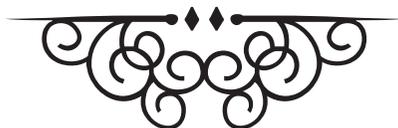


Camille Millier

Roses and Bones



Mr. Fayard Hawthorne died on October 27th, the year that I was thirteen. He was the first dead body I had ever seen. I never thought about death much before that. It was just what my Daddy did. I had heard all the stories from him. How he applied the makeup to make it look like they were less dead and pumped them full of special liquid to keep them from smelling. He told me stories about how some of them would still twitch in the basement under the fluorescent white lights, while little-kid-me sat wide-eyed in pigtails on the carpet of our living room. After Mr. Hawthorne died, Daddy decided I was old enough to come to work with him. He made sure the first body I ever saw on a slab wasn't someone I had known in their living years.

"Babygirl, you might own this thing yourself one day." Daddy winked a blue eye at me in the passenger's seat while Rob Zombie scratched his way out of the hearse stereo. There wasn't a body in the back, but he always did that. He would say that whoever was back there was on the way to their own party, we might as well let them have fun early.

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“But respect is key, okay?” He gave me the stern father look.

“Death isn’t a joke.” I nodded, fiddling with the tiny gold heart on the chain around my neck. I had gotten it from my father on my eleventh birthday. I didn’t understand the respect-for-the-dead thing. No one I knew had ever died, and thinking about myself dying was even more inconceivable.

I closed the heavy wooden doors behind us when we stepped into Hollow’s Mortuary. The place was empty in preparation for the funeral tonight.

He led me down to the basement. Mr. Hawthorne wasn’t down there. He’d already been dressed and made pretty and taken up to the fancy viewing room. I guessed that that was being saved for the grand finale. I sat on the edge of the metal table where the bodies go, resting my chin in one hand and twirling a strand of my blond hair in the other as Daddy picked up and talked about each clean, sparkling tool. First there was a scalpel to make a small opening for the arterial and drainage tubes. He showed me the embalming machine and which knobs controlled the power and speed. He showed me the shiny metal “angled forceps” or bent, scary, torture scissors. I wanted to see the body. Not only out of curiosity, but also because of the dare.

CJ, you have to kiss the dead man. Molly flipped her red ponytail. Everyone in our small circle giggled with delight, including me. Ever since the time I ran down the street at midnight wearing only my undershirt and a rainbow tutu while Molly and her cousin giggled down from the bedroom window, they all knew I was the only one brave enough, and they’d have an excuse to call me “death breath” for the rest of the year. *Come on. You weren’t a scaredy cat when we played with the Ouija board in my basement.* Molly curled her lips into a mischievous grin. You know you want to. Everyone else made exaggerated vomit noises. And I did want to. Because Christopher St. Agnes was standing right there smiling at me, probably thinking about the week before when I had kissed him behind the brick wall of the schoolyard. I gave him a wink to show him I was game.

“Cynthia Jane.”

My father’s voice made me snap my eyes back to focused and look over to him where he held a small jar of mismatched glass eyeballs.

“Are you listening?” He wrinkled his eyebrows.

“Yeah,” I said, “but I’m thirsty.”

Then I put on my sweetest voice. “Can I go get a pop from the

vending machine?"

His stern mouth melted into a handsome smile.

"Yes, CJ. Just hurry."

I hopped down from the table, my thighs sticking as I peeled them off of the metal slab. I hummed a song as I skipped up the stairs, passed the vending machine in the hallway and turned to the heavy, dark cherry-wood doors that lead into the large viewing room. I pushed one open with difficulty and stuck my head inside. The high ceiling was lined with chipped gold-painted molding. There were round-back chairs set up in rows, with a path in the middle going all the way up to the front where there was a giant, glorious, shiny walnut casket. I slipped inside and made my way to the front. As I got closer, the folded white hands came into view, then the chest, and then the sharp profile of Mr. Fayard Hawthorne.

