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*Marc Simon
Departures*

DR. JOSEPH TELLS ME, "Brandi, always greet them with a bright smile and a happy demeanor. Imagine you are St. Peter at the pearly gate. Be reassuring. Comforting. Angelic."

Angelic my ass. I'm no angel, I can tell you that. Far from it. Drugs, drink, getting knocked up at 15, dropping out of school at 16, arrested at 17, stripping at 18, there wasn't much I didn't do wrong. I'm 22 now, and way past that young girl foolishness, but still, no one ever confuses me with Shirley Temple.

I only do this receptionist job three days a week here at Departures because Gas 'N Go cut my hours and my landlord upped the damn the rent \$25 dollars. It's \$350 a month for two moldy rooms plus bath that look out over the dumpster in the alley behind the building, but it beats living with my mother.

Departures is one of them assisted suicide clinics they made legal here in Oregon a while ago. All you need to kill yourself is a tank of helium—the party stores sell them to blow up balloons—some plastic tubing and a plastic bag with a drawstring big enough to fit over your head. Then you just tighten the drawstring and turn on the gas. Doctor Joseph says it's a painless passing, but how would he know? No one ever came back to tell the tale.

Dr. Joseph also says Departures provides a compassionate service for old folks that want to take the big sleep whenever they damn well feel like it. Well, he doesn't say it in those words exactly. In the little pamphlet we give out, it reads, "Every competent adult has the inalienable right to die with dignity, in the manner and time of their own choosing."

How do I feel about it? I'm not saying I agree with that, and I'm not saying I don't, but like I said, I need the job and Dr. Joseph pays me cash money. What these people want to do with their lives, it's none of my business. I just hand out the consent forms and pens attached to a clipboard—gotta be careful about the pens, these old people will pocket anything that's not nailed down—and then enter it into the computer. I don't get involved with the actual event, as Dr. Joseph puts it. Never really wanted to.

When it's slow in here, which is often, I do my on-line college class. I'm taking up criminal justice. I already know a good bit about the system from personal experience. The classwork, it's pretty easy. They lay out it all for you, what's right and what's wrong, in black and white, which is what somebody ought to have done for me a long time ago.

As you might imagine, most of the time it's pretty glum in this place, and the syrupy Muzak makes it even worse. Although you'd be surprised, some of these folks—clients, Dr. Joseph calls them—are kind of cheery. I guess they're suffering so much from what ails them, they're looking forward to whatever they think comes next. I'm sure they got it all worked out in their own mind, Heaven and all, a release from pain and being a burden on family and friends. Maybe they think they're moving on to a

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better place. I got my doubts. All that pie in the sky, eternal rest, angels on high stuff, your guess is as good as mine.

The ones that piss and moan and cry about whether to go through with it, they're the ones that bug me. They should have thought about that before they made their non-refundable down payment. I go through at least five boxes of Kleenex a week with that lot.

Now Doctor Joseph isn't a bad guy, even if you believe helping people kill themselves is immoral. He's convinced he's doing the right thing. Plus, he's a family man and a regular churchgoer. I've seen the photos on his desk. I guess he must have squared it with God about what he does at Departures.

Well, this morning, things were slower than a turtle crawling through tar. All we had on the books was one exit for later that morning, then nothing, not even a consultation for the rest of the day. I'm sitting at the front desk, sipping a Red Bull and reading a *People Magazine* from 1991 which I already read three times when Dr. Joseph asks me to come in his office, he wants to run some ideas by me. I figure the only reason he asked me is that nobody else works here.

He motions for me to sit down across from him. "Brandi," he says, "I've put together some ideas that could be the turning point for our business."

I don't know where he gets this *our* business from, but I say, "Come ahead."

He clears his throat, as if he's about to make a speech to the President. "In a world of parity products and services, what is it that makes one business stand out from the competition?" He turns his laptop toward me so we both can see the screen. The word Marketing comes up in all capitals. "In a word, marketing. My belief is that with targeted, strategic marketing, I can grow Departures into a company that will not only provide a steady income stream but also be a franchise I can pass on to my daughters should they, God willing, choose to follow in my footsteps." He gets a little misty-eyed.

I say, "Uh huh."

He blows his nose. "So, how can we differentiate Departures from the rest? In a word, celebration. When you come to Departures, it's a celebration. We need to celebrate the entire life exit process, make it a positive experience."

I give him my best squint eye. "Celebrate? We're celebrating death?"

"Not death. End of life. What I'm saying is, we will help our clients celebrate their noble, courageous decision. And how will we do this? By offering a unique variety of products and services that celebrate the day." He gets this squirrely look on him like I seen on crazy teenage boys.

