

Mortuary of Eternal Rest

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Auburn, Alabama

I got out and had taken just a step or two when she said, not friendly, “Who you looking for, stranger?”

I stopped and said, “Are you Harmless James’s aunt?”

“Who wants to know?”

“My name’s Douglas Bragg. If you are his aunt, I’m afraid I got bad news for you.”

“What kind of bad news?” She had a rather high-pitched nasal voice and a missing upper tooth. But before I could answer I noticed her gaze had shifted to the car and, no doubt, to what could be seen of its passenger. I said, “That’s him there.”

“Drunk, huh? How come you brung him? Comes out here drunk by hisself all the time. Eat a whole loaf of bread and go back looking for whiskey again.”

“No, ma’m, not this time. He’s dead.”

She stiffened and stayed that way for a moment, then stepped down and walked deliberately to the car. Reaching in through the window, she put a hand on his head.

“I found him falling-down drunk out on the highway. I tried to help him and finally got him in the car. He just hauled off and died on the way into town. They told me to bring him to you.”

Finally she withdrew her hand and said, “Well, it’s a wonder he lasted

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1. A collection of essays on Madison Jones’ fiction is reviewed in this issue.

this long, poor fellow. Ain't never been nothing but drunk since he first could lift a bottle full of whiskey." She turned and walked back and sat down on the doorstep. She just sat there for a space, the little girl seated beside her now. A spotted hound dog came up and licked the girl's cheek.

All of a sudden the woman looked up at me. "I'm obliged to you," she said and looked away again, deep in her thoughts. A little later in a quiet voice, "Wasn't never one good thing ever did happen to Jimmy. No mama or daddy neither one, since he was a sprout of a boy. Th'owed out on the world. I wish I could of took him in. Couldn't do it."

I decided that now was the time to say, "I'd like to help you anyway I can ... with burying him and all."

She didn't answer, but seconds later she looked up at me with a different, almost lively expression. Her voice, a good pitch higher, said, "Naw. It ain't me goan bury him ... not by my hands. Jimmy goan have a *real* fun'ral." A little higher still, almost excited, "He's goan get embomed. And have one them fancy boxes to rest in. And whatever else they got goes with it ... to give him something nice 'fore he goes in the ground." Her expression now was downright triumphant.

I let the moment draw out. I hated to, but finally in the gentlest voice I could manage I said, "But you know, those things cost an awful lot of money." I wanted to say "a thousand or two" but I didn't have the heart.

"I got money. I got a fruit jar pretty near full."

I hoped it was a big fruit jar. I would let the matter drop for now. But she didn't allow it. She stood up suddenly and went in the house and after minute or two came out with that fruit jar. Standing there by the door she made a show of reaching in and coming up with bills in her hand and stuffing them in the big pocket on the side of her dress. I would have bet they were one-dollar bills (though some of them were not) and also that they were all she had in the world. She said, "I want you to take us in to that fun'ral house."

"Right now?" I pointlessly asked.

She didn't answer. To the little girl she said, "You go down there and play with Sim. I'll be back tirectly. Now, git going." and headed straight for my car.

Well, I thought, maybe the funeral man took charity cases.

But she didn't get in. Instead, as soon as she opened the door and leaned forward, she abruptly stepped back. "Pfeuw," she said. "Can't

take him in there stinking worse'n a skunk." She paused. "Goan have to give him a washing."

"A washing?"

"Drive him on around back," she said and turned and set off around the house.

Oh My God! I thought, and stood there considering whether or not to pull him out of the car and get in and drive away. But I couldn't do that. I got in with stinking Harmless and drove around to where she was waiting beside a huge iron pot just beyond an open gate. As soon as I stopped she came back through, saying "I'll git some soap," and while I sat there cursing myself for a damn fool hauling a dead drunk bum better left out on the highway all over the country, she went in the house and quickly returned with a big cake of brown soap. "Let's git him out," she said.

We did, with me holding him under his arms (and no free hand to hold my nose) and she by his forked legs, one on each side of her. We carried him through the gate and laid him down beside the pot. It was nearly full of water. It was for the two cows I saw in the field a little way off, and which, evidently attracted by the spectacle, were approaching for a look. So, I noticed, were some chickens. She said, "Git them sorry clothes off him."

We proceeded, I zombie-like. It wasn't much of a job. There were only the shirt and overalls, no underwear, one shoe and no sock on either foot. "Awright now, let's dunk him." We lifted him up and let him down in the water without splashing. There was not quite enough to float him. "Hold his top end up," she said, and I did, and watched her set to soaping him good ... hair and face and all of him down to his middle. Then the other end, every inch of it, grunting a little as she worked. At one point I felt, barely flinching, the hot breath of a cow on the back of my neck. "Now roll him over," she said, which we did and kept rolling till all the soap was gone and nothing was to be seen but flesh about the color of a fish's belly. She stood up, looked down at his clothes lying in a heap. "They ain't fitting for nothing." She studied for a second. "May be I still got some clothes my poor dead husband left." An instant and she was gone, leaving me alone among chickens and cows to swap gazes with Harmless's wet blank eyes. I took time out to kick a red chicken clear over the fence, and to nearly throw my leg out of joint by kicking at another one.

She came back with clothes and we lifted him out. I held him partly upright while she dried him off good with a grain bag. The clothes didn't fit, but it didn't matter ... "long as they's clean," she said. Which put me in mind of my own appearance, so that once we got him back in the car I got a clean shirt out of my handbag and put it on. She didn't seem to mind about her own dress being wet.

We drove in silence, with Harmless bent and balanced against the door, and she in the little back seat where, though but dimly reflected in my rear-view mirror, I could see how her face was set with determination. The only time she spoke, a couple of minutes after we had passed the town limit where now small houses lined the street, was to give me instructions.

