

ROOM 8

by demee williams

(NONFICTION)
Editors' Choice

A long and eerie hallway carries me to a maroon-colored door nestled in the basement of Morrill Hall—Room 8. The door is crowded by a formal sign that reads, “Restricted Area: No Visitors without Permission of the Lab Manager,” and just above the handle is a numbered keypad that tastes of security, or perhaps protection. As my hand touches the warm, sticky metal of the doorknob, it takes a great deal of momentum to ease it forward, but I’m in. The room is an L-shaped tomb with eggshell white walls and three tables for each teaching station, which are surrounded by stools with skeletons perched in every corner. The eyes of the room come from the dry erase boards that loiter above each station. I feel the cold, still air permeating into the cells of my skin and the stinging of fluorescent lights in my contracting pupils. The musky aromas of formaldehyde and ethanol quickly pollute the cavities of my nostrils, preparing me for what rests inside.

The basement windows are all securely shut, and thick blinds cover their glass panels, making me feel trapped. As I anxiously shuffle into the room, a sea of white scatters before me—faceless students in lab jackets, a few stained, others decorated. All are hovering over elderly human carcasses in numbered bags to be poked, prodded, and observed by the eyes of the youth who study their anatomy. Death clearly surrounds us, but it is now so far gone that no one seems to notice. I keep telling myself that I’m here to learn. There is no time to try and analyze the situation. If I want to pass this course, I’m going to have to focus, because everyone knows it is all about the grade. It is always only about the grade, and today we are studying the nervous system.

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“Quiet down now class, quiet down.” Mrs. Harper waddled across our 2nd grade classroom. Hair in short curls nestled her head as if the rollers still remained. Everyone was boasting, trying to prove they lasted the longest in the

Oregon Trail computer game that had been given to us as a history lesson for the weekend.

“I made it all the way to the Plains before the oxen died from bein’ thirsty,” one said.

“Well, I fought off a whole tribe of them Indians wit only my team!” said another.

“I did it better. I got to the Snake River. HA!” Yelled my attention-hog-best-friend Kayla.

“The next one who makes a sound loses their recess time today, now sit down!” Mrs. Harper had had about enough. “Thank you,” she said with a nod. “Now, as much fun as the

game on the computer may be, it wasn’t so thrilling for those who actually lived it. Thousands of people died making that journey, and others did whatever it took to stay alive.”

That was the first time I had ever heard about the Donner Party. At eight years old, I had seen my granddad two years earlier in an open casket, but I remember thinking it looked nothing like him. He was gone even though his body remained. As I listened to Mrs. Harper explain that they had to eat the dead in order to stay alive, I felt I’d rather die. I could imagine those people carving into the flesh, dragging the knife tight against the bone to get the most meat, the way my mom did when she prepared Parmesan chicken for dinner. I couldn’t wrap my mind around a person preparing a human being the way I watched her carve raw chicken all those times—such a foreign concept for an eight-year-old.

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The Nervous System

My fellow students now all have lab manuals clinging to their hips and a firm grasp on their pencils as they wait

for our teaching assistant, Jane, who finally appears in a slender opening. She is a four-foot-ten, thin framed, half Asian woman nearing her mid-20s, with a mouthful of perfectly aligned candy chicklets and swoopy bangs that carelessly fall across her forehead. Her turquoise necklace is just visible beneath her ponytail. Jane's slightly lower and somewhat scratchy tone of voice is surprising for her size, although the quick confidence of her voice cannot help but to distinguish her intelligence and experience. As she begins speaking, the tips of her fingers note each word as they tap in front of her, nearly throwing her off balance as she attempts to gain a few inches by elevating onto the tippy-toes of her Coach flats. She says, "Oh, oh, oh, to touch and feel virgin girl's vagina, ah heavenly." Mid-way through jotting down the sentence, my pen loosens in my hand and my eyes look up through a furrowed brow. Others follow suit as our eyes glue to her. She gives a conniving smile and says, "Now we're listening, aren't we. But this isn't a joke, you need to write that down and learn it—it will help you all to memorize the cranial nerves of the body. Don't just stare at me, start writing!" Who knew science geeks were capable of constructing perverted memorization mechanisms.

