

# Eyes Half Open

## *Short Essay*

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It is 8:30 am on a Tuesday morning and I am carpooling down I-40 east attempting to make small talk with my fellow passengers. These passengers happen to also be my first-year medical school classmates. We are each familiar with one another, but I wouldn't say we know each other well; a cordial hello in between lectures is the extent of our relationship. Having signed up for our autopsy today, we are forced together in the most unfortunate of circumstances. Questions and answers float between us and we manage to fill most of the trip with nervous chatter. After we inevitably run out of things to say, there are a few stretches of awkward silence.

Normally I would be all for cutting out small talk and being left to myself, but today the silence is unwelcome. It offers too much time to think about what is to come, what we are speeding towards. The silence made me acutely aware of a painful knot inside my stomach, and my anxiety worsens as I looked out the car window at the morning traffic headed to Raleigh. It seems like every car is going one hundred mph. I begin to feel nauseated.

*“Don't throw up. Throwing up all over the back of your classmate's car would not make this situation any better. Just breathe, dammit...”*

We pull into the parking lot and make our way inside. The building itself is surprisingly nice with plenty of windows. The sunlight in the lobby offers a false sense of comfort. After signing in, we wait; more nervous chatter, more awkward silence, none of us knowing quite what to expect. The tension mounts with each passing moment. Finally, we are led into the supply room to obtain our scrubs, gloves, booties, glasses, masks, and hairnets. After changing and feeling slightly victorious that I had managed to not puke on the journey so far, the time comes to enter the room where autopsies are performed. As if reading my mind, an employee points out a canister that we can vomit in if necessary. She seemed to have a smirk on her face. I wasn't sure if she was kidding or not.

*Was she enjoying this?*

I walk into the room and see the young man lying on the table. I realized that my tossing and turning overnight and the hours spent this morning attempting to prepare myself had been wasted –nothing could prepare me for this. It is more horrifying than I could have imagined. He just lay there, naked, eyes half open. He isn't discolored or grotesque like I anticipated he would be. He looks just like someone sleeping, as if at any moment he would get up and walk out of the room, perhaps apologizing for the inconvenience. But he did not get up. He continued to lie there vulnerable and exposed. I wanted to

cover him.

The pathologist tells us the man's age, race, and background information: "30-year-old Caucasian male found yesterday by his family on the sofa hunched over with a vomit bucket on the floor."

*Found by his family? What does that mean? His parents? His wife? His children? God, I hope his children did not find him like that.*

We learn that he had a history of IV drug use. The pathologist checks in between his fingers and toes for track marks. With the help of the technician, she repositions him onto the body block and the shift in pressure causes his eyes to bleed. Long streams of crimson red tears trickle down pale cheeks.

CRACK!

*What the...?*

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

*What is that noise? Oh my... his ribs.*

I look up and the technician is removing his rib cage. She is not fazed. The pathologist jabbars on about how she knew she wanted to be a pathologist in elementary school.

Who thinks about working with dead people when they are in kindergarten?

The pathologist receives the organs and begins examining them. She asks if any of us are interested in pathology. No one responds. I am shocked by the amount of liquid flowing to the bottom of the exam table. Suddenly, I get a whiff of the most horrible smell imaginable.

*Is that the blood? The tissue?*

It is the smell of death.

I feel bad that I am repulsed by the man. A day ago he was alive, just like me, just like everyone else in this room. Hell, he was alive when I signed up to attend this very autopsy. My breaths become shallower in fear that I will obtain another whiff of the pungent odor. This combined with the tight-fitting mask is sending me into a full-fledged panic. I think about the potential vomit container.

*Just breathe... dammit.*

I look around the room and realize that a couple of my classmates have stepped out into the hallway. The thought crosses my mind to step out too. It would be easy, only a few short footsteps and I could be free from this nightmare.

"We are now going to take out the brain," the pathologist says. "We have a specific way of doing this

to ensure that they can still have an open casket funeral.”

*Well, that's good news.*

I look over to find the technician making an incision at the back of the scalp. At this point I feel certain that I will leave at any moment. She begins to pull the skin forward. I look away while cringing, my jaw clenched. I muster up the courage to look back at him – and find that the young man's face has been peeled down, allowing access to the skull and brain. I can no longer see his half-open eyes because of the flap of scalp folded over them. I take a deep breath and decide to stay. As horrifying as it is, I can't bring myself to leave.

Authors Note:

I wrote this piece several years ago as a medical student. Now that I am an attending and I look back on the experience, I realize the anxiety and terror described in the piece is a metaphor for how I felt about medical school in general. This occurred early in the first year of medical school when I was attempting to adjust to a very terrifying time in my life. As a first-generation college student then medical student, I felt I made the wrong choice in attending medical school due to imposter syndrome and I felt an overwhelming sense of dread and anxiety for the first couple of semesters. I felt isolated and lonely and I think that may have been why I identified with the poor man found alone at home who was then alone and naked on that cold autopsy table. Perhaps the ending of the story- not leaving despite everything within me telling me to run, was a way of processing my feelings at the time subconsciously. I didn't tie any of this together until reading it back years later. I wish I could tell that terrified version of myself that everything would work out just fine.

A stylized graphic of an eye, rendered in shades of gray. The eye is composed of a central circle, an outer ring, and two curved lines representing the eyelids. The text 'a b o u t • a u t h o r' is centered within the eye graphic.

a b o u t • a u t h o r

**LONG**

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