Last of Kin

by Mike Makowsky

EXT. APARTMENT COMPLEX - DAY

A lone TAXI CAB is stationed on the curb outside a low-rent urban apartment. The DRIVER chomps on a cigarette, eyeing the taximeter impatiently. He is overweight, unshaven and purely apathetic toward the song buzzing on the radio, "LIKE A PRAYER" by MADONNA.

NEIL BLAUSTEIN, 18, taps lightly on the window. The driver briefly studies the boy. He is wearing a hand-me-down dress suit that fits poorly on his lanky body. His skin is bad and his face is forgettable.

TAXI DRIVER

Are you Neil?

Neil nods and hops into the backseat of the car. The driver turns on the ignition.

TAXI DRIVER (CONT'D)

Where to?

NETT

347 West 14th. Shapiro & Sons.

TAXI DRIVER

That's the, uh...

NEIL

The funeral home.

INT. FUNERAL PARLOR - DAY

Neil sits on a lime-green couch, staring blankly forward. His suit is matched with a beat-up pair of laceless Converse sneakers. He emits a slight, uncontrolled twitch every few seconds.

The FUNERAL DIRECTOR glides to him. Somber by profession.

FUNERAL DIRECTOR

You can see her now.

He opens the door at his side and beckons Neil to enter.

INT. FUNERAL PARLOR / VIEWING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Neil approaches the wood casket, which is displayed prominently at the end of the room. A small chandelier places the deceased, VICTORIA BLAUSTEIN, in the spotlight.

He stands over his mother, still expressionless. Victoria's worn-out face is bloated with age and embalmed in cosmetics. She appears to be frowning, although this may have just been her natural facial disposition in life.

Neil twitches. Waits for her eyes to open. Nothing.

NEIL

Fuck you.

Victoria's face is frozen, shrill. Devoid of reaction.

Another twitch. Neil grits his teeth, astutely aware that another will soon come.

INT. BROADWAY DINER - DAY

Funeral guests populate the retro diner, which is in need of a decorative update that it will never get. The majority of the space has been rented out for Victoria's post-service reception. However, the perimeter of the seating area is still inhabited by the diner's "usuals" -- the elderly patrons, who look utterly confused as to why the hell everyone else is donning formal wear.

Of the funeral crowd, most are either mingling appropriately or stuffing their faces with coleslaw. UNCLE DAVID, 50s, graying and stout, the perfect bespectacled mensche, engages in conversation with Neil.

UNCLE DAVID

I noticed you didn't cry at the service.

NEIL

I cried during the burial prayer. You didn't see.

UNCLE DAVID

Neil, I know you and your mother weren't on the best of terms.

NEIL

(restraining a twitch)
I did cry.

In a gesture of dutiful sympathy, David plants his hand on Neil's shoulder.

UNCLE DAVID

It would be nice if you gave a speech today. About what she meant to you.

I wouldn't know what to say.

UNCLE DAVID

You feel a lot of negativity towards Victoria at this point in your life. I can understand that. She was my big sister, after all-

NEIL

I'm fine.

UNCLE DAVID

These sentiments will pass, Neil, that's all I'm trying to tell you. And then you'll realize that she's gone forever. So honor her now, with everyone here to listen. You'll regret it if you don't.

No response from Neil. David sighs deeply, retracting his hand from his nephew.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)
She loved you the most, Neil. All
that other crap, it's not...
 (searching)
It shouldn't be so important.

NETL

Right.

David's eyes wander to the floor, and he notices Neil's Converse sneakers. He breathes out his irritation.

UNCLE DAVID

Well in any case I'm sorry for your loss.

He exits. After a moment of calm absorption, Neil turns in the opposite direction.

INT. BROADWAY DINER / BATHROOM AREA - DAY

Victoria's old friends gather around a wall of framed photographs, each depicting the diner as it was in the late 1960s. In its heyday. Swinging.

Black-and-white teenyboppers dance with wild abandon atop tables. Shotgun weddings are held by the jukebox. Carlos Santana poses nonchalantly with the manager, an autograph tearing across his torso.

