

Desairology with Monica Torres

Ologies Podcast

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Oh hello, it's the Kleenex that you forgot to take out of your pocket before you ran it through the washer and dryer and made 4,000 baby Kleenexes, Alie Ward, back with the final episode of this year's Spooktober series. True to my promise, they are getting a little closer to the heart, and the dead, the closer we approach Halloween. And in hindsight, I don't know if that was a good idea for 2020, since Halloween is just going to go butt-to-butt with the presidential election, but you know what? Oddly, death episodes tend to be really inspiring and life-affirming, so let's just press on. I promise that by the end of this you may be giving your job the finger or reaching out to tell people you love them. Mom, Dad, I love you. Thanks for making me. See, look. I just did it.

But first, a few more thanks to all the folks on [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://www.patreon.com/Ologies) who send in questions. You can join that club for as little as one single American dollar a month. We set a low bar. Come on in. Thank you to everyone who makes sure you're subscribed, and who rates the show, and who writes reviews for me to read on days when my anxiety gets the better of me, such as [Egg_Salad19](#), who wrote:

Listening to old DadWard is like a big, cozy ear hug every episode, even when the subject matter scares me slightly. It's just too interesting to press pause.

[Egg_Salad19](#), buckle up. And thank you to everyone who left such sweet-ass reviews, all of you. I read every single one. I'm earnestly so grateful for it.

Okay, Desairology. This is a real word and it was coined by a legend in the field, like a pioneer of professional funeral fanciness, Noella Papagno who authored the 1983 classic *Desairology: The Dressing of Decedents' Hair*. She was a hairstylist – she just passed away about three years ago – and she believed that her clients should be served after death as well, and that more care and attention needed to be paid to the dearly departed to make them look their best as their bereaved say goodbye. And I found a clip! Here she is introducing the world to this ology in the early 1980s:

[Noella Papagno giving a speech:]

Dear Professionals; for over 30 years one of my greatest rewards as a hairstylist has been my work for funeral homes. I would like to share that experience with you. For three years, hairstyling for decedent has been in the making. The story of techniques, touching all phases of hairstyling for a decedent, needs telling. This manual of Desairology describes these techniques in detail. Understanding your needs in this field and catering to them is what this book is all about. Thank you. [fading out with piano music]

Ah! Legend. Noella dubbed her work 'Desairology' because it was a portmanteau, kind of a Frankenword, of 'deceased' and 'hair', so des-hair-ology. But it tends to capture, kind of, all the glam given to folks before a viewing. I first heard of this ology probably two or three years ago, actually from Megan Rosenbloom, the Anthropodermic Biocodicologist from last week's episode.

This ologist holds many titles. She owns the NXT Generation Mortuary Support in Phoenix, and I was hoping for a few years for, like, a dusty road trip to the desert to take in her immaculate lab, and smell the rows and rows of solutions in bottles, and brushes, and blushes, but alas, a digital conversation in the times of covid would have to do. So we hopped on and we chatted all about the mortuary business, the particulars of embalming, reconstruction, her most memorable cases, and some heartwarming ones, whether she's ever perhaps seen or felt any presences, and who

dominates the funeral business, spa services for recently deceased, why you should just let things go, and, well, how to effortlessly look your best. So lean back on a satin pillow and get ready for world-renowned Desairologist Monica Torres.

Monica Torres: My name is Monica Torres, and I'm a licensed embalmer, licensed funeral director, postmortem reconstructive specialist, and desairologist. I know that's really long, but I've been doing this awhile.

Alie Ward: No, that's great. And the pronouns you use?

Monica: I'm a she. I'll go with she. My scholarship, actually, that I founded, helps women and trans gender individuals gain technical skills in funeral service and embalming, and management skills. So, that's something that's important to me, to learn how that community... what their expecting from the older, experienced generations.

Alie: And you mentioned you were a desairologist. Is that a word that gets used a lot? I know it was invented in the '80s, right?

Monica: Yeah, that's right. It's not used a lot. If you're, like, a regular lay person that has no experience in funeral service or embalming, it's not heard a lot. So don't feel bad, because most funeral directors and embalmers have not heard of it either.

Alie: Which came first? Were you more interested in makeup, or were you more interested in funeral services?

Monica: That's a really good question because it seems like I get a lot of people asking me these questions on my social media. Even in my email inbox, it's like, "How did you get involved in this?" So, my background is unique in the sense that I was actually a licensed cosmetologist before I became a licensed mortician. So, I had a background already when I went into mortuary science and mortuary college in cosmetology.

Aside: So the love of makeup came first here, but in a pretty gender-conforming society it's more common for ladies to be hands-on with contouring than corpses.

Monica: Back then... I did know that desairology existed because I had researched it before I went into mortuary college, but I also found out that it was just not very common. Because the industry is so largely populated by men, it is a male-dominated field, it kind of was just not something that was important to the professionals that were running the industry.

But things are changing. There's more women now. Most of our mortuary college classes... The college itself, as far as the students, the women outnumber the men now. So, I think that desairology, there's going to be exploration in that area as far as postmortem rejuvenation and treatments on the body. Now that there's more women, I think that's something we're going to bring to the table that's never been done before.

Alie: When it comes to makeup, is there something about the artistry of it that you loved? Were you a really artistic kid? Were you always painting, or drawing, or... What do you love about that?

Monica: It's funny you ask that, because I was. I started drawing skulls from, like, the time that I was very little. Back then, you know, my parents were mortified that I was drawing skulls and dead things. They did not understand or like that. And honestly, I didn't really even understand it. I just... It was just very natural to me. So yes, I've been an artist, like, since I can remember. I've always loved to draw, and paint, and sculpt, and use charcoal. I was

really involved in art when I was in high school. I did all the banners for the football team to run through and all that. Yeah. [laughs]

Alie: How do you feel in general about holidays when the rest of society, sort of, dips behind that curtain into spookiness? I grew up, like, goth, so whenever I saw everyone being goth the week of Halloween I'd be like, [scoffs] "Come on! We're out here every week!"

Monica: [laughs] Yeah!

Alie: But how is it for someone who works in funeral services, in mortuary science? Is that a holiday that you're so over, or not?

