I'll Be Seeing You

Margaret Mayhew

Chapter 1

My mother was buried on a bitterly cold day in mid-February, 1992. It had snowed on the day that she died and a hard frost had followed - so hard and so lasting that there was a problem about digging the grave. The funeral director was smoothly apologetic. Unfortunately, arrangements would take rather longer than usual. The cemetery was experiencing difficulties; the grave-diggers, faced with earth as hard as iron, were being unco-operative.

My brother and I sat in front of his desk while he explained this to us. While he talked, I noticed that the previously old-fashioned funeral parlour had undergone a complete makeover since my father's death eleven years before. On that occasion, I remembered sombre furniture, sober colour, sepia photos of horse-drawn hearses, black horses with black head-plumes, and pall-bearers with top hats swathed in black veils. Those photos had disappeared and in their place hung a large, framed declaration, a professional testimony in black, gilt-edged letters: DIGNITY. PERSONAL, CARING SERVICE AT ALL TIMES. PRIVATE CHAPEL OF REST. FUNERALS COMPLETELY FURNISHED.

The Dickensian decor had been updated to silver-and-grey striped wallpaper, fitted carpeting, venetian blinds and modern office furniture, while the elderly undertaker had been superseded by this much younger funeral director, smartly dressed and seated behind an Ikea desk. He slid an open folder across its shiny surface towards us and revolved it deftly for our inspection. Inside there were coloured photographs of coffins made in different styles and woods. Solid oak, he informed us, was the best, the most durable and, naturally, the most expensive. For that reason, it was normally only chosen for burials, together with handles of solid brass - also rather expensive. But there were more reasonably priced options; he turned a page, indicating other photographs with a well-manicured forefinger. Oak veneer, he assured us, was considered a perfectly acceptable alternative for burials, as well as half the price - and the handles were often what was known in the trade as brassed.

"Brassed?"

"Plastic covered with brass, Mrs Porter. Particularly suitable for cremations, which are becoming increasingly the norm - what with the shortage of land and the change in people's lifestyles. Though, of course, here we're concerned with a burial."

His manner was brisk now that we had got down to business; quite matter-of-fact. He might have been selling refrigerators, or washing machines or any other consumer durable. He must have decided that this was the most effective way to deal with bereaved families and achieve the painful decisions necessary to dispose of the loved one decently, efficiently and quickly. And for the same reasons that any good salesman targets the woman rather than the man, he had twitched the folder

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slightly in my direction, away from my brother, and addressed his remarks to me. He turned another page and flicked at the only photo dismissively.

"This one is made of pine and the cheapest. It's really only used in cases where there are no known relatives and the local council bears the cost."

"Paupers' funerals?"

"Exactly." He went back to the beginning and the solid oak. I fumbled for my reading glasses and took a closer look before I shifted the book back in Drew's direction. "Which do you think?"

He peered at the photos. "Up to you, Ju."

The funeral director said, "The raised-lid design is very popular."

"Is it possible to see one? I mean, do you have samples here?"

He hesitated. "As it happens we do have one of that particular style on the premises - in our private chapel here - but I'm afraid there's a lady resting in it. Of course, you're quite welcome to view, if you have no objections."

In my state of shock and grief, I had a ludicrous vision of some exhausted passer-by clambering into a spare coffin for a lie-down. And then I understood him. "No, no . . . that won't be necessary."

The decision was finally made. Anything other than solid oak was really unthinkable and I felt my mother would have preferred the simplest style without the fancy lid. And solid brass handles - the plainest design. The black folder was closed and returned immediately to a desk drawer; perhaps the funeral director had also learned that, if not, the woman in question might start changing her mind. Again, he looked at me, rather than my brother.

"Will you wish there to be floral tributes - other than from the close family? Many people prefer not. The trend these days is very much towards donations to some favourite cause instead. It can be specified in the newspaper announcement."

There was a black urn containing white plastic lilies placed on the window sill behind him. For some reason, I found them even more distressing than the coffin photos or the lady resting close by.

"Our mother adored flowers. The more people send, the better."

"Yes, of course, Mrs Porter. It's entirely as you prefer.' Another desk drawer was opened, another folder placed on the desk, turned round and slid towards us. I read the words on its cover: The Flower Basket: Sympathy Guide. "We find this local florist very satisfactory. As you will see, they offer some most attractive and original arrangements - the old-style wreaths have rather gone out of fashion these days. I assume that you and Dr Byrne will wish your own

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personal tributes to be placed on the coffin?”

I looked at more colour photographs - this time of flowers contorted into a bewildering variety of shapes: cushions, crosses, hearts, teardrops, teddy bears, toy trains, anchors, harps, guitars, open books, gates of heaven . . . The blooms all looked perfect specimens of their kind - presumably real, but just as depressing as the plastic lilies.

The funeral director said encouragingly, "The tributes would be delivered here on the morning of the funeral and we will take care of the rest for you. We offer a complete package, you know. The announcement in the press, limousines, service sheets, pall-bearers, even making the arrangements with a priest or minister, if necessary - not so in your case, of course, but the majority of people these days are not regular churchgoers. You'd be surprised at how many never go at all, but they still want a religious service of some kind. We arrange everything for them. It takes a lot of the stress out of the whole sad experience.”

"Is that such a good thing? Isn't stress rather a natural part of it?”

He said blandly, "We find our clients appreciate the support, Mrs Porter.”

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