

nothing number, and there they are, filming it and implying that the segment represents *you*.

I prayed for something to happen. Air raid—sneak Commie attack—us a typical American family caught in the onrush of great events. Or a burglar breaks in, only he's not just a burglar, he's something else, and a whole fascinating sequence begins. Or a beautiful woman knocks at the door, claiming that only I can help her. Hell, I would have settled for a phone call.

But nothing happened. I actually started to get interested in that movie on TV, and I put down my magazine and actually watched it. I thought they might be interested in that.

The next day my wife and I waited hopefully, even though we knew we had bombed out. Still, you can never tell. Sometimes the public wants to see more of a person's life. Sometimes a face strikes their fancy and you get signed for a series. I didn't really expect that anyone would want to see a series about my wife and me, but you can never tell. Stranger things have happened.

Nowadays my wife and I spend our evenings in very interesting ways. Our sexual escapades are the talk of the neighborhood, my crazy cousin Zoe has come to stay with us, and regularly an undead thing crawls upstairs from the cellar.

Practically speaking, you never get another chance. But you can never tell. If they do decide to do a follow-up segment, we're ready.

(1984)

MOLLY GLOSS

INTERLOCKING PIECES

For Teo, there was never a question of abandoning the effort. After the last refusal—the East European Minister of Health sent her his personal explanation and regrets—it became a matter of patience and readiness and rather careful timing.

A uniformed policeman had been posted beside her door for reasons, apparently, of protocol. At eight-thirty, when he went down the corridor to the public lavatory, Teo was dressed and waiting, and she walked out past the nurses' station. It stood empty. The robo-nurse was still making the eight-o'clock rounds of the wing's seventy or eighty rooms. The organic nurse, just come on duty, was leaning over the vid displays in the alcove behind the station, familiarizing herself with the day's new admissions.

Because it was the nearest point of escape, Teo used the staircase. But the complex skill of descending stairs had lately deserted her, so she stepped down like a child, one leg at a time, grimly clutching the metal bannister with both hands. After a couple of floors she went in again to find a public data terminal in a ward that was too busy to notice her.

They had not told her even the donor's name, and a straightforward computer request met a built-in resistance: DATA RESTRICTED ***KEY IN PHYSICIAN IDENT CODE. So she asked the machine for the names of organ donors on contract with the regional Ministry of Health, then a list of the hospital's terminal patients, the causes and projected times of their deaths, and the postmortem neurosurgeries scheduled for the next morning. And, finally, the names of patients about whom information was media-restricted. Teo's own name appeared on the last list. She should have been ready for that but found she was not, and she sat staring until the letters grew unfamiliar, assumed strange juxtapositions, became detached and meaningless—the name of a stranger.

The computer scanned and compared the lists for her, extrapolated from the known data, and delivered only one name. She did not ask for hard copy. She looked at the vid display a moment, maybe longer than a

moment, and then punched it off and sat staring at the blank screen.

Perhaps not consciously, she had expected a woman. The name, a man's name, threw her off balance a little. She would have liked a little time to get used to the sound of it, the sound it made in her head and on her lips. She would have liked to know the name before she knew the man. But he would be dead in the morning. So she spoke it once, only once. Out loud. With exactness and with care. "Dhavar Stahl," she said. And then went to a pneumo-tube and rode up.

In the tube there were at first several others, finally only one. Not European, perhaps North African, a man with eyebrows in a thick straight line across a beetled brow. He watched her sidelong—clearly recognized her—and he wore a physician's ID badge. In a workplace as large as this one the rumor apparatus would be well established. He would know of her admission, maybe even the surgery that had been scheduled. Would, at the very least, see the incongruity of a VIP patient, street-dressed and unaccompanied, riding up in the public pneumo-tube. So Teo stood imperiously beside him with hands cupped together behind her back and eyes focused on the smooth center seam of the door while she waited for him to speak, or not. When the tube opened at the seventy-eighth floor he started out, then half turned toward her, made a stiff little bow, and said, "Good health, Madame Minister," and finally exited. If he reported straightaway to security, she might have five minutes, or ten, before they reasoned out where she had gone. And standing alone now in the pneumo-tube, she began to feel the first sour leaking of despair—what could be said, learned, shared in that little time?

There was a vid map beside the portal on the ninety-first floor. She searched it until she found the room and the straightest route, then went deliberately down the endless corridors, past the little tableaux of sickness framed where a door here or there stood open, and finally to Stahl's door, closed, where there was no special feel of death, only the numbered code posted alongside the name to denote a life that was ending.

She would have waited. She wanted to wait, to gather up a few dangling threads, reweave a place or two that had lately worn through. But the physician in the pneumo-tube had stolen that possibility. So she took in a thin new breath and touched one thumb to the admit disk. The door hushed aside, waited for her, closed behind her. She stood just inside, stood very straight, with her hands open beside her thighs.