Our pencils stop short in our manuals, and our attention is now fixated on the man who confidently strides to the middle of the room. This man screams of money, power, and the city, though I doubt if he has had a taste of either for some time. Dressed as if he has fallen out of *GQ Magazine*, his black pinstriped suit and white tie peek out from under his baby blue scrubs. His deep, buttery voice, like the sound of warm milk running down the back of your throat, has lulled me into a glazed stupor. He is our phantom lab professor and the man who oversees all the cadavers—Dr. Jones. Jones proceeds to announce, "I've caught a few of you signing up for more than the limited three open labs a week, and if I see your name more than that I will black it out. Are we clear? Also, a heads up for the exam: I have asked another TA to supervise, and you will keep a cover-sheet over your answers at all times. Let's try to be honest, because we have a zero tolerance policy for wandering

eyes. You will immediately receive an "F" and be reported to student conduct. That also goes for disrespecting our donors in any way or bringing people not enrolled in Biology 315 down here during open lab. This is strictly prohibited, and necessary actions will be taken if any of these rules are breached. Thank you." With that, he turns on his heels and beelines straight back to the mysterious door within which only he and his staff are allowed to venture. His scrubs make a swooshing sound as his legs cross, but his tall frame never falters; even the black curly lock pushed to the right side of his forehead doesn't dare to fall out of place.

The week before, I caught him in the hall and he was surprisingly open about the process of obtaining and keeping the cadavers here at WSU. They were not only for our undergraduate course; the med students he teaches aid him in dissecting the bodies for us to observe. Dr. Jones said most people who are interested in donating their bodies to science come directly to him. They know they are at the end of their lives and want to give back, sometimes in the only way they can. The bodies are usually kept at WSU and the University of Idaho for about four years, and are then cremated and either returned to their families or placed in a plot the school owns in Seattle. He said he sometimes gets to know these people before their bodies are under his ownership. Perhaps that's why he's as protective as his locked rooms, keeping their bodies and the memory of them safe.

Resuming her authority, Jane motions our heads toward her with the flick of her wrists and proceeds to lean over the remains of a once elderly man, now looking as if he'd been attacked by wolves and then dried into jerky for their

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next meal. She tugs at the Spinal Accessory nerve located at the base of the open cavity of his skull. As I stand there, wedged between frantically moving pencils and faces, I can't

help but wonder how the man died. Most of the skin on his face is still intact, frozen and slightly browning, but the flap of skin that once covered his forehead now rests below his left eye. The muscles of his chest and ribcage are exposed and all of his organs have been removed, except for one lonely kidney that still clings to the right side of his thoracic cavity. A knit blanket covers his lower half from the waist down.

My eyes search his face, noting the acne scars deserted on his cheeks like a pet cemetery, one visible bushy eyebrow, a skin-colored mole near the corner of his mouth, and the grey whiskers perched on his chin. His lips look like crumbled paper, and the still-visible calluses on the palms of his hands make me think he worked hard during his life.

As we move to the next body, Jane's voice is drowned out under the blanket of my thoughts, and I feel as if I knew this man. His face appears kind and oddly warm, though the room feels warmer than he does when I search through the cervical plexus on his neck for his Transverse Cervical nerve.

My thoughts quickly fade as two girls next me begin whispering about nightmares they had about the hemi-head we reviewed last week. They are both blondes, one bleach and the other dirty. Sorority T-shirts peek through the front of their jackets, and decorated skinny jeans tuck into their brown and black mid-calf Uggs. One chatters on, "I dreamed that the hemi-head controlled the other cadavers and started ripping off my skin and then limbs, and I had to tell the hemi-head where every piece went in order to be put back together."

