



2009

Gross Anatomy

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Recommended Citation

Scheer, Kodi. "Gross Anatomy." *The Iowa Review* 39.3 (2009): 139-149. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.6766>

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KODI SCHEER

Gross Anatomy

Gabe follows me around the house. He's the cadaver we're dissecting in *Gross Anatomy*. The first time I see him, he's looking through the kitchen cabinets. His back is to me, exposing the muscles we teased apart in lab today, the trapezius and latisimus dorsi. A flap of gray skin hangs from his side, cut unevenly, how a child with his first pair of scissors might do it. I'm still a novice with the scalpel.

When he finds the bottle of cheap brandy I use for cooking, he pours himself a glass. I add some salt to the pasta I'm boiling and tell myself to get more sleep. I promise to go to bed early tonight, close the textbooks by midnight. But he's still there, sipping the brandy.

"Should you really be drinking?" I ask.

"Why not? Doesn't really matter anymore," he says. He's facing me now, completely naked. In the lab, he was covered in a muslin sheet with frayed edges. It's hard not to look at his shriveled genitals.

"Didn't you die of liver failure?" I say.

"Maybe I did. No harm now, young lady."

"Fine. Just don't scare my mother. Wait," I say. "You didn't—you didn't come to take her, did you?"

"I'm no grim reaper, I'll tell you that. I'll be good."

I start the cream sauce and cook the shrimp. For my mother's birthday, I'm making her favorite meal. There's a cake, too, but her day nurse bought it from the bakery section so I feel guilty. My mother used to be an excellent baker.

Gabe leans on the counter. He takes dainty sips of the brandy. I finish the shrimp alfredo and after a moment divide it into two portions. I don't want to encourage him to stay.

In the dining room, my mother tries to light a candle, her hand trembling, the flame dancing. I take it from her and light the tall candles with images of saints printed on the frosted glass holders, the cheap ones you find in the grocery store. A whole cluster of them. They fill the middle of the table like a fiery bouquet.

"There," she says, flipping the light switch.

“I don’t know if I can see my food.”

“Then look,” she says, “harder.” She speaks softly, slurring the words together.

“Sit, Mom, it’s your birthday,” I say, serving her first. I overcooked the noodles to make them easier to chew. She shuffles to her chair and I cut the fettuccine and shrimp into small pieces, making vertical and horizontal swipes, then diagonal cuts to get the last of it.

“That should do it,” I say. “I used your recipe.”

Gabe strolls in. He’s poured himself another glass and joins us at the table. My mother doesn’t react. She doesn’t even see him. I wind a single noodle around my fork and twirl it until the noodle forms a little nest. Since my mother takes so long to eat, I have to make a game of this. I would’ve taken her to a nice restaurant, but she’s too embarrassed to eat in public. People stare.

“You see patients today?” she asks, using as few words as possible. It’s getting difficult for her to speak.

“No, not exactly. We won’t see real patients for a few semesters.”

“What did you do?”

“I had biochem and anatomy lab. We looked at the muscles of the back today.”

Gabe smiles and takes a drink. His lips are pinkish gray and tight against his teeth.

“I may do that,” my mother says, “donate my body.” With her blank expression, another symptom of the disease, I can’t tell if she’s serious or not. So I change the subject.

“Do you like the shrimp?” I ask.

“It’s lovely.”

I twist another noodle around my fork. It’s mushy and limp.

“Who is this one?” I say, pointing to the nearest saint candle. I hold it up for her to see.

“St. Vitus. Protects against the shakes,” she says. She pauses from the effort. “In the Middle Ages, the St. Vitus dance.” She giggles. My mother doesn’t laugh very often. She begins to cough, then gasp for air. I almost expect Gabe to take her away with him.

This isn’t the first time this has happened. She calmly takes a sip of water, the liquid sloshing in the glass from her tremor, and swallows the food.

“Kate,” she says. “No ventilator and no feeding tube. If it comes to that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. You understand? No tube.”

“Fine,” I say. My promise is hollow. I can’t watch her die.

Gabe burps. He covers his mouth.

“Excuse me,” he says.

In lab that day, we all donned crisp white labcoats and hovered around the stainless steel tables. The smell of embalming fluid made me a little dizzy. We would meet our cadavers soon.

My lab partners, Rachel and Ali, stood a few inches from the table. Rachel kept clasping her gloved hands together, rubbing the latex nervously. Ali reviewed our anatomy text, nodding his head a lot.

“Male, right?” he said, referring to our cadaver under the muslin sheet.

“I think so,” I said. “He seems pretty flat—no breast bump.”

“Should we uncover him?” Ali said.

“Sure,” I said. “Rachel, are you ready for this?”

“Yes,” she squeaked.

