

## The Gig

When Paige receives the notification, she's sitting in a parking garage on Gervais Street. The single chime comes through cold and clear. It's a message from WorkWheel. There's a delivery job available at the Marcy Funeral Home. There's nothing in the description box aside from an enigmatic smiley face, but the job pays \$55.29. Good enough. She's spent the past three mornings in this garage, waiting for the app to send along a job. She'll take what she can get.

She taps the green check mark in the upper right corner of her phone screen. The app responds with a sharp, pleasing ding. She's on the job, thank God, and the funeral home isn't even that far. According to the app's navigation feature, it's ten minutes away. Paige knows the area. It's out in Cayce, near the old speedway where they hold the car shows in the spring. Not quite the sticks, but well past the point where the shrubs start to dominate. Mona used to live out there. She rented a two-bedroom bungalow with an in-ground pool, the same pool where Paige found her floating facedown, hair haloing out. But Paige tries not to think about Mona. It's all so melodramatic. She has to get moving, get her thoughts churning. Stasis makes her sick; she gets woozy when the sights get familiar. The feeling of motion is crucial.

It's a summer day. Columbia is at its muggy worst. The heat seeps through the windshield of her battered Toyota Sienna as she makes her way down Blossom Street, toward the bridge that will take her over the Congaree River and into the suburbs. Her air conditioning is on the fritz. If the funeral home wants her to deliver anything cold, she'll have to work something out. She doubts it will be a problem, though. Most of her deliveries are low maintenance: a greeting card, a case of beer, a pair of earrings, a gift basket. One-offs. Few come with detailed instructions for care.

Paige calls herself a delivery driver. WorkWheel refers to her as an *associate courier*. The title confuses her. It makes her wonder if there are plain old *couriers* out there reaping better rates and easier routes. She knows this is probably wrong. She's fairly certain the title is linked to her legal status. Legally, she's an independent contractor. Her parents are

still confused by this designation, though she's explained it multiple times. They want to know how it relates to her degree in sociology. She doesn't have a good answer for them. She suspects she never will.

The Marcy Funeral Home is a squat white stucco building with a gravel parking lot. There's only one other car in the lot. She hadn't considered the idea that a funeral home might have slow days. Maybe fewer people die in the middle of the week. She'd like to see the statistics on that. It would be good to know when to expect death. Mona's death came suddenly, though it lacked the element of surprise. She died on a Monday evening in late April, an hour before Paige's arrival. They were supposed to meet at Mona's house that night. They'd made a plan to watch *Jeopardy!* and cook hamburgers beneath the stars. It might've been pleasant. There was a breeze that afternoon, a real breeze—the kind that brushes the back of your neck, the kind you remember, the kind that reminds you Columbia can be nice sometimes. It's better to remember the breeze than it is to remember the walk through the back gate and onto the patio, where crushed White Claw empties littered the sandstone. And it's better to remember the walk than it is to remember the sight of her friend's body drifting beneath the diving board of a pool she didn't own. What a terrible pool to die in. The landlord left it in disrepair, and Mona made no effort to improve it. The water was green, and murky to the point of opacity. The cracked walls looked ready to crumble at the slightest ripple. Squalor was all over that house, though Paige didn't clock it at the time. Three months later, it dominates her thoughts—mold-stained ceiling tiles, flickering overhead lights, and white baseboards spattered with gray-black grime.

She opens the door to the funeral home. The air inside is tepid, settled. There's a lack of balance in the lobby. It's all teal carpet and bargain bin rococo. The ceiling is too low and the lighting is too dim. It reminds Paige of a nursing home.

A man strides forward from the shadows to shake Paige's hand. His grip is tight. His dark eyebrows arch dramatically, giving him the appearance of a man caught in perpetual surprise.

"You're two minutes late," the man says.

Paige checks her phone. The man is right. "Sorry."

"That's all right." He thrusts his hands into the pockets of his wrinkled khakis. "There's just a process, you know? My boss is a stickler. And we're offering a brand-new service, so he wants to make sure everything goes just right. We're revolutionizing the death care industry."