We turned off into a street with only scattered houses, though the one she directed me to was isolated more by its tall enclosing hedges than by its distance from neighboring ones. There was no hedge in front, however, and the large sign reading *Mortuary of Eternal Rest: L. J. Hibbs, Director* was clear to see. The well-groomed front yard was small, but the building, surely a converted residence, was of considerable size. There were two stories and, half-way up the front, supported by twin wooden columns, a roof that in the past must have sheltered a now-missing porch. The flawless paint job, a soft pearl gray, did a lot to conceal (as I soon learned) what the sides and back of the house clearly revealed: that it was an old, old building.

I turned in the driveway and, noticing the narrow space like a tunnel between house and hedge, I moved on to take advantage of the concealment offered. After all, how many people showed up at a funeral home with the corpse in hand. Helping the lady squeeze out of the car, I had another thought: I didn't even know her name. She answered my question in a faint, shaky voice. "It's Bell Loomis." Then, looking at me with her bleary eyes wide open, she said, "We goan carry Jimmy in?"

"Naw. They'll come get him." I didn't add "I hope so," or that I hoped to God some kind of a charitable arrangement could be negotiated. Or, again, considering her now obvious state of mind, that maybe we ought to just call it off and bury Jimmy in some good old country way. The money, I thought. I said, "Look. You can tell from here it's going to cost an awful lot of money. A thousand dollars, maybe more."

For my purpose this was the wrong thing. She straightened up and gave me a look that meant she didn't know nor care nothing about no thousand dollars. She said, "I got money. I got this-here whole pocket full, like I showed you."

"All right," I said, and falling back on the only hope I had, I took her arm and guided her around to the front door.

The button I pushed instantly produced a sound like a little bell tinkling. A brief delay, while Mrs. Loomis stared at the well-polished door as if she expected it to do something peculiar, and we stood in the very sympathetic presence of Director L. J. Hibbs. Or so it appeared, even before his soothing voice offered conclusive evidence of his sympathy. "Welcome," he said, reminding me of Bela Lugosi in his role as Dracula. "I suppose you are here about a Loved One."

A glance at the lady told me she wasn't sure what he was taking about. I murmured Yes, and he stepped back. "Please come in."

He didn't look anything like Lugosi. He was a tall man, but he appeared less so by the fact that he stood with his head thrust forward in an attitude of humble interest in our bereavement. His unusually wide mouth was vaguely up-turned at the corners, suggesting a gentle smile that never quite materialized. He had on a black bowtie with immaculate white shirt, of which the sleeves, a little too short, exposed his wrists and pale, long-fingered hands that he held serenely folded just above his gold belt buckle.

But once we both had got inside and stood facing him in the little entryway, his demeanor underwent a change. It was most evident in the way his hands had come unfolded and now hung rather stiffly at his sides. I spotted the reason. Before this, he had not got a good straight-on look at Mrs. Loomis. But now he had done so and as a result had lapsed into this uncomfortable silence. It lasted only seconds before his gaze, gone a little frosty, came back to me. In a strictly-business voice he repeated, "You are here about a Loved one, I suppose?"

"Yes," I said, a little stumped as to what should come next. As for Mrs. Loomis, I noticed that already her attention was not with us. Just on our right was a wide doorway to a spacious room where gentle indirect light fell on radiant white walls and holy pictures and plush purple carpet and a golden stand with candles (unlit) and, commandingly at the center of it all, a coffin that looked to be made of copper or bronze or something. The coffin was inhabited. Part of a face in profile, mainly the big hooked

nose, and a crest of up-swelling torso farther down, were clearly visible. Somehow visible because, judging by the depth of the coffin, the Loved One should have been entirely out of sight. Jacked up, somehow? It was curious.

Anyway, Mrs. Loomis was obviously smitten by the sight. Even as I noticed, she was underway and didn't stop until she was standing by the coffin with her hands on the rim, staring at the dead man as at a miracle. "Lor', ..." she said.

Director Hibbs' perturbation was obvious, and when he saw her reach out and touch the Loved One's nose, he was at her in a flash. "Madame," he blurted, "please don't!"

"Feel just like a live nose."

Hibbs took her arm, not politely, and moved her back out of reach of the coffin. "Don't touch anything, please."

"Sho is red in the face, ain't he? Bet he drunk a lot of whiskey. My poor Jimmy used to look that-a-way."

An obviously disgusted Director Hibbs said, "Madame, that is Mr. Edward Hamilton. Among the most distinguished gentlemen in this community."

"All the same," she said, and shifted gears. "Anyhow, that's just how I want my Jimmy to look. All embomed. In a gold box like this'n, too."

Hibbs drew an obviously deep breath. "May I ask, not meaning to offend, whether you are able to pay a very high price?"

"Don't worry, I got a-plenty."

Losing patience, Hibbs said, "How much money have you got?"

Put that way, the question did offend her. "All right, Mr. Smart." With a small show of hauteur she said, "I got seventy-three dollars. Right here in my pocket." She touched the pocket. "I'll let you count it."

Hibbs looked up at the softly lighted ceiling. "And how much insurance do you have?"

"How much *what*?"

Hibbs didn't bother to explain. "Madame," he said to the ceiling, "this *box*, as you call it, quite alone, not to mention other necessary services, sells for three thousand and five hundred and sixty-five dollars. The sum you have would not pay for the handles on it."

The poor woman looked as if it was only his high-flying language that had her stumped.

Hibbs, in the same voice but more slowly, repeated the figure. It was different with her this time, reflected in the turn of her head so that, her mouth slightly open, she was looking side-ways up at his face. A moment passed. She said, "It ain't no such a thing. You ain't telling me a true thing."

"I assure you, Madame, that I am telling you a true thing."

I was standing only a few steps away and she turned to me seeking assurance. I could only nod and gently say, "I'm afraid it's true. I told you."

