

## Bodies and Heads

BY STEVE RASNIC TEM

In the hospital window the boy's head shook no no no. Elaine stopped on her way up the front steps, fascinated.

The boy's chest was rigid, his upper arms stiff. He seemed to be using something below the window to hold himself back, with all his strength, so that his upper body shook from the exertion.

She thought of television screens and their disembodied heads, ever so slightly out of focus, the individual dots of the transmitted heads moving apart with increasing randomness so that feature blended into feature and face into face until eventually the heads all looked the same: pinkish clouds of media flesh.

His head moved no no no. As if denying what was happening to him. He had been the first and was now the most advanced case of something they still had no name for. Given what had been going on in the rest of the country, the Denver Department of Health and Hospitals had naturally been quite concerned. An already Alert status had become a Crisis and doctors from all over—including a few with vague, unspecified governmental connections—had descended on the hospital.

Although it was officially discouraged, now and then in the hospital's corridors she had overheard the whispered word *zombie*.

"Jesus, will you look at him!"

Elaine turned. Mark planted a quick kiss on her lips. "Mark... somebody will see..." But she made no attempt to move away from him.

"I think they already know." He nibbled down her jaw-line. Elaine thought to pull away, but could not. His touch on her body, his attention, had always made her feel beautiful. It was, in fact, the only time she ever felt beautiful.

"You didn't want anyone to know just yet, remember?" She gasped involuntarily as he moved to the base of her throat. "Christ, Mark." She took a deep breath and pushed herself away from him. "Remember what you said about young doctors and hospital nurses? Especially young doctors with administrative aspirations?"

He looked at her. "Did I sound all that cold-blooded? I'm sorry."

She looked back up at the boy, Tom, in the window. Hopelessly out of control. No no no. "No—you weren't that bad. But I'm beginning to feel a little like somebody's mistress."

Some of the other nurses were now going into the building. Elaine thought they purposely avoided looking at the head-shaking boy in the window. "I'll make it up to you," Mark whispered. "I swear. Not much longer." But Elaine didn't answer; she just stared at the boy in the window.

There was now a steady stream of people walking up the steps, entering the hospital, very few permitting themselves to look at the boy. *Tom*, she thought. *His name is Tom*. She watched their quiet faces, wondering what they were thinking, if they were having stray thoughts about Tom but immediately suppressing them, or if they were having no thoughts about the boy at all. If bothered her not knowing. People led secret lives, secret even from those closest to them. It bothered her not knowing if they bore her ill will, or good will, or if for them she didn't exist at all. Her mother had always told her she cared far

too much about what other people thought.

“I gather all the Fed doctors left yesterday afternoon,” Mark said behind her.

“What? I thought they closed all the airports.”

“They did. I heard this morning the governor even ordered gun emplacements on all the runways. Guess they left the city in a bus or something.”

Elaine tried to rub the chill off her arms with shaking hands. The very idea of leaving the city in something other than an armored tank terrified her. It had been only a few months since the last flights. Then that plane had come in from Florida: all those dead people with suntans strolling off the plane as if they were on vacation. A short time later two small towns on Colorado’s eastern plains—Kit Carson and Cheyenne Wells—were wiped out, or apparently wiped out, because only a few bodies were ever found. Then there was another plane, this one from Texas. Then another, from New York City. “It’s hard to believe they could land a plane,” had been Mark’s comment at the time. But there were still more planes; the dead had an impeccable safety record.

“I’m just as glad to see them go,” Mark said now. “Poking over that spastic kid like he was a two-headed calf. And still no signs of their mysterious ‘zombie virus.’ “

“No one knows how it starts,” she said. “It could start anywhere. It could have dozens of different forms. Any vague gesture could be the first symptom.”

“They haven’t proven to me that it *is* a virus. No one really knows.”

But Denver’s quarantine seemed to be working. No one got in or out. All the roads closed, miles of perimeter patrolled. And no zombie sightings at all after those first few at the airport.

The boy’s head drifted left and right as if in slow motion, as if weightless. “I missed the news this morning,” she said.

“You looked so beat, I thought it best you sleep.”

“I *need* to watch the news, Mark.” Anger had such a grip on her jaw that she could hardly move it.

“You and most everybody else in Denver.” She looked at him but said nothing. “Okay, I watched it for you. Just more of the same. A few distant shots of zombies in other states, looking like no more than derelicts prowling the cities, and the countryside, for food. Nothing much to tell you what they’d really be like. God knows what the world outside this city is really like anymore. I lost part of it—the reception just gets worse and worse.”

