

AUTOPSY ROOM FOUR

IT'S SO DARK THAT FOR A WHILE - JUST HOW LONG I DON'T know - I think I'm still unconscious. Then, slowly, it comes to me that unconscious people don't have a sensation of movement through the dark, accompanied by a faint, rhythmic sound that can only be a squeaky wheel. And I can feel contact, from the top of my head to the balls of my heels. I can smell something that might be rubber or vinyl. This is not unconsciousness, and there is something too ... too what? Too rational about these sensations for it to be a dream.

Then what is it?

Who am I?

And what's happening to me?

The squeaky wheel quits its stupid rhythm and I stop moving. There is a crackle around me from the rubbersmelling stuff.

A voice: "Which one did they say?"

A pause.

Second voice: "Four, I think. Yeah, four."

We start to move again, but more slowly. I can hear the faint scuff of feet now, probably in soft-soled shoes, maybe sneakers. The owners of the voices are the owners of the shoes. They stop me again. There's a thump followed by a faint whoosh. It is, I think, the sound of a door with a pneumatic hinge being opened.

What's going on here? I yell, but the yell is only in my head. My lips don't move. I can feel them-and my tongue, lying on the floor of my mouth like a stunned mole-but I can't move them.

The thing I'm on starts rolling again. A moving bed? Yes. A gurney, in other words. I've had some experience with them, a long time ago, in Lyndon Johnson's shitty little Asian adventure. It comes to me that I'm in a hospital, that something bad has happened to me, something like the explosion that almost neutered me twenty-three years ago, and that I'm going to be operated on. There are a lot of answers in that idea, sensible ones, for the most part, but I don't hurt anywhere. Except for the minor matter of being scared out of my wits, I feel fine. And if these are orderlies wheeling me into an operating room, why can't I see? Why can't I talk?

A third voice: "Over here, boys."

My rolling bed is pushed in a new direction, and the question drumming in my head is What kind of a mess have I gotten myself into?

Doesn't that depend on who you are? I ask myself, but that's one thing, at least, I find I do know. I'm Howard Cottrell. I'm a stock broker known to some of my colleagues as Howard the Conqueror.

Second voice (from just above my head): "You're looking very pretty today, Doc."

Fourth voice (female, and cool): 'It's always nice to be validated by you, Rusty. Could you hurry up a little? The baby-sitter expects me back by seven. She's committed to dinner with her parents.'

Back by seven, back by seven. It's still the afternoon, maybe, or early evening, but black in here, black as your hat, black as a woodchucks asshole, black as midnight in Persia, and what's going on? Where have I been? What have I been doing? Why haven't I been manning the phones?

Because it's Saturday, a voice from far down murmurs. You were ... were ...

A sound: WHOCK! A sound I love. A sound I more or less live for. The sound of ... what? The head of a golf club, of course.

Hitting a ball off the tee. I stand, watching it fly off into the blue ...

I'm grabbed, shoulders and calves, and lifted. It startles me terribly, and I try to scream. No sound comes out ... or perhaps one does, a tiny squeak, much tinier than the one produced by the wheel below me. Probably not even that. Probably it's just my imagination.

I'm swung through the air in an envelope of blackness Hey, don't drop me, I've got a bad back! I try to say, and again there's no movement of the lips or teeth; my tongue goes on lying on the floor of my mouth, the mole maybe not just stunned but dead, and now I have a terrible thought, one that spikes fright a degree closer to panic: What if they put me down the wrong way and my tongue slides backward and blocks my windpipe? I won't be able to breathe! That's what people mean when they say someone swallowed his tongue, isn't it?

Second voice (Rusty): "You'll like this one, Doc, he looks like Michael Bolton."

Female doc: "Who's that?"

Third voice-sounds like a young man, not much more than a teenager: "He's this white lounge singer who wants to be black. I don't think this is him."

There's laughter at that, the female voice joining in (a little doubtfully), and as I am set down on what feels like a padded table, Rusty starts some new crack-he's got a whole standup routine, it seems. I lose this bit of hilarity in a burst of sudden horror. I won't be able to breathe if my tongue blocks my windpipe, that's the thought that has just gone through my mind, but what if I'm not breathing now?

What if I'm dead? What if this is what death is like?

It fits. It fits everything with a horrid prophylactic snugness. The dark. The rubbery smell. Nowadays I am Howard the Conqueror, stock broker extraordinaire, terror of Derry Municipal Country Club, frequent habitue` of what is known at golf courses all over the world as the Nineteenth Hole, but in '71 I was part of a medical assistance team in the Mekong Delta, a scared kid who sometimes woke up wet-eyed from dreams of the family dog, and all at once I know this feel, this smell.

Dear God, I'm in a body bag.

First voice: "Want to sign this, Doc? Remember to bear down hard-it's three copies."

Sound of a pen, scraping away on paper. I imagine the owner of the first voice holding out a clipboard to the woman doctor.

Oh dear Jesus let me not be dead! I try to scream, and nothing comes out.

I'm breathing, though ... aren't I? I mean, I can't feel myself doing it, but my lungs seem okay, they're not throbbing or yelling for air the way they do when you've swum too far underwater, so I must be okay, right?

Except if you're dead, the deep voice murmurs, they wouldn't be crying out for air, would they? No-because dead lungs don't need to breathe. Dead lungs can just kind of... take it easy.

