

ENCOUNTERS

Clamps off

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table ...

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock
— T.S. Eliot

I count out 46 steps from the elevator to operating room one. The doors offer no resistance as I push through them with the intent of a terrorist. The red painted fingernails of the patient on the table disarm me and strip me. My breath spirals outward in a sign and my skin dusts off into this space. Her red pulls all the colour from my hair. I take no anticipatory breath, because it has already started.

The surgeon turns a friendly face, his hands busy. The donor nephrectomy, he declares, she's donating to her sister. The incision is pried open by metal-toothed clamps with more brute force than gentleness. He inserts the grapple hook and pulls hard to keep the flesh apart. The nurses come and go; they count the number of sponges. The overhead floodlight shines with the weight of a primary noon. Time pools and collects in her body cavity. It is noon. It is always noon.

The kidney comes out trailing white fat. The surgeon cheerfully sloshes it back and forth in the ice bath. He's flushing it with saline heparin solution. It goes into the renal artery and the displaced blood rushes out the vein, dyeing the bath into a punch bowl. And before it starts, it's over. The staples are done neatly, in a nice row. The lights switch off and the kidney acquiesces into the grey of the room.

The evening is spread out as the cleaning staff Hoover and spray. There's time for tea before the transplant. Over the clink of teaspoons, the surgeon shows me the native kidney Doppler. He jabs at the white blip on the black image: aneurysm in the shorter renal artery. You pick this one to transplant, I say. The surgeon nods. He leaves the



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better kidney inside the donor. I take a cautious sip of my Earl Grey. The liquid dribbles down my scrubs, leaving a mottled brown stain. I wipe at it absentmindedly. You're about to suture the complicated vessel, I say. The surgeon nods. I tuck my shirt in and retie my pant strings. The floodlights come on and time flows back to that primary noon. The recipient is wheeled in. No discernable human form is under that swath of blankets. The surgeon abandons his teaspoon for a sharper thing the nurse hands him. He moves rapidly.

The cut is huge. He saws through the transverse muscles. The patient consented to this trauma on her body. His hands plunge deep, exploring the nooks and valleys of her insides like a lover. I want to move away but I can't decide my feet on the direction.

Once satisfied with the size of the body hole, the surgeon turns to the kidney. He removes the aneurysm and repairs the artery integrity. Hours pool and collect in that red gaping hole. He lowers the kidney into the recipient. The lights glare overhead. He looks

away from the table briefly to say, “Clamps off.” The nurses come and go; they count the number of sponges.

The dentist suction that had been working softly is suddenly full of blood. The red pulses out in angry waves. Her red pulls all the colour from my cheeks. Her red draws all the colour from my eyelids, my eyes. It does not cease. The nurse dashes out and in, looking for a pair of Stevens. The phone rings. Blood products are on their way. The pace whirls into a gentle frenzy. The vein’s ruptured, the surgeon declares. His hands are a fine flurry of motion. The light bears down overhead but the colour of his gown is being pulled into that red cavity, where the suction picks it up and disposes of it. The restructured artery is torn, he adds. The suction is overwhelmed; time overflows onto the floor in large tepid pools. I pick up the phone five more times.

He does not slow or pause. It doesn’t look very good, he says, it’s coming out. He cuts away the stitches. The procedure long exceeds the scheduled OR time. The next surgery in line is cancelled indefinitely. I open my mouth to speak a hundred questions, but the words are drawn into the quiet roar of the suction. The surgeon continues to undo his work. The kidney comes out again. The flushing is attempted. There is no outflow from the vein. He massages the battered kidney and implores the nurse to squeeze harder on the saline drip. She presses so hard she tears the saline bag clean off the hook.

The kidney takes a turn of the ice bath and seeing how the heat of high noon had begun to fade, coughed once and begins to perfuse again. The surgeon caresses it as he murders its vessel walls and creates a hybrid of the renal and iliac. The second shift of nurses

comes and goes. They recount the sponges. Finally, clamps off. The last stitch tucks the last red out of sight.

I drift out in a daze. Drive home. I pull off my shirt to step into the shower. My fingers smooth out the fabric in search of that earlier tea stain, but the front is clean. There’s nothing there.

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Clamps off was awarded an honourable Mention in the 2011 *ARS Medica* and *CMAJ* Humanities Poetry and Prose contest. The winners were announced at the 2011 Canadian Conference on Medical Education.

This is a true story. The surgeon has given his consent for this story to be told.

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