

BRING OUT YOUR DEAD

At one minute after midnight, engines started one by one, parking lot by parking lot, outside the hospitals. Tires moved slowly on the pavement, careful as if the trailers were full of cartons of eggs, bottles of costly wine, fragile glass goblets. From the windows, some stared down, curious. Others stared down, knowing.

The dead were on the move. The bodies, in their body bags, were on the way. Through darkened streets, strangely empty from the curfews, onto the interstates still occupied by supply trucks traveling from one city to the next, the dead were being taken away from the parking lots where they'd been chilled and held because there was no room. No room at the inn, no room in the morgue, no more room in the cemeteries.

Within a day or so more morgue trailers would be delivered, whence no one knew, though those who had hosed them out, disinfected them, would know what those trailers had carried, though not where the cargo ended up. In mass graves, most assumed. Somewhere out of sight, out of range of reporters and TV crews, in a vast hole in the ground, the bodies would first begin to slide, in their black shiny anonymous body bags, and then tumble over the edge and into the bottom and eventually dirt would cover them. Most imagined that, and shuddered.

Through the night, the trucks went on, and into the dawn and the next day. Some could reach their destinations quickly; others might be several days on the road, the drivers changing shifts. Some waited in vast trucking terminals, changing one cab for another, while the trailer generator growled or hummed away, keeping the contents cold.

And when it was time, the dead moved on. It meant nothing to them, where they went or ended up, what route they took. And on a bright morning--hot in some states, cool in another, cold in some, the trucks rolled to their destinations.

Not a vast hole in the ground, but houses where someone lived for whom the dead had no meaning except as numbers, someone who had agreed that these dead were permissible, less important than other numbers. One by one, the trucks arrived,

parked, blocking driveways and gates and nearly blocking some of the streets. Gates that should have been closed to them, requiring code numbers...opened, stealthily, with the help of locals. In the posh, luxurious gated communities...in the ungated but upper crust communities...on the rural farms and ranches, in the centers of cities, the morning's quiet was shattered by the rumbling engines, the squawk and squeak of brakes, the clanking of the lowered braces and the uncoupling process, the grunting and heaving, the starting of the trailer generators, loud in the quiet neighborhoods. People came to windows, twitched the curtains aside. To doors, to peek and then quickly shut them again. They saw figures in hazmat-looking gear, hooded, covered, unfurling a tarp printed with something they couldn't yet recognize over the trailer, and setting out a sign beside it in the front yard of the house it parked near.

They saw the hooded figures, in their blue or yellow or green or beige coverings, get back in the truck cab, and then the loudspeaker blared.

WE HAVE BROUGHT OUT YOUR DEAD. THE DEAD YOU KILLED. LOOK ON THEIR FACES DISPLAYED HERE. LEARN WHO THEY WERE. CARE FOR THEM IN DEATH, AS YOU DID NOT CARE IN LIFE. AND REMEMBER TO FILL THE GENERATOR GAS TANK OR THEY WILL WARM UP AND STINK.

Then the cab of each truck drove away, back the way it had come, merging with morning traffic.

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The first reaction of the homeowner or family member who saw the truck outside, blocking egress from the driveway, was of course indignation and rage. A few ran out, furious, in bathrobe and slippers; others in clothes, even a few with guns. But the sight of the crews in hazmat garb stopped them. They demanded to know what was going on; the workers merely gestured: Go back inside. Not safe. Most complied.

Some did not, came close, continued to demand and question and give orders. Ignored at first, they were eventually met with spray from a device that looked medical in some way. They backed off. They were then handed a clipboard with an attached pen. "Sign here." They did. A hazmat-garbed figure scribbled on the reverse, and handed it back to them, pointing at the house. When they looked, the paper said "You have been served with the virus. You have been exposed. You will be reported to the local health department."

Many called local police and were told that if hazmat workers were on the scene they should stay inside, all doors and windows closed, until they heard it was safe to come out. Those whose house was now obstructed had more to say.

"My husband is a Senator! This is clearly the other party's vandalism, some vicious hoax. We need police protection right now. My children will be late for school, if--"

"Madam, I can't help you. We're short-handed. You'll just have to wait until it drives away. Call the school, let them know."

