Mr. Truhart

AMY CLEMENTS

Jimmy Truhart knelt down in his father's office. Beside him, on white wool carpeting, lay James Truhart, Senior, whose eyes were fixed on a chandelier overhead. Jimmy was trying hard to revive the old man, hammering on his frail chest and exhaling deeply into his cool violet mouth. It was almost dark outside, and the figure on the floor became gradually lit by a sign glowing through the window: "James Truhart and Son, Funeral Directors Since 1939."

"Is this even my dad anymore?" Jimmy thought to himself. His father's body no longer possessed its hallmark velocity; how could it possess Mr. Truhart either? Jimmy picked up the phone receiver and, after thumbing through the Rolodex, slowly dialed their doctor's home number, noticing that Mr. Truhart had rubbed away the numerals over the years. Unlike James Senior, Jimmy had thin fingers, and he didn't have to use the end of a pencil to make the rotary spin. Jimmy wondered if his father would have wanted him to call a hospital instead, though by now a hospital was of no use.

He knew what paramedics, or worse, a surgeon, could do to a body. He did not want his father's chest to be bruised or singed by their equipment. When he had tried to start his father's heart, he knew it was just an exercise in confirmation, helping Jimmy to believe the truth.

"Yes, it's Jim Truhart. Listen, this is kind of an emergency. It's my dad ... .No, he's not okay. He's not breathing. I think ... I'm sure, really ... yes. I think he's been like that for a while. I just found him. All right. Yes, I'll wait right here. Yes, thanks. Okay."

Recoiling in the window seat, Jimmy sank into a velour cushion that was the color of gold costume jewelry. Arms crossed tightly, he wondered out loud this time: "Where are you, Dad?" The question involved a matter of spiritual geography that both men had pretended to solve for thousands of bleary customers, week after week. It was a question they personally believed could never be accurately answered by any living human being.

Mr. Truhart's reassuring smile, generally toothless because he tried to hide his cigarette

stains by pulling his lips over his teeth, had collapsed with a startled gasp. His slightly hooked shoulders, always stooped while leaning closer to everyone who was shorter than his six-foot frame, were pressed open and flat against the wall-to-wall shag flooring that had been installed only last week. His kind gray eyes, almost always teary from cedar fever, seemed scared.

Jimmy observed his father's suit: navy blue, double-breasted, worsted wool. Looking more closely, he corrected himself. It wasn't a suit, actually. The trousers were in fact Sans-a-Belt, chosen not because Mr. Truhart objected to belts but because he enjoyed elasticity. The pants were mostly polyester, ideal for a widower since they never needing ironing. He did not wear black. The mourning color, he felt, was inappropriate on anyone but his clients.

Mr. Truhart's horn-rimmed eyeglasses, with lenses tinted the color of salmon because he had grown sensitive to light, had been crushed when he fell. Jimmy noticed them lying just a few inches from his father's head. One of the earpieces had snapped off, but the adhesive nose pads were still attached. Mr. Truhart rarely changed the pads. They looked flat and discolored. His necktie, a paisley clip-on, was at his fingertips, where Jimmy had placed it when he first tried to resuscitate him. He had also taken off his father's shoes, though he wasn't sure why, tossing the mammoth pair beneath a delicate settee.

He could hear a soloist rehearsing for a service down the hall. She was missing most notes of "I Need Thee Every Hour." He knew that this was the last chance he would ever have to gather an accurate memory of his father. The staff would come in soon, offering polite recollections and not addressing Mr. Truhart directly anymore. Local relatives, and the far-away ones who were not too cheap to buy bus tickets, would begin to characterize him. They would distort things with well-intentioned fallacies or self-serving rumors, or accidental projections of their own preferences ("He was just like me, the only one in the family who couldn't get enough mincemeat pie at Thanksgiving").

