

Today is Monday, October 10, 2005. The sky is blanketed

WAKING SUZANNE

Seeking a new life
away from
the family funeral home.

BY CRYSTAL HAMLETT

with what seems to be one gloomy, gray cloud stretched out as far as you can see. Mist floats through the air. The weather is eerie, the type you would relate to death and graveyards. I pull into Loving funeral home at the same time as Suzanne. I have entered this building once before. Through the front entrance I came to visit a friend one last time. This time I enter through the back door; the atmosphere is completely different. The front side is the stage, where visitations and services for the families of the deceased are held. The back of the building is where the production occurs. Today, the stage is lifeless or perhaps *deathless* would make more sense. There are no visitations or services scheduled for today.

The back area includes the office, which furnishes a small, twin bed for the employee who stays over night to answer the night calls. "Unfortunately, people die before and after 9-5 and on holidays and weekends," chuckles Suzanne's father, David, and Loving funeral director. The office is set off of the main sitting area also known as the lounge. The lounge is where most of the day is spent when there are no bodies or events in-house. The clustered, multi-purpose room resembles a college dorm room. There is a hand-me-down couch next to the TV, which is always tuned to Dr. Phil, Regis and Kelly, or The View. Across the room is the kitchen area including a fridge, microwave, and a kitchen table. The table is covered with a festive, vinyl Halloween tablecloth. The lack of decoration and the distinctive smell of the dead—embalming chemicals—separate this room from an ordinary college dorm. Right next to the dining area is the prep room where the bodies are prepared for visitation and their burial. The door is closed and a notice is posted on the door warning those who enter about the hazardous chemicals and possible diseases inside. The notice makes a point and I choose not to enter today.

On the walls of the lounge are various

whiteboards including the names of the bodies in-house and services scheduled. There is one mirror in the room, full length, that is mounted on the wall across from the prep room. If the door were open the reflection of the mirror would show embalming fluid next to a lifeless body laid out on the table. Today there is a shopping list hand-written on a Post-It stuck on the mirror. It reads, "Need- body bags, cremation bags, and disaster pouches."

On this particular morning Suzanne, Aunt Debbie, and I spent most of the time moving and arranging caskets. One in particular needed to be loaded on the cart and placed by the door. "There will be a man coming to borrow it," Suzanne says. "How does someone borrow a casket," I ask? Suzanne gets a good laugh out of my response and explains that an undertaker will keep it and return one identical in model and design. Suzanne and I do all of the laborious work, lifting and lugging heavy caskets around. Aunt Debbie, a heavy breather and about 100 pounds overweight, makes for a great task deliberator. Other family members are Granny and David, Suzanne's father and the funeral home's director. Granny pays the bills; Aunt Debbie deals with the families and public announcements like obituaries and funeral programs. Suzanne gets the leftovers, tedious errands, and 'shit jobs.' In one of our interviews she said to me, "I run errands and wake up in the middle of the night to pick up dead people." The harsh reality, disgust, and resentment is evident in her face and voice, despite her attempts to sound sarcastic.

This summer, in a desperate attempt to leave the funeral home and chase her own life dreams, Suzanne applied for a job at a camp. She was hired to work as the camp's film director. She returned at the end of the summer a changed woman. She was away from her family and it forced her to meet people. These people loved life and were interested in Suzanne, the person. They didn't expect her to be anything she didn't want to be. Her relationships with these new friends and the taste of acceptance and success she experienced at camp has given Suzanne more motivation to defy her family's pressures to enroll at mortuary school. Easily thought, tough to act on. Once she is immersed again into a life at the funeral home, will her motivation to leave be strong enough?

The next Monday I enter the funeral home greeted by sounds of laughter, jokes, and unfamiliar voices. There is a funeral today and more workers were called in to supervise and help run the service. Two older men, Fred and Tommy, are sitting at the table in the lounge sharing stories of past funeral services that they have worked before. I introduce myself and they respond, "Ah so you're the new apprentice?" Suzanne signals to my breakfast; her dad bought me a bagel. I sit down

to eat and notice a promotional piece from another funeral home. "Online and drive-thru services are now available!" As we sit around the tacky, Halloween tablecloth David walks in. Before I get a chance to thank him for breakfast he says to me, "You just missed it; I was going to get you to help me put the body in the casket." The look on my face made everyone laugh. Aunt Debbie (Deb) walks in behind him. "Back for another day? It's a beautiful day for a funeral," she chuckles heavily. The weather continues to have that eerie mix of heavy, gray clouds and light mist all week.