Within an hour, news media were descending on truck after truck, in city after city, in state after state. State troopers stopped every tractor-trailer cab without a trailer and found drivers who had just delivered a load of cabbages to a produce terminal or mixed groceries to a big-box supermarket and were going to a train station to pick up a load of parts for a factory somewhere. No hazmat suits inside the cab, no sign of passengers, just a trucker whose taste in road food was chips and candy and chili dogs or fried chicken and mashed potatoes with gravy.

Outside one Senator's door, the TV crew waited, cameras trained on one window after the next, looking for every twitch of curtain. Inside the house, a frantic small dog yipped continually. Reporters went around to the garage, slipped into the back yard, and, getting no response to knocking, moved to a neighbor's house. The camera crew, frustrated by curtains, finally concentrated on the trailer.

The tarp covering it was covered with faces. Side by side, each with a short description beneath. Mary Ann Ferguson, age 28, second grade teacher, married, infant daughter. Breck Sanders, age 47, plumber, married, wife disabled in car wreck 7 years ago, three children ages 18, 15, 12. Bethany Sutor, age 70, widow, retired bank teller, 5 children, 8 grandchildren, 2 great-grandchildren. Juanita Ramos, age 40, widow, four children, bus driver. Face after face, name after name, covering both sides of the truck. Black, brown, white, every shade of human skin. Every occupation but elected official.

The tent-shaped sign on the lawn, its feet driven into the sacred perfect grass, included a box, initially invisible under it, with fifty copies of a paper-bound book with the photos and names of the dead inside, and a longer bio of each. Reporters took the copies, looked at them, decided which to use in their on-air report. The generator's noise was annoying, though, and they eventually backed off where they could be photographed standing with the trailer and the Senator's house in view, but they could be heard over the generator.

Inside this Senator's house, the Senator's wife lost her temper with his secretary in Washington, D.C., and screamed "There are DEAD PEOPLE outside and I don't give a fuck about

caucus meetings or important votes, I want my husband on the line NOW, you stupid bitch."

"Mom! You grounded me for two weeks for saying fuck--"

The Senator's wife whirled and pointed a manicured finger at her daughter. "Do not say another word. Upstairs, in your room, or else."

Her son, three years younger, smirked at his sister.

"You're in trouble again, Jen-i-ferrr."

"And so are you," the Senator's wife said. "To your room, now."

"I didn't do nothing. It was Jennifer said the bad word..."

"Honey," the Senator said in the earpiece. "Honey, please, settle down. Listen, you shouldn't yell at Suzi."

"There are DEAD PEOPLE in a trailer outside, we can't get out the driveway..."

"Why not? Is it blocking--"

"YES, it's blocking the driveway, that's what I said. It's one of those morgue trailers parked on OUR street, and it's on television and the neighbors--"

"Honey, it's just a publicity stunt. A hoax. The damn Democrats--"

"I KNOW it's a publicity stunt, but it's at OUR HOUSE. Across our driveway. And a yard full of reporters and camera crews and--"

"It'll be over soon, honey. Listen, Clarissa, can you call a trucking company, just have them come pick up the trailer and haul it off? We're working to arrange pickups, but it'd be quicker if you'd just call somebody in town--"

"Thank you for thinking I'm an idiot. I did call. Nobody will touch it because we don't have a license."

"A license?"

"To transport dead bodies. We don't have it. We can't hire anyone because by law--" She turned her voice into an imaginary truck company person explaining this to idiots. "By law we are required to haul such things only for those companies who have complied with federal and state laws governing the transport of morgue trailers, with prior approval of the destination site giving a window of not more than 4 hours during which said bodies shall be delivered." Her voice returned to normal. "And we don't have any of that, and they won't take them away."

Time passed. The housekeeper didn't show, but called to explain that she could not come because her granddaughter was sick. The Senator's wife went upstairs, past the closed doors of her children's bedrooms, behind which she heard their voices. Of course they were on their phones or their tablets. She glanced out the guest bedroom window from behind the sheer curtains and saw people standing on their lawn, all around the trailer, staring. Reporters. Neighbors. Strangers.