The man whose name was Dhavar Stahl was fitting together the pieces of a masters-level holoplex, sitting cross-legged, bare-kneed, on his bed, with the scaffolding of the puzzle in front of him on the bed table and its thousands of tiny elements jumbled around him on the sheets. He looked at Teo from under the ledge of his eyebrows while he worked. He

had that vaguely anxious quality all East Europeans seem to carry about their eyes. But his mouth was good, a wide mouth with creases lapping around its corners, showing the places where his smile would fit. And he worked silently, patiently.

"I . . . would speak with you," Teo said.

He was tolerant, even faintly apologetic. "Did you look at the file, or just the door code? I've already turned down offers from a priest and a psychiatrist and, this morning, from somebody in narcotics. I just don't seem to need any deathbed comforting."

"I am Teo."

"What is that? One of the research divisions?"

"My name."

His mouth moved, a near smile, perhaps embarrassment.

"They hadn't told you my name, then."

And finally he took it in. His face seemed to tighten, all of it pulling back toward his scalp as the skin shrinks from the skull of a corpse, so that his mouth was too wide and there was no space for smiling. Or too much.

"They . . . seem to have a good many arbitrary rules," Teo said. "They refused me this meeting, your name even. And you mine, it appears. I could not—I had a need to know."

She waited raggedly through a very long silence. Her palms were faintly damp, but she continued to hold them open beside her legs. Finally Dhavar Stahl moved, straightened a little, perhaps took a breath. But his eyes stayed with Teo.

"You look healthy," he said. It seemed a question.

She made a slight gesture with one shoulder, a sort of shrugging off. "I have . . . lost a couple of motor skills." And in a moment, because he continued to wait, she added, "The cerebellum is evidently quite diseased. They first told me I would die. Then they said no, maybe not, and they sent me here. 'The state of the art,' or something to that effect."

He had not moved his eyes from her. One of his hands lightly touched the framework of the puzzle as a blind man would touch a new face, but he never took his eyes from Teo. Finally she could not bear that, and her own eyes skipped out to the window and the dark sheets of rain flapping beneath the overcast.

"You are . . . not what I expected," he said. When her eyes came round to him again, he made that near smile and forced air from his mouth—not a laugh, a hard sound of bleak amusement. "Don't ask! God, I don't know what I expected." He let go the puzzle and looked away finally, looked down at his hands, then out to the blank vid screen on the wall, the aseptic toilet in the corner. When he lifted his face to

her again, his eyes were very dark, very bright. She thought he might weep, or that she would. But he said only, "You are Asian." He was not quite asking it.

"Yes."

"Pakistani?"

"Nepalese."

He nodded without surprise or interest. "Do you climb?"

She lifted her shoulders again, shrugging. "We are not all Sherpa bearers," she said with a prickly edge of impatience. There was no change at his mouth, but he fell silent and looked away from her. Belatedly she felt she might have shown more tolerance. Her head began to ache a little from a point at the base of the skull. She would have liked to knead the muscles along her shoulders. But she waited, standing erect and stiff and dismal, with her hands hanging, while the time they had went away quickly and ill used.

Finally Dhavir Stahl raised his arms, made a loose, meaningless gesture in the air, then combed back his hair with the fingers of both hands. His hair and his hands seemed very fine. "Why did you come?" he said, and his eyelashes drew closed, shielding him as he spoke.

There were answers that would have hurt him again. She sorted through for one that would not. "To befriend you," she said, and saw his eyes open slowly. In a moment he sighed. It was a small sound, dry and sliding, the sound a bare foot makes in sand. He looked at the puzzle, touched an element lying loose on the bed, turned it round with a fingertip. And round.

Without looking toward her, he said, "Their computer has me dead at four-oh-seven-fourteen. They've told you that, I guess. There's a two percent chance of miscalculation. Two or three, I forget. So anyway, by four-thirty—" His mouth was drawn out thin.

"They would have given you another artificial heart."

He lifted his face, nearly smiled again. "They told you that? Yes. Another one. I wore out my own and one of theirs." He did not explain or justify. He simply raised his shoulders, perhaps shrugging, and said, "That's enough." He was looking toward her, but his eyes saw only inward. She waited for him. Finally he stirred, turned his hands palms up, studied them.

"Did they—I wasn't expecting a woman. Men and women move differently. I didn't think they'd give a man's cerebellum to a woman." He glanced at Teo, at her body. "And you're small. I'm, what, twenty kilos heavier, half a meter taller? I'd think you'd have some trouble getting used to . . . the way I move. Or anyway the way my brain tells my body to move." He was already looking at his hands again, rubbing them against one another with a slight papery sound.

"They told me I would adapt to it," Teo said. "Or the . . . new cerebellum could be retaught."

