

Unbending Eye by Jim Grimsley

Jim Grimsley tells us, "I'm working on a novel that carries forward characters from a couple of my stories from Asimov's, "Into Greenwood" (September 2001) and "The 120 Hours of Sodom" (February 2005); I'm not incorporating those stories into the book, but I am following the characters out of the stories into the next phase of their lives. In May, I won an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and in June I won a Lambda Award for my last novel, The Ordinary." He returns to our pages with a philosophical look at what it means to be caught in the glare of the...

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Seeing Roger Dennis again at all was the surprise, much less finding him in a bar on Chartres Street that I visited nearly every evening. I had heard he was dead some time ago. As I remembered the story, he died suddenly in an emergency room in Canada after some kind of accident the details of which I had forgotten, having listened at the time with only a polite modicum of attention, since I had not kept up with Roger after college. Yet here he was in my neighborhood bar where I came most evenings after supper, where the bartender had already seen me enter and poured out my favorite armagnac.

There was no mistaking Roger for anyone else. When I had known him in college, he possessed a singular, odd beauty that drew others to him, the face of Helen but made masculine--pale blue eyes, dark hair, lips like ripe fruit. We had shared a couple of classes in New Testament Greek. For a while I studied vocabulary with him, and we debated pronunciation and drilled each other in the conjugation of present tense verbs. In appearance he had aged since then, but not in such a way as to change him much. So when I saw him sitting by the window on a stool I thought to myself, well, it must have been somebody else who died, because here he is.

I took my brandy to join him, of course, thinking nothing peculiar, only that I ought to remember who told me he was dead so that I could correct the misinformation. But when I approached, he looked up at me and registered a jolt of shock; then he composed himself and greeted me with a handshake. But I could see that my appearance had frightened him. We greeted each other and the fear passed, but after we had spoken a few moments he began to glance at the window and then suggested we move to the back of the bar, where there were a few stools in a shadowed corner. There he seemed more relaxed and we spoke pleasantly on ordinary topics--what we had done since school, when we had last seen each other, the pains we had shared translating passages from Paul's epistles. I sipped the armagnac and let my nostrils linger in the rich aroma while he mentioned that he was looking to get out of the country on a ship here in New Orleans but had not yet booked any passage. My family had any number of ships in port at the moment, some cargo vessels with room for a few passengers, and when I mentioned this, his eyes lit up and he nearly lunged toward me to take my arm. "I need to leave the country very quietly," he said, "can you help me do that?"

I assured him that no one was in a better position to offer such help than I, and at his deep relief I was struck by the strangeness of the situation--that here he was alive when I had heard otherwise, yes, very much alive but needing to exit the country in secret. "Of course I'll help you," I said, "but you've made me very curious. Not just this business." I waved my hand a bit, feeling the liquor, but instinctively I kept my voice low. "I heard you were dead years ago."

He stared into his glass and said nothing.

"You must admit that it's very curious. And now here you are, wanting to sail away without a trace. Unless it really wasn't you I heard about. Unless I'm mistaken, unless it was someone else."

Something narrowed in his gaze, as if he were coming suddenly to focus, all of him drawn to a point. When he looked into my eyes I felt the gaze so far inside me that I shivered. "No," he said, "it was me who died," and ordered another drink, and when it arrived he told me this story.

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I will begin, he said, with the last scene I remember before I died: I was looking up from the emergency room examining table, listening to the doctor order a tomographic scan of my head, and somehow I knew, I must have heard, the fact that I had been injured. I had fallen down steps, crashing head first against a wall. I remember the fall only as a flash of something rushing toward me and a force on the top of my head. Nausea rushed through me in the emergency room and I felt my head pounding and my stomach heaved and someone propped me up and helped me to vomit and something split inside my skull and everything after that was hazy.

I woke up in another room, lying with a sheet pulled over my face. The thought occurred to me that I might be dead, in a morgue, maybe, and I lay there for a long time while a square of sunlight moved slowly down my body. I lay still until the room began to get dark. Feeling as if I had been drugged. Near sundown, for some reason the thought occurred to me that I should try to move, and I found I could move and sat up and looked out the window. A view of pink light in the sky and the tops of some fir trees, more tops of trees stretching away on all sides. Hill country.

While I was lying under the sheet I had thought vaguely I would find myself in a hospital but now I saw quite clearly I was in some other kind of place. I was sitting on a hospital bed, it was true, and there was some monitoring equipment beside me. On either side of my bed, rolling screens blocked my view. I sat up and faced the window with the emptiness of the room behind me, all silence, a stillness that struck me as eerie. My head began to throb.

