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Behind the Scenes

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1993

BEHIND THE SCENES

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of English

by

Gary G. Schneider

May of 1993

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BEHIND THE SCENES

Gary G. Schneider

4 May 1993

62 pages

Directed by: Pat Carr, Karen Pelz, and Frank Steele

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

"Behind The Scenes" is a creative, non-fiction thesis that delights and amazes the reader from behind the scenes of a funeral home. Often, funeral homes and funeral directors are criticized via newspapers, television broadcasts, and magazine articles. But, seldom is a reader allowed to enjoy tales from a funeral director's perspective.

So, Gary Schneider, a licensed funeral director and freelance writer, opens the doors and welcomes the reader inside his Victorian funeral home, Rudy-Rowland, the second oldest funeral firm in Kentucky. This time, however, the public is allowed past the viewing room, as the reader gets into the hearts and the minds of Schneider and his staff.

From a comedy of a cat funeral to the seriousness of Schneider burying a best friend, the thesis could be considered a bitter-sweet compend of tantalizing tales. Said Dr. Frank Steele of the work, "I especially like the way the organization yields up a comedy-pathos polarization. I expect that being a funeral director gives your life a certain thrust that alternates between extremes."

And Schneider shares those extremes with his readers. From tears of overwhelming grief to unbelievable comedy,

Schneider attempts to entertain the reader while sharing the seriousness of the business. Undoubtedly, few have ever read, shared, or heard such honest, straightforward accounts from behind the scenes of a funeral home.

Therefore, it is Schneider's intent to illustrate to the reader that a good funeral director must understand people and know how to be sympathetic. But a good funeral director must also know how to live, love, and laugh before he can properly prepare himself to bury the dead.

Now, if you will, let's go "Behind The Scenes."

New Life

Writing was my life and I loved it. I wasn't making much money, though, so I knew I couldn't live this life forever. Each day that I would report to my hometown Henderson newspaper, The Gleaner, to write outdoors columns, human interest pieces, and lifestyle features, I would try to think what turn my life should take. But just like a reporter trying to crank out a story with an editor breathing over shoulders at deadline, I stayed in such a frenzy, I failed to write a suitable headline to sum up how my story--my life--should read. Yet, each night I was assigned those dreadful dealings with death notices, I realized I'd have to number my days as a reporter at a small-town newspaper. No doubt, those newly deceased persons deserved a salute on their way out, but I didn't want to always be the person who wrote "this WAS your life." Besides, ever study the style of an obit? They all seem so standard--name, age, place and time of death, church affiliations, club and civic organizations, survivors, visitation, service time, and memorial contributions. None of my creative tendencies were permitted in obituaries.

Factual reporting bored me, so for my evening entertainment I'd spice up my life by joking with area

funeral directors after typing in the long lines that seemed to reveal nothing of the person whose life had just passed.

Oh, sure, there were the stilted, stern directors that would quite articulately pronounce every word and spell each letter of a deceased person's name without ever pausing to make idle chatter or newsy conversation with me. But there were others who would take time to ask me about myself. They were interested in me, and they seemed to have genuine compassion, concern, and understanding. (Sorry to admit, I always thought such qualities in a funeral director were superficial.) I distinctly remember one fall evening taking an obituary from Hilda Gallöway Posey at Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home. I was busy, and so was she, but she still made time to share with me. Just before I told her good-bye she asked, "Honey, are you in love?"

Shocked that a 70-year-old woman would ask such a question of a man she'd never met, I said, "Why, Mrs. Posey? What kind of question is that?"

"Well, are you going to answer me?" she responded, as if I were silly for acting surprised.

"Mrs. Posey, yes, yes, I am in love," I told her. "I believe I'm in love with you."

"Well, baby," she said with a chuckle in her voice, "I believe that's the sweetest thing a young man has ever told me."

Today, some seven years later, I remember that very conversation as a budding beginning between Mrs. Posey and

me; between her sister Dora Galloway Carney and me; and between the funeral industry and me. For it was about a week after that late-night chat that I was asked to tour the funeral home, and I did. Frightened to go alone on that cold, windy night, I asked my younger brother Jerel to visit the parlor with me. Once we arrived at the old, Victorian, white-framed home, Jerel and I were clinging at one another as if some spirits of bodies-gone-by were going to grab us before we could pass from the dark through those tall, Italianate-style doors that led into the funeral home. Mrs. Posey opened the door and hugged me.

She was a neatly-dressed woman, but she didn't seem overly fixy. She had straight, salt and pepper hair and some wrinkles that told me the business--or something--had chipped away at her otherwise jovial personality. I paid less attention to Mrs. Posey than I did to that stately building that showcased antiques everywhere the eyes could see. From an ancient Queen Ann's sofa to a Gothic-looking painting that hung above; from pure-silk, imported curtains, to an all-wool imported carpet; from oriental rugs to bright, warm, inviting tones, the entire home engulfed my mind almost as quickly as Mrs. Posey's personality engulfed my heart. As she walked me from the music room to the family room, from the chapel to the office, I instantly knew I loved that old home. The rooms were so splendid I felt as if I were walking through a museum. The antique furnishings--particularly the sofas and the chairs--were so

massive, I felt as if ropes should be separating their plushness from a visitor's temptation to touch. Everywhere, beauty stole me and carried me from the country life I so humbly lived to a life of nobility filled with splendor. I was in an environment unfamiliar to my lifestyle, and, quite frankly, the change felt healthy, positive.

Once we completed our tour of what seemed to me a pleasant palace, Mrs. Posey walked us out the back door, across a parking lot, and into a large, dark room. Until the room was lighted, I saw a shadowed border canvassed by a moon-lit night which beamed through the door behind me. Caskets with a multitude of colors traced the walls and the center floor. Those burial boxes were grey, blue, pink, copper-tone, and wood-grain, as I remember. They were metals, stainless-steels, coppers, hardwoods, and bronzes. Lids flashing open to our faces, we saw interiors of satin, velvet, and crepe. One heavy-built model was a National, solid-seamless, copper-deposit casket built in the 1940's, that was the same type casket in which Franklin Delano Roosevelt was buried.

Once we scrutinized each casket, Mrs. Posey took us upstairs to meet her sister, where we were offered cookies and a coke. It was more than I could fathom to take a bite of a sweet treat or a sip of a soft drink just above where dead people lay. I said, "No, thank you," and my brother concurred. We were ready to pass from this seemingly fabled

existence back into our simple, and comfortable country environment. And we did.

Shocked by the reality of death and the thought of my own mortality, I wasn't sure I ever wanted to visit Rudy-Rowland again. However, once I had overcome my fears, I was again on premise for yet another unnerving experience at the embalming room, which I had yet to visit.

The funeral home's embalmer, Richard Oliver, called me one Sunday evening and told me "the women" would like me to witness an embalming. They had invited me to work part-time, but they needed to make sure, he explained, that I was strong enough to grapple with those goings-on behind closed doors at a funeral home.

It was a rainy night, and the huge Magnolia tree's limbs were beating against the entryway of the preparation room. I knocked and Richard opened, and my eyes focused from the uncalmness of night to the dead-still silence that surrounded me in that sterile, white room. There lay the corpse on the table, his color so flush, his skin so pale, his body so stiff. Fluids were flowing inside him, clearing, brightening, and seeming to liven his appearance. Upon closer inspection, I told Richard I knew this man. I instantly turned my head away. Richard told me he knew the man, too.

"In a town the size of Henderson, you'll know most of the families we serve, Gary," Richard told me matter-of-factly,

"And that will take some getting used to. So if you wish to be in this business, you must learn to cope."

With that, I focused my eyes back to the corpse until the embalmer's task had finished.

A few weeks later, as I was working at the funeral home, I suddenly realized I was a better front-doorman than I was a back-door embalmer. So I made certain my job was to meet and greet the visitors, drive the hearse or the flower van during the funerals, and clean up the chapel after the crowd had gone.

After two years of my adjusting, learning, and accepting that death was an inevitable reality of life, the Galloway sisters decided they wanted to sell their business to me. Mrs. Posey was 72, Mrs. Carney 82, and none of their family was agreeable to continuing the business that was the second oldest funeral establishment in Kentucky. None of their nieces and nephews--their closest relatives--were interested in operating a business that was a 24-hour-per-day responsibility. Therefore, in September of 1988, I purchased Rudy-Rowland on contract from the Galloway family. Contrary to how the system was supposed to work, I had bought a business first and learned its operations second.

It was afterwards I learned I had to live, love, and laugh before I could handle the mental anguish of burying the dead. It was afterwards I learned I'd better enjoy life today because there might not be a tomorrow. It was afterwards I learned to have the utmost respect for the two

Galloway sisters, who whittled their way into my heart and filled the void of my grandmothers who died when I was a child.

