

The
Undertaker's
Wife

A MEMOIR

A TRUE STORY OF LOVE, LOSS, *and* LAUGHTER IN
THE UNLIKELIEST OF PLACES



DEE OLIVER

WITH JODIE BERNDT

ZONDERVAN

The Undertaker's Wife

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Prologue

IT. HAS. BEEN.
A. YEAR!

I lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling. The two dogs were asleep near my feet, having staked their territory on my Yves Delorme duvet months ago. Down the hall, my three daughters slept peacefully in their rooms.

May 2, 2008. People say the first year is the hardest — the first Christmas, the first Father’s Day, the first wedding anniversary without your spouse — but I couldn’t imagine life getting any easier. I’d made it through the first twelve months; only God knew how many more months — or years — I had to go. What if I never got remarried? Could I really live like this, with dogs in my bed instead of a man, for the rest of my life?

I looked down at the dogs. They needed a bath. Johnnie would have kicked them off. He liked things neat and tidy, organized, and efficient. Dogs on the bed were not part of his plan.

But then, neither was dying.

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The house was so quiet that time of morning. I slipped out of the sheets, reaching for my robe and pulling back my long brown hair into a ponytail. I'd had it colored last week; that, at least, was something I could control. If nothing else went right on the anniversary of Johnnie's death, at least my hair would look good.

Ever faithful, the dogs followed me downstairs, their paws making only the softest clicks on the hardwood floor of our kitchen. I let them out and started the coffee. As it brewed, my mind retraced the milestones of my adult life. I had checked a lot of boxes.

Travel through Europe? Check.

Go to college? Check, perhaps double checked. I'd had a lot of fun!

Live on my own with a bunch of girlfriends, holding down jobs that didn't get in the way of our social lives? Check.

Find a handsome and wealthy doctor to marry?

Not checked.

All of my life I'd had an irrational and yet ever-present fear of getting sick, so sick that I might die. If I married a doctor, I reasoned, I could take ill at any moment, even during the middle of the night, and I would have instant access to first-class medical care. The fact that he would be a *handsome* doctor was a given. Like UPS men, the doctors I'd known seemed, both on television and in person, to be square-jawed, physically fit, and generally attractive men. And the stipulation that my doctor-husband would, of necessity, be *wealthy* was something I'd picked up from my mother, a woman who taught me

how to drink (one glass of wine at a party; the bottle at home, if needed), how to make the most of a hospital stay (if you have to have, say, a hysterectomy, you “might as well call the plastic surgeon for a little nip too, darling”), and how to hold it together in the face of pain, sorrow, and unruly children (a neat trick that usually involved a new dress and, almost as often, a flight to Paris). As Mother routinely opined when dishing up nuptial advice, “You can fall in love with a rich man as easily as you can a poor one.”

Well, I never found the doctor. Instead, I fell in love with Johnnie, whose occupation I had, at the starry-eyed age of twenty-one, never even heard of. He was a funeral director. Which, when I stopped to think about it, was even better. Funeral directors couldn’t die; they had to stick around so they could bury everyone else, right? And surely this Teflon-coated protection would cover both him and me, his loving and supportive spouse.

So much for logic.

After pouring myself a large mug of coffee, I grabbed my Bible and headed outside to sit on the front steps, where the hydrangeas Johnnie had planted (well, the ones he had paid somebody to plant) were just beginning to bloom. I had never prayed all that much before Johnnie died, but with no one else to confide in, I didn’t mind when God stepped into the gap. I never felt like he was judging me for waiting so long to talk to him; instead, it seemed as if he had all the time in the world (which I guess he did — or does) and he was just glad I was there. Anyway, I hadn’t missed a day with God during

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the past year. With bills to pay, rotten windows to replace, and three daughters to raise, I needed all the help I could get, and talking things over with God in the morning had become as much a part of my widowed life as sleeping with dogs. And, I had to admit, it was infinitely more satisfying.

“Mom! Mom!”

I heard Madison, our middle daughter, bounding down the stairs. What would get a thirteen-year-old up and out of bed so early — and on a Saturday? I went inside and nearly collided with her in her haste to get to the window. Up she clambered, onto the kitchen counter, and pressed her face against the glass.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “What’s all the excitement?”

Nearly breathless, Madison turned to me, her face aglow with enthusiasm. “Do you know what *today* is?” she asked. “Do you?”

Well, of course I knew. It was the one-year anniversary of her father’s death — we all knew that. Clearly, though, something else was on her mind. I decided to play dumb (which is, most days, not all that difficult to do).

“I give up,” I said. “What’s today?”

“Mom,” Madison said reproachfully, swinging her long, colt-like legs off the counter and walking over to where I stood. “*Today* is the day Daddy died. I cannot believe you forgot.”