From here the faces on this side of the trailer seemed to stare back at her over the heads of the crowd, especially the top row. Were those really the faces that belonged to the dead in the trailer? Were there really dead in the trailer? Or was it, as the Senator had insisted, just a hoax? She stepped back far enough to see only that top row of faces, took the binoculars that lay on top of the guest chest of drawers, and focused on one of the faces. Black. She shuddered a little, bit her lip. Looked at the words below. Keesha, one of those Black names, but her second name was Powell. In the picture her head was turned slightly, and she was laughing. She wore a flowered blouse. Keesha Powell, age forty-nine, married, two children, biology professor. A biology professor. The Senator's wife felt surprise, and then shame. Why had she been surprised? Next to her was Jamarr Powell, age twenty-eight,

single, ER doctor. The white coat, the scrub top underneath. Her son? He could be.

Her heart stuttered. Mother and son in the same morgue trailer? Her mind made pictures of them as a family. She looked for another. Missy Jordan Carter, pouting face looking over her shoulder, a sexy pose, fluffy blonde hair pulled up to a ponytail tied with a scarf. Too much eye makeup. That bare shoulder, that skimpy spaghetti strap...skanky. Age thirty, divorced, a massage therapist and dancer. Well, then. No better than she should be, not much loss. But was hard to look at her and not see...beauty. Another man next, looked Mexican or something, and a foreign name, Ermano Quintanilla, age twenty-three, welder. Citizen? Immigrant? Welder sounded like a responsible job. Ian Foster, age 61, married, three children, four grandchildren, supermarket manager.

Her breath caught. She knew him. She shopped at that store. She'd known he'd died--a week ago, two?--but assumed of something else--a heart attack, a stroke--and that he'd had a normal funeral, had been buried in a normal cemetery. Was he really there, in that truck, in a black plastic bag like any other trash?

Her eyes filled; her stomach churned. She dropped the binoculars and hurried into the hall, across it, to the

bathroom. Wiped her face, ran cold water and wiped it again, and again. Ian Foster dead, well, that happened. Ian Foster, someone she knew, someone she'd spoken to...in that truck, in a body bag...that was more hideous. And why?

She had no answers; she smothered her sobs in a bath towel. He'd shown her a picture of the newest grandchild once, and she'd been in a hurry, had given him the Senator's wife's photo-op smile and a brief "How sweet! Congratulations!" without really listening to which of his children had birthed (if the girl) or fathered (if the boy) that grandchild. And now...now he was not just dead, but dead on her street, in front of her house, unburied. And that baby would never know grandfather Ian.

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Seven hundred miles away, another Senatorial wife recognized her hairdresser's face on the truck in front of their house. Martine Amberelli, age 35, married, mother of three, hairdresser. How did Martine end up in a morgue truck, she wondered. That must be why the phone at the shop rang and rang, and she had finally gone to another hairdresser, a heavysset woman with some kind of European accent--not French or German, but something hard to understand. Next to Martine was a youngster, a Black boy. They're so cute when they're young, she

thought automatically, and then read the text. Cooper Boynton, age 8, third grade, first prize in violin at the state competition for ages 6-10. Violin? Didn't they mean fiddle? She wondered if he played spirituals. Then an older man, blue eyes, gray hair, Olav some-name-she couldn't-say. Old people just died, why even count them?

She shrugged and turned away. This kind of stupid trick would fool some, upset some of the younger wives, but not her. People died of age; people died of disease; dead was dead. Same thing. The numbers were low, just a few percent, and mostly people who didn't matter, really. Yes, of course, every life matters, but hairdressers and Black kids and old people didn't matter much. They got sick and died all the time.

When the call came from her husband's staff to say it was all a hoax, not to worry, there weren't really dead people in the trailer, she poured herself another drink, smiling.

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Fifteen hundred miles away, on the ranch her husband had married her to get as a backdrop to his political career, so he could be photographed against the line of mountains, his arm over the saddle of a horse he never rode, another Senator's wife looked at the morgue truck parked out front and thought This is it. This is my ticket.

She went out the back door, pulling on her jacket and gloves and hat, past the stupid pool and the silly lanai her husband had built so his guests could swim and lie around not turning beet red at this altitude in the sun. Lanai. On a ranch. She went through the barn--it was a nice barn, thanks to her husband's money--and saw the ranch manager about to get in his truck, and called to him.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You see that big trailer out front?"