Monica: It's so funny that you ask that because, like, growing up I was kind of a goth chick too. But that was just how I always was. I was always like that from the time that I was very little. I just found beauty in the darker things in life. Halloween was, like, my favorite holiday for many years. As I've gotten older, not just Halloween but a lot of the holidays, I'm so busy with work that my life doesn't stop for Halloween, or Christmas, or Valentine's Day. As a mortician, we don't have holidays off typically, so it's hard for me to embrace the spooky vibes and stuff. It's my life, and I'm so busy serving families and other funeral directors.

But I try, because I know people expect me to. They're like, "Oh my gosh, you're the death queen! You should be having the spookiest house." [clip from song by Ministry: "To me every day is Halloween..."] Every day is Halloween in my world. It'd be like that Ministry song, right?

Alie: Yeah, exactly! I always think of that. What was it like for you to make that transition from the cosmetology side of it into mortuary services? What door opened to let you combine the two?

Monica: So, it's really hard as a woman in the industry. It's really hard to make headway, because like I said, it is still predominantly run by men. All the leadership positions, the decision makers are still men. So, I really had to go above and beyond what my skill level was. If you look deep in my background you'll find that I have a very deeply-rooted background in technical skills.

Aside: Okay, what does it take to be a Monica Torres? A lot of school and passion. So, she first got her Bachelor's in Recreation and Event Management, because funerals, they are, kind of, parties after all. She's been a licensed cosmetologist for 20 years, and while still an embalming intern, she completed a desaiology course named "Airbrush Artistry for Cosmetic Use in the Prep Room and Restorative Art." She's also trained in postmortem demi-surgery from the Fountain National Academy of Professional Embalming Skills. She's certified as a crematory operator and has been recognized in her industry with awards. She graced the cover of *American Funeral Director Magazine* and she's pioneered hair restoration that her peers now dub the "No-Wax Torres Technique." So my point: She has serious chops.

Monica: I wanted to make sure that the men that I was working alongside understood that my technical skills were on point. If they had a question for me, I had an answer. I found that was a stumbling block for a lot of men in our industry, when it came to cosmetology and makeup. So now that I have that skill base and I've completed the program at Fountain National Academy of Professional Embalming Skills, which is... in my industry, that's the most elite embalming college that you can go to. There's less than 60 individuals worldwide that have completed the entire program.

Alie: Oh my god!

Monica: Yeah! That's something I'm very proud of. I'm one of the very few women that has completed that program. When I completed that was when I was really when I gained respect in my industry and my community. At that point, that's when people started listening to me and saying, "Okay, maybe she has something to say and there is value in what she's talking about." And now teaching, because I teach it as well.

Aside: Should you choose, you too can sign up for her easily accessible online courses, such as: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Embalming but Were Afraid to Ask; Midnight Madness and Prep-Room Tour; Progressive Desaiology for the Modern Embalmer; and the toughest subjects, like Embalming the Infant Death, which, next time you're having a challenging day at work, just think what desaiologists are going through quietly behind the scenes of funeral homes all over the world. But actually... What is happening, I guess, backstage in the VIP area on stainless steel slabs?

Alie: And this is a stupid question, but a lot of us do not know how to embalm someone. Can you run through, kind of, in a nutshell? Because I think so many people are... It's such a mystery, what happens.

Monica: Right! It is.

Alie: What happens when you...??? What happens??!

Monica: What happens after Monica gets the call. Absolutely. I think it's not just some people. I would say, like, 99.99% of people do not understand what I do for a living. So, they know that I work around dead bodies, but they don't really understand the process. Embalming is comprised of three basic steps. The first part is disinfection of the body, which is very relevant right now with the pandemic. That's the first step.

The second step is preservation of the tissues and the body itself. And the third step is restoration, which is the makeup part. That is the cosmetology part. So there's three steps. Very simply put.

Aside: And those postmortem rituals and procedures have been happening for thousands of years, including mummification and other ways of preserving bodies. But injecting via arteries started in about the 1300s, but it really gained popularity in the US during the Civil War when fallen Union soldiers needed to be preserved for shipment home to be seen and then buried by their families. Back then, they used arsenic! They don't anymore. But once again, the whole embalming process is more than just a pitcher of fluids displacing blood. So let's break down those three steps further. There's disinfection, preservation, and restoration.

Monica: The actual embalming process itself is bathing – that's the disinfection process. We bath the body. We disinfect the body with the appropriate disinfectants that we use to clear off all of the bacteria, the microbes, anything that's going to harm the embalmer or the family. We get rid of all that stuff. It goes down the drain. And then we move forward into the preservation portion, which is where we actually are... we're trying to remove the bacteria-rich blood from the body and replace it with a disinfectant-based preservative.

[clip of Donald Trump at a press conference: "And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in a minute, one minute, and is there a way we can do something like that? By injection inside... or..."]

Aside: It's not bleach though or arsenic anymore. So, what is the disinfection-based magic potion?

Monica: Which is formaldehyde. That's the most... the chemical that we have found, so far, that works the best for that process.

So, if we can get the blood out and replace it with that chemical formaldehyde, then the body is preserved and... it basically buys us time between the decomposition process and going back to dust.

So, that's the process. The blood goes down the drain. All of the fluids that come out of the body go down the drain. A lot of people are really surprised to hear that. But that's what happens.

They're worried about contaminants, like, "Oh my god, all of this stuff's going down the drain!" The one thing that I want to say to all of these people: Remember that we are working with disinfectants. So yes, it is going down the drain, but it's also disinfecting as it's going down the drain.

Alie: Yeah.

Monica: You know, formaldehyde, once it comes in contact with protein which is blood and everything that our body produces, it's returning to its organic state. So, as far as fear of contaminants, and contaminating our soils, and our water supply, and all that, that's false. So, that's a misconception that a lot of people have.

Aside: Okay, quick aside. What else is in embalming fluid? Well, it's a cocktail, if you will, of formaldehyde, methanol, ethanol, and other solvents and wetting agents. In the prep room it's stored in something that looks kind of like if you had a frozen margarita machine. Each human person needs about two to three gallons of it flushed into and filling up their blood tunnels.

But let's chat about formaldehyde. It's a naturally occurring compound. It's CH₂O. It's all over the Earth. We even produce some of it naturally in our bodies. In its pure form it's an invisible gas. It has a smell that's been described as sweetly antiseptic, musty, and even pickle-like. But if it is in a solution, typically it's in a form of formalin, it's used in a ton of industrial settings, especially in making resins and particle boards. But also in keratin hair treatments like Brazilian blowouts, which I have had many and I've been handed a rubber respirator at the salon. Which is concerning, yet I continue to do it; despite formaldehyde being technically listed as carcinogenic.

