Mortuary Science

When I met Bob, he told me I'd make a great funeral home director; though I pressed, he couldn't say why. I said— *Thank you.* There is a solace to being told who you are.

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My first funeral was for an old lady I never met. I was seven. It was spring. The priest read from the Bible. I huddled close to my aunt's side as they hovered her over the open pit in the ground. What must have been the breeze moved the clothes around her belly. I repeated, "But she's alive! Look—she's breathing!"

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Lesson 1: Define "Mortuary." Abstractly, it is a debt or a gift. It is easier to see death

as a science. So—call it a room: a temporary reception for a corpse.

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My third funeral was when I was 25, for a friend who died young. The funeral: Greek Orthodox. When his mother approached his coffin before they closed it for the last time, she clung to his body. A few men had to pull her off. Like all mothers, I imagined my own son.

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Lesson 2: To become a funeral director, you must apprentice. An undertaker is another word for mortician. An undertaker is one who embarks on, or takes part in, some business enterprise.

It can also be one who undertakes the preparation of a literary work (though that is rare). What is a coffin, really? A box, a chest, a case? A coffin can be a long flower bed the sides of which are not parallel,

the casing of a chrysalis,

the calyx of a flower—the whorl of leaves forming the outer envelope

in which the flower is enclosed

while

still

in bud.

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Lesson 3: The three goals of embalming are sanitization, presentation, and preservation, with restoration being an important additional factor in some instances.

To embalm is to

impregnate a (dead) body with spices,

to preserve it from decay.

To preserve from oblivion, to keep in sweet and honored remembrance.

They say it helps you grieve to look at the dead loved one last time

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Lesson 4: cossetting (applying any sort of cosmetic or substance to the best viewable areas

of the corpse for the purpose of enhancing its appearance).

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My second funeral was for my uncle. Suicide. Restoration needed. The funeral should have been a closed casket. They made him melted wax. After we buried my uncle, I could think only of how cold he'd be in the ground.

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Lesson 5: Hearse and Chapel are verbs

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The fourth and sixth funerals I didn't attend: a best friend's and a cousin's.

My fifth funeral was for a co-worker's celebration of life,

I cried even though I barely knew her.

When we walked up to the urn someone said, "So this is Marilyn."

Lesson 6: Push the Urns. Historically, an urn can be a source of a stream, a bottle or vase for

holding tears, the constellation of Aquarius, the spore-case or capsule of urn-mosses,

to cause pain or anguish to (a person); to pain, irritate.