

Adventures of the Vulture



from In the Mountains of America,
Mercury House, 1994.



Dear Mr. Hebert,

I have selected your establishment for the eventual disposition of my remains. I want you personally to prepare the obituary and deliver the eulogy. I am contracting for your services far in advance in order to make choices and arrange everything as I want: a brief memorial service in your funeral home with appropriate music, chosen by you; cremation; a notice in the paper that incorporates the biographical information I am about to give you, as should your talk. It is a simple life story, a few truths as I see them. I want my secrets exposed. The public will probably be disappointed by the lack of lust, blood, and incest, but expectations have been inflated under the influence of television.

My life work has been to play the role of Viola's crazy lady who goes to funerals. You might begin my life story with something mildly risqué to capture their attention. The powder blue spring coat that I always wear to funerals belonged to my mother, as did the navy blue pillbox hat with the veil. My mother would wince to know that I wear navy and powder blue together, but

Viola will find far more interesting that the coat often covered a sweatshirt and rolled up pedal pushers or, in hot weather, a pair of baby doll pajamas. Yes, Mr. Hebert, and if you find the idea of a woman of my years wearing baby doll pajamas too vulgar to mention, then I will be forced to go to another funeral parlor, although Hebert's has been my first choice from the day I arrived in Viola.

I have always loved your polished marble and granite. As far as I have been able to discern, there is no plastic on the premises, although I presume you use those little plastic blocks to shore up the sinking cheeks of the deceased. Even you, Mr. Hebert, have a high gloss to your nails, a naturally waxy complexion, and such a fine head of hair! You yourself are the most superlative of your fixtures with your vibrant, yet serene, baritone. Without being unctuous, you are more reassuring than any of the preachers in Viola. You can make the most disturbing, heartrending, or even grotesque statement, and your audience feels uplifted. You still the waters, Mr. Hebert.

I have never forgotten the time when the deceased's divorced husband showed up at the funeral and the surviving husband started to curse and then moved as if to attack the other. You, Mr. Hebert, never hesitated; in spite of your weight, your age, and the crisp creases in your suit, you put your body between the two men and miraculously convinced the enraged bereaved that what he thought was an affront was actually a compliment to the good character of his wife. And both husbands stayed. You have a power, Mr. Hebert. I have thought about this a long time, and my conclusion is that we trust you because you are no hypocrite. You

only promise what you can deliver: a well-organized funeral, high quality makeup, satin pillows that coordinate with casket linings.

I would have an affair with you in a minute, Mr. Hebert, if you were game. I have a fantasy of lying in one of your biers, and you coming to me ever so quietly, still wearing your dark gray suit. But remember you're dealing with the funeral lady here, one of the town characters. We characters can say things like that. We might be serious, or half serious, but you need not take us seriously.

My first secret, Mr. Hebert, is that I am a skeptic in religion, and you know how seriously we take our affiliations here in the mountains. Perhaps that is your secret, too? I am not asking, of course; but I speculate. Or is your secret something exquisitely shocking: do you have intimacies with your corpses? Or is it only that you pick your nose or eat chocolates during embalming? I know you have secrets; we keep our souls in little private pouches, Mr. Hebert. You must be a materialist, *sub rosa* at least. How else could you make a living by preserving what should rightly return to the earth worms?

I grew up just over the ridge in Moorestown, so I came to Viola knowing your ways. I know how every town has its atheist as well as its funeral lady. Our Moorestown atheist was a gentleman named Dower Brown, although I think in retrospect he was less an atheist and more an exhibitionist. Dower used to corner the ministers at their morning coffee in AJ's Restaurant to challenge them on the virgin birth or the extent of Noah's flood. He used to show up at prayer meetings at our church and cry "But tell me why there are no more miracles? God knew that all those multiplied loaves and fishes would be hearsay by the time it got to us. If God works by miracles, why not give us miracles now? Let him step down and disarm the nuclear missiles. Let him give us so much oil we'll never be dependent on the Arabs again! Why are there no more miracles?" I believe most people secretly have some sympathy for Dower's position. Who doesn't hunger for the concrete? Even my mother said once on the way home, "It would be nice to have a miracle in Moorestown, wouldn't it?"

