

“By day, I worked in a morgue. At night, I became a stripper”

Emma Jane Holmes reveals her atypical (but certainly never boring) life as a mortician with an unexpected alter ego



I can recall sitting beneath a gum tree and slowly unpeeling the Glad Wrap from my salad sandwich. Noises of normalcy were my soundtrack: business professionals rushing past chatting on Bluetooth devices, dog walkers listening to the latest hits, and humming traffic reminding me that life goes on.

Since becoming a mortician, I had learnt to value every moment in life, like eating a simple salad sandwich. The smell of the plastic wrapping took me back to childhood school lunches; the pain in my lower back, caused by lifting the dead from kitchen floors, was a welcome reminder that I was alive. I bit into my lunch, cucumbers bursting on to my tongue (my nerve endings were still awake!) and I noticed a drop of blood on my trousers. I paused mid-bite and sighed.

No matter how hard I tried, I'd never be like everyone else passing by as long as I did this job. Not a single person around me had a clue these hands had just mended the noose imprint on a teenager's throat. Or that before that, I'd been on my knees scrubbing blood from the mortuary floor.

The previous night I took home the tiny cardigan belonging to a baby, soiled by her leaking autopsy incision. The blood swirled down my bathroom sink as I scrubbed crimson from the wool. Her mother would be protected from seeing the bloodied cardigan during the viewing – I'd make sure of that.

My role entailed visiting homes to transfer the dead from their beds. I attended hospital mortuaries and collected decomposed bodies from the city morgue. I transferred gaming enthusiasts from couches while

the Xbox was still turned on. I brushed the hair of young women killed at the hands of their lovers. I buried others my age who had faced vicious cancer; surfers who hadn't noticed that the water was too shallow. I bathed babies who'd never have a first birthday, and dressed their deceased mothers months later – because they couldn't cope. All day long, I catered to the dead and served their grieving families.

But when the hearses were done for the day and reverse-parked side-by-side, when the mortuary lights were turned down, I reached for the lace and lipstick.

This grateful little mortician with blood-splattered trousers had an alter ego, but she only appeared after dark. The red-light district came alive at dusk, as if sunset was its alarm clock, and I was a part of it. Mortician scrubs were pushed to the side for the evening and replaced with diamanté-studded heels. Big hair, big red lips, big money... I was the secret showgirl.

My night-time friends were single mothers, university students, Brazilians, Americans, Indigenous, fitness models and plus-size Queens, all with a shared aspiration – a garter stuffed with cash to fund their beautiful goals: food for their children, paid mortgages, bachelor degrees. They taught me about life, much like the dead. The dancers' dressing room was as fascinating as the mortuary. I had stories punching me at all angles. Showgirls and corpses, stage shows and coffins, heels and hearses. I wondered if I would ever sleep again?

No-one knew of my secret life. At dawn, I'd peel off the fake eyelashes, scrub the spray-tan from my skin, reach for a skinny latte (double shot) and begin another day caring for the dead. Sex and death are braided. Sex produces life and death is the end of it. So why are they so taboo? Shhh'd and ushered from conversation as quickly as you can say G-string or forceps.

Sex and death saved my life – they taught me to close my eyes when eating my favourite foods, to savour every pleasurable moment; to kiss a little longer; to send flowers to my Nan; to unwrap my sandwiches slowly. ♡

One Last Dance: My Life In Mortuary Scrubs And G-strings by Emma Jane Holmes (Harper Collins, \$29.99) is on sale Wednesday.

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