

# THE CUTTING ROOM

By Shane Jiraiya Cummings

*Hic locus est ubi mors gaudet succurrere vitae.*

The plaque gleamed, caught on the cusp of shadows and fluorescent light. Burnished copper letters. Stark Roman font.

“This is the place where death delights to help the living.” Parrish’s recital of the phrase was now ritual, as he donned the second pair of latex gloves. They snapped into place, leaving a satisfying echo that hung in the air. Smells of rubber and disinfectants clung to the place, thinly masking the stench of decay.

The plaque had been there for as long as he could remember, even before the tenure of crazy old Doc Kaufmann, who once famously ate a cadaver’s eyeball, and perversely, taught him everything he knew about forensic pathology.

“Doctor Parrish?” The *diener* said, throwing his concentration into turmoil.

“What is it, err... Greg, wasn’t it?”

“Gary. The body’s been prepped.”

“I can see that.” He spared a glance while adjusting his gloves.

A young woman lay naked upon the slab. Her breasts were thrust out, courtesy of the body block jammed between her shoulder blades. The lines of her ribs, the hollow of her chest, lay exposed under the intensity of the low-slung bar lamp.

He stopped fiddling with his gloves as he stood mesmerised, tracing the waves of her raven hair as they ate the light and shimmered with the glut. His eyes returned to the curve of her breasts, coquettishly angled in death. Noting the fullness of her nipples—hard, dark lumps contrasting to her pallid skin—he silently thanked the powers-that-be for his good fortune. An attractive woman, even a dead one, was better than the grisly parade that usually passed

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through his life, and his morgue.

"The bread knife's not here," Gary said. "Do you want me to go get one?"

"That won't be necessary." His gaze swept the room a final time before settling on the leather case placed by the door. *His* leather case.

Gary was all rangy limbs and awkward angles as he hovered by the corpse. The low bar lamp brought his apron and the folds of his scrub suit into sharp focus, obscuring his face in the feathery darkness beyond. He looked more like a butcher's clumsy apprentice than a morgue diener.

Doctor Parrish shook his head as he took possession of the case. "Greg, shouldn't you be doing something?"

"Umm... oh, right. And it's Gary, sir." He paused a moment longer before shuffling off to fetch the tape recorder.

As he laid the case upon the aluminium trolley next to the corpse, Parrish heard the assistant mutter something from the far corner of the room. It was a smallish room, lined with metal—amplifying every sound.

Brushing aside his irritation, he withdrew his personal serrated bread knife—a surgical version of the household knife, ideal for slicing organs—and placed it on the trolley next to the electric Stryker saw and the scissor-like enterotome. After storing his leather case at the foot of the trolley, he surveyed his tools, waiting for the assistant to return.

He picked up the scalpel, checking to see if it was fitted with a number 22 blade. The mavericks in Emergency sometimes raided the morgue supplies for their own ends, especially the larger sized scalpel blades. Satisfied, he replaced it, and moved to caress the Hagedorn needle when the diener returned with the recorder.

"Put it down." Parrish noted the diener's awkwardness.

Gary flinched, placing the recorder on the scales which dangled above the end of the autopsy table. The scales bobbed up and down, the needle settling to 272 grams.

"Not there." Parrish sighed from behind his surgical mask.

Snatching the tape recorder up with child-like indignity, Gary then leaned across the exposed corpse and dropped it onto the trolley with a clatter. He couldn't resist stealing a glance at the breasts as he pulled back and straightened.

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“Idiot,” Parrish muttered, more concerned by the tape recorder dropping onto his knife than the lecherous behaviour of his assistant.

“Tell me, diener—it was Greg wasn’t it—do you know what we do now?”

“Gary, doctor.”

“Well?”

“We... umm... make the first incision?”

“No, diener, we don’t.”

Gary flushed. His hovering hands, drawn up like effeminate claws, spoke volumes of his inexperience.

“We confirm the identity,” Parrish said after the silence wasn’t filled. “Get the paperwork while I inspect the tag.”

He watched the diener shuffle off to the filing cabinet before moving to the woman’s feet. He prided himself on efficiency and precise movements, as he navigated around the table without raising a sound. He stooped by the corpse’s big toe and read the name on the tag quietly to himself.

“What was the subject’s name?”

Gary was startled at the sudden question, almost dropping the clipboard. “Umm... Natasha.”

“Umm Natasha who, diener?” Parrish was tired of having his time wasted by this fool.

