The Act Of Incising Human Flesh Is Never Routine

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The preliminaries are over. Sponges, needles, and instruments have been counted and checked, their number recorded on a whiteboard on the wall, as well as a clipboard. The checkoff is a comforting hum of words; the tuned machinery of the workplace. As the bottle of local is opened and poured into a sterile bowl on the back table, the expiration date is read aloud. “January, Two Thousand Ten.” “We’ll be done by then,” I say, as usual. I look over the ether screen and ask the anesthesiologist, “OK to start?” “Dig in,” he says.

Scalpel blades come in myriad sizes and shapes. #15 for a delicate cut, needing controlled curvature, like around the edge of an areola. With those little pokes for insertion of laparoscopy tools, it’s #11. This being the real deal, I use a #10 blade, for its deep and long belly; a serious cutting device, but wieldy. There are bigger knives.

The act of incising human flesh is one of moment, never light, never routine no matter how familiar. Having thought about the exact location and length — not always standard for a “standard” operation — and having spoken to this person only minutes before; having made and accepted an awful commitment, asking for and taking trust; still, to take a knife in hand and with it to open a wound is a startling event. I never feel as focused, as intent, as responsible as when I make that first cut. I’m aware of transgressing, of forced entry, of crossing barriers, physical and ethereal. It’s like passing through an arbor draped with not entirely familiar vines, ominous and appealing simultaneously, not quite seeing to the other side until they’re pushed away, with resistance. It’s OK. I’ve been given the key, evidently I’m allowed here. But is such a thing possible? It remains a mystery. My breaths are shorter and harsher than normal; my pulse perhaps a few beats quicker; it never fails to excite me. Yet (almost) always my hands are steady. At this moment, there’s nothing else. Later, as it goes, the air gets lighter.

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