"Hay delivery?"

"No. Morgue truck full of bodies, it says. Blocking the drive, fence to fence. It's meant for Harvey, but of course he's in Washington. I need to use the pickup and the small horse trailer and get to town the back way; it'll take me about an hour in town so I won't be back until late. We'll get that thing moved tomorrow."

"Want me to come along?"

"No; you be here if he calls so he doesn't worry. Just tell him I'm out riding and there's no cell coverage. Which he should know by now but forgets."

He gave her a look out of those still-blue eyes. "I won't tell him any more than that. Which horse you want?"

"Bug," she said. And "I forgot something in the house; I'll be right back."

Into her office, messy as usual, and hard to search for her husband or his staff, she found the little leather sack right where it should be, between grandpa's Herd Book and daddy's. She slid that into her purse, grabbed a water bottle and packet of jerky on the way through the kitchen, and went back to the barn. Bug was already saddled and loaded in the shortest stock trailer; the ranch manager shut and latched the rear door. She held up the water bottle. "Can't believe I walked out without it. Been too long since I've ridden out. I'll leave the truck on this side of the creek."

The back road out meant going through three gates this side of the creek and two beyond, until she met the paved county road only a mile from town. The day was cool and there was a bit of haze over the mountains that said it would come cooler that night, but she had the jacket for it, and Bug liked cool weather. She'd left her cellphone in the tack room under a stack of saddle blankets; if Harvey even made it ring, no one would hear it. She felt light, like a young girl again, riding off across country without a phone, just her and a good horse.

At the bank she met the bank's VP and he opened the door for her. The bank lobby was opened for the few who needed

something the ATM didn't give--in her case, access to the safety deposit box. The bank VP opened the door to the vault, put the keys into her box, then left her alone with the light on. And there they were. The deeds. She tucked them in her purse, along with two of the ten packets of cash she'd stored in the box, closed it, pushed it back into its slot, and retrieved her key from the little door after closing it.

"Find what you wanted?" the bank VP said.

"Sure did. Thanks for opening for me."

"Like old times, you riding in on a horse."

"It's the weather. Bright cool days always make me restless." She smiled at him, a man she'd known from childhood when he was one year ahead of her in the local school. "See you another time."

She took Bug around behind the small grocery where there was an outdoor faucet and gave him water in the collapsible bucket in one saddlebag, then poured a little feed on the ground from a sack in the other. Inside, she bought an apple for Bug, a soda and a bear claw with cream cheese for herself, and came out in time to see the dark blue car turn into the back lot. A window lowered and her lawyer looked out.

"Is it about that political stunt with morgue trailers?"

"Part of it. One's sitting at my door at this moment. I want a divorce and I want the ranch. I've got the deeds. He's got the pre-nup. Remember those exceptions you put in?"

"Of course. You're thinking this fulfils number four?"

"And six."

"Maybe six. Four for sure. There's quite a storm brewing over this on the east coast. Started there well before here." He coughed, but carefully, into the car. "Can you get the truck out to the road?"

"Oh, yeah. And to his office in the state capital he's so proud of." The lawyer's brows went up but he didn't say anything. "I'd better start back. You'll want this." She opened her purse and handed him an envelope. "Retainer, so we're all fair and square, aren't we?"

"We are. Nice doin' bidness with you."

Bug ate the apple while she ate the bear claw and some jerky, then she mounted for the trip back. It was a wonderful feeling. Though the dead people...she did feel bad about that. The wrong people were dead. Her mood darkened as the skim of clouds thickened. The dead had done nothing to deserve it but catch a virus particle in the wrong place. But some people,

Harvey among them, had set it up, had refused to do anything to stop it.

When she'd ridden across the creek and up the slope to the bluff, loaded Bug in the trailer, and turned for home, her mood brightened again. The truck cab warmed up quickly. Her ranch manager was there to help her unload and untack Bug; she unpacked the saddle bags and took them into the tack room, sliding her cellphone out from between the blankets and into her pocket. It blinked balefully: messages waiting. Harvey, of course. Or his PA. Didn't matter.