She gives him a firm nod, hoping to convey her seriousness. The process can't be as involved as the man makes it sound. She figures he wants her to deliver something to the bereaved—a bouquet, or perhaps a sympathy card. The death care industry is an old industry. Maybe the oldest. There are only so many possible innovations. She knows this now; she

helped Mona's family plan the memorial service. After the service the family sent her a stuffed iguana, accompanied by a store-bought thank you card that read IGUANA THANK YOU FOR BEING THERE. She placed the card on the mantel. It felt wrong to throw it away. Now it looks perfectly natural up there. It's standing next to the photograph of Mona on the beach in Pensacola. This is Paige's favorite picture. She took it on spring break, when they were still students at Carolina. In the picture, Mona's greasy black hair is whipping in the wind. She's shooting the camera a dumb, toothy grin. Her nose is red from all the sun. Her eyes are a piercing green. She's sober.

The man with the dramatic eyebrows says his name is Randall. He looks to be in his late thirties. He leads Paige to a back room that's labeled EMPLOYEES ONLY. The walls in the room are lined with shelves, and the shelves are stacked with a mishmash of urns. It strikes her, now, how many options people have in death, and how little these options matter. The urns come in various shapes and sizes. Some have stickers plastered on their sides. These stickers range from solemn, simple crosses to facsimiles of famous cartoon cats. She assumes many of them are castoffs. She can't imagine anyone buying an urn adorned by a skinny, lasagna-starved Garfield.

Paige is so caught up with the urns that she almost misses the man sitting in the corner. He's sitting in a chair, shrouded in semi-darkness. Randall flicks on a floor lamp. The man comes into view. His face is pale and bloated, but the skin itself is flawless. He's dressed in a pinstriped three-piece suit and oxfords, and his gray hair is slicked back, revealing a wide white forehead. His eyes are closed; he looks to be at rest. There's a leather briefcase at his side. An umbrella rests on his lap. He looks like a gangster from the 1920s, sans tommy gun and fedora.

"What do you think of him?" Randall asks. "Looks good, right?"

The man is dead, she realizes. His hands are folded over the shaft of his umbrella in perfect symmetry. His chest strains against his dress shirt, which is perhaps a size too small. He looks like a wax figure in a museum. Three years ago, when she was at Carolina, she and Mona took a weekend trip to New York and visited Madame Tussauds, where they took pictures with a beaming copy of Jimmy Fallon. Paige gave him bunny ears and flipped off the camera. Mona sat down in one of the chairs beside the fake desk and pretended to be a guest on *The Tonight Show*. That night, they went out to a club in Bed-Stuy. Mona ordered a bunch of tequila shots and made out with a woman dressed as a pirate. The night ended in a screaming match with the bartender.

"Creeps me out," she says. "Who was he?"

"Paul McGee." Randall pulls a slip of paper from his pocket and reads it. "He's supposed to go to 844 Coriander Street. His daughter's house. Down by the river, if I remember correctly."

“And I’m supposed to get him there.”

“That’s right. I’ll come with you, though. We like to have a professional onsite to assist.” She eyes him. “You do this often?”

“Well, no. We’re still experimenting, to tell you the truth. Mr. McGee here was the first person to purchase our Deluxe Mobile Memorial Package. He’s sort of a test case.”

“A test case.”

“That’s right. Don’t worry, though. He was all for it. Mr. McGee was a bit of an eccentric. Saw himself as an old-school outlaw. Loved John Dillinger. Liked the idea of bucking the norm. So we sold him on this new package idea we’d been kicking around for a while. Told him we’d help him make one last visit. Told him we’d fix up a costume of his choice. He was gung ho. We couldn’t manage all his requests, but I imagine he’d be pretty satisfied.”

Mona’s service didn’t have a body. The family provided a framed portrait instead. In the portrait, Mona was still a high school senior. Her face was thinner, and her nose wasn’t pierced. There were no purple streaks in her hair. She looked like a person Paige had only met in passing.

“We need to get him loaded up,” Randall says.

He pulls a luggage dolly from the wall. He pushes it toward the body, motioning for help.

“Wait a minute,” Paige says. “This is worth more than my rate.”

“How much do you want?”

“Fifty dollars extra. Cash, please.”

Randall hands over a pair of twenties and a crumpled ten. She knows he could report her if he wanted. It’s a risk she’s willing to take.