At first, the business was fresh and new, and the challenges of success stung my soul so strongly that reality took a back burner in my brain. I handled those older persons' services with dignity, kindness, professionalism. The families were grateful for the services my staff and I conducted, and I was proud of my new career choice. But then those sharp stabs of sadness began wrenching my heart as I dealt with deaths caused by drug overdoses, AIDS, suicide, and brain tumors. It seemed the young, healthy looking persons were dying more frequently while the elderly persons were living longer. As the world's tears became almost more than I could stand, I learned to draw strength from the two women who devoted their lives to tending to others. Mrs. Posey became "Hilda" and Mrs. Carney became "Dora" as the two uniquely captured my heart. Grief was no stranger to Hilda, since her husband had died of cancer and six months later her only child, Benji, was killed in a car accident. Dora's husband had died, too, in 1981.

It was not until after I'd begun managing the business that I learned just how genuine these two ladies are. It was not until I'd witnessed their dealings with grieving survivors that I knew how gentle understanding and guidance can make a difficult situation much easier.

"Oh, Mrs. Posey, I don't think I can ever make it without my wife," one elderly man said, crying. "I have too many problems."

"No, my dear, you don't have problems," Hilda replied gave a gentle pat to the man's shoulder. "You have grief. And grief, my friend, you can do something about. Grief you can overcome as each day lessens the pain."

Hilda had begun to lose interest in the business after the death of her husband and son, and by the time I bought the business she for the most part would remain upstairs, leaving Dora downstairs to work with me. Still, I'm amazed at how energetic they both are. Even now I'm amazed at how hard they work to assure that families continue to call on me. Quite simply, I realize Dora and Hilda ache to assure that I succeed.

Largely, for my being at Rudy-Rowland, for my sincerity and honesty, I owe Hilda. And for my training, for my polish, I owe Dora. A former model and consultant for and coordinator of elaborate, high-society weddings, Dora has forever had the elegance, the beauty, the stamina, and the charisma to make her presence known. The glamorous gal with the soft, swirly-brown hair always looks as if she stepped straight from a fashion magazine. She is tall and slender, and her cheek bones, arched high, seem to radiate her facial features. No one ever believes she's 85; she looks much younger. Her unbelievable jewelry--bracelets, diamonds, ruby pins--further complements, accentuates her marked

beauty. And, though it doesn't seem possible, her inner beauty seems to surpass her outer zeal. For, from within is where ability is generated to sooth the minds of mourners; from within is where her skill is generated to leave a comfortable aura around those families with whom she comes in contact.

"Is there anything we can change to make mother look nicer," Dora might say to a daughter with her arm wrapped around a shoulder. "Now, if there is, we want to know. If there is anything, anything at all we can do for you that we haven't done, please tell us now. We want you to feel comfortable and at home."

No doubt, Dora is a pro when it comes to pleasing. She sometimes takes hours arranging flowers and assuring that the colors, designs, and floral schemes complement one another before a family arrives for visitation. Dora also insists that my staff be dressed in their finest--black, worsted-wool suits with dapper ties on funeral days. Allen Edmond leather shoes are nice, too, she hints. We are to offer only the finest in personality, services, attire, and decor, she insists.

Oh, occasionally, her sincerity is overridden by a laugh when she or we make a blunder. Take, for instance, the time she was trying to ask a seminarian what school he'd return to once fall arrived.

"Now, honey," she said in a serious tone, "what cemetery will you go to?" The seminarian teased Dora about having made a Freudian slip.

Rare it is, though, that Dora ever slips. In fact, it's her steadfastness and dedication that have added new dimension and direction and reshaped my life. No longer, for example, do I take my parents and family for granted. Rather, I attempt to be more giving of my time than I used to be. I strive to be more complimentary, appreciative, and understanding, to Mom and Dad, especially. There is something to be said about living every day as if it's your last.

Few of us wish to think of our own deaths. We refuse to ponder when our own lives might end. We cower from conversations dealing with terminal illnesses in our families. Though we don't have to dwell on death, we ought at least strive to value close relationships with family and friends while we're given the opportunities.

Yes, the Galloway sisters--through this difficult occupation that is foreign to most--have better prepared me to thwart trivial matters. They've better taught me to acknowledge and appreciate the world and persons that surround me. They've taught me to be myself, and they've insisted that I allow others to be themselves. And, most importantly, through death, they've taught me how to live!

The Write Education for the Right Job

When I'm introduced to a funeral director at a state-association meeting as the owner of Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home, I'm generally asked where I attended college. And with an impish grin racing across my face--knowing for certain my cohort is actually asking which "mortuary" college I attended--I say, in kind, "University of Kentucky."

"University of Kentucky?" the licensed director often responds with doubt in his voice. "They don't have a mortuary program!"

"No, of course they don't," I continue with a satisfied smile. "And I am not a licensed embalmer. I am a licensed funeral director. But I did attend University of Kentucky, and I received my degree in creative writing from the English department."

At this point, some life-long funeral professionals shake their heads and politely excuse themselves, too frightened to figure how this conversation might end. But those more inquisitive directors continue: "Now, if you went to the University of Kentucky and studied English, what in the world are you doing in the funeral business?"

Then I meander through my usual spiel--hitting all the curves and high points of a somewhat colorful past--and explain how my career came to be.

After college, for three years I was a full-time reporter for my hometown Henderson newspaper, The Gleaner. My primary responsibilities were to write a weekly outdoors column. I was also the agricultural reporter, and when time would permit, I enjoyed writing unusual, human-interest pieces. As with all small-town newspapers, there were also those thankless tasks I dearly dreaded, like police and court reporting and obituary writing. Ironically, however, my life suddenly became one of those unusual, human-interest pieces that I was always looking to write. But even with my creative mind, never could I have imagined that my career would take a novel turn from writer to funeral director. For it was with writing those final tributes that I met a charming and colorful character, Hilda Galloway Posey. She and her sister Dora Galloway Carney were two elderly women who owned Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home.

It wasn't long before Mrs. Posey and I had developed a mutual admiration for one another. Before I knew it, I was moonlighting at the funeral home. And after two years of working part-time for the Galloway sisters, I purchased the old Victorian home and business on contract. Contrary to most, I bought a funeral home first and was educated about its operations second. Funeral director/embalmer Dale Powell still teases me about the situation: "When you hired

me, you were my boss," he says with a chuckle in his voice. "Then you served as my apprentice funeral director, with me signing your papers, and I was your boss. And now, once you received your license in '91, I'm back to square one with your being my boss again."

Without fail, funeral directors, educators, and friends are forever getting a chuckle from learning how a funeral home seemingly fell at my feet. But it really wasn't much of a quirk. Education has always been important to me. Most people believe that an English degree prepares one to teach English, to do scholarly research, and to keep the nose nestled in a novel. Unfortunately, a good number of folks fail to see beyond. Yet beyond is where comes the training to communicate with most anyone, young or old, urban or rural, educated or uneducated. Beyond is where comes the essentials to grasp new concepts and the knowledge to apply those concepts to one's everyday existence. Beyond is where comes the ability to better read others, the polish to better relate to others, the understanding to better appreciate others. Don't misunderstand. I'm certainly not saying a person needs an English degree to be a funeral director. I'm simply saying--if used as a tool--any education, from self-knowledge to formal schooling, can undoubtedly better a person.

Just as a degree from a mortuary college can better prepare one to grasp those concepts of embalming and mortuary administration, so, too, can my English degree

better prepare me to read efficiently, adapt quickly, communicate effectively. Simply put, never would I discredit those with a "formal" education from an accredited mortuary college. The point is, no matter what we study, what fields we choose, if we respect our teachings--whether formal or informal, directly or indirectly pertinent--we will better our existence.

Education doesn't have to be painful; it should be fun. To me, education has been an escape from everyday doldrums. To me, education has been an escape from the funeral home, a way to release my anxieties and separate myself from dealing daily with grief.

Presently, I'm finishing my master's in English--creative writing--through Western Kentucky University. For me, classes are an escape from the sad situations and unfortunate circumstances endemic to the operation of a funeral home. I return from class recharged, refreshed, renewed.

An instructor recently told me, "Gary, I'm not so sure you could have been a funeral director had you not become a writer first. For it's your writing--your education in English--that has trained you to express yourself. And it is your English background that has allowed you to release all of your professional, pent-up anxieties by pounding your concerns and your fears out on paper."

You know, I suppose she's right. With a twist of yesterday shadowing me, and a hint of what tomorrow may

bring, I'm grateful for that formal education that
informally prepared me to be the best funeral director that
I know how to be!

