

Thank You

By Andrew Lane

This summer I embarked on my four-year journey through medical school. After years of anticipation, the first day of medical school arrived. This meant one thing, the first day in the anatomy lab. The experience of human dissection is the first time when medical students realize they are entering a career unlike any other. Only a select few people ever would get to experience we were about to share over this summer. There were 120 of us sitting there on the first day, no one really knowing what to expect or even knowing each other's names. Despite all of this, we were going to do something totally unique. However, this was not your first day though was it? No, you had been waiting for weeks, maybe even months for us. The anticipation must have been much greater for you.

Our anatomy professor got up to the front of the room for an introduction and an overview of the course. He went over the usual first day of class briefings: syllabus, schedule, grading, and attendance. Then he did something I never expected, he started reading us letters from your family members. The letters asked us to respect their loved one and told of your altruistic nature while living and how you were not about to let something as inconvenient as death stop your generosity. The letters were all very moving and brought the professor to tears as he finished.

We marched to the anatomy lab in silence and nervousness as we descended to the basement. I stood in front of a "cadaver tank" with my dissecting group. My group opened our tank and pushed the levers to raise the cadaver to the top of the tank. However, as the body rose slowly up, it did resemble Dracula rising from his coffin. Your body was there right in front of me now, completely covered in a large white towel; you looked like a mummy; you must have felt ridiculous. The smell that arose with you reminded me of the frog dissecting in high school. Needless to say, every time we came to visit, you greeted us from out in the hallway. It was like walking up the driveway at my grandmother's house and being greeted by the smell of fresh pies.

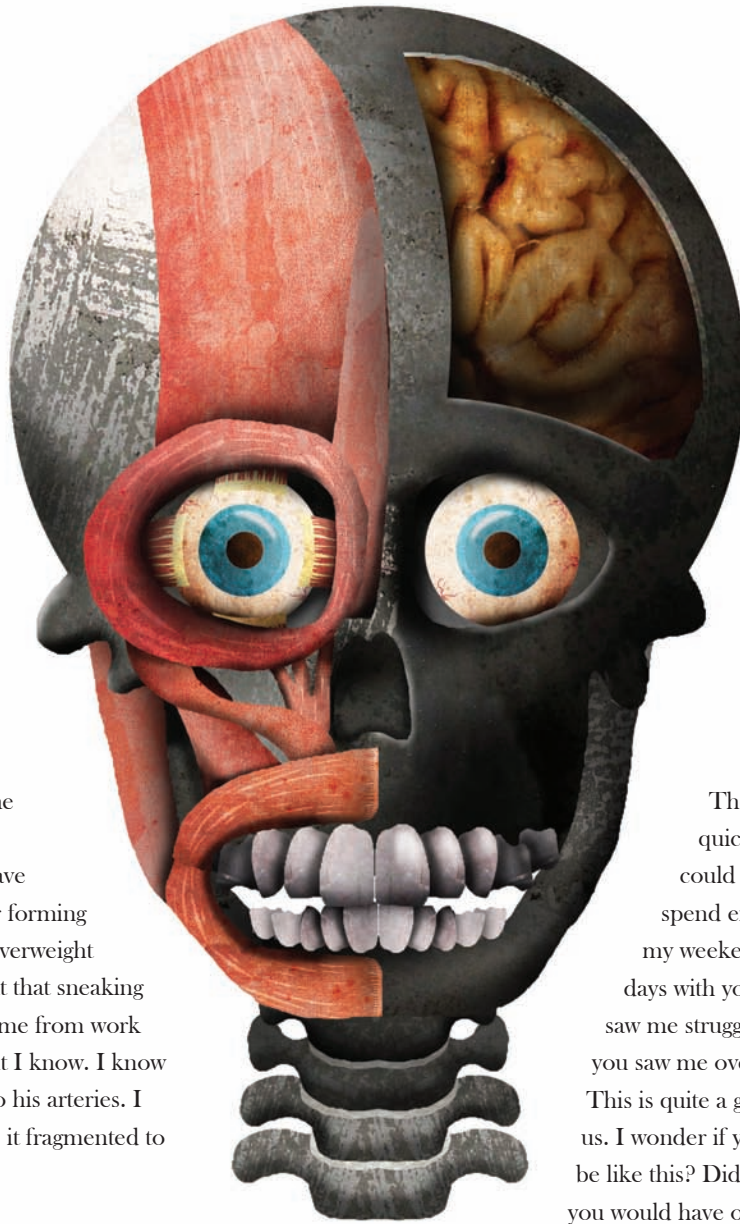
The next day, we unceremoniously returned to the anatomy lab after lecture for our first dissection. We had each read the

