



**SHORT
STORY
NIGHT**

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"SKATE QUEEN"

AND

"THE BOG KING"

BY WENDY WIMMER

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Wendy Wimmer

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Skate Queen

When Mary Ellen's left breast grew back on its own suddenly on Saturday during dinner break, that's when we had confirmation that something weird was happening.

It was between shifts – a private Cub Scout party had just left but our Saturday Night Late Skate didn't open for another two hours. "Wasted Skate" was our own little staff secret – two hours to kill and a 24 pack of Old Milwaukee because these days we weren't likely to party after closing 'er down and more likely to collapse a lung trying to hurdle the mop bucket like we used to twenty years back.

Mary Ellen's mastectomy scar had been hurting something crazy all night, she'd said. I'd spied her from the DJ booth, touching the pack of Virginia Slims she carried in a jeweled leather pouch in her breast pocket as though the stiff cardboard was poking her scar. She had limped off the rink slowly, her whole left arm collapsed against her side. We were all pretty used to Mary Ellen disappearing from time to time, between the smoke breaks and her chemo panics, you just trusted she'd pop back before you missed her.

Vera had gone into the restroom to pee and caught Mary Ellen with her blouse open, not even in a stall. Mary Ellen was inspecting the scar that had taken residence where her nipple used to be. The angry red puckered monster was scabbed and weeping, even though it had been healed over for seven months. She told Vera that she figured there was nothing to do until the late skate was done, so she popped an Advil and then I happened to play a particularly lovely ELO flashback mega mix, which coaxed her back onto the rink. Then during the swelling of the Moog organ, Mary Ellen took a nasty spill in the back turn. She was usually a ballerina on her Riedell quads, so my first thought was that one of those little Cub Scout cocksuckers had left a lollipop stick on the rink surface. I rolled over to help her up and she reached into her blouse and pulled out her falsie, then felt up her reunited cancer-riddled titty.

Nothing made sense, but when you're staring at a breast that defied all reasoning, you start adding up all the facts real quick. We all started comparing notes. It wasn't just Mary Ellen's prodigal breast. Vera pointed out that she was somehow gaining three pounds a shift, even though she'd cut back to 672 calories a day, a precise number because it consisted of three Kessler and Diet Cokes plus two dry pieces of toasted diet bread. Each of us had held onto the observation that our fingernails weren't growing as fast as they used to... weren't growing at all, actually. We'd all hoarded that secret shame, a piercing knowledge that our

worst fears were finally coming home to roost, that all the years of abuse and pharmaceutical recreation and our bodies had finally called a time out. Turns out, after twenty, thirty years of taking care of the rink, that old rink had decided to return the favor.

Randy thought we were all full of shit, but then after five laps to Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, he felt the memory of his bruised shin return just like he'd only just slammed the car door shut on it that second. The skin was a mean purple but after two more laps, the pain and the bruise were both gone. Then he fell to the ground, skates splayed out in front of him, bent his head and said Hail Marys until *The Year of the Cat* ended.

Time Passages by Al Stewart seemed to have the best effect, although anything by Fogleberg or Alan Parson's Project worked good too. The BeeGees worked a little too well, if you know what I mean, made our eyes feel swimmy, like our brains were remapping the colors and state capitals. It might have been the disco ball — hanging there since the Rolla-Rena opened in 1972. Or it might have been the skates, an aggregation of forty years of foot sweat and popped blisters reaching critical mass, leaking back up through our soles. Or it might just have been the new formulation of the blue raspberry slushie that we were testing out, a blend of high fructose corn syrup, energy drink and enough blue flavoring to make it glow under the black lights.

Kyle made us stop every five minutes and measured the length of our hair and fingernails, and asked us a few questions that had no rhyme or reason. Did we need to go to the bathroom? Did we feel tingling in our extremities? What day was it? What year was it? What was three times four? How did you spell "shish kebob"? Randy didn't know how to spell it but the fact that he consistently misspelled it was good enough for Kyle.

