

## My Beeping Heart

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Her staring unnerved me, but I wasn't offended by it, after all, she was only doing her job, but the intensity and constance of her gaze made me feel more ill-at-ease than I felt already. I closed my eyes and deliberately turned my hands over so that they rested palms-up on my legs. This probably looked like I was trying to imitate Buddha, but I didn't care, it was an old trick I'd taught myself years ago to ease stress. Almost immediately I felt more relaxed, and started to daydream.

A last glance at the clock above the theatre administration desk had showed I had been waiting here for nearly 25 minutes. Adding that to my long wait on the ward, and I had been ready to go for over 3 hours – no wonder I was feeling anxious. I concentrated on structuring my breathing, and because it was so hard, I managed to switch almost everything else off.

“Mr. Brown?”

I opened my eyes to see a petite theatre sister smiling shyly at me. I looked up into gentle blue eyes that had a faint sadness about them.

“Yes, that's me.”

“We're ready for you now.”

I felt a shiver run through me. Not my anxiety, something else, something inexplicable. I knew the lovely face in front of me, from whence I could not recall. I could not keep my eyes off her.

Her head on one side, she met my gaze, and smiled encouragingly. “Are you OK?”

I nodded, and she held out her hand. I took it – again the over-powering feeling of *deja-vu*. I got up and she led me into the theatre.

As I lay on the table, she busied herself with the insertion of a cannula, and attachment of ECG leads, all the while keeping my attention with the usual last-minute questions – all a repeat of what I'd been asked before, but guaranteed to be a life-saver if they hadn't been. She then asked me a little about myself, and responded readily when I asked her about herself.

We talked about retirement, children, grand-children etc. I was deeply re-assured by her care and attention, despite the feelings of *deja-vu*.

Eventually she was joined by the anaesthetist, and it was time for the

mask. She carried on talking as she looked down at me, waiting, then she said "You don't need this any more." and took away the mask. Her face was close to mine as she waited, watching. Her head was surrounded in a halo of very bright light as someone illuminated the table, though I could still see the sad, gentle eyes watching me.

I listened to the beeps from the ECG as it faithfully copied my heartbeat, including the all-too-frequent paradiddle of my A/F.

"That doesn't sound so clever" I said, indicating the machine's dial with a movement of my eyes.

She gave the faintest shake of her head and whispered "No, but don't worry, I'll look after you."

We looked into each other's eyes, and suddenly she came to a decision.

"You don't need these any more, either" and she began to remove the ECG terminals from my chest.

She held out her hand. I took it, and stepped down from the table. She led me out of the theatre and along a corridor. We entered a large room that contained many white boxes, all stacked neatly in rows.

She muttered "No, this is no good."

We crossed the room, and left it by the other door, and we were in another corridor. We walked awhile, still talking. She still had hold of my hand. She squeezed it and I stopped beside a darkened corridor to our left. I reached out and took her other hand in mine and leaning forward I kissed her. She didn't at first respond, but when I backed away, she pulled me forward and kissed me, her mouth hot and urgent. I backed into the darkened corridor, but she seemed unwilling to follow me. "Come with me" I said.

She shook her head, a panic in her eyes "I can't."

My arm was fully outstretched, but she wouldn't move.

I let go of her hand. She pleaded "Joe! Don't do this to me, Please don't do this."

As I retreated into the darkness of the corridor, her face and body disappeared into the light and only her outstretched hand remained visible, then that too was gone. I turned and went through a dark varnished door, and headed straight up the stairs.

I added my name to the list at the side of the bar, put my £1 entry fee in the tin provided, and ordered a pint. I wandered around the room, nodding at the few people I recognised.

Eventually, Colin called the room to order.

"Welcome to Wallsend Chess Club's Annual Buzzer Bash. Here are the rules. This will be a Swiss Tournament of five rounds. Each player must start with one full pint. The buzzer will sound every 10 seconds. You have the intervening 10 seconds to make your move. If you haven't made your move before the next buzz, you lose. Losers must buy the winners a pint, and a half-pint for themselves. Each drink must be consumed by the finish of the next round. The winner is the player accruing the most points. All entry fees go to charity. Any questions?"

There weren't, so I found my first opponent and sat down to play. The game lasted until my 8th move - which I failed to make within the allotted 10 seconds. I held out my hand, and my opponent took it with a regretful smile. "You aren't on form tonight Joe. I never expected to win against you."

"It's weird" I said "Each time it was your move, it seemed that time was elongated, giving you loads of time to think. Yet when it was my turn, I felt as though I had barely sufficient time to move the pieces, let alone think about the move."

He looked at me and shook his head, laughing "You haven't been on the happy-baccy have you?"

I smiled "I wish I had been. Maybe I would have relaxed and played better."

