

A Beautiful Passing

It begins at conception. A small number of 300 million sperm wiggle their way through the uterus' defenses. They bind with the zona pellucida, or the circular membrane of the ovum – a process that looks like sixth graders surrounding an empty dance floor. After a while, one determined little guy propels itself through the barrier, meets the egg, and initializes fertilization.

At four weeks, the fetus looks like a peanut. At nine months, it's the size of a Christmas ham. If all goes well, the child comes out healthy, covered in fluids that shouldn't be discussed. It's a new life. Parents beam and hand out cigars. They upload three dozen blurry cell-phone images on Facebook. And everyone can't help but think of the baby's future.

This is that future: this new life – like every other life – will eventually come to an end. This is the story about a dutiful young mortician who might be the one to guide you through the journey you'll take after you die.

Part One: Her Early Years

Like most children who grew up in suburban America in the late eighties, Jessica Amorose played with Cabbage Patch Kids and Barbie Dolls, rode bikes with her neighbor, and laced up rented skates at the local roller rink. The only lives she imagined for her Barbie were whatever image Mattel sold her as – like flight attendant Barbie, nurse Barbie or beach Barbie. Not surprisingly, Mattel definitely didn't have a mortician Barbie. Though, even if the marketing of her dolls did give Jessica the option of purchasing a “sold-separately” funeral home complete

with embalming room and light-up furnace for cremating corpses (batteries not included), it wouldn't have affected her childhood ambitions. Jessica had a different dream back then. She wanted to be a writer.

Similar to many of the residences in her hometown of Waldorf, MD, Jessica grew up in a small, brown, one-car garage family home. The population there, fourteen: herself, her sister, her parents, a family friend, four lizards, a particularly boisterous cockatoo, two hamsters, a dog and a cat.

As part of the mandate of growing up in the post-industrialized world, Jessica spent much of her childhood in school, just like all the other kids, and this is when the desire to write creatively took over her other interests. She carried a composition book, the same one every elementary student in the last fifty years has taken with them, the cover decorated with the splotches of black and white like television snow. Initially, she only wrote in the book as assigned. Soon, however, her teachers would bore her and she would write poems to escape the chalkdust torture of elementary education.

As Jessica grew up, and her understanding of the world and her emotional depth grew, Jessica's writings took on darker themes. Another friend of hers had been molested, and the mental damage of that experience for her manifested itself into skin cutting. The friend told Jessica the entire story of what happened; Jessica felt so moved by the tale she just had to write it down.

As a consequence of her ambitious writing, her talent became a proficient skill, and Jessica went on to win the West Lake High School, Jonathon Keats Award for achievement in creative composition.

Despite mostly focusing on and writing about the problems of others as a child, there was drama in her own personal life, too.

It happened often that one of her plethora of pets would die, and Jessica's father would arrange a funeral. They would bury the deceased under the mulch and stand around grieving for a time. Their creature's graves would be marked with palm leaf crosses.

And then there was the issue of her terminally-ill best friend.

Part Two: Growing Up Hard

Jessica's first job as a young teen saw her dishwashing at a local dine-in or carry-out restaurant called Mama Mia's. She'd scrape the leftover food – and mucus-filled napkins, already chewed gum, and cigarette butts and ash – off the plates into the trash and wash the dishes in scolding hot water, steam rising against her face. It was the only position management could give her because of her age. It was a dirty job, made more tolerable because she was able to work with her best friend, Angela.

Angela and Jessica had been best friends for most of their lives, extending all the way back to sharing chicken pox together, and their moms were great friends, too. Working in the same restaurant solidified their friendship even more. As Jessica grew older they promoted her to cook – a position that Angela already held – and they sweated together over the flattops, fryers, pizza ovens and grills.

