

The Anatomy Lesson

By Olivia DiLeonardo

I didn't have to go - it was a choice I made after hearing a number of medical students talk about it. Trying as I was to immerse myself in the culture of medical education, one so different from my liberal arts background, I felt it was important for me to experience it myself. My father, a linguist and aesthete thoroughly steeped in the humanities, had made his own personal contribution to medicine; his curiosity and courage motivated me to do the same.

The day arrives, and I look into my closet. What does one wear to anatomy lab? Would something bright or fanciful convey disrespect? On the other hand, might a dark, plain choice appear too somber or funereal? Should I wear heels, jewelry? My eyes move to the drawer that houses my Bakelite collection.... doesn't Bakelite have formaldehyde in it? After several more minutes of deliberating, I decide upon tan silk pants, a horizontally striped black and tan boat neck sweater, and black and tan peep toe heels. Unable to help myself, I add a statement necklace made of shiny red cherries with green plastic leaves, not real Bakelite, just faux. Will anyone notice?

"I've never actually seen a dead body before," I say to the woman sitting at the desk in the small office next to the lab. She hands me a "Pledge of Respect" form, which I must sign before proceeding. As I read the form, she rolls backward in her chair, looks under her desk, and groans audibly. "Open-toed shoes?" she asks, incredulous.

I tuck my feet further under my chair, embarrassed. "Oh, yes, I guess so...is that...I'm sorry, I didn't know..."

"This IS anatomy lab," she interrupts, handing me a knot of blue stretchy material, which turns out to be booties to cover my feet. "You don't want to lose a toe, do you? For some of these guys, this is their first time handling a scalpel."

"No, no," I say, trying to laugh while clumsily stretching the booties over my heels. "Is there a wrong way to put these on?" I wonder, as she watches me. In a hurry to end this awkward exchange, I mumble another apology and a "Thank you," struggle to my blue-bootied feet, and thrust myself into the lab.

I hear her voice trail behind me; she is saying something about the smell, and her office, and that I can come back if I need a break. Her voice sounds more caring, but it is miles away. The smell has already shot up my nose, into my mouth, my eyes, my throat, my brain. I can't imagine a time when I didn't smell the smell, and I can't imagine it ever leaving. It is a completely crushing, invading presence. Her words float on the air as my eyes take in the room. I see bodies - body after body after body on shiny metal tables. They are naked, their countenances covered by white squares of cloth. The bodies are yellow. I see legs, bellies, arms, toes, knees, breasts, pudenda, penises, fingers. I walk slowly up the center aisle of the room, between the shiny tables. A combination of the cloying smell and not knowing where to look, or how to act, walk, or stand, makes me feel as if I am an invisible, floating being. "Can anyone see me?" I wonder. I take in the other bodies in the room, the bodies of

the students examining, palpating, and slicing into the yellow flesh. Their faces are partially obscured by white masks, so only their eyes are visible. The particulars of their shapes, hair, hands and feet are concealed by blue scrubs and white coats, making everyone appear somewhat uniform and anonymous. Their heads are bowed, their expressions tense and focused. They are concentrating on the task at hand and not on this out of place stranger walking haltingly up the center of the room in her squishy booties and cherry necklace.

I approach a long table in the middle of the room; it is covered with medical textbooks. I am glad to see it, as I am feeling the need to hold on to something. I sidle up to the table a little too urgently, feigning interest in a Frank Netter illustration. All I want to do is look away, see something familiar, feel the page of a book between my fingers. Somehow not looking allows my mind to catch up with what I have just seen. "Has it been just a few minutes...how long have I been here?" I close my eyes for a moment and grip the table, which has become a kind of life raft. I can hear talking...not distinct words, rather the overlapping of conversation-the students discussing, professors instructing. "Roast beef," someone says. My eyes squeeze tighter and then snap open. With one hand holding the table, I slowly turn to face the scene. I am sure I heard it very clearly: roast beef. I search the eyes of the students, trying to ascertain who said these words, but there is no way to tell. Everyone is still working as diligently as before, and if anyone else heard the words, no one seems surprised. A group of students looks at an indistinct lump sitting on a yellow platform of muscle and sinew. An older man, who I gather to be a professor, is gesturing toward the lump and speaking. I realize then that the platform is actually the folded over layers of one side of an opened chest, and that the lump is a human heart. I look more closely at its owner. The female body's left hand lies at her side, her fingers long and attenuated, perhaps the hands of an artist or a musician. Still gripping the table, my eyes travel down from the hands to the thighs, knees, calves, to the feet and delicately curved toes and toenails, painted with prim pink polish.

Looking toward the front of the room where I began my journey up the center aisle, I see the office from which I first emerged. It seems impossibly far away, but somehow I have to get to it, as calmly as possible. I have seen all I can see today. I stand up straight, let go of the table, and fix my gaze on the office door. I start with my right foot, moving it forward, then my left, then my right again, and I find I am walking. The door slowly grows closer, and larger, and suddenly I am through it, and back in the office where I started. "That was quick," says the woman at the desk.