When I touched my head I remembered that I had fallen and hurt myself but at this point my head had been shaved and there was not a wound to be found on it. But still I had the pounding headache that was the last thing I remembered, so I lay down again and the throbbing subsided. At the back of my head something plucked at the fabric of the pillow and I touched the skin at the base of my skull--a small round hardness there, not a blood clot but plastic, it felt, like the cap on a catheter. Worrying at it with my finger, I lay quietly till my head stopped hurting and I could breathe calmly again.

Presently I smelled an odor in the room and slowly stood. Pervasive in the air, as if a gas had been discharged. The doors and windows appeared to have been carefully sealed; the room had never been designed as air-tight, but someone had attempted to make it so. The throbbing surged in my head but not so fiercely this time, and soon subsided. A long narrow room, many beds, an aisle down the center, walls of a nondescript brown tile. As I have been all my life, I was conscious then of the need to remain calm, but for the first time, I reached a state of quietude without any effort, even as I surveyed the two rows of beds, maybe twenty in all.

The beds were all separated by rolling screens, and each was attended by the same type of monitoring equipment. On each of the beds lay a body, covered by the same sort of white sheet that I held to my waist at the moment. As I walked slowly down the center aisle, I could make out the peak of each nose cutting across each face. Perhaps, gazing at these bodies, I felt a bit colder, though only for a moment.

So I had been correct in my first impression. This was a morgue, apparently, since these people were all dead.

The nearest of the bodies was a woman, perhaps in her late twenties, naked as I was, head shaven like mine. Her body had no odor of decay, and she had died in rather good shape with no obvious wounds. She was well preserved. When I laid my fingers between her breasts, the moist cleavage yielded no trace of a heartbeat. The flesh was soft and slightly cool. I leaned close to her, and smelled a sweet aroma rising out of her, the same over her head as over her torso, her feet. As if she had been dipped in a bath.

It occurred to me that she had died a beautiful woman. I say occurred to me because the thought did not

enter naturally, as it would have in the past. I gazed down at this woman, took the sheet off her, to see all her nakedness at once. Feeling hardly anything at all.

Without hurry I examined all the bodies, uncovering their faces, their torsos, sometimes letting the sheet drop to the floor beside the bed. Once, when I noted that the sheet covering a particular body was completely white and clean, I exchanged it for my own, which was marred by several dull brown stains, perhaps old blood stains that had been laundered many times but nevertheless remained clearly visible. This left bare the fair-complexioned man whose grave I was, in a sense, robbing, his bronze fingers curled gracefully against his thigh, soft, the shadow like a Chinese ideogram. I felt nothing for this man, any more than I had for the lovely dead woman several beds away, and I was certain he no longer minded much of anything, including the fact that I wanted his sheet.

Nineteen bodies I counted, ten female and nine male. All appeared approximately the same age, which was approximately my age; all were in rather good physical condition, as I was; all had the same sweet smell, except me, who smelled his own ordinary body odor. All had shaven heads.

I would not say I was surprised by any of this, but there was one thing more. I chose a young woman. Whatever had been added to these bodies to preserve them in this way, with this light scent of roses, of jasmine, of honeysuckle, had left the flesh soft, if cool, and rendered the joints limber, so that it was easy to raise her head. I had expected some hindrance of rigor mortis and was relieved, though puzzled, for she was clearly dead, but it was as though she had died only a moment ago.

At the back of her head, just at the base of her skull but slightly off center, a neat square in blue had been tattooed onto the flesh and at the center of the square nested a small white cap. I could not remove the cap in the one easy tug I gave it, and to do more seemed morbid.

Replacing her head gently on the bed, I covered her with the sheet again, and then, because I hardly knew anything else to do, I replaced the sheets over all the bodies, till everything was just as it had been before. As I was finishing this task, I heard a door open, followed by the sound of a number of people entering. Overhead, rows of fluorescent lamps flooded the room with harsh light. Though I had been able to see perfectly well without it, every detail.

I turned unhurriedly to face the people who were waiting, drawing the sheet more closely around me, determined to make the best appearance possible. A group of men and women, dressed in dark suits or lab coats, approached me. Now one of them stepped forward, an older woman with a long, crooked nose, bad skin, a smell of too much powder, and she was raising her hands to greet me, to tell me what had happened to me, but I was tired already.