So, folks who work with it are often at a greater risk for certain types of nasopharyngeal cancers, and blood cancers, and other irritations. But it certainly gets the job done when it comes to particle boards, glossy hair, and good-looking dead people.

Monica: Finally, the third part, the restoration part, the makeup part, that's the beautification and rejuvenation portion. That's the part that the family gets to see at the end. [*"Notice the life-like pigmentation."*]

Not to bash any guys, because I don't want to do that, I've learned from mostly men, but I feel like women have a lot to bring to the table in that portion. Because we are typically... As far as gender roles have been concerned for all this time, we've been kind of pushed into that, "Oh, you need to wear makeup." All of the marketing is, "Buy makeup, and wear makeup. Do your nails and do your hair." So, we already have this preconceived notion of what beauty looks like.

Alie: Yeah.

Monica: It's a little different for men and women.

Alie: This whole time in a male-dominated field, is there, like, Harold, 65-year old embalmer, doing makeup on a 19-year-old deceased patient?

Monica: Yeah. Absolutely. That's the standard right now.

Alie: That's so weird. *[laughs]*

Monica: Yeah!

Aside: I'm sorry for this frank reaction, but I'm just saying, imagine a 19-year-old chick walking into Sephora and getting a makeover by someone who doesn't really like or wear makeup themselves. It's maybe a little weird. But it would be super weird if you looked around and everyone who worked at Sephora was also like that guy. You might be like, "What's keeping ladies from doing this job?"

Alie: It's not weird because I'm sure that Harold is good at it. But it's also... for that to be a male-dominated activity seems so odd to think about.

Monica: It is, it is. I think that's, honestly... Like I said, I don't want to bash any men or any of the people that have come before me, but I feel like that's why cremation has gotten this huge rise, and aquamation is this big thing right now because people got sick of that. They got sick of paying all this money for this service and the skillset wasn't there. A lot of the families were like, "I can do a better job on my mom's makeup."

So, like I said, I don't want to disparage anyone's skillset, or their backgrounds, or their history, or whatever, but I think things are changing. And like anything else, any other kind of consumer product or service out there, you need to know who to go to. You need to know who to call. What hair stylist do you want to go to? You know where to go to get your nails done. When someone passes, you need to know who to go to. What's their skill set? What do they specialize in? Who's the person in the back room?

Alie: Right. Do you feel in the work that you're doing, do you feel like you're serving the family, and the friends, and the loved ones of the person who's passed, or do you feel like you're doing it for the person on the table?

Monica: That's a really great question. I'm so glad that you asked that. For me personally, I feel like I'm doing my work for the family, and the friends, and the loved ones, and the people that need that opportunity to say goodbye. The person on the table is... it's not necessarily for them. Basically, what I'm trying to do is to preserve their dignity. That may have been lost through cancer, or a traumatic car accident, a murder, whatever. So that part, yes, I am doing it for that person on the table, absolutely.

But in the big picture, everything that I do, and especially for those really difficult cases, I don't focus on that person on the table. I focus mentally, emotionally, on the family. I have to do whatever I need to do to help this family. So, that's how I separate that. You have to separate your emotions when you're working. Especially on a traumatic case or a baby.

Alie: *[softly, sadly]* Oh, I bet. What types... When you say a difficult case or a traumatic case, what kind of cases come to you? What's been a challenge that you really weren't sure you could get through, or that you ended up really serving a family well for?

Monica: Well, there's so many. I mean, there's just so many ways that people die. Cancer can be traumatic for people. It can be a traumatic process. But also, a suicide, gunshot wounds, hangings, overdoses. You know, that's really a difficult process. It ravages the body.

But, then there's infants and bodies that are decomposed. They're found. So, there's a lot of different types of scenarios that we deal with as embalmers, we deal with the worst of the worst. You don't get to pick and choose and say, "Well I'm only going to work on little old ladies that died of natural causes."

Alie: Yeah. You know, I'm from a Catholic family and so we... for some reason, Catholics love an open casket. Have there ever been cases where the family has wanted to say goodbye visually and it's something that maybe you wouldn't advise?

Monica: I personally always recommend for families to view their loved one. Even if the trauma is severe. It might not necessarily be for 200 hundred people, but for those people that were closest to that person, a lot of times, those cases in particular where there is severe trauma, are the ones where the families NEED to say goodbye. They need to be able to accept what has happened, because a lot of times it's a shock. They go to work in the morning and they don't come home.

Alie: [*softly and sadly*] Yeah.

Monica: I see death differently in that way, where I think, especially here in America we're so focused on looks. It's all about the way that you look. We're so focused on that, it's hard for people to understand that it's not about that. When you have that one last opportunity to say goodbye, that's it. That's all you have, that one last opportunity.

For example, if you knew that you were never going to get to see your mom again and she was like, "Oh no, you can't come over because my hair is a mess, and my house is trashed," No, it's not about that. It's like, this is your last chance.

For most people, I think, they don't care. They just want to be able to say goodbye. They're like, "You know what, I don't care what she looks like or whatever. I just want to be able to put my hand on her hand and say goodbye, say what I need to say." So, I'm a big advocate for viewing before cremation, or burial, or whatever it is. I think it's extremely important for the grief process and that journey.

Aside: And I figured there must be folks out there grieving. It's been a tough year and we all will grieve at some point. So, I looked up some coping advice from the *American Psychological Association*. They cited some research that most people can recover from loss on their own through the passage of time if they have social support and healthy habits. But also, they stress that there's no normal time period for someone to grieve. It's really individual.

But one thing that was reassuring was they said that "research tells us that it can also be the catalyst for a renewed sense of meaning that offers purpose and direction to life." They say it can really help to talk to friends or colleagues about your grief, and isolation or avoidance of your support systems can disrupt and really delay healing.

So, talk. It's okay to talk and remember the person. Also, feel your feelings and allow them, even if it's a range of emotions from anger to sadness. Also, take care of yourself. Get sleep, eat well, and get some exercise if you can.

They say it also might help to reach out to other people grieving the same person. Helping someone else can get you through the grieving process too. And to remember and

celebrate the life of the deceased. Take the chance to remember milestones in their lives; birthdays, anniversaries, even after they're gone. You may also want to seek out a counselor to help you chat about and process what you're going through. And though it may be very individual, Monica says that a visitation can help with accepting and processing the loss, she has found.

