

Emergency

A Story

[by Denis Johnson](#)

I'd been working in the emergency room for about three weeks, I guess. This was in 1973, before the summer ended. With nothing to do on the overnight shift but batch the insurance reports from the daytime shifts, I just started wandering around, over to the coronary-care unit, down to the cafeteria, et cetera, looking for Georgie, the orderly, a pretty good friend of mine. He often stole pills from the cabinets.

He was running over the tiled floor of the operating room with a mop. "Are you still doing that?" I said.

"Jesus, there's a lot of blood here," he complained.

"Where?" The floor looked clean enough to me.

"What the hell were they doing in here?" he asked me.

"They were performing surgery, Georgie," I told him.

"There's so much goop inside of us, man," he said, "and it all wants to get out." He leaned his mop against a cabinet.

"What are you crying for?" I didn't understand.

He stood still, raised both arms slowly behind his head, and tightened his ponytail. Then he grabbed the mop and started making broad random arcs with it, trembling and weeping and moving all around the place really fast. "What am I *crying* for?" he said. "Jesus. Wow, oh boy, perfect."

I was hanging out in the E.R. with fat, quivering Nurse. One of the Family Service doctors that nobody liked came in looking for Georgie to wipe up after him. "Where's Georgie?" this guy asked.

"Georgie's in O.R.," Nurse said.

"Again?"

"No," Nurse said. "Still."

"Still? Doing what?"

"Cleaning the floor."

"Again?"

"No," Nurse said again. "Still."

Back in O.R., Georgie dropped his mop and bent over in the posture of a child soiling its diapers. He stared down with his mouth open in terror.

He said, "What am I going to do about these fucking *shoes*, man?"

"Whatever you stole," I said, "I guess you already ate it all, right?"

“Listen to how they squish,” he said, walking around carefully on his heels.

“Let me check your pockets, man.”

He stood still a minute, and I found his stash. I left him two of each, whatever they were. “Shift is about half over,” I told him.

“Good. Because I really, really, really need a drink,” he said. “Will you please help me get this blood mopped up?”

Around 3:30 a.m. a guy with a knife in his eye came in, led by Georgie.

“I hope *you* didn’t do that to him,” Nurse said.

“Me?” Georgie said. “No. He was like this.”

“My wife did it,” the man said. The blade was buried to the hilt in the outside corner of his left eye. It was a hunting knife kind of thing.

“Who brought you in?” Nurse said.

“Nobody. I just walked down. It’s only three blocks,” the man said.

Nurse peered at him. “We’d better get you lying down.”

“Okay, I’m certainly ready for something like that,” the man said.

She peered a bit longer into his face.

“Is your other eye,” she said, “a glass eye?”

“It’s plastic, or something artificial like that,” he said.

“And you can see out of *this* eye?” she asked, meaning the wounded one.

“I can see. But I can’t make a fist out of my left hand because this knife is doing something to my brain.”

“My God,” Nurse said.

“I guess I’d better get the doctor,” I said.

“There you go,” Nurse agreed.

They got him lying down, and Georgie says to the patient, “Name?”

“Terrence Weber.”

“Your face is dark. I can’t see what you’re saying.”

“Georgie,” I said.

“What are you saying, man? I can’t see.”

Nurse came over, and Georgie said to her, “His face is dark.”

She leaned over the patient. “How long ago did this happen, Terry?” she shouted down into his face.

“Just a while ago. My wife did it. I was asleep,” the patient said.

“Do you want the police?”

He thought about it and finally said, “Not unless I die.”

Nurse went to the wall intercom and buzzed the doctor on duty, the Family Service person. “Got a surprise for you,” she said over the intercom. He took his time getting down the hall to her, because he knew she hated Family Service and her happy tone of voice could only mean something beyond his competence and potentially humiliating.

He peeked into the trauma room and saw the situation: the clerk—that is, me—standing next to the orderly, Georgie, both of us on drugs, looking down at a patient with a knife sticking up out of his face.

“What seems to be the trouble?” he said.

The doctor gathered the three of us around him in the office and said, “Here’s the situation. We’ve got to get a team here, an entire team. I want a good eye man. A great eye man. The best eye man. I want a brain surgeon. And I want a really good gas man, get me a genius. I’m not touching that head. I’m just going to watch this one. I know my limits. We’ll just get him prepped and sit tight. Orderly!”

“Do you mean me?” Georgie said. “Should I get him prepped?”

