

Night Delivery

By James Lambert Copyright 2024

This wasn't his job. Jay was a part time guy, a college boy. He was supposed to be answering the phones, putting flowers out in the staterooms, making coffee for those at the wake. He got to wear a suit, sit behind a desk, study for his college courses while he fulfilled the duties of what Mr, Carmichael called an "attendant." The job had been passed down to him by a senior student who was graduating. It was supposed to be a plum---easy duty, easy money. Above minimum wage, and they paid you all night while you slept in their apartment in the back of the funeral home. No embalming, that was for the pros. Just dress up, smile, and answer the phones. He loved it, until one night they asked him to drive down to Baton Rouge to pick up her body.

Jay was glad to get the job. He had no one filling his bank account. He was on his own. Jobs weren't exactly hanging on trees in his small college town. He would never have had a shot at college but for his scholarship to the little Methodist school. It covered the basics, but that was it. If he wanted to date girls, drink beer, or go out for pizza, he had to work. At first that meant humping it at the Shell station across from the gateway to the college. Jay pumped gas, cleaned windshields, and checked the oil of every customer. He went on road service calls to fix flats. Back at the station he washed and waxed cars, changed oil, and repaired punctured tires. In the summer, the red-hot asphalt broiled through his shoes. In the winter, the cold wind chilled his Southern blood. When his friend Mike asked if he was interested in a new job where he could

keep his hands clean and work inside, Jay jumped at the chance. Mike put in a good word for him, and he began work right after Mike graduated.

Jay's first night on duty was New Year's Eve. He reported to work at 5pm and had to attend to the needs of a small family whose elderly matron had passed away. Nothing special. He brought in several flower sprays, made a fresh pot of coffee, and sat in the small office near the front door. He overheard the small talk between the elderly friends and family. "Such a full life." "She's in a better place now."

Jay smiled politely at guests and answered questions about the funeral service and burial set for the next day. He graciously bade good night to the small family as they left. The doors were closed at 10pm. Jay was alone with the deceased. The casket remained open during the wake, so the last image he saw as he turned off the lights in the stateroom was the powdered face of the elderly woman who had lived her life in this small town. What was her life? Who were these people who loved her? The silence of the place was profound. What an odd way to spend a New Year's Eve. What were his buddies doing now? How was the world greeting the new year?

As the months passed, he noticed different groups in the community practiced distinctive and unique funeral rites. The Pentecostals brought tables of delicious food. Friends sat beside the body all night. The Cajuns not only brought the food but also filled the refrigerator with beer and wine. Each night before the funeral, a priest would lead the mourners in the chapel through the praying of the Rosary, over and over. Jay didn't get it. The Cajuns stayed all night, but mostly gabbed and laughed in the coffee shop. Sometimes their party spilled into the parking lot. The body would take care of itself, but they were going to chat and sip their drinks. The Baptists and Methodists were staid, out the door by nine. Not much fuss.

Jay enjoyed watching people and how they acted around death. He was only nineteen. This was his first time around death. Maybe death after all was a natural part of life. Before this job, he had a vague fear, and unease. Now, he felt he was seeing things more clearly.

One type of funeral got to Jay. The funeral of a child brought out wild and unfiltered grief. His first such funeral was that of a nine-year-old girl who drowned at a family picnic. The stateroom opened at noon, and her body lay in state until 10pm that night. Jay was asked by his boss to turn on a blue spotlight to highlight the child in her casket. Jay arranged a huge wall of flower sprays and potted plants sent by friends and family. The family was then ushered into the empty stateroom before it was opened to guests. They had to approve how she looked, how the casket was lit, how the flowers were arranged. When the parents and siblings first approached the small casket bathed in gentle blue light, the mother placed her lips against those of her daughter and let out a shriek, "Jenny! Jenny!" Then she collapsed into her husband's arms. The funeral of a child was a different animal.