Her gaze fell away. She looked down, looked back at the coffin, at last let her eyes go slowly wandering all around the room. Like nothing that could exist in the world, was what I imagined her thinking. I quietly said to her, "Why don't you go outside a few minutes and let me talk to Mr. Hibbs." She looked at me and did so and closed the front door behind her.

I looked at Hibbs, but he spoke first. "Is that ignorant woman kin of yours or something?"

"No," I said and, giving just enough facts to make do, added, "I felt sorry for her. I was hoping you took charity cases sometimes and maybe gave them some kind of a little funeral for not much money."

He drew a weary breath. "What I could get for her case would not nearly pay for my least expensive casket ... not to mention necessary services. I have to make a living. It's not easy in this little town. Especially," he added with a show of disdain, "because many send their loved ones up to Bentonville." He drew another long breath. "Moreover I am short-handed at the moment. I dismissed two of my team only yesterday ... for lack of seriousness." I noticed the little flare of his nostrils.

He paused and I could tell that something had clicked in his mind. He was looking me up and down. He said, "What do you do, Mr ...?"

"Bragg," I said. "At the moment, not anything."

After another pause, "Are you, by chance, a college man?"

I was pleased that he seemed to think so. "Yes," I modestly said.

"And you are just out wandering, I take it. Looking for something. Anything that might suit you. Right?"

"About right."

He cupped his chin and stroked it for a space. "Possibly we could make a deal. You work for me in exchange for this woman's funeral. A very modest funeral, of course. Naturally you would have nothing to do with

the basic work, I have a professional for that. You would be free to leave, assuming you wished to, as soon as your work has paid the full cost of the funeral. At which time you would receive a certain bonus What do you think?"

At first I thought Hell No, envisioning a stretch of days in this lugubrious atmosphere, with dead bodies lying around and unimaginable business going on somewhere close by in this building. But I thought again. I thought about poor old Mrs. Loomis, and also about how it's said that sacrifice is good for the soul. In any case, as things stood, I was practically out of money. But just as I was about to start bargaining with him, he interrupted with another condition, a seeming after-thought, that took me aback. He said, "Of course there must be a small down-payment. For security."

"Yeah?" I finally said.

"I think a hundred dollars might be enough."

"She hasn't got a hundred dollars."

"I know," he said. "But since you are so anxious to help her, I thought you might be willing to chip in. Do you have that much?"

Cheapskate. But I sensed that something more was going on, something I didn't figure out till later. It was aimed at discovering whether I had money enough in hand to walk out on him before I had paid my dues in full. If anything but foolproof, it was still a sort of trap, the best he could manage off-hand. At the time, though, I assumed that his motive was only greed of the regular kind that can't resist a moment of opportunity, and not necessarily the kind to really look out for. Anyway, there was poor, poverty-wrapped Mrs. Loomis, and on my part the certainty that I could take care of myself. So, to his question I said, with a measure of defiance, "No, but I can pay some of it."

This was enough. "Agreed, then. And, who knows? You might just find here what you are looking for ... a profession." There was a small though curious narrowing of his eyes as he said this, but I was otherwise engaged and didn't think much about it. After dickering for a minute or two, I accepted a salary (suspended of course for the interlude) that was reasonable enough considering that a private room upstairs was included.

I had anticipated and was amused to see the expression of astonishment on Hibbs' face when I told him we had her Loved One out there in my car. In fact there probably was disappointment, too, in that he was

accustomed (as I soon learned) to an added charge for fetching bodies. But he quickly recovered and in a quiet but still commanding voice told me to drive around to the rear of the building where Mr. Fischer would tend to the matter.

I did so, and in the hedge-enclosed back yard stopped between the house door and a shed where there was a pile of lumber and a few tools scattered around, and parked in back of that, a large cream colored hearse. A couple of minutes later, Mr. Fischer, a rather pallid and completely bald man in late middle age, appeared with a rolling stretcher. He never said one word, unless you could count his muttering as he hoisted Harmless James, who had stiffened somewhat by now, out of the back seat. Mrs. Loomis, still wearing a look of satisfaction, tried to help, but he without seeming to notice elbowed her aside. He had his burden loaded and through the doorway before we could even think to ask a question. Less than an hour after that I left a thankful Mrs. Loomis at her own doorway loudly anticipating the burial day to come.

So here I was, employed not by a grocery store or gas station manager, but by an undertaker who was not even an undertaker but, by protocol, a 'mortician.' or 'director.' It was that way here with every funeral term in common usage. Dead was 'departed' or 'deceased'; a body was a 'loved one' or 'Mister' or 'Mrs.'; a hearse was a 'coach'; flowers were 'floral tributes,' and on and on. And right away, in the process of being instructed in this matter, I got off to what seemed a bad start with Hibbs. We were standing in the Slumber Room near the coffin of Mr. Edward Hamilton when I demonstrated my insensitivity by a wisecrack at the expense of poor dead Harmless James. (Or Jimmy, as I thought of him now.) The instant I referred to him as the 'drunken one' Hibbs fixed me with a look of what at least appeared to be real indignation. "We don't joke about the 'departed' here. Even when no visitors are present." The look in his sharp greenish eyes continued for a space, a re-evaluating look. My nod of humble contrition, however, didn't stop me from imagining just such an expression on the beaked face of Mr. Edward Hamilton. Anyway, after that I kept my tongue in check.

His composure restored, Director Hibbs returned us to the business at hand. It was necessary that I be made aware, and appreciative, of all the refinements contributing to the 'feel' of this Slumber Room. The immaculate white walls, the floor length rose colored drapes, the deep-piled

purple carpet, the rich gold candle stand. And there was the soft ethereal music (reserved for visitation hours). And most of all, perhaps, the lighting, the gentle twilight glow that wakens memory. 'Otherworldly' was the word. I thought how contented Mr. Hamilton must be, lying there in his comfortable coffin.