The funeral isn't until 2:30 p.m. and it's only 10 a.m. The service will take place in the stage area and will not proceed to the cemetery for the burial. Instead, Suzanne, David, Fred, Tommy, and I will ride to the cemetery to supervise the burial and make sure everything is done properly. Before the service, much work is to be done. Suzanne and I are instructed to pick up and deliver fried chicken platters to the families of other deceased customers. On our way out the door a truck pulls in the reads Hacker Caskets! I take a step to the right and I am relieved when the truck now reads Thacker Caskets! They have come to replace the casket they borrowed from last week.

At Moseberth's Chicken Place in Portsmouth, the cashier and kitchen workers greet Suzanne with familiarity and three large platters of fried chicken. It smells really good, the kind of good that is bad for your health. One worker who seems to know Suzanne offers to help load the chicken into her car; he says, "busy week, I take it." I also carry one platter and set it on my lap. Making the rounds to the houses of the families, I tease Suzanne about eating some of the chicken. She then tells me the story of Fred. Fred used to deliver the chicken but he got caught eating some and he hasn't delivered it since. "I wouldn't be so lucky, they won't fire me," she says. I ask her what she means but she avoids answering. I switch to a lighter subject and ask her how she broke her hand; it has had a blue cast on it since the beginning of our interviews. She tells me, "A casket rolled over it." So much for a lighter subject, and she isn't lying. While loading a casket in to the hearse one day her hand was rolled over. She wasn't allowed to go to the hospital until after the service and funeral.

Back at the funeral home the service is ending and we will be heading for the cemetery soon. First we must check on the other deceased folks in-house (in the side rooms) to make sure they are ready for visitation, should anyone from their families come while we are at the cemetery. The feeling is surreal. I finally get a sense of the business aspect in this industry. This is the job. We are not here to grieve but to do the unsightly work so the families and loved ones can grieve properly and not be stressed over tedious planning details. The dead are on

display. We check make-up, hair, clothing and the position of the bodies, as they lie lifeless in their caskets.

David usually drives the lead car but on this occasion he drives the hearse and I ride with him. On the way to the cemetery he tells me how his dad built and ran Loving funeral home. He admits there are difficult days when distancing himself from the lifeless body before him is hard. Just the other day he had to bury a fourteen-year-old boy. I remember reading that death certificate on my last visit. I understand now the need for dry humor and laughs. In earlier conversations the family would refer to other people by relating them to past burials. Suzanne would get aunt Debbie to remember someone by saying something like, "you remember that lady, we buried her sister." This is a loving family, one that relates to one another, however, with shop talk. Their jobs just happens to be involved with the world of death. I look out the window of the hearse as we pull into the cemetery; there are two hawks attacking a crow. We all have to face death one day, even the birds.

At the cemetery two black men with extremely large arms greet David. They are the vault guys—set up the vault for the casket to be lowered into where it will lie for eternity. David calls me in closer and explains the entire process of the burial. Someone digs the grave, the vault is set in place and the casket lowered into it, and then someone else comes to cover the grave. David tells me that it costs \$800 just to dig and cover the grave. The costs go to the cemetery, the grave placement and the gravediggers.

Fred sits on a nearby tombstone, one leg propped up and begins to recall the story of a recent Jewish service in which all the funeral home workers had to wear yamakas despite their Christian beliefs. In Jewish services, the family stays to watch the casket be buried instead of leaving. Fred chuckles as he continues with the story. While the vault men were lowering the vault into the grave it was discovered that the grave was smaller than the vault. They had to make it fit; they couldn't let the family know there was a problem. The vault was grinding and scraping, even chipping off on the sides. The family never noticed the disturbance and the casket ended up being buried with the vault straps. The two black men remember that service too and they recall how close they were to re-digging the grave in front of the entire grieving Jewish family. They can laugh about it now.

