

CADAVER REUNION

By Larry Zaroff

The cadavers gathered in early September. After a cold dark summer, a lonely time, each alone on a gurney, shoved into a narrow cage, stiffened by cold and formalin, they were glad for the well-lit anatomy laboratory, though one or two expressed exasperation at the fluorescent lightening which gave their skin a bluish pallor. Moose had hoped for a bit of sun but all the windows were doused with silent shades. On first arrival early morning, covered with dismal sheets, they lay quietly as the anatomy instructors inspected them, a process not to their liking.

During the night, the lab locked—as if anyone would penetrate a room full of twenty-five ungraved dead - the leader of the cadavers-now undraped - soulfully elected for his knowledge of neuroanatomy-- a former professor of neurology at this very medical school --subsequently to be named Moose (he was a large man, well developed) by his medical students, was highly critical of these casual teachers. “That was the problem,” he said, “They are casual. OK, I understand that the gross anatomy class is routine for them but yet where would they be without us? We are dead serious as we expect the students and instructors to be. Excuse my small pun.”

Eloise, during life, a librarian, one of the few females, and thus deferred to, was always allowed to speak though she often interrupted others, pointed out, “they don’t even think of us as whole bodies, to them we are just parts, to be exposed, laid open to the drying effect of this dehydrating room.” Cassius, who had lived as an executive of a non-profit, named so by a student who managed to complete his premed studies while majoring in the classics and thus considered by the admission committee as desirable since he added some diversity to a class dedicated to molecular biology, asked, “and what do they say of our souls, our spirits, our memories, our ripples. Nothing. We will leave ripples, not for them but for their students, no our students. When she finds an enlarged spleen in a sick child, a pediatrician will remember mine. When the orthopedist deals with a torn rotator cuff, perhaps he will remember one of our shoulders, and when a surgeon transplants a heart, she will recall that the first heart she touched belonged to Eloise.” Eloise who never admired Cassius and believed his arrogance superceded his acquaintance with Socrates—she had studied Plato as she sat behind her desk-- smiled.

Moose said, “let’s forget the professors, focus on the students. We need to hope for a group that will treat us with respect, as we were when alive, as if they understand why we offered our bodies to them. Think back to our motivations. We believed our physical bodies were no longer important, that these bones and muscles could do no good in the ground or as ashes. Better that our corpses should be first patients, teach, make better doctors.” Cassius said, “yes I agree, the key—to be their first clinical experience. To approach us with compassion and empathy not only for what we were, not just because of our donation, but for what we are, still human with feelings that exist in the memories of our families and friends, and for the memories that they will carry away from this anatomy lesson.”

Eloise, forgetting her dislike of Cassius, said, “the lessons learned in this class will not just be of the intricacies of the brachial plexus or the blood supply to the small bowel but more important, I hope the students will imagine our lives and come to believe that medicine involves more than science. Charlie, the only funeral director ever to offer

his body to anatomy, said, “yes I hope our gift reminds them that they too must give to their patients, taking time away from rearing children, from watching baseball, leaving early, missing family dinners. And when they find an anatomical anomaly, something not in the atlas, they will start to realize that to practice medicine is to live with uncertainty, often not knowing the diagnosis or the best treatment.” Moose, looking directly at Cassius, said “I hope a few students will express their gratitude, not just for us but, as Epicurus said, for their own happiness. They need to learn early that in this tough business of medicine expressing gratitude to patients and friends and teachers will help lift the veil of loneliness, because medicine is solitary work.”

The following morning, the cadavers re-covered, silent, awaited their students, four to each. Moose, yearning to teach again, wondered what his pupils would be like. As a professor he had had the bright, the dull, the kind, the nasty. Now he hoped that his final teaching assignment would be appreciated and that he would not be forgotten, not just his organs and tissues, but him, Moose. The students, in green scrub suits, shoe covers, books in hand, filed slowly in, some moved to the bulletin board to find their assignments, while others stood back awaiting Professor Falls introduction. Falls, in his late seventies, bald, looking tired, white shirt, red bow tie, and blue suit—known to previous students, never to approach a cadaver, was blunt.

“You are here to learn the body, a vast task, one that you will be tested on in detail. At the end of the course you will have forgotten most of what you have memorized. My hope is that in a moment of decision, alone, in a crisis you will recall one bit that will save a life. Now the shoulder.” For the next 45 minutes Falls, less lively than his surroundings, made the anatomy of the upper extremity so boring, without anecdote, without mention of function, never discussing common injuries or treatment, that all but a few students lost interest, not just in the shoulder but in gross anatomy as well. Linda, destined for Moose’s table, paid attention. She was certain that surgery was her destination.

