

THE UNDERTAKERS CLUB

By Con Chapman

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CHARACTERS

- ROWAN WILKINSON** A normal teen-aged boy who just happens to have a desire to become a funeral director. The spiritual and intellectual leader of The Undertakers Club and the one who gives the others their direction.
- BOBBY LAZAR** ROWAN's sidekick and original partner in the crime of hanging around school after hours to conduct their mock rites. While less knowledgeable than ROWAN, he is a steadying influence on ROWAN's wilder flights of fancy.
- BETTINA KNAPP** A budding actress who didn't fit in with the school's theatrical troupe, and who has a found a sympathetic outlet for her talents in The Undertakers Club. Resists the discipline that CAROLINE brings to the group, but begins to find herself in the regimen that is imposed on the group's activities, helping to organize a fund-raising dance that unfortunately falls flat.
- JENNY COLLINS** A girl who doesn't make friends easily, a fact made plain by her reaction to BETTINA's death. She joins the group as a lark and initially resents the rigor that CAROLINE requires of her, but like BETTINA she eventually responds in a favorable way to the changes that adult supervision bring to the club.
- TONY** A diffident boy whose inability to achieve recognition by any other means leads him to pursue the role of cadaver in the club's funerals, as if it brought with it the status of quarterback on the school football team. As the play develops, it becomes apparent that TONY's interest in the club may be founded on a death wish, and the death of BETTINA causes him to re-examine the attraction that he feels for the peace of the grave.

CAROLINE UNGER	A new teacher at the school, she accepts the invitation to become faculty advisor to the Undertakers Club in part out of her naïveté, but also because she finds the group's members interesting. She requires the students to take their interest seriously, and channels their youthful energy into productive labor. Her efforts transform the students from giddy adolescents into young adults who are capable of hard work and mature emotions.
PHOTOGRAPHER	Can be either a teen or an adult; can be doubled with the JANITOR.
JANITOR	Should be played by an adult, can be doubled with the PHOTOGRAPHER.

COSTUMES & SETS

No costumes. BETTINA and JENNY should be dressed as somewhat disaffected teens would dress in the present, given the locale in which the play is performed (e.g., black outfits or neo-hippy garb). ROWAN and BOBBY are serious young pre-professionals, and could be expected to dress less casually than their classmates—corduroy blazers, ties in the scene in which ROWAN leads the school assembly following BETTINA's death. TONY is a bit of a loner and an outcast; he should dress as a high school misfit or social outcast would. MS. UNGER should be clothed in outfits appropriate to her standing as a young faculty member. A loose-fitting floral print dress and comfortable shoes, for example, would be consistent with her character.

Sets: The entire play can be staged on a simple set with one door placed upstage left or right. Four or five desk chairs of the type usually found in a high school are needed for the scenes in which the students are in the classroom. A bench of the type used on the sidelines of a basketball game is needed for those scenes in which the students perform a mock funeral. Two candles are needed for the scene in which MS. UNGER plays the deceased, and a table with a bowl of candy may be added to the scene of the high school dance.

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At Rise: The lights reveal TONY reclining on a backless bench of the type found on the sidelines of a basketball game, his feet towards the audience. There is an unlit candle on either side of the bench, preferably on a tall, floor-length candlestick or a table-size candlestick resting on a small table so that when lit the flames will glow slightly beneath the eyes of the players who will walk on stage. TONY's hands are clasped across his chest and HE is trying, with limited success, to remain motionless as HE periodically bats at a flying insect that is apparently trying to land on his nose. After a minute or so of this business, the fly relents and the boy rests in peace. ROWAN and BOBBY then enter, one from each side of the stage, and each solemnly lights the candle on his side of the reclining boy. They position themselves to take a better look at the face of mock corpse, examine it with a studious air and then, after nodding in satisfaction to each other, ROWAN turns to the audience and begins to speak.

ROWAN: Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

BOBBY: May the Lord be with you...

ROWAN: And with your spirit.

BOBBY: Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to pay our last respects to Newton B. Minnow, beloved son and brother, devoted husband and father, friend to many.

(TONY begins to twitch as the fly returns to bother him.)

ROWAN: We take the measure of a man not by the things he acquires, but by the lives he touches, and by this measure, Newton Minnow was quite a man.

(TONY rubs his nose, settles himself, and appears at peace again.)