The call came in at 10:30 pm on a Saturday night. Jay was back in the apartment alone. He was watching Saturday Night Live on a small black and white set. No funerals were scheduled that weekend, so his sole duty was to answer the phone when it rang. He was in the middle of a belly laugh watching Belushi play a crazed samurai. The call was unexpected, coming late at night on a slow weekend. He turned the volume down and picked up the receiver.

"Jay, this is Pete over at the main branch. We need you to get dressed and help us make a pickup."

"Pickup? What kind of pick up?"

"Oh, that's right. You're the new kid. You're one of the college boys. Well son, I ain't asking for you to grab us a six pack. We need you to drive to Baton Rouge and pick up a body.

We're shorthanded over here, and we got three big services tomorrow. Go ahead, you get dressed and come on over I'll give you all the details when you get here."

Mr. Carmichael, the big boss, had assured him that he wouldn't be involved with embalming. You needed a license for that. Nothing was said about picking up bodies. As Jay tied the knot in his tie, he looked at his face in the mirror. He could do this. No reason to feel queasy. They were shorthanded. They needed help. He'd pitch in. He liked his new job. Easy duty, easy money. No problem. Jay slipped on his sport coat and walked out to his car.

Pete brought Jay back into his office at the main branch. "We got a female in Baton Rouge, Barton's Funeral Home, out on Florida Boulevard. Here's the address. There'll be a man waiting for you. Just knock on the back door. Her family wants to come in tomorrow and make the arrangements, so we need this done tonight. You should be back before dawn. Here's the keys. Come on, follow me to the garage. I'll show you the rest "

Pete walked Jay back to where they kept the hearses. "Jay, since we need all our hearses tomorrow, you'll have to use our station wagon."

"Station wagon? Like a regular model?"

"Yep, except we have the grabbers in there to handle a stretcher or a casket." He opened the swing gate to see a medical stretcher with fold down wheels held in place by chrome plated grabbers affixed to the frame of the station wagon. "Kind of like an ambulance, without the markings. You just pull this release lever, and it's free. Like so, see? The man at Barton's will help you get her in and out of the wagon. When you get back here, go wake up Williams and he'll help you get her out and wheel her up to the makeup room. Barton's people already embalmed her. You got a full tank of gas, so no need to stop. Any questions?"

"Do I need to know anything more about the lady? Her name? "

“Na, they only got one body for us. But I think the last name is Lacroix. Don’t know anything else. Oh, be sure to put up the curtains. Here, you see these clips? Just clip them up after you get the stretcher locked in.”

After a two-hour drive south, Jay knocked on the back door at Barton’s. A bald middle-aged man welcomed him, helped him take the stretcher out, then walked him to the morgue. When the bright lights flicked on, Jay saw a young woman lying naked on the embalming table. He figured her to be in her early twenties. Her head was shaved, and a freshly closed incision with thick surgical stitches formed a dark pink circle on her hairless skull. She had two black eyes and a split lower lip which had been stitched. The only other visible injury was a nasty abrasion on her left forearm. Jay stood motionless and speechless, holding onto the rolling stretcher. He had expected someone older. This young woman was his peer. She had a body like the college girls he dated. Her exposed breasts and pubic hair made him uncomfortable. She should be covered.

“Here son, you need to sign this paperwork,” the Barton’s man said.

Jay leaned over the desk to sign. “What the hell happened here? Who is she?”

“She’s Bonnie Lacroix, married girl. Lived up where you’re from. She and her husband drove down for a football game this afternoon. After the game, they was driving out on River Road. Door of his pickup flew open, and she fell out. So they said. I dunno’, maybe some drinking involved. Doctors tried to take the pressure off the brain. Craniotomy you see there.”

“What’s that about drinking?”

“That’s just me guessing, but two cops came over here and wanted to look her over. One was a detective.”

“Oh yea, I saw their car leaving just as I pulled up. What’d they want?”

“You know cops. They didn’t tell me nothin’. But they was checking her face real close.”

“How old was she?”

“Twenty-three they said.”

“Kids?”