I looked into Madison’s face and saw no hint of confusion. She was serious — and yet her eyes sparkled, as though she knew a really good secret. Grabbing my hand, she pulled me back over to the counter and resumed her post at the window.

“Madison,” I said slowly, choosing my words carefully, “what are we doing?”

“Look!” she insisted.

I looked. The driveway was empty. I wondered what she saw. A spirit? A vision of her father? God? (I knew I’d left Him out there, but I figured He might have followed me back into the house.) Was the child going crazy? Racking my brain for the name of a good psychiatrist who would take a teenager on short notice, I decided to play along.

“What am I looking at?” I asked.

“Nothing — yet,” she chided. “They haven’t come yet. But they will be here soon.”

“Who will be here? It isn’t even seven in the morning. Who is coming?”

“I don’t know *which ones*, Mom, but they will *all* come.”

Pouring myself another mug of coffee (and wondering if it was too early to think about switching to wine), I took a seat at the kitchen table. “Madison,” I said gently, “please sit down and tell me what all of this is about.”

“Okay,” she agreed, pulling up a chair and propping her elbows on the table. “Today is the anniversary of Daddy’s death, right?”

I nodded my head yes.

“Well, you said,” she continued, in the patient-yet-exasperated tone of someone who thinks what they are explaining is blatantly obvious, “that after Daddy died it was the *proper* thing for our family to be in mourning for a year, because we are a *funeral* family and we are *Southern*, right?”

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I nodded again, not sure where any of this was going, but glad she had her facts straight.

“Well, it has been a year and now we don’t have to mourn anymore, right?”

Still not sure what I was supposed to say, I kept my mouth shut.

Taking a deep breath, Madison finally unleashed her thoughts: “All of the other single moms date, but you said you weren’t allowed to date because you were in mourning. Well, it has been a year.”

“Oh, honey.” I sighed as the weight of understanding finally fell. “You are right. It *has* been a year. But all of the moms you know who date are divorced, and I am a widow, and that feels different somehow. I just don’t think I am ready to date anyone. Your daddy and I were very much in love — ”

“Mom!” Madison interrupted, her voice rising now. “It. Has. Been. A. Year!”

I looked at the clock. Not even 7:30 yet. It was going to be a long day.

Slowly, my daughter leaned forward, her face inches from mine. “Go upstairs,” she said, clearly and deliberately, as though I was not only stupid but probably deaf too. “You look horrible. Put on some makeup and do your hair. And put on something with a little style.”

When I hesitated, she grabbed my hands and pulled me out of my chair. “Hurry up!” she insisted. “They will be here soon!”

I scuttled up the stairs, wondering what had become of

my life. Being a widow was bad enough; being hounded by a fairy-godmother-of-a-daughter was awful. I closed the bathroom door, locking it behind me, lest she come in to check on my progress.

I took a critical look in the mirror. Madison had exaggerated. I didn't look *horrible*. Tired maybe. And not exactly twentysomething. But I still had nice legs, thanks partly to God and partly to my daily workouts. I leaned closer to the glass. Was that a new wrinkle? Maybe. But it was nothing that some mascara and a stiff shot of Botox couldn't fix. Sure, a funeral director had tools like duct tape and embalming fluid at his disposal (and I'd seen Johnnie work magic on some of our less attractive acquaintances), but a plastic surgeon — now *that* would be a good husband to have on call. *Maybe*, I thought as I rooted around for my eyebrow tweezers, *one of them would show up on the white horse of Madison's dreams*.

By lunchtime, I'd lost count of how many times Madison had gone outside to check the driveway, letting more flies in the house with each foray. "I just don't understand," she would wail every thirty minutes or so. "Has anyone *called*?"

"No," I would answer, reaching for the flyswatter for what seemed the millionth time, "no one has called."

By midafternoon, Madison had stopped peppering me with questions. Instead, she wandered into the kitchen at random intervals, muttering about my hair or saying something about my clothes before shaking her head and walking out of the room. I thought about calling a man — any man — to come over and just *pretend* to be interested in me, but I didn't

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know anyone who was single, at least not anyone I would trust to play the part. All of Johnnie's and my really good friends were married.

Finally, the dinner hour arrived. That boded well, since it meant two things — wine for me and an impending bedtime for the girls. Once the dishes were done, I announced that it was bath time. Jacquie and Aven, Madison's older and younger sisters, hustled up the stairs, arguing over who had dibs on my shower that night. Madison hung back, stealing one last glance out the window.

My hope, as I made my bedtime rounds — saying prayers, dispensing kisses, and tucking each daughter in for the night — was that Madison would be fast asleep by the time I got to her room. I had saved her for last, on purpose.

