

ONE TIME RIGHTS

4500 WORDS

COFFIN FOR SALE; USED ONLY ONCE

BY JAMES J. COLLINS

Did you ever try to sell a coffin? No problem, right? Well try to sell one that has been used, even if it was only used once. It is not as easy as it sounds. A few problems immediately, come to mind. However, they are nothing compared to what actually occurred.

St. Petersburg Florida must be the town where Death resides for The Grim Reaper visits there every day.

Each day, the big event for as many elderly, transplanted, residents is to gather at noon on the street corners or in the grocery stores, and take roll call to see who made it through the night. They discuss those who passed away yesterday and then they plan their days around the wakes that result. The daily funerals are unique social gatherings, eagerly anticipated by the regulars. This is where the survivors meet, compare symptoms and make bet on their compatriot's longevity. No one takes offense; they all recognize the inevitable. However, they all try to look their best

each day - it might well be their last.

In this kind of environment, you notice any one who stands out from the crowd; Rosie Schultz was just such a person. She was a large sturdy woman; a widow; sixty-eight, with well-coiffured brown hair, a pleasing disposition twinkling eyes and a perpetual smile. She dressed well, looked fifteen years younger than her true age, but would only admit to being fifty. She radiated health and vitality, and was the envy of her compatriots.

For the past two years, she had been going with Johnny Dupre, a seventy two year old widower from Rhode Island. Formerly a deep-water fisherman, he sold his boat and with his wife, followed the path of the aging lemmings down to the warmer clime of St. Petersburg. When his wife died, Johnny was left alone. Women outnumber men seven to one in this aging demolition derby, and a man who is walking unassisted, and not on oxygen, is considered a catch. Johnny because of his diet and the years straining at the nets was in much better shape than most men his age. Thin and gaunt with a wry smile, he charmed the women. Wire rimmed glasses gave him the appearance of a retired college professor, but the calloused hands that radiated strength when he gripped you, erased that impression. He and Rosie gravitated together because they were the only pair that looked like they could survive a full year. However, Rosie found a lot of competition for she had to wade through adoring women who surrounded Johnny at every event.

Because these admirers had, all buried at least one husband and a few had buried three, Rosie, with a little in her voice, liked to refer to them as the "Black Widows."

Once they found that special something, Rosie and Johnny decided to share the rest of their lives, and without benefit of matrimony, they moved in together.

Three years earlier, Helmut, Rosie's father who was in to his nineties, asked if he could come and live with her - he could not put up with his other daughters. Since Rosie was alone at the time, she invited him to come down. His small Social Security check helped pay for his keep, and Medicare paid for most of his medical bills, but the last major illness had drained Rosie's savings.

Today she was all dressed in black for last night Helmut died.

When Rosie came in to give Helmut his medication, she found him dead in bed. She woke Johnny, and they discussed what they had to do.

"My father wanted to be buried next to my mother back home, so we will have to ship the body back to my sisters. I'm not quite sure how to do this but the funeral home will know what to do," said Rosie.

"You'll have to do it all yourself," Johnny responded, "Helmut told me all about your sisters. He did not have too much

use for them, and indicated that they were a sorry lot. He told me they were still mad over some dumb thing that happened twenty years ago"

"Well maybe his death will let them over look that incident but I doubt it. I don't expect to get any help from them, so I'll have to make all the arrangements myself."

"You spent almost all your savings on the last illness, all that's left is the burial insurance that Helmut got from his union. That is only two thousand bucks. I'll put up the rest of the money."

"No you won't, John Dupre. He was my father and he is my responsibility. He will be buried with dignity but it will just have to be low cost. I just do not have the money. Every thing else is in the business."

"Since you're emotionally involved in this, maybe you should let me do all the negotiating with the funeral home."

"Fine but I'm o k. All I am worried about are the finances. Can you keep it cheap and simple?"

"No problem. I know how to handle these undertakers. Some are all right but some are out to fleece you. I will get the best price, but, depending on the undertaker, it may get a little embarrassing. I'm going to have to get a little outrageous in my negotiating, but I know Helmut wouldn't mind. He had a hell of a sense of humor and would take this as a big joke."