Jimmy spoke out loud, but softly. "You would have helped me through this, Dad." And then, "Please help me." Jimmy hardly looked old enough for the draft, but he was pushing thirty. He had perfect skin that didn't need to be shaved daily. His hands were free of hangnails. His mind exuded clarity—a gift from his father, who had deprived his son of

responsibility. Now Jimmy felt all of the connections to his father, his only genuine friend really, fading to nothing like the sky outside. It reminded him of the final evening of a beach trip, when the scalding daylight became gentle and he craved just one more day near the ocean.

Jimmy eventually returned to the floor, leaning forward to remove his father's silver-plated cufflinks. They were engraved with a capital "T," set in a typeface of rigid serifs and enveloped by a fluid half-circle that had always reminded Jimmy of buttery crescent rolls. Now he pressed them between his cupped hands, feeling the cufflinks begin to warm against his palm and jab him slightly. Then he sat in the window seat a little while longer. It was the tail end of rush hour, and a centipede of headlights lit up the lane.

Jimmy shuddered when the front door slammed shut. There was a clatter of high heels on the porch, and two women began growling at each other.

That was the world Mr. Truhart had kept Jimmy from ever having to face. Jimmy tried to decide which sight was worse—the body at his feet, or the anger building outside. His father had always been a gentle but efficient person. He would have calmly intervened out front, particularly when there was so much slow traffic. On a nice night like that, everyone had their windows rolled down, tuning in to the scene at Truhart and Son as if it were a radio show.

"I've had it with you," one woman said to the other. They wore larger-than-stylish bouffants and eye shadow in blues and greens that made them look more like car-wreck victims than fashion plates. Jimmy recognized their voices; they were Audrey and Emily, sisters who had been in his graduating class during high school. They had tried to browbeat him into choosing between them for a date until they grew bored by his polite sweetness. Audrey puckered up her lips and took a long cigarette drag before continuing. They were the first of his many difficult entanglements with women, who left him feeling bewildered and exhausted. "You let Mother lie in that room full of dirty cat pans for a whole week. Do you have any idea how embarrassing it was when they came to get her, with you and the whole house smelling like a litter box?"

"At least I was there. Do you have any idea how much work it is? Do you? Did you ever have to change the diaper of a grown woman?"

"How am I supposed to help her if you won't even let me in the house?" Audrey wanted to know. "You've always had to control everything. EVERYTHING."

"This is the limit. *You're* the one who's always got to be in charge. You won't even let us sing any of the hymns I asked for. I know the one that was Mother's favorite, and now it's not even on the program. But you hide and watch, Audrey. I'm going to stand up and sing it myself tomorrow. 'All Things Bright and Beautiful.' I know it by heart."

"Oh, you've got everybody fooled. They all think you're such a good girl. Straight-A Emily. But who is it that's always out there picking up your SHIT."

"Sure. Go on kidding yourself. You've been evil from Day One, and I've got it on film."

"What film?"

Their handbags, dangling off their elbows, banged into each other slightly as the sisters got close enough to blow smoke and spittle at each other.

"Marcy Thorne's birthday party. 1951."

"Who's Marcy Thorne?"

"You knocked over my ice-cream cone. You snuck up behind me and jabbed me in the neck. Daddy was recording the whole thing with his movie camera. You know it, too. You've always been a bully. You've always tried to come between me and Mother. All your lies. And now you can't even try to compose yourself and act like a lady for just once, not even the night before her funeral."

Jimmy stood up and smoothed his hair. He didn't have any ideas about what to say to silence them. Then two men who looked like husbands or coaches (or, Jimmy hoped, were psychiatrists), crept up and pulled them off each other. There was no sound after that, other than the rattling of skinny shoes on asphalt as the women staggered to their separate cars.

Jimmy dreaded the family reunion that was implied by his father's death. He knew the consequences of losing the last peacemaker. His father never forced him to participate in any activities with their hostile second cousins from out of town, a group of adults and kids alike who would cheat and bawl during their visits, which sometimes ended with an unexplained fire.

