Little Lady

Category: Stories
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Growing up, I was the one thought to be the most squeamish about medicine—the needles, the knives, the musty smell of alcohol swabs and the rusty stench of blood. Whenever my mother, an ob/gyn, talked on the phone with her patients about menstruation, cramps and bloating, I'd plug my ears and wish for death by embarrassment. Once, standing in line for a routine TB test, I had a friend pull up a chair for me "in case you faint."

So my entire family thought it hilarious when I decided to go to medical school.

"You know that residents practice stitches on each other, don't you?" my cousin teased.

"Consider real estate instead," my grandmother advised.

In deference to her, I actually did go and obtain a real estate license. But I also persevered in the pursuit of medicine. So much about the profession appealed to me: the intellectual challenges; the lifelong learning; the intimacy found only in a doctor's office. Born into a family of physicians, I'd had a glimpse into their working lives that most people don't get, and I deeply valued what I saw.

My first hurdle in medical school, of course, was anatomy lab.

Four of us stood there at 8 am, fresh-faced men and women, evenly matched by gender and age, dressed in blue scrubs, plastic aprons and protective glasses. Our toolkits perched nearby, filled with shiny new scalpels, probes and forceps.

A million thoughts were racing through my head. The scene's macabre undertones suddenly reminded me of the film *Hostel*, in which sadistic people pay to kill and dissect unsuspecting tourists in Bratislava. I quickly tied the thought down and shut it away.

Then I remembered my mum's surprise that our gross anatomy lab would last a meager twenty sessions.

"In India, we dissected a body for a full year," she told me.

"How did the body keep?" I asked.

She grimaced. "It didn't."

Now, under the stark, yellow overhead lights, I tried to steel myself for this first encounter. What was I expecting? Body busted, blood encrusted,

heart still fluttering, fingers blue? I held my breath.

We opened the body bag.

In tune with the satisfying purr of the zipper, all the thoughts in my head fell silent. All I could hear was silence, all I could see was silence, all I felt was silence.

I realized that the body was that of a woman. I reached out and tapped her leg with my finger, to try and tell myself that this was real—that she was real.

Short and slight, she lay there calmly, as if asleep. We saw only her torso and legs. Her face was still covered by a cloth, to be saved for another day. Her skin was hard, pale, mottled, cold.

There was nothing between my two ears—no pretty poem, no joke, no metaphysical observation. There was nothing. That is to say, in another sense, there was everything.

Some experiences refuse to make sense until long after they've taken place. In my life, immigration from India has been one such experience. Illness has been another. When you're in the midst of them, these experiences feel like a total blur. Day by day, you wake up and go through the motions; you don't think to roll around in angst or to question God or even to give up, because there isn't any space for that. The feelings of anguish, or liberation, come later. It's the way the our minds work at understanding the hitherto unimaginable.

Back to gross lab. On the first day, our professor had said, "We learn to heal the living by plundering the bodies of the dead." Although I didn't realize it then, he could have told us no greater truth.

Day after day over the following weeks, my partners and I subjected the woman's body to relentless destruction. We broke her sternum, her clavicle, her neck, her knee, her ribs.

We used large helpings of black humor to get through it all. The skull lab we entitled "We came, we sawed, we divided." We couldn't stop laughing at that, though I know that a large part of our hysteria stemmed from panic at the sheer ludicrousness of the whole episode. The sound of metal on bone, shearing through dentures, and the sight of a human head supported only by a few neck muscles seemed crazy. Every act of dissection involved a personal wince because one automatically imagined what it would be like to have the saw or scalpel turned on one's own living flesh.

And yet each act of scientific brutality also brought us to respect the woman more. Every act of destruction against her body made us more introspective. We tried to imagine her as in life—healthy, vibrant and alive, not just a fully functional puzzle set. We wondered whether her palm calluses meant that she'd held an industrial job, whether her extraordinarily thin thighs meant that she'd been wheelchair-bound. We imagined how she had come to donate her body to science. We *adored* her. She became our "little lady."

And when the twentieth session arrived, and our time with her came to a close, we let her go as you would a friendship that falls away over time—regretfully, but resignedly. In my own mind, this relinquishing seemed like a second death, one as natural as the first.

Erma Bombeck once wrote, “When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, ‘I used everything you gave me’.” I never fully comprehended her meaning until my encounter with our little lady.

Everything about gross lab was transformative. The little lady taught me to love the human body in a way I hadn’t before. She taught me to redefine beauty—every wrinkle, fold and liver spot of it. She taught me how tough the body is, and how delicate. How much simplicity there is in complexity, and vice-versa.

More than anything, she taught me to be thankful. Thankful for my own mind, for my own body, for the gift of hers and for opening my eyes to these greater mysteries.

These lessons feel obvious, as if they were nothing at all—but that is to say, they were everything.

The silence I felt as we closed her up for the final time was very different from the first day’s silence. That first silence had felt like blankness. This was tumultuous, like white noise, in which all the sounds of the universe sweep through, leaving you somehow endowed with more clarity.

So thank you, little lady. Thank you so very much.

About the author:

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