Elaine knew that everything he was saying was true. But she kept watching the screens just the same, the faces seeming to get a little fuzzier every day as reception got worse, the distant cable stations disappearing one by one until soon only local programming was available, and then even the quality of that diminishing as equipment began to deteriorate and ghosts and static proliferated. But still she kept watching. Everybody she knew kept watching, desperate for any news outside of Denver.

And propped up in the window like a crazed TV announcer, young Tom’s head moved no no no. At any moment she expected him to scream his denial: “No!” But no words ever passed the blurring lips. Just like all the other cases. No no no. Quiet heads that would suddenly explode into rhythmic, exaggerated denial. Their bodies fought it, held on to whatever was available so that muscles weren’t twisted or bones torqued out of their sockets.

His head moved side to side: no no no. His long blond hair whipped and flew. His dark pebble eyes were lost in a nimbus of hair, now blond, now seeming to whiten more and more the faster his head flew. His expressionless face went steadily out of focus, and after a moment she realized she couldn't remember what he looked like, even though she had seen him several times a day every day since he had been admitted into the hospital.

*What is he holding on to?* she wondered, the boy's head now a cloud of mad insects, the movement having gone on impossibly long. His body vibrated within the broad window frame. At any moment she expected the rhythmic head to levitate him, out the window and over the empty, early-morning street. His features blurred in and out: he had four eyes, he had six. Three mouths that gasped for air attempting to scream. He had become a vision. He had become an angel.

"It's going to take more than a few skin grafts to fix that one," Betty said, nervously rubbing the back of her neck. "My God, doesn't he ever stop?" They were at the windows above surgery. He'd been holding on to a hot radiator; it had required three aides to pull him off. Even anesthetized, the boy's head shook so vigorously the surgeons had had to strap his neck into something like a large dog collar. The surgeries would be exploratory, mostly, until they found something specific. It bothered Elaine. Tom was a human being. He had secrets. "Look at his eyes," Elaine said. His eyes stared at her. As his face blurred in side-to-side movement, his eyes remained fixed on her. But that couldn't be.

"I can't see his eyes," Betty said with sudden vehemence. "Jeezus, will you look at him? They oughta do something with his brain while they're at it. They oughta go in there and snip out whatever's causin' it."

Elaine stared at the woman. *Snip it out. Where?* At one time they had been friends, or almost friends. Betty had wanted it, but Elaine just hadn't been able to respond. It had always been a long time between friends for her. The edge of anger in Betty's voice made her anxious. "They don't know what's causing it," Elaine said softly.

"My mama don't believe in 'em." Betty turned and looked at Elaine with heavily-shadowed eyes, anemic-looking skin. "Zombies. Mama thinks the zombies are something the networks came up with. She says real people would never do disgustin' things like they're sayin' the zombies do." Elaine found herself mesmerized by the lines in Betty's face. She tried to follow each one, where they became deeper, trapping dried rivers of hastily applied makeup, where pads and applicators had bruised, then covered up the skin. Betty's eyes blinked several times quickly in succession, the pupils bright and fixed like a doll's. "But then she always said we never landed on the moon, neither. Said they filmed all that out at Universal Studios." Milky spittle had adhered to the inside corners of Betty's mouth, which seemed unusually heavy with lipstick today. "Guess she could be right. Never read about zombies in the Bible, and you would think they'd be there if there was such a thing." Betty rubbed her arm across her forehead. "Goodness, my skin's so *dry!* I swear I'm flakin' down to the *nub!*" A slight ripple of body odor moved across Elaine's face. She could smell Betty's deodorant, and under that, something slightly sour and slightly sweet at the same time.

*That's the way people's secrets smell,* Elaine thought, and again wondered at herself for thinking such things. *People have more secrets than you could possibly imagine.* She wondered what secret things Betty was capable of, what Betty might do to a zombie if she had the opportunity, what Betty might do to Tom. "Tom's not a zombie," she said slowly, wanting to plant the idea firmly in Betty's head. "There's been no proof of a connection. No proof that he has a form of the virus, if there is a virus. No proof that he has a virus at all."

"My mama never believed much in *coincidences,*" Betty said.

