

Scene One

(The stage is bare except for a few straight back chairs facing the audience suggesting a funeral parlor. The casket is an unseen symbol sitting downstage center as close to the audience as possible. Perhaps flowers are sitting to either side of the imaginary casket to designate its location. The lights come up slowly on the funeral parlor. Henry enters and stands center stage, facing the casket, composing himself before speaking.)

HENRY Ok . I'm ready.

(Quietly the sound of appropriate funeral parlor music begins to play. Slowly and with appropriate funeral director composure, Henry walks about the stage listening to the music and occasionally nodding to the empty chairs as though they are occupied by mourners.)

ALBERT How's the volume?

HENRY Sounds about right.

ALBERT Henry you've got this down to a fine art.

HENRY Thank you, Albert. One must set the appropriate mood. Now play the music George Haskal's daughter requested for him tonight.

ALBERT Old George knows how to go out in style.

(We hear, "Take Me Out To The Ball Game", Quite loud. As Henry shouts to stop the music.)

HENRY Not so loud Albert! I don't want anyone to outside to hear it.

(The music is now played softly in the background.)

That's better, I just hope none of the other guests object.

(The music stops. Albert enters standing near the door observing Henry for a moment before speaking.)

ALBERT If I could sell used cars this way I'd be a rich man.

HENRY You can't equate selling cars to the caring for the departed.

ALBERT I dress them up the same way. Some of them look as dead as your customers till they get a good wax job.

HENRY They are not customers and they don't get a, "wax job".

ALBERT You're still dressing them up.

HENRY And that is a difficult task without an assistant. I hope this, Beatrice, is qualified. The last one the agency sent was terrible. Two weeks without help is ridiculous.

ALBERT Well it's all show biz Henry. You need a bit more flash to bring the customers in.

HENRY I do not need any, "Flash", as you call it. We've had a different view of things since high school and it's not going to change now.

ALBERT You're right about that, funeral parlors and used cars. There's got to be a connection somewhere or how the hell could we have stayed friends all these years?

HENRY Continuity, that's what friends and funerals are about. They both keep you grounded, remind you where you came from.

ALBERT How about where you're going? Don't answer that Henry, or we'll be here for an hour. I've got a customer coming to find continuity in a classic beautifully waxed sixty-eight mustang, the better the continuity the better the money.

HENRY Can you give me a hand tonight? It's George Hascal's first night and there'll be a lot of family members.

ALBERT And potential car buyers, I'll be here.

(Albert exits singing, "Take Me Out To The Ball Game". Henry approaches the casket reluctantly until he finally views the body. The experience upsets him. He walks away quickly searching the room for some meaning as he shouts. Beatrice enters as he does so.)

HENRY Used cars! Is that all this is?

BEATRICE Excuse me?

(Henry turns to face her. There is a pause.)

I was waiting outside. I thought I heard you call me in.

HENRY No—I was just—a—

BEATRICE Are you the funeral director?

HENRY You must be Beatrice.

BEATRICE Ah huh, that's me. Nice casket.

HENRY We do our best to present the dearly departed in an appropriate manner.

BEATRICE That's for sure.

HENRY You do understand what's required of you?

BEATRICE Doing hair and make up, only the customers ain't breathing.

HENRY I am getting very tired of people referring to the departed as customers.

BEATRICE I'll call them whatever you want.

HENRY It's not what you call them. It's how you regard their status and that of their families.

BEATRICE Well I've never been on the receiving end before. Back home we just stepped aside and let the Talbot Funeral Parlor take care of things.

HENRY That's what professionals are for.

BEATRICE One phone call and they were in and out before you knew what happened. When Aunt Martha died Mr. Talbot was there in a flash, talking to the family while his cousin Charlie and Charlie's son Gilbert had the body out the door. Death was gone and the bed made before you knew what happened.

HENRY The last person the agency sent fainted when I told her to undress the deceased.

BEATRICE I'm not the fainting type. That's the first thing they asked me.

HENRY I'm not surprised after the last one that they sent. I spent a great deal of time explaining procedure, demonstrating how one should respectfully display our guests, and then she faints right there over Mrs. Bradey.

BEATRICE A chicken's a chicken, feathered and scratching or roasted and stuffed.

HENRY What did you say?

BEATRICE I said it's not a very good make up job.

HENRY Yes, well that is what I need you for. Makeup works wonders if it's done well. The agency said you were a trained cosmetologist.

BEATRICE I'm a beautician, if that's what they mean. But I've never put make up on dead people. Although some of my customers look like it.

HENRY It requires very specific skills. Luckily I have the background to teach you what you need.

BEATRICE Well now ain't that something. I'd never have figured a guy like you would know what to do with face powder.

HENRY This is a family business; you learn every aspect of the process. May I ask what motivated you to apply?