I'd guess nearly 40 percent of our class consists of this type of girl—pre-nursing students who I secretly hope don't get in. I'm not sure if I would feel comfortable with my life in their hands; I'm not even sure a few of them could take care of a pet. Although, that is a little rough, given that a number of driven Greeks are pulling high A's in one of the most difficult courses on campus. But the real cutthroat, no social lives, serial students are the pre-med students applying this upcoming fall. The grade is everything, along with

an annoyingly friendly relationship with the course's professors, who can write letters of recommendation. Everyone knows that without either of these things they can kiss the dream of becoming a doctor good-bye. Everyone in this room is afraid to fail. So much, in fact, even the naturally smart students will use Adderall on a normal basis, a subject that many will talk about openly before exams. Every one of these students has a seller, a price, and a moment of desperation. Every one.

Moving to the third body, Body #16, laying face down with his back exposed to us, I see every

fat deposit hollowed out, including the man's ass. The only skin that remains is on the soles of his feet and the tips of his fingers. It's haunting that his overgrown nails still remain, yet he has been peeled like a banana everywhere else. Even his bone is exposed in several places. "The Peduncul Nerve is called our Happy Nerve," our second of three TAs, Erin, explains in her monotone voice. This TA can put a coke addict to sleep with her forgettable looks, uninterested demeanor, and overall grouchiness. "This is the nerve that allows you to feel the climax of an orgasm, and for you ladies, it's the nerve you feel if you adjust yourself on a bicycle." Our entire section falls quiet, not necessarily embarrassed, but shocked that anything even remotely as graphic as that could ever come out of a mouth such as hers. I am in denial when Erin makes her thick eyebrows dance over her silver-framed glasses, and a crooked smile tiptoes across her make-up-less face. I'm beginning to wonder if I have these people pegged accurately.

As we approach Body #19, currently my disclosed favorite among these strangers, butterflies gnaw away at the lining of my stomach. I prefer to spend the majority of my time observing him, but I feel mixed emotions of nausea and warmth. In the smallest way, he makes me think of my

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father. Perhaps it is the shape of his face, the sun-stained tone of skin scarred from years of working outdoors, or the small patches of grey and white whiskers that have sprouted on the point of his chin. He looks to be about 65, much older than my own father, but the way his faintly plump cheeks wrap around his face and cushion the edges of his jaw is just like my dad, and in that regard he's timeless. The one eye that still remains is a clouded blue that peeks out from the fissure of his eyelid. I expect he was a huskier man, but by looking at his torso, stripped of nearly all fat and a good portion of muscle, I find it hard to judge. There are also the deep brown stains on his mandibular teeth, and his flesh-colored lips that pull back at the corners of his mouth, making his face look more pain-stricken than peaceful. A hint of emotional residue still clings to him—he reveals his humanity.

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The dim light of my bedside lamp burned through my shut eyelids, awakening me instantly after my mother switched it to life. She leaned over my groggy young face and whispered, "You have to get up. Grandma just died a few minutes ago and we're all going up to the ranch." My eyes brimmed with tears and quickly flashed to my digital alarm clock. It was almost 2 a.m. on December 9, 1999. She'd been sick for two years with uterine cancer, and for the last two months all three of her daughters and their families were with her every day. She had just turned sixty. My parents had helped her run the wheat farm after the passing of my grandfather, so the journey to her house was less than two miles away on the back roads through the countryside of eastern Oregon. When we arrived, my mother's two younger sisters and their husbands were already waiting for us in her bedroom. I was eleven years old the first time I saw a freshly dead body, one that hadn't been tampered with for an open casket showing. My grandmother was different. She was still warm, her fingers gripping tightly around the edges of her down comforter and her eyes half open, cloudy blue versions of what they once were. She somewhat resembled the woman I knew and loved, but it

wasn't her anymore. She was gone. Nine of us linked hands in a circle around her lifeless body, and we prayed like the proper Catholics she raised her daughters to be. "Hail Mary Full of grace...now at the hour of our death, amen."

