

SATIRE

Michael Hollister

(1938- )

Barthelbe Brothers Mortuary (2009)

They drove in a prickly silence.

Rex turned her rental car into a slot next to a potted sapling at the Morehead Mall. Diana blew her nose and adjusted her dark glasses. They got out into the noon glare, she pulled the strap of her bag up higher on her shoulder and Rex showed her to Barthelbe Brothers Mortuary next to Computerland. Behind the glass facade the foyer looked empty.

They stepped inside the cool bare reception area and stood on a gray carpet in front of a gray desk with casket brochures on it. Beyond the desk two doors set at angles to each other had pale gray words over them, *Luxury* in script over one and Economy in plain letters over the other. The gray vinyl chairs were modern and the muzak was the popular television theme from *Star Trek*, accompanying a poster on the wall advertising the dispersion of ashes in space. They sat down near a steel urn ashtray that looked as if it might contain somebody. Rex leaned forward and sorted through the magazines on the low table, mortuary and sci fi mostly, with some postmodern art. He showed Diana an ad for busts of celebrities made from the ashes of ordinary people mixed with resin and painted to look alive. Give your loved one eternal life as Elvis! A salesman appeared in a gray suit of European cut and multicolored sneakers. He had a tuft of beard and thin gray hair slipping back from his forehead that thickened and curled up behind his neck. He welcomed them, clasped his hands behind his back and peered at Diana through his glasses like an expert with a doctorate in death.

“Yes, I--” she lost her voice. Trying again, “I’m Diana Hartfield. I’m here about Yakov Tete.”

“Ah, yes. We’ve been expecting you.”

He bowed slightly, made an ushering gesture and led her through the door into *Luxury*, a windowless gallery draped with black velvet. Rex hung back to wait for her, leaning in the doorway with leathery brown hands and face, thumbs in his jeans, curled straw cowboy hat tipped forward and tawny hair feathering back in swoops from under the hat.

To the music of *Star Trek*, Diana followed the salesman down an aisle between two rows of open caskets, all in each row set at the same angle. The air felt conditioned and cool. Ahead at the end of the aisle, on a platform like an altar, a pink neon cactus stood like a lopsided crucifix potted in a brass spittoon. Jack would have enjoyed the profane joke, the mocking artifice of a cactus crucifix holding its arms up like a robbery. Otherwise the black velvet gallery was a showcase for the two angled rows of samples on display. Each casket along the rows was heavy, polished and empty, with a cushy soft interior that looked comfortable. Halfway down the aisle the salesman handed her a price list covered in plastic, then he clasped his hands behind his back and smiled with thin closed lips, his goatlike tuft of beard curling up and his glasses blank as he watched Diana look over his gallery of caskets.

He rapped one with his knuckle.

“Nondegradable.”

The lighting of the gallery exaggerated angles, making the caskets look like open books with ornamental fittings and shiny handles. Diana bent over a snow white satin interior and peered at a design inside the coffin lid. Above where the face of the departed would be, if there was a face, a postmodern collage displayed ads and clippings and headlines in what Yakov would have called random signification without continuity or closure. Pop celebrities and other trivia were juxtaposed with images of human tragedy to convey a vision of life as ephemeral and absurd.

She pulled off her dark glasses, but that did not help.

“What does it mean?”

“Nothing,” the salesman looked pleased. “It’s a style. Depth without meaning. We’ve revitalized the language of death.”

“Who will be able to read it?”

He smiled with a clever ripple of his lips closed tight above his goat boy beard.

“The mourners of course.”

"How...unusual."

"Not anymore. We've started a chain."

"Of mourners?"

"The purpose of a funeral is to help the mourners feel glad they're not the one in the casket, right?"

"Silly me. I thought it was to honor the deceased."

"As you wish."

Diana stepped away from the salesman and looked around at Rex leaning against the doorframe like her bodyguard in cowboy boots with hat tipped forward and askance.

"If you'd prefer something traditional, we have a catalogue."

"Thank you, but I don't have time for that. The body has to be shipped home to New York City. His relatives will want to choose the actual casket, I just need something functional."

"Ah. The departed is in transition."

"Something simple."

"Yes, of course. My brother will be glad to show you what he has in that line. Something minimalist."

"More basic."

"Of course."

From the breast pocket of his suit he handed her a limp pink balloon stenciled with his mortuary logo. Then he pulled out a blue one, but Rex gave him a prickly look. Through the door to Economy they were met passively by a man wearing a plaid shirt in a Walmart cut with a green eco button on his breast pocket, jeans faded to a fashionable degree and eyes like melting ice crystals. He had less hair than his brother, shiny bald from his brow over the top of his head, with a faint mustache and fringe of beard. His gallery had the lighting of a laundromat full of shiny aluminum caskets stacked against the walls like tins of sardines. Diana covered her mouth with her hand.