But her lights were still on. And when I peeked in her door, she was sitting upright in her bed, her arms crossed and her attitude bolstered by an army of stuffed animals, all of whom seemed to glare at me as though I'd made some sort of heinous and unforgivable mistake.

I slipped into the room and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I just don't get it," Madison said with a sigh, more defeated than angry now. "Why didn't anyone come to date you today? You look nice enough. I mean, you're not ugly or anything like that. You're really smart. And Daddy liked you a lot."

"Oh, Madison," I said, brushing the hair from her face, "God has a plan for us. He will take care of us. He never makes mistakes — never! He will provide someone for me to date when he knows the time is right — for me and for all of us."

I leaned back on the bed, feeling satisfied with my explanation and imagining that God was pleased with me too. I loved the idea that my daughter could learn from my example of faith and that she would be equipped to put her trust in God. Who needed a father when there was such a wise and insightful mother around to be such a good Christian role model? Maybe I really could do this single-parent thing after all.

I closed my eyes, picturing my daughters growing up to be strong women of faith. I was almost asleep when I felt a gentle pressure on my hand. Coming awake, I saw Madison's eyes peering earnestly into mine.

"So, what do you think you did wrong? You need to figure this out so it doesn't happen again ..."

Madison was still talking when I reached the door of her room. "Good night, darling," I said as I turned out the light.



*Life and Death
with Johnnie*



DATING THE GRIM REAPER

I watched, mesmerized, as the heat waves danced lazily on the blacktop of the hospital parking lot. If I squinted, I could almost pretend they were a mist rising up from the ocean, or some sort of desert mirage. It was hot as all get-out. I felt the sweat trickling down my chest, and I wondered, with a sort of morbid curiosity, what would happen if I just had a heat stroke and fell over.

Probably nothing. My family was too engrossed in their discussion to notice my discomfort. But weren't they hot too? Why didn't someone suggest we finish our conversation inside, where the cool, dark hush of the hospital lobby sanitized all feeling?

"She would definitely not want 'Amazing Grace,'" my aunt insisted. "I am not even sure she would want any singing."

"Yes, but —"

"And we can't have the reception at home, even if it is just family. Too confusing. Jacquie, can you call the Club?"

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Snippets of conversation darted about like swallows in the air — *flowers, an obituary, the proper suit to wear*. My grandmother had just died. I felt the grief welling up inside me. I wanted to cry — but not about losing Momma Claire. I wanted to cry because I was so stinking hot, hot as Hades, and it didn't seem like anyone had any intention of leaving the sweltering parking lot. There was a funeral to plan, and no matter that it was to be just family and a few close friends, my mother — Jacquie Branch, the queen of everything — was gearing up for an *event*. Dress shopping had to be done, hair appointments booked, ham biscuits ordered. At the ripe old age of twenty-one, I could not have cared less. I loved my grandmother, but I didn't want to think about her funeral. I just wanted to go to the beach.

Finally, just as I thought I really might pass out, some sort of an accord was reached and I was, thankfully, released.

Perhaps I should have paid better attention — at least to the wardrobe discussion. Momma Claire was to be laid to rest at Forest Lawn, and as I slid out of the car at the cemetery, keeping my knees together as my mother had told me all good girls do, I felt my cousin's stare.

"*Seriously?*" she hissed. "You wore *blue*? Don't you know you are supposed to wear *black* to a funeral?"

I didn't — but I wasn't about to let on. "Why on earth would anyone wear black?" I replied. "It is hot as all get-out, probably a hundred degrees, and everyone knows black absorbs sun. I will be much more comfortable in this dress — and for your information, it isn't blue; it is *teal*. And it matches my eyes."

Standing at Momma Claire's graveside, I sensed my aunt at my elbow. "Dee, darling," she whispered, "that blue is quite ... becoming ... but I do think you might have worn something a little less ... garden party."

"It's teal," I muttered.

"What?" My aunt leaned in, keeping her voice low so as not to distract the minister, who was saying something about ashes and dust.

"Teal. The dress is *teal*. But can we please focus on Momma Claire?"

Rebuffed, at least for the moment, my aunt stepped back, and we turned our attention to the service. It was a smallish gathering, and I was struck by how many employees from the funeral home seemed to be lurking about. Dressed in dark suits and red-and-navy-striped ties, they looked more like secret service men than undertakers. A couple of the guys looked familiar, which wasn't surprising. The H.D. Oliver Funeral Home had been in business for nearly two hundred years, and the Oliver family, like my own, had called Tidewater, Virginia, home since ... well, since forever, I guess.