Next to the casket, a metal stand held a large framed picture of Mr. Hawthorne from when he was living. I compared the picture to his sleeping face. The photo must have been recent, because even in the casket he still looked to be in his late fifties, with just a bit more of a grayish tinge to his skin, but handsome for an old man just the same. I took a step forward to get a closer look. He had gray hair that probably used to be blond, parted on the side and combed back in an elegant swoop. His cheekbones were high and sharp above the deflated hollows of his cheeks. He was wearing a black tie with a gold tie clip, and a gold wedding band on one of his clasped fingers.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hawthorne." I chirped. "Today's your lucky day."

I bent at the waist and leaned my face in close. My stomach felt hollow for a second. The lines that showed the age on his face became more apparent. His lips were full, but pale, and pulled into a round frown. He reeked of the chemicals downstairs. I took a breath, puckered my own young, rosy lips, and pressed them against his. They were cold and still. *Duh.* I had at least expected them to feel room-temperature. I pulled away quickly. I touched my warm lips and looked down at my floral dress and shiny beige flats, half elated and shocked at what I had done.

The inside of the coffin was lined with cream satin. It looked cushiony and soft. Why did it matter if a dead person was comfortable? And why was it so *big*? It looked as though it could fit two people instead of one. Perhaps... a small girl of my size.

Without thinking, I swung one leg over the edge of the casket. Molly wants me to kiss a corpse? I'll do her one better.

I lifted the other leg and maneuvered myself gently inside,

pressing myself next to the tall, thin body.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell Mrs. Hawthorne.” I said as I reached up and slowly pulled down the hinged lid of the casket until the small crack of light shrunk and turned into darkness.

I shivered. “Cozy in here.”

There was no difference between opening my eyes and closing them. I blinked hard in the blackness. Nothing. The cold, rigid elbow underneath Mr. Hawthorne’s suit sleeve jabbed into my rib when I breathed. The thick stench of embalming fluid burned the inside of my nostrils. A stronger version of what I caught a hint of when Daddy came home in the evening and kissed my forehead. I whimpered. The smell was so heavy that I felt like it was clogging my insides and shriveling my lungs. I tried to hold my breath but there was no breath to hold. I gasped for air and frantically groped for the handle, until I realized there wouldn’t be a handle on the *inside*. I tried to push the lid up with my sweaty palms but it didn’t budge. I couldn’t see and I couldn’t breathe and all there was inside this tiny tomb with me was a dead old man that I had just violated. I was going to die in here next to him and get what I deserved. I thought about Mr. Hawthorne - how less than two days ago he may have been in line for a vanilla latte at the Rose Café. Or sitting on a bench at the train station, briefcase set on the floor by his feet while he read a two-month old issue of *GQ*. I realized that one day, I would be standing in front of a coffin much like this one, and my father would be the old man in it. Tears spilled out of the corners of my eyes and down my red cheeks. I banged my fists on the shallow, padded ceiling and screamed. Finally, one blow raised the lid up enough for the crack of light to appear again, and I used all my strength to push the door back up on its hinges.

I sprang from the coffin, falling on my knees just in front of it as I violently gulped in air. I got up, sprinted down the long room and exploded through the large door. Running for my life. As I rounded the corner I crashed into my father’s chest, tears still streaming.

He grabbed me by the shoulders and looked at my face. My breathing slowed and my heartbeat returned to normal.

“CJ, why would you do this?” He snapped. “I should have known you weren’t ready for this.”

I sniffled.

“I know it’s weird to see one for the first time.” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “That’s why I wanted to be with you for it. You should have just waited for me.”

I buried my face in his *Lost Boys* t-shirt. The slim black suit would come later.

“I’m sorry, Daddy”.

The car ride home was silent before Daddy turned on the radio and nudged me playfully. I gave him a small smile, but then returned my somber gaze out the window. I never found my gold necklace after that day. I can only guess it was buried with Fayard Hawthorne.