

P R O L O G U E



A rare sunny morning comes to Colma.

The sky brightens over San Bruno Mountain, bruised blues giving way to baby-cheek pinks and teases of gold. Navigation lights blink, red and resolute, atop the radio towers that scar the broad, rambling summit. Sunlight creeps across the green valley in which Colma is nestled, wicking away the dew from the lawns of the city's residents.

Twelve hundred of these residents are alive. They do what living people do: work jobs, sweat on treadmills, make love, incur debt, celebrate birthdays, worry about aging, watch prime-time TV, pray, complain about the weather. Another two million of these residents are already dead. No one knows for sure what they do—if they do anything but lie mute, immobile, decaying—but some of the living have their suspicions.

As the sun makes its way across the valley, it shines first on the Cypress Golf Course. Underneath these seventeen acres of Bermuda grass and fescue is the potter's field where the beggars of cobblestoned San Francisco were buried in numbered graves and forgotten. Four golfers in primary-colored windbreakers take practice swings on the first tee, whipping metal-gleam arcs through the crisp morning air. A greenskeeper backs a long-bed golf cart out of the maintenance shed, and a lone golden-crowned sparrow answers the cart's reverse-warning beeps with a plaintive, unrequited song.

The first golfer tees up his ball and takes his stance with the light morning

wind luffing his nylon sleeves. As he swings, his plastic spikes slip in the wet tee box, and he slices the ball dead right, a line drive into the pine trees and scrub. He mutters a curse, blaming himself for his first-tee jitters, but then the ball thwacks against something in the woods and caroms out, skidding ahead on the slick grass and rolling to a stop in the center of the fairway, just a choked-down 8-iron away from the green. He turns and grins as his friends moan their disbelief. *Lucky sonofabitch. Somebody's looking out for you today.* And they continue their round: nine holes, played twice. It never occurs to him that the brownish scuff on his ball did not come from a tree or a rock or a log, but from a misshapen human skull coughed up by the shifting earth of the fault-lined valley.

The glow of morning spreads over the easternmost cemeteries of Colma: Olivet Memorial Park; the Serbian Cemetery; Pet's Rest; and the two Chinese cemeteries, Hoy Sun Memorial and Golden Hills.

Across Hillside Boulevard.

Nocturnal gamblers emerge from the front doors of the Lucky Chances 24-Hour card house, slack and pale as fish in a bucket; they rub their eyes in the morning light, then collapse into their cars and drive away. All of them—the winners, the losers, the breakers—even—will be gnawed at by the *if onlys* until the next time they rest their elbows on the soft green baize and ante up.

The day advances into Holy Cross Cemetery, Colma's oldest, a former potato field blessed in 1892 as a Catholic cemetery to serve San Francisco. Skyrocketing land values had convinced city dwellers that death was best dealt with elsewhere, and it was roundly agreed that a ten-mile trip southward was not an onerous journey for the dead to make—a mere step or two, in fact, compared to the great voyages on which their souls had already embarked.

The sun rises higher. Cypress Lawn East. Hills of Eternity. Eternal Home. Home of Peace. Salem Cemetery. The Italian Cemetery. The Japanese Benevolent Society Cemetery.

Lawn mowers sputter and cough out puffs of blue exhaust, then rumble to life and prowl the gentle slopes of the graveyards. In the lots of the car dealerships that clot Serramonte Boulevard, beads of dew glimmer on the polished

hoods and roofs and trunks, while strings of red, white, and blue plastic pennants flick in the breeze, hopeful as America.

Across El Camino Real.

The overnight clerk at the Zes-T-Mart prepares to go home. He is a heavily tattooed young man whose pierced ear and nose are connected by a length of steel chain, and he wears the afternoon-shift girl's name tag because he likes to head-fuck naive customers into wondering if his name really might be Mindy. He notices that, once again, several cartons of Chesterfields have vanished on his watch. He blames their disappearance on ghosts. He will never inform his manager of his suspicions, and he will never ask to see the surveillance tape to test his theory. This coming afternoon, though, he will crawl out of bed and join his four roommates around the house bong (a complicated maze of Habitrail tubes that once housed a gerbil named Happy), and, while watching smoke plumes rise from the mouthpiece, he will dreamily remark, "Dudes. When we die, we'll all smoke Chesterfields." And although his friends will burst out laughing, thinking it's just stony talk, he'll find himself happy to believe in ghosts who jones for nicotine and remain brand-loyal. It's the one belief he has that is unique and private, and thus absolutely unassailable.

