

Trigger Warnings: Misgendering, implied suicide, surgical procedures.

Seams

by J.K. Petrie

The smell of formaldehyde permeated through the hallways like the breath of a sick dog waiting for euthanasia. Under it was a note of stale lily and artificial pine. Overall, it smelled like the opposite of decay. No matter how many times he entered that building, which was daily, the lack of rot struck him—*perturbed* him— every time. It reminded him of Limbo.

It wasn't anything Mikey hadn't done before. He'd helped prepare former classmates, even. Ashley Briggs died from falling off her porch. She was sitting on the railing and lost her balance. He shaved her legs, per her family's request. Washed her hair and styled it. Set her vertabrae back in place best he could. Her family chose a long white dress for her. It made her look like a porcelain doll, and it made him wonder what they wanted her legs shaved for.

They attended the same classes, but he still hadn't known Ashley that well. Morgan, on the other hand, was his best friend. He was otherworldly and pale, his hair dark. His arms were skinny and looked like they could have bent backwards at the elbow like a wishbone.

He didn't get to see Morgan yet. His father wouldn't let him. "You're not ready," he'd said. "Not for that." His dad let him prepare Ashley so he'd get used to working with the bodies of people he interacted with often, but Morgan would be too much.

Mikey opened the casket. The corpse was wearing a sundress, legs shaved clean. His hair smelled like strawberry shampoo. Eyelashes blackened with mascara. Exactly like his family requested, Mikey supposed.

He stared down at all he had left of his friend and tried to summon the will to do what he was going to do. He let out a deep breath he didn't know he was holding and picked Morgan up. The body's head nodded forward as Mikey swung his legs out of the casket. His eyes widened as he floundered to catch it. For a moment, he awkwardly held onto Morgan's body, halfway falling out, and stared into his face. His eyes were super glued shut like a sleeping baby doll. He took another deep breath and lifted his body back up again, then lay him on the slick metal surface of an embalming table. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he calmed himself. It wasn't that it was hard to carry his friend's body. When he was alive, he was about 105 pounds soaking wet. It was panic mixed with something else.

Mikey washed the body's face first. He found himself trying not to get soap into his eyes. He rinsed it off with all the reverence of a priest performing a baptism.

His face looked dewy. Stray curls glued themselves to Morgan's wet forehead. He took a pair of shears off the counter and snipped off a lock of his hair. Then another. Then another. Each time he clipped a new piece of hair, the scissors' blades whispered under the basement's thick quiet with finality. He was no barber, but he had enough experience to produce something decent. Better than what Morgan had before, anyway. Stray clippings would have tickled his eyelashes were he still alive. After he cleared away all of the shorn curls, Mikey stared down at his friend's face and traced his sharp jawline with his fingers.

Cutting his hair was the first step past the point of no return. Practice. Mikey had watched videos, but nothing could ever fully prepare him for what he was about to do.

He rummaged through his kit, produced a scalpel, and undressed the body. His breath caught in his throat as he dragged it across Morgan's chest. Formaldehyde trickled beneath the blade. It felt right. The skin parted cleanly, welcoming, undoing itself like a torn seam. Contouring the chest was the important part, Mikey knew. Each slice of fat away from muscle came with a little prayer.

When he finished, two half-moons of skin and fat peeled off Morgan's chest like an overripe peach from its pit.

Then he mended. Grafted Morgan's nipples back into place the same way one might sew a patch onto torn jeans. A little wax hid away the wounds.

Mikey exhaled. He all but dropped the scalpel. Nevertheless, he persisted with the final step.

He rummaged in his backpack and produced a suit. He'd driven far out of town to find it. He was pleased to find that it fit Morgan perfectly. His friend looked like a sprite— ethereal, like he was living between two different worlds.

He checked his cell phone. It was two in the morning.

His family requested a closed casket. Morgan only had some bruising around the neck, nothing a little color correction and foundation couldn't fix, but they were insistent that he shouldn't be seen. His mother was especially devastated, Mikey recounted. Of course she was. She thought her baby girl was going to Hell. What Morgan did could not be fixed by repenting. It could not be fixed at all.

Mikey thought he'd feel scared. After all, if anyone decided to look in Morgan's casket before the burial— if what he'd done got out— he couldn't begin to imagine what would happen. His father's business might go under if it weren't for the fact they were the only funeral home in town. Probably he would be disowned— no, not disowned. Institutionalized. They'd send him all the way to the psych ward up in Wichita. Nobody knew how Morgan felt except for Mikey. That'd only bewilder the town more.

But Mikey wasn't scared at all. He stopped being scared of anything as soon as he heard the news that Morgan was gone.

He picked him up bridal style and put him back in his casket. It was easy that time. He felt like a parent putting their child to bed. *Go to sleep, Morgan*, he thought. *It's all over.*