

## Second Act

### First Place Award for Best Short Story of 1990

Jason Lester Atkins

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The following review was written by the Judges of the 1990 Annual Writer's Conference: "This is a superb story that exhibits prosaic deftness, skill and courageous narrative innovations. The opening page is flawless and the characterization, choice of character names and subtle nuances are extraordinary. ... Bravo! This is a prize winning story."

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### Second Act

The smell of embalming fluid and stale cigarette smoke was heavy in the air of the Work Room. No one else could stay for long in this room, but Gaines Twicegood was happy working here. That is, he was as happy as Gaines could be. At times, he regretted joining his brother Dewey, as partner and licensed embalmer at Twicegoods Inc. Dewey talked him into attending mortician's school in 1964. For the last twenty years, this Work Room had become, more and more, his only reason to leave his small apartment. He was good at his job, perhaps, one of the best in the business. He took pleasure in his work. Gaines' other pleasure was Vodka! A pint would start the day. His long, thin fingers would begin to work, moving first with the scalpel, then the pumps. Each educated digit moved with precision, from the scalpel to the plugs, to the pumps, a continued flowing motion over to the ash tray and the burning cigarette. The combination of formaldehyde, smoke, and Vodka has created a chemical combination that turned Gaines tick hair a yellowish gray, matching his skin and eyes.



The other employees didn't like to be in the same room with Gaines. Especially was this true for Bob Doss. Bob was pick up and delivery man. Tonight he has delivered a new client at 8:30 P.M. It was late and Gaines had begun to relax early, with his evening Vodka. This pick up was an intrusion into his mood. He didn't want to have to become professional this late at night. Recently, the company had purchased a new "State of the Art" body pick-up bag. General Electric had designed it with an electric body warmer and moisturizer. The salesman had guaranteed it to prevent the on-set of Rigor Mortis up to thirty hours. This was only the second customer using the bag, so Gaines had his doubts. The shape of the bag indicated the corpse was in a sitting position. Gaines hadn't looked inside because he didn't want to disturb the disposable liner. He knew it would take extra work and skills to straighten the body. Irritated he pushed Bob's call bell.

"Come over here, boy," Gaines said, "I want to know something. Who is this? What's the name? Where did you pick up the body?"

Bob saw the bag had not been opened and replied. "Hell, Gaines, I don't know who the guy was! A young guy, only had his pants on! He was bent like that and his neck was pulled and red, when we put him in the bag."

"Where did you get him?" Gaines asked in a curious tone.

"At the City Jail," Bob said. "He was on the floor of the Isolation Cell. The officers hadn't moved him." In the same breath without stopping, Bob asked, "What you think happened to a young guy like that, to bend him so stiff?"

"I don't know," Gaines said. "Better go find Dewey and send him in here. Tell him, 'I ain't doing nothing tonight, if I don't have to?'"

Gaines looked at the formaldehyde cooler. It was cold. He didn't want to force himself to work that night. This was especially true if there wasn't going to be an early viewing of the deceased. Dewey should know. He would wait on Dewey. The burning butt of the last cigarette furnished a new light to another unfiltered Chesterfield, while he waited. The house phone rang. It was Dewey.

"What you want?" Dewey asked.

"This new pick up tonight, what about him?" Gaines asked.

Dewey responded, "What you mean? What about him?"

Gaines said, "I mean, Dammit, who is he? What happened? Bob said he picked him up at the Jail. He's stuck sitting down in the body bag. Does he have to be ready in the morning? Looks like I will have to use the straightening vise. That takes extra time? What's the story? Was he a cripple?"

"I don't know, Grimes," Dewey said. "His brother, Joe Fletcher, called me about 5 this afternoon. I know him from Rotary. There is some mix-up with the law and the funeral won't be for a few days. Wait till in the morning to work on him, uh-um after I talked to his brother," Dewey continued. "I remember something about this Allen Fletcher. Killed his wife about four months ago! It was in all the papers. They were a young couple. Can't remember a reason. Seems she was completely naked when he came home unexpected? She was supposed to have been at the College office. I'll find out more when I see Joe tomorrow. See you in the morning." Without waiting for an answer, Dewey hung up.

Gaines had all he needed to know, for now. He sighed, reached for the one half gallon jug of Vodka, and poured himself a reward of three good fingers in a tall glass. He walked over to the lead sink and turned the water on. In one big gulp he killed the Vodka and filled the glass again with water for a chaser. Now, Gaines was happy, as happy as Gaines could be, for tonight. He glanced at the bent figure outlined in the new Electric bag, continued looking around at the all blue ceiling and walls, then clicked the lamp off. Leaving, he thought, "Thank God for new technology and General Electric."