His eyes skipped up to her as if she had startled or frightened him. His mouth moved too, sliding out wide to show the sharp edge of his teeth. "They didn't tell me that," he said from a rigid grin.

It was a moment before she was able to find a reason for his agitation. "It won't—They said it wouldn't . . . reduce the donor's . . . sense of self."

After a while, after quite a while, he said, "What word did they use? They wouldn't have said 'reduce.' Maybe 'correct' or 'edit out.'" His eyes slid sideways, away from her, then back again. His mouth was still tight, grimacing, shaping a smile that wasn't there. "They were at least frank about it. They said the cerebellum only runs the automatic motor functions, the skilled body movements. They said they would have expected—no, they said they would have liked—a transplanted cerebellum to be mechanical. A part, like a lung or a kidney. The 'mind' ought to be all in the forebrain. They told me there wouldn't be any donor consciousness, none at all, if they could figure out how to stop it."

In the silence after, as if speaking had dressed the wound, his mouth began to heal. In a moment he was able to drop his eyes from Teo. He sat with his long, narrow hands cupped on his knees and stared at the scaffolding of his puzzle. She could hear his breath sliding in and out, a contained and careful sound. Finally he selected an element from among the thousands around him on the bed, turned it solemnly in his hands, turned it again, then reached to fit it into the puzzle, deftly finding a place for it among the multitude of interlocking pieces. He did not look at Teo. But in a moment he said, "You don't look scared. I'd be scared if they were putting bits of somebody else inside my head." He slurred the words a little at the end and jumped his eyes white-edged to Teo.

She made a motion to open her hands, to shrug, but then, irresistibly, turned her palms in, chafed them harshly against her pants legs. She chose a word from among several possible. "Yes," she said. And felt it was she who now wore the armored faceplate with its stiff and fearful grin.

Dhavir's eyes came up to her again with something like surprise, and certainly with tenderness. And then Teo felt the door behind her, its cushioned quiet sliding sideways, and there were three security people there, diminishing the size of the room with their small crowd, their turbulence. The first one extended her hand but did not quite touch Teo's arm. "Minister Teo," she said. Formal. Irritated.

Dhavir seemed not to register the address. Maybe he would remember it later, maybe not, and Teo thought probably it wouldn't matter. They watched each other silently, Teo standing carefully erect with her

hands, the hands that no longer brushed teeth nor wrote cursive script, the hands she had learned to distrust, hanging open beside her thighs, and Dhavir sitting crosslegged amid his puzzle, with his forearms resting across those frail, naked knees. Teo waited. The security person touched her elbow, drew her firmly toward the door, and then finally Dhavir spoke her name. "Teo," he said. And she pulled her arm free, turned to stand on the door threshold, facing him.

"I run lopsided," he said, as if he apologized for more than that. "I throw my heels out or something." There were creases beside his mouth and his eyes, but he did not smile.

In a moment, with infinite, excruciating care, Teo opened her hands palms outward, lifted them in a gesture of dismissal. "I believe I can live with that," she said.

(1984)

LEWIS SHINER

THE WAR AT HOME

Ten of us in the back of a Huey, assholes clenched like fists, C-rations turned to sno-cones in our bellies. Tracers float up at us, swollen, sizzling with orange light, like one dud firecracker after another. Ahead of us the gunships pound Landing Zone Dog with everything they have, flex guns, rockets, and 50-calibers, while the artillery screams overhead and the Air Force A1-Es strafe the clearing into kindling.

We hover over the LZ in the sudden phosphorus dawn of a flare, screaming, "Land, you fucker, land!" while the tracers close in, the shell of the copter ticking like a clock as the thumb-sized rounds go through her, ripping the steel like paper, spattering somebody's brains across the aft bulkhead.

Then falling into the knee-high grass, the air humming with bullets and stinking of swamp ooze and gasoline and human shit and blood. Spinning wildly, my finger jamming down the trigger of the M-16, not caring anymore where the bullets go.

And waking up in my own bed, Clare beside me, shaking me, hissing, "Wake up, wake up for Christ's sake."

I sat up, the taste of it still in my lungs, hands twitching with berserker frenzy. "'M okay," I mumbled. "Nightmare. I was back in Nam."

"What?"

"Flashback," I said. "The war."

"What are you talking about? You weren't in the war."

I looked at my hands and remembered. It was true. I'd never even been in the Army, never set foot in Vietnam.

Three months earlier we'd been shooting an Eyewitness News series on Vietnamese refugees. His name was Nguyen Ky Duk, former ARVN colonel, now a fry cook at Jack in the Box. "You killed my country," he said. "All of you. Americans, French, Japanese. Like you would kill a dog because you thought it might have, you know, rabies. Just kill it and throw it in a ditch. It was a living thing, and now it is dead."

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