

Requiem for the Dead

I've been at Jenkins Funeral Parlour for a while now, and I'm still not used to its quirks. It's a rambling old building, the kind of grand residence I hear people talking about in terms of its 'bones', and find a little draughty. Mrs Jenkins does her best to make it feel comfortable, but her taste is a little off and the beige walls and red velvet drapes and ornate cornices do little to make it feel like a real home.

Terry Jenkins owns the business, has done since his dad prematurely passed it to him in the sixties. He's a stiff sort of fellow, looks as though he should be next in line for the coffin. But when he thinks he's alone in the sterile room with just the client on the table, he finds a rhythm most won't ever know. Terry's shoulders dance as he massages the rigor mortis from the corpse, hums the California rock songs he used to listen to when he had a full head of hair.

I think he sensed me watching him, once. He peered in my direction from behind his wire-framed glasses, but I was hidden in the cupboard and made no sound. He eventually started working again—sliding the small cups behind the client's eyes so they don't get that sunken look—but he'd stopped humming and every so often glanced my way. I think I freaked him out.

After Terry's done with the embalming and positioning, it's Claire who handles the makeup. I have no idea why Terry uses her, because you can tell from her face that she's a little heavy with the cosmetics. Not long ago she slathered so much blue eye shadow on a pointy-nosed housewife that the only fair likeness was a peacock. Her bricklayer of a husband didn't look too pleased and I don't think nervous old Terry got his full pay cheque.

In any case, I doubt Claire will be here much longer. I saw a stack of paper sticking out of her handbag and couldn't help taking a peek. Resumés. She'll be an executive assistant to

some lawyer before mid-year, and probably sleeping with him by Christmas. I took a quick look at her driver's licence while I was there and was surprised to find she's only twenty-two. Not much older than me, really. I thought she was closer to forty.

The problem is, I wasn't too careful with how I left things and now Claire knows someone went through her bag. She didn't ask anyone about it, obviously—and I sure as hell didn't say anything—but I could tell because she's been walking around the place like she thinks someone's following her ever since.

John and Darryn turned up with the wrong corpse the other day. *Corpse* isn't a fair description because the old dame was still alive, just so knocked out by her pills that she looked the part. It turns out it was her roommate they should have picked up, and it wasn't until the old bird woke on Terry's table that they realised their error. Not sure we'll get the repeat business, when the time comes.

John and Darryn are Terry's nephews. They help out with the heavy lifting, fill in as pallbearers if needed, do odd jobs and things like that. Darryn also steals from the clients, owing to his gambling problem. There was this Greek couple who died when their gas heater leaked carbon monoxide, and their relatives had placed a gold coin on each of their eyes for the viewing. I caught Darryn pocketing the lot just before he nailed the coffin lids shut. I had no idea what to do—Terry's a drinker and if he has that hazy look in his eyes he's no man to mess with—so I ducked back into the corridor and stomped around like I was just arriving. Terry stuck his head out to see who it was but I ran away, and I don't think he knew it was me.

If there was one part of the funeral business I find difficult, it's the sighing. All sorts of gases build up in dead bodies, and they have to get out somehow. Sometimes it's like the person is still alive, breathing one last creepy gasp on the table in front of you.

Terry's a professional, but there was this one time he was tired after a night out at a musical and he failed to notice some stomach bloating as he dressed the client. Usually it's not a problem because it escapes before the service anyway, but this pocket of gas lingered and the mourners were shocked to hear their dear departed patriarch letting rip with one of the loudest, stinkiest farts the world has ever heard. No-one knew how to react, but it cracked me up. Everyone looked like they had never heard laughter before.

Now, Mrs Jenkins is a wry one. I know she hasn't always been faithful to Terry but her wit all but makes up for that. When she heard the story about the fart she was in stitches. As she likes to say, she puts the *fun* in *funeral*. I heard her on the phone once to the guy at the old folks' home on Spring Street and whether it was flirting or not I don't know, but she said *I hope you don't think I'm only after you for your bodies*. I laughed. Mrs Jenkins frowned and covered up the mouthpiece while she looked around to see who was there, but I was already out of sight.

At first I thought the strange-looking man who arrived in the middle of the night must have been one of Mrs Jenkins admirers, but then Terry followed him in the front door and I quickly got the feeling things weren't right. The man looked like a priest, only he can't have been because his black shirt was shiny silk and his clerical collar was studded with rhinestones. He removed his ten-gallon hat as he crossed the threshold, laid it neatly on the hallstand, squinted into the gloom. He was the least hurried man I had ever seen.

Then he saw me, standing at the top of the stairs. His eyes were brown and kind, but they struck me with such a force I couldn't move.

Yup, I see your problem, he said, to Terry. Eyes still clamped on mine he made his way across the foyer and up the stairs, each step like a little bell ringing.

When he reached me, he said, *You shouldn't be here, y'know*. His voice had something of a southern twang.

I know. I felt my whole body begin to tingle.

Eyebrows raised in sympathy, the man gave me a look so comforting it was as though he had reached out a hand and laid it on my shoulder. But there was nothing to touch. He was the first person to have seen me in a long time, and there was a release in not being invisible any more.

None of us want to leave this place, the cowboy priest said. *But we all got to*. He reached into a leather satchel, brought out a bottle of clear liquid, splashed the air around me. Said some words I couldn't understand. The tingling that had started when he had first spoken amplified and spread through my whole body. The bells grew louder in my ears and finally I began to see the light.

Light. That is what I had been expecting, after the crash. The blinding phosphorescence of the pearly gates opening wide. But all I got was a cream room with red velvet drapes and ornate cornices, a soft hint of lavender in the air.

Plus my mum. Standing over me, looking at my stapled and glued body and the *best-I-could-do-sorry-Mr-Jenkins* makeup job, a frail hand over her trembling mouth as though her heart was about to lurch out of her throat. Then there was the arm around her shoulder, the gentle guiding away, and I couldn't help but leap up to follow her, to let her know she would never be alone.

I never did find my way back.

But now I can see the light, feel it in my being. The draw of heaven is as bright as promised, but it's more like a sunrise: a thin sliver of light on the horizon, slowly growing,

spreading across the land until it is all I can see. It is warm and relieving and all the more dazzling for the hours of darkness that come before it.

The last thing I see is the cowboy priest, down by the front hall stand, replacing his hat and looking a little ruffled. Terry's given him a roll of notes, and the priest tips his hat in thanks. He opens the door, daylight floods in, and my sunrise is complete.