Rusty: "What are you doing next Saturday night, Doc?"

But if I'm dead, how can I feel? How can I smell the bag I'm in? How can I hear these voices, the Doc now saying that next Saturday night she's going to be shampooing her dog, which is named Rusty, what a coincidence, and all of them laughing? If I'm dead, why aren't I either gone or in the white light they're always -talking about on Oprah?

There's a harsh ripping sound and all at once I am in white light; it is blinding, like the sun breaking through a scrim of clouds on a winter day. I try to squint my eyes shut against it, but nothing happens. My eyelids are like blinds on broken rollers.

A face bends over me, blocking off part of the glare, which comes not from some dazzling astral plane but from a bank of overhead fluorescents. The face belongs to a young, conventionally handsome man of about twenty-five; he looks like one of

those beach beefcakes on Baywatch or Melrose Place. Marginally smarter, though. He's got a lot of black hair under a carelessly worn surgical greens cap. He's wearing the tunic, too. His eyes are cobalt blue, the sort of eyes girls reputedly die for. There are dusty arcs of freckles high up on his cheekbones.

"Hey, gosh," he says. It's the third voice. "This guy does look like Michael Bolton! A little long in the old tootharoo, maybe . . ." He leans closer. One of the flat tie-ribbons at the neck of his green tunic tickles against my forehead. "But yeah. I see it. Hey, Michael, sing something."

Help me! is what I'm trying to sing, but I can only look up into his dark blue eyes with my frozen dead man's stare; I can only wonder if I am a dead man, if this is how it happens, if this is what everyone goes through after the pump quits. If I'm still alive, how come he hasn't seen my pupils contract when the light hit them? But I know the answer to that ... or I think I do. They didn't contract. That's why the glare from the fluorescents is so painful.

The tie, tickling across my forehead like a feather.

Help me! I scream up at the Baywatch beefcake, who is probably an intern or maybe just a med school brat. Help me, please!

My lips don't even quiver.

The face moves back, the tie stops tickling, and all that white light streams through my helpless-to-look-away eyes and into my brain. It's a hellish feeling, a kind of rape. I'll go blind if I have to stare into it for long, I think, and blindness will be a relief.

WHOCK! The sound of the driver hitting the ball, but a little flat this time, and the feeling in the hands is bad. The ball's up ... but veering ... veering off ... veering toward ...

Shit.

I'm in the rough.

Now another face bends into my field of vision. A white tunic instead of a green one below it, a great untidy mop of orange hair above it. Distress-sale IQ is my first impression. It can only be Rusty. He's wearing a big dumb grin that I think of as a high-school grin, the grin of a kid who should have a tattoo reading "Born to Snap Bra Straps" on one wasted bicep.

"Michael!" Rusty exclaims. "Jeez, ya lookin' goooood! This'z an honor! Sing for us, big boy! Sing your deadassoff!"

From somewhere behind me comes the doc's voice, cool, no longer even pretending to be amused by these antics. "Quit it, Rusty." Then, in a slightly new direction: "What's the story, Mike?"

Mike's voice is the first voice-Rusty's partner. He sounds slightly embarrassed to be working with a guy who wants to be Bobcat Goldthwait when he grows up. "Found him on the fourteenth hole at Derry Muni. Off the course, actually, in the rough. If he hadn't just played through the foursome behind him, and if they hadn't seen one of his legs stickin' out of the puckerbrush, he'd be an ant farm by now."

I hear that sound in my head again- WHOM-only this time it is followed by another, far less pleasant sound: the rustle of underbrush as I sweep it with the head of my driver. It would have to be fourteen, where there is reputedly poison ivy. Poison ivy and ...

Rusty is still peering down at me, stupid and avid. It's not death that interests him; it's my resemblance to Michael Bolton. Oh yes, I know about it, have not been above using it with certain female clients. Otherwise, it gets old in a hurry. And in these circumstances ... God.

"Attending physician?" the lady doc; asks. "Was it Kazalian?"

"NO," Mike says, and for just a moment he looks down at me. Older than Rusty by at least ten years. Black hair with flecks of gray in it. Spectacles. How come none of these ~ can see that I am not dead? "There was a doc in the foursome that found

him, actually. That's his signature on page one ... see?"

Riffle: of paper, then: "Christ, Jennings. I know him. He gave Noah his physical after the ark grounded on Mount Ararat."

Rusty doesn't look as if he gets the joke, but he brays laughter into my face anyway. I can smell onions on his breath, a little leftover lunchstink, and if I can smell onions, I must be breathing. I must be, right? If only-

Before I can finish this thought, Rusty leans even closer and I feel a blast of hope. He's seen something! He's seen something and means to give me mouth-to-mouth. God bless you, Rusty! God bless you and your onion breath!

But the stupid grin doesn't change, and instead of putting his mouth on mine, his hand slips around my jaw.- Now he's grasping one side with his thumb and the other side with his fingers.

"He's alive! - Rusty cries. "He's alive, and he's gonna sing for the Room Four Michael Bolton Fan Club!"

His fingers pinch tighter-it hurts in a distant comingout-of-the-novocaine way-and begins to move my jaw up and down, clicking my teeth together. "If she's ba-aaad, he can't see it," Rusty sings in a hideous, atonal voice that would probably make Percy Sledge's head explode. "She can do no wrrr-ongggg... My teeth open and close at the rough urging of his hand; my tongue rises and falls like a dead dog riding the surface of an uneasy waterbed.