At rear of the Slumber Room was a little chapel, the doorway crowned with a Gothic arch. 'Chapel of Peace,' the small sign read. The large window at one end was of rose-tinted glass, and under it, facing half a dozen rows of folding chairs, a stand with an open Bible on it. Pictures again, holy ones.

We passed back through the Slumber Room and across to a parlor nicely fitted out with a sofa, three or four plush chairs and a small bookcase containing books with titles like 'Peace Of Soul.' Then on through a door in the rear wall that opened into the Selection Room. We were just at the point of entering when the tinkling sound announced a presence at the front door.

By coincidence, as by something scripted, the presence was a bereaved couple, a Mr. and Mrs. Dozier, uncomfortably here for the express purpose of choosing a coffin. Or 'casket' as Hibbs insisted. So, as Hibbs covertly let me understand, here was a lucky chance to advance my education.

It did that, all right. By the time he had got to the end of his extended sales pitch I was much more than a little impressed. I had come to see, for instance, that the arrangement of the coffins, a dozen of them set distinctly apart in groups of three (and not according to cost) was itself a part of his strategy. The whole was clearly a work of art, perfected no doubt by years of dubious refinement. The very tone of his voice, his air of consideration as he guided the bereaved from coffin to coffin, all but compelled confidence. Resting a hand on one especially rich in surface texture he said, as no doubt he always said, "This splendid one, of everlasting copper, at over \$5000, is absolute top of the line. Needless to say, only a few families are prepared to go this high. It is for you, of course, to decide whether you are one of these.

In answer both Doziers nodded as in sympathy for those not prepared to go this high.

Moving on to another group Hibbs, his fingers just grazing the coffin designated, announced with a hint of boredom that this one, at \$2850

less, was at bottom of the line. Then on to another group where the coffin indicated was, at \$769 more than the previous one, in the popular range. But still another in the same group, almost identical except for silver instead of gold handles, was only \$670 more, a saving of \$99. So it went on. At the end, humbly asked for a little clarification, Hibbs proceeded without impatience to more or less retrace his steps through the thicket. No help to the Doziers, who finally, by devious suggestion, were reminded that the casket's worth was not only a reflection of how deeply the family valued the Loved One, but also of their standing in society.

I don't know exactly how much the Doziers ended up spending for their coffin, but I would bet it was a good deal more than they had counted on. Nevertheless they left there looking satisfied, if maybe a little uncertainly so, just as I expect most of Hibbs' customers did. I had witnessed a masterfully slick piece of work. It was hard not to admire it.

Besides this, later that same afternoon I was also privileged to observe the perfection of his technique with the families and friends of the 'departed.' There were official visiting hours from five till seven o'clock for Mr. Hamilton, and Hibbs had firmly advised me to follow him around and listen. I didn't have any good clothes, but he did, in plenty (maybe from the families of corpses) and he had me dressed up almost like a true gentleman host. I surmised that he was already hoping to keep me on as a regular ... mainly, I thought, because I was a college man and should be quick to learn. In any case, I stayed in his tracks and listened for pretty much the whole two hours.

In the entryway he would welcome the visitors with a humble stoop of his head and a perfectly convincing expression of heartfelt sympathy. "So glad you were able to come. Mr. Hamilton has so many dear friends and admirers." If Hibbs didn't know the visitors' names, which usually was the case, he would say, managing to appear as if the name was right on the tip of his tongue, "And you are Mr. and Mrs ...?" To their reply he would nod and murmur, "Of course," and proceed to usher them into the Slumber Room.

Most of the visitors stood gathered in little groups about the room, with frequent migrations from group to group as conversation attracted them. But always there were a few standing around the coffin to gaze upon Mr. Hamilton lying there in eternal repose. Often Hibbs, with me in tow, would approach and stand among them, secretly reveling in compli-

ments paid to his handiwork (in fact the handiwork was Fischer's). "He looks like he's not dead at all," an older viewer remarked. "Like he might wake up any minute." Which inspired Hibbs to modestly say, "That's the effect we strive to produce. Except that 'produce' is not the word. We try to call up the man himself, just as he appeared in life, in all his dignity." Swelling a little now, he went on, "You can imagine the benefits for his dear ones. It is grief-therapy. Seeing him like this, they form a picture-memory that will stay with them all their days."

"Good job, anyhow," another man said, rather shattering the established mood. Hibbs gave the man a look, and shortly afterwards turned and joined a nearby group.

Soon, after further murmured instructions, I was introduced around as a 'young associate' (it seemed that things were moving awfully fast) and set to mingle. Talk about Mr. Hamilton, with praise for his life and works, was a common topic and I was expected to pitch in. Other than what I had so far heard said, there wasn't much I could do but put on a little show of having heard these wonderful things about him elsewhere. Being a pretty good actor, I was, as it seemed to me, quite convincing enough to make an impression. In fact I even got a little emotional, and just barely stopped myself before I went too far. In any case I was a success with Hibbs, who several times discretely sent me a definite nod of approval. Maybe I could become just like him? No danger, surely, I thought.

But Mr. Hamilton was not everywhere and always the topic of conversation. Especially as the number of visitors increased there came to be, at least among several groups, conversation of a much more profane sort. One group, exclusively male, was discussing baseball, and another, though not so noisily, seemed to be telling jokes. That they were indeed was made pretty clear by a loud burst of laughter. Immediately I sought out Hibbs, who was standing at no great distance from them with a look of outrage on his face. He was half-way there before they saw him coming, and hurriedly scattered away.