After an hour, Kyle had massed some data to form a few hypothesis: counterclockwise worked, and clockwise didn't. The disco ball needed to be spinning, but the data was inconclusive whether the laser beams had any effect. There was some backfeed with more modern music, but heavy synths from the early 80s seemed to have the best return on our time investment. The rink was erasing anywhere between a day to a week every time you circled. Your body was getting younger, going back through time, anywhere from a week to a month in the spread of five minutes.

As soon as we put a calculation to it, we all shut up and started skating real fast.

My calves felt itchy, unused, a sense of growth in my spine. Somewhere in the last decade, I had gotten an inch shorter. Spine compression, my doc said, talking about the vitamins that were leeching out of my bloodstream, how my bones belonged to a man twice my age. Now I felt taller.

We all should have been winded from skating miles around the rink, but each lap felt like a new start, as though it erased the one before it and we were starting with a fresh day. Running around the rink without skates on didn't seem to do anything. Kyle had a theory

about spatial contact and rogue soundwaves that no one cared to listen to. I needed to do more laps. We all needed to. Time might have been running out for all we knew.

“We should close the rink.”

“Are oh eye!” Kyle tapped his data sheet with the tip of a chewed pen, as though we were paying attention.

“We can’t tell anyone else about this,” I said, pointedly staring at Randy who concentrated on tightening and retightening his laces. Randy was on probation already. He could get sent back to jail for even being near all these kids. We just made sure he was never alone with any of them.

“What are we going to tell the owner?” Vera’s buttons were straining – I hadn’t noticed that she’d been slowly losing weight over the last few years, but she looked healthier, had to have rolled back six months or more at that point.

“Asbestos mitigation,” Kyle said, squinting. The boy had a tick of some sort, and soft supple hips that reminded me of slow dancing. He held a pair of skates by the laces, the way you might hold a dead rat.

“Them kids,” Vera said, fiddling with her heart monitor wristwatch. “What’s it going to do to them? How many times does a kid skate around a rink? Twenty? Thirty?”

The implications were tough – losing twenty or thirty days was nothing for used up bodies like ours but kids, that was a different story. The potty training gone to hell, the forgotten ability to tie their own shoes. We all looked around and nodded, half thinking about the children, and not wanting to admit that we were also thinking about having more time on the rink. Or less time, if you think about it that way.

Vera was flipping through the events calendar. “Derby.”

The derby team practiced at the ‘rena every Saturday and Tuesday and could really rack up the rotations: A lot of strong lesbians who couldn’t even get on the team unless they could circle the rink 25 times in five minutes. They’d unage a year in a single practice session. They’d use up the rink and all that youth juice would be gone, quicker than snot.

Vera made us all do pinky swears, for the lack of a suitable bible. “For now,” we said, as though we’d make any other decision until the miracle of the rink stopped working. We made a sign off the clean side of a Dr. Pepper box:

Asbestos!

“TBA”

Normally, you don't think about how many times you do laps. If you do, you start to get a little dizzy, go all Camus about the futility of the situation.

Your laces on the right side start to get loose, from always turning against them. Normally I switch it up, do a little fancy footwork and skate backwards for a bit, but what if that turned the transdermal youthificationwhatever- it-was off? What if I sped up time instead of reversing it and my face melted off like the Nazis when they opened the Arc of the Covenant?

We had been so excited about the discovery that we didn't notice that Mary Ellen still hadn't come back from the bathroom after her breast reunited with its beautiful partner. I could see her through the little window in the DJ booth, whenever I'd go in to change the songs. She was standing out back behind the dumpster in her stocking feet, taking long drags off her cigarette, occasionally touching her left breast, feeling for the area where there had been a lump. Or still was a lump again. She had a slushie cup that she was using as an ashtray, the used butts collected in blue raspberry melt. I threw on the soundtrack to Xanadu. I could hear Kyle asking Randy if he thought the rink could be used for other means, philosophical questions. "Just bring a lady here for a friendly skate. She wouldn't even feel it. She wouldn't even need to know what was happening. The thing would just be gone. Just skated out of reality, are you feeling me? And then a brother would be off the hook and it wouldn't be a sin. This is God's way – this is an act of God, you get what I'm saying?" Randy was muttering and making negative sounds.

