

# THE MORTICIAN

By Katharine Yacovone

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Comedic writing comes with lots of challenges but 'The Mortician' never misses the mark. A hilarious send up on the funeral business with all the gallous humour you'd expect. And for this reason alone it's worth reading. But beneath the yuks lies an impressive mastery of craft. Jerry and Mort are so effortlessly created and keenly present that you just take them for granted, forgetting entirely what an achievement this represents. We don't see them as 'characters', we see them as real people. We sldo like the structural device of back to back monologues and especially the superbly realized voices. The insightful prose both crackles: 'I don't think anyone can really hate Morty. He's a riot; he's a live wire. Being around him is like getting electrocuted and then thanking him for it after.' And impresses: 'There was something about giving families a goodbye. To take care of a loved one, to be trusted with the body of someone, to prepare that moment where they begin to let them go forever. Patching a face back together, dressing them in their last outfit, staging them like the living so that the living could face them for the last time. People need that closure and I get to give it to them. I didn't get it with dad.'*

The Mortician

Katharine Yacovone

**Jerry**

“What the fuck Morty?”

“I'll find it; I swear.”

“You'll *find* it? What do you want me to tell the family when they arrive in—” I checked my watch, “twenty fucking minutes?”

“Do you need to swear so much?”

“What the fuck am I going to *fucking* do?”

“I don't know, Jer. Stall or something.”

“I swear to god, Mort. I don't know what to do with you sometimes.” Morty merely shrugged, his boney shoulders falling forward in the lackadaisical way that showed he wasn't

half as worried as I was. When he saw I was expecting an explanation, apology, any sense of taking responsibility, he only lifted his hands in a sign of surrender, his black gloves still shinning with blood and formaldehyde, and shrugged again.

I growled and spun around, storming up the stairs to get out that morbid basement, shoving past the empty brown metal casket with golden accents and the freshly pressed blue suit hanging above it. The Gaumont family would be here for Mr. Gaumont's funeral before I knew it and I had to think of some way, anyway, to distract them. Morty had lost the fucking body.

I hurried to my office, falling into the chair behind my antique desk, straightening the row of pencils on the polished surface, and pulling out Mr. Gaumont's file. I mean, this was our first year running the funeral home, but how could we be screwing it up so badly already? Morty keeps saying we'll get better in time, but each time something got messed up, I thought about how we were better off at the firm.

What makes two financial advisors qualified to run a funeral home? Other than a client agreeing to sell us the place when he retired and a mortician's license Mort got as a joke in college, not much.

How was I supposed to know he would get me into *this* when we met at Northwestern fifteen years ago? Maybe I wouldn't have approached him in the lounge of our freshman dorm that day. I remember he'd dragged his record player out of his room and was playing Jimi Hendrix and smoking Pall Malls. There was a deck of cards out in front of him and he was doing card tricks, duping every guy in the dorm with this smirk on his face. I wanted to smack it off him, so I went over there and had him do the trick for me. Little did he know, I knew a bit about card tricks myself. I could tell he was impressed by the way he let the cigarette hang out of the

corner of his mouth and grinned at me, pointing one long, bony finger and saying, “You’re interesting,” Then, “The name’s Mort.”

At first, I wanted to hate the guy, but I don’t think anyone can really hate Morty. He’s a live wire. Being around him is like getting electrocuted and then thanking him for it after. It appeals to everyone at first, but it gets to be too much for everybody eventually. Still, after that day, Morty seemed to decide we were going to be friends. He came into my dorm a few days into school and started leafing through my records, commenting on my Stones, Bob Dylan, the Kinks. Before I knew it, we were talking like I’d invited him over.

I lent him my Stones record and he lost it in the black hole of his dorm room before he had a chance to listen. I never saw that damn record again. He’d go on to lose apartment keys, credit cards, and even my wife and I’s rings the day of my wedding ceremony. He’d always been forgetful. It was like there were too many things going on inside his head that he never seemed to keep up with the things going on outside of it. But how does someone lose a corpse? It’s not like they can run away.

The phone rang, nearly scaring me half to death.

## **Morty**

Jer just needed some time to cool off. Now, where was Mr. Gaumont? I had him yesterday, that slippery fucker... I’d drained him, filled him with the embalming fluid, and set his face. It was some of my best work. He looked pretty as hell. His pale wrinkled skin was pulled back like the finest Botox and I’d combed his white hair over nicely. I thought it’d put him back in his drawer; I’d even labeled it like Jerry keeps telling me to. Right there: T. Gaumont. All I had to do was dress him up for the main event. But when I went to get him this morning, he wasn’t in said drawer.