“That I don’t know. Here. Take this sack. It’s got the clothes they cut off at the ER. Some stuff in her pockets, change, a driver’s license. You give this to your funeral director.” Jay looked inside and saw shredded blue jeans, a purple pullover, bra, panties, and a pair of leather sandals.

“Let’s wrap her up in this sheet, and we’ll get her out to your wagon.”

Jay stood by the table ready to cover Bonnie’s body, but before he did so, he ran his finger along the closed incision and then down her cold cheek. He touched her split lower lip. The Barton’s man paused. Jay glanced again down her cold white body, at her breasts and pubic hair. He thought of her husband who knew her body so well. What had he lost when she fell out the door? They pulled the sheet tight. Together they wrapped Bonnie snugly, and gently moved her corpse onto the rolling stretcher.

“Damned shame, aint it? Young girl like that,” said the Barton man. “Oh, tell your director I had to cover that nasty scrape on her arm with a lot of cream and some plastic filler. I think it’ll be alright. She took the embalming fluid fine, but they need to check the arm before they dress her, make sure there ain’t no leaks. He’ll know. Just check the arm.”

Within minutes, she was locked in place, and they were on the road home. A two-hour drive, early Sunday morning. Farm country and a few small towns. Most of the football crowd already home in bed. The dark highway was wide open. Nothing but sugarcane and soybean

fields. Jay felt a sadness for this young woman and her husband. He began what he intended to be a one-way conversation.

“So Bonnie, I keep thinking about you and your husband. I can’t imagine seeing the person you love fly out of a car, just like that.” Jay snapped his fingers. “Gone. The love you two had, all the years you looked forward to. Gone. And why? It doesn't make sense.”

Why does it have to make sense?

Jay could never say he *heard* anything that night, and least not with his ears. But those words came to him as clear as any sound. His heart leapt in his chest, but he felt no fear. More excitement than fear. He pulled the station wagon to the side of the road and killed the engine. He opened the door, activating the dome light and jerked his head around. His eyes were staring at the top of Bonnie’s snugly wrapped head, only inches away. In the back of the station wagon, near the corner of the roof and the tailgate, he saw something dark, like smoke or a tiny cloud hanging in the air.

“You’re dead. How are you speaking?”

I’m still here, just separated from my body. But here with you. I can’t leave yet.

“You and your husband. I was thinking about what you lost, about how he’ll never see you again. Never feel your body. Never get to see you grow into a woman. You’re my age. It seems crazy, what happened out there on River Road.”

You know nothing about what happened. Nothing about my husband.

“Was there drinking involved? Did he cause this?”

His name is Todd. We drank at the game, but a fight started when I accused him of cheating on me with an old girlfriend. We’d seen her at the game, and the arguing started there. I was yelling at him in the truck, and he slapped me hard. I told him to pull over. I wanted out. I

yanked the door handle, and it just flew open. I flew out, hit the pavement. Todd was out of his mind on the side of the road. I saw it all, but I couldn't reach him.

“How can I hear you?”

Not sure. But so far, I've seen everything from above my body. The hospital, the funeral home. Everything. Police. They suspect him. The black eyes, the split lip. He cut his hand on my teeth when he slapped me. He told them the door just flew open. They don't believe him. I want you to talk to him. I'll give you a message.

“But he'll think I'm crazy. No one will believe me.”

You tell him to remember his promise to me graduation night at the lake. He'll know it came from me.

Before Jay could respond, he was alone again. The black cloud was gone. He questioned himself. Had he invented this? He took several breaths. He restarted the engine and headed north, glancing occasionally at the white form strapped to the stretcher. He arrived back at the main branch before dawn. The embalmer took Bonnie's body to the makeup room. Jay went back to the apartment at the funeral home where he worked and fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke, he wondered if the conversation had been some type of waking dream. Maybe it was wishful thinking. He wasn't sure.

