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Pacemaker

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Five masks whirl around me
in a practised ballet of hands and movements,
positioning me on the table and stripping
my gown to the waist while I lie,
tucked and sedated, staring up
at equipment suspended from the ceiling beams:
lights, monitors, a dangling fluoroscope.

Surgeries are machine shops, only white;
a movie set for a cast of one.

Oxygen, a mask announces, clipping
the tube onto my nose while another
presses cold pads onto my chest and side.
Defibrillators, the mask explains, *for contingencies*.

Contingencies.

That's a word you never have to consider
when you're lying unconscious,
and this time I'll be fully awake.
This time it's my heart.

They're ready to begin and drape
a sterile tent above my head
with a window on one side. A mask
gives me a thumbs up and disappears.

My world darkens to touch and a disorienting
metronome of voices consulting around me,
the midazolam suspending my apprehension
as I feel the tiny pinpricks of needles
injecting lidocaine into my chest.

The incision feels like a pencil line
drawn below my collarbone,
rough hands daubing away blood
while the retractor clicks into place.

Time suspends. How long have I been here?
Is that tickling sensation the pacemaker's
tiny electrodes snaking down
through my veins into my heart?

I feel hands manipulating something into my chest
and ask if that's the pacemaker.
I'm just fitting it now, the surgeon replies,
deftly tugging the incision closed
with sutures and butterfly Steri-Strips.

Suddenly, the tent lifts and I lie blinking
while hands rapidly tape a huge
bandage worthy of a bullet wound
onto my chest.

To prevent swelling, a mask explains,
while two others slide me onto a gurney
and wheel me into X-ray
to check that the pacemaker's electrodes
are in their right places.

They are,
and wheeling back to the ward
I imagine I can almost hear
their life-sustaining impulses
ticking.

About the Author

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