"Would you care to sit down?" The salesman did not change expression as he stepped forward without reaching out.

"I'll be all right," she straightened up.

He called her attention to a shiny aluminum sample on display with the lid shut and a porthole on top of one end. She peered down through the hole to where the face would be, if there was a face.

There was no silver lining.

"This is our Deluxe."

Rex stepped up and tapped the Deluxe with the toe of his cowboy boot. Then he kicked it, making a clank. His jaws were whiskered like a cactus. A real one, not pink neon. Frowning, he stepped back. Under the brim of his hat, through a prickly squint he scrutinized the salesman.

"You make it so dirt gets shoveled into the face?"

"The occupant is dead."

"It's like a shithole in an outhouse."

"The hole speeds up recycling. Rodents and worms can--"

"--Oh, please!" The limp pink balloon dangled from her hand like a condom. Quickly she stuffed it into her bag. "He did hate closure."

"We can seal it or install a glass window if you wish."

"No, it doesn't matter."

Surveying his inventory, the salesman related in a monotone, "Lots of people want open caskets now, to see how bad the corpse looks. They like to see other people looking worse than they do. The Deluxe is our best seller. Popular with busy people. It doesn't matter how the occupant is dressed, if at all, and no one has to get close. The spacey feel of it comes from emptying. As you can see, we have no soft interior and everything is flat and bare and uniform as much as possible."

From overhead speakers, the *Star Trek* music played over and over. Diana looked around at the stacks of aluminum space capsules gleaming in the fluorescent light. "He was in an accident. His head. There's nothing left that anyone would want to look at."

"We specialize in artificial faces," smiled the salesman. "Would you like to see our catalogue?"

"Not really."

"Do you have a picture of the occupant?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, less is more. Perhaps you could describe him. We don't need much to go on. We use stereotypes."

She glanced around, "Is this all there is?"

Rex pulled down his hatbrim. As he walked away, the back of his faded blue denim jacket conveyed a broad reproach.

"We do carry something plain," replied the salesman. "As opposed to minimal. The bottom line. It's down at the end."

He led her through the stacks of aluminum containers to the end of the gallery. The plain style turned out to be closed boxes made of fresh yellow pine. She smelled the sweet wood. Rex put his arm around a pine coffin and ran his fingertips over the grain. He was prickly today and the wood felt smooth. Feeling the grain with him she traced the veins and inhaled the fragrance of the wood and Rex.

"We don't make this style ourselves," the salesman kept his distance. "This is the last of a lot."

She had to get out of here.

Rex stood with his arm around the coffin like a brother while she quickly wrote a check and gave the salesman the Tetes' address in New York City. Then she hurried back to the foyer and plunged outside into the heat. The hot air blew into her face like a suffocation. The potted sapling in the parking lot wavered into a mirage and she felt dizzy, gasping beyond Computerland. She had to get out of this mall. Around a corner she found an exit into open air and stumbled up a hill. She had to get away, had to make it up to the crest of this hill, much higher than it looked. The ground rough under high dry grass, she had to keep moving up but she stumbled, falling to her knees. After a moment, in a welter of sweat and gasping, she got her breath and tried to rise.

The mall lay below her.

Up here she could breathe again in the quiet, the parched grass prickly on her ankles and the sun burning down on her head. She smelled the hot dry land. Up here on a hill above Morehead Gap, she felt a long way from Yakov Tete and had a clear view of the whole affair. She let him intrude upon what was supposed to be her sanctuary for the summer, let him come out as a guest in her aunt's old house--she even let him back into her bed! Now, in an afterglow of pink neon cactus tacky and spineless, his pink face came to mind at the moment when he let it slip that he did not get a blood test after all. You misread me, Di. She stumbled down the hill, feeling buzzy.

At the bottom, Rex sat waiting in the shade of the white rental car with his arms folded, his back against a wheel and the curled straw hat pulled down over his eyes. He heard her coming and stood up, a handy blur in the glare as she wiped the wet strands off her forehead, realizing what she must look like. They returned to the car in silence. He drove her back slowly on the old road through the wheatfields instead of on the expressway. With open windows her hair blew lashing across her face. She shut her eyes tight as the image of Jack blew through her eyelids red and his head disintegrated into bits and specks dispersing in the waves of heat that were rippling the asphalt into mirage. She felt like such a fool. Whatever attracted her to him in the first place, what mattered now was whether her own immune deficiency would prove to be fatal.

"Listen, Diana. He set you up," Rex absolved her.

"I have some responsibility."

"He brought it on himself."

Rex sounded as prickly as his whiskers. The feeling he gave her now though was not of cactus but of ripe wheat bristling in the heartland where a desert used to be, grain yellow like the coffin.

"Thanks, Rex. For sticking up for me."

"I think you should have burned the guy."

She tasted ashes. Hair blowing around in the hot breeze, she nodded with the ripening wheat and let the strands lash her face.

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