BOBBY: ***(begins to notice the disruption of TONY's repose)*** A man for all seasons, who in the autumn of his years, fell from the tree of life like a ripe crabapple.

ROWAN: ***(to BOBBY)*** That last line was a bit overripe itself.

BOBBY: I was distracted. ***(nods toward TONY)***

ROWAN: Carry on, man.

BOBBY: How can I carry on when I don't have a quality corpse to work with?

ROWAN: **(to TONY)** Tony, do you think you can suck it up and play dead like you mean it, or do we need to let somebody else have a turn?

TONY: **(without losing the aspect of a corpse)** Don't do that - please. I've worked hard to get where I am!

ROWAN: Then let's see a little strength in the face of adversity. Nobody ever said it would be easy being dead.

TONY: **(still lying motionless, eyes closed, arms crossed on chest)** All right. But see if you can get that fly.

ROWAN: We will do the best we can to insure that the afterlife is pleasant for you. **(takes the program from which HE has been reading and rolls it up into an extemporaneous fly swatter; to BOBBY)** Carry on.

BOBBY: **(to ROWAN, with a dignified air)** Thank you. **(to TONY)** I trust there will be no further interruptions from the deceased. **(resuming, in a solemn tone, his elegy)** Our time here is short but, like the ripples on the surface of a pond when we cast a stone upon the waters, our deeds radiate outwards until they touch a distant shore.

ROWAN: **(to BOBBY)** Thank you for those words of inspiration and comfort. **(broadly, to the audience)** If anyone would like to approach the departed to say a final farewell, they may do so at this time.

(HE withdraws to the side with BOBBY, and they begin to murmur quietly to each other as BETTINA and JENNY rise from their seats in the audience, walk up onto the stage and begin to file past TONY. BETTINA and JENNY are dressed in black, which is the style they adopt to express their gothic, bohemian sensibility, but which is also appropriate for their play-acting as mourners.)

BETTINA: **(with the air of an old woman)** My, my; he sure looks natural.

JENNY: They did a real good job on him.

(TONY's nose begins to twitch and HE moves his hand to his face to scratch it.)

BETTINA: **(to ROWAN)** Excuse me? Mr. Funeral Director?

ROWAN: Yes?

BETTINA: There seems to be a problem here.

JENNY: Good Lord! He's alive!

ROWAN: Tony!

JENNY: The dead have risen!

BETTINA: Honestly, Rowan. I think you're playing favorites. Jenny and I could do much better than that!

JENNY: **(in an ecstatic tone)** He's alive!

TONY: **(still lying stiffly)** I have seniority.

BETTINA: Big deal - in the cadaver business you've got to produce every day.

TONY: **(to ROWAN)** Rowan - it was a fly. Honest.

BOBBY: **(as HE approaches the bench)** The fly's long gone, Tony.

BETTINA: Ain't no flies on that...

ROWAN: Please. Try to maintain a sense of decorum. **(to TONY)** I'm sorry, Tony, but I'm going to have to demote you to mourner.

TONY: **(in a pleading tone, but still maintaining his comatose character)** Come on - it was just a little slip.

BOBBY: I'm sorry, but we must maintain the highest standards of our profession. We do not accept corpses that cannot remain motionless during the entire funeral ceremony.

TONY: **(upset)** Bobby, please. It's the first time this has happened.

ROWAN: What about the burp?

TONY: What burp?

ROWAN: I believe you belched during my elegy last week.

TONY: **(sits up for the first time and thinking for a minute)** They served chili in the cafeteria that day.

BOBBY: Even worse.

TONY: **(begging now)** Rowan?

ROWAN: **(in the monotone voice of a game show announcer)** The decisions of the judges are final. Relatives and employees of the Robert & Rowan Funeral Home are ineligible to participate. **(assumes the voice of his character again)** I believe the next in line to die is... Jenny.

JENNY: All right! **(turns to hug BETTINA, give her a high five or otherwise indicate her excitement.)**

BETTINA: Congratulations! **(to ROWAN)** Does Tony move to the bottom of the list now?

ROWAN: **(quietly, so that TONY who is sitting up now cannot hear him)** He's on probation. If you surpass him in terms of gravity and composure in the meantime, you would become the heiress apparent.