I began searching through the drawers along the wall of the basement. It's not like he could have gone far. Sure, I wouldn't want to go six feet under either, but he couldn't really run away from it. The basement wasn't that big, basically just a cube beneath the earth; he had to turn up somewhere. Maybe I should start listening to Jerry and get this place organized. Sure some would call me messy, but that hadn't been a life or death issue until we opened the place. Tools were strewn around the basement: trocars, and blades, bloody and covered in chemicals on the metal table tops. Vats of embalming fluid were scattered about the floor and I hadn't taken out the hazardous waste in a while. I wondered if cleaning services covered morticians' labs. I could talk to Tatiana maybe when she came to the house next week, ask her over the sound of the vacuum running. I could imagine her face now, that girl gets the heebie jeebies whenever I talk about work. She would probably drop the vacuum to make the sign of the cross. She doesn't understand why I would abandon such a high income, a job I was good at. That's simple, though no one ever seems to get it but Jerry.

I mean business here is stable: death is inevitable and I was dying slowly at that firm. I finally feel alive among the dead. I just couldn't thrive in that whole tight-suit, necktie, cold-office environment. I was sick of all of those stiff lunches in fancy Chicago restaurants, folded napkin on lap, two forks and a coffee spoon when I didn't even like the taste of the bitter dirt. When you're a financial advisor, you're dealing with wealthy people who need people to *advise* them on their finances. And with people, I always seem to say the wrong thing, make a joke at the wrong time, come across as creepy or arrogant, offend in some way that I don't understand or see coming. Few people understand my sense of humor. It always seems too harsh, too dark, too... I don't know but working with the dead is easier I think. Don't get me wrong, there's no

itch for murder that I'm scratching here. I'm not *that* kind of guy. It's just that dead bodies don't need to be pleased.

Right now, one just needs to be found.

## **Jerry**

Still without a plan, I took long strides down the hall to the blue room where the Gaumont's were having their service. They were due in ten minutes. God, I hoped they weren't early. People were always early when you didn't want them to be. The flowers were in place, but I sprayed them with a little water to prevent wilting and straightened the canvas photo of the poor guy who died peacefully in his sleep at 82: Sagging cheeks, bald spot in the middle of his white hair. We edited out those pesky nose hairs, though. I just hoped we could find him now so that Mrs. Gaumont and her three kids, and six grandkids could say goodbye.

I flipped through the binder: it was a closed casket, what a blessing. And I thought I remembered Mrs. Gaumont mentioning her daughter had a phobia of dead bodies or something. I'd just have to play on that. Keep that damn casket shut. Pray that Morty found him.

I started biting at my nails. My wife hated when I did this, what can I say? It's a nervous habit. This could go real bad. We could get in big trouble. Business shut down trouble. Police trouble. Although... maybe that would be for the best?

Morty thought the whole thing was hilarious. His life is just one big joke. Just because of the irony of his name, he had to buy a fucking funeral home. That's not the first thing he's done something ridiculous for a good laugh. And it won't be the last. I knew where my life was headed the day I bought this property and I should have put a stop to it then and there.

## **Mort**

Not only was Mr. Gaumont missing from his drawer, he wasn't in any of the drawers as far I could tell. At first, I'd thought maybe I had just mislabeled him, but then he wasn't in Mrs. Dennis's drawer or Mr. Crawford's or Mr. Miles: Old person after old person after old person and none of them appeared to be Mr. G. He wasn't in the empty drawers or under the table or in the storage closet or the chemical cabinet.

I pulled open the file cabinet, and when his body wasn't in there either, started leafing through the various body files. There was Mr. Crawford's file, Mr. Venice's file, with a red tag because he'd gone into the crematorium yesterday, and finally I came across Mr. Gaumont's file, with a photo clipped to the front. I just had to look a little longer. Maybe I hadn't recognized him? All these old guys looked the same sometimes, especially naked and dead.

Or maybe he'd been stolen? That could be something that wouldn't be our fault. Body snatching was a thing, wasn't it? But I'm sure Mrs. Gaumont wouldn't be very happy about that.

Sure, maybe it looked like I wasn't taking this seriously, but I was. It's not that I didn't care, though people always seemed to take it that way. And there was something about this career, something that I knew would matter much more to me than investing rich people's money and trying to please them. I could do something that might actually matter. Sure, people might see it as morbid, but someone had to take care of all those bodies. There was something about giving families a goodbye: Patching a face back together, dressing them in their last outfit, staging them like the living so that the living could face them for the last time. People need that closure and I get to give it to them. I didn't get it with dad. He never came back from Vietnam, never got sent back in a wooden box with an American flag on it. But at least I could give it to

other people. Jerry probably thought I just did it for fun, for the irony of the thing. Let him think that.