BEATRICE I'm tired of people complaining. I figured it's a safe bet that there's none of that here.

HENRY We have our standards.

BEATRICE Me too, but like my Daddy always says, "You can't make rice pudding out of a pig's ear".

HENRY That must be a colloquial variation of—

BEATRICE Daddy changes things around, kind of makes the sayings his. He thinks rice pudding is beautiful.

(They gradually make their way toward an exit as they speak.)

HENRY I see—I think. Well I'll show you the preparation area and which of our guests you need to work on.

BEATRICE Do I get a bonus if I make the stiffs look like rice pudding?

HENRY Have some respect. They are not stiffs. They are the deceased.

BEATRICE It's the same thing.

HENRY Stiffs are characters in bad detective stories. Our guests have families that care about them even when they've moved on. We treat them with the utmost respect. If you want to work here you need to show concern for their needs.

BEATRICE As long as they don't talk back, it's fine by me.

(They exit as lights fade.)

Scene Two

(We hear, "Take Me Out To The Ball Game", playing quietly in the background. Mildred is sitting center stage as Albert enters. As Mildred speaks the music fades away.)

MILDRED Hello Albert. You can sit next to me.

ALBERT Good to see you Mildred—shame about poor Uncle George.

MILDRED Yes, it is.

ALBERT But he looks good.

MILDRED Yes, he does.

ALBERT Never saw him look that good. Were you at the funeral parlor when they laid out his wife?

MILDRED I'm afraid not. That was the week of the teachers' convention and I—

ALBERT She looked good too. It's amazing what they can do these days. They pump them up with that stuff.

MILDRED Embalming fluid.

ALBERT That's it, stretches out the skin real nice – and the make up. Henry must be paying a pretty good penny for that new make up artist because old George really looks good and she only started this afternoon.

MILDRED Henry always puts his money where it counts.

ALBERT I've been to every funeral in the neighborhood since as far back as I can remember and believe me some of these places don't hire properly qualified cosmetologists. *(Pause)* Did you notice the suit he's wearing?

MILDRED Well I find that—

ALBERT Do me a favor Mildred. Go up and have a look at it. You always had a good eye for clothes.

MILDRED I don't think it's really necessary.

ALBERT Are you one of those people that thinks it's bad luck to look at the body twice?

MILDRED I'm not superstitious. I just don't feel like going up there.

ALBERT I've seen that look before. You haven't even been up.

MILDRED I've given my condolences to the family.

ALBERT You've got to look death in the face or you'll never face death. My mother told me that when my grandfather died. I was only eight and I've been looking death in the face ever since. You can't avoid it forever. Why not make a start right now. Go up there and tell me what you think about the suit.

MILDRED I don't think it's appropriate for me to go up there and look at Uncle George's suit. It cheapens the process, makes him seem less valued as a person.

ALBERT Uncle George doesn't mind. He's said his last farewells, gone to the great unknown.

MILDRED It wasn't Uncle George I was thinking of; it's the rest of the family.

ALBERT Well they're all making mental notes. The senior family members sit here from the time the parlor opens till it closes. They know who's been up and who hasn't.

MILDRED His daughter Julie only just came in.

ALBERT She was in that side room counting the money. Those envelopes add up. You've got to know who gave how much so you know what's appropriate when someone else kicks it. Funerals can be very expensive.

MILDRED You're so knowledgeable about these things.

ALBERT It's human nature. You learn a lot about human nature selling used cars. Don't think I'm morbid but if something should happen, this is probably the best in the neighborhood. Wait till you check out that makeup.

(Mildred hesitates.)

Go ahead—you'll feel better.

MILDRED Thank you. I wouldn't have had the courage without your support.

(Mildred goes up to examine the dearly departed. While she does so we hear the ball game music softly in the background. The music fades as she returns.)

ALBERT Well? What do you think?

MILDRED He looks quite nice, for a dead person.

ALBERT I'm talking about the suit.

MILDRED It's a perfectly good suit, way to big for him but he won't know the difference.

ALBERT How about the buttons?

MILDRED They don't match, one gray, one brown. If I had a needle and thread I'd—

ALBERT Third time I've seen that suit this year, must be a new downsizing effort. Funeral directors have to keep an eye on the bottom line. Old George never owned a suit and they sure as hell couldn't bury him in that Bud Lite tee shirt he always wore. If his family had to spend for a suit they couldn't afford as much for the funeral.

MILDRED You're so clever Albert.

ALBERT Henry is one hell of a funeral director. Those national franchise operations are muscling in, even in an old neighborhood like this, but he keeps things going. It's the personal touch, just like in the used car business. You've got to know your customers by their first names and keep the overhead down.

MILDRED I never realized there was so much involved.