When she turned on the satellite TV for the evening news, the fix had already gone in: it was a hoax, a cruel, despicable hoax, by the opposition. There weren't really bodies in those trailers, and the President had activated National Guards in all the affected states to clear them away. The faces on the tarps weren't real people but faked composites created by computers.

The phone call came at 8:25. The machine answered, than she heard a woman's voice, a little shaky. "This is Clarissa," she said, and the Senator's wife started to say something but the woman spoke over her. "I'm a Senator's wife, like you." She gave the name. "Did you--did you have a truck come to your house?"

"Yes."

"They say it's a hoax but--" Her voice broke and then she went on. "My husband said it was a hoax. I tried to tell him I knew one of them but he said no, the pictures were fake people, but I knew--the name, the face, it was someone I knew, from the grocery store. The manager. He said I should call the doctor, take a tranquilizer." A gulp, a silence the woman at the ranch dared not break. "It's not a hoax," she said, in a small voice.

"You're right, it's not a hoax."

"Thank God you believe me. I mean I haven't looked inside of course but...but I'm sure, the man in the picture, the name and everything, that's him, the manager."

She couldn't remember where Clarissa's husband was from, the state for which he was Senator. "Are you safe?" she asked. "Is your husband home?"

"No. He's in Washington. That's about six hours drive. Isn't yours?"

"Yes." Unless, upset by her being unreachable by phone, he'd borrowed someone's plane and was on the way back. She hadn't thought of that.

"I don't know what to do," Clarissa said in the phone. "He told me to stay here, and he'd be sure the National Guard came tomorrow but to calm down."

"I think you should leave," she heard herself say. And then more strongly. "You need to be somewhere safe. They're lying about this, and they'll want us to pretend it didn't happen."

To her surprise Clarissa didn't refuse immediately. "You mean leave home now?"

"Now." She'd done this before, back before the marriage, working in the county shelter. "Do you have your ID? Some money?"

"Yes...but the children? And I can't drive, that truck's blocking the driveway. Jennifer's thirteen, and my son's eleven."

Old enough to walk a distance. The old skills came back; her voice stayed steady, calm, gave information, gave choices. Cab or public transportation? Hotel or shelter? Thinking, thinking, all the time, how many and where and who else might call. Finally Clarissa thanked her and hung up.

It would be almost dark there; it was still light enough here to see that Ron hadn't gone home yet; he'd have to drive through the pasture, bypassing the morgue trailer, and through two gates to reach his own house. She fixed supper for herself and ate it.

After dark, she went outside, into the noise of the compressor, to the back of the trailer. The latch was simple, the lock on it slightly open. They wanted her to check.

She went back in the house and got the good camera, the tripod, and a sturdy ladder. The other Senators' wives she'd met on that one trip to Washington didn't strike her as women who'd open the back of a morgue trailer and find out if there were really bodies in it, but she'd seen dead people before. Her mother, in the hospital. Her dad here at home. She put her hand on the door. Cold, but it was getting to be a cold night. She climbed up and took hold of the latch, tugged. It swung out; she climbed down and pushed the button on the camera. The flash reflected from the shiny black plastic bags.

She called the ranch manager and got his wife, Sherry. "Sorry," she said. "Did he tell you about that trailer thing?"

"TV said it was a hoax," Sherry said.

"I don't think so. I want you to come up here tomorrow morning early; it's unlocked and I'm going to open it, take pictures. I want you as witnesses."

"I--I can't! And the children!"

"Did you let them go to the viewing for your grandpa?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"It's the same thing, Sherry. If it's what I think, these are, these were people just like him. Their families aren't here and the government's been taking bodies and throwing them in pits without the families getting to say goodbye. And nobody's here for them but us. We need to witness it. If I do it by myself, Harold will claim I faked it. Everybody in the county knows you and Ron are straight arrows. And the kids. You can leave Tilly and Jack in the house, but Tucker and Cheyanne are old enough."

"How long will that thing stay there?"

"I'll start for the state capital as soon as I have the pictures safely on their way."

"You? Alone? How--" Sherry took an audible breath. "The show truck?"

"Yep. I can back it around--Ron can help with the backhoe hooked to the back end."

"We'll lose our jobs," Sherry said, "and Harvey will never forgive you."

"I won't forgive him," she said. "Tell Ron seven, OK?"

