



The first heart I ever held

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I remember one of my first visits to the anatomy dissection lab—cold, sterile, humming with artificial light. The metal tables stood in rigid rows, organized as if a ceremony was about to begin. The air was thick with the sharp, unmistakable scent of a cadaveric preservation solution, a smell that would cling to my scrubs and linger long after I left. My peers whispered in hushed excitement, their voices a mix of anticipation and unease, eager for their first encounter with the human body. I wasn't nervous exactly; I was intrigued. Was this right? To cut into the body of someone who had once lived, breathed, and loved?

We were divided into small groups, each assigned to a cadaver sealed in a black bag, zipped shut. A simple tag was attached to the bag with just a name and age, the last remaining identifiers of a life now devoted to anatomical study.

When we opened the bag, I saw her: an old woman, her face dissected, skin glistening from the preservation fluid, her expression frozen in time. Her body

was silent and lifeless. I didn't know then that she would become one of the greatest teachers I would ever have.

Our professor guided us through the basics: the instruments we would need, how to approach a cadaver, how to differentiate tissues by touch. An artery doesn't collapse like a vein does, he said, and I repeated it in my mind, trying to anchor myself in the science of it all. Then, he told us to begin. This session was meant for us to familiarize ourselves with the body, to get past the initial hesitation.

I remember how my hands moved cautiously, feeling heavier than they should. What if I pressed too hard? Would I break something? The cold, rubbery texture of the skin, the resistance of the underlying structures—it was unlike anything I had ever touched before. I had once heard that this was one of those moments that unglued medical students from the rest of the world, the moment where an observer becomes an interventionist.

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And yet, as I unwrapped layers of muscle and tissue, fascinated by the intricate structures I had only seen in textbooks, another thought crept in: This was once a person. Someone who had walked, spoken, laughed. Why did I feel excitement? Was it wrong to be enthralled by someone that had once been alive?

I reached for the heart. It felt like the right choice, the emblematic center of life itself. Of course, now I understand that who we are, our thoughts, emotions, identity, resides in the intricate circuits of the brain. From the melatonin-regulated rhythms of our sleep to the executive functions governed by the frontal lobe, most would argue it is the brain that defines us. But back then, I had been told time and time again that the heart was what made us us. The metaphors had shaped my understanding: kind-hearted, big-hearted, broken-hearted.

So, I lifted it from the chest cavity, embracing it in my hands like something sacred. I weighed it, like Anubis. I observed it, like Galen. And I let myself feel it, as if the ancient Greek thymos, the seat of passion and emotion, still lingered within. It wasn't as heavy as I had expected. Its surface bore the scars of previous dissections. Its walls were thickened from hypertrophy. It was imperfect, but it was still whole.

This heart had once sustained a life. It had raced with joy, pounded with fear, steadied in moments of calm. It had kept a rhythm on an ordinary Tuesday, working without thought, without praise. I knew its anatomy, arteries, chambers, conduction pathways. I could recite its metrics: EKG patterns, stroke volume, ejection fraction. I understood its pathology and the tools we used to visualize it: Doppler ultrasound, echocardiography. But did I know this

heart? Did I know the person it had belonged to? Medicine teaches us that to care for patients, we must understand their heart, not just as an organ, but as a part of who they are. Why should it be any different in the lab? Standing there, holding that silent heart in my hands, I felt humbled. I felt thankful.

As I said, the bag had a tag: a name, a number, a brief identifier of a life now entrusted to our learning. And for that tag, I am grateful, our professor insisted that we address them by name. Always. It was a small gesture, a reminder that this body had once been a person, not just a specimen for study.

But beyond that name, I knew nothing. I would never know her voice, her laughter, her struggles, or her joys. Was she a doctor, guiding patients through illness? A teacher, shaping young minds? A mother, holding her child's hand through life? A daughter, cherished and protected? Was she loved deeply? And what did she love? Books, music, art? Did she find comfort in a morning cup of coffee, in the embrace of someone dear? Did she have a roof over her head, a place where she felt safe? Had she fulfilled her dreams, or had life left her with unfinished stories?

I would never know. But as I looked closely, searching for traces of a life I would never fully understand, I saw scars—faint, pale lines engraved into the skin, silent bystanders to past wounds. Where did she get them? An accident, a surgery, a childish injury? Each mark told a story I would never hear—fragments of a narrative lost to time. Studying her hands, I wondered, had they written letters, played an instrument, held another's hand tightly in love or in grief? The cadaver in front of me was silent, but she had once lived a life as vivid and complex as mine. The heaviness of that realization settled in,

filling the sterile air of the anatomy lab with something more than science.

Of course, looking back, this might sound far too mystical for an early-career medical student. Back then, I may not have fully grasped what I realize now, but that moment planted a seed, one that would grow and shape the way I experience medicine. From the anatomy lab to the hospital wards, from cadavers to living patients, I was taught to see beyond the organs, beyond the clinical signs. To see the person in the body. To see the heart in the heart.

A lot of what I learned that day has stayed with me, continuing to unfold in ways I never expected. Cadavers are the best teachers and the most patient of patients. They do not wince when we fumble with our instruments. They do not ache when we make mistakes. They remain silent, yet they reveal so much.

I might not have known her story, but she is now part of mine. I carry her with me in every echocardiogram I analyze. In every pulse I feel beneath my fingers, I remember my teacher. Thank you.
