

## First Year

### 1. A beautiful slice of dead penis

"I will eat anything that I can't name."

I looked over, but I knew only John Hunter would say something that vain. Sure enough, I saw him, grungy even for a medical student, pressed up against his corpulent cadaver, gloved hands raised as if he were about to demonstrate complex surgery for our edification. A crowd gathered, and I moved away from my own cadaver for an impromptu study break.

"You point it out, and if I can't name it -- I'll eat it." He punctuated his boast with a perfunctory shrug.

John had to be the smartest twit I'd ever met. I had no idea why he would want to rile us all up, but I'd never known him to waste brain space with extraneous trifles like empathy. Of course no one took him up on his offer. We all knew there weren't any body parts he didn't know, the guy was ridiculously brilliant. His conceit mocked the group. Stressed-out students converged before him more like a mob than an audience.

"Vessels, organs, muscles, nerves -- take your pick," John continued. "If I get it wrong, it becomes my late night snack."

The grumbling of the crowd sounded ominous. We'd all been there for hours, inhaling the vapors that effused from our pickled cadavers, our fingers pruned beneath two or three layers of gloves, our nerves unraveling while each hour brought us ever closer to our final gross anatomy exam. I decided to poke a hole in John's proposal if only to create a release.

“You’ll eat any body part or just the one you get wrong?”

He hesitated before answering. “Just the one.”

Dismissive murmurings filled the air. Just the one? The crowd thinned, and that might have been the end of it, but Margaret Jones spoke up.

“That’s not fair. You can’t eat the parts you don’t know.”

Curious faces regarded her, and any amusement ceased when met with her austere frown. Of course Margaret was serious, Margaret was always serious. As much as John had no social skills, Margaret had no sense of humor. She kept her body rigid, but her eyes revealed her thoughts to anyone still unclear: this was all a nefarious plot to eliminate any body parts he didn’t know so our instructors couldn’t ask him to identify them on the exam! Most dismissed her, but her paranoia resonated with the more anxious students in our class, and they grumbled along with her. I had been hoping for a lighthearted study break, not a geek feud.

“Come on, any body part.”

I had enough. I broke away from the crowd and headed back to my cadaver to join my lab partner Sujay Patel, one of the few remaining sane people in the room.

“I think I’m losing it.”

Sane was a relative term with this group.

“Seriously, Seth, I’m not ready for this exam.”

"You're fine. We're both going to pass." I used my most reassuring tone -- smooth as a baby's liver -- but I couldn't tell if he bought it, so I changed the subject. "Where did we leave off?"

Sujay searched inside the cadaver as though he'd stuck a bookmark in there. We resumed identifying the branches of the internal iliac artery and had made it up to the internal pudendal artery when Benjamin Chen poked his head between us.

"Hey, guys, Homer's looking pretty tattered. What you did to that poor man -- hey, why did you name your cadaver Homer?"

I spoke up before Sujay could respond. "It's a tribute to the famous Greek poet whose works have been dissected by each generation's elite for centuries."

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. "Excellent. Well, good luck on the exam tomorrow."

"More like the exam later this morning."

He whipped his head around and cursed the clock on the wall. "It's already past midnight? Oh crap, I haven't even started reviewing the extremities yet."

I watched Benjamin scurry over to his cadaver and noticed Sujay scrutinizing me.

"I thought we named him Homer after the fat guy from The Simpsons."

"Yeah, we did, but now I wish we'd come up with something more profound. This guy donated his body to science, and we shredded him." I peered inside Homer. With most of his organs removed, our cadaver resembled a dugout canoe.

"I doubt Benjamin really cares," Sujay said.

“I care. I’m going to miss good ol’ Homer. Do you think there’s anything left of him they can identify for the exam?”

Sujay lifted the greater omentum and poked his hand through a hole. “How about the Fran foramen?”

Fran Sussman was another one of our lab partners. As an accomplished memorizer, she was a credit to the team, but when holding a scalpel, she was a danger to herself and others.

I examined the ragged defect. “How did she even make that hole?”

“She slipped.”

“With her whole fist?”

Sujay removed his hand but maintained his serious expression. “Whenever I dissected with her, I always kept to the other side of the table.”

The image of lanky Sujay cowering from pint-sized Fran tickled me, but we had work to do. We proceeded from the abdominal vessels to the head and neck. I suggested that we tackle the cranial nerves first.

Sujay chimed right in. “Oh, Oh, Oh, To Touch And Feel A Girl’s Vagina, AH!”

He loved the mnemonic to remember the cranial nerves and placed a fair amount of exaltation into the AH.

“Ah, indeed,” I said. “But I still like my mnemonic better.”

“How does yours go again?”

“Oh, Oh, Oh, Tell-me, Tell-me About Forsaking Abstinence. Good Virgins Are Horny.”

Sujay repeated it to himself, listing the cranial nerves while counting with his fingers up to twelve.

“Okay, that works, except Tell-me is not really one word.”

“If AH can be two words, Tell-me can be one.”

He squinted as though deciphering complex polynomials. “Fair enough, but why are good virgins horny? Wouldn’t bad virgins be horny?”

“Depends on your perspective, I guess. Also the glossopharyngeal nerve starts with a G.”

“True that. Hey, can we do my favorite mnemonic?”

As if he had to ask. We broke right into song.

“C3, 4, and 5 keep the diaphragm alive. S2, 3, and 4 keep the penis off the floor.”

We repeated this several more times, each time louder than the last, our giddy mental exhaustion fueling the level of silliness. We might have been chanting this all night, but Fran and her study partner Jan Zhen joined us, and their higher pitch gave the rhyme the cadence needed to reach harmonic closure.

