

Cadaver Girl

by Ms. Meghan Doraty

Late at night when all the other students go home, I sit with cadavers. The anatomy lab aches with darkness, a wide, hollow cavern lighted only dimly by a ceiling bulb that swings in the draft of the air con. Around me are bodies laid out on stretchers, shrouded in white sheets. I have my pathology textbook open beside Fern, whose last name is Hiatus Hernia, because she suffered from such before the embolism took her at eighty eight. I cannot see her face. A white sock tugged over her head obscures her features. Her chest has been cut down the middle and the skin and muscle spread open like a door, her internal organs, grey and dry, resting primly in their places. There are pieces of Fern that have been tied together, loose arteries and veins tagged with red twine to keep from sagging. The students have had their hands in her for twenty years. Her heart has been removed.

I share her table.

In my mind, Fern was like my grandmother, like the kind of adorable old lady to collect small china figurines of poodles and mice and display them on the windowsill.

Fern would be the type of person to wear lavender hand cream and to hold your hand when you are sad. Now we all smell like fermenting.

*

I perch on the examining table and watch my family doctor mentally pluck the DSM IV off the bookshelf of his brain and rifle through it. Major Depressive Episode. Very common for medical students, he mumbles.

1. Depressed Mood

When I come home from classes, I sit in the bathtub until the water turns murky and the light outside my window dims. It makes me feel like I am in a dark river underground. The River Styx, perhaps, a crevice between the living and the dead.

2. Psychomotor agitation:

I sit in the back of the class by myself and chip off my red nail polish. I like how it looks like I am flicking dried blood off my fingers. Then I go home and paint my nails so I may chip it off tomorrow.

3. Decrease in appetite nearly every day:

I examine the specimens of neoplasms in the anatomy lab. The adenocarcinoma of the colon, compressed between two plates of glass, resembles an underwater flower, its many branches like polyps of the sea. Imagine that growing inside of you. Who can eat with these thoughts to grip you?

4. Insomnia nearly every day:

My midnight trysts with the cadavers in the anatomy lab. We are quite good friends and I have grown to worry about them. How long will they be with us?

5. Recurrent thoughts of death:

In class we learn about new pathologies – chronic lymphocytic leukemia, cholangiomas, disseminated intravascular coagulation and so on and so on – and I wonder which of these that I am learning about today will be the one to kill me tomorrow.

*

The dean, a cheery chipper man with nothing on his mind but the peppermints in the admin office, stops me in the hall and wants me to represent the faculty by attending the memorial service for the cadavers donated over the past ten years.

In the park where we gather for the memorial, a fine grey mist drifts around us, the icy breath of a specter against my neck. The brilliant autumn oak leaves crackle with the cold. I wish there were someone to hold my hand.

We sit on folding chairs that sink into the wet sod and listen to a boy from my class play the bagpipes. I know him because sometimes he sits in the anatomy lab and peers into cadavers. His forehead wrinkles when he is being earnest. The sound of the bagpipes is

faint and deep like a ship's horn blowing in from sea. We are all at sea. The dean says a few words and then the anatomy professor. The cadavers are essential for our student's learning, they say. A great sacrifice has been made. We recognize the dead.

A woman named Elisa gets up and stands before everybody. She gets up and talks about her mother, who gave her body to the medical school. Elisa wears a shawl thrown across her plummy breast and long, iron grey hair that is tangled now in the wind. She has a green tattoo snaking down her arm and rings with pearls and diamonds on her fingers. She looks as though she may own a crystal ball. She says her step mother always believed in science. Her mother died of an aneurysm but Elisa believes that there are times when she can feel her here with us.

*

After the service, Elisa walks away and I follow behind her through a grove of willows to a row of town houses. She walks up the steps and turns the key to go inside number fifteen. I hide behind a willow and count for twenty seconds before gathering my courage and running up the steps. I ring the doorbell vigorously.

She answers the door and stares at me. I didn't notice before but her eyes are different colours. One is smoke grey and the other is hazel.

"Hello," she says, in a tightly pleasant way.

"I was at the memorial," I say by way of introduction. I have scooped up a handful of autumn leaves and am crushing them in my fidgety way. The smell is like ancient parchments and the spirits that inhabit them.

"You followed me home."

"I know your mother."

"Do you?"

"I call her Fern but that is not her real name, is it?"

"It was June."

I inch a couple steps closer to the open door, warmth wafting out. "I'm sorry she died."