Together, they lift the body onto the dolly. It’s heavier than she expected. Perhaps it’s the dead weight. She saw something about that on a police procedural—how the muscles go stiff after death. There’s a term in Latin for the phenomenon, but she’s always forgetting it. Mona loved talking about shit like that. Back at Carolina, they’d sit together in the dorm room and watch cop shows for hours. They liked the writing. The prosecutors were always explaining horrific crimes in such a jaunty tone. Mona got a kick out of that. She’d sit on her bed, bug-eyed, and deliver the worst monologues by memory. Her favorite speech was the one about the serial killer who would cut off his victims’ pubic hair and weave it into tight little balls. She had everything down pat, including the lawyer’s Staten Island brogue. She was a performer.

Paige and Randall park the dolly beside the van. It’s nearly noon. The heat is beating down and the mosquitoes are out for blood. Paige opens a door and fiddles with the switch that’s supposed to make the seats go down. Randall taps her on the shoulder.

“You don’t need to do that,” he says. “We want him seated. It’s more realistic that way.”

She nods. They hoist the body into the back of the van. Randall buckles it in. The body slumps against the seat back. The head lolls to the side. The would-be mobster is wilting.

Randall returns to the funeral home to retrieve the umbrella and the briefcase. Paige starts the engine, hoping she can revive the air conditioning. She turns the dial to the coldest setting and places her hand over the vent. Nothing. She puts on a classic rock radio station. The DJ is talking about a time when music had real balls. His voice has the perfect amount of gravel in it. She’s unaccustomed to the radio’s incessant patter—the ads, the shock jocks, the knowing asides. During deliveries, she usually plugs her phone into the auxiliary cord and cues up a playlist. She figures the radio will be more palatable for Randall. She doesn’t want to subject him to her music.

When Randall returns, he places the umbrella on the corpse’s lap. He stows the suitcase on the seat beside it, lodging it between the armrests. He climbs into the passenger seat and Paige puts the car in drive. A Led Zeppelin song comes on. The drums clatter into a frenzy.

Randall makes a show of clearing his throat at the end of the song. “You like driving?”

“It’s all right. Pays my rent. Or, pays part of it.”

“What pays the rest of it?”

“Odd jobs most of the time. Right now? Nothing.”

He looks down at his lap. “Sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. I’ll find work soon. There’s still some time. Not much. But some.”

The van hits a pothole, causing a clatter. Paige glances back. The umbrella has fallen to the floor. The body is slumped. Its legs remain secure, but its torso has fallen into an awkward lean. Its eyes are now open. The pupils are stretched wide. They’re blue and still and lifeless.

Paige jabs a thumb in the direction of the body. “Is that a problem?”

Randall glances back. “Shit. Yeah, kind of.”

He unbuckles and climbs over the console. His scuffed gray New Balances trail past her. With the rearview mirror, she watches him fall into the back. He pulls himself up with the help of an armrest and settles into a crouch between the seats. He fusses with the body, attempting to push it into an upright position. She can’t watch for long. She returns her eyes to the road.

“I thought you said there was a process,” she says.

He grunts. “There is one. We didn’t take the driver into account.”

“Hey, don’t blame me. It’s these roads. They’re awful.”

Randall climbs back over the center console and into the passenger seat. Paige looks over her shoulder. The corpse is sitting up again, with its umbrella in place. Its arms are

fixed to its sides, secured beneath the seat belt. Its hands dangle over the edge of the seat. The van trundles on.

“Now we’re in business,” Randall says.

Paige eyes the app’s navigation screen. They’re three miles away from the destination, where Paul McGee’s daughter is waiting for them—waiting for her father, or what’s left of him.

“Does the daughter know we’re coming?” Paige asks.

“She should know. She signed off on it. But I don’t know for sure. I only met Paul.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t like this. Feels like a violation of some unwritten rule.”

“Don’t worry. It’s all above board.”

He smiles at her. The van hits a bump, jostling the pens kept clustered in the cupholders.

“I guess you know what you’re doing,” she says.

“Sure hope so. Seen my share of dead people.”

He’s looking out the window, tracing figure eights along the top of the gray console with his index finger. The motion is unconscious. She wonders what he’s thinking about. She wonders if he thinks of the bodies after they’re buried or incinerated or gone in some other, stranger way she hasn’t thought of. She wonders if he can picture them, if he cares for them. She wonders if they follow him around town, whispering their names, whispering his. She hopes they do.

“My friend died back in April,” she says. “They didn’t dress her up in a costume.”

He shifts in his seat, sits up straight. “How’d they do it?”

