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The Blotter

magazine



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“That’s not your job - part 1”

Perhaps by now you’ve surmised I’m not a big fan of social media. I feel sometimes that it is like a traffic accident on the highway, a wildfire, one that we all stop our vehicles to watch, not noticing that it has slipped around behind and now threatens to consume us. And before you activate your righteous ire button, yes, I have a Twitter account, recognize the hypocrisy, and don’t apologize for it. I can guess what you’re thinking: What the hell?

Yeah. You’re right. How can I badmouth the hand that feeds me?

Well, let me climb back up on my high horse and say it doesn’t feed me. I have no illusion that it does me any good whatsoever. I don’t sell books or get readers from it, create connections to useful others, or crowdsource... anything. If I ever thought I would gain some functional career boost from a free piece of software, I was misguided.

But my motives were sound. Thirty-five years ago, we were told that no one reads anymore. Scary times for me, because I did, receiving my Book of the Month Club catalog and making my choices according to a very stringent set of guidelines (how many can I afford and still keep my lights on?) I had a lovely little bookstore I also frequented, the Cranbury Bookworm, in Cranbury, New Jersey, a short bike ride from my home. It was an old house on the main street, with creaky stairs and shelves and stacks all cantilevered into corners and along walls. You can check it out – it’s still there and I’ll bet still has some hidden treasures going for a song.

And parenthetically, I was writing love poems and using company software and mainframe time to do layout and printing of little chapbooks of my work, to share with friends. They were lovely, awful, amazing things.

No one reads anymore. What would I do if books went away, or at least were difficult to find? What if only the big-name authors got published, and the New York Times Review of Books...didn’t? How would we readers find the quirky, the obscure, the not-so-well-received?

Then, about thirty years ago, the publishing world (spoken as if it were a single, unified organism, with a snake head that could be cut off by some dragon-slayer) altered itself to align with shiny new mega-bookstores, intended to take what was left of the industry and consolidate it some more, under the auspices of economies of scale profit-theory. Wait a minute – I thought nobody reads? Wrong. I signed up for membership discounts and made my Saturday afternoon journey to the mall and wandered the aisles, looking for paperback copies of bestsellers and seeking the below-cost copies of classics I was supposed to have read in high-school. If, perchance, print-matter was going away, I was going to have a stockpile of TBR that would last at least through the millennium, when all the power kicked off and we returned to a state of stone-aged grace. I also submitted my foolishly derivative sci-fi yarns

to the pulp monthlies I picked up at the little newsstand next to the video rental store. I learned a lot about rejection, but who doesn't? I kept writing. I kept reading. What better way to approach the end of the world?

Twenty years ago? As I recall, the publishing giants – all reswizzled, rebranded, relaxing and basking in renewed sales of print matter discovered that the new little online bookstore named after a South American river wasn't going away. The megastores were sweating it, too, those that didn't understand the internet and what was possible. People spending their money online? Preposterous. And my little independent bookstores – the ones I could drive to and stand around in and talk with the booksellers and even the bookbuyers and find out what was cool out there, but wouldn't get much if any shelf space so if I wanted a copy they could order one for me – well, they...went away.

And only slightly tangentially, as publishing, reading and selling books sea-changed, the libraries massaged their game, too. My two locals (it is a wonder to belong to two public libraries, I must say) had a tough time, at first. What to stock on shelves. What to borrow from other libraries, if they can, so that everyone doesn't have to spend the bucks on the same, rarely read items. There's a certain kind of magic in a library. I highly recommend knowing a few librarians, and treating them with respect.

How do you even browse online? Algorithms of previous interests are not the same. Telling me what others did in my position is not the same. Browsing is defined as surveying goods in a leisurely and casual way. Allowing me to type in keywords for a search is something, but not the same as shelf space, isles of titles, authors, subject matter. If you can't see what's out there, how do you include them in your "survey?" That's always been my problem with the big river store. At least in a megastore, I could look around. I can't do that same thing online. And I am in an albeit fortunate position that I can go to my last small handful of independent bookstores, look for what interests me, and purchase them without too much of a discount. It may or may not make a difference in the end.

But I'm hopeful....

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CAUTION

I will do, there's no doubt...

“Philomena”

by Shana Raphaeli

The cool wind pricks James’s face and his eyes tear up as he stands by the side of the road. He uses his free hand to dry his cheek, grazing the sharp stubble on his jaw. The diner restroom where he has been grooming himself was occupied that morning and James had no patience to wait, wait, wait.

In his other hand he holds a black trash bag containing all of his earthly belongings: a few shirts, some underwear and what’s left of his drag wardrobe. After a moment he raises his hand and signals; in this seedy part of his East Coast American town, the finger dipping motion indicates James is for hire.

Despite the place’s small-town air, its people are fairly progressive. Not only are there gay and lesbian bars, but there is Club Xotique, the drag venue where James used to work as his glamorous alter ego Philomena Cox. There is also this corner where men can turn tricks even in the daytime. James’s hometown is a pretty place for the most part: rolling plains with occasional bursts of hills. There is an element of crime but most people lie somewhere on the honest working, lower middle class spectrum.

He watches cars whizz past, emitting ugly, grey plumes of exhaust in their haste to get somewhere else. Sometimes he counts the cars but he quickly gives up because that too is too boring to stand. This is where James spends his days. At night he goes to the homeless shelter.

Soon his extended arm grows tired. He switches hands. Before long a large, silver Mercedes Benz sedan veers

off onto the shoulder and pulls up in front of James. He opens the rear door, throws his garbage bag onto the floor and climbs into the front.

“Hi, Randy.” James doesn’t bother with the seatbelt. He is tempted to pull down the passenger seat mirror in front of him—an old impulse of his to admire and preen—but he knows he looks like shit.

“How’s it going?” Randy looks in the rearview mirror as he eases back into traffic. His seatbelt stretches tautly over his wide belly. He is a large Caucasian man in a bespoke suit and tie, old enough to be 19-year old James’s father. But the two look nothing alike. James is mocha-skinned, tall and slender with legs any supermodel would envy. In his drag days, James loved to show them off.