"I will," Sherry said, and then Ron's voice behind her, "Who's on the phone?" and she must have held it out because next it was Ron in her ear.

She repeated what she'd told Sherry. "It's dangerous," Ron said.

"A little, but not much. I filed for divorce today. I'm getting the ranch."

"That pre-nup you said was unbreakable?"

"There were exceptions. He's violated one of them for sure, and maybe another."

"That's why you went to town the back way, 'stead of taking the Jeep out through the pastures--"

Ron had always been smart. Sherry not so much, but a good wife for him, and a good mother to their children. She was happy for Ron, in the long run. "Yes," she said. "And I'm taking the trailer to his office in the state capital and parking it there, and then I'll unhook and drive the cab home."

"You'll need help," he said. "It's a long trip." It was offer and invitation both. And then, "Did you look already?"

"It's too tough a trip for Sherry and the kids," she said, not answering.

"We could drop the kids off at her mom's."

"That'll work." She would need the help; she could drive the big truck, but unhooking it was a two person job. "See you in the morning."

They were in their house, out of sight of hers. She went back out with a pinlight and lit each face on the tarp individually. Read the texts. Went inside again, found the sage bundles she kept wrapped behind the luggage in her big walk-in closet, brought one out and lit it. The smoke smelled of the wild wind, the mountains, the pastures: healthy, vibrant with spirit. She walked around the trailer singing softly what she could remember and letting the smoke make a faint, temporary cloud in the dim light from the house windows. Someone cares, she thought at them, trying to believe their spirits would know. Someone who cares is here.

She slept better than she'd expected to, and woke early as usual. She wasn't sleeping in the master suite; she never did unless Harvey was there. Her feet came down on bare wood, cold and smooth, instead of the carpet overlain with fur. Never again sang in her heart. Never again. She hesitated before dressing: the ranch chic Harvey wanted her to wear when he brought his political friends to the ranch? Or the real ranch clothes? Well, wasn't this a real situation? With real dead people? She dressed for the cold of the first half the trip,

what she'd have worn right here. Then out to the kitchen, for the breakfast that would carry her through the day. The phone rang once, then after a gap rang again. She answered on the third ring, as arranged. It was Clarissa.

"He's really angry," Clarissa said. "I called a TV station last night from a convenience store. Told them the trucks were full of bodies. Told them to go look. Now he's told the police I'm a fugitive, that I've stolen the children."

"Are you safe?"

"I'm at a Day's Inn. There's an Amber Alert out, using my car's license number even though I told him I couldn't get the car out. It's still sitting in the driveway, blocked in." Clarissa's voice lowered. "I made the kids leave their cellphones behind. I'm going to the thing you told me about. And I'm using the room phone."

"You be careful. It's going to get wild. I'm about to get pictures of mine. Inside. I'm sorry, I've got to go; people coming here."

She heard Ron's car coming up from below, and then his and Sherry's voices, ringing clear through the cold air, and stomping feet on the porch.

"The kids are already at my mom's," Sherry said. "That thing looks awful."

"I'm going to hay the stock in the barn, if you haven't, then disable the GPS on the truck cab," Ron said. "Make sure it's full of gas, bring it around, and then what?"

"The pictures," she said. "Then we leave." She took a dozen: the trailer in front of the house, from several angles, hard to fake. The trailer doors, open, showing the stacked body bags, Ron's and Sherry's shocked faces. And finally, sending Sherry to the house, she opened one bag to show the face of the corpse inside. Then she sent three images to the news department of all three stations in the state capital: the truck and house, the stacked corpses and shocked expressions, and the face inside the bag. She shut the doors, latched them, but left the lock hanging in the latch, as she'd found it. When Ron and Sherry returned, the trailer was ready for hookup.

It was still only six AM when they drove away, early sun bright on the logo on the cab: S.J. Harvey Performance Horses. She expected they'd be stopped when they got on the Interstate. She saw state troopers' cars here and there but they didn't pursue. Her cellphone rang; she looked at it--Harvey. She put it back in its charger. Ron's rang; he looked at her; she

shrugged. He turned it off, shoved it in his pocket. "He's riled up."