Alie: Is that possible with covid patients, and do you get a lot of covid patients?

Monica: Absolutely. This has been something that... It's so new people don't understand it. So, you have to remember, go back to what I was talking about in those three steps to the embalming process. The first and most important step is disinfection. So, by disinfecting the body, we're irradiating any of that virus that's intact, or active, or whatever. It's actually more dangerous to have unembalmed bodies laying around than embalmed bodies when it comes to covid. In my personal opinion.

The families can absolutely see their loved one who has been embalmed. Absolutely. Now, touching and kissing and all that, I wouldn't recommend. Just like now, if you wear a mask and all that. But, for families, if your loved one dies of covid, absolutely you can see your loved one. I would recommend embalming for those cases specifically. If you have a loved one who has died of covid, embalming, I would say, yes, please do that.

Like I said, if you're going to let that infection fester, there's more of a chance that it may be spread, or that people who are working on the body may be affected. The embalmers themselves, the funeral directors, the transporters. So yes, they are difficult cases, absolutely, but we deal with many difficult cases like that. You have to remember that as embalmers, we are the most prepared for these types of cases than really anyone else. I deal with MRSA cases, I deal with all types of infectious diseases, not just covid. There are diseases that I am way more afraid of than covid to be honest.

Alie: And you've never caught anything?

Monica: I haven't. But I also... I'm an advocate for using personal protection equipment. So, I'm one of the few embalmers, I think, that's really public, that has been using a full-face respirator for years. I've been using one for years and I teach that in my embalming classes for my students as well.

Aside: Monica, for a visual, has high cheekbones, eyebrows arched kind of like a '50s pin-up. One side of her black hair is shaved at the temple, and she's usually working in hot pink scrubs, or a lab coat with her skull and crossbones company logo embroidered in fuchsia. Her smile is under there but it's obscured by the full-faced respirator. She usually wears a clear face shield as well. But she's more stylish draining fluids than I am right now as I'm recording this, I promise.

Monica: I wear scrubs, and I wear appropriate attire, and the gowns, and gloves, and all of that. So, I feel very prepared to deal with any of the infectious and blood-borne pathogens.

Alie: Has your work changed the way that you look at your own life, or living in the moment, or mortality, or postmortem plans?

Monica: Oh yeah, totally. Absolutely. Oh, for sure. I try not to hold grudges so much anymore.

Alie: [chuckling] That's a good one.

Monica: I try to live for today honestly. I really do. I say I love you to pretty much everyone because I never want to have that be the last call and I didn't say 'I love you' to my friends

and the people that I really do care about. And I try not to get too wrapped up in the things that really, in the big picture, are not important.

Alie: Yeah.

Monica: I'm also not as... what's the word. I think that people get wrapped up with material things. Buying this and buying that. I value my friendships and my family a lot more than that kind of stuff.

Alie: Yeah. The old, "You can't take it with you," type of a thing. *[laughs]*

Monica: Yeah, absolutely! Absolutely.

Alie: Can I ask you listener questions?

Monica: Oh yeah, let's do it!

Aside: Okay, but first a little break to hear about sponsors of the show giving you some deals, which lets us donate to a charity of the ologist's choosing. This week, easy-peasy. Monica mentioned her scholarship fund, which is called Hi Precious, which she established to help break down social, racial, and political barriers and offer female and transgender individuals the opportunity to gain advanced technical training and management skills in funeral service. She named it Hi Precious because that is how one misogynist troll patronizingly greeted her on the internet. So she reclaimed it and she called the whole thing Hi Precious, which I love. So yes, a donation will be made to Hi Precious, and do check out the link in the show notes to find out more about it. It was made possible by the following sponsors:

[Ad Break]

Okay, now on to your dark, and sunny, and curious questions.

Alie: Yeah. *[sing-song voice]* I let them know you're coming on the shoooooow and they were excited! So they submitted hundreds of questions and I've boiled them down to the most popular. *[laughs]*

Melanie Baker, Jessica Morgan, Emily Tudorache, Amy Meagher, Grace Robisheaux, Lynn and Dori, Jenifer Lowe... A lot of them all had questions about the type of makeup that you use. And they want to know if you use your own makeup or if you use makeup that belonged to the deceased. Are there different, specific brands if you're working with a corpse? What do you use? What's in your kit?

Monica: Everybody wants to know this. Every case is different, for those that are listening. Every case is different, and I do always ask for the family to bring the person's makeup in, because that is super helpful. If you're a woman that wears makeup, you know, it's a lot of women's lifeline. So yes, absolutely I ask for people to bring in the person's makeup. However, dead bodies that... We use a makeup that is non-thermogenic, and that's what works best on dead bodies. There is no heat being produced by the body, so a lot of the makeups that we use as women in our everyday lives don't have the same reaction.

So what I try to do is I use my non-thermogenic makeups. I've started to use a product by Lola Se7en. She's a funeral director and embalmer. She's created her own makeup line. It's absolutely fabulous. I'm not just plugging her, I've never used a makeup like that because it actually smells really, really beautiful. She's done a really nice job. So I do use Lola Seven for some very difficult coverage issues when there's bruising or postmortem staining.

Aside: Post-mortem staining? I just looked it up. Aka livor mortis or blue death, is when blood pools in parts of the body and leaves a dark, mottled, purple splash under the skin. Monica makes sure that the clients on her table get the good stuff. Drugstore zit concealer? Get outta here! You're not gonna do the job!

Monica: Then I also use my traditional mortuary pigments that our old-school chemical companies make. Dodge Company is known for their cosmetics line and I use theirs quite a bit as a base. I also use a product called NecroMetics and PMRC. Those are kind of like special effects makeup to cover any major camouflage. I also use an airbrush when it's needed. The airbrush, I don't use for bridal makeup, I use that for really severe cases, traumatic cases where I need a good coverage.

What I try to do is I use my mortuary makeup to create a foundation for a lifelike appearance. I'm basically just bringing them up to an appearance of when they got out of the shower and they're getting ready to put their makeup on. [*"So fresh and so clean."*] After that is when I take their makeup bag out and I work my magic with their makeup.

Alie: Aww! Do you ever have to ask the family...? How do you know if someone would want a bold lip for their goodbye or like a peachy nude?

