

Time of Death

A PJ Gray Novel

by Shirley Kennett

Chapter 1

I'm surprised to see that my right hand trembles as I hold the knife.

With fear? No. I'm the one in charge here. I am not the slicee.

Shame? Maybe a little, that I don't have more socially acceptable things to occupy my time. Who decides what's socially acceptable, anyway? Probably there's some secret god to worship, the God of Successful Parties. I've made my humble little offerings at the altar, but not enough for the god to bless me into the kind of life I want: the house, the servants, upper arms that don't jiggle, the aura of class if not the real thing, adequate sex with hubby and a little something extra with the golf pro or the personal trainer or the stock adviser. Or with all of them, separately or in any combination.

If my offerings to the god weren't sufficient before, maybe some blood sacrifice will do it.

There's a little regret in the trembling of my hand, too. Regret that I didn't do this sooner. I've always known that if you don't climb the social ladder, you live on the droppings of the people on the higher rungs. I've just never done anything about it before.

Mostly my hand is trembling with excitement. This is going to work, I know it. I'm joining the ranks of rich bitches, and I'm doing it with my own cleverness and my own admittedly trembling hand.

I look around Old Hank's barn, checking my supplies. Hank's space heater, creating a bubble of warm air where I'm working. My telescoping five-hundred-watt halogen work light—ooh, watch out, that bulb gets hot! But it does lend an operating room flair to the whole setup. Scissors, gleaming. Syringe and needle, used and useless now, its ketamine contents spurted into the slicee's arm muscle. Stainless steel pans, oddly shaped, like little kidneys. A scalpel for delicate work. The rib saw. An anatomy book. A bottle of water. A heavy wrench to bash with, in case things get out of hand. The hammer and nails. And the knife from the sporting goods store. Yes, ma'am, that's one honkin' big knife any man'd be proud to own. For what, I'd like to know. Gutting little Bambi, I suppose.

Willing my gloved hand steady, I lean over the sedated form lying on a sheet-draped workbench. I would have preferred a stainless steel table, but bringing one in would have been far more trouble than it was worth. So, the old, oak workbench would have to do.

Showtime.

The first slice is reserved for his limp dick. I do the deed and plop the severed organ into one of the little stainless pans. A muffled gasp escapes me as his blood slips down his bare thighs and spreads between his legs.

Old Hank doesn't hear my soft gasp. In fact, I could stomp and holler and Hank wouldn't know. He's up at the main house, a hundred yards away, drunk to the gills.

Earlier I left two fifths of Scotch on the porch, knocked on the door, and hid behind some bushes. The door opened and there stood Hank, silhouetted against the interior lights. I imagined his eyes gleaming as he picked up the bottles, and the puzzled look that must have crossed his face as it dawned on him that bottles didn't ordinarily walk onto his porch by themselves. He shrugged and went inside with his prizes. I figured that in less than twenty minutes he was dead to the world.

The neighbors all knew about Old Hank's binges, so they won't think it's anything out of the ordinary when he's found passed out in his own piss. That's Hank all right, Officer, hosed as usual.

Hank's house, barn, and chicken coop were an island of country life in the 'burbs. When Hank dies, there won't be a chicken around for miles. A live one, at least. Only those bloodless little corpses neatly arranged in the grocery's meat case.

Speaking of blood . . .

After the first slice, it gets easier.

I move my hand quickly, whimsically, angrily, leaving behind streaks of blood. The nose. The cruel lips. Plop. The testicles. Plop, plop.

The slicee's eyes are open, even though he's unconscious. It's just the way the drug works, but it's kind of unnerving. I turn the pages of the anatomy book, looking at the charts, then measure with the span of my hand down from the collarbone and out from his sternum to a spot on his chest. In a few minutes I've got a rough hole dug. It's easy to do, if stitching the patient up afterward isn't a concern. I watch in fascination as his heart pumps beneath my questing fingers.

I check his breathing and sit down on a straw bale to wait. I'm not sure how long

he'll be unconscious. Timing is important here. He might bleed out or go into shock. Maybe I gave him too much ketamine, and he's so far down the k-hole that he'll never climb back out. There's a good chance I've done too much damage during my inelegant intrusion into his chest, and his body will just give up trying to live.

I hope those things don't happen.

The pendulum in my head ticks off time, and then he begins to groan. I dash the bottle of water in his face. He screams as he becomes more alert. Must be like waking up in the middle of an operation to find that the surgeon's still fiddling around inside. I grab his face—what's left of it—with both hands and force his eyes in my direction. I want him to take a look at me. I want to be acknowledged. He's a bit past the acknowledging stage, but I settle for what I can get.

I lean over with the knife, put my weight behind it, and stab him in the heart through the chest hole, the window to his innards, the seat of his soul if he has one. I watch as the heart quivers and stops.

Didn't need the wrench after all.