instructions for the first day's work, removing the spine. Now, I have never cut into a human with anything before and was a bit concerned when I was given a box of basic hand tools from WAL-MART. It almost made it seem like we were going to help you build a bookshelf or hang a picture in your metallic condo. The interior design of cadaver tanks was a bit Spartan I decided. I drifted off as I began to ponder which metallic side would be the best for the accent wall. Then I began to wonder if I would need special paint to use on steel. The sounds of power tools brought me back to the present.

I had always heard about medical students naming their cadavers. I was assumed that this was how medical students were able to cope and it was the beginning of them distancing themselves from death so they could sleep at night. Indeed, some did name their cadavers, but I believe it was more for the convenience of saying a name. I never did name you despite us spending more time together than with my girlfriend. I wondered if she would begin to get jealous of so much time spent with another woman. The reason I never named you was because I believed that if I were to name you Mary, then you would forever be Mary to me. You see, by giving you a name I would be robbing you of your identity. If you have no name you are a woman, you are a mother, you are a manager at the bank, you are someone's wife, and you are a person. The moment I call you Mary, you cease to be that person.

That is a funny thing about death, no matter who you are, you are still dead. You are just as dead as the guy next to you and all those things you did in your life cease to exist because you cease to exist. The woman in the corner may have lived a good life, but never been religious and the man to my left could have been a Catholic priest, and to my right a devout Buddhist. Where were they now? Were they in some sort of Heaven or Nirvana? Were they watching me as I dissected their bodies or were they just lying there, devoid of life, not knowing they were dead? Where were you all those nights?

I felt I knew you and the other cadavers better in some ways than those who loved you, and sometimes even better than you. The man with pancreatic cancer might have never told his family what was going on for fear or worrying them about



his eminent demise. The woman with a replaced heart valve might not have known she had a tumor forming in her abdomen. The overweight man might have thought that sneaking fast food on his ride home from work would go unnoticed, but I know. I know what the fast food did to his arteries. I could feel the plaque as it fragmented to my touch.

I know what years of smoking did to your lungs. You probably thought that the black lungs in the jar in your high school health class were there to scare you, but I know that your lungs look worse. I know what you did to yourself. I know many things about you that you never knew and by realizing this I know more about myself.

While I do know all of those things, I also know many more things that will be useful throughout my life. Every time I meet with a patient with a distended colon, I will see yours. Every time I try to picture the liver, I will see your liver when I close my eyes. Every time I try to describe the effects of smoking I will see your shriveled lungs and the look of pain upon your face. You see, you have taught me something no one else ever could have. You are my first patient and you are taught me more than any patient ever will.

The summer passed by rather quickly didn't it? However, you could never say that we did not spend enough time together. I spent my weekends, weeknights, and exam days with you. You saw me cry, you saw me struggle, you saw me angry, and you saw me overcome my own limitations. This is quite a gift you have given to all of us. I wonder if you ever imagined it would be like this? Did you know of the influence you would have on the living? I would like to think so, but if not let this letter show that you have shown yourself to be truly altruistic, not only while living, but even in death. I admire your gift and I hope that when I die I can look back and say I have given as much as you.

So my friend, we are at the end of our journey. You are cremated and physically gone from my life forever. But do not think for a moment that you are dead to this world. The knowledge you have given to all of us will continue to make a difference in this world for many years to come. I would like to think that you are in some sort of afterlife, looking down at me and smiling at my gratitude. I really hope this is true. But, if I am wrong, and you are not, then no matter, because in the knowledge you have given me, you are immortal. I hope to one day meet you and personally thank you, but until that day, goodbye my friend and thank you.