

# The Near Departed

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THE SMALL MAN OPENED the door and stepped in out of the glaring sunlight. He was in his early fifties, a spindly, plain looking man with receding gray hair. He closed the door without a sound, then stood in the shadowy foyer, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the change in light. He was wearing a black suit, white shirt, and black tie. His face was pale and dry-skinned despite the heat of the day.

When his eyes had refocused themselves, he removed his Panama hat and moved along the hallway to the office, his black shoes soundless on the carpeting.

The mortician looked up from his desk. "Good afternoon," he said.

"Good afternoon." The small man's voice was soft.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, you can," the small man said.

The mortician gestured to the arm chair on the other side of his desk. "Please."

The small man perched on the edge of the chair and set the Panama hat on his lap. He watched the mortician open a drawer and remove a printed form.

"Now," the mortician said. He withdrew a black pen from its onyx holder. "Who is the deceased?" he asked gently.

"My wife," the small man said.

The mortician made a sympathetic noise. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Yes." The small man gazed at him blankly.

"What is her name?" the mortician asked.

"Marie," the small man answered quietly. "Arnold."

The mortician wrote the name. "Address?" he asked.

The small man told him.

"Is she there now?" the mortician asked.

"She's there," the small man said.

The mortician nodded.

"I want everything perfect," the small man said. "I want the best you have."

"Of course," the mortician said. "Of course."

"Cost is unimportant," said the small man. His throat moved as he swallowed dryly. "Everything is unimportant now. Except for this."

"I understand."

"She always had the best. I saw to it."

"Of course."

"There'll be many people," said the small man. "Everybody loved her. She's so beautiful. So young. She has to have the very best. You understand?"

"Absolutely," the mortician reassured him. "You'll be more than satisfied, I guarantee you."

"She's so beautiful," the small man said. "So young."

"I'm sure," the mortician said.

The small man sat without moving as the mortician asked him questions. His voice did not vary in tone as he spoke. His eyes blinked so infrequently the mortician never saw them doing it.

When the form was completed, the small man signed and stood. The mortician stood and walked around the desk. "I guarantee you you'll be satisfied," he said, his hand extended.

The small man took his hand and gripped it momentarily. His palm was dry and cool.

"We'll be over at your house within the hour," the mortician told him.

"Fine," the small man said.

The mortician walked beside him down the hallway.

"I want everything perfect for her," the small man said. "Nothing but the very best."

"Everything will be exactly as you wish."

"She deserves the best." The small man stared ahead. "She's so beautiful," he said. "Everybody loved her. Everybody. She's so young and beautiful."

"When did she die?" the mortician asked.

The small man didn't seem to hear. He opened the door and stepped into the sunlight, putting on his Panama hat. He was halfway to his car when he replied, a faint smile on his lips, "As soon as I get home."