I say, "Maybe I'm thick but I don't quite follow."

"This will explain." He opens up his Power Point presentation, titled *Departures Celebratory Getaway Packages*. I read them to myself as he goes from slide to slide:

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The Easy Way Out™: For a flat fee of \$1000, Departures supplies flowers and floral bouquets, recorded music, folding chairs, a simple but elegant program booklet and register book. Includes Dr. Joseph's assistance with the exit. Customer provides his/her own helium tank and exit bag. Limited to six guests.

The Next Level™: Begins at \$1600. Clients not only get all of the above, plus the following options: hot or cold food trays—Kosher, vegetarian, gluten-free or Vegan, slightly higher—choice of plastic or real China, napkins and linens with or without monograms at the client's option, videotaping of the event and Dr. Joseph's assistance. Client provides his/her own helium tank and exit bag, or it can be provided for a fee. Limited to 12 guests. Extra guests at additional cost.

The Golden Getaway™: Flat fee of \$4000, client gets all Next Level amenities, with even more food options both hot and cold, dessert buffet including chocolate fountain, alcoholic and non-alcoholic punch, a live string quartet, keepsakes of the day, a take-home goodie bag, a sermon/homile specially crafted by Dr. Joseph (extra), newspaper notices if desired, and one hour of after-event counseling provided by Dr. Joseph or a grief therapist of your choosing. (Additional hours at \$400 per hour.) Guest limit 20.

It takes me a second to drink it all in. "What's them little TMs mean?"

He says he's trademarking the titles to protect his intellectual property. "Now, I believe most people will opt for *The Next Level*. According to my projections, if we have approximately 100 events per year, based on an overall average of \$2500, we stand to gross approximately \$250,000. So what do you think?"

The man is either a genius or crazy. "Looks like you got her all figured out."

He shakes his head. "Not quite." He clicks to the next slide. "This document is crucial." It says, *Successful Brand Strategizing*.

He tells me how we answer these questions may well be the difference between success and failure. He moves the cursor over the first one: What is your company's mission? He looks at me. I feel as if I'm in 9th grade and Mr. Owen my math teacher just called on me and I wasn't paying no attention. "Well, if you really to know, I'd say the mission is to make a shitload of money."

He sighs. "Yes, but I mean, I was thinking in more brand positioning terms at this point, not so much about monetizing various aspects of the operation. Let's try another one: What are the barriers to communicating your company's mission or position in the marketplace?"

I'm coming up dry as a hangover. "You got me there, doc."

He puts his hands on his cheeks. "Yes, it's a tough one. It can mean so many things. Let's move on. Who are your primary, secondary and tertiary audiences?"

The doorbell chimes. I think, saved by the bell. I go into the reception room. Standing there is a crinkly old woman, skinny, with a raggedy scarf draped over her head. She looks up. "Brandi?"

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I say, "Ma?"

"What did you do to your hair? It's all blue."

Immediately I push my bangs back. "Never mind about my hair, Ma. What the hell are you doing here?"

She coughs a few times and it sounds like she has a chest full of gravel. "There's only one reason, Brandi." She steadies herself against the handle on a long helium tank on wheels. She must have gotten from a toy store, because stenciled up the side it says, Party Time Fun! It's decorated with red and blue balloons and a clown's face. Looped over the end of it is a large plastic bag. "But hold on, now. What are *you* doing here?"

"I work here."

I haven't seen Ma for five years because she kicked me out of her trailer when I gave up my baby. She laid into me good when she found out, screaming and hollering like I was the Devil come to Earth, and how could I turn my back on her granddaughter and my own flesh and blood. As if it had been easy for me to give her up, like I was giving up cherry pie for Lent. Oh, we went at each other pretty strong for some time until I walked out. I swore that day I'd never talk to her again. Still, seeing her here of all places, in the state she's in, it has me shook up good.

I'm about to tell her to turn her ass around and leave when she holds a skinny arm out to me. "Brandi-lamb, come here." She hasn't called me that since I was a child. She grabs my wrist and whispers, "Honey, don't be mad at me. I got the cancer of the gut. Real bad."

My throat gets real tight and I can't talk for several seconds. I want to say I'm sorry but the words don't come out. I just say, "Oh, Ma."

"They say there ain't a blessed thing they can do about it."

"Who says?"

"Two doctors I been to." Her breath wheezes as if she swallowed a whistle. "So it's settled in my mind."

Dr. Joseph holds his hand out to my mother. "Mrs. Potter! So nice to see you again."

I turn around. Mr. Joseph has this big stupid smile on his face. "Hold on there. How do you know my ma?"

