

## WORKING STIFF

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Brackish water dripped down my face and into my wide open eyes. It burned, but I was helpless. I couldn't even blink. As I lay flat on my back in the mud, a circle of faceless figures stared down at me. Covered head-to-toe in white, only their eyes were visible. One of them probed the grisly wound on my temple with tweezers.

"Who did this to you, darlin'?" murmured the prober. Of course, I couldn't answer him that it was my dentist. "Turn her over," he said. The other wraiths leaned down and grabbed me by my shoulders and feet, flipping me onto my stomach. In the process, my rank hair fell forward to cover my face and fetid water trickled into my mouth.

"No lividity," I heard him say. "She was killed within an hour or two of being dumped in the river. You can take her to the morgue now."

I was rolled back to the face-up position, but this time the three ghostly attendants hoisted me onto a clammy plastic surface. As I stared up at the sky, the sound of a zipper advanced toward my head until I was in complete darkness. Dank, still air filled my nostrils, but at least now I could breathe. I felt myself lifted up.

"Jeez, Zoya," whispered a disembodied voice. "You been mainlining pierogi? I swear you've gained twenty pounds since the last time."

Because he knew me as Zoya, Bobby assumed I was Russian. In truth, I couldn't tell you the difference between a pierogi and Boris Yeltsin. Zoya just sounds more glamorous than Judy MacKenzie. I'm a corpse actor. Dead women are all the rage on TV these days, what with multiple versions of *CSI* and *Law and Order*.

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After several suffocating minutes, the director called “Cut” and someone unzipped the body bag. I sat up, dressed only in my underwear, and accepted a towel from Bobby, who was playing a crime scene investigator. I glared at him as I wiped the East River off my face.

Perhaps sensing my irritation over the comments about my weight, Bobby tried to make amends. “Don’t worry. It hasn’t rained in a few days. I’m sure all the poop has washed into the Long Island Sound by now,” he said. “And we didn’t see a single syringe.” New York was infamous for dumping untreated sewage into the river during storms, along with the occasional batch of illegal medical waste. Oh, and of course, dead bodies, which accounted for the four a.m. makeup call on the Bronx riverbank set of *CSI:NY*.

“Very reassuring,” I said, blotting my hair with the towel.

Just then the Assistant Director shouted, “Lunch! Thirty minutes. Stay in character everyone. We have to do the scene again. The mic picked up some bozo talking about pierogi.” I smirked at Bobby and headed for the craft services table. At \$136 a day, plus an extra \$18 for getting dumped in the river, this gig wouldn’t even cover two days rent for the apartment in Queens that I shared with my sister and her two kids. And that was if I worked every day. So, river stench or no, I planned to take full advantage of the free food provided for the cast.

Standing in line contemplating a display of sushi, I noticed that, as usual, the rest of the cast kept its distance. It might have been the smell, but I suspected that the cloudy gray contact lenses and the fact that the left side of my skull was a bloody pulp were also factors. Only the show’s star seemed willing to stand next to me.

“Nice work today,” he said, filling his plate with unagi. “I couldn’t see you breathing at all.” I tingled with excitement. I was proud of my ability to hold my breath for extended periods, a skill I had achieved by lying at the bottom of the pool at the Ozone Park YMCA, much to the

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chagrin of the lifeguards. I had also perfected the art of remaining perfectly still. Yoga helped with that, as did my ability to recite the presidents of the United States backward in my head.

The star had shed his crime scene suit and now wore khakis and a polo shirt with “Crime Lab” embroidered over his heart. He still wore his white paper shoe covers, though, which added to both the authenticity and the absurdity of things. His character had great empathy for victims, so I always enjoyed working on this show. His probes were gentle and he never made lascivious comments about my half-naked body. And now he had complimented my work. I wondered if he would let me quote him in my IMDb profile.

“Thank you sir. That means a lot. I hope one day to get a role in which I’m still alive.”

He smiled and moved on to the fruit platter while I continued my perusal of the sushi. A whiff of river stink filled my nostrils when a breeze stirred my hair. Suddenly the last thing I wanted was raw fish. I headed for the roast beef and arugula sandwiches on tiny brioche buns, slathering several with horseradish sauce in the hope of clearing the stench out of my sinuses.

