

I Must Have Been That Man

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*"I suspect there was some kind of fall," she said, /
even if it was just a little stumble."*

- "I Must Have Been That Man" by James Tate

On a Monday night in October when I was twenty, I walked home with a boy from a party drinking cheap whiskey and sharing puffs of his cigarette. We stopped on the stairs outside of my apartment and kissed. I asked if he wanted to spend the night. *This is healthy*, I told myself, *this is college*.

In my room, we laughed and shushed each other, fumbling around with buttons and zippers until he took off my shirt.

"What's this," he said as he traced the scar down the middle of my chest, his fingers lingering on the keloids, the small, hardened lumps of scar tissue that punctuated the already prominent pink line.

"I had a heart transplant," I said.

"When?"

"A year ago."

"Oh."

I waited for him to ask the usual questions: *why did you need it, are you okay now, what about the donor*.

"You have *great* boobs," he said.

After he fell asleep, I got out of bed and felt around in the dark for a shirt. I could only find his flannel so I put it on like a robe and walked to the bathroom. I opened his shirt in front of the mirror and placed my fingers on each of the keloids, imagining I might be

able to play my breastplate like an accordion, find the right note, and have the scar disappear.

Even after a year, the straight scar down my chest hadn't become a part of my landscape like the rest: the two scars on my back that frame my shoulders like wings, the one scar on each rib that tan in the summer and look like scrapes in bark, and all the small ovals, where suction tubes once were, that could easily be birthmarks or sun spots. But the transplant scar remained surgical-looking and wouldn't blend or sink. It sat there, hanging just below my neck.

To the left of the scar, I could see the new heart beating beneath my skin. Some nights, shortly after the surgery, it beat so hard I couldn't sleep. I would lie awake listening to its unfamiliar rhythm: *bump-BUMP bump-BUMP*. The new double pump song of perfection replacing the one wrong beat, a single ventricle, I'd had before. Sometimes I would fall asleep and dream of people dancing in ballets with symphonies coming out of their mouths when I expected words. I didn't tell anyone about the dreams. I was afraid they'd say that maybe it was the donor, maybe the donor had danced.

I tried not to think about the donor much. I'd spent close to two years waiting, always wondering what the donor might mean, what might change in me. I'd seen kids lose themselves in their donors. They'd make websites dedicated to living the life their donor never got to finish. They'd talk about their donor as if they were friends. When I listed, my parents, both rabbis, told me a story from the Talmud about a rabbi who goes to visit three sick men and each time the rabbi asks, *Is your suffering dear to you?* That's the whole story, they'd explain, and it's the question that's important. I took it to mean this: When the time comes, will you be able to live without the heart defect that always made you special and strong? Will you be able to face wellness and normalcy? Will getting a good grade be as big of an accomplishment if you didn't have to study in the hospital to get it?

So, when the call came, I didn't ask where the heart was coming from or where it had been. And when I started dreaming in ballets, I didn't go looking for answers in my donor. Instead, I decided this must be how people with healthy hearts dream: in music and dancing, kicking off blankets and sheets in the middle of winter because my blood had never moved so fast through my veins and the warmth of it was almost unbearable.

After the surgery, the doctors said that it would take a year, a full year, for the heart to thaw and reach its capacity. Now, at almost a year, I stood in front of the mirror in a boy's shirt wondering how long it was going to take until that new rhythm wouldn't keep me up at night. How long I would have to live with this new heart before it would feel like mine and I would forget the years I spent waiting, getting too close to death. How many cigarettes I would have to smoke, how many boys I would take home to prove to myself, and the new heart, that this body was still *my* house.

Is your suffering dear to you?

No, I thought.

In the morning, I hid his cigarettes and made him toast and everything was funny again. We had headaches, we smelled like whiskey, and it was a Tuesday. He left for class and I stayed home because I didn't have classes that day, just rehearsal for a play in the evening. He told me I should come find him later, before my rehearsal, he'd be at the library and he'd be happy to help me learn my lines.

After he left, I showered, got dressed, gathered my books, and walked outside. It was October in St. Louis and not quite cold. There was a slight drizzle and even though I was wearing a raincoat, I could hear my mother's voice saying, *You're immunosuppressed, please take an umbrella.* That's when I realized I was locked out.

The walk to campus wasn't long, fifteen minutes, and even though I had a car, I walked it almost every day. I liked to walk it alone. Before the transplant, fifteen minutes was impossible. The doctors explained it to me like this: for you, in heart failure,

a fifteen-minute walk is like a marathon and that's why sometimes you throw up at the end. Doctors often explained my illness to me using sports metaphors—as if, as a kid born with a single-ventricle heart, sports was a language I ever learned to speak.

I sat on my stoop and rubbed my head, regretting my decision to forgo a Tylenol. Both of my roommates were on campus, most likely with the boy from the night before. He was probably smoking a cigarette outside the library not knowing the gift he had given me by not asking questions and treating my body like I hadn't been split down the middle and pieced back together. But now he knew that I walked around that campus with a perpetually broken chest plate and a very loud heart. And for that reason, I didn't want to see him again.

