just trying to make sense of things. Everyone does it in their own way.”

Now, he did turn around, and I saw by the look on his face that he was struggling with his emotions. His chin puckered and quivered, but his eyes flashed with anger.

“Did you ever notice that the people who spend the most time trying to make sense of things never really do? They ask a lot of questions but rarely do they come up with any answers. That’s Becky’s problem. If I told her about that stain on your shirt....” He shook his head in disbelief. “We’d be talking about that for the next year.” He held up the stack of pictures.

“We’ve already wasted enough time on bullshit.”

His words hit me like a slap. I took my time formulating a response.
“Maybe those pictures will help answer some questions for her.”

He snorted, something between a laugh and dismissive contempt. “If I thought that, I’d take a hundred more. But it won’t. I know that. I just want this over with.”

“Would you like me to talk to her?”

“No. Just be here tomorrow to run the funeral. That’s all I really care about.”

He went out the front door without saying good-bye.

I didn’t have much time to brood over my encounter with Mr. Fisher. Ten minutes after he left the basement doorbell rang, which meant I had a delivery. Tyler’s casket.

I went downstairs to the garage where I accepted all of my large deliveries. The driver, Rick, had worked this route for several years, and he smiled when I activated the garage door opener to let him in. The air was heavy and humid, thick with the exhaust belches of the idling UPS truck. He slid the large box off the back of the truck and loaded it onto a dolly.

“It’s been awhile,” Rick said. “Were you on vacation?”

“No by choice.”

He looked puzzled. “Were you sick?”

“No. Business is just slow right now.”

He nodded and wheeled the narrow box through the garage and into the basement. I followed him and signed my name on the electronic clipboard. He took the fake pen back from me and stuck it behind his ear.

“Looks like you’ve got a little one there.”

“Yeah. Unfortunately.”
“Well, hopefully I’ll be seeing more of you now.”

He gave me a friendly clap on the shoulder and went back out to his truck. I appreciated him not saying anything else, or trying to engage me in some philosophical discussion about how we all had it coming to us one day or how sad it was to see a child die. We were both adults and we both knew these things without saying them. Why waste the breath?

I used a box cutter to slit the packaging open and dug down through the wrappings until I had Tyler’s coffin exposed on the embalming table. It was a nice little casket--white, basic and sturdy, with imitation wrought-iron handles on the side for carrying. There was room for four pall bearers, although one man with average strength would be capable of carrying the whole load, Tyler and the casket. The extra pall bearers gave more people an opportunity to be involved in the ceremony, and it gave the process a more substantial look. I lifted the lid, and the hinges squeaked in protest. The inside was also white, a soft imitation satin complete with frilled edges and a small pillow. I removed the brochures that the casket company sent along and a shipping invoice reminding me that I now owed them four hundred and seventy-four dollars. It was an expense I’d pass along to the Fishers, with a standard twenty percent mark-up to ensure my profit. A prominent wholesale food outlet had recently begun selling caskets at reduced prices. Not only could people shop for a twenty pound bag of rice or enough peanut butter to last until the breaking of the seventh seal, but they could also pick up their home through eternity at a fraction of the cost. My profession hated it, and if the practice ever became widespread, we’d all have to scramble to make up for lost revenue.

My work for the day was basically finished. When Jim arrived tomorrow, we would place Tyler’s body in the casket and move him upstairs. We could tend to a variety of last-minute details at that time, but for now, I needed to unwind from the long day and make sure that I got a
good night sleep. I had my hand on the light switch, ready to shut everything down for the night, when the phone rang.

A lot of days, I ignored the phone. I often let the answering machine take the call, and I listened to see whether it was anything I wanted to deal with. Most of the time it was a telemarketer, and I could let them make their spiel to the tape and erase it later. That’s how I knew the call about Tyler was something important--it came in the middle of the night. But I had actual clients I was working for now, and the ringing phone could very well have been the Fishers, calling with some last minute request or question. I also had the momentary flash that the call was something bad, that Mr. Fisher had gone home and reported the blood on my shirt to his wife, and perhaps in a fit of buyer’s remorse they were cancelling the whole deal. I hesitated near the downstairs extension. The phone rang for a fourth time, a fifth. It couldn’t be that. I answered before the machine picked up.

“Mr. Hoskins?”

“Yes?”

“Lance Bosco.”

“Oh Lord,” I muttered.

“Not exactly, Mr. Hoskins. Not exactly.”

Bosco represented the Barr Company, the corporate entity that was buying up funeral homes across northern Indiana and southern Michigan. His business card, which I had thrown away a long time ago, stated his title as Executive Director of Regional Acquisitions, a polite way of saying that Bosco was in charge of scouting out and buying up promising funeral homes to place under the Barr Company umbrella. This call represented just one aspect of an ongoing courtship ritual between myself and the Barr Company, and I had to hand it to them, they often
made me feel like the most desirable girl at the dance. Over the past year, they had sent me fruit baskets, stationery, refrigerator magnets and a Christmas card depicting a plump, joyous snowman with a black bird perched on his carrot nose.

“This isn’t a good time for me, Mr. Bosco.”

“Did I catch you in the middle of dinner?” His voice lowered as if interrupting a meal was a crime punishable by death.

“I’m working.”

“Good for you.”

I have to admit that there was a seductive element to the sound of Mr. Bosco’s voice. It was nice to have someone pay attention to me, to have someone call me on the phone and act happy just to hear my voice. I knew that behind the surface niceties there was no genuine concern for my well-being. This call was simply part of what he hoped would end up being a business transaction, but sometimes in life, we take what we can get, and for the last few months Mr. Bosco had been one of my very best friends, even as I grew to detest him and everything he represented.

Mr. Bosco cleared his throat. “It’s funny, I was just talking to Michelle Warndorf this morning. She’s my immediate superior. Have you ever met her?”

“No.”

“I’ll have to bring her by sometime. I’m sure you’d enjoy meeting her. Anyway, we were talking about you and the Crumley Funeral Home, and she was trying to tell me that it was a loss, that I should write it off and forget about it. But I said, ‘No Michelle, I think you’re wrong there. I think that place has potential.’ And look at this, you’ve got some business.”

“I really don’t have the time for this right now. It’s getting late.”
“Can I come by and see you this week?”

“I doubt it.” It felt good to be able to say this and mean it. “This is a busy week for me.”

“Can I be honest with you, Mr. Hoskins?”

“I wish you would.”

But I detected something new in his tone, a directness that hadn’t been there before. I had the feeling that our dance was entering a new and potentially final phase, one in which I would be required to make some kind of a commitment or back out altogether. I was curious to hear what he had to tell me.

“I think you need to realize that you’re running out of time. The people above me really aren’t interested in waiting, and they’re going to pull all offers if you don’t act soon.”

“I’m not interested in selling.”

“I know, I know.”

He sounded like someone dealing with a stubborn child, and to a certain extent, that representation of my attitude wasn’t unjustified. But there was also something to be said for being so old and alone that you just didn’t give a damn, and holding onto something in the face of common sense became the only thing worth living for. I didn’t have anything to lose but the ability to practice my trade, and Mr. Bosco wasn’t offering me that option, not in any meaningful way.

“Then why do you keep calling?”

“Because I really think you want to sell. If we could just meet this week and have lunch.”

“I just don’t have time this week.”

That just wasn’t true, of course. After Tyler’s funeral, I had nothing to do, and the coming days stretched out before me, a string of empty minutes and hours.
On his end, Mr. Bosco let out a deep sigh.

“That’s too bad, Mr. Hoskins. I had another offer for you.”

His words hooked me. In spite of my own desire not to sell or be involved with the business of the Barr Company, I wanted to know, out of simple curiosity, how much they were willing to offer me. Based on Mr. Bosco’s words, it sounded as if the price had gone up.

I gave in.

“Why don’t we talk on Thursday,” I said. “That would be best for me.”

“I can come by around noon.”

“Don’t come by. Just call. We can take it from there.”

I did know a little something about negotiation. I didn’t want to appear too eager to see him, or make him think that the door was open too wide.

“Okay. We’ll talk Thursday.”

“Fine. Now if you’ll excuse me, I really have to finish my work.”

After I hung up the phone, I put my suit coat back on, pushed my tie back into place below my chin, and drove back downtown to the Walgreen’s for my final task of the day. There was a different clerk working that night, a pale teenaged boy with an abundance of sore-looking red acne peppering his face. It’s an occupational reflex, I know, but I found myself thinking of all the different make-ups I could use to cover up the outbreaks on his skin were he one of my clients. I had it a lot easier than a cosmetologist to the living since I didn’t have to worry about skin irritation and allergic reactions. After some scrambling, the boy found the negatives under
the counter left in an envelope with my name by the morning clerk. I thanked him, took the negatives and turned to go.

“Say, don’t you work at that funeral home?” the kid asked.

“Yes. The Crumley Funeral Home.” He nodded. “How did you know that?”

“My grandpa had his funeral there.”

“What was his name?”

“William Hazelwhite.”

“That was about a year ago,” I said.

Nothing remarkable. I didn’t know William Hazelwhite until he died, and even then there was nothing remarkable about the funeral. A viewing, a service, a burial. Mr. Hazelwhite must have been up in his seventies when he died, and the funeral was well attended by friends, family, children and grandchildren. The whole event felt so long ago to me, it may as well have been in a different lifetime.

“I’m surprised you remember.”

“My brain still has its moments.”

The kid smiled, revealing a gleaming row of braces. I envied him his youth, despite his teenaged awkwardness, and as I pushed through the door and walked back to my car, I hoped he understood the gift he had in abundance: limitless possibility.

Night was coming on as I drove back down Center Street. Darkness pooled around the trunks of the big oaks as I passed, and the moon, as bright and sharply defined as a spotlight, climbed above the horizon in the distance.

I thought back to the Hazelwhite funeral and to the many other funerals I had presided over in the time since Eloise died. Not a single one stood out to me or made a lasting impression
on my mind. They were all done by the numbers, an exercise in mediocrity, and admitting it to myself twisted my guts into a knot. What good was the lip service I paid to personal service and care when in reality I couldn’t find the motivation to keep the required amount of business coming through the door?

I glanced down at the red envelope full of negatives on the passenger seat. The Fishers had given me an opportunity, not just in the business sense but in a more profound, meaningful way as well. I felt connected to something more important than myself again, and even if Mr. Fisher had his doubts and discomforts about the whole process, I didn’t care. I was rediscovering my profession, my love and my passion for it.

I turned down my driveway but didn’t go all the way to the back of the house and the garage, stopping instead in the driveway where I could examine the house in the gathering darkness. She was a beautiful old Victorian, three stories and steady as a rock despite the leaky roof and blistering paint, and I was proud to call her mine, at least to the extent that I shared her ownership with the bank. In my haste to leave for Walgreen’s before they closed, I had left a few lights burning on the first floor, and their amber glow cast a welcoming feel. One could easily imagine finding comfort behind those walls, a welcoming embrace, a steady shoulder to lean on. And that’s the way it should be.

But I was afraid that once the Fisher funeral was over, my life would go back to just the way it was before I ever met them. I had no new work on the horizon, and a fear crept up on me that this time, when Mr. Bosco made his latest pitch and offer, that I wouldn’t be able to say no to him, that the offer would just be too good. I shuddered at the thought of it, and the taste of bile came into my mouth. I turned the ignition key just enough to activate the battery, and I rolled
down the driver’s side window. The night air wasn’t exactly cool, but it still provided relief from the stuffiness inside the car.

I just wasn’t sure how much longer I could hold out unless something changed. I put on a brave, strong face to Mr. Bosco and anyone else who would care to listen, but the truth was much less pleasant. At some point I had to reckon with the bank. I had already borrowed against the house once just to meet my operating expenses. There wasn’t a bank in town that was going to lend me any more money. I was on my own from here on out, sink or swim.

For several years I had told myself that I didn’t care what happened, that I would lash myself to the railings of the Crumley Funeral Home and if it sank, I would go down with it. But a voice inside me, one that grew louder and louder with every moment I aged, kept saying that there was nothing worse than being a sixty-three year old bankrupt, one who spends his remaining years living on social security and feeling guilty about the unpaid debts he has left behind. I didn’t have any heirs to pass them onto, but still, I didn’t like the notion of leaving things unfinished and incomplete. My father always told me that everyone had their price, and maybe there was one out there with my name on it.

All of the thinking and the considering of the various angles made me more tired than I expected to be. I rolled up the window, pulled the car into the garage and went on into the house. It had indeed been a long and ultimately satisfying day, one that reminded me again how nice it felt to be active and of use to my community. I considered diverting myself by stopping in the basement and batting the ping-pong ball around, but my body was tired, so I settled for the mindlessness of the television set in my quarters, and the t.v. was still going strong at three a.m. when I woke up and dragged myself to bed.
Jim showed up just before noon wearing a dark brown suit and tie. He had his thinning hair slicked back against his head, and his cheeks gave off the sweet odor of aftershave. He wore a large signet ring on his left pinkie signifying his membership in the Dove Point Elks Club. He looked dignified and serious, the kind of guy you’d want standing next to you in a crisis. We shook hands and headed downstairs without saying much to each other. We both knew what to do.

There were many things that I had to be thankful to Mr. Crumley for, but the thing that I valued perhaps the most was the freight elevator he had installed from the basement of the funeral home to the first floor shortly before I took possession of the business. In the old days, we had to haul the caskets and their contents up a narrow flight of stairs. For the heavier clients, we would have to assemble a team of four or six men to make it work. Mr. Crumley saw that in order to compete, he had to keep up with the times and install some modern amenities, and so we became the first funeral home in the county with an elevator for moving bodies and caskets from one floor to the next. It may have been the last time that the Crumley Funeral Home found itself on the cutting edge of anything. Of course with Tyler we easily could have carried him up the flight of stairs ourselves, one man alone could have, but the elevator felt like a luxury after a day and a half of hard work and I wanted to use it.

Jim held the refrigerator door while I picked up Tyler and carried him to the casket. He fit right in like he was born to rest there, and I made a few adjustments to his gown so that everything looked ship-shape.
Jim watched me with a solemn look on his face, then he bowed his head for just a moment and made a quick sign of the cross. Jim was a part of the Catholic minority here in Dove Point, and he attended Mass several times a week in his retirement. I had seen him repeat this gesture over almost every body we ever worked on, and it never failed to make me uneasy. My parents raised me Presbyterian, but I didn’t believe in it very much anymore, and I preferred that religious thoughts and gestures be kept to one’s self as much as possible especially outside of a church. Tyler wasn’t a Catholic anyway, and I doubted that as his spirit wandered the netherworld it took a great deal of comfort from being blessed by Jim.

“Poor little guy,” Jim said. “What was it?”

“Crib death.”

I stepped forward and slowly lowered the lid. Jim shook his head.

“He teaches over at the high school,” Jim said. “Math teacher. Did you know that?”

“I didn’t know what he taught.”

“Their people are from over in Plainfield. I guess they’ll all be coming in for this.”

“I suppose.” I moved to one end of the casket and Jim took his place at the other. “How do you find all this out?”

“My wife has a friend works over at the high school. Other stuff, I just talk to people. The grocery, the post office. You ought to try it sometime Doc, it’s good for you.”

He gave me a joking smile. It occurred to me that I had no idea what Jim’s wife looked like or what her name was. It was possible I had seen her in town many times and just didn’t know what name to put with the face. Jim didn’t pick up the casket yet. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on the foot end of Tyler’s casket, his brow furrowed with thought.

“After I talked to you yesterday, this whole thing kind of got me thinking.”
“Got you thinking what?”

It wasn’t often that Jim turned pensive, but every once in a while he’d stop for a moment and try to kick around some issue or idea that was in the front of his mind. Most of the time he wanted to discuss something political or social: the increasing lack of respect and manners shown by young people today, or the way crime had slowly spread from major cities like Indianapolis and Chicago to the smaller towns and when would it reach Dove Point in a big way. Because of my line of work, Jim considered me a man of the world, someone who had seen quite a bit and formed a lot of opinions. I didn’t think of myself that way at all. If anything, Jim was the man of the world, and the only thing I had seen more than the average person was dead bodies.

“Well, a kid dying like this tends to make me more aware of my own mortality than someone my own age dying. Is that true with you?”

“I think about dying all the time. I thought about it all the time before I ever took this job, even as a little kid.”

Jim looked surprised to hear me say that. He straightened up a little.

“I guess you’re just different then,” he said.

“I think I know what you mean.”

“Sure you do. Guys like you and me, we’ve had our time, right? If we were to croak, no one would think anything too bad about it. People would be sad, and they’d come to our funerals, but it wouldn’t be viewed as any sort of tragedy. Not like some little kid who has his whole life ahead of him. I guess that’s what got me thinking.”

He looked pleased with himself, and I hated to burst his bubble.

“I’m not going to have a funeral,” I said. “So nobody has to worry about coming to it.”
I was ready to pick up the casket, my right hand poised just above the handle on my end, but when I made that last statement Jim stopped, his mouth slightly open.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

I hadn’t meant to bring the subject up at all, and I wasn’t exactly sure why the words about my own funeral even came out of my mouth. But they were there now, hanging in the air along with the smell of embalming fluid and the sterile coolness of the air-conditioning.

“I don’t think I want a funeral, that’s all. It would be a waste of time and money. And nobody would come.”

“That’s silly, Doc. I’d come. A lot of people would come. People know who you are.”

I pictured Jim and the kid from Walgreen’s standing in front of my open casket, not knowing what to say to each other.

“I don’t need to think about it today,” I said. “I just wonder sometimes how much good all of this does. What difference do I make to people?”

Jim shrugged. “Hell, I always thought a lot of difference.” He gestured towards the closed casket. “This is one of the most important things people do. They come to you for that.”

I came around to the front of the casket. Jim raised his eyebrows, while I raised the casket lid again. The silk lining covered most of Tyler’s body, and I folded it back just like we would do upstairs in preparation for the viewing, making his entire body visible.

“What good does that do anybody?” I asked, gesturing at the body.

Jim came over, slowly, reverently. He gave Tyler’s body a close examination. I wasn’t sure he understood my point, but I didn’t want to say anything else because he was being so thorough and careful about looking. When he spoke, his voice was just above a whisper.

“He looks very good. Very life-like.”
“That’s my point,” I said. “Why should he look life-like? He’s dead. He should look dead.”

Jim shook his head. “No he shouldn’t. That’s not what people want. They want to remember someone like they were when they were alive. That’s what you’re supposed to do.”

I pulled a stool over toward me. It made a high-pitched screech as I dragged it across the floor. I sat down, but kept my eyes on Tyler’s body.

“If you were me, and someone made you an offer, would you sell this place?”

Jim crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Somebody made you an offer?”

“Not yet. But I think they will.”

“The Barr people?”

I nodded. I didn’t feel like saying their name out loud.

“I’m supposed to meet with them on Thursday, but I might just cancel. I don’t even know why I made the appointment.”

Jim put his hands in his pants pockets and did a short little pace back and forth at the far end of Tyler’s casket. He looked like a dog picking the best spot to do his business. He stopped and turned back to me.

“Can I ask you something, Doc?”

“Shoot.”

“Why wouldn’t you sell?” He shrugged. “Is it a good offer?”

“It’ll be good. They’ve indicated I’ll be able to make a profit of some kind. Enough to pay everything off and then some.”

“And why you don’t want to do it?” He chuckled. “Because you don’t like these people?”

“Exactly.”
“But you just said yourself that you’re not doing anybody any good. Why not take the money and run?”

Jim wore a self-satisfied smile, like a little boy who has caught his parents in a contradiction. I expected him to shout Touche or Gotcha at me.

“Just because I’m having doubts about my job doesn’t mean I want someone else taking over. They’re even worse.”

“It sounds to me like this is as much about you as it is about them. Are you afraid to retire?”

“It’s not just that.”

I thought of the pictures again, of trying to make a difference somehow.

“I was afraid to retire too,” Jim said. “I kept thinking that there was no way good people would come along to replace me. Nobody who could do the job as well as me anyway. It’s like that when you do good work at something.”

He gestured to the casket again, to Tyler’s preserved and made-up body. We both looked and paused for a moment. His little corpse had served as quite a prop for our conversation, exhibit A in defense of not selling the Crumley Funeral Home. “It does happen you know,” he said.

“What?”

“People retire and others take their place. Maybe some new blood is needed.”

“That’s just it.” I stood up, feeling myself on the verge of some new insight, ready to put my finger on what had been eluding us during our conversation. “The new people are going to keep getting further and further away from doing what people really need. The new ways of doing business are lousy. Nobody cares.” I stood over Tyler’s casket, looking down on him as if
the answer lay somewhere in his face. But I wasn’t really thinking of him. He was just the start, the trigger. I wanted to look past him to other funerals, to other opportunities. “If I stay with it, I just know I can find a way to really make a difference for people. To help them grieve in a real way.”

There was a heavy pause before Jim spoke.

“How?”

I wanted to tell him about the pictures, but I didn’t imagine that Jim was capable of seeing them in the way that I wanted them to be seen.

“I’m not sure. I need time to think about it because I’m just not sure.”

“That’s okay.” He patted me on the shoulder. “It’s a big decision. But you might be happier selling. What would your wife have wanted you to do?”

I looked over at him, a little surprised to hear him bring up Eloise. I wasn’t sure I had mentioned her to Jim since she died.

“She’d want me to sell.”

“Wives often know what’s best for us. It’s something to think about.”

I looked at my watch a non-verbal signal to Jim that we had to get moving. I flipped the liner back into place and gently brought the lid back down. Without saying anything else, Jim moved to his end and I moved to mine, and together we moved Tyler to the elevator and up to the viewing room.
We placed Tyler’s casket on the bier at the front of the main viewing room, and I lifted the lid. It took only a few minutes of arranging for everything to look just right. I planned on waiting until closer to four o’clock to put the finishing touches on his make-up so that he would look as fresh as possible for the arriving guests.

While I was taking care of the casket, the doorbell rang at the back of the house, meaning it was a delivery. The florist brought in the first five arrangements sent by family, friends and co-workers. Flowers were a funeral directors best friend. I placed them around the viewing room, their color adding the kind of vitality that the room lacked, their smell making the room fresher and more pleasant. The mourners would appreciate them too. Flowers provided a distraction, a conversation piece for those who attended the viewing. Rather than just standing around, hands in pockets or on hips, people could look at the flowers, read the cards and comment on how nice everything looked while mentally calculating the amount of money that someone else had spent.

Whenever we worked together, Jim took it upon himself to get the vehicles ready. I had three funeral vehicles on the premises--one hearse, a roomy Lincoln Town Car for the immediate family to ride in, and an ancient Cadillac limo that needed new tires and bled oil. The Fishers would be using the hearse, of course, and the Town Car, and Jim left to fill them both up with gas and check their oil. These vehicles were both asset and liability, necessary to running the business, but expensive to maintain and store. I cursed them every month when I wrote the check for their insurance.

While Jim was gone with the cars, I took care of some minor details around the house. I set up more folding chairs and brought up extra coffee cups from the basement storage room. The back doorbell rang with another flower delivery. The driver, a young guy I had never seen before, told me that he had a total of eight arrangements to drop off.
“Where should I take them?”

“Follow me.”

I took one of the arrangements out of the back of his van and showed him the way upstairs. The driver was a young man, about twenty-five, tan and thin, and when he put the flowers down in the viewing room, his eyes darted toward the casket. I knew he couldn’t help it. A dead body and the human eye have the same relationship as a light bulb and a moth on a warm, dark summer night. He wanted to be respectful, but more than anything, he wanted to peek.

“You can go ahead and pay your respects,” I said. “He won’t bite.”

“No, no. That’s alright.”

He went out to get the last few arrangements.

I started moving the new ones around the room, putting them down one place and then another, trying to create something pleasing to the eye. I didn’t have the touch, and I thought about letting Rochelle have a go at it when she showed up. After all, it was Eloise who used to handle this part of the job for me. She could walk into a viewing room, and in a matter of minutes turn a hodgepodge of flower arrangements and wreaths into a perfectly integrated display.

The driver returned with the last few arrangements.

“That’s it for now,” he said.

“Thanks.”

He was staring at the casket again.

“Why is that so small?”
“Do you want to have a look?” The guy gave me a quick, glancing appraisal to make sure I wasn’t fooling around. “It’s okay. You don’t have to know someone in order to pay your respects to them.”

I waved him forward, and we walked side by side right up to the the casket.

“It’s just a baby,” he said.

“Yes.”

He shook his head, his eyes wide with curiosity.

“I couldn’t do what you do.”

“Not everybody has to.”

We stood next to each other in silence. The delivery guy had his right hand resting on the lip of the casket, the other dangling at his side. It always fascinated to me to watch the careful dance around death that so many people do. As humans, we have an endless fascination with death and an absolute resistance to learning more about it. I believed it was part of my job to get people over that fear.

“Go ahead and touch him.”

The delivery man cocked his head in my direction.

“Excuse me?”

“Why don’t you go ahead and touch him?”

He shook his head and backed up.

“No sir.” He was halfway across the room before he stopped. “I don’t want to do that.”

“It’s okay.” I reached into the casket and gently stroked my index finger across Tyler’s cheek. His skin had the cold but familiar rubbery feel of the dead and embalmed. “It’s not a big
deal. Every time we see a dead person, we should just stop and be aware of the fact that someday it will be our turn. We’re all going to die, but most people don’t seem to realize it.”

“I’m late,” he said and disappeared like a shadow.

I hadn’t meant to scare him or make him uncomfortable. Not exactly. In a way, I was administering a test for his sake as well as mine. I had been curious to see how far his curiosity really went, and I had to give him credit, his went further than most. It surprised me that he was even willing to step as close to the casket as he did, and stare into it for so long. But he drew the line at physical contact with the dead.

Duly noted.