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The trunk popped open and I blinked into the harsh sunlight. “Jesus H. Christ,” gasped Grace, as the bottle of wine she held slipped through her fingers. “Do you have to do this shit all the time? The kids will be down any minute.”

I unrolled my stiff limbs and climbed out of the trunk, sidestepping the mess on the pavement. “I was practicing positioning myself. Do you have any idea how many dead bodies are found in car trunks? I was trying to decide whether I should curl up in a fetal position or just lie on my back with my knees bent. It would have been a better test if I were tied up, but it’s hard to tie yourself up.”

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“You are creepy as shit,” said Grace, rolling her eyes. “Melanie still hasn’t gotten over finding you in that bathtub full of ice, blue as a Smurf. C’mon! We’re due at Mom’s in an hour and now we have to stop and get another bottle of wine.”

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“Bettina and I saw “Better Off Dead” again last night. It’s one of our favorites,” said my mom as she cut up four-year-old Melanie’s pork chop. Bettina is Mom’s best friend and the two of them have a standing Friday night date to watch re-runs of *Law and Order: SVU*. “And you were so lifelike! Er, I mean, well you know what I mean, Judy.”

“How many times is that now, Mom, twenty? You *do* know that no matter how often you watch that episode, I won’t make any more money. Residuals are only for principal actors with spoken lines.”

Mom frowned. “Maybe you should get a job with a real paycheck. Bettina’s son-in-law’s timeshare business is booming. They always need more people on the phones. I’m sure she’d put in a good word for you.”

I’d rather spend six hours as a floater in a cesspool than be a telemarketer. Although I did sometimes think about moving to L.A., where at least floaters tended to turn up in swimming pools, with all that glorious chlorine killing any lurking effluvia.

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I killed time among the pizza boxes and vodka bottles while the principal actors consulted with the director. McKinley, Cleveland, Harrison, Cleveland again. Grover Cleveland is kind of a trick question because he was president during two non-consecutive terms. Suddenly, something mushy and greasy landed on my head. “What the hell!” I yelled as I bolted up and poked my

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head over the side of the dumpster. I wiped scrambled eggs out of my eyes to find a Production Assistant holding a styrofoam cup of coffee staring back at me.

“Oops, my bad,” said the PA. “I didn’t realize you were in there.”

“Now I’ll have to go back to makeup, you twit.” Groaning, I did my best to climb over the edge of the dumpster with some dignity, a near impossibility in a dress that barely covered my ass. I was portraying a hooker who died of an overdose and was ditched by Albanian mobsters in the dumpster behind their nightclub. Not very smart mobsters, but plot was not my department. Now there would be at least an hour’s delay while my pallid death makeup and fake vomit were re-applied. I found myself thinking fondly of timeshares.

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Yesterday I was in a dumpster. Today, I lay on an ice cold steel slab for the post-mortem scene. “Corpus Delectable” was a rare two day gig for me. I love autopsies because I get to wear a chest prosthetic adorned with the iconic Y-shaped incision. That means I’m actually allowed to breathe. But the set was essentially a meat locker.

“You, dead girl. Stop shivering!” yelled the director. Hoover, Coolidge, Harding, Wilson.

By the time we were done, it was dark outside and I had spent four hours semi-naked and freezing under a “modesty sheet.” I was so tired, I considered leaving my makeup on and heading straight home. This would have had the added advantage of making the hour-long trip on the subway infinitely more entertaining. But then I thought about little Melanie and her brother Frankie and decided I’d rather not risk another ass-kicking from my sister. Especially since I was two months behind on the rent.

When I came up from below ground at the Ozone-Lefferts station, my voicemail alert pinged. Clicking on it, I heard the voice of my agent. Well, I say agent, but most days Bashir was

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a waiter at Dar Al-Yemen, the Middle Eastern restaurant over on Rockaway Boulevard. But, hey, everyone has a dream.

“You’ve hit the big time, Judy! *Law and Order* wants to murder you on camera. That dude from *CSI* recommended you. He told them he admired your dedication to your craft. You get to run around the apartment and scream before the killer strangles you. And you even have a line!” He switched to a falsetto voice. “No, please, I promise not to tell!”

I skipped the rest of the way home. In my head, the neon signs of the bodegas and pizzerias were marquees flashing “Starring Zoya!” Maybe my next job would include a flashback to my life before the murder.