Real Ticker

*Heart attack*, imagine who thought to call it that? I think of an eighties boy band or one of those pub eating challenges, *not* a catastrophic medical event. My issue has always been with its ambiguity; the correct medical term varies depending on the specific cause but when they tried to tell me that as a child I remember thinking *was his heart being attacked or was his heart attacking him?* Both could be considered correct, of course, but there was just no telling me. I knew it was serious even that first time. Visiting him in hospital to see him plugged in at the arm, tubes running up his nostrils. I later learned that the specific medical term for Dad’s condition was ‘Dilated Cardiomyopathy*.*’I learnt early that the heart is a treacherous, fickle organ.

Bill is up the ladder when I wheel into the driveway at Mum’s. I screw my palms into my eyes and check my watch. He’s gripping thatches of wet leaves and hurling them down onto the lawn. He doesn’t hear me until I close the door. He squints down from the ladder, then he says, ‘Marlee?’ A grin blooming in his eyes. ‘Thought that was you.’ He hobbles down, one step at a time, favouring his left leg.

He smears his palms down his jeans, then offers his hand.

‘G’day Barry,’ I say.

He grips my hand, gives it a firm pump.

‘Mum in?’

He turns his head back to the house. ‘Was about before. Might be out in the garden.’

‘Great, I’ll go say hi.’

I asked a colleague from cardiology, Deb, about Dad. Given the circumstances what would have been the recommended treatment back then? It was late, ships in the night, I was just coming on and she was finishing up. We hadn’t spoken much since we had slept together one boozy night over Easter a couple of years ago. She had since married.

She blinked a few times, recalibrating. ‘Change of diet, exercise, same sort of thing as today. ACE inhibitors, I suppose if they’d help. Smoker?’

‘Yes.’

‘Even back then doctors would’ve told him to quit or cut back. Light beer, lower stress. Same old.’

But he hadn’t. He still kept the fridge stocked with steak, and four x. He continued to lay bricks, with a cigarette always hanging from his bottom lip. Somethings I just need to accept yet I know I never will. I will never accept that he *chose,* not to change.

‘Is it possible they had a different protocol?’

She cleared her throat, glanced at me, *stop wasting my time.* ‘Late nineties, right?’

I nodded.

‘Different meds, Aspirin maybe. Different treatment plan, not a chance.’ She closed her locker, and paced out. Shoes squeaking as she went.

Mum is not in the garden, but I can see from the kitchen window, she is inside perched on the couch with her feet beneath her. At Christmas, we’d sat together on the garden bench. She had a sort of narcotic absence about her, staring at me the way someone might stare at a river in which their best friend was swept away. I’d hauled a carload of presents up for her, Barry and Jill. I didn’t realise Gary’s other kids, some as old as me, would be floating about with kids of their own calling Mum ‘Grammy’.

‘Hey Mum,’ I say. She turns, startled.

‘Marlee.’ Rising, arms outstretched. ‘What a surprise! How are you?’ After the hug she clutches my face gazing into my eyes.

‘I wish I knew you were coming, I would have organised lunch. Are you just up for the day, or staying the night?’

‘No, I ah.’ I try to smile.

‘You’re more than welcome?’ Her voice rises, childlike with anticipation.

‘No, it’s fine.’

‘So just visiting.’

A pause, the air changes.

‘Is everything okay?’

‘It’s twenty years, Mum.’

A subtle animation in her features. Solemn she says, ‘Twenty years… today?’

I nod. ‘Doesn’t seem it.’

‘Shit, Marlee.’ She bites her lips looks outside into the yard. I’m afraid to move, to stir the air between us. ‘It is today, isn’t it. Twenty years.’ I wonder if she imagines an alternative timeline, one in which we stayed in the old shack, one in which he had taken the meds, followed a treatment plan, stopped working. Who would I be?

‘You coming up then?’

She’s still looking outside. ‘I can’t, Marlee. Not today.’

‘Not today.’ I scratch my jaw. ‘Right.’

She let’s her breath out, mutes the huge flat screen TV. The house is self-consciously bare, the sort of place cleaners float through each week looking for things to dust and wipe.

‘I think about him everyday. I’ve visited him more than anyone else.’ Cords draw tight under the skin of her throat, her head tilts a little, a fierce old habit. I can’t meet her gaze.

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘Jill about?’

‘She’s at school.’

‘How’s she going?’

‘Fine, Marlee. It’s her last year.’

Bill comes in and washes his hands at the sink. ‘Cuppa?’ he says.

‘That would be lovely, Bill. But I’m a bit short for time.’

‘Oh right.’

‘Just passing through.’

‘Long way for a day trip by yourself, you get bored?’

‘I listen to audiobooks.’

‘Well it’s a Bugger you can’t stay. Not often we get visitors is it, dear?’