I rubbed my bicep. The skin didn't feel as rubbery. When had it gotten rubbery? I hadn't noticed, sometime over the last five years, apparently. Mary Ellen needed to get in on this, more than any of us. I leaned my head out the backdoor, feeling the rise of OLJ's sweet vocals pulling me to skate.

"You coming in and knocking down some laps?" I was careful to not let my skates hit the pavement, my front wheels locked over the doorlock. The owner was insane about the chastity of the skate floor: We swore she could spot street grit through sixth sense but I also didn't want to impact the sanctity of the connection between the skates and the unending oval time rift that we were freestyling on.

"Diet Coke. Tasted like dirt or needles for so long after the chemo. It just started tasting right a few weeks ago." Her hand went to touch her left breast but then stopped in midair.

"The tum– lumps are back?" As easy as it was to believe that roller-skating had regrown tissue.

The question loitered between us in the alley. If you didn't know better, you'd never believe she was the girl in the oxidized photos from the 80s that still hung in the rink locker room. Somewhere along the way, her forehead had cast a long divot between her eyebrows and a constellation of pock marks on her chin and cheek from god only knows what. A feather of a

scar curved down from the corner of her lip, so soft and light it seemed that it was a missed spot of lipstick – Mary Ellen had taken a headfirst dive off a boyfriend’s Harley about a decade back. She probably should have gotten stitches, she figured, but the boyfriend had been drinking and doing a little pharmaceutical, so they didn’t dare go into the ER. Then he dumped her a month later, saying that he lost his boner when he looked at her ruined face.

And now I’d get to see the lady unspool, undo the decline of the 10’s and the pessimism of the 90’s. Roll back through the hip hop years, slide into the grunge and then coast into synth pop looking fine in her Levis. I’d only been nine or ten when I first started coming to the rink but Mary Ellen’s clipped business voice as she dished out your skates, followed by her amazing sideways and trick footwork during the slow periods, I cursed our age difference and vowed to marry her someday. Of course, somehow we never managed – Back then I’d practiced my tricks and jumps, and then came the war and the sand and put the rink behind me. When I was working my way off the needles, during the worst of the anhedonia, I’d get a beautiful vision of her swishing in through the brain fog, a blur of satin tight pants and lip-gloss. Had to look her up once I made it past the night sweats and ended up with a job that was meant to last me for a while. That was over a decade ago. Sometimes it’s too easy being easy.

A shout erupted from the rink, over the sweet mellow licks of Olivia Newton-John’s vocal Xanax. I skated back over the carpeted rink hump to the center, where Kyle was curled into a fetal position, as though gut punched. Randy and Vera hovered over him nervously.

Kyle struggled to his knees and then dry heaved onto the rink, letting one sinew of spit slowly slide towards the floor and then had the grace to catch it with his hand and wipe it on his pants. He motioned for a pull up and we all stood in awkward quiet, and looked at Randy, who was the lowest on our pecking order, the one who knew that he’d be kicked out if he made himself even a tiny pain in the ass. Randy obliged and then stuck his hands in the front pockets of his Levis for a discrete wipe.

“Don’t skate too close to the epicenter,” Kyle finally said. “It really fucking sucks.”

His eyebrows were completely gone, and his hair had gone all short and bristly. He limped back to the side, picked up his reporters notebook and fell onto the nearest bench. Above us, the disco ball was an unblinking eye.

Dancing Queen queued automatically, as though the ancient MP3 shuffler was making an editorial comment, urging us to continue to circle circle circle. Vera squealed in approval of the song selection and shoved off, hugging the wall. Her pale doughy stomach peeped out where her shirt had popped a button. Judging by the size of her ass, she had to be coasting

back into the winter months of three years ago, when she'd been her heaviest. She skated with a need to feel her jeans get looser; to know that she was skating closer and closer to some version of herself that loved her thighs.

Mary Ellen had come back in and was carrying her skates back over to the bench. I watched her for a minute to see if she was going to put them back on, but it seemed like she wasn't sure either.

"Hey."

