The Coffin Maker

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Characters

Paul - A coffin maker in his late 50s
Irene - A journalist in her mid 20s
Mark - The coffin maker's apprentice in his late 20s

A workshop with two doors on opposite ends. One leads to the main shop and the other to the main street. The room is moody, dark and lonely. The floor is covered in wood pieces and shavings. The room is sparse except for a big worn out worktable in the middle of the room, two chairs a little away from the table and a big wide cupboard in the back. Paul is painting a coffin which is in the shape of a hammer. A young woman, Irene, watches Paul for a moment. She knocks on the door.

PAUL: Yes?

IRENE: Hello.
I am Irene
from the Afternoon Chronicle.
I called you earlier about a possible interview.

PAUL: Yes.

IRENE: I was wondering if we could do it now?

PAUL: Now?
You should have called to confirm the time.

IRENE: I am sorry.
I know
I should have.
I was around this area and
thought I could come in and say hello
and may be have a chat?

PAUL: I am busy right now.

IRENE: Oh, Okay.

Pause

It won't take much time.
I'll just stay
in the background.
Watch you work
and ask questions.
It won't be distracting.
I promise.

PAUL: Fine.
But I can't stop working.

IRENE: That's okay.
I was thinking
I could write a preview for your art exhibition.
You know call it
Coffin maker to watch out for.

She laughs nervously

MARK: (O*ff stage)*
That was Mr. Andrews.
He was asking about his wife's coffin.
He was wondering whether instead of black
the cat's collar could be painted blue.
So I said okay.
Why would you want to be buried...

Mark walks into the room and notices Irene

Oh. Hello.

IRENE: Hello.

MARK: Come for a coffin?
I can take you to the gallery area if you like.

IRENE: Uh...

MARK: We have a lot of coffins for you to choose from or we could make you a custom one.
We do custom ones only by appointment.
We need at least three weeks to complete one.
I am Mark by the way.
The apprentice.
Have you come to get a coffin made?
What's your name?
I didn't get it the first time.

IRENE: I never gave you
Irene.
From the Afternoon Chronicle.
Here to interview...

MARK: Paul?
For the art exhibition?
Oh that's brilliant.
Have you seen his work?
I can show it to you.

IRENE: That would be great.
Maybe after the interview?

Mark nods and pulls up a chair.

MARK: Why don't you sit here
and let me get you something to drink.

IRENE: Yes, thank you.
A glass of water would be fine, thanks.

Mark leaves.

IRENE: May I take a look at the coffin your working on.

PAUL: Sure.

Irene walks around the coffin and stops near the work table. She takes a audio recorder from her bag and places it on the table.

IRENE: I hope you don't mind.
I want to record everything that you say.
The editor will ask for it.
It's the company's rules.
I will also send a photographer tomorrow to take pictures of you working if that's okay.
He won't intrude in your work I promise.

Irene touches and examines the coffin.

IRENE: This is some beautiful work.
So Paul
tell me your story.

PAUL: I don't know where to begin.

IRENE: Is this a family business?

PAUL: No
my father was a carpenter.

IRENE: And what made you decide to take up coffin making.

PAUL: Circumstances.
The carpentry business wasn't going that great.

IRENE: Why did you start making coffins though?

PAUL: Because business comes to you.
And it's never a slow day.

IRENE: Did you always make novelty coffins?

PAUL: I don't think there is anything novelty about a coffin.

IRENE: Sorry.
I meant personalised coffins.

PAUL: No.
I made regular ones.

IRENE: Who was the first coffin you made for?

PAUL: Traditional coffin?
The village pastor.

IRENE: Kind of ironic, huh?

IRENE: What got you started making personalised ones?

PAUL: People feel a need to express themselves
it becomes really important to do that when they know
that they don't have much time left.
They want to leave a mark
a particular image of themselves with their loved ones.

IRENE: How did you come up with the idea though?

PAUL: I had a customer who didn't want traditional coffin.
He was actually the first person who had come to my shop to get his own coffin.
He said
he had recently learnt that he had a malignant tumor and had a few months to live.
So he wanted to leave this place in a coffin that
meant something to him.
Something that
represented him.
His greatest passion in life was flying his plane.
When he flew he felt like the only person in the world.
Only him.
Only his
breaths
and only his heartbeats.
Only him.
He finally believed he existed.
It was this feeling he said he would sorely miss.
He had a Cessna 206 and would love to be buried in it.
So I designed a coffin in the shape of the aircraft and that is how it began.

Mark walks in carrying a glass of water.

MARK: Everything going well?

Irene looks at Paul who continues painting.

IRENE: Yes.

MARK: Are you sure you don't want anything?

IRENE: Yes.
Thank you.

MARK: Just give me a shout if you need anything.
I am just in the next room.

Mark leaves.

IRENE: What was the reaction
of his family
when they first saw the aircraft coffin?

PAUL: The wife
she didn't take it well.
She thought her husband had lost his mind
and said that death wasn't a laughing matter.
She said it wasn't respectful for her husband
to go in a coffin shaped like a toy.
The man's children though supported his choice
and said that if that was what he wanted then that is what he will get.
In the end the wife
reluctantly agreed and the man got his coffin.

IRENE: Where did that lead to?

PAUL: Hand me a beer first will you.
Its in the ice box behind the table.

IRENE: Were people up for the idea?
About coming to a coffin maker to get their own coffins made?

Irene hands him the beer and Paul removes the cap and drinks.