As Charlie, the undertaker and longtime friend of my grandmother, entered the room, we all left him alone with her and watched as he emerged a few minutes later rolling a black vinyl bag on a metal cart in front of him. He walked slowly, hunched over the cart; I knew he was much older than my grandmother had been and I could see the liver spots glowing on his frail hands and bald head. I remember wondering how he could run a mortuary for so many years, how he could see death every day and not miss out on the living. Most of all, I wondered: When he finally died, who would roll him away on a creaky cart as his loved ones looked on?

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Erin is hastily reciting the names of structures we soon will be tested on, occasionally noting details that may help us remember. Sliding the dull point of her metal probe across the nape of his neck, just below his skinless laryngeal prominence (Adam's Apple) and then down through the striations of his sternocleidomastoid muscle, as if she was slitting his throat. I realize she does this in an attempt to bring our attention to the abnormal size of his lymph nodes. She explains that the reason his lymph nodes are swollen is because he had contracted lymphoma, which ultimately led to his death—perhaps years before his time. Erin tells us this without a hint of emotion lingering in her voice. She has successfully disconnected herself. She's now in a reality where it is no longer who they were but what they

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are. Just as Dr. Jones told us before the labs commenced, "It is nothing to freak out about, you all will get used to it soon enough. Just remember to respect our donors, but never forget the reason they are here."

The Circulatory System

Isolated hearts everywhere. At each station, there they are, in labeled tupperwares, similar to the ones my mother uses for leftovers in her kitchen. The tubs also house isolated arms, kidneys, penises, and lungs. Now I knew why hearts were absent in nearly every body I'd encountered. Here they are, probably the most important organ in the body; the organ we associate with feeling love as well as losing it. Did these sad, shriveled chambers hold more than just blood? Did the people they belong to experience love in their lives?

The human heart it quite an amazing thing if you think

As I hold an
enlarged heart
in my palms,
I can feel its
weight in my
wrists.

about it, almost a single perfect life. Beating more than 72 times a minute on average, more than 35 million times a year, and more than 3 billion times in the average life span. Apart from the brain, the heart is the most complex organ. There are more birth defects in the heart than in any other part of an infant body, 1 in every 150 births, which is said to be because it must develop faster than any other organ. It is also how we ultimately determine death, apart from everything else; it is how we validate life. As I hold an enlarged heart in my palms, I can feel its weight in my wrists. Even such a powerful organ will meet its match.

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Two years last January, I missed a call from my mom's cell phone at 11 at night. It was my first year of college but I knew my parents never stay up later than 10 p.m., especially never on a Monday night. She couldn't call me from her cell phone at home, because we live in the country where it's impossible to get service. Something was wrong. When I was able to reach her 20 minutes later she answered, calm as could be, and said in a strong voice, "Your dad has just had a heart attack." I immediately assumed the worst as frantic thoughts began to pour through me; I thought I'd

lost my 47-year-old father. When I began to cry she tried to assure me he was in surgery and that he'd be okay, but I couldn't listen. I was in hysterics and went home as quickly as school allowed. When I arrived, he was already walking around the house and trying to work. Later I learned they hadn't cut into his chest, they just went through an artery in his groin and wedged stints into the opening of his heart to keep his cardiac arteries free from clotting up again. Tiny pieces of plastic tubing will carry out their days inside my father's heart, which, like his emotional disposition, has always been the weakest part of him. Maybe it's true what they say about loving with your heart. Maybe his just doesn't work as well as everyone else's. Or perhaps I was never sure what it was capable of until then.