But Dower was too passionate; he wanted God to overcome him, and apparently God did, because I heard shortly before I left that he was studying with the priest at St. Ann's. I, on the other hand, have never opposed God. I simply have a bone-deep intuition that this flesh, the messages darting along these synapses--that these are as far as it goes. That all the promises of the Golden Shore have been misinterpreted. Is there a God? Perhaps. Did He take Mother to join Daddy in First Baptist of Moorestown, West Virginia Heaven? I doubt it. I visit your Chapel of the Bereaved, Mr. Hebert. I gaze at your corpses with their hair set and their pancake makeup, I sign the guest book, and then go back again to contemplate the nails and eyelids, and I know I am looking at a finished thing.

My second secret is that I was disappointed at how long my mother lasted. I was the youngest of three daughters, and the others had long since left home when my mother got sick. The fact that I was the one to stay with her was a happenstance, not a choice, and I think I resented this most of all. Not the constrictions I lived under--which were not so much worse than the ones I live under now--but how my life just happened to me with no conscious choosing. Did you consider pharmacy and dentistry before you settled on mortuary, Mr. Hebert? I hope so. My job at Garner's Dress shop was a summer makeshift--what I happened to be doing while I decided whether to use my college graduation money to sail directly to Europe or to spend some months in New York first. I stayed home that summer because my father had died over the winter, and

Mother was lonely. Then they found the lump in her breast, and she had her operation, and I stayed for twenty-five years. I wasted my youth planning my escape.

That was the summer of 1955, and we figured she had a year to live, perhaps two. I sometimes think she lived so long because she knew I'd never keep her house the way she liked. It was brand-new--they'd moved into it only four months before Daddy's heart attack. It was what they had always wanted: a house with no ancient dirt between the floorboards, with no wallpaper under the wallpaper. They thirsted for factory new Early American furniture and low-maintenance vinyl siding and tilt-in windows. They both came from coal mining camps, you see, and it is their affliction to worship the new and the clean. Viola is a more diversified town economically than Moorestown, which had only the mines. Everyone there grew up with coal dust in their ears, and my mother spent her energies in keeping scratches off her cherry wood hutch and weeding her borders of impatiens. Pale pink impatiens, of course, because bright colors repelled her. She recoiled especially from anything yellow or red, which she associated with the immigrant girls who used to live on the bottom street in her company town. To my mother, bright colors, loud frying, and possibly even hearty laughter were the signs of a lower social station.

My third secret is that I loved all those things: theatrical gestures, the color red, anything packed in olive oil, and John DeMarco. John was my lover for most of the years I stayed in Moorestown. Solid, square, a big eater and laughter, with twinkles in the corners of his eyes. Older than I, married with children--a Catholic, of course, and my father's employee. Many times forbidden to me. You need not allude to him by name, Mr. Hebert, but I would like it to be known that I had a lover. And do mention that I loved bright colors and olive oil. At least it will explain the cases of imported artichoke hearts in my pantry.

My mother died at long last unexpectedly of a stroke, perhaps related to her various cancers and perhaps not. She collapsed on her new aluminum walker in the back yard, never releasing her trowel. In a panic of shock and guilt and relief, I made bad choices about the funeral. Our minister was out of town and the substitute I picked got her name wrong. Isn't that a horror? A faithful church lady all her life, and the stupid idiot called her Ida instead of Edna. He did not once touch on her real life's work, which was the conservation and improvement of that impeccable house. I confess I overreacted, speaking out loud and thrashing about in the church pew.

My sisters were concerned about me, and I think they were right, because I had a kind of break-down. Looking back, I know I was out of control. I locked myself in the downstairs bathroom where I kept my secret supply of Oliverio's Italian peppers, and I ate an entire pint with my fingers, leaning against the sink.