"Hey." Her face had gone slack and sallow, her eyes bright. A few times, Randy mentioned that he thought Mary Ellen was tweaked. She had never seemed that way to me. Now a sweetness clung to her, like burnt cinnamon and old hair spray. We always thought the crack pipes we'd found in the back alley were from the hobos that liked to dig through the rink's garbage for half-eaten SuperRopes. Maybe they weren't.

Randy skated past us and shouted "Woo!" as Madonna's "Like a Virgin" automatically played. It was Randy's theme song. He got a little too excited about heavy innuendo music and songs usually made us uncomfortable but in my quest for early 80's music, I had forgotten to remove it from the playlist. Maybe we were all involved in some kind of collective acid trip. Maybe there was a mold in the skate rink, the one that made the girls in Salem all get tried as witches. Did they think they were getting younger? Did they imagine that body parts grew back on their own?

"Eben!" shouted Vera across the rink. "No Madonna! Madonna doesn't work!" She had ditched her blouse and was now wearing just her bra, her body glistening with sweat. Randy was taking in the sights, weaving behind her like a mako shark behind a seal.

Kyle's entire skull seeming to glow under its skin. I pushed off the wall with enough force to ruffle the Coke advertisements stuck to the side. For lack of anything better to do, I hit the rink, being careful to take it along the edges, getting no more than a stride inside the invisible line. Lava! Hot lava! A child's voice played in my head. Going back a day at a time seemed a safe rate. Best not to screw with the natural order too much. Dabbling, was what we were doing. Dabbling. Nothing serious. Nothing like Mary Ellen's consequences.

What you forget to think about is the logistics of the situation. You couldn't think about it, you'd want it too badly. Instead you think about the hairline you had when you were seventeen, you think about the way you could stroke off forty times a day and only because you had to sleep and go to school during the rest of the time. You think about how each of your coworkers were skating back days they already spent inside this former fall-out shelter, spinning hot dogs on heated spindles and handing out skeeball tickets to 8-year-olds. You think about how you could do things over — if you could go back again — you could ask Mary Ellen for a date. And then she wouldn't ever have to date criminals and assholes and take up smoking and get cancer and a ruined face and a mouth that had formed a perpetual

frown over time, like tire ruts in a gravel driveway. Enough time and you could go to college with the incoming freshmen, get a real degree and not some late-night-television infomercial certificate of technology that didn't mean nothing when you actually tried to get a job somewhere that needed a resume instead of a paper application.

Mary Ellen had her purse on her shoulder and was clipping her lighter to her jeweled leather cigarette pouch, the conclusive movement that signaled the end of every shift since I'd known her.

"You're not going to skate no more?" I shouted over The Hollies *The Air That I Breathe*.

She shook her head and smashed her lips together, then bumped the door open with her butt and for a moment, she was cast in shadow, backlit by the golden cast of an orange sunset. She paused again and I skated over the carpet, reaching to steady myself at the cashier's table. The front wheel of my skate kissed the entryway but she had already walked backwards into the parking lot.



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Wendy Wimmer Fall 2020

 jetfuelreview.com/wendy-wimmer-fall-2020.html

I drove my rental car straight from the Dublin airport to the museum but I still managed to miss the staff, who had all left for the night. I was greeted by the museum guard – tired, eyeing up a Thermos against the cold dark. I knew without knowing that it probably contained more than coffee, so I affected my best – or worst -- Appalachian accent, appealing to his blue-collar roots, or whatever they called it in the Emerald Isle. Maybe the working class wore green? I was wearing my great-grandmother's favorite brooch, a glittering owl with two large diamond eyes and citrine feathers, grasping a green chalcedony branch. I took care to cover it with an obviously hand knit scarf. If he would have seen the jewels, he certainly would have balked and shut me out – he was the type. Hell, I was the type too. I shouldn't have even worn it to travel in – it was too dear -- but I had brief hopes of getting an upgrade on the transatlantic flight. Sometimes that worked. It hadn't worked this time, but it definitely was a good luck charm hidden under my layers, because he shrugged and decided I was boring enough to be a research scientist. I promised him I just wanted to be easy, stay out of his way, really I wanted to set up my workstation and apply the first coat to the specimen, that's all, but he was already going back to his desk and small television.