I peeled back the sheet. The body was positioned on its stomach, its back to us. It hardly looked human. White hairs sprouted from his fleshy back. The skin was greenish gray and wrinkled like old leather. Although his face was pressed against the table, I had to look at it. Eyes closed, lips slightly pursed. We were all relieved that he didn’t have the death scream, mouth wide open, fighting for the last breath.

“That’s one ugly bastard,” Ali said.

We already knew his cause of death, liver failure, so he wasn’t emaciated like the cancer bodies. I was pleased with his musculature. He would be an excellent specimen.

“Thank you,” Rachel whispered to him.

“What?” Ali said.

“I was thanking him for his sacrifice. Thanking him for donating his body so we can learn. He’s like an angel.”

I’d memorized the lab instructions and watched the video at least four times, so I was getting impatient.

“We have to stick this block under his chest for support,” I said. “You guys lift his head and shoulders and I’ll position the block. On three?”

Ali grabbed the shoulders while Rachel gingerly touched his head.

“One...two...three.”

His upper body was heavier than we’d expected. There was a large incision in his neck where his blood had been drained. Rachel dabbed it with a sponge, washing his body with Biostat as we’d been instructed to do. She smoothed the sponge along his entire body in careful strokes.

“Gabriel,” she said. “We should call him Gabriel.”

“How about Gabe?” Ali said.

“Gabe,” I said. “Time to draw.” I pulled out a purple marker and made a dotted line from the base of his head to the point of his buttocks. Then I made a horizontal line under the shoulder blades. Ali, eager to help, finished by drawing more horizontal lines, three inches wide, neat sections. This would help when we removed the skin.

“Can I cut first?” I asked. Ali handed me a scalpel.

I pointed the scalpel along the midline and thrust the blade into the skin. It was stiff and leathery. Rachel whispered, I’m sorry Gabe, I’m so sorry, over and over. I concentrated on the line I’d drawn, pulled the scalpel along the purple dots. I’m not sorry, Gabe. One of our instructors walked by, murmuring good, good.

Next I plunged the blade into my horizontal dotted line. When I finished the cut, I pulled up a corner of skin with forceps. The subcutaneous fat was bright yellow, a vivid contrast to the gray skin. I kept pulling, slicing away the dense fat with my scalpel. In some places I could see the muscle underneath. Soon I had skinned a rectangular section of his back.

“Wow,” Ali said.

Rachel looked as if she were in pain, her face red and scrunched up.

Ali wanted to cut. We finished skinning his back and began to scrape the fat from the trapezius and latissimus dorsi. I pulled up a beautiful triangle of the trapezius with my forceps. Rachel wasn’t impressed.

“Do you want to hold the trapezius?” I asked. “It’s so well-defined.”

“No, I’ll just watch this time.”

“I’m glad I don’t eat meat,” I said.

Rachel didn’t laugh. I imagined Gabe using this muscle, rowing a canoe down the river, tossing his grandchild in the air, lifting a bag of groceries. But the thought was fleeting. If I considered him a person, I’d never make it through anatomy.

In our next lab, we take apart Gabe’s spinal cord and I manage to get spinal fluid in my hair. When I return home, Gabe’s sitting on the steps waiting for me.

“My back’s killing me,” he says.

“Funny,” I say. “Were you a comedian?”

“No, just a retired teacher.”

“Is that why you donated your body?”

“You’re exactly right, young lady.”

I hate this young lady crap. I step past him, glance at his dissected back. The spinal cord is fascinating, and much thicker than I’d expected, considering it seems so delicate. I unlock the door, jiggling the key to make it fit. Maureen, my mother’s health aide, is on the other side. She slings her purse over her ample chest.

“I’m sorry,” I say, acknowledging my lateness.

“Have to pick up Emma,” she says, slipping her feet into rubber clogs. “Bye now.”

My mother sits on a chair in the middle of the living room, her face partially obscured by wet strips of plaster. It looks like a death mask, but Maureen’s left holes for her mouth and eyes. My mother grabs another white strip and dunks it in the bowl of water to activate the plaster, but drops it on the floor. Gabe watches everything.

“Damn,” she says.

“What exactly are you doing?”

“For a shrine in Brazil. People leave replicas of the diseased body part”—she pauses—“pray to the Virgin and wait for the miracle.” She speaks without moving her jaw or the drying plaster.

“So you’re doing your whole head?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Aw, let her have some fun,” Gabe says. “While she still has hope.”

“Hope is dangerous,” I say.

My mother looks disappointed. One day last year, when the DMV took away her license, she gave up on science and medicine. She quit volunteering at the library and started wearing a gold cross around her neck. Just like that.

I notice the gray roots peeking through her scalp. When I have time, I'll touch them up with #54 Cinnamon Espresso. I smooth plastic wrap over my mother's hair to protect it from the plaster.