The observers focus on one picture in particular -- Victoria, late teens, leaning on the outside steps of the diner with a handsome, long-haired TEENAGE BOY in a checkered shirt. Victoria is absolutely stunning, model-beautiful. Her captivating eyes wander away from her companion, to a point outside the range of the photograph. She seems entranced in some sort of daze.

FRIEND #1

My God, is that her?

FRIEND #2

She was gorgeous.

Neil looks on from afar, invisible to the group. Next to him is CHUCK SILKOWITZ. He resembles Victoria's boyfriend in the photograph, only forty years older. His hair is thinning and he has on a spray-on tan, but otherwise he has maintained his good looks. He nurses a glass of scotch.

CHUCK

(to Neil)

You know, we used to say she looked like a brunette Twiggy.

He extends his hand. Neil notes the Rolex on his wrist.

CHUCK (CONT'D)

You're Vicki's son, right? Neil? I'm Chuck Silkowitz. I knew your mom back in the day.

NEIL

Yeah, I remember she liked to talk about you.

CHUCK

Well, we had some good times.

Smirking, he takes a sip from his glass. His teeth are pearlywhite against the darker skin of his face.

NEIL

She said you guys went up to Woodstock together, in one of those old Volkswagen buses.

CHUCK

Hm. No, I don't think I've ever been to Woodstock.

 \mathtt{NEIL}

I'm probably just confusing it then.

CHUCK

But Vicki was an awesome girl. She was always down for an adventure. I'm sure she was a great mother.

NEIL

She was in bed a lot. (beat)

She was tired.

Chuck doesn't know how to react.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Had you seen her recently?

CHUCK

Oh no. Let me think. Damn, it had to have been at least twenty-five years. I think we were Facebook friends though. Maybe.

Chuck's WIFE and SON enter. The three of them together make the kind of family they use in advertisements.

CHUCK (CONT'D)

Neil, I'd like to introduce you to--

Chuck's voice fades out. Friendly exchanges are made. The Silkowitz family extends its deepest sympathies. It's all very standard. Neil struggles to keep his smile intact.

EXT. BROADWAY DINER - DAY

Neil sits on the same step his mother was photographed on, watching the cars go by. He shivers in the cold. Twitches intermittently.

KAT

Hi.

KAT, 18, strolls over from the parking lot. She is mildly pudgy as a result of retained baby fat, not conventionally attractive by any means. Her hands are buried in the pockets of an oversized sweatshirt, and a formal black skirt exposes her legs to the low temperatures.

NEIL

Hey Kat.

KAT

I'm sorry about your mom.

NEIL

It's okay.

KAT

No, I mean, it sucks. I can't imagine how you must feel.

NEIL

You remember what she was like. All she ever did was smoke and watch stupid sitcoms.

KAT

She raised you.

NEIL

No she didn't. And I'm sick of everyone saying otherwise. She didn't have a job. She never even bothered to look for one. No rides to school, no family meals. She couldn't cook. I'm not even mad at my dad for leaving. I get it.

Kat plants herself down next to Neil.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Have I ever told you the Wheel of Fortune story?

KAT

No. I don't think so.

NEIL

The two of us used to watch Wheel of Fortune together. It was this ritual we had every night when I was a kid. And without fail, she would always be able to predict the words after only two or three letters.

KAT

Wow.

NEIL

I thought she was the smartest person in the world. She had to be, right? Who could do that?

KAT

That's really incredible.

Yeah. When I was ten I realized they aired the episodes earlier in the day, at 5:30. She'd watch it twice and not tell me.

KAT

I...I didn't know they did that.

NEIL

I stopped watching it with her after that. She kept at it though, with or without me. I still heard Pat Sajak's voice every night from my room.

Kat stares down at the ground. Neil sees that her bare legs are quivering and drapes his suit jacket over them.

KAT

I should probably go--

NETT

Come inside.

KAT

Ian's waiting in the car. I was just supposed to stop by.

She takes the jacket off her legs and hands it back to him, then pushes herself up from the ground.

NEIL

Who the hell's Ian?

KAT

My boyfriend...I thought you knew.

NEIL

I've been away.

KAT

I'm being such a bitch, I haven't even asked you about college.

NEIL

It's good. It's really good.

KAT

I'm happy for you.

Beat.

Thanks for coming, Kat. It actually does means a lot.

KAT

I guess, if you need anything...