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The doctors were very proud of their project, however, and so, after I had dressed in the awful clothes they offered me, they took me to a conference room with all the latest electronic equipment, including a projection screen that they could all write on at the same time, when they could get the electronic pens to work. Video-conferencing cameras in the four corners of the room, in case they should need to video conference with somebody, and microphones at each chair, small and round. So much extremely modern equipment housed in what looked like an old hospital from the forties, plaster walls and tile wainscoting, crank windows and steam radiator pipes. In the conference room they introduced themselves; there were, I learned, five doctors and four security people, as they termed themselves. Their chief, the woman who had spoken to me, introduced herself as Dr. Carla Lucas, and after we had been served coffee and sweet doughnuts, nearly inedible, she proceeded to deliver a brief lecture on the nature and purpose of this apparently dilapidated installation. Research into a means for suspending the effects of decay on recently-deceased bodies, an attempt to extend the viability of the organs for transplant or other use. The research was based on early success with the use of hyperoxygenated compounds injected into the

corpses of laboratory animals just after death. This had led them to an unexpected bit of serendipity: certain laboratory mice when freshly dead and preserved in this way had actually come back to life when stimulated internally with an electrical charge. The viable percentage had increased dramatically when a preparation that included a massive number of fetal neural cells was injected directly into the brain of the dead mouse, and when the mouse's tissues were kept under one and one-half atmospheres of pressure in a mix of gases more rich in oxygen than the usual.

I endeavored to listen to the details but could not for the life of me take my eyes off the doctors, all of whom were dressed in quite shabby clothes, tattered sleeves, and worn elbows, holes in the soles of their shoes. The security people were also wearing really awful outfits, some sort of blend of fabrics that ballooned out stiffly from the thighs, like jodhpurs. The doctors were endeavoring to convince me that this research was being conducted by some branch of our Canadian government and the security people were agreeing with this, but I had great difficulty believing that federal officials could be so badly dressed. They looked as though they had all been hired by the local school board.

I should try to remember all of what they told me in this conference room because I have a feeling it was important, but for the life of me, little of it made any impression on me whatsoever. I understood that they were very excited by the fact that I was walking around, breathing, and that they meant to do a lot of tests on me to make sure my body was functioning as it had before I died.

Dr. Lucas flashed on the screen a diagram of the human skull, and her hand hung slackly at the point at the base of the skull labeled, "Point Alpha," with some attempt at grandeur. The researchers had injected their neural stew into this point, and this had apparently jump-started the brain--my brain, she meant--while at another insertion at Point Beta, into a vein in the chest near the heart, they injected a small, ingeniously devised matrix of electrically charged proteins, a kind of organic lightning bolt, she said (and had said this phrase many times before, I intuited, from her pleased expression). This biological battery was designed to lodge along the heart wall and send electrical pulses through the muscle, stimulating the heart to beat. As it had done, in my case. There was more, but I was never good with very many polysyllables at once.

At a certain point the lecture stopped and they waited for something. I studied Point Alpha carefully, no less expectant than they. After a moment, Dr. Lucas asked, "Do you have any questions, Mr. Dennis?"

They had been waiting for me. To show some interest. Smiling politely, I shook my head. "No."

The doctors all seemed mildly surprised, and the security people appeared particularly put out. Dr. Lucas, however, gave me a patient, motherly look. As a scientist, she could afford to be generous to me, a layman. "You have understood everything, just as I have explained?"

"Yes, you've been very clear."

She adjusted her reading glasses. "I'm glad to hear it. I was afraid my explanation was too technical."

Simply to reassure her, I said, "Oh no, you've been so helpful." I was sitting at the conference table, trying to appear cheerful, but they were all watching me as if I were saying something wrong. "I suppose I do have one question. How long has it been since I died?"

Dr. Lucas consulted with one of her colleagues, a man named Potter with a lot of papers and a palm computer, who needed someone to repeat my name to him, and I heard it, my name, with such a curious detachment. "Roger Dennis." After some checking he was able to announce, with complete satisfaction, that I had been dead about two years, preserved by the hyperoxygenated refrigerant and held in a hyperbaric chamber till the recent procedure had been performed, the various injections in the oxygen-rich gas, which had proven so successful.

"We can't preserve a body much longer than two years, even with the gamma serum," Dr. Potter continued, "so it was a good thing for you we were ready."

"I was getting a little ripe, was I?"

He tittered nervously, and they all looked at one another, as if they wanted to laugh but were uncertain.

Dr. Lucas still smiled at me, but I detected a rising level of discomfort in her stiff expression. "I must say, I find your reaction to all this to be very unexpected."

"My reaction?"

"You hardly show any surprise at all. And yet you're alive again, after dying."

"Well, I don't remember much about being dead."