We bid farewell to Momma Claire — who, mercifully, was perhaps the only family member who did not weigh in on the color of my dress — and I didn't give another thought to the Olivers.

A week or so later, the phone rang. It was my cousin Vicki, wanting to know whether I might be willing to "meet someone."

I'd just ended a rather unremarkable relationship, and not

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having anything better to do, I figured what the heck. “Sure,” I said. “Set me up.”

(Note to the single gal: Before agreeing to any blind date, get some background intel. The guy could turn out to be a serial killer. Worse still, he could work with people who are already dead. But I am getting ahead of myself.)

We set a date, and I drove the twenty-five minutes from my home in Virginia Beach to a neighborhood bar in Norfolk. Spying a spot right in front of the place (this date showed promise already!), I eased my jacked-up four-wheel-drive Chevy Blazer with the killer sound system into the parking space and cut the engine.

Vicki met me at the door, taking my elbow protectively as my eyes struggled to adjust to the dim lighting. “Okay,” she said, “Mr. Wonderful is here.”

“Whoa,” I replied, halting in my tracks. “Let’s get some info first. Like, what’s his name?”

“John Oliver. He is thirty-five years old and —”

“Stop. You did not just say *thirty-five*. That is old. Way old. Like, older-than-dirt old.”

“Oh, Dee,” Vicki said with a laugh. “It’s not *that* bad. And John is cute. He just got divorced and —”

“Vicki!” I pulled my arm out of her grasp. “No! Look at me, Vicki. Look me in the eye. N. O. No.”

“Oh, come on, Dee. You know his family. It will be okay.”

“I do?”

“Yes! He’s one of the H.D. Olivers. You know — the funeral people.”

This had to be some kind of sinister joke. I mean, who goes out with a funeral person? And do those people — I couldn't bring myself to even think the word *mortician* — even date?

I spun on my heel and was headed back toward the door when Vicki's sister came strolling up, her arm linked through the arm of one of the handsomest men I had ever seen.

"Hey, Dee Dee," she cooed, her smile breaking into a grin. "This is Johnnie. Vicki and I thought you might like to meet him."

Johnnie extended his hand, his blond hair falling loosely over one of his gorgeous brown eyes. I found my resistance softening — until I caught sight of his black pinstriped suit. It fairly shouted, "Death."

I wanted to bolt back to the Beach — and to the bevy of surfer boys I typically hung out with — but if Jacquie Branch had taught me nothing else, she taught me how to be a lady, and that included a fluency in small talk. I made a few polite remarks and then excused myself to visit the restroom. But even the most well-bred Southern charm has its limits, and I couldn't help myself. I had just met the Grim Reaper. Yes, he had nice eyes. But I don't even watch horror films. *Why*, I asked myself, *would I ever want to date one?* I passed the bathroom and headed straight for the exit.

Plus, I thought as I put the Blazer in gear, *that guy's on the verge of collecting Social Security*. Punching the radio button, I let the sound of Aretha Franklin belting out her need for a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T soar through my open windows as I sped home through the night.

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Four months later, Vicki invited me to attend an art exhibit. Afterward, we headed to the same bar where I'd met Johnnie. "They have a great steak-and-fries dinner," she explained, knowing the way to my heart.

We had just polished off the last of the beef when who should come strolling through the door but Mr. Pinstriped Suit himself. I prayed that Johnnie wouldn't see me, but sure enough, he spotted our table and sauntered over, a gleam in his even-more-gorgeous-than-before brown eyes.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked, taking a chair.

Almost on cue, Vicki stood up, smiled, and said she was leaving. And to my horror she did — taking my exit strategy with her. Stranded in a less-than-upscale Norfolk neighborhood, I was savvy enough to know I wouldn't get very far without a car.

Undeterred by her departure, Johnnie ordered two beers — one for me — and began talking.

"I saw you at your grandmother's funeral," he said.

"At the cemetery?" I asked. "You noticed me *in a graveyard?*"

"Well," Johnnie said, laughing, "you were hard to miss. I loved the color of your dress. It matched your eyes."

Maybe it was the beer, but ten minutes later I found myself looking past the pinstriped suit. Twenty minutes later, our age difference didn't seem quite so stark.

"Okay, I'll be really honest," Johnnie said, leaning across the table. "When I spotted you that day, I asked one of my guys who you were. I figured they'd know — I mean, there are not

that many girls in town who have legs like yours. In fact” — he smiled, a little sheepishly — “I think my exact words that day were, ‘Who’s the girl with the legs?’”

Mortified (and, okay, kind of flattered), I remembered that the blue dress — the *teal* dress — was not, actually, all that long. And it’s not like I am boasting when I admit that God has, in fact, blessed me with a pretty decent set of gams. I found myself secretly happy that Johnnie had noticed.

