

Slip off her wedding ring and add it to the rest of the jewellery on the tray. She's starkers on the bed with the white light beaming down on her. Body withered, sagging. The colour of egg-washed pastry. Her face is relaxed and peaceful, not constipated like most of 'em that get rolled in. It looks as if she's having a quick kip and'll hop up to make a brew any second. Shame she'll be a pile of ash in twenty-four hours. Crumbled and blended. Shovelled into an urn for the rest of her days.

I don't need to look at the name on her toe tag to know it's Paula. She's an eighty-year-old Pat Butcher type who used to be my dinner lady in high school. Purple eye shadow, chandelier earrings, the full whack. Lads from the boozer think it's weird that I see people I've known bollock-naked after they've snuffed it. It never crosses my mind. You even forget they're naked. At the end of the day, I provide a service. My task is to make 'em look presentable. I'm not rolling in it but it pays a decent wedge, covering the rent and a cheeky bet. The main thing is being there for people when they need it – when they're most vulnerable and think the world's caving in on 'em. Being paid is just a bonus.

It's serious shit. I'm responsible for that last image that'll stick in your noggin' for years. Believe me, I know – that's why I got into this bonkers job in the first place, but I'll get to that. The only weird thing is seeing how still they are. The silence proper freaks you out at first, until you get used to it. Everything about death seems quiet. The room I dress them in, the cemeteries, the mourners as

the coffin's carried into the chapel, even that last breath is always a small whisper.

It's more apparent when someone comes in like Paula, a brutal force of a woman who would slap that cottage pie on your tray hard enough to break ya wrist. Those cold, waxy hands, peacefully crossed on her stomach. They used to switch from tray to tray with blurry speed. Sweat beading off her head, dripping into the food. A wipe of the nose with her arm here and there. She was a right cunt to be honest, but respect the dead and all that. When people die, that's all in the past. It's not for me to worry about what they did in their life, it's how I prepare them for what's next, wherever the fuck they go. It's an art, what I do. A dying art, you might say. A tough one as well.

Paula's clothes and jewellery are off now. I wash the body with a wet towel, digging into the nooks and crannies of her armpits, behind her knees. Cleaning them is an important part; you have to have a delicate touch about you. You can't go all rough like you're scrubbing the kitchen worktops 'cause you'll end up snapping a bone or summat. It's all about patience, finesse. Think of it as polishing your nan's favourite crystal swan, or whatever ornament's got leathery skin and sandbags for tits if you wanna be more realistic.

After drying her, it's all about arranging the features of the face. This is what family and friends remember the most. No one inspects the fuckin' ankles, do they? Or says, *Aww, didn't she have nice elbows?* I use these plastic eye-caps that slot in under the eyelids. They have small spikes that grip on to the lids to keep them shut. Your dead relative winking or staring the fuck out of you from the coffin isn't the one. Next, metallic wires are inserted inside the roof and bottom jaw of the mouth, then tied to keep the mouth shut. Without it, relaxed faces lie there catching flies. Glue's then used to seal the lips shut. The satisfaction of doing that if you knew they were a right mouthy fucker. I've thought about using it on Rebecca, my girlfriend, once or twice. She works at Selfridges and

is actually way out of my league. Right mouth on her too at times.

Anyway, when you've got a lass on the counter like Paula – one that used to rant and spray spit in your face if you were caught chatting shit in the dinner line – you make sure to slap that glue on and seal those fuckers up for good.

After scrubbing any excess gunge from the ears and nose with a cotton bud, the face is pretty much set, ready to apply make-up to later. You try and arrange the features to a happy, content expression. I'm half-tempted to have her grinning like fuck for a laugh but Paula was never the one for smiling. I arch the corners of her mouth slightly upright. It's an expression that says, *It's okay. I'm ready. I'm at rest now*. That's all the family want to see. Getting the balance right is tough. The goal is to make them look 'natural', not 'life-like'. If they're lying there looking like they'll sit up any second, it'll scare you shitless.

