

Sterile Thoughts

By Philip Blatt

Step One: Pick up the scalpel. Find the middle line of the back, where the spine runs vertically and make an incision from the base of the neck to the lumbar area. Ensure that the incision goes past the layers of the epidermis and through the adipose tissue, all the way to the plane of the muscles. Once this cut has been made, make a horizontal cut across the back of the shoulders so that the first incision and this one form a “T”. Like the first one, make sure to make the incision deep enough. Once the plane has been located and the “T” incision formed, begin slowly cutting along the plane and peeling back the skin and fat on other side to reveal all the underlying muscles of the back. Going slow is recommended because cutting less than you intended is harmless, but if you cut something more than what you wanted, you can’t get it back.

I looked up from the textbook and locked gazes with the three other students in the cadaver room. The only sound was the humming of the powerful vents of the stainless steel dissection table meant to protect us from the noxious fumes. Nerves crept through my body; could I really take a knife to this woman’s? The instructions in the textbook dehumanized the cadaver – it never refers to “the body,” “the person,” or “the human,” – in order to prevent the emotion that accompanies death and to focus simply on the science. But this was much more than just another sample, model, or specimen; this was a person. She may be dead, but she lived once. Did she have a family? What did she do in her life? How did she die? I knew nothing about this woman, yet here I was preparing to explore her musculoskeletal system, the twists and turns of her intestines, the chambers of her heart, the air sacks within her lungs and the network of nerves, arteries and veins that had once brought life to this body. The three other students and I were still in a paralysis from the gravity of our situation with a mutual feeling of, “who are we to think we have the right to breach the sanctity of this woman’s body?” We were about to see this woman’s body in a way she and possibly nobody ever had; in a sense, we were about to know this woman better than anyone else, because we actually were going to see what was on the inside. The professor interjected the silence and said the words we feared were coming. “Who wants to make the first cut?” We stood there, nobody wanting the grave responsibility. I waited, hoping for someone to respond, when three words slipped out of my mouth. “I’ll do it.”

I walked over to the counter and just as the instructions insincerely said, I picked up the scalpel handle and securely fitted the blade on the end. There was something comforting about the snapping noise the blade made when it was completely locked into the handle. It reminded me of when your seatbelt clicks when it locks in and is ready to save your life. The sound made me believe that this scalpel wasn't going to fail me; it had one purpose, and it was going to fulfill that purpose. I took a second to feel the weight of the blade in my hand, feel the coolness of the recently washed handle and admire the elegant curve of the knife-edge. I could feel my heart beginning to beat a little harder, I felt the warmth of nervousness surge through my body, and I took a deep breath as I approached the table. The woman lay prone on the surgical-steel surface with her head still completely covered in gauze, another technique used to dehumanize the situation. I was thankful for it now, because looking this woman in the eye as I was preparing to cut into her would have been overwhelming. *Ignorance is bliss*, I thought to myself. With my finger I traced the path of the spine, like how a golfer does a practice swing before they really line up to hit the ball, and then looked to my professor for reassurance. She nodded and I felt my stomach rise up into my mouth and I prayed that my dinner was going to stay where it belonged. I took the scalpel and placed it where the spine becomes the neck as it prepares to enter the cranium. The blade was resting on top of the skin now, and all it needed was the slightest pressure from my fingertips to make the incision. When I'm afraid to do something I give myself a countdown in my head. So I counted down from three. *Three, two, one*, and I pressed down ever so slightly on the scalpel and felt the futile resistance of the skin as the knife passed through it. I retracted my arm and began moving the knife down the middle of the back just like I was instructed. The scalpel split the skin with ease revealing the bulbous and glistening globules of fat beneath and I was taken aback at the sharpness of the tool in my hand. The skin required some pressure to get through, but the scalpel sliced through the yellow fat underneath like an airplane soaring through a cloud. I continued the cut the length of the back and ended it where the instructions indicated. There was silence and the room felt cold. I lifted up the blade. My stomach sank back into my abdomen, relieved that the moment was over, but also gripped by an excitement, a rush of something I had never felt before.