"You'll go with me? To Brazil?" she says.

"I have school, Mom. What did you eat today?"

"Oh, I don't remember."

"I'll make something quick. How about mac and cheese?"

"Lovely. Will be dry soon."

"Don't mind me," Gabe says. "I'm lactose intolerant."

I submerge a strip in the water, carefully adding it to the white mask. Later, I make macaroni from a box and unpack the overnight bag my mother left by the front door. I don't even know how she got it there by herself. While I'm studying at my desk, Gabe watches me from the window seat, smoking a cigarette. He's careful to blow the smoke out the window.

We're dissecting his forearm and hand when Rachel has a breakdown. She picks out the ripple of tendons with forceps and cleans them with a scalpel. I pull on the tendons to make his fingers curl.

"Cool," Ali says.

We tease apart the tendons for each finger. The forearm is an intricate network of muscle and tendon and bone.

"Check it out," Ali says, pulling on the middle tendon, the extensor digitorum. "He's giving us the finger."

Rachel stares for a moment, then snaps off her gloves and heads for the door.

"It was a joke, Rachel," Ali says.

"I'll go," I say. "Keep working on the hand."

I find Rachel in the locker room, lying on a bench. She's tracing the wood grain and trying not to cry.

"We didn't mean to be disrespectful," I say. "We need your help in there."

"You'll do just fine without me."

"You learn and recite each nerve and muscle before we even figure out how to pronounce them."

"I can't do this," she says. "I can't even distance myself from my first patient."

I've never thought of Gabe as a patient. He's a body we're taking apart, piece by piece, to examine form and structure. He has long yellow fingernails and a strong back. He follows me around the house.

Gabe is smoking on the porch swing. Since we peeled away the muscle and tendons of his right hand, he holds the cigarette with the bones of his thumb and forefinger. His palmaris longus sticks out as he lifts the cigarette to his mouth. We forgot to trim it.

"Smoking will kill you," I say.

"Too late now," he says. "Better check on your mother."

When I enter the living room, the sharp smell of urine greets me. I see her slumped in her easy chair, motionless. For a moment, I think this may be the end. But when I face her, she coughs, flings open her eyes. She's wearing her nightgown.

"Didn't Maureen help you get dressed today?" I ask.

"Fired," my mother replies.

"Why did you do that? She was really good. And I can't be here all the time. You know that. I'm going to call her and apologize."

"Bitch."

I don't know if she's talking about me or Maureen.

"Come on," I say. "Let's get you up."

Her arm jerks forward. I have a feeling she hasn't taken her meds today, so there's more to come. Her legs twitch in a spastic choreography.

"Wanna dance?" I say. We play this game when the drugs wear off. I help her up. It's better to laugh than cry.

My mother's right leg shoots out. I mirror her movements, clap my hands. Her left arm goes up, over her head, hand flailing as if she were drowning. I copy her strange rhythm. We dance.

"Faster," I say.

She wiggles her hips and smiles. Gabe joins us, shaking, twisting, laughing.

We've cut apart Gabe's major muscles and limbs. Rachel has returned. Ali and I act as though nothing happened, working on his chest. After we reflect the skin, we cut his ribs with a tool that

looks like sharp pliers. I have to use two hands to squeeze before the bone cracks. Squeeze, crack. I cut the right side and Ali does the left. Then we lift the breastplate and ribs, the whole thing hard and curved like a tortoiseshell. His deflated lungs are dark with tar.

"A smoker," Rachel says.

"Who still does that?" Ali says. "Europeans?"

"Maybe he's French," I say. "*Très romantique.*"

Rachel lifts one of the lungs and cuts the bronchial tube. She points out a small white mass in the lung. One of the lab assistants sneaks up behind us.

"Looks malignant," he says, drifting to the next table.

"I thought he died of liver failure," I say. I feel betrayed. Gabe never mentioned this. We find several more tumors.

"Maybe his doctor screwed up," Rachel says. "It happens. We're all human."

My mother refuses to get out of bed. I couldn't get her up that morning, and I haven't hired another nurse yet. Tendrils of her hair spread across the pillow like tentacles.

"Die," she says. "Die, die, die."

"Right," I say. "That would solve the problem." As I say it, I realize it may be true. I am a terrible daughter. My father left when he couldn't handle it anymore. They'd been on the brink for years, separated several times, but her rapid deterioration got to him. I think it was the diapers that finally did it.

Gabe watches us. He's looking worse for the wear, his chest wide open with one pitiful lung, one hand and foot stripped to the bone, flaps of gray skin and muscle hanging from his body.

"Let her do what she wants," he says. "You're not her doctor."

