

Reflections

Cor Cordis

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Way back at the beginning of medical school, Gross Anatomy stood in front of us like a mysterious monolith. It was our first great rite of passage, that, let's be honest, most of us were very ill-prepared for. Before titles, before pagers, before children, before hair loss, before anything we consider normal today, we were handed the incomprehensible task of dissecting and studying a human cadaver. And after the countless hours spent studying anatomy, it was natural to walk away with the singular notion that Gross Anatomy was all about human anatomy. But, if you ask me, the greatest lessons it offered were less about the cadavers, and more about the people around us who were very much full of life. Many of my closest friendships began in the anatomy lab, and not surprisingly, because of what we shared then, many of them still thrive today.

I remember funneling into the anatomy building for the first time along with dozens of other students. Looking up from the ground, we shot shy grimaces at each other as we made our way into a grand hall. I found my assigned cadaver and quietly introduced myself to the other students in my lab group. Huddling together, our white knuckles clenched shiny new dissection kits and brand new dissection manuals. We passed around oversized latex gloves and braced ourselves.

On the table in front of us, a tall body lay still, covered by a single cotton sheet. It belonged to a middle-aged man who had died of liver disease. Surrounding us was a grid of 60 other tables, each hosting a different group of students, all frigid with anticipation. An array of pristine white sheets gleamed under a fluorescent buzz. The stale, pickled stench of formaldehyde filled our nostrils. We took solace in each other's contorted faces.

Our lab instructors were introduced, and course objectives were enumerated. Platitudes on doctoring were repeated. Our senior anatomy professor took stage to impart some words of wisdom. "Remember," he concluded, "these cadavers are not just your first medical books, they are also your first patients." With a wave of his hand, he then gestured the start of our first dissection exercise.

The minute we drew back the sheet, our audible gasps stopped us dead in our tracks. Our cadaver's skin was green! We were appalled.

"Before he died, he probably had jaundice," an instructor offered casually, as he walked by. "Sometimes the yellow of the bilirubin reacts with the preservatives, and it turns the skin that way."

We all stood there in silence, blinking at each other. Finally, someone offered an ice-breaker: "How about we call him Seamus?"

Nervous laughter ensued. And just like that, our first patient helped inaugurate our first bond.

In the days that followed, our camaraderie grew as we explored Seamus together. During each session, we spent hours making small, tentative cuts followed by awkward examinations with slippery, gloved fingers. What at first felt like an invasion of privacy turned into a confident and familiar rhythm, necessary for academic pursuit. A few weeks in, we barely noticed the transition from precise incisions with scalpels, to large cuts with blunt saws.

With the discovery of each new sight, smell, and texture, the human body was slowly demystified. As we progressed, all expectations of leaving the lab unsullied were abandoned. We accepted that our shoes would need to be retired right after the course was over, and that our scrubs had become immune to detergent.

At the end of each session, we covered Seamus meticulously, packing away some bits of dismembered tissue for future study and casually discarding the rest in a large communal trash can full of human flesh. On the way out,

we reminded each other to wash our hands. Just another day in the anatomy lab.

Soon, medical jargon began stumbling out of our mouths.

“Hey, you guys want to see a cool gubernaculum? Ours is pretty hypertrophied.”

“See that tuberosity? It’s just medial to that. No, no, more posterior.”

My, how impressive. We sure sounded like doctors, didn’t we?

As we peeled Seamus away layer by layer, we uncovered many oddities about ourselves too. “Have you noticed that Seamus smells far less repulsive than all the other cadavers?” someone once asked.

Curiously, other groups reported the exact same observation about their cadavers. Apparently, one got used to one’s own brand of decay.

“If it gets too bad, I usually turn my nose into my armpit,” someone admitted coyly. We all snickered, suddenly realizing that our own armpits were probably the best smelling things in the room.

At the end of the day, eating dinner together become a sort of ritual—in part because we oddly all found ourselves ravenously hungry every time we left the lab.

“It’s all because of evolution, you know,” someone offered as a theory. “Think about it, we are carnivores and we’re surrounded by flesh all day!”

Hovering over our appetizers, this was never a very popular thought to chew on for too long. Instead, we would quickly move on to the pertinent gossip of the day and burst out in raucous laughter, undistracted by our mouthfuls of delicious cheese steak.

As days turned into weeks, our once shiny dissection instruments turned dull and greasy with body fat and formaldehyde. The pages of our manuals became translucent and torn. Seamus’ once-white sheet turned to muddy brown. Eventually, we reached our last day of anatomy lab, and we faced our final hurdle: the dreaded anatomy final practical exam.

On that day, we gathered in the anatomy building just as we had on the first day. However this time, we felt less like freshmen and more like graduating seniors. While waiting, the line was abuzz with wisecracks and previews of post-exam celebration. Soon, this would all be over.

On entering the lab, we were once again confronted with a grid of cadavers, half-covered to expose only the areas of current interest. Our first patients were now to become our first exam questions.

Then, quite unexpectedly, something wholly unnatural occurred. For the first time in weeks, we were separated,

each of us directed to a different table. All of a sudden we found ourselves standing alone next to a random cadaver and a question card that posed something deceptively simple, like, “The string is tied around what structure?”

We would have two minutes to write an answer. Then a bell would ring and each of us would have to move on to the next table to face the next question.

For all its anticipation, the day went by in a blur. As luck would have it, my last question landed on Seamus. His glowing green skin provided momentary comfort. His heart was exposed and a string had been tied around the interventricular septum. And then, the question, “What runs through here?”

I blanked.

What runs through here? What kind of question is that? Blood? Septal arteries? Electricity? My mind flipped through the possible options. Where was my group when I needed them? As the clock ticked down, my frustration devolved into fear, then to panic. My heart raced.

Not knowing what else to do, I took a deep breath and looked up for inspiration. My eyes gazed around the room at my classmates, now my extended family. Each quietly focused on their own question, with that same dedication that earned them a spot in the very room where we all stood. Each remarkable in their own way. A unique cast of characters, now indelibly bonded through a most unusual saga. I framed that moment like a sepia photograph to admire over and over again.

In the last 10 seconds of Gross Anatomy, I looked at the blank piece of paper in front of me, picked up my pen, and with a glint in my eye, wrote down the only answer that made any sense, “Love.”

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