I bought him a pint, and myself a half whilst the next round draws were made, then sat down to play a nerdy little boy.

This time I lost in six moves. He wasn't so polite as my last opponent, giving out a whoop of delight at his victory. I was now almost convinced that somehow, the buzzer was not keeping to strict 10 second intervals - as well as being convinced that this theory was complete bunk, and I was hallucinating. I bought the sprog an orange juice and was actually glad when I was told that I had a 'Bye' for the next round.

I stood and listened to the buzzer as everyone else started to play the 3rd round and it seemed perfect. My mind was obviously playing tricks. Despite the event being just a bit of fun, I was annoyed with myself, and couldn't work out what was wrong. The buzzer started to annoy me, so I left the upstairs room and headed downstairs to the bar.

I stood at the bar, and finishing the half I'd bought upstairs, I thought "What the Hell" and bought myself a pint. Amongst the background hubbub of noise I imagined I could still hear the Beep - Beep of the Chess buzzer upstairs, except this time the tone of each beep seemed different. This was becoming very silly.

I turned around and there was a young man sitting playing a table-top version of Pelota. I breathed a sigh of relief and watched as he played against the machine with moderate success. At one point he looked up and caught my eye "Fancy a game?"

"Yeah, Why not." I sat down opposite him and fed the machine a coin. Almost immediately he seemed to have the advantage. He managed to hit the ball with his bat at just the right angles to give an aggressively fast return, and despite my best efforts, I lost - 3 times in a row.

I was now both angry and frustrated with myself, and determined to win at least one game, but was interrupted with a hand on my arm trying to get my attention. It was Colin. I had to resume playing Chess upstairs.

I looked at my arm. A blood pressure monitoring machine was busily inflating itself on my bicep. The infernal beep of the ECG with the occasional paradiddle, was on my right. I looked around. The theatre recovery area was deserted except for the sad-looking registrar that stood

by my side.

"How do you feel?" He asked

"I'm fine" I said "Where is everyone?"

"They've all gone home" he said, a little forlornly. I looked at the clock. It was 18:25.

"What time are you supposed to finish?" I asked.

He gave a little laugh "Half-five"

"I've been unconscious for nearly an hour and forty minutes" I said.

We exchanged glances. He said nothing but simply nodded. He removed the ECG lines from my chest, but left me hooked up to a drip. Picking up a 'phone he spoke quietly into it, all the while watching me. A little later a porter arrived, the drip was removed, and the two of them pushed my bed back to my private room.

Susan eventually left, still surprised and a little disturbed by the outcome of my 'simple' knee operation.

She had been waiting several hours, then told I would be 'kept in', so was intensely curious as to how the operation had proceeded.

I had kept my hallucinations, dreams, or whatever they were, to myself, but could not stop her from seeing the paddle-burns on my chest after I discarded the gown and freshened up in front of the mirror.

"My God!" She had exclaimed "What the fuck have they done to you!"

I had turned and said quietly: "I believe there were problems. Can we leave this until I've had some rest?"

She kissed and hugged me, and despite our recent estrangement, whispered: "Come back safe to me Joe."

I settled back into the firm but comfortable bed. My head reeling with the multiplicity of emotions I'd experienced. I tried to put each one in place, but almost each time as a conclusion surfaced, another question appeared. I eventually dozed.

A cool hand was placed on my brow. "How do you feel Joe?"

I opened my eyes and looked up. The familiar beautiful blue eyes met mine.

"You tried to get away from me, didn't you, you naughty boy?"

I smiled, probably weakly. "No. I wanted you to come with me."

She stood back, shocked. "Good God, you were conscious!"

I looked up at her. Reached up, and touched her hand, "Maybe, I don't know, but there is something, something about you." I couldn't find the words.

I looked down at her name badge, trying to find an answer there.

She took my pulse, examined the dressing on my knee, then measured my SATs, before finally sitting down and looking at me.

"How do you feel?"

There was no doubt in my mind anymore.

"About the operation?" I hesitated, "or about you Wendy?"

She smiled and bent forward, touching me lightly on the cheek.

Sitting back, she said: "The Op was difficult, despite anaesthesia, now I know you became conscious some of the time. Worse, was that your heart stopped shortly after. We had difficulty in resuscitating you."

She looked at me. "I spoke to you during this time and you actually answered back."

I said "That I do remember, and you think?"

"I think you know who I am."

Her eyes and mine locked in an embracing appraisal I found strangely moving.

Then it came to me. Something deep, and very dark in the past. The park, the screaming woman, the small child drowning in the filthy park lake, but especially the child's eyes looking into mine.

'Holy Shit!' I said. "Not Saltwell Park. Not you. Not the child?"

She took my hand, holding it firmly.

"It is so. I owe my life to you."

