

**All Old Clothes**  
**By Anthony King**

My mother looks fat in her coffin. Her head is tilted forward on the satin pillow so that all of her chins are thrusting upward, and the formaldehyde has her bloated to where she's just a little bigger than she should be. It's not ridiculous, just swollen enough to make you wonder, "My god, was she really that fat?"

Before she went into surgery, she asked my father to tilt her head back in the coffin if she died "so she'd look pretty for the wake." Now Dad and I are jostling for arm-holds to lift her dead body and shimmy it towards the closed end of the coffin so we can angle her head back on the coffin pillow and alleviate some of the chin doubling. She's very heavy, and since all of her blood's been removed, her skin feels clammy and slick, like a room-temperature oyster. I touched her in the hospital right after she died but there was still the ghost of warmth. Now it doesn't feel like skin at all.

We're working to shimmy her and I keep thinking that if we push too hard, or make some kind of sudden movement, she might pop and gush embalming fluid into the bottom of the coffin. How would we explain that? My father, my brother, and I, greeting all those sympathetic mourners, trying to pretend the deflated,

wet corpse in the box beside us is completely status quo. "*She wanted it this way!*"

But we're not making much progress. Apparently coffins aren't made for bodies to be slid around inside of them, so we push her down as best we can, tilt her head, and it tilts right back. We shimmy again, tilt, and her head creeps forward, the chins slowly rising from her neck like mountain ranges at the dawn of time. Here I am in a funeral home, my arms wrapped around my newly dead mother, and I'm thinking about the dawn of time. Death is so dramatic.

If someone walked in right now, they would definitely think we were trying to steal my mom's body - or have sex with it. Dad decides we should give up. "Sorry dear, that's the best we can do." He says it like they're sharing a private joke that no one else would understand but that they think is hilarious. Then he walks away and stares at the wallpaper.

My brother, Duke, is at the other end of the room entertaining my cousin, Jerry's, blonde daughters, four and seven, who think everything he does is the funniest thing that has ever been done by anyone ever. They clearly shouldn't be laughing so loud and so often in a funeral home, but the person who'd tell them to shut up is lying dead in front of me.

Aunt Nancy got here early this morning and did Mom's make-up and hair. Her eye shadow seems thicker than I ever remember

her wearing it, but it's probably good to look extra beautiful when you're the centerpiece. She's wearing the same blue dress she wore that day I told her she looked pretty and she burst into tears. It was a few years ago. I had come into her bedroom while she was getting ready to go to church, and I gave her an off-handed compliment. She broke down crying - ridiculous sobs - and she told me, "When you get married someday, you tell your wife you love her every day, every single day."

Donald Bradley (who told us to call him "Mr. B") runs the funeral home. Mr. B inherited it from his father when he died, which must have been a hell of a first day at work. He tells Duke and the girls to "keep it down or take it outside." They opt to stay and are snickering on their bench, alternately poking each other and covering their mouths. The oldest one thinks this is especially hilarious. She laughs and bounces, her face bright red, but she never makes a sound. She has clearly not only played this game before - she is a master. Duke sees me watching them and crosses over.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know."

We stand in front of our mother like people stand in front of a fireplace. There have been so many of these long periods of silence in the last 48 hours - tense stretches when two

people stand close to each other but don't speak because they either don't know what to say or saying it is too horrible. My eyes blur, not from tears, but because for some reason I keep having to remind myself to blink. Blink. Blink. Speak:

"She looks fat."

"She is fat."

We laugh and it feels good.

"It's weird that she's dead." Is it weird that she's dead or weird that she died? Die. Died. Dying. It's such a small word for something so definite. Or maybe it's exactly the right size word for something so brief. You always hear about people who are "dying," sometimes for years and years, but they're not actually moribund, they're *fighting, praying, making* amends. We *DIE* - big D, big I, big E - in an instant, and we're gone.

Duke thumps the side of the casket. "How much longer do we have to stay here?"

Mr. B and my dad come over. It's time to go into Mr. B's office and pay the bill for the coffin and the funeral service and all the other things that no one has any desire to itemize. We chose the sleek, aerodynamic, stainless-steel coffin my mother will be buried in from all the other coffins in the showroom because it is reddish/pink and Mom liked reddish/pink. And because it is neither the cheapest coffin (which would be embarrassing!) nor the most expensive (which would be

ridiculous!). Mr. B outlines an installment plan for the whole shebang at a low, low interest rate, which he is very excited about, but which my father nixes immediately. Dad never buys anything on credit.

Then Mr. B tells us a "hilarious" story about a man whose wife had died a few weeks ago. When this "man" started to write the check to pay for the funeral, he broke down sobbing and had to stop. Then he collected himself and said, "I'm sorry, I always cry when I spend this much money."

We smile but refuse to offer the socially-required courtesy laugh. Dad peruses the bill and I read, reread and read again the framed certificate on the wall behind Mr. B's head.

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I wonder if Mr. B learned his story of the cheapskate crying man at a convention in some horribly-bland city where funeral directors gather to sample new technologies, drink themselves blind at endless happy hours, sexually harass the one or two female funeral directors who must exist in the world, and listen to awkwardly-tailored experts in the field of the funereal arts share bits of wisdom like, "When you force

grieving people to overpay for your services, it's best to ease the unbearable atmosphere with a humorous anecdote. You'll find a very, very funny one about a weeping penny-pincher on page 140 of your workbook.

National Funeral Directors  
DONALD P.  
excellence  
Embalming

My Dad asks why we will need two cars to take us to the funeral and Mr. B gives some sort of answer, but I'm too tired to listen. My throat is savagely sore from tension and snot. I force myself to swallow.

Funeral  
P.  
balm

Back out by my dead mother, Jerry is using her as a visual aid to explain death to his daughters, four and seven.

THE FOUR YEAR OLD: So she won't wake up?

THE SEVEN YEAR OLD: No, stupid. It's just like MeeMaw.

JERRY: Kelly! Stop it! Jess wasn't alive when MeeMaw passed.  
(to THE SEVEN YEAR OLD, softly)  
No, she won't wake up.

THE FOUR YEAR OLD: Why?

THE SEVEN YEAR OLD: Cause she's dead!! Dead! Dead! Dead!  
DEAD!

There's nothing like hearing a seven-year-old say a word four times in a sing-song voice to make it meaningless. I mean, she's right. My mother is dead! Dead! Dead! Dead! DEAD! Now, who wants some ice cream? Seriously, this funeral needs a pony.

Jerry notices us in the doorway and immediately ushers his kids out of the room, flashing his eyes towards us, his mouth taut with both embarrassment and anger. I watch them exit, rolling the word "DEAD" around on my tongue. Big D, big E, big A, big D.

The seven-year-old looks back at us screaming, "Why do we have to leave!?"

I choose to hate her. I hate my seven-year-old second cousin who I have only met once before today. And she will never know.