

BUSH MEAT

A slick operation.

BY PAUL RENAULT

Was it honey and spoiled milk, or the deserts of love? Ray kneaded her with the stuff to keep the skin supple and elastic, to prevent tearing, to minimize the risk of infection and the amount of scarring afterwards. Part of him hated the scalpel, its forced entry.

Instruments and vinyl-gloved hands thrust into her plumbing — and there it was: the blockage. He could feel it, while they seemed more insensitive and detached than usual. Distracted. Incredulous. They argued with him; said he was seeing things, asked if he'd smoked 'more of that good Congolese ganja' prior to the procedure.

"I don't care if it is legal in your crackpot nation, or if you aren't technically under the influence here, when you're on the job. It's policy. Understand? You fail another drug test, Ray, we're going to have to let you go. Be a shame, losing a good spongebob like you. Might have to close up shop here, if we don't find a qualified replacement. We pull the plug, where does that leave you? Where does that leave her and the others? It's your choice..."

He took a deep breath and slowly let it out. He held his tongue. He had to stick one of the spare camera-wands in there manually and point it out to them before they addressed the problem in language long dulled by routine, in voices hollowed out like drinking gourds on their trip through space — via satellite — from halfway around the world. No apologies, no excuses, never a show of appreciation, nothing. The octopoid mechanical arms darted into and out of the patient with choreographed whirring precision. Ray turned to the screen mounted high on the wall and watched, keeping his thoughts to himself.

They left behind a trail of orange 'road-hazard' antiseptic and closed her up with surgical glue, even though he'd asked for stitches, worried that the glue would not hold. Ray had recurring nightmares of patients coming unglued, and there were few cases of malpractice here — a grieving family member was more likely to come after him with a machete, hack him to pieces, while the surgeons themselves would be safely out of reach.

But there was no discussing the issue. They had no time to spare.

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Their surgical theatre included most of sub-Saharan Africa, parts of south and southeast

Asia, and many island nations in the Pacific. They flitted here and there like hummingbirds in a garden of the flesh. They left him to bathe and dress the patient. He switched her cart over to battery power, wheeled her into the post-op room for observation and plugged her back into the grid. Their cameras and bugs only made him feel that much more isolated. He tried not look at the patient, that lump under a white sheet with only the head sticking out. He turned away from her and headed to the locker room to strip off his scrubs and wash his hands at the sink. He stood at the mirror and considered a shave, left the razor on the shelf and turned back as though connected to the patient by an umbilical cord; an astronaut out on a spacewalk, wanting only to be cast adrift — to be able to look down on Earth and know that he was free at last.

He ran his time card at the desk and stepped outside to lock up for the night. The air felt — it felt like the inside of her body. Ray crossed the red dusty road to the café, where he met Gabon Harry at a table in the back. Harry was a big-boned man with a way of talking that picked you up and carried you along like floodwaters, often into the kind of trouble that you had to fight your way out of, but his years as a peacekeeper with the AU, including tours in Darfur and Mogadishu,

had mellowed him; so had the banana beer and the ganja. He blew smoke at the ceiling fan.

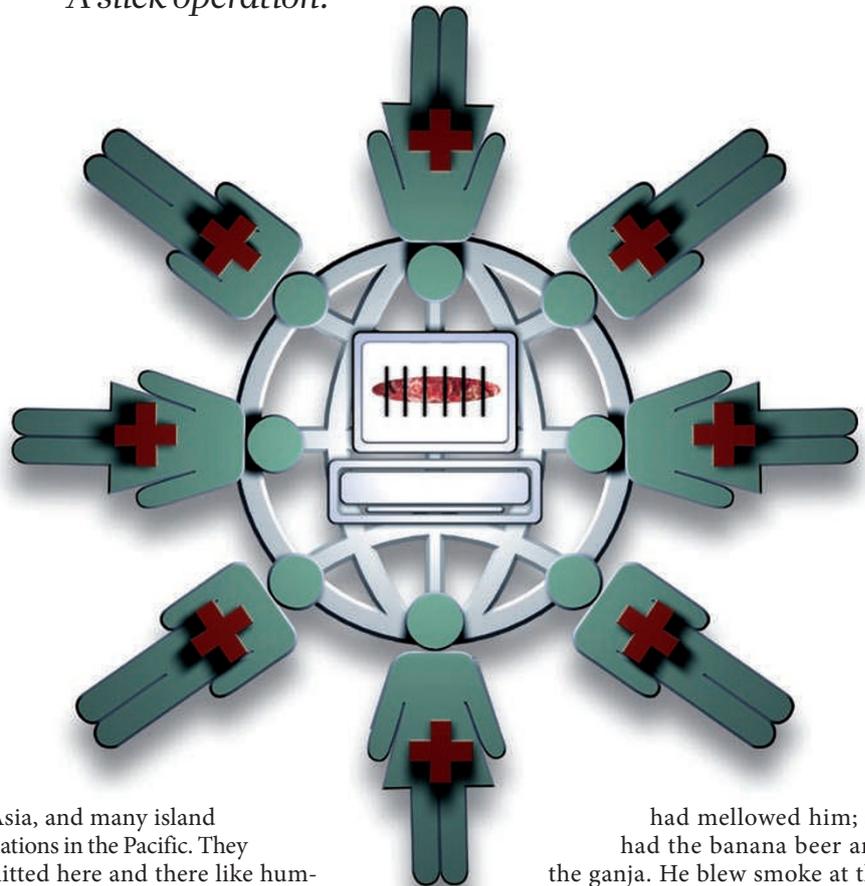
"You look beat, Ray. Why don't you quit that spongebobbing and come work for me? Take a load off, maybe live to a ripe old age? I can't afford to pay much now but once the maglev train comes through, we'll be going places. Why don't you come along?"

"I'll think about it."

"What's to think about?"

Her body on a slab in the building across the road. Her vitals up- and downloaded to a bank of computers, where GRCC nursing students drank energy drinks and chit-chatted to stay awake as they watched over patients reduced to figures on the screen. They learned to pick up and examine the torn and bloodied fragments of our love as though pawing through the bush meat in a cooler. We aren't real to them. We aren't people. We're broken things to be tinkered with, maybe to be fixed. Ray envied them, in a way — they burgled haunted houses and did not believe in ghosts; did not hear the screams; would not come undone with the glue. ■

Paul Renault took his first steps in Angola, picked up a second-hand language and kept on walking. He served time in (of all places) Grand Rapids, Michigan and Montreal.



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