"I know he would. He always said you should drop him off the back of a ferry after he died. It was the cheapest way to go. Do whatever you think necessary and I'll back you up."

As she entered the Happy Time funeral home, the air conditioning rushed over Rosie wafting the present smell of flowers that one associates with a mortuary. She assessed the very neat waiting room with its unusual abundance of upholstered chairs. This was in deference to the age of most of the mourners at a wake in St. Petersburg.

When her foot hit the carpet, a discreet low-level chime could be heard in a distant office. Like a spider, responding to vibrations on the web, a smiling mustached, forty year old undertaker, oozed out of a doorway near the entrance. His appearance was startling. Thin as a rail, with a face that accentuated the underlying skull, he could have just risen from one of the caskets. Fastidiously dressed in black with a small carnation in his lapel, his hair was slicked down and parted on the left while he rubbed his hands together as if he were anticipating counting money. The smile on his face reminded one of a hawk about to pounce on a rabbit. Johnny, who accompanied Rosie, sized him up immediately. When you have to dicker to sell fish, you quickly learn to evaluate people or you go bankrupt. Johnny retired in comfort.

"How do you do. Welcome to the Happy Time Mortuary. My name

is mister Waters. How can I be of service to you?" The words came out as if this cadaverous man had spent hours in front of the mirror softening the tones, and rounding his mouth so that they were sent precisely as he wanted. The effect was one of calm and measured motion. Obviously designed to assure the distraught; it was disarming. However, the eyes, behind the facade of a face, looked out as if through a mask astutely assessing the net worth of the two who had just entered his parlor. (She is dressed in black; it is too early for viewing Mr. Johnson; therefore, she is a potential customer.) The avaricious glint nearly lit up the room. Rosie and Johnny looked at one another and a silent affirmation of their assessment passed between them. Mr. Waters would have to be watched.

Motioning them to enter the office, Mr. Waters stood aside, and they could feel his eyes checking them over as they passed him to take seats in front of his desk.

"Is there something I can do for you?" oiled the man as he eased into the seat behind the desk.

"Well," Rosie said, "my name is Mrs. Schultz. This morning my father passed away, and we've come to make the necessary arrangements."

"I'd like to offer my condolences," responded Mr. Waters, "We have a lot of experience in these matters, and I'm sure we can

adequately meet all of your requirements. I assume this is your husband," he said turning toward Johnny.

"I'm Johnny Dupre. I'm just a friend."

A knowing smile crept over Mr. Waters face, and was quickly wiped away. Johnny took note.

"Of course," oozed Waters as he turned toward Rosie to concentrate his charm on her, "Then you will want the very best funeral for your father I'm sure."

"No, a very reasonable one" said Rosie, "as a matter of fact, he's to be buried in New York, and I've come to make arrangements to have him shipped back to my sisters. All we are interested in is the coffin and the shipping arrangements. There will be no wake here. Helmut was house bound for the last year and did not know anybody in St. Pete'. Since Johnny has a lot of experience in funerals, he will be my agent in handling the arrangements." She paused and as if an after thought, stated, "You should know we don't have much money. "

Waters looked crestfallen. If a grieving family member were involved, the funeral costs would expand but Johnny did not look like a big spender. Nevertheless, painting on his happy face, and rising to the occasion, he offered, "We take all major credit cards."

"Can I first get a written estimate?" countered Johnny.

"Surely you're joking," pouted Mr. Waters

"No not really, I think you should always get three written estimates before you let out a contract," said Johnny as he reached down to brush some imaginary lint off his pants.

"Do you people represent some nursing home?"

"Will that lower the cost?" smiled Johnny.

"Of course; we have a volume discount. How many people do you have in the home?"

"We're not in the nursing home business; this burial is for her father."

"I'm sorry, you're confusing me. Didn't you indicate you wanted an estimate?"

"Yes why do you ask?"

"Well an estimate seems so out of place when a loved one is involved. It seems so callous, that I assumed that there really wasn't any blood relationship."

