

# Sure, I Can Handle a Dead Body!

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It was a dreary Monday morning, as are all Mondays, especially when they are the first Mondays at medical college. So here I am realizing a dream come true. Actually it was my parents who dreamt of me clad in a white overall with a stethoscope dangling from my frail neck and I was just unfortunate enough to pass an entry test that deemed me fit to save ailing humanity. My objectives were defined. I was to treat the ill. My patients would be people with problems, people with feelings. It went without saying that all my patients would be living beings. I learnt otherwise.

“He is a dissector, not a lecturer”, exclaimed my new found friend on my inquiring about the beast like creature who stood before the class. “A dissector, what is that?”, I asked, puzzled at the new terminology. The man standing before us was a brute, intently scrutinizing us with his beady eyes, studying the contours of our bodies, as if to assess which of us had enough flesh on our bones. With his stare he seemed to mentally place his scalpel at our frail breast bones, penetrating, slicing, reflecting the skin. As I was wondering, the beast made an inaudible sound, a sort of grunt. Then, looking into my eyes, he repeated it; “Do you want to dissect”. Had he just asked me if I wanted to die? He repeated his question. There was pin drop silence. I got up. My legs were numb my heart pounded in my chest, the smell of death seemed to embrace me. My body was saying no, my mind was baffled. I simply said, “Yes Sir”.

The dissection hall awaited us with its doors wide open. As we entered, the pungent smell of formalene made us gag in our throats and our eyes sore and red. Wait! Did I smell something else? A revolting smell was in the air. Could it have been somebody’s smelly feet or maybe the ladies forgot their deodorant. No! This smell was pungent and fishy; it was the smell of the dead bodies lying before us, on tables all over the hall. There were six in all, each covered with a thick blue sheet, which concealed their identities; waiting for us to begin.

The class seated themselves upon wooden stools, distancing themselves from the dead bodies.

Suddenly I was singled out again. The dissector ordered me towards one of the dead bodies. “Do you have your manual?”, he asked. I answered in the affirmative. “Good! Do you have your dissection kit?”. I placed the kit before him. I had always thought that this dissection kit was meant only for the dissection of frogs but I was now to learn that it was just as useful for dissecting humans.

The rest of the class was now seated behind me. Their lips were sealed and their faces looked pale as they eagerly awaited the curtain raising ceremony of exposing the dead body. I could not help wondering who the dead soul was and how he had ended up amongst us merciless, ruthless, medical students; who were about to embark on a mission of dismembering his body. “Oh Lord! Have mercy on this poor soul”, I whispered before grasping the corners of the thick, blue, moth-eaten cloth that covered his body. I hesitated for a moment and then with my eyes closed, I gently tugged upon the drape. I opened my eyes to see a young man, probably in his mid twenties, lying there silent and undisturbed.

“In order to expose the pectoral region, make an incision in the midline”. The dissector drew a line, from the jugular notch to the xiphisternum and signaled to me to make an incision. I lifted the scalpel and firmly pressed it against the cadaver’s chest. The sharp blade had no effect on his tough rubbery skin. I tried again with more force, but the blade couldn’t penetrate the skin. “Hold his arm and try again”, the dissector ordered me. I could not muster up enough courage to grab hold of his arm, so another student gingerly wrapped a tissue paper around the arm before holding it. On my third trial, I succeeded. But as the scalpel sliced through the skin and exposed the yellow fatty layer, the cadaver seemed to let out a groan. I looked in amazement at his face; his lips appeared to move and his face

went into a painful expression. Was I imagining things? No! Apparently not. My helper seemed to have witnessed the same series of events for in his panic he flung the arm right into my face. The cold and clammy hand of the dead body made contact with my mouth. I could taste concentrated formaline on my taste buds and the feel of a dead hand on my skin stimulated my sympathetic nervous system. I was scared, disgusted, horntied and I started spitting, choking and cursing all at the same time. So here I was behaving like a raving lunatic in front of my teacher and the whole of my class on the first day of my career as a doctor. I tried to save face by saying that I was allergic to formaline and rushed out of the hail.

Getting to sleep that night was a terrible ordeal. The cadavers haunted my dreams. I was all alone with them as they teased me, prodded me with scalpels, pinned me down to the dissection table and tore off my skin. I screamed and howled as they inflicted pain upon me but no one seemed to care. My teacher and my colleagues watched silently as my arteries and nerves were wrenched out of my body. The day's situation was reversed, as I was now dissected upon instead of being the dissector. I did not get to sleep that night.

The following morning I decided not to attend college. When my mother asked me if I was scared of dead bodies, I answered, "No, I'm not in the least scared. I can handle a dead body. I just need to come to terms with the meaning of death."

Sure, I can handle a dead body. Over my dead body, that is!