My sisters knew something was wrong. You'll be so lonely in that house! they said, meaning, What crazy thing are you going to do when we leave? I didn't brush my hair, I paced, I ate hot peppers, no longer secretly, but in front of them. My sisters put her affairs in order, and while they were drinking coffee in the kitchen with the boxes of insurance forms, I slipped out to the pay phone at the Dairy Mart and got information on setting up bank accounts in other cities. I

inquired of realtors about selling the house and its contents by proxy. I was having a breakdown, but a cagy, shrewd one. My sisters finally left, and I assigned rights and filed affidavits. I composed letters telling each of them I was cutting my ties. I wrote John DeMarco that I was going to ride the Orient Express and then take a cruise around the world. He shouldn't try to contact me, perhaps I'd send post cards. Perhaps not.

In the dead of night, not having slept in three days, I packed the Chevelle and drove north and east, taking the small roads, stopping for an hour to watch the sun rise over the Allegheny Front. I bought half a bushel of apples in Maryland and ate them at scenic overlooks and chatted with retired people on a bus trip and made up lies about where I was going.

As afternoon wore on, I knew I was in a strange mental state, but I pretended it was just fatigue. I made frequent stops to drink coffee. I bought a pack of cigarettes and smoked them one after another, until I was nauseated. It was night again when I reached the New Jersey turnpike. I had developed a sinus headache that I blamed on cigarettes and the refineries.

Looking back now, Mr. Hebert, I wonder what happened to me. Some major change occurred--perhaps I even found my calling--but what it was remains a mystery in my mind. I had cash and credit cards. Why didn't I find a motel until my headache was gone? Why didn't I find a place with a shower and a firm mattress, sleep as long as I wanted, get a good breakfast and sit back to think about the past and the future?

Instead, cars passed me, honking, trucks exploded on two sides. My vision blurred with the aura of the headache, and I moved over to the service lane, and drove there mile after mile. I remember the throbbing of pain, but not how I guided the car. I saw thin, ghostly towers ahead and thought they were New York. I remember half ducking from sudden large green presences that turned out to be exit signs for Staten Island and the Holland Tunnel. I kept driving across exiting traffic, and each time there were screaming horns. Someone should have locked me up for the night. They would have, too, in a small town, wouldn't they, Mr. Hebert? In Moorestown or Viola they would never have let me endanger myself and others like that.

I found another rest stop and laid my forehead on the steering wheel. The pressure seemed to equalize the pressure inside my head, and I lifted myself enough to look at my arm, at the flesh over my wrist, where there were some silvery hairs picking up light from the high sodium lamps, and I became convinced that my body hair had turned white, that I had plunged into old age without knowing it. I stumbled inside, and found in the bathroom mirror that I still had at some brown hair, that my cheeks had not sunken.

It was one of those ugly plastic caverns in all the colors that alarmed my mother. I know the people were not as terribly distant from one another as they appeared to be. I know they must have been coming out of the bathrooms, looking at maps, making phone calls, doing all the things they usually do in those places, but they seemed to me to be floating underwater, corpses caught in the seaweed, so far away, and I another. I sat down.

A couple of tables away was one man who seemed alive. I remember he was chewing, and wearing a cap that said Budweiser. But mostly, Mr. Hebert, I was drawn to him because he had the same reassuring, chunky build as John DeMarco.

I called out, "You remind me of John DeMarco from Moorestown, West Virginia."

He nodded his head, more or less politely. I don't suppose he really heard me. I stumbled over the five steps to join him at his table, and I could suddenly see very clearly, but only him: the five o'clock shadow, the kind of lips that are always moist. Joining him at that table was not the kind of behavior they taught me in Moorestown, Mr. Hebert. This part is hard to relate. I have relieved it a hundred thousand times, and still don't understand myself.

I said to this stranger, "I seem to have run out of steam. Did that ever happen to you? Did you even run out of steam? You're not related to John DeMarco are you? Are you Italian? Of Italian descent?"

The man, who I had mistaken for kind because he resembled John, said, "Listen, lady, I don't mean to be rude, but what business is that of yours?" He sounded like he was from up there, New York or New Jersey.

I believe I started talking about appliances. I believe I told him how John really likes repairs, not selling. How he always closes the shop early so he can go in the back and fix, but how he does it in his suit. How I used to join him back there. It was my father's shop first, you know. I used to love to watch John's wrists when he was working. I think I talked at great length about John Demarco to this stranger drinking coffee and chewing cheeseburger. When had I ever had anyone to talk to, Mr. Hebert? Might I have stayed in Moorestown if I had had someone to talk to?