"That's very kind." Elisa adjusts her shawl. The mist has settled on her hair and it sparkles as though spider webs weave through it.

"What was she like then? In real life, I mean."

"What is she like now?" Elisa counters.

"She's a bit worn out, to be honest," I say.

"She's been with you for a long time."

"What will happen when she gets too old?"

"You talk as though she isn't dead."

"I don't know," I say. I crumble my leaves.

"I never knew her," says Elisa. She blows on her hands. They are red and chapped.

The willow rustles, their boughs are long bony fingers they drag along the ground. I believe they are called weeping because they mourn for us.

*

The next week, I visit Elisa and she sits me on her chesterfield and feeds me milky tea and refrigerator cookies. I flip through a photo album of her mother, mostly a collection of ruddy coloured Polaroid's from the 70's. Fern, or June, has a nutty complexion and curly brown hair she hides behind. She has a shy, sad way of looking at the camera as though she distrusts it.

"My mother was a very private person," says Elisa, across from me. "She used to lock herself up in her room for days and not come out for anyone."

"What was she doing?"

Elisa shrugs. "She was depressed. Nobody knew what to do so we let her be."

I munch my cookie. It is cold and crisp.

"My kids love those," said Elisa.

"This is the first home made baking I've had in ages."

"Don't you have a mother to bake for you?"

I shake my head.

"Well that makes two of us. At least mine passed away before my lymphoma happened."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Elisa waves her hand around as though chasing away a foul odor. "We all have to go sometime."

We sit in silence as I eat another four refrigerator cookies, dropping crumbs on the glossy pages of the photo album.

*

I visit June and tell her about meeting her daughter.

"I like her a lot," I said. "I'm sorry you never really got to know her."

But June keeps her own counsel.

The boy with the bagpipes slouches in the doors of the anatomy lab and slumps in front of his cadaver.

I pick up my pen and start making notes.

"Hey," says the boy. "Do you want to see an inguinal hernia?" He points to his cadaver.

The boy's forehead is wrinkled with earnestness.

"No," I say, even though I do. It's just that I've never associated with the other students.

They call me Cadaver Girl. I turn my back on him.

*

Elisa is in the cancer center getting her chemo. I put on my short clerk's coat and drop by for a visit. Her room is bright with vases of flowers. She's perched on the edge of her bed, listening to an iPod while her IV drips. She looks anemic.

"You have a lot of flowers," I say.

She pulls out the ear buds and pats the spot on the bed next to her. I sit down, stiffly. If I were to touch her, she might break.

"I like flowers. They mean someone cares."

I try to think of the last time I got flowers.

"Except for lilies," continues Elisa. "My coworkers got me a bouquet of lilies and I banished them to the corner of the nurse's lounge."

"Why?"

"When my mother died, nobody brought flowers to her funeral. It was just me. So I went a little wild, I think, and ordered 88 bouquets of white lilies. I remember driving to the funeral with them all crowding in my car and the smell was like death. I stopped and puked out on the highway."

"Why didn't anyone bring her flowers?"

"People are assholes," said Elisa. "I swore I wouldn't die alone like my mother."

I fidget and chip at my red nail polish.

Elisa patted my hand. I ache to hold her own pale hand within mine and warm it up.

"I'm sorry, dear," Elisa says, "You're too young for all this."

"I should go," I say.

She nods and lies back in bed, squishing her ear buds into place. "My kids made me a chemo playlist."

"Bye Elisa."

She waves faintly.

*

I stop by the nurse's lounge and pinch a lily. I tuck it in my coat pocket and take the underground route to the lab.

All the cadavers are zipped up in their plastic bags for the night. I find number 43 and unzip June. I take her hand – gloved in white cotton – and hold it tightly in mine. It is still and cold and does not warm. I rest my forehead on the edge of her table.

The boy with the bagpipes comes in and sits down. He is whistling.

"Hello," I say, my head in my arms, my voice muffled.

He doesn't answer.

I sit up. "Would you like to see a hiatus hernia?"

He looks me over, suspiciously.

I wrinkle my forehead.

He snaps on some gloves. "Let's see."

I make room for him at the table.

Before I leave for the night, I tuck the lily inside her internal cavity, close to the embolus – blood red like a cluster of pomegranate seeds – that killed her. It will grow brown and crinkled and its petals will wilt and fall but it will mean someone cared. I wonder, as I flip

the lights to the anatomy lab off, what flowers will grow inside me.