“All’s good,” James is glad Randy came around. Randy has become a regular customer, driving by James’s spot three to four times a week, always during the work day; James isn’t sure how Randy gets away from the office so easily. Randy once said he works in investments.

“Good.” Randy seems tense again. Is it the stress of his job that always seems to pain Randy? His eyes are slits and James can see his teeth are clenched. Randy is good for steady cash, but his strain rolls off onto James.

Randy pulls into the parking lot of a car part manufacturing plant. It’s their usual spot. He parks under a large oak tree in a remote corner of the space. James doesn’t need instructions. He begins to climb over the leather-lined seat into the back of the car when Randy

grabs his arm and squeezes. “Don’t fuck up the leather.”

“Yeah, man. I’m always careful.” Randy is more on edge than usual and James has a premonition that things aren’t going to go well. Then he remembers what Randy is here for and promptly unbuttons the fly on his dirty jeans. He lowers the boxer shorts he has been wearing for the last week.

Randy has greater difficulty reaching the backseat but manages as always to squeeze his large frame through the space between the two front seats. It is Randy’s rule that they never leave the car lest they be seen by any employees of the car part company.

Randy unwittingly swats James’s face with his arm as he arranges himself. He grunts. When each is settled, Randy undoes his suit pants and pulls them down over his thick, hairy thighs. “That’s it.” He rubs James’s naked ass. James wills his hips to undulate in a way that appeals to Randy. “That’s it.”

James bounces his ass up and down, giving Randy a little show.

“Mmm.” Randy continues to touch James’s ass, his hand wandering everywhere. He abruptly strikes James’s bottom and James flinches. Randy doesn’t usually get so rough right off the bat. “Bareback this time.”

James stops moving. “What?”

“It will be hot. I want you.”

“Sorry, daddy. I don’t do that.”

James slides away.

“Come on. It will be more fun for you too.” Randy reaches out to pull James back by the end of his shirt.

“Look, I don’t do that. Why can’t we do it regular?”

“Because I want to try something new!” Randy barks. “I take enough shit from everyone. How about you give a pass to your best customer? Shit. I’m probably your only customer most days.”

“Brother, no. I’m not down.” James

straightens up and turns to face Randy. "Regular or I'm getting out."

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Randy punches James's right cheek. James takes a moment to recover from the shock of the blow. He tries to pull out his garbage bag from below the seat. Randy smacks the side of James's head and in rapid succession attacks him: his face, his neck, his shoulders. James's cries drown out Randy's ragged breathing.

"What are you doing?" James shrieks as Randy pummels him.

"My money, my terms." Randy flips James's limp form around as James sobs. Randy rapes James, who suddenly stops crying.

A switch flips and James is no longer in the car with Randy. He is with his house mother, Mother Aurelia, who teaches Philomena how to draw rainbows on her eyelids with eyeshadow. All around her, Philomena's drag sisters get ready for a night out at Club Xotique. Miss Conduct wears nothing but her tucking panties as she examines potential wigs she might wear. Banana Splits pulls green tights up her shapely legs, smoothing the material to avoid wrinkles. Jadalingus laughs at Banana Splits as she sips a martini.

"The key to getting all the colors on is drawing the outlines first. Then you fill them in. Like drawing wings on eyeliner." Mother Aurelia steps back to examine Philomena's makeup. Philomena peers into the mirror and admires herself.

"Thank you, mother! I'll try the other eye."

Jadalingus shrieks with laughter. "You look like an elf! The opposite of an elegant queen! Take those godawful things off!"

Banana Splits finishes donning her tights. "You, Moronalingus, have no imagination! This outfit will be red hot! You're about to be one jealous bitch.

Now make me a martini too!"

As Randy slams into him, James even starts to think of his birth parents, having dinner with them. Staunch Christians who never had much, they had given Randy a good life until they didn't. His mother had been an inventive cook and dinners at home were delectable. She died of cancer when James was 12 and three years ago, when he was 16, his father kicked him out. Homosexuality was perverse enough but drag? They'd had good times when his mother was alive though. James thinks of them now. Christmas mornings with piles of gifts. Small trinkets but exciting all the same. His father used to take short hikes with him into some nearby hills. They'd played minigolf on a local course on special occasions.

Randy slaps his ass hard enough to cause welts, ripping James from his reverie. James notices that Randy is taking an extra-long time. He considers another escape attempt but backs away from the idea; Randy will overpower him again. There is nothing but the past for company as he waits for Randy to release him.

When Randy finally moves away, he tosses \$200, quadruple James's usual rate, onto James's trash bag. His fly still hangs open. "I gave you something extra. Now get the hell out of here." Randy's voice is husky behind him. Usually Randy drops him off at the side of the road but James isn't about to ask questions.

He looks down at the cash, grabs it and at lightning speed, dresses himself, takes his stuff and beats it out of the car. He sprints as fast as he can. Out of the parking lot and down the side of the thoroughfare. The tears race just as quickly as he does. Snot streaks across his cheek.

But he has nowhere to go. The homeless shelter doesn't open until 5

PM. It vacates its guests each morning at 8 AM. James usually spends his days roaming the boulevard, looking for tricks, daydreaming about new looks for Philomena when he returns to doing drag. He hasn't gotten pressed since he left the House of Noblesse. Mother Aurelia has a monopoly on Xotique. Only Noblesse queens work there and it is the only drag club in town. Maybe one day he'll go to New York. There are vast possibilities there.

James can't stop moving. When he finally runs out of breath and his knees hurt, he kneels to the ground and rests his head on his trash bag. He has nowhere to go and no desire to do anything. The only thing he can think of is to lie down on the sidewalk. On another day he might have taken his spoils and bought himself a nice meal or shopped for a piece of drag attire. Now he has no appetite, nor interest in anything. Once again a man's dick has gotten him into trouble. A silent vow never to cross another dick again passes through his mind. *Something like this was going to happen at some point.* Maybe he is lucky he got away with tricking as long as he did.