BETTINA: **(genuinely grateful)** Thank you. **(helpfully)** Shall we resume the ceremony?

ROWAN: **(with a dignified air)** Certainly. **(approaches TONY)** Time to move to your eternal reward, pal.

TONY: **(as HE gets up)** I don't deserve this.

(As JENNY moves to take his place, there is a knock on a door frame at the edge of the stage.)

MS. UNGER: Excuse me? I have this room reserved to grade papers.

BOBBY: Oh, hi Ms. Unger. Sorry - we're done.

MS. UNGER: Thank you. **(begins to spread her papers out on a desk; smiling)** What group is this?

ROWAN: This is... uh... nothing really. We're just fooling around.

MS. UNGER: **(still pleasant, with a note of firmness)** If you're just fooling around you're not supposed to be on school grounds.

BOBBY: We're uh... not an official group.

MS. UNGER: **(a little suspiciously)** Oh. Okay. Well, I'm going to get to work if you don't mind.

ROWAN: Sure. Thanks. No problem.

(The boys and girls walk off as MS. UNGER appears to settle into her work, but SHE glances at them as they walk out with a skeptical eye. The lights go down, and when they come back up ROWAN and BOBBY are sitting together on the bench, elbows on knees, chins resting in their hands.)

ROWAN: **(after a few moments)** What time have you got?

BOBBY: Three.

ROWAN: **(with impatience as HE looks offstage)** Are we going to do something today or not?

BOBBY: Don't know. I can't stay long anyway. I've got algebra homework.

ROWAN: Wuss.

BOBBY: Lots of it.

ROWAN: Wimp. **(silent for a moment)** You know...it really is sort of a mystery.

BOBBY: What?

ROWAN: How people actually show up to listen to what we say and do what they're told.

BOBBY: **(considers this)** Yeah.

ROWAN: I mean, let's face it. There's nothing about you or me that would lead a casual observer to think we have some sort of hypnotic power over people.

BOBBY: **(with mock umbrage)** Speak for yourself.

ROWAN: **(in a contemplative tone)** We both gave up football after about a week.

BOBBY: True.

ROWAN: You quit guitar lessons and I sold my drums.

BOBBY: **(with affected precision)** That is correct.

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ROWAN: I can't skateboard.

BOBBY: Me neither.

ROWAN: We're not gonna make the Honor Roll unless someone kidnaps the entire National Honor Society.

BOBBY: Now there's a thought.

ROWAN: It ain't gonna happen.

BOBBY: Why not?

ROWAN: Did you see their yearbook picture?

BOBBY: Right, right.

ROWAN: I don't see Rebecca Maynard batting her eyelashes at you or me in the halls.

BOBBY: Don't rub it in.

ROWAN: And yet every week, we somehow or other attract people to our little... uh... ceremonies.

BOBBY: That is a conundrum.

ROWAN: A what?

BOBBY: A puzzle... a mystery.

ROWAN: Right. Yeah. Anyway, I don't understand it.

BOBBY: I think it's like Tom Sawyer.

ROWAN: Whadda ya mean?

BOBBY: You know - he got everybody to help him paint the fence by pretending he wanted to do it.

ROWAN: Right - except for one thing.

BOBBY: What?

ROWAN: We aren't pretending.

BOBBY: Oh. Yeah.

ROWAN: I want to be an undertaker, and so do you.

BOBBY: You're right.

ROWAN: Which makes it even weirder.

BOBBY: Why?

ROWAN: That we seem to have attracted this...cult following. I don't think any of the other members of the Undertakers Club have any interest in **(drawls the words out)** mor-tu-ary science.

BOBBY: They think it's just a goof.

ROWAN: Right. **(pauses)** When did you first get interested in it?

BOBBY: When we studied Egypt in eighth grade. How about you?

ROWAN: Freshman year - biology.

BOBBY: So what's the attraction for the others?

ROWAN: I dunno. It's something to do after school. They don't do sports or belong to any other clubs.

BOBBY: So are you saying we get the dregs?

ROWAN: Not at all. I think we're a fairly interesting bunch on the whole.

BOBBY: Really? Why do you say that?

ROWAN: Well, everybody in the group has a good sense of humor.

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BOBBY: Better than the school newspaper staff.

ROWAN: That's for sure. Maybe it's black humor, but it's still funny.

