

## READINGS

No two profiles are alike, and yet they share defining features. Together, the four readings in this chapter reveal a number of these features, so you will want to read as many of them as possible. If time permits, complete the activities in the Analyzing Writing Strategies section that follows each reading, and read the Commentary. Following the readings is a section called Basic Features: Profiles (p. 165), which offers a concise description of the features of profiles and provides examples from the four readings.

Description  
Information about  
subject  
classify  
define  
examples  
Topic or narrative  
plan  
A role for writer  
observer  
participant  
A perspective on  
subject

**John T. Edge** directs the Southern Foodways Symposium, which is part of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. He coordinates an annual conference on southern food. Food writer for the national magazine *Oxford American*, he has also written for *Cooking Light*, *Food & Wine*, and *Gourmet*. He has published several books, including *A Gracious Plenty: Recipes and Recollections from the American South* (1999); *Southern Belly* (2000), a portrait of southern food told through profiles of people and places; and, with photographer Robb Helfrick, *Compass Guide Georgia* (2001), a collection of new and archival photographs, literary excerpts, and practical travel information.

This reading (and the photograph shown on p. 141) first appeared in a 1999 issue of *Oxford American* and was reprinted in 2000 in *Utne Reader*. Edge profiles an unusual manufacturing business, *Farm Fresh Food Supplier*, in a small Mississippi town. He introduces readers to its pickled meat products, which include pickled pig lips. Like many other profile writers, Edge participates in his subject, in his case not by joining in the activities undertaken at *Farm Fresh* but by attempting to eat a pig lip at *Jesse's Place*, a nearby "juke" bar. You will see that the reading begins and ends with this personal experience.

As you read, enjoy Edge's struggle to eat a pig lip, but notice also how much you are learning about this bar snack food as Edge details his discomfort in trying to eat it. Be equally attentive to the information he offers about the history and manufacturing of pig lips at *Farm Fresh*.

### *I'm Not Leaving Until I Eat This Thing* John T. Edge

It's just past 4:00 on a Thursday afternoon in June at *Jesse's Place*, a country juke 17 miles south of the Mississippi line and three miles west of Amite, Louisiana. The air conditioner hacks and spits forth torrents of Arctic air, but the heat of summer can't be kept at bay. It seeps around the splintered doorjamb and settles in, transforming the squat particleboard-plastered roadhouse into a sauna. Slowly, the dank barroom fills with grease-smearred mechanics from the truck stop up the road and farmers straight from the fields, the soles of their brogans thick with dirt clods. A few weary



souls make their way over from the nearby sawmill. I sit alone at the bar, one empty bottle of Bud in front of me, a second in my hand. I drain the beer, order a third, and stare down at the pink juice spreading outward from a crumpled foil pouch and onto the bar.

*I'm not leaving until I eat this thing*, I tell myself.

Half a mile down the road, behind a fence coiled with razor wire, Lionel Dufour, proprietor of Farm Fresh Food Supplier, is loading up the last truck of the day, wheeling case after case of pickled pork offal out of his cinder-block processing plant and into a semitrailer bound for Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

His crew packed lips today. Yesterday, it was pickled sausage; the day before that, pig feet. Tomorrow, it's pickled pig lips again. Lionel has been on the job since 2:45 in the morning, when he came in to light the boilers. Damon Landry, chief cook and maintenance man, came in at 4:30. By 7:30, the production line was at full tilt: six women in white smocks and blue bouffant caps, slicing ragged white fat from the lips, tossing the good parts in glass jars, the bad parts in barrels bound for the rendering plant. Across the aisle, filled jars clatter by on a conveyor belt as a worker tops them off with a Kool-Aid-red slurry of hot sauce, vinegar, salt, and food coloring. Around the corner, the jars are capped, affixed with a label, and stored in pasteboard boxes to await shipping.

Unlike most offal—euphemistically called “variety meats”—lips belie their provenance. Brains, milky white and globular, look like brains. Feet, the ghosts of their cloven hoofs protruding, look like feet. Testicles look like, well, testicles. But lips are different.

Loosed from the snout, trimmed of their fat, and dyed a preternatural pink, they look more like candy than like carrion.

At Farm Fresh, no swine root in an adjacent feedlot. No viscera-strewn killing floor lurks just out of sight, down a darkened hallway. These pigs died long ago at some Midwestern abattoir. By the time the lips arrive in Amite, they are, in essence, pig Popsicles, 50-pound blocks of offal and ice.