I went back to my work on the flowers, then went upstairs to shower and dress for the evening.
Chapter Seven

When I came downstairs, I heard voices in the kitchen. Jim was in there, holding a mug of coffee, and Rochelle was going through the cabinets.

“What are you looking for?” I asked.

“Hi Uncle Jack. Tea bags.”

She wore a dark business suit that made her look professional and five years older than she really was. I knew that this was the year in school when she would interview for internships, and the suit was probably purchased with an eye towards that. If not, almost everyone had a dark funeral suit that they kept in their closet just in case.

“The other cabinet there. And there’s Sweet’n Low in there too.”

“I don’t use that.”

She shook her head as if I had suggested she put urine in her tea.

“The Lincoln’s air conditioning isn’t working too well,” Jim said. “It probably needs a freon charge.”

“No problem.”

I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat at the table. Jim leaned back against the counter. The afternoon sunlight slanted through the kitchen window, warming the spot where I sat. I didn’t want to think of anything but the funeral. I knew that when I woke up on Thursday morning, all the petty money problems were going to come back to me, but for just a moment, I wanted to feel like a man with work before him and friends beside him.

“Why don’t you use Sweet’n Low?” I asked.
“That stuff’s terrible for you.” Rochelle talked as she poured her tea. “All those chemicals.” She shuddered. “Isn’t that why we have to bury people in those vaults? Because we have too many chemicals in our body?”

“I’ve never heard that,” Jim said.

Rochelle blew on the top of her tea. “It’s true. We eat all these chemicals and additives, and then when we die and decompose, they get into the groundwater and soil.”

“I’m not sure that your theory holds water,” I said. “They sell those vaults as a way to make money. There’s no need for them.”

“But you still sell them, don’t you Uncle Jack?”

“Cemeteries require them,” I corrected her.

She took a cautious sip of her tea as Jim watched her carefully. It was a rare treat for both him and me to be around a young woman like Rochelle. Most days the house sits empty and quiet, so empty that I’d welcome even a corpse for company. Now here we all were, thrown together for this one event. Rochelle’s youth and energy and feminine beauty made the house seem twice as alive as at any time in the past month. Having children must create a similar effect. I could, if I wanted to, just let my mind go and imagine that she was my daughter, visiting from college, ready to tell me everything about her life because we have such a good, close relationship. I drank it in.

“Well, I’m going to be cremated anyway. It’s more natural.”

“Don’t tell me that.”

“Why?” she said. “It’s very popular now. More and more people are doing it. We’re going to run out of land for cemeteries.”
“Give me a good, old-fashioned funeral anytime,” I said. “I think cremation’s barbaric, another sign of a throwaway society. It’s like emptying a vacuum cleaner bag.”

“You just said you didn’t want to have a funeral,” Jim said. His smile cocked to the right ever so slightly, and the look in his eyes said that he had once again caught me in a contradiction. I didn’t see it that way at all.

“If it was up to me, I’d have a good nineteenth century funeral. That’s when they knew how to deal with death.”

Rochelle giggled. “Sounds like you were born a hundred years too late.”

“He was,” Jim said.

“Now hear me out. If you were to die a hundred years ago in a town like Dove Point, you’d die at home with your family around you. Your family would take care of dressing you and getting you ready. No embalming, nothing fake. No make-up. Hell, your family would probably make the coffin for you. Something simple and wooden. Everybody’s would be the same. No real choices. And you’d be laid out in your home, right in the living room or parlor. Someone from the family might sit up with the body all night, by candlelight.” I paused.

“Sometimes they’d even take pictures of the body just so the family could remember the deceased. Pictures, death masks. Locks of hair.” I looked at both of them, met both of their eyes.

“It sounds better that way, doesn’t it?”

“Sounds creepy as hell,” Rochelle said. “Dead people in the house with you.”

“Some people do it,” Jim said.

“Oh I’m sorry, Uncle Jack. I didn’t mean you were creepy.”
“You wouldn’t be the first to think it.” Something came back to me that I hadn’t thought of in a long time. “But you stayed here once, when you were little. Remember that? You were scared and couldn’t sleep.”

“I do remember that.” She scratched her chin, her eyes narrowing as the memory came back. Her parents went out of town for a night, a romantic weekend getaway, and Eloise volunteered to take Rochelle for twenty-four hours. “I remember I cried to Aunt Eloise that I didn’t want to sleep in a house with dead bodies in it.”

“And you turned out okay,” Jim said. “Right?”

“I guess so,” she said. “So far.” The front doorbell rang. I checked my watch. 3:40. “I’ll get it.”

She went out leaving the two of us old men to their coffee. I drank off the last of mine.

“You know, I like her. She’s a good kid,” Jim said.

“You like her because she’s easy on the eyes.”

“There’s that too. She must not be your side of the family.”

I shook my head. “It’s all Eloise’s blood.”

Rochelle came back to the doorway. Voices murmured from the other room, the front door closed.

“Uncle Jack? It’s the Fishers.”

Jim and I looked at each other. We both instinctively straightened our ties and ran a hand over our thinning hair. I went out past Rochelle toward the front room.

The Fishers hadn’t come alone. Nine people stood with them, including two older couples that turned out to be Tyler’s grandparents. The other five people were siblings, aunts and uncles, with more of them to arrive later, I felt certain.
“We came early with our family,” Mr. Fisher said. He wore a charcoal gray suit with a dark red tie, his hair looked stiff and gelled into place, his shoes too big for his body. “I thought you said that would be okay.”

“That’s fine.”

I nodded a greeting to all of them. They were a tired looking bunch, like a squad of soldiers who had seen too much on a particularly dangerous mission.

Rochelle and Jim came up behind me but didn’t say anything. Everyone looked to me as the guy running the show, and their expectation filled my chest with the hot air of pride. I didn’t mind the expectation, in fact, I embraced it. In much of my life I didn’t have it, but here I had a measure of control and authority.

Mrs. Fisher wore a knee-length black dress and a strand of small white pearls. Her hair looked perfect and her face was made up as if she were heading to a nice dinner party.

“They wanted a chance to see Tyler,” Mrs. Fisher explained. “Before the crowds...”

I nodded my understanding.

“You can all go right on in.”

I showed them to the doorway of the viewing room and stepped aside while they filed in solemnly, heads down, hands crossed, Mr. and Mrs. Fisher in the lead.

“Look at the flowers,” someone said, the voice an awed whisper.

I closed the doors to the room, allowing the Fishers’ inner circle a greater sense of privacy.

“Jim went to make more coffee,” Rochelle said.

“Good.”

“Those were the parents, those people who talked to you?”
“Yes. The Fishers.”

“They look so young.”

“I don’t think they’re much older than you.”

I could tell she was trying to make some sense of all of this. Rochelle was still young enough not to have seen a lot of funerals; in fact it was possible that the only funeral she had ever been to was Eloise’s. And even if she had known people her own age who had died or suffered tragedy, it still comes as a surprise. To see misfortune fall on someone your own age could still knock the wind out of you. I sometimes wished that I still had that capacity.

“Makes me not want to have kids,” Rochelle said. “You can lose them that easy.”

“This kind of death is rare.”

We stood in silence, and I found myself at a loss for something to say. What did I have in common with a nineteen year old girl?

“Hey Uncle Jack?”

“What?”

“I remember something else about that time I stayed here with you and Aunt Eloise. I cried because I was scared and you offered to walk me around the house to show that it was safe. Do you remember?”

I thought back, straining the machinery of my memory. I did have a vague recollection of leading the little girl version of Rochelle around, pointing out the locked doors and windows, the security system mounted in the wall.

“You weren’t letting us sleep.”

“You finally brought me in there. There was a funeral the next day, and you walked me right up to the casket. It was an old lady, I remember that. She had white hair and glasses.”
Rochelle smiled a little at the memory, but I don’t think it was a completely happy smile. “You touched her. You like poked her with your finger and said I could do it too. You told me they weren’t anything to be afraid of. They were just people.”

“Did you do it?”

“No. I wanted to go back upstairs then. I stopped crying too.”

“So it worked?”

“I stopped crying because I was afraid you’d bring me back down here again.”

“And you never told your parents.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I know so. If you had told them, I would have caught hell.”

She still looked more amused than angry. I again saw a similarity to Eloise in the angle of her smile and the shape of her teeth. All the women on Eloise’s side of the family had the same straight narrow teeth as Rochelle.

“I did tell some kids at school.”

“I’m lucky I still have my license.”

“They thought it was cool. Some of us decided to come over one day and have you let us all touch a dead body, but when we got here no one was home.”

“That’s lucky for both of us. Look, I promise you won’t have to touch any dead people. Okay? Just keep the kleenex flowing.”

The door from the viewing room opened and the Fishers extended family filed out. They kept their eyes down, and walked softly on the carpet. A gray-haired man a few years younger than me caught my eye.

“The parents wanted to take a moment before everyone arrived,” he said.
“There’s coffee and soft drinks in the kitchen down the hall.” Jim had appeared behind me. “You’re welcome to make yourself at home. There are more places to sit in the other room here.”

No one said anything, but they nodded their appreciation. Rochelle walked among the family with a box of kleenex extended in her hand. Almost everyone took one, either for themselves or for the person they were standing next to. We were a ragtag group of employees, but we worked well together. Most funeral homes had two or more partners, professionals who ran and oversaw the daily operations of the business. We couldn’t afford such luxuries, but in our own way we provided better service. Jim and Rochelle weren’t professionals, and the people who passed through our doors received a more sincere, sympathetic kind of service from them because they weren’t polished or practiced. At no time did Jim or Rochelle give the impression that they had said or done these things hundreds of times before because they hadn’t.

Some of the family members took seats, and a couple drifted down the hall, lured by the odor of the brewing coffee. I pointed to a free-standing podium near the entrance to the viewing room and reminded everyone to sign the guest register at the family’s request.

Mr. Fisher stuck his head out the viewing room door.

“Mr. Hoskins? Can you come here?”

I moved closer. “Can I help you with something?”

He moved back into the room, allowing space for me to come in, which I did. He closed the door behind me. Mrs. Fisher stood at the front of the room near the casket, a wad of kleenex in one hand, her eyes on me. Mr. Fisher moved in so close to speak to me that I smelled the mouthwash on his breath.
“My wife,” he began. Mrs. Fisher cleared her throat. “We, I should say, we were hoping that we could, if you could help us....we’d like to take some more of those pictures. Like we did the other night.”

“You mean now?”

“I brought a camera,” Mrs. Fisher said.

“Can’t this wait until later?”

“We thought about that,” Mr. Fisher said. “But we have all this family staying with us. You saw them. We wouldn’t be able to get away.” He lowered his voice just a little. “Becky really wanted to do it now.”

They weren’t going to let go of this, I could tell. Not Mrs. Fisher because it appeared to be her idea, and not Mr. Fisher because he couldn’t change his wife’s mind and have any peace. My thoughts turned to the roomful of guests as well as Jim and Rochelle. None of them seemed likely to just come on in and run the risk of interrupting the parents private grieving, but that didn’t stop my nerves from jangling. The picture taking had been my idea in the first place. It didn’t seem possible to pull back and tell them no at this point.

Mr. Fisher wore an almost sheepish look on his face. During our conversation the previous afternoon, he had told me how little he cared for the pictures of his child. Now, he found himself outnumbered two to one. I leaned in close and spoke so that only Mr. Fisher could hear my voice.

“I thought that all of this was bullshit.”

His jaw clenched.

“What can you just help me out? I’m paying you enough.”
“What do you want me to do?” I asked, directing my question to Mrs. Fisher. “Just take a picture of you at the casket?”

“I want to hold him again,” Mrs. Fisher said. “We’re all dressed up now. It will be like a family portrait.”

She held the camera out to me.

I took it, nodding my head.

“We should do this quick,” I said. “People will be waiting.”

Mr. Fisher moved over next to his wife, but the two of them just stood there looking lost.

“Can I just...should I just go ahead and pick him up?” Mrs. Fisher asked.

“Yes, just pick him up. Try to watch his make-up. I might not have time for a touch-up.”

She bent down and lifted Tyler up out of the casket, like a mother lifting her child out of a crib. She brought him to her chest and straightened out his gown.

“He’s so cold,” she said.

Her husband put his arm around her and drew her close. I looked down at the camera to see what button I was supposed to push and to see if the flash was turned on. It was the same make of disposable camera that we had used the other night.

“Are you ready?” I asked. “We should probably try to hurry.”

“We’re ready,” Mr. Fisher said.

They arranged themselves into the same tableau as the other night, and I even had to remind them to tilt Tyler’s head up so that the camera could catch it, just like I did before. But nothing else felt the same. That first night, I felt natural, at ease, confident that I was doing the right thing for my client. But tonight I felt the presence of all those people just outside the door who might not understand what we were doing. And more than those eyes, I felt the eyes of the
entire town at my back. I snapped the pictures quickly, three in a quick succession. The Fishers
didn’t even have time to blink.

“Would you like to hold him for a few, Mr. Fisher?” I asked.

“You should,” Mrs. Fisher said.

He took the baby, as gently as if Tyler were still alive, and I snapped a few more with
their positions reversed.

“More?” I asked.

“Can we just get him back in there.”

Mr. Fisher moved to the casket, but then looked uncertain about how to maneuver Tyler
back in. He looked at me for help.

I handed Mrs. Fisher the camera. “Here.”

I took the baby from Mr. Fisher and laid him in the casket, straightening his gown,
making sure that his make-up didn’t rub off or get smudged onto my shirt. He still looked as
good as when I had laid him down the night before. I checked my watch. 4:05. We needed to be
ready for business.

“I’ll go open the doors now,” I said.

“Do we have to?” Mrs. Fisher asked. “I was hoping to have just a little more time alone.”

I took a deep breath.

“I’ll leave you two alone and tell the guests to hold on a little longer.”

When I left the room, they were both looking down into the casket, their backs facing me.
Chapter Eight

A funeral runs at a pace all its own. Most of the work, for me and the people who work for me, is done in advance. By the time the viewing starts, everything must be in its place, and if it is, few problems will arise. During the viewing itself, I almost become superfluous.

The closest relatives of the deceased take up a position near the casket in order to easily receive the guests. The guests arrive in their good time and naturally form an orderly line at the door. No pushing, shoving or cutting at a funeral. Most of the guests have no desire to get to the front of the line where they will have to face not only the embalmed, made-up remains of the deceased, but also, and perhaps even more difficult, the living, grieving family members. No one knows what to say or how to say it. No one knows when to let go from a hug. It’s a crisis for everyone.

As someone who has stood on the receiving end of people’s sympathies, once for each of my parents and once for Eloise, I can say with certainty that the words spoken to me brought very little comfort for one simple reason: I didn’t hear any one of them. My mind swirled on those days. Sick with grief, blurry with sleep deprivation, I stumbled through those services. I have no way of knowing what my face looked like during the viewings for my family members, but I feel pretty certain that it looked very much like the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Fisher during Tyler’s viewing. Their tight smiles and pinched expressions covered up a depth of emotion and feeling, and no doubt it was all they could do to keep from dissolving into hysterics or collapsing to the floor.
In Mrs. Fisher’s case, I suspected something else. I suspected that she still felt a great deal of anger, just as I had when Eloise died, and if she gave into what she truly felt, if she really let go, her fists and curses would fly until the room was wrecked. At some point all of that would be released, maybe not until long after the funeral ended, and I imagined myself keeping in touch with her, offering my own experience as a widower and funeral director for her comfort. My continued interest in the Fishers also had its practical side. They had parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and maybe even grandparents. If my services proved satisfactory to them now, if they saw me as a small businessman willing to go above and beyond the call of duty, then I increased the chances that the whole family would come back to me in the future whenever they needed the services of a funeral director.

Tyler’s viewing moved easily and gracefully through its three hour course. The crowd turned out to be the largest in the Crumley Funeral Home in a number of years. I tried to remember the last time we had so many guests packed within these walls, and I had to think back to 1978 when Mrs. Ronald Crumley Jr., the widow of the man who gave me my start in the business, died at the age of eighty-three. She had spent her declining years involved in any number of civic organizations around Dove Point and had acquired quite a legion of respectful friends and admirers. Tyler Fischer came close to outdrawing Mrs. Crumley. In addition to a large quantity of family members from around the state--The Fishers had a lot of aunts, uncles, cousins and friends--the faculty, staff and student body of the Westlake County Community High School turned out en masse, and a steady stream of awkward, uncomfortable looking teenagers, stiff in their formal clothes, filed into the viewing room to offer their condolences to the Fisher family. It may have been summer break, but somehow the word got around.
I didn’t have any interaction with the Fishers once the viewing started. They stayed close to the casket, receiving guests, and I, along with Jim and Rochelle, attended to the more mundane machinations of keeping the viewing going. One of us was always checking on the coffee and refreshments or bringing more chairs up from the basement to accommodate the swelling ranks of guests. The toilet in the men’s bathroom clogged around six o’clock, and I had to go to work on it with a plunger until I felt the sweat beading on my forehead.

The crowd began to break up between six-fifteen and six-thirty. The only latecomers were people who were stopping by on their way home from work. Most of the members of the Fisher family who had showed up at the outset stayed to the end, and over the course of the evening, I came to understand who was who based on my observations of their interactions and surface physical resemblances. One man in particular stood out to me, and I came to see the physical resemblance—the cool blue eyes, the hard, rigid jawline—between he and his younger self, Mr. Fisher. This man hovered over everybody, and on more than one occasion I witnessed him pointing something out or giving directions as if it were he who was in charge of the event. Around 6:45, when the crowd was thinning out, he approached me and took me by the elbow.

“You’re in charge here, right?” he asked.

We were the same approximate age, but he was stamped with all the outward signs of success: a tan, an expensive suit, a thick but not flabby midsection, and a bulging gold ring from Indiana University. The MBA program if I had to guess. I told him that I indeed owned the funeral home.

“I want to make sure we’ve got the travelling arrangements worked out for the morning,” he said. “I mean as far as who’s riding in what car.”
“We have our hearse, of course, and I thought that Tyler’s parents could ride in our second vehicle which will be driven by my assistant, Mr. Heilman.”

“We want to take two cars besides the hearse.”

“The Fishers only contracted for one additional car. I thought only the parents were riding in the car.”

“Both sets of grandparents want to ride in a limo. Do you have enough vehicles to do that?”

“I do have an additional vehicle, a Cadillac limo.”

“Perfect.”

I had a feeling that the elder Mr. Fisher’s enthusiasm might dim once he saw the condition of my car.

“I’ll just have to let the Fishers know what the extra cost will be.”

His face scrunched, a look that said the cost of the extra car was no object. He shook his head.

“I’m paying for it. Don’t bother them.”

“Consider it done,” I said, hoping our conversation was over.

He looked at his watch.

“I guess everybody’s ready to go now,” he said.

“Almost.”

“We’re supposed to go back to Becky and Jason’s house for a little gathering after this.”

He looked at his watch again. “You’d think we spent enough time together already.”

“They would probably appreciate you being there with them. I know they’re having a rough time.”
“Of course. I don’t mean to say that I don’t want to support them. I’ve been doing a lot of travelling lately.” He shrugged. “Do you live here?”

“Upstairs. The top two floors.”

“Was it rough having a family here?”

“My daughter works here. Did you see her tonight?”

“The dark-haired girl?” He gave me the onceover, no doubt wondering if a man my age could have a daughter so young. “I did see her.”

“It must not bother her if she wants to work here.”

“It must be nice to have someone to pass the business along to. Jason always wanted to be a teacher. His brother’s in school to be a teacher too.”

“That’s too bad for you. I’ll see you in the morning.”

I immediately regretted being short with Mr. Fisher, but his personal problems didn’t interest me. True, he was now a paying client to some degree, but my main concern was for the Fishers. If Mr. Fisher was more concerned about which car he rode in than he was about his grandson’s death, I didn’t have anything to say to him. Over the years I had acquired the habit of cutting people off when I felt them to be on the brink of some irrelevant personal disclosure. Not a compassionate standpoint, I admit, but one that had spared me the petty ramblings of more than a few fools.

Rochelle was sitting at the kitchen table, looking bleary-eyed and distracted. The sink and the countertops were littered with empty coffee cups, saucers and water glasses. All part of the clean-up before I went to bed. Guests would be back in the morning before the drive to the church and the cemetery, and I didn’t want them thinking I left dirty dishes sitting out overnight. We’d need the clean cups anyway.
“Tired?”

“Drained, I guess,” she said. “How can you do this night after night?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t do it night after night. Keeps me fresh.”

“I don’t mean that.” She let out a deep sigh through puffed cheeks. Her hair hung a little looser, and she had taken her earrings off and placed them on the table in front of her. The evening was still young enough for her to go out and do all the things I could only dream about anymore, and I was getting to the point where even the dreams didn’t sound that interesting when stacked up against a good night’s sleep. She shouldn’t have had a care in the world.

“There’s a dead baby in there, a dead baby. And you dressed it and made it up and handled it and you act as if nothing unusual is going on. I know that’s your job, but how can you do it?”

“It’s not always easy, especially with a child.”

“Really? It does effect you? I’d like to think that it effected you.”

Rochelle really didn’t know me at all. I had played a very small role in her life, visited with her and her family only on special occasions, and even then we had never had a single meaningful or in-depth conversation that I could remember. She belonged to her parents not to me, and any knowledge of life that she required came from them first. We weren’t even blood. Her parents had certainly offered information about me over the years, and I doubted that much of it was positive. Something compelled me to explain a little more about myself to Rochelle. Maybe it traced back to that moment in their kitchen the day before when her resemblance to Eloise became so strikingly apparent, maybe that similarity made me want to open up. Rochelle was an adult now, not a little girl.

“I had a brother who died as an infant. Did you know that about me?”

She shook her head. “Huh-uh.”
“He was actually a stillborn, so he never really lived I guess.” I became aware of
everything in the room, like I was starting out on a highwire and Rochelle’s face was the only
thing keeping me suspended. The bell of self-disclosure had been rung and I couldn’t unring it.
“So naturally I’ve thought about him a lot these last few days. It hasn’t been easy to see all of
this, but for the most part I’ve had to put it aside.”

Rochelle’s mouth hung halfway open, her face frozen somewhere between interest and
the fear that she had opened up a stale can of old man rambling. Her eyes showed sympathy and
compassion.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Jack. I never knew that.”

“I’m sure your parents don’t even know. I probably only mentioned it to your Aunt
Eloise a handful of times over the years.”

Rochelle was at a particular point in her life that I remember well. At a certain time, right
around the age of eighteen or nineteen, we all realize that we are adults in the eyes of the world,
and that this entitles us to have adult conversations with other adults. I say this about Rochelle
because she asked me a question that I’m sure had been on her mind for many years.

“Did you and Aunt Eloise ever try to have kids?” she asked.

“Not really. Not in any serious way.” I couldn’t think of how to sum it all up. “It just
never happened for us.”

“They know a lot more about that stuff now.” She picked up her earrings and slipped
them into the pocket of her blazer. The sun was still bright outside, and would be for another
couple of hours. It gathered in a fading pool on the kitchen floor. “I think I’m going to adopt
anyway. There are too many kids in the world who need homes. Did you guys think about
adopting?”
“No. The subject never came up. I don’t know how good of a father I would have been.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I think you would have been a good father. Both of you would have been good parents.”

“I don’t know. Look what I did to you when you couldn’t sleep.”

“That’s true.” She laughed. “You might want to leave that one out of your repertoire.”

I went over to the sink and turned the water on. I plugged the drain and squirted liquid detergent into the bottom of the sink.

“I can do those Uncle Jack.”

“No. Sit. This helps me unwind.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke. I stared into the filling sink watching the white bubbles form and cover up the few mugs in the bottom until they were out of sight. I really should have been back out in the front of the house as the last guests left, but I trusted Jim to handle that. If someone truly needed me they would find me, but I doubted anyone would. The family had their own places to go, and they had to get ready for the next day, which in my experience, is the hardest to get through emotionally, the last finalities in a series of finalities.

“I thought about something tonight.” I shut the water off and the room seemed quieter than it did before. “You’re about the closest thing I have to an heir.” I turned around, but Rochelle wasn’t looking at me. She was tracing her finger across the tabletop moving an invisible crumb or piece of dirt around in figure eights. “I guess you probably want to get out of Dove Point when you’re through with college, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure what I want to do.”

“Well, you’re studying business, and I could try to show you a few things around here.”

“I like working here,” she said. “I really do.”
“Good. I like having you around. You’re good with people.”

“But I’m not sure I’m cut out to do what you do. I think it takes a special person.”

“Special can be taken a lot of different ways.”

“I mean it in a good way.”

“It’s not much of a business anymore.” I scraped some bubbles off the top of the water and pressed them in my hand until they disappeared. “It would be nice to keep it in the family. Some new blood might make a difference.” She began to fidget in her chair. “You don’t have to say anything about it now. I’m sure your parents wouldn’t like it.”

“I’ll think about it. I will. But don’t hold off on selling or anything because of me.”

I turned back to the sink. Something heavy and awkward had descended into the room, and I felt intensely aware of my own folly at thinking a young woman like Rochelle would have any interest in inheriting my business. I hoped that she wouldn’t go home and tell her parents about my offer, and at least I would be spared the indignity of having Bill know what I had said to his daughter. I dropped my hands into the soapy water and a few interminable minutes passed before Jim stuck his head in the door.

“They’re all gone now, Doc. Everybody.”

Jim looked as fresh at seven o’clock as he did at noon. I had the feeling that I could work him seventy-two hours straight and he wouldn’t break a sweat.

“Even the Fishers?”

“Everybody. They were having a little get together at somebody’s house.”

“That’s fine. There’s been a slight change of plans for tomorrow.”

Rochelle didn’t look at me when I spoke, then when she did, her eyes were filled with pity.
“What’s the matter?” I asked her.

“Nothing.”

I took a deep breath. Jim bailed me out.

“What’s the change in plans?” he asked.