We kept talking.

An hour later, I had made it past the fact that he was divorced. I was still not comfortable with the whole funeral director thing, but the fact that Johnnie was cute, smart, witty, and incredibly charming kept the visions of ghosts at bay. I agreed to go out with him again, this time on an “official” date.

My mother was ecstatic. She bought me three new outfits in anticipation of the evening; she knew Johnnie’s family and, evidently, considered him quite a catch. When the doorbell rang, I opened the door and felt my knees go weak. Standing on the front porch in his blue blazer and khaki pants, with his shirt open at the collar, Johnnie was a transformed man. Without the death suit, he looked like a J.Crew model. (An older model, to be sure, but still . . .)

Johnnie had made reservations at the Steak and Ale. We climbed into his 280z black sports car, five on the floor, and I thought to myself, *This guy is getting cuter by the minute.*

But then he broke the spell. “I’m on call tonight,” he said. “I tried to get someone to cover for me, but no one could do it. But I am sure it won’t be a problem. I hope you don’t mind.”

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Mind? Why would I mind? I was on a date with a J.Crew model — and I didn't even know what being "on call" meant.

Two miles later, I found out. Johnnie's pager went off, and we pulled into the nearest 7-Eleven so he could use the pay phone.

"Ah, I have to make a quick house call," he explained, sliding back in behind the wheel. "It won't take but a minute. Do you mind?"

For the second time in as many minutes, I found myself saying I didn't mind, particularly since, like with "on call," I had no idea what a "house call" entailed. Plus, I was hungry, and I wasn't sure what else I would do for dinner if this date went south.

Before I knew what was happening, we'd pulled into the parking lot of the funeral home — which turned out to be Johnnie's actual home too — and he jumped out of the car, saying he just needed to "run in and change clothes." I was still processing the fact that my date lived among the dead (clearly we would not be coming back later for a nightcap), when Johnnie was back, decked out in that all-too-familiar pinstripe. Much to my surprise, he didn't get into the car; instead, he came around and opened my door.

"We need to switch cars," he explained, motioning toward a black station wagon.

I wasn't quite sure what to make of the swap, but I have always prided myself on being a good sport, and if nothing else, my curiosity was piqued. Trying to look unconcerned,

I adopted my best “it’s cool” face, and we headed out into the night.

Ten minutes later, we pulled into a driveway. Through the windshield I could see two other men — pinstriped bookends in matching ties — standing on the lawn, apparently waiting for Johnnie to arrive. They surrounded the car and opened Johnnie’s door, like maybe they expected to find the president driving. Johnnie turned to me, and I felt my heart flutter as a lock of his hair fell over his eye. “Don’t go anywhere,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Where would I go?

With nothing to do but wait, I lit up a Virginia Slims. Sitting in the darkened car, my smoke wafting out the open window, I pondered my plight. My date was old, divorced, and employed in a decidedly creepy job. Still, he was cute. And unpredictable. That, I thought, was probably a plus.

I stamped out my cigarette and heard a noise that sounded like someone had opened the station wagon’s rear door. Before I could turn my head, I felt a jolt that knocked me forward in my seat. Had something smacked into the back of the car? I turned to look, and — lo and behold — I was no longer alone. There, a mere six inches from my elbow, was . . . a sheet. On some sort of a board. Or maybe it was a cot. Whatever it was, there was definitely something — or someone — underneath the white cloth.

“Okay,” Johnnie said, sliding into the driver’s seat, “we’re done here. This is Mrs. Smith. I’m hungry and I bet you are too, so let’s go get dinner.”

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For the first time I could ever remember, I was speechless. There I was, in a brand-new dress, sitting in a car in a strange neighborhood with a man who was not like anyone I'd ever met before. And a dead person.

Finally I found my voice. "Will Mrs. Smith be joining us for dinner?" I asked.

Johnnie laughed — a big, hearty, warm, and wonderful laugh — and right then, crammed into the front seat with a man I barely knew and a woman I never would, I knew the truth: *I was going to marry John Oliver.*



THE RING TOSS

Johnnie and I had been dating for about six months, and to avoid the twenty-mile commute between Norfolk (where he lived and worked) and Virginia Beach (where I still lived in my parents' oceanfront home), I had taken to spending the night at Vicki's house more often than not. It was, I figured, better than spending the night in the funeral home — and not just because I wasn't the kind of girl who shackled up with her man. I also wasn't the kind of girl who fancied sleeping among the dead.

My college graduation was approaching, and I was looking forward to celebrating. My mother, having just had the first of several face-lifts, had missed my high school ceremony, but she was still looking pretty good four years later, and I figured she'd be up for some sort of party this time.