Jay laid eyes on Bonnie's body once more when he assisted with her funeral two days later. He helped the funeral director position her casket in the chapel, adjust the spotlights, and bring in all the flower sprays from the stateroom where her wake was held. He ran a microphone check for the minister before the service. He helped seat the immediate family in a small alcove to the right of the dais where the minister readied himself to deliver the eulogy. A tall young man sat in the front row between two elders. Jay assumed this young man was Todd, and the two

elders his parents. His father grasped Todd with a shoulder hug throughout the service. His mother stared at the floor and dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. Two other older adults were sitting next to them. Jay could sense the debilitating grief he had seen in other funerals where parents buried their children. These were Bonnie's parents, and they leaned on each other throughout the service. The mother cried and moaned. The minister delivered a forgettable message between piped in hymns. It was a Protestant funeral and mercifully short. Jay wanted to talk to Todd, but now was not the time.

The family was escorted to awaiting black Lincoln limousines and followed the hearse to a cemetery outside town. The burial was held under a deep blue autumn sky. A gentle breeze ruffled the gold and red leaves on the tree under which Bonnie was to be interred. After a few prayers and the blessing of the body by the minister, and after the deposit of lumps of earth on the casket as it was lowered into the open grave, the mourners and family made their way back to their vehicles. They would re-enter the world of the living back in the small college town. Jay and his funeral director stayed behind to collect the chairs, the tent, and oversee the closing of the grave.

Jay overheard loud talk coming from the dispersing crowd. Parked near the black Lincoln limousine was a police car. The writing on the door identified it from East Baton Rouge Parish. Two men in suits were talking to Todd. They were arguing with him. Todd's father was shouting at the men. He saw the two police handcuff Todd and escort him to their unit.

"What the hell?" asked the funeral director.

"The guy at Barton's said that the police had come by and inspected her body," Jay said.
"I think they suspect the husband, not sure why."

"Hell of a time to pull a stunt like this. Goddamned cops."

Jay and his funeral director wound up their work at the cemetery. When they arrived back at the main branch, the staff was buzzing about the arrest, but no one knew details.

Jay heard nothing more about Bonnie's death or Todd's arrest for the next couple of weeks. That did not mean he didn't think about Bonnie and Todd. What happened on his trip back from Baton Rouge kept running in his head. She was always on his mind. The sight of Todd being arrested stayed with him. He had hell sleeping.

One night, Jay was watching a talk show on the TV in the funeral home apartment. Again, Bonnie came to him. He saw a dark cloud in the corner of the room up near the ceiling. He turned off the TV.

Visit Todd in jail. Tell him he promised to never leave me, that nothing would ever separate us, not even death. I remember the promise he made before we became lovers, and that I want him to keep it. I'm waiting and can't leave here without him. If he doesn't come to me, he'll spend the rest of his life in Angola. He must keep his promise.

Jay no longer doubted. He understood what Bonnie wanted him to say to Todd, but not its meaning. This was about a promise whispered between lovers. Who can tell what really goes on between a man and his wife? Certainly not a boy of nineteen. But although he was still a boy, Jay now saw his role as a bridge between living and the dead, like Hermes going between the gods and men. By giving this message to Todd, perhaps he could bring them together again.

Jay called Todd's father and told him he had information which may help Todd. The father put him in touch with the lawyer the family hired to defend their son. Jay told the lawyer that he had a message for Todd but insisted that he be allowed to give it to Todd directly and alone. The lawyer arranged for Jay to visit Todd in the parish prison where he was being held pending trial.

Jay arrived at the prison in ample time to be cleared and admitted to the visiting rooms. This was his first time in a prison. When he cleared the first sallyport, the slamming sound of the sliding barred door behind him caused Jay to clinch up. The locks snapped shut. The finality of the sound marked his entry into the netherworld of the incarcerated. He walked down a hall and entered a room where another security officer checked his name and identification. He was told to sit and wait. He heard the continued slamming and locking of the barred door, as well as voices of men in their cells on the multiple tiers where they were confined.