It had been George after all who started all the drama. Philomena had sucked his cock at his provocation even though Miss Conduct was his otherwise favorite queen. But Miss Conduct was Philomena's rival and George's attention had been a reward. Miss Conduct punched Philomena inside Club Xotique after Banana Splits and Jadalingus told her what they saw while smoking cigarettes nearby. Miss Conduct's wig nearly flew off from the ferocity of the blow she landed on Philomena before the other House of Noblesse sisters pulled the two apart.

It was the first time James was brutalized in any way. He'd had a big bruise on his face when he tried to explain to Mother Aurelia that George had been

The Blotter

flirting with him and buying him drinks. James aimed to please when it came to sex; knowing he was wanted was the greatest turn-on for him and George had clearly desired him. Why was James to blame for succumbing?

James remains on the ground for several hours. Occasionally someone passes on the sidewalk but anyone who comes near is careful to avoid disturbing him; they surely take him for a reprobate or bum. When it starts to get dark out, he rises to his feet and throws his parcel over his shoulder.

One thought spins round and round in his head. He has to find a new way to earn cash. He may starve or die but he will never take payment for sex again. Payment can make a man think James is his boxing bag.

A murder scene in which Randy lies pummeled and bloodied on the ground flashes across James's mind and he realizes he has never been able to get away with anything. Not with his mother or father, nor Mother Aurelia, nor tricking. He simply doesn't have that kind of luck.

That night James thrashes in his sleep, his body jerking with pent up rage. He is exhausted when the shelter attendant nudges his shoulder at 7:45 AM. James sluggishly pulls himself up, takes his trash bag and hits the streets. He hasn't eaten in nearly 24 hours so he goes to his local diner and orders pancakes. Neither maple syrup nor fluffy stacks bring him joy; he doesn't finish his food. But he can pay for his meal. He has money. He has saved some cash from his work on the boulevard and Randy gave him a severance package. Every cent matters because there is no telling when he'll earn his next dime.

For days James roams the streets, picking scraps out of garbage cans and fixing himself up in public restrooms. It is hard to shave with nothing but a rusty razor but he still has some toothpaste

and a well-worn toothbrush. Sometimes to lift his spirits he dabs on lipstick and tries to resurrect his old self, his best self, Philomena, but unlike Philomena, James doesn't like to talk to people and he doesn't feel the old confidence or flair without complete Philomena regalia.

Dressing as Philomena is the greatest drug James has ever tasted. It transforms him into the person he wishes he truly were. His most charming, glittering and confident self. Knowing that he can achieve the grace of Philomena makes him feel he is worthy and has something to give the world. Restoring Philomena to her previous beauty, going someplace where she can find another drag family and returning to regular performances are paramount for James to feel fulfilled.

In dirty clothes he has worn too many times to count, he visits convenience stores, gas stations and bars looking for work. He doesn't have any work experience other than lip syncing and telling jokes as Philomena, but he knows how to make a good cocktail and he can learn how to work a cash register.

"Not hiring."

"Fully staffed."

"Take a shower, son."

He gets nowhere. He stops looking in mirrors altogether or making any effort at all to put himself together. Several days he spends drowsing on a bench in a local park because he is too ashamed to persist in his job-hunting efforts. Philomena is a queen and James is now a spectre of his former self. He knows he needs a job and despite his earlier efforts to land one, he can't actually conceive of working. His mind is weighted and muddy; his thoughts have been circuitous since Randy's assault. When he isn't in the park scaring away mothers and their young children, he traverses parts of town he doesn't know.

He gets lost, sleeps on the ground off, rambles back to where he started the next day.

He misses Mother Aurelia. Why did she abandon him? So what if he blew Miss Conduct's man? George had wanted him to do it. George had straight up asked for it. It would have been a rejection not to acquiesce and George didn't deserve that. Why do queens have to be so territorial? Philomena and Miss Conduct had been sisters. James and Miss Conduct's male counterpart, Louis, had been like brothers. Mother Aurelia hadn't even heard him out; he has a side to the story too. Worst of all, the punishment didn't fit the crime. Now James is trash diving and wandering aimlessly, homeless. Now James has been beaten and raped.

He loses track of time. He hoards his cash, spending only a few dollars when he can't find someone else's leftovers. He has lost 20 lbs. but doesn't notice that his clothes hang off of him. Philomena would have balked at the loss of body fat. It is hard to make curves from a coat rack like James's wasted physique.

Spring arrives and one afternoon James digs into the bins behind a pizzeria. He discovers a wholly uneaten slice of pepperoni pizza stuck to a page of newspaper. Gingerly he peels the pizza off the newsprint and takes a bite. The food is tasty and James turns the newspaper page over to wipe his mouth. When he pulls it away, he catches the word "makeup" printed in bold black letters. He examines it more closely. "Makeup Artist Wanted." James's pulse quickens. Chewing another big mouthful of pizza, James reads the oil-stained ad.

*Mortuary Makeup Artist Wanted
Must be skilled in applying makeup to
diverse skin types.
No mortuary experience necessary. We*

are willing to teach.
Apply at Kingsley Mortuary.
15673 Richardson Street

James isn't certain what a mortuary is but he reckons it has to do with dead people. Still! A makeup artist job! James has tons of experience doing makeup for his former sisters in the House of Noblesse. Some were black like James, others were white or Latino. There had been an Asian sister. James knows he is a master at matching skin tones, evening out foundation, setting false eyelashes and enhancing lips with liner. Getting back into makeup would move James one step closer to restoring Philomena. Maybe he could get his hands on some new cosmetics and do himself up one night.

When he left the House of Noblesses in ignominy, he hadn't been able to bring all of his makeup with him. There was simply too much. Boxes upon boxes of eye shadows, lipsticks, blushes, brow pencils. He'd had the variety only a drag queen requires to beat her face with different looks for unique outfits to match a night's theme. A woman who lunches one night. Corporate powerhouse another. His favorite was 1940s siren; that was Philomena's true identity.