"Lips are all meat," Lionel told me earlier in the day. "No gristle, no bone, no nothing. They're bar food, hot and vinegary, great with a beer. Used to be the lips ended up in sausages, headcheese, those sorts of things. A lot of them still do."

Lionel, a 50-year-old father of three with quick, intelligent eyes set deep in a face the color of cordovan, is a veteran of nearly 40 years in the pickled pig lips business. "I started out with my daddy when I wasn't much more than 10," Lionel told me, his shy smile framed by a coarse black mustache flecked with whispers of gray. "The meatpacking business he owned had gone broke back when I was 6, and he was peddling out of the back of his car, selling dried shrimp, napkins, straws, tubes of plastic cups, pig feet, pig lips, whatever the bar owners needed. He sold to black bars, white bars, sweet shops, snowball stands, you name it. We made the rounds together after I got out of school, sometimes staying out till two or three in the morning. I remember bringing my toy cars to this one joint and racing them around the floor with the bar owner's son while my daddy and his father did business."

For years after the demise of that first meatpacking company, the Dufour family sold someone else's product. "We used to buy lips from Dennis Di Salvo's company down in Belle Chasse," recalled Lionel. "As far as I can tell, his mother was the one who came up with the idea to pickle and pack lips back in the '50s, back when she was working for a company called Three Little Pigs over in Houma. But pretty soon, we were selling so many lips that we had to almost beg Di Salvo's for product. That's when we started cooking up our own," he told me, gesturing toward the cast-iron kettle that hangs from the rafters by the front door of the plant. "My daddy started cooking lips in that very pot."

Lionel now cooks lips in 11 retrofitted milk tanks, dull stainless-steel cauldrons shaped like oversized cradles. But little else has changed. Though Lionel's father has passed away, Farm Fresh remains a family-focused company. His wife, Kathy, keeps the books. His daughter, Dana, a button-cute college student who has won numerous beauty titles, takes to the road in the summer, selling lips to convenience stores and wholesalers. Soon, after he graduates from business school, Lionel's younger son, Matt, will take over operations at the plant. And his older son, a veterinarian, lent his name to one of Farm Fresh's top sellers, Jason's Pickled Pig Lips.

"We do our best to corner the market on lips," Lionel told me, his voice tinged with bravado. "Sometimes they're hard to get from the packing houses. You gotta kill a lot of pigs to get enough lips to keep us going. I've got new customers calling every day; it's all I can do to keep up with demand, but I bust my ass to keep up. I do what I can for my family—and for my customers."

"When my customers tell me something," he continued, "just like when my daddy told me something, I listen. If my customers wanted me to dye the lips green, I'd ask, 'What shade?' As it is, every few years we'll do some red and some blue for the Fourth

of July. This year we did jars full of Mardi Gras lips—half purple, half gold,” Lionel recalled with a chuckle. “I guess we’d had a few beers when we came up with that one.”

Meanwhile, back at Jesse’s Place, I finish my third Bud, order my fourth. *Now*, I tell myself, my courage bolstered by booze, *I’m ready to eat a lip.* 13

They may have looked like candy in the plant, but in the barroom they’re carrion once again. I poke and prod the six-inch arc of pink flesh, peering up from my reverie just in time to catch the barkeep’s wife, Audrey, staring straight at me. She fixes me with a look just this side of pity and asks, “You gonna eat that thing or make love to it?” 14

Her nephew, Jerry, sidles up to a bar stool on my left. “A lot of people like ‘em with chips,” he says with a nod toward the pink juice pooling on the bar in front of me. I offer to buy him a lip, and Audrey fishes one from a jar behind the counter, wraps it in tinfoil, and places the whole affair on a paper towel in front of him. 15

I take stock of my own cowardice, and, following Jerry’s lead, reach for a bag of potato chips, tear open the top with my teeth, and toss the quivering hunk of hog flesh into the shiny interior of the bag, slick with grease and dusted with salt. Vinegar vapors tickle my nostrils. I stifle a gag that rolls from the back of my throat, swallow hard, and pray that the urge to vomit passes. 16

With a smash of my hand, the potato chips are reduced to a pulp, and I feel the cold lump of the lip beneath my fist. I clasp the bag shut and shake it hard in an effort to ensure chip coverage in all the nooks and crannies of the lip. The technique that Jerry uses—and I mimic—is not unlike that employed by home cooks mixing up a mess of Shake ‘n Bake chicken. 17

