

❖ CHAPTER 1 ❖

*We've Got a Body*

One of the opening shots of my family's 8 mm home movies was of massive funereal flower arrangements, flowers so plentiful and so flawlessly arranged that they did not look real. The camera slowly panned over a casket in which a young woman lay in perfect stillness. I'll never forget how she looked. Her coal-black hair spread over a white satin pillow; her lips, painted a bright cherry red, contrasted brazenly with her gypsumlike skin. She looked like the Disney version of Snow White, except that her thick, black glasses revealed the era of her death to be the 1950s, the grainy film already at least ten years old. Her glasses looked out of place—why did she need them now? She didn't, but her family needed them. Their last memory of her required familiar and, therefore, comforting details. The first time I saw a close-up of her face, even with her eyes closed she looked so alive and vibrant that I asked, "Is she really dead, or were you all just fooling around?"

I have tried to remember the first time I saw a dead body. There have been many odd firsts in my life, like the first time I touched a dead person. I was too short to reach into the casket, so my father picked me up and I leaned in for that first empty, cold touch. It was thrilling because it was an unthinkable act. But I recall no first viewing because from the time I entered the world there were always dead bodies.

When I was old enough to understand what they meant, people told me they felt decidedly creepy about funeral homes. I knew a woman who always ran to the other side of the street whenever she happened upon ours. She gave a little shudder when she saw me seated in the swing on the veranda. I nodded to her and remained silent, having no need to defend my position, and anyway, sooner or later she, too . . . But I could understand how one would think it a bit unnatural to spend day after day, year after year, entertaining the grieving and caring for their dead.

It could have been a gloomy existence were it not for my father. Whenever I mentioned “undertaker” or “mortician” to people who’d never met him, I saw in their eyes what they thought. They pictured a dour man, a Uriah Heep sort who wore black, scratchy suits with dull white shirts fading to yellow. Nowadays, people raise their brows when they think of the modern undertaker, who burrows down in courses such as General Psychology and Dynamics of Grief, Mortuary Law, and Death and Human Development. These men are thought of as exploitive, nothing more than ruthless businessmen. My father would have squirmed at being compared to them. Each funeral was an opportunity to imprint his stamp, the details of which bore his personal touch. Not one strand of the corpse’s hair should go astray, not one of a family’s requests should go unheeded. A final perfected image, a memorable experience, was his unwavering goal.

He never had to work too hard at being different, he just was.

Frank Mayfield was a clotheshorse, an undertaker with flair that verged on dandyism. He thought nothing of driving miles to hunt down a better-quality suit, no easy task given that our little, rural town did not border any large metropolis.

My father allowed me to observe as he groomed his dark brown, wavy hair into a matinee-idol sweep. I sat on the sink or stood in the claw-foot bath to gain a little height and squirted the Brylcreem into his palm, but the stuff did nothing to tame the dramatic widow's peak that marked his forehead. Long, curly, black lashes accented his hazel eyes, and a prominent swath of dark eyebrows ran across his forehead. I swear he looked like a movie star.

He never struggled when dressing. His fingers and hands played with his diamond cuff links as I imagined they might have swept up jacks and a ball, nimbly and quickly. The eye-catching ties did not demand extra time or attention, but magically knotted themselves into place as if he were only there to assist. He had leaned over hundreds of men as they slept the deep sleep of death, slipping their ties under their collars and knotting the fabric one last time. His reputation depended upon the perfection of such a task.

On the last day of 1959 my father, the Beau Brummell of morticians, piled us into his green-and-white DeSoto and drove away from Lanesboro, the city in which my older brother and sister and I were born, and toward a small town on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. Though only a ninety-minute drive, it might as well have been to Alaska.

Gliding into Jubilee, our big boat of a car circled the town square and headed toward the residential section of Main Street. My father pulled over, and our five dark heads turned to face a

huge, three-story, slightly run-down house. In this old house he would finally realize his dream of owning his own funeral home.

Back in Lanesboro, I had been the first in our family to be carried as a newborn from the hospital directly into a funeral home. Birth and death in almost the same breath. My brother and sister, Thomas and Evelyn, had enjoyed living in a normal house until my father's employer forced him to move into the funeral home in Lanesboro so that he could be available at any time of the day or night.

"Well, if we're going to live in a funeral home, it might as well be one that I own," he'd said upon deciding to move.

My mother told me that the first week after our move to Jubilee, I held on to the hem of her skirts and would not let go. Where she went, I followed. "You wouldn't let me out of your sight," she said. Then I turned a corner, let go of that familiar fabric, and slowly became fascinated with the funeral home.