PAUL: Not at first.
People weren't comfortable
with the idea of getting their own coffins made.
If you are in that stage where
you have a few months to live,
coffins are the last thing on your mind.
It's reminds them of a full stop to their life.
And if you are okay
with the fact that you are going to die
and you want to get a coffin personalised,

you need to be happy
with the life you lived.
Because the shape the coffin takes will be a reminder
of your life
not only to you
but also to everyone who comes to your funeral.
And that
is not easy.

IRENE: Yes, I bet it is difficult.
I don't think I could come up with a shape I would want my coffin to be in.
I would have to have lived a life where I am so satisfied and fulfilled with what I have done and achieved to really know what it is that I want to be buried in.
So what was the next coffin you made?

PAUL: A Dodge.

IRENE: A truck?

PAUL: Yes.

IRENE: What was the client like?

Paul takes a big battered sketching book from a drawer on the working table. He flips through the pages and stops on one.

PAUL: He had used up all his savings to buy it.
It was his livelihood.
Called it Teddy.
After Theodore Roosevelt.

IRENE: May I?

Paul hands over the book to Irene.

IRENE: Does this contain all the drawings of the coffins you've made.

PAUL: Most of them.

IRENE: They are fascinating.

Irene looks at a few more drawings.

IRENE: You write quite a lot about every client.

PAUL: It is their coffin after all.

IRENE: And the clients always know they are dying.

PAUL: Always.

IRENE: How do you deal with them?

PAUL: Like a coffin maker.
Things do get more emotional.

IRENE: Since your dealing with the person whose going to lie in it.

PAUL: Yes.

IRENE: Wow.
Are they.
Ready?

PAUL: Most of the times.

IRENE: Is it difficult for them to decide which shape they want.

PAUL: Varies.
Some come with an open mind.
Some with their own drawings.
Most of them terrified.
They don't know what to expect.

IRENE: What about their families?
People who accompany them.

PAUL: Opposite.
If the client is terrified they are calm.

Irene shows a drawing to Paul.

IRENE: Is this a puzzle?

PAUL: Yes.

IRENE: It says the top of the coffin should have a puzzle on it.
And when the puzzle pieces when fit together should form a picture of a sail boat out in the sea.

PAUL: Yes.
During the funeral the client wanted everyone who attended to take a piece of the puzzle back with them.
So if everyone got back together...

IRENE: The pieces of the puzzles would fit together.
That's a beautiful thought.
Will you be displaying a similar coffin at the art exhibition?

PAUL: Yes.
That and a few others.

IRENE: Have you ever looked at the coffins you make as a piece of art?

PAUL: Art is always related to context.
The coffins are related to people's lives.
So how can I not?

Pause

Come have a look.

Irene stands next to Paul. Irene looks at the coffin shaped like a hammer and then stares at it. Hard.

PAUL: Well?

Irene hesitates, then blurts out.

IRENE: The colours.
They are not right.

PAUL: Like the steel of the hammer?

Irene nods.

PAUL: That's the base colour.
It gives the tone.
The shadow and the light.

IRENE: The colour is dull.

PAUL: The client's a carpenter.
He wouldn't want a new hammer.
He wants something worn and used.

IRENE: Familiar.

PAUL: Yes.
Now you get it.

IRENE: I would have never thought of a coffin so lively.
Something with a character.
You know.
How many coffins are you making for the art exhibition?

PAUL: Nine.

IRENE: Have these been commissioned before?

PAUL: Some have.

IRENE: And you've thought up the rest.

PAUL: Yes.
That was the most difficult part.

IRENE: Any you would want for yourself?

PAUL: No.
They are not me.

IRENE: If you didn't make coffins who would you go to?

PAUL: Someone who offers wine and company.

IRENE: And your not that kind of coffin maker.

PAUL: I am.
I was.

IRENE: What changed it?

PAUL: Well the realisation that once you've served them they are never coming back.

IRENE: You must be excited about the art exhibition then.
Once a person is buried in your coffin it's not like you will ever see the coffin you worked on for months again.
At least now you can look at it, admire it and have others see your work.
I find the whole concept interesting and fascinating.

PAUL: It is a lot of work but I agreed to do it.
I don't know how the exhibition will go though.
Its peculiar to think that people will pay to look at coffins.

IRENE: Well, I can see your point but your coffins like you said, are after all pieces of art so they fit the bill.
I am looking forward to see all the pieces on display.

Paul doesn't look convinced.

IRENE: Did I say something wrong?

PAUL: No.
Not at all.

IRENE: You gave me this look.

PAUL: I am just learning to trust a true compliment as much as a critique.

IRENE: Well what I said was true, your work is art.

PAUL: Yes?

IRENE: Yes.

Paul gives her a shy smile.

IRENE: How long does it take for you to finish one coffin.

PAUL: Depends on the details.
And how long the client has.

IRENE: What's been your favourite?

PAUL: Shape?

IRENE: Yes.

PAUL: You're asking me to judge a person's life.

IRENE: Do you always have to be.
I don't know.
Philosophical.

Paul grins.

PAUL: Well.
Comes with the profession.

IRENE: So which one was it?

PAUL: One lady had come with a peculiar request for her coffin.
She wanted it to be shaped like a regular coffin.
But she loved the sea.
So she wanted me to make her coffin out of things that the sea brought in.
Driftwood.
Sea shells.

IRENE: Did she like it?

PAUL: I hope so.
She said it smelt like the sea.
And.
That it breathes.

IRENE: To your customers the end product must seem so.
Final.

PAUL: Yes.

IRENE: Are there tears when they see it.