I don't really know why, but it was just about this time that something happened inside my head. All of a sudden I was seeing Hibbs' demeanor in a different light. Now it seemed like something, a behavior, not truly belonging to him, but instead a mere role that I described to myself as 'essence of undertaker,' leaving him with practically nothing of his former self ... a caricature, sort of. Which amounted, then, did it not, to

what the word 'phony' well described? I thought again, more generously this time. The cause could as well be ambition, the simple determination to be perfect in his job, and the inborn skill of an actor to achieve it. After all, as the saying went, 'Practice makes perfect.' So it was only fair to assume that this was the case with Hibbs, and that I was in the hands of a flawless model for the 'undertaking' world. If the ethos of his world occasionally clashed with that of other worlds, so it was all around. I might have settled for this view completely if it had not been that the word 'phony' (and sometimes an even harsher word) had got stuck in the back of my mind.

But my initiation into the world of undertaking had not been completed with the departure of the guests. Food was much on my mind and my intention had been to visit the little restaurant two blocks away that Hibbs had mentioned to me. It was not to be, not yet, and when the time did come I found myself with not much appetite.

The interval was that of my descent into the lower regions, the "Preparation Room," where, as Hibbs a little deferentially suggested, I probably was needed by now. It was for Mr. James, he told me, and indicated the door at the rear of the Selection Room. The rather sweeping gesture of his hand instantly called back that fleeting moment this morning when my first glimpse of him had put me in mind of Dracula. And more, the nugget of wisdom he now proceeded to bestow on my reluctant self seemed quite to fit in with that pattern: "It is all a part of life."

Even if it was, I didn't have any desire to experience it. I had seen animals gutted, with all the blood, but those were animals, and for all I knew they did the same thing with people. Standing there on the next to top basement step, I was amazed to think I had gone all these hours without giving this matter more than glancing thoughts. Even in much later days my memory of these moments still took hold of me sometimes. But now I drew a couple of shaky breaths and finally descended.

The light at the bottom of the steps came from the open door of a room where it seemed almost blinding. At the door was where I stopped, with my gaze riveted on a body (clothed, thank God) stretched out on a table, and a bald-headed man, Fischer, leaning over it. Around it all were shelves and shelves of bottles and jars and tins of something awful, and wickedly glittering metal instruments and, worst of all, bucket-sized containers that seemed to have no tops on them. And another thing: a sort of

little pump, I thought. The voice, that sounded as if it had never been used much, came with a jolt inside my skull. "We are pretty near through, now," he had said.

We! And what was left to do?

"Come look at him," Fischer spectrally said, still without turning to look at me.

Four or five reluctant steps and, stopped beside him, I was looking down at Mrs. Loomis' Jimmy. Or was it Jimmy? I had seen him both alive and dead, and this 'departed one' didn't resemble either of my recollections. In fact he didn't resemble anybody I had ever seen. I thought he could have passed as a dummy with too much make-up on, and a smiling dummy at that. And the frayed red necktie that had been put on him. A sudden gust of what I might call lugubrious merriment came on me and pretty well cleared my head.

Fischer's voice again. "I was hurried. Not my best work, I'm afraid."

I said, "Maybe if you could take that smile off him"

After a pause, "Let's see," he said and reaching with thumb and first finger outspread he slowly drew down the corners of the mouth.

"Too much," I said. He looks sour now."

Fischer made the adjustment and we both stood there considering the result. Then a strange thing began to happen. With slow and eerie progress the corners of Jimmy's mouth made their way up and into the smile again. Oh, well, I thought, maybe Mrs. Loomis will like to see him smiling. And the red tie, too.

"I can fix that," Fischer said. "But we'll go ahead and casket him." He had the jargon, also.

It was out in the dark near the backdoor, on rollers. We pushed it in and lined it up next to Jimmy. Stiff as he was, it was trouble getting him in because the part of the lid that opened was only half the length of the coffin. And speaking of the coffin, it was nothing anybody could brag about: just a plain old homemade wooden box, varnished, all right, and with a few strips of shiny metal tacked along the sides and over the top, but which didn't succeed in making it look like anything more than just what it was. We finally got him settled in, supine on what looked like a blanket trying to imitate a soft velvet cloth, and a plush pillow under his head. I left him lying comfortably there, still smiling, and climbed the steps giving thanks that this had been the extent of my initiation down here.

So I finally got to the little restaurant and ordered bacon and eggs which, after all, I didn't have much taste for. The only customer besides me was a policeman drinking coffee and who, somewhat to my discomfort, kept eyeing me from time to time. Why? No doubt it was just that I was a stranger in town.

My room upstairs was all right, with two chairs, a table, a small closet and a good enough bed that I was glad to get into. But I couldn't go to sleep for a long time and I lay there thinking about my situation and how long I would be able to put up with it. Off and on, since I hadn't heard any sounds, I wondered if Hibbs was in one of the other rooms asleep. To amuse myself I imagined him asleep in one of his coffins downstairs, no doubt the most expensive one. Or else wandering about in the night, the way his kind was supposed to do. I finally went to sleep.

My sleep was fitful, though, and twice I had to get up and go to the bathroom. It was on the back of the house and the open widow looked out on the dim, hedged-in backyard. On my second trip I heard voices down there and after that a car start up, but I couldn't see anything. Probably a Loved One brought in, one that couldn't wait. I shook my head to expel an image of some poor mangled corpse.

The next day was to be burial day for Jimmy. It was scheduled for mid-afternoon and, considering my part in the matter, I had expected permission to go along for the funeral. It was not to be. Hibbs was firm against my arguments. "There is much cleaning to do. And new caskets to be polished. I need you here." So it was, though I couldn't see any real need for it. The only things I did that were at all necessary was help to get a fat new Loved one into a coffin and Jimmy into the hearse. Or 'coach', as Hibbs insisted. I participated with a good measure of anger, thinking also that this delivery was a service I would be paying for ... and probably overcharged.