NEIL

(half-smiling)

I'll be all right. You don't have to worry about me.

Kat isn't reassured, but she leans in to give him a warm embrace. He fleetingly melts into her touch, then recovers at once as she backs away.

INT. BROADWAY DINER - DAY

Uncle David is talking with a male FUNERAL GUEST.

FUNERAL GUEST

And wouldn't you know it, Vicki bought a ticket to Brazil the next morning. Isn't that remarkable?

UNCLE DAVID

Yes, my sister was known for being very impulsive in her time.

FUNERAL GUEST

She was really something.

David spots his son MISHA, 6, running in circles around the restaurant, a miniature twister of chaos.

UNCLE DAVID

If you'll excuse me. Misha!

Misha stops in his tracks, strides over to his father for his inevitable reprimand.

MISHA

Hi Dad.

UNCLE DAVID

Tell me Misha, what is this place you're in?

MISHA

Restaurant?

UNCLE DAVID

That's right, you're in a restaurant. Not a playground.

MISHA

I'm sorry, Dad.

UNCLE DAVID

We'll discuss this later. Where's your mother?

MISHA

I don't know.

CUT TO:

INT. BROADWAY DINER / CUSTODIAL CLOSET - DAY

KAY, David's wife, is PRESSED FIRMLY AGAINST A SUPPLY SHELF, as a buck-naked CUBAN BUSBOY gives her what may very well be THE BEST SEX OF HER LIFE.

INT. BROADWAY DINER - DAY

Return to David and Misha. The former holds back tremendous frustration.

UNCLE DAVID

Okay. Where's your grandmother?

MISHA

Over there with Neil.

Misha points. On the other side of the diner, Neil is being accosted by his grandmother ESTELLE, mid 80s, bingo vixen.

ESTELLE

That was my daughter that died.

NEIL

I know, Grandma.

ESTELLE

I remember when she was a baby. Just a little tot. Her and Davey...

Even though he is too far away to hear his name, David turns at the sound of it.

ESTELLE (CONT'D)

She would torture him. Chase him around the apartment.
(MORE)

ESTELLE (CONT'D)

He was still in diapers. He really just wanted to be left alone.

She laughs to herself.

ESTELLE (CONT'D)

That was my daughter. That was Vicki.

Estelle pulls out her wallet, fishes out a ten-dollar bill.

ESTELLE (CONT'D)

I almost forgot.

NEIL

No, you keep it. I don't need it.

ESTELLE

Oh, don't be an asshole. Take it.

Neil is slightly taken aback by his grandmother's profanity, but accepts the money.

NEIL

Thanks.

ESTELLE

You're a good boy.

Estelle turns to leave. Neil stops her.

NEIL

Why did she have to change, Grandma?

She first reacts with a look of pure puzzlement. The look she's trained herself to present whenever a form of that question is asked. Then, unexpectedly, she breaks.

ESTELLE

I suppose it wasn't her that changed so much, but the world around her, you know?

With that, Estelle wanders off.

INT. BROADWAY DINER / BATHROOM AREA - DAY

Neil re-examines the photo of Victoria on the wall. David appears from behind, adjusting his glasses carefully to see his sister clearer.

UNCLE DAVID

There's a reason they keep these pictures by the bathroom.

NEIL

Huh?

UNCLE DAVID

Well Neil, things were a lot different in the sixties. Very few people cared about what was important. Love. Family. Dignity.

The black-and-white newlyweds by the jukebox are blissfully unacquainted with David's thoughts. The husband has his hand over his wife's pregnant tummy, a wide grin on his face.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

You can recognize that, can't you? You've always been very smart.

He steps in front of Neil's line of vision, blocking him from the wall of photographs.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

How is Brandeis treating you, by the way? Are you learning?

NEIL

It's fun. I like Waltham.

David rocks his head, expecting further elaboration.

NEIL (CONT'D)

Uncle David, I was thinking maybe I'm not the best person to give a speech today.

UNCLE DAVID

Of course. That's your prerogative.

NEIL

You're not mad, are you?

UNCLE DAVID

Come on, don't be ridiculous. I just thought it would be a nice gesture, as her son. If anyone should give a speech to close out Victoria's life, why not have it be the person she was closest to.