It would be divine to work with makeup again. He loves makeup! The miraculous transformation it creates is part of what James adores about drag. Makeup is a tool to become whom you want to be and that person need not be set in stone. With makeup, you can be another woman every night!

He scarfs down the rest of the pizza and hightails it to the diner he patronizes. Once inside the restroom, he opens his trash bag and fishes around for his toothbrush and razor. He does what he can to clean himself up. His hair needs to be cut but he presses it down with some water. He dresses in

the cleanest clothes he has: some dirty jeans and a black t-shirt. He ties his bag up again and leaves for 15673 Richardson Street. As he closes the restroom door, taking note of the elderly man who has been waiting for him to finish, he realizes that the only dead person he has ever seen was his mother when she finally passed on. Even in his scorching grief he'd noticed that her makeup looked odd. Her complexion wasn't even and her eyeliner was slightly jagged. James could certainly do better than that.

Kingsley Mortuary is a pristine stone building with double wooden doors and an expansive manicured lawn, green blades of grass like small daggers. James stows his trash bag between some waist-high shrubbery and approaches the doors.

He walks into a wooden foyer and looks around. Stone walls and paneled ceilings give the interior an air of somber repose. A door on his right bears a golden placard reading, Reception. He knocks.

"Come in!" a young woman's voice calls out. James enters an office with a long desk and filing cabinets. A light-haired woman stands up from behind a large, old-fashioned computer monitor.

"I'm Carey. How can I help you?" She has an upturned nose and a small mouth. James thinks that her lips need some gloss.

He shuffles from foot to foot, finding he has lost his voice for the moment.

"Umm. Y'all need a makeup artist? I can do makeup."

Carey's eyes widen and she smiles. "Wonderful! You're the first person to answer our ad."

James can't make out whether this is a good thing. "I've been doing makeup for years. I can do anyone's makeup. I, uhh, don't have my full kit anymore though."

"Oh, that's no problem. We have all the supplies here. Mortuary makeup requires special utensils and unique applications. Let me get Miss Kingsley. You can have a seat right there." She gestures to the chairs lining the wall across from the desk.

James sits down as Carey leaves the office. The wait seems long to him. He taps his foot and rubs his arms, studying the space. There are some awards for best funeral home in the city. There is a bronze sign: Our dearly departed deserve the love and attention that graced those whom they touched in life.

He can't see what is on the computer screen and considers getting up to take a peek but Carey returns with Miss Kingsley.

"We have an applicant for the mortuary cosmetician," Carey says. Miss Kingsley appears to be in her 50s. She wears her grey hair in a tidy bun and her cinched black dress reveals a curvy figure with flattering proportions.

James rises to his feet. "I'm James." He extends his hand and hopes no one notices how unkempt his fingernails are. Miss Kingsley takes James's hand in her own cool one. The place is well air conditioned but Miss Kingsley has clearly come from a much colder environment.

"Miss Kingsley. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise, ma'am."

"Have you ever worked with the deceased?" Miss Kingsley discreetly appraises James's appearance.

"No, ma'am, but I've done makeup on tons of people." He thinks for a moment and then adds, "Men and women." James has only ever done drag makeup on other men but he feels that counts as "men and women."

"Well, I like to give all my applicants a test. It's the only way to tell whether someone can handle this kind of work or not. The role of mortuary makeup is to make the deceased appear

The Blotter

as they did in life. Even better. To make them look alive with coloring and the right shades. To make them look their best.”

James nods politely.

“Carey here is wearing no makeup at all. Oddly, she never wears any makeup.” Miss Kingsley herself is fully made up though James notes her blush needs blending. “I want you to make up Carey. She’ll provide all the cosmetics you need. Please make her look like a better, livelier version of herself without going overboard into the vulgar or unrealistic. We’ll go from there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” James shoves his hands in his pockets as Carey leaves the room to fetch the makeup.

“Do you live around here?” Miss Kingsley looks James in the eye.

“Yes, ma’am.” He prays that she doesn’t ask for further details.

“Kingsley Mortuary was founded in 1945. My father ran this place before me. It is our goal to give the deceased the respect they deserve and to comfort the grieving as best we can. Most people repress their awareness of death in order to get through life but here we embrace finality. All things must come to an end and that includes living. Insects, animals, humans. Do you have a fear of death, James?”

James bites his lip. Death isn’t something he likes to think about. He thinks of his mother’s decline when she had cancer and how it had been a mercy when she finally passed. Randy pops unbidden to mind. Randy could have killed him. Had Randy known that? He’d been so out of control that he could have snapped James’s neck.

“I don’t know exactly. Like you said, it’s a part of life.”

“That’s just it. It’s a truth we cannot escape.”

Carey returns with a large cosmetics box and rolled case for makeup

brushes. James wonders whether the utensils he is about to use have already been used on dead people. The notion makes him queasy, but he resolves to forge ahead. He needs a stable job.

“Great. Supplies. Where should I do this?” He looks at the chairs by the door and the desk chair.

“You can unpack on this chair and Carey can sit down here.” Miss Kingsley points at the chairs by the door. Carey sits, placing everything she’d brought beside her.

“Ok.” James opens the box and unrolls the brush case. He picks through the contents of the box, assessing what he has to work with. Eyeshadows, mascaras, liners, lipsticks, blushes, contouring powders, concealers, foundations, tweezers, brow gels and more. He looks at Carey’s face and turns back to the tweezers. “Do you mind?”

“Do exactly what you need to do.” Miss Kingsley steps back so she can better watch James work.

He proceeds to clean up Carey’s brows. They aren’t ragged but he removes stray hairs and accentuates the arches. He doesn’t do a full job—enough for a polished look once he colors in the brows.

He works in earnest. He doesn’t apply drag makeup—he knows Miss Kingsley won’t go for that. He covers Carey’s face in ladylike makeup: clean face, well-defined eyebrows, a bit of a smokey eye but not too dramatic, gentle contouring of the cheeks and nose and only slightly enhanced lips. It doesn’t take him long. He used to do his own full drag makeup in twenty minutes when it took most of his former sisters an hour. They would drink champagne and gab the whole time though.

