

Sammy, Poor Sammy

When the dental assistant tiptoed into the treatment room and whispered in my ear that two police detectives had come to speak with me, I mumbled an excuse to my patient, asked her to rinse out, and went out to greet them.

Understandably, I was somewhat surprised by their intrusion; after all, I couldn't recall committing any recent felonies.

“How can I help you, officers?” I asked. I noticed that my voice rose to that certain characteristic high-pitched quality that it typically developed whenever I try to do something like talk a traffic cop out of giving me a speeding ticket.

“Tell us what you know about Sammy Rinaldi,” they demanded. Sammy, a pleasant fellow who lived alone, had been my patient for years. Recently, he had developed some sort of acute depression or psychological illness; he lost his job and became a homeless derelict.

He showed up sporadically at my office looking for a handout. I always gave him a five-dollar bill, and begged him to let me help him by getting him to a mental health center for treatment. He always accepted the five-dollar bill, but never my advice.

I notified the policemen that I had not seen Sammy for quite a while now. They explained to me that Sammy's estranged mother had just died, had left Sammy a small fortune, and that some of Sammy's cousins had verified that a recent unidentified suicide victim was actually Sammy, their missing relative.

"We need you to come to the City Morgue with Sammy's dental records and do a forensic dental identification of the corpse," announced a gum-chewing officer.

The detectives drove me to a dimly-lit, non-descript building. I felt like I was in a 1950's "B" movie. An associate coroner, with a discernible limp, led me to a cold room, a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling, furnished with a table and a sheet-draped corpse.

Sammy was single, with neither siblings nor children. The table was surrounded by a gaggle of Sammy's cousins, who were, presumably, his rightful heirs.

Another assistant was taking notes rapidly, as the cousins spoke:

"It's Sammy, poor Sammy!" cried one.

"I could recognize him immediately," sobbed another.

"It seems like just yesterday that I was at his Christening," added a third.

All were dabbing with tissues and handkerchiefs at seemingly perfectly dry eyes, while they watched me suspiciously.

I pulled on my gloves, and tried to act with professional detachment as I set up Sammy's x-rays. The assistant pulled back the sheets, and explained that witnesses saw the victim jump in front of a speeding train. I felt like I was back in general anatomy class in dental school.

The head and neck were mangled beyond recognition, but did bear a superficial resemblance to Sammy Rinaldi.

I looked at the deceased's jaw and announced jauntily, "Open wide, please." No one in the room seemed amused.

After examining the mouth for just a few moments, it was obvious that the corpse was not Sammy. This jaw contained teeth that Sammy was missing. I announced "This is definitely not Sammy Rinaldi. The forensic evidence is clear and beyond any possible doubt."

The assembled cousins began muttering.

"He's a quack," complained one.

"What does he know," added another.

A third cousin said nothing, but stared at me malevolently while making an unmistakable slitting motion across his throat.

I left the morgue hastily.

Two weeks later, a very disheveled-looking and unkempt Sammy Rinaldi showed up at my office looking for a five-dollar handout. He couldn't understand what all the excitement was about.