I figured wrong.

"Good news, Dee!" she announced one day out of the blue. "Your father's ship will be in Spain or Italy next month, and I've booked a trip for us."

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"Next month?" I asked. "Mom, that's my graduation. I was kind of thinking I would attend that."

"Oh, don't be silly, dear. They can mail those diploma things. Let's go to Europe!"

I thought that one over. My father was a navy captain, and he seemed to always be somewhere in Europe. Mom was forever jetting off to meet him in one port or another; a trip to Italy or Spain did not seem, to me, to be grounds for skipping one of life's major milestones.

"I think I'd rather not," I said. "I don't really want to go to Europe."

"Well, all right then," Mom said brightly. "I know what we'll do. Your father and I will send you to *Bermuda*! On a *cruise*! It will be a *graduation* present! You can leave right out of Norfolk, and you can take Vicki with you.

"Call the school," she continued, warming to her new plan. "Get them to send you your diploma. And when we all get back, we shall have a wonderful celebration!"

And just like that, it was settled.

I had no real desire to go to Bermuda — or anywhere else, for that matter — but my darling mother was bound for Europe and I was going wherever and whenever she sent me, even if it meant missing my own graduation ceremony. Thus it was that, three weeks later, I found myself kissing Johnnie good-bye (he'd been kind enough to drive Vicki and me to the dock) and promising I'd be back in ten short days.

As it turned out, they were ten *long* days. Maybe it was because the Bermuda plan was formulated so late in the game,

or maybe it was because she'd spent most of her money on luxury hotels in Spain and Italy, but my mother had booked us into the very worst room on the entire ship. It was windowless, with a bathroom so small that the entire room got wet when you took a shower, including the towels. At night, when the lights were out, the darkness seemed to press in on every side. I lay there on the top bunk (yes, Vicki and I had bunk beds) and found myself thinking about Johnnie a lot and wondering if this was how it felt to be in one of his caskets.

When the ship returned to port, Johnnie waited at the end of the gangway. Never in my wildest imaginings had I thought I would be so happy to see a pinstriped undertaker! And when we got in his black car and he filled me in on the lives and deaths of the recently deceased, along with all the details of their services, I found myself captivated.

That night, Johnnie picked me up for dinner. "Hey," he said, "open the glove box. There is something in there for you."

I reached in and pulled out a half-eaten candy bar.

"Um — thank you," I said. "But can I save this for after dinner?"

"No, no," Johnnie said, laughing, "not that. That's my candy. Reach farther in, toward the back."

I did, and my hand closed around a small, square leather box.

"Oh, my." I pulled it out and felt my heart leap into my throat.

Johnnie continued to drive, his eyes on the road. "I didn't

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realize how much you meant to me until you were gone. I really missed you. So . . .”

He seemed to be fishing for words as I sat there looking at the box and wondering what was inside.

“So go ahead,” he finally said. “Open it!”

I lifted the lid, and there, nestled against a cushion of Tiffany velvet, was the biggest, most beautiful diamond ring I had ever seen. Sparkling in the reflection of the dashboard lights — Bruce Springsteen was on the radio, singing some song about the USA — the diamond seemed to light up the whole car.

“Do you like it?” Johnnie asked.

“Yes! I love it!”

“Good.”

And that was it.

Johnnie drove on in silence. I studied the ring, wondering what the heck he had meant by “Good.” Had I just been proposed to? It sure looked like an engagement ring, but with Prince Charming behind the wheel of his black funeral car instead of atop a white horse, I wasn’t quite sure. I mean, where was the bended knee? The romance? The princess story?

Finally, I couldn’t stand the suspense. “Johnnie,” I said, “what, exactly, is this ring?”

“It’s for you.”

He’d already made that clear. The candy bar was his; the ring was mine. I was beginning to feel like he’d been taking conversation lessons from some of his clients — the silent ones.

“What are you giving it to me for?”

“I thought we would get married. Would you like to?”

“So are you proposing to me?”

“Yes. Can’t you tell that?”

“No. You haven’t asked me.”

“Well, I gave you a ring. So would you?”

I realized this ping-pong exchange was probably as romantic as this conversation was going to get, so I said yes. Johnnie kept driving, Bruce kept singing, and just like that, I was engaged.

My mother, of course, took full credit for the match. “You see?” she said. “This would never have happened if your father and I hadn’t sent you on that trip to Bermuda. That’s when Johnnie knew he couldn’t live without you!”

I grudgingly admitted she was probably right, but if she expected me to write her some sort of thank-you note for sticking Vicki and me in a windowless cubby for ten days while the postman delivered my college diploma to an empty house, well, that wasn’t going to happen. I was, however, grateful for her can-do spirit when it came to wedding planning.