Speaking of, if I didn't find this body, Jerry would quit me for sure. I started pulling the drawers out again because I wasn't sure what else to do. My hands were getting clammy, what would happen if I couldn't figure this out? Jerry had been screaming something about malpractice and law suits and jail time when he'd come down with that pretty blue suit and opened Mr. G's drawer to find it empty. I checked my watch: less than ten minutes till the Gaumonts would be here. It couldn't be that hard to find a five-foot seven eighty-two year old in this basement... Wait, was that Mr. Venice's body? Hadn't I put him in the crematorium?

## **Jerry**

I was headed to the basement to check on Mort when the door chimed: five minutes early. What was I going to tell them? As long as they didn't ask to see the body, we might be able to get away with this. I just had to sell it.

Mrs. Gaumont stood in the lobby along with her three children. Though adults, they looked childlike around their mother, falling steps behind her. She looked put together with powder over her wrinkles and red lipstick, trying to contain the undeniable tension underneath that makeup. She gave me a weak smile and I noticed a smear of red on her teeth. Her shoulders hunched forward slightly, but I couldn't tell if it that was due to her mourning or if it had become the natural shape of her body. Her two sons stood behind her looking slightly uncomfortable in their suits. Mrs. Gaumont's daughter, a pale thirty-something with bags under her eyes, had her arm around her mother.

“Where are those cute munchkins? Are the grandkids coming separately, Mrs. Gaumont?”

She perked at the topic of grandkids, as all grandmothers do, “Yes, they were bouncing off the walls. My daughters-in-law are bringing them after a run around the yard. I thought it best.”

“Good plan.”

“Though, Armie did always love running around with them.” She said this listlessly.

Her daughter squeezed her shoulder and said, “It’s okay, Mommy. He’s happy wherever he is.”

“He’s probably watching Jeopardy up there.” Added in one of her sons, which made her chuckle.

“Yes, he’s resting peacefully now. This day is mainly for you guys. To say goodbye and show him that you love him,” I began my spiel, “Everything is just about set up. The flowers look quite perfect and the pamphlets are just in the door. The photo makes him look like a movie star—”

“And where is he?” Cut in Mrs. Gaumont shyly. She was looking past me, to the empty place at the front of the room where Mr. Gaumont’s casket should have been.

“Ah, he—” just as I started to come up with an excuse, the lift from the basement began to squeal to life. I raised a finger as if to say, just a moment, and pulled the door open to find the shiny casket with gold accents. *He better fucking be in there*, “He is right here, Ma’am.”

“Oh, we picked a beautiful casket.”

I pulled it onto the cart nearby and pushed it over to her. “One of our finest.”

Mrs. Gaumont rested her hand on top of the cool metal and fanned her fingers out. Her hand was on the spot where Mr. Gaumont's heart would be. She took a deep breath and her shoulders relaxed. The twist in her face began to unwind, as if being close to him, or his casket at least, was comforting. When she took her hand off, her palm print remained on the metal. "It would be nice to... I don't know... to see him one last time."

I swallowed and the air got stuck in my throat. "...If you would like to see him, of course we can do that. Is your daughter comfortable with it? I remember you saying she was a little queasy around the dead."

"Rose, is that okay?" Gaumont asked her daughter.

Rose looked white, the veins prominent under her tired eyes. "I can handle it for you, Mom."

"Thank you, honey." She turned to me, "May I?"

"Of course, Mrs. Gaumont. Just a moment." I shoved my shaking hand into my pocket and fished around for the key ring wishing for anyway to delay the inevitable. When I pulled it out, my fingers slipped on the keys as I shuffled through them slowly until I came the small golden one that matched the casket. Turning it in the coffin's lock, I prayed that the body was in there. I began to push open the casket, but jumped back and dropped the lid when Mrs. Gaumont shrieked.

## **Mort**

When I came to the top of the stairs, I heard a shriek. Shit, we'd been caught. I creaked the door open to see Mrs. Gaumont on her knees, cradling her daughter who had seemingly fainted on the ground beside her.

“Rose, honey, can you hear me?” She said with a shaky voice.

Rose’s eyes rolled back in her head for a moment, revealing white, then she blinked quickly and looked around the room in confusion.

“I’m sorry, mom,” She whispered. “I thought I could handle it. I don’t think I can.”

“That’s okay, honey. He’s not in there anyway.” Mrs. Gaumont looked up at Jerry, who looked just about as shocked as I felt, “You can close it. Is he wearing the suit I left for him?”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding in and noticed that Jerry did too, “Of course he is. Let me escort you in so that Rose may sit down,” Jerry said in steady voice.

