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Wounds of the Heart and Great Vessels

My first date with Dr. David Constantino lasted five minutes. It was a windy Friday night in spring, and I was moderately excited to date a doctor, even if he wasn't the kind who saved anybody. "I'm an anesthesiologist. I put people to sleep," he had said on the phone, and on his online profile, and in an article written for an HMO that I found on the internet. In the picture, he was giving a patient a handshake with his right and a thumbs-up with his left.

David showed up at my doorstep an hour and seven minutes late. He was wearing a jacket thrown over a white shirt with sweat stains on it. There was a smear of blood on his stubbly jaw. Or maybe it was just ketchup. He was uncommonly tall—even in heels, I was a head shorter than him—and he had a slight potbelly, but he was good-looking in that douchebag way that I can't help but find attractive. It's a problem for me.

"You're late," I said.

"You look nothing like your profile picture," he said.

The exit sign buzzed in the hallway.

He rubbed his eyes. "You want to go, Rachel? Or not?" He looked almost like he had been crying.

I considered just shutting up and going with

him. I mean, he was cute and I had at least two hours left on my perfume. I'm a secretary for a flooring company; I hadn't ever had a shot at a doctor before. But an hour and seven minutes and no apology? I tried again: "You're over an hour late."

He said, "And you're twenty pounds heavier than you said you were, but who's counting."

My hand fluttered to my neck.

Dr. David Constantino seemed surprised by his own words. A tic began in his left eye. "You ready?"

I gave him a you-first wave, my new nails glittering. He nodded and turned his back. As soon as that schmuck was clear, I slammed the door behind him and locked it.

There was one faint knock, then nothing. The wind pressed against the windows. I ordered a pizza with anchovies and went back online.

A week later, we were hit with a spring blizzard, over a foot of wet snow and counting. I almost spun out driving home from work. It had been a particularly hard week, and I was glad it was Friday. You think answering phones for a flooring company isn't stressful? Guess again. People can do without a lot of things, but show me one

person who doesn't need a floor.

So I was in early pajamas, a movie cued up and a bowl of soup on my coffee table. It's my famous chicken soup, famous to me. It cures the common cold, probably cancer and definitely heartbreak. I was blowing on the first bite when I heard something scratching outside my door. I thought it was my neighbor's rat terrier—they keep him off leash, and he once pooped on the hallway carpet in front of my apartment. But when I opened the door, a man was bent over my welcome mat. "Hey," I said, and he straightened up.

I almost didn't recognize him. It was Dr. David Constantino. He was in a snow-covered blue shirt, and looked like he was ten pounds skinnier than the week before. His potbelly was nearly gone, and he had that anorexic look right behind his ears, where the body can't lie. His skin had turned as mealy as half-dried library paste. Snow encrusted the top of his head in a ring, and adorned his shoulders like melting epaulets. The shadows under his eyes were darker than his eyes themselves.

"Rachel. I was just dropping this off." With the toe of his shoe, he nudged something further under my welcome mat, which I pulled aside. Underneath it was a gold watch.

"It was my father's," David said. "He's dead. It's just a token, really. An apology for hurting your—for my rudeness." His voice was all scratched up, not like the smooth, resonant one he had affected on the phone before our aborted date. Snow melted from his hair and down his forehead. He swayed a little and grabbed the

doorframe, but he didn't seem drunk.

"You're giving me your dead father's watch?"

"So, we're good?" He looked relieved, as if the last item on his list had been checked off. "Goodbye." He started to lurch away, but I grabbed his arm.

"David, where's your coat?"

"I don't need a *coat*." He seemed bewildered at the thought.

"You shouldn't be out driving in this mess." Clods of snow dropped off his shirt. I asked, "When's the last time you ate? Or slept?"

"I don't know. The night before I met you."

"You haven't slept in seven days?" I felt scared, but wasn't sure why. "Come inside."

He swayed on his feet and shook his head.

"I'm not asking," I said.

He tried to pull himself out of my grip, but it turns out that I'm stronger than a man who hasn't slept in seven days. I put my weight into it, and Dr. David Constantino stumbled across my doorstep. I shut the door behind him.

