

*"My sense of the humanity of our cadavers is evasive and shifting. One of the strangest things about dissecting a human body is the difference between a human body and a human being - in some ways readily identifiable and in others barely perceptible" (Montross, 24.)*

James, the director of the anatomy lab, beams brightly as he guides us into the strangely alien depths of the human cadaver. Without any apparent embarrassment, he fumbles under the loose skin at its crotch and comes up with the middle of a fleshy tube squeezed between two fingers. Yellowed and dull, it is barely recognizable as a part of a human body.

"Now," he says excitedly. "Here is the femoral artery! This thing provides circulation to the whole lower section of the body. But," he reaches down and hooks his fingers into stiffened flesh. "Look over here..."

I have no trouble believing his earlier confession of his past life as a Disneyworld employee, as absurd as the idea had seemed just several minutes prior. I can easily imagine him pointing out costumed characters on the stage to young children in the same tone of voice. *Now, over there is Mickey Mouse... and if you look a little bit closer, you can see the telltale forward-slouching gait that stems from his disproportionately large cranium -*

Perhaps it is his easy nonchalance, or the inhuman unfamiliarity of the cadaver's rubbery skin, or even the way our class is positioned - squeezed together and peering over heads and shoulders to see the great spectacle. But I do not feel like I am looking at a dead body.

The streaks of fat on the cadaver's chest muscles remind me of marbled pork roasts at the supermarket. Its head and hands are wrapped in white cotton fabric, obscuring the fine details of humanity and wiping away personal identity.

The moment of realization hits me halfway through the exploration. For Montross, humanity came in small details, in purple nail polish and detailed tattoos. For me, it is the body hair that does it - fine and pale white in the fluorescent lighting of the lab, they blend in almost entirely with the scurvy yellow of the skin. There are so many, dotting the forearms and concentrated in a trail down the chest. Pale liver spots are visible in the spaces in between. An old man and his knee replacements, laid out frail, bare, and open under almost two dozen curious eyes. It feels obscene.

There is a sort of cognitive dissonance that comes when viewing the informational posters that are scattered across the room. "Replace all organs and skin flaps to original position," one explains, matter-of-fact. "Spray each layer with Infutrace as you go." Human organs emerge vivid and bloody in my mind's eye, but here they are impersonal and sterile, puzzle pieces to be assembled and fit together by inexperienced hands.

"Original position." I imagine livers in esophagi, spleens ballooning up veins. *Less 'original' than 'correct'*, I think to myself. At least, I *hope*. Like forcing two mismatching puzzle pieces together, there seems to be such set order to the makeup of a human body that any aberration becomes terrifying.

This detachment seemed to contrast greatly with Geisel's recent shift towards personal connection within the anatomy lab, in which students are provided with obituaries and family accounts of the human being that had once been the cadaver that they are cutting apart and turning inside out. Those documents are laid out carefully on a lab table in the middle of the room, and despite my initial disbelief, I find myself drawn to them immediately by my own morbid curiosity.

Some are handwritten in looping cursive, others neatly typed and professional. All tell stories - of a soldier who became a physician after a harrowing near-death experience in the field, of a beloved grandmother who was cheery until the last, of a single father who struggled with alcoholism for decades. There are several hundred years of accumulated life laid out here, and I am struck suddenly, illogically, by the unfairness of death. These people had lived good lives, done great things. But human mortality had taken them, these walking, talking, loving beings, and reduced them to these shrunken corpses, laid out still and quiet on metal tables.

And then I come along. To see, perhaps, or even observe. But mostly, I feel that despite my best efforts, I gawk.

One stapled pad of papers tells the story of a mother. Large emphasis is put on her modest size, which belied her sheer force of personality and immense stores of love. There is an attached image in black and white of a smiling old woman with a poof of white hair.

Ten minutes later, I come across her name again, scrawled hurriedly on a tacky "Hello, my name is:" sticker that hangs several inches from a sea blue body bag. The cadaver within is tiny, barely taking up three-quarters of the available space.

The pieces are not difficult to put together, but I am shaken nonetheless.

Though this loving matriarch had long gone from 'she' to 'it', a human being transformed by time and nature into a human body, it feels to me like a reunion. I am seized suddenly by the urge to open the bag, rip the covering cotton from the cadaver's face, see that smiling old woman again. Bring her back to life, in some way.

Return her humanity to her.

I do not. I cannot. I look quietly for a moment longer, and turn away.