"Mom," I say, stroking her hair, "where's that shrine in Brazil? Maybe we can go next summer. I'll call a travel agent."

"Too late," she says.

"Now you're being difficult. I know you want to go."

"No. *No.*"

"We could get great tans."

"Winter," she says. "Winter!"

"Southern hemisphere. You're right—it would be winter there, wouldn't it? But how cold does it get?"

She doesn't reply. Her arm jerks forward.

“Are you trying to punch me?” I say. “I can take a hint. You need to eat. Tomato soup okay?”

She nods. I go into the kitchen and Gabe follows.

“I have a bone to pick with you,” I tell him.

“Ha ha,” he says, lighting a cigarette. The smoke comes out his chest through the bronchial tube that Rachel severed.

“You didn’t have hepatitis, did you? You had lung cancer.” I twist the can opener, using too much force, tipping the can over.

“You saw it yourself. Why are you asking me?”

“I thought you died of liver failure.”

“Ah, the great mystery,” he says. He gets close and blows smoke in my face. I cough and tell him to get out of my kitchen.

“That’s no way to talk to your teacher,” he says.

We cut open the pericardium, the sac that protects the heart. We name the different chambers and structures that we can see, then use a blade to remove the heart from the chest. Gabe’s heart. I hold it with both hands. To see inside, we have to cut it open. Ribbons of heart tissue cling to my scalpel.

My mother is gluing her plaster mask when I get home. The sides almost fit together, except for a gap at the top. It’s eerie to see a replica of her head in white plaster. Gabe looks over my shoulder.

“Nice,” he says.

“Salvador,” my mother says. “Salvador, Brazil.”

“I’ll call a travel agent and see what we can do.”

“You’re learning,” Gabe says.

I don’t want to speak to him, not yet. His chest is nearly hollow. “So how’s the new girl?” I ask my mother.

“Kelly,” she says. “She’s okay. I think she ate the pickles.”

“Pickles. Weird.”

“I’m basically a pickle, you know,” Gabe says. “Preserved to last a long time.”

“But otherwise Kelly’s okay?” I ask. “She helped you bathe and make breakfast and lunch and everything? Did she take you to the library?”

“Yes,” my mother says. “I got a Brazil guide.”

“Good. That’s good.”

She holds up the plaster cast. Her fingers tremble as they always do. Suddenly everything seems real. Someday soon I will lose her. I go into the bathroom because I don't want her to see me like this.

In my head, I go over the structures of the cardiovascular system as I fight back tears. Gabe puts a bony hand on my shoulder.

"Jesus," I say. "You can't scare me like that."

"Have you figured it out?" he says.

"You did it to yourself. Because of your prognosis. You took something and poisoned your liver."

"You're the grand prize winner. I smoked for less than ten years. Quit when my daughter was born," he says.

"You didn't want to see yourself deteriorate, did you? Die slowly, in increments. That was your choice."

"Exactly," he says. "I didn't want my last glimpse to be of a hospital parking lot. They'd poke and prod and I'd get a nasty infection in my central line. I'd be on the vent, which would give me pneumonia. Finally I'd drown in my own lung fluid."

"You refused further medical intervention," I say, thinking out loud.

"Even if I survived for a few more months, I still had metastatic cancer. It's called quality of life," Gabe says. "Now let's have a drink while I still have a digestive system."

We take him apart, piece by piece. We cut open his stomach and see the remains of his last meal, fishy and pale. Most bets are on lobster, though it's difficult to tell. We take out his swollen liver, his spleen, his intestines, everything. We poke and slice his insides until there's hardly anything left.

When it's time to dissect the pelvis, we let Ali take over. Even he is out of jokes. Rachel flushes at the sight of the limp penis. I hold my breath. As Ali saws in a vertical line, from genitals to navel, he looks pained. Then he saws the abdomen from the torso. Gabe's legs are now detached, like a magician's trick gone wrong. We're supposed to hemisect the pelvis for a better view of the internal structures—bladder, prostate, testes.

That isn't the worst of it. Before our final two weeks of lab, our instructors prepare the cadavers' heads. They use an electric saw to cut the skull and face in half, down the midline. Gabe is reduced to the right half of his head. We lift the muslin shroud. On the side

of his chin, there's a small scar I've never noticed. On the bridge of his nose, a few dark freckles. We flip him over. Inside, everything is pinkish gray, grayish pink. Part of his tongue, his teeth, his sinuses, his brain. He's missing two molars.

We take out the right hemisphere of his brain, the side associated with logic and reason. It's not exactly true—the neural circuitry isn't that simple. I hold Gabe's brain in my hands, trace my fingers along the wrinkled fissures. I wonder what memories are locked deep inside. I commit the structures to memory: central sulcus, lateral sulcus, cingulate sulcus.