Starting a couple of hours later, what happened, or began to happen, was a series of events I am not likely to ever forget. I was still in the basement polishing away on one of those damn coffins, when the hearse returned and stopped out back. The little driver, Eddy, a young red-haired guy whose face, in contrast to my recollection of it, was curiously pallid, got out and came in looking for Hibbs. His shaky voice also showed me that something was wrong. The instant I pointed to the steps, he was on them and up in a hurry. Since Fischer wasn't present at the time, I quickly followed suite and stopped at the door he had left open. I could hear

voices, but not many words, only here and there a phrase. "You did what?" And then another, the young guy's voice: "I had to. He ..." I missed most of the rest of it, but there was something aside from what they were saying that puzzled me for a moment. I could tell which voice belonged to the young guy, but the other voice, which had to be Hibbs', didn't sound like Hibbs at all. I supposed it was just because he was angry about whatever had happened. Anyway, I soon retreated back downstairs in a confusion that was only cleared up for me entirely later on.

What had happened so far, which I hadn't yet understood, was that there was something in that coffin besides Jimmy. It was drugs, down where his feet were, and it was scheduled to be delivered to a receiver at a specified point on the way to the graveyard. But Eddy, driving the hearse, got spooked and made a big mistake. The place of intended delivery was a short dead-end dirt road that at some little distance past the grocery store turned off the road leading to the graveyard. But it happened that a patrol car with a cop in it was parked beside the grocery. The driver of the hearse saw him and immediately panicked because it seemed to him that the turn-off place was within the cop's range of vision. He was afraid it would look funny if he turned around and drove back past the cop again, so he went on and delivered the coffin to Mrs. Loomis and company at the graveyard. After all, how likely were they to go poking around down in there where the body's feet were?

But Hibbs was a long way from satisfied. I didn't lay eyes on him for nearly an hour after the little driver left, and when I finally found myself in his presence again, he seemed to have quite cooled off. In his usual voice (with maybe a little slip or two) he had a convincing explanation for the boy's excitement. "A small accident," he said. "No damage to the coach, but some to the car it struck. The young man is very excitable. And too inexperienced, really, to be driving such a large vehicle. I should have known." Then he added, with a casualness that caught my attention, "He also mentioned that it didn't look as though they were ready for a funeral out there."

He was quiet for a little space, in which, as I could just discern, he was giving me a new kind of once-over. "There is something we need to do. I'm afraid Fischer did too hurried a job on the ... the deceased. "It simply won't do to keep him out of the ground any longer." A faint grimace, and

he added, "I would not want to be responsible for the probable consequences."

I accepted this, though a little uncertainly.

"What I want you to do is go out there and be sure she understands. Let her know how ugly it would be to have on hand a Loved One who ... (he grimaced again) both looks and smells bad. Think of the picture-memory she would be left with Do you understand?"

I did, sort of, and nodded. He stood waiting for my departure, and I set out.

J. T.'s car required some jiggling of the wires in the motor, but it soon started, and twenty minutes later, some few hundred yards this side of the Loomis estate, I arrived at the Ebenezer Bible Baptist Church. It was one of those small, frame church buildings, with a treeless graveyard out beside it that you can see all over the rural South. There was a big yellow backhoe standing idle in the graveyard close by a ridge of red clay scooped out to make the grave. A few men were standing in front of the church, but I couldn't see a coffin anywhere. Inside the building then. A bad sign, I thought, but maybe not. I got out of the car, under scrutiny from the men, all in clean long-sleeved cotton shirts and suspenders, standing around. Right off, though, their scrutiny gave way to cordial nods and murmurs of welcome. It seemed that I had already become, so to speak, famous. They directed me into the church where Mrs. Loomis was to be found ... and of course, Jimmy in his coffin.

As soon as her eyes fell on me she came out with something like a shriek of delight. "Lor'," she said, "I'm so glad you come." She rushed up to me and took my arm and turned me around two or three times for the ladies present to see, saying, "Looky-here. The one done it all and give Jimmy this fine fun'ral, besides. The Lord bless him." She called off the names of the half-dozen smiling ladies, now up from their folding chairs, the Bakers and Smiths and Millers in their Sunday-best dresses from the Sears catalogue, and made every one of them step up and shake my hand. When the uproar died down I said, sort of like taking a risk, "When's the funeral going to start?" I had not seen anybody who looked like a preacher.

"Lor'," she said, "I done put it off to tomorrow. Want everybody have chance to come see Jimmy one last time, looking so nice. Even looking kind of happy. And my sister and her husband coming all the way from Paris."

Paris? Then I remembered: Paris, Tennessee.

"You come look at him." Taking me by the arm again, she squired me the few steps up to where the open coffin stood cross-ways in front of the pulpit. I looked. There was Jimmy, still smiling.

"And that purty necktie they put on him. Don't he look nice?"

I thought that probably once upon a time he had looked nice. I quietly said, almost at a whisper, "I got to tell you something. The funeral man told me to. He said you've got to bury right away ... because he probably won't keep till tomorrow."

She just looked at me.

"That's what he said. That his man hadn't done much of a job embalming him, so it wouldn't last but a little while. You know ... what would happen. That you wouldn't want people to see." Suddenly I really felt like a liar.

She looked down at Jimmy, then back up at me. She reached into the coffin and with thumb and first finger lightly pinched Jimmy's nose. She looked at me again. "It's no such a thing. He don't feel no-ways different from that old hook-nosed man in the coffin yesterday. Just look at him." She stood waiting for my response.

I finally and quietly said, with unexpected relief, "You're probably right."

She smiled, showing the gap in her upper teeth, and my mission at least in name was now completed. I would try, I told her, to come back for the funeral tomorrow, and amid kindly expressions of farewell I went out and, hurriedly now, got in the car. But there was more to come.

I had just got turned around to drive away when I saw one of the smiling ladies come out of the church door and head for me with something, a box, in her hands. No, it was three boxes stacked on top of each other, which she held up to my open window, saying, still sweetly smiling, "Bell forgot all about these. She reckons they's something from the fun'ral home got in the coffin by accident. She just happened to go poking around down in there to see if Jimmy had shoes on."