“Natasha Kohl, Doctor. From out of town. Lived in London, England.”

“What were you doing here, all that way from home?” Parrish asked of the corpse. “Now, diener, we’ve established this is the correct body. How do we proceed?”

“The first incision?”

“No...”

Again, the diener paused awkwardly beside the autopsy table, clutching the clipboard across his chest like a shield.

“Try, the external examination,” Parrish instructed.

Gary nodded.

“I take it you’ve not performed many autopsies before, then, diener?” Parrish emphasised the assistant’s title. “Stop cradling that clipboard, get over here, and activate the tape recorder.”

Gary scurried to comply, uncertain of where to offload the clipboard.

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“Wait,” said Parrish. “On second thought, read me the cause of death.”

Gary froze mid-step, then returned to studying the file.

“Umm... says *Cause of death: Unknown.*”

“What? Incompetent fools. Any injuries listed?”

“Nope.”

“Are there any notes then?” Parrish waved his hand for emphasis.

“Says *Rigor has not set in at time of admission.*”

“When was that? This morning?”

“Umm... hang on.” Gary scanned the file with darting eyes.

“Out of the way, fool!” Parrish nudged the assistant away and commandeered the clipboard. Gary half retreated, half stumbled against the wall.

Propping his lanky frame on the handle of a body storage vault, he shot the doctor a glare laced with indignation and shock. Parrish was too absorbed in the file to take notice.

“This is ridiculous,” Parrish fumed. “Not a skerrick of information to be found. I’m operating blind.”

He tossed the clipboard at the open filing cabinet. It smacked off the side of the cabinet and clattered to the ground as Parrish circled around the body and resumed his position next to his tools.

Gary scampered over to retrieve the fallen clipboard while Parrish commenced the external examination.

“Do you know what diener means, Greg?” Parrish’s gaze never left the corpse.

“Gary,” said the diener, shaking his head as he shunted the cabinet door closed. The metallic echo reverberated through the room.

“It’s German,” Parrish dropped back into measured tones. “Those Germans are an industrious people. A good sense of order. They were the first to perform autopsies, you know.” He bent low, hovering his face bare inches above the woman’s chest. “Diener means *servant*, Greg. Do you like the sound of that?” His eyes sparkled as he looked up from his inspection and met the diener’s sullen glare.

Parrish flicked on the tape recorder as he drew himself to full height. “Stratton Memorial Hospital, autopsy in morgue examination room two,” he said. “Subject’s name is Natasha Kohl. Female Caucasian. Approximately thirty years of age. Cause of death: un-

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known. Doctor Hamilton Parrish MD is prosector.” He paused, glancing at Gary again. “What’s your surname?”

“Timms.”

“And the diener.” Parrish spat the word at Gary. “Is Greg Timms.”

“Gary.” The assistant muttered.

“Time is 2:39 p.m. and I have commenced the external examination.”

Parrish moved around to her feet once more. He placed his hands on the aluminium slab either side of her legs and began his task. His gaze soon drifted upward, taking in her calves and thighs.

He swivelled first to the left, then to the right, following the table’s moulded blood groove up the expanse of her legs. With her torso pushed out by the body block and the table angled downward to facilitate blood flow, he had a prime view of her curves and the sparse hair of her pubic region. He savoured the sight, knowing tomorrow would bring a decomposing drunk or a messy railway suicide.

“Subject appears to bear no obvious signs of trauma,” he spoke into the recorder. “Her pallor is unusual. The skin is very white. Strange... no obvious signs of livor mortis.”

Gary had crept closer, floating behind Doctor Parrish.

“I’m examining her legs for injuries or puncture wounds.” Parrish started at the toes, wedging them apart while holding the foot closer to the light. It was true. No rigor mortis. Her limbs were still supple, even after lying in the morgue for hours. Her state prevented a guess as to the time of death. The case grew more intriguing by the moment.

He worked his way upward, inspecting knees and thighs for signs of the unusual. He paused at her crotch, sifting through her pubic hair. He eased her legs apart and spread her vaginal lips wide. He found traces of her natural lubricant.

“Unusual,” he said into the air, keeping a calm voice despite an accelerating heart rate. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say her body is exhibiting signs atypical of a corpse. As if she only died this very moment. There is...” He coughed, cleared his throat. “A surprising amount of vaginal fluid.”

Parrish shifted position, allowing the legs to droop and splay even further apart. Standing by the woman’s torso, he checked for a pulse.

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Nothing.