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I slept well past noon many summer days when I didn't have to help my parents on the farm. I have always loved when the light of summer bleeds through my drapes and tickles my nose. The summer before entering high school, I stumbled out of bed and noticed that the sun wasn't as bright as I'd known it to be and the birds outside my window were strangely silent. I headed straight for the refrigerator, which sits in plain view of our gravel driveway. As I opened the sticky white doors, I could hear the screaming under the hum of the antifreeze. My eyes darted to the window but I wasn't prepared for what I saw. The lamb I decided not to take to a 4-H livestock auction the previous month was pinned on its back by a burley man in a John Deere cap and worn-out Wrangler jeans. As I walked toward the window the sound was gone, and my eyes locked in on the glint of the butcher's knife. The lamb's head jerked against its body as thick, blackish-red life poured from its jugular and washed the white wool of its chest. I could see the constant flow of blood as it pulsed its way out of my lamb's sturdy body and pooled in the gravel. Its heart killed it faster. The pulsations didn't stop until there wasn't enough blood to return.

The Reproductive System

This is the last lab of the semester, the last anatomy lab of my life, I expect. The TAs are looking forward to this lab, especially Jane; she has dibs on the female genitalia. As she leads us to the covered body in Bag #2, Jane wears a proud grin. She pulls at the metal zipper, unveiling a body wrapped in a white blanket. I can immediately tell by the size that it is a woman and she is decapitated, and I wonder what her head is being used for instead. As Jane finally lifts the blanket in a swift, magician's hook, she reveals what is known around the lab as the "angry vagina." We call it that because the larger lips, the labia major, have been dissected out, but "the labia minor along with the clitoris, vaginal orifice, and even the perineal body (the taint) can be identified," she announces with a smile.

Johnny, a boy I often study with, a fairly easy going, somewhat openly perverted kind of guy, whispers, "Oh god, that's someone's grandma's vagina...I can't look at that!" Another boy next to me loudly whispers, "That's some dank pussy." But even worse, some just look intently in deep thought. I feel that, despite my occasional moments of emotional connection, I've been fairly good with seeing mutilated dead bodies on a daily basis, but this is almost more than I can handle. However, the "angry vagina" is only the beginning.

In our lab manuals, one of the structures we are advised to learn and identify is the hymen. The TAs tell us they can't be seen on any of the female cadavers so there most likely won't be a question about it on the test. A sorority girl, much like the one I'd encountered weeks ago, jabs her friend saying, "Yeah we can't see it, because they're all old and have done it." Her friend replies, "Well my friend from the Tuesday 9-12 lab said you can't see the hymen on any of the figures. Even the models are whores!" At this, they both let out a raspy cackle and a few weak coughs, probably from being beginner smokers.

As the lab wears on, we finally reach our last station, which is fully dedicated to male reproductive organs. Jen, our third, more down to earth TA with a lip ring and dyed

red hair, teaches our final lesson. She eases us into learning each structure. We see a few penises on the plastic models and then on a body, where we unfortunately get familiar with the intimate details of some elderly man's scrotum. Then, from below the table, Jen pulls out a tupperware full of isolated (severed) penises. One is bent, and she says it "was probably broken from being jammed in and out of these tubs." This makes the smart boys behind me laugh, and I imagine their immaturity is one of the reasons why this lab is likely the most action they've ever seen.

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As it turns out, Biology 315 wasn't just about the grade, angry vaginas, or isolated, bent penises, although that is the last and most prominent thing I remember. It was an examination of human life, both internally and externally. The semester was full of crude jokes, childish behavior, and just

trying to keep our heads above water; trying anything to disconnect ourselves from situations and realities that, even as college students, many of us weren't ready for. I still see some of the friends I made in that class around campus, and as we wave and say our hellos there is the occasional joke or reminder of the experience we shared, an experience few are able to comprehend. No matter how hard we all tried to separate ourselves from the situation, death permeated all of our experiences in that lab. When I imagine the doctors and nurses who will eventually emerge from these undergrads, I know that what they will come to understand is even above my own comprehension. In their careers, death will only come with life. I realize that wondering about the lives of those donors is nothing compared to actually knowing them as human beings, before they become carcasses on your lab table—before they end up in Room 8. |