"Did he?" I vacantly said.

"Sho didn't. He was barefoot as the day he was borned."

I don't know what my face must have looked like. By now I was practically sure what it was, or had been, in that coffin, and I felt like my face, eyes nose and mouth all screwed up together, was about to give me away. I braved it. I just succeeded in muttering an ungracious "Thank you," took in the boxes and drove off.

For God's sake, what would I do now? But after a minute some thoughts broke through. One thing I certainly would not do was return the stuff to Hibbs, and so be complicit in his nasty and dangerous business. So, what? An idea came. I slowed the car, watching for a turn-off place in the woods to either side. I saw a path, a log road. With a glance to make sure that all was clear behind me, I made the turn and drove a few hundred feet to where dense thicket concealed me. Now, to be double sure. The boxes were wrapped around with paper tape and it took me several minutes to free and lift one corner of a box. Sure enough, little plastic bags, soft as with dust inside. No matter that it would take a while to scatter it bag by bag in the thicket and so be done with it all. But another, a better thought crept up on me and put a smile on my face. The back seat of the car would lift up, I discovered, and that's where I put the boxes. I had, I hoped, all the details clear in my head before I got underway again.

The sun was just setting when I turned in the driveway and parked behind the hearse in back. Hibbs must have been intently watching for me out front, because he had managed to be there in the back doorway when I got out of the car. Sunset, I thought, and he just fresh from his coffin. He waited till I got inside and the door shut behind me. In the basement gloom, I thought again, and girded up my loins. Fixing me with eyes a little narrowed, he waited in silence for my report. Yes or no ... did it matter? I decided to split the difference. "She wouldn't really say. She just said Maybe. I couldn't hardly push her."

A flicker of anger appeared in his face. "Why didn't you stay to find out?"

He had caught me a little off balance, but I bravely said, "I didn't see any use in it. I had told her just what you said."

Deliberately he looked away and stood there as if he were hearing something. When he looked back it was with a different expression, a long, reading look. I didn't believe I would like what he was thinking. At the same time I was half conscious of no longer being in the presence of anything resembling a model undertaker.

But a sudden change came about. "Well," he said in a voice approaching the friendly. "She will do what she will do. I suppose you did your best." Then, "Let's go upstairs."

I couldn't tell what was in store. As it was, there seemed to be nothing in particular, because he went upstairs to his room and didn't come down

in the interval while I waited expecting something. But this did give me occasion to enter the Slumber Room for a glance, if he was there on display yet, at the new Loved One. He was there, big belly and all, comfortably resting. My heart gave an extra beat or two.

When, after a few more minutes, Hibbs still hadn't come down, I decided it would not be unexpected if he found me gone out for supper. At the little restaurant I saw my cop again. He was on the way out, but he gave me another look in passing, and this started me thinking about what I would do for a grand finale. But first things first.

Luck was on my side, maybe. Approaching the house I saw that Hibbs' car, which had been parked out front, was gone. Where? If my guess was right, troubled as he clearly was, he had gone out there to the church to see for himself. There would be, as old country custom required, watchers in the church all night, but it needn't matter. Secretly parked somewhere at a little distance, he could approach in the dark and get close enough to see if the grave was still open. So now, in his absence instead of up in the night, was surely the time to do it. A risk, however, of getting caught red-handed in the act. I went inside and, pacing about waited for a while. I decided to risk it.

Out in the dark I took the boxes from under car seat and hurried back in and up to the Slumber Room. After another listening pause, I proceeded. It turned out to be a good bit of a procedure. This Loved One's great belly all but filled the cavity at mid-point, and working the boxes through and down was at considerable expense of his repose. I had to rearrange him afterwards, being careful to get his head straight on the pillow and his clothes back in order.

But it was some time yet, a trying time, before a flash of light across the front windows signaled a car turning in. For a moment I stood there undecided. Then I headed for the stairs, and up to my room and left the door wide open. What should my posture be? I switched on the light and sat down on the bed, and waited. Then I heard him, his feet uncommonly heavy on the steps.

He was standing in my doorway, no friendly gaze fixed on me. In a level voice he said, "Where are they?"

A blank expression was all I could manage.

"The boxes. She gave them to you."

I have been in other situations where I was compelled to do some fast

thinking, but never one to match this. Clearly this man whose narrow glare held me, as it were, pinned to the wall, was so far out of his role as model funeral director that it was almost impossible to believe. That he had on an unlikely, loose-hanging sport coat would have been no great matter if it hadn't been that his face had that expression of practically murderous intensity. Even his right hand, held in a tight fist, was positioned as if readied to deliver a blow. But this, as I now discerned, was not all. He was not alone. There was somebody standing behind him, a man much bigger than himself, who chose this moment to step into the light. He was somebody I would not want to encounter on a deserted street at night. That he didn't say anything, I attributed to the probability that he was unable to master human speech. It was Hibbs who finally said, "Where are the boxes?"

All of a sudden it was like I was participating in one those blood-curdling TV dramas, or a Mickey Spillane novel where the bad guys would as soon as not either shoot you or beat you death. In that same moment I just missed saying, "In the coffin down there," but something, a thought, held me back. What would it get me if I did? No expression of gratitude, I am sure. After all, I was a mere wandering waif, and this was actual gangster stuff. Imagining what Sam Spade would have done, and possibilities in the thought, I haltingly said, "I hid them out in the woods." I will always admire my readiness here.

"Where in the woods?"

Faintly, "Out not far from the church. Up a log road"

"Still intact ... in the boxes?"

I nodded "yes."

Hibbs, paused for a second. Still glaring at me, he said, "If you are lying ... Mr. Nails, here, can be a very unpleasant companion."

I nodded again, in agreement.

"Get up. You are going to take us there."

I stood up, slowly.