He steps back to evaluate his work and decides he is finished. “I’m done.”

Miss Kingsley draws near. She

turns her face to scrutinize Carey from all angles. “Well, Carey, I don’t suppose you’ve ever looked any better.”

James smiles.

“Well done, James. Are you willing to learn how to restore the face of a dead person? It’s a bit different from making over a living person. Sometimes the face needs to be recreated, you know, in case of wasting from illness or a violent end. We have special products and tools for that.”

“Yes, ma’am. I would love to.”

James feels uneasy and faintly disgusted.

“Excellent. You’re hired. Come back here at 9 AM tomorrow. We work all hours of the day here but you’ll only be needed from 9 to 5. Rina Hartley needs makeup but it can wait until tomorrow when you are here. The viewing isn’t until Thursday. You’ll get paid biweekly at the rate of \$25 an hour. Sound fair?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you so much.”

Twenty-five dollars an hour is far more than James expected. He feels a jolt of excitement and determines to slay this job the way he’d slay a runaway. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, James. Have a good evening.”

He nods at Miss Kingsley and Carey and takes his leave. He is elated. A real job. One that pays good money too. If he succeeds at this job he can save money, real money, money that might take him to New York City, where he can find a new drag house, a new family, and resume performances as Philomena. Everyone knows the biggest drag scene is in New York City. If he gets kicked out of one house, there will be fifty more to choose from and he knows Philomena is a fierce queen. Some house mother will see her originality and her potential to dominate the runway, dance and sing for her life. James swallows loudly. One thing at a

time. He has to prove he can do this dead person business first and he is not certain he can.

James returns the next morning at 9 AM sharp. He is nervous. Will Miss Kingsley notice that he is wearing the same clothes? He spot-cleaned them in the sink at night. If he succeeds at this job, he can buy some new rags. Can he even pull this off? It all seems kind of scary but this is a steady job and that is appealing. This is what James needs. He says a silent prayer and enters the building.

Miss Kingsley is in the office to meet him.

“Good morning, James. Let’s get to work on Miss Hartley.”

“Sounds good.” James follows Miss Kingsley through a series of cool rooms and ultimately into a large stone and wood chapel lined with benches. They pass through a door at the back of the room into a white-walled chamber, where a woman’s corpse lies under a white sheet on a rolling metal table.

James instinctively seizes up in the freezing room. The cadaver looks waxen and very much dead.

“She has been embalmed and her features set so she is ready for makeup. Afterward we’ll dress her, but you won’t need to do that. I just need you to work on her face, neck and hands—the parts that will be exposed.”

The face of the body is smiling slightly; it leaves James unsettled. He doesn’t know what it took to achieve Miss Hartley’s benign quietude but he doesn’t want to know either.

“This is an easy one. She died of natural causes. There was no autopsy. A traumatic death or aftermath can make this far more difficult. She’s a good one for you to get started on.” Miss Kingsley slides a rolling tray of makeup toward James. “Just pretend she’s not dead. And don’t forget her hands.”

James steps toward the body, his

nose wriggling at the scent of chemicals that the corpse emits. Taking a deep breath, he dives in, reaching for the foundation.

“Wait. Here are some gloves. Also, you’ll need strong pigmentation.” Miss Kingsley hands James plastic gloves, steps back and folds her arms.

“Have these brushes and sponges been cleaned?” James doesn’t really care but he is curious.

“Yes, we wash all utensils between each client. Pay special attention to the lips please; they tend to shrink during embalming.”

James commences his work, startling a bit at how cold the older woman’s skin is. It helps that she is on her back and perfectly still. His drag sisters used to booze it up, gossip and laugh while he did their makeup. If he had the chance again, he’d ask them to lie down during makeup application. He finds it is much easier this way.

After setting the foundation and applying some contouring and blush to the cheeks, he moves on to the eyes. He forgets the woman is dead.

“Don’t forget about the hair. Here is a photo.” Miss Kingsley proffers the photo of a smiling elderly woman with short, bouffant hair. “There are brushes and hairspray on the counter.”

“Sure.” James takes an eyeshadow brush and gets to work on the eyes. He moves onto the lips, enlarging them with liner. When he is satisfied with the face, he moves on to the hands.

He notices some spotting there but doesn’t recoil. The foundation conceals the marks and soon the hands match the face.

“What do you think?” He turns to Miss Kingsley.

“Fine job. I doubt she ever looked this good in life. You’re a natural. I’m glad to have you onboard.”

“Thanks. I’ll do the hair now.” James selects a medium-sized round

brush and takes the hairspray. He has a great deal of experience teasing wigs so the withered remains of an old woman’s hair should not be a problem.

Tease and spray, tease and spray. Curl, shape, spray, spray, spray. Rina Hartley’s hair has volume and a pleasing shape. James thinks the old gal looks pretty good.

“I’m finished. Unless I missed something?” James wipes his hands on his shirt, remembering that it is the same shirt he wore yesterday and hoping Miss Kingsley hasn’t noticed. He thinks that she probably has. If he can hold onto this job, he won’t be wearing the same clothes for long.

“No. That’s all for this one. Rina was an easy one to get you started. The crime victims are more challenging. I’ll coach you on those. We don’t have any at the moment but it won’t be long until we do. You know how things go in this town. On to Charles Merving.”

James makes up four more cadavers that day, stops by the diner for a bite and retires to the shelter. It will be two weeks before he receives his first paycheck. He wanted to ask for weekly pay but didn’t want to reveal how hard up he is for money.

Throughout the next few weeks James works diligently at his job. Most of his subjects are old people. He makes them look lively again; he colors their face, fixes their hair and gives their hands the visage of live flesh.

One day a five-year-old crosses his table and he blanches. He seems to understand why he is paid so much for his work. Death isn’t supposed to reach someone so young. For a moment James isn’t certain he can touch the child. It seems like a sacrilege. He takes a few moments to collect himself; he has a job to do and he told Miss Kingsley he could do this work. He takes a series of deep breaths and goes to work on the child the same as he

The Blotter

would anyone older. When he is finished she looks like she is taking a play-time nap.

