The Broken Parts

He hadn’t slept in two days and held a human heart between his palms like clay. This was the last painful hurdle before bed. He worked his magic, the frail man on the operating table survived, and the lights all faded out like dying constellations as the staff left the sterile room. Alone in the bathroom, he ran his hands beneath scalding water and watched the crimson streams from his gloves finally run clear. A coughed erupted deep inside his chest. The noise echoed against the walls and flew back at him. When he looked into the mirror ahead, his grey eyes drooped, and his lips tightened around his teeth. Here, each night, he was presented with the same choice. The same test he usually failed.

‘Get rest, old man,’ the young nurse playfully called to him from behind the counter where she shuffled patients’ files like playing cards.

It was all the same game of luck, really. The doctors tried their best. The nurses tried their best. But the universe played out its hand each time and if the cards were low, there was nothing to be done. He liked that freedom. Each and every time he could simply do his best. He put his heart and soul into the surgeries and prayed silently beneath his paper mask. But the choices he made were clinical. Decisions he was trained for after years of school, practice, and intuition. As he got into his car, hours before anyone else would reasonably get up, the street lines blurred and he slipped his phone onto the seat next to him.

She had texted three times. His wife, however, hadn’t messaged him once all day because she was busy with the children and a dying mother and knew eventually her husband would return to her. His mistress, though, enjoyed no such security. At least she didn’t think she did, so she piqued his interest with stories of her day. A man had hit on her at the corner bodega, offering to buy her the ripest peaches. The doctor pounded his steering wheel a little, jealous. She mentioned a job offer in Arizona where the air was dry. He gripped the wheel, digging in his nails, as if he could grip her hands, too, and keep her from leaving Philadelphia.

The last text simply said ‘I need you,’ and he swerved off the freeway, making a quick turn back towards the city whose lights were harsh against his eyes as a headache pulsed up from the base of his neck. He took medicine. He sipped water. He thought of texting his therapist who sometimes, not usually, but sometimes convinced him to get back on the freeway, but tonight he had no strength left. His shoulders ached beneath the bones. The city pulled him back as if he were caught on a string. Soon, he entered her parking garage and used the spare key, letting himself into the slick apartment where she had presumptuously set two plates and poured bourbon.

She knew his last surgery ended at one and that he had two luxurious days off. His wife had no idea, because he never gave her the real schedule. Doing so would mean he would be forced to make the right choices. The real luxury of two days off was being able to choose what to do with his time.

“You never messaged me back,” the mistress scolded.

“No time,” he mumbled, taking the drink all at once and pushing the glass forward, a silent request for another.

“So you make time. I worry when I don’t hear from you.” She unwraps her hair from its bun and lets the burgundy curls hang over his shoulder as she embraces him and presses her cool lips against his neck.

“Never worry. It’s frantic on surgery days and if I’m not careful, a nurse could see my phone and our messages. What if they told my wife?”

She withdraws and moves to the kitchen, picking up a peach as a silent threat, now pressing her lips against the soft fuzz. *See*, the action says? *Other men want me just as much as you do. And they are not tethered to wives.* This is her punishment when he brings up his wife, only he is compelled to do it each visit to torture her...or himself. He isn’t sure.

“You’re pale. Eat the dinner. I’ll get you another drink.”

She is a masterful cook. The food anchors him to the table and the room. There is no space for his confused thoughts between the meal and the way her body moves as she tells him about her day. He feels the heat return to his own dogged frame and soon he wants nothing more than to be next to her. They met accidentally seven years ago in the train station. She dropped her bag, and its contents scattered along the cement cracks. He picked up each piece to help her, and he felt needed. He felt like he was getting to know her with each item, gently placed back in her black gloved hand. It was a scene from a film. It was the moment the hero, or the villain, wakes up to the world.

In her apartment, after they eat and make small talk, he delivers the line perfectly that he must say each time.

“I’ve got to get home soon. I can’t stay the night.”

She shakes her head. Not yes or no but an understanding that their time is finite, and she should know better than to hang her hopes on this relationship. But she’s become too fond of him to let go and when they kiss, she’s back at the train station, too. He is neatly picking up the scurrying pieces of her scattered life and handing them back to her. Love is strange that way. Never kind, in her experience. At least, he is the kindest man she has been with in some time.

This man, she tells herself, is built to save lives.

In the bedroom he is precise, undoing her dress and bra, folding them and placing them into the hamper. She rolls on the bed, wrecking the sheets before he gets in, not allowing him to be precise there. She is his tornado, and he releases his fears and frustrations, moving with her the way a grain of sand navigates the stormy dessert. He is utterly enthralled and despite his best intentions, he falls asleep in her tangled arms, exhausted.

His wife is used to his absence, he tells himself. She is better when he’s not there. Perhaps happier.

In the morning, after sleep and coffee, his life comes into focus and his mistress is wound tightly again. She is dressed for work and will not look him in the eyes because he is leaving, and they never share two nights in a row. He won’t go to the hospital now. He’ll drive across the bridge and find his small neighborhood where the morning has raced along without him. He will shower in the basement, then climb the stairs and emerge a new man to his family.

“I’m taking the job,” his mistress announces as he laces his shoes and stretches out a cramp behind his shoulder blade, readying himself to find his way again.

“That’s a shame,” is all he can muster. He has already left her apartment in his mind and second-guesses the space his absence leaves in his home. He is imagining the bed his wife slept in alone. The sheets are barely crumpled, and half of it is desolate because it is unused. He swore he wouldn’t stay the night here, but he always does.

“You’re sick,” she says to him.

“I hope Arizona is beautiful,” he lies, because she won’t go and he won’t let her go. He may know the mechanics of how a heart works, but he is utterly unaware of the magic it can hold over someone.

“I’ll send you postcards and pictures that will make you ache,” she swears, slamming the door behind her.

On the highway, he plays old music. Loud music that reminds him of reckless days when so much wasn’t at stake. His muscles are sore, and his phone vibrates against his hip.

*I need you* the message says, only this time it is his wife, and a string of mundane items from the grocery store follow. Except he ignores the rest and clings to the first three words. I need you.

After running the errands, he enters the basement and steps into the scalding shower. In his mind he recites the rest of his week. Four surgeries. Four card games where he can only do his best. When he turns off the water and stands naked, dripping, and confused, he realizes what a shame it is that he can equally fix and break hearts so easily. The mistress. His wife. His own.