BOBBY: What else?

ROWAN: Everybody's pretty creative.

BOBBY: Unh-huh.

ROWAN: Interesting clothes.

BOBBY: I guess you're right.

ROWAN: We don't do drugs or anything.

BOBBY: True.

ROWAN: So why should we think of ourselves as outcasts?

BOBBY: (**shrugs**) Now that you put it that way...

ROWAN: I think it's time we (**dramatically**) emerged from the darkness into the bright light of legitimacy.

BOBBY: And do what?

ROWAN: Become a full-fledged student organization.

BOBBY: (**with contempt**) Give me a break.

ROWAN: Seriously.

BOBBY: Why?

ROWAN: Do you know what kind of money they give the marching band just for uniforms?

BOBBY: No - how much?

ROWAN: (**a little sheepishly**) I don't know. But I bet it's a lot.

BOBBY: Rowan, I know the club was your idea originally, but wouldn't we be kinda defeating the purpose if we went... official?

ROWAN: Whadda ya mean?

BOBBY: Well, the attraction for me was that we were doing something unauthorized. Not really, forbidden, but it was like we did it because we didn't want to be in a real club, with some teacher looking over our shoulder all the time.

ROWAN: Who says we need a teacher?

BOBBY: You want to be official, you have to have a faculty advisor.

ROWAN: Hmm. Guess you're right. Do they have to be there all the time?

BOBBY: If you want to be in the building after school, yeah.

ROWAN: Oh.

BOBBY: So like I say, that's gonna scare away just about everybody in the club.

ROWAN: (**in a parody of seriousness**) Bobby my boy - this is what leadership is all about.

BOBBY: What?

ROWAN: Having the courage to overlook the petty interests of your followers.

BOBBY: Yeah, well. What are you gonna do for mourners if everybody quits?

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ROWAN: They won't quit.

BOBBY: How do you know?

ROWAN: Psy-chol-o-gy, buddy. I'll persuade them it's in their best interests to leave the nether world of unsanctioned after school activities and become a bona fide student organization.

BOBBY: I don't know - sounds like a tough sell to me.

ROWAN: **(temptingly)** You can get academic credit...

BOBBY: Really?

ROWAN: **(nodding his head knowingly)** One unit per semester.

BOBBY: So... if we go "legitimate" - I'd only have to take **(counts mentally)** three courses last semester of my senior year.

ROWAN: Bingo.

BOBBY: **(weighs this unforeseen advantage)** All right - I'm in.

ROWAN: Good.

BOBBY: We still need an advisor. **(beat)** How about Ms. Unger?

ROWAN: Who?

BOBBY: The teacher who took over the room the other day.

ROWAN: What's she teach?

BOBBY: Freshman English.

ROWAN: Do you know her?

BOBBY: Sort of. My mom knows her from PTO.

ROWAN: Oh. Would she do it?

BOBBY: I don't know. She's new, she's young - she might need the money.

ROWAN: There's money in it for her?

BOBBY: I think so. I think it's like coaching. You get paid overtime.

ROWAN: Hmm. Shall we give it a shot?

BOBBY: What do we have to lose?

ROWAN: Only what little self-esteem we've achieved so far in our high school careers.

BOBBY: So nothing - right?

ROWAN: You got it.

(The lights go down. When they come up, MS. UNGER is seated at a desk grading papers, while ROWAN and BOBBY walk hesitantly towards her from stage right.)

BOBBY: **(clearing his throat)** Ahem. 'Scuse me - Ms. Unger?

MS. UNGER: **(looking up)** Yes?

BOBBY: It's Bobby Lazar - Myrna Lazar is my mom.

MS. UNGER: Oh hi, Bobby. I didn't recognize you. How are you?

BOBBY: Fine. Um, I'd like you to meet my friend Rowan Wilkinson.

ROWAN: Hi.

MS. UNGER: How do you do?

ROWAN: Fine thanks.

MS. UNGER: So what are you two up to?

BOBBY: Well, uh, actually, we came to talk to you.

MS. UNGER: (**surprised**) Really? What about?

BOBBY: It's about a club we've started, and we're looking for a faculty advisor.

MS. UNGER: Gracious. I'm flattered. What kind of club is it?

BOBBY: It's the Undertakers Cl -

ROWAN: (**interrupting, a bit hurriedly**) The Future Funeral Directors of America.

