

## **Pillow Talk**

*by Hedley Dandridge*

Closer, those bars look closer together tonight. It must be my eyesight going. Like the head in the joke, “Sorry, bad news: all your teeth have to go.” Just a head, that’s all that’s left of me. They connected me up in some way after the accident in the workshop. I’m a visitor attraction now, like the elephant man. Come see the freak—he’ ain’t got no body.

They're worrying now in case I live forever. The only thing that could finish me off would be a combined power failure and generator breakdown. Otherwise as long as they keep changing the sparkplugs on this machine, nothing can go wrong—touch wood.

I can't move anything other than my eyelids, so I'm writing this by blinking morse code into a special camera. The arteries in my neck are plumbed into a gizmo pumping "I can't believe it's not blood" around my bonce.

Although I can't talk, my hearing and eyesight are fine, and the camera sensor can translate my rapid blinking

morse into voice a bit like Stephen Hawking's. (Hawking, that's another thing I don't have to worry about.)

I've a feeling that the way this technology is going, all life will end like this, or rather be endless in this way. With economies of scale it would be practical and efficient to keep everyone in beds like this. The attention needed is minimal and we could manage the machines ourselves.

No, what am I saying—that's far too unambitious. If I weren't a lifer in a prison hospital, there's no reason why I should be stuck indoors, or why other heads should stay bedridden. We could have motorised carts, very small and

eco-friendly of course, and be out and about. See, we're much better off without the bodies. It's the body that kills you. That's what did for old Christopher Reeve.

I suppose you might be thinking, "What's he got to live for?"

By the way, I never said I was a he, and there's no easy way to tell now without counting chromosomes (and I don't know if you know but that never was an infallible guide either). No stubble or anything because, that's created by hormones that come from somewhere where I only have phantom aches now.

But even worse are phantom itches; not only are they in non-existent places, but I wouldn't even have anything to scratch them with. That's a killer when you have no limbs: an itch on your head. It's not like I can even roll myself on the pillow either. They have me in this sort of gyroscope affair, where they turn me from time to time as if they were roasting me on a spit. (Spit: that's another thing I'll never do again.)

Although I don't eat, in order to keep me from going insane (worse than the teeth-pulling joke—"Sorry, you've lost your mind") they bring me juicy food every day and

squeeze it on my tongue. It's bliss for a while, but it doesn't really help. I feel hungry all the time—that's the worst part of this whole disaster. Hormones again, you see, lack of the satiating ones. If I wasn't only about nine pounds, I'd probably be fifty stone, again.

The temptation here is to watch telly all day, but I like to spend the day working and messaging on the internet. I'm a freelance technical writer, specializing in accessibility issues. I'm not a wealthy man, but I do nicely enough out of it. I'm saving up for a holiday that I dream about. I can never take it unless I get parole (which I

probably never will), and I can't use the money for anything until then because of the prison regulations.

I know the first thing I'll do when I get out, and I'm being honest here (I have really nothing to lose, have I?): I'm going to order up one of those visiting call girls. I hope she looks like the adverts. I really hope she looks like that one, I know the one I mean, my dream girl. Oh god, I hope she does. I want the kind that enjoys the work, you know? They do exist, believe me, they do. I will make her the happiest little hooker in town. I'll send her wild, all flowing

over me, trying to suffocate me, I'll get right in there, nose first, man.

But back to “What have I got to live for?” One word: Art. You wouldn't believe me, you probably think Art is all very well as long as you have your muckier animal pleasures first to really blow your libido. But as for me, it's no use watching porn. I mean I can't jack off a phantom boner with phantom hands. Art is all I have.

So I go into ecstasies over paintings and music but as for films, they only increase my frustration. I'd rather gaze

at an abstract painting than a Modigliani nude, for the same reason.

Come to think of it, I'm completely nude myself all the time and not the slightest bit embarrassed, though if I were a Jew, I'd have to wear a hat sometimes, which I think might create a somewhat comical effect. What are the rules about circumcision if you lose your todger? I suppose you'd have a certificate, a circumtificate, that when it was extant it was crew-necked not polo. Mine was nine and a half, the full Rabbi Burns, ladies (measured from the coccyx of course). (That's another thing I'll never bruise.)

I never thought when I was telling that old shaggy dog story about the two drinking friends, one of whom like me was just a head and no more, that I would end up playing the title role. (His friend rushes to the door of the bar and throws the head as far as he can out into the street. “I told you not to serve them anymore. When they drink too much they always start to argue, and your man ends up throwing the head.”)

Enough about me. Let’s talk about Dr De’Ath (an unfortunate name for a nice, inoffensive man.) He’s the one who looks after me. I’m his great achievement. (Yes, just

like the elephant man story—so sue me.) It's in his interest to keep me alive for as long as possible because he's famous on my account. I hope he outlives me. I wouldn't trust anyone else. They'd have an interest in making Dr De'Ath seem not quite so great after all, just like their mediocre selves.

It's not like you think with doctors, you know, they're not all Dr Finlays, Kildares, Watsons. There's a sprinkling of Shipmen among them. They get it into their heads (no pun intended) that they have your life's roadmap to complete for you. They have a service plan for your engine

but also a planned obsolescence date, the time when they will decide not to bother changing your “I can’t believe it’s not blood”. Oh the power they wield—it drives them crazy, like prime ministers. They start to think they are gods.

“Good morning, Dr De’ Ath.”

Sorry, I just used my speech synthesizer then. Dr De’ Ath is here to see me.

“Good morning, Mr Dandridge, and how are we today?”

I know it's hard to believe, but he really does say that every day. He must have missed that first morning in medical school, when they told them not to say that.

“I don't know about you, Dr De'Ath, but as for *me*: top hole!”

I could have chosen a more felicitous phrase, I know. I don't like to sound supercilious.