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Essay

Anatomy Gifts Registry

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It was the first day of anatomy lab, and the four of us at Table 33 were stalling. We had just removed the plastic covering our cadaver and lifted a moist cloth to reveal the body beneath. Our donor was a woman, small and compact, with arms curved in an awkward ballerina's first position, fingernails long. She had died of pneumonia at 86 years old. On her left foot, her second toe crooked unnaturally over her big toe, like it was broken.

We had agreed the day before to remove the cloth covering her face before we started dissecting. It wasn't necessary to look at your donor's face on the first day, and most students didn't do it until months later, when it was time to dissect the head and neck. But I felt that it was important to acknowledge that this was a person we'd be working with, someone who had lived a full life before ending up formaldehyde-soaked and laid out on our metal table. My team agreed, and we planned to take a moment with our donor fully uncovered, out of respect and gratitude for the gift we'd been given.

We looked at each other, a little panicked. "Let's get oriented," we agreed. "Let's get our footing. Then we will look."

We named the parts that we could see, gently pressing our gloved hands into her tough skin. This is the sternum. These are the true ribs and the false ones. This is the intercostal space. This is the iliac crest of the hip. Feel her pubic bone, here.

And then it was time: swollen lips, chin tilted back, eyes I can't quite remember.

A teaching assistant walked by: "You know you don't have to look at that." We looked at him blankly in our moment of silence. "We know," I said quietly, and he walked away. We all locked eyes, gave each other a nod, and lifted the cloth back over her face.

My partner made the first cut from the clavicle to the pubis—one fell swoop, just deep enough, pausing only make a little half-circle around the belly button.

I looked down and saw I had my hands resting on her right thigh, like I could comfort her. Or maybe I was just trying to include her, let her know that I remembered that she was here, too.

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Day 1

The TA said we were the most hesitant, careful group he'd ever seen.

We were going to be doctors: We had to get over it, get moving. Get in there.

"But we're conscientious," I said. "Isn't that how you want your doctor to be?"

He may have said "maybe" as he walked away.

I considered it a victory.

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I was prepared for dissection to be a visceral experience of the body, full of smells and textures and greasy gloves. But I was surprised by how much of that physicality involved my own body, my own muscles.

Opening the abdominal cavity required all four of us: two to pull the skin back as forcefully as we could, two to cut into the fascia lining the skin's underbelly, releasing its grip on the body's insides. We stood with legs braced, using all our strength, adjusting our grips, fingers slipping.

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Day 5

We were told we were wasting scalpels.

"Use blunt dissection," he said,

"Just use your hands and fingers and probes."

It felt bad but he was right:

The body rips apart so easily.

Digging for vessels in the gut, separating the mesh of connective tissue,

is satisfying for the same reason I would glue my hands together as a child

and pull them apart, a brief web between my palms—

Those delicate chains feel great to break.

The lungs though, those take force.

After slicing through the right lung root,

I scraped my knuckle on the cut end of a rib

while tugging the lung from its bed.

I noticed later there was blood in my glove.

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It doesn't seem like it would be difficult to remember that a cadaver is a human body. But, once the initial shock of cutting into human flesh subsided, my partner and I got into a pattern that started to feel routine. With routine comes normalization, which can slip into something that feels close to disrespect, but might be better described as forgetfulness. Un-mindfulness.

Change into scrubs, head to Table 33. Glove up, remove the plastic and the cloth. Chat about classes or the weekend. Turn to the day's instructions in the manual. Hunt with scissors or a probe or fingers for the correct muscle or nerve or artery. Find the right teaching assistant to explain it all in a way that makes sense.

This isn't to say that I didn't have moments of appreciation and awe—like when I saw how the intestines fold in upon themselves, suspended in sheets of connective tissue like a book you can flip through, or when I held a heart in my hands and peeked into the valves whose perfect structure and unrelenting motion keep our blood pumping second by second.

But eventually the donor's body starts to feel like yours, like an extension of the classroom, like a prop to show off.

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Day 12

Our donor has such great vessels in her gut!

How strange that it makes me feel proud

to show other students as they come by,

as if I had anything to do with it.

Hordes of med school interviewees came in today,

stood in suits wearing smocks, asking questions.
We became showmen, salespeople,
handed an eager student a heart.

