

Voices

Not everyone is lucky enough to be entirely sure of their choice of occupation so early in life. Jack was convinced at a young age that he wanted to be an undertaker, a Funeral Director as they were called in his part of the country.

At age eleven his mother allowed him to attend the funeral of Uncle Clarence, the town's oldest mortician, who advised Jack from his casket that a good living could be made from sending souls down the chute to eternity. And not long after that surprising experience, Jack began visiting the cemetery on the east end of town, often stopping in the afternoon on his way home from school.

He'd continue to hang around that field of carefully mowed green grass and granite monuments even as an adult, when he had become the most successful undertaker in town, as well as an insightful and knowledgeable town historian, full of facts unlisted in the local history books, as if he had a direct pipeline to the past. Where Jack dug up all that information was a wonder to all. But not to Jack. He spoke with the dead.

"So it's a big deal when you die, huh Jack?" said Tom.

"Well, we try to make it nice for you and your family."

"Memorable, huh?"

"Well," said Jack, "not too memorable. It isn't a wedding."

"No, far from it," said Tom, and even though not a single tiny muscle in his entire body moved, Jack could clearly hear the man speak as well as the fidgeting in his voice.

"Don't be nervous, Tom," said Jack, "everyone goes through this."

"Will someone come to meet me, Jack?"

Jack had heard this question thousands of times, but he had no answer. He didn't know what happened after the final curtain. The dearly departed were clueless at this point and Jack knew that soon the departed would stop talking, exactly like a dead person. The chatter simply ended, but might resume later in a different way. Meanwhile, there was never any mention of being visited, picked up, judged, sanctioned, punished or any of the other expectations one might have of life after death. The talkative spirits seemed to leave and go somewhere, perhaps to a grand induction ceremony in the heavens. Some of them came back.

"Tom, I have to do my undertaker job now. Don't be scared."

"It won't hurt, will it Jack?"

"Of course not, you're dead."

"It hurt a lot when they were jumping on my chest in the hospital."

"You were still alive then."

As much as science and medicine had progressed in the past hundred years, the basics of embalming had not changed much. Jack cleaned the body with disinfectant, then replaced the fluids and viscera with preservative chemicals. Next would come the dressing of the deceased in clothing last worn to a niece's wedding ten years ago. Then it was time to pretty him up with natural looking cosmetics made especially for dead folks.

"Not THAT suit," said the newly dead man as Jack removed the garment from the plastic bag Tom's sister had dropped off. "I HATE that suit."

Jack recognized Tom's reaction as bizarre, coming from a corpse, but he was used to this kind of behavior.

"Oh, come on, Tom, I think it looks great!" Jack lied. "It's the perfect color to match your skin tone ... now that you're dead."

"I hadn't thought of that," said Tom. "Do you really think so?"

"Yes, of course," said Jack. "And the rose colored ceiling lights over the casket will give it a nice warm tone. It's a perfect funeral suit."

"Still," said Tom, "I've never liked Glen Plaid. My wife bought me that suit without my even trying it on."

Jack paused a moment, suddenly uncomfortable. Then, trying to sound as natural as possible, he spoke. "How'd she know it would fit?" he asked.

"You don't know Margie," said Tom. "Told me it was a 42 Regular and I'd better lose weight and fit into it before Easter."

Jack continued to fiddle with the aspirator and rub his chest where it hurt. Eating his usual salami and provolone sandwich while embalming might be why he was getting a lot of heartburn lately.

"Twenty years I was married to that woman," said Tom, "twenty years of pure hell. What was it my buddy Artie used to say about his wife ... 'I could have killed her seven and a half to ten years ago and been out of jail by now.'"

"You don't remember how you died, Tom?"

“No, I hadn’t even thought about it.”

“It seems,” said Jack, “that Margie shot you.”

“No!” exclaimed the corpse. “Well, that’s a hell of a thing! Why?”