“They burned her up and tossed her in an urn. A little impersonal, if you ask me.”

“I like cremation. It’s a beautiful process. Like an ancient ritual: flesh, fire, ashes.”

“I wouldn’t know. Her mom didn’t want to do a viewing. Too morbid, she said.”

Mona’s mother is a serious woman with high cheekbones and pursed lips. She bears little resemblance to her daughter, who inherited her father’s softer, rounder features. Mona rarely spoke of her parents. Paige didn’t question it. Mona didn’t like to reminisce. Now, though, she’s certain there was a rift. The reasons for the rift are still unclear. Perhaps it had something to do with Mona’s death spiral. That’s how Paige thinks of it—a spiral. But it might’ve been a straight line. Was there a point of origin? In college she drank like everybody else and everybody else drank like her. If there were signs, they were hard to see, then.

Maybe it—the spiral or the line—didn’t start until after graduation, when Paige stayed in town and Mona moved out to Cayce. There was certainly a corresponding uptick in day drinking. Mona worked from home as a telemarketer, and there was no one around to stop her from rifling around in the liquor cabinet. But she was functional, at least for a while. The wheels didn’t come off until the last month of her life. That was when the

drinking started to show. If it had shown earlier, Paige might have kept a closer watch. That's what she tells herself. The decline is obvious in retrospect, though. Five days before Mona died, Paige found her passed out on the patio. She didn't consider the idea that her friend might wander into the water, which sat yards away, placid.

"People get so precious about this stuff," Randall says. "A body is a body. Nothing more. But I get it. It's hard, losing someone." He sighs and rubs his temple. "I like the idea of driving around like you. New sights. Lower stakes. Less crying. Sounds like a good deal."

"It's tolerable," she says. "No benefits, though."

"Sometimes I want to bail. For real, I mean. Just up and leave."

"What's stopping you?"

"A good, steady paycheck. That's the one upside to this gig. Well, that and the discounts."

The app dings. Paige checks the navigation. They've reached their destination. The house at 844 Coriander Street is a small red bungalow with a pitched roof and a wide front lawn. The lot is close to the banks of the Congaree. Paige can make out the roiling, muddy water through the pines as she eases her car down the sloped driveway. About a dozen people are standing on the grass. They're dressed in black. They're middle-aged, with the exception of a couple children. They've fixed their eyes on the approaching van. Paige looks back. Paul McGee is sitting up straight.

"Quite the turnout," Randall says. "Didn't expect so many."

Paige stops her van at the point where the driveway meets the curve of the front sidewalk. The mourners are standing in the overgrown grass with their hands on their hips. They seem to be having an animated discussion amongst themselves. In the middle, directing proceedings, is a woman with matted brown hair and pinched cheeks. She has the same large, pale forehead as the corpse. She's pointing at the van, explaining something to the others. The adults are nodding and frowning as she speaks. The two children—a little boy and a little girl—dart around, oblivious.

"They look confused," Paige says. She turns off the radio. "What do we do?"

"One moment," Randall says. He twists around in his seat and reaches into the back seat. He's making final adjustments. He drapes himself across the console, straining to make contact. He places his right hand on Paige's right shoulder, bracing himself. With his left hand, he unbuckles the corpse and straightens its tie. He pulls at the arms, causing them to slacken, to look more relaxed, more natural. Then he settles back in his seat. "Open the windows."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

She rolls the windows down. The mourners murmur excitedly. She can hear the river rushing from behind the trees. The mourners draw closer, angling for a better look.

“Now what?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Randall says. “It was supposed to be more intimate.”

“Intimate.”

“Right. Intimate. A private viewing. Just the daughter.”

Gasps arise from the crowd of mourners. They’ve spotted Paul McGee. The children cease their play and cock their heads, curious.

The woman who shares the corpse’s forehead pushes to the front of the crowd. She’s yards away now. Paige can hear her labored breathing. Her long neck is shiny with sweat, and her face is pale, paler than usual. Her lips are trembling. “Why is he dressed like that?” she asks. Her voice is cracked, on the edge of wailing. Paige wants to comfort her, but she’s not sure of the protocol. The woman moves to the front passenger-side window. She’s face-to-face with Randall, now.

“This is the mobile memorial service for Paul McGee,” Randall says. “You’re his daughter?”