"It's all right, son," Mr. Truhart would say, patting Jimmy on the shoulders. "Here's a

little change. Why don't you just skip all this and go over to the picture show?"

Jimmy sat down in the well-oiled leather chair at his father's desk. For a moment, but only a brief one, he considered asking one of the other morticians to handle his father's case. But all he could think of was spending as many minutes as possible with what was left of his dad. He understood that once Mr. Truhart was buried, there would be no turning back. At least, right then, he had something tangible.

He soon heard the doctor's fast gait stirring the shrubs along the sidewalk. He lived only a few blocks away and drove as seldom as possible. He reminded Jimmy of his father, especially the way he rushed through doorways.

Had he tried artificial respiration? Jimmy nodded yes. How did James seem that morning? They went through a hushed series of questions as the staff gathered in the hallway to eavesdrop.

The doctor had looked after Mr. Truhart since the 1940s and said that there had always been problems with Mr. Truhart's blood pressure, plus he'd had symptoms of mitral valve prolapse.

"When did you last see him alive, Jimmy?"

"Right after lunch. We always have pimento-cheese sandwiches together in here. I brought him another glass of iced tea at about two o'clock. Then I left him alone to go over some receipts I'd brought him."

The doctor was crouched on the carpet, scanning Mr. Truhart's sternum with a stethoscope.

"All right. Well I'm going to call this for three p.m., based on the condition and temperature of his skin. I'll have to record that as an estimated time of death, though." He jotted a few notes on a steno pad. "Are you all right, son?"

"I'm okay."

"I always admired your dad. Calm in the storm, that's for sure. You and I can do the paperwork easily, natural causes and all. It's my duty, really, as his personal doc all these years. Hard to believe, though. He hadn't complained of pain recently."

"He never complained of anything. As long as I knew him he never complained."

"And if he didn't call out for help, or try to get to the phone himself … "

"I still wish I'd gotten to him sooner. If I'd come back for the iced-tea glass. Anything. This has been such a slow day. I didn't have any reason to bother him this afternoon."

"There's no one to blame, son. Just let it go."

Then their conversation dwindled to farewells, and Jimmy approached the front desk to tell the receptionist what had happened. She nodded, moving her head in a delicate wave of understanding that was required for her job. She offered to call Mr. Truhart's sister, who would in turn call each and every family member. One of the drivers and a pony-tailed embalmer stood against a wall, not speaking. They were not used to taking orders from anyone except Truhart Senior. The driver asked Jimmy if he would like them to move his father from the office. "We'll take him together," Jimmy said.

"You sure you're up for this, man?" the embalmer asked. Jimmy nodded yes.

They placed their hands on the body's outstretched limbs, lifting wordlessly and positioning it on the cart. Jimmy placed a hand over his father's forehead and pressed his eyelids down.

"Don't need the head block, I guess?" asked the driver, emitting mumbled syllables slowly from his mustached mouth.

"No, it's all right," Jimmy said. "I'll just hold him in place, like this. We don't have far to go."

They draped a small blue sheet over the gurney and then made sure that there were no customers nearby. They passed through a pair of swinging doors, which the embalmer had once said were like the dividing line between a restaurant's kitchen and the dining room. "Front of the house, and the back. Got it," he had proclaimed on his first day of work. With every shiver of the lightweight cart, Mr. Truhart's head rolled back and forth between Jimmy's palms underneath the sheet.

Behind the doors there was no chaotic shuffle of people, no view of a busy street. The only sound came from customers on the other side of the wall. Jimmy could hear a man on the phone with a close relative.

"OK, honey!" he said as zealously as if they were planning a vacation. "I went with the ebony one," he shouted into the receiver. "Now, what I need to know is how many cars to ask for. Yes, I have to take care of everything—it's part of this package, and if I sign tonight,

I can lock in the price. I know, I know, but it's their risk, isn't it? Well, I doubt it, but they'd be stuck with the deal. No one's ever beat this thing, honey. Medical miracles don't run in our family. You know that. Look, I'm just saving you the trouble. So do you think you and my mother can stand to ride in the same limo, or do I need to spring for two?"