I pull from the bag a coral crescent of meat now crusted with blond bits of potato chips. When I chomp down, the soft flesh dissolves between my teeth. It tastes like a flaccid cracklin’, unmistakably porcine, and not altogether bad. The chips help, providing texture where there was none. Slowly, my brow unfurrows, my stomach ceases its fluttering. 18

Sensing my relief, Jerry leans over and peers into my bag. “Kind of look like Frosted Flakes, don’t they?” he says, by way of describing the chips rapidly turning to mush in the pickling juice. I offer the bag to Jerry, order yet another beer, and turn to eye the pig feet floating in a murky jar by the cash register, their blunt tips bobbing up through a pasty white film. 19

### Connecting to Culture and Experience: Gaining Firsthand Experience

Undoubtedly, Edge believed that he should visit a place where Farm Fresh Food Supplier’s most popular product is consumed. He went further, however: He decided to experience the product firsthand by handling, smelling, and tasting it. Except for his own squeamishness, nothing prevented him from gaining the firsthand experience he

## Considering Topics for Your Own Essay

Consider writing about a place that serves, produces, or sells something unusual, perhaps something that, like Edge, you could try yourself for the purpose of further informing and engaging your readers. If such places do not come to mind, you could browse the Yellow Pages of your local phone directory. There are many possibilities: producer or packager of a special ethnic or regional food or a local café that serves it, licensed acupuncture clinic, caterer, novelty and toy balloon store, microbrewery, chain saw dealer, boat builder, talent agency, manufacturer of ornamental iron, bead store, nail salon, pet fish and aquarium supplier, detailing shop, tattoo parlor, scrap metal recycler, fly fishing shop, handwriting analyst, dog or cat sitting service, photo restorer, burglar alarm installer, Christmas tree farm, wedding specialist, reweaving specialist, wig salon. You need not evaluate the quality of the work provided at a place as part of your observational essay. Instead, keep the focus on informing readers about the service or product the place offers. Relating a personal experience with the service or product is a good idea but not a requirement for a successful essay.



To use the Writing Guide Software to record your ideas, click on  
▶ **Journal**

*Trevor B. Hall runs a Boston nonprofit company, The Call Academy, that provides enrichment programs for low-income urban high school students. Program participants study literature, practice the documentary arts (writing, video and film, photography), and take part in adventure travel. DoubleTake, a magazine for the documentary arts, published Hall's "A Documentary Classroom," a profile of one teacher's efforts to bring documentary into the English classroom, in 2001. The following profile was published in DoubleTake in 2000. As you read, notice how Hall goes about presenting the Edison Café as an irreplaceable social asset to Skagit Valley, Washington.*

### *The Edison Café*

**Trevor B. Hall**

It is almost 6 A.M. in the town of Edison, Washington, and Julie Martin's headlights are cutting through fog and darkness. Julie is the cook and owner of the Edison Café. When she pulls up behind the small, crooked, fire-engine-red building, her first customer is waiting for her. Few words are passed as she opens the doors and begins to ready the kitchen. Soon the local farmers will begin to pour in. They are tall, hearty men with weathered baseball caps or cowboy hats, earned dirt under every fingernail. Their entrance is always the same: the door creaks open; everyone looks at the new arrival, who swings around the lunch counter to the coffee machine.

"Mornin'," shouts Julie from the kitchen.

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The new arrival quietly replies: "How-do?" The regulars each grab a mug, fill it, then top off everyone else's cup. It's an unwritten rule that no one's coffee gets low or cold.

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Outside it's still pitch black, and the only light in Edison comes from the café—the fluorescent red EAT sign in the window and the dim yellow glow of the interior lights. Some mornings, there is playful banter; at times they all hold comfortable stares and listen quietly to the faux-antique, turquoise radio.

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Edison is set in Washington State's Skagit Valley, some twenty-three thousand square acres of the most plush, fertile farmland one can imagine. The valley has the look of a dark-green down comforter, creased by the water that travels down from the Cascade Mountains on its way to the Pacific Ocean. Dotting the horizon to the west are the rounded San Juan Islands. Directly to the east, the ten-thousand-foot volcanic Mount Baker stands watch (when, on occasion, the winter clouds split to allow its appearance). It is from this mountain that rainwater begins the journey down through the foothills and into the Samish River and its tributaries, creating a wetlands on this valley floor.