A Rough Ride

At a mere 25, I was inhaling the summer sunshine, hands poked in pockets, eyes to ground, fretting over my future. It was the summer of 1988, and I had, almost on a whim, purchased Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home. I was uncertain if I'd made the right decision, but I kept telling myself, "You must take risks in life if you thirst for success." Better to try a new venture and fail, I figured, than to be forever looking back at someone's bright future that you could have called your own. Life is so laced with risk, chance, uncertainty.

Looking at the icing-white, Victorian-style funeral home, I felt proud of my decision. The smell of freshly cut grass pleased me, as it always does, for some reason. The bright-red geraniums that bordered the sign made me feel warm and good inside. I climbed the inlaid brick steps at the front of the funeral home and stared down at the freshly-painted, dark green porch and pretended I was the landowner of some big Southern plantation. My mind took me away from Henderson, Kentucky, and into Louisiana and Virginia. I had forgotten I was a former feature writer and columnist for three years at the local newspaper. Instead,

as I sat in the cushioned, white-wicker furniture on the front porch, I looked across the lawn and envisioned gardeners tending to the flower beds, servants bringing to me fresh-squeezed lemonade. My eyes saw petite women approaching me, each dressed in full-length hooped skirts swaying from side-to-side as they walked, heads adorned with lavender-colored hats which sweetly smelled of the freshly-cut lilacs that bordered their rims. I was so far into make-believe that it took Mrs. Dora Carney the second calling to gain my attention as she stood in front of me on the porch and said, "Honey, now you come inside. We have a call from Georgia, and the funeral director is on the phone to talk to you."

Mrs. Carney, then 83, was one of two sisters that had sold me the business. She and her sister, Mrs. Hilda Posey, would continue to live upstairs and answer the phones and help with the business for as long as they were able.

Quickly, Dora ushered me into the office and pointed for me to position myself behind the desk as I took the call. She seated herself beside the desk in an antique wicker chair, her back as straight, her shoulders arched upward, her chin held high.

"Mr. Schneider," the Georgia funeral director said across the line, "We have a Mr. Lowell Livingston who died earlier this morning, and his wife, Elaine Livingston is her name,

is asking that your funeral home handle his arrangements there in Henderson."

After the funeral director gave me the necessary information, I politely asked for the airline flight number and arrival time.

"Uh, well, Mr. Schneider, although this is somewhat unusual, I must tell you that the body will not be arriving via the airlines." The director had a somewhat underlying, disgruntled ring to that Southern brogue of his.

Mrs. Livingston feared her husband's body would be lost if she were to put him on a plane. And she thought it silly, he said, to incur shipping costs when she and her family were planning to drive.

"Since Mrs. Livingston must come to Henderson and her husband must also come to Henderson as well," the director concluded, "It's Mrs. Livingston's intention to bring her husband with her."

"Bring her husband with her?" I yelled, forcing Mrs. Carney to instantly rise from her chair. "What do you mean she's bringing her husband with her?"

Ever so gingerly, Dora's hand rested on my arm as she whispered, "Now, honey, calm down and speak softly. You'll see a lot over the years if you stay in the funeral business. Your job is to simply be agreeable and carry on."

"Mr. Schneider," and now the funeral director's voice was edging toward "Believe me, I don't like this any more than you do, but my hands are tied. Mrs. Livingston insisted, and it is perfectly legal. She has secured all of the necessary paperwork, the burial transit permit and so forth, and there is nothing I can do to stop her."

He assured me the body was "embalmed, and placed in a minimal casket."

He concluded with the fact that Mrs. Livingston and her two sons were having the director slide her husband's body in the back of her cab-covered, 1982 Chevy. She, her sons, and her dead husband were to arrive at Rudy-Rowland at 6 p.m. the following day.

After I dropped the phone from my ear, I sat silently and stared into the office wall, waiting for some divine inspiration to come to me, tap me on the shoulder, and inform me that I was dreaming once again.

"What did he say? What did that funeral director say to you? Just what is Mrs. Livingston planning to do, honey?"

"You'll never believe it," I said to her. "I don't believe it myself. I'm not so sure I was cut out for the funeral business. We have some weird families here."

"Now, dear, our families are not weird," Mrs. Carney was slightly defensive as if she were a mother protecting her children's reputations. They may be a bit eccentric, somewhat flamboyant by nature, but they are not weird!"

I sat there still speechless.

"I know what you are about to say. You're about to tell me that Mrs. Livingston is putting her husband in the back of her pick-up truck."

My eyes made contact with Dora, and I gave her an expression of disbelief, as if she were a mind reader.

"Now, you think nothing of this, dear. Mrs. Livingston is a very wealthy woman, and she's a lovely person, too. She is very colorful. She and her husband were both educators. They were college professors. You will love her once you meet her."

I was even more amazed when Dora told me this wasn't the first Livingston from Georgia that was transported in the rear of a Livingston pick-up truck. Mrs. Livingston had also personally delivered one of her parents to Rudy-Rowland in a similar manner years before.

But never would I have dreamed--and my imagination is quite vivid--that a woman would bring me her dead husband in the rear of her pick-up truck.

I retired early that evening.

The following day--as we waited for our personal delivery to arrive--Dora was putting on her jewelry, and her sister paged me to come upstairs.

"Dora wants to see you in her room," Hilda said to me. First, I chatted with Hilda for a while until Dora was ready for me. Hilda is the rough one of the bunch. The heavy-set one that will ram her hand down her bra to pull out her filterless Camel cigarettes. She'll pull up her panties right in front of any man. She believes in telling it like she sees it--no holding back. By now she refuses to become involved in the downstairs operations of the funeral home, so the only way I can have contact with her is over a cup of coffee upstairs early mornings or by the intercom system, which she has conveniently positioned beside her television.

"Go on in now, baby," Hilda said as she kissed me on the cheek. "I think Dora's ready for you."

Dora continued to put on her silver bracelets and straighten her violet-colored, ultra-suede suit, as she said, "Now please take a seat in the Chinese Chippendale and let's talk, honey."

Gracefully, she sat at the edge of her bed, crossed her legs and cupped her hands across her hair as she held a mirror to her face. "When Mrs. Livingston arrives, I shall be waiting for her in the family room. You introduce yourself and tell her I'm anxious to see her. As quickly as

you can, usher her into the family room, seat her, offer her coffee, tea, or a cold drink, and I'll do the talking. You listen for a while. She's really quite nice. I'm sure you'll love her. She's a charming woman, understand."

Nervously, I went downstairs, seated myself in the lounge and chatted with Dale Powell while we awaited Mrs. Livingston's arrival. Some thirty minutes had passed when we heard the astoundingly loud putt-putt of a truck motor.

Gliding from the family room to the coffee room, Dora sternly said, "Now, boys, we must have a talk with Mr. Mattingly, the attorney who just bought that apartment complex next door. Let him know those loud cars coming and going next door are less than desirable. This must stop. And he'll understand. Tell him I said so. We buried his father here a year or so ago, so he understands it must be peaceful here. He'll respect our wishes."

Peering out the window, I said, "Dora, this less than desirable sound is being generated from the pick-up truck of our client, who just pulled in our driveway."

After a quick glance through the curtains, Dora said, "My Lord, honey, you weren't kidding. Now quick, you greet her. And be nice. I'm gone to the family room."

"Sure you don't want to help?" I asked in a mischievous voice.

"Absolutely not. Not until you get that man out of the truck and into the preparation room. This is not one bit funny, young man," she said. "Now you take care of your business. And in a professional manner," she yelled as she was nearing the family room.

Out the back door Dale and I went as the noisy truck came to a screeching stop. There was a loud squeak as the passenger's door opened and a long, lean leg stretched from the vehicle. No sooner had Mrs. Livingston's high-heeled shoes touched the asphalt than she raised her hand to greet me.

"You must be Mr. Schneider. What a pleasure it is to meet you." She spoke a soft-sounding, Southern accent. She was about 75, a most attractive woman. She had a Merle Norman face, not overly made-up, but not pale-faced either. The few wrinkles she had were smooth, as if she treated herself with facial cream every night. She had striking features, poignant eyes, a slender face with high cheek bones. She was wearing a chartreuse ultra suede suit which looked to me like a Lilli Ann, but I didn't dare ask. From the looks of her hands, she had more diamonds than she did fingers. I got the idea she should have stepped from a Mercedes rather than an out-dated, tattered-looking truck.

I asked her to follow me into the family room to visit with Dora.