Today, I pull up to the funeral home and head for the back door. I cannot hear the usual laughter coming from the screen door. As I walk in I see everyone sitting at the kitchen table eating and drinking their coffee. The silence is eerie and an unknown sadness fills the building. What is going on?

The whiteboard on the wall shows no funerals or visitations were scheduled but from the looks of the family they were attending their own funeral.

Suzanne and I sit in the office as she types a death certificate for an elderly woman. Her eyes begin to swell. "One year ago today my grandmother died," she whispers. "I'm not supposed to talk about it. It's too painful for everyone." I try to comfort her and remind her she can talk to me. "It's still hard. I never had a moment to grieve properly. At the service, I had to work. We were really close, she was the only one who supported my film directing." Her family wouldn't let her talk about her loss, even to this day. She doesn't want to be in the death business forever. She has dreams of being a film director. She does all kinds of films for church, weddings, and summer camps. The family doesn't recognize film directing as a profession, only funeral directing. As we move back into the kitchen the Halloween tablecloth mocks her sadness. We sit on the couch.

We are alone in the lounge and Suzanne starts to talk freely about her real passion—film. She just returned from a Christian summer camp where she was the staff film director. She becomes alive like I haven't seen her before. All her cynicism washes away and she is reborn for a moment. Her aunt Debbie gets mortuary school applications sent to Suzanne's house. The pressure is hard on her to hurry up and get serious about becoming a funeral director and to stop daydreaming about becoming a film director. Suzanne tells me she throws the applications away when she gets them, before her family sees them. She cannot escape the daily pressures, at home and at work, all the time she is with her family. This summer at camp she was allowed to focus on what she wanted for the first time. Since she has been back life at the funeral home has been bothering her. Before she could pretend it didn't bother her much, but now that she has tasted the life she dreams of she cannot pretend any longer. She tries to get fired daily. The errands that she runs take all day, instead of the hour they should. Her irresponsibility towards her job makes it impossible for the family to give her more important jobs yet they refuse to fire her. So she suffers. She will not abandon her family, but neither will she abandon her dreams.

There is a funeral service today and the staff is getting ready. All the funnies are there, Fred, Tommy, and David. We sit around the kitchen table, still decorated in a Halloween tablecloth despite the arrival of November, and everyone makes the usual pokes at Aunt Debbie, notorious for making others run her errands. Suzanne and I are instructed to fill the gas tank on the lead car. We get in the car and she starts to apologize. "I'm sorry if this car smells bad. Aunt Debbie has

been driving it." I smile and she continues, "She has started using all these herbal soaps and stuff, they smell funny."

When we return from the gas station, we sit alone in the car, talking. Suzanne continues to feel she has to work for her family even though her heart isn't in it. I am about to ask her why when her father, David, walks up to the car. There is bird poop on the car door and window and Suzanne is told to wash it off. She gets the hose out, begins to spray the droppings off the car and says to me straight-faced, "I hate every aspect of this job." I laugh a little and she does too after she realizes the humor of that statement while she washes off the poop.

At the church, Suzanne and I stand outside while the funeral service takes place inside. She tells me that she has chosen to stay with the funeral home because she gets paid salary and she needs the money to save up for film school and a possible move to Nashville for an internship doing the type of film directing she did this past summer in North Carolina. She seems content with her decision. "It sucks right now, but it'll pay off in the future," she sighs. "Just a couple more years." I wonder silently just how long she can hold off the mortuary applications. Suzanne has accepted her current suffering in exchange for a future chance of life.

A week later, after my interviews at the funeral home ended I get a call from Suzanne. "I guess I was a little wound up today and I quit my job." I congratulated her and asked how her dad took the news. "He told me I couldn't quit." Suzanne accepted this response and backed down. She will continue to work for the funeral home but will always secretly strive to live for the future. •

Postscript, October 2007

Since 2005, Suzanne has spent every summer at different camps working as the film director and steadily building her reputation. This past summer she received a full-time job as an contractor doing all film directing for a camp in Tennessee and has lived in Nashville for two months now. Her family has come to terms with her disinterest in mortuary school and the family business. Her Dad even helped her move out...