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The village of Corona, New Mexico lies along US Route 54 and has a population of 165. Don Dupree has buried sixty-five of Corona’s former residents in its cemetery. If you include burials in the Cedarvale and Red Hills cemeteries in the neighboring towns of Vaughn and Encino—not to mention Tecolote, Coyote, or Capitan—Don Dupree has put more people into the ground than he has ever met on the street. Driving Route 54 might leave the impression that the fields of Lincoln County are empty, which is true as long as you don’t use a shovel anywhere.

Cemeteries in that part of the southwest don’t run a big water bill. They bleed into the surrounding land, expanding their dimensions in a long, slow inhale. Short barriers peppered by shrubs line their fronts. Some entrances have a bit more embellishment, like old lanterns dangling from pink adobe archways or overgrown bougainvillea branches flaunting more thorns than flowers. Others utilize a simpler approach: an open gap wide enough to drive a horse trailer through it, oftentimes featuring a flagpole of some sort. A single access road parts the graves down the middle until they trail off into the desert. Don Dupree calls them the Gates to Nowhere.

Dupree Mortuary was a long-standing family business, beginning when Don buried his parents at an early age. Left in the custody of his aging and distraught grandmother, all manners of interment fell to the youngest Dupree. The rest of his family lived elsewhere. They had fast-paced lives in metropolitan areas and could only make their way to the Land of Enchantment for a brief weekend of grieving. Choosing and arranging family plots, embalming procedures, and casket models were carried out alongside homework and driving school. Don’s driver’s license had just arrived in the mail when it came time to repeat the process with his grandmother. He drove the hearse himself.

As the orphan Dupree’s high school tenure came to a close, he had inherited two homes and a budding skillset. Grandmother Dupree’s house was full of jelly bowls and furniture bleached by sun exposure, while Don’s childhood bungalow had already been emptied and listed. He let the bungalow slip away to a family from Ohio that wanted more sun in their lives. The remarkable tidiness of the situation was not lost on the young man. It didn’t take much imagination to connect the thin velour drapes and fake flowers decorating his grandmother’s house with the trappings of a funeral home.

Don rented the house to local ranch hands while he completed his apprenticeship in Roswell. He returned in three years’ time, the trunk of his grandmother’s Dodge Dart filled to the brim with jugs of embalming fluid. His first job came with the daily mail. Percy Marsh met Don on the porch to deliver a fistful of coupons and glossy ads. It was 10 a.m. and Percy was sweating through his shirt. He swayed to and fro, swirling his tongue as if he were nursing a cut inside his cheek.

“My Ma passed late last week. I need to plan a funeral.”

Don stalled as the mailman looked to him for affirmation. “I’m sorry, Percy,” he managed at last. “She was always really nice to me.”

“Ma liked begonias,” said Percy. “Her cat used to nibble on them. She got a real kick out of that. I’d like to have begonias instead of death lilies.”

“We can certainly do that.”

A wave of relief washed over Percy Marsh and he embraced Don. His moist, starchy uniform pressed against the boy’s face between quivering breaths.

“Can I bring her by?” Percy asked. “This heat can’t be too good for her condition.”

Rae Marsh was embalmed later that afternoon in what used to be Grandmother Dupree’s guest bedroom. The funeral service was held in the living room that Friday with the Marsh family and some of Rae’s oldest friends in attendance. Don set up several electric fans to keep the heat under control and did his best to comfort the bereaved. Percy’s sister Lucille remarked that her mother’s makeup was surprisingly accurate. Rae still had the forged ruddiness of a desert stone. She was buried in Cedarvale and Percy delivered a thank you note along with Don’s final payment in Saturday’s mail.