"Now, Mr. Schneider, I'm not going anywhere until we take Lowell out of the back," she said. "I don't know if you've driven the roads between here and Georgia much, but I want to tell you we hit some real gulley washers. Just some terrible pot holes. Why, I'm afraid we may have jarred George's mouth or accidentally opened an eye. Won't you please check?"

Dale and I tried not to roll our eyes at one another, and I tried to make words come from my mouth, but only air whished forward as my mouth opened. Immediately, Dale rescued me: "Mrs. Livingston, Mrs. Carney is anxious to see you. While you are visiting with her, we'll make sure everything is O.K., and then we'll let you know."

Although she seemed to have some reservations of leaving the truck before her husband was unloaded, she did what Dale suggested. Her two sons, John and Jim, both well built and expensively dressed in black suits, one with a gold pin-stripe, followed behind, yielding only pleasant smiles.

The young men looked like twins, but they were two years apart, they told me later. One was 33, the other 31. They had dark skin--they had been in the sun. But you got the impression that even in the winter their skin was darker than most. They had coal-black hair and sea-blue eyes. I got the impression they were either iron pumpers or they had been introduced to steroids since they were very muscular

men. The black suits complemented their dark hair. Their shoes were as shiny as polished obsidian. I found out the next day they were smooth dressers and smooth talkers, but I never did remember which one was Jim and which was John.

During visitation that following day, how graciously Mrs. Livingston and her sons met with her friends. How polite Jim and John were as they shook the hands of the frail-looking women. It was truly amazing to me how normal these three appeared. All three were exceedingly intelligent, dignified, respectful. All three had an answer to every question asked.

"Oh, did your husband arrive at the airport before you all got into Henderson? Or did you all arrive in Henderson first and meet his body at the airport?"

"Mrs. Vandeman," Mrs. Livingston replied politely, "We all arrived in Henderson at the same time. But the funeral home suggested that they personally care for Lowell themselves. Then, very kindly, Mr. Schneider directed us into the chapel for viewing."

Looking over her friend's shoulder, seemingly amused that I heard her reply, Mrs. Livingston gave me a warm but smirky sort of grin.

And I gave her a faint little chuckle.

Miss Priss

In he walked, his love swaddled in fresh linens, held securely in his arms. Tears streaming, he told the doctor he thought it was time. He was lead into the sterile examining room where he was asked to wait. With flourescent lights spotlighting his baby that lay on the cold, stainless steel table, Mr. Albert Mathias placed his hand on his "little girl" and rubbed some love and warmth into her for the last time.

In the meantime, near the back of the clinic, the doctor, with needle in hand, was sucking into his syringe pentobarbital sodium, a deadly agent.

"Mr. Mathias, are you ready to let her go, now," the doctor kindly asked as he reentered the examining room.

"No, no, I'll never be ready, but I know I have to Dr. Nichols. So do what you have to do."

First, though, while gingerly patting the love of his life, Mr. Mathias told the doctor that he'd been feeling alone when one day he walked outside his historic home on South Main Street. In his early seventies, on a bright spring day, there he saw his red tulips being nourished by the sun. When he'd peer outside his bedroom window, he noticed the robin nesting in his cedar tree, incubating three pale blue eggs.

The mother dove fluttered into the Magnolia tree carrying a worm to her newly hatched brood. There life was beginning all around Mr. Mathias. Yet he felt choked with loneliness, as if his life were ending. He had no family in town. Most of his friends had preceded him in death.

On this spring day, however, at one of his lower moments, staring into his tulips as if he could see the vein of life that was running through them, Mr. Mathias felt a gentle brush across his back. It was so light a touch, it felt like static electricity clinging to his shirt. When he turned around, there she was. She was as white as the grass was green. She was as soft as the silk shirt that covered his back. She was as cute as a baby duckie on Easter Sunday and as innocent looking as a long-faced, floppy-eared basset hound batting his eyes from a pet-store window. She warmed his heart as the sun warmed his tulips.

Looking down one last time at his barely breathing cat, Mr. Mathias sadly said, "She was purrrr-fect, Dr. Nichols. She was my little Persian kitty that brought sunshine and happiness back into my life."

Then he rubbed his hands through his slick, white hair that covered only the sides of his otherwise bald head, sobbed and turned his head and walked away to take a seat in the waiting room of the veterinary clinic. Then the doctor inserted his syringe into a leg vein of Prissy and pumped life out of the heart of the cat who, some 14-years before a kitten had pumped life into the heart of a lonely old man.

After placing the cat in the box, Dr. Nichols asked Mr. Mathias if he'd like to take Prissy home for burial.

"No, no, I can't bury her, Dr. Nichols. But Gary Schneider can. I know you two are friends, and I know you're a Rudy-Rowland stockholder. So won't you please call him and ask him to take care of her? Tell him I'll come over to the funeral home in the morning to make arrangements."

Dr. Nichols stood there a minute looking at the old man. "Uh, well, well, sure, sure, I'll call Gary. I'll do that right after you leave. And I'll tell him. Then he can call you, or something like that."

Mr. Mathias insisted that the doctor keep Prissy overnight, bathe her, and prepare her for burial.

"I'll be by tomorrow morning to pick my sweet pea up, Dr. Nichols. I want to take her to Gary all cleaned up before he embalms her. Please have her ready," he said as he walked out the door.

My telephone sounded a few minutes later.

"Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home, Gary Schneider speaking."

"Yeah, Schneider. I knew that damned funeral home of yours would get me in trouble sooner or later. You're really screwed now. You have to bury Mr. Mathias's blasted cat!"

After a few choice expletives, I hem-hawed around, and my blood pressure began to rise.

"Forget it, Lafe. We've been buddies for a long time. But I have to draw the line somewhere. And this is it, my friend."

Lafe, however, being the persuasive guy that he is, went on to tell me how Mr. Mathias's family "always uses another funeral home." If I'm good enough to bury Mr. Mathias's cat, then I'm good enough to bury Mr. Mathias, Lafe assured me.

So I weakened as the day grew older, and by evening I'd called Lafe and had conceded.

In the morning I was dressed like a funeral director ready to meet with Mr. Mathias, who was to arrive at 10 a.m.

As usual, Mrs. Carney was downstairs "waiting to meet the family," as she puts it. Her hair was short and swirled tight, with the new perm she'd gotten the day before. Gold bracelets dangled from her slender arm. Her dress, a Chinese silk suit made by her dressmaker, was soft with an autumn hue accentuating her auburn-colored hair. She said she knew just how to handle Mr. Mathias. After all, her sister Jane Galloway, the former owner of Rudy-Rowland, who died in 1985, had three dalmatians over a 30-year-span. There was Peter I, Peter II, and Peter III. When each dog died, he was placed in a casket and driven in the hearse to the Galloway family lot out in the country. Although Dora detested dogs herself, she assured me she'd know just what to say to Mr. Mathias.

When our front door sounded I swiftly walked to meet Mr. Mathias. Dora trailed close behind. In Mr. Mathias walked, a tall, skinny man with a scratchy voice and a firm handshake. Shallow lines dug softly into and travelled parallel over his forehead like furrows lightly embedded across a freshly plowed field. His hazel eyes made prominent a horizontal, olive stripe in his suit. His silver-framed glasses coordinated with his solid-silver watch and diamond-studded ring. He wore a well-maintained, plaid suit from somewhere in the late '40's. His suit didn't look really old, but rather stylishly dated, you might say. His coat had brown, pearl buttons, and a fresh-looking maroon silk handkerchief made a triangular splash from his pocket. Suspenders held his cuffed pants just over the hips of his slender frame. His white with brown-bordered Spectator Wing-Tips shone with fresh polish. When he was seated, his designer argyle socks complemented nicely that stretch of leg and foot that shows from the bottom of the pant leg to the top of the shoe. He had an almost militant aura about him: precise ideas, demanding requests, well-defined expectations.

"Honey, I am so sorry about precious little Prissy," Mrs. Carney said, trying desperately to fill her voice with a sincere ring. "Now I know just exactly how you feel, honey. If you'll remember, my sister Jane had three Peters in her life. Peter I, Peter II, and Peter III. She loved all of them just the same. Why, each time one of those dogs

died, her heart died with them."

"Mrs. Carney," Mr. Mathias said crisply, "I'll bet you weren't as fond of her Peters as she was. You just referred to them as dogs. I'll bet Miss Galloway didn't call them dogs. And my Prissy is no cat. She is never to be referred to as a cat."

Dora's head turned to my face. Her eyes looked into mine just before they seemed to enlarge and roll upward. Her face reddened; she knew she had said too much. Quickly, grabbing a tissue from her suit coat she wiped her forehead and said to me, "Lord, dear, I'm hot. Isn't it hot in here? Shall we turn up the air?"