They laughed a bit at that, then the room got silent. Dr. Lucas was still watching me. To console herself, she entered into another long explanation, about the need for further tests, for, as it turned out, they were puzzled by the fact that I was the only one of the twenty dead people to wake up. "Dead subjects," as she termed them. So many more tests would be needed on me, and on the failures as well, and she hoped I would be willing to undergo them. "We have a mission, now that we know our technique can be successful. We need to know why it is that you've come back to life, the only one of twenty."

"But have I come back to that?" I asked.

Poor dears, all puzzled again. I should not have been so smug, I suppose; it would haunt me later.

"Back to what?" Dr. Lucas asked.

"To life. I only mean to ask if you're sure that's what this is."

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My question hardly ruffled them, I think, though it would echo for a while. The philosophical underpinnings of our situation never interested them, that I could detect, then or later. We were finished with the briefing, I could go. One of the doctors conducted me to my rooms, which were actually rather pleasant, if nondescript. A small bedroom adjoined a small sitting room, with a bathroom tucked between. Windows with old fashioned, and rather yellowed, venetian blinds. Clean down to the last corner, a state so conspicuous I wondered if they were worried I might be susceptible to bacteria or contagion, me in my freshly dead state. Or post-dead, rather.

Dr. Potter stopped by to suggest that I rest, as in the morning I would be having several imaging studies, under the supervision of Dr. Lucas herself. He asked me some questions, took my vital signs, noted the strength of my reflexes, all the while making neat notations into his computer. Dr. Potter expressed his hope that I understood the importance of the work in which he and his colleagues were engaged.

"I believe I am engaged in it, too," I said.

"What? You are, of course, you are. And you play the most vital role of all. One might say that, even."

"I believe you could say that."

He lingered another moment and finally came to the point. "Do you remember your past life? Do you know who you were?"

"I was--I suppose I am--Roger Dennis, a systems analyst for a small software company in Montreal. Is

that right? I could tell you some of my memories but I doubt you would know whether they're correct or not."

"No, I suppose I wouldn't."

"Then I don't understand your question."

"I was simply curious because you've expressed no interest in any of that. Your life. Your family."

"But I'm dead, as far as they're concerned."

"Yes."

I turned away from him, lay on the bed. "Then I really don't see the point." And I didn't. I felt nothing. Not for my mother, my sisters, the woman I had been dating. It was as if the memories had grayed.

Dr. Potter retired soon after, when the old man Farley came with my dinner. Setting the tray on a table in the living room, nodding to the security guard posted at my door, Farley showed his name badge (for what, I don't know) but refused to look me in the eye. I suppose he knew I had been dead and was uncomfortable about it. Not a scientist, I guessed, but someone rather ordinary, though he had remarkable blue eyes and shaggy, heavy brows hanging over them.

The meal appeared to have been prepared carefully, but I found I had no taste for it at all until the hot foods cooled. Even then I could not stomach the small beef steak. I ate the leafy salad and the over-boiled broccoli. Presently the old man came to take the plate away, still refusing to look at me, snatching the tray and scurrying away, and I wished, vaguely, for a pair of fangs to wear the next time he came in.

Needing no rest, I went for a walk. I wondered if the security person would try to hinder me but she simply fell in beside me. Her presence proved no bother at all, since she said not one word. I was delighted that we might thus avoid all personal tedium and we explored this post of scientific progress as thoroughly as I was allowed, even leaving the building, at one point, to stroll in a courtyard, the moon over the wall, razor wire thrown into silhouette.

The fresh air smelled wonderful and I remarked on it. The security woman said she liked to get out, and I smiled. The stars were fierce. One would have thought that, once outside, my curiosity would have led me to examine the exterior of what had evidently become my prison; but it was only the stars that I cared to watch. Fascinating, thousand upon thousand, teeming, dense, white-hot light drifting from such incomprehensible distances, a particle of light bound all the way from a star into my eye. Pouring untroubled through all that emptiness. I felt something familiar, standing there, gazing upward. Some shiver of feeling passed through me, an echoing loneliness.

I asked the security woman to lead me back to the rooms then, and she did, and I lay in bed all night, staring upward in the dark.

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As it happened, those first examinations stretched into some months. I doubt any human body has ever been better mapped, unless it be one of the virgins of the *120 Days of Sodom*. The staff of the installation was not large but there must have been forty or fifty people on site. They were all bright, earnest people who dressed very badly, and after a time I came to the conclusion that they were engaged in the search for something almost out of habit, as if this project had been funded once, a long time ago, and continued because nobody had asked about it since. Most of the people here were doctors but I was never sure which of them were medical doctors, though I did soon enough recognize Dr. Stewart as

a neurosurgeon by his arrogance and haughty treatment of his peers.