He was crooked and wretched, and too tall for my apartment. He smelled like rotten chicken. I pulled him onto my sofa. He clenched his car keys in his fist. "But I have to go do something important," he said. And then he was crying.

I had only seen kids cry like this, not men. His mouth opened, and all his feelings fell out onto my shoulder. He covered me with violent sobs, coming from deep inside the man. I just hung on. He shivered and shuddered and nearly convulsed, and I didn't feel like I was hugging him so much as trying to hold all his body parts

together.

He said, "I killed someone."

"You murdered someone?" Now, I didn't dare let go of him.

"A patient. On the table. Last Friday, before I met you. That's why I was late," he slurred into my shoulder.

I continued to hold him while he told me about a teenage female patient brought in for emergency surgery, with a heart nicked by a knife. "'Wounds of the Heart and Great Vessels' is what they call it," he said in a suddenly medical-sounding voice before dissolving again. "She had a negative reaction to the anesthesia. I missed the signs. I wasn't paying close enough attention. She went into shock and died."

"But maybe she would have died anyway. Of the knife wound or whatever."

"Maybe she *would* have," he grieved. "But she died from *me*."

"It's not your fault," I said, but what did I know? It might have been. "That's why you're not sleeping?"

"I never even wanted to be a doctor when I was young. Younger." His crying was steady now. "But my parents wanted med school, so that's what I did. Tragic mistake."

I didn't know what to say. I had never heard of anyone settling for medical school. "Do your parents know about all this?"

"No. Yes. I mean, they're dead." He wiped his nose on my shirt, and then on his sleeve. "My mom died of cancer two years ago. My dad just gave up and kicked it after that. I'm alone."

I should have said, "You're not alone," but instead what came out was, "Can't you take some narcotics or something?"

"Don't you think I tried? Nothing works." He laughed, semi-hysterical. "I know. The irony."

By now, both of his hands had wormed onto my breasts, and he started kissing me with his rotten chicken breath. Again, I considered. Go with it? Doctor? But he was just too disgusting, and probably dying at that very moment. I pushed him away and said, "I'm calling the hospital."

"No. I work at the hospital." He began to stand up. It took him two tries. "Not your problem. I'll go."

I gave him a little shove, and he splayed backward onto the sofa. Food, I thought. You can always rely on food. I pointed at the soup on the coffee table. "Eat that first."

David glanced at my soup as if it were sewage. He tried to pick up the spoon, but his fingers clattered against it without establishing a grip. His whole body shook. Finally, he managed to raise the spoon to his lips, but he spat the soup out in an involuntary exhale. It splattered on my face and pajama top, and I wiped it off with my hand. "I'm sorry," he said. So I took the spoon from him. Blew on the soup and everything. When he opened his mouth, his tongue was trembling.

He swallowed my food. Something changed between us. It was so subtle, only a dog could have smelled it. David looked me in the eyes for the first time. He put his hand on mine, guided another spoonful toward his mouth, like a toddler. Then again and again, and soon he

had picked up the bowl and was gulping great mouthfuls of soup, chewing the chicken and carrots and potatoes as if he had never eaten before and damn, isn't this eating thing great? Broth glistened on his chin, and a small rivulet ran down his neck into his collar.

He lowered the empty bowl and gazed at me, stoned. "More," he said.

So I refilled the bowl from my pot in the kitchen and brought it to him. Again with the gulping and chewing and swallowing. It was deeply satisfying, watching someone eat my soup like that. It spoke to my deep talent. Why do you think men marry nice Jewish girls? We know from soup.

When David was on his third bowl, I remembered an article I read once about a bulimic model who ate everything in her refrigerator and then dropped dead from the shock. "Perhaps you'd better slow down."

"More," he started to say again, then a terrified look crossed his face. He ran to my bathroom and slammed the door. I followed and knocked. "David? Are you okay?"