“Yes,” she says. She shakes her head. “I thought—”

“We’re with the Marcy Funeral Home. The styling was done at your father’s request. I believe you signed off on this already.”

She shakes her head again. “I signed some papers. I didn’t agree to any costumes.”

“You did. My boss has the papers, if you’d like me to get you a copy.”

“Hold on,” Paige says. “There’s obviously been some kind of mix-up.”

Tears cloud the daughter’s eyes. She glances at the corpse. “A mix-up?” she asks.

“No, there hasn’t been a mix-up,” Randall says. “We’re just meeting our contractual obligations, miss. You and your father requested a service. We’re delivering that service.”

The daughter lets out a sharp cry and shuts her eyes tight. It takes her a moment to gather herself. When she opens her eyes, Paige can see they’re light blue, just like her father’s. She’s turned her eyes from Randall. She’s staring at her father, transfixed. “I thought you’d bring a picture and chairs and a wreath and all that. Like they do in the movies. That’s why I invited all these people. Figured it would be a nice, normal memorial service. No bodies. No urns.”

“This is better,” Randall says. “It’s our deluxe package. It’s new. It’s cutting edge.”

“She doesn’t care about that,” Paige says. “The body’s too much for her. Can’t you see?”

The daughter falls to her knees, out of Paige’s sight, sobbing. Several mourners rush up to comfort her, throwing looks of disgust in the van’s general direction.

Randall turns to Paige. “This isn’t personal, you know. I’m doing my job. Just like you.”

“You’re not doing it very well.”

The mourners are murmuring again. It’s an angry sound. The daughter rises to her feet.

Randall grimaces. He turns back to the window, bushy eyebrows drooping inward. “Look,” he says to the daughter. “If you want, we can call things off. We’ll forget the pa-



perwork. We won't charge any extra fees. We'll plan a new ceremony. Something more to your liking."

"And the cremation?" asks a mourner. "He'll still be cremated?"

"Of course. We'll call tomorrow. We'll sort out all the details. Together."

The daughter pauses to consider the proposal. She looks at her father several times, as if she's waiting for him to speak his mind. But she can't lock him in; she keeps averting her gaze. A warm breeze wafts through the driver's side window, ruffling Paige's hair. It reminds her of how Mona used to climb into her bed when she was drunk and start spooning her. She can almost feel Mona's warm breath brushing her scalp, feel her soft fingers bumbling down her spine. She thinks of white sheets and ephemeral spirits—the signifiers swirl through her mind, swift and light and suddenly unburied. She knows, now, what it means to be haunted. She doesn't hate it.

"OK," the daughter says. "OK, OK. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Perfect," Randall says. He grins. "I'm glad to hear that."

"You can leave now," the daughter says. Her voice cracks again. "Please leave."

The mourners pull her back into their ranks, petting her head, comforting her. She sinks into them, sobbing. The children stand at the periphery, gawking at their elders, confused.

Paige and Randall drive back to the funeral home in silence. Paige can't think of anything worth saying. She feels like some unknown force has rebuffed them. Occasionally, she looks back to make sure the corpse is still there. She's not sure what compels her, but every time she sees the body back there, head bobbing limply, she gets a rush of relief, as if everything is in its place.

When they get back to the funeral home, Randall sits for a moment, staring into space. "You have to understand," he says, gaze unbroken. "If I don't do this job, somebody else will."

"I don't care," she says. "I really don't care."

She lets him unload the body. He doesn't seem to mind. She watches him pull it out and drag it across the parking lot. He gives her a small, perfunctory wave and disappears around the back. She waits for him to return, to say something else, to convince her of his goodness. She waits for ten minutes, hoping to deny his attempts at closure. He doesn't return. She decides to leave.

There's still time for more jobs, but she can't bear to return to the parking garage and sit in her car. Instead, she returns to her apartment. Her phone dings as she walks in the door. The payment has come through. She jumps in the shower and lets the hot water rush over her.

After emerging from the steam, she slips into a pair of checkered pajamas and sets her phone to airplane mode. There will be no more deliveries today. She turns on the television

and flips to USA Network, hoping for *Law & Order*. She's not disappointed. The actors are in the courtroom. The camera is trained on the actor playing the prosecutor. He's asking the defendant, a Catholic priest, if he can read God's mind. Paige turns up the volume. She wants to hear the prosecutor's voice. She wants him to sound like Mona.

SECRET