“We all three need to drive tomorrow,” I explained. “It’s limo envy. Both sets of grandparents want to ride in a nice car now. I have no problem charging them the extra money. I just have to hope that the Cadillac can actually make it from here to the church to the cemetery without falling apart. I can still drive the hearse. I thought maybe Jim should take the Caddy. If it croaks, you’ll do the best job of soothing any ruffled feathers.” Rochelle was shaking her head.

“What? All you have to do is drive the Fishers and-”

“I can’t drive anyone,” she said. “I don’t have a license.”

“Yes you do,” I said.

“No. I got a DUI at school this year. I can’t drive for two more months.”

I’ve heard it said a great many times, often about politicians and athletes, that the measure of a man can best be taken by how he responds to a crisis. Rochelle not being able to drive was perhaps the most minor of crises in the organization and execution of the Fisher funeral, but I suddenly didn’t see it that way. It became my own personal Waterloo, something I saw as a humiliating defeat in the eyes of the world.

“Well, that’s great, I guess. Just great. These people lose their baby, and they just happen to pick the only funeral director in the state of Indiana that can’t gather together three people to drive the family to the church and the cemetery.”

“We can find another person, Doc.”
“Another person to pay.” I looked at Rochelle. “I’m already paying you and now I have to pay somebody else.”

“I don’t care if you pay me, I told you that.”

I went on past her logical objection.

“Plus gas and whatever else it takes to get that heap running. I’ll barely come out ahead. And all the people that came here tonight and will be there tomorrow, what will they think when the car can barely run or there’s no one even to drive it? You think they’ll be coming to me for business in the future? May as well roll the whole business into a grave out at Blue Pines tomorrow.”

I brushed past Jim leaving the kitchen.

“Now hold it a minute,” he said. “I’ll call my wife.”

But I kept on walking. I went downstairs and outside with no certain destination in mind. I stepped out into the driveway, and it was still a calm, beautiful summer evening. Birds chirped to each other in the trees above, and the street was quiet. I went out to the free-standing garage at the back of the property and went in the side door.

The Cadillac’s tires looked a little low, but not flat or rotted. They would hold up another day. The keys stayed in the ignition at all times. Crime was slowly going up in Dove Point, including the occasional car theft, but plenty of people like me left doors unlocked and windows open at all hours. I refused to live in a world where a person couldn’t leave the keys in their car in their own garage. That wasn’t my Dove Point.

The Driver’s door made a creaking protest as I opened it. It was heavier than I remembered. I climbed into the musty-smelling front seat and turned the key over halfway. The door chime went off and the dashboard lights came on. The battery still had juice. I pressed the
button to lower my window and closed the door. I just sat with my hands on the keys, staring into the darkening garage. If a person spends a lifetime maintaining as even a keel as possible, even to the point of holding back as much as possible, then those moments when that person does show their true feelings about something can seem all the more remarkable to those who witness it. I regretted acting the way I had acted in front of Jim and Rochelle, and I regretted taking the Fisher funeral on at all. They deserved better than me. Rather than giving them what they really wanted, I had allowed them to get sidetracked into all this picture-taking business. And I allowed myself to get sidetracked right along with them to the point that when I should have been tending to more important matters concerning their funeral, I was running around town picking up pictures from the drugstore.

When Mr. Bosco came on Thursday, he could have the whole thing, the whole mess. The leaking roof, the broken down cars, the debts. He could provide a staff and enough capital to make the place over so that it relived its glory days.

My hand still rested on the ignition key. All I had to do was turn it over and let the garage fill up with poisonous carbon monoxide. It was an easy way to go. I had seen numerous victims of such a death over the years, and they all looked peaceful and unmarked except for the telltale sign of cherry red lips brought on by oxygen deprivation. I had considered this method of escape a few times in the years since Eloise died, in those moments when my life and business didn’t seem to amount to anything worthwhile, but something always brought me back. Stubbornness, I guess. I didn’t want to let go so easily and leave everything to the vultures.

Even if I did choose that way out, the business would still end up in Mr. Bosco’s hands. I was foolish to think that Rochelle or any of my other relatives would hang on to this enterprise the way that I had. They would sell the Crumley Funeral home before I was in the ground.
“Hey Doc.”

The voice startled me, and I jumped in the seat.

“It’s me. Jim.”

He had come in the side door while I sat brooding. His face filled the driver’s side window like a benevolent god.

“What?”

“What are you doing here in the dark?”

“Checking the car. The battery still has juice.”

“Well, let me open this door so we can start it.”

I heard the garage door go up on its rollers, allowing some of the fading sunshine to come in. Jim came back to the side of the car.

“I talked to Rochelle. She’s got a friend who’s going to drive the other car for us. It’s all worked out.”

“A friend? Who?”

“Some kid she knows. You don’t have to pay either. They’ll do it gratis.”

“I’ll pay.”

“Look.” He held up a hand. “If it’s any trouble, just give them my pay. I don’t care. Young kids should get the money over an old fart like me.”

I nodded.

“I think I’m going to sell, Jim. It isn’t worth it anymore.”

He looked pleased. “That’s good thinking. You might like being retired. You could do some travelling.”

“I’m going to start her up and get some gas.”
“I’ll finish up inside.”

I turned the key and the engine fired to life right away. I let it idle for a few seconds while Jim stood by the side of the car looking at the tires.

“Did Rochelle leave?” I asked.

“Somebody picked her up.”

“That stuff I said in there...”

“Forget it. You’re under some stress. You know something, I never had the guts to go out on my own and run a business. I always had a boss. You gave it a hell of a run here. You made a difference.”

“You’re right.”

It felt good to hear someone else’s take on my career, even if I wasn’t sure that I believed it yet. It had been a good long run, and I was tired. I wished I had more to look at as a life’s work, something more concrete and tangible.

“Think of the places you can go.”

“The old folks’ home? Shuffleboard class?”

“Bah. You’ll be free.”

Free, he said. I’m not sure Jim or anybody else for that matter really knew what that word meant. I know I didn’t.

I backed the car out, slowly and steadily. Jim stood in the open door of the garage watching me, one hand in his pants pocket, the other offering a wave.

I expected him to look relieved and happy over my decision to sell out since that was clearly what he wanted me to do. But as I pulled down the driveway, it looked to me that his face showed more worry and concern than relief.
By the time I reached the gas station, which also served as a mini-mart, bakery and deli, I had come up with several viable options for my retirement, things I hadn’t ever thought of before. The most appealing thing that came to mind was hiring myself out as a teacher to a mortuary college. One was located in South Bend, an hour’s drive away, and I imagined that they would only be too happy to have an experienced member of the profession on their staff on a part-time basis. Isn’t that what a lot of rich, retired business executives did with themselves when they were through working? Didn’t politicians take up cushy posts at places like Columbia and Stanford when their careers were done? Granted, I didn’t carry the prestige of that type of person, but within the field I was a valuable resource. I could simply leave out all the details about the business declining, and the feeling that I had of running away with my tail between my legs. The world would see me as a success--build a business and then sell it. Leave the headaches to someone else.

Eloise would have been happy to see me working as a teacher. In the most difficult times, when business slowed to a trickle and all the ink ran red, she told me that I would have been better off working in a profession like teaching. She thought that my patient disposition lent itself to teaching, and more importantly, working for the public school system provided a steady paycheck, excellent benefits and a chance to retire after twenty-five years with a sweet pension. She meant well with such comments, at least that’s what I told myself, but I couldn’t help but take such advice as criticism of my chosen profession. We rarely if ever fought, and whenever she started in on me about finding a different line of work, I bit back on my anger and kept it to
myself. Being a teacher would have changed the entire course of my life. I would have had to go to college for starters. If no jobs were available in the Dove Point area, I would have had to move elsewhere. I never told this to Eloise, but if I had chosen to go off to college and settle somewhere else, she and I may never have ended up together in the first place. I stayed in Dove Point because it was my home and I liked it, but I also stayed because of her. There was only one thing I would have changed about our time together and that was that it had come to an end. Otherwise, I considered our marriage a happy one.

I let the pump run until the handle clacked off. I returned it to its cradle, capped the tank and went to pay. The gas station was flooded with fluorescent lights which washed over the white concrete. It gave the impression of walking on the moon, except for the muzak playing over the loudspeakers and the gasoline fumes. I didn’t pay right away. I walked to the back of the store to the row of glass fronted coolers. I found the one for beer and selected a forty-ounce bottle of Budweiser. I knew I couldn’t drink the whole thing, but it would be cheaper to buy forty ounces and waste some then to buy a six-pack that I would never finish. I hadn’t planned on buying the beer until I entered the store, but it seemed like a good way to mark the end of an era, and it might even help me sleep better. I was never much of a drinker, but on occasion I like to sip a beer or two as the fitting end to a day of work.

I had the company credit card out, ready to pay for everything together. I could call the beer an entertainment expense. I was surprised to see that the clerk who rang me up was a man very close to my own age. He was heavier, with a fuller head of puffy white hair and big hands with thick rounded knuckles. He leaned on the counter as if for support.

“Evening,” he said, and went about the task of entering my purchases into the cash register with a profound lack of enthusiasm. I thought I knew most of the old-timers in Dove
Point, but this was a face I didn’t recognize. He took my credit card and swiped it through the little machine. He pointed at the beer bottle. “Let me put that in a bag for you.”

“Thanks.”

I glanced over and saw a sign on the front door announcing that they were now hiring, with the added bonus of making $6.50 an hour to start. Despite my high hopes for a second career, it didn’t seem far-fetched to think that I might very well end up working in a place like this once all was said and done. The money from the sale and social security would only go so far. I would have to do something else.

The clerk tore the receipt off the machine and handed it to me with a pen for signing. I scribbled my name and kept a copy for myself.

“Do you like working here?” I asked.

“What?” He screwed up his face. “Who likes working anywhere?”

I smiled at his joke. “Are you retired?”

“If I was retired, I wouldn’t be working. That’s what retired means. Not working.” He looked through the plate glass window of the store to the gas pumps. “That Cadillac your retirement car? You must be doing alright.”

“It’s for work. It’s not that impressive really.”

“Suit yourself.”

I took the package and started for the door where the sign caught my eye again. I turned back.

“I guess I was just wondering how guys our age end up working in places like this, places where teenagers should be working.”
He looked up from the magazine he’d already gone back to reading. He gave me the same screwed up look, one that said he just couldn’t believe a person like me existed in the world and asked such questions of him. The muzak that had been playing outside continued inside the store, tinny and artificial.

“Do you want to write my life’s story or what?”

“No, I don’t.”

“You say ‘guys like us.’ Does that mean you work in a place like this when you’re not tooling around in your Caddy and whipping out your credit card?”

“I think you misunderstand. I’m getting ready to retire and I need to have a job. I really just wanted to know what it was like to work in a place like this.”

“Where you retiring from?”

“I run the Crumley Funeral Home on Indiana Avenue.”

He straightened a little on his stool. “An undertaker. No wonder you’re so weird.” He sniffed. “Why aren’t you driving your hearse?”

“It’s not a pleasure vehicle, although I did used to pick my wife up in it before we were married.” I paused. “I almost forgot I used to do that.”

“Let me explain how it is with me, then you can go on your merry way. I work here because I have nowhere else to work. This is the best I can do. Anybody you see working in a place like this, they’ve got nowhere else to go. So if you’ve got nowhere else to go, I’ll hand you an application.”

“I don’t need an application.”

The clerk wasn’t even paying attention to me anymore. He had his magazine, and his head was down, poring over the pages. He didn’t even look up when I left.
By the time I got back home, the sun was setting, and a band of pink showed above the
tops of the trees and houses while the sky above turned a darker blue. As I pulled down the
driveway and past the porte cochere Jim came out the back of the house.

“Most everything’s finished in there,” he said. “I didn’t get to the dishes.”

“Thanks.” He didn’t walk away right away. “I’m going to sleep on this decision to sell.
See what it feels like in the morning.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

I lifted my hands off the wheel in a small shrug. “What if I have to work somewhere
else?”

“They might keep you on here, kind of as a consultant.”

“I don’t know if I could do that. Watch them run this place their way, with no real say
about anything. I’d be a stranger in my own house.”

A lightning bug fluttered between us, its green bulb popping on and off. Jim made a
playful swipe at it and cupped it in his hand.

“Why do you think you’d have to work anyway? You can live on the profits from what
they give you.”

“That’s the problem. There isn’t going to be any profit. I’m mortgaged to my ears. I’ll be
lucky to break even.”

Jim let the bug go. It floated away, blinking on and off dumbly.

“Are you serious?”
“Look, it’s not your problem. Maybe they’ll come up with more than I thought.”

“You won’t be in trouble. We know people in town. If you want a job we can find you one.”

“I think I was just offered one a few minutes ago.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“There’s social security too. You’ve been working a long time. Let Uncle Sam help you out.”

“I’ll let you go. Thanks Jim.”

“You bet.”

I drove on into the garage, the Cadillac’s engine rumbling through the dark space around me.

Inside, there was still a sink full of dishes waiting, but, true to form, Jim had cleaned up most everything else. He had folded up the extra chairs and put them away and run the vacuum cleaner over the carpet in all of the spaces open to the public. He was a good man and one of the closest things I had to a friend in Dove Point.

The dishes called to me, but I took a plastic cup from the counter and filled it with beer. I took a long drink of the cold beverage and felt it spread through my body in small tingles. I looked up my brother-in-law’s phone number in the little address book that Eloise kept by the side of the kitchen phone and dialed. Eloise’s sister Leslie answered the phone on the second
When I identified myself, she responded casually as if we spoke on the phone almost every day.

“Oh, hi Jack.”

“What's new, Leslie?”

The beer had loosened me up slightly.

“Nothing new here, Jack. I've been working a lot of hours, and Bill's tending to the garden. How about you?”

“Working when I can.” I took another sip of the beer. “I was calling to talk to Rochelle.”

“She's not here. She's out for the night. You know how that is.”

“I wish I did.”

“What's that?”

“It's been so long.” My voice sounded like a shout. I tried to soften it. “It gets harder and harder to remember those days.”

“True.” The conversation paused. I heard a beeping on Leslie’s end of the line that sounded like a microwave oven timer. I was ready to end the call when Leslie started talking again. “Hey, you know what Bill and I were talking about the other day?”

“What's that?”

I liked Leslie a lot better than I liked her husband, but our lives had gone in separate directions over the years, even long before Eloise died. In the months following Eloise’s death, Leslie and I called each other on the phone and occasionally met for coffee or lunch as a way to keep the other’s spirits up. We were the two people who knew Eloise best, and the one’s most likely to keep her memory alive. Those calls and visits petered out over time, and I didn’t think there was anything of substance left for us to talk about.
“We were talking about the times we used to go swimming out at the rock quarry. Remember how the four of us used to go?”

“Sure.”

Two miles outside of Dove Point, just off highway forty-three, sits a rock quarry, abandoned since the days we were teenagers. It filled with rainwater and made a wonderful natural swimming and diving hole for the kids from town. We used to go there with picnic lunches and a transistor radio and spend the day alternating between splashing in the water and lounging on the rocks letting the sun tire us out.

“We didn’t know anything then, did we?” she asked.

“I still don’t.”

“Remember how we used to dive off of those big rocks, how high it was.”

“Bill liked to do that.”

“We all did.”

“I hate heights.”

“Come on. You used to jump with the rest of us.”

I couldn’t summon up a single memory of jumping off of those rock bluffs into the water-filled quarry below. Just the thought of it tickled the pit of my stomach with anxiety. But at this point in my life, how could I be certain that my memory was any more reliable than Leslie’s? How could I even know what memories had disappeared from my brain forever? Maybe I did take daredevil leaps into the cold quarry water. Maybe I did it to impress Eloise or to save face with Bill. Whatever the case, if it did happen, it sounded like a different version of myself than the one I thought I knew and understood.

“I was actually calling to talk to Rochelle about work.”
Leslie wasn’t going to let me pass that easily. “Jack. We should never have lost touch the way we did.”

“I’ve never been very good at that.” I sat down at the kitchen table, the paper cup and beer bottle in front of me. Outside, the day was going fast, but I didn’t bother to turn on the kitchen light. I chose instead to sit in the faint half-glow, the objects in the room starting to appear as shapes and shadows. “I’ve got a lot to do here.”

“Jack.” She knew it was a lie, that I had very little to do here most days, but was also kind enough to not call me on it. “That’s fine. But we’re family, remember? We are still family. I know you don’t have any on your side. We’re not much, but we’re it.”

“I don’t know what to tell you Leslie. I’ll try, but family’s just not a big thing with me.”

“She would have wanted you to stay in touch with us.”

An effective counterargument, and one that, for a moment, took me off guard. Something softened in the center of my chest, and I had to hold it back before it turned into a catch in my throat. Eloise would have wanted me to stay in touch with her family, but not for the purposes of family togetherness that Leslie hinted at. I knew Eloise too well, and so did her sister--those things didn’t matter any more to her than they did to me. Eloise would have wanted me to stay in touch with anyone I could as a measure against loneliness, but once she was gone, there wasn’t anything that was going to do the trick against that condition.

“I’ve enjoyed working with Rochelle,” I said. “She’s a good kid.”

“She is.”

“She kind of looks like Eloise.”

“That’s true. I think of Eloise every time I look at Rochelle. Did you know Ellie when she was Rochelle’s age?”
“How old is Rochelle? Nineteen?” I paused, even though I didn’t have to. I knew very well that Eloise was nineteen and I was twenty-one when we first met. “I think we met when she was around nineteen.”

“It’s okay with me if you want to duck my questions about getting together. We’ll see each other sometime.”

“I just saw Bill the other day. You weren’t home.” I saw a faint glow through the window where the moon was rising behind the clouds, a little past full but still large and bright. “Can you tell Rochelle something for me? Will you tell her that I appreciate the fact that she found another driver for us.”

“I probably won’t see her tonight, but I’ll leave a note.”

“Do you know who she would have found to help out?”

Leslie made a soft, grunting noise. I wasn’t sure if it was meant to display derision or not.

“Probably her friend, Todd. A boy she knows from growing up.”

“What’s his last name?”

“Page. I doubt you’d know the family. They’re fairly new to town.” I didn’t know them. I wanted to ask if this was a boyfriend, but Leslie answered the question for me. “They run around together whenever she’s in town from school. He’s an okay kid. Probably never going to get out of Dove Point.”

“I guess I’ll meet him in the morning.” I left the subject of the DUI alone, figuring that stirring that up would only cause more grief for Rochelle. “Did I really jump off those high rocks way back when?”

“You did. I thought you were so brave.”

“That was quite a long time ago.”
And we said our good-nights, leaving me sitting alone in the dark kitchen.

I didn’t finish my beer that night. I left it sitting on the kitchen table to grow warm and flat as the night went on. When the dishes were finished, I walked through the house checking the doors and windows. Most nights I didn’t bother with this walkaround, but when a body was in the house overnight, it was important to make sure everything was secure. It had never happened to me or the Crumleys, but we always heard reports of pranksters breaking into a funeral home at night and making off with a body. Kids mostly. They’d joyride around with the body for awhile, take it somewhere to show their friends or their girlfriends, and bring it back before morning, none the worse for wear. A surprised milkman or paper boy would find the body on the stoop of the funeral home in the morning and a scramble would ensue to keep the loved ones of the deceased from finding out. It used to be possible to do that back in the days when newspaper editors were discreet and the police didn’t tiptoe around afraid of lawsuits. News travelled faster now, but that wasn’t always a good thing.

The blinds were closed in Tyler’s viewing room. I shut off the lights without looking in his casket. Before I went upstairs I activated the security system. Motion detectors on the first floor and bells and whistles that rang at the police station if someone tried to break in any of the windows or doors. A necessary expense in today’s world of business, and one I paid close to a hundred dollars a month for whether I used it or not. I thought that dead-bolt locks and security windows were enough to do the trick, but my insurance company insisted that I have the whole system installed as a measure against lawsuits should anything go wrong. I punched in the code—Eloise’s birthday—and went upstairs to bed.
The next morning, I was up at seven a.m. without the aid of an alarm clock. I expected the Fishers around nine so I was able to take my time showering and shaving and getting dressed. The morning felt good. I parted the curtains in my bedroom and squinted against the first slanting rays of sunlight. Today would be an easy day for us. Most of the morning would be taken up by the ceremony at the church, and those proceedings belonged in the hands of the minister. All we had to do was shuttle the Fishers and their immediate family members from place to place, making sure that all the trains ran on time so to speak. By eleven-thirty, twelve at the latest, the graveside service would be finished, and the rest of the day would be mine.

Downstairs, I threw the remains of my beer away and occupied myself with some last minute tidying up around the place until Jim arrived at eight-thirty. He carried a bag of doughnuts in his left hand.

“You eaten yet, Doc?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, have some of these. We need to fatten you up.” He took a plate from the cabinet and started laying the doughnuts out. “I don’t see how you put in such long days without eating anything.” He took a healthy bite from his first doughnut, and it left a small powder mustache above his lip. “I’m supposed to watch my cholesterol, but that ain’t living.”

I picked up a glazed and took a bite.

“Good, isn’t it?” Jim said.

“It is.” The icing hurt my teeth. “Coffee’s ready.”
He poured us both a cup and we sat at the kitchen table.

“So?” Jim wiped his face with a paper napkin. “How do you feel this morning? About selling? You said you had to sleep on it and see how you felt today. How do you feel today?”

“I feel like enjoying my breakfast and getting this kid planted by noon.”

Jim laughed. “That’s a good thought. The simple things and all that. A good meal. A good day’s work.”

“Exactly.”

The food tasted better than anything I had eaten in a long time. Maybe it did have something to do with my decision to sell the business to Mr. Bosco and his minions, although the more I thought about that course of action, the less satisfied I felt. In fact, as soon as Jim brought up Mr. Bosco and the sale, my attitude veered away from one of pleasant contentment to one of shifting unease. I had a vision of myself in a green smock, working the night shift at the convenience store/gas station, and the guy I spoke to the night before looking over my shoulder as my supervisor.

“I was thinking about your situation, with the debt you’re carrying and all.” Jim took a sip of coffee and put the cup down on the table with a little thump. “There are ways you can get around that and come out in the clear.”

“I’m not filing.”


“I’m not.” I put my doughnut down. “I appreciate your help, but I’ve already thought about that. I’m not going to bail that way. I made this mess. I need to clean it up.”

“If the hole’s as deep as you suggested last night, you might never get out of it.”
“Maybe I’m not supposed to get out of the hole. Maybe I’m not meant to be retired. I
don’t think it’s right that we can be able to just walk away from a load of debt and let someone
else have to fix it. Or let people go without ever getting their money. They just raise the price to
the next guy.” I drummed my fingers on the table top. “Maybe Bosco will come up with a bigger
offer than I think.”

“Maybe.” Jim looked around the room. “This place needs a lot of work.”

“You’ve got something to fall back on. You’ve got a pension. A family. This is it for
me.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

I stood up and went to the sink. I washed the doughnut stickiness off my hands.

“Rochelle’s going to be here soon. I don’t want her to know about any of this.”

“Sure.”

I dried my hands on a paper towel, my back to Jim.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do yet. I really don’t. I go back and forth. I’ll see what
this jerk offers me and go from there. I can’t decide until I’m in that room.”

“It seems obvious you don’t really want to know what I think so I’ll just leave it alone.”

He stood up to refill his coffee cup. “If you want to know what I think in the future, you can
ask.”

“Fair enough.”

Things were awkwardly silent for a few seconds, but it didn’t really bother me. Jim was a
friend, and if we couldn’t have our little disagreements and silences then we couldn’t have
anything. He didn’t seem to mind and neither did I.
“I think we’re ready to go,” he said. “You know anything about this kid Rochelle’s bringing along?”

“Some friend of hers. His last name’s Page.”

“I don’t know them.”

“They’re new to town. My sister-in-law told me.”

Jim held his second doughnut between the box and his mouth. “Leslie?”

“She’s the only sister-in-law I’ve got.”

“I didn’t know you still talked to her.”

“I called to talk to Rochelle, but she wasn’t home. So I had to talk to Leslie.”

Jim finished the doughnut in two quick bites. I knew what he was thinking--that Leslie and Bill were good people, that their very presence was proof that I had people in town I could depend on, that I should stay in touch with them more. Jim was a big family man, with kids and grandkids, and he never missed a chance to help one of them out with his time or his money. He no doubt assumed that Bill and Leslie would be able to help me out if I asked, if not with money, then at least with emotional support and friendship. He didn’t understand the kind of relationship I had with them, and I wasn’t sure I could have explained it if I tried, but the larger point was that I just really didn’t want to have anything to do with them. I liked having Rochelle’s help, but I didn’t want any more details of my business to be known by my in-laws. They had been expecting me to fail for many years, ever since Eloise and I had married, and I wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction of seeing that happen. A Chapter Eleven filing would show up in the newspaper, the town would talk. Even selling sounded like an admission of defeat. If I could turn everything around and make it viable again, I could--maybe--convince Rochelle to take the
business, and Eloise’s family would see that there was merit in what I had been doing all these years.

“I thought everything went pretty well last night. It was a nice viewing.”

“I haven’t lost my touch I guess.” I sipped from my coffee cup. “Really, it’s just a matter of staying out of the way. It’s not about me, it’s about them. Same thing today, let the minister run the show. He’ll have the right words to say.”

The front door opened. I heard the latch click and the hinges squeal.

“That must be the youth brigade,” Jim said. I nodded. Jim put his coffee down and started for the living room. “You coming to say hi?”

“I’m coming,” I said.

I took my time sipping the last drops from my coffee cup. I used a paper napkin to wipe carefully around my mouth. As easy as it was for me to bicker with Jim and then leave it behind, that’s how difficult it was for me to think about facing Rochelle after losing my temper the night before. I had hoped to patch things up over the phone, to at least apologize and make some appeasement before we had to stand face to face. When Eloise and I fought, everything else in my life went to pieces until we made up. I couldn’t concentrate on work and often left a body on the table while I ran all the way upstairs to apologize. It had been years since that feeling had come over me, but I recognized the symptoms. A tightness in the chest, a dull ache in my brain. I stood up. I didn’t have any choice today but to get through it, so I brushed the crumbs off the front of my suit and went out into the living room.