"Stop it!" the lady doc snaps at him. She sounds genuinely shocked. Rusty, perhaps sensing this, does not stop but goes gleefully on. His fingers are pinching into my cheeks now. My frozen eyes stare blindly upward.

"Turn his back on his best friend if she put him d-"

Then she's there, a woman in a green gown with her cap tied around her throat and hanging down her back like the Cisco Kid's sombrero, short brown hair swept back from her brow, good-looking but severe-more handsome than pretty. She grabs Rusty with one short-nailed hand and pulls him back from me.

"Hey" Rusty says, indignant. "Get your hands off me!"

"Then you keep your hands off him, " she says, and there is no mistaking the anger in her voice. "I'm tired of your sophomore class wit, Rusty, and the next time you start in, I'm going to report you."

"Hey, let's all calm down," says the Baywatch hunk Doc's assistant. He sounds alarmed, as if he expects Rusty and his boss to start duking it out right here. "Let's just put a lid on it."

"Why's she bein' such a bitch to me?" Rusty says. He's still trying to sound indignant, but he's actually whining now. Then, in a slightly different direction: "Why you being such a bitch? You on your period, is that it?"

Doc, sounding disgusted: "Get him out of here. sign the log."

Mike: "Come on, Rusty. Let's go

Rusty: "Yeah. And get some fresh air."

Me, listening to all this like it was on the radio.

Their feet, squeaking toward the door. Rusty now all huffy and offended, asking her why she doesn't just wear a mood ring or something so people will know. Soft shoes squeaking on tile, and suddenly that sound is replaced by the sound of my driver, beating the bush for my goddam ball, where is it, it didn't go too far in, I'm sure of it, so where is it, Jesus, I hate fourteen, supposedly there's poison I ivy, and with all this underbrush, there could easily be-

And then something bit me, didn't it? Yes, I'm almost sure it did. On the left calf, just above the top of my whit athletic sock. A red-hot damning needle of pain, perfectly concentrated at first, then spreading ...

... then darkness. Until the gurney, zipped up snug inside a body bag and listening to Mike ("Which one did they say?") and Rusty ("Four, I think. Yeah, four.")

I want to think it that's only because was some kind of snake, but maybe I was thinking about them while I hunted for my ball. It could have been an insect, I only recall the single line of pain. and after all, what does it matter? What matters here is that I'm alive and they don't know it. It's incredible, but they don't know it. Of course I had bad luck-I know Dr. Jennings, remember speaking to him as I played through his foursome on the eleventh hole. A nice enough guy, but vague, an antique. The antique had pronounced me dead. Then Rusty, with his dopey green eyes and his detention hall grin, had pronounced me dead. The lady doc, Ms. Cisco Kid, hadn't even looked at me yet, not really. When she did, maybe-

"I hate that jerk," she says when the door is closed. Now it's just the three of us, only of course Ms. Cisco Kid thinks it's just the two of them. "Why do I always get the jerks, Peter?"

"I don't know," Mr. Melrose Place says, "but Rusty's a special case, even in the annals of famous jerks. Walking brain death.-
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She laughs, and something clanks. The clank is followed by a sound that scares me badly: steel instruments clicking together. They are of to the left of me, and although I can't see them, I know what they're getting ready to do: the autopsy. They are getting ready to cut into me. They intend to remove Howard Cottrell's heart and see if it blew a piston or threw a rod.

My leg! I scream inside my head. Look at my left leg, That's the trouble, not my heart. !

Perhaps my eyes have adjusted a little, after all. Now I can see, at the very top of my vision, a stainless steel armature. It looks like a giant piece of dental equipment, except that thing at the end isn't a drill. It's a saw. From someplace deep inside, where the brain stores the sort of trivia you only need if you happen to be playing Jeopardy! on TV, I even come up with the name. It's a Gigh saw. They use it to cut of the top of your skull. This is after they've pulled your face off like a kid's Halloween mask, of course, hair and all.

Then they take out your brain.

Clink. Clink. Clunk. A pause. Then a CLANK! so loud I'd jump if I were capable of jumping.

"Do you want to do the pericardial cut?" she asks.

Pete, cautious: "Do you want me to?"

Dr. Cisco, sounding pleasant, sounding like someone who is conferring a favor and a responsibility: "Yes, I think so."

"All right," he says. "You'll assist?"

"Your trusty copilot," she says, and laughs. She punctuates her laughter with a snick-snick sound. It's the sound of scissors cutting the air.

Now panic beats and flutters inside my skull like a flock of starlings locked in an attic. The Nam was a long time ago, but I saw half a dozen field autopsies there-what the doctors used to call "tent-show postmortems- -and I know what Cisco and Pancho mean to do. The scissors have long sharp blades, very sharp blades, and fat finger holes. Still, you have to be strong to use them. The lower blade slides into the gut like butter. Then, snip, up through the bundle of nerves at the solar plexus and into the beef-jerky weave of muscle and tendon above it. Then into the sternum. When, the blades come together this time, they do so with a heavy crunch as the bone parts and the ribcage pops apart like a Couple of barrels that have been lashed together with twine. Then on up with those scissors that look like nothing so much as the poultry shears supermarket butchers usesnip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH, splitting bone and shearing muscle, freeing the lungs, heading for the trachea, turning Howard the Conqueror into a Thanksgiving dinner no one will eat.

