



She's in
a Better Place



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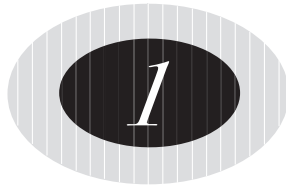
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Life is pleasant. Death is peaceful.
It's the transition that's troublesome.

—Isaac Asimov





Corpses should be better behaved.

Mr. Lyle Kourtis, aged ninety-three years, has been resting on my embalming table for less than an hour, but he's already belched four times. I wouldn't mind so much—the dead do burp and even shift occasionally—but the hour is late, darkness is pressing at the windows, and I'm alone in the chilly prep room.

Gerald had run to the drugstore for cotton balls, so I've been left to bathe Mr. Kourtis. The job won't be difficult—the old man is as thin as a bird, and rigor is not so pronounced that he's resisting my efforts. The arterial embalming is well under way, the Porti-Boy rhythmically clicking as it sends embalming fluid through a plastic tube and into our client's carotid artery. A bath will help the solution move through the arteries in the gentleman's limbs.

I pick up the hose, turn on the water, and test the temperature by spraying a stream over my wrist, the same place I used to test bottles of formula when Clay and Bugs were babies. The water doesn't have to be warm, of course—Mr. Kourtis certainly won't care if it's cool—but Gerald has ingrained in me such a respect for the dead that I can no more imagine giving my client a cold shower than I could perform an embalming without a hand towel draped over the body's most private organs.

My professors in the mortuary program thought my methods quaint, but they are Gerald's methods, born out of love for others.

As the Porti-Boy clicks and hums, I spray the few strands of white hair on Mr. K.'s head and smooth the deeply scored lines from his forehead. This man came to us from the Pleasant Valley Nursing Home, where he had been a resident for nine years. According to the file we found waiting on the zippered body bag, he outlived two of his sons. A daughter, Felicia, lives in Winter Haven, while a granddaughter lives here in Mt. Dora.

Fortunately, we didn't have to consult Felicia before beginning our work. Mr. Kourtis was wise enough to preplan his funeral, so Gerald and I have proceeded according to his wishes. The administrator at Pleasant Valley informed Felicia Kourtis Josten of her father's death, so I followed up with a call and left a message asking if she had any preference as to the time of the funeral service.

I suspect that it may be attended by few family members. The daughter may be in her seventies, and though Winter Haven is only an hour's drive away, miles of teeming tourist traffic lie between our funeral home and Felicia Josten. I don't know many older folks who like driving at breakneck highway speeds . . . which is probably how they survived to be older folks.

I squirt a dime-size glob of shampoo into my wet palm and work it into Mr. Kourtis's thin hair. "I hope your daughter can make it," I tell him. "But if she doesn't, don't you worry about having a crowd. People in Mt. Dora love a good funeral."

The back door opens, followed by Gerald's laugh and a rush of cool April air. "Congratulations," he says, stamping mud from his shoes. "Though you won't find it written in any book, one of the surest ways to know you're ready to be a full-time funeral director is when you start talking to the clients."

I grin as I pick up the spray nozzle. "They don't seem to mind a little conversation."

"They don't. But do let me know if they start talking back." Gerald tosses a bag of cotton balls onto the counter and lumbers to the sink where body fluids and clotted blood are draining from the trough in the side of the prep table. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," I say, rinsing Mr. K.'s hair and sending a stream

of soapy water into the trough as well. "No plumbing problems tonight."

"Good." He reaches for a pair of latex gloves. "You want me to shave him?"

"Already finished. His cheeks are clean and prickle-free."

"I wish everything about this case were prickle-free."

I glance up. "Is there a problem I don't know about?"

"Maybe not . . . but at the time Mr. Kourtis signed his preneed papers, his daughter and his second wife had a falling-out. They flew out of here like a pair of hornets, buzzing at each other the entire way."

"There's no mention of a wife in the file. The daughter is listed as next of kin."

"That's because the woman divorced Lyle right after she put him in the home. If the ex-wife and the daughter meet at the funeral, we might see a few fireworks."

I smile as I spray Mr. K.'s shoulders with an antibacterial solution. "That contract was signed a long time ago. Surely you don't think those women are still feuding."

"Women have an awful long memory about such things."

"So do some men."

"Point taken. But I'm wondering if we shouldn't do something to keep those gals apart in the chapel."

I rub soap into Mr. Kourtis's skin, massaging his upper arm and working the pink arterial fluid through his capillaries. "I don't think you need to worry. If both women show up, surely they'll come together in their grief. They'll have to realize that they both loved this man."

Gerald gives me a narrowed glance. "Funerals don't always bring out the best in people, missy."

"Just leave it to me." I reach for the spray nozzle again. "If they both show up, I'll have a talk with them before the service. If they still have hard feelings toward one another, I'll do what I can to bring them together . . . or seat them on opposite sides of the chapel."

"Sounds good." He leans one hand on the table and surveys the room. "Okay, what else do you need?"

I glance at him, noticing that his voice sounds more gravelly than

usual. Dark circles lie under his eyes, and his color seems . . . off. “You look exhausted.” I shut off the water. “Why don’t you go on up to bed?”

Gerald gestures to the man on the table. “I oughta help you.”

“It’s okay; I don’t think I’m going to have any problems. In a couple of hours I’ll be done and headed upstairs to tuck the boys into bed.”

He looks around as if searching for something to do, but I sidestep and catch his eye. “Thanks for the cotton balls. You go on up, and I’ll call you if I run into a problem. We’ll get Mr. K. casketed tomorrow.”

Gerald sighs and turns toward the door that leads to the staircase.