Like all mothers who have daughters, I guess, my wedding became “hers,” and Jacquie Branch was in her element. It didn’t matter that we had less than six months to pull it all off (Johnnie and I had set a date for September, and I think my mother was secretly glad it would be upon us so soon, lest he change his mind); she went to work with a light in her eyes that I hadn’t seen since US Air had introduced its direct-to-New York flight that set travelers back a mere \$35. Parties

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were in full swing; the church had been booked, the country club ballroom reserved, and the wedding dress ordered (as befitting Johnnie's and my romance, the train seemed to stretch all the way from Virginia Beach to Norfolk); and all manner of silver, crystal, and pieces from two china patterns arrived daily at our house via UPS. Throw in the parade of bridesmaids — I had settled on eleven — and my mother was in nuptial heaven.

Johnnie, however, was not.

He was, as it turned out, down the street drinking martinis.

It was a month or so before the wedding, and Johnnie was due to pick me up for a dinner date we had booked with some friends. He was normally a punctual fellow, so now, as the minutes ticked into hours, I grew concerned. Perhaps someone had died. I'd been dating Johnnie long enough to know that death pretty much trumps everything in a funeral director's life, and this wouldn't be the first time we'd had to put our plans on hold. Surely, though, he would have called.

Two hours after he should have been there, my worry had given way to anger. John Oliver had not yet met my temper, but unless he was dead himself, there was a good chance he'd see it tonight. That is, if he ever showed up.

Why hadn't he called?

Kicking off my sandals, I sunk into Vicki's La-Z-Boy recliner and silently fumed. When the doorbell rang, I leapt up and flung open the door. There was Johnnie, looking as drop-dead handsome as ever, wearing a sheepish grin.

"Where have you —"

I caught a whiff of Johnnie's breath and stopped short. Had he been drinking? He had! And, from what I could tell, he was smashed.

"Please tell me," I began softly, "that somebody died in a bar. And that once you removed him, the family convinced you to stay for a drink."

"No," Johnnie slurred, still smiling. "I stopped off at Mike's house for a quick martini, and guess who was there?"

"I haven't a clue," I said, keeping my temper in check, "but please do tell me, because you are two hours late."

"It was Sue, the girl I dated before you!"

He said it like I would be happy, like he had won some sort of contest.

"You are kidding me, right?" I was too young to know much about blood pressure, but I was pretty sure mine was starting to spike. "I have been sitting here, dressed and ready for dinner, *for two hours*, and our friends have gone on without us, while you have been drinking with *an old girlfriend*?"

Johnnie considered this. "Well, now," he said, "it sounds kinda bad when you say it like that."

"*I can't believe you!*" I shouted, throwing to the wind every how-to-be-a-lady lesson I'd ever learned. Visions of dark suits and headstones clouded my eyes, and I thought about how good it would feel to pop the tailgate on one of H.D. Oliver's "removal wagons" and shove Johnnie's body in, headfirst.

Sensing the storm that was upon him, Johnnie tried to protest, saying that the wedding had "put him under a lot of pressure."

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“Then let me help you remove some of that pressure,” I said. I twisted the ring off my finger — the one-carat diamond offered a ready handle — and clenched it in my fist. Johnnie probably thought I was going to hit him, but I’d backed off and was too far away for that. Instead, from a distance of about fifteen feet, I cocked back my elbow and let the missile fly.

It was the perfect throw, one I couldn’t repeat in a thousand tries.

Johnnie’s mouth was open — undoubtedly to offer some other lame excuse — and the ring hit him square in the back of the throat. He looked at me, stunned, and then he began to gasp and choke.

Good! I thought, as I watched his eyes grow wide. But when he began to turn a pale shade of blue, I figured I’d better do something. I didn’t care if he died; I just didn’t want him to do it in Vicki’s Norfolk apartment.

I crossed the room and came behind Johnnie, circling his body with my arms and thrusting my fists below his rib cage while squeezing upward as I’d been taught to do in the mandatory first-aid class I’d taken in college.

I thought surely I’d break a rib but, sadly, that wasn’t the case. Instead, Johnnie let loose a mighty cough, and the ring tumbled out of his mouth and onto Vicki’s hardwood floor. We both stared at it as though it might jump up and attack again.

Finally, Johnnie bent over, picked it up, and shoved it into his pocket. “If that is what you think of my ring,” he slurred, “I will just go on and keep it.”

He hadn't even thought to thank me for saving his life. "That's fine," I said, through gritted teeth. "You can keep your old ring."

And he did.