I excused myself to answer the phone, leaving Dora and Mr. Mathias to visit in the family room.

"Schneider, it's me again, Lafe Nichols. Has Mr. Mathias gotten there yet?"

"Yes, he has. Now what are you going to say to make my life even more miserable?"

"Well, you know Mr. Mathias told me to position Prissy a certain way. But I'm no damned embalmer; hell, I'm just a dumb country veterinarian . . . He told me to keep her cool. And I just wanted you to know, I kept her cool all right," he said, laughing.

"I curled her up, and then I froze her. Hell, she was as hard as a brick bat when I got to work today. Judy said I'd better thaw her out some before Mr. Mathias picked

her up. So keep your mouth shut about that, Schneider, or I'll kill you. You hear me?"

"Yes sir! No problem, Doc," I had to wait to rearrange my smile. When I reentered the family room, there was Dora sitting on the antique sofa next to Mr. Mathias, patting his hand in a slightly vain attempt to console him. She was somewhat silenced for fear the word "cat" might come sailing from her mouth once again. While I was on the phone, my funeral director, Dale Powell, had carried Prissy's body into the family room. There she lay, still swaddled in her linen blanket, curled in a little frozen bundle. I nonchalantly walked over to the box as if I had the need to view Mr. Mathias's baby. But as my hand rubbed across her fluffy, white body, I was actually trying to see just how frozen she still remained. A gentle tap to her side made an echo that sounded like I'd thumped an empty, galvanized-steel milk bucket. Still too frozen for Dale to embalm, I thought to myself.

"Now, honey, did you bring any clothing in that you want us to put on Prissy?" Dora asked, pretending now that Mr. Mathias's feline friend were a real person.

"Oh, no, no," Mr. Mathias said somberly, his chin tucked to his chest, his eyes staring at the floor. "But there is a handmade, pink quilt you might get from the back seat of my car. After she's embalmed, she's to be wrapped in her favorite quilt. And be sure to have her head facing the right side of the room," he said.

"Why, honey, why does it matter which way we turn her head? We want to do what you want, but I'm just curious as to why her head is to face a certain way."

"Well, Mrs. Carney, Prissy is to be buried beside me on our plot in Fernwood."

"Do what? She sat up even straighter. "Now, Mr. Mathias, we can't bury pets in the city cemetery, you know. We simply cannot do that. What about your back yard, honey? You'd be closer to her that way. You could walk out and visit her grave every day without having to drive to the cemetery. Don't you think that would be best?"

Mr. Mathias told us quite matter-of-factly, however, that if we would not bury Prissy in the city cemetery, our competitor said he would. With brow raised and voice sounding stronger, more confident, Mrs. Carney said, "Why, honey, you just go on home and rest. We'll bury Prissy in that cemetery, too. We will!"

Next, we had to display our tiny baby caskets so that Mr. Mathias could decide what he wanted for Prissy. He picked a white fiberglass casket, probably more for the interior than the exterior. He was particularly struck by the pink-velvet lining. He seemed to love the teeny-tiny pale-pink ribbon that was made to go either on the baby's outfit or to be used as a hair ribbon. We were instructed to position the ribbon securely by separating a clutch of white fluff to embed the streamer a tad so that its pretty lace wouldn't protrude too far out atop Prissy's head. The

ribbon was to be placed evenly between her two ears. Then a fresh coat of pink fingernail polish had to be painted on her toes. Oh, yes, pardon me, but a squirt of Scoundrel, her favorite perfume, had to be doused on her coat and rubbed in.

I was beginning to see why she was called "Miss Priss."

Anyway, after Mr. Mathias had tearfully concluded his casket selection, he headed home to rest up before Prissy's visitation and funeral the following morning. Meanwhile, as Dora and I were entering the office she was incessantly babbling, "Now, honey, in my 50 years in the funeral business I've never had this kind of trouble. What is the matter with your clients?"

I'd learned by then that anytime the clients were somewhat normal they were tagged "her" clients, and anytime they were somewhat abnormal, they were termed "my" clients. Mr. Mathias was "my" client.

"Now dear, listen to me. Please listen carefully. I told Mr. Mathias we would bury his cat in that city cemetery, because if you-know-who can bury a cat there, so can we." (Dora always refers to our competitor as "you-know-who.") So you simply must talk to the city manager, the mayor, the city attorney. Just tend to it. Right now! Lord, honey, I'm so nervous I must go upstairs and lie down," she said. She was still softly mumbling in a disgruntled tone as she climbed the stairs.

So I went to the city manager's office to personally explain my dilemma.

"Mr. Mathias was a city commissioner here, you know. And he assures me there have been pets buried in the city cemetery before. He said there are monuments that say 'Here lies Fido,' and 'my beloved rottweiler Rover.'"

Moreover, Mr. Mathias said, if the city didn't bury Prissy in Fernwood, he would go to the newspaper and protest. After all, he said, there was no city ordinance that stated 'only human remains may be interred in the city cemetery.' Therefore, since other animals were buried in the cemetery, if Mr. Mathias were denied that right, he claimed he could file a discriminatory suit against the city.

"Gary, why is it always Rudy-Rowland that gets the city in such a pickle?" Mr. Sights said, laughing after he'd listened carefully to the situation. "You sit tight for a while and I'll call the city attorney to see what he says. I'll get back with you early this afternoon."

The city attorney said he had no choice but to grant permission to Mr. Mathias. Just as Mr. Mathias said, there was no ordinance prohibiting pets from being buried in the cemetery. However, the attorney told me, "Don't ever ask permission for such a request again, because I will personally see to it that at the next commission meeting there is an ordinance passed that states 'only human remains may be interred in the city cemetery.' And that, Mr.

Schneider, will put an end to these foolish requests," he said, his voice laced with laughter.

City officials then contacted the cemetery department and demanded that the grave be open. Grass was to be laid around the opening, with a small bier resting for the casket to be positioned. "Rudy-Rowland will be rolling through the gates at 10 a.m. with a service," the city manager told cemetery employees. He then gave the space and lot number and said, "The name of the deceased is Prissy Mathias, for the record. Born 1975, died 1989."

Just as we thought the problem was settled, another question arose. The city charges \$250 to open and close the grave of an adult, but only \$125 to open and close the grave of an infant. Since Prissy was being buried in a baby casket, couldn't she be considered an infant? But, since Prissy was about 98 years old in human comparison, should she be considered an adult? After another closed-session meeting, the city called me back to say Mr. Mathias was to be charged the infant rate.

Exhausted, my head lying face down on the desk, I heard my telephone ring. It was Frank Boyett, a reporter at The Gleaner newspaper with whom I used to work when I was a general assignment reporter. Great-- I silently thought to myself-- Frank is probably calling to ask me to go out after work to have a beer for old times' sake. I certainly could use a nice cold one after all of this shit! But to my dismay, Frank began questioning me about the cat burial. He

planned to have a photographer present at the cemetery to photograph Rudy-Rowland pulling onto city property with a cat funeral.

"Frank, that's bullshit," I yelled. "I've worked with you for three damned years and you'd do this to me?"

"Ah, come on now, Schneider. As you used to always say, 'A story is a story.'"

"Yeah, well, screw you, Boyett. I've changed my mind. This is my story. And it's a story that will not be told!"

I slammed down the phone and drove over to and charged into The Gleaner.

"Jenkins, what in the hell are you trying to do to my business! How would this look? Front page headlines reading, "Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home Buries Cat."

Jenkins just laughed and said, "Schneider, you have to admit it'll make a cute feature."

Boyett, his desk nearby, was listening to our conversation. He bounced out of his chair and cockily high-stepped it to me: "Schneider this story will run. People will just laugh. It's no big deal."

When I was ready to cry for this poetic justice--for having the tables turned on me--Ron Jenkins laughed and said, "Frank, kill the story."

Frank argued and argued, and finally said, "No way."

"Damn it, Frank, I'm the editor. I said kill the fucking story! A fucking cat may have nine lives but you

only have one. So if you don't go kill that story out of the system right now, your one life will be gone!"

Frank killed the story. And the next morning I buried the cat.

It was a beautiful day. Weather-wise, anyhow. Dora was dressed in her worsted-wool, black suit. She wore a solid-gold, delicate-looking butterfly on her jacket, solid-white pearls around her neck and pearl earrings to match.

I wore a Hickey Freeman, worsted-wool black suit, too. We always wear black on funeral days. Mr. Mathias arrived on time, and spent nearly an hour talking to and rubbing on Prissy.

"She was there for me," he said, his eyes clouding, tears spilling over. "It's people in this world that will stick you in the back. But never Prissy. She was just there for love and affection. She'd curl up in my lap and purr that pretty little purr of hers."