There were certainly enough of them that their complete attention on my limited number of molecules soon proved irksome. I was scanned in a magnet and under radiation, by positron emission, by sound wave; I swallowed radioactive dyes and endured other kinds of contrast imaging studies, the whole panoply available right there in the complex. My image was reconstructed in three dimensions in the various computers in the various rooms and I would lie there, watching the iodine-stained image of my heart beating, the slight ischemic defect in one of the walls, present since I was a child, from a time when I nearly drowned and had to be revived by cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Even granted that some of the equipment appeared outdated, the array of toys these fellows had was impressive. The imaging studies proved only that my body had apparently taken on its normal human functioning once again, in spite of the fact that I had suffered a brain concussion and death and had been preserved by means of something called gamma serum, followed by refrigeration for nearly two years.

When I chafed at all this attention, however, I did note that my fate was superior to that of the nineteen corpses who had failed to resurrect, all of whom were undergoing the most extensive autopsies imaginable, under supervision of a team of pathologists led by Dr. Shiraz.

They were looking in the wrong place, and I already suspected the truth, but I had no reason to say so. I no longer felt present in a living world, I felt I had settled into something else. This proved more than an illusion. Nothing they did hurt me in the least, or caused me the slightest discomfort, not when they sampled liver or lung tissue, not when they cored my bone for marrow. I said nothing. If offered a painkiller I took it, but I felt nothing from it, except a temporary sense of concealment.

At night, in my small suite, I lay on the bed watching the shadowed ceiling. No longer sleeping, though I only revealed this to the doctors when they were performing their sleep studies. Had I always been an insomniac? No, I had never had any trouble of that kind. But my medical records, which they had apparently obtained, indicated that I had asked for sleeping pills on several occasions from my primary care doctor. Because I liked to take sleeping pills, I said. Very pleasant.

They gave me more sleeping pills. They gave me injections. They could knock me unconscious, they learned. But they could not put me to sleep.

This caused some consternation, particularly for the neurologist Dr. Shabahrahmi, who performed various scans of my brain, some lasting for hours, to determine exactly what type of brain-wave activity I had when unconscious. He found nothing determinate, except that I never slept.

I often rested, however, lying in the bed dressed as if I were sleeping, staring up at the darkness, at the ceiling, at whatever was there.

At the end of these first examinations, nothing had been determined that could differentiate me from my dissected fellow specimens, except that I had, for some reason, gotten up from bed when I was supposed to, and the others had not. The mystery had, in fact, deepened, since it was clear that, along with rising from the dead, I had undergone some kind of change. I had lost the need for sleep. But these learned people could not determine why.

I had lost other appetites, and these were duly noted and, in the secondary phase of their study of me, tests were performed on these missing appetites as well. I had asked that the dietitian no longer allow the old man to serve me any meat, and, after a while, I lost all appetite for cooked food. I ate fresh fruits and vegetables. The doctors tested me by feeding me meat, which I would promptly vomit up, and they would scurry to do tests on the vomit, to determine what type of stomach acid was present in it, and to look at my stomach, to see if they could learn why my stomach was suddenly rejecting this food. But

again, the tests showed no conclusive results, vomit that was like anybody's vomit, feces that was like anybody's feces, nothing to lead them anywhere, only the fact that I had changed in some way, for some reason that eluded them.

It was suggested that my change in eating habits might be the result of some psychological changes, and that these might require study, but there were no psychiatrists or psychologists on the staff of the project, and these branches of science were not held in high regard. Those ideas were never pursued.

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A week or so passed during which no tests were conducted and nearly all my time was my own. I remember speculating that perhaps they were abandoning this line of research and would set me free. Looking back on that now, it seems such an innocent thought, particularly for a man who had already died once and ought to know better. But a certain innocence still remained to me. I was aware that many discussions were going on around me during this quiet interlude, but I ignored them. With hours to myself, I sat for long intervals in the courtyard at night, staring up at the stars, watching them wheel slowly overhead. Gazing upward into the face of something cold and unknowable.

Dr. Lucas called me to her office at the end of the week, and the security guard, Taquanda, the same woman as on my first day, escorted me to her. They had kept up the practice of the continuous security escort and guard for my quarters though I had never shown the least inclination to escape, so I had gotten to know some of my guardians by name. Dr. Lucas beckoned me inside and closed the door. She always did her makeup very badly, sloppy lipstick and crooked mascara, and today was wearing something awful, a knit dress that clung to her lumpish body in all the wrong places; she seemed even more hideous than if she had been naked, so that the interview was conducted, on my part, in a state of horror, as though I were conversing with Grendel's mother. "Can you guess why I've called you here tonight?"