MS. UNGER: The Future Funeral Directors of America? So, what do you do? Go out and have grave-digging contests?

ROWAN: No, it's serious. We stage mock funerals, and we study the art of embalming and its history, and human anatomy, and how to perform an autopsy...

MS. UNGER: You are serious, aren't you?

ROWAN: Absolutely.

MS. UNGER: Well, I coached girls volleyball once, but I've never been a faculty advisor.

BOBBY: There's a lot of things we could do if we had a faculty advisor that we can't do now.

MS. UNGER: Like what?

ROWAN: Well, there's a morticians' convention this weekend we could go to. There'll be a Coffin and Casket show Friday night.

MS. UNGER: (**doubtfully**) Um-huh.

BOBBY: There's a lecture Sunday on New England grave-rubbing techniques.

MS. UNGER: Is grave robbing legal in New England?

BOBBY: Not grave-robbing. Grave-rubbing. (**with enthusiasm**) You take an impression of the old Colonial gravestones by rubbing a sheet of paper with charcoal.

MS. UNGER: Oh. Interesting.

ROWAN: So we'd need a faculty advisor to do that, plus money for meals and use of the school's van.

MS. UNGER: I don't know. It all sounds rather...

BOBBY: Ghoulish?

MS. UNGER: (**with gratitude and admiration**) That's precisely the word I was looking for.

ROWAN: Actually, it's just as academic as journalism or the debate club. Maybe more so.

MS. UNGER: Still...

BOBBY: We don't need an answer today. We just want you to think about it.

MS. UNGER: Sure, I'll... uh... think about it.

ROWAN: **(with the gravity of an official representative)** We would be most grateful if you would.

BOBBY: **(as the two boys walk offstage)** Thanks very much Ms. Unger.

MS. UNGER: **(with a trace of skepticism in her voice)** Sure. Say hello to your mother for me.

BOBBY: I will.

ROWAN: Bye. Thanks again.

MS. UNGER: Bye.

(The boys exit stage right and MS. UNGER stares after them as they go with an attitude of puzzlement. The lights go down. When they come back up, the entire group is assembled with MS. UNGER at stage left and ROWAN standing between her and the rest of the students as HE introduces her.)

ROWAN: Okay, everybody. Um, I told you I'd have a surprise for you this week. **(Nervously as HE veers between familiarity with his classmates and the need for deference to MS. UNGER's position.)** This is Carolyn Unger. You may know her from freshman English. **(The other kids look at her with faces that register emotions from contempt in the case of the girls, to trepidation in the case of TONY.)** She's... uh... agreed to become our faculty advisor.

BETTINA: Why do we need a faculty advisor? We never had one before.

JENNY: Yeah. I thought this club was a secret.

TONY: Are we going to be graded now?

ROWAN: Calm down everybody. It's all part of the natural evolution of our organization.

BETTINA: Rowan, I didn't join an organization. I like to act, but I didn't want to end up in a student production of South Pacific.

ROWAN: Nothing's going to change.

JENNY: **(in a huffy tone)** It already has.

BOBBY: Hey, give us a chance.

ROWAN: Look, there's no reason why we should miss out on the benefits the school has to offer just because we came up with our own club.

MS. UNGER: Uh, guys, if I'm not wanted here, I'm not interested in the job. **(turns as if to leave)**

ROWAN: Wait, really, everything's all right.

JENNY: C'mon Bettina. **(picks up her purse.)**

MS. UNGER: **(to ROWAN)** Your group seems to lack a certain...uh, cohesion.

ROWAN: (*grabs BETTINA by the arm as SHE starts to walk past*)

Just a second, everybody. Let me explain.

BETTINA: (*pulling her arm away*) Please do.

ROWAN: Bobby and I are the founders of this club and we realized, after a great deal of reflection, that we are missing out on a lot of the benefits this school has to offer by operating...underground, so to speak.

BOBBY: Yeah, like money.

JENNY: I don't do this for money, Bobby.

BOBBY: I know, but wouldn't it be nice to, say, go to a museum exhibit on mummies together on the school's nickel?

MS. UNGER: Try not to be so cynical in my presence. I haven't agreed to do this yet.

ROWAN: Or take a tour of a big city morgue?

BETTINA: I think you've misjudged us.