"Your ma? But your name is Daniels."

"That's because she stuck me with my daddy's name."

My mother says, "Now Brandi, don't start in fresh on that."

Dr. Joseph says, "Mrs. Potter—your mother—came in to do her paper-work last Tuesday, when you were off. We scheduled her exit for today. And thank you, Mrs. Potter, for being so punctual."

She holds out a handful of bills. "I got the rest of the money right here, sir."

I put my hand over hers. "You put that away right now, Ma."

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Dr. Joseph says, "But Brandi, your mother has chosen with her own free will. Death with dignity. It's her right."

"You just shut up about it, you money grubber. You and your dumb-ass Strategic Brand bullshit. Selling suicide like it was vacation cruises."

My mother says, "I'm very sorry, Doctor Joseph. She always had a smart mouth on her.

"Shut up, Ma."

"Mrs. Potter, if you could come into my office we can begin."

"Don't you move a step closer. She ain't going nowhere with you." I stack myself between him and my ma.

"Always strong willed, even as a child. She gets that from her Grand-pap Lloyd Potter, Lord rest his soul."

"I said shut up."

Mr. Joseph backs off a bit. I guess he can see the fire in my eyes. "Brandi, please. I know you're feeling a bit conflicted. It's only natural. But this is your mother's decision. And, I might add, trying to influence a client one way or the other while an employee of Departures is strictly forbidden."

"Oh yeah? Well I quit." I toss my nametag on the floor and grab my mother by the wrist, thin and bony. "Come on, Ma."

We sit side by side on a bench outside the ice cream shop across the street. My mother has lit up a Pall Mall. I tell her to put it out, but she says, "It don't matter now, hon. I'm too far gone already. Did I tell you your father called?"

"What?"

"Yes, just last week, out of the clear blue sky."

"Well how would I know, Ma? I haven't talked to you in five years." I can't even remember what my father looks like, except he had a mustache that tickled when he kissed me. "What did he want?"

"Oh, we just talked about this and that. He's doing pretty good these days. Working out in North Dakota in that oil boom. He asked after you."

"Yeah? He got no business with me. Or you, after what he done. You tell him that."

"Now honey, don't get all persnickety. I buried my anger with him a long time ago. It didn't do no good to stew on it. Anyway, he says he's changed. Took him 20 years and two coronaries to get his mind right, he says. I told him you were fine and happy, since I hoped you was. Any-way, he sent money. For the both of us."

"I don't want his money."

"Well, you're gonna get it anyway, after I've gone. It's in the will."

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I try to keep my voice calm, even though I feel like shaking her. "Ma, do you realize what you're doing?"

"I read up on it some."

"But you don't have to do this. You don't. There's alternatives."

"Brandi-lamb, they already trimmed out about everything they can down there. There's nothing else to be done."

A stinging feeling runs across my forehead. I want to ask her why she never tried to get in touch with me, but I already know. It's the same reason I never tried to get in touch with her. Guess we're just too much alike. "I don't mean that. I mean, if it comes to it, you can get hospice care."

She crushes her cigarette on the sidewalk. "Oh, that. I read up on that, too. I'm not gonna hang on like a vegetable on morphine. That's not living. That's eroding. And I'm sure not gonna be a burden to anyone, especially you. I can't think of nothing more selfish, making a person sit around and wait for their mother to die." She runs her fingers through my hair. I can feel the bones in the tips of her fingers. "You're so pretty. Always was. Even now with that blue hair. You filled out nice. You got a fellow?"

I think about Tyler and how all he wants to do is work out at Crunchers and play Xbox 360 and do Jagermeister shots and screw me. "Not really."

She inhales sharply. She closes her eyes for a few seconds. "I'm so glad you was working there at Departures. Maybe it was meant to be, this illness. You see how it's brought us together."

A bus passes by. We sit there for a while. The sun feels warm on my face. "Mama, I'm scared."

She rubs my neck. "Scared? What are you scared about, sweetheart?"

I lean my head on her shoulder. "I don't know. Everything. I'm scared for you. And for me. If you go I got nothing. No baby. No mama. Nothing."

"Oh, honey. You have your whole life ahead of you."

"My life is a big zero."

"I know you feel that way now. Wasn't long ago I felt that way, too. Even before the cancer. But then I heard from your daddy. And I found you. Funny how sometimes, things turn out. Then we move on." She takes my hand. "Honey, can I buy you an ice cream? You still like chocolate, right?"

I slouch forward. "Yeah."

"It was always your favorite. Let's get us double scoop." She pulls me up as she gets to her feet. "Come with me."