The Work Room was dark and quiet now. The only occupant was what remained of Allen Fletcher. Allen was dreaming again. It was the same old dream, that had haunted him since a small boy. He was able to fly, no one else knew. Just to raise his arms like the wings of a bird and he could soar over trees and houses. It was a joy, as a child, to raise his arms and rise above his playmates or family. There was power in the act, especially since he was shorter than most of the other kids. The dream continued into

adulthood, always with new versions of this ability to fly. During the dream he was always half conscious, knowing that it was only the same old dream. He would wake up! He always did, whenever he willed it!

Tonight, the dream was a little different. He would float out and up into a bright golden light. The light was warm and beaoning. It swirled around him, coating his flying body with golden mist. This mist moved in a pulling, magnetic motion, yet, there was no breeze or draught. He could reverse flight downward to an area dominated by curling, soft blue haze. It was the blue periods that produced his nightmares. There was no joy in being able to look down and seeing his own bent body on the Jail Floor. He thought, this is like a stage play and I am an actor. It was so real he



could hear and understand the voices of the other characters in the melodrama. They were talking about him, just as if he wasn't there. The golden light held and drew him closer and closer. He could see them put his own body into a cloth bag. The riding motion to another location was felt. Blue mist became much stronger now! It was just at his feet before. Now it was around him completely, the same as blue fog. Looking down, he could see himself in the same bag completely wrapped in blue. He was on a table, a long table covered with tile. This was not the same as his other dreams! He would wake up now. It wasn't a joy to fly anymore. The books had taught him to believe he could and he would do what he tried. Now, he was really giving it his best try. Still he could not wake himself. The golden mist, with the strong center light, became brighter. Its pull became more powerful. Again, he began to float and fly upward. Panic and terror began to dominate his thoughts! Even in dreams, he had been able to control his thoughts in the past. "So what's wrong with me," he anguished? "Why, why am I losing my mind. Am I crazy?" No, he thought to himself! He would control this somehow! Hadn't he studied most of the control your own mind, self help, books. This positive attitude approach had helped him rise from the very wrong side of the tracks, in "Skaggs Hollow," to a respected citizen and business leader. Use it now, he thought! Use this positive mental attitude! He would break this nightmare with the power of his own mind and will! The blue phase returned slowly. He could see the room plainly now. It was his body. It had to be real! Each instrument on the white cart next to his table was plainly visible. There was also some long device lying next to him. More like a steel pole, with cloth straps along the side. A small turnbuckle was located by each strap. At this moment, he knew, he was in a mortuary. In the way the mind has of knowing, he accepted it was not a dream. He was dead! No, no, it can't be so! It couldn't be! Yet, still his mind just knew, his body was dead. Using every power of concentration of will, not a muscle would move! His confused, scrambled brain became quiet, panic left slowly. Acceptance began to creep into his soul. Slowly, too, the last traces of the bright golden light drifted out of his mind's eye. Now only the soft blue remained. The same voices he had been conscious of earlier began to speak near him. A door opened and he was aware of footsteps close by.

Gaines walked over to the work table with the drain troughs on each side. This morning, the bent figure in the bag was waiting his skills. He pushed the electric button under the formaldehyde heater and then started to fill a small percolator from the sink tap. Coffee was stuffed tight into the top container and the pot was plugged in next to the embalming fluid heater. Gaines emptied the stale butts from the two large glass ashtrays. Now, he had room to fill them again, this new morning. His wake-up tonic of one half orange juice and one half Vodka he had taken before leaving his apartment was beginning to clear his head. He checked the wheeled, white enameled table close by. Laid out in rows were his trade tools, two sharp scalpels, one long steel tong and then added six orifice plugs of specially treated, hard cotton. Other

than two curved surgical needles with pink silk thread, he was ready for work. The coffee aroma began to compete for the air in the room, with the cigarette smoke. This was Gaines' ready-to-go signal. He slid the body bag and its occupant over on the drain table. The zipper opened easily - along with the small zip on the inner lining. It was the first time he had seen the body. It looked good, still soft and workable! Now, it was coffee time before the rubber gloves were pushed on.

The cup he used was a big one. Almost took the whole pot of coffee to fill it. Gaines always drank it black. The big cup handle would allow him to stop work and sip, even with the gloves on. Once a big slurp of coffee was down his throat, he began to work the outside bag off the body. It was difficult since the unnatural bend made it hard to slip off. Next, the disposable inner liner was slit with the scalpel, and off it came. Gaines thought to himself, "This is a nice looking young man." He remembered part of what Bob Doss had told him last night. No belt, not even socks - only a pair of Khaki pants dressed the body. He reached for the scalpel to cut the pants to take them off easier. Then, as always, he remembered what store the loved ones set by the clothes off a corpse. Slowly, he forced the pants off and now, nude, the body was ready for straightening in the vise. Gaines lit another cigarette and took two long sips of the hot coffee. With his eyes, he began to measure his next step.



