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Getting Comfortable With Death

Death is ranked as the second greatest fear among American citizens, and yet they are utterly fascinated by any form of media that depicts it. Case in point, James Patterson’s *Lifeguard*, a nail-biting story involving murder and theft, currently stands atop of the New York Times Best Sellers list. As far as movies are concerned, *Friday the 13th*, a film that idolized the grotesque actions of a sadistic slaughterer, gained a large enough fan base to spawn ten sequels. Finally, *CSI Las Vegas*, which portrays the everyday life of crime scene investigators, has been America’s most popular TV show for five years in a row. Due to this fictitious exposure, however, there exist too many people with severe misconceptions about death and about those whose business is death. They often believe that investigators are absolute geniuses with flashy sports cars, that every killer is a serial killer, and that coroners (as well as funeral directors) love death. Thankfully, life awarded me the opportunity to break away from such thinking. After completing an internship at the Allegheny County Coroner’s Office, I can personally attest to the falsehood of these stereotypes. By physically playing a part in the process that is criminal investigation, I gained a more complete understanding of many things. Not only do I better understand the requirements of investigation, but I also came to understand life as a whole. In the two examples that follow, I will reveal the knowledge that I gained about forensic investigation and the value of human life.
June 7th of 2005 was no normal summer day. Rather than sunbathing along the side of
my thirty foot diameter pool, I was sitting in a stuffy cubby hole, which the deputies of the
Allegheny County Corner’s Office (ACCO) call their home away from home. Unimpeded, my
mind wondered about aimlessly. This irresponsible daydreaming was the predictable product of
two weeks without a single interesting occurrence. In fact, refilling the office staplers and
sharpening dull pencils began to excite me more than fifty cent wing night at Quaker Steak. As I
prepared myself for a long day of waiting, however, the phones began to ring out in one accord.
Before my arms could unfold, a Coroner’s Deputy answered the call. On the other end was a
representative of the local police, who reported the discovery of a decomposed body.
Apparently, the family of the deceased had failed to contact him for approximately one week.
When they decided to check his apartment, the deceased was found dead and decaying. In every
case involving decomposition, the ACCO must retrieve the remains for identification purposes.
This case was no exception. The Coroner’s Deputy hung up the phone, fixed his eyes upon me,
and calmly muttered, “You ready Cunzolo?” After gathering forms that logged the decedent’s
personal information and belongings, we whirled through the streets of Pittsburgh with our red
lights gleaming.

As we approached the scene, I became increasingly concerned about working under such
foul conditions. All I could do was pray that my stomach remained calm. When we saw the fire
department in front of the apartment building, however, anxiety struck me like a cast iron skillet
to the head. The firemen were requested for ventilation purposes. Completely clad in firemen
attire, they only entered the building to open windows and hook-up oversized fans. Otherwise,
they would not go into the building, and they took every opportunity to roast us about the smell.
Before we crossed the threshold of the steamy building, a police officer asked us if we needed
any masks. At that point, the Deputy smiled and confidently remarked, “It’s okay, we’re from the Coroner’s office.” With this statement, my goose bumps receded back into my skin as pride began to seep out.

Having my chin held high, I easily inhaled the stench of the decomposing flesh that awaited me on the third floor. Once again, anxiety began to grip the handle of its skillet, but the expertise of the Deputy consoled my gurgling stomach acid. I made sure to follow his every command. When I entered the residence, I immediately made visual contact with the decedent. He was lying on the floor of his bedroom, which was to my left. The Deputy instructed me to secure a few snapshots of the body with our digital camera. Officially on my own at this point, I proceeded into the bedroom.