BOBBY: What if you could get credit for doing what we do?

JENNY: (*after a moment of silence*) Are you serious?

BOBBY: As serious as I can get.

JENNY: How?

BOBBY: You get credits for theatre, and speech and debate. That means you don't have to take as many real courses...

MS. UNGER: There's got to be some academic aspect to the activity.

ROWAN: But there is. There's history, and biology, and archaeology...

MS. UNGER: Okay, I hear you. Well, I'm game if you all are.

BOBBY: How about it, guys?

TONY: Will we have to do homework now?

MS. UNGER: No, but I'll expect a serious commitment to the subject, whether you end up doing a written project or just do your little...uh...dramatic interpretations.

ROWAN: Bettina?

BETTINA: Well, I never planned on joining an actual student organization. I thought it was just kind of a fun thing to do after school sometimes.

BOBBY: Yeah, but there's a serious side to this too.

JENNY: I suppose. Do we have to get into that?

MS. UNGER: If you want academic credit.

TONY: Can I get a letter sweater?

MS. UNGER: We'll have to decide what the criteria for getting a letter should be.

TONY: (*a little disappointed at her apparent interest in high standards*) Stage crew gets them.

ROWAN: We don't need to settle that now, Tony.

TONY: I'm not joining this club unless there's something in it for me.

BOBBY: Tony - if we're an official club we can get letters, but you still have to show up and participate.

TONY: Okay. (**pauses a moment**) What sort of doo-hickey will the letter have on it?

BOBBY: What do you mean?

TONY: Well, the football team has a little football in the middle of the letter. Speech and debate has a little gavel - you know.

BETTINA: How about a skull and crossbones?

JENNY: (**enthusiastically**) Cool.

ROWAN: (**trying to re-direct their attention to the business at hand**) Yeah, great. So if you're all on board...

BETTINA: (**with reluctance**) Yeah.

JENNY: I guess so.

ROWAN: Great. (**turning to MS. UNGER**) And do we have an advisor?

MS. UNGER: Well, you people seem to have a sense of self-direction, even if the place you're heading is a little weird. So, against my better judgment...

ROWAN: Great!

MS. UNGER: Provided you're not just pulling my leg about this morbid fascination you claim to have.

BOBBY: Oh, we're sincere.

MS. UNGER: Well then, I'll tell Mr. Finley and get you registered and all.

BOBBY: Terrific.

MS. UNGER: Shall we set a meeting date?

(The kids look around at each other with bewildered expressions on their faces.)

ROWAN: Uh - sure. I guess.

MS. UNGER: Why don't we say next Tuesday?

BOBBY: (**looking around at the others**) Okay? (**to MS. UNGER, after getting a few nods of acknowledgment**) Sure. Uh - three fifteen?

MS. UNGER: That's fine. My home room is 2A on the east side of the building. (**cheerfully**) See you then!

ROWAN: Bye.

(MS. UNGER exits stage left.)

JENNY: (**after MS. UNGER is gone**) You guys sure about this?

BOBBY: We've given it a lot of thought - give it a chance, okay?

BETTINA: Okay. See you next week.

ROWAN: See ya.

(The girls walk off stage slowly, and TONY, ROWAN and BOBBY gather their backpacks and follow slowly behind them.)

TONY: *(as HE walks offstage)* Are you sure I'm gonna get a letter sweater?

(Lights go down. When they come back up we see the students and MS. UNGER facing the audience and aligned in a group as if posing for a photograph. PHOTOGRAPHER faces them, his or her back to the audience, holding a camera. HE/SHE arranges the players with MS. UNGER to one side, the tallest student in the middle and the others (arranged by height, pyramid style) facing inward towards the middle student on each side.)

PHOTOGRAPHER: Okay, everyone. Arms straight down, hands resting on your thighs. *(They arrange themselves accordingly.)* Good. Folks on the end, move one step closer to the middle. Great - just like that. *(raises the camera and peers through the lens)* Okay - smile.

(They stare at the camera blankly as PHOTOGRAPHER snaps a picture and a bulb flashes. PHOTOGRAPHER advances the film and then examines the group.)

PHOTOGRAPHER: Let's take another. Okay folks - smile. *(They continue to look at the camera with an aspect of annoyance.)* C'mon - geez, you're a pretty grim group.