ALBERT Business is personal Mildred. You live it or lose it.

(Albert looks around the room carefully, then gets up to leave.)

I guess they'll be closing up for the night pretty soon. I always try to be outside before the others leave, see who's driving what car. There's a lot of potential customers.

MILDRED I hope to see you at the funeral tomorrow.

ALBERT Wouldn't miss it for the world.

MILDRED Well, I'll look for you.

(Albert exits and lights fade.)

Scene Three

(Beatrice and Henry busy arranging flowers etc.)

HENRY You'll have to do that one over again.

BEATRICE But it took nearly two hours. I gave that woman the most elegant hands you ever saw. We should take a picture and put it in that little pamphlet you give people. You'll get a lot more customers.

HENRY I appreciate your efforts Beatrice and I know you spent a lot of time. But Mrs. Baxter was seventy-eight. The family will not appreciate false nails, especially with the letters of her name spelled out in gold.

BEATRICE I had to try something to take attention away from her face. I couldn't make her look good if she were alive. The woman was just plain ugly.

HENRY You must not refer so negatively to those who are no longer with us.

BEATRICE She's no longer with anybody. She's dead!

HENRY Please, not so loud.

BEATRICE No one can hear us they're all dead. Ashes to ashes, dust to Hoover.

HENRY Dust to what?

BEATRICE Hoover, you know, the vacuum cleaner. It makes dust disappear.

HENRY Is that another of your fathers—

BEATRICE That one's mine.

HENRY I'm not a bit surprised.

BEATRICE She was the only, "deceased", I couldn't get to look—

HENRY Now Beatrice you have to contain your pension for dark humor. This is not a beauty parlor. There are social restrictions. It requires a very different view of life.

BEATRICE And death. Did you check out the pink frosting I did on her hair? It's exactly like the photo her husband gave us. Of course she's twenty years older but the hair looks great.

HENRY I trust your judgment on the hair and I appreciate your efforts. This one for example is exemplary.

(He checks his list for her name.)

Miss Lillian Williams was quite a challenge. Sickness obviously aged her beyond her years and you have single handedly removed the suffering from her face.

BEATRICE Thank you Henry, that's the first time you've given me credit for anything since I've been here.

HENRY Well I'm sorry, I didn't—

BEATRICE It's OK. You're not the kind of guy to give compliments. You're too busy attending to business.

HENRY You must have one of your father's famous sayings for the occasion.

BEATRICE How about, "You only die once so you'd better get it right."

HENRY I'm beginning to look forward to them.

BEATRICE Henry, when I walked in here that first day—the young woman in the casket—did you know her?

HENRY We have to finish here before—

BEATRICE You stood by her in that parlor for a long time every day when we closed.

HENRY Miss Morrison will be here any minute and—

BEATRICE After they took the casket for the funeral I saw you sitting in there alone.

HENRY You'd better take care of Mrs. Baxter's nails before the family arrives.

(Beatrice exits as Joanna enters.)

Miss Morrison, good to see you. It was very short notice but everything is arranged. I think you'll be pleased.

(Joanna walks to the coffin.)

JOANNA It's not cheap but it's worth it. Lillian hasn't looked that good in a long time.

HENRY Well if you'll excuse me, I still have to make final arrangements for transportation tomorrow. Are you sure one car is enough?

JOANNA Like I told you, it's only me, but I want the best.

HENRY I understand.

(Henry exits. Joanna stares at Lillian quietly for a moment then speaks.)

JOANNA I kept my promise Lillian. I got you the best. Maybe you were lucky, at least you're out of this mess.

(The minister enters.)

MINISTER Excuse me I'm looking for the Jameson family. They said it was the parlor on the left.

JOANNA Wrong room.

MINISTER Can I be of assistance?

JOANNA It's too fucking late. Go away.

MINISTER I'm a minister. If you—

JOANNA I know what you are. Prayer is a waste of fucking time.

MINISTER God listens. He hears all prayers.

JOANNA Why can't God be a she?

MINISTER God manifests whatever form is appropriate for the faithful, and in his—or her—infinite wisdom, shows you the light.

JOANNA Well then I designate God as a cockroach for they will inherit the earth.

(There is a pause as the minister is taken back by the comment.)

What's the matter? Don't like cockroaches?

MINISTER All life serves a purpose.

JOANNA Well tell me, what was her purpose?

MINISTER Perhaps if I know more about her I—

JOANNA Lillian was a thirty-five year-old hooker with Aids.

MINISTER I'm sure she—

JOANNA I'm sure she got what she deserved, that's what you really think, that's what everybody thinks.

MINISTER We're all God's children.

JOANNA That's it? I was waiting for the speech. I know you've got one. I heard two of them while she was dying in the hospital; one from an old bald priest and one from a self-righteous rabbi with a beard.