

The Coroner's Office

By Nina Willis

In the high school where I went, they offered a nursing class for juniors and seniors. It provided a quicker, more direct path to getting a nursing degree and served as a nursing assistant training course, with the students able to take the official state test and get their licenses as CNA's and move on to actual nursing if they so chose. Personally, I had no interest in nursing but they offered me the opportunity to follow a veterinarian around in place of field training so I took the class. I was one of the seniors in the class and preparing for graduation and attending a college with a strong veterinary program. On the second to last day, just before the final, we took a trip to the coroner's office for some sort of presentation.

I had no idea what was going to be covered or if they would even show us an autopsy being conducted. The instructors didn't give away much, and I wasn't even sure if I should be wearing street clothes or my official classroom scrubs. They gave us a map on a bright, neon pink half sheet of paper a few days before class. It was crudely drawn in marker, with nearby landmarks written to indicate the location. When I finally arrived, it was this run-down white sided building, no more than 900 sq. ft. big, deeply set into the street block with a long driveway, and hidden behind two equally run-down houses with only a small blue-and-white sign pointing out the coroner's office from the street. The coroner promptly greeted my class and I as we arrived and gave us a quick tour. There was a larger refrigerator that spanned the length of the whole building and currently shelved to hold ten bodies (He did comment that he could fit up to twenty-five if he stacked them right.) An examination room specifically for conducting autopsies, was next to the massive refrigerator, and kept heavily air conditioned to preserve the bodies and filter out the pathogens. The blue glow coming from the vent was a UV light that killed off anything contagious before it was cycled back into the atmosphere. There was his chief assistant's office, with the usual office setting, a desk,

shelves with books and paperwork, and other uninteresting things which I don't feel is necessary to go into detail about.

After the tour, we gathered about the coroner's desk as he lectured us on the importance of his work despite the lack advertising for this particular career field. In my opinion, it's probably because cutting open sometimes heavily decomposed bodies is hard to appeal to the general public save for the most morbid and twisted individuals. Speaking of the morbid and twisted, the coroner did share with us the possibly most disgusting story ever occurring in the history of mankind, or at least during his time as a coroner. I will try to recount the story verbatim, but my memory may alter the wording slightly. However, it will in no way alter the way in which the story should impact you. I should also note, if you are in any way squeamish, I suggest you stop reading now to save your lunch.

"There was this married couple; an older couple and they had been married so long they were sick of each other. One day the wife finally snapped and attempted to kill her husband, I mean chasing him down the street with a shotgun and they had her arrested and sent to a western medical facility; as in located somewhere on the west coast. Some time later the husband had died of a heart attack. He was in his home, a very nice place, but they also had several heaters-you know those kind that sort of emit a red glow and radiate heat? Well, that was the kind and there were four of them and the deceased husband had collapsed in between them. Sort of cooked him. Heat and decomposition do not mix. Cold and decomposition is manageable, but man, when it's hot it isn't pretty. Excuse me if I'm being racially insensitive but I can honestly say in all my sixteen years of working as a coroner that's the first and only black guy I've seen turn that shade of green. It was about a week before we found him-He had a dog and perishables too and we normally don't do this but we cleaned out the fridges, threw out all the perishables, and gave the dog to a neighbor. It was a

nice house, and we didn't want to see it ruined from all the rotting food. Procedure says we contact next of kin of course, and the neighbors couldn't identify any other relatives besides the wife. So we had to search through medical records and that took some time as we contacted one medical facility and no, she wasn't there or she had been transferred or whatnot. Finally, we got a hold of her location and the social worker who was handling her case sat her down and informed her of her husband's passing. She refused to believe it. To her, he wasn't dead because she hadn't killed him yet. Insisted on seeing the body. Now at this point the body had been decomposing for four weeks.

We asked the social worker 'Well, can we just leave out the hand for her to see.'

No, she needed to see him totally to accept his death. So we made an exception to our no-viewing policy and had her come in. I know you guys are young so probably not, but have any of you seen the little old lady from the Wendy's commercial, the one who asks "Where's the beef?" She looked sort of like that. She was tiny. When she was viewing his remains I was at the head of the body, my assistant was at his feet, the wife was at the side and the social worker behind her. She was stroking his forehead and it made us a bit nervous because before she came in, we had accidentally bumped the nose as we were transferring and it fell off. So we put it back into place and smoothed it out as best we could before she saw the body. We were afraid she would accidentally peel back the skin or something and that wasn't good. I should also mention, the body was so decomposed fluids were coming out of his mouth as well. And it wasn't clear fluids either. It had sort of pooled in his mouth at this point.

Before we could react she dived down, and kissed him. Now we aren't talking a little peck, it was full on French kissing. We were right there and we could see the tongue action going on. It was impossible to predict that was going to happen because it wasn't a slow kiss either. It was like a panther pouncing on a gazelle sort of frenching. Then she came up, and we all stood there

completely shocked. For whatever reason, she proceeded to dive down again for seconds. You could see the fluids out of the corners of the husband's mouth seeping out from all the kissing. We were all sick. I don't know if she ever got sick from that but when she came up again I offered her a breath mint. There was nothing else I could do. She was in that mental hospital for reason though. So there you can see an extreme case of why we typically don't allow viewings for family members. It's easier to just take a picture and have the family identify it that way. Of course, there are exceptions such as that kid serving in Iraq coming home to view his father, but typically we let families work with funeral homes to have proper funeral viewings and such."

There's a reason I chose veterinary medicine over any sort of work with people.