The minute Gaines had opened the bag, Allen had been aware of his every action. He could feel the transfer of his body and the slide of his pants. The awareness of the blue ceiling and walls was oppressive but he could not move or speak. Once more, fear and panic began to stir in his brain. It was a turmoil, "Am I crazy," he thought, "Am I just dreaming? If I could only scream!" The golden mist began to swirl in again. This time, there was a strange comfort in the beginnings of the gold light's brightness. The light surrounded by this tunnel of gold became brighter than ever. "Let go! Let go!" an inner voice said. It was more comfortable than fighting the blue, he began to relax and drift upward.

Gaines felt the fluid tank and checked both electric pumps. Not quite warm enough to do a good flush job, he judged. The morning paper was still in a roll in his hip pocket. He opened the paper standing by the table and spread it over the body to read. Because the body was on its left side facing Gaines, the bent waist made a good angle to hold the newspaper steady. Moving the big crock cup over next to the body, he began to read and smoke. There was no system to his reading. Just spread the paper and start with anything that caught his eye. The banner letters of one long article caught his attention immediately. He read on:

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**"Local Man Hangs Himself in City Jail"**

*Allen Skaggs Fletcher, age 34, hung himself sometime between one and two PM yesterday afternoon. Police Chief Jackson stated that Fletcher was in a padded isolation cell which was security checked every hour. As a safety measure, the prisoner had been allowed, only, his pants and shirt. There were no overhead fixtures or high bars in this cell. Chief Jackson stated what Fletcher did was almost impossible. He was able to tie his shirt around his neck and secure it to a short horizontal bar on his cell war. This bar was only 3 feet from the floor. By locking his body in a sitting position he was able to hang himself. The body was discovered during the 2 PM security check. The County Coroner pronounced him dead at 3 PM and set the time of death 1-1/2 hours earlier. Chief Jackson said he had never known of*



*any prisoner with the willpower it took Fletcher to hang himself in a sitting position. Allen Fletcher was being held for the brutal stabbing and mutilation of his young wife in their fashionable Windsor Heights home.*

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Gaines looked up from the paper thinking, that explains why the body is in a sitting position. This man's will must have been strong. For the first time he lifted the paper up and really looked at the body as a person. "Poor Devil," he thought, "Wonder what his wife did?" Gaines was sympathetic. With three former wives himself, he never understood them, but never thought he could kill one! The fluid was warm now. He dropped the paper on the floor, moved the coffee cup out of the way and picked up the body straightening vise. Usually, he used it before the pumping. An impulse to embalm first struck Gaines. He propped the vise against the white side cart. The right arm of the body was on the up side. He picked up his short blade scalpel. Lifting the arm, he moved to the armpit with the blade point.

Allen was conscious of every move around him. There was a difference, he couldn't see his own body from a distance as before. The golden fog was gone but the strong presence in the light seemed near. He knew the mortician was ready to stop his awareness forever.



The blade of the knife was cold against his armpit. Suddenly, an unexpected strong surge of survival flooded his consciousness. For the first time, during all this nightmare, he knew the golden presence was his salvation. A long pleading prayer flowed from his being. "Please, Please, God, I repent, I am sorry! Please forgive me! Just give me one more chance to live!"

Gaines had just inserted the blade edge under the skin of the armpit. For no apparent reason, the body relaxed. The muscles, holding the sitting position, almost unperceptibly began to straighten. This was so unusual it caused Gaines to pause. He placed the scalpel down and thought, "Dewey should see this." The bell button to Dewey's apartment was on the wall. He pushed this and waited for his brother.

Hearing the bell, Dewey knew it was some kind of emergency call. Pulling his pants on over his pajamas, he hurried down to the Work Room. As soon as he opened the door, he knew something had happened by the expression on Gaines' face. He asked calmly, "What's up?"

Gaines pointed to the now relaxed body and said, "I believe this man is alive!" That was the first time Gaines had thought of Allen as anything but his trade term, "the body."

Dewey walked over to the table and stood by his brother. Looking closely at Allen, he bent even closer to his face. "Gaines," he ordered, "Call the Lifesaving Crew at Riverside Hospital immediately. Be sure you put everything away before they get here."

Gaines didn't expect this reaction from Dewey and bent over Allen's head to see what had created the quick decision. A large tear had rolled out of the corner of Allen's right eye. It had traveled across the bridge of his nose to join another twin tear from his left eye. They had formed a puddle of life on Allen's cheek.

The End