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The valley gives life to a wide variety of birds: waterfowl (mostly ducks), eagles, blue herons, huge flocks of sparrows, occasionally an exotic snowy egret or a mysterious Egyptian hawk. The valley is home to some of the best winter hawk-watching in the country. It is an active, lively place where nature and its doings are never far from the eye.

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Most of Skagit Valley is farmland, and Edison is one of the only towns with remnants of a main street (though Edison is no longer officially recognized by a postal zip code of its own). Established in 1869 and named after the inventor Thomas Alva Edison, the town enjoyed a heyday in the late 1880s, when it boasted three hotels, two churches, three grocery stores, a hardware store, a bank, a cheese factory, and four thirst-quenching establishments. For the most part, individually owned farms have since been pushed out by larger industry, and the logging and fishing businesses have slowed to a near standstill. The town has learned to be grateful for its two remaining bars and, of course, the Edison Café.

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*Mt. Baker's clouds over Edison, 2000*



*Early-rise breakfast, 2000*

✓ As the day progresses, the café will see three waves of customers: the early-morning farmers; the gamy, dice-wielding “shakers and rollers”; and the Edison Elementary School’s rear-window gang. 8

The first crew is mostly men (and two of their wives, Rosie and Lucille) in their fifties or sixties. They are people who have, in one way or another, worked the land of Skagit Valley: dairy farmers, potato farmers, fishermen, construction workers. The Edison Café is home for them—a combination dining room and kitchen. 9

One local asserts that while an estimated twenty-seven people have actually owned the café since its beginnings in 1944, life in the café hasn’t changed much over the years. Some of the owners have tried to fancy the place up a bit, but the changes were always met with either indifference or outright scorn by its customers. Julie understands: “It needs to be a place where people can come in with cow dung on their boots. You can’t change that.” 10

Julie is an attractive woman in her early forties, her blond hair usually pulled back for cooking—a woman who knows what people around here like, to the point that almost no one actually places a food order. Customers sit down, chat with whoever is around, and eventually some food shows up—their meal, which is a day’s selection of certain familiar possibilities: two pieces of bacon, a pancake, and a sausage; two eggs, a piece of bacon, and hash browns; an egg, two pancakes, and toast. The bill arrives on time. Everyone pays for the food (though some on mentally kept accounts), but if you’re lucky, you can drink coffee for free. 11

“They roll me double or nothin’ for the coffee,” Julie declares. With five dice, in three rolls, you must get a six, a five, a four, then the highest total of the remaining two dice wins. Those are the basic rules, but time has built many nuances into this game. Before people head out the door, they call to Julie, “Come roll me for this coffee.” Julie emerges from the kitchen, dries her hands on her white apron, straightens her shoulders, peers at her competition, and grabs the dented leather dice cup. When Julie is on one of her winning streaks, she gets her fair share of suspicious looks, but it’s part of the deal. 12

“Now, don’t you bad mouth me for that one,” she gently warns a loser as she makes way back to the griddle. 13

By about 7:30 A.M., the first wave of customers is off to work, and the dice cup has moved to the corner table, where the next wave will hit. It’s not the last Julie will see of the morning crew, though; most will return periodically throughout the day (some of them four or five times). A little bit of light comes into the valley, and Julie can step out back for a moment’s break. 14

Other than the arrival of her two waitresses—the sharp-tongued Roxy and the charming woman known as Bear—or one of Julie’s two high-school-aged daughters, the midmorning quiet lasts until about ten o’clock, when the shakers and rollers—a group of eight to ten local residents, mostly retired couples—show up, as they do every day, for The Game. The first half-hour or so is spent rolling for coffee, until someone rises to the top as the day’s winner. That person then rolls one-on-one against Julie, double or nothing, for the entire table’s coffee. Talk of the weather, the nation, and town gossip rumble through the café. Then, promptly at 10:45, the usual breakfasts are delivered for everyone. 15

The meals are the standard fare—eggs, toast, hash browns, bacon—except in the case of Peter Menth, who is in his late sixties and whose well-trimmed gray beard and black captain’s hat give him the authority of a fishing-boat captain at sea. His meal commands an equally grand respect and even has its own name on the menu: the Peter Pan Hotcake. This is no ordinary hotcake, and is surely the mark of a man who “won’t grow up.” Simply put, it is huge—so big that Peter bought his own larger-than-life plate to accommodate it—but the hotcake still falls over the sides. Julie respectfully keeps the plate in back. 16

