

### **Thank Goodness My first Corpse Was Fresh**

By this time, I was going to two or three court sessions every week. It was a lot for someone who was still relatively inexperienced. I needed a great deal of time to prepare thoroughly for every case. At the same time, there were courses to attend and prepare for - all training for "outsiders" like me. What it came down to was that I worked every evening and weekend, even when I was home. I simply could not get everything done during normal working hours.

I later discovered part of this situation was deliberate, to test me. Pressure was ratcheted up quickly to see whether I could deal with the stress levels that are simply part of this job, and whether I was able to keep the plates spinning even under difficult circumstances.

Luckily I did well. Though this period did have repercussions for my family, especially for my children, who were very young at the time.

I had already completed six sessions, three of which took place at police court. It actually wasn't too bad, especially after that first time when my nerves temporarily got the better of me. I was feeling much better now. But I still was not at ease with the female judge with whom I had three sessions in a row.

She was nice enough, but seemed to resemble a social worker more than a criminal court judge. After my first session I was under the impression that she did not want to pass sentence on anybody, and rarely did. This trend continued through the third session.

As a result, I immediately made a beeline to the deputy chief public prosecutor after every session - he of the satay skewers - to discuss appeals.

"And then all she gave him was a suspended sentence for community service. Though this was clearly a repeat offence. Absolutely insane, don't you agree?" Steam was practically coming out of my ears as I sat across from him with my files on my lap.

He looked at me with amusement. "Agreed. In complete agreement. Appeal!"

"OK. Good. And now this one." I picked up the next file.

"A woman who stole money from her employer for months. She completely took advantage of him when he thought he could trust her. And what did Overhof say? She only sentenced her to a fine, and a tiny one at that: three hundred guilders. I ask you! And that after a recommended sentence of 120 hours community service and one month suspended jail! She said the woman had learned her lesson. Well, I seriously doubt that, as it wasn't the first time she did this. And after she left, Overhof said she felt sorry for her. What's that supposed to mean?"

"Appeal!" said my partner, without blinking an eye. I was under the impression that he was silently enjoying the righteous anger I was displaying.

By the way, years later I would have the dubious honor of being the one who, together with a male colleague, had submitted the most appeals in the course of one year. The seed was probably planted during these conversations with the deputy chief public prosecutor.

"Pascale, tell me, how do you like it here so far?" he couldn't resist asking.

"I think it is absolutely wonderful!" I answered in complete honesty. "I'm learning so many new things every single day. And I love doing court sessions! I'm really happy. Though it has been a bit much recently, with all the court cases and lots of homework for the courses I'm doing," I added.

"Hm, yes, that's true, but things will be on a more even keel soon. Well, I'm glad to hear that you are enjoying yourself, though I really hadn't expected anything different. And good luck with all of those appeals!"

Oh, right, those appeals meant even more work. I'd have to squeeze them in somehow. Oh, well, all for a good cause. I walked back to my office feeling pleased.

Peter approached me with a message almost as soon as I arrived.

"I was just called by the police. They have a fresh corpse for you and you're expected at the hospital mortuary within half an hour. The coroner of the judicial forensic laboratory has probably already arrived."

I felt the blood drain from my face, and glanced at him to see whether this was a joke. But, no, he was completely serious.

"What do you mean, a fresh corpse?" I asked, to gain some time.

"A man, about 30 years old, was just discovered in his bedroom. Looks like a drug overdose. Fresh in the sense that there's no flies or maggots crawling out of him yet," said Peter, this time with the familiar twinkle in his eyes. "Or fresh because this is not an old, bloated, deep purple, reeking, waterlogged corpse," he added a gruesomely. "Should I let them know you're on your way?"

I was only just able to suppress a shiver of disgust. I dug around in my mind for a credible excuse to get out of this. It was already past 3:00 PM, too. God only knew what time I would finally get home tonight. And I had already been working pretty much day and night to get the work done these past weeks. Including weekends.

I was not happy with the situation, especially as far as the children were concerned, but in those early days I had so much to learn. Everything was new and interesting, but also took a great deal of time to internalize. It would take a while before I could rely on routine like my more experienced colleagues.

Just when I was about to bring up the fact that I had a few appeals to attend to, as an excuse not to have to go, Peter said, "You really have to do this. Everything else will just have to wait."

Drat, I thought to myself. Can he read minds now, too?

I decided to play along with the game, cool as a cucumber. "OK, this is just my lucky day, isn't it? Well, I guess I'll be on my way, then."

I grabbed my handbag and had almost left the room, when Peter called after me teasingly that I should probably put on a big splash of perfume.