“Don’t know,” said Jack, “but you must have really pissed her off.”

“She’ll go to jail!” exclaimed Tom. “That’s terrible. She’ll lose the house and have to give away that foolish dog. And some shyster will take every penny of my hard earned money for a so-called defense that’ll fail miserably. She’ll wind up in prison. You gotta help us ... Jack, is it?”

“Yes, but I can’t help. Your life is over, Tom, you can’t affect anything any more.”

“But you can,” said Tom. “Tell the police you spoke with me and I went at her with a butcher knife or something. That’s why she shot me. In self defense.”

“I don’t think they’d believe me, Tom. And besides ...”

“But, you gotta try. For my sake. For Margie’s sake. For gosh sakes, man, don’t let her life be ruined!”

“How would I explain my talking with a dead man?” Jack said. “And besides, she ... Tom?”

He got no response. “Tom?” Jack inquired. Still no response.

It often happened this way. The corpse would get excited about something and go howling off into eternity, his soul cursed with a problem he couldn’t solve, and being dead, shouldn’t worry about anyway. Like the time Jack was asked by the late Harry Bonaparte to remind his wife to have the snow tires taken off in the spring.

Jack didn’t know why, but after a body arrived at the cemetery, he might hear them speak again, or not. He wondered if some were here and some were elsewhere, and if this was the difference between heaven and hell. Those who returned spoke only of life, never death. And for some reason, the dead could no longer hear Jack, but Jack heard them.

Weeks later Jack walked down a deserted lane of the cemetery on a lovely summer afternoon, lovely except for the heartburn he didn’t seem able to shake, the pain sometimes feeling like a hot coal inside his chest. He listened to the voices coming from a variety of dead spirits, some over two hundred years old. The dead often sat on their headstones speaking mostly to themselves and sometimes to each other, unable to hear the living and evidently unaware that only an occasional visitor heard them. It was like listening to someone on the radio. You couldn’t ask a question, couldn’t talk back. You just listened and learned the strangest things,

sometimes interesting, sometimes not. A former town mayor from a century ago had been the source of much of Jack’s knowledge of the area’s unrecorded beginnings and political intrigue.

Approaching Tom’s headstone, Jack could hear the fellow was now back on line, still talking about Margie. A monologue, which was not unusual for these spirits. As Tom droned on, he didn’t seem to be listening very much to Margie, as she chattered away in the grave next to him. As in life, evidently, they were often like two ships passing in the night.

“I should have at least tried to get away with it,” said Margie, “rather than shoot myself. My dress was absolutely ruined! Why didn’t I wait a few minutes and think things out? No, I had to immediately go out in a blaze of glory!”

“I can’t imagine her doing anything to mess up her hair,” said Tom.

“I could have said he came at me with a knife,” said Margie. “I might have beaten the rap. I so much miss the dog.”

“You know what I think,” said Tom to himself, “even if her lawyer didn’t steal all my money, she probably would have given it to him when she married the bastard. She was always a big flirt.”

“Hush up, Tom!” said Margie, “I’m trying to think this through.”

Jack’s heartburn was worsening and he was getting quite irritated. “Tom, Margie,” he said, “what does it matter now? You’re both dead and gone.”

A buzzing in his ears that Jack hadn’t noticed until it stopped became quiet. How odd, he thought. Only now did he remember a buzz in the background throughout his entire life.

“Well,” said Tom, “that’s a hell of a thing. For you to tell us we’re gone. We’re right here. With you, Jack.”

Jack was confused. He hadn’t expected to be heard.

“You can hear me?” he asked.

“We can all hear you now,” said one voice after another from everywhere around him.

The cemetery’s caretaker found Jack dead of a heart attack, leaning up against Tom’s headstone, a quizzical look on his face. It was too bad, to die suddenly like that. But at least Jack could now have a proper conversation with the dead. And besides, he could sense Margie giving him the eye.

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