

Gross Anatomy

By Chrissie DyBuncio

The first part of him I ever saw was his shoulder. It poked out from underneath a white muslin sheet and was grayer and more mottled with sunspots than I had expected. Little blisters had formed all along his triceps, areas where preservative had pooled during the embalming process. He was “Donor #6,” the person that five other medical students and I were going to spend the next year dissecting, each three-hour lab designed to reveal another part of the human body normally hidden behind the opacity of skin.

I was a brand-new medical student, excited to learn about the human body and all of its attendant parts. I believed there was a fundamental truth to be found in the parsing of dissection: physicists took apart matter to molecules, molecules to atoms, atoms to protons and on and on until they revealed previously concealed truths about the universe. It was proof to me that there was a method in the madness, if only one could ferret it out. Every night that first semester, I drilled flash cards of the body parts we had unearthed that day. When an image of the tassel of spinal nerves came up, I whispered its name, “cauda equina.” Each new part was a totem, and I thought if I learned its name and position that knowledge would reveal the secrets the human body harbored in its staggering organization. I told myself that with these secrets, I’d somehow become a better person—more understanding and empathetic—more in touch with what it means to be a human.

On that first day in the cadaver lab, we cut a big cross on his back with brand new blades. I loosened and lifted one corner of skin and pulled it back, taking the scalpel to the subcutaneous fat underneath so that with each slice, more of the skin lifted. Tearing the skin away from the underlying tissue took much more force than I had imagined. At first, I felt my vision go blurry and acid creep up my throat. *Pretend it’s pork!* I told myself. I squeezed my fists, took a few deep breaths, and after a few more swipes, I began to lose myself in the task at hand. What, minutes before, was an act that was incomprehensible—I was removing another person’s flesh!—now reminded me more of ripping up industrialized carpet. *This is what I have to be able to do to become the person I want to be*, I thought, as my neurons acclimated to their new normal. I had convinced myself that a prerequisite to my goal of becoming the highest version of myself was the ability to see and absorb anything that was presented in front of me, no matter how disturbing. How could I stare at the core of what it meant to be human without some sort of sacrifice to my sense of comfort?

Soon, it began to feel good: to feel so comfortable in the lab that my classmates and I joked and commiserated about our lives as time-crunched, stressed-out med students while unearthing plaques that had ultimately caused this man’s death. But, later in the day, questions creeped in. Wasn’t it strange how these tiny clots took up only a minute or two of our lab time but perhaps were also the catalyst for a family’s lifetime of grief? What did it mean that I had

been excited to find them—like the plastic baby in a King Cake or Waldo on a crowded beach? A dissonance followed me out of the cold air of the cadaver lab and into the dry Southern California fall of that first year of school. I had expected to do gross things, but I hadn't anticipated what it would feel like to *have* done gross things—to carry around the asymmetry of having mundane, even joyful, thoughts in the face of confronting someone else's demise.

Sometimes, it was easier when a lab was so gory that my thoughts couldn't stray from the destruction at hand. On the day of the urogenital dissection, our task was to excavate some nerves and blood vessels in and around our cadaver's groin. I balked at the idea of prying our cadaver's legs apart, especially against the resistance of his chemically preserved, rubbery muscles. When I pulled his legs up into the stirrups, I noticed that he didn't feel as heavy as he normally did. My insides shuddered as I realized what had happened: someone had cut him in half. His head stayed immobile at the top of the gurney while his intestines spread out like tangled electrical wires over a two-foot expanse. Without telling us, the TAs had sawed the bodies in half so that they would be easier to flip back-and-forth between chest and back. The effect was practical, yet haunting. I felt my own mid-section twist in response.

It was more difficult to shake off the images of body parts strewn about after labs like these. When the images of severed heads and floating limbs popped into my brain just as I was about to take a bite of a sandwich or when I plunged my knife into the chicken my boyfriend, Tanner, and I had roasted for dinner, I felt a compulsion to vomit the memory of them out.

"This reminds me of when we had to disarticulate the femur from the hip," I quipped one night, as I pulled a wing off a chicken carcass. Tanner looked at me, horrified.

"Gross," he said, as he pushed his meal to the side of his plate. "Can we not talk about this while we're eating?" *Fine*, I grumbled to myself. But as the year went on, and the images accumulated and took up more and more real estate in my mind. I needed an outlet. So, I took my tales elsewhere.