“Diener,” he said. “Fetch a thermometer. I’ll need you to take a measurement.”

Gary sauntered off to do as bidden.

“Quickly!” Parrish called after him.

Gary returned a moment later with the thermometer in hand. He wavered as he stared at the body, his indecision clear.

“In the rectum, man!” said Parrish, leaning across her face to feel for breath.

Gary eased the glass device into the orifice. Expectancy was clear on his face. Even Parrish looked down with anticipation. Heartbeats later, Gary removed the thermometer and arranged the woman’s legs in a more modest pose.

“What’s the reading?”

“Umm... a few degrees above room temperature.” Gary cocked his head. “Isn’t that what you expected?”

Parrish didn’t answer. Instead, he was fixated on something near her breast. “Get me a magnifying glass.”

Gary dutifully complied. Within moments, the magnifying glass was in the doctor’s hand.

“Come here—” the doctor motioned “—what do you see?”

Gary leaned forward, awkward in proximity to Parrish, and stared through the magnifying glass.

“Well?”

Gary pulled his gaze from the glass and focussed instead on the woman’s chest and abdomen.

Doctor Parrish traced a line with his finger from underneath her breast down to below her abdomen. “There! It looks like a scar. A faint one. But definitely a scar.” He began to trace the line back toward her other breast but pulled back, whirling to face Gary.

“Tell me about the initial incision,” Parrish demanded.

Gary stepped back, flinching from the doctor’s fervour. “Umm... it’s a deep cut, down to the bone. It’s a ‘Y’ shape, starting from the front of the shoulders and goes down to the...”

“Go on.”

Gary stared harder at the corpse, at the near-invisible scar. The line Parrish had just traced. “Down to the abdomen.”

“Someone’s been at her before me.”

Gary nodded but shrank back. Confusion was rife in his eyes.

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“I don’t like this one bit. We have to cut her open.” Parrish moved with purpose, repositioning himself next to the trolley. “Normally the diener makes the first incision, but I think I’ll spare you that honour today.”

Gary stood in the shadows.

The woman’s chest lay exposed, propped up, and at the mercy of Parrish’s scalpel.

“I am commencing the initial incision,” Parrish declared to the recorder.

He stabbed the scalpel into the right shoulder, furtively at first, but was soon slicing along the scar in a barely controlled rush. Parrish used hungry sawing cuts to part skin and flesh. Trickle of blood and other fluids seeped from the monstrous incision, spilling down the woman’s torso and onto the table.

A tiny moan escaped into the room, almost unheard, as the scalpel sliced through the woman’s stomach tissue.

Parrish’s response was sluggish as he shook himself from the task. “What was that?”

“What?”

Parrish gaped at the corpse. “Did you hear a noise? Like a sigh?”

The woman’s face was locked in a death mask as before. Her closed eyes were lost to the world, her mouth open in the tiniest of pouts. All identical to when Parrish had first entered the room.

“I’m continuing the incision,” he said to the recorder, as he plunged the scalpel deep into her stomach, picking up the weeping thread of the cut. He was approaching the lowest end of the incision but proceeded with caution, having lost his earlier vigour.

*Gary.* A voice called to the diener. A feminine voice. Foreign. *Stop him! He’s not doing it right.*

Gary looked about the room in alarm but saw nothing—no one other than the doctor and the corpse. Parrish’s tentative incision was nearing the abdomen and the pubic area.

*Diener!* Doctor Parrish looked up from his bloody handiwork to stare Gary in the eye. He lowered his mask, exposing a demented grin. His voice the screech of a harpy. *Punch me in the face!*

Gary shook his head, timidly at first, but more fervently as the doctor’s grin darkened to a snarl. He tried to back away but his limbs tingled with energy and a sudden urge to violence.

*Punch me, knock me out! Or you’re fired!* The doctor’s voice was out

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of sync, built of raw menace. *You incompetent fuck!\_Diener! If you don't punch me in the face right now, I'm gonna gut you next.*

The threat cut to Gary's core, spurring him into action. The tingling in his limbs hit critical mass.

Gary lunged, grabbed Parrish by the wrist, and wrenched at the scalpel. It was freed from the woman's abdomen with a slick sound.

"What are you..." Parrish stammered. All trace of the harpy's voice was gone. The doctor appeared dazed in the heartbeat before Gary's fist slammed into his face.

The bloodied scalpel clattered to the floor as Parrish crumpled. The crunch of bone and cartilage ghosted the room before fading away.