Elaine spent most of the night up in the ward with Tom and the other cases that had appeared: an elderly woman, a thirty-year-old retarded man, twin girls of thirteen who at times shook their heads in unison, a twenty-four-year-old hospital maintenance worker whose symptoms had started only a couple of days ago. As in every other place she'd worked, a TV set mounted high overhead murmured all evening. She couldn't get the vertical to hold. The announcer's head rolled rapidly by, disappearing at the top of the screen and reappearing at the bottom. But as she watched she began thinking it was different heads, the announcer switching them at the rate of perhaps one per second. She wondered how he'd managed the trick. Then she wondered if all newscasters did that, switching through a multitude of heads so quickly it couldn't be detected by the average viewer. She wanted to turn off the TV, but the doctors said it was best to leave it on for stimulation, even though their charges appeared completely unaware of it. Dozens of heads shaking no no no. Heads in the windows. Heads exploding with denial. Heads like bombs.

Two more nurses had quit that day. At least they had called; some had just stopped showing up. All the nurses were on double shifts now, with patient loads impossible to handle. Betty came in at six to help Elaine with feeding some of the head shakers.

"Now buckle the strap," Elaine said. She had the "horse collar," a padded brace, around the old woman's neck, her arms around the woman's head to hold it still. Betty fiddled with the straps.

"Damn!" Betty said. "I can't get it to buckle!"

"Hurry! I can't hold her head still much longer." Holding the head still put undue pressure on other parts of the system. Elaine could hear the woman's protesting stomach, and then both bladder and bowel were emptied.

"There!" Elaine let go and the old woman's head shook in her collar. Betty tried to spoon the food in. The woman's body spasmed like a lizard nailed to a board. Sometimes they broke their own bones that way. Elaine held her breath. Even strapped down, the old woman's face moved to an amazing degree. Like a latex mask attached loosely to the skull, her face slipped left and right, led by an agonized mouth apparently desperate to avoid the spoon. Elaine thought it disgusting, but it was better than any other method they'd tried. The head shakers choked on feeding tubes, pulled out IVs, and getting a spoon into those rapidly moving mouths had been almost impossible.

"I know it's your turn, but I'll go feed Tom," Elaine said.

Betty glanced up from the vibrating head, a dribble of soft brown food high on her right cheek. "Thanks, Elaine. I owe you." She turned back, aiming the spoon of dripping food at the twisting head. "I don't know. If I had to be like them... I don't know. I think I'd rather be dead."

Tom had always been the worst to feed. Elaine fixed a large plastic bib around his neck, then put one around her neck as well. He stared at her. Even as the spasms pulled his eyes rapidly past, she could see a little-boy softness in those adolescent eyes, an almost pleading vulnerability so at odds with the violent contortions his body made.

She moved the spoon in from the side, just out of his peripheral vision. But every time the metal touched the soft, pink flesh of the lips, the head jerked violently away. Again and again. And when some food finally did slip into the mouth cavity, he choked, his eyes became enormous, the whites swelling in panic, and his mouth showered it back at her. It was as if his mouth despised the food, reviled the food, and could not stand to be anywhere near it. As if she were asking him to eat his own feces.

She looked down at the bowl of mushy food. Tom reached his hand in, clutched a wet mess of it, then tried to stuff it into his own mouth. The mouth twisted away. His hand did this again and again, and

still his mouth rejected it. Eventually his hands, denied the use of the mouth, began smearing the food on his face, his neck, his chest, his legs, all over his body, pushing it into the skin and eventually into every orifice available to receive it. He looked as if he had been swimming in garbage.

Tom's face, Tom's eyes, pleaded with her as his hands shoved great wet cakes of brown, green, and yellow food up under his blue hospital pajama top and down inside his underwear. Finally, as if in exasperation, Tom's body voided itself, drenching itself and Elaine in vomit, urine, and feces.

Elaine backed away, ripping off her plastic gloves and bib. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" she screamed, as Tom's head moved no no no, and his body continued to pat itself, fondle itself, probe itself lovingly with food-smearred fingers. Elaine's vision blurred as she choked back the tears. Tom's body suddenly looked like some great bag of loose flesh, poked with wet, running holes, some ugly organic machine, inefficient in input and output. She continued to stare at it as it fed and drained, probed and made noises, all independent of the head and its steady no no no beat.

She ran into Betty out in the corridor. "I have to leave *now*," she said. "Betty, I'm *sorry*!"

Betty looked past her into the room where Tom was still playing with his food. "It's all right, kid. You just go get some sleep. I'll put old Master Tom to bed."