ROWAN: We're the Future Funeral Directors Club.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Really? Guess that explains it. Okay - do the best you can. *(MS. UNGER smiles broadly but the students' faces remain expressionless except for BOBBY and ROWAN. The flash goes off as PHOTOGRAPHER takes a picture.)* There - that should do it.

MS. UNGER: Thank you.

(PHOTOGRAPHER walks off stage as HE/SHE performs some business - removing film, etc. - with his/her camera.)

BETTINA: *(apprehensively)* Will we get a chance to choose which picture goes in the yearbook?

MS. UNGER: Um - I think the yearbook staff will make that determination.

JENNY: Will we at least get to see which one they pick beforehand?

BOBBY: Probably not - unless you know someone on the yearbook staff.

JENNY: Uh - I don't know many people outside of our little circle here.

BETTINA: I'm not very photogenic.

MS. UNGER: I'm sure it will be fine. Now that we've got that out of the way, why don't we get down to business. Tony, I think you were going to give us your report on the tradition of the wake?

TONY: Um, yeah. I guess so.

(The other students seat themselves on chairs or in the sort of movable desks typically found in high school classrooms.)

MS. UNGER: Are you prepared?

TONY: Well - yeah. Sort of.

MS. UNGER: Tony - you put this off at last week's meeting. ***(SHE waits for him to answer and, hearing nothing, continues)*** We agreed that everyone would do an oral report on some aspect of American funeral traditions.

TONY: ***(reluctantly)*** I know. ***(aside, in a tone of fatigue)*** I wish I could just be the corpse again.

MS. UNGER: I heard that. Tony, I made it clear at the beginning of the semester that I wasn't going to be a baby sitter for a bunch of teenage vampires who wanted to roam the halls after school. Now, come on. If you want to be a funeral director, you're going to have to learn to speak in public.

TONY: All right. ***(composes himself, takes a few note cards out of his shirt pocket and begins to read in a monotone)*** The Tradition of the Wake in American Fyoo-ner-rarry History. ***(clears throat)*** Most people think that a wake is what you see behind a big boat as it moves through the water, but it is much more than that. It is also the ceremony where mourners gather around the coffin of a departed friend or relative. ***(pauses, looks at the others' faces, and continues)*** Originally, a wake meant that people stayed up with the corpse all night to make sure that the person was really dead and didn't wake up. Eventually, wakes turned into parties where people got to see their relatives and eat and drink. Sometimes wakes would get rowdy when people would get drunk. Wakes were supposed to bring families together but sometimes they drove them apart. ***(shuffles his note cards and, not finding what HE is apparently looking for, flips the cards over to examine their backs; after a few moments HE speaks to MS. UNGER)*** Uh... I guess I left some of my report at home.

MS. UNGER: ***(with disappointment)*** Tony!

TONY: Really - I did.

MS. UNGER: You were doing fine. That was a very good beginning. Why couldn't you just finish it?

TONY: (*quietly*) I don't know...

MS. UNGER: Well, I'll give you an "incomplete." Do you think you can wrap it up at next week's meeting?

TONY: (*sits down*) ...I think so.

MS. UNGER: All right. (*looks encouragingly around at the others*) Well, are you going to put on one of your little skits for me now?

BETTINA: (*through clenched teeth*) They're not little skits.

MS. UNGER: (*breezily*) I know - but let's get on with the show.

JENNY: (*echoing BETTINA's tone*) It's not a show.

ROWAN: No need to get testy. Bobby - do you want to set the scene?

BOBBY: Sure. First we need a corpse...

TONY: Me, me...

MS. UNGER: Not until your report's done.

TONY: Darn.

ROWAN: That's okay Tone - we need you as an acolyte anyway.

TONY: What's an acolyte?

ROWAN: You're going to hold a candle and help me.

BOBBY: And we need Jenny and Bettina as mourners.

ROWAN: (*to MS. UNGER*) That leaves you.

MS. UNGER: For what?

ROWAN: For the departed.

MS. UNGER: Me? But I'm your advisor.

ROWAN: Well - I don't think you can properly advise us if you haven't experienced what we do.

MS. UNGER: (*warily*) I don't want to experience death for as long as I live.

BOBBY: C'mon - it's fun.

MS. UNGER: All right. Who am I supposed to be?

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