After some time, there was flushing, and more flushing. David stumbled out. "I think I broke your toilet," he said. He fell onto my sofa, his knees buckling beneath him. He panted, "I feel so much better, I don't even want to kill myself anymore."

And then he passed out and began to snore.

I hovered, staring. A faint cast of pink began to make its way to the surface of his skin, like the slowest dawn in history. Outside, the night snow

had turned the world an iridescent blue.

I grabbed the plunger and went to see what he had done to my bathroom.

So this is me: I had a baby once. Her name was Leah Sharon Rose. She died of SIDS when she was three weeks old. I had just nursed her. Afterward, I held her upright so she wouldn't get acid reflux. She slept in my hands with her brow furrowed, like she was working out some very complicated math problem in her head. When exhaustion got to me, too, I pulled her tiny body to my chest, where she nuzzled slightly and stayed. I didn't wake up until she was already cold.

So that happened.

Everyone grieves differently, and my husband's way was to find a different woman, a younger one. He said, "I want a big family, Rachel, with like five children. Live children." Last I heard, he has a son now, and another baby on the way. Good for him. It's a talent, forgetting. Good for him, good for him.

I read somewhere that doctors can't say, "Whoops." Medical schools tell them not to. Instead, when they make a mistake, they have to say, "There."

What kind of fuckery is that, a system that doesn't allow for human error? You amputate the wrong leg, you lose a sponge inside a patient, you slip and cut a jugular and you can only say, "There," like you had planned this all along, like your secret mission was to kill the very person you were trying to save.

I spent the weekend watching bad movies and listening to David's snoring. He covered the entire length of my sofa and didn't move. I cleaned my apartment, cooked, ate, eventually even vacuumed while he slept. Twice a day, I pulled him upright and said, "David. You have to use the bathroom." He moaned and stumbled after me, holding my hand, his eyes still closed. I helped him to my abused toilet, let him do more of his business, and cleaned up. I cleaned him. He never really woke up at all. I managed to get a couple of smoothies inside him during his toilet breaks. You didn't know that a person can drink a smoothie without waking up, did you? I didn't either.

Then I helped him back to the sofa, where he collapsed again as if he had just completed a marathon. His eyes rolled from side to side under his thin lids. His jaw was slack and loose, and his lips were cracked. Sometimes I moistened them, or lifted a lock of dark hair from his eye. While I watched TV, I squeezed water into his mouth from a towel, very gradually so he wouldn't choke.

I knew I should probably call one of his doctor friends, but David's phone wasn't with him—I didn't know who to call. And what could he possibly need more than what he was getting on my sofa? I could see the change. It's like his body was an ocean cruiser, still pointed toward death, only beginning its wide arc back toward life.

By Sunday night, most of the snow had melted, and my apartment smelled like a homeless shelter. It had to be done. I worked off his shirt, pants, and socks and laundered them. I folded

his clothes and left them on the coffee table, where he would see them upon waking, if he ever woke. I spread his watch on top. I sponged off his skin with soapy warm water, wiping it dry with a cloth in my other hand so he wouldn't get cold.

His chest heaved under my washcloth. The hairs on his legs straightened and aligned themselves. I washed between his toes. His dark eyebrows relaxed, and his face smoothed into a soft smile. He smelled like lavender.

After I tucked a fresh cotton blanket around his torso, David's eyes drifted open. "Am I here?" he asked.

"You're here," I said.

"Are you here?" he asked.

"I'm here," I said.

He closed his eyes again. He groped along my arm until he found my hand. I held his hand for a long time with those words thumping in me. Then his grip loosened as his body surrendered to sleep, as it must. He let me go.

I found an article Dr. David Constantino wrote for an online medical journal, on anesthesia. He said that surgery used to be performed with a bottle of whiskey and four strong men to hold the screaming patient down. People chose suicide instead, preferring death over known pain. And some killed themselves afterward, because during the surgery, they felt that God had utterly abandoned them.

"But now we just count backward from ten, and our pain vanishes," he wrote. "It's a taste of death. When we come alive again, we're relieved

of our worst memories.”