The three of them were standing in a little triangle by the door. Rochelle was in the middle with Jim on the right and the Page kid on the left. Jim wore a smile from one side of his
face to the other. Rochelle had on the same suit she wore the night before, and the Page kid
looked uncomfortable in a dark two piece with gold buttons, his hair still wet from the shower.

“Here he is,” Jim said.

“Okay team.” I forced a smile onto my face and cheer into my voice.

“Doc,” Jim said. “I want you to meet Rochelle’s friend, Todd Page. Todd, this is Mr. Hoskins.”

We shook hands. He had a firm grip, but his palms were sweaty. With people living
longer than ever and children increasingly shielded from death, it wasn’t unusual to find young
people in their twenties and even into their thirties who had never been to a funeral. It was
possible that the young Mr. Page was making his first trip across death’s door. He kept himself
composed. I had seen others making their first trip into a funeral home whose eyes and heads
kept darting around like they were in a funhouse, as if there were corpses hidden behind every
closed door and blind corner.

“I appreciate you giving me the chance to work here,” Todd said.

Up close, I saw that his shirt wasn’t crisp and white, but somewhat wrinkled and even
yellowing just a bit around the collar. His sport coat was beginning to fray around the cuffs, and
the buttons on his coat were tarnished and worn. The jacket looked to be a couple of sizes too
big, and I wondered if it had been borrowed from his father or an older brother. He lacked the
overall air of confidence and polish that Rochelle carried with her, but he was earnest. His eyes
stayed locked on mine while we shook hands until I found an excuse to look away.

“No problem,” I said. “Today should be an easy day. Just driving for the most part.”

“Say Doc,” Jim said. “I have an idea. Why don’t I take Todd down to the basement and
show him the car he’ll be driving. You and Rochelle can make sure everything’s good up here.”
“You don’t have to-” I said.

“No problem,” Jim said. “C’mon Todd. I’ll show you the works.”

At first, Todd looked reluctant to leave Rochelle’s side, as if he needed her permission to leave. She smiled, and Todd allowed himself to be led down the hallway and out of sight. When they were gone, Rochelle and I stood alone.

“Is there a lot to do?” she asked.

“No. Actually not. We’re in good shape.”

“I got your message from Mom,” she said. “I knew Todd was looking to make extra money. He’s saving for school.”

“He seems nice,” I said. “Does he go to IU?”

“He’s not in school now. He’s saving to go in a year or so.”

“Good.”

I knew her father wouldn’t like the idea of Rochelle keeping company with a boy who wasn’t on the straight path to college. I liked the kid more knowing that he annoyed my brother-in-law.

“I’m sorry about the mix-up yesterday,” Rochelle said. “I didn’t think there was any chance I’d be needed to drive.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“I felt as bad telling you about the DUI as I did telling my parents.” A blush spread across her cheeks. “It’s stupid, really. I had a couple too many drinks and ran a stop sign. It was like high school all over again. Getting into trouble, having my dad get angry. It’s so embarrassing.”

“Your Aunt Eloise couldn’t hold her liquor either,” I said.
“My mom either.” Rochelle laughed. “Well, at least I come by it honestly.”

“You don’t need to apologize.” Her deferential manner made it easy for me to apologize to her. She was a sweet girl, and I envied Todd Page every leisurely moment he enjoyed with her. “I overreacted. There’s a lot on my mind these days, and this funeral...”

“I know,” she said. “It must be tough with this being a baby’s funeral and all.”

“I’m just not handling the unexpected very well,” I said.

“But you said today will be an easy day, right?”

“Let’s hope so.”

“What do we need to do?” she asked. “The family will be showing up soon, won’t they?”

“There really isn’t that much to do,” I said. “Jim and I took care of most of it last night and this morning.”

Rochelle raised her eyebrows. “Do you have anything to eat?”

“In the kitchen. Doughnuts and coffee.” She looked at me expectantly. “What?”

“Are you going to offer me some?” she said.

“Of course. I’m sorry. I thought you’d help yourself.”

She patted me on the arm. “I was kidding, Uncle Jack.”

We went down the narrow hallway together and into the bright kitchen. I could only imagine the arcane information and minutiae that Jim was filling Todd’s head with in the basement, but one of the benefits of the funeral home business is that its practices and habits are endlessly fascinating to the outside world. If I had been an accountant or a bricklayer, Jim would have had about ten minutes worth of information to keep the Page kid occupied.

Rochelle poured herself a cup of coffee.

“I thought you didn’t like artificial stuff,” I said. “But you’re willing to eat a doughnut.”
“On special occasions, yes.” She used a paper napkin to hold her doughnut. “My talk is only good so long as the goods aren’t dangled in front of me. This would be two days in a row that I would have to resist.” She pointed to the coffee pot. “Want some?”

“No thanks. I don’t want to get the jitters.” I stood behind one of the kitchen chairs, my back to the kitchen’s lone window.

“My parents switched to decaf.” She leaned back against the counter near the sink and used her ring finger to wipe a piece of frosting from the corner of her mouth. “I think they miss it.”

“It was strange talking to your mom last night.”

Rochelle studied my face. “Because you haven’t talked in so long?”

“Well that.” I took a deep breath. “We talked over old times. She remembers things that I don’t remember anymore, or that I hadn’t thought about in a number of years.” She nodded at me as if to tell me to go on. “Nothing special really. Just times we used to go to the quarry and swim.”

“What was my dad like then?”

“He was alright. A little defensive and pushy, but an alright guy. Your Aunt Eloise didn’t like him at first, but she came around.”

“But you never really cared for him,” she said. Her voice carried some defensiveness of its own, a subtle message that she didn’t really want to hear anything too bad about her father.

“He can’t be all bad,” I said. “He raised you.”

Her cheeks flushed again, and she sipped from her drink.

“But I don’t really want to talk about that,” I said. I felt a renewed purpose and certainty, a sense that I was moving in the right direction even if I wasn’t quite sure what that direction
was. “It’s just that there are so many things that I can’t remember anymore. So much that is
lost.”

“Tell me about it,” she said. “I can’t remember what I did last week.”

“Not that.” I didn’t want the conversation getting off track into the mundane. Rochelle
cocked her head, perhaps sensing a repeat of what transpired the night before. “Sorry.” I held up
my hand. “I mean....there are significant moments in our lives--when people are born or when
they die or when they get married. How much do we really remember of those? You asked me
what your father was like, but I can’t really tell you. I barely remember, and I was there. And a
hell of a lot younger.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. If I really want to know, I’ll ask my dad. He just
doesn’t like to talk about that stuff.”

“My business is helping people to remember,” I said. “Helping them control how they
remember somebody.”

“You can’t do that for people. It’s a choice how people remember a loved one. It’s
effected by way more than what you do.”

“Maybe, maybe. But I should be able to do more.” I went over to the row of cabinets and
drawers where Rochelle was leaning. “Let me show you something.” I opened up what I
considered my junk drawer, a place where I kept spare batteries and candles and a corkscrew for
opening bottles of wine. I put my hand on the envelope of pictures, the duplicate set that I had
made of the first night the Fishers came to the house. “What I said last night about you taking
over for me someday...”

“Uncle Jack, it’s okay.”
“No. I want you to understand something.” I brought the envelope out of the drawer. “I
don’t want you to think that I was just going to hand you a broken down business. I think there’s
a real opportunity to make money and make a difference for people, if it’s done right.”

I held the pictures out to Rochelle.

“What’s that?”

“Hold on.” I went to the kitchen door and checked the hallway. No sight or sound of Jim
and Todd. “Look at these.” I gave her the envelope. “Tell me what you think.”

She lifted the flap. “Pictures?”

“Being young and all, I thought you might be open to new ideas.”

It hadn’t been my plan to show Rochelle the pictures when she showed up that day, but
once I saw her, it started to make more and more sense. I wanted her to have all the facts in front
of her before she said no once and for all to taking over the business someday. And I had also
become consumed with a desire to tell someone, anyone, about them. If Eloise had been alive, I
would have shared them with her. As it was, I had almost told Jim about them the day before, but
I knew that Rochelle made the most receptive listener. She was young and sensitive, not likely to
come to quick judgements.

She used her thumb and index finger to handle the pictures, making sure not to smudge
them. She turned through them slowly, a somewhat puzzled look on her face.

“The baby’s so cute,” she said. “What do you have them for?”

“I took them.”

Rochelle stopped flipping. “Wait. You knew the Fishers before this?”

I paused. “No. I just met them the other night.”
“So....” She looked down at the pictures again. She flipped back through a few of them.

“So you mean the baby’s already dead in these pictures?”

Rochelle’s eyes narrowed, and one corner of her mouth raised as if she were trying to comprehend something difficult and unpleasant. She shook her head slowly from side to side.

“They wanted me to do it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s a permanent reminder. It’s better than an open casket.” I heard the basement door squeal open and Jim’s booming voice. I took the pictures back from Rochelle and stuffed them into the envelope. “Let’s keep this between us. We can talk more later.”

I put the envelope of pictures back in the drawer just as Jim and Todd appeared in the doorway.

“We’re all set,” Jim said. “I think we’ve got a good worker here.” He clapped his hand on Todd’s shoulder like they were fast friends. For his part, Todd looked a little uncomfortable underneath the attention, but he forced a smile anyway. “You guys alright?”

“We’re good,” I said. “Just eating.”

Rochelle forced a smile of her own, but she still looked like someone in the early stages of seasickness.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom before the family arrives,” Rochelle said. She squeezed her way past Jim and Todd. When she was gone, Jim came into the kitchen to take her place.

“Todd’s granddad was a firefighter over in Westland,” Jim said. “I could tell I was going to like him as soon as I saw him.”

“Is he retired now?” I asked.

“He passed away a few years ago,” Todd said. “Lung cancer.”
“I’m sorry.”

“Damnedest thing, Doc,” Jim said. “Firemen smoke more than anybody. I think it’s all that free time. I’m glad I gave it up.”

“Is there anything special I need to know?” Todd asked. He directed the question at me. Jim had probably told him that I was the final authority on everything. “Is there anything I should or shouldn’t do?”

His voice still carried that strain of eagerness, but there was a hint of something else—aggression maybe or disapproval, some sense that he didn’t completely trust me. I wondered what Rochelle had told him about last night in order to get him to come along.

“Basically, just stay out of the way as much as possible. If you don’t know something, ask one of us. Be polite. Mostly, you’re here just to drive.”

“You’ll be fine,” Jim added.

The toilet flushed down the hallway and the water running through the pipes in the walls sounded like falling shards of glass. The three of us stood in the kitchen waiting for Rochelle to come back. She stuck her head in the kitchen doorway.

“Someone’s on the porch,” she said. “It must be them.”

Todd looked at me for the next move, but I didn’t say anything. Jim spoke up.

“Looks like we’re on,” he said and everybody moved.
One of the first family members through the front door that morning was the elder Mr. Fisher. We made eye contact as soon as he came into the living room, and he made a beeline for me. He placed his hand on my arm and leaned in close to my ear.

“Did you take care of that matter we talked about?”

“It’s done.”

“Remember I want to—” He stopped. “Is there someplace we can talk?”

“This way.”

While I led the elder Mr. Fisher down the hallway to the kitchen, Jim showed the other family members into the viewing room. I had lost sight of Rochelle and Todd and assumed they probably wanted to stay out of the way as much as possible.

In the small kitchen, Mr. Fisher’s cloud of aftershave filled the room, and I wondered if he had bathed in it that morning instead of water.

“I want to pay for that,” he told me.

“I understand.” He had his right hand in his pants pocket. “You want to pay now?”

“How much is it?”

“A hundred dollars.”

“A hundred bucks? For a couple of hours?”

“That’s the going rate.”
“Jesus.” He brought out a wad of cash held in place by a gold money clip. He undid the clip and counted out five twenties. “Here. I don’t want that showing up on any invoice.”

I took the money and folded it into my pocket. “Don’t you think Jason and Becky will notice the extra car?”

“They won’t even think about it, they’re so messed up.” He ran his hand across his forehead. “You guys have got life by the short ones, don’t you? I should have considered this as a career.”

“It’s not for everyone.”

I knew that by this point, the Fishers and the rest of their family were standing over Tyler’s casket, getting ready to say their last good-byes. I was required to stand by and know when precisely to step forward and close and seal the casket so that we could get to the church on time, but Mr. Fisher stood still in front of me, his eyes studying me like I was a vexing piece of modern art.

“These kids, Jason and Becky,” he said. “Do you think they’re handling this alright? In your experience?”

“They seem to be doing the best that can be expected. Everybody’s different.”

“I wonder if it’s normal for them to seem that agitated. It’s almost as if something happened that set them off.”

“Do you know of something that happened?” I asked.

“No, no. But you know how kids are--always keeping secrets from their parents.”

“Right,” I said, remembering that I had told Mr. Fisher that Rochelle was my daughter. I nodded, trying to look like a father who understood. “I really need to get back out there.”
Mr. Fisher blocked my way. “I guess I’m really worried about Becky. This is her first child, and she isn’t the...calmest person under normal circumstances. I don’t know what it is about her, but she’s different. She was raised in a different way than Jason.”

“You’re worried about her?” We were standing just inches apart, and if his aftershave had been ether, I would have passed out on the floor. “If you ask me, your son is the one who needs help.”

“Really? Why do you say that?”

“I have to get out there now.”

I brushed past him, our arms bumping at the elbows.

“Do you know something I don’t?”

I kept walking, retreating to the viewing room and the safety of the funeral crowd and my work. I told myself to just hold my tongue and, for the sake of everyone involved, avoid the elder Mr. Fisher for the rest of the day.

I took up my position in the back of the viewing room next to Jim. The Fishers and their family members were crowded around the casket, leaning on each other for support. I checked my watch. Five more minutes. My kitchen discussion with Mr. Fisher had come close to throwing everything off schedule.

“Did you and Rochelle patch things up?”

“I think so.” I checked the room. “Where are they by the way?”

“Todd’s pulling the cars around. I guess Rochelle went with him.”

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Mr. Fisher Senior entered the room. He didn’t look in our direction but instead went straight to the front and placed a hand on his son’s shoulder. The family had formed itself into a semi-circle around the casket with Jim and I far behind. For their part, Mr. and Mrs. Fisher looked calm and determined. Neither one of them cried, and Mrs. Fisher especially maintained a look of steely detachment.

“What did the old man want to talk to you about?”

“He paid me for the limo. Cash. You should have seen the roll.”

“Must be nice.”

A female relative of the Fishers started sobbing loudly in the front of the room.

“I hate this part,” Jim muttered. “It’s so final.”

I wished Rochelle was there. Her presence could have provided a softening counterpoint to my insistence on punctuality and order. Was she avoiding me?

“Well,” I said. “I think it’s time to do it.”

I moved toward the Fisher family, my shoes quieted by the soft carpet. I went up to Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, and they acted surprised to see me there at all.

“We need to get going to the church,” I said in a low voice. “If people want to take a last moment with Tyler then move on out to the lobby.”

Everyone took just a couple of moments over the casket with their own private thoughts. Jim and I left the room as well, and when the mourners were finished at the casket, they filed past us into the front room, heads down, kleenex and handkerchiefs pressed to their faces.

I did a quick scan of the room and still no sign of Rochelle. I suppose I wouldn’t have been surprised if she and Todd had both taken off and left Jim and I to our own devices. The
pictures probably made her uncomfortable with me and perhaps with the entire Fisher funeral party.

But I didn’t have time to dwell on such matters. The Fishers themselves emerged from the viewing room. Mr. Fisher supported Mrs. Fisher, her mask of steely resolve crumbled into tears. They were swallowed up by their relatives. Jim nodded to me, and we moved into the viewing room and pulled the doors shut behind us, leaving the family outside. We cut ourselves off from the sobs and the snifflings, and the room felt suddenly cool and quiet.

Jim went to the side door and opened it. This door opened to the porte cochere on the side of the house where Todd and Rochelle should have placed the hearse and the other vehicles we would be using in the procession. When Tyler’s casket was closed and resealed, we would reopen the doors of the viewing room to the family, and they would be able to come back in so that the pallbearers could deliver Tyler to the hearse. It was no wonder that at this point in the process I often felt like a magician or a funhouse operator, opening different doors, controlling the flow of the mourners, distracting them with complimentary beverages and soothing words. They were allowed to move on to the next stage of the day only when I said so, only when everything was perfectly prepared. And there were never, ever to be anything so surprising as an intimate encounter with death.

Jim swung open the double side doors, and true to their mission, Rochelle and Todd stood outside in the morning sun, the hearse and the two additional cars parked in exactly the right place. Jim gave them a little salute which Todd returned. Rochelle wore a pair of large sunglasses which covered half of her face.

I stepped over to Tyler’s casket. I raised my right hand to the open lid but didn’t pull it down right away; instead I took my own last look at Tyler’s lifeless body. The professional voice
in my head, which guided me through all things funereal, told me that I had no right to take this extra moment over Tyler’s body, that it wasn’t my place to pause for an extra moment of grief. I had even told Jim just a short time earlier that my fondest wish was to see Tyler’s burial and the completion of my obligations to the Fishers and their extended family. But I didn’t really feel that way. I had found Tyler’s funeral to be one of the most invigorating experiences of my professional life, a series of events that I wouldn’t soon forget, and I really didn’t feel prepared to let it all go without first taking a moment to completely understand what had happened. I too felt entitled to one last moment alone with the baby just as his parents and grandparents had been given one last chance to hold him and say good-bye. My left hand came up slowly and moved toward Tyler, intending to give a last caress to his face.

“Everything okay, Doc?”

I didn’t turn to face Jim. “Fine.”

“You forget the key?” he asked.

He was referring to the casket key, an oversized Allen wrench with a large handle for leverage. We used it to seal the gasket that would supposedly keep Tyler dry and clean throughout eternity. I used my left hand to check my left pants pocket.

“It’s right here.”

Jim came up next to me and looked down into the casket. “We don’t want to keep the family waiting,” he said. “And the people at the church.”

“You’re right.”

Jim helped me lift the satin liner into the casket, making sure not to cover Tyler’s face. It always struck me as odd that we did it this way; we both knew that no one was ever going to see
his face again, and there was nothing he was going to be looking at or smelling. Yet we insisted on keeping the face exposed. I brought the lid down over Tyler’s body and into place.

“You want me to seal it?” He held his hand out for the key.

“I’ve got it,” I said. “I know we need to get moving.”

“We do.”

He looked over my shoulder through the open doors to the waiting hearse. I didn’t turn because I didn’t want to see whatever questioning looks Jim received back from Rochelle and Todd. I took the casket key and inserted it into the lock. The handle was bigger than the handle on a standard Allen wrench, and it allowed me to gain quite a bit of leverage. The strength had been steadily decreasing in my hands over the years, and it took me longer than usual to crank the bolt into place. When I stood up, there was a dull ache in my knuckles, and I was just a bit winded.

“There. It’s done.” I slid the key back into my pocket. “And we really don’t need to worry too much about time. There are two times in life when other people can’t start without you. Your wedding and your funeral.”

Jim gave me a questioning look. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Never better.” I forced a smile. “Really. We don’t want to keep these kids away from their summer fun.” I pointed back toward the door where Rochelle and Todd waited.

Jim turned on his heel and went to let the mourners back into the viewing room.
To my great surprise and immense relief, the vehicles performed flawlessly during the course of the Fisher funeral. Not one of them broke down on the side of the road or suffered a flat tire, and the air-conditioning performed well enough to keep everyone happy. Even the elder Mr. Fisher disembarked at the church looking as proud as a peacock in a roomful of sparrows.

There was little for the four of us to do once we arrived at the church, an aging red-brick structure on the south side of Dove Point’s downtown. Jim and I guided the pallbearers to the back of the church and gently prodded them in the right direction when the service was about to start. As a good business practice, I usually lingered in the back of the church with Jim, pretending to pay attention to the minister’s words. Jim, a Catholic to the core, crossed himself repeatedly even though we were in First Presbyterian.

But I quickly ran out of patience with the dark, closed-in atmosphere of the church and the minister’s platitudes about young lives being snuffed out before they got a chance to start. Rochelle was the young life on my mind, and I whispered to Jim that I needed to get some air. He nodded, his attention absorbed by the ceremony. I slipped out the back door as discreetly as I could.

Rochelle and Todd had chosen to wait outside during the service and were sitting next to each other underneath a tree on the side of the church, their heads dipped so close that they almost touched. Todd laughed about something, his hands making an exaggerated, swirling gesture in the air, and Rochelle nodded encouragement to him. She had her sunglasses pushed back on top of her head, and a cigarette burned in her right hand. When they saw me approaching, they stopped laughing and talking and became attentive, as if I was the teacher returning to the classroom.

“All right team,” I said.
Todd stood up, brushing pine needles from the seat of his pants. “Are we ready to go?”

“Almost.”

Rochelle stood up too, taking a last drag from her cigarette. She ground the butt under her shoe and let out a long plume of smoke. Apparently something had transpired between us so that she no longer worried about her uncle knowing that she smoked.

“Is it okay that I didn’t go into the church?” Todd asked. “I just don’t enjoy church much anymore.”

“Me either,” I said. “You can do me a favor though.”

“Sure.” He was all eagerness now, the courting boyfriend willing to jump through any hoop in order to impress his girl’s family, even if it meant spending a summer morning in the company of the dead.

“Why don’t you go into the back of the church and help Jim. Just follow his lead.”

“Okay.” He gave his pants another good brushing. “Are you sure?”

“There’s nothing to it.”

He looked at Rochelle. “See you in a bit.”

“This is a moment in history,” she said. “Uncle Jack normally likes to do everything himself.”

Todd blushed from the compliment and walked off toward the church. He took a few more swipes at his pants before he went inside.

I didn’t look at Rochelle. “He seems like a nice kid.”

“He is,” she said, her voice non-committal.

“Is it serious?” I asked.
She let out a short laugh of disbelief. “You’re full of surprises today. Are you working for my parents? You never ask me questions like that.”

I shrugged. “Just making conversation.”

“No, we’re not serious. We don’t want the same things out of life. He’ll probably never leave Dove Point.”

“Some of us aren’t meant to.”

“I’m sorry, Uncle Jack. There’s nothing wrong with staying in Dove Point. My parents are the same way. It’s just that I want to get away and see the world a little bit.”

“I don’t blame you. Dove Point isn’t the same place it was when I was growing up. It used to be a more vigorous place...” I stopped myself. Rochelle’s eyes had glazed over. More than likely she had heard this same speech from her parents and her teachers more times than she cared to count. She didn’t need me to add another layer to the tired tale.

A light breeze moved the pine branches over our heads. The morning was warm but not unpleasant, containing just a suggestion of the more intense heat that would come in the afternoon.

“I’m sorry if I sprung that picture thing on you out of the blue,” I said. “I just wanted someone else to know.”

Rochelle shifted her brown eyes to the left, using them to study and appraise me. She looked like someone trying to decide whether or not she should jump off a high place or just turn around and walk away on solid ground.

“You seemed to want me to have a certain reaction to those pictures,” she said. Her words were carefully chosen, but more than anything, Rochelle sounded curious, as if she was trying a theory out and wanted to know how it came off in the light of day. “It was like you were
testing me. It’s always that way with you. Or that time when I was little, and you showed me that old woman’s body in the middle of the night.” She paused. “You tell me these things—even your little speech about Dove Point—and then if I don’t react just the way you want, you seem angry.”

“I’m not sure anger is the right word. I want people to think the same way about things that I do because I think I’m right. It’s disappointing to me that no one else sees things the way I do.”

“You do seem angry about it,” she said. “You should know that.”

I looked back at the door of the church. No movement yet. We were done with everything that ran on any kind of a schedule. It didn’t really matter what time we arrived at the cemetery; the gravediggers would be there all day, getting paid by the hour, but the cost to the Fishers was a flat rate for the burial and the graveside service. The long-windedness of our minister allowed Rochelle and I to talk longer than I had anticipated.

“You never told me what you really thought of the pictures. Do you think I’m doing something wrong?”

She took a deep breath, and her shoulders sagged a little. “I don’t think you’re doing anything wrong if they wanted you to take the pictures.” She widened her eyes. “They did want you to take the pictures, didn’t they?”

“Of course. They’re in them.”

She nodded. “There’s nothing wrong about it.”

When she spoke, I felt a wave of relief pass over me, as if someone had lifted twenty pound weights off of my shoulders. I hadn’t been aware of it, but I had been anticipating her judgment on the pictures all morning, like a condemned man who knows all too well that the governor has his phone number but still might not use it.
“You seemed so....disturbed this morning. I didn’t know what to think. But you understand what I’m trying to do. It’s something more permanent for them, something they can take with them and keep. It’s not perfect, but it’s a different kind of preservation, maybe even better than the kind I can do.” I was off. Rochelle had released me. The words tumbled out of me. “I thought I could get some books on photography, maybe take a class. No one would think anything of it. People always take photography classes.”

“And you’re just going to do this for everybody who comes through your door?” she asked.

“Anyone who wants,” I said. “It’ll be another service for them, another part of the package if they want it. This could be my thing, the difference that keeps the business going as well as helping people.”

“How is this going to help people?” She put her hand on my arm and spoke to me in measured cadences, the kind reserved for scared or confused children. “Maybe that’s what disturbed me, as you say. Your determination that this is the key, that this will make everything okay for people. You can’t expect everyone to feel the way you do.”

“The Fishers do.”

“They do?”

I confessed the truth. “Mrs. Fisher seems to.”

“She still lost her son. If you had a picture of Aunt Ellie would that make it any easier on you.”