I often joked that I was descended from lumber barons, railroad barons, but really, my grandbarons hadn't pillaged land. They had pillaged people – factories where retirement funds weren't necessary because the workers rarely retired, either choosing to die stooped over their workstations, or picking up the rare forms of malignancy that for some reason weren't very rare in the buildings that bore my mother's family name. My ancestors wouldn't have approved of my line of work – or really, my line of *very erudite volunteerism* as the trust attorney liked to call it. When I made preparations for this trip, he had savored that line once again, rolling it around in his mouth like a pearl onion, and I had to suffer through it until he handed off my money. MY money.

I liked to say that my family had left me orphaned but comfortable – I had some trust money that kept me from being homeless, just barely. Tenure jobs in my field are less common than unicorns and you practically had to wait for someone to die to get their job but I never thought I'd be pushing forty and still doomed to an adjunct's life of making less than \$2K per month without medical benefits.

My coterie of past roommates always picked on my penchant for wearing my brooch. One thing I understand from my family, pinched scarce relatives that they were, is that real

wealth always recognizes their own kind. That stupid owl brooch had gotten me into just enough places and rubbing elbows with just enough of the right kind of people. I always felt moments away from getting the big patron to support what my great aunt liked to refer to as my *unfortunate history habit*.

Once inside the antiquities lab, I found that nothing had been prepared for my work in advance, but this was to be expected – everything is always underfunded and academics were generally more interested in their own research unless they could get a co-credit. But there it was – my date for the night and I had it all to myself.

When the workers had found Cloonageeher Man, the body was curled in a fetal position, one femur snapped in two by the peat threshing machine, signs of ritualistic overkilling, its thoughtful eyes closed to the damp morning, its hair dyed red by the tannins in the sphagnum. They thought the body was a recent murder victim. *Recent*, they thought, as in the last few years, maybe a decade at most. They thought it was a fresh kill.

Most bog bodies look like empty people-shaped balloons at best, unidentifiable misshapen clumps of trash marked only by small terrible reminders of humanity, a blob with a perfect foot, a deflated football that turns out to be a crushed head, for instance, or, like Kayhausen Boy, looking very much like a discarded and dirty snowsuit that some child had forgotten after a busy day of make believe.

But Cloonageeher Man was mostly there, recognizable, unmistakably male, impressively rendered in its humanity, complete with a hammered copper armband. There was also a grinning slice under its chin where it had received the killing blow, followed by a braided leather cord that may have hung the body after death, or completed the dirty execution that had been botched in a rush or in a passion.

“Hello handsome,” I said. Maybe that was what did it, some kind of incantation. Handsome it was not, but I had started mentally referring to it as Clooney just the same. The face was one of the better bog faces I had seen – only some compression, eyelashes resting on the gritty brow as though it were still sleeping. The skin was rumped in on itself, dark bronze, like leather, like statuary, an expensive leather throw one might buy in a fancy mall. Its chin still had stubble, the mouth closed to murdered secrets.

I had a powerful urge to lean over and kiss the lips, and caught myself. The things we think when we are all alone. Ultimately, people in charge of seductive human remains had done far worse. Eva Peron’s embalmed body, for instance, and that doctor in Key West who fell in love with his terminal tuberculosis patient. What was a little kiss here?

The team had done the medical imaging already, so we already knew the body still had internal organs. That itself wasn’t unusual. Usually bog bodies were murdered in a

seemingly rushed affair, without the formal preparations for burial. However this one also had bones – which was very rare with bog bodies, especially ones as old as Cloonageeher Man. The bog juices and plant matter keeps the soft tissues and even the fingernails looking pristine, half moons along the fingernail beds as though the person had been only a nightmare away from waking – but the sphagnum generally leached out calcium, one thing healthy bones need. There must have been something special about the flora of that particular bog where Clooney had rested millennia, something about its long nap that made this one special.