A thin, nagging whine-this does sound like a dentist's drill.

Pete: "Can I-?"

Dr. Cisco, actually sounding a bit maternal: "No. These."

Snick-snick. Demonstrating for him.

They can't do this, I think. They can't cut me up I can FEEL!

"Why?" he asks.

Because that's the way I want it," she says, sounding a lot less maternal. "When you're On Your Own, Petie-boy, you can do what you want. But in Katie Arlen's autopsy room, you start off with the pericardial shears."

Autopsy room. There. it's out. I want to be all over goosebumps, but of course, nothing happens; my flesh remains smooth.

"Remember ,", Dr. Arlen. says (but now she's actually lecturing), "any fool can learn how to use a milking machine . . . but the hands-on procedure is always best." There is something vaguely suggestive in her tone. "Okay?" "Okay," he says.

They're going to do it. I have to make some kind of noise in or movement, or they're really going to do it. If blood flows or jets up from the first punch of the scissors they'll know something's wrong, but by then it will be too late, very likely; that first snip-CRUNCH will have happened, and my ribs will be lying against my upper arms, my heart pulsing frantically away under the fluorescents in its blood-glossy sac-

I concentrate everything on my chest. I push, or try to ... and something happens.

A sound!

I make a sound!

It's mostly inside my closed mouth, but I can also hear and feel it in my nose-a low hum.

Concentrating, summoning every bit of effort, I do it again, and this time the sound is a little stronger, leaking out of my nostrils like cigarette smoke: Nnnnnnn- It makes me think of an old Alfred Hitchcock TV program I saw a long, long time ago, where Joseph Cotton was paralyzed in a car crash and was finally able to let them know he was still alive by crying a single tear.

And if nothing else, that minuscule mosquito-whine of a sound has proved to myself that I'm alive, that I'm not just a spirit lingering inside the clay effigy of my own dead body.

Focusing all my concentration, I can feel breath slipping through my nose and down my throat, replacing the breath I have now expended, and then I send it out again, working harder than I ever worked summers for the Lane Construction Company when I was a teenager, working harder than I have ever worked in my life, because now I'm working for my life and they must hear me, dear Jesus, they must.

Nnnnn-

"You want some music?" the woman doctor asks. "I've got Marty Stuart, Tony Bennett-"

He makes a despairing sound. I barely hear it, and take no immediate meaning from what she's saying ... which is probably a mercy.

"All right," she says, laughing. "I've also got the Rolling Stones."

"You?"

"Me. I'm not quite as square as I look, Peter."

"I didn't mean. . . - He sounds flustered.

Listen to me!" I scream inside my head as my frozen eyes stare up into the icy-white light. Stop chattering like magpies and listen to me!

I can feel more air trickling down my throat and the idea occurs that whatever has happened to me may be starting to wear off ... but it's Only a faint blip on the Screen of my now thoughts. Maybe it is wearing off, but very soon now recovery will cease to be an option for me. All my energy is bent toward making them hear me, and this time they will hear me I know it.

"Stones, then", she says. "Unless you want me to run Out, and get a Michael. Bolton CD in honor of your first pericardial"

Please, no!" he cries, and they both laugh.

The sound starts to come out, and it is louder this time.

Not as loud as I'd hoped, but loud enough. Surely loud enough. They'll hear, they must.

Then, just as I begin to force the sound out of my nose like some rapidly solidifying liquid, the room is filled with a blare of fuzz-tone guitar and Mick Jagger's voice bashing off the walls""Awww, no it's only rock and roll, but I LIYYYYKE IT..."

"Turn it down!" Dr. Cisco yells, comically Overshouting, and amid these noises my own nasal sound, a desperate little humming through my nostrils, is no more audible than a whisper in a foundry.

Now her face bends over me again and I feel fresh horror as I see that she's wearing a Plexi eyeshield and a gauze mask over her mouth. She glances back over her shoulder.

"I'll strip him for you," she tells Pete, and bends toward me with a scalpel glittering in one gloved hand, bends toward me through the guitar thunder of the Rolling Stones.

I hum desperately, but it's no good. I can't even hear Myself.

The scalpel hovers, then cuts.

I shriek inside my own head, but there is no pain, only my polo shirt falling in two pieces at my sides. Sliding apart as my ribcage will after Pete unknowingly makes his first pericardial cut on a living patient.

I am lifted. My head lolls back and for a moment I see Pete upside down, donning his own Plexi eyeshield as he stands by a steel counter, inventorying a horrifying array of tools. Chief among them are the oversized scissors. I get just a glimpse of them, of blades glittering like merciless satin. Then I am laid flat again and my shirt is gone. I'm now naked to the waist. It's cold in the room.

Look at my chest! I scream at her. You must see it rise and fall, no matter how shallow my respiration is! You're a goddam expert, for Christ's sake"

Instead, she looks across the room, raising her voice to be heard above the music. ("I like it, like it, yes I do," the Stones sing, and I think I will hear that nasal idiot chorus in the halls of hell through all eternity.) "What's your pick? Boxers or Jockeys?"

With a mixture of horror and rage, I realize what they're talking about.

"Boxers"" he calls back. "Of course! Just take a look at the guy!"