I remember, even as I talked, wondering what kind of hair this man had under his cap, if it was the dense wavy kind like John's. I believe I asked him to take off his hat.

"I think you better go about your business, lady," he said.

I wondered if he was hiding a bald spot under the hat. I believe I told him my theory that bald indicates extreme masculinity because only men are bald.

He glared from under the bill of the cap and said, "Listen, I'm a family man."

It occurred to me then that he thought I was making a pass at him. I was wearing old pedal pushers and ankle socks, and a blouse that overhung my bosom as if I had twice as much belly. I was flattered to be mistaken for something so well-defined, and instead of disabusing him--you will not approve of this, Mr. Hebert, but remember my state of mind, I said, "Oh my goodness, you think I'm--well, who knows, perhaps I am." It was like playacting: I wracked my brains for what one of those women would say. "Do you want to party? I guess I know how to give a man a good time. I'm not the freshest, you know, but very cheap. I've been on the road for eighteen hours or more. No sleep, no toothbrush. But very cheap."

"Listen," he said. "I'm stuck here all night because damned if I'm going to drive into New York City in the middle of the night, and I want to be left alone. I mean it. I want to be left alone."

"What a wonderful coincidence. I'm going to New York too. Or rather, I'm trying to go to New York, and I seem to be stuck."

I think I asked him again if he were Italian-American.

"None of my business is none of your business," he said. "Do you get my meaning?"

I said, "I don't really care about your roots. Or rather, I want to know about your hair roots. I just want to know if you have hair like John DeMarco's."

He firmed the bill on his hat and got up. I got up too. He said, "I don't need this tonight. I don't need any crazy ladies. I have a headache."

Was that the moment I received my calling, Mr. Hebert? When he called me a crazy lady? I know I felt some kind of rush of hope. I said, "I have a headache too! And that's the truth, although I have to confess I was lying about being a lady of the night."

He started to walk away. I didn't want to be left alone. I believe I lunged at his hat.

I must have lunged, because I distinctly remember that he blocked, gave me a solid push in the shoulders.

Something changed then, Mr. Hebert. There was some kind of little tremor, and the room shrank down to normal size, and I heard a sort of normal thought in my head. I believe I told myself, This is crazy, but I came at him again anyhow, and again he shoved me away, harder this time, and I lost my footing on a wet patch of floor, skittered, but stayed upright. I was like one of those country boys who come to town and get drunk, and yearn to feel a fist, to feel. I moved forward, and he backed into the coat rack. For an instant, we both hesitated, and there was a multitude of possibilities: he could have broken my jaw, I could have shrugged and walked away.

I said, "I just want to see your hair."

He whipped off the hat and spun it into my face. It struck me across the bridge of the nose hard enough to make my eyes tear. I turned away to follow the hat, stooped to pick it up. By the time I turned back again, he was out the door, and I never got to see his hair after all. I ran out too, carrying the hat into the orange and shadows of the sodium lights. I looked in the cabs of the trucks, but I never found him.

I had lied: I wasn't a prostitute, of course. But if he had been willing to make love in the cab of his truck, I probably would have done it gladly. I would have done anything to ease my aching.

The rest of it will not make you uncomfortable, Mr. Hebert.

There were stars over Pennsylvania, but fog in Maryland. I crawled up and down the mountains barely able to see, but then, towards morning, there were stars again over West Virginia. I could see swooping ridges by starlight, and how they gradually gathered into the familiar humpy hills. I parked on the shoulder for a while, climbed up on the hood of my station wagon and lay back, feeling the warmth of the engine under me, smelling the black night wetness, and I made up an idea, a sort of practical joke. I would come back to some town like Moorestown but not Moorestown, and I would pretend I was returning after many years' absence. I would pretend I had left to go away to college and was only now returning. I would ask after nonexistent friends and relatives and wonder what happened to them. I would tell startling adventures from my life. I would tell them I lived with a sculptor in Greenwich Village and rode the Orient Express across Afghanistan. That I lived in a palazzo in Venice, on the Left Bank in Paris. I fell asleep until the engine began to cool and a damp dawn wind lapped over me. A rainy fog enveloped everything, too, so I drove on. With a feeling that I was finally on the right path, I passed the exit for Moorestown and got off at Viola. I first had in mind to visit various towns until I found the right one for my project, but as I drove the fifteen slow miles from the

interstate into Viola, I felt more and more the sensation of settling.