The front door opened into the office, a space from which traffic seemed to want to flow and not linger. My father kept it simple; he thought a plush office would appear pretentious. His hefty wooden desk nearly dwarfed what was barely a room at all. In front of the desk and against a windowed wall, several wooden folding chairs formed a row into which family members sat to make funeral arrangements. In this room the families of our town made difficult decisions, sometimes numbly asking how this event came about so quickly. "Why, just the other day Truman was mowing the lawn . . ." My father would gently steer them back to reality.

When a death occurred, an entire series of rituals shifted into gear. My father led each grieving family on a journey as they completed the necessary funeral arrangements. From the office, they first approached a large foyer. On the right, the Hammond organ

loomed in a small corner, and on the left, they walked past the large, open entry that led directly into the chapel, where their recently departed would be on view in a matter of hours. Opposite the chapel's doorway, a tall staircase flanked by a wooden banister led upstairs to our private rooms. Most people respected the boundary and resisted the temptation, but something about a nice staircase beckons.

One night while the people downstairs milled about during a visitation, I lay sprawled on my stomach upstairs leafing through a coloring book. Crayons were scattered on the carpet. I heard the familiar creak of the stairs, which I assumed was my mother making her way up for the evening. I quietly walked toward the top of the stairs, where, in a dull glow that emanated from the lights downstairs, stood a beanpole of a man wearing overalls and a suit jacket. Shocked and suddenly vulnerable in my nightgown, we stared at each other.

"Who are you?" he asked, his mouth agape.

"Who are you?" I took a step back.

Then I heard my father racing up the stairs. "Mr. Granger, the bathroom's downstairs."

"Who's that, Frank? Do you see a child?"

"Well, of course. She's one of my daughters."

"You mean you and your family live up here?"

"Yes, sir, we do. Now if you'll just step down here with me, I'll direct you to the restroom."

"I ain't never heard the likes of that, Mr. Mayfield. I'da never known if I ain't seen it with my own eyes, a family on top of a funeral parlor. I swear, I thought I seen a ghost."

That happened occasionally, when the rooms downstairs were full of people and it was hard to keep track of everyone. Beyond the staircase, the foyer narrowed into a hallway so dim that a ceiling

light burned throughout the day. To the left, a small, humble hospitality room was comfort enough for those who came to visitations and funerals. Here families and their friends paused for a hot or cold drink and murmured in low whispers. An old-fashioned snack machine stood against the wall filled with packs of Planters peanuts, Nabs crackers, and candy bars that dropped into the tray after the money rattled down. Bright red knobs protruded from the cream-colored frame, and I could almost hear the old machine asking to be touched. “Not so hard,” my father would say when I pulled with all my might.

Farther down the hall to the left was a door that always remained closed. This room pressed upon my childhood, possessing the power to scare the bejesus out of a grown man, conjuring the stuff of nightmares. This room housed the monstrous white porcelain table, the knowledge of which hastened my step when I walked past each day: the embalming room.

My father ushered family members past the embalming room where their loved one lay under a crisp white sheet, to the door facing them at the end of the hall. This was “the showroom” where they would choose the casket. One of the last choices the family made with my father took place in the casket room, my room of cold comfort, the only room downstairs spacious enough to accommodate a large array of caskets. It was, as if by design, the end of the journey. This journey from the front of the funeral home to the back, made with countless families over the years, became the rhythm of my childhood.

One of the first things my father did when we moved to Jubilee was to contact Southern Bell to make sure we had enough telephones. The telephone, which brought news of tragedy and death, was our lifeline. At that time funeral homes also operated as an emergency service. As the world’s surgeons became more

skilled, the reasons to bring doctors' patients to the hospital increased. Funeral-home ambulance service began as an outgrowth of their need to transport human bodies supine in their long hearses. When a citizen needed to go to the hospital, or just wanted a ride to the doctor's office, they called the funeral home of their choice. The telephones in our new house were sacred objects, and one could be found in almost every room downstairs and upstairs. They rang at all hours of the day and night, the volume cranked as high as it could go. Every time they rang, it sounded like a house full of alarm clocks going off. Two of them sat importantly on the corner of my father's desk. On each of the flesh-colored telephones a row of clear-plastic buttons lit up whenever we received a call. I couldn't keep my hands off them and played with the buttons when no one was looking, intrigued by how the light flashed first and the tone came afterward, like a warning strobe light—death calling, death calling. I still can never hear a phone ring without thinking that someone, somewhere, has died.

When a death call came the entire atmosphere in our home changed instantly. My father ran out to the three-car garage in the back of the property and revved up his Henney-Packard ambulance. What a piece of fast-rolling machinery. The Packard ambulance—a smaller version of our black hearse, which had the sharp, sleek lines of the later-model Cadillacs—looked like a long, fat cigar. It was known for its disturbingly named "suicide doors": the back doors were rear-hinged and susceptible to all manner of dangers. If one of them opened accidentally, the force could cause the ambulance to swerve either into oncoming traffic or onto the side of the road—and that wasn't the half of it.