I looked away. “It wouldn’t make it any harder.”

Rochelle moved her head in order to see around me. “They’re coming out of the church,” she said.
I turned and looked. A trickle of mourners leaked out onto the church steps, meaning that
Jim and Todd would be leading the pallbearers in just a few moments. We had to get to the cars
and get them started for the last leg of the journey.

I looked back to Rochelle. She released my arm.

“I have to try something,” I said. She gave me a pitying frown. “Don’t look at me like
that, like I’m the poster boy of lost and hopeless causes.”

“It’s not that,” she said, not very convincingly. “I hope you get what you want.”

“Me too.” I reached out and took her hand, our fingers intertwining. I felt the sweat from
my palm rub against her skin. It was the first time I had touched her in that way since she was a
child, and a charge, something like electricity, travelled up my arm and into the rest of my body.
I hadn’t felt a touch like that since before Eloise died, but the sensation was unmistakable, like a
smell that triggers a childhood memory or the feelings stirred by a favorite song. I wished it
could last but more pressing matters called for my attention.

“C’mon.” I let go of her hand. “We still have some work left today.”
I disliked everything about the new, modern section of Blue Pines. I disliked its perfectly manicured lawn, its pristine, endlessly bubbling fountain, its flat grave plaques that couldn’t be seen from the road. I couldn’t stand that they had taken to calling it a “Memorial Park and Remembrance Garden” as if there weren’t a single body buried on the premises, and people just came here to gather their thoughts and stare at the pretty flowers as if they were on a retreat.

I understood the concept of course. Blue Pines existed as a business, a money-making venture, and they prospered by passing savings along to the customer. Cutting the grass was a lot easier if every gravestone was flat and pressed into the ground. The headstone cost less because they all looked the same with the same basic inscription--the person’s date of birth and date of death. And everyone felt good about depositing their loved ones in Blue Pines because it was such a clean, open space, the kind of place where death is pushed to the side and rarely thought about. It was the fast-food version of death: fast, convenient, cheap. Five minutes after leaving the service, everyone can forget they were ever there. People zipped by on Highway Seventeen all day long, going to and from work, taking the kids to and from school, and never once did they have to think about the legions of the dead buried just beyond the berm that separated Blue Pines from the rest of the world. They didn’t even bother with a fence.

I thought these things every time I came near Blue Pines, and I thought them again as our procession turned into their driveway and wound its way to Tyler’s final resting place and the site of our brief, graveside service. I led the way in the hearse, followed by Todd, Rochelle and the Fishers in the Lincoln and Jim in the limo with the grandparents, and then a stream of cars.
and vans, the friends and family of the Fishers who wanted to see everything through to the end. The cemetery had provided me with the location of Tyler’s grave, and I navigated through the numbered and lettered streets of the “Memorial Park,” turning east and then north until I saw the green canvas tent and folding chairs, the pile of newly dug earth obscured by a silly astroturf blanket. I’m not sure what the owners of Blue Pines thought people were going to think when they saw that astroturf covered lump next to the grave. I imagined some executive somewhere passing on a memo or an e-mail, something that decreed the covering of all excavated earth with a green blanket in order to further sanitize the burial process, as if they could convince people that in the midst of this flat, monochromatic landscape, a hill suddenly appeared one day only to disappear the next.

The old section of Blue Pines, the section where my parents and brother and Eloise were buried, was a different story entirely. It sat half a mile away, adjacent to the new section but accessible only through a different entrance. The roads from the old section didn’t connect through to the roads in the new section, and generally the management of Blue Pines treated the old section like the crazy aunt in the attic, something that was there and that everyone knew existed, but nobody really liked to acknowledge. For my part, I loved the old section of Blue Pines, its rows of uneven, oddly shaped headstones, its stone angels and sorrowful Christs, its weatherbeaten mausoleums with rusting gates, its weeds and trees and overwhelming sense of loss and gloom. The old section played decaying, character-rich old town to the new section’s overplanned suburb, and in this one case at least, I considered myself a city boy through and through. It was everything a cemetery should be, and someday I too would make my home there

We eased to a stop at our predetermined spot, and the rest of the cars parked on either side of the narrow road. There were many things about my profession that I knew to be
superfluous, but the graveside service wasn’t one of them. If everything was up to me, I would require the entire service to be performed at the graveside so that the mourners could stand over that open hole in the ground and spend a good deal of time contemplating its meaning, both for the deceased as well as themselves. Almost every funeral today still performed some type of service at the cemetery, and Blue Pines was no different than cemeteries around the country that provided a small, nondescript, non-denominational chapel on the premises to host that service. It cost more money to go all the way to the graveside, and I for one applauded the Fishers for choosing to go that route. Even Blue Pines, for all their attempts at sanitation, hadn’t developed a way to conceal that hole in the ground during the graveside service.

Car doors slammed around us, and feet scuffled across the road. I was out of the hearse as fast I could go and moved to the back to open the door. The sun was bright and nearly overhead, and it reflected off of the smoked glass and chrome of the vehicles. By now, the pallbearers knew the drill well, and they assembled at the back of the hearse like military cadets awaiting their marching orders. The Fishers exited the Lincoln, and rather than move together to the graveside, Mrs. Fisher broke off and headed in my direction, the look of determination back on her face.

“Mr. Hoskins?” she said. “I’d like to speak to you after the service.”

She didn’t allow me a response. She went back to her husband and took his hand, then joined her parents in moving to their seats underneath the canopy. The rest of their relatives fanned out in a rough circle around the grave, heads bowed out of respect and as a defense against the summer sun. Normally I would have helped Jim slide the casket out and pass it off to the pallbearers, but Tyler’s casket was so small that Jim handled it by himself. In fact, once the pallbearers had carried Tyler to the bier over the top of his grave, I stepped back to watch and
listen, and a wave of exhaustion passed over me. The sun beat against the back of my neck, sweat trickled under my shirt, and I stifled a yawn that seemed determined to break out. I always felt a certain detachment at the end of the graveside service. I recognized that the family would be going on to some kind of reception at somebody’s house, and then for weeks and months afterward, they would be grieving together while I went on about my own business. My part in the process had come to an end while the family’s grief would go on forever.

Rochelle and Todd stood close to each other near the back of the crowd, their elbows almost touching. While the minister went on once again longer than he needed to, keeping us all out in the hot sun, the sensation of my hand clasping with Rochelle’s came back to me. I hesitate to overstate things too much, but it would be fair to say that some kind of transference occurred when I took her hand outside the church, and that transfer of energy coupled with our conversation made me feel more purposeful and determined than I had in many years. Rochelle’s words and touch released me to pursue what I thought of as my higher purpose, my reason for existing in the community and in my profession. When Eloise was alive, I wanted to her to play that role for me, but she could never look beyond the day to day realities of having to balance the budget and put food on the table. I knew that Rochelle didn’t have to think about those things, that her youth and distance from me allowed her the kind of freedom to cheerlead that Eloise never had.

Todd leaned close to Rochelle’s ear and whispered something. Rochelle shook her head and smiled faintly. When I looked back over the rest of the crowd, I locked eyes with Mrs. Fisher. I nodded to her, and she looked away. Then her husband caught my eye. The preacher chose that moment to wrap up his service, although I suspected he’d still be buttonholing people in the buffet line during the post-burial reception.
It was my cue, and I stepped forward and delivered the real last words of Tyler’s funeral.

“That concludes our services today. The interment will be taken care of by the cemetery staff. Thank you.”

My words broke the spell. Postures relaxed, and people immediately began moving back toward their cars. A few went in the direction of the Fishers, but most probably planned to see them back at somebody’s house and the need to say any final, emotional good-bye was delayed for another hour or so. Jim clapped his hand on my shoulder and left it there while we walked over to talk to Rochelle and Todd.

“Nice work you two,” Jim said. “Really. You did good.”

“Thanks,” Todd said. He shuffled his feet a little, full of awshucks charm. I had to admit that I liked the kid. His sincerity, while somewhat forced, still managed to register with me. Who didn’t like to be flattered? “I didn’t do much.”

Jim tightened his grip on my shoulder until I thought he wanted to draw blood. “Well, you’ve got an old pro leading the way here. The best in the business.” I suspected that he was relieved more than anything else, relieved that the cars ran, relieved that Rochelle and Todd saw things through, relieved that he didn’t have to play psychological nursemaid to me.

“If I ever have any money, remind me to give you a bonus,” I told him. I saw the Fishers making their way to the cars. They were the last two to leave the gravesite, their parents walking on ahead of them. “Why don’t you all head back. I have to talk to the Fishers for a bit.”

“I’ll take care of things at home,” Jim said.

We went our separate ways. When the Fishers and I came close to each other, Mr. Fisher let go of his wife’s arm and walked on, leaving the two of us alone.
Mrs. Fisher still held the crumpled kleenex in her right fist. The edges of her nostrils were red and sore-looking, and the stress of the last few days had removed all color from her face. She needed to sleep for about a week straight, maybe more.

“Is there something else I can do for you?” I asked.

“No.” She took a swipe at her nose. “We’ve bothered you enough I think.”

Mr. Fisher stood against the side of a minivan, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Do you need a ride someplace? We can take any of you.”

“We have friends to take us all. Thanks. But I did want to invite you back to our house. There’s a lot of food. Jason said not to bother you, but I thought it would be rude not to invite you and your workers along.”

“No one’s ever invited me back to their house before.”

“Really?”

“Most people don’t like to socialize with the undertaker. Everyone’s ready to leave my world behind at this point.”

Mrs. Fisher looked in the direction of her husband. I got the feeling that their marriage wasn’t going to make it through this one, that like Rochelle and Dove Point, Mrs. Fisher had bigger plans than her husband.

“They say you don’t ever get over losing a child,” she said.

“You’re young...” I didn’t finish the thought, but Mrs. Fisher knew what I meant. She had probably been told the same thing by countless well-meaning friends and relatives.

“I’m not going to have another one. Jason already wants to try, but I told him no. I’m not going through this again.” She looked up at me. “Maybe you were smart not to have children. Maybe that’s the way to go.”
I shook my head. “I don’t have all the answers.”

“I’m sorry. I hope my saying that didn’t offend you.”

“No, it didn’t. I lied and told your husband’s stepfather that my niece was my daughter. Maybe that says something about me.” She got a funny look on her face. I shrugged. “I have the feeling you have a great future ahead of you.”

She looked in her husband’s direction again. “Yeah,” she said. “I guess I better get going to it.” I held out my hand and we shook. “I guess maybe I’ll see you.”

“Not if you’re lucky.”

She tried to smile. “I meant in the grocery store or something.”

“Maybe you will. I think I’m going to be out and about more in the coming days.”

“If you change your mind about coming over, please do.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you for helping us. Thank you for listening to what I had to say.” She began knotting the tissue again, transforming it slowly into tatters and fuzz. “You’re about the only person who did. It made a difference.”

Without saying anything else, she stepped off toward the cars, her shoes making brief indentations in the grass. Her husband took her by the hand and guided her into the back of the waiting minivan, then he climbed in behind her. He pulled the door shut without offering me so much as a wave good-bye.
Chapter Thirteen

I made it out to Blue Pines on my own every two weeks or so, and when I had a job there, and time allowed, I never failed to stop by the graves of my parents, my brother and Eloise. My car was the last to leave Tyler’s gravesite, and rather than go home, I turned left on highway seventeen, drove half a mile and then made another left into the entrance to the old section of the cemetery. I had made the trip so many times that I didn’t need a map to find my way through the winding roads to where my family was buried.

The cemetery dated back to the beginning of the century and was meant to replace Oakwood, Dove Point’s first large public cemetery. Even though my parents had been dead close to forty years, they were far from being Blue Pine’s oldest tenants. Both sets of my grandparents as well as countless aunts, uncles and cousins of mine were also buried in the cemetery, the birth dates on their headstones going well back into the last century. My parents owned a four-person family plot not far from the road in the southwest corner of the cemetery. There was no tree coverage where they were buried, but it was a good spot, easy to reach, sunny, and insulated from the noise of the highway.

I parked on the side of the road, the wheels on the passenger side of the hearse resting in the grass. I climbed out into the afternoon sun and decided to take my jacket off and leave it in the car. My parents purchased the all four plots when my brother died, so technically there was still a space waiting there for me, but Eloise and I purchased side by side plots early in our marriage. At some point I would have to sell the one near my parents, probably to a lifelong bachelor or elderly old maid who hadn’t thought very far in advance. Given the inflation of the
cost of burial plots, it will probably turn out to be one of the best investments I have ever owned. Real estate, always the way to go.

A single headstone with the family name prominent across the top marked the location of the family plot. Below the family name were inscribed the names of each of my parents along with their birth and death dates. To the right of the large headstone and low to the ground sat a solitary, granite block with one word chiseled on its face. Son. To my knowledge, my parents never picked a name for my brother, and if they did, they never let anyone know about it. After my parents died, I went through their personal records and found a combination birth and death certificate marking the occasion of my brother’s simultaneous entry into and departure from this world. Under the space for name it simply said “Infant Boy.” I found it hard to believe in all those months leading up to the birth, months when the baby was alive and no doubt making his presence known inside my mother’s body, that my parents didn’t make plans for their child including the discussion of possible names depending on the child’s sex. To the right of my brother’s plot was the empty space for me, one that my parents fortunately never lived to see filled during their lifetimes.

A spider had strung a web across the front of my parents’ headstone, filling the chiseled out space of some of the letters. When my parents bought the plot, it contained a provision for perpetual care, and the people at Blue Pines actually did that part of their job quite well. I think it related to our American obsession with perfectly manicured lawns and sharply trimmed hedges. Cemeteries, like suburbs, wanted to create the impression that if everything on the surface was groomed and healthy, nothing too very bad could be going on beneath. And what was going on beneath the well-manicured lawns of Blue Pines was decay. Rot. Skin drying up, organs dissolving, bones turning to dust. They could promise perpetual care for the grass and trees, and
maybe they could deliver that, but even my best work couldn’t guarantee perpetual care for the human body.

I bent down to the headstone, my knees creaking in protest, and with my right hand wiped the spiderweb from the letters of my parents’ inscription. It was about all I could do for them at this point.

I pushed myself back up and started walking further into the cemetery, back through row after row of headstones, some of them decorated with names I recognized, prominent names from Dove Point. Konrad. Haas. Brannigan. One section over, my childhood friend James Morgan rested, his head cracked by a speeding car when we were ten. I stopped by his grave sometimes on my visits to Blue Pines, and the weathering of his tombstone only made me feel older. The grass was a little brittle from the heat, and it scrunched under my shoes like plastic. I went about ten rows and bore a little to the left before I reached my destination, another headstone with my last name on it.

Eloise and I had bought our side by side plots in the early days of our marriage. Most people put off making such a purchase until much later in life, and sometimes they don’t even do it until after someone has died, but given my line of work, I felt compelled to take care of that business as soon as possible. If I was going to preach advance planning to others, what my colleagues now call “pre-need planning,” I thought it a good idea to practice it myself.

I remember the fall day not long after our marriage when we went to Blue Pines to pick out our plots. We had a map of available plots in our price range from the cemetery office, and we walked through the grounds together, our hands intertwined. A light breeze knocked the leaves off the trees so that in certain sections of the cemetery our every step was met with a crunch. We hadn’t even bought our first house, and already we were deciding on our home
through eternity. We walked to one of the empty spaces in the grass and stood side by side, checking it out from every angle. How much sun came through, how much shade. We considered the direction that we would eventually face and took into account the quality of the neighbors we would have to share the space with.

Eventually we settled on the spot. It was open and unpopulated at the time, relatively close to my family’s plot, and had one medium-sized oak tree growing about twenty feet away. Eloise, always the better planner than me, understood the significance of the tree.

“But by the time we’re using this space,” she said that day in Blue Pines, “the tree will be big enough to give us some shade.”

At that point in our lives, it was easy to measure time in glacier-like increments. We could plan our life around the length of time it would take a tree to reach maturity and make long range forecasts for owning a business. The idea of one of us being planted in the ground seemed absurd enough to laugh at despite my daily encounters with the deceased of every age. Youthful ignorance at its finest.

Eloise was buried on the left as I faced the headstone, her names and dates inscribed on that side. On the right, my name and the year of my birth with a blank space just waiting to be filled in. I would have been happy to have my name left off it entirely. If anything made me want to spend less time at Eloise’s grave, it was the sight of that blank after my birthday. Nature abhors a vacuum, and that space couldn’t stay blank for an indefinite period of time. I hated the thought that my life had just one final act to perform, one last milestone to reach. There still had to be something else left.

The tree that was meant to provide us with shade died before Eloise did. On the day of her funeral, I had trouble recognizing our plot because the tree that I had used as a landmark for
so long was gone and only a stump remained in the ground. I asked one of the landscapers about it after the service.

“It got the blight,” he told me. “Had to take it down.”

A few weeks after Eloise’s burial, before the grass had even grown back in over her grave, I came to visit and saw two workers with a tractor and a chain extracting the stump from the ground, roots and all, like a rotted tooth. Over the next few months the hole was filled in, and grass seed planted over the top. By the time a year had passed, no evidence remained to indicate that a tree had ever existed there.

I stepped forward. For the second time in a matter of minutes, and without benefit of a shade tree, I bent down to the ground and leaned in close to a headstone. I placed my hand against the smooth, flat surface after the date of my birth and rubbed my fingers across it, back and forth several times. I had done this before, and the smooth, polished surface had become a kind of talisman for me, an Aladdin’s lamp that I used to get myself closer to Eloise.

“Ellie,” I said.

I had my left hand on top of the headstone, my right still pressed against it. My knees were in the grass, supporting most of my weight.

“I’m going to do it this time,” I said. “I’m going to make it work.”

Except for perhaps Times Square and certain other big city neighborhoods, a cemetery was the only place a person could go and hold a one-sided conversation without drawing any unusual stares or inquiries concerning the state of one’s marbles. The living could feel free to speak out loud to the dead in a cemetery, at least that’s the way I had always seen it. And I wasn’t the only one. There have been many times when I have strolled through Blue Pines on an afternoon and seen someone standing or kneeling in front of a headstone, lips moving, hands
gesturing. Sometimes, I know, it was just a prayer, but other times I have to believe an entire conversation took place, one person saying to a lost loved one, “Guess what I did” or “Guess what I heard” or “Guess what has happened since you’ve been gone.” Even if people did stare or laugh, I’d do it anyway. I still heard Eloise’s voice in my head, and I could imagine exactly what she would say to me when I told her what I had to tell her.

“You’re going to be proud of me,” I said.

Be careful, she’d tell me.

“I will.”

Don’t rule out selling if a good offer comes along.

“I can’t make any promises.”

And she’d conclude with something that I heard her say many times, but which I was never certain she really meant.

If this is going to make you happy, I want it for you.

I gave the headstone a final two pats and pushed myself up. I brushed the loose grass and dirt off my knees and headed for home.
Chapter Fourteen

By the time I arrived home, my joints were aching and my body was tired. I loosened my tie during the drive and decided that I wouldn’t even pause in the kitchen to get something to eat. I’d just pull the car in and head straight upstairs for a nap. The few bits of paperwork and housekeeping that remained from Tyler’s funeral could be attended to during the evening or early the next day, whenever I felt inclined to do the work.

My intention had been to go right down the driveway and pull into the garage, but when I came close to the house, I saw two figures sitting on the front porch. At first, I thought the two people were Todd and Rochelle, choosing to spend some quality time sitting on my porch together, watching the world passing by. But the woman didn’t look anything like Rochelle. Her hair was too short, her manner too business-like. And the man was dressed in a nice, gray suit. I stopped the car at the head of the driveway and climbed out. Only as I moved up the walk, and the couple stood to greet me, did I recognize the man.

“Mr. Hoskins,” he said.

“I thought we were talking tomorrow.”

“We did say that, didn’t we?” Mr. Bosco said, his voice even more oily than usual. “We had to change our plans a little.” He nodded toward the woman with him. “I want you to meet Michelle Warndorf, one of our Vice-Presidents. I think I mentioned her to you in one of our phone calls.”

“Mr. Hoskins.” Michelle Warndorf held her hand out to me and we shook. She wore a dark jacket and matching pants over a white shirt. Her face was narrow and slightly tanned with
freckles that sprayed across the bridge of her nose and onto her cheeks. She was pretty in a natural way, and I could imagine her growing up in a small Hoosier town just like Dove Point, going off to IU to study Business and working her way up the Barr Company ladder with no plans to stop anytime soon. I put her age in the mid-thirties, a few years older than Mr. Bosco. “Sorry to barge in on you like this.”

“I’m just finishing a job,” I said.

“That’s great for you,” Mr. Bosco said. He had his suit coat open and didn’t wear a tie. He probably figured that this tieless look made him appear dashing and stylish, a young businessman breezing from deal to deal. He had slathered something like Crisco through his hair so that he could weather a hurricane without coming uncoiffed. “We came by today because Michelle had some free time, and she wanted to meet you. If you’re free for lunch-”

“Why don’t you call me tomorrow,” I said, reaching for the front door.

“Mr. Hoskins,” Michelle Warndorf said. “I have to fly to Dallas tomorrow. I know it’s sudden, but if we could just have a few minutes of your time.”

If it had been Mr. Bosco alone, I would have had no qualms about simply telling him to go away, but the presence of Ms. Warndorf indicated that, indeed, they were serious about making an offer on the business. Mr. Crumley himself used to say that everyone had their price, and while it was easy for me to say that I had no intention of selling and mean every word of it, I really wanted to know what Ms. Warndorf had in her briefcase for me. Call it curiosity or vanity, either one would do, but I opened the front door for the two of them.

“Why don’t we just talk about it here,” I said. “I’m not very hungry.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hoskins.”
Ms. Warndorf went in the door ahead of me, then Mr. Bosco stopped and waved me on. He tried to take the door from me.

“Go ahead,” I said.

I lead them to the sitting room and offered them seats on the same couch that had held the Fishers the other night. While they settled in, I sat on the love seat. There were still coffee and doughnuts in the kitchen, but I didn’t offer them anything. I didn’t want the Barr people to get the feeling that they were in friendly territory or that we were going to spend a lot of time making small talk. Ms. Warndorf bent down, opened her leather briefcase and brought out a small sheaf of papers. She placed them on her lap.

“As you know Mr. Hoskins, we’ve been interested in acquiring your property for a few years now. I know you’ve been talking to Lance and you’ve expressed a reluctance to sell.”

“That’s right,” I said.

She gave me a toothless smile while her eyes remained serious and cold.

“As you might expect, we’ve done some research on your business here. We think that the Crumley Funeral Home can be a profitable venture in a town the size of Dove Point. The property itself is worth a fair amount of money. If you accepted our offer, the Barr Company would continue to operate under the name of the Crumley Funeral home, and we would offer the same high level of customer service to the people of Dove Point that you have offered over the years. We would be able to eliminate the debt you’ve been carrying and also pass on lower prices to the customer.”

“Initially,” I said. “Your prices would be lower initially. But eventually you could begin to charge whatever you wanted since you’d own every funeral home in town.”
This time she spoke without the smile. “You shouldn’t concern yourself with what would happen after the sale, Mr. Hoskins. You should think about what’s best for you.”

“I wouldn’t be able to work here at all?” I asked.

Mr. Bosco cleared his throat. “We’ve found that it’s best for the previous owner to move on once the sale is complete.”

“So I’d even have to move,” I said. “Out of the residence.”

“The offer we’re prepared to make would enable you to comfortably move wherever you wanted,” Ms. Warndorf said.

Everything was moving so fast and so suddenly that I wanted to slow it down. Mr. Bosco showed up early and unannounced with a Vice-President in tow and an offer in the briefcase. They hoped I’d be so taken by what they had for me that I’d say yes on the spot, and the truth was that the strategy was working. I could feel my resolve which had been so strong just a half an hour ago beginning to weaken.

I uncrossed my legs and moved forward in my seat. “Why don’t you just leave the pertinent information with me so that I can look it over.”

Neither of them moved. Ms. Warndorf kept her eyes locked on mine.

“Like I said, Mr. Hoskins, I’m flying to Dallas today. We’re meeting there to determine which properties we’re going to purchase in our various regions. The budget is limited in each region, so if I can’t make a compelling case to my bosses, the money won’t be there. So what I’m saying, Mr. Hoskins, is that this deal is only good until I get on that plane. After that, I have to green light another property. Yours is high on our list, but we need some kind of certainty.”

“You want me to decide right now.”
“Why don’t you look this over?” She handed me the top sheet from the stack on her lap. “I know it’s kind of rushed, but you have been talking to Lance for quite a while. While I appreciate the relationship you two have developed, the time has come to decide. We can’t keep devoting time and resources to a negotiation that may never see fruition.”

I’m not sure what surprised me more: the speed with which I was expected to decide on the offer, or the revelation that what Mr. Bosco and I had could actually be judged a relationship. But I understood what was happening and why Ms. Warndorf had showed up at my door. She was the closer, the hammer, the one brought in to finish what someone else started. For months, Mr. Bosco and I had been dancing around the question of whether or not I would sell. Now, Ms. Warndorf had cut in, stepping all over Mr. Bosco’s toes, and she had just informed me that the ball ended at midnight, and the clock currently read eleven fifty-five.

The document in my hands was written in several different dialects of legalese, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to make heads or tails of it.

“Basically our offer will cover the existing debt you have on the business and the property, while simultaneously allowing you to walk away with a profit somewhere in the neighborhood of seventy-five to a hundred thousand dollars.”

I looked up from the paper in my hands. Mr. Bosco wore a smug smile, a look that told me he believed they had thrown down the highest trump card, that they had just made the offer I couldn’t refuse. Ms. Warndorf maintained her look of all-business, refusing to concede that anything extraordinary was taking place.