"Gary."

Confused, he looked down at the woman. Blood spilled from the incomplete 'Y' incision spanning her torso. Her breasts were still propped up and within reach, their bareness enticing. He wanted to move but her eyes – her open, lightning-streaked eyes – held him in thrall. His thoughts were trapped in the blue-white zigzags. The tingle surged through his extremities; his skin itched and burned.

"Pick up the scalpel," she commanded. The lilt of her voice was intoxicating. Compelling.

He picked up the scalpel.

"Finish the incision." The woman's eyes swirled with electric fire as she raised her head to study him.

Gary hesitated.

The corpse gripped the edges of the table and pulled her legs up, spreading them suggestively.

"Finish the cut, Gary," she commanded. Her voice was insistent, echoing through his mind a fraction of a second after it reached his ears. "But do it slower, deeper. With care."

Wavering, Gary fought the suggestion and the incessant energy under his skin.

The woman writhed on the autopsy table, arching her head back, breasts and hips forward, in an entrancing rhythm. More blood, crimson shading to black, spilled from her wound and was smeared across the slab by her gyrating buttocks.

Gary struggled against the betrayal of his groin. Sweat banded across his forehead and along his back. His skin crackled with latent energy; his scrub suit was saturated—damp plastic chafing his skin.

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*Finish the incision, diener!* She screamed without opening her mouth. The words lingered in his mind. Nausea churned his gut.

The moment he stepped forward, scalpel raised, the nausea and heat diminished. Everywhere except his throbbing crotch.

He wiped his brow, and blinked the excess sweat out of his eye. He'd already positioned the scalpel over the woman's stomach.

The woman stilled. They both watched the blade slide into her abdomen. The upward thrust of the scalpel forced out a breathless gasp.

With a mix of delicacy and clumsiness, he started the upward cut toward her left breast. He pressed his groin into the side of the table; the cool metal a mixed blessing. Static electricity discharged up the front of his scrubs.

The woman renewed her gyrating, soon filling the examination room with moans of pained delight. Gibberish punctured her moans: a chant that was both familiar and foreign.

The scalpel blade was greedy despite his awkward hand. Urged on by the corpse's desire, it sliced through her flesh and soft organs. Blood and intestinal fluids spilled from the incision as he arced up the side of her abdomen and further. The smell was fetid yet tinged with saccharine sweetness, as though he were dissecting a mouldy gingerbread woman.

He scraped across her ribs. Every scoring of bone wrenched stuttering whimpers from her. Gary lifted her breast with his free hand and tentatively ran the blade beneath its mass—generating whimpers, followed by a shuddering moan as the scalpel circled her breast and finished at her shoulder. White skin disappeared beneath her fluids as the incision wept.

Gary pulled away. His erection diminished as the press of cool metal took effect and the electricity abated. The clamminess remained, along with an intense headache pounding at the base of his skull.

The lightning-eyed woman continued to writhe, exulting in the expanding pool of blood. The table was awash with it; gravity and motion eased it down the blood grooves. Burgundy thinning to silver.

After long moments of revelling in the pain and the blood, she petered off. She then fixed Gary with a predatory smile, running her fingers along the incision. In their wake, the cut healed over, leaving only a bloody smudge.

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“Diener,” she purred, sliding from the slab and stepping over the fallen form of Doctor Parrish. “You have executed your task well.”

She paused to examine the surgical tools, testing the weight of each item. She seemed especially fond of Parrish’s knife, fingering it with the appreciation of a true fetishist. Blood coursed down her legs, pooling at her feet. She abandoned the tools and crossed the room for the door, spattering a bloody trail across the floor.

Two snowy figures with matching pairs of zigzag eyes hovered outside the door, pressing their faces against the tiny inset window. The woman paused, turning from her kind to fix Gary with one last stare.

“We may meet again, diener.” She smoothed a palm over her hip; her gaze lingering on the bloodied scalpel.

Gary shuddered, dropping the surgical blade. Unsure what to do, what to touch, he held his hands up, palms open, like a pre-op surgeon. His heart and skull thumped in unison.

“Remember, diener.” The woman pointed to the plaque above the door. She uttered the phrase in imitation of Doctor Parrish, perverting it. She paused to blow him a kiss before slipping through the door. Joining her companions in the corridor, she disappeared from view, leaving a bloody smear on the door handle, and her translated words lingering on Gary’s conscience.

“This is the place where the living help to delight death.”

