

Stiff

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On a meadowy slope somewhere in the Midwest, cadavers at different stages of decomposition are laid out. The whole is part of a program to document the stages of putrefaction of corpses in nature in order to give valuable help to forensic research. The reader is treated in graphic detail to the various stages of decay which is inevitable once the immunesystem of the living entity is turned off. Things liquify, gases build up, cadavers take on monstrous proportions, as they become bloated. They are turned into unwitting hosts to insects and larvae, and eventually they seep out into the ground. The smell of death is prevalent, it is not easily rubbed off. You are being forcibly brought to be aware of the ephemerality of your bodily existence. I read this excerpt, and a similar one, in the Guardian while in a Bed and Breakfast in Glasgow, more than a year ago. I got intrigued. Unfortunately what comes out gripping as newspaper text, does not always sustain through a book.

Once you are dead you do not care what is done to you. The contemplation of which may not appeal to you while alive, but once dead you have no longer any say in matters. People have for a long time donated their bodies to medical research. And in recent decades also specific organs to be carried on beyond your expire. As to the former, few are aware of the kind of indignities will be perpetrated on your remains. Most are actually used simply for teaching purposes in medical schools, subjected to the legendary cynical attitude of staff, supposedly protective. But there are other uses, like dummies in collision tests, where one is interested in not only what kind of forces and their strengths but what they actually do to the body. Or for bullet practice. Why do people collapse immediately when shot, as the time for the blood loss to effect the brain maybe up to fifteen seconds? The author believes it is psychological. Once you are hit you believe that you are done for.¹ If you do not know, like a deer, you will run on to the end, even if hit in the heart. The upshot is that next to actual experimentation on live people, nothing beats cadavers to the study of impact on the human anatomy.

The author, a woman in her early forties. A curious and above all determined busy-body she does not shy away from anything, making a special point of her lack of squeamishness. She goes on to a wild goose-chase to Hanai to investigate a press-rumour of a couple of Chinese guys who chipped off buttocks on bodies bound for the morgue to be used in dumplings. (The Chinese funeral directors are not amused and deny all connections with the story, which might after all be nothing but yet another urban myth.) No lead too unsubstantial not to warrant a pursuit. Consequently the book is stuffed with all kinds of

¹ Actually the pain of a shot depends on where you are hit. A shot in the abdomen is excruciatingly painful, while one in the liver is not. Footage from the riots at the EU meeting in Gothenburg 2001 shows a young man being shot. Instead of collapsing he keeps on running. As a matter of fact he will survive, due to the vitality of his young age and the unrelenting efforts of his father, a surgeon, involving some hundred odd pints of blood transfusions to stem the haemorrhage

matters relating to cadavers. How to get hold of them? The status of death itself (no, there is no sharp limit) and organ transplants, with a special digression on decapitation (does a guillotined head preserve consciousness at least for a few moments after the trauma?) and head-transplants (such things have been done). As well as cannibalism and body disposal. The effect is something of an over-kill. Death is made to look more and more absurd, and hence less and less likely to affect you personally. To this contributes the breezy style, the cheap pun, the facetious side-remark. Thus instead of becoming a serious contemplation of the inevitable end, it becomes a kind of tickling horror-story to be savoured in the light prose of an inconsequential magazine article. Still somethings can always be picked up.

The cruelty and the muddling of medical research (especially the botched up research of previous centuries) has been well documented, but the book gives you a reminder. It also indicates, like all good investigative journalism, how much is actually kept secret from people in general, not so much by conspiracy but by the pure inertia of information flow. Everyone who has ever flown must have thought of crashes and what actually goes on. One would believe that an airplane crash is literally as mysterious and unknowledgable as death, as no one (except in some exceptional circumstances) survives to tell the tale². But the cadavers survive, and experts called in to the scenes, can learn a lot from the injuries sustained. There are two kind of crashes. The one we actually fear most, is the free fall from a great height, when the fuselage quickly disintegrates in midair, spilling its human cargo. A body that hits water from such a height, could as well hit concrete. The ribcages collapse, and the lungs concomitantly; and the aortas rupture from the hearts. Being ejected in mid-air must be a terrifying experince, but maybe there is simply such an overload of things going on, that the mind is numbed, feeling that it is not really part of it. But the most common one takes place while taking off or landing, when velocities are not that great. Typically what happens is that the passenger breakes his legs when slamming into the chair in front of him and is unable to crawl to the emergency exhibit. Unlike what the instructions you are served on flight safety will actually make you believe (no one intimates that the emergency evacuation is expected to take place after a crash), reality is a much messier affair with panic and confusion and stampedes. Burned bodies by the emergency exits are what meets the eye of the investigators afterwards. In fact measures could be taken to significantly reduce the casualties figures from air-linecrashes. Shoulder belts, inflateable cushions (i.e. air-bags), nitrogen infusions to stifle fires. But it all adds weights and costs and at the present pricetag of 2.7 million dollars of a human life, it simply does not make economical sense.

Finally how to depose of a body? No matter how you do it, it will be an ugly business. Out of sight, out of mind, has been the traditional strategy. Burial being the prime example. The coffin is lowerd six feet under and left to slowly decompose and being eaten by worms. Pretty soon nothing but the skeleton will remain, we are now talking about a year or so. Burial at sea is another option for those that know of no other. The body is obviously not allowed to rest in peace but ravaged by predators, just like the typical body of a dead animal left to its own resources in nature. Cremation became more common about a hundred years ago. Rather than the decaying body with its inevitable

² Actually a friend of mine once suggested, somewhat tastelessly, that in addition to the usual black-box they should have one videofilming the passengers

putrification there is nothing but ashes. Those two constitute the standard routines, and they are prefigured (at least in some Western cultures) by the morticians embalming the remains in order to present a proper corpse for the bereaved to contemplate. Embalming is never for ever, even when intended for burial, but a temporary interlude. Liquid is pumped into the system, often making the dead appear more youthful and vigorous than in actual age. Wrinkles disappear, colors return, and the male can flaunt a far more well-endowed organ than ever in life. But even cremation has its hazards. It is expensive, according to the author, it typically involves a hundred dollars worth of natural gas: and there has also been concern about its environmental hazards, especially the vaporization of mercury fillings³ New methods like disintegration in lyme, reducing water and eventually disposing into the sewage system as harmless waste, are being proposed, as well as the possibility of being turned into compost, successfully promoted by a Swedish young woman⁴, prompting the author to a lengthy and chatty digression on the funeral home situation in Sweden. What nicer prospect than being the source of new life, say as a tree, after your death? The closest we can hope for as to reincarnation.

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³ Actually the usual burning of trash, which far outweighs that of the body itself during a full lifetime of consuming, is not surprisingly a far more serious contributor.

⁴ The peculiar form of her quoted surname makes you suspect the author of garbling things up more than usual