“Sometimes when we purchase a business,” she continued, “we allow the previous owner to maintain a small ownership for a limited number of years, and those profits serve as a small pension. We thought you’d make more money this way.”
The numbers she quoted—seventy-five to a hundred thousand—rang in my head like a brass bell. I had expected something smaller, a token profit of maybe twenty thousand or so, enough so that I could move out and set myself up in a quiet retirement. What they had actually offered guaranteed me an unexpected measure of comfort for my remaining years. Not enough to live like a king, but combined with social security, it would give me more money and comfort than I had had in the last twenty years. Financially, it was more than I could have ever hoped for, more than I really deserved considering the work I had done as a businessman over the years. Their ambush strategy worked to a tee—I was blindsided and shocked. I tried my best to match Ms. Warndorf’s air of business-like cool, but I felt my cheeks flushing, the tips of my ears turning red. I loosened my grip on the paper so that they wouldn’t see my hands shake.

“You have to understand that I’d like my accountant to look this over. I’ll need a few days.”

Ms. Warndorf nodded, but it wasn’t a nod of agreement. “Like we said,” she began, “time is the issue here. If the negotiation had moved along faster between you and Lance, then we could do that. Right now, we need an agreement in principle on the sale so that I can take that to Dallas. I think you’ll find that everything is in order there.”

I let out a deep breath. “I really don’t know what to say.”

I knew what Eloise would have said. I heard her voice in my head saying the same two words over and over again.

Take it. Take it. Take it.

“I’m surprised you’d have to think about it at all,” Mr. Bosco said. “Quite frankly, I’m surprised at how high the offer is. This will allow you to get out with your head held high.
You’ve built a nice business here, and now you can pass it on to others who have the energy and resources to make it even better.”

Ms. Warndorf’s business-like cool slipped ever so slightly while Mr. Bosco spoke. She didn’t speak or turn her head away from me, but I detected the smallest tightening of the muscles along her jawline and a quick twitch of her right eye. I suspected that Mr. Bosco had been given strict orders to be seen and not heard, but he couldn’t help himself. He and I had a relationship after all, and I couldn’t imagine he’d sit back and let his female Vice-President do all the heavy lifting.

“It’s going to be better?” I said, making it half statement, half question.

“Absolutely,” Mr. Bosco said.

Ms. Warndorf took a dramatic look at her watch. “Mr. Hoskins—”

“Have either of you ever worked in a funeral home?” I asked.

They didn’t answer.

“Have you?”

“That’s not our part of the business,” Mr. Bosco said. “We let the experts do that.”

“Excuse me, gentleman,” Ms. Warndorf said. Her voice brought our attention back to her. “None of this is really relevant to why we’re here today. We know that Mr. Hoskins runs a good business. That’s why we want to purchase it from him. We just don’t have the time to discuss every little thing under the sun.” She took the papers that remained on her lap and stuffed them back in her briefcase. Her movements had an air of finality about them. “Mr. Hoskins, we need to know now. Will you sell or not?”
Sweat had begun to form between my fingers and the paper I still held in my hands. A lawn mower went on at one of the neighbors houses, its engine grinding through the quiet afternoon.

“When I bought this place from Mr. Crumley, he only told me one thing. ‘Don’t screw it up,’ he said.” I handed the smudged paper back to Ms. Warndorf. “Thanks for coming by. I’ll show you out.”

I stood up. Ms. Warndorf showed no reaction on her face. She simply took the paper from me, added it to the contents of her briefcase and stood up. But Mr. Bosco visibly shrank. His shoulders slumped and his mouth fell open in disbelief.

“You’re telling us no?” he said.

“Lance-”

“We’re giving you more than this place is worth. Way more. You’re making out like a bandit.”

“Is that from one bandit to another?” I said.

“Lance. Mr. Hoskins doesn’t want to do business with us, and we have to respect that. We need to go anyway.”

Mr. Bosco looked like he wanted to say something else. He raised his hands, then dropped them to his lap. He stood up, and I lead them to the door. Ms. Warndorf had extracted a business card from somewhere on her body and handed it to me before she walked out.

“My flight leaves in an hour. If you reconsider, call me on my cell phone. After that...” She let her words trail off for effect. “It was a pleasure meeting you.” We shook hands again.

Mr. Bosco paused in the doorway. “You lead me to believe you’d sell. I put a lot of effort into this.”
“And your efforts prove to me that this place can still make money. If it couldn’t, you wouldn’t want it so bad.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “It will only make money for us, not for you. Your time has passed. It’s over.”

“Then I’ll have to go downstairs and embalm myself since neither of you would know how to do it.”

“Lance.” Ms. Warndorf tapped Mr. Bosco on the elbow. He didn’t say another word, but instead went past her and down the walk. “One hour before I’m on the plane, Mr. Hoskins. One hour.”

“Have a nice trip.”

I closed the door on them, shutting them out and closing myself into the cool of the house.
I fell into sleep that night like a heavy stone dropped into a murky pond, and I didn’t dream. I didn’t know how long the phone had been ringing. It took what felt like hours for me to wake myself up, and even then, I felt like I was moving through quicksand as I reached for the phone.

“Jack?” A woman’s familiar voice.

“Ellie?”


“Leslie?”

A rattling sound, like the phone dropping against linoleum.

“Leslie? What’s wrong?”

I looked at the clock. 1:35 a.m. I shook my head to clear the cobwebs of sleep away.

“Jack? It’s Bill.”

His voice sounded empty and rough, void of its usual edge of superiority.

“What happened, Bill?”

“Rochelle’s been in an accident.”

“Good God.”

My heart plummeted, and I missed a breath.

“If you could just pick her up from St. Michael’s,” Bill said. “We just came from there.”

“Pick her up...”
The full weight of what he was saying landed on me like a ton of steel. The phone almost slipped from my hand.

“If you could do that for us. We’ll talk to you later today. We have more calls to make.”

He hung up the phone, leaving me in my darkened bedroom, the red glow of the digital clock my only source of light.

Eloise died at home. It took just seven months from the time of her diagnosis to the November night when she died in our bed. I stayed up with her for three nights straight at the very end, while her mind went in and out of consciousness, and I was by her side when she breathed her last. Living and dying above the funeral home meant that I didn’t have to worry about arranging transportation from a nursing home or a hospital. Since I knew all the town officials well, I simply called the coroner’s office directly, and one of their officials came out to the house and pronounced Eloise dead, then helped me carry her down to the basement where her body would be embalmed and prepared for burial. But before I called anyone, before the official business of Eloise’s death began to swirl around me, I took the opportunity to be alone with her one last time. I moved the bedsheets aside, slipped off my shoes, and climbed into the bed next to her.

Death is ugly. The cancer had whittled away her body until it was nothing but matchsticks and skin. I slipped my arm around her and moved my body as close to hers as I could. Her body was still warm to my touch, but it possessed the unmistakable emptiness of death. Whatever had once been her substance was already gone, but I still sat there for close to
two hours, not crying or talking or doing anything that I can clearly remember, just holding her
close and wondering if I would ever be able to let go. When I finally did place the call to the
coroner, my grief became public, and I became consumed with professional duties as well as the
duties of the grieving widower. When I look back on those hours after Eloise died, I wish that I
had appreciated them more, not because those moments brought me any profound satisfaction,
but because those were the last moments that belonged to us. I would have laid there longer,
maybe forever. I would have tried to make that moment permanent in some way.

I wish I could say what my emotions were on the drive from Dove Point to St. Michael’s
hospital on the night Rochelle died. Emptiness. A hollowed out feeling like the core of my being
had been removed, like the marrow had been drained from my bones and flushed away.
Incomprehension as well, a profound wish against all logic that the whole thing had been a
mistake, that in the depths of my sleep I had dreamed the phone call, and when I arrived at Saint
Michael, they would have another good laugh over the dinosaur who runs the Crumley Funeral
Home in Dove Point.

I had dressed in a hurry and put on the same suit I had worn that day since nothing else
was clean. My hands trembled while I knotted my tie. Just before I went downstairs to the
hearse, the phone rang again. I ran to it, figuring it was Leslie or Bill again, perhaps calling to
tell me that there had been some mistake made, but when I picked up the receiver, there was no
one on the line. I heard a click then the dial tone. I replaced the receiver and waited a few
minutes, but they didn’t call back, and I went downstairs to the garage.

I didn’t go right inside when I reached the hospital. I made an extra loop around the
block, taking the extra time to gather my thoughts and make certain that my composure was what
it should be. Even though I felt as numb as a rock, I knew that I would have to face Spider, and I
didn’t want to let him get the best of me in this situation. I pulled back around to the loading
dock and concentrated on getting my equipment unloaded. I allowed myself the fleeting, false
hope that Spider had called in sick, but I knew that wasn’t likely. He wasn’t the kind of person to
get sick. Like a cockroach, he’d go on breathing and spreading misery long after the rest of us
had gone to our rest.

“Twice in one week,” he said when I entered his puny little office. “This is some kind of
record.”

I took the clipboard from him and signed my name. I didn’t say anything.

“You sell that place of yours yet?”

He tore off my copy of the release form and handed it to me. I put it in my jacket pocket.

“I’m not selling.”

Spider shook his head. His pale skin looked even more sickly under the fluorescent lights.

“You’re one of those martyr types, an uh...” He snapped his fingers in the air while he
searched for the right word. “An idealist, that’s what you are. You put principles ahead of
money.”

“Can we just do this?” I said.

“Sure.” He stood up and came around the desk, stopping right next to me. “You know
that stunt you pulled last time? You know, how you were hugging on that dead baby?”

I gritted my teeth but didn’t respond. His breath smelled like onions.

“You might want to try it again,” he said and winked. He tapped his clipboard. “This
one’s nice.”

He chuckled and pushed through the double doors, holding them open just long enough
for me to get the front end of the gurney through. The doors closed on the middle of the gurney
with a jolt, and Spider didn’t even turn around to apologize. He walked ahead of me whistling, the notes echoing off the tile and stainless steel.

“Here we are,” he said. “Number two seventy-six.”

I had stopped a few paces back, so when Spider pulled the drawer open, I couldn’t see inside.

“If only people wore their seat belts,” he said, shaking his head. “What’s the matter?”

The room became warm, and I felt dizzy. I didn’t answer him.

“You’re doing that sweating thing again,” he said. “You know something? You are the queasiest damn undertaker I’ve ever seen.”

“Will you do it for me?” I said.

“Do what?”

I nodded toward the gurney and the body bag. “This.”

“You want me to load her up for you? I don’t get paid to do that.”

My throat was dry. I tried to work up some saliva in my mouth and swallowed. “She’s my niece.”

“Your niece?”

“Yes.” I swallowed. My throat felt like it was full of broken glass. “Could you...”

I turned and went out of the room without waiting for a response. I didn’t stop until I hit the loading dock. I took deep lung fulls of air, and spots swam before my eyes. I leaned against the building for support, the brick wall rough against my palm. My equilibrium came back slowly. My heart rate slowed, and the sweat beads on my forehead began to dry. I had never had that reaction in the morgue before, not even in my earliest days of working for Mr. Crumley.
I stood out there for so long that I decided that Spider wasn’t going to help me, but just as I turned to go inside, he came out through the doors, pushing the gurney in front of him, with Rochelle’s body on top zipped into its body bag. He went past me to the ramp.

“I can take it from here,” I said.

“Forget it.”

He wheeled her all the way down to the back of the hearse and opened the back door. I followed him down, and together we lifted her into the vehicle.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You ought to see a doctor,” he said. “I bet you’ve got a heart condition.”

“My heart’s fine.”

“Well, I can’t do this shit every time you come out here. I’ve got blood pressure problems.”

I nodded my appreciation and started around for the driver’s side of the hearse.

“Is she really your niece, Jack?” Spider said.

I opened my door. “Yes, she is.”

He nodded, processing this bit of information. “Well,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you,” I said for the second time, but he was already on his way up the ramp, and I couldn’t say for certain if he had even heard me.

I had been around hospitals enough to know that there were often police officers in the emergency room late at night. They came in to take the statements of crime victims, or else they
arrived to arrest an offender who had been brought in for some sort of emergency treatment. They jawed with the nurses in the hallways and exchanged war stories with paramedics and emergency room doctors.

I felt better once I sat in the car for a few minutes. I turned the air-conditioning on high and let my body get back to its normal rhythms. Curiosity got the best of me, and I drove around to the emergency room entrance, parking the hearse away from the door and making sure that everything was locked and the privacy curtains closed in the back.

I went to the emergency room for a couple of reasons. I wanted to know what had happened to Rochelle, what exactly caused the accident and where it had occurred. Spider wouldn’t know, and I didn’t want to bother Bill and Leslie with these details in the midst of their grieving. What I needed was a police officer to give me the rundown. I needed to hear facts and logical explanations because I thought that hearing the story of Rochelle’s death in that way might make everything more believable to me.

More than anything, I didn’t want to go home yet. I knew that once I went home, I would have to begin to work. I knew that I would have to unzip that body bag and see her.

I could simply call Bill and Leslie and tell them that I couldn’t do it for them. I could even deliver the body myself to Wellington, but there was no way I could allow a piece of the Barr Company to perform this job. As much as I wished to avoid this responsibility, I also wanted to embrace it. This was important. This was what I did. At this point, it was the only thing I could do for Rochelle. If I didn’t do it, and do it right, who would?

I went through the automatic doors into the brightly lit emergency room. The tile floors were white and tracked with dirt, the walls an inoffensive gray. On one side of the room sat a young man, probably high school age, holding an ice pack over his right eye. His girlfriend sat
next to him, rubbing his arm and whispering soothing words into his ear. A harried looking mother with two children sat on the opposite side of the room. She held the younger of the two children, who must have been about three, in her lap, rocking him gently. The child looked pale, with dark circles under his eyes. I went toward the hallway that ran alongside the nurse’s station and hit pay dirt right away. A middle-aged county deputy in a crisp gray uniform stood halfway down the hall writing in a memo book. He looked to be deep in thought, perhaps remembering something important about a case, so I waited until he looked up.

“Help you?”

He had deep blue eyes and high cheekbones, with a chin strong enough to crush cinder blocks. He had the effect on me that cops always had—he immediately rendered me speechless. They always looked so busy, so efficient, so cold. They constantly gave off the impression that they were being bothered.

“Can I help you, sir?” he said with more force in his voice.

He wore the Smokey the Bear style hat that all county deputies wore, and I wondered if the county made the deputies wear the goofy hats as a way to make them seem less intimidating.

I introduced myself and told him what my job was. When I explained my relationship to Rochelle, his eyes didn’t change a bit.

“Do you know anything about that accident?” I asked. “I was hoping to find out what happened.”

“I responded to the scene,” he said.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

He paused a beat. “Single vehicle accident. One fatality.”

“Was she—was Rochelle driving?”
“I spoke to the immediate family,” he said.

“Yes, of course.” The overhead lights bored into my eyes and started to give me a headache. The cop’s spitshined leather shoes gave back a distorted reflection of myself, the head elongated and misshapen. “I’m her uncle, though. Her only uncle. I just want to know what happened. Was she driving? Was she speeding?”

“Sir? Are you feeling okay?”

The spots swam before my eyes again, and I placed my hand on the deputy’s rock solid forearm for support.

“I just don’t understand what happened.”

He guided me back to the waiting area and helped me into a chair. I felt like a small child, or worse yet, an infirm old man. The deputy walked away, leaving me alone. I sat on the edge of the chair, my head throbbing. I started to feel nauseous again, and the sight of the dirty tile floor only made me feel sicker. The footprints and wheel tracks testified to the number of people passing through there everyday.

“Drink this.”

The deputy stood in front of me again with a paper cup full of water. I took the water, my hand shaking just a bit, and drank. The water was so cold it hurt my teeth, but it brought immediate relief.

The deputy tugged on his pants legs and got down in a catcher’s crouch in front of me.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes. Thank you. I don’t normally...It’s been a long week.”

I took another long, cool drink of the water. It tasted so good that I wondered why I didn’t drink water more often.
“It was a single vehicle accident. The car missed a curve on county road 500 and struck a utility pole. Speed was likely a factor.”

“Who was driving?”

“Ms. Bradley was the driver.”

“She doesn’t have a license.”

“She also wasn’t wearing a seat belt. She died of massive internal injuries, likely a result of impact with the steering wheel. She was dead on arrival here. Probably internal bleeding.”

“Jesus.” I slumped back in the chair.

“The passenger in the vehicle refused treatment. He had his seat belt on and was just scraped up a little.”

“Todd Page?” I asked.

The cop stood up. He reached into his shirt pocket and brought out a small memo pad. He thumbed through it to the right spot.

“Yes. Mr. Todd Page of Dove Point was the passenger.”

I finished the water. I started to say something but stopped. The deputy studied me.

“Would you like more water?”

“Please.”

I had already started to feel better. The spots cleared from my eyes. When the deputy came back with another cup of water, he brought a nurse with a blood pressure cuff.

“The nurse wants to check you out,” the cop said.

“I’m fine.”

“Are you driving yourself home?” the nurse asked. She was just as tough looking as the cop, maybe more so.
“Yes.”

“We don’t need any more accidents tonight,” she said.

I dutifully slipped off my jacket and rolled up my sleeve. The cop stood by while the nurse checked my blood pressure and pulse. When she had done that, she pressed the back of her hand against my forehead.

“A little warm,” she said to the cop like I wasn’t there. “But for someone his age, the pulse and blood pressure are fine.”

She walked off, her white shoes squeaking against the tile. The cop stood over me again.

“Are you going to the morgue now?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Home. I’ve already been to the morgue.”

His face showed a flicker of surprise. “You mean...” He pointed toward the parking lot.

I stood up. “I have to get home.”

He didn’t ask me any more questions or detain me any longer, but he tailed me all the way back to Dove Point, his headlights providing me with company all the way to the end of my driveway.
Chapter Sixteen

I backed into the garage—carefully, slowly—so that unloading would be easier. My head had remained free of dizziness and splotchy vision on the drive home. The police gave me the facts, and now they could begin to sink in. Rochelle was dead, killed in a car accident. Her family, whatever I might sometimes think of them, needed me.

I pressed the switch to close the garage door and went inside. Before I brought Rochelle’s body in, I went upstairs to the kitchen and checked the answering machine. Three new messages, a surprising number. I figured there was a good chance that Bill and Leslie might call back, but I never got three calls at one time, and certainly not in the middle of the night. I checked the clock above the stove. 3:11 a.m.

I pressed play. The first caller hung up, the loud crash of the receiver indicating that they waited all the way until the recording started before hanging up. The second call came from Bill.

“Jack, um....” He took a deep breath. “You’re probably still out.” Another pause. Someone spoke in the background. “Yeah. I guess we’ll just come by tomorrow and finalize things. We were thinking we’d like to do it as soon as possible. I imagine you have the room on your schedule. Well....talk to you tomorrow. And thanks.”

The third call was another hang-up, the same as the first.

If Bill and Leslie wanted the viewing to take place as soon as possible, I would have a full day of work tomorrow. I expected them to come over early to finalize the major details. They would need to get those things out of the way before they were inundated with relatives and clergy and friends. I would call them early in the morning and offer to stop by their house.
Everything we could do here, we could just as easily do over there, and it would save them the trouble of having to make the time to leave the house.

The way I saw it, there was just one more thing I needed to do. I couldn’t leave Rochelle’s body out in the warm garage. It wasn’t secure, and it wasn’t the best environment. I took my jacket and tie off and left them sitting on the kitchen chair before I headed back down the stairs and out to the garage.

Ordinarily, I would have wheeled Rochelle into the cooler, gurney and all, and left her there overnight. Instead, I rolled her all the way into the embalming room and parked the gurney next to the embalming table. I began to think that I should go ahead and embalm her tonight. I wasn’t tired, and it might help to have that part of the job out of the way before Bill and Leslie showed up. It could help me as well. I hadn’t seen the body yet, but I now knew and understood the facts of the accident which allowed me to begin to comprehend it. People, not just young people, wrecked their cars on our county roads all the time. The roads were narrow and poorly lit, winding through acres of corn and soy bean. People miscalculated curves all the time or else failed to see stop signs at intersections, resulting in fatal accidents.

Hearing the facts from the police officer made a difference in my understanding, but I still had a way to go before my understanding would be complete. Everyone would have their own moment of clarity concerning Rochelle’s death. For her parents, it might be the first Christmas dinner without her, or the first time her birthday came around without her being there to celebrate it. For her friends, it may not occur until school resumed, and they gathered together
in a bar or the cafeteria and realized that the seat Rochelle usually occupied was now empty. These moments could go on for a long time. Even though I sat by Eloise’s side and watched her die, even though I cleaned her body and prepared it for the viewing and the burial, I still spent weeks after her death going upstairs to our apartment, expecting that she would be there waiting for me, her body returned to its healthy, pre-cancerous state. I didn’t harbor any illusions that my preparation of Rochelle’s body would confirm her death in my mind in any permanent way, but I thought it would be a key step in that direction.

I maneuvered the gurney flush against the embalming table and set the small brakes that were attached to the wheels. I knew it might not be easy for me to move her body from the gurney to the table, but I didn’t want to have to wait another day for Jim or someone to come and help me. Something inside me bristled at the idea of getting help on this job. It felt private and personal, something I had to do alone.

I started with the lower half of her body. The body bag had plastic loops sewn into its sides so that a person could get better leverage with their hands. I took the two loops at the lower end of the bag, counted to three and took a deep breath, and with one quick, decisive movement, hefted the lower half of Rochelle’s body onto the work table. Really only a third of her body had come over, and her body was now turned at a forty five degree angle to mine, but it was a pretty good start. The effort winded me a little, and my biceps felt the strain, but I went on. Some newer funeral homes, ones with all the latest equipment, had an electrical lift system for moving bodies. All it required was someone to attach a series of belts and loops to the body on the gurney, then with the flipping of a few switches, the machinery lifted the body over and down onto the embalming table, like a crane moving a large piece of building equipment.
I moved around to the head of the table where there were two more loops. The top half of a person always weighs more than the bottom, but with the same quick movement, I got her head and upper body over onto the table. Her midsection didn’t come over all the way however. The area of her hips caught a little, and if the gurney didn’t have its wheels locked into place, Rochelle’s body and body bag would have slid all the way back off the table.

I went to the open side of the embalming table, the side opposite the gurney, and reached across, gathering two large fistfuls of the body bag in my hands. Before I even pulled, I felt the strain in my back, but I gave it a good yank, and Rochelle’s body slid the rest of the way off the gurney and onto the table. I took a moment and straightened out the body bag, making sure that Rochelle’s body was lying flat.

I went around and released the brakes on the gurney and pushed it off to the side of the room. I wanted the work table clear and open and ready to be used. Only then did I stop and take a seat on my stool, allowing my tired arms to rest and wiping the sweat off my forehead with a paper towel.

For the first time it occurred to me, as I sat on my stool staring at the body bag and the faint outline of a human body contained within, that Rochelle would not be taking part in the future of my business. That thought hadn’t occurred to me when Bill and Leslie had called and broken the news to me, and it hadn’t occurred to me when the granite chinned deputy gave me his just the facts ma’am version of events. I should have understood that there was no future for Rochelle and the Crumley Funeral Home when she told me with her own voice, but I held out hope for a change of heart. It was just for myself that I clung to that hope, a silly little wish. I wanted someone to share this dream with, and now I only had myself to fall back on once again. Perhaps that’s the scariest moment of all, for anyone, to finally own up to being alone.
I tossed my sweaty paper towel into the garbage can and got up from the stool. I went to the embalming table, the bright lights above casting my shadow faintly over the body bag. With one hand, I held the top of the bag, and with the other I slowly pulled on the zipper, its metal teeth separating with a slow buzzing sound. When the zipper was down, I used both hands to part the halves of the bag, revealing Rochelle’s face and upper body.

Her face was paler than it would have been in life, and her open eyes, their deep brown color only slightly dulled, stared straight up at nothing. Her hair was back off her face and tangled behind her head.

I parted the bag a little more. She was naked. Most people came to me naked, and I clothed them for the burial. As I parted the bag I saw the real damage that the accident had done to Rochelle’s body. A deep bruise, purple and red in color, and roughly the same size and shape as a steering wheel, circled around her chest and down to her stomach. I had seen these injuries before. If the car was travelling fast enough, the force of the impact with the steering wheel could cause the rupturing of major blood vessels around the heart and lungs. More than likely, Rochelle had suffered a perforated aorta and had bled to death at the scene of the accident before anyone could do anything to help. Only surgery could save a patient at that point, and that was if the person made it to a hospital fast. There were more bruises and scrapes on her lower legs, the result of contact with the steering column or dashboard. It was summer, and she was probably wearing shorts or a skirt.

I pulled the two halves of the bag back together, leaving only her face exposed. With my right hand, I reached up and gently closed her eyelids. My hand lingered near her face. I brushed the back of my hand across her smooth cheek, the way I once touched Eloise’s face. She was
cold and getting colder. I took a loose strand of her hair and twined it between my fingers before letting it fall back, then I brushed it behind her head again.

I knew I wasn’t going to embalm her, at least not that night. I couldn’t imagine using the rough, invasive tools of my trade on her body. It didn’t seem right. Her body should know some rest, some peace, before the funeral circus began. Perhaps I could talk Bill and Leslie into not embalming her at all, and instead convince them to give her a more natural burial, the kind of thing Rochelle talked about on the first day of the Fisher funeral. She said she wanted to be cremated, which didn’t thrill me, but I did support her reluctance to be filled up with chemicals. Someone like Rochelle deserved better.

I wished I hadn’t placed her on the embalming table at all now. I couldn’t leave her on the table all night, naked and wrapped in a body bag, but the effort to move her back would be so great. I moved over and started digging through the drawers of make-up. By knowing the person well when they were alive, I was able to more accurately make that person up when they were dead. In most cases, I worked from a picture provided by the family, and as anyone knows, a picture doesn’t always capture the real essence of a person no matter how hard we try to make it right. With Rochelle, I could work from memories that were just a half a day old, a reliable enough time frame even for me.