"There isn't with me. I am just the negotiator, and I want the lowest price we can get. You see I'm a business man and this is just another transaction as far as I'm concerned."

"Mrs. Schultz, do you go along with this unusual approach?" pleaded Mr. Waters.

"I've every confidence in Johnny and if you'll excuse me I'll let you gentlemen work out the arrangements among yourselves. I'll be right outside." Rosie rose and gracefully left the room.

Waters looked shaken. Commissions were being stripped off his

fingertips. He felt like he was playing a game on very unfamiliar territory and he had to regain control. "Well this is most irregular," was all he could blurt out. As he repeatedly fingered the knot in his tie and the flower in his lapel, it was obvious that he was nervous

Johnny noted his discomfort and, wanting to keep him off balance, leaned forward to press on with his weird options. "We'd prefer not to pay for embalming if it's all the same with you."

"What?" asked the incredulous Mr. Waters? "If you're planning to ship this gentleman on a plane he has to be embalmed. It's the law," he stated with finality.

"Well if you have to, you have to," Johnny relented, "but how about using anti freeze instead of that expensive formaldehyde." This last statement was delivered with a look that was positively angelic.

"You're putting me on," smirked Waters. "You're not serious...Are you?"

"Hey why not. What's going to happen? Helmut will look a little redder or more yellow depending on the brand you use but what the hell. You realize we're sending him back to New York City. It's a different place. A little color in a stiff there would never be noticed."

"I'm sorry it's quite out of the question. Any reputable funeral home will not go along with that preposterous proposal.

Now if you were of the Jewish religion and you were to bury him tomorrow, we could skip the embalming but otherwise it's quite impossible."

"Well then we'll let you add that to the estimate but understand the bottom line decides who gets the business."

"Then we should go straight to the casket pavilion and select the model for Helmut," Mr. Waters said as he rose from the desk. Perspiration started to show on his forehead. He patted it off with his handkerchief. Johnny took note.

Down the stairs in the basement in the back, pair of ornate doors was opened by Mr. Waters, which led into a large darkened room. Reaching over to the wall, he threw a switch and overhead track lighting illuminated a highly polished casket set on a raised wheeled counter. Soft blue light from a spotlight focused on the unit as if it were the center of a stage show.

"This is our slumber beauty model. It has all the latest features; upholstered springs, silk interior, brass fittings and mahogany finish. Before internment, this lovely unit is enclosed in a lead lined case. It's guaranteed not to leak and it comes with a fifty year guarantee."

"What does this all go for?"

"Only ten thousand dollars," smiled Mr. Waters

"Forget it," Johnny responded, "you're way out of our price range. What else do you have?"

"Here we have the heavenly rest model for only eight thousand," oiled Waters as he reached over to the wall. Lighting shifted and the overhead spots now illuminated another display ten feet back and off to the side. . Again, the blue lighting softly highlighted the casket and any other item in the room was cloaked in darkness. It was a staged event with the different models being presented like debutantes at a cotillion. "This beauty has all the features of the better unit but the lined case is not included."

"Tell me about the guarantee," Johnny said with that angelic look.

Feeling back on sound ground, and not recognizing the signs of a trap, Waters went into a prepared spiel. "This unit is fully guaranteed not to leak for the period quoted. It's backed both by us and the manufacturer." This final line was delivered with a flourish that should be reserved for bullfighters.

"Does this mean that I would get my money back or you would replace the unit if I brought it back in ten years because it leaked?" asked Johnny in a most disarming way.

"What would ever cause you to dig it up after a number of years?" asked the perplexed Mr. Waters.

"Well what if I got a note from Helmut that his feet were wet?"

"Mr. Dupre, this is a serious business. I have no time for your sarcasm," snapped Waters as he reached the end of his rope.

"Good. Then maybe we can finally get down to some serious negotiations, and get away from all this prepared bullshit. "Johnny's tone had hardened as he stripped away the facade that he had presented to this irritating man."It seems to me that you have this display area organized with the most expensive items toward the front, and, therefore I assume, the cheapest units are located in the back. Feel free to correct me if I'm wrong."

