

So here I am on the island with all sizes of mechanical artifacts whizzing by in every conceivable direction, even overhead.

Here I sit.

(1950s)

THE HAPPY CORPSE STORY

*White girl dappled mare
the stags and the ferns in the wood.
Tuft of black hair caught on a thorn
She went by so fast
Now she is gone.*

The young man, dressed in purple and gold with a blond wig and carrying a jukebox, threw a tantrum and fell on the mossy knoll in a passionate fit of weeping.

"She never returned," he cried.

"Sentimentality is a form of fatigue," said the Happy Corpse, greyish, swinging to and fro on the gnarled elm, like a wasps' nest.

"Nevertheless," shrieked the youth, "I must seek her, because I am in love."

The Happy Corpse laughed. "You mean your secret thread got wound around a galloping damsel. The thinness of it being pulled is a sinful waste and woeful want."

The young man's wig fell off, showing a skull covered with black bristles.

"However," continued the Happy Corpse, "if you catch hold of me and ride on my back, I may help you to find this woman."

"Whoop!" yelled the youth and grabbed at the corpse, which fell into ashes and appeared on the other side of a brambleberry bush.

"Not so fast."

Around and around the brambleberry bush they ran, and as the young man got nearer and nearer the corpse got thicker and thicker, till the youth leapt on its back; whereupon the Happy Corpse stamped its foot and away they ran.

Thorns grabbed at the pair as they hurried through the wood. Great Scot, a nasty black-and-white terrier, ran constantly at the corpse's heels, snapping. This mangy creature lurked the haunts where Happy Corpses abide, since one can hardly say live in this case. The dog smelled as bad as the corpse; it was practically impossible to tell one from the other. They just looked different.

Being full of holes and dents, the corpse could talk out of any part of its body. "Now," said the corpse through the

back of its head, "I shall tell you a story." The youth heaved a groan like a death rattle. He felt too preoccupied to listen. Nevertheless the story began. Think of listening to a story told straight into your face out of a hole in the back of the head with bad breath: surely this must have troubled the delicate sensibility of the young man. However, what can't be cured must be endured.

"The story," said the Happy Corpse, "is all about my father." As they unraveled themselves from the tendrils of some poison ivy, the story continued: "My father was a man so utterly and exactly like everybody else that he was forced to wear a large badge on his coat in case he was mistaken for anybody. Any body, if you see what I mean. He was obliged to make constant efforts to make himself present to the attention of others. This was very tiring, and he never slept, because of the constant banquets, bazaars, meetings, symposiums, discussions, board meetings, race meetings, and simple meetings where meat was eaten. He could never stay in one place for more than a minute at a time because if he did not appear to be constantly busy he was afraid somebody might think he was not urgently needed elsewhere. So he never got to know anybody. It is quite impossible to be truly busy and actually ever be with anybody because business means that wherever you are you are leaving immediately for some other place. Rela-

tively young, the poor man turned himself into a human wreckage."

A thing like a great black rag flew past heavily, saying, "Hands up, Infidel."

"What was that?" asked the youth, alarmed. The Happy Corpse smiled through the hole in its head. "That was Dick Turpin, once a Highwayman, always a ghost. He is going to the Fantomat."

"The Fantomat?"

"Yes, the Fantomat is an automatic Fantomator. There are a lot of them, chainwise, as we get nearer and nearer to Hell."

Terrified by now, the youth became blue around the lips and was too alarmed to reply.

"As I was saying about my father," continued the Corpse, "He eventually became an executive for a firm. This meant that he actually executed persons with showers of legal documents proving that they owed him quantities of money which they did not have. 'Firm' actually means the manufacture of useless objects which people are foolish enough to buy. The firmer the firm the more senseless talk is needed to prevent anyone noticing the unsafe structure of the business. Sometimes these firms actually sell nothing at all for a lot of money, like 'Life Insurance,' a pretense that it is a soothing and useful event to have a violent and painful death."

"What happened to your father?" asked the youth, mostly to listen to his own voice for comfort during the increasing horror of the journey. Now the woods kept fluctuating with apparitions: beasts, garbage cans overflowing with decomposed entities, leaves chasing each other chaotically, so that no shape was ever constant; grass behaving like animated spaghetti, and a number of nameless vacuums, causing events that were always unhappy or catastrophic.

"My father died of a heart attack during a telephone conversation, and then of course he went to Hell. Now he is in Telephone Hell, where everyone has these apparatuses constantly glued to their lips or ears. This causes great anguish. My father will be with his Telephone for nine hundred and ninety-nine billion aeons before he gets rid of it. Afterwards he might even become a saint. Before actually maturing into a real Entity, everybody goes to Hell first, and if they are not too careful, afterwards they must begin all over again."

"You mean that your father is actually in Hell?" asked the youth. "And why do you never mention your mother?"

Here the Corpse almost paused. The trees were scarcer, so that a stretch of desert was visible in the distance.

"My mother committed suicide from boredom. My father was so busy that she had nobody to talk to. So she ate and ate and then shut herself into the refrigerator and half froze and half suffocated to death. She also went to Hell, but

in the refrigerator, eating constantly. I composed a poem to her memory. It goes like this:

When Father's Face was hard to bear

Mother got into the Frigidaire,

Father, said I, I'm so unhappé

Mother is completely frappé.

Tears were now streaming down the face of the young man. "The whole story is quite dreadful. And really much worse, because my own poor mother also committed suicide. She shot herself with a machine gun."

The Happy Corpse stopped suddenly, throwing the youth to the ground, saying: "You silly boy, do you suppose I don't know that? I am your mother. How would I ever have carried you so near to Hell had I been another, a stranger?"

"Mummy?" said the youth, trembling violently. "Forgive me."

"You always used to eat strawberry-jam sandwiches for tea."

They were both lost for a moment in memories of the strawberry-jam sandwiches. After a while the Happy Corpse said: "Now you had better return, since you forgot the white girl on the dappled horse, as those on their way to Hell forget.

"Now you must remember, and in order to remember you must return again, alone."

So that the boy should find his way back, she tied his leg to Great Scot, the terrier, with a long black hair. Off they went, and one can only hope they found their way back. The Happy Corpse dissolved into ashes and, laughing heartily, returned to the tree.

(1971)