About fifteen minutes before the graveside service was to begin at the cemetery, Mrs. Carney took Mr. Mathias by the arm and said, "Now, honey, you say goodbye to Prissy and I'll be out in the hall waiting to take you to the car. We want to be on time for the service, you know."

I drove the burgandy Lincoln to the cemetery. Prissy's casket was sealed and nestled in the front seat beside me. Dora and Mr. Mathias rode in the back. When we arrived at the cemetery, the workers were waiting to carry the body and escort us to the gravesite. Flowers had been sent from a

few of Mr. Mathias's closest friends. Judy Bennett, a dear friend of his, met us at the cemetery. There we stood, Prissy's sealed, white casket positioned on the bier which rested over the grave. Pink sweetheart roses sat atop her casket. And Dora, Mr. Mathias, Mrs. Bennett and I stood, heads bowed toward the ground for a moment of silence. There was no minister, no music. Just a simple little service.

A simple little service, understand, because Mr. Mathias claimed to be a simple man. A simple man, he said, who "doesn't believe in making a big deal, much of a fuss about things."

One Foot in the Grave

It was to be a relaxed day, no funerals scheduled, no pre-arrangements on the calendar, no appointments of any kind. I was thumbing through the newspaper and thinking about getting out of the office for a while. We'd had three funerals the day before, and the entire staff was exhausted. I dreamed of basking in the sun, catching a few crappie or bluegill on this beautiful day, or, perhaps, shopping for the latest fashions of spring.

But then the phone rang.

"Gary, this is Mildred Sutton. How are you honey?"

"Fine," I replied, "And how are you, Mildred?"

"Well, I'm not too good right now, sweetie. I'm hoping you can help me."

"Anything for you or your family, Mildred. You all have always been so good to us. What can I do for you?"

Mildred told me that Arthur, her father-in-law, was in an Evansville hospital again. He had diabetes, and unfortunately, his foot had to be removed.

"Oh, God, Gary. I just don't know how to ask you this, so I'll just spit it out," Mildred said, with a nervous hesitation in her voice. "You see . . . uh, papaw had some toes removed several years ago, and the hospital just threw them out. He knows he'll be dying soon, and he'd really

like to take his foot with him. He wants it buried with him, I mean. He wants you to pick it up and store it until he dies. Then, before you close the casket, put it where it belongs."

There was silence on my end of the phone. I simply did not know what to say. Questions were overwhelming me. Even if I could keep the foot, where would I put it? I'd have to freeze it, and contrary to what most people believe, most funeral homes do not have refrigerated units available for storage. And I knew I didn't want the damn foot in my freezer at home.

"Gosh, Mildred, I've never done anything like this before."

There was a silence.

"But I'll figure out something. You just let me know when." I hadn't the faintest idea how I could pull this one off, so I'd appease her, I thought, by stalling for time.

"Tomorrow is the day that his foot will be amputated, babe. The hospital will call you to pick it up. We've already given them your name."

I tossed and turned all night. Why do I have to be such a nice guy? Why do I deserve this shit? Has any other funeral home in the whole world ever had such a request? What is it about these Rudy-Rowland families?

I dreamed that night that I conned my Mom into storing the foot in her freezer. One day she mistook it for the pigs' feet when she was preparing pigs' feet and sauerkraut

and . . . you get the picture! Lying awake in bed, I thought of the old phone trick I used to play when I was a kid. With some of my teenage friends present, I'd call a supermarket and ask the manager. "Sir, do you have pigs' feet?"

"Yes, I do have pigs' feet," the grocer would answer.

"Oh, you poor thing," I'd reply. "Put on your shoes and nobody will know!"

No doubt, I'm still a practical joker in a serious profession; I claim that's how I maintain my sanity. But my Mom was forever telling me my meanness would someday come back to haunt me. I was beginning to believe she was right.

Not able to sleep any longer, I tossed my covers off, showered, dressed, and drove to the funeral home. I was at work by 6:30 the morning I was to take custody of the foot. Nervously, I bit my fingernails, skimmed through the daily paper, caught the early morning news, and drank about a pot of coffee. Then, suddenly, I figured a solution.

Between Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home and the Evansville Hospital was the Veterinary Medical Center, the clinic that my buddy Lafe Nichols owned. Why couldn't I put that foot in his freezer at the rear of the clinic? After all, the freezer was used exclusively for dead animal storage. No one would know Arthur Sutton's foot was back there. I wouldn't tell Lafe until after I'd sneaked the foot in, because if I'd ask permission he'd definitely say, "No!" After the fact, all he'd do was bitch!

No sooner had I had that revelation than the phone rang.

"This is the Evansville Hospital calling from the morgue."

"Yes, this is Gary Schneider speaking. I'm the owner of the funeral home."

"We have the foot of Mr. Sutton. It has just been amputated. It is red-bagged and waiting for you to pick it up. It will be in the morgue."

I thanked the morgue attendant for calling and then asked my younger brother Jerel to go on that run.

"Why in the hell do I always get the shit work around here?"

"Because I'm the owner and the boss," I said. "If you don't like what I ask you to do, simply find a job that pleases you."

"Hell, Gary, that's always your answer. You know how to get out of everything," he yelled as he walked out the door to go to the hospital.

"What if Lafe doesn't let me put that foot in his freezer?" Jerel asked.

"Jerel, just pull up and go through the service door in the back. He leaves that door unlocked during the day. He'll never know the difference until it's all said and done. Then it'll be too late. Just tell Judy at the reception desk what I told you to do only after you do it!"

When Jerel arrived at the clinic, he tucked the red-bagged foot under his arm as if it were a bowling ball. He

told me he was determined for no one to see him. He said he was not about to answer questions. Once he refrigerated the foot, and then told Judy what he'd done, she shook with laughter. Then, wiping the smile off her face, she seriously said, "Lafe is going to kill Gary. He'll probably kill him by hitting him upside the head with that frozen foot the next time Gary walks through this door."

When Jerel returned to the funeral home, he told me what Judy said. I called the clinic and joked with her for a few minutes. Then I told her to book Lafe for lunch the following day. "I'd better smooth things over, Judy. So I'll pick him up about noon tomorrow unless he calls and tells me otherwise."

When I entered the clinic the next day, he gave me that "if looks could kill" expression. Already exhausted from having worked cattle earlier that morning, he didn't appear to be in the best of moods. There he stood, his thin frame doused in cow shit, pretty much from head to toe. His brownish-red hair had been blown back by the wind. While removing his glasses to rub his tired-looking eyes, he said, "Schneider, you go wait for me in the back room. Once I get cleaned up, you and I are going to talk."

I could tell he was in one of those moods. He was going to act angry, but I knew he really wasn't. He was going to have his fun chiding me, but I knew he'd still leave that foot in the freezer.

As Judy was laughing and I was trying to figure exactly what he planned to do, he entered the pharmacy room in the back. The pharmacy was off-limits to clients.

"I've done a lot for you in my lifetime boy! I take care of your Thoroughbreds for free. I helped build your barn and your fence out at the farm. You name it, I've done it," he said in a forceful manner, trying to keep that grin off his face. "But that fucking foot has got to go. I don't even know if this is legal. It could be a scandal, you know. I can read the headlines now: 'Local Veterinarian Stores Body Parts in Freezer.'"

"Look, Lafe," I said. "I still owe you for having to bury that damned cat. What could be worse than Prissy's funeral? You don't have to do anything. Your freezer is doing all the work, and it's not complaining. Besides, Mr. Sutton won't last long, and the foot'll soon be gone."

"You'd better hope so, Schneider. Because I refuse to even walk in that back room while it's in there. I can't stand the thought."

After we'd argued back and forth a bit, we went to Gene's Restaurant for lunch, and Jane, my favorite waitress, served us.

"Gary, why aren't you working today? You got your jeans on. How unusual not to see you all suited up. Dr. Nichols, I've seen Gary and the funeral home crew a lot lately, but I haven't seen much of you."

"Well, I've been busy," Lafe said. "But you'll be seeing more of me than you will of Gary in the future, because I'm going to kill this kid."

"Kid! Gary, how old are you?" Jane asked.

"Twenty-eight."

"And, Doc, how old are you?"

"Thirty-eight, going on a hundred," he said.

"Well, then I guess in that case you can call Gary a kid," she said, laughing. "What'll it be today, guys?"

"How about pickled pigs' feet?" Lafe said, chuckling. He was determined to work the word foot in at every available opportunity. "Or, what about a foot-long hotdog?"

I laughed until tears streamed down my face, and so did Lafe. Although I usually let Jane in on my "inside" jokes, this time I couldn't. She was stymied as to why we were acting so stupid, so she left our table.