Asshole! I want to scream. You probably think everyone over forty wears boxer shorts! You probably think when you get to be forty, you'll-

She unsnaps my Bermudas and pulls down the zipper. Under other circumstances, having a woman as pretty as this (a little severe, yes, but still pretty) do that would make me extremely happy. Today, however-

"You lose, Petie-boy," she says. "Jockeys. Dollar in the kitty."

"On payday," he says, coming over. His face joins hers; they look down at me through their Plexi masks like a couple of space aliens looking down at an abductee. I try to make them see my eyes, to see me looking at them, but these two fools are looking at my undershorts.

"Ooooh, and red," Pete says. "A sha-vinguh!"

"I call them more of a wash pink," she replies. Hold him up for me, Peter, he weighs a ton. No wonder he had a heart attack. Let this be a lesson to you.

I'm in shape! I yell at her. Probbably in better shape than you, bitch!

My hips are suddenly jerked upward by strong hands. My back cracks; the sound makes my heart leap.

"Sorry, guy," Pete says, and suddenly I'm colder than ever as my shorts and red underpants are pulled down.

"Upsa-daisy once," she says, lifting one foot, and upsa-daisy twice, lifting the other foot off come the MOCS, and off come the socks-

She stops abruptly, and hope seizes me once more.

"Hey, Pete."

"Yeah?" Do guys ordinarily wear Bermuda shorts and moccasins to golf in?"

Behind her (except that's only the source, actually it's all around us) the Rolling Stones have moved on to "Emotional Rescue.". "I will be your knight in shining ahh-mah," Mick Jagger sings, and I wonder how funky held dance with about three sticks of Hi-Core dynamite jammed up his skinny ass.

"If you ask me, this guy was just asking for trouble," she goes on. "I thought they had these special shoes, very ugly, very golf-specific, with little knobs on the soles-

"Yeah, but wearing them's not the law," Pete says. He holds his gloved hands out over my upturned face, slides them together, and bends the fingers back. As the knuckles crack, talcum powder sprinkles down like fine snow. "At least not yet. Not like bowling shoes. They catch you bowling without a pair of bowling shoes, they can send you to state prison."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to handle temp and gross examination?"

No! I shriek. No, he's a kid, what are you DOING?

He looks at her as if this same thought had crossed his own mind. "That's ... um . . . not strictly legal, is it, Katie? I mean. . ."

She looks around as he speaks, giving the room a burlesque examination, and I'm starting to get a vibe that could be very bad news for me: severe or not, I think that Ciscoalias Dr. Katie Arlen-has got the hots for Petie with the dark blue eyes. Dear Christ, they have hauled me paralyzed off the golf course and into an episode of General Hospital, this week's subplot titled "Love Blooms in Autopsy Room Four."

"Gee," she says in a hoarse little stage whisper. "I don't see anyone here but you and me."

"The tape-

"Not rolling yet," she says. "And once it is, I'm right at your elbow every step of the way ... as far as anyone will ever know, anyway. And mostly I will be. I just want to put away those charts and slides. And if you really feel uncomfortable-"

Yes! I scream up at him out of my unmoving face. Feel uncomfortable! VERY uncomfortable! TOO uncomfortable!

But he's twenty-four at most and what's he going to say to this pretty, severe woman who's standing inside his space, invading it in a way that can really only mean one thing? No, Mommy, I'm scared? Besides, he wants to. I can see the wanting through the Plexi eyeshield, bopping around in there like a bunch of overage punk rockers pogoing to the Stones.

"Hey, as long as you'll cover for me if -"

"Sure," she says. "Got to get your feet wet sometime, Peter. And if you really need me to, I'll roll back the tape."

He looks startled. "You can do that?"

She smiles. "Ve haff many see-grets in Autopsy Room Four, mein herr. "

"I bet you do," he says, smiling back, then reaches past my frozen field of vision. When his hand comes back, it's wrapped around a microphone which hangs down from the ceiling on a black cord. The mike looks like a steel teardrop. Seeing it there makes this horror real in a way it wasn't before. Surely they won't really cut me up, will they? Pete is no veteran, but he has had training; surely he'll see the marks of whatever bit me while I was looking for my ball in the rough, and then they'll at least suspect. They'll have to suspect.

Yet I keep seeing the scissors with their heartless satin shine-jumped-up poultry shears and I keep wondering if I will still be alive when he takes my heart out of my chest cavity and holds it up, dripping, in front of my locked gaze for a moment before turning it to plop it into the weighing pan. I could be, it seems to me; I really could be. Don't they say the brain can remain conscious for up to three minutes after the heart stops?

"Ready, Doctor," Pete says, and now he sounds almost formal. Somewhere, tape is rolling.

The autopsy procedure has begun.

Let's flip this pancake," she says cheerfully, and I am turned over just that efficiently- MY right arm goes flying out to one side and then falls back against the side of the table, hanging down with the raised metal lip digging into the biceps. It hurts a lot, the pain is just short of excruciating, but I don't mind. I pray for the lip to bite through my skin, pray to bleed, something bona fide corpses don't do.

"Whoops-a-daisy," Dr. Arlen says. She lifts my arm up and plops it back down at my side.

Now it's my nose I'm most aware of. It's smashed down against the table, and my lungs for the first time send out a distress message-a cottony, deprived feeling. My mouth is closed, my nose partially crushed shut (just how much I can't tell; I can't even feel myself breathing, not really). What if I suffocate like this?

