MJA Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Prize

My teacher

Highly commended
MJA Dr Eric Dark Creative Writing Prize
(Medical student category)

Today, I am going to open a corpse. I'm eighteen and in my first year of university.

Apprehension jars my every movement as I approach the white sheet stretched tight over a humanoid form. I stare, try to imagine, try to prepare myself. But no preparation is enough.

This could be my grandfather, my grandmother, my uncle. An aunt. But it's not.

"Be respectful." My lecturer raises his hands, palms upward — a hybrid of an invitation and a call for peace. He smiles. "This person has lived, laughed, loved, and been loved in return. And died." His last word is spoken almost with awe.

I glance up at the clock hanging on the white, white wall: ten minutes past. After this, a piano lesson.

Piano lesson? My cheeks burn: *focus!* But my fingers dance a scale up my thighs.

The clock stares me down, expressionless.

Whenever you're ready.

As if you can ever be ready.

Heart beating hard against ribs, I fold the white sheet firmly down. The sour smell of formalin springs up and fills my nostrils. My throat constricts, my lungs protest, but I make myself stare at him.

He looks peaceful. There are wrinkles on his forehead, wisps of hair combed against his scalp. His nose is slightly flared, as if he's going to breathe with me in the next rising of my chest.

This isn't my grandfather.

But it *is* someone else's.

I have to force myself to breathe, and listen to time passing in clicks like a metronome. It's funny, though: only when death is so near do you become crazily aware of time leaking past you. With all the technology and medicine in this age, death is still something we can't measure, explain or understand.

Blood pulses through my veins, pumped from my heart. He has experienced this too. He has lived as well.

As instructed, my colleague folds the sheet a little lower.

My fingers tighten around the scalpel. Shining, cold, and sharp. But it is my colleague who makes the first incision.

Dizziness takes me. I have to look away.

The clock: it ticks, it tocks.

Tick, tock. When I play the piano and sometimes it's just wrong and I can't get Mozart right, I just sit there, listening to the beat of a metronome. Click, click, click, click.

I wipe my sweaty palms against my trousers and my hands inch forward, breath by shallow breath. I'm scared.

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> "I'll know this person's most intimate secrets, know him inside out, know him better than his lover. Better than his doctor"

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But this man must have been scared too, when he made the choice to donate his body to the medical school. And his family and friends would have been scared. Was his family happy that his wishes were respected? Or was there dispute around it, words bombing at one another, the family not ready to let him go? But we can't harness the sun, and we can't stop death.

On the other side of the room, a group squeals, someone giggles.

Our lecturer slides over, calm. "Suzanne, where is your respect?"

The student is mortified, and I feel her angst. We want to learn, excel, memorise drugs and disease, symptoms and statistics. But to do the best we can is to remember that we treat people, not disease. To respect this body I need to think of him as a person. The evidence is all around us, if we focus beyond the peeling flap of skin.

These stitches on my knee? I was showing off my motorbike to my mates and lost control.

I stretch on my gloves. I'll know this person's most intimate secrets, know him inside out, know him better than his lover. Better than his doctor.

That scar down my chin — tried to finish a race first, tripped and landed wrongly.

The burn marks on my wrist — that's cooking for the first time to impress a lover! And you see my writers bump? There's a law degree.

But to know him as person, and then cut him. Such a condradiction of actions: to love, and to hurt. The more I know about him, the more I don't dare touch him. But cut I must. Running a gloved finger over his skin, his scars, *him*. . .

The simplicity of the ticking of the clock prompts me to relax, to think of that solely, and then, when my mind fills with the ticks and tocks, then I try again.

Hey, girl, learn from me. That's what I'm here for.

The clock salutes its agreement with a hand. Black hands against a white face. Nothing is so black and white in life though.

This is what it is to be a doctor. To hurt in full knowledge of the person you are hurting, to let that rip at your soul and not harden yourself to it.

I wipe my sweaty palms against my plastic apron. Only to realise the sweat is harboured inside the plastic gloves. The clock ticks. Ticks again. My fingers close around the cold smooth handle of the scalpel; I feel its dead weight in my hand.

I have felt the velvet of deer lungs before, and the bursting ripe-tomato feel of a rabbit's heart. In the

weeks to come, I will slide a finger down a tibia, see how bones are glued by tendons and muscles. I will feel the weight of a human heart in my palms, know how the inner organs of man lock into one another in an intricate puzzle.

We've learnt from textbooks and digital images, but to actually touch something, *someone*, real is our first step out from the world of books. It is only when we see — and feel, and hear — what normal is in a body that we will understand what is going wrong in our patients. That is the gift of a body donor.

One body donor will teach many dozens of doctors, dentists, physiotherapists. These dozens of people will go out and help hundreds. Not only their pain, but the pain of their families: their children, their mothers, their friends. Indirectly, one body donor has changed the lives of thousands. No matter the petty indiscretions in the course of their lives, the fights, the crimes, the betrayals. They've given their last gift to mankind. One can be selfless in death.

I glance at the clock again. Mozart will understand: the man before me will tell him, *Hey, your piano student, the one who's learnt all your music and more — she's my student, too.*

Piano can wait. My life can wait. And for now . . .

I'm eighteen, and in my first year of university. Today, I am going to learn from my teacher. ❑