

VISITING DAD
by Emily Taplin Boyd

Synopsis: A woman shares her complicated feelings about the unconventional way in which her science-minded father chose to be remembered.

Run time: 10 minutes

Productions: *Visiting Dad* is was produced by Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, MA for their ten-minute play festival, February 2015.

AMANDA enters carrying a stack of dog-eared science magazines and a rolling, day-bag type suitcase.

AMANDA:

It's always a trying time in my family when the season rolls around to visit Dad. Normal families, I imagine, spend a quiet afternoon in a cemetery, placing a bouquet of flowers at the foot of a solemn gravestone, bearing an epitaph, "Here lies so and so, beloved father and husband." Or perhaps hiking to the top of a picturesque autumnal mountain where the deceased had his ashes sprinkled in memory of old family camping trips. They share a thermos of cider and rehash all the good old days with Pops. That's not what it's like in my family when we go to visit Dad.

You see, my father was a man who didn't believe in God. He was a physics teacher, and what he believed in was science. When I was a little girl, I asked him "Daddy, what happens to us when we die?", and he told me "Well, we get buried in the ground and worms eat us and turn us into dirt. And that's *beautiful*." I know that he found this idea poetic, but to me at age 10 it was extremely disturbing. I tried to imagine what it might feel like to have earthworms crawling through my skin – cool and slimy, whole droves of them wriggling their way through my body like animated Udon noodles.

Dad really *believed* in science, though, I mean, he kind of *worshipped* it. And like most religious zealots, he proselytized. His way of preaching this religion while we were kids was to teach us everything he could about the way the world works – scientifically, I mean. From the moment we left home, his new way of spreading the good word was to send me and my sisters subscriptions to *Scientific American*, *Science News*, *Popular Science* – endless, yearly subscriptions that came, first to our dorms, then to our apartments and, later our houses... I can't tell you about my sisters', but mine just gathered, piling up unread... like leaves from a deciduous tree in fall.

It's not that I'm close-minded about science or some religious nut or anything. I just... well, it's not my thing. To my father's chagrin I was terrible at science and math, receiving grudging C's and B minuses throughout high-school and college. Now, I'm a potter. My big sister writes Sitcoms and the baby teaches painting. But dad used to say that all his artistic girls ought to know about science, because how can you make art without understanding the world around you? So the periodicals kept coming. At first I used to keep them in the bathroom under the pretense that I'd read them when I was, you know, occupied in there. But the truth is I'd rather read *Cosmopolitan*, because how does it really effect my day-to-day life that the Large Hadron Collider has proven the existence of the quark? So after a while, when they came, I appreciated the sentiment and just boxed them right away. They went in the attic, where I didn't have to deal with them, and I didn't have to feel guilty about throwing them out.

Anyway, it was no surprise that when he died three years ago, in his will he requested that his body be given to Science. Just like that, "To Science". You know, like "To Infinity and Beyond!" except..."To Science!" Originally I think his plan was, like, to give his cornea to some blind person like Jerry Orbach did... and his liver to some

alcoholic, and his skull to a dental school and his skeleton to a classroom, and his brain to stem cell research, or whatever. I dunno, I don't really know how that works. But like, that's what he told us on the rare occasions that he was even willing to tackle the subject of his demise. I asked him, "Dad, what do you want us to do with the rest of you, like the part that "science" won't take?" And he seemed pretty confident that "Science" was gonna need everything, from his balding scalp to the toes he always stubbed on everything.

Which frankly I found kind of upsetting. Not that I, at all, object to the idea of donating your organs to help other people. But it's nice for a family to have some place to *go*, you know to like, pay their respects. So I, like, literally begged him, "Dad – just tell us a place, some place we can go where if there's any tiny scraps of you left, we can bury them or scatter the ashes of them or whatever. For us. So we can have closure." And in a joking, gruff, fatherly kind of way, he'd say, "No closure. Only Science!"

Except, apparently, in the months before his death, he got wind of something bigger, something greater, the grandest possible way he could make his contribution... To Science!

You see, apparently, my father went to one last reunion after he found out he was dying and reconnected with a friend from college who had invented a technique called "plastination"? For the uninitiated, "plastination" is when they take real human remains and put them through some kind of process that preserves them forever in a semi-firm, semi-wobbly position. Kind of like embalming, but a lot more, well, scientific. So now every year, on the anniversary of his death, my family gets on planes from Chicago, New Mexico, Los Angeles and Connecticut, and we fly to a special, specific, pre-ordained destination: the location of a travelling museum exhibit called "Our Bodies Revealed." Because my father had decided to become work of Cadaver Art. Like you do.

We walk past the Marlboro cowboy who's made out of only muscles and has the lungs of a real lung-cancer victim, seated on top of a bucking, only-muscles horse, lassoing an only-muscles cow...and just to the left of the display of the preserved feet of 25 different marathon runners...my father is The Science Teacher. Perhaps you've seen that section of the exhibit? It's set up like a high-school classroom...the plastinated body of a teacher dissects the plastinated body of a frog while several plastinated teenagers look on?

It's creepy, man. And it's weird. And the first time I went there I wanted to laugh and cry and barf, all at the same time. But, um. We have a place... a totally weird, crazy and fucked up place, to *go*. To visit him. To pay our respects...among a crowd of Austrian school children on a fieldtrip to Hamburg, or college students scribbling notes in Beijing, or tourists snapping photos in New York City. And when I'm standing there, staring at the muscles and ligaments that were once inhabited by my father, I feel grateful. Because in a perverted, strange, and – *utterly scientific* – way, it gives me closure.

After he died, I thought the magazines might, you know, just stop coming. But last month, three years after his death, I once again received in the mail my bi-yearly card to

inform me that my two-year gift subscription to *Science News* was being renewed, followed days later by a similar card from *Scientific American* and an email from *Popular Science* along the same lines. I called my mom – was she doing it, is it a condition of the will? – I wondered. She knew nothing about it. So I called up the magazine people, and I was able to discern that my father had somehow managed to advance pay for each of his daughters to have 40 years of subscriptions to all three magazines. He did this three years ago last month, two days before his death.

So, ok, Dad. You win. I've got *boxes* of science magazines up in my attic. And 37 more years of them on their way down the pipeline. I'm not going to promise you I'll read every single one but I promise I will thumb through them for anything that interests me. And if there's anything that's really special – if the Large Hadron Collider discovers a particle smaller than a quark – I'll come here, to "Our Bodies Revealed", and I'll share it with you.