I watch him go and shake my head when the door finally clicks behind him. I don’t know why he’s so worried about Mr. Kourtis’s survivors. In all Gerald’s years at Fairlawn, I know he’s noticed how funerals often bring people together. The power of a meaningful, reverent memorial service is one of the reasons I’m proud to say I’m an apprentice funeral director.

Morticians fix things. We repair broken bodies and restore ruptured relationships. When death comes, we minister to the deceased and help the living continue with their lives. We act as the hands of Jesus in caring for the dead and ministering to the grief-stricken family.

Gerald stepped into my life and helped me put its frayed elements back together. If not for him, I don’t know where my boys and I would be.

I startle when another soft burp escapes Mr. K.’s lips. “Don’t you worry,” I tell my client, reaching for a towel. “I’m going to make sure your family members enjoy a dignified funeral service. You’ll be proud of them.”

I smile as I wipe glistening water droplets from the old man’s face. After two years of living in Mt. Dora, I think I understand why God brought my boys and me to the Fairlawn Funeral Home.



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Leticia Gansky lowers the phone and reaches for her husband. “Pop-pop’s passed on,” she says, squeezing Charley’s shoulder. She blinks at the sting of sudden tears. “He died this afternoon.”

Charley turns his attention from the blaring TV tucked beneath the kitchen cabinet. “Huh?”

“My grandfather died.” She returns to her chair at the kitchen table. “Mom said he died after lunch. Right after a big plate of beef Stroganoff.”

Her husband stops chewing. “The old geezer was done in by a plate of pasta?”

Leticia struggles to swallow her irritation. Men can be so dense. “Don’t think so. After lunch he went to his room, lay down for a nap, and didn’t wake up.”

Charley snorts. “When you’re old, that’s a good way to go. What was he, two hundred and six?”

“Ninety-three.” Leticia drops her chin into her palm. “Ninety-three and he still had all his marbles. Mom said the last time she went to see him he was complaining about politics. Said the commercials cut into his soap operas.”

Her husband looks back to the television, where overpaid athletes are playing a baseball game in some faraway city.

Leticia picks up her fork. “Imagine being ninety-three and still following your favorite soap operas.”

Charley stabs a Tater Tot and pops it into his mouth, then grins at the TV, where a runner is sliding across home plate.

After taking a bite of chicken, Leticia chews slowly and wonders if she should feel sad. She loved the old man, but for the last few years the family has been expecting him to die at any moment. Even though Pleasant Valley Nursing Home is only ten minutes away, she hasn't visited Pop-pop in months. Charley keeps her busy answering the phones for his air-conditioning business, and she has her daughters and grandchildren to think of. Between their needs and Charley's, Leticia doesn't have time to go trotting down to the old folks' home every time she feels a twinge of guilt.

But she will make time for the funeral. Pop-pop was smart enough to take care of everything beforehand, so she'll send a nice spray of flowers, make sure to sign the girls' names to the card, and show up early for a front-row seat.

Maybe she'll be asked to say something during the service. After she clears the dishes, she ought to sit down with a pen and paper to see if she can come up with something sweet and amusing to say. Pop-pop was such a great guy—in his day, he was so popular, folks always said he should run for mayor.

A shame he had to outlive most of his friends.

"You know—" Leticia swallows a bite of chicken—"it's too bad we don't hold funerals while people are around to enjoy them. Might be nice to tell about the good things folks have done while they're still able to appreciate the comments."

Charley grins as another baseball player scores; then he winks at her. "Whatever you say, hon." He picks up his iced tea glass and tips it until it chinks against hers. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

The man has just toasted a comment about *death*. Was he even *listening*?

She lifts her own iced tea glass and swirls it until the sweetener in the bottom disappears. Charley might miss having a hot meal waiting when he finally comes in from work, and he might miss clean laundry after a week or two. But if she died, would he miss *her*?

Would anyone?

About the Author

Christy Award winner Angela Hunt writes books for readers who have learned to expect the unexpected. With over three million copies of her books sold worldwide, she is the best-selling author of *The Tale of Three Trees*, *The Note*, *Magdalene*, and more than 100 other titles.

She and her youth pastor husband make their home in Florida with mastiffs. One of their dogs was featured on *Live with Regis and Kelly* as the second-largest canine in America.

Readers may visit her Web site at www.angelahuntbooks.com.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you read the first two Fairlawn books, *Doesn't She Look Natural?* and *She Always Wore Red*? If so, how has Jennifer changed since the day she first heard that she'd inherited the Fairlawn Funeral Home?
2. What do you think the author intended as a theme in *She's in a Better Place*? Who's in a better place at the end of the story?
3. Do you have a favorite recurring character in these books? Who is it, and why do you like this character? Which character reminds you most of yourself?
4. Has reading books set in a funeral home changed your view of death or mortuaries in any way?
5. Leticia Gansky planned a fake funeral because she felt invisible and ignored. Have you ever felt this way? Have you found a "cure" for this condition?
6. If you had to write a slogan for a funeral home, what would you suggest?

7. Gerald thought of Kirsten as his prodigal daughter. Do you have a prodigal in your life? Did this story affect your feelings about that person?
8. Why do you think Kirsten rebelled in her teenage years? Could Gerald and Evelyn have prevented this?
9. What did you think of Jen's decision to hold her wedding in such an unusual setting?
10. What do you think Kirsten will do with the rest of her life?
11. Would you recommend this series to other readers? Why or why not?
12. Have you given any thought to what sort of funeral you would like? What would you request to make sure the experience was memorable? What sort of memorial message would you want shared with your guests?

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One final note: Mt. Dora is a real city in Lake County, Florida. If you have an opportunity to visit that charming town, you will discover that many of the buildings, landmarks, and streets described in this novel actually exist . . . but not the Fairlawn Funeral Home. To visit that establishment, you will have to rely on your imagination.