I lay in silence, looking up at her lovely face. Not knowing what to say or do. She stroked my brow, her eyes never looking away from mine.

"Can you be sure?" I eventually found the words.

She smiled. "If I had any doubt, you have confirmed our bond already.

Despite my Mum's panic on the day, she later regretted her reactions and contacted your school. She was ashamed of her response to your act, but passed details of you on to me, after I questioned her several years later about my experience. I have carried your name with me for many years."

She paused, then shook her head. "I couldn't believe it when I was passed your details before theatre. It was almost too much to take in that our paths would cross again."

Again she paused, shaking her head slightly. "But here we are, and I can still feel your strong young arms around me, your quiet assurances that I was safe. I still see your face, concerned and anxious."

She stopped talking, then sobbed, tears falling unashamedly. She bent over me, kissing me gently on the lips.

I put my arms around her, holding her until she had calmed.

She sat up and smiled weakly at me. "I would be dismissed if anyone witnessed what I have just done."

I shook my head. "Not if they were given details of the incredible coincidence that has brought us together again."

She wiped her eyes with a tissue. "You have a partner."

I smiled sadly. "Yes, once. Susan and I have shared many things together, but all that remains of our relationship is a respectful care for each other."

"I want you." she said simply, awaiting my reply.

"I am yours." I neither knew, nor understood why, but I loved her.

She sat back. "You will be kept here for at least two days, or more, if your heart condition contra-indicates."

She kissed me gently on the lips and stood up, took her scratch-pad and pen from her pocket and wrote.

Tearing off the page, she handed it to me. "Night or day, call me if you

need me." She paused, "Or just to re-assure me of how you feel about me." Finally she gripped my hand. "I have to go. Try to rest, I'll pop in and see you tomorrow."

Then she was gone.

I half-dozed, a little weak, and also bewildered about what had just happened. At one point, I had myself believing it was yet another bizarre dream, as I was unsure about anything anymore.

I sat up and picked up the slip of paper she had wrote on - it was real, her name and telephone number were on the paper.

I lay back on the pillow. It was as clear to me as if it was yesterday.

Norman and I had taken the early school lunch and meandered down to the park. A walk around the lake was uneventful, until we approached part of the lake occluded by bushes. Dreadful screams rang out, and we both ran further around to see a young woman holding her head and screaming. A small child was thrashing about in the lake about 10 metres from the edge.

I took off my blazer and shoes, and waded, then swam to the child. That her thrashing had kept her afloat, there was no doubt, but her screaming was accompanied with choking noises as she gulped in the filthy water.

I reached her and trod water, holding her up and facing me. I had said a few words of reassurance. She stopped screaming, but sobbed and looked at me, terrified, but beautiful.

I turned her round, holding her to my chest, her head above water. I talked quietly to her as I swam backwards until my feet hit the bottom, I turned around and stood up, before wading ashore.

Norman stood beside the woman, his arm around her. A few other folks were stood, watching me.

As I mounted the pavement, she had leapt forward and snatched the child from my arms, roughly putting her into the push-chair and turning, rushed off. The last I remembered of the little girl were her lovely blue eyes.

Two or three folks clapped their hands. One elderly guy came over to me and took my hand. "Well done, son."

We made it back to school, I was soaked, and headed for the Gym. Davies, the Gym Instructor, listened attentively as I told him what had happened, whilst I shedded my soaking clothes and donned an oversize track-suit of his.

When I was ready, he had said quietly "Well done Joe. I'll speak to the headmaster. Go home, and get cleaned up. We'll see you again tomorrow."

It had been a week or so later, summoned by the headmaster, I had been told that a young woman had visited him and apologized for her 'behaviour', and asking the headmaster to thank me for my 'brave' action.

That 'Hawkeye' was delighted with me was evident. Sadly, it was probably

the only occasion in my whole time at the school that he was.

The next morning, early, I wheeled my way to the Hospital entrance hall and called her.

“Good Morning Wendy.”

“Ah, Joe. Good Morning. How do you feel?”

“I feel very happy. Can someone fall in love in an afternoon?”

She laughed. “I did, with you.”

“And me with you.”

“One question.” I said.

Again a light laugh. “Only one?”

“For now.” I replied “Did I ask you to come with me, and did you reply that you couldn't, saying 'Joe! Don't do this to me, Please don't do this?'”

I waited. Then I heard her sob. “I'm sorry Wendy, I shouldn't have mentioned this.”

She spoke. The sobbing had stopped. “Yes, you did ask me, and yes, I did say that. I said it because I thought you were going, and never coming back, and I pleaded with you. There is no need to apologize.” She paused. “Yes, I will come with you, wherever you go lovely man. Come and see me at home when you are released. I want to hold you, I want your arms around me.”

“And your's around me Sweet Wendy.”