Angela was two years older and had recently dropped out of school but her social intelligence still soared. Together, after work, they would attend unsupervised pool parties and get buzzed off of Smirnoff Ices while smoking cigarettes. At one such party, some boy they

knew tossed Angela into the water. He didn't throw her far enough. She smacked her head on the edge of the pool, and she rose back up from the water, crying and cursing him out. Over the next few days Angela complained of headaches and excessive tiredness. During a shared smoke break outside Mama Mia's, Angela let an unfinished cigarette drop from her fingers.

“What's wrong with you? Are you drunk or something?” Jessica asked.

Angela laughed. “I just feel funny.”

A week later she went blind in one eye. Another friend of theirs called Jessica and questioned if she had heard the news yet. “What news?” Jessica replied.

“Angela has a tumor on her brainstem,” the friend answered, echoing a type of jargon that implied medical knowledge. But Jessica didn't know what that meant and the mutual friend didn't either. How could any of them have known? How could any teenager with an unfinished high school education have known that the news really meant that their friend had almost no chance of living and would likely die? The surgeries began almost immediately: seven over just a few months.

Jessica visited her best friend in the hospital as frequently as possible, despite knowing that because of her poor sense of direction, she would get lost every time. In an eerily dark room, Angela was placed on a gurney and clothed in a medical gown. Her mother, Rachel, always sat by her side faithfully and never left – even staying the night in the room. An adornment of balloons and stuffed animals surrounded Angela's bed. Jessica had given her a pink and white dog before the first surgery that Angela took to the hospital (Angela had always wanted a pet of her own). She also gave her a double-sided picture frame that included photos of them as children and as teens. Angela's head was shaved in many areas and scarred by incisions. The hospital staff tried to beautify the remaining hair by fashioning it into pony tails or braids. Jessica

would lean into the bed and hold her best friend's hand. There wasn't much to say. When they did talk, they'd whisper.

“I love you, Angela.”

“I love you, too.”

Eventually the decision arrived to send Angela home to be placed on hospice care. For the remainder of her time, Angela was put on medicines that filled her organs with fluid and caused her face and limbs to appear bloated. She couldn't leave the bed. Rachel would calmly remove her daughter's excrement from a bed pan every couple of hours. Occasionally, the hospice workers would inject morphine into the dying teenager.

At Mama Mia's their boss had told Jessica about the story of a man in Italy who was saved from a brain tumor by the grace of God. Jessica couldn't forget the story. It fueled her thought process like water to the parched. Why couldn't Angela be a miracle too? She was fine until she hit her head; how did that cause a brain tumor? (Jessica couldn't disconnect the diagnosis with the injury even though they were unrelated.) She could keep living, couldn't she? As easy as it could come, it could go...

A call came one morning while Jessica was showering before a scheduled shift at the restaurant. Rachel had left a message on her phone.

“I'm sorry, sweetie, but Angela's dead.”

Jessica called out of work and rushed over to Angela's home. A group of family and friends had already arrived. She embraced Rachel first then ascended the stairs to Angela's room. Angela's eyes were closed. Jessica hugged and kissed her, then leaned by her bed, holding her hand. She sat up beside the body and held her. It was the last time they'd touch.

Two funeral workers came over to collect Angela's body. Jessica watched through a large bay window as they removed her and Rachel followed the stretcher, wailing.

"Thank God, for people like them. How can that be somebody's job?" A family member asked.

From that moment forward, Jessica decided that would be her job.

Sometime after her best friend's passing, Jessica confronted her friend who cut her arms. "The next time you cut yourself, you should just kill yourself because there's people out there who want to live and don't have a choice," she screamed.

At the funeral, Jessica read an essay about Angela's life. It was the last personal topic she would ever write about. After mortuary school she's stopped writing entirely, except for the letters she still writes to her deceased friend.

Part Three: The Young Woman

Now that she's all grown up and educated and certified, Jessica works as a full-time funeral director at a very "busy" home. Her days begin by opening a giant blue machine known professionally as "the retort." After twenty-four hours and 1500 degrees, she collects the cremated remains from the machine: masses of resilient bone and charbroiled flakes of the flesh the size of fingernail trimmings. She hunches over and rakes the leftover matter into a collecting pan in the middle of the cremator.