Sphagnum moss was capable of holding over 25 times as much water as itself -- I felt like sphagnum moss sometimes, overly full of history and worries and inappropriate impulses. But unlike my anxiety, sphagnum prevented human remains from putrefying, essentially leaving the body preserved – but sometimes crushed eventually by the weight of water and time. Some kind of Iron Age magic tea, I had said in my grant proposal for this project, a grant proposal that was denied.

Cloonageeher Man was so freshly pulled from that quiet internment, a midpoint between earth and water that lacked oxygen – that its preserved flesh was still pure. Exposure to the air was only just starting to oxidize the muscle. Left out of the bog environment, the body hardens and loses plasticity, recoils as time itself speeds up or perhaps unravels, first cracking and then flaking, turning powdery and eventually crumbling into powdery dust in the period of just a few months.

To combat this rapid deterioration, I had tapped criminal forensic scientists who had been experimenting with a way to revive desiccated skin to help with body identification, retrieving fingerprints and identifying scars on corpses long exposed to more brutal elements. It was worth a shot the next time they pulled up a juicy one and given the decades before bog body discovery, I never thought I'd get tapped only a year after my paper was published theorizing this treatment. And then, the invitation from the Museum and then a quick money tap from my dwindling resources and then here I was and here it was, Clooney, my golden boy who would deliver me tenure on a silver platter.

The chemical broth smelled like moss – Icelandic this time, full of anti-oxidants. Rich wives discovered it first, anointing their décolletage to reverse sun damage from their bikini-wearing vacations in Bimini, Palm Springs and Monaco, or wherever it was the nouveau riche went these days. I still identified with old money enough to disdain the newly wealthy, even though I had only heard stories of my matriarchal family's excesses and had never dipped a toe myself, a poor relation as those with wealth tended to whisper. It was my lot in life to be invited to distant family weddings and arrive with empty Tupperware in my tote bag so that I could dine on leftover prime rib. It would be better after tenure though. It would be better after I documented and preserved Clooney and took my place among the paleoanthropology glitterati.

For now, I started with the face, using a cosmetics-grade fan brush, purchased in a Sephora that smelled like lilies and copper balanced with acrid indulgence and need. I had to put it on my credit card but I had kept the receipts and was slightly worried that the university would think I had a cosmetics splurge on their dime. The cadaver forensic goop was cool to the touch. I applied a very light skim of it over Clooney's amber skin. Up close, pores were visible, tendons, veins on a particularly strong-looking forearm. Was that a very delicate scar? Perhaps chicken pox? The first gel coat quenches oxidation. The next evening, the body would sink into a tank full of the stuff, some seven thousand dollars worth of fancy Beverly Hills housewife goo.

Already the facial skin I had treated looked more wholesome, a bit more vital. The reality of the body was hard to parse – Clooney performed as a doll when I had arrived, but now with the glistening salve, its skin was plumping up, looking more like roasted meat, like pork or perhaps a leaner game cut, something like venison.

I lost myself in the minutia, poring over its fundament with delicate kisses of the brush, *whisk whisk whisk*. The slurry turned bronze as well, the tannins oozing forward, a smell like burnt coffee and mushroom and sewage but somehow savory, like rotting beef stew. Venison, I corrected myself, its hand in mine, fingers outstretched, the index finger tickling my wrist while I brushed the goop around its thumb.

I had made it all the way down to the inner thigh when I heard a sound. *Chaaaaaa wish*. It was an owlish sound, a keening.

Dia hish

Again. It was the sound of something papery shuffling against dry wood.

Dia hswith

I leaned back on the work stool and craned my neck to look through the open door down the hallway. The security guard was sure to be around. "Hello?" My voice echoed down the corridor. This was the beginning to every horror movie, the penultimate scene before a killer wearing a sporting mask stabs the heroine through the head with a machete. "Hello?"

Dia dwish. The sound again.

I leaned forward and looked at Clooney. Its eyelids unshuttered, empty places where eyeballs once were. Like occurred in its kinsman Grauballe Man, the eyeballs of Clooney had shriveled and marbled under the pressure of plant matter, decades of Irish peat cutting machines weighing down with every pass. There was nothing there, a dark clot of

tissue in each socket, a mottled raisin that might once have been bright green or a dazzling hazel.