Taken aback by the significant transformation that had taken place in front of his eyes, Waters could only stammer, "Ri...Ri...Right, but it wasn't done that way on purpose." He still tried to get the situation under control, but it was too late.

Striding over to the wall, John switched on all the lights. The room seemed to shrink. No longer, did the darkness cloak the room in mystery, all the coffins were displayed under incandescent lighting and the mystique vanished. Scanning the room, John spied his target, walked directly to the far corner of the room, and placed his hand on a simple looking coffin. "This looks like about the right range for our pocket. How much?"

"Fourteen hundred dollars," responded the deflated Mr. Waters, "But it only has a fifteen year guarantee."

"Sold," said Johnny, and as an afterthought, "And I'm going to hold you to the guarantee." He smiled as he said this, and for some reason this response totally unnerved Waters. "Put the

guarantee in writing on the bottom of the bill, add in the air fare and the embalming and I'll pay you the full amount in cash by two o'clock today."

"Yes, Yes, Yes, anything to end this terrible ordeal." conceded the beaten man.

The next day Helmut was winging his way north to the care of those relatives who had not seen him for a couple of years.

One week later Rosie got a call to see if she was home so the express office could deliver a crate she had to sign for. With the delivery was a scathing letter signed by her three sisters who were incensed that their father was sent to them in a 'cigar box'. They loved him more than she did (this from the same group who wrote him off when he went to Florida) and they had sent back the 'cigar box' as a measure of their contempt.

"Boy your sisters are really a unique lot," laughed Johnny.

"Those bitches have stone hearts and no brains. They'll never hear from me again," muttered Rosie whose pleasant features took on a grim look. "But what are we going to do with this?" she asked as she patted the returned coffin.

"Let me go down and see Waters, and see what he'll give me for it. After all it was only used once and it never went into the ground."

As Johnny hit the hidden chime, Waters popped out of his hide a way as if spring loaded. His painted smile peeled away as soon

as he recognized Johnny. "Why are you back? Trying to get a discount for some other friends?"

Obviously, this was not going to be easy, thought Johnny. "Good morning Mr. Waters," Johnny boomed, "It's good to see you again."

"Well the feeling isn't mutual," pouted Waters. "What do you want? I'm quite busy."

"I'm here on business," Johnny countered. "I've got your coffin outside and I wanted to sell it back to you...at a discount of course."

"You've got to be kidding," Waters spluttered. "This isn't a used car lot. We do not buy back coffins. What did you do with the body...dump it somewhere? Florida doesn't take kindly to people dumping bodies helter skelter over the state."

"Calm down, calm down," Johnny said as he pushed his hands palms down in a pumping motion. "There's nothing illegal about this. Rosie's sisters were unhappy about the coffin so they took the old man out and put him in a new box and shipped the first one back to us. It's just like new. There isn't a scratch on it. Other than two flights across country it's like it never left here."

"Well it really doesn't matter," Waters, intoned in a prissy manner. "Once a body was in the box it cannot be used again. The problem of potential disease you know."

"Who's going to get sick...The next stiff you put in it?"

"Really Mr. Dupre we have rules in the state and I don't think you'll find any reputable funeral director who will give you any thing for it." Waters had reached the end of his patience and it was beginning to show.

"How do you recommend that I sell it?" asked Johnny.

"Why don't you put an ad in the paper," snapped Waters as he flicked his hand, turned on his heels, and slid back into his den.

The ad in the St, Petersburg papers was intriguing it read:

COFFIN FOR SALE

Reduce the high cost of dying

Select a coffin to go with your plot

No reasonable offer rejected.

The people who came in response to the ad were characters in their own right.

The first pair of elderly women who showed up went over the box like they were at an antique auction. They had a magnifying glass and a checklist that they had prepared with questions about its origin. Johnny had the bill of sale and the shipping papers, which answered all their questions, but they left and never came back.