Elaine stared at her, sudden alarms of distrust going off in her head. "You'll be okay with him? I mean—he didn't *mean* it, Betty."

Betty looked offended. "Hey! Just what kind of nurse do you think I am? I'm going to hose him off and tuck him in, that's all. Unless you're insisting I read him a bedtime story, too? Maybe give him a kiss on the cheek? If I could *hit* his cheek, that is."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"I know what you meant. Get some rest, Elaine. You're beat."

But Elaine couldn't bear to attempt the drive home, searching the dark corners at every intersection, waiting for the shambling strangers who lived in the streets to come close enough that she could get a good look at their faces. So that she could see if their faces were torn, their eyes distant. Or if their heads were beginning to shake.

Mark had been staying in the janitor's apartment down in the basement, near the morgue. The janitor had been replaced by a cleaning service some time back as a cost-cutting measure. Supposedly it was to be turned into a lab, but that had never happened. Mark always said he really didn't mind living by the morgue. He said it cut the number of drop-in visitors drastically.

Elaine went there.

"So don't go back," Mark said, nibbling at her ear. He was biting too hard, and his breath bore a trace of foulness. Elaine squirmed away and climbed out of bed.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said. After closing the bathroom door, she ran water into the sink so that she would be unable to hear herself pee. People reacted to crisis in different ways, she supposed. Mark's way was to treat all problems as if they were of equal value, whether it was deciding what wattage light bulb to buy or the best way to feed a zombie.

Elaine looked down at her legs. They'd gotten a little spongier each year; her thighs seemed to spread a little wider each time she sat down. Here and there were little lumps and depressions which seemed to move from time to time. Her belly bulged enough now that she could see only the slightest halo

of dark pubic hair when she looked down like this. And the pubic hair itself wasn't all that dark anymore. There were streaks of gray, and what had surprised and confused her, red. By her left knee a flowery pattern of broken blood vessels was darkening into a bruise. She tried to smell herself. She sometimes imagined she must smell terrible.

It seemed she had always watched herself grow older while sitting on the toilet. Sitting on the toilet, she found she couldn't avoid looking at her legs, her belly, her pubic hair. She couldn't avoid smelling herself.

She stood up and looked at herself in the mirror. She looked for scars, bruises, signs of corruption she might have missed before. She pretended her face was a patient's, and she washed it, brushed her hair. As a child she'd pretended her face was a doll's face, her hair a doll's hair. She'd never trusted mirrors. They didn't show the secrets inside.

"I have to go back," Elaine said coming out of the bathroom. "We're short-handed. They count on me. And I can't let Betty work that ward alone."

But Mark was busy fiddling with the VCR. "Huh? Oh yeah... well, you do what you think is right, honey. Hey—I got us a tape from one of the security people. The cops confiscated it two weeks ago and it's been circulating ever since." Elaine walked slowly around the bed and stood by Mark as he adjusted the contrast. "Pretty crudely made, but you can still make out most of it."

The screen was dark, with occasional lighter shadows floating through that dark. Then twin pale spots resolved out of the distortion, moving rapidly left and right, up and down. Elaine thought of headlights gone crazy, maybe a moth's wings. Then the camera pulled back suddenly, as if startled, and she saw that it was a black man's immobile face, but with eyes that jumped around as if they were being given some sort of electrical shock. Frightened eyes. Eyes moving no no no.

But as the camera dwelled on this face, Elaine noticed that there was more wrong here than simple fright. The dark skin of the face looked torn all along the hairline, peeled back, and crusted a dark red. A cut bisected the left cheek; she thought she could see several tissue layers deep into the valley it made. And when the head moved, she saw a massive hole just under the chin where throat cartilage danced in open air.

"That's one of them," she said in a soft voice filled with awe. "A zombie."

"The tape was smuggled in from somewhere down South, I hear," Mark said distractedly, moving even closer to the screen. "Beats me how they can still get these videos into the city."

"But the quarantine..."

"Supply and demand, honey." As the camera moved back farther, Elaine was surprised to see live, human hands pressing down on the zombie's shoulders. "Get a load of this," Mark said, an anxious edge to his voice.

The camera jerked back suddenly to show the zombie pressed against gray wooden planks—the side of a barn or some other farm building. The zombie was naked: large wounds covered much of its body. Like a decoration, an angry red scar ran the length of the dangling, slightly paler penis. Six or seven large men in jeans and old shirts—work clothes—were pushing the zombie flat against the gray wood, moving their rough hands around to avoid its snapping teeth. The more they avoided its teeth, the more manic the zombie became, jerking its head like a striking snake, twisting its head side to side and snapping its mouth.