A few minutes later, the security officer told him to go down a dimly lit hall and enter visiting room number nine. Upon entering, he took a seat. He would be separated from Todd by a Plexiglas panel with a small circle cut in its center. Jay's heart pounded strongly in his chest. His mouth was dry. Although he knew what he must say, he was nervous. He kept telling himself he was bringing Todd good news. After all, Bonnie was near, not dead, not really. She still loved Todd and wanted him to know.

A security officer opened the opposite door to number nine, and escorted Todd into the room where he sat in a corresponding wooden chair. Todd's arms and legs were manacled. The officer locked one of Todd's arms to a fixture on the desktop. He told us we had twenty minutes and closed the door.

"Who are you?" asked Todd.

"My name is Jay. I have a message for you. I hope you'll thank me after we talk."

"What kind of message? How did you get in here?"

"Your lawyer arranged it. This is a message from Bonnie. But wait until I tell you the whole thing. Let me explain."

“What are you talking about? My wife is dead. How the hell did my lawyer let you come in here?”

“Wait, I know it sounds crazy, but Bonnie wants me to give you a message. She’s spoken to me, not in my ears, but in my head. I work at the funeral home. I was the one who picked up her body in Baton Rouge late that night. It happened on the way back to our town. All I can tell you is that she spoke to me. She wants me to remind you about a promise that you made, right before you made love to her the first time. Graduation night. That nothing would ever keep you two apart, not even death.”

“Did her sister put you up to this bullshit? Or her mother, was it her mother? She always hated me. Bonnie must’ve told her everything.”

“Look, I know this is hard to believe, but I swear I’m not lying. Her soul can’t leave here. Somehow, you’ve got to contact her. I’m not sure what she needs, but she wants you to keep that promise. She says it’s your only way out. She sees what will happen if you go to trial. She claims you’ll end up in Angola.”

“Get the fuck out of here! Guard, guard, come get me!”

The door opened and the officer stepped in and unlocked the attachment. “I hoped you’d be happy to know she still loves you. She’s not really dead, at least not gone. She wants you back.”

“Don’t you ever come back again. You hear me? You’re crazy! Tell her mother to fuck off!” Todd was escorted out of room nine and door slammed behind him.

Jay returned to his college courses and work. He later heard that Todd had pleaded guilty to manslaughter in connection with Bonnie’s death. Todd would serve ten years. During Jay’s senior year, he began to look around for another underclassman to whom he would pass his job.

The job had been very good for Jay. Easy duty, easy money. No more voices, no black clouds. The years had passed smoothly. Jay was ready to enter the real world, join the rat race as they say.

About three weeks before his graduation, his boss at the main branch called to give him details on an upcoming funeral. The body would lie in state that night. Jay had to place the proper signs at the stateroom and on the directory board in the entrance hall. When he heard the name, Todd Lacroix, Jay asked, "Wait, the same Todd Lacroix whose wife we buried? I thought he was serving time."

"I guess he couldn't wait it out," replied his boss. "They found him hanging in a tree up at Angola. Used some sheets from his cell."

There was another type of funeral which really got to Jay. When the deceased had committed suicide, the wake was subdued, the words few. People talked in hushed tones, in pairs, scattered down the halls. There were no flower sprays to be brought in. A small number of visitors came and went quickly. The family usually left by nine. Most were closed casket affairs. Todd's wake was no different.

After the family departed that night, Jay locked the door and went back to the stateroom to turn out the lights. Rather than turning off the lights, he walked to the casket, still bathed in the light blue spotlight. He was tempted to open the casket and gaze upon the young man to whom he had spoken. But as he touched the cool silver surface, he felt a chill come over him. He looked to the upper corner of the stateroom and saw the same black cloud which he had seen twice before.

Thank you, my Hermes. Thank you.

The cloud departed. Jay brought the lights down and retired to the apartment. Delivery completed.

Author's note: While a college student in 1971-72, I worked at a funeral home in my hometown of Alexandria, Louisiana. This story is a supernatural take off of an actual mission I was sent on to Baton Rouge to pick up the body of a young woman.