“Is this a hospital?” the doctor asked. “Is this the emergency room? Is that a patient? Are you the orderly?”

I dialled the hospital operator and told her to get me the eye man and the brain man and the gas man.

Georgie could be heard across the hall, washing his hands and singing a Neil Young song that went “Hello, cowgirl in the sand. Is this place at your command?”

“That person is not right, not at all, not one bit,” the doctor said.

“As long as my instructions are audible to him it doesn’t concern me,” Nurse insisted, spooning stuff up out of a little Dixie cup. “I’ve got my own life and the protection of my family to think of.”

“Well, okay, okay. Don’t chew my head off,” the doctor said.

The eye man was on vacation or something. While the hospital’s operator called around to find someone else just as good, the other specialists were hurrying through the night to join us. I stood around looking at charts and chewing up more of Georgie’s pills. Some of them tasted the way urine smells, some of them burned, some of them tasted like chalk. Various nurses, and two physicians who’d been tending somebody in I.C.U., were hanging out down here with us now.

Everybody had a different idea about exactly how to approach the problem of removing the knife from Terrence Weber’s brain. But when Georgie came in from prepping the patient—from shaving the patient’s eyebrow and disinfecting the area around the wound, and so on—he seemed to be holding the hunting knife in his left hand.

The talk just dropped off a cliff.

“Where,” the doctor asked finally, “did you get that?”

Nobody said one thing more, not for quite a long time.

After a while, one of the I.C.U. nurses said, "Your shoelace is untied." Georgie laid the knife on a chart and bent down to fix his shoe.

There were twenty more minutes left to get through.

"How's the guy doing?" I asked.

"Who?" Georgie said.

It turned out that Terrence Weber still had excellent vision in the one good eye, and acceptable motor and reflex, despite his earlier motor complaint. "His vitals are normal," Nurse said. "There's nothing wrong with the guy. It's one of those things."

After a while you forget it's summer. You don't remember what the morning is. I'd worked two doubles with eight hours off in between, which I'd spent sleeping on a gurney in the nurse's station. Georgie's pills were making me feel like a giant helium-filled balloon, but I was wide awake. Georgie and I went out to the lot, to his orange pickup.

We lay down on a stretch of dusty plywood in the back of the truck with the daylight knocking against our eyelids and the fragrance of alfalfa thickening on our tongues.

"I want to go to church," Georgie said.

"Let's go to the county fair."

"I'd like to worship. I would."

"They have these injured hawks and eagles there. From the Humane Society," I said.

"I need a quiet chapel about now."

Georgie and I had a terrific time driving around. For a while the day was clear and peaceful. It was one of the moments you stay in, to hell with all the troubles of before and after. The sky is blue and the dead are coming back. Later in the afternoon, with sad resignation, the county fair bares its breasts. A champion of the drug LSD, a very famous guru of the love generation, is being interviewed amid a TV crew off to the left of the poultry cages. His eyeballs look like he bought them in a joke shop. It doesn't occur to me, as I pity this extraterrestrial, that in my life I've taken as much as he has.

After that, we got lost. We drove for hours, literally hours, but we couldn't find the road back to town.

Georgie started to complain. "That was the worst fair I've been to. Where were the rides?"

"They had rides," I said.

"I didn't see one ride."

A jackrabbit scurried out in front of us, and we hit it.

"There was a merry-go-round, a Ferris wheel, and a thing called the Hammer that people were bent over vomiting from after they got off," I said. "Are you completely blind?"

"What was that?"

"A rabbit."

“Something thumped.”

“You hit him. *He* thumped.”

Georgie stood on the brake pedal. “Rabbit stew.”

He threw the truck in reverse and zigzagged back toward the rabbit. “Where’s my hunting knife?” He almost ran over the poor animal a second time.

“We’ll camp in the wilderness,” he said. “In the morning we’ll breakfast on its haunches.” He was waving Terrence Weber’s hunting knife around in what I was sure was a dangerous way.

In a minute he was standing at the edge of the fields, cutting the scrawny little thing up, tossing away its organs. “I should have been a doctor,” he cried.

A family in a big Dodge, the only car we’d seen for a long time, slowed down and gawked out the windows as they passed by. The father said, “What is it, a snake?”

“No, it’s not a snake,” Georgie said. “It’s a rabbit with babies inside it.”

“Babies!” the mother said, and the father sped the car forward, over the protests of several little kids in the back.

