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How to Befriend a Cadaver

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First, remove the skin. It's easiest to pull it off in strips, peeling off layers of hair and fat like peeling an orange. It will be simultaneously gruesome and tedious. Your hands will cramp and your mouth will taste like disinfectant, but show no weakness. Your cadaver is testing you, waiting for you to succumb to the fragility of being alive and having senses. Go home that night and have a shower, but know the smell will not leave you for four months. This cadaver is yours for the term: male, aged 57.

Next, cut the ribs. Don't eat beforehand, because the smell of bone on saw will be shockingly familiar, smoky and rich, with an undertone of rotting sweetness. You will avoid eating meat for weeks. Rivers of embalming fluid will flow from the chest, forming small pools in the body bag. Rolls of paper towel and armfuls of rags will not staunch the flow. You have angered your cadaver, exposing it to the fluorescent-lit world. Give up, and work with wet sleeves. You have a heart to find.

The chest will take several weeks. The heart is blanketed in a layer of fat so thick and pink it re-



sembles muscle, and you will cut into it under constant threat of severing arteries. Your cadaver will remain indifferent as you unwittingly remove the entirety of the main coronary blood supply. During teaching sessions on this subject, you will sheepishly bring forward a plastic model, admitting the ignorance to which your cadaver bears witness. You have lost to your cadaver, and should learn to be more humble. There is so much you don't know.

During the lung dissection, you will consult an old anatomy textbook flecked with dried pieces of flesh from its lifetime of use in the cadaver lab. Your cadaver will reward you with pulmonary vessels shaped exactly like the pictures; you are learning. Admire how the lungs fit snugly into the chest, and for a second, let yourself feel a strange pride in the size of your cadaver's heart. Think about what once made that heart race, and consider how similar that heart must be to your own. Try to entertain these thoughts for only a moment, but be warned that they will pervade. During the evenings you spend at home with your head on your partner's chest, you will no longer hear his heartbeats as reassuring. Instead, each one will be a reminder that the only thing between life and death is the absence of this sound.

The abdominal dissection will reveal your cadaver's deepest secret, disclosed only to you and the surgeons who left those stitches in the abdominal wall. The tumors clustered around the vessels, intestines, and liver will be so large in number and size that they make identifying structures near impossible. The sticker on the table will impassively remind you that



the cause of death was pancreatic cancer. You will be the only one surprised by what you see.

With every structure found to be obscured by tumours, you will silently curse your luck and look on with jealousy at the others at their tables, easily locating gallbladders in the cadavers of those who died of heart disease. Each of these thoughts are accompanied by guilt. Who are you to judge what qualifies as a good death? The hours you spend painstakingly separating metastases will be your penance for not appreciating the gift your cadaver has given you. When you come to the pancreas itself, look for a tortured and enlarged organ, riddled with growths and partially eroding into the main abdominal artery. Appreciate that your cadaver could not survive this, and it was these very tumors that took your cadaver's life. If you feel overwhelmed by the burden of mortality at this point, take a break and go outside. Call your father, who is your cadaver's stated age. Tell him you love him, and that everything is fine, but will he please stop smoking? Then go back inside.

Leave those tumors intact and recognize what is really meant by the caution "treat cadavers with respect." Your cadaver has fought and lost more than you ever have. To remove those tumors would do a disservice to this battle, even if your students will gripe about missed learning opportunities and seek out other cadavers to learn from. Highlight the mass on the pancreas and use this chance to remind students of the mortality rates of pancreatic cancer. Privately, think about how you would feel if your death was equated to a statisti-



cal fact, but suppress the urge to apologize to your cadaver out loud.

Leave the face for last, to ensure you have sufficient skill to remove facial skin and tissue without damaging the delicate web of vessels and nerves that runs right underneath them. You will not think you have this skill, but do it anyway. Feeling nervous as you dissect the face is entirely natural. Remove the plastic wrap and cloth to reveal a kind, albeit sunken, face. Observe the strong jawline and cloudy blue eyes, and don't be surprised if you feel stubble when you put your hand against the chin. Do this final dissection with care, and note how easy it is to be alone with your cadaver. The violent colors of muscle and blood will have softened, and you may forget how many hours you have been in the lab. If you find a tattoo behind the ear, smudged little initials of someone's name, let yourself imagine that special someone putting their arms around your cadaver's neck. Appreciate, finally, that your cadaver has not always been yours, but more importantly, has not always been a cadaver. You might feel overwhelmed by the realization that your cadaver was a person, whose heart once beat as yours does now, who decided to give their body so you could learn. You will not be able to comprehend what went into making this decision, but it is a good exercise to try. Carry this realization into the remainder of your dissection, and do not be embarrassed to feel concern for what will happen to your cadaver as the term comes to an end.



On your last day, look closely at all the wounds you have inflicted, and give silent thanks to your cadaver for absorbing them without complaint. Wrap the hands and feet with damp cloth to prevent the structures from drying out in storage, and smooth disinfectant on all the muscles you have exposed. Acknowledge how much you have learned, and recognize that the cost of this education was a life. You are now finished. If you feel a pang of sadness as you zip up the body bag for the final time, you will know that you have befriended a cadaver.

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