Jan Zhen had started the year as one of my least favorite people, but my opinion changed once I got to know her. She had the misfortune of being assigned to the cadaver next to ours where Margaret ruled the roost. Margaret enforced a rigid façade of solemnity at all times while



in the anatomy lab. Confusing proper respect with excessive seriousness and eager to prove her moral superiority by spewing offense at every opportunity, she responded to any inclination towards mirth with gasps of horror.

“Don’t even think of naming the cadaver. He already has a name,” Margaret said.

“Yeah, no kidding, but we don’t know what it is,” I argued. I failed to see how calling our cadaver “the dead guy” was somehow less dehumanizing than giving him a nickname. My group agreed with me, and Margaret eventually abandoned her crusade to save us. Despite suffering her disapprobation, I remained satisfied that we viewed Homer as an important team member, maintaining respect and appreciation for his final altruistic act even while we dissected his remains with varying degrees of competence.

As one of Margaret’s acolytes, Jan spread the gospel of no enjoyment equals respect and remained miserable well past the first set of exams. Her moment of truth came with the genitourinary system. Our class proceeded with the tacit assumption that the female medical students had dibs on slicing the male genitalia, and after watching what Fran did to Homer, I could only hope that her future husband remains faithful for eternity.

I scanned the room for a female cadaver to examine but instead noticed Jan standing alone, hovering over her cadaver’s groin, her forehead dotted with sweat. Moving closer, I found her frozen in place, penis in one hand and scalpel in the other, stymied with complete mental block. I removed the scalpel from her hand and performed a transection, slicing what resembled an oozing, rotten salami.

Jan gawked at me. “You’re a guy. How can you do that?”

"It's just another part of the human body." I didn't really believe this but, wanting to disguise my queasiness, went with the first profound thought that came to mind.

I returned the scalpel, and she fixed on it, stupefied.

"Come on, Jan. When are you ever going to get another opportunity like this?"

She cast a wry grin and made a second transection as though she'd spent the previous year interning at a deli counter. The cut exposed a clear view of the tiny dorsal vessels and nerve, the two bulbous corpora cavernosa, and the corpus spongiosum with the urethra exposed at the center in a flattened O-shape as though partially startled. This was a beautiful slice of dead penis.

"Nice," I said.

"I can't believe I actually did that." Jan flashed what would be the first of many broad smiles to come my way.

Our chanting completed, Jan and Fran swung around to the foot of the table. While Jan bounded over in her usual chipper manner, Fran dragged, showing the wear of post-dinner marathon cramming.

"We came to check Homer's legs."

"Which part?"

"I want to make sure I can pick out Tom, Dick, AND Harry."

The mnemonic set Sunjay off. There would be no stopping him until he had completed his task. "Tibialis posterior muscle, flexor digitorum longus nerve, tibial artery, tibial nerve, and the flexor hallius longus." He beamed like an eight-year-old having recited his times tables, until a flash of panic all but consumed him. His gaze locked on to mine. "Wait, is it Dick over Harry, or Harry over Dick?"

"Dick is over everything except the muscle, so it's Dick Harry. There is no Harry Dick."

"Ah, no Harry Dick, I like that."

Fran looked up while gliding her finger over Homer's shin. "What was that about Dick?"

"It's Dick over Harry. There is no Harry Dick."

Fran tapped Jan on the arm to get her attention. "There is no Harry Dick."

"There's...what?" Jan had buried her face deep within her notes and blinked at us as though surprised by the light of day.

"No Harry Dick," Fran repeated, barely suppressing a smile.

"I've got to remember this." Sujay closed his eyes as though in a trance. "No Harry Dick. No Harry Dick."

Fran and I joined the refrain: "No Harry Dick. No Harry Dick."

Jan studied the three of us, her brow furrowing ever deeper. "Okay, someone needs to explain about the harry dick."

"It's right there, Dr. Zhen."



Sometimes we called one another by our future doctor names. We did it partly to be funny, but mostly because we liked it when people did it back to us.

Reaching over, I pulled the stringy brown nerve back into position. "It's supposed to loop like this. Someone cut the damn thing by mistake."

"Oh." Jan slapped herself on the side of her head. "The flexor digitorum longus nerve, Dick over Harry, no Harry Dick, right, right, very funny. Come on Fran, let's work with my cadaver, yours is a mess."

Fran followed her without making eye contact with Sunjay or me. We all knew who cut the damn nerve.

Sunjay clasped his gloved hands together and stepped over to Homer's head. "So what should we review next?"

"I think I'm going to pack it in."

"What?"

I could see the accusation of betrayal in his eyes, but I remained resolute. "My goal was be in bed by midnight, get six hours of sleep, and still have time to review in the morning. Now with showering and winding down time, I'll be lucky if I get four hours sleep." I reconsidered my math. "Well, I suppose I could sleep in, but I don't feel that confident."

"You could skip showering."

The stench of first-year medical students was so overpowering that most of us had lost our olfactory sense months ago.

“No. I tried that once and the stink festered in my mattress for weeks.”

Sujay let his shoulders droop. “Okay, I still need to review the extremities, so I’m going to stick around a little longer.”

We stared at each other. The finality of it all rushed over me, my emotions a curious amalgam of apprehension and relief.

“What are you going to do after the exam,” he said, “when gross anatomy is finally over?”

“My laundry. Then I’m going to burn my hamper.”

Sujay had an oddly shrill laugh for such a tall guy. “Yeah, okay. I plan to get drunk off my ass.”

He stooped over Homer, and I started to leave, but I had one more thing I wanted to say.

“Catch you later, Dr. Patel.”

“Kick ass, Dr. Levine.”

I couldn’t help but smile. One day, somebody will call me that for real.