Viola, like Moorestown, has a railroad and a river. Like us, you are not quite near enough the interstate for easy off-and-on. But unlike Moorestown, you had your rich Mr. Hodgkiss who gave you some public buildings. I stopped in the parking lot behind the Methodist church. Yes, Mr. Hebert, by coincidence also the parking lot for Hebert's Funeral home.

When I woke up, I looked around pretty thoroughly, at my leisure, examining everything I could see without getting out of the car. I had this odd sensation of one view superimposed over another. I was seeing Viola and Moorestown both at once, and the little variations were like looking through a stereopticon--the slightly different angles give you depth of vision, or at least the illusion of depth.

I dug down in the pocket of my pedal pushers and found a Drakes coffee cake and ate it until the drizzle started. Then I noticed people arriving at the church: the limousine, the hearse. I didn't have a raincoat, but mother's spring coat was in a paper bag in the back, and I wore that. It was a small funeral, for an elderly gentleman I never heard anyone mention again from that day to this. I enjoyed the singing as I always do, and I thought the minister's remarks were extremely well-taken. "He was the kind of man who gave nickels to little boys for ice cream," he said. "He gave nickels to little boys long after an ice cream cone cost half a dollar, and do you know what? He was the kind of man that the little boys never told him any different." I found myself crying over this old gentleman I'd never known, and I cried all the way through the rest of the service. So much to cry about, I thought.

Afterwards, I visited Hebert's and signed the guest book for whoever your corpse was that day. I think you had a couple of them, I don't really remember. I found a newspaper, I got my room at Sis Critchfield's house. The room has its own toilet, sink and kitchen, though you have to share the tub with Mrs. Critchfield. But it works out fine because she and I neither one want to dry out our skin with over-many baths. Later, I went to the grocery store and bought things to stock my cabinet. I bought things that I used to keep under the sink in the bathroom or in the trunk of the car: my packaged cakes from Hostess and Drake; lots of canned fish in oil like sardines and anchovies; anchovy paste, too; and herring in mustard sauce; my artichoke hearts, of course; several kinds of olives and hot peppers. I put up open shelves for storing my groceries, and I set them out in plain view. They please me, Mr. Hebert, to look at and to eat. I don't worry about my figure or my breath. And you'd be surprised by the number of men who ask me out anyhow.

Late at night, I read stacks of library books and listen to the radio talk shows in bed with hot peppers and ginger snaps. Sometimes I stay home till I run out of canned goods. I let the oily old cans and jars pile up on the floor and table. I don't change out of my nightgown. It seems like sacrilege to speak of such slovenliness to you, Mr. Hebert, with your finger nails that are cleaner than most people's silverware.

But you needn't take me too seriously, I'm the funeral lady. All I ask is for you, or your heirs, should I outlive you, to take charge of my funeral arrangements. And you must agree by now that the obituary will not be a huge shocker, except perhaps for the headline, in which I want you to refer to me by the name the children call me. Back in Moorestown we used to call our

funeral lady Hannah Hearse. I want my headline to read, The Vulture Passes. What I am trying to do, of course, is nail down my life as best I can, the way you can nail down a coffin. I enclose a check as a retainer. I want everything as regular as a Hebert Funeral Home funeral can be.

And here's a funny thing: over the last few years, as I've been making these decisions, I have found that there is something else I want. Perhaps I've attended enough funerals for now. I find myself thinking that I might take a trip after all. I might contact my sisters and go for a visit, or even go back to Moorestown and see if John DeMarco is still living. I might on the other hand just sign up for one of these senior citizen bus trips, or call a travel agent.

The last thing I'll need from you, Mr. Hebert, is a separate estimate for transporting a body, should I die en route, back from Moorestown or New York or Europe, or perhaps even the Far East. Wherever I end up, I want to rest assured I will still have my Hebert Funeral Home funeral.