"I suppose I could try. You've been reassessing your results this past week and there's been a lot of disagreement as to what you ought to do next. But now you've come to some decision."

"Yes, we have." She patted her hair, drab, thin stuff, no shape. At that moment, I understood I would never be going home. Something about the indifference of her ugliness, none of the gentle peace of homeliness. "We'll be taking another line of research starting tomorrow."

I accepted the information without any show of interest, and she waited, and finally said, "You really aren't at all curious about what we're going to do, are you?"

"You're not going to let me go?"

"No, of course not."

I shrugged. "Then the answer is, no, I'm not curious as to what you're going to do."

She appeared startled by my statements and leaned back in her chair, tapping that crooked nose with a sharp fingertip. "We can't let you go, unfortunately, you're our only hope."

"To bring back more people like me. From the dead."

"Surely you understand the value of what we're doing."

I gave no sign that I understood anything at all, and finally, exasperated, she began to clean her eyeglasses with fierce little motions of her hands. "Well, I don't have anything more to say than that. We'll be trying another line of research starting tomorrow. I wish you the best of luck."

"You do?"

"Yes, of course I do." She spoke vehemently, as though I had challenged her humanity on some consequential ground.

"Well, then, I assume I'll need it," I said, and left her office and went back to my rooms.

I ate my dinner, an apple and two bananas, some orange slices, raw carrots, even a raw potato, which was good to keep and nibble. I have no idea which of the fruits or vegetables contained the preparation called Serum Omega, the composition of which no one ever discussed with me, since they were ashamed of its existence. I understood from the strange sensation, the tingling, in all my limbs, that perhaps the doctors were beginning their work earlier than announced. I who had not needed sleep in all these months felt a slow lethargy seep through me, my limbs heavy. What kind of poison kills the body but does not damage it? They came for me before I had completely lost consciousness, lost life, but by then I was paralyzed, and simply felt them stirring around me, dragging me onto a stretcher, wheeling me down the dull tiled corridor. The last thing I remember, in a room that seemed suddenly familiar, was a tingling at the base of my skull, where the little cap had waited, all this time, in case it should be needed again.

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This time I surfaced in a glare. A light hung just above me, a fierce, round light, and I could not see so much as feel, and the light was not so much a brightness as an insistent gaze transfixing me from a distance infinitely remote from me, out where existence is the only thing there is, out there so far away....

A dream? I never woke from it, I surfaced inside it, not as if I were waking but rather descending from a height. I became aware of where my body was and then I was inside it, but the distance seemed greater than before. I was aware of the room, the same clerestory windows, the square of sunlight traveling along the sheet that covered me. Not the same sheet, this one snow white. As before, still bodies lay in the beds on either side of me and along the opposite wall. The motionless sheets shone faintly white, and the sweet smell was almost more than I could bear. I quickly checked the bodies as before, and this time I found one of them breathing, not strong enough to pull the sheet down from her face, but breathing nevertheless, so I pulled it down, and, as I bent over, she looked at me with a complete coldness, utter contempt. She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

She continued to breathe for a while, long enough for the doctors to arrive. They were excited, of course, and rushed her off to revive her further, if they could, though by the time they wrestled her onto a stretcher her breathing was already slowing. She died, or faded, a few minutes later, just down the hall.

While they were studying her they left me alone, except to draw blood and samples of other tissue; her they dissected, sampling her in every way possible, with every type of biopsy pincer and core needle, till at the end of their studies her body was completely exploded into ten thousand pieces, all preserved in formaldehyde in offices up and down the corridors. I used to wonder what pieces of tissue floating in cloudy jars were her, in the later weeks, after they could derive no more pleasure in carving her up into even smaller slices, or mounting slices of her onto slides. Within weeks they returned their attention to me.

They studied me again, all the same tests, some even more invasive and uncomfortable than the first battery. At times they looked at me as if they wanted to cut me apart too, but they were afraid to do it. The cycle of tests went on and on, till again it stopped for a few days, and I waited.

One night in my room I felt the drowsiness run through all my limbs, unnatural to me by that point, since I had not slept in many months; so I knew I was to die again.

Same as before, a burning gaze above me, all I can remember of that time, or place, or whatever it might

be called, between my death and wakening again. I lay beneath a fierce eye examining me every moment, and I longed to be removed from its gaze, but I could only lie there while it watched me, ceaselessly...

