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Removing the Body

I didn't want to work that summer, not after what had happened at college in the spring. Working meant interactions and a close proximity to others, details I couldn't handle. But I needed the money, and Alex's dad needed help at his funeral home.

"Would I have to do anything with the bodies?" I asked

"It's a funeral home, idiot," Alex replied.

"Like, touch them?"

"It's night removals. If someone calls in a death after the funeral home is closed, you pick up the body. It's \$150 a trip, and you get to sleep all day. What else do you want?"

I'd watch TV through the night, keeping the volume low so I wouldn't wake my parents. It was mostly travel shows and DIY stuff, anything light. When a call came, I'd head to the funeral home and grab the keys for an eight-year-old black minivan. It had no seats in the back, just a collapsible cot with a thick cover that zipped shut over the bodies.

I only had two destinations that summer: the hospital's morgue and the county coroner's office. At the hospital, I'd park next to a bio-hazard dumpster and watch the security guard smoke a cigarette. After she stubbed it out, she'd let me into the chilly room with the stainless steel drawers. At the coroner's office, I'd take a ramp down to a windowless, basement facility where three attendants were always eating despite the wet, chemical odors.

On the first few trips, I felt like I was missing necessary credentials. I was sure someone would call me out or accuse me of breaking the law. And it was strange, seeing the dead in an unadorned state, some with eyes and mouths still open, others with ragged, post-autopsy stitching down their chests.

I'd slide on latex gloves and try to move them, worried I'd disturb or break something in the process. It was one of the coroner's attendants who showed me how to do it.

"Hold on," he called as he put down a carton of lo mein.

“Line your cot up next to them, lean over the middle, grab tight, and yank. You try and tug at the arms or legs, and you’ll be here all night just wiggling that guy back and forth.”

I was sweating when I clutched the dead man’s hip. But I yanked, it worked, and the attendant got back to his food.

My return trips to the funeral home were silent. I passed through neighborhoods with empty sidewalks and blinking street lights, the radio off and my mind twitching with thoughts of college. I guess that’s why I started talking to the bodies.

At first, it was piecemeal observations:

“This van really has no acceleration.”

“I never noticed that Greek restaurant before.”

“Sorry in advance, but there’s some bumps coming up in the road.”

But soon, I was talking about me. About whatever I had been watching on TV that night. About how I hardly saw my parents or friends that summer. About what had happened at college in the spring.

It felt good to say what I wanted without being asked, “And how does that make you feel?” And the bodies never tried to direct the conversation towards some bullet point on a list of symptoms.

I told an overweight man mottled with liver spots that my friends had portrayed the whole thing as wish fulfillment rather than invasion, something that didn’t require recovery, but celebration. I told a frail woman with patchy hair about the campus security officers, how they had rolled their eyes and kept repeating, “But you were drunk, right? And they didn’t actually hurt you, correct?”

I told all of them how it felt to have something taken. Something you hadn’t bought or earned. Something that was just there, and then, just not. I told them everything, and they listened in comforting silence.

Back at the funeral home, I’d park in the garage and use a creaky service elevator to bring the cot down to the prep room. Then I’d move the night’s passenger to the embalming table in the middle of the room, and my job was done.

I always wanted to stay, though. I wanted to guard the bodies through the long hours before the staff arrived, to act as quality control as they were embalmed and cleaned, dressed and casketed. I wanted to watch them change, to see their damage hidden.

But I knew I couldn't stay. People were worried about me. Spending the night alone in the prep room and making demands about the work to be done on the bodies would only worry those people more. So I started the ceremonies. They were brief reflections delivered to an invisible audience, but they helped to place a period at the end of my nights.

The final ceremony came a few days before I headed back to college. I stood in the prep room looking down at a shrunken woman in a hospital gown. She still had medical tape attached to her arm where an IV had been inserted.

"She was a bright light in a dark world," I said, a little disappointed by the cliché.

"She helped me to understand what comes after the line is crossed."

It was vague but better.

"I was feeling detached before her. Like all I could see was this other, baser side of people. And no one wanted to hear that. But she was different. And maybe she's not really her anymore, but there's still something there, some part of her that can't be removed or altered no matter what happens. She showed me that. I guess they all did."

I made a bow, turned off the lights, and left through the garage. I knew she'd be fine. I knew they'd all be fine. After being prepped and displayed, their bodies would be sealed away, buried, protected. And that was all I wanted.