Georgie came back to my side of the truck with his shirtfront stretched out in front of him as if he were carrying apples in it, or some such, but they were, in fact, slimy miniature bunnies. “No way I’m eating those things,” I told him.

“Take them, take them. I gotta drive, take them,” he said, dumping them in my lap and getting in on his side of the truck. He started driving along faster and faster, with a look of glory on his face. “We killed the mother and saved the children,” he said.

“It’s getting late,” I said. “Let’s get back to town.”

“You bet.” Sixty, seventy, eighty-five, just topping ninety.

“These rabbits better be kept warm.” One at a time I slid the little things in between my shirt buttons and nestled them against my belly. “They’re hardly moving,” I told Georgie.

“We’ll get some milk and sugar and all that, and we’ll raise them up ourselves. They’ll get as big as gorillas.”

The road we were lost on cut straight through the middle of the world. It was still daytime, but the sun had no more power than an ornament or a sponge. In this light the truck’s hood, which had been bright orange, had turned a deep blue.

Georgie let us drift to the shoulder of the road, slowly, slowly, as if he’d fallen asleep or given up trying to find his way.

“What is it?”

“We can’t go on. I don’t have any headlights,” Georgie said.

We parked under a strange sky with a faint image of a quarter-moon superimposed on it.

There was a little woods beside us. This day had been dry and hot, the buck pines and what-all simmering patiently, but as we sat there smoking cigarettes it started to get very cold.

“The summer’s over,” I said.

That was the year when arctic clouds moved down over the Midwest and we had two weeks of winter in September.

“Do you realize it’s going to snow?” Georgie asked me.

He was right, a gun-blue storm was shaping up. We got out and walked around idiotically. The beautiful chill! That sudden crispness, and the tang of evergreen stabbing us!

The gusts of snow twisted themselves around our heads while the night fell. I couldn’t find the truck. We just kept getting more and more lost. I kept calling, “Georgie, can you see?” and he kept saying, “See what? See what?”

The only light visible was a streak of sunset flickering below the hem of the clouds. We headed that way.

We bumped softly down a hill toward an open field that seemed to be a military graveyard, filled with rows and rows of austere, identical markers over soldiers’ graves. I’d never before come across this cemetery. On the farther side of the field, just beyond the curtains of snow, the sky was torn away and the angels were descending out of a brilliant blue summer, their huge faces streaked with light and full of pity. The sight of them cut through my heart and down the knuckles of my spine, and if there’d been anything in my bowels I would have messed my pants from fear.

Georgie opened his arms and cried out, “It’s the drive-in, man!”

“The drive-in . . .” I wasn’t sure what these words meant.

“They’re showing movies in a fucking blizzard!” Georgie screamed.

“I see. I thought it was something else,” I said.

We walked carefully down there and climbed through the busted fence and stood in the very back. The speakers, which I’d mistaken for grave markers, muttered in unison. Then there was tinkly music, of which I could very nearly make out the tune. Famous movie stars rode bicycles beside a river, laughing out of their gigantic, lovely mouths. If anybody had come to see this show, they’d left when the weather started. Not one car remained, not even a broken-down one from last week, or one left here because it was out of gas. In a couple of minutes, in the middle of a whirling square dance, the screen turned black, the cinematic summer ended, the snow went dark, there was nothing but my breath.

“I’m starting to get my eyes back,” Georgie said in another minute.

A general greyness was giving birth to various shapes, it was true. “But which ones are close and which ones are far off?” I begged him to tell me.

By trial and error, with a lot of walking back and forth in wet shoes, we found the truck and sat inside it shivering.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

“We can’t go anywhere without headlights.”

“We’ve gotta get back. We’re a long way from home.”

“No, we’re not.”

“We must have come three hundred miles.”

“We’re right outside town, Fuckhead. We’ve just been driving around and around.”

“This is no place to camp. I hear the Interstate over there.”

“We’ll just stay here till it gets late. We can drive home late. We’ll be invisible.”

We listened to the big rigs going from San Francisco to Pennsylvania along the Interstate, like shudders down a long hacksaw blade, while the snow buried us.

Eventually Georgie said, “We better get some milk for those bunnies.”

“We don’t have *milk*,” I said.

“We’ll mix sugar up with it.”

“Will you forget about this milk all of a sudden?”

“They’re mammals, man.”

“Forget about those rabbits.”

“Where are they, anyway?”

