

One Body

By Meghan Reilly

Before you can carry weight, you need to learn how to hold it. In strongman training, static holds are foundational. You set up the pick, get a good grip, get tight and lift it up. After a while, even if your grip is still strong, your body begins to shake. Deep in your core, out to your limbs, you vibrate. One body can only hold that much weight for so long. This is what I thought about as my body tremored standing in the anatomy suites. Not even a foot away was a body, shrouded in plastic: our anatomical donor. I listened to our instructor as she read a poem written by a donor, and all I could think about was how the body on our table died the same way my dad did nine months ago. One body can only hold that much weight for so long.

The sport of strongman appealed to me for many different reasons, one being that you compete as an individual. There is no one to pass to, no one you need to rely on. It is just you, the weight, and your will. In the months leading up to my first year of medical school, I trained religiously in the garage gym my dad and I constructed. I had registered for my first strongman competition, and was slated to make my debut just a month before classes started. Now in the suites, it felt like a lifetime since I wrapped my fingers around the iron. I never made it to the competition floor. A small casualty in the seismic wave of grief I was drowning in.

I knew that our anatomy labs were going to be hard. It is something I thought about very soon after my dad passed away. It took months of preparation. Mentally preparing myself for a body on our table — perhaps someone's parent whose child misses them terribly, as much as I miss my own. I was able to wrap my mind around what needed to happen in lab. Until the night we received our donor assignment and were told their cause of death. Cardiac arrest. When I read the words, I thought how stupid I was not to prepare myself for this. I had prepared for the possibility of a male donor, I had prepared for the dissection, I had prepared for all of it, except for this. Same cause of death. Then the flashbacks started and the sadness flooded in. Next came anger. Why did my donor get to live into their nineties before their heart stopped working? Why did my dad's stop at 60? Needless to say, a difficult night turned into a difficult morning, which turned into an afternoon of sharp anxiety and dread as I watched the clock counting down the minutes until I had to leave my apartment to go meet our donor.

In the anatomy suite, listening to the poems being read, and becoming aware of the steady tremble of my body as I did everything I could not to cry, I thought of strongman. How one body can only hold that much weight for so long. And as I felt the weight slipping out of my hands — about to drop — I looked up to see five concerned and thoughtful faces. As much as I like competing as an individual, it's unrealistic to do these things alone. Because in that moment when the weight I carried became insurmountable, it was my anatomy lab partners — my teammates — who each took an end and lightened the load.

I expected all of the bad and none of the good. I expected a breakdown, and maybe that I would have to excuse myself from the room. I didn't anticipate our group of six huddled with arms around one another outside the lab room, with words of encouragement and unending support. I expected that the pit in my stomach would only widen when I saw my donor's face. Instead, when we zipped open the plastic, I was relieved. They weren't my dad. On a day I thought I wouldn't recover from, I actually left campus smiling. One body can only hold that much weight for so long, but six can make easy work out of it.

Meghan Reilly is a second-year medical student at UMass Chan Medical School. She received her BA from Clark University and loves all things Worcester, MA. She would like to dedicate this piece to her anatomy group: Andy, Daniel, Kristen, Marissa and Sashrika. It is written in memory of Edward B. Reilly Jr.

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