While I crack on with all this, a mixed solution of formaldehyde, alcohol and water whirs away in a machine by the scalpels. It's a loud thing, swishing away, ruining the calmness of it all. This is the 'tissue builder' I pump into the body to plump it out and give it some colour if I think they need it. I use it ninety per cent of the time 'cause anyone who snuffs it round Openshaw is likely a skinny, jaundiced alky. I get some big fellas in now and again who don't need it. Like this fat fucker, Brian, last week, who took an hour to just wash. I was relieved I didn't have to fill him up with a shedload, like some lorry before a long trip. These chemicals ain't cheap.

Once the solution's ready – about two or three gallons of it – I do a small incision under the right collarbone and insert two tubes: one that goes into the carotid artery, and one into the jugular vein. The first pumps the solution towards the heart and replaces the blood, exiting the body through the second tube into a tray or directly into the sink. I dropped the tray once, sending blood splattering over the white tiles, covering the floor. Proper Bambi

on ice situation. Took a fuckin' week to clean. You get used to the thick look of it, the amount that comes out. Worst is the sound. Paula's is coming out in tepid squirts, like when you're busting for a piss but it's just dribbling out into the urinal. I have to stick the radio on during this bit sometimes, block it out. No matter how many bodies you do, it's always rank.

While the transition of fluid happens, I massage her body. Not for pleasure; I'm not a creep. This is to make sure the solution's distributed evenly throughout her body. If you don't, you have one chunky pink arm and one yellow skinny one. Under my rubber gloves, her skin feels like rolling out floured dough. It ripples, moving as one. The more I massage, the more I see her cheeks filling out. Life returning to her expression, almost convincing enough that she could start serving dinners again. I rub her swollen ankles, up through her fleshy thighs. Her body gradually expands like an air bed. Wrinkles ironed out, bones vanishing. I only wretch twice, which I'm quite impressed with.

I remove the tubes then and chuck them in the sink to be washed. I stitch the hole up and powder it with make-up as if nothing was there. Next is the even more unpretty bit, the one no embalmer enjoys doing. We have a tool called a trocar – sort of a long, hollow needle – which we jab into the central cavities of the body and thrust around for a good twenty minutes. There's no nice way to explain it. It's to remove any build-up of gas, fluid or shite that's lurking around in there. I've had plenty of bodies let one rip while I'm working away. It's not even that the sound shit me up, the smell is fuckin' rancid. Like letting one go in a hot car after a Chinese.

The body jolts as you stab around the stomach, making sure to get every last bit of excess rubbish before filling the cavities back up with a higher-concentrate solution. Once they're all filled up, you block the hole with a tiny plastic screw as if bottling an oak-aged whisky.

Paula's nearly ready now to be put on display in the viewing room. I give her another wash, dry her off, then get to putting the finishing touches on. I apply heavy moisturiser to the face and prepare the make-up, dependent on the preferences of the relatives. Paula always wore this pink lippy, so it didn't surprise me her daughter opted for that. 'Plush Romantic', it's called. It makes me wretch again. Her mouth's like a cat's arse, but I manage to find the lips and wipe away the smudges, so it looks all neat and nice. Purple eyeshadow and a thick foundation to accompany it. Make-up for dead people isn't the same as the stuff you find in Boots. Those are made for warm skin, for cheeks with blood pumping through 'em. I have to order in special cosmetic ones. Dense, opaque pastes that bring a human look back into their faces. Paula's a bit like polishing a turd, I'm no fuckin' magician, but I know her daughter will be happy. It's how she remembers her, looking like this. The lippy, the eye shadow, that's her mam. That's how she wants to remember her and how she should be remembered. I'll go as far to say Paula looks beautiful.

I comb her hair, positioning her fringe to the side. The fringe I saw dripping with sweat, pasted to her forehead over hot stoves. Here it was, wiry but clean, a sweep of grey like a plume of smoke. The last touch is the clothes her daughter kindly presented on a hanger. Black pin-striped suit with padded shoulders and a white silk blouse to match the cushioned interior of the coffin. I use a hand-held steamer to iron out the creases before dressing her slowly. Pulling black stockings over the thin legs of a dead eighty-year-old woman never gets easier.