Three things were definite: he was dead, he was rotting, and he was quite stinky. Standing in the doorframe, I took an overhead shot of the deceased, who was lying face down on the floor. If anyone with general knowledge about decomposition snuck a peek at my photos, then they would easily identify its signs. Due to the fact that the decedent only wore only a t-shirt and underwear, lividity was visually identifiable. That is to say that the decedent’s blood gathered at the southern most portions of his body. Once the heart stops forcibly pumping blood throughout the body, gravity takes over and blood acts like any other substance. After proceeding to take a couple more shots from different angles, I felt that this man expired four to ten days prior to our arrival (this was based on my newly acquired knowledge of decay). This stage of decay is known as putrefaction and precedes initial decay (0-3 days), which involves the release of intestinal bacteria and digestive fluids into the body. I felt that he was in putrefaction because his body no longer appeared or smelled fresh. Instead, his body was severely bloated due to the anaerobic respiration of bacteria. This respiration created gases like hydrogen sulfide,
which led to both the bloating and the foul odor. I also ruled out the black putrefaction stage (10-20 days) because no part of his body was black in appearance. With my photos secured, I returned confidently to the Deputy, who then instructed me to log and bag all of the decedent’s prescription medicines. We then moved into the bedroom again in order to remove the remains. This was the moment of truth. I knew that when the body moved, its fluids would be released. Sadly, fluid equals putrid stench. Turning it inside out, we placed a blue body bag next to the body. Effortlessly, we rolled the decedent onto his back and right on top of the bag. His bloated face only further confirmed my theory about the stage of decay. It resembled a ballpark frank after being plumped in the microwave for two minutes. Thankfully, once the bag was closed, I no longer had to expose my eyes to such a sight. Together, the Deputy and I carried the body down three flights of stairs, laid it upon the stretcher, and loaded it into the van. After finishing up some paper work with the police, we shook the hands of everyone involved and received much praise for our toughness. I felt as if I were part of some crime fighting family (it was great)! Jumping into the van, I thought we were finished. Little did I know, my fifteen minutes of fame lay only fifteen minutes away.

Enroute to the ACCO, the coroner van’s cell phone began to jingle. Without hesitation, the Deputy answered. At the end of the line was another Deputy back at the office, who informed us of a body found in the Larimer section of Pittsburgh. This was no natural no-jurisdiction death however. It was not even a suicide or a drug overdose. Surprisingly, this case involved homicide (the inexcusable killing of a human being by another human being). Immediately, with the smell of death still resting in our nostrils and its source in the back of the van, we departed on yet another removal.
The Deputy knew the area, but he was unsure where the exact location of the scene was. He instructed me to start peering down the various streets and alleyways that passed my window, in the hope that we could spot a police cruiser. All attempts to spot such a vehicle failed, but I did manage to find something even better. After looking over what seemed like the same road twenty or thirty times, I spotted one absolutely smothered in news vans. Like a scene from the *Dukes of Hazard*, the Deputy quickly swung the van through the turn and onto the congested street. As soon as we came into sight, every last news camera became fixated upon the van. Some of them were less than a foot from my face! As reliable as Arnold Schwarzenegger and his one liners, the Deputy chimed in with yet another pride provoking statement. With a hint of happiness he said to me, “I hope you have cable because you’re going to be on every news channel in the Burgh!”

Leaving the news cameras behind us, we carefully approached the scene and the yellow caution tape that guarded it. Like VIPs at an exclusive Las Vegas club, the sight of our white van was ID enough to enter the highly quarantined crime scene. After parking the van, I opened my door and instantly noticed all the cameras pointing my way. Composing myself, I retrieved my protective gloves and our on-the-scene investigation kit, which carried items like evidence bags. I then strolled towards the body, attempting to look just as professional as Dr. Cyril Wecht himself. What sat before me was a grey colored Honda Accord, which had ricocheted off a telephone pole. The front end was smashed in, the windows were busted, and the dead body of a young man stretched from the driver seat to the passenger seat. I motioned for a nearby police officer to come near me. He told me that originally the deceased was riding in the car with his cousin, when they were approached by two men in the alley way. The deceased stopped the car and rolled down his driver-side window to talk. When he did this, one of the actors put a gun to
his head and demanded money. Feeling that his reflexes were faster than a speeding bullet, the deceased decided to hit the gas. Sadly, the gunman managed to unload one or two rounds, hitting the driver in the head and causing him to crash his vehicle. At this point the two actors fled the scene, leaving the driver’s cousin alive and able to alert the authorities.