I walked instead towards a coffee shop. I kept to the side streets and little alleys because I felt as if I might cry and if I did, I didn't want to run into anyone who might try to talk to me about it. Halfway down the street, I saw a man lying on the ground, his electric wheelchair fallen beside him in the dirt.

As I got closer, I recognized him. He rode around the Loop a lot and we had spoken a few times outside the coffee shop. He always asked what I was reading but he never seemed to remember that we'd met before. Earlier that spring, he stopped by my table on a sunny day and said, "You're just lovely." I thanked him and I meant it because on some days after the surgery, I would look down at my chest to make sure it wasn't bleeding, to make sure you couldn't see that underneath my shirt I had been stapled together and might one day do something clumsy, slip on the sidewalk, and come undone. I was put together fine (expertly, in fact) but something remained unhealed in me that spring and it comforted me to know that the world hadn't noticed.

When I was close enough to speak to him, he propped himself on his elbow and adjusted his glasses.

"Well, hello," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Walking in the rain, huh?"

“I locked myself out of my apartment,” I said. “I’m on my way to the coffee shop.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” he said as he tried to pull himself into a sitting position. He couldn’t manage to sit so he continued to prop himself from one elbow to the next. I set my bag down on the ground.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“Oh, it happens all the time,” he said. “My chair doesn’t work so good in the rain. I’m saving for a new one. It’s lighter and it goes faster. You look familiar.”

“We’ve met. Outside the coffee shop. I’m—”

“Oh, yes! You read a lot.”

I blushed. “I’m a student.” I’ve always been self-conscious of my reading, as if it betrays that I have stayed home for an embarrassing chunk of my life.

“You must be a good one,” he said.

“I’m okay.” There was a pause between us, and the rain picked up. “Can I help you get back in your chair?” I asked.

“Oh, no, no,” he said. “I’ll be just fine. I live right over there with my mother. I’ll get up eventually, I just need a little time.”

“Can I call her for you?” I asked.

“No, no. She’s still at work. She’ll be home in an hour.”

“Well, maybe I can just turn the chair upright,” I said.

“Ha!” he said. “Like to see you try!”

The chair was behind him and somehow I managed to turn it right-side up but it wasn’t easy. I’m not sure how I did it and I don’t think I could do it again. After, I sat down beside him to catch my breath. I was already wet so I took off the hood of my raincoat.

“You are stronger than you look,” he said.

We both laughed. “Do you want to try to get back in the chair?” I asked.

“Well, it looks like you’re some kind of weight lifter so, yeah, let’s try.”

I hooked my arms underneath his shoulders and he pulled up on the wheelchair. On three, we both lifted but the weight of his

legs was too much. We fell back into the dirt. He was about six feet tall and over 300 pounds with everything from his waist down tethering him to the ground. I couldn't lift him, not even a little. I wrapped my arms as far as I could around him as he pulled up on the wheelchair, but the few inches he got off the ground were from his own effort. While we were struggling and sort of hugging like that, he asked me what I did.

"I'm a student," I repeated.

"But what do you study?"

I was a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies major but the last time I had said that to a man he replied, *Yeah, me too*, with a horrible wink.

"I study theater. I'm an actress," I said.

"Oh yeah? Yeah, I could see that. You're real pretty. I bet you're a good actress."

"I'm okay," I said again.

"Are you in anything right now?"

"I am. A comedy at my college."

We lifted again and from behind me I heard a gruff, "Hey!" We fell and I turned to see a white pickup truck. The driver gave us the up-and-down and said to me, "You all right?" I looked around like maybe there was someone else in trouble. Then I realized what the truck driver must've seen: a tiny white girl struggling beneath the weight of a large black man on a side street in St. Louis.

"I'm fine," I said. "We were just trying to get him back in his chair."

The man's brow unfurrowed and, suddenly, he saw the electric wheelchair as if it hadn't been there before. He parked his pick-up in the middle of the street and climbed down to help. We tried to lift the man with just the two of us a few times but still couldn't manage to set him in the chair. Because the man was so tall, the seat of the wheelchair was high off the ground. And because of the rain, the chair had short-circuited and the seat wouldn't lower.

"Wait here," the man with the truck said. "I'm working construction a block away. I'll get my guys."

He took off running down the alley, leaving his truck parked in the middle of the street. I sat down to wait beside the man whose name I didn't know. The rain picked up and the dirt around us started turning to mud.

"You can go," the man said. "It's so nice of you to wait but I'll be alright. It'll come back on, the chair, it always does."