“You’re not listening to me. I said, ‘Forget the rabbits.’ ”

“Where are they?”

The truth was I’d forgotten all about them, and they were dead.

“They slid around behind me and got squashed,” I said tearfully.

“They slid around *behind*?”

He watched while I pried them out from behind my back.

I picked them out one at a time and held them in my hands and we looked at them. There were eight. They weren’t any bigger than my fingers, but everything was there.

Little feet! Eyelids! Even whiskers! “Deceased,” I said.

Georgie asked, “Does everything you touch turn to shit? Does this happen to you every time?”

“No wonder they call me Fuckhead.”

“It’s a name that’s going to stick.”

“I realize that.”

“ ‘Fuckhead’ is gonna ride you to your grave.”

“I just said so. I agreed with you in advance,” I said.

Or maybe that wasn’t the time it snowed. Maybe it was the time we slept in the truck and I rolled over on the bunnies and flattened them. It doesn’t matter. What’s important for me to remember now is that early the next

morning the snow was melted off the windshield and the daylight woke me up. A mist covered everything and, with the sunshine, was beginning to grow sharp and strange. The bunnies weren't a problem yet, or they'd already been a problem and were already forgotten, and there was nothing on my mind. I felt the beauty of the morning. I could understand how a drowning man might suddenly feel a deep thirst being quenched. Or how the slave might become a friend to his master. Georgie slept with his face right on the steering wheel.

I saw bits of snow resembling an abundance of blossoms on the stems of the drive-in speakers—no, revealing the blossoms that were always there. A bull elk stood still in the pasture beyond the fence, giving off an air of authority and stupidity. And a coyote jogged across the pasture and faded away among the saplings.

That afternoon we got back to work in time to resume everything as if it had never stopped happening and we'd never been anywhere else.

"The Lord," the intercom said, "is my shepherd." It did that each evening because this was a Catholic hospital. "Our father, who art in Heaven," and so on.

"Yeah, yeah," Nurse said.

The man with the knife in his head, Terrence Weber, was released around suppertime. They'd kept him overnight and given him an eyepatch—all for no reason, really.

He stopped off at E.R. to say goodbye. "Well, those pills they gave me make everything taste terrible," he said.

"It could have been worse," Nurse said.

"Even my tongue."

"It's just a miracle you didn't end up sightless or at least dead," she reminded him.

The patient recognized me. He acknowledged me with a smile. "I was peeping on the lady next door while she was out there sunbathing," he said. "My wife decided to blind me."

He shook Georgie's hand. Georgie didn't know him. "Who are you supposed to be?" he asked Terrence Weber.

Some hours before that, Georgie had said something that had suddenly and completely explained the difference between us. We'd been driving back toward town, along the Old Highway, through the flatness. We picked up a hitchhiker, a boy I knew. We stopped the truck and the boy climbed slowly up out of the fields as out of the mouth of a volcano. His name was Hardee. He looked even worse than we probably did.

"We got messed up and slept in the truck all night," I told Hardee.

"I had a feeling," Hardee said. "Either that or, you know, driving a thousand miles."

"That too," I said.

"Or you're sick or diseased or something."

"Who's this guy?" Georgie asked.

"This is Hardee. He lived with me last summer. I found him on the doorstep. What happened to your dog?" I asked Hardee.

"He's still down there."

“Yeah, I heard you went to Texas.”

“I was working on a bee farm,” Hardee said.

“Wow. Do those things sting you?”

“Not like you’d think,” Hardee said. “You’re part of their daily drill. It’s all part of a harmony.”

Outside, the same identical stretch of ground repeatedly rolled past our faces. The day was cloudless, blinding. But Georgie said, “Look at that,” pointing straight ahead of us.

One star was so hot it showed, bright and blue, in the empty sky.

“I recognized you right away,” I told Hardee. “But what happened to your hair? Who chopped it off?”

“I hate to say.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“They drafted me.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yeah. I’m AWOL. I’m bad AWOL. I got to get to Canada.”

“Oh, that’s terrible,” I said to Hardee.

“Don’t worry,” Georgie said. “We’ll get you there.”

“How?”

“Somehow. I think I know some people. Don’t worry. You’re on your way to Canada.”

That world! These days it’s all been erased and they’ve rolled it up like a scroll and put it away somewhere. Yes, I can touch it with my fingers. But where is it?

After a while Hardee asked Georgie, “What do you do for a job,” and Georgie said, “I save lives.”