The embalming table was metal, matching the swinging doors. At one end of the table was a small drain. Jimmy flipped a switch, and the room lit up with a white light that always made his pupils shrink to pinpricks. Everyone in the room was silent today; usually they chatted about something they had seen on television.

As they used another blue sheet to move the body from the cart, the driver said, "There you go, Mr. Truhart."

"Jimmy, you know, another one came in about an hour ago," the driver told him. "That service is set for day after tomorrow."

Jimmy was picturing the way his father would look in two days, when everyone would gather together and the reality would be hidden by a casket. He could see it solemnly sliding past the hearse's rear door, which would be swung open wide like half of a wing.

"Oh, I didn't realize," Jimmy whispered. "Well, this won't take me long. It should be very straightforward." He turned to the embalmer. "Would you mind staying late? Taking care of the other one after I'm finished in here?" Jimmy was starting to take charge, a little.

"Hey, no problem. You're sure you want to do this?"

Jimmy nodded and said, "I promised Dad I would."

On the other side of the wall was the sound of the terminally ill client winding up his phone call. "Fine, honey, fine. Home in fifteen. I'll bring the brochures. Love you too. Bye-bye."

Then the building was quieter. The soloist had gone home. The driver asked if he could do anything to help.

"Actually, yes, I need my dad's tux," Jimmy told him.

"OK, sure. Anything."

"I'm just not sure I can go back into his room tonight, you know?"

"Right, I got you. So, you want to give me the keys?" the driver asked, hiding his disdain for the fact that Jimmy still lived with his father.

Jimmy reached into his pocket, feeling the cufflinks scraping against his key ring. "This is for both locks. It shouldn't be hard to find. The tux. His room has the double bed, so just look in the closet in that room. And his dress shoes; they're wingtips. The only ones that lace up. You can't miss them, on the floor of the closet. And I guess some, you know, briefs; there's a small drawer at the top of the bureau for that. Dress socks too. Black silk. That's in the other drawer, next to the one with the underwear. I think that's all."

"What about the tie, Jimmy?"

"Oh. Well, those are hanging on a rack inside the closet door. There's only one tux tie. It'll be obvious."

"If you don't mind me asking," the embalmer drawled, joining the conversation, "whose idea is the tux thing? You know, usually it's just Sunday clothes."

"It's what Dad wanted," Jimmy lied. The truth was that Jimmy admired his father most on the nights when Mr. Truhart dressed up for special parties.

Then he was by himself in the room. He slipped on a lab coat and started removing his father's clothes, folding each item loosely, building a precarious pile of dark fabric on top of a vinyl-covered stool. As he lifted and rolled various sections of the body, he noticed how dry the skin felt in his hands, as if Mr. Truhart had never discovered lotion, or just wasn't able to reach certain parts of himself alone. When Jimmy slipped the withered Fruit of the Looms down past Mr. Truhart's ankles, he pressed a trash can open with his foot, choosing the basket for things destined to go in the incinerator. He stepped back to observe the table.

He realized that his father was physically his opposite. Mr. Truhart looked weary and damaged. Even where there was muscle, he appeared limp. And in spite of being such a tall man, he still looked like a remnant, dwarfed by an aura of what he used to be. Every one of his hairs was white. Most of his body was scattered with oversize freckles, a few of them inflated. His toenails had apparently not been trimmed for a long while, and they curled inward at the ends. Jimmy sprayed every crevice of the body with a disinfectant. But as he lifted his father's torso, he discovered a labyrinth of scorched flesh. The sight made him flinch.

"Keloid scars," he murmured, "and hypertrophics." He traced the thick rope of wrecked tissue that began at the center of Mr. Truhart's spine and curled its way outward, with tentacles that sputtered just as they reached each shoulder.