"Well, do you think I stuck my foot in my mouth this time?" Lafe continued to joke. "You know, I've been thinking. Aren't Mr. Sutton's other leg and foot pretty much shot, too?" he asked me.

"Probably. Why?"

"Because, if they ever try to sue me for freezing his foot, Mr. Sutton won't have a leg to stand on, will he?"

"Come on, now, Lafe." I was almost in hysterics. "I've got to stop laughing. This is killing me."

When we'd gotten back to the clinic, as Lafe was getting out of my car before I returned to the funeral home,

he said, "Schneider, I will get you back for this. I don't know how just yet, but I will get you back. Soon!"

Driving home, I wondered what he could do to me. I did, however, manage to quickly block the threat out of my mind until the phone rang the following day:

"Is this Mr. Schneider?"

"Yes it is. How may I help you?"

"Mr. Schneider, this is Kimberly Greene from the Evansville Hospital calling. You came and picked up the foot of a Mr. Sutton yesterday. Or at least you thought you did. But actually, Mr. Schneider, there were two foot amputees yesterday, and our feet got mislabeled. The foot that you have--the foot that was labeled Mr. Sutton--is actually the foot of Mr. Schmidt, from Newburgh. We're terribly sorry for the inconvenience, but we'll need you to bring your foot back."

I told the woman she had to be kidding; I truly believed she was. Lafe Nichols thinks he has me, but I'm not going to be so gullible to fall for this ploy, I told myself. I'll just throw this gal a curve and have her fess up, I thought:

"Well, Mrs. Greene if you'll give me your extension number and your title, I will call you back to verify this call." I used my authoritative tone. "You know, unfortunately funeral homes are often the culprits of some pretty crude jokes. So we don't go on any call until we've verified its validity."

Feeling good about what I'd told her, knowing I'd force her to tell me this was a prank, she said, "Oh, I understand, sir. I don't blame you. My extension number is 456, and you can reach me in the morgue until 4 this afternoon."

"Thank you very much," I said. "I'll call back shortly."

Laughing all the way to the bookshelf, I reached for my Evansville phone book and looked up the Evansville Hospital. I called the hospital's general information line and asked who was working the morgue.

"Mrs. Greene is on duty today, sir. Would you like me to ring for her?" the hospital operator asked.

"Yes. Please do."

I was so shocked I could hardly talk when the same voice--the Mrs. Greene voice--answered the telephone.

"It is you," I said in amazement. "This is really the truth. You guys really did get the feet mixed up. I must ask you, though, how can you tell one foot from another?"

"It's real easy," she said, "when one is a left foot and the other a right."

I kindly explained to the pathology assistant that I didn't feel I should bring the foot to the hospital. Let's face it, I told Mrs. Greene, I'm not the one that made the mistake. You are. I don't get paid one red cent for hauling feet around. And I don't get paid one red cent for

freezing a foot. But you do get paid for surgery, so you bring the foot to me if you want the other foot back.

She agreed. But first, of course, Jerel had to go to the Veterinary Medical Center to get the wrong foot out of the freezer. I wasn't about to tell the hospital that we froze our foot at a veterinary clinic. As Jerel arrived, only Judy and Lafe were at work. Fortunately, for Jerel's sake, there were no clients up front. When Jerel went through the door, Lafe and Judy began to tease him just like they tease me. Jerel had a smirky grin on his face that he couldn't erase. But rather than speak, he silently walked to the freezer, opened the door, removed the foot, and packed it up front as if it were a sack of potatoes.

"You've got to be kidding me," Lafe said in disbelief. "Mr. Sutton died that quickly?"

"No," Jerel replied. "We just got the wrong foot." Now Lafe was convinced that we were teasing him. Jerel assured him, however, we were totally serious.

"This is unreal. The hospital mixes up the feet? I'm not believing what I'm seeing!"

Leaving Judy and Lafe completely mystified, Jerel returned to Rudy-Rowland with his foot. Shortly after, there was a knock at the rear entrance of the funeral home. As Jerel opened the office door and stepped outside, there

stood a young man in his mid-20s with a red bag under his arm.

"Uh, you guys missing a foot?" he said humorously.
"Because if you are, we found an extra."

We all laughed. Then we exchanged feet. Then Jerel went back to the clinic and froze the real Mr. Sutton foot. It was about a year later when Mr. Sutton died. As we promised the family, we did remove the foot from the freezer and, yes, we buried it at "the foot" of the casket.

That was three years ago.

Recently, though, I was reminded that I did bury a foot. While having lunch with Lafe, I was asked, how many funerals we ended up with last year.

"Well, let me see." I paused to figure. Since we don't count infant funerals, and since we don't consider a ship-in--a casketed body forwarded from another funeral home--as a complete funeral, I was subtracting some numbers from my total.

"O.K.," I said, "We had about 82 complete funerals and" I was about to say "seven ship-ins and two baby funerals." But I was interrupted.

"Yeah, yeah, Gary, I know," Lafe said with a smile on his face. "You had 82 complete funerals, and I'll bet you

buried a couple of feet, one or two arms, a leg, and a hand
last year, too. Right?"

Dying Days

This time last year I heard the Batesville casket truck arrive outside my upstairs window. My eyes darted from the casket truck to my next-door neighbor's white-brick home. There, I saw Steve Martin sitting on a step--elbows to knees, hands to chin--staring, gazing at the truck. His two children, Kate, then-7, and Will, 4, were bouncing about the yard tossing leaves at one another, completely innocent and protected from what was going on around them. However, this special-order delivery could not go unnoticed by Steve and me.

As the driver opened the double doors at the rear of the truck, Steve's stare seemed more intense, and cold chills raced down my spine. Finally, I could see it--a hand-polished, solid-cherry casket that glistened as the rays of sun beamed and danced from its wood-grain. It was a beautiful casket ordered for a beautiful woman. Steve's wife, Libby, had been battling a brain tumor for three years. She had already had two surgeries, and doctors told Steve his wife had only a short time to live.

As I watched two men roll the casket across the parking lot and into my storage area, my mind traced back to those special times I'd spent with Libby. She always offered me an enjoyable next-door escape from my hectic and traumatic

business. Over some herbal tea or a fine cup of her gourmet coffee, she and I would sit at her kitchen table and talk. We'd talk about my business or about her businesses that she'd given up. We'd talk about politics and farming and friends and neighbors. Then we'd often launch into deep, philosophical chats. Libby would generally let me pick the topics, then she'd chime in with remarkable comments. Not only was she brilliant, she was beautiful, too. She had sandy-blond hair that stopped at her shoulders. Forever bright-eyed she had tall, nicely arched cheek bones and refined facial features. She was radiant and would catch most any man's eye at a formal evening event. But when she would dash out for the paper early mornings in her robe, she'd look as fresh and fragile as a tulip in springtime. She was the daughter of a prominent farmer and the wife of a fine photographer. She had practiced law and was owner/operator of an outstanding gourmet restaurant. But she gave up her law practice and sold her restaurant to stay home with her two children. She moved her culinary creativity from her restaurant to her residence. Just about every time she'd cook something new, she'd call across to the funeral home and invite me over to sample. Her only request was that I be honest--did I like her new creation or not? Quite honestly, she never prepared anything I didn't like. Often, before returning across the street, she and me would make plans for her family and me to attend a movie or a musical or a special dinner. Then Libby would mark it on

her calendar as I'd tease with Kate and Will. Just before I'd leave, she'd give me a warm hug and ask me to come back after 5 o'clock to tell Steve what we'd planned for him. He'd laugh in amazement and sometimes act as if he didn't want to go. Truthfully, though, he confessed that he looked forward to our outings. If Libby and I didn't keep enough "fun stuff" marked on the calendar to suit him, we'd hear about it.

I also reminisced about those summer evenings when we'd all grill either at the funeral home or the Martin's home. Often we'd eat some of Steve's homemade ice cream and then take a long walk on a dark, calm night.

Before, when I'd look out my office window on a pretty day, there'd be Libby in the yard reading to or playing with her children. In early spring, she and the kids would be planting flowers or painting the porch or playing with Alice, the family dog. In the winter she, Steve, and the kids would build a snowman, and then Libby would dress him with pretty scarves and hats. In the summer she'd climb in the little duckie pool with her kids--and sometimes Alice would hop in, too. In the fall, the whole family would rake leaves. But first, Libby and Steve would gather a huge pile and let Kate and Will pounce on top of it and plunge into the bottom. Then they'd toss leaves on top as the children would yell, "Mommie, Daddy, cover us up."