Monica: Exactly. So what I try to do is when I sit down with the family, I ask them for pictures and I say, "Find a picture that you really like: your mom's, your sister's, your brother, whoever, where you really like their makeup. And bring me that picture and I'm going to try and recreate that." So if you want your mom's hair to look the certain way but her makeup to look another way, then I need two different pictures.

And families are pretty good about it. They usually bring in one picture and they're like, "You know, this was my brother's wedding or something and my mom absolutely loved the way that the makeup artist did her makeup," or "This is how my mom always wore her makeup. Can you do it like this?" And that's what I try to accomplish.

Alie: Kyla Kelly and Naomi Tahsin both wanted to know if family members ever request to do their makeup and if that's something that even happens.

Monica: Yeah. There are a lot of family members that do want to participate, and I actually teach a class, it's called The Family-Assisted Dress Experience. I teach other funeral directors how to engage families so that the family can be a part of that process. I started teaching that class in 2015, and basically it teaches the funeral director how to guide the family so the family can do the hair, and makeup, and nails, and even dress their loved one. But that's a service, you pay for that. You pay your funeral director for that service.

But yes, absolutely, families can be a part of that, and dress their loved one, and do the makeup, and all that. The one thing I would recommend is that they ask the funeral director or embalmer to help them through that process. Because it can not only be technically difficult, with discoloration and the condition of the skin after death, but also emotionally. And an embalmer is trained on that, on how to work with those challenges. You think you can do it and then you get in there and you're like, "Oh man, I don't know if I can do this."

So, I'm going to go back to finding the right professional, finding the right funeral home and funeral director, just like you would find a dentist, or a doctor, or a hairstylist, and have them in your back pocket. You know already, "This is the person who is going to take care of my family or my loved one." It's hard to think about! It really is, but when you're going through it, you don't want to have to make those decisions at that time.

Aside: So read some Yelp pages, ask your most goth friends, or maybe the people in your life who voted early, and have an earthquake kit, and just generally have their shit together.

Alie: Have you ever had anyone interview you while they're still alive?

Monica: What do you mean?

Alie: Like say, "Hey, things aren't looking so great..."

Monica: Oh, yes! Like for pre-arrangements and whatnot? Absolutely! Many people don't realize that funeral directors often do pre-arrangements, and so you can pre-arrange your funeral with your funeral director. Absolutely I have families that come in and talk to me and say, "Hey, Monica, I want to plan everything now so that you know exactly what to do when I die."

Alie: *[gasps!]* So like, "I looked amazing here. I'd like a smokey eye." *[laughs]*

Monica: Yeah, absolutely! And they choose everything. They can choose their casket, or whether they want a shroud, or if they want a bronze casket, or if they want to be cremated. We do everything. All the details, you pick the urn, if you don't want a funeral hearse, "I want to be in a horse-drawn carriage." *["Aww... fancy, fancy."]* We can plan all that in advance. You can even pay for it in advance too, like funeral insurance. A lot of people don't know that.

But the one thing I would say is that you don't have to pay to do funeral arrangements. A lot of people have that misconception that they have to pay for their funeral if they go and talk to a funeral director about it, and that's not true. You can go in, and funeral directors love that because then it's just so much... They already know what to do. They already know. They pull your file, and "this is what Shelly wants." We already talked about it, her signature's right here. That takes the pressure off of the family. They don't have to make decisions. All they have to do is pay.

Alie: Yeah. Just pick up the tab. Pre-ordered it... It's like ordering Indian food. *[laughs]* "He chose everything. Just pick up the tab."

Monica: Yeah! You could even do it online. I have colleagues that do it online now so families don't even have to go in the funeral home.

Alie: Oh my gosh. That's so smart. On that note, I got so many questions from so many amazing listeners. Jacob Blizzard, first-time question-asker: Have you ever prepared a full clown in makeup? Jeffrey Bradshaw wants to know: Has anyone ever asked to be made up as a character? *[laughs]* This one question, JV Hampton VanSant wants to know: If I wanted to, say, be buried looking like a Dolly Parton drag impersonator, is that a request? Taryn wants to know if they could go out in drag makeup. And I really loved this one question...

Aside: Shout out to patron Felix Wolfe who asked: Do you try to mimic the makeup style or aesthetic of the deceased? As a queer freako I would want my makeup to reflect what I wore in my life and not an idea of "normal" makeup. Felix, I love you.

Alie: Is that cool?

Monica: It's totally cool, but like I said, you have to find the right funeral director. Politics play a big deal in everyone's life. You want to make sure that you're going to somebody who understands what you want and that they also respect your own views and the way that you live your lifestyle. For example, my best friend David passed away from cancer a few years ago. When they told him, "You're terminally ill," he came to me and he's like, "I want

to plan all this out.” So we started doing that. And he was a gay man, but he was not just a gay man. He was a *fabulous* gay man. And everybody knew that. His nickname was Barbie, and so everybody knew how fabulous David was. And I wanted to make sure that he went out just as fabulous as he could.

So we talked about that and he’s like, “Monica, puhleeease, oh my god please, do not let me go out without a tan.” Because he lived in Florida and he loved to be tan. He was like, “Make sure that my highlights are on point and please make sure that I have a tan.” So we did that. I made sure that I gave him a spray tan. He wanted glitter all around his suit. He had a white suit that he picked out and this beautiful, bright-colored shirt. I made him a flower corsage and it had glitter on it, and I made sure that his highlights were on point. So, yes, if you want to look like Dolly Parton, you can do that. But you need to call Monica. You need to call me. *[Alie laughs]*

You need to find a funeral director – really though – you need to find a funeral director that understands that and can offer you the service that you want. It just takes a little bit of legwork, but absolutely it can be done. If you want to look like a cartoon character, if you want to go out in cosplay or whatever, yes you can do that, but you need to... First of all, you need to express that to your family and make sure that your family understands. You need to have it in writing, and you need to find a funeral director that’s going to honor your wishes and that has the skills to do that.

You know, not everybody can do drag makeup. It’s not easy. *[RuPaul: “You’re born naked and the rest is drag.”]* Yeah, it’s not easy. So you want to make sure that you have the right people in place. If that really, truly, is your wish, you need to put it in writing, make sure that you have the right professionals in place, and that your family fully understands your requests.