I brought two shades of base over to the table. I applied a quarter-sized amount of the first one to Rochelle’s forehead, but that didn’t look quite right. I tried the other one next to the first and decided that it looked more natural for her skin tone and hair color. Her skin was somewhat pale to begin with, so I had to choose something subtle that wouldn’t make her look as if she had spent the last week of her life in a tanning bed. With disposable make-up sponges purchased from the drugstore, I applied an even coat to her face, making sure that my strokes
were smooth and even. When that was done, I chose a blush and added some color to her cheeks simply trying to restore the natural color that Rochelle carried there when she was alive, a healthy, youthful glow.

Her lips were pale and slightly parted. I had never seen her wear lipstick during her life, so I didn’t apply any to her that night. I didn’t really like the way that lipstick looked on a woman anyway.

I put the make-up back in the drawer and took out a hair brush. I wanted to just give her hair a few good strokes so that it looked fuller and more lifelike. When I went to brush her hair, the body bag interfered. Her head had to be propped up somehow and lifted away from the table. There was a neck brace that elevated the body’s head off the table, allowing for the washing and styling of a body’s hair. I placed my hands under Rochelle’s armpits and lifted. Her head lolled back and made contact with the table, but I continued, and with one good tug, I managed to lift her neck into place and lowered her back down to the table. I gathered her hair in my hands and pulled it free from underneath her body. It hung down off the end of the table, thick and dark and curly. I gave it a series of strokes, just working the knots out. At some point, I would have to wash it, and perhaps Bill and Leslie would pay a hairdresser from town to come in and make it look nice for the viewing. I didn’t think Rochelle would appreciate that either, since those hairdressers inevitably made the corpse look like someone on their way to senior prom rather than a real person in their everyday life.

When I was finished, I laid the brush aside and examined my work. She looked good. I lifted her hair and brought it back up onto the table so that it fanned around her face and around her shoulders, just as it would in life. I felt much better having done those things. I understood that if Bill and Leslie went against my advice and opted for an embalming, I may have to do this
work all over again in advance of the viewing, but that didn’t bother me. In some way, I probably wished for a chance to do it all over again.

I still faced the problem of having to zip her back in the bag and leave her overnight. It seemed so cold to do to someone I knew and cared about. When Eloise died, I managed to do it, but it gnawed at me the entire time. How could it feel right to leave the person I cared about most in the world in a cooler in the basement?

I stepped back from the table and went upstairs. The house was still as a locked church. I paused in the kitchen and parted the curtains. The street and yard were silent and dark. When a town like Dove Point put itself to bed for the night, it slept and slept deep. No cars, no pedestrians. Even the trees barely stirred in the moonglow that put a faint shine on their leaves.

I stepped away from the window and climbed the carpeted stairs to my apartment. I hadn’t changed a thing since Eloise died. I hadn’t re-arranged the furniture or bought new sheets or towels. I hadn’t applied a new drop of paint or a single piece of wallpaper. I knew that some of these things really did need to be done, that performing these tasks would help me move on in a way that maybe I hadn’t, but I was--obviously--a man slow to change. I went back into our bedroom. We had two closets in the room, one larger than the other. Eloise had always kept her clothes in the larger closet, and I hadn’t opened it since her funeral, when I had gone in there and removed the dress and shoes that she had already told me she wanted to be buried in.

When I opened the door to Eloise’s closet, it smelled musty and heavy. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see a flock of crow-sized moths, fattened by years of feasting on my wife’s clothes, fly out past my head. But the door had sealed things in pretty well, and except for the musty smell that tickled my sinuses, nothing appeared to be amiss.
For a moment, I stood in the open doorway, one arm resting against the closet door. Staring into that closet was like staring straight into my past. I recognized some of the dresses hanging there, and with each one of those, there were certain memories attached. I can remember Eloise wearing one of them at Christmas, or on a night we went out to eat to celebrate an anniversary. Even the simplest housecoat took me back to summer days and nights together, reading the paper or eating lunch, the kind of nothing time that we often remember the best and long for the most. I understood why I had left this closet closed for so long. I could have stood there for hours, lost in my own memories of a life that was gone. If I wasn’t careful, I would lose myself in there and never leave. Fortunately, I had work to do, and that brought me back to my present reality.

I figured Rochelle and Eloise to be about the same size. They had similar builds, and despite the difference in their ages at the time of their deaths, I expected to be able to find something of Eloise’s that would fit Rochelle. The styles might not be right, but my gesture was more for respect than fashion. I worked my way through the clothes, sliding the dresses to the left as I worked through the wardrobe. By the time I had gone through everything, I had picked a few outfits that I thought might work, and I headed back down to the basement.
I don’t know what time I fell asleep that night. My work exhausted me to the point that I didn’t even climb the stairs to my apartment. I woke up on the living room couch, my back aching and my arms feeling strained, like I’d been moving boulders up a mountain. I was cold from sleeping beneath an air-conditioning vent without benefit of a blanket or even my suit coat. I sat up, rubbing my hands together to generate warmth and get my blood moving.

Someone knocked on the front door.

It was morning. Faint sunlight came through the draperies. I checked my watch. 7:16. My body felt like it had been twisted into the shape of a question mark. My neck ached every time I moved.

The knocking again.

I tried to remember who might be coming to see me, and then it all came back with a sickening clarity. Bill and Leslie. The arrangements for Rochelle. I meant to call them first thing and offer to come to their house, and now they’d see me looking like a train wreck. I thought about going upstairs and grabbing a jacket and tie, perhaps smoothing down my hair, but they knocked again, more persistent. They knew I was here, and they needed me. I went to the front door, rubbing the bleariness out of my eyes. I gathered myself and opened the door to the morning.

“Mr. Hoskins?”

“Todd?”

He pushed past me into the house, nearly knocking me over.
“I have to see her,” he said, his words a breathless whirl. “Mr. Hoskins. I have to see her. I killed her, Mr. Hoskins. She’s dead because of me.”

While he spoke, he held one hand against his forehead as if he was in the midst of a world-class migraine. His clothes looked even more rumpled than mine, and the sour stench of liquor came off of him in waves. His hair looked tangled and twisted like he’d combed it with a knife and fork.

“Todd, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He came right to me, as if seeing me for the first time. He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed me so tight that I thought my ribs would snap.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

He was sobbing, deep heaving sobs. He buried his face against my neck, the hot water of his tears touching my skin as he sniffled and choked. I didn’t know what to do with him. I understood now who had been calling me and hanging up.

I put my hands on his back and patted him gently.

“It’s alright, Todd. It’s alright.”

“I killed her.”

“No, you didn’t. It was an accident.”

“I did. I did. Oh God.”

He had his hands clenched around my biceps, his nails digging into my skin.

“Why don’t you just sit down for a second,” I said, guiding him over to the couch. “We can talk.”
He didn’t resist my efforts to move him, and he collapsed onto the couch like a man who had been shot. His eyes were red-rimmed and wild, his face streaked with tears. When he used his shirtsleeve to wipe his nose, I handed him a box of tissues left over from Tyler’s funeral.

“I’m going to get you something to drink,” I said.

In some cases, I would have given him a shot of whiskey to ease his jangled nerves, but it seemed as though Todd had already had enough liquor for one night. I didn’t even want to think about him driving around Dove Point in his present condition.

I went out to the kitchen and saw my tie and jacket on the back of the chair. I took down a clean glass and filled it with tap water. I went into the freezer and grabbed a handful of ice cubes.

“I made her drive.”

I turned away from the freezer, and there was Todd in the kitchen doorway. He held the box of kleenex in one hand. I dropped the ice cubes into his glass and handed him the water.

“She didn’t have a license,” I said.

“I know.” He took a long drink from the water, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down twice. “Don’t you think I know that?”

“Sure. Do you want to go back to the couch?”

“She broke up with me tonight,” he said. “That’s what happened. She said we couldn’t see each other anymore. She said she wasn’t going to stay in Dove Point, she wasn’t even going to come home for summers anymore. She said she wasn’t going to be a nothing and stay in Dove Point her whole life.” He put the box of kleenex down. “I would have moved. I told her that. I would have moved.”

“Were you two serious?”
“I loved her, Mr. Hoskins. I loved her. I was serious.”

“Why don’t we go sit in the-”

“She broke up with me tonight. That’s why she was driving my car. She broke up with me, and I was so upset that I couldn’t drive. I couldn’t even drive the car. I was crying and yelling. So she drove. And we took the county roads because there are fewer cops.”

“Because of her license.”

He nodded and sniffled at the same time. “She didn’t want to get in any more trouble.”

Todd seemed to be calming just a bit. I knew I had to let him talk it out, say what he came to say, then gently guide him to the door. I’d give him a ride myself or get in touch with his parents so that he could get home okay.

“It was just an accident,” I said.

He looked up at me, a flash of anger in his eyes.

“My seat belt doesn’t work. The driver’s side seat belt doesn’t work on my car. It hasn’t for three weeks. And the car’s too old to have an air bag. I knew that. I shouldn’t have let her drive. It should have been me, I should have died.”

“You shouldn’t think that way.”

“I have to think that way.” He slammed his glass down on the counter, making a sharp thump. Water sloshed over the rim. His chest heaved as his breathing sped up, and I was afraid he might hyperventilate. “It’s my fault.”

“Okay. If that’s how you feel right now. Maybe someday you’ll see it differently.”

“She told me about the pictures you took of that baby. I want to see her and I want the pictures taken. I need it.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”
“Don’t lie to me.” He spat the words out, like he had a bad taste in his mouth. “Rochelle told me you took pictures of that dead kid with his family, and you showed them to her. She said you do weird shit like that all the time and you want her to work here and do it too.”

“Yes.” I said the word to Rochelle, not as a denial.

“Is she downstairs?”

“This probably isn’t a good time.”

“Bullshit.”

He spun around and left the kitchen. He headed right, and I followed him, moving as fast as I could. When I came out in the hallway, I saw him going through the basement door. It sounded like he took the stairs two at a time going down. I went along behind him as fast as I could, but being careful not to fall.

By the time I hit the bottom of the stairs, Todd was opening the embalming room door. I followed him in and found him standing in the middle of the room. He spun one way, then the other, his movements quick and frenzied.

“Where is she? Where?”

“You shouldn’t be down here,” I said.

“What did you do with her?”

“What makes you think she’s even here?” I said.

“Her parents.” He held his hand up, his index finger extended. “Her parents told me where the funeral was going to be.” He looked around the room again, and his eyes stopped on the cooler. “Jim showed me this stuff.” He started walking. “I know where you keep them.” He pulled the door open. I could see over his shoulder into the empty cooler. He let the door fall shut.
again and turned to face me. His voice became calm, truly puzzled. He sounded like a child.

“Where is she?”

I held my hands out to calm him.

“I’ve dealt with a lot of people in your situation. I think it best if you just wait for the funeral before you see her. You’re kind of in shock right now. Nothing makes sense.”

Todd looked at the floor. He ran his hand through his hair. “I just want to see her again.”

“I know. That’s what the funeral is for.”

He started to pace the room again. He wobbled a little as he walked, like a man with an inner ear disturbance. I watched him while he made several circuits back and forth on the embalming room floor. He held his hand to his head again, like the headache had come back to bother him.

“I can’t wait,” he finally said. “Where is she?”

He didn’t face me. He was turned to the left, his eyes fixed on the embalming table and the tools of my trade as if seeing them for the first time. He must also have seen the two dresses that once belonged to Eloise. They were draped over the counter.

“Is she in the hearse?” he asked.

“No.”

He turned his upper body toward me. I followed his eyes, and they seemed to be shadowing the movements of his brain. His eyes moved above my head, first toward the stairs, then the ceiling. He didn’t say anything, but I could tell what he was thinking. If I had been a little faster, if the years hadn’t chipped away at my ability to read and react to the physical actions of others, I would have done anything to keep him from getting past me. I would have latched onto his legs like an undersized football player and not let go until he either fell down or
gave up. Instead, Todd went past me like a shot, headed for the stairs, and for good measure, he threw his elbow into my sternum, knocking the wind out of me and sending me down onto the floor of the embalming room.

I was down on my back, gasping for air. I heard his footsteps going up the stairs and across the floor above me. By the time I was on my feet and following, I couldn’t hear his steps anymore. I climbed up to the first level and out to the living room. He wasn’t there, and I hoped that he had just gone out the front door of the house. There was a dull ache where he had hit me, and I kept my hand pressed there while I walked.

The house was silent, the sun brighter through the curtains. I breathed heavily from Todd’s blow and the exertion of the chase.

Then I heard the footsteps above me. He had gone up to my apartment. I went up the stairs, using my right hand on the banister for support. Todd yelled something I couldn’t understand. I reached the top of the stairs and looked down the hall. Todd stood in the doorway of my bedroom, his back to me. He spun around when he heard me coming.

“You.” It was all he said.

“Todd.”

“You’re…” He left the sentence unfinished. “I’m telling. I’m telling everyone.”

I grabbed his arm as he went by, but he broke out of my grip easily and went down the stairs. I heard the front door slam.

I waited a moment in the hallway. I thought about running after him, but it was too late. I never would have been able to catch up with him. He was gone, and whatever he chose to do would be done.
I looked into my bedroom and saw what Todd had seen. I saw the same old room, the old furniture, the out of date curtains. The sun came in illuminating the dust motes that swirled like tiny constellations. I saw the bed, its bedclothes folded down on the side where I slept. And I saw Rochelle, dressed in one of Eloise’s dresses, lying beneath the covers on Eloise’s side of the bed, her head propped on a pillow, her arms resting at her side, looking very much like my wife did in the early days of our marriage.
I’ve often heard it said that a small towns are reluctant to yield their secrets. Reluctant, but not unwilling. Todd left my house and went straight to the police station downtown.

I didn’t cover up anything in the house. I couldn’t have even if I had wanted to. I simply didn’t have the strength to move Rochelle’s body again. Instead, I went downstairs to the kitchen, put a pot of coffee on and waited for what would come next. I knew that I could just explain everything, from start to finish, and that the story would make a great deal of sense, and even Todd would calm down and allow things to go back to the way they were.

Two uniformed officers arrived at the house within twenty minutes of Todd’s departure. I opened the door for them, and talked to them in the living room. They were young and respectful, perhaps even a bit awed at being inside a funeral home when there wasn’t a funeral to attend. They told me that a complaint had been lodged against me, and they asked if they could look in my bedroom. I told them to look wherever they wanted. One officer stayed downstairs with me while the other went up the stairs slowly, not exactly thrilled by his assignment.

He came back down in five minutes and nodded to his partner.

“Sir,” the one who stayed with me said. “We’re placing you in custody.”

“On what charge?”

The two cops leaned close to each other and exchanged whispers. One took out a cell phone and dialed, walking down the hallway so we couldn’t hear.

“This whole thing can be explained,” I said.

“Sir. It’s best that you keep quiet right now.”
Then he read me my rights and placed handcuffs on me. I had gone my entire life without having handcuffs placed on me, but here I was in my sixty-third year experiencing one last rite of passage. He sat me down on the couch and told me to wait.

I sat there for another twenty minutes until a female, plainclothes detective arrived, along with two more squad cars and two more uniformed cops. The detective barely acknowledged me on her way past. She followed the first two cops up the stairs to survey the scene herself. I sat on the couch as still as a stone, my shackled hands resting in my lap. One officer stayed in the room with me while the other stood on the porch. No doubt the neighbors were getting quite a show from behind their curtains. I could imagine phone lines lighting up across Dove Point.

The detective came back down the stairs with the two uniformed cops in tow. I decided not to answer any more questions until I talked to an attorney.

As it turned out, there weren’t going to be any more questions asked at the house after all. Just as the detective’s feet hit the carpeted floor of the living room, voices rose out on the porch. The cops went to the door en masse, leaving me alone. If I had wanted to, I could have taken off through the basement, but I wouldn’t have gone very far with the handcuffs on.

Through the open front door, I heard the detective’s voice ordering someone back, telling people to be calm, that she understood. Then a voice I recognized. Two voices I recognized.

“What’s happening?”

“Our daughter’s in there. Please.”

“Just tell us—”

“Our daughter.”

The detective told them to go home, that everything was being sorted out.
“We’ll call you when we know anything,” she said to my in-laws. To Bill and Leslie.

“But you can’t come in here now.”

And I actually felt relief. I wouldn’t have to face them yet.

Thank God for small favors.

I spent that first day alone in a cell in the Dove Point jail. I was their only prisoner. They fed me sandwiches from the local deli and steaming styrofoam cups of coffee. They took my shoelaces and belt. I asked for a court-appointed attorney to represent me, and he didn’t show up until late that afternoon, too late for a bail hearing or an arraignment. His name was Joe Higby, and he was fresh out of law school. His suit coat looked to be two sizes too big, but he turned out to be a competent attorney. We were allowed to speak in a small, windowless room near my cell.

“Is jail time a possibility here?” I asked.

“Let’s just get the bail and arraignment out of the way first. I’m going to ask that they release you on your own recognizance, then we can talk plea with the prosecutor.”

“A plea?”

He patted me on the arm. “Tomorrow, Mr. Hoskins. Just get a good night’s sleep tonight.”

The next day, when they led me into the courtroom for my arraignment and bail hearing—my shoes and belt returned for the occasion—I received a sense of why Mr. Higby was so eager to talk about a plea. I would be willing to bet that until my arrest, Dove Point had never seen anything close to a “media event.” The courtroom was packed with spectators that morning, and
they fell into a hush when the guard led me in. I saw two television news crews--one from South Bend and one from Indianapolis, and several more people scribbling in notepads. Todd Page sat up near the front, and he glared at me as I took my seat, but otherwise, I didn’t recognize any of the other faces.

“Are my in-laws here?” I whispered to my attorney.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “They still have to make arrangements. For their daughter.”

I felt sick over that news. They would have to go to Wellington, or perhaps out of town altogether. I leaned over to my attorney again.

“Can I just plead guilty now and get this over with?”

“No,” he hissed. “Plead not guilty now. Then we talk to the prosecutor. Just do what I say and don’t improvise. In fact, don’t say anything at all. Just stand there looking contrite. Let me talk.”

He had probably seen the television cameras and understood what it could mean to his fledgling career to get this kind of face time. But I went along. I sat and looked at the tabletop while the bailiff went through his spiel about the case number and all that. The People versus John Alan Hoskins. Then they read the charges, and I nearly fell out of my chair.

“Two counts gross abuse of a corpse, one count improper disposal of a corpse, one count violation of State Health Code Section 57a, sexual abuse of a corpse.”

The last one brought a gasp from the crowd, and just like in the movies, the judge banged his gavel a few times, calling for order.

Then he looked our way for the first time. The Honorable Harry McDonald. A fellow graduate of Dove Point Community High and a regular at Domino’s.

“Counselor, how does your client plead?”
“Not guilty to all counts, Your Honor.”

I started to reach up and tug on my lawyer’s elbow, but I stopped myself. The whole event seemed somewhat scripted, and I got the feeling my lawyer knew something he wasn’t telling me. Still, I had to hear those words spoken about me in open court, in front of all those people. A matter of public record.

The prosecutor asked for bail of fifty thousand dollars. That’s when Mr. Higby did his stuff. He told the judge that I was an established and respected member of the community, that I had roots here going back four generations. He told them that I wanted to stay and clear my name in court, which made me feel a lot better. Then he told everyone that I was in debt, that I simply didn’t have the money to pay any bail.

“Even his business wouldn’t make satisfactory collateral, Your Honor. The man has nothing.”

It no longer sounded like an exaggeration.

Judge McDonald nodded. He agreed to release me on my own recognizance and set a court date for three weeks later.

Apparently, the prosecutor’s office had talked to everyone I’ve ever known. When we were kids, we used to play a game called Kill the Man. One guy got the football, and then everyone else tried to tackle him, and frequently the ball carrier ended up underneath a pile of screaming, shouting boys. Everyone piled on just for fun. That’s what my prosecution felt like.
Todd Page, of course, agreed to testify to what he saw. The flower delivery man, the one who I had encouraged to touch Tyler’s body, came forward to testify against me. Spider told the prosecution about the night I picked up Tyler’s body, and he used words like “freaked” and “bizarre” to describe my behavior on the night Rochelle died. The elder Mr. Fisher told anyone who would listen that I had lied about Rochelle being my daughter. And he let it slip to a local news crew that he thought my prices were exorbitant and meant to take advantage of grieving families. Even his son joined in the hit parade. He said he felt “pressured” and “coerced” into having photographs taken of his dead infant son, photographs that the police found when they made a thorough search of my home. He made a sympathetic figure on the evening news, and he told reporters that his wife just couldn’t talk about it at all.

“She’s very upset,” he said. “We’re trying to have another child, and the stress of this is just too much.”

Bill and Leslie stayed out of the spotlight. An attorney spoke for them in the media, and said that his clients hoped for a swift end to this matter. The Rogers and Windheim Funeral Home in Charlesburg took care of Rochelle in the end, a subsidiary of the Barr Company.

In the end, the prosecutor and the powers that be in Dove Point just wanted everything to go away as well. The coroner examined Rochelle’s body and, except for some bruising on the backs of her legs from when I carried her up the stairs, found no evidence of any “abuse.” That put to rest--at least in the eyes of the prosecutor’s office--the worst rumors that had been circulating about me, ones that I’d rather not repeat here in the interest of not giving them any more attention than they really deserve. I agreed to plead guilty to one count of improper disposal of a corpse and had to stand up in front of Judge McDonald and explain what happened that night. A court reporter took down everything I said as a matter of public record.
I told the truth. My niece meant a great deal to me, and I couldn’t stand the thought of leaving her naked and alone in the basement of a funeral home. I still had clothes that belonged to my late wife, and I dressed my niece in them. I brought her upstairs to rest in a comfortable bed. The exertion required to move her body so wore me out that when I came downstairs to make sure that the doors were locked and the alarm activated I must have fallen asleep on the couch. The judge gave me a thirty day jail term which he suspended. He placed me on five years probation. My license was revoked forever.

Public testimony deals only in facts, a circumstance that cuts both ways. As the person testifying, I appreciated being free from the need to explain the motivations behind my actions. No one wanted to psychoanalyze me or dig back into my childhood. On the other hand, facts always leave a void, and everyone in town seemed more than happy to color in the empty spaces. I know they talked about Rochelle’s resemblance to Eloise, and the kind of loneliness that only men can experience. I let them have their say, and left others to draw their own conclusions. When I walked out of the courthouse that day, I hoped to leave all of that in the past where it belonged.

Mr. Bosco called me the day the plea was announced and offered to buy me out with a profit of twenty-five thousand dollars. The Barr Company kept the name of the funeral home the same, and even used the scandal to advertise their taking possession of the business. They ran t.v. commercials with a new slogan. New Ownership. A Renewed Commitment to You.

“People have short memories,” he told me on the phone. “This is a what have you done for me lately world. The Crumley Funeral Home will bounce back.”

I accepted his offer without argument or negotiation.
In a way, Mr. Bosco proved to be right. I dodged the occasional television news person or print reporter for a few weeks after my plea was announced, and my story made the rounds of the internet and wire services, but eventually everyone went on to other things. In the end, my scandal just wasn’t big enough or sexy enough to sustain anyone’s interest.

I briefly considered taking my small profit and moving away from Dove Point. I even flirted with the idea of moving to Florida, joining the southern migration of millions of my fellow senior citizens. No one would know me there, and the sun would shine almost every day. But as I’ve already said, I’m a man reluctant to change. And what would I do with myself in a place like Florida? Fish? Play bridge? Chase wealthy widows?

When the time came for me to vacate the Crumley Funeral Home, I chose a small, one bedroom apartment in a new complex on the north end of town. It is cheap and clean, with free cable t.v, and I still live there today. Most of my neighbors are young people, new to Dove Point and fresh out of college. They either don’t recognize me from the newspapers and the television, or they just don’t care. On those few occasions when we pass in the halls or the parking lot, they nod politely and smile, granting me the kind of quiet respect that they would offer to any older man. Thankfully, they don’t extend dinner invitations to me or bake me pies. It’s a quiet life. Not the one I would have chosen, but good enough.

That’s not to say that everyone in Dove Point has such a short memory. I do receive dirty looks on my occasional trips to the grocery store. I’ve seen people cross the street to avoid walking past me on the sidewalk. I received hate mail and crank phone calls before I moved out
of the funeral home, and now I use a PO box and have an unlisted number. Someone egged the house before I moved, but I didn’t bother cleaning it up. I left the mess--along with my ping-pong table--as a housewarming present for Mr. Bosco and his friends.

It should come as no surprise that I have never heard from Bill and Leslie again. They no doubt associate me with and possibly blame me for the worst time in their lives, the death of their only child. I have made no attempt to contact them, and I never will. Some burned bridges are never rebuilt. Rumor around town has them preparing for a move themselves, possibly as far away as Arizona where Bill has a cousin and no one knows about their past. An insurance settlement from the accident, so the story goes, has set them up for life financially, although I know that they, like me, would trade every penny to have Rochelle back.

I can only wish them well.

About two months after my plea and six weeks after moving into my new apartment, someone knocked on my door. It was around nine in the evening, and I assumed it was a kid selling magazine subscriptions or else a mistake, someone looking for the apartment’s previous tenant. I ignored it.

But they continued to knock, and a familiar voice called out.


I didn’t even bother with the peephole, but undid the chains and the deadbolt.

“Jim.”

He looked sheepish standing in the faint light of the hallway. He wore a polo shirt and khaki pants and stuck out his hand. We shook.
“I didn’t know if you’d see me,” he said.

“Of course. Come in.”

I had written Jim off, truth be told. I hadn’t heard a word from him since everything became public, and I assumed that he didn’t approve of me in the worst sort of way. But he seemed friendly enough as he took a seat in my apartment and accepted the coffee I offered him.

“Nice place,” he said.

“It works for me.”