Then something happens that takes my mind completely off my nose. A huge object - it feels like a glass baseball bat - is rammed rudely up my rectum. Once more I try to scream and can produce only the faint, wretched humming.

"Temp in," Peter says. "I've put on the timer."

"Good idea," she says, moving away. Giving him room. Letting him test-drive this baby. Letting him test-drive me. The music is turned down slightly.

"Subject is a white Caucasian, age forty-four," Pete says, speaking for the mike now, speaking for posterity. "His name is Howard Randolph Cottrell, residence is 1566 Laurel Crest Lane, here in Derry."

Dr. Arlen, at some distance: "Mary Mead."

A pause, then Pete again, sounding just a tiny bit flustered: "Dr. Arlen informs me that the subject actually lives in Mary Mead, which split off from Derry in-

"Enough with the history lesson, Pete."

Dear God, what have they stuck up my ass? Some sort of cattle thermometer? If it was a little longer, I think, I could taste the bulb at the end. And they didn't exactly go crazy with the lubricant ... but then, why would they? I'm dead, after all.

Dead.

"Sorry, Doctor," Pete says. He fumbles mentally for his place and eventually finds it. "This information is from the ambulance form. Mode of transmittal was Maine driver's license. Pronouncing doctor was, um Frank Jennings. Subject was pronounced at the scene."

Now it's my nose that I'm hoping will bleed. Please, I tell it, bleed. Only don't just bleed. GUSH.

It doesn't.

"Cause of death may be a heart attack," Peter says. A light hand brushes down my naked back to the crack of my ass. I pray it will remove the thermometer, but it doesn't. "Spine appears to be intact, no attractable phenomena."

Attractable phenomena? Attractable phenomena? What the fuck do they think I am, a buglight?

He lifts my head, the pads of his fingers on my cheekbones, and I hum desperately-Nnnnnnnnn-knowing that he can't possibly hear me over Keith Richards' screaming guitar but hoping he may feel the sound vibrating in my nasal passages.

He doesn't. Instead he turns my head from side to side.

"No neck injury apparent, no rigor," he says, and I hope he will just let my head go, let my face smack down onto the table-that'll make my nose bleed, unless I really am dead-but he lowers it gently, considerately, mashing the tip again and once more making suffocation seem a distinct possibility.

"No wounds visible on the back or buttocks," he says, "although there's an old scar on the upper right thigh that looks like some sort of wound, shrapnel perhaps. It's an ugly one."

It was ugly, and it was shrapnel. The end of my war. A mortar shell lobbed into a supply area, two men killed, one man-me-lucky. It's a lot uglier around front, and in a more sensitive spot, but all the equipment works ... or did, up until today. A quarter of an inch to the left and they could have fixed me up with a hand pump and a CO₂ cartridge for those intimate moments.

He finally plucks the thermometer out-oh dear God, the relief-and on the wall I can see his shadow holding it up.

"Ninety-four point two," he says. "Gee, that ain't too shabby. This guy could almost be alive, Katie ... Dr. Arlen."

"Remember where they found him," she says from across the room. The record they are listening to is between selections, and for a moment I can hear her lecturely tones clearly. "Golf course? Summer afternoon? If you'd gotten a reading of ninety-eight point six, I would not be surprised."

"Right, right," he says, sounding chastened. Then: "Is all this going to sound funny on the tape?" Translation: Will I sound stupid on the tape?

"It'll sound like a teaching situation," she says, "which is what it is".

"Okay, good. Great."

His rubber-tipped fingers spread my buttocks, then let them go and trail down the backs of my thighs. I would tense now, if I

were capable of tensing.

Left leg, I send to him. Left leg, Petie-boy, left calf see it? He must see it, he must, because I can feel it, throbbing like a bee sting or maybe a shot given by a clumsy nurse, one who infuses the injection into a muscle instead of hitting the vein.

"Subject is a really good example of what a really bad idea it is to play golf in shorts," he says, and I find myself wishing he had been born blind. Hell, maybe he was born blind, he's sure acting it. "I'm seeing all kinds of bug bites, chigger bites, scratches . . ."

"Mike said they found him in the rough," Arlen calls over. She's making one hell of a clatter; it sounds like she's doing dishes in a cafeteria kitchen instead of filing stuff. "At a guess, he had a heart attack while he was looking for his ball."

"Uh-huh . . ."

"Keep going, Peter, you're doing fine."

I find that an extremely debatable proposition.

"Okay."

More pokes and proddings. Gentle. Too gentle, maybe.

"There are mosquito bites on the left calf that look infected," he says, and although his touch remains gentle, this time the pain is an enormous throb that would make me scream if I were capable of making any sound above the low-pitched hum. It occurs to me suddenly that my life may hang upon the length of the Rolling Stones tape they're listening to ... always assuming it is a tape and not a CD that plays straight through. If it finishes before they cut into me ... if I can hum loudly enough for them to hear before one of them turns it over to the other side ...

"I may want to look at the bug bites after the gross autopsy," she says, "although if we're right about his heart, there'll be no need. Or do you want me to look now? They worrying you?"

"Nope, they're pretty clearly mosquito bites," Gimpel the Fool says. "They grow 'em big over on the west side. He's got five . . . seven ... eight ... jeez, almost a dozen on his left leg alone."

"He forgot his Deep Woods Off."

"Never mind the Off, he forgot his digitalin," he says, and they have a nice little yock together, autopsy room humor.