The next morning I drove over to my parents' house. My mother was in the dining room, surrounded by a sea of Wedgwood's Kutani Crane (the multiple colors, my mother had explained, would go with any table décor) and Lismore goblets by Waterford (identical to the ones she owned so that, as she artfully put it, I could "look forward" to inheriting hers, knowing they would all match). We had not even mailed the invitations yet, and already our dining room looked like a Fifth Avenue window display.

"Look, darling, the invitations arrived!" She held a stack of white cards triumphantly in her right hand. "They are absolutely *perfect!*"

I let my gaze drift to the window, unwilling to shatter her joy just yet. It was August, and I could see the ocean just beyond the fence line of my parents' manicured lawn. I pictured my friends sitting out there on the beach, unencumbered by a department store's worth of now-unwanted crystal goblets and Tiffany silver. I hadn't thought too much about God since my graduation from Catholic high school more than four years earlier; now I found myself silently praying that my mother wouldn't faint when I told her my news. Either that, or maybe God could just open up a crater in the dining room floor and swallow me whole, taking a whole dinner party's worth of china and flatware with me.

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"Mom, John and I have had an argument."

"No worries, darling." My mother smiled. "These things happen. It will be fine."

"No, Mother, it will not be fine."

"Yes, it will," she replied, more firmly this time. "I've seen it happen a thousand times before. It's just wedding jitters. These things always work themselves out."

"No," I said again, taking a tentative step toward her. "The wedding is off. We are not getting married."

There. I'd said it. The dining room floor didn't open, and my mother was still upright. Both were, I thought, good signs.

My mother did not speak. I waited. Still, she stood there. *Can people die standing up?* I wondered. Finally, I saw her blink. Clearly, she was not dead. I moved closer.

"Mom?" I began, softly. "Did you hear m —"

"*Oh my God!*" My mother's scream rattled the plates. I jumped back, fearful that she might actually explode, or flip the table or something.

My father, recently returned from his umpteenth voyage, barged into the room like a torpedo. "What on earth is going on?" he demanded to know.

"Your daughter has called off the wedding!"

Dad's gaze shifted from my mother's stricken face to mine. "What happened?"

Slowly I filled them in on Johnnie's infidelity. No matter that he hadn't slept with, or even kissed, his old girlfriend; knocking back martinis with her while I waited, all dressed

up and all alone, signaled, I thought, an irreparable character flaw.

“I don’t want to marry him,” I said. “It’s over.”

My mother sank to the floor, collapsing amid a pile of boxes, white tissue paper, and engraved envelopes, and began to cry.

“Jacquie,” my father began calmly, his captain’s demeanor bringing order amid the wreckage, “if the girl doesn’t want to marry the boy, we are not going to make her marry him.”

Sensing my opportunity, I slipped out of the room to let my parents talk. I moved outside. I could hear my mother wailing through the open windows and wondering how in the world she was going to explain “all this” to her friends. Finally, I felt my father’s presence at my side.

“Honey,” he said, “I am taking your mother to Florida. I think it is best. Let me know if you need anything.”

The next day they were gone. I returned the gifts, threw away the invitations, and sent Johnnie the bill for my dress, along with the bills for the eleven we’d purchased for the bridesmaids.

A week passed. My father called with regular updates; my mother, it seemed, was inconsolable. I went back to the life I’d known the summer before: sipping Coronas on the beach, hanging out with my friends, and checking out the surfer boys. Saying good-bye to a mortician was, I figured, no great loss. Maybe I should aim higher next time. Maybe I should date a doctor . . .

UNDERTAKER'S WIFE

A True Story of Love, Loss, and Laughter in the Unlikeliest of Places

By Dee Oliver with Jodie Berndt

On Dee Branch's first date with Johnnie Oliver, a fourth-generation funeral director, she knew she was in for a unique relationship when he had to leave "for just a minute"—and he came back to the car with a corpse.

Over twenty years of marriage later, Dee was still in love with her charming southern gentleman when he passed away suddenly in 2007. Determined to carry on Johnnie's work, Dee earned her mortuary science degree, only to be told that she was no longer needed in the family business. There was, however, another firm that wanted her. The only hitch was that this one was operated by, and for, African Americans. Not sure what lay in store, but eager to put her decades of experience and her education to good use, Dee crossed the racial divide in the most openly segregated industry in America and went to work.

In *The Undertaker's Wife*, Oliver draws from her wealth of experience to provide candid and often hysterically funny advice on dying well and surviving the loss of those who have gone before. Her insights on the common ground of grief, survival, and the ever-present faithfulness of God (to all of us, regardless of our race, religious upbringing, or socio-economic background) will help readers prepare for one of life's only certainties—and do it with wisdom, grace, and a healthy dose of joy.

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