Alie: Absolutely. Several people: Tammy Fortin, Mollie Rose K Siebert, Heidi Stooshnoff and Elaine Lamirande, who is a first-time question-asker, wants to know: HBO series *Six Feet Under*. Did they get it right? Was it flimflam? *[clip from Six Feet Under: Tracy, “Why do people have to die?” Nate, “To make life important.”]* Heidi wants to know if you ever imagine having full-on conversations with the deceased, or Tammy wants to know: Do you ever just talk to the person while you’re doing them up, either out loud or in your head?

Monica: Those are all really common questions that I get. First of all, I’m sorry to disappoint you all, *[soft drumroll]* I never watched *Six Feet Under*. *[Alie laughs]* Sorry, I just don’t watch shows like that. I’m a super nerd. I watch documentaries on the history of food or something. I’m really into nutrition and fitness, so I typically spend time watching those kinds of shows, or history. So, sorry, I don’t know if they got it right or not.

As far as conversations with the dead, yeah, I do. I do have conversations with them sometimes. My most favorite one would be like, “Help me help you.” *[laughs]* If I have a body that’s giving me a hard time and I’m not able to really get the effect that I’m going for, I tell them, “Help me help you.” Or sometimes I’ll say, “We’re going to get you where you’re going. I’m going to help your family through this, and you’re gonna look beautiful.” That’s something that I do a lot. I’ll be like, “You’re going to look so great. You’re going to look beautiful.” And I don’t know if that’s more for me, but yeah, I do. I have those kinds of little conversations every once in a while, for sure. It’s lonely in there! *[Monica and Alie laugh]*

Alie: A few people had some questions that I'm sure you get a lot but they're probably afraid to ask. Molly and Sadie want to know: Eyeballs. Do you have to close them? Do you have to sew...? And lips, Karen wanted to know this: Do you have to close the lips or the eyes? How does that work?

Monica: Okay, so that's super technical and a lot of people are weirded out by that kind of stuff. Sometimes I'll get a body in and their eyes are already closed, and their mouth is closed, so I don't really have to do anything. 90% of the time, we do have to close the people's eyes and we do have to close their mouth. There is a surgical procedure that we do, and it's a suturing procedure. You have to think of it like you're going to the dentist. People get so weirded out about it, but I'm like, "You guys, this is plastic surgery on the dead. That's all it is. Okay?" Basically, it's a surgical procedure where we go in and we suture through the nose, the septum, and down into the mouth and close the mouth that way.

So obviously we're not using any pain killers or anything cause the person is dead. [*"Didn't feel a thing."*] I try to demystify it for people so that they aren't afraid by explaining it that way, where it's a surgical procedure, much like prostate surgery. The same with the eyes. Sometimes, we will use a little tiny bit of adhesive just to keep the inner canthus and the outer canthus closed.

Aside: A canthus is a corner of the eye. I also just read that some desairologists might use eye caps under your lids. They look like large plastic contact lenses, but they have spikes on one side to keep the decedents eyes closed. Like they're in deeeeeeep sleep.

The facial features are set before embalming in a kind of restful, pleasant expression. Although it has kind of left me wondering if anyone's ever been asked to be presented as if they're just in mid-afternoon nap, rumpled shirt, and a remote control in one hand. Maybe a pool of drool on a couch cushion under their head. Anyway, sometimes they do dab a little glue to keep you from looking alert, not what you want.

Monica: Not always though. If the embalming process goes very well, you don't have to use any kind of adhesive at all. That tissue will firm in that position, which is what we're really after.

Alie: Okay. I didn't know that. Do people die with an expression on their face?

Monica: Sometimes. Yeah, sometimes I'll get somebody in that has a little smirk or something like that. Usually by the time the person has gotten to me at the mortuary, any kind of rigor mortis has gone away so they're in a natural position.

Aside: And not that this was something I thought I'd ever learn, but there are stages the body goes through after your spirit flies off into Heaven filled with frogs, and friendly possums, and your grandpa, and all you can eat lactose-free gelato, and hammocks.

So, the first stage after you die is 'pallor mortis', where circulation stops, and skin looks lighter and pallid. Then there's 'algor mortis', where the body comes to ambient room temperature. Just cools off like leftovers. And then 'rigor mortis', in which the muscles stiffen from a lack of ATP to relax them. This rigor mortis stage starts about 12 hours after death and lasts a few days, and then the muscles begin to decompose, and the body relaxes again. And then there's 'livor mortis', that purplish staining which can start as soon as 20 minutes after death.

I also found it very sweet to learn that during embalming, the desairologist or embalmer will massage the body just to keep things flowing. In a sort of final pampering spa day. But

you know, one of the naked spas. But yes, Monica says that by the time she works on them, the limbs and the muscles are pretty flippity-floppity chill. Those are not her words.

Monica: People die with their mouth open a lot. I mean, you relax. Every muscle relaxes. So, kind of like when you're sleeping, sometimes you sleep with your mouth open. It's kind of the same thing.

Alie: Catching flies. We've all done it.

Monica: Yeah. No horrified looks though. I don't really have recollection of any horrified expressions.

Alie: That's good. I was worried about that.

Monica: Yeah. No, that's not something that I've seen.

Alie: Wendy Miles and Lulu Hall both wanted to know if there is a smell or if that is even an issue? I guess also you're wearing a mask. So, is that a thing?

Monica: The smells. Yes. So, that is one thing for sure. Decomposition definitely has a smell and dead human bodies have a smell, much like when you walk into the hospital. So, those smells from the hospital, they do carry over into the mortuary. There are the bodily fluids that are produced. All of those very clinical hospital smells, and then that's paired with the smells of decomposition.

I try to explain it to people like, if you've ever had a steak in your refrigerator and gone away for the weekend, and you come back and you open the refrigerator up and you're like, "Ooh, there's something bad in there." [*Smell this.*] So, that smell is what it's like, but on a grand scale.

I think it's important also to point out that the embalming process retards that smell. That's why it's like, "Okay, let's get these people embalmed so that we don't have those smells and there's no offensive odor for the family." To be honest, working as a professional, I don't want to smell those smells either. They can get a little stinky.

Alie: Yeah. Oh, Buhbrie had a great question: Is makeup done differently on deceased people of color? Products for darker complexions weren't wildly available before the '70s.

Monica: Yeah, absolutely. It's totally different. Also, it's important to remember that another fascinating and amazing thing about embalming is that we can cosmeticize a deceased person from the inside out.

