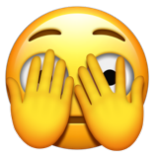
It Remains To Be Seen

Viewing Views

One of the matters to be considered when making funerary arrangements is whether or not to have a public gathering for a viewing or wake. If it will be included as an aspect of proceedings, the next question is whether the casket will be open or closed. Guests would likely have mixed reactions to a full frontal view of the decedent… some noting the value of it as psychological validation of the death coupled with the comfort of a peaceful image, but others expressing disdain for what they regard as repellent stimuli.



Perhaps you've hated being expected to stare at the contents of open caskets when you have attended viewings and funerals. You may have dreaded going, specifically for that reason. Invariably, a family member escorts you to the casket and effuses a predictable remark: "She looks so natural, doesn't she?" Unable to evoke a diplomatic response while thinking that she resembles a garish, ninety-year-old drag queen (actually, quite evocative of the plastered look she had flaunted in life after wreaking havoc on her weathered face – an effect now superbly

replicated by a heavy-handed cosmetologist who captured her photo image precisely), you nod affirmatively and moronically mutter, "Naturally." Another query follows: "Didn't they do a nice job?" Flustered, in a moment of panic you blurt out, "Oh, yes, impeccably executed. In fact, she reminds me of an exquisite barmaid I saw in a wax museum!" You don't mean to utter aspersions, but you are totally bedeviled (not a good spot for a demonic spirit to be hangin' around!) by your awkward predicament. While attempting to gain your composure, you muse to yourself, that woman NEVER looked natural! And true to form, she sure doesn't now!

At times such as these, one gets backed into a corner with no escape. And just what are you supposed to do when you are part of the family in this type of situation? Imagine being in the role of a dutiful daughter-in-law (who loathes open caskets), wife of a man whose mother's body is in another room of the funeral home prior to commencement of the public viewing. Family members are beginning to arrive and are gathering in a common reception area for a period of kindred communion. With high hopes of averting direct visualization of the body, you have secluded yourself in a corner of this anteroom when the funeral director taps you on the shoulder and

requests your presence in the "other" room. Gulping, you attempt to disavow a historically ingrained sense that you are being summoned to the principal's office. But it's even worse than that! You are led directly to the casket. As you compliantly gape at the mug of what appears to be an anemic flounder, the man asks you if you think any cosmetic touch-ups are needed. He presses your body inward so that you can get a closer look. Your sweaty hands have nothing to grab onto except the slithery sides of the polished casket. As your eyes fall upon this blanched, inanimate mass, you wonder if the embalmer took a longer lunch break than he should have. While peering directly downward at the ghostly, prune-like remains of this person who used to haunt you (even before she died!), a few beads of sweat dribbling down your cheeks merge with the cake-like batter on your mother-in-law's face. Yet it must have gone unnoticed by the officious man, as he continues to explore the artistic possibilities. "Do you think the lip color is right for her?" "Oh, yes, perfect," you insist (while hoping that hovering heavenly hosts don't surmise you are lying). In an effort to conclude this interaction and make a hasty escape, you blabber, "You have accomplished a miraculous transformation... she's like an angel!"

Excerpt from the recreational pre-planning book,
Pondering Leaves: Composing and Conveying Your Life Story's Epilogue
(no longer available)

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