

FORENSICS OF TINSELTOWN

by Alan Shapiro

The year NYU awarded my student film "best of festival," Warner Brothers upped the ante with a coveted summer apprenticeship at their Burbank studio. Under the tutelage of director Ken Russell on Paddy Chayefsky's "Altered States," I delivered donuts daily to the set, carved my initials in the rafters of Stage 24, and managed to sell my first movie pitch to the studio brass. Thus began the next thirty years of writing and directing for the major studios. I had my peaks and valleys, but 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 it bombs, you are condemned to a circle of hell known as "Director's Jail." It is the "Un-Cheers" of Hollywood, "the place where nobody knows your name."

After laying one such egg, word spread like an AMBER alert that I was "colder than whale shit," (per my producer, verbatim). I was off to the big house. Gone was the young man with the world in his hands. In his place was a graying, middle-aged schlub who used to direct.

I had no other marketable skills. 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, apropos of nothing, I read in the paper of 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 human decomposition in a range of conditions and identify a person's age, sex, race, and time of death.

I was intrigued. Who doesn't love decomposition? Maybe there's a story. I finagled a "research" ride-along closer to home in an L.A. 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 medical examiner, "Coroner to the Stars," has jurisdiction over roughly 4,000 square miles, an area larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined.

Fifi parked the meat wagon at a Hollywood apartment.

Neighbors had complained of a smell. Police showed us into an apartment where, on the bathroom floor, a naked white male of ample proportions had been ripening in the summer heat, teeming with maggots. In coroner vernacular, a "decomp." It was real horror-show. For Fifi, it was Tuesday. He radioed for assistance. I found it all weirdly compelling.

I wanted to know more, but I needed more time to find my story. I inquired about volunteering. While I possessed no obvious qualifications, I was game for entry level grunt work. Somehow, I talked my way into the job. Over the course of weeks and a gauntlet of security checks, I became a "Tech 1," given a photo ID badge and my own locker. I had arrived.

On my first day of duty, I found Fifi in the print lab soaking a mummified severed finger in his celebrated papaya and kerosene slurry. I didn't ask whose finger, or where the rest of him was, but overnight it had expanded enough for Fifi to deploy it like a rubber-stamp to make perfect prints.

We suited up in head-to-toe protective wear and approached the entrance for AUTOPSY PERSONNEL ONLY where a skull and crossbones warned DANGER: BIO-HAZARD and EXTREME FIRE RISK, along with a sign-up for Sunday potluck. He checked if I was good to go. I gave a confident thumbs up. With a wave of his security card, the double doors parted and sent me reeling from a pungent blast of putrid fish and tangy formaldehyde. Grace notes of butterscotch and pine that I knew must be something else entirely made it particularly revolting.

Soldiering on, I followed Fifi past a half-dozen autopsies in progress. One corpse seemed to leer at me despite missing a brain, a peculiar affect endemic in Hollywood.

Fifi told me to watch and learn. He put a fresh blade on his scalpel, paused to contemplate the subject, then made a 'Y' incision, trimmed back flesh and fat, cut the ribs with tree pruners, and removed the breast plate to reveal the vital organs. Then like an auto mechanic disassembling an engine, he cut them out, one by one, for the pathologist to review. Blood and guts aside, I found it to be a rather conventional workplace, just as bored and ironic as "The Office."

After lunch, Fifi hovered a handheld metal detector over a gunshot victim to locate then fish out 9mm slugs and drop each into an evidence jar to a CLANG.

With great flourish, he demonstrated the autopsy saw's high-speed oscillation to cut through bone with minimal damage to soft tissue, then handed it to me to take off the top of the subject's skull - "pop the hood," as it were - then gently pull the brain from its cranial vault for the pathologist. It took some getting used to.

Exam complete, they tossed me the leftovers - literally. I had to gather the residual organ detritus into a red bio-hazard bag, pack it into the hollowed body cavity, replace the breast plate, sew up the chest and scalp, then wrap and wheel into the crypt.

A new body arrived. A young woman found in her car with a needle in her arm, now laying grey and naked in perfect stillness on stainless-steel. The toe tag labeled her Jane Doe. At the conclusion of the autopsy, I sewed up her chest and now empty head. Then washed, wrapped, and rolled her into

the crypt, a gymnasium-size fridge with room for 500. As I wheeled past row after row of lifeless bodies, something was nagging at me. I was struggling with this Solomonic riddle which neither science nor religion offers a satisfying answer to: What happens to the actual person, the unique, sentient life-force distinct from its now vacant facsimile? I couldn't get my arms around it. I still can't.

Singer Peggy Lee put it best in her sultry purr: "Is that all there is?"

This was all day one.

On day 2 I made my first "Y" cut. Fifi prattled on as he ladled the blood that pools in the body cavity into a jar. I'm far away, wondering what I'm going to do with the rest of my life.

Fifi hands me something. "Have you heard a word I said?"

I snap to. "Absolutely," I lie, opening my hand to find a testicle. I get rid of it, fast, to the pathologist.

Fifi pulls off his face mask and turns to me. "That'll do her. Questions?"

I look up blankly. "Don't those come in pairs?"

As Fifi and I head for lunch, I can't help thinking of the girl I had just put back on a shelf. Eventually they'll learn her name and inform next of kin, and she will cease to be Jane Doe. She'll become a person. With parents and friends. Then it becomes tragic. How do I process this while shoveling her leftover organs into a bag? It's confusing. I suspect the longer I'm here, the less I'll care. Just like Fifi and the others. That bothers me. But soon I'm back to dwelling on my non-career. In time, I'll find a story.

This place has been a sober reminder: It matters not how or why we "shuffle off this mortal coil." In the end, we all lie in perfect stillness, naked on stainless-steel.

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

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