This time he flips me by himself, probably happy to use those gym-grown Mr. Strongboy muscles of his, hiding the snakebites and the mosquito bites all around them, camouflaging them. I'm staring up into the bank of fluorescents again. Pete steps backward, out of my view. There's a humming noise. The table begins to slant, and I know why. When they cut me open, the fluids will run downhill to collection points at its base. Plenty of samples for the state lab in Augusta, should there be any questions raised by the autopsy.

I focus all my will and effort on closing my eyes while he's looking down into my face, and cannot produce even a tie. All I wanted was eighteen holes of golf on Saturday afternoon, and instead I turned into Snow White with hair on my chest. And I can't stop wondering what it's going to feel like when those poultry shears go sliding into my midsection.

Pete has a clipboard in one hand. He consults it, sets it aside, then speaks into the mike. His voice is a lot less stilted now. He has just made the most hideous misdiagnosis of his life, but he doesn't know it, and so he's starting to warm up.

"I am commencing the autopsy at five forty-nine P.M.," he says, "on Saturday, August twenty, nineteen ninety-four."

He lifts my lips, looks at my teeth like a man thinking about buying a horse, then pulls my jaw down. Good color," he says, "and no petechiae on the cheeks." The current tune is fading out of the speakers and I hear a click as he steps on the foot pedal which pauses the recording tape. "Man, this guy really could still be alive!"

I hum frantically, and at that same moment Dr. Arlen drops something that sounds like a bedpan. "Doesn't he wish," she says, laughing. He joins in and this time it's cancer I wish on them, some kind that is inoperable and lasts a long time. -

He goes quickly down my body, feeling up my chest ("No bruising, swelling, or other exterior signs of cardiac arrest," he says, and what a big fucking surprise that is), then palpates my belly.

I burp.

He looks at me, eyes widening, mouth dropping open a little, and again I try desperately to hum, knowing he won't hear it over "Start Me Up" but thinking that maybe, along with the burp, he'll finally be ready to see what's right in front of him.

"Excuse yourself, Howie," Dr. Arlen, that bitch, says from behind me, and chuckles, "Better watch out, Pete those postmortem belches are the worst."

He theatrically fans the air in front of his face, then goes back to what he's doing. He barely touches my groin, although he remarks that the scar on the back of my right leg continues around to the front.

Missed the big one, though, I think, maybe because it's a little higher than you're looking. No big deal, my little Baywatch buddy, but you also missed the fact that I'M STILL ALIVE, and that IS a big deal!

He goes on chanting into the microphone, sounding more and more at ease (sounding, in fact, a little like Jack Klugman on Quincy, ME.), and I know his partner over there behind me, the Pollyanna of the medical community, isn't thinking she'll have to roll the tape back over this part of the exam. Other than missing the fact that his first pericardial is still alive, the kid's doing a great job.

At last he says, "I think I'm ready to go on, Doctor." He sounds tentative, though.

She comes over, looks briefly down at me, then squeezes Pete's shoulder. "Okay," she says. "On-na wid-da show!"

Now I'm trying to stick my tongue out. Just that simple kid's gesture of impudence, but it would be enough ... and it seems to me I can feel a faint prickling sensation deep within my lips, the feeling you get when you're finally starting to come out of a heavy dose of novocaine. And I can feel a twitch? No, wishful thinking, just-

Yes! Yes! But a twitch is all, and the second time I try nothing happens.

As Pete picks up the scissors, the Rolling Stones move on to "Hang Fire."

Hold a mirror in front of my nose! I scream at them. Watch it fog up! Can't you at least do that?

Snick, snick, snickety-snick.

Pete turns the scissors at an angle so the light runs down the blade, and for the first time I'm certain, really certain, that this mad charade is going to go all the way through to the end. The director isn't going to freeze the frame. The ref isn't going to stop the fight in the tenth round. We're not going to pause for a word from our sponsors. Petie-boy's going to slide those scissors into my gut while I lie here helpless, and then he's going to open me up like a mailorder package from the Horchow Collection.

He looks hesitantly at Dr. Arlen.

No! I howl, my voice reverberating off the dark walls of my skull but emerging from my mouth not at all. No, please no!

She nods. "Go ahead. You'll be fine."

"Uh ... you want to turn off the music?"

Yes! Yes, turn it off.

"Is it bothering you.

Yes! It's bothering him! It's fucked him up so completely he thinks his patient is dead!

"well . . ."

"Sure," she says, and disappears from my field of vision. A moment later Mick and Keith are finally gone. I try to make the humming noise and discover a horrible thing: now I can't even do that. I'm too scared. Fright has locked down my vocal cords. I can only stare up as she rejoins him, the two of them gazing), down at me like pallbearers looking into an open grave.

"Thanks," he says. Then he takes a deep breath and lifts the scissors. "Commencing pericardial cut."

He slowly brings them down. I see them ... see them ... then they're gone from my field of vision. A long moment later, I feel cold steel nestle against my naked upper belly.

He looks doubtfully at the doctor.

"Are you sure you don't-"

"Do you want to make this your field or not, Peter?" she asks him with some asperity.

"You know I do, but-"

"Then cut."

He nods, lips firming. I would close my eyes if I could, but of course I cannot even do that; I can only steel myself against the pain that's only a second or two away, now steel myself for the steel.

"Cutting," he says, bending forward.