The annoying thing is that my fine work will be up in flames in twenty-four hours. Name another job where your work consistently gets destroyed in a 900-degree oven. Paula will be in a casket made of pine, lighting up in no time. Think of lighter fluid on a barbecue. Poof. The flames'll engulf the fucker before my finger even comes off the button. Hundred times better than those posh,

lacquered finished caskets made out of walnut or hickory. Like throwing your chicken in a slow cooker then ones. Best to get it burnt, get it in the urn and crack on with your life. No point dragging the thing out. Some mourners I've had though, fuck me, they'd get in the casket with 'em if they could. They really struggle with that bit, which is understandable I guess. Never think of the hours it took me to prepare the bastard though. Sometimes, I'm more gutted than they are!

At least Paula will be in the display room so family and friends can go to visit and admire my work. I hope they appreciate the application of the eye shadow, the way her hands are placed delicately so the wedding ring's the focal point. That's the problem when you're dealing with mourners: they're never in the right headspace to appreciate all the work that's gone into it. Especially when you've got a Paula. Details matter. Details you'd only pick up on years down the line. A stray hair. A make-up smudge. Visible stitching. It all matters, it all has to be perfect. The death industry doesn't do second chances.

Paula's all done now. She's ready for the viewing room. I ping off my rubber gloves into the bin and remove my white coat and face mask. The stench of the solution still lingers in the air, mixing with make-up powder and the indescribable scent of death.

Paula lies still in the middle of the room. All I hear is the buzz of the lights and the fluid machine whirring into sleep.

'Night, Paula.' I say, before turning off the lights and leaving her at peace.

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Before I head to the boozer, I say bye to Janice in the casket room, who's arranging the new coffin arrivals. Janice is the funeral director who hired me years ago. A chubby, tiny woman with a brunette perm – not too much younger than Paula. Think of Danny DeVito in a wig, with heavy foundation, thick-rimmed glasses, and wears

nothing but black suits. Animated jowls and a mole on her chin you could land a helicopter on.

‘All right love, all okay?’ she says, rolling a glossy pink coffin into the corner of the room.

‘The fuck is that?’

Half of it is open, showing a baby-blue silk lining. It looks like something Barbie would be buried in.

‘Mingin’ innit? The old ladies love it though. We’ve had three sales in the last week already.’

‘Are you one of ’em?’

‘Cheeky twat. Got plenty left in me yet.’

Around us the walls are cracked. Beige wallpaper patched and peeled. Each casket illuminated by a golden light, a recent addition after Janice won a few quid on the Irish Lotto last year. The far wall by the window is dedicated to our selection of urns. Teetering shelves full of wooden boxes and metal containers, even velvet drawstring bags if that was preferred. It never stops amazing me the way people fuss over how to contain something that doesn’t exist any more.

‘You okay?’ Janice asks. ‘You look rough as a bear’s arse.’

I rub my eye and blink until my vision’s back.

‘Yeh, sound. Just tired.’

‘Rebecca all right? Not kicking off at home, is it?’

‘Nah nah, nowt like that. Just need some kip, that’s all.’

Janice gives me a look. Me and Becca bicker more often than not, but it wasn’t that.

Janice is like a second mum to me. She’s a belting woman, always keeping an eye out. We run the Openshaw Funeral Home, just the two of us, with me doing all the body prep and Janice doing more of the sales and admin side. Coffins, urns, funeral packages, official paperwork, flowers – she takes care of all that. There’s shitloads that goes into a funeral and the organisation of it. The average one costs over four grand apparently, so I assume

the business doesn't do too bad. But we're a small area on the outskirts of Manchester, we always have to work hard to keep things ticking over. Luckily, Janice is an expert. Everyone comes to her in Openshaw if they need help.

'She all ready in there then?' asks Janice, changing the subject and lighting up a fag in the middle of the casket room. She could have us both cremated in a sec, the material of some of these coffins. I learnt quickly that she does what she likes.

'Yeh, should be all set for tomorrow, what time they comin?'

'Fuck knows,' she says. 'Daughter will be here all day, I think. In absolute bits when I went through the paperwork with her.'

'What, 'cause you wiggled a gold-plated urn out of her? I'd cry at that price.'

'Pays your fuckin' bills dunt it?' she sniggers, inhaling a deep drag.

I laugh and give her a kiss on the cheek.

'Anyway,' I say, 'will see you Monday. Give us a ring if you need anything, yeh?'

'Ah piss off, I'll be fine.'

I walk through a cloud of smoke out of the room and through the exit. The smell of fresh air gives me a kick up the arse. I realise how much I'm gagging for a pint.