Alie: What?!

Monica: It's so cool. It is super cool. Especially, as an embalmer, if you can master that technique, it's really neat. So what we do is we add a dye additive to the embalming fluid. Whether that person is Caucasian or Black, we have different types and color of dye that we can use. When it's done right, it is *really* beautiful. The person's skin tone just comes out really nice.

You can do that, but then also the cosmetics that we use, if its topically that we're talking about, LolaSe7en is a very modern brand of mortuary makeup. And it was actually created by a Black lady. She's a Black funeral director. So, that was something that she brought to the game that was really valuable to me. She brought different palettes of different complexion types.

Alie: Cool.

Aside: Oh, and if you want to look up LolaSe7en, they're on Instagram as @lolase7encosmetics. I started poking around their cosmetics site, and for a sec I was like, "Oooh, that's a great coral lip palette." Then I remembered it will hopefully be a very long time before I get to wear it.

Monica: Yeah, I have all of her palettes. So any kind of complexion, whether they're Black, or Asian, or Hispanic, or Caucasian, I have all of those different types of foundation colors.

Alie: Oh, that's great!

Monica: Yeah. But I do have to say, I do try to cosmeticize internally first because less is more when it comes from mortuary makeup, in my opinion.

Alie: I guess that's also just a good lesson. If you want your skin to look great while you're alive, drink a lot of smoothies, eat a lot of vegetables, take your vitamins, and hydrate. *[laughs]* I feel like the best skin cream is just drinking water.

Monica: You're absolutely right. I have to agree with you on that.

Alie: A few people wanted to know if you've had any really strange requests. Cassy Flint and Arielle Jade asked if you've had a really strange request that either caught you off guard or was a challenge.

Monica: Yeah. So, I think the most interesting and strange request was when I had a young lady who passed away and she was an exotic dancer. Obviously, a young girl, very beautiful, but she didn't really have a family. So, her work family were the people that were taking care of her arrangements. They wanted to have her prepared in her dancing costumes. And I'm fine with that. I will honor anyone's wishes within reason. But the issue that I had was that so much of her skin was showing, and that's a lot of makeup.

It was a challenge because of the decomposition process and the way that the body breaks down. A lot of that we can camouflage under clothing, as morticians. So I was like, "You guys, I don't know if that's the best idea. That's really a lot of skin that's going to be showing." Her body wasn't in the best condition as it was, as far as the place that she was in the process of decomposition. She wasn't in a great place. However, I wanted to do that for them. I just didn't think it would be the best last memory for them.

Once I explained it to them and told them what was going to show, they were like, "Oh yeah, no, we don't want that." So, I think just having that open conversation with them, of telling them what they're going to see, makes people's minds up for them when they have that conversation. They're like, "Oh, I didn't think about that."

Aside: Urgh! Y'all, friends do become family and this story just socked me right in the guts. I hope her molecules have fed mushrooms, and flowers, and worms that feed birds that sing in the sunshine. She deserves it. I wanna cry. How did it turn out?

Alie: What did she end up wearing? Did she end up wearing a dress?

Monica: Yeah. We put her in a really pretty, shimmery dress. It was one of her costumes that she had; it just had more coverage. She ended up looking really pretty on her special day, but I did have a magician one time.

Alie: Really?

Monica: Yeah. That was kind of cool. It was a funeral of all magicians, so that was kind of cool. They did a really nice sendoff for him. They had his little hat and his little bunny and everything with him.

Aside: Wait hold the phone, did they bury the magician with his bunny?

Monica: The bunny was alive. Oh yeah.

Alie: But not buried with him alive!

Monica: No, no, no, no. But he was there for the service. He was with him and he was there for the service. Yeah, absolutely.

Alie: Emotional support bunny!

Monica: Yes.

Alie: Oh my gosh. Did you have to hide a bunch of scarves in his sleeves?

Monica: All that stuff.

Alie: Ah, amazing! You got to know some real magic tricks, I'm sure.

Monica: Oh, it was one of the most memorable funerals that I've had. All the magicians were there. Yeah, it was definitely one for the books for sure.

Alie: Oh, what a party! Koryn and Jen Borlick and Meehandlebars want to know if you've ever had anything spooky or downright weird happen. Any unexpected surprises or if you've ever kind of freaked yourself out.

Monica: Spooky or unexpected surprises? Unexpected surprises would be, last day of service; I've worked my buns off all week trying to get this body prepared, and the funeral running, and everything perfect. And then the day of the service, the family has no money to pay. *[laughs]* So, I would say that's probably the one that I'm like, "Oh my god! Now what?"

But I know what people are after, but spooky? I don't really have any of those stories. It's just not like that. I think people get so caught up in the movies and what they see on TV that they don't realize, it's really a hospital setting. It's very clinical. We have our cooler. Yes, there's bodies in our cooler, but I'm so busy that I don't have really time to think about spooky stuff. I think people think that we have one body and that's it. In reality, we're probably processing between five and twenty bodies at a time.

Alie: And are you going from one to the other, depending on stages and stuff?

Monica: Yeah, absolutely. I wish I had some spooky stories. I wish I could say, "Oh yeah. This one time, this guy sat up and he started talking to me." *[laughs]* It's just not like that.

Alie: That's good. *[laughs]* I think that helps people.

Aside: So, I guess, don't be afraid of funeral homes or dead people. Dead people who are literally chillin' in fridges right now were probably afraid of dead people while they were alive. They're just someone's cousin, or girlfriend, or mom, or coworker, or mailman. They all had birthdays, and got excited about donuts in the breakroom, and had favorite songs, and a smell that reminded them of a first love. Monica is there to make sure that they look amazing at the last party they'll ever host, a bon voyage to the great beyond. But it can't all be smooth sailing for her.

Alie: And one of the last questions I always ask, what is one thing about your job that is the hardest or something that's annoying or petty? What's one thing that you hate?

Monica: My one thing I would say that's really hard for me is the misconceptions about embalming: what it is and why we do it. I want to really drive this home to your listeners. There's a lot of propaganda on the internet right now about how embalming is bad for the

environment; it's bad for this, it's bad for that. And it's not. Stop listening to embalming advice from people who don't embalm. You're not going to take advice from a hairstylist when you're trying to get a root canal done. A lot of what gets under my skin is that there's a lot of misconceptions about the embalming process itself.