I woke in the same room as before. For the third time I examined rows of bodies. This time no one had responded to any of the serums or gases, only me. The arrival of the doctors was delayed, as it had been each time, and only now did I become in the least curious that they should leave me alone for so long with these dead ones, this sweet smell in the air. From the expressions of Dr. Lucas and Dr. Potter it was clear they understood they had failed again, and now when they looked at me I could only wonder what lay in store.

For a few days I was left in peace. Then Dr. Lucas called me to her office, and I followed with the escort she had sent, into her sitting room with the old fashioned crank windows, partly rusted near the top. Like the office of some elementary school principal, the room was decorated with darkly stained wooden furniture, slatted blinds with frayed cords, pipes running ceiling to floor, a steam convector under the window. She was sitting in this office, dressed more tastefully this time, a dark, high-waisted dress that helped mask her lack of discernible shape, even a pair of what were called ear-bobs in my mother's day, white and round and big. A touch of lipstick. Feeling quite honored by the care with which she had done her toilet, I took my seat on the long, wide sofa. Straightening a place for myself in the twists of the chenille throw, I wondered in an offhand way whether I should be prepared to die tonight, and after a moment while she finished some notation or other in some computer file or other, I stated, "So I expect you are preparing another phase of tests."

She lifted a finger to signal that I should wait, tapped the keyboard intently for another few moments, closed the lid of the notebook, the whine of the drive dying away. "Please excuse me. Yes, we have been discussing our next phases." She sagged in the chair, clearly exhausted. "We're puzzled more and more by our repeated failures in the aftermath of our one complete success. You, I mean."

"How many more times do you think you can bring me back?"

She looked at me quite oddly, quite fixedly. "I really don't know."

"But you'll keep on till I fail, too."

Her jaw set itself into a strong line. "We'll keep on until we can understand what is happening in your body that isn't happening with the others. We'll keep on until we succeed."

I must have looked skeptical, for she continued. "We're close, and we know it. The discoveries we've already made are remarkable, really. Tricks even the Egyptians never learned about the preservation of tissue, even its healing after death, as in the case of your brain injury."

"The first time I died, you mean."

"Yes." She waited for a while, then asked, "You don't have anything to say?"

"A question, perhaps."

She leaned forward, as if this were some turning point in our relations. "Go ahead."

"How long was I dead? The first time, I mean. Before your treatment to preserve me."

"We had to give you the first infusion of hyperox before you were taken off life support."

"Before."

"Yes."

I smiled. "You must have a very efficient system for collecting subjects. To find the right kind of dead people, so quickly."

"We had a number of hospitals helping us with the initial part of the study, the part that related to the preservation of organs for re-use. The other portion of our research is confidential. For obvious reasons."

"So when I fell and hit my head, someone called your people as soon as I died. Or just before I died."

"Something like that." She seemed perplexed, then irritated. "Are you implying some sort of impropriety? We aren't killing anyone. We didn't steal your body out of a morgue. Your own next of kin gave us permission to use you in the research. I can show you all the paperwork if you like."

"That won't be necessary," I said. "How many more of me do you have? In the refrigerator, I mean. How long can you go on?"

She set her mouth in a line. "What we're doing here could be of benefit to billions of people."

"Of course it could." I sighed. "That's all. I only had those questions."

She thought about that for a moment. Relaxed, when my tone changed. "I suppose I had expected you to ask about your freedom."

I laughed, and turned away from her, and laughed again.

She gave me the most chilling look, and I wondered if they had already administered the killing specific, if she had brought me to the office to watch me die this time, to witness the exact moment of my passing.

"When I'm dead," I told her, "before you bring me out of it. There's someone watching me."

She moved her head just slightly. I believe she considered that I might have become unstable in some way, and so I stood and waited in the doorway for a moment.

"Who do you think it is?" she asked.

"I don't know. But it strikes me that maybe someone is there, sending me back to you, over and over again. Keeping me there for a while and then sending me back. Only me."

"Why?"

I shrugged.

But she had heard what I said, and judging by her expression, a vision of the place I was describing arose in her head at that moment, a place in which she was lying suspended in darkness from all sides, darkness and cool air, and above a light, a piercing eye gazing into the center of her. I believe she saw this as I had, hanging in that endless expanse, the feeling of a presence, the unbelievably fierce awareness. She had a look of awe, a whiteness to the eyes, a face of glass, and I said good night to her and she whispered goodnight to me as Taquanda took me back to my room.