Several men in their 40s cross Kingsley Mortuary. They are typically heart attack victims who worked too hard and lived too carelessly. They fail to make James uncomfortable. They are much older than he is, so their deaths seem more natural. Some of them have a bloated look to their face; James reduces it with contouring.

When the crime victims arrive, Miss Kingsley teaches him how to use mold and plaster of Paris to fill in battered areas of the face and conceal wounds. He surprises himself with his nonchalance. He has grown accustomed to cold, unmoving bodies with eyes sewn shut.

He earns a few paychecks and cashes them at a local check cashing counter. He has no bank account. As time passes, he saves some money and moves into a tiny rent-by-the-week room with a communal bathroom. The place is rundown but he revels in it. No more sleeping among scores of rustling, noisy, smelly bodies. The corpses at work smell better than the homeless men and women of this town.

In his private abode, he lays out all his clothes, emptying the black plastic burden he has carried for so long. He admires the vestiges of his drag wardrobe that he took with him when he left the House of Noblesse. He left so much more though. Hourglass silhouettes with padded shoulders. Nipped-in, high-waist tops. A-line skirts to the knee. Pretty hats, dainty gloves and fashionable handbags. And heels. High platform heels, the hallmark of any queen worth her satin. When he feels he has enough money, he does some shopping; he buys boy clothes, some new drag dresses and a new blonde wig.

One evening after work he goes to

the communal shower. After carefully cleansing himself, he shaves his entire body. At one of the sinks he closely shaves his face and walks in a towel back to his room. There he sits on the edge of his bed and pulls his makeup near. He has bought some new eyeshadows, concealers and powders.

He paints his face. Sharp cheekbones, sparkly eyes, long, fake eyelashes, glittering red lips. He dons a padded bra, a blue sequin dress, a pair of six-inch stiletto heels with a platform in front. Next comes the new wig, which he carefully pins onto his head so it doesn't move when he tosses his bust-skimming hair. It is platinum blonde with Veronica Lake waves. She has always been his inspiration. Philomena always aspires to resemble the old Hollywood film star with her peek-a-boo hairstyle. Philomena is a friendly and flirty femme fatale in James's mind and carries all of the sultry intrigue of one.

Downtown Philomena finds groups of people carousing on the streets and in the bars and restaurants that line the strip. She flashes her alabaster teeth at random people she passes. Philomena has never met with animosity before; she is inherently carefree. She believes she truly passes for a woman. Thankfully the town's vibrant gay scene has made people familiar with different personas.

"I'm Philomena. Pleased to meet you!" She waves at a woman in a shop uniform. The woman squints at Philomena and walks past.

"What's your name?" Philomena bends down to ask a child. The child giggles. "I'm Philomena Cox! I bet you're a very good boy." The boy's mother tugs the boy along. Philomena doesn't care. She is back in form and feels unstoppable.

Philomena parades up and down the promenade. She stops short of

entering any bars or restaurants. She doesn't really want to drink, which is unusual for her because in the prime of her drag career when she worked at Club Xotique, she always drank. Mango margaritas. She is different now. She has evolved with James.

A group of drunken men asks Philomena to pose for a photograph with them. She kicks up her leg and one man holds it high for the picture. She blows them kisses as they walk away.

Philomena sashays around the mall, basking in her own beauty, relishing her charisma. After a few hours she returns to her place and washes off her makeup in the communal restroom.

"You one of those transvestites?" a grey and hirsute older man asks from the next sink over. He brushes his teeth.

James startles. Is this man going to start trouble? James sizes him up and sees he is bigger than this man. He can take him on provided no one else gets involved. No one else is around. "I'm a drag queen," James dares as he wipes a cloth over his cheeks.

"What the hell is the difference?" The man puts down his toothbrush and watches James.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" James removes his eyelashes with quick tugs.

"You're all queer. That's all I know. Queer as key lime pie. I hope you had a good night all the same." He gathers his things and leaves the men's room.

I did have a good night, if you don't mind.

In the morning he goes to work in a new shirt. He is never late and he drinks his coffee on the walk over. The trip to the mortuary is 45 minutes on foot and James enjoys the time to himself.

At work, Miss Kingsley is waiting for James.

"Good morning, James. We've got

a heart attack. Male, aged 42. It's a rush job; the family wants to hold the wake tomorrow. Apparently he was very important in the community. He's still in embalming but he'll be ready for you this afternoon. You can get started today in room two. She'll likely take all morning. Domestic abuse case. Her husband beat her up real good before he pushed her to the floor and her head hit the tiles."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get right to it." James disposes of his empty cup and proceeds to room two. He has come to find his work relaxing. It offers him pre-occupied alone time; he doesn't ruminate on his past or the things that have happened to him. Sometimes he talks to the corpses. "Don't you look nice?" "Feeling like your old self again, huh?"

Not this time though. The battered woman's face is irregular with one side puffed up. The bruising is pronounced in death. James feels nauseated. This woman reminds him of what he looked like after Randy nearly beat the soul right out of him. This poor woman. She hadn't made it. Her husband did her so badly he killed her. James wonders what had sparked the disagreement that ended in this. It's hard to even look at her but he has work to do. He has to pretend he doesn't know why she died in order to fix her up. Even as he does so, the lining of his stomach feels raw, like he could vomit at any moment.

He forces himself to reach for his heavy-duty mortuary tools and get to work. He'll go extra heavy on the foundation and have her turning heads in no time. She deserves to look better than she ever looked before given what has happened to her. Poor miss.

When he is finished, he goes to find Miss Kingsley. She follows him back to room two and appraises his work. "Fine job, James. She's ready to go and I see you repainted her nails too. Nice touch. The family will like that. No one

wants to see their mother with chipped polish when she's in a casket. Alright, the big one is ready for you. And I do mean big."

Miss Kingsley leads the way to room five. "The wake has already been scheduled for 9 AM tomorrow. He shouldn't be a lot of work but he is high profile so this one really counts. He's important for business, if you know what I mean." Miss Kingsley folds back the sheet covering the body to reveal the head and shoulders.