Yet the usual stack is nothing to ignore—especially when ordered as part of the farmer’s breakfast special: two eggs, two sausage links, two strips of bacon, hash browns, and two pancakes, all for \$7.25. Many adolescent appetites have made an attempt at this one and come close—until the pancakes arrived, thudding on the counter under their own weight. 17

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In his book *Blue Highways*, William Least Heat-Moon offers that the measure of an American café can be taken by the number of calendars on its wall; five calendars earns his top rating. The Edison Café tops that by three, and I would add one twist to Least Heat-Moon’s measuring stick: if one of the calendars features pictures of tractors . . . loosen your belt. This café offers such a calendar, and a meal for two, really, all for under \$10; a customer is hard pressed to spend more than \$5, and further pressed not to leave the Edison Café teetering, completely full. Nonetheless, at noon a gang of students from the Edison Elementary School certainly tries their hand at this. (The café sits on the school’s property, always has, which is why the elementary-school students are allowed to run over for lunch.) One local, Duane, recalls the café’s presence in his life during his days as a student in the late 1940s: “I remember being beat up in this café in 1947—by my dad,” he says with a smile—then explains: “I brought a white-face bull right in the front door, did a one-eighty-degree turn with it, and headed out. They banned me for a month.” The school cafeteria food soon helped him mend his ways, and today’s students are quick to tell you that Julie’s food is an “awesome” option. 18

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The madness begins quietly enough as two of the students, Emma and Kyla, arrive before the crowds. Through good grades, they have earned the right to “work the window” and get a free lunch in exchange. Moments after their arrival, the rush is on. From the back window of the café, it looks like a mob running in panic from a fire: backpacks bouncing off of shoulders, sneakers squeaking across the wet pavement, eyes wide with anticipation. 19

“We keep them under control,” Emma says. “They give us their order, we shout it out to Julie, then we make sure everyone gets the right food. It’s not too hard, and we get a free lunch, which is great!” Julie loves her two helpers, referring to them as “my girls.” 20

This last rush is usually over by twelve-thirty; then Julie can take a well-earned rest on the bench out back. The sun is most likely to show its face about this time of the day, and she leans against the café wall, her face aimed at the warmth. One of her waitresses likely joins her, and the gossip begins. If it’s her daughter, she often prods, “Didn’t I fire you this morning for being late?” Leaning on her mom’s shoulder, the daughter shoots back, “Mom, you fire me every morning.” 21

So it has gone for years and years—a community tradition born of the need for food, comfort, and ritual. Everyday service to others is willingly and eagerly offered as a café 22



owner's privilege—a service tendered with love, not because it promotes good corporate culture or because it will bolster profits, but because these are Julie's day husbands, her shakers and rollers, her girls. The Edison Café is a town's reliable home away from home, where personal politics and pettiness must be checked at the door. From the dark, foggy mornings to the breaks of sunshine in the afternoon, Julie knows that day in and day out, for better and for worse, in Edison, Washington, she "gets 'em fed."

### Connecting to Culture and Experience: Community Social Life

You belong to several communities: your college, your neighborhood if you live off campus, perhaps a church or other spiritual community. You can see that communities are small-scale, local, and somewhat intimate, in that people at least recognize and greet each other and perhaps even talk casually. Besides these occasional brief, casual interactions, people in a community are likely to seek more substantial social interactions and look for places to find it, like the customers at the Edison Café.

Think about the communities you have belonged to or now belong to, and identify one place where you occasionally met or meet now to talk informally with others. These would be meetings, indoors or out, with two or more people you consider friends or perhaps only acquaintances. The meetings recur, at least for a few weeks. There is typically no agenda or purpose for the meeting, even though you might eat together, play cards, or watch a sports event on television. It may be scheduled, or it may occur spontaneously. There could be a different mix of people at each meeting.

With two or three other students, describe in turn this place, detailing where you meet, who typically shows up, how frequently and for how long you talk, and what you talk about. Then together explore the social meanings of these informal meetings. That is, what is your motive for meeting? What sustains your interest in meeting? What do you gain as individuals and as a group from these meetings? What do you think holds together groups like this, and what dissolves them?

