

The Lady Who Needed a Story for Sweeps Week
by Y York

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(**The Lady** is talking with a friend.)

It's sweeps week. Everyone in the industry is jumping the shark. Everyone is feeling network pressure, even those of us breathing the rarified air in the newsroom. Stu calls me in: Find an angle, get a story. Didn't I used to be an actress, can't I think up something flashy and dramatic?

"You mean like what's-her-name over at channel 5 doing the homeless thing?" I ask.

The channel 5 "homeless thing" is their female investigative weather reporter donning rags and soot, pretending to be homeless with camera person and disguised bodyguards standing by. It's probably the most offensive thing ever seen on television news. So, of course, their ratings are through the roof. I'd anticipated something like this, so I have a couple of ideas in my mental drawer.

I slowly close the door. Stu begins to salivate, misinterpreting the action. I step safely far from his desk and say, "I've got an idea." Disappointed, but ever the professional, he sits back down.

"You know how you feel when confronted with someone who's badly deformed or scarred. How you have to turn away when you see one of those...faces?" He's nodding, I've got his attention. "What do you think it feels like, to be the person, the one with the face?" Go on, he says.

"Well," I say, "What if we go inside the face, follow the face, record the horror on the faces of those who face the face?"

You know somebody? he asks.

"Me." I say. "We doctor me up, or down, as the case may be. Send me into the city. With a hidden camera. We document the pain. The humiliation. By showing the reaction of the people around her."

That's what I want, he says.

This idea was actually my warmup idea. The real idea was the next one – an exposé of a so-called no-kill shelter. But now I'm stuck, so I throw myself into it

I bring in Sherri who does the anchor makeup. I like Sherri. She has a keen sense of justice. Last month she put blue eyeshadow on one of our homophobic anchors. He did the whole segment without noticing. He only found out through the uptick in his fan mail.

Sherri takes to my task with relish. Which is how I'd describe my face when she gets done. I was prepared for plaster casts and prosthetics, but she does the whole makeover with paint and latex. She glues down one of my eyes, blackens my front teeth, puts a dental swab in my cheek to distort my mouth, and then applies that relish texture over a green base. I look in the mirror. I'm ready to laugh, but it takes a few deep breaths to see the humor in this transformation. The amazing part is how little it takes to turn my normal face into a human nightmare. Looks are decided my millimeters.

I display Sheri's creation to the outer office. The newsroom is immediately quiet. Those not-in-the-know drop their jaws and stop talking until those in-the-know begin clapping. I stare down the smirks and smiles until the newsroom is again quiet.

An odd power surges through me.

It's dark when we head for the subway -- Carter -- my hidden camera -- and me. I pull back my cap. I do Charles Laughton's Hunchback-of-Notre-Dame shuffle. I walk under streetlights to give everybody a good look. The people rushing home from work on Sixth Avenue cast their eyes away, but not before a gasp escapes from their refined faces. A solitary child dragged behind a shopping mother cries mommy, mommy. The mother shushing and pulling her away. Carter grinning as he captures every reaction for its full entertainment value.

On the almost empty Subway, onlookers stare, avert their gaze when I catch their eye. When they sneak another glimpse, they find my eyes still staring at them. My gaze drives them back into their newspapers or to the graffiti on the subway ads. Yes, there is power here. I might make this a regular segment.

As we approach the end of the line, a guy gets on our car, takes one look at me and heaves his dinner. Maybe he was sick. Or maybe Sheri is a genius. Carter is thrilled.

The reek of the vomit sends us out of the subway into the Brooklyn night. Time for a break. We're deep in the borough. We walk down a quiet street and find an all-night diner. I go in first, Carter following a minute or two later so he can continue his guerilla filming.

The diners glance at me, then go back to what they're working on. The half dozen customers are eating concoctions over rice, the cook is doing the crossword, and the waitress heads my way. "Take your order, Dearie?" She's smiling. I have caused nary a stir. Has my makeup slipped?

I head for the bathroom to check -- their indifference is the strangest thing to happen since I left the newsroom. I'm alone at the mirror -- my mask still in place, when behind me, coming into the bathroom, a face. I see it in the mirror, and I can't look away. It's the real Hunchback of Notre Dame. The flesh of her face -- lumps -- like hills are erupting across her forehead and cheeks. The eyes nose and mouth jammed together in the middle, like they're one pulsing feature surrounded by puss-filled nodules that continue down her neck and disappear inside a woolen plaid shirt.

My heart has stopped, my stomach has turned, and I barely make it to a toilet. The creature holds my head while I throw up. I want to shake her off, but her hand is smooth and cool, and she's supporting me, so I don't fall in. Once I stop heaving, I hear what she's saying:

"There, there, little lady, it's a warning to you.
Stick to the salad. Avoid Gus's stew."

She's talking in rhymes. A deep quiet calm voice. We sit on the tiles. She lights a cigarette and hands it to me. I beg off with a gesture even though nicotine is really appealing right now. I'm too scared I'll catch ... whatever it is she is.

She shifts her weight and her large soft thigh presses my own. We are way too close. I focus on her eyes, squinting to block out the bumps -- the distortion that is the rest of her face. Her eyes. They're like an elephant, large, dark, kind, and something ...eternal. Her eyes are eternal. My ears are ringing, probably because they're filled with puke from my eustachian tubes. I want to disappear. Thank goodness Carter can't come in this room. I try to stand but the light touch of her hand keeps me in place.

I need to confess. I need her to forgive me. I need her to forgive the world. I need her to forgive TV news. "This isn't my face," I try. She gently puts a finger on my lips. She studies me for a moment, dragging on the cigarette, a deep inhalation, and life's longest sigh.

"I know." She says. "I know. No one knows better than I.
I wear this face because of the Princess I hide.
She's young and she's trim
and except for a heart-shaped mole, no blemish mars her skin.
I give her this home, hide her inside of me.
It's how she stays safe through our dangerous journey."

I nod at her words. She extends the cigarette again. I take it. Inhale.

(The end.)