On Monday morning, David was still sleeping. He was still skinny, but his cheeks were pink in the dim light. His chest rose and fell as if he were floating on swells of gentle water. His forehead felt smooth and warm, and he had the beginnings of a soft beard. He nuzzled his cheek into my touch, and resettled into sleep.

I called his office and left a message saying that Dr. Constantino was unwell and would not be able to see his patients that day. And I had to go to work too, right? The phones at A&A Flooring weren't going to answer themselves. So I showered, dressed, and left David a note that said, “Dear David, you've been sleeping for three days. If you wake up, please eat something. I'll be home after work. —Rachel.”

I worried all day. I dropped a full box of paperclips all over the floor. I forgot the company's name twice. I ate an entire box of powdered sugar mini-donuts from a convenience store. When five o'clock finally arrived, I rushed home.

David wasn't on the sofa. My apartment was empty.

My note was flipped over, with doctor-handwriting scrawled across the back of it. It said, “Dear Rachel. I think you saved my life. David.” Stretched across the top of the note was his father's gold watch.

I picked it up and held it in my hand. I felt . . . I don't know. Maybe it's enough to say that I felt.

Here's my soup recipe, in case you ever need to save anyone's life:

Chop up shallots and onions, and fry them in olive oil. When they get loose, stir in minced garlic, ginger, cumin, and cinnamon if you like it. Don't skimp. Add peppered chicken thighs, bone in, skin side down, and fry them in that spiced oil. Turn them once, and add chicken broth, potatoes, carrots, celery, bay leaf, and brandy or sherry. Boil, then simmer for an hour. Finish with sesame oil if you left out the cinnamon, and serve over matzo balls or whatever. Pasta. This is the recipe that I created in the name of my Jewish ancestors, sleeping in the graves they were sent to by cancer and heartbreak.

I called David's clinic a few times to check on him, but he never called back. The nurses sounded surprised at my questions. He seemed just fine, was I a relative? A patient? A friend, I said, the lie evident in my voice. I had no idea what I was.

So one evening after work, I drove to David's clinic to return the watch. I pulled into the parking lot as they were shutting off the lights inside. Deflated office workers and strung-out doctors in blue button-downs seeped out of the building. I shut off my car and waited for him. Maybe I was scared again—I don't know. I waited a long time before David pushed through the doors.

It felt strange to see him so far away, like he was anybody else. He looked like he had gained his normal weight back. He strode in my direction. I took a deep breath and reached for the door handle, but David slowed and then stopped. He squinted at the gray sky.

It was beginning to rain, great drops splatting my windshield, thudding against the metal roof of my car. Everyone scurried to their cars, except for David. He turned in a slow circle. The rain intensified around us. Suddenly, he raised his face and arms to the sky, as it opened up and poured down on him.

The rain ricocheted off every surface with violence. David's face and hair were soaked, his clothes sticking to his skin. A few remaining coworkers paused to watch him, their purses or hands shielding their eyes. But Dr. David Constantino stayed there, his arms raised like a mighty conductor, or some version of God. I didn't move either, David's watch in my lap. It was a long time before David finally dropped his arms. He waved at a staring coworker, got into his car, and drove away.

That was a year ago. I still wear the watch. I stopped crying in my sleep. When I think of my daughter, an airy calm settles across my shoulders. I began dating a nice municipal worker who does landscaping in city parks, tending trees and

bushes. Last winter on our way to a late movie, a semi almost skidded into his car. Right before it narrowly missed us, I thought, I've done good in this life.

I once heard a legend about an empress who fell off a boat. The river was swift, and she couldn't swim. An empress doesn't learn how. She flailed in the water, and the oarsmen crowded together at the edge of the boat.

In whatever culture this was, if you save someone's life, you're responsible for that life forever. The peasants on the boat were poor, powerless. They couldn't bear that kind of responsibility. According to this legend, they stood on the boat and watched the empress drown to death.

What a load of crap.

Of course they saved her. Because they could. And from then on, through the cracks in their days flowed this constant memory: the strength of the current, a stranger's hand, and that sudden pull back to life. 