After the lecture the students moved to their designated cadavers. Joining Linda were Isaac, planning for psychiatry, Herman, whose parents both practiced obstetrics, was disappointed with a male body, and Evan who loved music, only in medical school to support his real career as a cellist. Linda, who had already reviewed and absorbed the features of the arm, said, “I’ll start,” to the relief of her three partners. Following the instructions in the dissecting manual, she picked up the knife without hesitation, making an incision through the skin over the shoulder carrying it down to the fascia over the deltoid muscle. Isaac turned away, Herman wandered over to Eunice, and Evan focused on the clock. Moose thought, “well one of four is not bad.”

It was at night that the cadavers chatted across their tables, most feeling the relief of finally being put to some use. Eunice was angry at her four male students who left her naked while dissecting the arm. “Where was their courtesy, would they do that to their sister or mother. I lay on the table, breasts and pubis exposed, silently cursing. I was helpless, those pricks. Worse no instructor came over to cover me. Bastards. My abdomen is full of metastases from ovarian cancer—I hope they enjoy that.” Cassius who had a soft spot for Sappho’s poetry, commiserated: “Eunice, I am sorry, wait till they try that on a living patient. Someone will get his butt kicked.”

So went the weeks and months. Each day the cadavers, parts subtracted, became smaller, as organs were exposed, deeply dissected, discarded. The students thought less

and less of their cadavers as whole, now focusing on the final exam. Every night the cadavers became more and more depressed knowing that the end was near, when they would be separated, cremated, alone forever. Little was said as the extremities disappeared, the abdomen emptied, until the heart was removed and placed on a table away from its geography. That night Charlie, who knew better, who understood the metaphors of the heart as the seat of intelligence, love, the soul and spirit—were just that, metaphors, cried. In embarrassment he turned to Moose, a scientist, “I know, I know, but I can’t help myself. I think of my heart, which makes me miss my wife and children.” Moose, used to consoling his patients with incurable neurological diseases, said, “I understand. Your feelings are normal, we all feel the loss of our hearts. If only our hearts could be weighed against our good and bad acts, as the Egyptians did, to determine our ultimate fates. Alas, dear friends, I know better.”

On the Saturday, prior to the last week of class, at seven A.M. the instructors assembled in the lab to remove the top of the skulls, exposing the brain. Moose, if he could, would have protested at the sloppiness, some assistants damaging the dura covering the brain. He wanted to shout, “this is me, my intelligence, my personality, my memories—be careful.” That evening was a time for quiet, all the cadavers were in shock contemplating their no future. Hardly a word was said. But Sunday night was different. Cassius, as classicists are wont to do, was thinking long term. “Look this is our last gathering, our final reunion. Let’s think positively. The Greeks had a great revival and we will too. I predict whenever this class meets, years later, when they have their reunion they will talk of anatomy lab, how hard to learn so much, how painful Falls lectures were.” “Yes, Moose said, they will tell their students and their children how tough anatomy was in the old days. I know what is coming to future anatomy classes. Forgive me but you need to understand that in some schools students will not dissect, only view our pre-dissected organs. Eventually we will be replaced by CT scans, MRIs that show function, ultrasounds, superior atlases. Students will spend more time in the operating room observing living anatomy. Keep in mind though, that we, in the future, will be considered pioneers, ultimate donors. We have paved the way for the future of anatomical studies. Students and teachers will write about us.

Monday morning, just prior to the start of class as the students strolled in, an electrical outage occurred. In the dark the cadavers could hear Charlie shout, “we have done our part now get out there and do yours.” When the lights came back on the students cut out their brains.

Author Bio: Bio: Larry Zaroff has had five careers. He focused for 29 years on cardiac surgery, including a stint as director of the cardiac surgical research laboratory at Harvard. There, his work centered on the development of the demand pacemaker. He spent the next 10 years concentrating on climbing and did a first ascent of Chulu West, a 22,000-foot peak on the Nepal-Tibet border. His third life has been at Stanford, where he received a Ph.D. in 2000, and where he teaches courses in medical humanities. His fourth career has been as a writer, publishing in the NYT science section, The Pharos, Pulse, Atrium, The Hektoen International Journal, and others. He now works one day a week as a volunteer family doctor. He has received awards as the outstanding faculty advisor for the Human Biology program and in 2006 was honored as Stanford's Teacher of the Year. [Zaroff Email](#).