"I can imagine." She could. He hated not being in control of everything, and now his wife, his 'hand' as he called Ron, and his big truck were all off his radar. They reached the outskirts of the state capital; traffic thickened. She eased the rig onto the off-ramp and into the streets. Sherry, who'd been listening to the radio through earbuds, said "You gotta hear this," and turned the volume up.

"Police say the car is still in the drive, the house empty and unlocked, with a dog shut into the kitchen. The doors of the morgue trailer are open...there's a police cordon around the neighborhood, and the word is there are body bags inside the trailer. There's a leak from Channel Ten that one of their reporters was told not to air what they learned yesterday: those faces on the trucks *are* real people, their deaths from the virus confirmed by family members. We've also had a report from Dallas that another trailer has been found and opened...bodies stacked inside. Federal sources still say it's a hoax, but--"

She felt the grin stretching her face. That had to be Clarissa. Up ahead she saw flashing lights, between her and the building where Harvey had his office. Two local police cars pulled out in front of her and an officer on foot signaled. She

stopped, lowered the window. "You're the Senator's wife, right? No problems on the trip? Good. They'll show you where to park. Got it cleared for you."

The block-long parking space was right in front of the bank building; a row of people stood on the sidewalk, clapping. Across the street, trucks from each local station, crews ready.

"Didn't expect this," she said to Ron. "Thought we'd have trouble. Bless that Clarissa back east; she's got way more guts than I thought she had."

She stopped the truck, put the parking brakes on, and opened the door. Lights flared as the reporters came across the street, cameramen with them. Well, she'd asked for it. She clambered down, aware that she was not the half-glam Senator's wife in ranch chic, but a graying and weathered ranch woman. Ron and Shelly got out the other side, and she nodded at the camera and microphones but said nothing, walking steadily, though her knees felt shaky, to the back of the trailer. Ron turned the corner when she did. Shelly came forward with him, and the three of them slowly, ceremoniously, took off the hanging lock, pushed up the latch, and pulled the doors open. Cameras pushed forward; those on the sidewalk did the same. There were the black bags, and the one she'd opened, the face as dead as ever.

Harvey's office manager and the bank president pushed through together. "What do you think you're--Miz--uh--"

"Delivery for Harvey," she said, handing them one of the books that had come with the trailer. "His choice; his mess." She turned to the cameras and the others. "Respect these dead. People like you, like me. Learn their stories. Remember them. And let's all make better choices."

She walked back to the cab; the crowd parted before her. Ron was there already. "I'll drive," he said softly. He helped her up, then, and she moved across and back to the second seat, sat there empty of everything but grief and exhaustion. Sherry, climbing into the passenger seat with a paper bag, handed her a cup of coffee and a cinnamon roll. "Ron's got it taken care of. We'll be on our way soon." She handed back tissues from her purse. "You just rest." Sherry opened her door and climbed back down.

Halfway through the coffee, the Senator's wife thought to turn on the radio.

"--both houses of Congress. Eighteen more trailers have been reported by wives and neighbors to be full of bodies--"

Someone thumped on door beside her. She lowered that window. A young trooper, pink-faced, eyes glistening, said

"Ma'am, I just had to speak to you--my father's in here. You brought him, ma'am. They wouldn't let us, and now--we can know."

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I wish it could've been another way."

#

Clarissa, in a shelter in the heartland, sat watching TV with others in crisis. The other women knew who she was now, and watched her as much as the TV. She didn't know what she was going to do, but she knew what she had done was right.

#

In a fine white mansion on the East Coast, another Senator's wife poured the last pills in the bottle into her hand and chugged them down with the last wine in the other bottle. She didn't think anyone would come to find her until she was dead. She didn't think anyone would care. Dead was dead.

#

In a sprawling house on the West Coast, a Senator's husband listened to her apologies and excuses, saying nothing, while packing a suitcase. When she ran down, he said "I have a business trip. We can talk later." As in never, he thought, remembering his brother's wife's face on the side of the trailer

that had parked in front of their house. When he walked out, he left his wedding ring on her dressing table with a note. "I can't even."

#

And someone wrote new words to an old hymn, and crowds sang it for the weeks it took to end the rotten regime. "Bring out your dead, there is no need for shame. Show every face and let us hear each name. Better to know, how many we have lost...than lie and say that no such deaths have cost..."

The End