"Why should I?" I call back dispassionately. "I won't be needing that! My corpse is altogether fresh!" And before I could change my mind, I walked out of the room.

"Where can I find the coroner?" I asked when I reached the front desk of the mortuary about 20 minutes later. The whole area had clearly seen better days, and looked deserted. The depressing corridors with no signs of life, and the undefined odor, did nothing to improve the condition of my already tense nerves.

After what seemed like a lifetime, an elderly lady appeared in the doorway. "Oh, hello, I didn't know anybody was here. You can just walk down the hall, take a right at the end. They're probably enjoying a slice of pie," she added, winking at me.

"Oh. Well, thanks. I'm sure I'll find it," I said with mock self-confidence.

The sound of voices and scraping of cutlery on plates told me I had arrived at the right place. I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

"Come on in!" a cheerful voice called out. I opened the door. Four men and one young woman were seated around a table. I released an almost audible sigh of relief. For once I would not be the only woman present.

"And you must be the public prosecutor, am I right?" boomed a deep voice that did not seem appropriate for its tall, lean owner.

"Yes, that's right. Pleased to meet you," I said with a weak smile, as I examined the coroner curiously from close up.

So this was the man who cut corpses for a living. Despite everything, I was curious to find out how he did it.

"Let's have something to eat first, shall we? Have a delicious piece of pie. Coffee and tea are over there. You haven't met the rest, so let me introduce you. These gentlemen are from the forensics department."

I quickly shook their hands and told them my name.

"And this gentleman here is my assistant. I would be lost without him!"

The coroner laughed loudly and clapped his assistant – a huge man with a square head - cheerfully on the shoulder. The assistant examined me closely, and gripped my hand so tightly I actually gasped for air. His hands were as big as spades.

Probably that's a useful attribute for digging into corpses, I couldn't help thinking while I inconspicuously rubbed my bruised hand.

"And then we have this young lady. She is studying to be a public health doctor." I looked at the young woman, who seemed to be about my age.

I took the smallest slice of pie I could find, and a cup of tea. Coffee didn't seem like a good idea. My stomach would probably be making itself known soon enough as it was.

"Never seen a corpse before?" was the obvious question from the forensics man.

"No, I haven't. This is my first. I can't wait," I joked faintly.

"Luckily the ventilation system here is excellent, that really helps," the second forensics man adds to the conversation.

I looked at him briefly in confusion.

"Because of the stench," he clarified.

"Oh, right." I had only taken two bites of my piece of pie, but this message was enough to make me refrain from eating any more.

"Listen, if you feel like you're going to be unwell, just leave the room. The only problem is that you probably won't be able to come back in. Because if you stay inside, you get used to the smell, but when you go out for a minute and come back in, the sudden strong smell can really be overwhelming. It took us time to get used to it too, you know," the first forensics man tells me reassuringly.

The young woman, who had not taken part in the conversation up to that point, asked the coroner what the plan was.

"We always start by examining the exterior of the corpse very carefully. Forensics takes pictures, and so do we. I'll also make verbal notes of any peculiarities I notice. Dirt under the nails, hair, and so forth, will be examined. Of course we also check for signs of violence from exterior sources, such as scratches, lumps or defensive wounds. Then we make a Y-incision in the chest. Actually, my assistant does it," he said while winking at him, "Because it is a physically demanding job. This is also when you'll smell that particular scent. It's the protein. It might be disconcerting, but that's how we all smell on the inside when we're cut open."

The coroner was on a roll, and lectured on.

"As soon as the chest is completely open, he'll scoop out the blood with a ladle, and..."

I suddenly felt lightheaded. My stomach lurched and it felt as if the pie was trying to make its way back up. The coroner was oblivious to my discomfort, and continued without hesitation.

"... next, each of the organs is examined and weighed, one at a time. Finally, the skull is sawed open and the entire face removed so that we can have a good look at the cranium."

I longed for the whole thing to be over. I felt an overwhelming need for fresh air. And I hadn't even seen or smelled anything yet. I silently cursed myself for ever applying for that vacancy for public prosecutor.

I didn't have a lot of time to obsess about it, because I was startled to see the coroner suddenly push back his chair and announce that it was time for everybody to get dressed.

I cowered at the rear of the line as we went to the dressing rooms, one for ladies and one for gentlemen. We put on light blue aprons, light blue covers over our shoes, and were handed a facemask. Then we marched in single file into a kind of college lecture hall, with a table on wheels in the middle, on which lay an entirely nude corpse of a man.

"We already examined the clothes," the forensics man said, misinterpreting my frown.

But I was not thinking about the forensic implications if something went wrong in that department, but rather that I was standing here in the same room with an unknown man who was lying there in full naked glory.