Jessica is twenty-two-years old now and has muscles from working this job, yet she's still slender and graceful in her appearance. Her typical uniform consists of black dress pants and a

respectful white V-neck top. She also dons an orange surgeon's mask, which contrasts with her white apron. Behind the mask, she ties her hair back neatly.

Jessica needs work clothing that fits many situations. In the same day, Jessica will embalm a body, dress the corpse and then organize the funeral with the deceased's family. A lot of the time, the person she meets with for the arrangement can't believe that she's also the embalmer, but that doesn't shock her anymore.

Jessica carries the wide and heavy collecting pan past a sign that reads: "No eating, drinking, smoking, application of personal makeup and application of contact lenses in the crematory area." She carefully places the pan near another machine called the "processor," which is basically an oversized garbage disposal. Before grinding the crematory remains into ashes, Jessica glides a magnet over them to collect surgical emplacements like pins, rods, cones, cavity fillings, or pieces of artificial hips that have survived the cremation process. She turns the processor on. After a few minutes, the machine turns off and she raises the cover; a white smoke of fine, human dust rises like cigarette smoke into the air.

Jessica isn't an anomaly among the numbers of seemingly traditional young women who work in the funeral business nationwide. According to numbers maintained by the National Funeral Director's Association, "there's been a steady rise in the number of females enrolled in mortuary school (over 60% of 2007 respondents)." The association's research also indicates that "the average mortuary student today is a female between the ages of 18 and 24; and that since 1995, there has been 38% decrease in the number of male students."

Cynthia Reibold, a current student in the Community College of Baltimore County Mortuary Program, thinks that the reason for this gender shift within the profession is because "women have a natural urge to help people, it's an innate characteristic. Death is a process, it's a

transition and a lot of grief is involved. People are in a vulnerable state and need someone to feel as if they care about someone we don't even know."

Maureen Givnish, a funeral director in New Jersey, agrees that women have unique qualities that can benefit them in the business. "Sometimes being more emotional is a good thing. Families don't want a stiff, unfeeling director." She also suggests, "As the world's view on women changed, so did the workforce. Women are just as capable – if not better – at the same jobs men have."

Whatever the reasons for the shift, it's quite likely these days that Jessica or another woman will be the one to take you past your death. You should be so lucky.

Part Four: After Your Death

Everyone looks like death in the body preparation room – especially the dead but even the living. The overhead fluorescent lights accent everyone's blemishes, wrinkles and other signs of bodily decay that natural lights don't highlight.

When you are dead, your body will be placed on an inclined porcelain table and Jessica will take care of you. After suturing your mouth shut (the embalming fluid will tighten, preserve, and color your skin in whatever position your body is in) she will slice open the bottom of your neck with a scalpel. Once your jugular is opened, your blood will stream down the inclined table along the grooves in its perimeter, and into a toilet that collects your fluids. All your organs will be drained, too.

After you are emptied, Jessica will use aneurysm hooks to hold up your carotid artery which she finds by remembering that "it looks and feels like a fettuccine noodle." Inside your

carotid artery, she'll inject the embalming solution. She has another saying she will use for remembering how much of the fluid to inject: "a light rain is better than a downpour." She will know you are ready when your skin falls slowly back into its original position after being pricked by her fingertips.

Jessica will then study photos of the time you were alive once more. She will painstakingly study your clothing interests, your makeup style, how you kept your nails and how you maintained your hair. She will uncover what your favorite lipstick was, whether you ever wore eye shadow for special occasions, what kind of jewelry you displayed and what it meant to you, which blazer jacket was your favorite.

After pondering how you made yourself up in life, she will take your passing and make it as alive as she can. She will love you like a best friend when she displays you one last time.