Jimmy had never seen his father shirtless, or in short sleeves. He pulled the skin taut, thinking he had misinterpreted what he was seeing. Perhaps it was not from a wound. Perhaps it was actually a botched, oversize tattoo, with the initials of Jimmy's mother fossilized in epidermis. She had died young and slowly, from disease. But there had been peace throughout the process. Mr. Truhart had created an oasis for his tiny family, keeping the evils of the world at bay, even as he and his son made their living by erasing the dread of death from the minds of mourning families.

Jimmy filled the sink with warm water and made it sudsy with an abrasive soap. He wrung out a yellow sponge, and starting with the feet began scrubbing all traces of this earth from Mr. Truhart. He did not scrub harshly, just thoroughly, swishing back and forth between all ten toes. "Who did this to you, Dad?" It couldn't have been an accident. The pattern was too perfect. "Did this happen when you were a little boy? Or after I came along?" He pictured a superhero. "Were you defending someone, Dad?"

There were no grandparents on that side of the family. Mr. Truhart and his sister had been raised by no one in particular, propelled into the Midwest on a train whose passengers were orphans. Some were never adopted but were shared by a multitude of families wherever the demand for free labor was greatest.

The scars were not those of a veteran; Mr. Truhart had never been to war. He had come of age in peacetime. Soon Jimmy realized that the list of things he knew about his father was much shorter than his list of questions. He never asked about the past because it might create turbulence, and his one taste of turbulence—his mother's death—had been enough to last a lifetime. But if he had dared to ask? *Can we be sad together, Dad? Do you want to tell me about the day you met Mom? Do you want to tell me about the day you decided to apprentice for the undertaker? The day you bought a house with running water? The day someone decided to initiate you into something horrible, or teach you a horrible lesson? I would have taken care of you. I would have rushed you to a hospital, and changed your bandages, and helped you through the pain. When did this happen, Dad? And how? And why? And who?* That question made him tremble with a new feeling, which was rage, and he was unaccustomed to it.

If Jimmy's aunt had the answers, she would never share them. She was emotionally underwater at a depth from which she could never be retrieved. Mr. Truhart used to smile

and say, "Her best friends are named Gin and Tonic," and shake his head, and Jimmy never thought to ask what memories she might be so frantic to drown out. Jimmy's rage deflated slowly as he reminded himself that he and his father were peacemakers. Yes, that would be their inseverable connection to each other. To endure without a fight.

He no longer spoke to his father under his breath, puzzling over the revelations out loud while he finished his work in a room that echoed with each action.

To clean the torso, Jimmy pressed the body against his shoulder, as if he were burping a baby. The more he mopped the grim spiral, the more brightly it shone. At first, it had been the color of weak tea. Now it was almost ruddy. Jimmy tenderly stroked his father's back, following the outline of each rib and then resting the body flat again. He said, "Now you're all cleaned up, Dad," and placed a cushioned support behind his father's neck, covering him with a crisp sheet that he folded gently beneath the chin, the way Mr. Truhart had done when tucking in his child at bedtime.

Jimmy felt a lump of loneliness and tried to massage it out of himself by rubbing his temples. He opened one of the cabinets and found a bottle of aspirin. He swallowed two, choking a little and running to the water cooler in the hallway. He downed one paper cupful and told the receptionist good night as she tottered toward the parking lot.

He returned to his task. Mr. Truhart looked like someone who'd simply been anesthetized and would surely make a full recovery. He used a small sprayer hose to rinse the table completely, as if trying to wash away the damage of that image. A little bit of the mist coated his eyeglasses, so he paused to wipe them with a handkerchief.

He disinfected a small scalpel and lifted the lower part of the sheet so that he could make a tiny incision on his father's abdomen, picking a spot near where there was already an appendix scar. That scar was no surprise; the five-hour appendectomy had happened not long ago. He kept pressing the area and suctioning with a rubber syringe. Then he drained some of his father's blood, opening one of the many veins clearly displayed through his filmy skin. After that, Jimmy found an artery near his father's neck and began running pints of watered-down formaldehyde through Mr. Truhart's circulatory system, every capillary soon brimming with a substance that ensured the defiance of decay.