Somehow I was beginning to feel like this might be exciting as well as unpleasant. I watched as the assistant with the spade hands got all kinds of instruments ready – ewwww, a saw! – while the coroner checked his recording device. I took a seat in the top row together with the female doctor-in-training, and placed my writing materials in front of me on the table like a safety buffer.

I decided to take notes of everything I saw, which would be an excellent distraction. From the corner of my eye, I saw that the woman sitting next to me was doing the exact same thing.

The first 10 to 15 minutes were not all that impressive, filled as they were with the detailed examination of every inch of the head and body of the deceased.

"We are now starting the incision," the coroner suddenly called out to us. He might have spared himself the trouble of an announcement, because his assistant had already made a deep cut in the chest. I watch, mesmerized, as the skin fell apart and a kind of red with yellow marbled carcass became visible.

Goodness, I thought to myself, it looks like a huge serving of spareribs. Just when I was starting to think the smell was not too bad, my nose was hit with the most penetrating, disgusting rotten egg stench I'd ever smelled.

What are you talking about, excellent ventilation, I thought angrily.

I was not sure I could cope with this. Next to me, the woman quickly grabbed a piece of mint chewing gum, and thank goodness she offered me one. The fumes were overwhelming, even this high up in the room.

"Are you alright up there, ladies?" the coroner asked without even looking up.

"Hm," we answer in concert. I was certain the stench would be the most difficult part, but nothing was further from the truth.

When the assistant started scooping blood from the corpse with a sort of giant soup ladle and dumping it into a bucket, I felt myself start to gag. I decided to look away.

The almost-doctor next to me whispered to breathe in deeply through my nose, and exhale through my mouth.

But with every breath of air that entered through my nose, so did the rotten egg smell, now mixed in with the metallic, sickly-sweet smell of blood.

I can't stand this, I thought gloomily. But I was also adamant that I would not leave, because in a heartbeat, the whole district would know about my lack of courage, never mind the entire police corps.

Thank goodness the assistant had finished his gruesome task, but then the coroner startled us by telling us both to join him downstairs. I stumbled down the stairs and stood at some distance from the totally unrecognizable body.

"No, come closer, otherwise you can't see anything."

To my absolute horror, I saw that he was holding the heart in his hands. He placed it on a cutting board and poked at it with his scalpel.

"Do you see this thin membrane?" We saw it. "That's the heart valve. Beautiful, right?" the coroner said enthusiastically.

It certainly was beautiful, though it did not remotely resemble a valve as I imagined it to look. Despite my aversion, I suddenly found myself feeling intrigued, and thoroughly interested. My sense of curiosity always trumped my fear. I suddenly dared to get really close.

"And this is the liver. Let's see - right, this one is much too heavy," he said after placing the liver on a scale. "It's not supposed to be like this, this liver is enlarged. A healthy liver weighs only about 1500 grams."

Because it was beginning to feel more like a lecture than an autopsy, I started to relax. Which is to say, until I heard the chilling sound of a skull being cracked open as if it was some kind of giant walnut.

When I looked up, I saw that the entire face of the poor man was being torn loose, and thrown back like a giant flap. Beneath it I recognized the grey mass of the brain, and a bloody area where the barely recognizable face once was. It was a surrealistic sight, literally and figuratively.

"It" was completely dehumanized.

The coroner weighed the brains and inspected them closely.

After 20 more minutes of agony, thank goodness the whole thing was over. I watch incredulously how the organs, after the biopsies had been taken from them to determine whether a drug overdose was indeed the cause of death, were returned to the gaping opening in the chest. After which the deceased was sewn back together with the necessary respect, and his face is flipped back and put into place. In the end he looked almost normal. Except that he was dead as a doornail.

After thanking the coroner for his instruction, and saying goodbye to the others, it was time for me to go home. When I reached the car, I couldn't resist sniffing the sleeve of my jacket. Ewww... the stench of rotten eggs was still in it. Quickly I grabbed a lock of my hair with my hand and brought it to my nose. Disgusting. I stank to high heaven. I longed to take a shower as soon as I arrived home.

Still wearing my overcoat, I walked upstairs where my husband was bathing our son. When I saw the small head of wet curls, I melted and was overcome by an overwhelming feeling of love.

I kissed my toddler, and he threw his soaking wet arms around my coat.

"Mommy tired?" he asked.

Wow, I thought. I must look totally exhausted if even a four year old can tell.

"No, no," I lied. "But I am very happy to be home with you."

As soon as my little man clambered out of the bath, I took an extra-long shower to scrub the disgusting corpse odor from my body.

Later that evening, I decided to skip the spaghetti bolognese. It was a matter of unpleasant associations.