It was the expertise of these authorities that I valued the most in this case. Before me was the opportunity to watch a real crime scene get processed! I remember every single detail. Initial photos were taken of the undisturbed scene. Investigators then began to scan the area for any debris or other evidence relating to the incidence. They found various pieces belonging to the car, debris from inside the car, and a single bullet casing about forty or fifty feet from the car’s resting place. Each piece was logged by placing a yellow plastic card next to it, each having a different number. The pieces were then described, photographed, and their distances measured in relation to the car. I noted how thoroughly each piece of evidence was probed by the investigators. To them, every object was like a puzzle piece that would congeal into one clear and larger picture. With every last piece logged, they eventually moved inside the car. Taking additional photos and performing initial observations on the car, the investigators proceeded with even more care. At this point, the Deputy gave me the green light to start snapping off some photos for the ACCO. Believe me, those were the most cautious steps I ever took! I knew that if I made one false move, then the whole investigation could be ruined.

With only one foot of separation between the body and myself, I was finally within the scene, experiencing a taste of my bright future. I took forensic photos, made observations, mingled with professional investigators, and felt as if I was one as well. This was the highlight of my summer. When the authorities felt comfortable, they allowed us to remove the body (even though no one is allowed to make physical contact with it until the Coroner does). A couple of
pieces of evidence were removed to make room for our equipment. With the driver side door ajar, we placed our stretcher just outside with a body bag on top. The Deputy positioned the body for the easiest removal possible and gave me the honors of handling the head end (the heavy end). My only concern was all of the blood on the victim’s head. I did not want it to touch my bare skin. However, no sooner had I secured my arms underneath the decedent’s armpits, when his limp and massively bloodied cranium sloshed onto my stomach. In the second that followed, I watched almost in slow motion as it then relocated to the bare skin of my forearm. While waiting for the Deputy to secure the feet, the victim’s head began rub up and down my arm, painting a picture of pure red. After a minute of this, we had his body on the bag but the blood on my arm was too dry to wipe off. I was stained. Still, I knew my duties were not complete. Together once more, the Deputy and I searched the body, logged the important information, bagged his personal effects, and took a liver temperature. With all this completed, we loaded the body into the van and headed off to the ACCO for the final time.

Though the rear of our van held the remains of two dead bodies, my attention was completely focused upon the warm-blooded and living pedestrians we passed by. I found myself studying their facial expressions, mannerisms, and style of dress. I had done this plenty of times but something felt different. For the first time in my life, I began to view people as more than mere creatures struggling to survive. I began to see them as souls with a wide array of feelings that are easily broken. I observed the longing that each held for acceptance, and I cringed when they sacrificed who they truly were just to obtain it. Most of all, I despised the ignorance of those who thought of themselves as higher than another. It was easy for me to think this way because I faced death personally. I knew that someday each and every last person would be in the same basket: dead and soon forgotten. This was the lesson that I valued the most throughout
the entire internship. No longer would I take my life for granted or ignorantly wish my days away.

Whether it is planned or accidental, all human life is highly valuable. Sadly, it is also very fragile. My internship at the Allegheny County Corner’s Office opened my eyes to these two priceless lessons. It also reinforced my desire to pursue a long-lasting career in forensic science. I want to bring to justice any and all offenders who destroy what I value so greatly. Of course I will also take pride in being honored in the eyes of the public. Though their perception of me will be completely wrong, I will let them think that I am rich and an absolute genius. Still, I will not hesitate to correct their obsession with death. Though my business will involve death, my priority will be saving lives. After experiencing the team-work that forensic investigation requires, I know that everyone else on the job will feel the same way.