

## First Patient

Her skin was leathery and weatherbeaten, wrinkled with age. I guessed she was maybe sixty or sixty-five years of age. I couldn't know how old she was for certain — we hadn't been given any of her notes. She seemed pretty well-fed for someone her age, though; she didn't have the harsh, sharp thinness typical of someone of her advanced years. She lay still on her back, ready for us medical students to learn by examining her; I couldn't help thinking how wonderful she was for letting us practise on her like this. I looked down at her and she stared vacantly at something between herself and the ceiling, her eyes glassy, beady and fragile-looking, her mouth agape, her skin discoloured, her abdomen sliced open with layers of her skin, fat and abdominal muscle hanging off either side of her like shutters, her serpentine intestines snaking around inside her and her brown liver tucked up just visible under the overhang of the bottom of her thoracic cavity.

The nauseating stench of the formaldehyde preservative filled the room. Looking at the gut and gristle inside the old lady's belly was the simple part — internal organs are fascinating and alien enough to not mean anything to the cognising part of the brain. It is difficult not to be unnerved, however, when you look at the utterly motionless face of a person who has ceased to function, ceased to laugh, ceased to cry, ceased to live, ceased to *be*. I had used the word "expressionless" in the past, but it then seemed as though I'd used the word incorrectly the whole time; if you ever saw the eerie, still nothingness that is the face of a dead sexagenarian you'd know that that's the only thing you could ever accurately describe as "expressionless".

Discolouration and damage were visible on her chest where, as our lecturer speculated, she'd probably been the recipient of some futile cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Her arms felt indescribably weird: there had been no part of my previous experience I can draw from to describe how a muscle feels when it's completely heavy and unresponsive, not even the slightest twitch or the tiniest contraction. I prodded cautiously, but no matter what I did, she stared silently into mid-air and stayed still.

I never really felt like a medical student until that afternoon in the dissecting room. I guess poking around in dead people tends to do that to you.

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