"Wait a sec!" she cries.

The dimple of pressure just below my solar plexus eases a little. He looks around at her, surprised, upset, maybe relieved that the crucial moment has been put of-

I feel her rubber-gloved hand slide around my penis as if she means to give me some bizarre handjob, safe sex with the dead, and then she says, "You missed this one, Pete."

He leans over, looking at what she's found-the scar in my groin, at the very top of my right thigh, a glassy, no-pore bowl in the flesh.

Her hand is still holding my cock, holding it out of the way, that's all she's doing, as far as she's concerned she might as well be holding up a sofa cushion so someone else can see the treasure she's found beneath it-coins, a lost wallet, maybe the catnip mouse you haven't been able to find-but something is happening.

Dear wheelchair Jesus on a chariot-driven crutch, something is happening.

"And look," she says. Her finger strokes a light, tickly line down the side of my right testicle. "Look at these hairline scars. His testes must have swollen up to damned near the size of grapefruits."

"Lucky he didn't lose one or both."

"You bet your ... you bet your you-knows," she says, and laughs that mildly suggestive laugh again. Her gloved hand loosens, moves, then pushes down firmly, trying to clear the viewing area. She is doing by accident what you might pay twentyfive or thirty bucks to have done on purpose ... under other circumstances, of course. "This is a war wound, I think. Hand me that

magnifier, Pete."

"But shouldn't I-"

"In a few seconds," she says. "He's not going anywhere. She's totally absorbed by what she's found. Her hand is still on me, still pressing down, and what was happening feels like it's still happening, but maybe I'm wrong. I must be wrong, or he would see it, she would feel it.

She bends down and now I can see only her green-clad back, with the ties from her cap trailing down it like odd pigtailed. Now, oh my, I can feel her breath on me down there.

"Notice the outward radiation," she says. "It was a blast wound of some sort, probably ten years ago at least, we could check his military rec-"

The door bursts open. Pete cries out in surprise. Dr. Arlen doesn't, but her hand tightens involuntarily, she's gripping me again and it's all at once like a hellish variation of the old Naughty Nurse fantasy.

"Don't cut 'im up!" someone screams, and his voice is so high and wavery with fright that I barely recognize Rusty. "Don't cut 'im up, there was a snake in his golfbag and it bit Mike!"

They turn to him, eyes wide, jaws dropped; her hand is still gripping me, but she's no more aware of that, at least for the time being, than Petie-boy is aware that he's got one hand clutching the left breast of his scrub gown. He looks like he's the one with the clapped-out fuel pump.

"What ... what are you. . ." Pete begins.

"Knocked him flat!" Rusty was saying-babbling. "He's gonna be okay, I guess, but he can hardly talk!" Little brown snake, I never saw one like it in my life, it went under the loadin' bay, it's under there right now, but that's not the important part! I think it already bit that guy we brought in. I think ... holy shit, Doc, whatja tryin' to do? Stroke 'im back to life?"

She looks around, dazed, at first not sure of what he's talking about ... until she realizes that she's now holding a mostly erect penis. And as she screams-screams and snatches the shears out of Pete's limp gloved hand-I find myself thinking again of that old Alfred Hitchcock TV show.

Poor old Joseph Cotton, I think.

He only got to cry.

Afternote

It's been a year since my experience in Autopsy Room Four, and I have made a complete recovery, although the paralysis was both stubborn and scary; it was a full month before I began to recover the finer motions of my fingers and toes. I still can't play the piano, but then, of course, I never could. That is a joke, and I make no apologies for it. In the first three months after my misadventure, I think that my ability to joke provided a slim but vital margin between sanity and some sort of nervous breakdown. Unless you've actually felt the tip of a pair of postmortem shears poking into your stomach, you don't know what I mean.

Two weeks or so after my close call, a woman on Dupont Street called the Derry Police to complain of a "Foul Stink" coming from the house next door. That house belonged to a bachelor bank clerk named Walter Kerr. Police found the house empty ... of human life, that is. they found over sixty snakes of different varieties. About half of them were dead-starvation and dehydration, but many were extremely lively ... and extremely dangerous. Several were very rare, and one was of a species believed to have been extinct since mid-century, according to consulting zoologists.

Kerr failed to show up for work at Derry Community Bank on August 22, two days after I was bitten, one day after the story

("Paralyzed Man Escapes Deadly Autopsy," the headline read; at one point I was quoted as saying I had been "Scared stiff") broke in the press.

There was a snake for every cage in Kerr's basement menagerie . . . except for one. The empty cage was unmarked, and the snake that popped out of my golf bag (the ambulance orderlies had packed it in with my "corpse" and had been practicing chip shots out in the ambulance parking area) was never found.

The toxin in my bloodstream-the same toxin found to a far lesser degree in orderly Mike Hopper's bloodstream-was documented but never identified. I have looked at a great many pictures of snakes in the last year, and have found at least one that has reportedly caused cases of full-body paralysis in humans. This is the Peruvian Boomslang, a nasty viper that has supposedly been extinct since the 1920s. Dupont Street is less than half a mile from the Derry Municipal Golf Course. Most of the intervening land consists of scrub woods and vacant lots.

One final note. Katie Arlen and I dated for four months, November 1994 through February of 1995. We broke it off by mutual consent, due to sexual incompatibility.

I was impotent unless she was wearing rubber gloves.