All at once James's mouth runs completely dry. His stomach convulses and he drops the makeup box in his hand. It's Randy. Randy! He never wanted to see Randy again. But Randy is dead! James wants to run.

"Are you ok, James? Is this someone you know?" Miss Kingsley lays a palm on James's arm.

"Umm, uh. No, ma'am. Just reminds me of someone is all." James recuperates quickly.

"Because I need your best work here. A lot of people will be here tomorrow. We're lucky we got this one. If everything goes well, we'll be getting more calls and that means more work for you."

"Yes, ma'am." James can't tear his gaze from Randy's pallid face. It's so very, very wan. Every strand of facial hair stands out in high relief. The mouth angles downward in a frown as though Randy were disappointed to have died. He looks more bald in death; James sees a flash of Randy's thinning strawberry blonde hair during one of their encounters.

"I'll leave you to it. Please find me when you're done."

Alone with Randy's corpse, James is frozen. He has tried his hardest not to think about Randy since the man violated him but now he has nowhere to hide from those memories. His hands clench and he gasps; he has forgotten to

breathe.

"You son of a bitch," James whispers. "Piece of shit. Rapist son of a bitch." He has the urge to batter Randy's cadaver but he restrains himself. "You deserved to die." James grunts.

He can't hurt me now. Just do your job and get out. James takes a deep breath and gets to work. Mercifully men don't require as much effort as women and it doesn't take James long to restore Randy to a life-like countenance. He forces himself to sing aloud as he restores Randy, pushing out all his anger and fear because even in death Randy has the power to strike terror in James's heart.

Upon finishing he finds himself in Randy's grip. He knows he should fetch Miss Kingsley to approve his work but he can't move his gaze from Randy's corpulent face. James feels stuck, like Randy is somehow in control of him and wills him to remain where he is. Without a thought, he places his hand on Randy's wide, cool arm. He starts to squeeze. With a little strength at first and then with all the vigor in his body. He catches himself and stops. He'll leave a mark and even though Randy will wear a suit in his casket, Miss Kingsley might see and know James did something untoward.

He tears himself away and goes to find Miss Kingsley. "Good, good." She enters the room and squints at Randy's face. "I like what you did with his hair. Looks like he has more of it now."

"Oh, just hairspray." James taps his foot, eager to leave the room. "Who is next?"

"Well, it's 3:30 PM but that's all I have for you today. I guess we're a touch light. You can go home. Don't worry; you'll get paid for the full day. You've done good work today."

"Thank you, Miss Kingsley. See you tomorrow." James is careful not to run

out the door lest he arouse her suspicion but once he is off the property, he races away. He goes straight to the outdoor mall where he'd come the previous night as Philomena.

He hightails it to the first bar he finds and settles in. He is in the mood to drink. "Whiskey double please." He hunches over on the bar stool and rests his head on the wooden bar. When his drink comes, he downs it quickly and requests another.

"Coming up." The bartender produces the bottle again.

James has several rounds of whiskey until his head swims and Randy is no longer on his mind. He stumbles back to his room and lays down on the bed without undressing or turning back the blanket. The room spins when he opens his eyes. He jumps up and runs to the bathroom where he is sick for some time. At the sink, he forces himself to wash his mouth and drink some water. Then he drags himself back to bed.

At 5 AM the next morning, he bolts awake. There is still time for what he has just thought up. The world needs to know Randy for whom he truly was and James can facilitate this revelation. In fact, James may be the only person alive who knows the true Randy. Randy had always seemed like he had a rich life, a fancy life. James knows Randy is a monster and soon the world will too. He throws some things into the duffel bag he purchased to replace his old trash bag and speeds off to the mortuary. He jimmys the back door with a bobby pin he uses to secure wigs. Slowly and quietly, he opens doors to rooms. He finds caskets and corpses. He carefully and silently opens the caskets and moves on until he finds Randy in a grand, wooden coffin padded with satin the color of robins' eggs. He pulls open the top half of the casket all the way and then makes

sure the door is closed.

He stares at the dead man for some time. He has a plan to execute but there will be repercussions. He finally achieved some stability for the first time since he was booted from the House of Noblesse. Prostituting himself was miserable and he did that for too long. Miss Kingsley gives him security, security that he has earned. He does honest work at the mortuary and Miss Kingsley lavishes him with adulation. What he is about to do will strike an end to all that; he knows he'll catapult into the unknown again. He shuts his eyes and rubs them vigorously.

When he opens them, he sets upon Randy like a starved cannibal. He finishes, puts some things back into his duffel bag, closes the coffin and rushes back to his room to get ready for work.

He showers leisurely in the luke-warm water. He'd run it hot if he could. He runs his fingers through his hair, the water sluicing down his scalp. Hands against the tiled wall, relaxation takes over. James smiles.

In his quarters he gets his belongings in order and cleans up the space, throwing out debris and trash. Calm washes over him; he has a sense of purpose. For the first time in this epoch he feels hopeful, a sensation that has become so foreign he nearly skips to work for the verve it brings him.

At work he enters the chapel where Randy's friends and family converge. There are sniffles, tears, tissues held to faces and open weeping. The large casket rests at the front of the chapel, closed for now. James takes a seat in the final pew. He examines the woman and children in the front row. Randy's family. His wife is rotund like Randy but more polished. James can't tell how young Randy's children are but they seem confused and cranky. They don't want to be here.

Soon the room is full of people. James is shocked by how many people turn up for Randy. He'd had no idea how influential Randy was.

At 8 AM on the dot the minister rises and moves behind the coffin.

"We are here today to show our love and support for Randy Carson's precious family. Not only have we sensed our own personal feelings of loss over Randy's passing, but our hearts have been drawn toward them."

James tunes out the words. Who was Randy anyway? In life he seemed to have ample free time during the day. Whatever investment job he had couldn't have been that taxing. Or maybe it was and caused Randy's need for a regular release during the work-day. Randy had a family. A wife who grieves for him. Two sons whose lives may be scarred by his death. What kind of a father could Randy have been? What kind of husband? Wasn't he gay anyway? Maybe repressing his true identity sparked the rage that assailed James. Randy was obese. Maybe in those fleshy limbs he stored bitterness, misgivings and hatred.

