

CORONER CONFIDENTIAL

by Alan Shapiro

When my NYU short film won the year's best film, Warner Bros. awarded me a summertime apprenticeship at their Burbank studio under director Ken Russell on Paddy Chayefsky's "Altered States." You can still find my initials carved in the rafters of Stage 24. I also managed to sell my first movie pitch. Thus began twenty-five years of writing and directing for the major studios. I had my peaks and valleys, but mostly I was working.

Until I wasn't.

Hollywood sniffs out failure like cadaver dogs. If your movie's a hit, you get rich and all the cool kids want to be friends. But if the opening weekend box office shits the bed, you are condemned to a circle of hell known as "Directors Jail." Think of it as the Un-Cheers, the place where nobody knows your name. I was off to the slammer. This once promising up and comer was now but a graying, middle-aged shlub who used to direct. I had no other marketable skills. To quote one studio big shot, my status in town had been downgraded to "colder than whale shit".

The prospect of a new career on the eve of my first Social Security check was laughable and I knew it. I sank into a depression.

Serving my time, I stumbled upon a magazine piece on a forensic anthropological research facility at the University of Tennessee known as the "Body Farm," a 3-acre complex where fifty or so corpses lay about in the elements so students can study the stages of human decomposition and learn to identify a person's age, sex, race, and time of death.

I was intrigued. Who doesn't love decomposition? Maybe there's a story here. I finagled a "research" ride-along in an LA Coroner van. My forty-something driver, Fidel, was a chatty and hilarious Mexican-American who went by "Fifi." We became fast friends.

The County of Los Angeles runs the nation's largest medical examiner with a central facility responsible for an area of roughly 4,084 square miles, making it larger than the states of Delaware and Rhode Island combined.

Fifi pulled the van up at a Hollywood apartment where neighbors had reported a terrible smell. Police pointed us to a bathroom where a large and deceased white male had been ripening in the summer heat, enveloped in writhing maggots. One of those "you can't un-see it" events. In coroner-speak, a "decomp." I almost hurled.

But it was definitely compelling. I wanted to know more and inquired about volunteering. While I possessed no qualifications, I was game for entry level grunt work. After weeks waiting and a gauntlet of security checks, I became a "Tech 1" reporting to Fifi. I received an official ID badge and my own locker. I had arrived.

I found Fifi in the print lab soaking a mummified severed finger in his celebrated papaya and kerosene slurry (patent pending). I didn't ask whose finger, or where the rest of him was, but overnight it had swelled to enable perfect prints. I stood, riveted, watching Fifi stamp intake forms with someone's amputated finger. Something you don't see every day.

Nothing could prepare me for an autopsy. We suited up in head-to-toe protective wear. Past the face splash guard protecting me (from what?) the double glass doors parted. I was immediately knocked back with the power of a Mike Tyson upper cut, enveloped in an ambrosial of putrid fish and tangy formaldehyde. Grace notes of pepper and coffee grounds made it particularly revolting.

I followed Fifi past a half dozen autopsies in progress. Each station manned by a forensic pathologist, assisted by a "Tech 2" (Fifi) charged with opening the chest with a 'Y' incision, pruning flesh back, deploying tree pruners to cut open the rib cage, then methodically extract organs, urine, and blood for the pathologist to review.

Once I got past the blood and guts, I was amused to find it a surprisingly conventional workplace, as bored and ironic as "The Office," with a cast of the prosaic and odd, including our inappropriately horny septuagenarian pathologist who regaled us with his latest sexual conquest in Tijuana while slicing shavings of what looked like brain sushi.

Fifi demonstrated the high-speed oscillating saw that cuts through bone without damaging soft tissue. He challenged me to pull back the scalp and cut completely around the skull's crown, then deploying a flat head screwdriver to "pop the hood" as it were. Presuming the subject's head had arrived intact, you next peel away a thin film to expose the piece de resistance. Per Fifi's running directive, I slipped my scalpel underneath to separate the spinal cord, then carefully extracted the brain from its cranial vault to deposit upon a scale. As one does.

As a lowly "Tech 1," I was tasked to verify the decedent's toe tag, retrieve the corresponding cadaver from a gymnasium-size crypt with shelves of bodies stacked five high, then roll it to the autopsy table where the pathologist and Tech 2 worked their magic. Later, on their way out, they threw me the leftovers -- literally. I had to bag the bloody scraps of organ detritus into a red bio-hazard bag, pack it into the hollowed chest cavity, cover with the breast plate, sew up chest and scalp, and return it to the crypt. I marshaled a penumatic lift stacker to return the body tray to its shelf. Now and then a corpse would slip and drop to the floor. I'd

scramble to maneuver it back up before anyone noticed. I came to more fully grasp the meaning of "dead weight."

As we worked through the day's cases, I wondered what brought the person here, now naked, laid out on stainless steel before me. What were their final moments? I recalled a childhood friend killed by a drunk driver. When my mom told me, it didn't make sense. But...where'd he go? There was a beat missing in the transition from my friend to nothingness. I couldn't get my arms around it. (Still can't.)

Of course, we don't mourn a body. An autopsy concerns the flesh, or what's left. Whatever je ne sais quoi which led me to the coroners had awoken a haunting enigma. A foundational riddle that neither science nor religion offers a satisfying answer to: What separates the person -- the essential and unique "who" -- from its fleshy facsimile? Put another way, asks Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?"

While I continue to send out screenplays in hope of being found like a message in a bottle on some studio executive's beach walk, I recalled how intensely I wanted to direct movies, and how little it meant in the end. This random cross

section of humanity rolled up in plastic or being dissected before me each lived a life peculiar to them. My sojourn at the coroners has been surprisingly revelatory. No matter your station in life, in the end we're all renting.

Until then, I just want to make "Tech 2".

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