Because of the way my mind was racing, it seemed that mere seconds had passed before I found myself standing there in the dark beside Hibbs' car, with a heavy hand on my arm. "Who you want to drive?" Nails said in a voice like a growl.

Hibbs, speaking to me, said, "How far along this log road, where you hid it?"

My mind was suddenly clearer. I jumped at the chance. "Pretty far. I wanted to get where woods were thick."

"Still a road, though?"

"Yeah. Like a road."

Hibbs paused for a second. "All right, you drive. And don't you even think about trying anything smart. Because Mr. Nails is not always a gentleman and he's going to be sitting there right tight up against you. Now let's go."

Nails went around and got in the passenger seat and Hibbs firmly ushered me in under the steering wheel, uncomfortably close to the hulk beside me. Hibbs got in the back seat and I on orders cranked the car.

Starting here, with desperation already gathering around me, my memory of the following events is not so much cloudy as simply disjointed. I turned onto the main street and headed out with a single static thought in my mind, the thought that I must do 'something'. Hadn't I had some thought before this, one that escaped me now? Throw myself out of the moving car? That the bastard's heavy arm rested where it did, across behind my neck, signaled that this was impossible. Once the voice behind me said, "A little faster," and after that, or maybe before, in a threatening tone, "Stay in the lane!" Hopeless. The scattered houses along the road gave place to empty fields.

But suddenly, Hibbs' voice again, "Slow down. Pass him slowly."

The reason was clear. It came at me like something flung directly into my eyes: a patrol car with red lights blinking, parked behind a pick-up truck with a cop standing at the cab window. Cry out? This, thank God, was not what I did. In fact, as I have often allowed myself to imagine, it was not my work but that of some bright angel intervening to save my worthless neck. Anyway it was my hands on the steering wheel that swerved the car smack, with a grinding noise, across the front corner of the police car. Then, stopped dead on the road shoulder, I again had reason to give thanks because the cop arrived maybe just in time to literally save my neck ... from Nails, who already had both hands on it.

The cop yanked my door open. "Get the hell out!"

Again, this time to make double sure of my salvation, I was inspired to say, "Fuck you."

His hand with his long arm squarely behind it glanced off my chin and grabbing my shirt front yanked me violently out of the car. "We'll see

who gets fucked.” Holding me upright with both hands he said, “You drunk, boy?”

There was a moment, before the gust of rage came on me, when I almost could have congratulated Hibbs for his footwork. What he had said was, “The boy must be on drugs. I hired him to”

“Drugs, hell,” I raged. “He’s the one, the drug dealer ... him and his goon, there. He’s trying to ...”

“Shut up,” the cop said and gave me a hard shake or two.

It didn’t stop me. “There’s drugs in that coffin right now, the one on display. You can” The stab of pain from his fist just under my rib cage stopped my voice but not the sudden realization that I had made a mistake, a big one, maybe.

A brief pause, and Hibbs went on, “I didn’t suspect. I hired him to drive us to Bentonville, because I don’t drive at night. And my friend has no license. I am L. J. Hibbs, Director of the mortuary.”

Cool, by God, was not enough of a word for it. But I hadn’t got my mouth open good before the cop slammed me against the side of the car. “One more word out of you, you little fart” He put cuffs on me in a way that hurt and walked me around for a look at the other side of Hibbs’ car. Then, “Okay, Mr. Hibbs. You got a front wheel locked up tight. You all wait here. I’ll send somebody to take you home. Come down to the station in the morning.”

It was a mistake, a hell of a one.

Without another word the cop turned me sharply around toward his car and opened the backdoor and gave me a hefty push inside. His car didn’t have but one headlight now and made a scraping sound as we drove off, but it wasn’t put out of commission like Hibbs was. I thought maybe I had reason to be glad of this, at least.

Under threat of getting my teeth knocked out, I kept my mouth shut all the way to the station. But I wasn’t able to do any better with the cop who processed me in and locked me up in a cell. Later, grinding my teeth all the while, I tried again with the cop who replaced that one. It wasn’t till morning, after a grueling night on that hard little cot, that the sheriff himself appeared and I tried again. At first he didn’t seem to be listening at all, just sat there rustling through papers at his table across the room from where I stood gripping the cell bars. But finally something I said made him look at me. It was a beginning. “Look,” I said, “if you find him still

there or anywhere in this town I'll eat one of these bars for you. If your guys had listened to me last night they'd have found the stuff right where I told them it was ... in that coffin. It'll be gone now, though, along with Hibbs and his gorilla." I regretfully added, "Because I shot my mouth off."

I had rung a bell somewhere. The sheriff, his long, weather-beaten face turned squarely on me now, was listening with real interest. I added on, brought in Mrs. Loomis and Harmless James and Fischer and the young guy Eddy who had driven the hearse out there to the church. I still hadn't finished when the sheriff put his hands on his chair arms and stood up. "Booker," he said, and right away another officer appeared in the doorway to an adjacent room. "We need to go check on something. And bring this-here boy along."

The result was just as I had predicted. There was no answer at the front door and the other officer had to pick the lock. The clearest single evidence of flight hit us squarely in the face as soon as we stepped into the Slumber Room. It was the fat Loved one, sitting half upright in his coffin, his head at an awkward angle that, if his eyes had been open, would have put us directly in his line of vision. It was because of his belly, I supposed, that they had found it too difficult to get him back into his proper position, and so, in their haste, had decided to leave well enough alone. No repose for him, poor fellow.

There were other signs of flight, such as disarray in Hibbs' room upstairs, but clearest of all was the absence of the hearse. Without his car (mine being unthinkable) Hibbs had had no other choice. The hearse was later found some fifty miles down the road, but no sign of the desperate duo.

To the considerable vexation of my arresting officer, I was soon released. I was also warned. "Better watch your back," the sheriff told me. "Them dudes takes it hard when somebody messes them up. You better make it a long trip out of here."

I agreed.