NEIL

Well, why don't you give it?

David flinches. Neil has hit a nerve.

UNCLE DAVID

Hm. That might not be appropriate.

NEIL

What do you mean?

UNCLE DAVID

No, it's nothing.

Chuck Silkowitz struts over to the two men, the white teeth of his open mouth leading the way.

CHUCK

Holy shit, is that Little Davey Blaustein?

UNCLE DAVID

Hello Chuck.

CHUCK

How have you been? God, the last time I saw you...

UNCLE DAVID

You were stoned off drugs, dropping my sister back off at our apartment.

CHUCK

(giggling)

Oh fuck, that's right. Good memory.

Neil looks from David to Chuck, and senses immediately that something is wrong.

UNCLE DAVID

My mother and father had to take care of her while she puked up in the kitchen sink. She could barely stand straight.

CHUCK

What?

UNCLE DAVID

Chuck, thank you for coming today. I'm sure it would have meant a lot to Victoria. Now I'm just having a conversation with my nephew, if you don't mind.

David grabs a hold of Neil's arm. Chuck is mortified.

CHUCK

Dave, I didn't mean to--

UNCLE DAVID

Excuse us.

He yanks a deeply confused Neil into the men's bathroom.

INT. BROADWAY DINER / MEN'S BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

David flicks the lock on the door behind him.

UNCLE DAVID

You want to know what kind of woman your mother was?

Neil stays quiet, watching as his uncle erupts before him.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

The problem with Victoria was that she couldn't accept reality. She paraded half-naked through Brooklyn thinking she was, God knows, Janis Joplin. She didn't take anything seriously, your mother. It was all a rose-colored joke to her.

NEIL

You don't need to do this.

UNCLE DAVID

No, I think it's time for you hear it. If not now, when? Although clearly you don't put your mother on any sort of pedestal as it is. Not like those other schmucks out there who didn't know the truth about her. Or your grandmother who refuses to admit it.

Still no argument from Neil. He just stares.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

Because the truth is everyone else in her life was able to grow up, and she never could. I always thought, it must have been all the drugs that did it. Could they have triggered some sort of chemical imbalance in her head that rendered her functionally incompetent?

Neil bites his lip. It's unclear as to why.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

Tell me she wasn't, Neil. Tell me she was a good mother to you, that she raised you with principles. Did she ever even get out of bed for you? Tell me to stop and I'll stop.

Neil's twitches are becoming more frequent. His lip is now softly bleeding.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

I knew all along. There's no speech you could possibly give on her behalf. All these years, it's been me that pays for your apartment. For the food on your table. My practice is fairly successful, but to support two families on my own? And she never once thanked me.

Neil holds on to the bathroom sink to maintain stabilization. The twitches are dominating him now.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

But I have no reason to complain. Not when compared to you. You know where the twitches come from, don't you Neil? Don't you?

NEIL

(clenching his teeth)

Yes.

UNCLE DAVID

So you saw the track marks?

NEIL

She told me.

David nods. Neil begins to settle.

UNCLE DAVID

When?

NEIL

The night she died.

(beat)

She called me into the room. I guess she knew it would be the end. She apologized to me.

UNCLE DAVID

She apologized?

For everything.

UNCLE DAVID

And then?

NEIL

And then she died.

David processes this. Takes a long, deep breath.

UNCLE DAVID

Have you forgiven her--

NEIL

I'm not sure.

UNCLE DAVID

That I can understand.

A moment passes.

UNCLE DAVID (CONT'D)

Your lip is bleeding.

He unlocks the bathroom door and exits. Neil gazes into the mirror, sees that his uncle is right.

NEIL

Fuck.

INT. BROADWAY DINER - DAY

The funeral guests are all seated in the main area, eating their entrees in quiet contentment. David and his family have their own booth. Misha is the only one that emotes, as he nibbles cautiously on a chicken tender.

A few tables away, Neil hasn't touched his food.

Finally, he stands. Taps his fork to his glass. All of the guests turn in the direction of the noise. David shoots him daggers as Misha, freed momentarily from his father's watchful eye, finishes the entire chicken tender in one bite.

Neil composes himself.

NEIL

I'd like to say a few words about my mother.

FADE OUT.