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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Raw Chicken

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Raw Chicken

When I shop for fresh chicken I look for the leanest possible. I'm not counting calories. It's rooted years ago in medical school, first year gross anatomy.

Chicken fat is remarkably similar to human fat, yellow and pebbly. After soaking in formaldehyde for months, human flesh also resembles that of a chicken, cold, slightly sticky with a slimy undercoat. Finger pokes leave concave depressions.

Contrary to popular belief and the entertainment industry, medical students do not ridicule our cadavers. We were subdued, slightly traumatized by the sight of our first dead body.

The gross anatomy lab is a cold impersonal room with stark grey painted concrete block walls. Stainless steel tanks are lined up in two rows. Along one wall are the metal industrial sinks with long rubber hoses. Along the opposite wall is something from Ripley's: shelves held jars of formaldehyde containing fetuses with genetic disorders, open hearts with the vessels cut and showing clots, heads cut in half with milky eyes staring ahead into nothing and many more oddities. I shuddered when I walked past, averting my eyes.

The tables themselves are stainless steel tanks. Ours held a very thin elderly woman. We were lucky. On the next table lay a two-hundred-pound male with a Semper Fi tattoo. We named him Sarge.

After lifting the heavy lid and lowering it to the side, we turned a crank to lift the tray holding the woman's body out of the preservative. There was a sloshing sound as it broke free of the surface of the liquid. We watched the fluid drain out of the opened body. In the beginning the bath was pristine and clear. Soon it became murky with floating pieces of tissue and fat.

Despite soaking in preservative, there is an underlying sweet smell of decay which grew stronger as time went on. The fat darkened and became crumblier. The edges of the cadaver dried like chicken left too long to bake in the oven.

To dissect a cadaver, you make a Y-shaped incision starting from one shoulder to the other and a vertical cut down the sternum to the pubic bone. The day we opened up the abdomen was monumental. When the skin was cut through, the pebbly yellow fat squeezed out. The smell of formaldehyde grew stronger the deeper the layer. By the time we had cut through the visceral fat, the abdominal muscles, then the peritoneal fat and into the open abdominal cavity, the smell was formidable. Our eyes watered and we had to step away

from the ravaged corpse for a moment. We nicked the lower intestines that day and blackish green fecal matter oozed out and floated in the fluid bath. The stench combined with odors already present, and the air was nauseating.

The odor of formaldehyde permeated our hair, our clothes, our skin. We no longer noticed it on ourselves but the upper classmen pegged us first years in an instant. Laypeople probably thought we had poor hygiene.

Strength is needed to grip and pull back the layers. Leaning in to our shoulders, we tried not to think about the fact that our upper body was often inside another human being. We distanced ourselves, hiding behind an armor of Latin names like sternocleidomastoideus and temporoparietalis, protecting ourselves against feeling.

Unfortunately, it did not always work. Reality would always bring us back: Once the crank failed suddenly and the cadaver fell back into its formaldehyde bath, splashing us with foul smelling liquid. Occasionally a layer of tissue would slap back against us and leave tissue pieces on our scrubs. We picked them off each other the best we could.

At night, in the shower, I would sometimes find dried fat tangled in my long auburn curls. Turning the temperature to scalding, a fog would envelope me. I would scratch at the piece until it dislodged and spiraled down the drain, dancing so not to step on it. Scrubbing furiously, my scalp turned raw, my hands and arms red and painful.

It was after graduation that the nightmares started. Waking up in a cold sweat, I felt compelled to check all the rooms, the closets, the freezer, especially.

Twenty years later, the nightmares are long gone. All that is left is the revulsion I feel at the touch of raw chicken.