"Do you remember the undertaker in Mullen County?" My father loved to tell this story, erupting in peals of laughter before

he began, which anyone listening echoed. “This undertaker, Fred Bowles was his name, picked up a patient at his home to take him to the hospital. It wasn’t an emergency; the man just needed a comfortable ride. Well, the patient’s doctor was at his house, too, and wanted a lift in the ambulance. Fred told the doctor to sit in the front, but, no, this old crank just had to sit in the back with his patient. I remember Fred said he was pretty hot under the collar about it. You know, everybody thinks they can just sit back there, go for a ride like they know what they’re doing.

“Anyway, this doctor got real hot sittin’ back there and took it upon himself to open the window on the passenger side. Well, hell, what did he do? He opened the damn door by mistake. I tell you what, that wind got ahold of that suicide door and it flew back, and it was like the wind just sucked him out and that old crank fell out of the ambulance. And you know what else? The door came swinging back and gave him a good smack before he hit the ground.” And here, my father finished between fits of laughter, “Fred wasn’t going fast, the doctor was all right, a little bruised, but he never asked if he could ride in the back again.”

Whenever my father set out to bring a body home to us, my mother became the noise police. She marched through the rooms upstairs like a sergeant major, her solid frame following her head-first walk, spreading the word to her children.

“We’ve got a body,” she clipped. “And you know what that means, so get to it!”

I sighed. Another one? A dead body in the house meant we would be sequestered. Even though many of Jubilee’s dead rested with us over the years, we were the ghosts of the house. Our family learned how to disappear with those four words: “We’ve got a body.” From the time the family of the deceased first entered the door to make arrangements until days later when the last



person left after the funeral, our family became invisible, nonexistent. We tiptoed around upstairs and whispered to each other when it was necessary to communicate. The sound of music or the television would not be heard in our house until the last mourner walked out the door. Foods that emitted strong odors were out of the question so that we wouldn't offend the bereaved with a reminder of life going on above them. The volume of the chiming phones was lowered to a softer, duller ring.

The days and evenings of visitation culminated in the funeral service. The chatter of the visitors halted, the movement of people downstairs calmed, and now, during the actual funeral service, we weren't even allowed to speak or walk upstairs. We created a hush and the house fell silent.

Funeral services were usually held in the afternoons when Thomas and Evelyn were at school. Thomas was already in junior high school and Evelyn was two years behind him at the end of a less than spectacular grade-school career. They were more occupied with new teachers and friends than the business of death. Thomas was particularly industrious and soon became familiar with Jubilee's various neighborhoods when he began a paper route. He delivered the *Nashville Tennessean*, a daily afternoon paper that occasionally reported on a few counties in Kentucky. Jubilee's newspaper came out only once a week, filled most prominently with the news of lost cows, ice-cream-supper locations, and, most important, the obituaries, which my mother proofread with a magnifying glass like Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

Kindergarten was held only in the morning and I was home by lunchtime. I was funeral-home trained from the beginning. When school closed for the summer break, Thomas and Evelyn climbed into the cloth seats of the Greyhound bus for the trip to Lanesboro, where, once there, they parted ways and visited cousins,

aunts, uncles, and grandparents. So for the first few years I bore the brunt of the daytime silences alone. When death came visiting and I was forced into silence, it felt like a lock had been turned and I was shut off from the world for a period of time, isolated from any living thing. It was difficult in the beginning, like jumping high, both feet off the ground, and trying to pause in midair. With my arms folded and my face screwed up in a stew I sat quietly, swelling with resentment and irritable that yet another person had died. But as I grew older and death continued to claim our citizens, I learned why silence was necessary: Respect. This is the word I heard consistently during my childhood. When a life fades and ends, the family deserves a quiet place to mourn. I gradually made peace with a life that demanded to be lived in quantities of silence. Resentment flickered to acceptance, and boredom fell away, replaced with a curiosity about what went on downstairs.



My mother, intolerant of noise at any time, was perfectly suited to this line of work. Childish expressions of emotion irritated her. She must have invented the phrase “If you don’t stop crying, I’ll give you something to cry about,” which she threatened whenever she spanked me.

She was the disciplinarian of the family. My parents must have agreed that her job was to relieve him of the burden of attending every scrape, fight, tug-of-war, disobedience, whine, and moan that three children were sure to muster. Although she often threatened us with “I’m going to tell your father,” he rarely stepped in.

I blamed sour-faced Bretta West for my mother’s ability to slip so easily into funeral-home mode. Bretta, my mother’s mother,