It was fascinating to see the body begin to articulate its extremities. The eyelid membranes were so thin; it wasn't surprising that they should move slightly as the moisturizing liquid rehydrated the cells. I snapped several pictures of Clooney's face, the lashes parted, the eyebrows seeming to furrow now.

All who had inspected Clooney agreed that it was definitely an overkill specimen, likely a former king given the body's location near a king-making hill. In Clooney's case, the leather garrote was still wrapped around its throat, which also had been sliced open -- and the skull was crushed, which might have been done post-mortem, but also might have been a bludgeoning. Clooney was scheduled to be undressed and the archaeologists firmly expected to find stab wounds under its wrappings. The unveiling would be delayed until the photographers from National Geographic were available, which could be a week or more.

I scrawled a reminder to do more research into the Sleeping Beauty of Capuchin, a child who died of pneumonia after World War I and was essentially mummified and is displayed in the catacombs. With temperature fluctuations, her tiny eyelids partially open from time to time, revealing intact bright blue eyes under the lids -- but of course, that body was only 90 years old and had been interred with more modern chemical cocktails of zinc, glycerin and aspirin. On second thought, I also wrote "Lady Dai Zhui?" and underlined it. Lady Dai Zhui might have walked the planet at the same time as Clooney, roughly 300 to 100 BC. Not only were her mummified organs intact and her limbs flexible but the blood in her veins could even be ABO typed -- and to this day, researchers have not been able to figure out how she was prepared for mummification and, more specifically, why.

There was something fascinating about how we treat and mistreat our dead. Women generally seemed to get the brunt of it, although here we were, roles reversed, Clooney on the table and I with my fancy makeup brush. I thought again about the fund lawyer suggesting I go into mortuary science instead of archeological. At least it would provide a living wage, but I would have to deal with fresh grief, identities and legacies and mistreated relations cut out of endowments.

Diar wish. The feathery sound again, prickling the back of my neck. I dropped my fan brush to the floor. It did sound like the noise was right there next to me. The sound of maybe a knife being sharpened on a leather strap, a creaking empty sound.

Clooney's lips had previously been pressed together, but now they had the appearance of parting, opening, jaw perhaps unclenching as the elixir did its work to saturate the ligaments and sinew.

I took another photo, and flipped backward to check the previous ones – the lips had definitely begun to get plumper and were dropping open. Clooney’s last moments still evident on the facial expression of grim endurance that it had worn throughout millennia. Now it was changing. My actions were changing it. Clearly the forensics fluid was more powerful than I had originally anticipated – less than an ounce applied to the mandibular area had penetrated the hinge joints, and gravity now pulled it forward out of the post-mortem eternal clench. I wrote furiously on a fresh sheet in my notebook.

Jihar witchhhhh. A sense of movement out of the corner of my eye. His face, the eyes, his mouth. *Diaarrrr winch*. His lips were out of alignment, air sucking from somewhere inside his body, a hidden fissure or stab wound through the ribs, inflating his old compressed preserved lungs.

What I want to say is “How is this happening” and what I want to do is run away and find that guard and what I want to think about is getting tenure and a job offer from Harvard and what I want to do is kiss his mouth and wake up because I’m clearly having a jet lag hallucination and what I do instead is remain sitting on the stool and instead I said “Oh, it’s you.”

The burnt corks in his eye sockets moved in concert toward the owl brooch pinned to my sweater lapel, glittering dazzling under the harsh examination lights.

His fingers flexed, twitching.

“Diar wish.” It was old Gaelic. *Hello*, he was saying. *Hello again*. We might only have moments together. Minutes. Seconds. Harvard. Maybe I’d prefer the weather in Stanford more. The staff would be here in the morning. This moment would never come again.

I picked up the fan brush and dipped it into the forensic balm. “Hello, handsome.” I said again. How this must seem to him, to be one moment a king and the next, lying on a steel autopsy table. How I must seem to him.

I brushed the saliva-like goop around his parched lips while picking up my phone to film. In frame, out of focus, the brush working around his mouth while the autofocus worked to settle on his brittle leather fingers, reaching out toward the camera.