### Analyzing Writing Strategies

1. A profile writer attempts to convey a **perspective** on a subject—a point of view on it, an insight into it, an idea about it, an interpretation of it, or even a judgment about its worth. This perspective can be stated or implied, and all the details and information in the profile must be consistent with this perspective. Hall states his perspective quite directly in paragraph 22. In that paragraph, underline phrases that identify the role of the Edison Café in the community. Also underline relevant phrases in paragraphs 7, 9, and 15. From these various statements, write a sentence of your own that concisely expresses your understanding of Hall's perspective on his subject.
2. Photographs seem a natural partner to the written text of a profile. Hall includes three with his text. With film or digital camera, you can create visual images to

## *The Last Stop*

Brian Cable

Let us endeavor so to live that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry.

—MARK TWAIN

Death is a subject largely ignored by the living. We don't discuss it much, not as children (when Grandpa dies, he is said to be "going away"), not as adults, not even as senior citizens. Throughout our lives, death remains intensely private. The death of a loved one can be very painful, partly because of the sense of loss but also because someone else's mortality reminds us all too vividly of our own.

Thus did I notice more than a few people avert their eyes as they walked past the dusty-pink building that houses the Goodbody Mortuaries. It looked a bit like a church—tall, with gothic arches and stained glass—and somewhat like an apartment complex—low, with many windows stamped out of red brick.

It wasn't at all what I had expected. I thought it would be more like Forest Lawn, serene with lush green lawns and meticulously groomed gardens, a place set apart from the hustle of day-to-day life. Here instead was an odd pink structure set in the middle of a business district. On top of the Goodbody Mortuaries sign was a large electric clock. "What the hell," I thought, "Mortuaries are concerned with time, too."

I was apprehensive as I climbed the stone steps to the entrance. I feared rejection or, worse, an invitation to come and stay. The door was massive, yet it swung open easily on well-oiled hinges. "Come in," said the sign. "We're always open." Inside was a cool and quiet reception room. Curtains were drawn against the outside glare, cutting the light down to a soft glow.

I found the funeral director in the main lobby, adjacent to the reception room. Like most people, I had preconceptions about what an undertaker looked like. Mr. Deaver fulfilled my expectations entirely. Tall and thin, he even had beady eyes and a bony face. A low, slanted forehead gave way to a beaked nose. His skin, scrubbed of all color, contrasted sharply with his jet black hair. He was wearing a starched white shirt, gray pants, and black shoes. Indeed, he looked like death on two legs.

He proved an amiable sort, however, and was easy to talk to. As funeral director, Mr. Deaver ("Call me Howard") was responsible for a wide range of services. Goodbody Mortuaries, upon notification of someone's death, will remove the remains from the hospital or home. They then prepare the body for viewing, whereupon features distorted by illness or accident are restored to their natural condition. The body is embalmed and then placed in a casket selected by the family of the deceased. Services are held in one of three chapels at the mortuary, and afterward the casket is placed in a "visitation room," where family and friends can pay their last respects. Goodbody also makes arrangements for the purchase of a burial site and transports the body there for burial.

All this information Howard related in a well-practiced, professional manner. It was obvious he was used to explaining the specifics of his profession. We sat alone in the lobby. His desk was bone clean, no pencils or paper, nothing—just a telephone. He did all his paperwork at home; as it turned out, he and his wife lived right upstairs. The phone rang. As he listened, he bit his lips and squeezed his Adam's apple somewhat nervously.

"I think we'll be able to get him in by Friday. No, no, the family wants him cremated."

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His tone was that of a broker conferring on the Dow Jones. Directly behind him was a sign announcing "Visa and Master Charge Welcome Here." It was tacked to the wall, right next to a crucifix.

"Some people have the idea that we are bereavement specialists, that we can handle the emotional problems which follow a death: Only a trained therapist can do that. We provide services for the dead, not counseling for the living."

Physical comfort was the one thing they did provide for the living. The lobby was modestly but comfortably furnished. There were several couches, in colors ranging from earth brown to pastel blue, and a coffee table in front of each one. On one table lay some magazines and a vase of flowers. Another supported an aquarium. Paintings of pastoral scenes hung on every wall. The lobby looked more or less like that of an old hotel. Nothing seemed to match, but it had a homey, lived-in look.

"The last time the Goodbodys decorated was in '59, I believe. It still makes people feel welcome."

