

## The Morgue

I rang the bell at the institutional metal door. The city sidewalk teemed with office workers starting a nine-to-five day. Automobiles honked and buses clanged over the trolley tracks.

“Can I help you?” a voice said from the intercom.

“I’m here from Seton High,” I answered. The buzzer unlocked the door.

The bleak, gray foyer matched the concrete stone of the outside foundation. A plaque on the wall read, “Let conversation cease. Let laughter flee. *Hic locus est ubi mors gaudet succurrere vitae*. This is the place where death delights to help the living.”

“Sign in here,” the receptionist said, pushing a composition book towards me.

My signature was graceful—Catholic school calligraphy. In the column marked “Reason for visit,” I wrote, “Government Day.”

The office worker looked dubiously at this, picked up the phone, and dialed.

“Dr. Smith, I have a high school student here who says she’s supposed to visit the Medical Examiner’s Office today.” A pause, then, “Yes sir. Will do.”

“He says you are to come right in.” She smiled. “No one has chosen our office in 15 years, since we started listing with the program.”

Fifteen years—that was my age.

Choosing the morgue had seemed inspired when our sophomore class received a list of agencies willing to have kids shadow for the day. My friends picked city hall and the mayor’s office, with visions of becoming sophisticated Girl-Fridays or uniformed court clerks. My dream was to be a physician. I reasoned I could learn about the human body by seeing it in the flesh.

Standing in the foyer, I felt dizzy.

The secretary pushed a button and the inner door clicked open. She waved me through. The

corridor, dimly lit and dank, smelled of rotten food with an overlay of bleach. The hallway seemed to narrow and grow darker.

An older man called to me from a doorway farther down the hall, “This way, Miss.”

I walked toward the human contact.

“Go, change in there, and leave your stuff in a locker,” he said, pointing to a door labeled Women.

“Thank you,” I said, heading into the room, grateful to leave the creepy hall behind.

On one wall, shelving contained folded surgical scrubs, the kind Dr. Kildare wore on television. The professional attire calmed me as I changed from my blue plaid school uniform. Pushing open the door on the opposite wall revealed the autopsy suite.

A pungent aroma assailed my nose, reminding me of unwrapping fresh beef to make a roast on Sundays, only much stronger. The lights were brighter than the hallway, making the air warm and stale. They reflected brightly off the stainless-steel surfaces. Water ran continuously, splashing in the sinks at the tables’ ends. Spilled blood and urine swirled into the drains.

Four dead people were lined up on the gurneys. The only kind of dead people I had ever seen were in their Sunday-best nestled in mahogany coffins. These folks lay on the cold metal, naked without even hospital gowns or bandaging.

Between the feet of each cadaver sat a bucket, containing discarded tissue already examined by the pathologists. A garbage can in the center of the room collected the innards when the buckets became full. One attendant made notes on a clipboard. Another stood near the door smoking a cigarette. Both wore bloody gloves.

Saws grinded, cutting through bone—skulls and ribs—to expose the internal viscera. Hanging scales swayed as dissected organs were placed inside. Instruments sat on cafeteria trays

balanced across the thighs of the bodies.

Directly in front of me lay a corpse, chest caved in, scalp pulled forward covering his face to expose the skull. Blood pooled on the table, leaking from recently severed insides. A tall, thin doctor in a butcher's apron stood to the side. Yellow rubber gloves covered his hands extending to his elbows.

"Hello, I'm Dr. Smith. I would shake your hand, but..." he shrugged.

"Hi," I said. "Nice to meet you." My voice squeaked an octave higher than usual.

"Stand here," the doctor said, motioning me closer to the table. He handed me a matching pair of Rubbermaids. He retrieved an object, the size of a grapefruit, from a silver salad bowl. The thing was red brown with splotches of yellow and white, rubbery tubes on one side.

"This is the heart," he said, dabbing it with a paper towel. He used a probe to point to a large rip in the muscle. Placing the organ on a cork board, he cut into a straw-like portion with a scalpel.

He said words beyond my understanding like coronary artery occlusion, myocardial infarction, and hypercholesterolemia, words that would become familiar to me much later in medical school. At the time, they brought scientific refinement to the macabre scene.

"Blood couldn't feed oxygen to the muscle because of the blocked vessel, leading to a heart attack," he explained. "Here."

He held the organ out to me.

Putting my hands together, palms up, like a communicant, I received this gift. The heart felt hard, except for the tear, which was soft like overripe fruit. The main artery, no bigger than a coffee stirrer, was closed off by a tiny glob of fat. Dr. Smith talked on; the words inaudible. My attention focused on the patient's anatomy.

I clutched a human heart. Hours earlier, it beat inside someone's chest and then stopped. Like my father's had.

The stench and disgusting appearance of the morgue faded.

Did this man know he was going to die? Was it painful? Was he alone? Could a doctor have saved him? Did he have a family?

"Thank you," I managed, gently returning the organ to the pan.

Strength gathered in the rapid beating of my own heart. I watched as the pathologist continued with the man's autopsy.