"And now may the dearly bereaved bid their final farewells to the deceased. I will open the casket." The minister lifts the top half of the ornate casket.

The entire room gasps at once. Randy's wife shrieks. Other shrill voices are heard.

"What in the name of the lord is this?" The minister covers his mouth. "What is this? Is this a mistake? Is this a joke?"

"Why does Daddy look like a clown?" Randy's elder son asks.

"Who could do such a thing?" Randy's wife moans.

James gets up to take a quick look at his handiwork. He sees Randy's profile. A long, curled fluorescent red wig comes down to Randy's chest. James

can see the top of the low-cut purple leopard leotard cutting into Randy's skin. It is far too small for Randy but James squeezed him into it; it took every ounce of strength in his body to lift Randy's dead form. Chest hair sprouts everywhere and the skin is pale.

And the face. Oh, the face. James chose the longest false eyelashes he could find. He glued down Randy's true eyebrows and painted on dramatically arched, comic ones in the middle of Randy's forehead. Red and purple eye-shadow. Bold and red, glittery lips. Fiercely delineated cheekbones. Randy makes an ugly woman, regardless of the exaggerations James chose.

It's time to go. James can see Miss Kingsley speaking to the minister, her eyes scanning the room in case James is stupid enough to make an appearance. The color streaks high on her cheekbones and her lips are dry. He never meant to do her wrong. Surely her business will suffer for this. James feels stabs of compunction in his belly as he looks at Miss Kingsley. She had given him the best job outside of drag that he'd ever had. He'd rebuilt some of what he'd lost because Miss Kingsley had taken a chance on him. He felt sorry for her and somewhat regretted that he was leaving Kingsley Mortuary behind him.

As the room collectively heaves all around him, James stands up and furtively sneaks out of the building. He runs to a trio of shrubs and reaches through the branches to collect his duffel bag. It's much fuller now than the trash bag was when he started working at Kingsley Mortuary. He runs for a bit until he has put some distance between his former place of work and himself.

He's on his own again. He knows this feeling. It's not reassuring but he also one-upped Randy and that makes him swell with a sense of power. Knowing how he left Randy is worth the

new uncertainty surrounding his life. He has been here before and he'll manage again.

James climbs into a cab.

"Bus station. Please." He sighs. He smiles again. Pride overtakes him. He no longer feels so vulnerable, like a plaything to be exploited. He feels like an agent of his destiny. The view out the car window is pleasant; it's a sunny day and children play in their yards. Other cars look shinier than usual. The sky is a cerulean blue and the cloud formations are inviting—fluffy and benevolent.

"Nice day." He puts one hand on the back of the seat top in front of him.

"Mmm-hmm." The cab driver turns a corner.

"How far are we?" James pulls his duffel bag close in anticipation.

"It will be just a minute now."

"Good."

When the cab pulls up to the bus station, James tips the driver handsomely and makes his way to the ticket booth. There are only four people in front of him. It doesn't matter anyway. He isn't in a particular rush. When it is his turn, he pulls out some cash and says to the sales agent, "One to New York for Philomena Cox." ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

Often running is a part of my dreams – not for exercise, of course, but to get away from or to someone or something.

Last night I ran down a hill, hoping to get enough speed to jump over a gap in the road – a sinkhole, maybe? – and I was alongside a family member, and my alarm went off just as I was readying myself to jump.

Why did it go off right then?

Is it possible that my dream knew what time it was – or that I knew that my alarm was about to go off, and so I didn't get to make the jump, or is it just coincidence? Or did my dream-self know that I or my family member couldn't jump over the sinkhole.

It seems so connected, that I am suspicious and thinking about it all day.

Robert K. - cyberspace

"Gaits"

My father could still walk
but barely, the day of the storm,
when we trudged home from the local bar,
and when huge drifts slowed me to his speed.

"Made for winter," he said, indicating
the grumbling bones in his legs.

Outside seemed impassable to me,
all forward journey sent back
by huge mounds
and cold, heavy blows of wind.

But he hummed an old song,
as if his bearing were there
between his tongue and his teeth.
He planted confident boot-prints
like he once put down seed.

As we stumbled home,
he kept up with me,
old rules of age, of balance,
broken with every step.

That was a month before he died,
when he came to life a little,
boasted proudly how he could still do it.

I stopped at the door
to wipe my boots on the mat.
He kept on going,
straight into the darkness.

"Bobcat"

It has no idea that,
as it trots across
the snowbound landscape,
there are other cats
curled up on a human's lap,
before a roaring fireplace.

For all it knows,
every feline must forage for food
in this desolate wilderness.
They have to be lean,
not fat.
Paying attention
not tribute.
For, even at rest,
a cat is still a hunter.

Day after winter's day,
the bobcat rummages
for vole and mole or mouse.

It's never seen a tiger
But it knows the feeling.
It's never seen a house cat.
Or imagined one either.

“Parental Visit”

Nurses keep waking Matt
out of his coma
to tell him things that make no sense
to his lifeless brain.

They shake
his shrugged shoulders,
scream in his ear –

your mother is here, Matt,
your father is here, Matt.

How do you explain to someone
that you don't know what “here” means?

Matt has bulbous eyes
that are content to stare at the ceiling.
It has wonderful white cracks of paint.
And a battalion of spiders
that he marshals like a general.

But nurses insist on sitting him up,
twisting his head in all directions,
like they're lining up rifle sights.
Two strangers step through the door,
wide grins on their faces.
If he really was a gun,
he'd shoot them.

Contributors

Shana Raphaeli is a financial writer living in New York City. She is passionate about electric guitar, literature and animals. She has been published in several literary magazines and aims to develop *Philomena* into a screenplay.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Orbis*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Connecticut River Review*. Latest books, “Leaves On Pages” and “Memory Outside The Head” are available through Amazon.