The sun.

Across Cypress Lawn West, the Greek Orthodox Cemetery, Greenlawn Memorial Park, and, finally, Woodlawn Memorial Park.

The day rolls by, and one hundred twenty-two people are interred in Colma, this self-described "city-cemetery complex." Mourners lift their eyes skyward as jets taking off from SFO thunder overhead, drowning out somber-voiced pieties and whispered farewells. Solitary and rickety white-haired people struggle up the muddy incline at Pet's Rest to lay wreaths for departed cats, dogs, bunnies, goats, horses, ocelots. Four mortuaries, ten florists, and eight monument carvers within the city limits are open for business, ensuring that the dead are admirably furnished. One proprietor reminds a new employee to speak slowly and with pleasant, reassuring words when asking for

customers' credit cards, and instructs her to up-sell only the lost, the desperate, the bewildered, the afraid, the stoic, the defeated, and the accepting. "Never the angry," he says. "It's best to avoid a scene."

At the end of the day, the fog sweeps into Colma, a cold Pacific breath that flumes over the coastal hills. It hunkers down for the night, thick and mist-filled, alive with visible eddies and chutes that are swept by the chilled wind. Night-shift police officers reporting to the station zip their Tuffy jackets against the cold and pin their badges to the outside. Through the night, they patrol the quiet streets, wait for intoxicated drivers leaving Molloy's to cross the center line on Old Mission Road. They intervene in a domestic dispute on Spindrift Lane, thwart lumber thieves loading a pickup behind the home-improvement warehouse, break up a fight at the movie theater. They run passing checks through the cemeteries and sweep their spotlights over the fields of granite and marble, chasing away copulating kids, who dart like sprites into the shadows behind mausoleums and obelisks and weeping angels, struggling to hitch up their pants or just running bare-assed with their bundled clothes in their arms and their exposed skin shining ghost-white.

The next morning, one of these officers—Wesley Featherstone, a twenty-seven-year veteran—will not report back to the station. His Crown Victoria will be parked underneath the grand stone archway that leads into Cypress Lawn East, the driver's door ajar and the alert tone pinging softly. Sergeant Featherstone will be slumped behind the wheel of the cruiser, one hand reaching toward the radio, the other clamped over his mouth. His eyes will be wide and panicked. A lock of his thin hair—once red, long since turned peachy gray—will dangle from his temple, hanging all the way to his chin.

Featherstone will be dead of cardiac arrest.

Four dead men will sit atop the archway and pass a jug of daisy-petal pruno to toast their success. One of them will take a deep swig, dribbling onto his powder-blue tuxedo jacket, then hand the bottle to a hard-looking man with bloody fingertips, who will push him off their perch. The man in the tux will slam facedown on the pavement, inches away from the cruiser's front bumper. He will yelp and howl and curse the persistence of gravity even as his shattered bones begin knitting themselves together again, as ghost bones do.

The rest of the gang will shinny down to the ground, and all four of them, laughing and swaying drunkenly, will gather around the car for a final round of taunting the sergeant's corpse. Then they will stagger off to catch some rest. Even the dead need a little shut-eye sometimes.

A twenty-year-old Salvadoran landscaper reporting early for his first day on the job will hop out of a pickup truck, slap a good-bye on the quarterpanel, and wave as his cousin drives away. As he passes under the archway, he will glance into the cruiser's windshield and discover the corpse. This will be his first up-close glimpse of death, of an empty, defeated body, and as soon as he is able to unlock his legs, he will sprint down El Camino, get on the first bus he sees, and head out of town, anywhere, he won't care. He will stare vacantly out a knife-scratched window as the bus rumbles through the foggy morning. The young man's name is Ángel María de Todos los Santos, and he will forever be haunted by the pop-eyed look of terror on Featherstone's face. He will come to dread the hour of his own death even more acutely, forever robbed of the ability to believe that God helps souls pass gently. He will not appear in this story again.