An eighth man—fat, florid, baggy tits hanging around each side of his bib overalls—carried a bucket full of hammers onto the scene and handed one to each of the men restraining the zombie. Then the fat man reached deeper into the bucket and came out with a handful of ten-penny nails, which he also distributed to the men.

Mark held his breath as the men proceeded to drive the nails through the body of the zombie—through shoulders, arms, hands, ankles—pinning it like a squirming lizard on the boards.

The zombie showed no pain, but struggled against the nails, tearing wider holes. Little or no blood dripped from these holes, but Elaine did think she could detect a clear, glistening fluid around each wound.

The men stared at the zombie for a moment. A couple of them giggled like adolescent girls, but for the most part they looked dissatisfied.

One of the men nailed the zombie's ears to the wall. Another used several nails to pin the penis and scrotum; several more nails severed it. The zombie pelvis did a little gyration above the spot where the genitals had become a trophy on the barn wall.

The zombie seemed not to notice the difference. The men laughed and pointed.

There were no screams on this sound track. Just laughter and animalistic zombie grunts.

"Jesus, Mark." Elaine turned away from the TV, ashamed of herself for having watched that long. "Jesus." She absentmindedly stroked his hair, running her hand down his face, vaguely wondering how she could get him away from the TV, or at least to turn it off.

"Damn. Look, they're bringing out the ax and the sickle," Mark said.

"I don't want to look," she said, on the verge of tears. "I don't want *you* to look either. It's crazy, it's... pornographic."

"Hey, I know this is pretty sick stuff, but I think it tells us something about the way things *are* out there. Christ, they won't show it to us on the news. Not the way it *really* is. We need to know things like this exist."

"I know goddamn well they exist! I don't need it rubbed in my face!"

Elaine climbed into bed and turned her back on him. She tried to ignore the static-filled moans and giggles coming from the TV. She pretended she was sick in a hospital bed, that she had no idea what was going on in the world and never could. A minute or two later Mark turned off the TV. She imagined the image of the zombie's head fading, finally just its startled eyes showing, then nothing.

She felt Mark's hands gently rubbing her back. Then he lay down on the bed, half on top of her, still rubbing her tight flesh.

"They're not in Denver," he said softly. "There's still been no sightings. No zombies here, ma'am." The rubbing moved to her thighs. She tried to ignore it.

"If there were, would people here act like those rednecks in your damn video? Jesus, Mark. Nobody should be allowed to behave that way."

He stopped rubbing. She could hear him breathing. "People do strange things sometimes," he finally said. "Especially in strange times. Especially groups of people. They get scared and they lose control."

He resumed rubbing her shoulders, then moved to her neck. “There are no zombies in Denver, honey. No sightings. All the news types keep telling us that. You *know* that; you’re always watching them.”

“Maybe they won’t look the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe they won’t look the same here as they do everywhere else. Maybe it’ll take a different form, and we won’t know what to look for. They think it’s a virus—well, viruses mutate, they have different forms. Maybe the doctors and the Health Department and all those reporters aren’t as smart as they think they are. Christ, it might even be some form of venereal disease.”

“Hey. That’s not funny.”

“You think I intended it to be?” She could feel her anger bunching up the shoulder muscles beneath his hands. She could feel all this beginning to change her; no way would she be the same after it all stopped. If it ever stopped.

“I know. I know,” he said. “This is hard on all of us.” Then he started kissing her. Uncharitably, she wondered if it was because he’d run out of things to say to her. But she found her body responding, even though her head was sick with him and all his easy answers and explanations.

His kisses ran down her neck and over her breasts like a warm liquid. And her body welcomed it, had felt so cold before. “Turn out the light, please, Mark,” she said, grudgingly giving into the body, hating the body for it. He left silently to turn out the light, then was back again, kissing her, touching her, warming her one ribbon of flesh at a time.

In the darkness she could not see her own body. She could imagine away the blemishes, the ugly, drifting spots, the dry patches of skin, the small corruptions patterning death. And she could imagine that his breath was always sweet smelling. She could imagine his hair dark and full. She could imagine the image of the zombie’s destroyed penis out of her head when Mark made love to her. And in this darkness she could almost imagine that Mark would never die.

His body continued to fondle her after she knew his head had gone to sleep.