“Sure. Sure.”

He blew on his coffee.

“Well,” I said. “It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too,” he said. “You look well.” He shifted in his seat. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you or anything when all that was going on.”

I waved him off. “Don’t worry about it.” I meant it, too. I had lived in the past too long already, dwelling on things that couldn’t be changed. It was time to move on. “That’s life.”

“Yeah.”

We sipped at our coffee, and I began to get the feeling that this was more than a housewarming call.

“So to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” I asked.

He nodded a few times, then placed his coffee mug on an end table.

“You remember Terry Johnson? Guy who used to own the dry cleaner on Market Street?”

“Sure. Short guy with red hair. Used to sit behind the counter doing crosswords.”
“Right.” Jim rubbed his hands together. “His wife died today. She was a few years older than him. A smoker. She had lung cancer, then it spread.” Jim made a face that registered the unpleasantness of the whole thing. “Anyway, Terry asked me if I still talked to you.”

“How did you get my address?”

“I’ve got a buddy at the post office.” He smiled. Jim was the kind of guy with a buddy everywhere. “So, Terry wanted me to talk to you about his wife.”

I held up my hands. “I lost my license, remember?”

“I know that, Doc. We all know that.” He looked me right in the eye. “It’s just that Terry knows...what you did for those people with the baby. The Fishers. And your niece. He wants to know...” He cleared his throat. “Well, this is going to sound kind of odd...But he wants to know if you could do the same thing for him. Sort of a side job, in his home.”

Jim didn’t smile or laugh. His face reamined as serious as a banker’s.

“Didn’t he call the funeral home?”

“Not yet. He wanted me to talk to you first. He wants you to come by, do your thing, then he’ll call the funeral home for the rest.”

I didn’t doubt for a moment that if word of my involvement in any sort of funereal activities leaked out, Judge McDonald would be more than happy to enforce the thirty day jail sentence he had already suspended. I was still in the early stages of my probation. I could tell by the look on Jim’s face that he didn’t expect me to say no, and I didn’t want to disappoint, especially when duty called. In for a dime, in for a dozen. And like I said, What exactly was I going to do with myself?

“He’s offered to pay,” Jim said.

“That doesn’t matter.” I stood up. “Just give me a moment.”
I went back to the bedroom and picked out a clean shirt and jacket. While I knotted my
tie, my hands shook. It was the most excitement I had felt since....well, since those nights with
the Fishers and Rochelle.

I came back out to the living room ready to go, my mind inventorying the tasks that lay
ahead.

“We may have to stop and buy a few things,” I said.

“Terry says he has all his wife’s make-up there. You can use that.” He paused a moment.

“And he has a camera.”

I gave Jim a pat on the shoulder. “Are you driving?”

“Sure.”

We rode into town in silence. Jim and I never had a great deal to say to each other
anyway. Ours was a professional relationship, and I knew that if I needed help with the
upcoming job, he would be there for me.

The October night was warm so I rolled my window down, the better to smell the rich air,
the scent of fallen leaves and harvested earth. A season of death, and one of renewal as well. A
season of change.

I watched the familiar buildings and houses pass by as we entered the old downtown, the
familiar streets I knew like the back of my hand. Just like Rochelle, I would never leave Dove
Point. Unlike Rochelle, I never wanted to. Dove Point was still my town and always would be.
And when Terry Johnson opened his door to me that night, his eyes rubbed raw with grief, his
welcome full of gratitude, I was back in business. Not exactly what I imagined, but who really
gets everything they want in this life? In my line of work, I know that better than anybody.
I’ve helped many more Dove Point families since that night with the Johnsons. People do talk in a small town, after all. Word spreads. Sometimes it even happens discreetly.

At least so far it has.

In certain moments, I even allow myself to imagine that everyone knows, and they simply choose to let me continue my work out of recognition of its value. A person my age can still be of use to his community in ways no one could have imagined, a community that belongs to the living as well as to the dead.

THE END
UNFATHOMABLE ME:
The Privileged View of Nature in
Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*

In his book *Theory of Religion*, Georges Bataille speaks of the pull that the animal has on the human:

> The animal opens before me a depth that attracts me
> and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth:
> it is my own. It is also that which is farthest removed
> from me, that which deserves the name depth, which
> means precisely *that which is unfathomable to me*.
> (Bataille 22. Italics in original)

It is this very same pull, this drive toward the unknowable that lies at the heart of many of the works we read this quarter and is central to Ishmael’s voyage in *Moby-Dick*. Like Thoreau at Walden Pond and Susan Fenimore Cooper in *Rural Hours*, Ishmael desires a privileged, unimpeded view of the natural world and he receives this view through his encounters with first Queequeg and then later with the whales that the Pequod hunts. Another character in the novel, Pip the cabin boy, also receives a privileged view of nature when he is abandoned in the ocean during the chapter called “The Castaway,” but Pip’s encounter with nature leads to an entirely different reaction than the ones that Ishmael has. Pip does share another similarity with Ishmael
in that Pip becomes involved in a homoerotic marriage of sorts with Captain Ahab, an echo of the earlier marriage between Ishmael and Queequeg. The views of nature that Pip and Ishmael come to have stand in marked contrast to the views held by the books other major characters, especially those of Captain Ahab and to a lesser extent Starbuck and the other sailors.

Ishmael’s stated intent for his voyage is a desire for knowledge, a desire to see parts of the world that he has not seen and to experience things that he has not previously experienced. He states his desire simply enough to Captain Peleg. “I want to see the world” (Melville 71). In this exchange, Ishmael comes across as an innocent, someone setting out on a simple coming of age journey, but the narration reveals Ishmael’s larger purpose: to turn the experience of going to sea and the encounters with whales into a larger, more profound mythic journey. In this sense, the ocean becomes the place where Ishmael renews his spirit and throws off the “drizzly November in [his] soul” (Melville 18). He goes to great lengths to explain the pull that the ocean has on all of humanity. The first chapter of the book, “Loomings,” explains this pull and is Ishmael’s first attempt to turn the voyage of the Pequod into a Jungian quest for the unknowable, a shared desire for what Bataille calls the “unfathomable.” Ishmael echoes Bataille in saying that what we find in the ocean is some buried part of ourselves that we are trying to reconnect with, and he likens it to the mythical story of Narcissus staring into the water. “But that same image we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (Melville 20). At this point in “Loomings,” Ishmael does not give any specificity to this “ungraspable phantom,” but by the end of the chapter it has begun to take shape. Ishmael presumably has not seen or heard of Moby Dick at this point in the novel, but he acknowledges that before he ever set foot on the Pequod he has an image in his mind of the animal that will be the center of the ship’s quest and its ultimate destruction. “There floated into
my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air” (Melville 22). By the end of the first chapter, Ishmael has invested the sea as a whole and Moby Dick in particular a kind of mythic status as the great unknowables that draw all men to the sea. This vision of Moby Dick doesn’t just belong to Ishmael. He suggests that all of the sailors on board the Pequod share in this vision of the great white whale. “What the white whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life” (Melville 158). The encounters with Moby Dick and with nature itself become inevitable, a deep-rooted part of human nature itself. At this point in the novel, Ishmael doesn’t seem to understand this call or what it can mean to him; he is simply going along and following this very human urge to encounter nature or the other. Only as the novel progresses does Ishmael begin to see the voyage as a more transforming event, one with implications far beyond the need to simply escape a landlocked lifestyle.

The first fifth of the novel is spent on land before the Pequod ships out, and it is during this time on land that Ishmael has his first transforming encounter with the other in the person of the harpooner Queequeg. This encounter is also the first of two interracial, homoerotic marriages in the novel, the other being the marriage between Ahab and his cabin boy Pip. In his book *Hero, Captain and Stranger*, Robert K. Martin sees the Narcissus imagery as central to an understanding of Ishmael as “an image of the desire to overcome...isolation by joining self and other” (Martin 73). Queequeg represents everything that Ishmael is not in terms of race, religion, language and nationality. He is as unfathomable to Ishmael as the depths of the sea and initially Ishmael is repulsed by the prospect of sharing a room and bed with him. Ishmael can not see beyond the dark surface of Queequeg’s body; he only sees Queequeg as object and not as
subject. Queequeg is as foreign to Ishmael as an animal swimming beneath the surface of the ocean. When confronted with this inscrutability, Ishmael almost seems angered by it and wants to “demand a satisfactory answer concerning what seemed inexplicable in him” (Melville 34). Later in the novel, Ahab will express the same kind of anger when faced with the inscrutability of Moby Dick. Unlike Ahab, Ishmael is able to eventually get past what initially confounds him and see through to the real Queequeg. Robert K. Martin sees this relationship as the key to the rest of the novel because it allows Ishmael to enter into the brotherhood of the sailors on board the Pequod and “prevents Ishmael from becoming another Ahab...Ishmael faces the forbidden darkness of the unknown” (Martin 77-78). By facing this “forbidden darkness,” Ishmael transcends it. He can never look at the world the same way again, and he will not be able to look at any “other”--including nature and animals--the same way again.

This sense of connection that Ishmael feels with Queequeg, and by extension to the other sailors on the ship and then all of humanity, is best exemplified by “The Monkey Rope.” In this chapter, Ishmael and Queequeg are wedded yet again, joined by a rope as they hang over the ocean and the ravenous mouths of the feeding sharks. Ishmael, typically, takes this as an opportunity to reflect on all the ways that human beings are interconnected and interdependent:

I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals.

If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die.

(Melville 256).
Ishmael’s recognition of his interconnectedness to others, Queequeg included, stands in sharp contrast to the irresponsible outlook of Captain Ahab. Ahab is willing to sacrifice the safety and livelihood of all the men on board the ship, as well as the ship’s investors, for the sake of his pursuit of Moby Dick. Ahab sees everything and everyone as subordinate to his reckless quest. Robert K. Martin sees Ahab and Queequeg as opposites in the novel (Martin 91). He sites the two instances in which Queequeg risks his own life to save the life of another sailor who has fallen overboard, even when one of the men is “the greenhorn who has been jeering at the companionship between the two men of different races” (Martin 91). Once Ishmael is able to transcend the boundaries that exist between men of different races and backgrounds and sees himself as part of the larger interconnected human family, he is ready to take that knowledge and apply it to the animal world that he encounters during the voyage of the Pequod. His encounters with nature occur most often and most profoundly with whales.

Ishmael’s most important and most transforming encounter with whales comes during “The Grand Armada.” This chapter most clearly shows the way in which Ishmael is able to see whales as subject and not object. It is also the chapter that shows the ways in which Ishmael’s quest for knowledge and experience is intimately linked to his recognition that there is an interconnectedness between all living things, between human beings of different backgrounds as well as between humans and the natural world. In *Theory of Religion*, Bataille states that “we do not know ourselves distinctly and clearly until the day we see ourselves from the outside as another” (Bataille 31). Ishmael has already had this sort of disorienting experience with Queequeg, and come to realize in “The Monkey Rope” exactly how dependent he is on other human beings. In “The Grand Armada” Ishmael has the same sort of epiphany concerning a pod of sperm whales. When the whalemens find themselves in the calm center of a pod of whales,
they receive a privileged view down into the depths of the ocean to where the whales are nursing and breeding. Ishmael’s glimpse into the transparency of deep water brings to mind the kind of privileged glimpse into Walden Pond that Henry David Thoreau talks about in his chapter called “House-Warming”:

The first ice is especially interesting and perfect,
being hard, dark, and transparent, and affords the best opportunity that ever offers for examining the bottom where it is shallow; for you can lie at your length on ice only an inch thick...and study the bottom at your leisure, only two or three inches distant, like a picture behind a glass. (Thoreau 240)

Ishmael’s leisure to stare into the depths of the ocean comes in the midst of a whale hunt, and that fact makes his privileged view even more amazing than Thoreau’s. Thoreau has had nothing but leisure to study nature and animals, but Ishmael’s view occurs in the midst of trying to kill the very creatures that he then gets a moment to calmly observe. Ishmael sees the newborn whales and the nursing mothers and for the first time recognizes that these whales have a subjectivity, that even as he observes them, the whales are also returning the favor and observing him:

The lake, as I have hinted, was to a considerable depth exceedingly transparent...even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were a bit of Gulf-weed in their newborn sight.

Floating on their sides, the mothers also seemed
quietly eyeing us. (Melville 303)

Not only does Ishmael recognize that the whales are looking back with their own subjectivity and their own thoughts, but he also realizes that the men in the whaleboats are not necessarily the center of the whale’s attention. The consciousness of the novel becomes decentralized for a moment, and the men cease to be the center of the universe. In fact, the men recede in terms of importance so far that they become nothing but a piece of “Gulf-weed” in the eyes of the massive whales. The whales have their own social order, their own relations and their own thoughts. In her article “Melville’s Environmental Vision in Moby-Dick,” Elizabeth Schultz makes a case for the importance of “The Grand Armada” because in this chapter “Melville most fully evokes the relationship between humans and cetaceans through descriptions of their anatomy, psychology, and social behavior” (Schultz 102). Ishmael goes so far as to humanize the whales, likening the nursing habits of the whales to the nursing habits of humans:

As human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at the same time; and while yet drawing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some earthly reminiscence. (Melville 303)

Not only do the whales become humanized in this section, but Ishmael grants them the ability to have complex thoughts and complicates the notion that the sperm whale is any kind of eating machine that does nothing but violently feed. In this passage, the whales’ feeding is calm and benevolent, and the humans and the whales can exist side by side peacefully. Ishmael then takes the moment even further by comparing himself to the whales he is observing. The analogy
doesn’t run from whales to humans, but in the opposite direction as he compares his own behavior to those of whales:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle
of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the centre freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve round me,
deeep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy. (Melville 303)

A transference has occurred in which Ishmael can recognize that human behavior and cetacean behavior are not that different, and Ishmael even seems to have learned a lesson from observing the whales about how to comport himself in the midst of chaos. In this way, Ishmael exemplifies what Bataille means by seeing himself through the eyes of the other, in this case the whale. Only by so calmly and closely observing the whales, and only by recognizing their inherent subjectivity, does Ishmael come to understand himself better and understand the motives for his own behavior. The whales draw the humans toward them and fulfill that vision that Ishmael had in “Loomings” that sees “two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale” (Melville 22). Whales and humans can experience this sort of transference and can offer this sort of understanding to each other because they are so closely related and because the
whale seems to be some essential part of our human make-up. Humans carry a part of the whale imbedded within themselves.

To varying degrees the other sailors on board the Pequod stand in contrast to Ishmael’s enlightened view of whales. When Ahab announces his intention to hunt Moby Dick down at all costs, Starbuck expresses the view that most of the sailors probably adhere to: that all whales are alike and lacking in either intelligence or consciousness. “’Vengeance on a dumb brute!’ cried Starbuck, ‘that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness!’” (Melville 139). Starbuck has a job to do. He is not seeking knowledge of the watery world or even a greater understanding of himself. He is on the ocean to harvest as many whales as it is possible to harvest and in the process make his living. The whale is a tool, a means to that end. Starbuck’s views of the whale are later echoed by the ship’s surgeon on board the English whaling vessel the Samuel Enderby. Doctor Bunger explains that a whale is not capable of digesting a human arm or leg and that “what you take for the White Whale’s malice is only his awkwardness” (Melville 339). In other words, what happened to Ahab as a result of his encounter with Moby Dick had no meaning; it was simply a mistake, an attempt by the whale to scare Ahab that went wrong. Ahab refuses to see things that way, and he at least makes some aborted attempt to see a subjectivity in the whale, specifically in Moby Dick. Ahab’s view of Moby Dick falls somewhere in between the views represented by Ishmael and Starbuck. Ahab allows for the slightest possibility that Moby Dick has an intelligence, a consciousness and a subjectivity. “Sometimes I think there’s naught beyond” (Melville 140). The unspoken part of that statement is that sometimes Ahab thinks there is something at work behind Moby Dick, that the animal has an awareness of its actions. But Ahab allows his quest for revenge and his hate to get in the way of seeing Moby Dick as
anything but a malevolent agent of evil. The white whale becomes a blank screen onto which Ahab can project all the anger that he feels for the world:

He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.
That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.

(Melville 140)

Like Ishmael, Ahab recognizes that there is something unknown and unknowable about the whale, but rather than being drawn to that “inscrutable thing” in the interest of discovery, Ahab wishes to destroy it. He can not live with the unknowable; in fact, he takes the inscrutability of Moby Dick—and by extension, the natural world—as an insult. While Ishmael and Queequeg are united in marriage and become a force of unity and brotherhood, Ahab stands in opposition to them as a force of destruction. As Robert K. Martin notes, “Ahab’s end is balanced against the positive symbols of Ishmael and Queequeg...[Ahab] is destroyed by his own aggressive arm” (Martin 93). Ahab never gets beyond Moby Dick’s mask. He never sees past it in the way that Ishmael is able to in “The Grand Armada,” and the White Whale remains an object to be destroyed rather than a subject that can be understood.

One other character in the novel receives a privileged view of nature, the kind of view that Ishmael has in “The Grand Armada.” This is Pip the cabin boy, and his transparent glimpse of nature occurs during “The Castaway.” When Pip goes overboard and is abandoned by the whaleboats, he finds himself utterly alone and cut off from the other sailors, and he, like Ishmael in “The Grand Armada,” sees himself for what he truly is in the great scheme of the natural
world: the smallest insignificant speck. “But the awful lonesomeness is intolerable. The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! who can tell it?” (Melville 321). When Ishmael sees his place in the world in the proper perspective it leads to a moment of transcendence, an understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things and the close relation between the human and the animal world. Ishmael, unlike Pip, gets to have his intense, up-close experience of the natural world from the relative safety of a whaleboat with his fellow sailors--and especially his closest companion Queequeg--at his side. Ishmael has already experienced this closeness, this connectedness with another human being, and so it isn’t a great leap to then extend this intimacy to the animal world. But Pip is the lowest of the low in terms of rank on board the Pequod. He is left to face the immensity of the ocean by himself, without the buffer of a boat or any of his fellow sailors to share the experience with. An argument could be made that Pip’s experience of nature is more intense, more real than the one that Ishmael has. Before Pip’s experience is fully understood, Ishmael hints at the kind of isolation that Pip’s cowardice could lead to. “In the fishery, a coward, so called, is marked with the same ruthless detestation peculiar to military navies and armies” (Melville 321). Pip’s fellow sailors do not ostracize Pip for his lack of courage, at least that is not the reason given; rather the sailors on the Pequod believe that Pip’s abandonment in the ocean has left him mad. Pip never gives voice to what he saw when he was left in the ocean. He merely states that “‘base little Pip, he died a coward’” (Melville 366). Like so many things in the novel, it is Ishmael who interprets the experience for the reader. He tells the reader what really happened when Pip was left behind:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up,

but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to
wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. (Melville 321)

Pip saw something more primal, something closer to the moment of God’s creation than Ishmael sees when he observes the breeding and nursing whales in “The Grand Armada.” Pip’s experience in “The Castaway” might most closely resemble the experience that the sailors have when they encounter the oozing formlessness of the giant squid in the chapter called “Squid.” In “Squid,” there is a sense that the lack of a face and the lack of a defined form makes the squid an even more terrifying force than Moby Dick, and what Pip sees is nature before it has taken shape. In his book Exiled Waters, Bainard Cowan calls what happens to Pip “the consequence of direct revelation” (Cowan 158). Ishmael has the good fortune to encounter nature in an understandable shape and form; he can easily relate the behavior of the whales to human behavior. But there is nothing for Pip to relate his experience to; when he comes out of the water he isn’t even articulate enough to make sense of it. Pip finds himself in the role that Bataille assigns to the first men who ever walked the earth. “They distinguished the animal form from themselves perhaps, but not without a feeling of doubt mixed with terror and longing” (Bataille 35). Ishmael, unlike the rest of the sailors on the Pequod, recognizes that Pip’s experience in
“The Castaway” is something profound and special, a glimpse that has allowed Pip to come closer to the creator than anyone else on board the ship:

He saw God’s foot on the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.

(Melville 322)

The chapter that follows “The Castaway” is “A Squeeze of the Hand,” perhaps the novel’s greatest celebration of male bonding and community. Ishmael manages to lose himself in the company of the other sailors until he can no longer sense boundaries between himself and those around him. “I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me” (Melville 322). Ishmael’s insanity by virtue of its placement in the novel stands in contrast to Pip’s. Ishmael’s insanity is shared with his fellow sailors; it is diffused, decentralized and communal. Pip, on the other hand, experiences his alone, and his experience of nature only drives him further away from the other sailors. His privileged view of nature leads to more alienation, a subject that Bataille touches on in *Theory of Religion*:

Such a view, which plunges me into the night and dazzles me, brings me close to the moment when--

I will no longer doubt this--the distinct clarity of consciousness will move me farthest away, finally,
from that unknowable truth which, from myself
to the world, appears to me only to slip away.

(Bataille 23)

Pip’s experience of nature as pure, unadulterated subject takes him further away from his fellow sailors, but it does bring him closer to Captain Ahab, and their relationship remains intense throughout the final quarter of the novel.

When the rest of the sailors shun Pip, Ahab develops a strong interest in him, and the two develop a marriage similar to the one shared by Ishmael and Queequeg. The marriage of Ahab and Pip crosses lines of race and crosses lines established by the hierarchy of the ship. The language Ahab and Pip use to describe their relationship echoes the language used to describe the union between Ishmael and Queequeg in “The Monkey-Rope”:

‘Thou touchest my inmost centre, boy; thou art
tied to me by cords woven of my heart-strings.’

…”This seems to me, sir, as a man-rope;
something that weak souls may hold by.’

(Melville 392)

Just as Ishmael feels his heart melting in the presence of Queequeg, so Ahab feels a deep connection with Pip and--in their most overtly homoerotic exchange--Ahab invites Pip to share his cabin with him for the remainder of the voyage. “’Here, boy; Ahab’s cabin shall be Pip’s home henceforth, while Ahab lives...I do suck most wondrous philosophies from thee!’”

(Melville 392, 396). This gesture on the part of Ahab also brings to mind the “honeymoon” between Ishmael and Queequeg when Queequeg offers to share all of his money with Ishmael and the two decide to marry their fortunes together and ship out on the same whaling vessel. In
his book Exiled Waters, Bainard Cowan addresses the relationship between Pip and Ahab and argues that “Pip’s madness...answers to something deep within Ahab” (Cowan 167). When Ahab looks at or considers Moby Dick, he sees only the fury that he feels toward nature and the unknowable world. Even when Ahab looks closely into the eyes of another sailor, as he does with Starbuck, he only sees some aspect of himself reflected back. “‘I see my wife and child in thine eye’” (Melville 406). But when Ahab stares into Pip’s eyes, he sees something different. “‘I see not my reflection in the vacant pupils of thy eyes’” (Melville 392). Pip’s eyes and his experience beneath the surface of the ocean are just as unknowable and inscrutable to Ahab as any other experience of nature, but rather than react with anger towards Pip as he does with Moby Dick, Ahab reacts with tenderness and curiosity. For a moment, just a moment, the possibility exists that Ahab could find the same kind of transforming experience with Pip that Ishmael finds with Queequeg. Just before the final pursuit of Moby Dick that makes up the novel’s climax, Pip takes hold of Ahab’s hand and attempts to go along with the Captain. The emphasis on the touch of their hands calls to mind Ishmael’s experience of waking up next to Queequeg and the feeling of “the supernatural hand” that goes with Queequeg’s embrace. It also summons that ultimate shared experience in “A Squeeze of the Hand,” when Ishmael again loses himself in the touch of another. But Ahab turns Pip away, as he must if he wants to carry out the tragic arc of the novel. “‘Thou must not follow Ahab now...There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady’” (Melville 399). Cowan sees the inevitability of Ahab’s final hunt and agrees that Pip’s overture to the Captain “must finally be rejected” (Cowan 167). Ahab breaks off physical contact with Pip by releasing himself from the cabin boy’s grasp. “‘And now I quit thee. Thy hand!’” (Melville 399). Ahab’s tragic encounter with Moby Dick seems destined to occur, as if the Fates had arranged the confrontation before well before anyone on board the
Pequod had ever been born. In this way Ahab carries that unknowable phantom image of the whale within himself just as Ishmael does. “’Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act’s immutably decreed. ‘Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled’” (Melville 418). Ahab’s choice to play out his role as the tragic hero means that he can never see any other that comes into his view--whale, sailor, cabin boy--as anything but object. Ahab turns his back on the potential relationship with Pip and leaves the cabin boy to play the role of Fool to his--and the Pequod’s--tragedy:

But ere [Ahab] entered his cabin, a light,
unnatural, half-bantering, yet most piteous
sound was heard. Oh, Pip! thy wretched laugh,
thy idle but unresting eye; all thy strange
mummeries not unmeaningly blended with the
black tragedy of the melancholy ship, and
mocked it! (Melville 372)

Pip isn’t alone in questioning Ahab’s wisdom or offering the Captain a way out of his quest. Starbuck and the Captain of the Rachel also encourage Ahab to give up the hunt for Moby Dick, but Ahab does not turn back and the Pequod is destroyed leaving Ishmael as the voyage’s soul survivor, left alive to return to land and tell the tale. Ishmael, the quester after knowledge, who sees nature for what it is and recognizes his own insignificant place in her scheme, realizes how insignificant the loss of this one ship is compared to the vastness of the ocean. “The great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago” (Melville 427). In a sense, his life is once again saved by Queequeg. But in the Epilogue, Ishmael loses some of the perspective that he has in the last line of Chapter 135. “The unharming sharks, they glided by as if with padlocks
on their mouths” (Melville 427). Ishmael has slipped back into thinking that nature does care, that his place in the ocean is more significant than a piece of “Gulf-weed.” It’s possible that those “unharming sharks” have already feasted on the remains of the Pequod, and only chance allows Ishmael to survive and tell the story of *Moby-Dick*. 
Works Cited