One more time they killed me and I woke under the eye, with the wind of that place scouring through me and the searching of that eye above me, never blinking or moving. A voice in my head, not words, only the voice, notes like music, and then my body closed around me like wet clay and I was lying in the room, alone this time, no other corpses to keep me company. Though perhaps somewhere else, in some other room, two rows of beds, faces under white sheets, a sweet smell in the air. Perhaps the doctors

had decided to spare me their failures, at least.

The routine had become settled by now, and that first night when I was alive again, or what they called alive, I was allowed to be on my own while the doctors assessed whatever data they had collected during the resurrection. Since I had always been docile, even inert, the security people had become a bit lax, and the security person with me that night was one of those who had fallen under the influence of Farley the cook, who thought me some sort of monster. She hung back from me when I went for a walk and that provided the avenue of escape I needed. By then I knew the layout of the installation fully, and so I lured her into a part of the building that was sparsely inhabited and I strangled her there.

Curious, that I killed her. I had no plan to do anything of the kind, I meant only to immobilize her in some way, maybe knock her out, but instead I put my bare hands around her neck and squeezed with such force that she was quickly gone, despite some struggles to free herself. I let her drop to the floor and turned away. Let them revive her, I thought.

I escaped the place through the kitchen, where Farley was puttering, whistling something rather tuneless, "Waltzing Matilda," I think; and for a moment I wanted to kill him, too, but I decided it was better to let him go on humming, so that when the doctors learned of my escape he could swear that he had been in the kitchen the whole time, getting their dinner ready, and he hadn't seen me. I slid through the pantry, out the delivery door, and headed into the woods at the edge of the parking lot.

The rest is tedious. I stole a car, I stole some money. I crossed the border into the United States on foot and stole another car and more money. I avoided any more killing though the thought often occurred to me on my journey. I have driven the long way here. Though I am certain there are people trying to find me, people who already know where I've come. So I need to get on a ship going south, to where the sun beats down more strongly from the center of the sky.

* * * *

When his story began I found it fantastic, but troublesome, and as he continued with it, I myself became quite uncomfortable in the noisy bar. So we interrupted the story to walk to my apartment in the Pontalba Building, and he finished the telling of it in my parlor, with the casement windows open and the breezes stirring from the front gallery. He sat there with his white hands in his lap. I knew he expected some response, but I had nothing to offer, the story itself was so astounding.

"You can't really believe me, of course," he said, after a moment, "but that doesn't matter, as long as you help me."

"Of course I'll help you," I said, "first thing in the morning. We have a ship leaving for Caracas, and I'll get you on that."

He seemed very moved by this, settled back into his comfortable chair. I thought he might fall asleep but remembered his story and watched, and he never more than blinked his eyes.

I led him back to my room, helped him to undress, lay him on the bed, undressed myself and laid down beside him. I watched him all night, his good body, his firm jaw, his face that I had remembered from so long ago. We simply lay there, side by side, and I knew I would remember that night, maybe wish we had made love to one another, wish I had tested whether there was any warmth in him at all. To be able to say later that I had made love to a dead man, or a ghost. He never closed his eyes that I saw, though I drifted off myself, in the wee hours. When I woke the next morning he was lying exactly in the same position, gazing upward at the ceiling, high and shadowed, a place into which only he could see.

The captain of the *Sylvia Moon* did not much like my insistence in the morning when I called him, but he finally saw the wisdom of acceding to my wishes when he remembered who I was, or, rather, who my

family was. My friend Roger Dennis set sail immediately for the northern coast of South America.

I had no more idea then than I do now of what to make of his story. Some people did come looking for him and landed eventually at the office of my family's shipping concern; they were persistent and remained in New Orleans for some days, but they were not able to penetrate through all the veils of the company to me, and therefore I can only speculate as to who they were. But I made certain they learned nothing of the *Sylvia Moon* or its passenger.

My caution was unnecessary, however. Roger Dennis never landed at any port. The ship's captain later told me, with some fear for his future, I expect, that as the ship was crossing the Caribbean, Roger leapt overboard one noon and drowned. His body was not recovered. The crew gave him a burial service at sea, my captain said, and since I alone knew who he was, could I please notify his family? I promised I would take whatever steps were necessary, and I did make a trip to Ontario, though naturally I saw nothing at all of his family. I checked the records of the hospital at which Roger told me he had died, and after various referrals was able to confirm his original death. Roger Dennis had perished of head trauma after a fall nearly five years before. As if the paper assurance were not enough, I made a trip to a cemetery near Montreal, where my uncertainty finally increased to the point that I could credit him what he had claimed. I can believe his story was true, so far as he himself knew the truth, now that I have seen his grave.

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