Mark’s kiss woke her up the next morning. “Last night was wonderful,” he whispered. “Glad you finally got over whatever was bothering you.” That last comment made her angry, and she tried to tell him that, but she was too sleepy and he’d already left. And then she was sorry he was gone and wished he would come back so his touch would make her body feel beautiful again.

She stared at the dead gray eye of the TV, then glanced at the VCR. Apparently Mark had taken his video with him. She was relieved, and a little ashamed of herself. She turned the TV on. The eye filled with static, but she could hear the female newscaster’s flat, almost apathetic voice.

“...the federal government has reported increased progress with the so-called ‘zombie’ epidemic...” Then this grainy, washed-out bit of stock footage came on the screen: men in hunters’ clothing and surplus fatigues shooting zombies in the head from a safe distance. Shooting them and then moving along calmly down a dirt road. The newscaster appeared on the screen again: silent, emotionless, makeup perfect, her head rolling up into the top of the cabinet.

It was after four in the morning. Betty had handled the ward by herself all night and would need some relief. Elaine dressed quickly and headed upstairs.

Betty wasn’t at the nurse’s station. Elaine started down the dim-lit corridor, peeking into each room.



In the beds dark shadows shook and moved their heads no no no, even in their dreams. But no sign of Betty.

The last room was Tom's, and he wasn't there. She could hear a steady padding of feet up ahead, in the dark tunnel that led to the new wing. She tried the light switch, but apparently it wasn't connected. Out of her pocket she pulled the penlight that she used for making chart notations in patients' darkened rooms. It made a small, distorted circle of illumination. She started down the darkened tunnel, flashing her small light now and then on the uncompleted ceiling, the holes in the walls where they'd run electrical conduit, the tile floor streaked white with plaster dust, littered with wire, pipe, and lumber.

She came out into a giant open area that hadn't yet been divided into rooms. Cable snaked out of large holes in the ceiling, dangled by her face. Streetlight filtered through the tall, narrow windows, striping piles of ceiling tile, paint cans, and metal posts. They were supposed to be finished with all this by next month. She wondered if they would even bother, given how things were in the city. The wing looked more like a structure they were stripping, demolishing, than one they were constructing. Like a building under autopsy, she thought. She could no longer hear the other footsteps ahead of her. She heard her own steps, crunching the grit under foot, and her own ragged breath.

She flashed her light overhead, and something flashed back. A couple of cameras projected from a metal beam. Blind, their wires wrapped uselessly around the beam. She walked on, following the connections with her light. There were a series of blank television monitors, their enormous gray eyes staring down at her.

Someone cried softly in the darkness ahead. Elaine aimed her light there, but all she could see were crates, paneling leaned against the wall and stacked on the floor, metal supports and crosspieces. A tangle of sharp angles. But then there was that cry again. "Betty? Tom?"

A pale face loomed into the blurred, yellowed beam. A soft shake of the face, side to side. The eyes were too white, and had a distant stare.

"Betty?" The face shook and shook again. Betty stumbled out of a jumble of cardboard boxes, construction and stored medical supplies breaking beneath her stumbling feet.

"No..." Betty's mouth moved as if in slow-motion. Her lipstick looked too bright, her mascara too dark. "No," she said again, and something dark dripped out of her eyes as her head began to shake.

Elaine's light picked up a glint in Betty's right hand. "Betty?" Betty stumbled forward and fell, keeping that right hand out in front of her. Elaine stepped closer thinking to help Betty up, but then saw that Betty's right arm was swinging slowly side to side, a scalpel clutched tightly in her hand. "Betty! Let me help you!"

"No!" Betty screamed. Her head began to thrash back and forth on the litter-covered floor. Her cheeks rolled again and again over broken glass. Blood welled, smeared, and stained her face as her head moved no no no. She struggled to control the hand holding the scalpel. Then she suddenly plunged it into her throat. Her left hand came up jerkily and helped her pull the scalpel through muscle and skin.

Elaine fell to her knees, grabbed paper and cloth, anything at hand to dam the dark flow from Betty's throat. After a minute or two she stopped and turned away.

There were more noises off in the darkness. At the back of the room where she'd first seen Betty, Elaine found a doorless passage to another room. Her light now had a vague reddish tinge. She wondered hazily if there was blood on the flashlight lens, or blood in her eyes. But the light still showed the way. She followed it, hearing a harsh, wet sound. For just a moment she thought that maybe Betty

might still be alive. She started to go back when she heard it again; it was definitely in the room ahead of her.