He pushed the casket into the blue room as they walked behind him.

When Mike mentioned selling his funeral home, I didn’t think about the difficulties of the job. Instead, I saw a path that I’d somehow unintentionally prepared for my whole life. Jerry and I do everything together and as much as he likes to deny it as we get older, he loves the thrill of it. We all end up in the ground or the air or the water eventually. Jerry liked to pretend that his dream job was at the firm, but I know that he wanted to be an archeologist when he first came to school. He pretended that view and that office and those fancy lunches were everything he’d ever dreamt of, but I caught him more than a few times spacing off towards a fixed point in the distance of the Chicago skyline. He was safe in the office, but he wasn’t as happy as he let on. He’s a lot more like me than he lets himself think. If he wasn’t, why was it so easy to convince him to fuck off from the firm and start a funeral home?

When he came back to the lobby, he saw me at the top of the basement stairs. He raised his eyebrows and waited for an explanation.

“I figured it out,” I said with a grin.

“You found the body?”

“You could say that.”

“Morty, did you find the body or not?”

I shrugged, “Sure.”

“You really gotta stop doing this. You’re going to give me a heart attack.” Then he noticed my black elbow gloves I’d forgotten to take off, “You shouldn’t have those on up here. You’re going to disturb the clientele.”

“Sorry, Jer. I thought you were supposed to wear black to a funeral?”

## **Jerry**

I refused to let Mort off easily, “So, where’s his body?”

“Oh, it’s in there.”

“Mr. Gaumont’s embalmed body is in that casket?”

“Mr. Gaumont’s accidentally cremated ashes are in there.”

“I swear to God, Morty.” I sounded like a scolding father, “You’re lucky it was a closed casket. You really can’t do that again.”

“But it all worked out in the end.”

I only looked at him incredulous. I should’ve put a stop to this the day Mort said, *Listen, Jer. Mike here is retiring and he wants to sell Denison Funeral Home.*

I still don’t know how got me to agree to it, but a month later we were signing the papers for the place. At the time I was dead set on never being a Funeral Director, only agreed to help him buy the property. But obviously, that happened too. Morty gifted me with an antique desk for my new office and a copy of *Funeral Home’s for Dummies* in its top drawer.

Now I wondered if that damn book had anything about missing bodies incase this happened again. “You know, I’m ready to leave this whole thing, and you, behind. The firm called again and offered my old job.”

“Did you say yes?”

“I said I’d let them know.”

“Come on, Jerry. You know you love this place.”

“You’re going to get us arrested. Or worse.” I hissed. “It’s not like college anymore. We need to grow up.”

“We’re all gonna end up a casket.” Morty said nodding to Mr. Gaumont’s, “Why not enjoy ourselves?”

“I swear to God, Morty!”

“So, what? You gonna abandon me? Go back to the firm?” Morty didn’t seem worried when he asked this.

“Yes. I am.”

“No, you won’t.”

I opened my mouth to tell him off; hell, I should have just went down to my office without another word and called back the office, accepted the offer then and there, got away from this place. But, nothing came out of my mouth. A lot of people fall into the flow of the nine to five after college and stop living, but Mort refused to accept that reality. And I guess, once he decided I was going to be his best friend, it was never a risk for me either. I took a deep breath to steady my beating heart. It would have been a lie to say this day hadn’t been exciting. And seeing Mrs. Gaumont’s face when her hand was on her husband’s casket...“Will you at least get an assistant?”

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I think the core of this story is the idea that death doesn't always have to be distorted, horrible, sad, or heavy, and that, in the most stressful or odd of situations is when people can finally feel alive. During my senior Fiction Workshop, our professor gave us a sole rule for writing our stories: Don't kill off your characters. It's too easy and cheap. And yet, each week the stories got increasingly morbid with each ending more ambiguous as to whether the characters made it out alive. That is when, as a girl who grew up on Cohen brothers and Tarantino films, I decided to write something that would question this need for morbidity in storytelling. The Mortician came out of an attempt to play around with the dramatic theme of death by making it more lighthearted and funny. I wanted to explore two goofy characters, Jerry and Mort, who left their careers in financial advising that were slowly killing them, to feel more alive among the dead.*

**BIO:** *Katharine Yacovone is a fiction, poetry, and travel writer from Connecticut. She is currently a senior English Writing student at Marist College. Katharine enjoys traveling and finding stories in her travels. She finds a bookstore in each city that she travels to and speaks French. She has published poems in the Marist College Mosaic Literary Magazine including "Tulip" (Fall 2017, 2<sup>nd</sup> place poetry), and "Thunder" (Fall 2019).*