"Ha ha, yes," replies a voice; I suppose it is mine. I am pulling off the booties, handing them back to the woman, saying "Thank you again," and walking through another door, the one that leads out into the main hallway, to the elevator, another hallway, another door, and then fresh air.

I am outside; I see bright green grass, feel a warm breeze hinting at an afternoon shower, hear students chatting at nearby tables. But my companion, the smell of the lab, is still with me, deep in my nose, behind my eyelids, swirling around inside my skull. I imagine clawing at my nostrils and eyes to release it, but instead I lower myself onto a concrete step, rest my elbows on my knees, put my head in my hands, and try to think about what I have just seen. It is already taking on the quality of a dream, even though I was just there and it is still happening upstairs. I am looking at the sidewalk, not really seeing anything, when I notice a long black caterpillar making his way across the concrete. He is beginning a heroic trip across a vast expanse of sidewalk to the safety of the green grass on the other side. Watching this brave creature, I am reminded of my father.

My father, my favorite person in the world and a vibrant, intelligent, witty, thoroughly adorable man, succumbed to a rare demyelinating disease ten years ago. The progress of the disease was relentless and cruel; within a few weeks' time, my dad could barely walk, talk, write, or hold a book. Witnessing this process was like watching a man fall off a cliff in slow motion—each day he grew smaller and smaller, tumbling further and further away from himself and the life he had always known, plummeting into the recesses of a dark, unknown place where no one and nothing could reach him. As the caterpillar makes his fuzzy, determined way across the sidewalk, I think of a particular story that happened during my father's final weeks at the hospital, before he returned home in an ambulance and quietly died in his library late one night when no one was watching.

It was evening, and I was talking on the phone with Ralf, my father's partner, about the events of the day. My father had just been diagnosed, and we were still reeling. We could say progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy, we knew there was little hope for a recovery, but we were still brimming with questions and blinking with disbelief. Our conversation was drawing to a close when Ralf said, "Oh, I wanted to tell you, your dad agreed to have his case presented to a group of medical students and residents today."

I sat silent for a moment. "What?" I said.

"Yes," Ralf went on, "he agreed to be there while the speaker, one of the infectious disease doctors, talked about his disease, the symptoms, the progression, prognosis, everything."

My father had, up to this point, successfully avoided seeing a doctor for nearly 30 years. He squirmed and fidgeted around any sort of illness and detested speaking to anyone about his own health. The idea of him agreeing to sit in a room full of strangers while they discussed, in detail, the particulars of this disease (his disease, Ralf had said) was incomprehensible to me. My mind flooded with questions: my dad could hardly walk - did he go to this case presentation in a wheelchair? Did he wheel himself, or did someone push him? What was he wearing? He was a breezily stylish man, always careful about his dress and appearance. Did he simply go in a hospital gown? Was he asked to walk and speak to demonstrate the faltering gait and the dysarthria that left him almost impossible to understand? Did the speaker mention anything about the subject's life before, how he recorded all the books he read in a little blue journal, how he would only listen to Sade on Christmas morning, or how he and his daughter drove to Luxembourg with the top down in his convertible when she was in 8th grade, and it rained, but the rain just flew over their heads and they didn't get one bit wet, and they laughed, because it was so ridiculous?...my mouth opened, but all that came out was, "oh." And then, "Sorry, sorry, Ralf, but I have to go." I remember putting down the phone and staring at it. The questions roiled around and around in my head for several minutes before eventually slowing down and finally settling into one image that has stuck with me ever since: a man, alone, sitting in a wheelchair in a spotlight on a stage, disheveled but still handsome, frail but still vital, ravaged but not defeated, his hands folded in his lap, his grey moustache lifting slightly as he attempts to smile at the audience.

On the caterpillar marches; he is halfway across the great stretch of concrete. In the distance, I see a group of students approaching. They are laughing and chatting, carrying books and enjoying the day. Even though they move at an easy pace, I can tell that the caterpillar will not reach the other side in time and risks being inadvertently flattened into oblivion. I rise to my feet, stride over to the grass, snatch up a leaf, and crouch down. Even in the presence of this looming giant, the caterpillar still surges ahead. I ease the leaf down to the

ground and maneuver it gently under his many legs; he hesitates at first, and then gingerly crawls onto its surface. Cupping my hand over the leaf and its passenger, I walk several paces into the damp grass and lower the leaf to safety. At first the caterpillar is still, and then his long body begins to move from the leaf into the grassy depths. And then he is gone; only the leaf remains. I watch and then rise to my feet. The students have passed; one of the college doors closes behind them. I feel the warm wind in my hair and the cool wetness of the grass through the open toes of my shoes. I am a youngish woman in blowing silk pants standing in the middle of a damp manicured lawn in front of an imposing, modern building, not moving, not going anywhere, just standing quite still. In that moment, I am in exactly the right place.

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