

Dressing the Dead

Category: Nursing

written by Stacy Nigliazzo | January 24, 2026

What's he wearing? An odd thing to ask about a dead man.

Nurses hear everything. I think I've heard it all, but I haven't, even after more than two decades at the bedside.

Ash was sixty-nine years old. His mother, Ashley, who was named for her father (Ash's grandfather), is eighty-six. She was working when Ash died, braiding hair at the mall, a temporary job to cover his deductible. She called to check in mid-shift, whimpered softly when we told her, then asked about his clothes.

He was wearing a hospital gown, I reply. And I'm deeply sorry for your loss. I've been chided more than once for saying "I'm sorry" after someone dies. It implies guilt. I say it anyway.

She calls back to say I've found a place. It's five hundred dollars, without a viewing. I think I can cover that, but not the extra fee to dress him. I know you think I'm crazy. I just washed his favorite shirt. I need to put it on him—he can't go through the fire in a hospital gown.

I'm not crazy.

I think of my grandpa. I was ten years old, asleep in a rollout cot beside his bed when he died. He was wearing boxers and an undershirt. Ghosts rarely change their clothes in books or on film. I wonder if he's bound to his pajamas in the afterlife, or that suit from the back of the closet he was buried in.

I tell Ashley, morgue visitors are not allowed; patient privacy, infection control. I don't tell her about the shrieking steel doors, or about the reek of rotting meat and apples—how it sticks in your hair.

You're not crazy, I also say. And I'll do it.

She arrives within the hour, cradling a frayed Houston Oilers t-shirt and a pair of socks, because his feet get cold.

The morgue assistant pulls the drawer and we raise him up. Ash, your mom loves you, I declare. His shirt smells of Bounce and Marlboros. Even through two set of gloves, it's soft. The socks are new, but also washed and Bounced. They fit snugly over old skin grafts on his ankles, beneath a bulldog tattoo.

I remember my first hospital death. He was Ashley's age, transported in cardiac arrest from a nursing home. The ER doc pronounced him upon arrival and called his family. We changed his brief, covered him in a cloud of sheets with mitered corners tucked in at the foot of his gurney. Dimmed the lights.

Leave one hand out in case someone wants to hold it—and someone always wants to hold it, my preceptor, Jester, instructed, soaking his mottled fingers in warm saline and peroxide, scraping the dirt from under his nails.

We held him in the ward for two hours. No one came.

I leave the morgue and notice nine missed calls. Before returning them, I tell Ashley it's done.

She thanks me.

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