

Transition

September 2012

“Stick to your group. Form a line and we will make our way to the DR!”

The moment has come. The lecture hall is buzzing with excitement. The professor gives up yelling out instructions and lets the havoc reign. No one seems to have that “line formation” in mind. I push and shove my way out of the hall to the stairs. First floor, second floor, third floor...and I am there. The stench of formalin is heavy in the air. I would have been able to smell my way to the room without direction but he leads the group all the way regardless.

This is it. A whole month of memorization and sleepless nights is about to pay off. I am standing in front of a locked metal door. The lab assistant fiddles with the padlock for a moment and pushes the door open. The Dissection Room—the holy grail of med students-- lies before me. Every inch of it is covered in white ceramics. Four surgical tables covered in white cloth lie equidistant from each other. Two tables with assortments of clamps, retractors, drill bits and scalpels are placed on the far left and right end of the room.

I step in. I put on one of the white coats suspended on the rack and make my way to the closest table with the group. We form a circle around it and wait for the other three groups to do the same. A few minutes pass and the room falls quiet. The instructor paces around and stops at our table. He breaks the circle and steps in. He is facing me.

Am I prepared? Yes. Do I know my muscles and bones? Yes. Do I want him to pick me for the first dissection? No. Am I lucky? No.

He picks me. I take a deep breath and step out of the circle. I draw a mental map of the upper limb anatomy I have been working on. It is still there. His instructions are short and clear. “Pec Major”.

Pectorialis Major. Origin- medial half of the clavicle, anterior surface of the sternum, the superior six costal cartilages, the aponeurosis of abdominal oblique muscle. Insertion- lateral lip of

the bicipital groove. This should be easy. Only a layer of skin and subcutaneous tissue stand in my way. I won't have to worry about the insertion much. It is the origin that counts.

I remove the white cloth. I panic. The cadaver is a man in his mid-fifties. His hair had started to grey. A few strands of cotton fibers peak out of his tightly closed eyelids. *Faaya. His chest...that is where the pec major is. You can't fail.* I take a pair of gloves, a scalpel, a sterilized blade and forceps from the table. I am ready. I start from the acromion process and carefully make my incision medially towards the sternum, down to the sixth costal bone and back to the axilla. Then I encircle the nipple as per the dissection manual. Now the skin is out of the way. A thin layer of subcutaneous tissue remains. I try peeling it away with the forceps and scalpel but it is too slippery.

The instructor loses patience and shoves me out of the way. Then, he brutally begins pecking on the cadaver's chest with the forceps. The whole scene slowly sinks in. I just cut a human being, I didn't complete the dissection and my hands are covered with slippery fat and formalin. I feel numb and I struggle to take a breath in. *Why am I here in this room? In this class? In this hospital? Why am I really here?*

I hear my mom's voice in my head. "An Electrical Engineer?! Here?! You cannot be an engineer in Ethiopia. What are your prospects? Fix an electric stove? The culture is too hard on women. You'd be ruining your future if you chose to be one here. Look at your grades. You can be anything." But can I? And if I could, should I? I respect and appreciate the views of my parents more than anything but I would so much rather be fixing someone's stove right about now. If you open up the back of a broken stove, you see electric wires, switches and a beautiful coil of the radiant element. You figure out one of the three ways it could possibly go wrong and fix it. It doesn't stay dead. You fix it.

I snap out of it. It looks like the teacher is done with the removal. I takeover and detach the muscle from the origin and reflect it upward as instructed. I am done for the day. The class goes on for three more hours. After the class is over, my friends talk about how they did this and pulled off that, but I pay no attention. For some reason, all I can think of is Sherlock Holmes' (Robert Downey Jr.) snooty face going "Always have a contingency plan."

The journey begins.

December 2012

I find great comfort in certainty. So, as I sit in front of Dean Hagos's secretary, filling out my withdrawal form from medical school, I feel *very* uncomfortable. There are just too many 'what-if's in what I'm doing. I wonder if it would be rude to just walk out of the office and forget about it all. The pointlessness of the questions is not helping my resolve either. Why in God's name would they need to know how many members I have in my family to process my request? I go through it with stupor until I spot the only question that should have been on that form.

Reasons for withdrawal. This makes me think of Zeno's paradox, the wall that can't be reached -- the perfect analogy as to why I'm withdrawing. I must be feeling philosophical today. The thing about me and I guess, the thing about every other human being, is that a few of us have mastered the art of contentment. When I was in middle school, all I ever wanted to do was ace the national examination, get into Addis Ababa University and study engineering. But the reality of things have messed with my plans so, here I am, choosing to let everything slip for the slim second chance of "making my dreams come true."

I write how I have decided to change my department and how I have applied to other universities overseas and hand the form over to the secretary. She takes a look at it and shows me to the dean's office to get an approval. As I walk in, the dean scans me with his eyes, his reading glasses dangerously close to falling off of his nose. He reads out the form and gives me this look. I can't quite crack the meaning behind —contempt or admiration?

It doesn't matter much either way. I have reached the parting of the way and I have chosen not to be content.

March 15, 2013

Pi- day has lost its meaning in Ethiopia about twenty hours ago. Unless you are terrible at rounding off and you would rather write 3.15 for pi. I love MIT. Even its announcements are shrouded in the mystique of math and science, pi-day, tau-time. It is a shame I will not be in alignment with the ingenious arrangement. I curse spacetime.

It is 2 a.m. here. I have not slept the entire night and I am pretty sure I will not get any sleep tonight. I refresh decisions.mit.edu every couple of minutes

2:20 a.m. I hit refresh once again. My chrome page reads “Unable to connect to the internet.” I panic. Then, I realize the flaw. I have been connected to the internet for 6 hours, enough hours to wipe out all the money in my card. It is dead at night. I cannot run to the nearest convenience store and recharge. I drag myself to bed.

8:30 a.m. On my way to the store, I see the internet café open. I change direction. Calmly, I type in the URL. I press enter. The page appears. It has a warning on it. It reads, “If you are not ready, don’t proceed” or something close. It is going to be quick and painless. Like ripping off a bandage. I am ready. I enter my password... VICTORY!

I shriek, I yell, I sing a God awful rendition of “Praise the Lord” that would have driven Simon Cowell crazy. I hug a random stranger. I jump up and down and sway around. I wish I could tell you more about my reaction. But I genuinely don’t remember.

Psychology 101. Ecstasy does that to you.

August 18, 2013

It is 9:00 p.m. After 13 straight hours of flight, I have arrived at Logan Airport. With a stupid smile on my face, I walk towards a friendly upper classman holding up my name printed in bold letters.

Two bus rides and a short walk later, we arrive at MIT. I try to contain myself as I push Random Hall’s front door open and step inside. A friendly face greets me, looks through a list on her desk and gives me an approving node. With a wide smile on her face, she says the magic words.

“Welcome to MIT!”

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