As he watched the skin plump slightly, Jimmy wondered if he'd released enough blood, then dropped the thought because he heard the driver return through the back

door. He knocked lightly and told Jimmy that he had the tux all ready; it had been no trouble to find. Jimmy opened the door halfway. "Thanks a lot," he said before passing him a ten-dollar bill. "I know it was a long day for you. You should go home now. I'm really going to need you tomorrow."

He wondered whether his father's face looked too thin. He decided to pack a small wad of cotton in one of the cheeks and then removed it, deciding to offset the thin face by doing a good job with the mouth. Jimmy subtly curved it into an expression of sincere amusement, as if they were sharing a private joke. The others liked to insert wire in the lips, but his father had taught him how to use careful stitches to more precisely manipulate facial expressions.

"That's what everyone looks for, Jimmy," he had said. "That's why they come to the viewing. They want to make sure that Uncle John looks happy to be wherever he has gone to."

Jimmy walked over to a laminated floor plan that was mounted to a wall. He checked for an available viewing room that he could reserve for the next two days. He marked himself down for the gray parlor. It was being used tonight, but the family was having the funeral and burial in the morning. Jimmy could have it by noon, and all of the Truharts could start trooping in after lunchtime. Jimmy preferred the gray parlor because it was the only one that seemed to acknowledge why it was there. The others were done in pinks and yellows, but the gray room made customers feel as if they were stepping into a sad cloud. Jimmy passed by it, just to make sure that it was the right one for his father, and he caught sight of a sunburned teenage girl leaning into a coffin.

"Daddy, I hate your casket," she said as if she were delivering the evening news. Daddy was lying in a model the Truharts tried to avoid selling, the notorious pine box, reminiscent of a container built for pencil storage. The Truharts at least offered a version that was covered in felt, and in this case the felt matched the gray walls of the room. The girl stroked her father's face. "I thought you'd have picked out a pretty one. It's hard to look at you in this old thing."

As part of his business model, Mr. Truhart offered deep discounts to anyone willing to pre-pay. But he personally didn't believe in choosing the details of your own funeral. "It's

not for the dead, son," he had said. "We do this for the survivors, so they really should be the ones to select the things that will comfort them most."

Jimmy padded softly to the embalming room again, disconnected his father's tubes, and began drying the table. He would need help wheeling the casket in. He knew exactly what he wanted his father to be buried in: black lacquer, with a pristine interior, white and angelic.

He set his father's garments on the counter and approached the table, lacing his fingers through Mr. Truhart's cold hands. They were no longer bony and now looked like a waterlogged pair of gloves. As he pressed his fingerprints against his dad's, he whispered his fear. "I'm not sure who this man is, but I know who my father was."

He looked down at the natural outline of his father's body. Mr. Truhart seemed to lie before him frankly, honestly. Jimmy raised the table a few inches and placed his head on his father's chest. Images of childhood games and late-night Johnny Carson strolled by, Mr. Truhart laughing from his recliner, munching a midnight snack of peanut butter on rye toast. Explaining to Jimmy how to live, and how to make a living off the dead. He lifted his father's body once more and saw that the vermilion scar was darkening to maroon, almost purple: the postmortem stain.

As Jimmy's tears began to soak his father's sheet, it started to faintly rain. Stroking the glass of a half-open window, the weather made a fragile sound that helped him stop shaking. As the trickle slipped from the eaves, it gave voice to Jimmy's mind. Then it occurred to him that his parents might have made it rain and, for the moment, they were the rain, speaking to him in a language that articulated something much more comforting than answers, drawing him into a chilly, uncomplicated stream of fresh air that lashed at him and made him pure. □