"How's school going?" a friend asked.

"We cut open a colon today," I started. "Well actually, we cut the pel—"

"Stop, stop, that's gross," he said, waving his beer-clutching hand in the air as if to break apart the image my words conjured up.

"I'm not even telling you the grossest part!" I retorted. "It's not that bad!" His look back translated plainly to *yes, it is*. But despite the pleas around me to keep these gruesome grenades to myself, I couldn't help it.

"I don't think everyone is as comfortable with that kind of stuff as you are," Tanner said to me, after I complained to him about feeling like I couldn't talk to anyone anymore. "Maybe you can talk about something else?"

“I don’t have anything else to talk about! This is my life now,” I insisted. “Plus, they should want to hear about this kind of stuff. This is the reality of who we are! It’s what we’re made of!” Tanner looked at me, his furrowed brow betraying his own discomfort at my insistence that others confront their anatomy (and mortality!) on what was supposed to be a fun Friday night. What I didn’t tell Tanner was that in telling these stories to others, I hoped that they could tell me what lesson I had missed out on when we removed our cadaver’s pacemaker or cracked through his sternum to reveal his heart. The school year was almost over, and his body was almost entirely dismantled, but I still hadn’t ferreted out the pearl of wisdom that I was convinced was in there.

I didn’t feel like I could talk to anyone besides my fellow med students, who didn’t flinch when I mentioned a toe that popped off. But, inevitably, we’d descend into our gallows humor. Wasn’t it funny that our cadaver’s pacemaker still beeped incessantly when he was clearly dead? Should we tattoo the wrong dissection instructions onto our bellies so that future med students would be confused when *we* became cadavers? Then the cycle would start again: these thoughts felt insensitive, maybe even profane. I felt guilty, and what’s more, I had lost the horizon—what was OK to say? Or for that matter, to even think? I sensed that my normal was drifting further away from the normal of most people around me.

I felt like I was going mad. In my gut, I knew that cutting up my cadaver’s body was the most intimate experience I had had with another person in my life thus far. I spent hours elbows deep combing through his viscera, I cradled his brain in my hands, I closed his eyelids and lips before we wrapped him back up in his muslin sheets. I was present for the final moments of his body in its human form, a part of our life cycle most people never see before they experience it themselves. How could I feel *more* alienated from what it meant to be human when I had never known so much about it?

During the last lab of the year, after our cadaver had been severed at the waist, I hoisted up his upper half so that my palms were nestled in his armpits. I was trying to flip him so that we could take a closer look at the back of his larynx. In order to do so, I had to disentangle what remained of his thorax from the detritus that had piled up underneath it. I shimmied him up and down, momentarily engaged in a macabre waltz.

In those final moments together, I was so frustrated: I hadn’t found the secret that would resolve the dissonance that fogged my days. *What have we become?* I asked him, collecting the loose ends of his vessels in one of my hands so that they wouldn’t graze the floor. *What am I becoming?* As I held him in our jerky-two step, a typical series of thoughts flashed through my mind:

I wondered if he knew when he was chewing the almonds we found when we cut open his stomach that they would be his last meal.

I wondered what he would think about me, opening the skin flaps of his abdomen twice a week, taking out his insides, and then putting them all back in.

I wondered if he had a daughter, and if he danced with her like this at her wedding.

I couldn't help it—I imagined myself as him, then as his family, then as his friends. I considered his body first, then mine, then his again. Back and forth and back and forth. My breath caught at the vertigo of considering the two of us from so many angles, so that when I lay him face down, I felt it rap against my chest, thinking about how suffocating it would feel to have my own face smashed down against the metal.

There is a thing that happens when one body sees another: a quicksilver reflex that recognizes that the other body has a heart that pumps, intestines that peristalsis, and toes that curl, just like your own. There was a discomfort that came from this recognition, one that I had tried to overcome from the moment I encountered it. But what had I lost from trying to evade these feelings? What had I lost in trying to power my way through this year of unease?

For the moment, I let myself surrender to the discomfort, to the space between bodies that doesn't always align, to the tension of trying to hold two lives in equal stead in my brain at once. Maybe feeling gross was the most human thing I could do, because it acknowledged that taking him apart took me apart too. Maybe that was the secret all along: that we are at our most human when we feel another's anatomy as our own.

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