Aside: *Gets under her skin...* That's Dad-worthy right there. Bravo.

Monica: Just be careful with what you are listening to on YouTube, and podcasts, and a lot of the natural burial advocates and stuff like that. I love natural burial. No offense to natural burial. I absolutely love it. I think it's a beautiful, amazing way to say goodbye. Absolutely. Just be careful about what you're listening to.

Aside: Of course, just DadWard jumping in to say that opinions really differ on this topic, as you can imagine. Plenty of websites say that embalming fluid is a disgrace to our poo-filled sewage systems, but I did find a 2011 paper from the University of Johannesburg titled, "The Effect of Formaldehyde Use in Sanitation" which stated:

Formaldehyde does not raise any serious human health or environmental concerns, provided it is properly handled and stored. When released into the air, it is rapidly broken down by photolysis. (Light) When released into water, it is biodegraded within a few days.

This paper went on to discuss porta-potties. Essentially, the formaldehyde breaks down into carbon dioxide and water through the natural action of oxygen, and sunlight, and bacteria, and heat. Good for poo, good for you. That is not the slogan of the Formaldehyde Commission, nor should it be.

But if you're going to get truly pissed about formaldehyde and industry, essentially, maybe get bent about resins and particleboard first, and embalming a distant second.

But if you're like, "I want a natural burial. I want to return to the Earth ASAP." I get it. I feel you completely. As for natural burials, you can get encased in the fetal position into a big fibrous egg that will feed your loamy nutrients into a tree, or you can return to our mother by donning a mushroom suit that breaks you down to grow strains of fungus. Perhaps a body farm donation is for you? Or you can get tossed into a vat of concrete and thrown in the ocean to help a coral reef develop. It's your bod, do what makes you happy. Just maybe let someone know what those wishes are. You can do it in a fun way, you can write a poem or a singing telegram. Tweet it. ["*You're asking me, what I want?*" "*Yeah, it's your funeral.*"]

Alie: What about the thing that you just love the most about your career, your job?

Monica: The thing that I love most about my career and my job is that, hands down, I get to help people that are living in their darkest days. I get to connect with people on a level that other people will never... that even their closest friends and family do not get to connect with them. I really love the fact that years after, I'll have families that'll reach out to me, and they remember every detail of the time that we spent together. You know, planning the service and the things that I did for their loved one. I just truly love connecting with people like that.

Alie: Yeah. You have to really be a people person to work with the dead, huh?

Monica: I think so. I think you have to have compassion and you have to be able to be strong. The family's counting on you to get them through that really horrible time in their life. That's my favorite part of it.

Alie: Wow. That's a beautiful thing. That's really great. And you're so respected in your field. You're just *the* person to ask about this. I was so excited to talk to you. [*laughs*]

Monica: Aww, I love that.

Alie: Well, I'm so glad to get some of your time. I know, unfortunately, it's busy season for you.

Monica: Yes, it is. It is a busy, fast-moving kind of pace here and we're going into our busy season as far as death is concerned, I have, for your listeners or anybody else, a link set up on my website for the general public. I do teach classes as well for the general public. All these questions that your listeners are asking, they might want to take a class that I offer. And they can engage with me and other people that are interested in the macabre and learning about death in a comfortable environment.

Alie: Awesome.

Aside: Oh! This was asked by Patrons and mortuary students Kayla Simpson and Kyra Dye. Hello, wonderful death workers! Thank you for taking care of the people we love!

Alie: Oh, a few people who are in mortuary school asked if you have one piece of advice for someone going down this path that you could give to yourself in the past or someone else starting out. Any one last piece of advice?

Monica: For somebody that's going into this industry, is to really thicken your skin right up. Thicken your skin up, and don't let anybody tell you that you can't achieve your dreams. Go after it. Whatever your dreams are, don't let anybody squish 'em.

Alie: Don't let anyone squish 'em! That should be a t-shirt.

Monica: Don't let anyone squish 'em. Yeah. Don't let anybody get in your way.

Alie: Well, thank you so, so much. Keep up the amazing work for those families, and make sure to get some rest in between if you can.

Monica: It's been fun, Alie. Thanks for having me. Thanks for reaching out. I guess until next time, happy embalming.

So, ask smart people stupid questions and whether you want to dance, or wear glitter, or embalm people, or write a novel: follow your dreams. Don't let anyone squish 'em!

To learn more about Monica and her classes, services, and even embalming uniforms, you can check out her website NXTGenMortuarySupport.com. Link is in the show notes. Follow her on [Instagram](#) and on [Twitter](#) at @ColdHandsHosts. All those links are in the show notes alongside one to donate to Hi Precious should you desire.

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Noel Dilworth helps me schedule the interviews because I'm just, frankly, very bad at that. Jarrett Sleeper is the assistant editor, who also went to the store and got me ice cream sandwiches the other day, and thus shall be canonized into sainthood. Huge thanks of course to the thread that sutures all these pieces together, Steven Ray Morris. He also hosts the *Purrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right*, two great podcasts about kitties and dinos. Nick Thorburn of the band *Islands* wrote and performed the theme song.

If you listen to the end, I divulge something. This week, I got a new watch that tracks your heart rate. Y'all know I have anxiety, but I try to control it with diet and medication, but out of the blue last week, I started to have an anxiety attack. And I was like, "One of these. I'm used to them." Later, I looked at my watch, and my heart rate went from resting at maybe 55 beats a minute to 160. It just jumped from one minute to the next doing nothing. How weird is that?

But it was actually really nice and affirming to know that anxiety isn't just me being a weenie who worries about things. It's a chemical and somatic thing, so to take care of our minds, we have to take care of our bods, while they still have the blood pumping through them. So, I've been trying to chill out a little bit more. Life is short. Let's breathe, relax, live it minute to minute and appreciate the people you love. Also, leave a will and some instructions on what kind of funeral you want.

Also, one more thing. For some reason, the album that I work the most to is *Miss Anthropocene* by Grimes. I don't know why. Anyway, right as I was finishing some research on embalming, Spotify shuffled in a Grimes song called "Flesh Without Blood." OoOoOh spOoKy! Some real ghost-in-the-machine right there. Anyway, that concludes 2020 Spooktober. Also, I might just re-air pumpkins as a palette cleanser as well this week. If I do, go listen to pumpkins too. Get a pumpkin and live your life. You deserve it. Berbye.

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