But on this fall day as my eyes refocused into Steve and Libby's yard, the leaves were piling up outside and no

one really cared. Libby was bedfast. Steve and I had just set up a hospital bed in their bedroom. We had gone across the river to Evansville to a convalescent store to buy adult diapers. Though he later shopped in Henderson, it was just so difficult the first time to tell his friends at the local pharmacy that he had to buy diapers for his 39-year-old wife.

Fluid had filled her eyes and swelled them shut. By November she could no longer see and could barely hear. Although her mind was waning, too, there were days when she could communicate. Once December arrived, for instance, I remember sitting with her and telling her that we were about to put our lights on the outside tree.

"How long have I been stuck in this darned bed?" she asked me.

"Since September."

"That's almost four months, you know ... a long time," she said. "Is it cold outside now?"

I told her it was. Then she asked me to help her shop for Steve and the kids' Christmas. I asked her if she'd like to sing some Christmas songs and she squeezed my hands. I had to battle to hold back the tears; I had to fight to keep my voice from cracking. We sang "Dashing Through the Snow," "Jingle Bells," and several other oldies. Then, Steve bought the kids home from school, and they were all amazed to hear her singing. Steve and I decorated the house for Christmas. We hung fresh greenery around the mantel in

Libby's bedroom, hoping she could at least smell her way into the spirit of Christmas since she could no longer see or hear very well.

Libby's parents would sit with her during the day. My Mother and another woman who works for me, Cora Sheffer, would cross the street each day, too, to help bathe and feed Libby. Steve finally quit work. He would not consent to Hospice--he wanted to care for her himself, with only his friends and family involved. Steve's mother had recently died. She had Alzheimer's for about five years. His father came over every night, but he had to double up and do both his and Steve's work at Martin Studio of Photography during the day. Steve's sister came from Lexington as often as she could.

My Mom, Cora, and his family would provide the necessary help and support during the day. Usually, I'd go over at night and help him feed Libby. I'd clean up the kitchen while he'd put the kids to bed. Then Steve and I would sit and talk. Often, I'd just listen. There was really nothing else I could do--that's what hurt me so. We talked openly about Libby's death. We carefully planned her funeral. She wanted us to. Libby was an open, honest woman. I remember, for instance, when I first learned she had a brain tumor. I was scared to face her, but she made it easy. She broke the ice as she said one day, "Gary, you, Steve, and I used to always look at your new caskets. But you never ask me to do that anymore. Why not?"

"Why, Libby," I responded, "you can see the caskets any time you want."

That was Libby's way, I guess, of letting me know I was more uncomfortable with the situation than she was. From that morning on, when she'd see the hearse pull in or out, she'd ask--just as she did before her illness--who died. "Anybody I know?"

Once she was bedfast, mid-morning coffee seemed to perk her up a bit. After her morning bath, she'd ask for me. I was her little "coffee man," she'd say. I'd raise her bed and gently press the cup to her lips. Instantly, she'd tell me whether her coffee was too hot or too cold. Then she'd let me know whether she'd decided on sugar or milk. Day by day there seemed less of Libby living and more of her body dying, fading away. By March she was nonrespondent, other than a whimper here, a gurgle there. No one knew why her suffering had to continue. Dr. David Vickers visited her home weekly, and he became a close friend. Quite frequently, after he'd check on Libby, he'd come over to the funeral home and take me to lunch. When he'd stop by in the evenings, he and Steve and I would chat for hours. He'd explain to me how he'd hurt each time he'd lose a patient; I'd tell him how I hurt each time I directed the funeral of a close friend. We understood one another.

Finally, in late April, Libby had stopped eating. Dr. Vickers said she'd die within a few weeks. And we hoped that she would die soon. Everyone was exhausted, including

Libby. No longer would she respond when we'd work with her. I'd squeeze her hand, but she wouldn't squeeze back. I'd kiss her cheek, but she wouldn't smile back. Kate and Will would only go up to her bed when Steve would insist. To the children, Libby was already dead. She couldn't hug them, hold them, talk to them, or read to them. She wasn't "Mommie" anymore. So all we could do was wait patiently until she drew her last breath.

On Wednesday, May 6th, Steve came running across the street, and my funeral director, Dale Powell, happened to be gazing out the window.

"Something's happened," Dale said to me. "Steve's running this way."

"Libby's gone," Steve said to us. That was all he could say.

My mother, Cora, and I followed him across the road. Steve called Libby's parents, and then he went to pick the kids up from school. Since the casket was to be closed, the family had agreed to spend some time with Libby at home before we moved her across the street. Mom and Cora put her burial robe on her, and I combed her hair and put blush on her cheeks. First, Steve's parents arrived and they spent time alone with their daughter. Then Steve and the children returned, and they spent time with Libby. Steve hugged and thanked each of us for being there for him. And Kate and Will just squeezed us and cried and cried. We all cried, too. Once Steve and his family went into the living room,

Dale and I picked Libby up, placed her on the stretcher and, with the hearse, transported her across the street and placed her in her casket. It was difficult for me to close the lid of her casket, knowing it would never be opened again.

Her funeral was at 3:30 p.m. that Friday, and we had a quite large crowd. At the end of the service I entered the chapel to get Steve, Kate and Will. With a harpist playing softly in the background, four-year old Will said loudly to me as he reached for me to pick him up, "Gary, now we go to the cemetery to bury Mommie. I don't want to do that."

Tears streaming down my face, I said, "Will, I don't want to bury Mommie, either. So it's O.K. for us to cry."

What Is Life?

When I bought a funeral home, it changed my life. It was almost on a whim that I nuked newspapering and dug my way into the funeral profession. It was almost overnight my newfound career taught me that I must live, love, and laugh--that I must enjoy life--before I can bury the dead.

But, always before, when I'd imagine a funeral director, I'd see in my mind an old bug-eyed man. I'd see a stilted, stern, serious-minded 'sir' that the children would run from and the elderly would pay little attention. The profession itself was disgusting, I thought. It was morbid, and my mind made pictures of hoses and tubes and blood and torn-up dead people that were rebuilt to look like something straight out of the horror movies or out of wax museums. I couldn't give an undertaker a simple handshake from worrying about where his hands had been and what they had touched. I figured those who'd enter the profession could be only eerie, creepy, cold, and crude. A funeral director to me was a tall, lanky, and downright mean looking person who had a devastating past or a worthless existence.

Today, however, I know the truth! The truth is that a good, sincere funeral director must put others before himself. The truth is that a good funeral director can never lose those important elements of character, like

compassion and patience and understanding and concern and dedication. The truth is that a funeral director must fight to figure the meaning, the significance of life before a clear understanding of death can be ingested.

Before I became a funeral director, I spent less time sharing in life's wonders and more time fretting over trivial, unessential matters. Before, I'd concentrate on schedules and deadlines and a formatted, regimented daily agenda. Before, I'd share that great American dream of achieving success and power and wealth and prestige. Before, I failed to realize that I had to find some peace, serenity, and self-respect inside of me before I had the right to look outside of me and demand acceptance and self-respect from others.

I'm now learning that life's happiness of which we all speak is not found--it's made. Sometimes I must force myself to look through the clouds to see a beam of bright light. Sometimes I must continue plowing through the rain with a certainty in my heart that the sun will soon shower down bright beams which will again leave me feeling warm and good inside. Sometimes--no matter how busy I think I am--I must force myself to stop and pluck a petal from a rose and appreciate its beauty, delight in its sweet redolence, and acknowledge that even this small petal has a purpose and a creator. As I gaze through my office window I see magnolia leaves that stay green and display signs of life even in the coldest of days. Like those leaves, I believe I must strive

to show similar signs of life during those coldest, darkest days of my existence. For, it is those dearest days of winter that force me to notice the beautiful contrast of those green leaves outside my window. But, in those green, plush days of spring and summer, the beauty of those green leaves is camouflaged and therefore goes unnoticed.

Likewise, I realize I can be thankful that I am a funeral director. I realize that never should I be ashamed of my profession, but ought instead share its values with others. For--just as it takes the sour for us to savor the sweet--sometimes it takes the threat of tears for us to share the smiles and the laughter. Perhaps, if we truly wish to understand a person or a theory or a concept, we ought first consider the opposite. For it is in sadness that we learn to appreciate the happy times. It is in death that we learn to appreciate life. These statements, my friends, are more than just words placed on paper. For, each time I witness a visitation at Rudy-Rowland Funeral Home, between the tears I see smiles and hear laughter as family members talk about and reflect upon those happy and joyous occasions spent with that loved one who has died.

It is at this moment that I realize I must spend quality time with friends and family. And it is at this moment I am ever so thankful that in my younger years I'm allowed to begin formulating in my mind an answer to that otherwise impossible and queer question, "What is life?"