And so "Goodbody" was not a name made up to attract customers but the owner's family name. The Goodbody family started the business way back in 1915. Today, they do over five hundred services a year.

"We're in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, along with another funeral home whose owners' names are Baggit and Sackit," Howard told me, without cracking a smile.

I followed him through an arched doorway into a chapel that smelled musty and old. The only illumination came from sunlight filtered through a stained glass ceiling. Ahead of us lay a casket. I could see that it contained a man dressed in a black suit. Wooden benches ran on either side of an aisle that led to the body. I got no closer. From the red roses across the dead man's chest, it was apparent that services had already been held.

"It was a large service," remarked Howard. "Look at that casket—a beautiful work of craftsmanship."

I guess it was. Death may be the great leveler, but one's coffin quickly reestablishes one's status.

We passed into a bright, fluorescent-lit "display room." Inside were thirty coffins, lids open, patiently awaiting inspection. Like new cars on the showroom floor, they gleamed with high-gloss finishes.

"We have models for every price range."

Indeed, there was a wide variety. They came in all colors and various materials. Some were little more than cloth-covered cardboard boxes, others were made of wood, and a few were made of steel, copper, or bronze. Prices started at \$400 and averaged about \$1,800. Howard motioned toward the center of the room: "The top of the line."

This was a solid bronze casket, its seams electronically welded to resist corrosion. Moisture-proof and air-tight, it could be hermetically sealed off from all outside elements. Its handles were plated with 14-karat gold. The price: a cool \$5,000.

A proper funeral remains a measure of respect for the deceased. But it is expensive. In the United States the amount spent annually on funerals is about \$2 billion. Among ceremonial expenditures, funerals are second only to weddings. As a result, practices are changing. Howard has been in this business for forty years. He remembers a time when everyone was buried. Nowadays, with burials costing \$2,000 a shot, people often opt instead for cremation—as Howard put it, "a cheap, quick, and easy

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means of disposal." In some areas of the country, the cremation rate is now over 60 percent. Observing this trend, one might wonder whether burials are becoming obsolete. Do burials serve an important role in society?

For Tim, Goodbody's licensed mortician, the answer is very definitely yes. Burials will remain in common practice, according to the slender embalmer with the disarming smile, because they allow family and friends to view the deceased. Painful as it may be, such an experience brings home the finality of death. "Something deep within us demands a confrontation with death," Tim explained. "A last look assures us that the person we loved is, indeed, gone forever."

Apparently, we also need to be assured that the body will be laid to rest in comfort and peace. The average casket, with its inner-spring mattress and pleated satin lining, is surprisingly roomy and luxurious. Perhaps such an air of comfort makes it easier for the family to give up their loved one. In addition, the burial site fixes the deceased in the survivors' memory, like a new address. Cremation provides none of these comforts.

Tim started out as a clerk in a funeral home but then studied to become a mortician. "It was a profession I could live with," he told me with a sly grin. Mortuary science might be described as a cross between pre-med and cosmetology, with courses in anatomy and embalming as well as in restorative art.

Tim let me see the preparation, or embalming, room, a white-walled chamber about the size of an operating room. Against the wall was a large sink with elbow taps and a draining board. In the center of the room stood a table with equipment for preparing the arterial-embalming fluid, which consists primarily of formaldehyde, a preservative, and phenol, a disinfectant. This mixture sanitizes and also gives better color to the skin. Facial features can then be "set" to achieve a restful expression. Missing eyes, ears, and even noses can be replaced.

I asked Tim if his job ever depressed him. He bridled at the question: "No, it doesn't depress me at all. I do what I can for people and take satisfaction in enabling relatives to see their loved ones as they were in life." He said that he felt people were becoming more aware of the public service his profession provides. Grade-school classes now visit funeral homes as often as they do police stations and museums. The mortician is no longer regarded as a minister of death.

Before leaving, I wanted to see a body up close. I thought I could be indifferent after all I had seen and heard, but I wasn't sure. Cautiously, I reached out and touched the skin. It felt cold and firm, not unlike clay. As I walked out, I felt glad to have satisfied my curiosity about dead bodies, but all too happy to let someone else handle them.

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### Connecting to Culture and Experience: Death

"Death," Cable announces in his opening sentence, "is a subject largely ignored by the living. We don't discuss it much, not as children (when Grandpa dies, he is said to be 'going away'), not as adults, not even as senior citizens." Yet when a family member dies, every family is forced to mark death in some way.