I heard a rumor that a donor's family member heard about this,
about applicants touring the anatomy lab, and was upset,
because that's not what the donor signed up for:
a bunch of strangers filing in and out, taking a peek,
holding body parts to say they did.

One interviewee admitted she felt strange.
Once she was offered the chance, she couldn't say no—
not on a day that's all about being impressive.
But she hadn't really been prepared, she said,
to stand in a room full of dead human bodies
in a suit and a smock.

What am I involved in here?

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Exactly one month after the first day of anatomy lab, I left the lab in a hurry to go cry in the bathroom. My 91-year-old grandma was in the hospital for pneumonia, and she wasn't doing well. I changed out of my scrubs, walked home to pack, and left town to be with her and my family. I asked a classmate to relay the message to Table 33.

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Day 33, but I'm not there
My grandma died yesterday at 1:29 pm.
We sat with her body until 6:10 pm.

My aunt filled out the forms from Anatomy Gifts Registry:

My grandma was donating her body to science.

I am no longer sure how I feel about that,

Knowing, now, what I know.

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My grandma had the worst rheumatoid arthritis anyone had ever seen. Her fingers and toes were gnarled like tree branches, joints so beyond painful that they no longer were, nerve endings lost like frayed cords. She brought her coffee to her lips like a kid would, two handed. One time my mom held up a ginger root, with its fat twisted stubs, and said, “Hey Mom, this looks like your hands!” They both burst into laughter.

If my grandma’s body is used for rheumatoid arthritis research—if it is used to teach people who know exactly what they’re looking at, who know exactly how valuable her body is to advancing knowledge in their field—then that is one thing. That is something I can wrap my brain around.

But if my grandmother’s body is given to medical students to rummage around in, that feels like another thing entirely.

I have learned, and am still learning, so much from my donor. From someone else’s grandmother who died of pneumonia.

It just feels so different when it’s your own.

So many medical students—every single one I’ve asked, in fact—say they wouldn’t want their loved ones to donate their bodies. Not after experiencing the anatomy lab for themselves.

Some people say that it’s inevitable to become desensitized. That it’s normal and healthy and maybe even necessary to do the kind of work we’re going to do. But I wonder if those people know anyone who donated their body to science.

I wonder if there could be another way.

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The anatomy lab has long been the standard initiation into medical school. Considered a rite of passage for first-year students, anatomy lab functions as both an introductory tour to the complexity of the human body and an introduction to medical school itself; the sheer volume of material makes the course the perfect example of the “drinking from a fire house” analogy often applied to medical education.

While most medical students learn anatomy with a range of resources— lectures, videos, imaging like CT or ultrasound, and physical exams—the full-body cadaver dissection is typically the crux of the course. But the literature is mixed as to whether dissection is the most effective way to learn clinical anatomy, and in recent years, some schools have moved away from dissection in favor of other approaches. In the UK, for example, as medical school enrollment has risen and cadavers have become less available, prosections—body structures that have been expertly dissected to display their most important features—have become more common alternatives to student-led gross dissection.

But the benefits of full-body dissection are hard to deny; there is nothing quite like "learning by doing," and exposure to a lab full of bodies does give you a real appreciation for the variety of the human form. No two hearts or livers or aortas look the same, and in the anatomy lab, we have to learn how to recognize the same structure on very different bodies.

The 160 students in my class are split into tables of four, which means we have 40 donors total. Are all 40 donors necessary to demonstrate the variety of the human form? Do we all need to cut lungs from their roots to appreciate their function? Could we learn the same material with a combination of prosections, iPad apps, and 3D-printed body parts? Has technology finally liberated us from the necessity of full-body cadaver dissection?

It's difficult to say. I am learning an incredible amount of anatomy, and I have no way of knowing if I would be learning equally as much some other way. But at what cost am I learning? And is it worth it?

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If my grandma's body does go to medical students, I hope they don't rest a book on her face. Or stick scissors in her leg to keep them handy, like she's a pincushion. Or dehumanize her in any of the other small, thoughtless ways I've seen, heard, and participated in while in the alternate reality of the anatomy lab.

I hope they don't do something else I've done, either, which is even more insidious: let the enormity and privilege of the gift I've been given—the opportunity to learn more about a person's insides than they ever knew themselves—fade into the background of exams and frustration and sleepiness and memory mnemonics. Failure to register the meaning of a gift is its own thoughtlessness.

I hope her students treat her body like it used to be her home.