Next was a little old lady in her nineties wearing a floral patterned sundress with flowers the size of gorillas, a cockeyed straw hat, and brown oxfords and over her arm, a pocketbook that

dragged on the ground. She wanted to try the box on for size because the funeral homes would not let her into the caskets. After clamoring in and settling back, she took a nap. Johnny had to wake her because she was so old he was afraid she would expire in the box. She was so incensed he woke her that she stormed off in a huff, and was not heard from again.

Several callers had no interest in the coffin but they thought the ad was some kind of gimmick. They showed up purely out of curiosity.

One old lady wanted to put the coffin on 'lay away'. Johnny had difficulty explaining to her that it had to be a purely cash and carry transaction. She indicated that she did not have the money at present but would be back. She was never heard from again.

Four members of a college fraternity wanted to rent the coffin for a single night for a party at the frat house but Johnny figured they might damage or destroy the box and he would not be able to get his money from them.

Two young fellows wanted to use the coffin as a boat in some strange race but they wanted to take it over to the ocean first and try it out before they would pay for it. Johnny knew what salt water would do to the wood and he would not hear of it. They would have to pay for the box up front, and prove out its sea worthiness later. This was not acceptable, and the deal fell through.

One lady seemed to be the ultimate customer. She wanted the coffin but she wanted to be sure that she could get to use it when the time came. Putting down a refundable deposit to hold the coffin, she promised to be back within a week with the rest of the money. Five days later, she was back demanding her deposit.

"What's the matter?" asked Johnny in a puzzled voice.

"I've been to six funeral homes and the answer is the same - No way. One was arrogant enough to tell me 'this is not a do it your self-business'. It seems they get most of their profit from the coffin and they want to discourage bring in your own. None of them would handle the arrangements if I brought in my own coffin, so I want my deposit back."

"No problem," said Johnny as he gave her back her money, "But I can cut the price some more if you'll take it today."

"Afraid not," she said as she put the money in her purse, "I'm afraid you have a white elephant on your hands." With that she got up thanked them and left.

The next ad was quite original it read:

#### HOPE CHEST FOR SALE

Extra large hope chest of unusual design;  
Gorgeous wood and finish; lined interior;  
Reasonable; must be seen to be appreciated.

A young engaged couple was the first potential customer. Johnny had gotten three large colored bows, which he affixed, to the top of the box, figuring it would give it a nice homey touch - but to no avail.

"What the hell is this?" asked the groom to be.

"Just as advertised," smiled Johnny, "a hope chest of an unusual design."

A hope chest...For who?...Dracula?" exploded the future groom as he pulled his soon to be bride out of the house never to be seen again.

Another couple showed up and seemed to want to stay after a brief whispering conference. They had coffee and cakes, and appeared excited, staring at different items in the room and leaning over to whisper to one another all the while, giggling at strange intervals. This went on for an hour without any agreement about the 'hope chest'. Questions would be raised; Johnny would answer them; both would smile knowingly and giggle. Rosie finally ran out of patience and asked, "Well, have you made up your mind? Do you want the chest?"

"Of course not," answered the male, "We know it's a joke. We're on Candid Camera aren't we? The camera is hidden in the big vase," With that, they both jumped up and started waving at the vase in the next room and hollering greetings to 'aunt Gilda' in Wyoming. Johnny escorted them to the door.

Several other ads were also explored these included the following. A coffee table, but the plates kept falling off the curved top surface, besides nobody wanted a coffee table that opened in quite such an unusual manner. Later it was offered for sale as a brick-a-brack piece for the corner, but its six foot height and its lack of shelves caused it to be deemed weird. It went to several flea markets and was the center for at least one abortive 'Dupre lottery' but all were doomed to failure.

Right now, there is a very rare flower box on the lawn of a house in St Petersburg. I would give you the address, but the place would become a tourist attraction, and the neighbors would not like the unwanted attention. It is rare because if you push aside the flowering shrubs and the roses you would notice that the box is mahogany and has brass handles of a very unusual design. The owner, Johnny Dupre will be glad to tell you that he is checking out the warrantee on the product and if it fails, he intends to get his money back.

THE END

COLLINS 19 COFFIN FOR SALE USED ONLY ONCE