My heart was pounding from trying to lift the man. I looked at him now sitting propped against his chair and couldn't find the words. I thought about unzipping my jacket, peeling off my high-necked shirt, and showing him my chest. Pointing to each scar, hoping it might act as our common language. *Here, I would say, was a suction tube that stayed in for three days; here is where they do biopsies every six months now by taking little pieces of the heart out through my neck; here is where my muscles were cut when I was four years old for a repair that didn't work.* I wanted to explain to him that I wasn't good at much, but I was good at waiting. How I had waited nearly two years for a heart and, a year ago, I had come so close to death that sometimes I worry the smell of it lingers on my body and maybe that's the reason I buy so many clothes and creams. So, when I said, "I'm happy to sit here with you," I meant it with all of my hearts.

The man with the truck returned with two more men. As the three men tried to lift the one man into his chair, the man being lifted told the Mexican man he was reading a book about the Mayans. He asked if the Mexican man was Mayan and the Mexican man replied, "Not anymore."

There was a lot of tugging and pulling at the man's wet clothes to hoist him towards his seat. A lot of, "One. Two. Three. *Lift.*" I turned away because his pants started to fall. It was humiliating and uncomfortable but once he was in the chair, he thanked us and said he could handle it from there. He said we should all go, the rain was lighter now and he could wait until it stopped and the chair came back on, as it happened all the time. But the chair would not turn on and the men would not give up.

"No, no," one of the men said, "We'll carry you home."

Then they all chanted *carry you home.*

The chair was heavy and the men had to stop to catch their breath several times. A man who owned a Chinese restaurant nearby had also joined us and he held his yellow umbrella over the other men. They were like a parade now, a march, and I continued to walk beside them not knowing why I was still there. I hadn't been able to help in a while.

When we reached his house, his mother opened the door. *She's home from work*, I thought, *it must have been over an hour since I first sat down beside him in the dirt*. She thanked us all, adding, "You didn't have to carry him in the chair. The chair will come back on. It always does." I was ashamed then and I couldn't meet her eyes.

They lived on the second floor with no elevator and one of the construction workers asked how he would get up the stairs. "He does just fine," the mother said. She was fierce and we deserved it.

I shook the man's hand and he held mine a moment. "Good luck to you," he said.

My throat was tight and I could barely breathe: *bump-BUMP bump-BUMP* it screamed. "I'm sure I'll see you around," I said.

"Oh, sure you will. I'm always around."

When his mother closed the door, the other men were peeking in to see him get up the stairs using only his arms. I was already in the street, walking back to where I had left my bag in the mud. The three construction workers and the man with the umbrella caught up to me. They were laughing about how they were like a bad joke: a black guy, a white guy, a Mexican, and a Chinese guy find a man in a wheelchair.... They patted each other on the back as we walked, saying how lucky that man was that I found him, how he would've been "shit up a creek" without me.

"I didn't do much," I said. One man held the umbrella for shelter, one man went for help and brought the two other men who finally hoisted the man back into his chair and carried him home. All I really did was sit beside him and wait in the in-between.

The man with the truck asked if I needed a ride anywhere. I said, "No, thank you." The rain was lighter now and the coffee shop was only a few blocks away. He piled into the truck with the

other two construction workers and they drove away. The man with the umbrella asked if he could walk with me so that I might stay dry. I said, “No, thank you.” I was already wet. We parted ways and I sat back down in the mud and cried. Someone walked by and gave me a smile but didn’t stop. *College girls cry all the time*, I thought.

When I walked into the coffee shop, I made a puddle of muddy water on the floor. I spotted a friend at a table in the corner and she waved me over.

“You look like you’ve been through a war,” she said.

I took off my coat and realized my clothes were soaked through. I went to the bathroom to clean myself up.

I was shivering and there was mud was all over my face and hands. I stood in front of the mirror and thought about going back to the man’s apartment to apologize to him. I didn’t know what I would say. We couldn’t have left him there in the mud, I suppose, but I should have just listened to him and waited alongside him a while. Nothing would’ve been fixed, not the chair or the man’s body, and we wouldn’t have talked about how we might try. We would’ve just sat beside each other in the mud, talking about books and school, staring across some invisible river at ballets and marathons, able bodies and recognizable rhythms. And that alone might have been better than three men lifting his body into a stubborn and broken chair.

I turned on the faucet and waited for the water to warm.

It takes a year for the heart to thaw.

I washed my hands.

The chair will come back on, it always does.

I wet a paper towel and wiped the mud off my face. I stopped shivering and started to warm up. It happened so quickly: warming up from a healthy heart and fast-flowing blood. My cheeks were flushed and my clothes clung to my body. I looked in the mirror—flushed cheeks, big breasts, pink lips—a body that smoked cigarettes and drank whiskey on Monday nights and could still lift wheelchairs the next day. A body that now slept beside other

hearts of the same beat and warmth. A body finally good enough to say *no, thank you* and no one would insist on carrying me home. I removed my shirt to wring it out in the sink. I traced my scar and looked at the quick rise and fall, the vibration in my chest—the raging, healthy heart.

Is your suffering dear to you?

Yes. A little bit, yes. ∞