She tried not to think of Betty as she made her way through the darkness. *That wasn't Betty. That was just her body.* Elaine's mother used to babble things like that to her all the time. Spiritual things. Elaine didn't know what she herself felt. Someone dies, you don't know them anymore. You can't imagine what they might be thinking.

The room had the sharp smell of fresh paint. Drop cloths had been piled in the center of the floor. The windows were crisscrossed by long stretches of masking tape, and outside lights left odd patterns like angular spiderwebs on all the objects in the room.

A heavy cord dropped out of the ceiling to a small switch box on the floor, which was in turn connected to a large mercury lamp the construction crew must have been using. Elaine bent over and flipped the switch.

The light was like an explosion. It created strange, skeletal shadows in the drop cloths, as if she were suddenly seeing *through* them. She walked steadily toward the pile, keeping an eye on those shadows.

Elaine reached out her hand and several of the cloths flew away.

*My god, Betty killed him! Betty killed him and cut off that awful, shaking head!* The head was a small, sad mound by the boy's filthy, naked body. A soft whispering seemed to enter Elaine's ear, which brought her attention back to that head.

She stopped to feel the draft, but there was no draft, even though she could hear it rising in her head, whistling through her hair and making it grow longer, making it grow white, making her older.

Because of a trick of the light the boy's—Tom's—eyes looked open in his severed head. Because of a trick of the light the eyes blinked several times as if trying to adjust to that light.

He had a soft, confused stare, like a stuffed toy's. His mouth moved like a baby's. Then his naked, headless body sat up on the floor. Then the headless body struggled to its feet, weaving unsteadily. *No inner ear for balance*, Elaine thought, and almost laughed. She felt crazed, capable of anything.

The body stood motionless, staring at Elaine. Staring at her. The nipples looked darker than normal and seemed to track her as she moved sideways across the room. The hairless breasts gave the body's new eyes a slight bulge. The navel was flat and neutral, but Elaine wondered if the body could smell her with it. The penis—the tongue—curled in and out of the bearded mouth of the body's new face. The body moved stiffly, puppet-like, toward its former head.

The body picked up its head with one hand and threw it out into a darkened corner of the room. It made a sound like a wet mop slapping the linoleum floor. Elaine heard a soft whimpering that soon ceased. She could hear ugly, moist noises coming from the body's new bearded mouth. She could hear skin splitting, she could see blood dripping to the dusty floor as the body's new mouth widened and brought new lips up out of the meaty darkness inside.

The sound of a wheelchair rolling in behind her. She turned and watched as the old woman grabbed each side of her ancient-looking, spasming head. The head continued its insistent no no no even as the hands and arms increased their pressure, the old lady's body quaking from the strain. Then suddenly the no no no stopped, the arms lifted up on the now-motionless head, and pulled it away from the body, cracking open the spine and stretching the skin and muscle of the neck until they tore or snapped apart like rotted bands of elastic. The old woman's fluids gushed, then suddenly stopped, both head and body

sealing the breaks with pale tissues stretched almost to transparency.

The new face on the old woman's body was withered, pale, almost hairless, and resembled the old face to a remarkable degree. The new eyes sagged lazily, and Elaine wondered if this body might be blind.

The old woman's head gasped, and was still. The young male body picked up the woman's dead head and stuffed it into its hairy mouth. Its new, pale pink lips stretched and rolled. Elaine could see the stomach acid bubbling on those lips, the steadily diminishing face of the old lady appearing now and then in the gaps between the male body's lips as the body continued its digestion. The old woman's denuded skull fell out on the linoleum and rattled its way across the floor.

Elaine closed her eyes and tried to remember everything her mother had ever told her. Someone dies and you don't know them anymore. It's just a dead body—it's not my friend. My friend lives in the head forever. Death is a mystery. Stay away from crowds. Crowds want to eat you.

She wanted Mark here with her. She wanted Mark to touch her body and make her feel beautiful. No. People can't be trusted. No. She wanted to love her own body. No. She wanted her body to love her. No. She tried to imagine Mark touching her, making love to her. No. With dead eyes, mouth splitting at the corners. No. Removing his head and shoving it deep inside her, his eyes and tongue finding and eating all her secrets.

No no no, her head said. Elaine's head moved no no no. And each time her vision swept across the room with the rhythmic swing of her shaking head, the bodies were closer.