The Tesla is speckled with red dust and the driveway crackles as I pull out. Setting out in silence, I think about the first time I held a human heart. I couldn’t imagine it throbbing; it was rigid and cold, and what surprised me most, was its size. People often consider brains to be much larger than hearts but fail to realise you can hold the two, one in each hand. Brains, they think are head sized, hearts are squeezed between a host of other organs and yet, side by side the difference in size doesn’t seem so great.

Cemetery road runs off the highway south. A ute follows me close behind, I glance down, the speedo reads 110*.* Up ahead, a thumb-smudge forms in the heat shimmer at the roads edge. I indicate, pull onto the shoulder to let the ute pass and as I approach, I see a figure squatting. She rises. No sign, no pack, legs reddening in the sun.

She approaches sheepishly, tilts her head forward. I inch the window down.

‘Hi,’ I say. ‘Looking for a lift?’

‘I’m trying to get south.’

I suck my teeth. ‘I’m heading out of town soon but I have to make a quick stop on the way. I’m heading to Melbourne but you’d have to wait or you can stay here and try your luck—’

‘I’ll come,’ she says, opening the door. She falls into the seat like air filling a vacuum. ‘I was melting out there.’

She’s younger than I thought, knotted hair, ripped jeans, nose ring. I blast the air conditioning.

‘How far south you want to go?’

‘I’ve got to get to Torquay.’

I pull away from the curb. She reaches down and pulls off her shoes, looks about the car. ‘Nice wheels.’

‘Thanks.’

‘What do you do?’

‘I work in medicine.’

‘Medicine?’

‘Like a doctor.’

I wheel into the cemetery and park up, pocketing my keys and wallet before climbing out.

The ground is hard and dry. Every time I come I’m taken by the new rows, stacked upon each other. It’s a lonely plot of land; with any luck it will be full by the time I require it.

I find Dad’s grave. A slab of stone, His name, his date of birth and his photo inset. *Loving husband to Deborah and father of Marlee.* He takes one half of the headstone. A stencilled heart at the centre is half-filled with the light of burnished aluminium the other half is dark granite, waiting for its pair. Space is left for a second photo and a second set of details mirroring Dad’s own. He was forty-four. Mum was thirty-nine. He must have known what might’ve happened. I reach down and touch the flowers from Christmas; they’re crumbling in the heat.

I rode into the pub on Dad’s shoulders still in my footy uniform, crusting with dirt. I sipped raspberry lemonade and watched him feed notes into the pokies, nursing a cold pint. Regulars would rough my head with their dusty palms and say ‘How many you kick today?’ and I’d get hot in the neck and cheeks, and quickly say ‘Ten.’

There is a single moment I think of when I think of his heart. An old bear of a man, stiff legged with pocked skin. He came up and patted my chest with his huge calloused palm. ‘Your old man, not always the best kick but he had r*eal* ticker.’

‘Did you wash your hands?’ she says, sucking herself against the door like I’m viral.

‘What?’

‘Your hands, you’re supposed to wash them.’

I go back and rinse my hands, drying them on my pants and climb back into the car.

‘You should always wash your hands when you leave a cemetery. You’ve got to rinse away any spirits or bad vibes you pick up from the dead.’

‘I’ll have to be more careful.’

‘You shouldn’t joke about it. That kind of shit stays with you, hanging over you.’

I think of putting an audiobook on, I’m going through a philosophy series but I opt for the radio instead.

The woman’s phone rings. When she answers she turns her head toward the window and cups the phone tight to her ear.

‘Yeah?… no I’ve left…’ she speaks quietly without moving her jaw. ‘I told you I was going, I have work tomorrow… got a lift… some random guy, look I’ve got to go okay… He’s a fucking doctor or something, don’t stress. I’ll be careful.’ She hung the phone up forcefully and placed it back in her pocket. On her wrist a stencil map of the world is tattooed.

‘Boyfriend?’ I say.

‘Dad.’

I raise my eyebrows involuntarily.

She looks at me. ‘I’m going to just say it. If you’re expecting anything from me for the ride, you can pull over right now.’

I lift my palms from the wheel for a second protesting the suggestion. ‘I think that’s a myth.’

‘What’s a myth?’

‘Well, you know, what they say about truckers and hitchhikers or... you know.’ My cheeks burn. ‘Maybe not but I certainly don’t expect a thing from you.’

‘Well, just so long as we’re clear.’

‘Have you hitchhiked before?’

She thinks for a moment. ‘No. You pick people up often?’

‘First time.’

*You got your brains from your mother,* he’d say whenever I recited facts I learnt from the pocket edition science book they’d given me. But whose heart beats in my chest? Maybe I should have stayed at Mum’s the night. I knew weeks ago that I would make the trip, I could have phoned ahead, taken a day off to stay. I was always fearful of what she would say, if she would remember the day.

A bray of static issues through the speakers, I search for a new station. She checks her phone, and looks back up at me. These are the lonely stretches of the trip. Just flat road. When I really listen, when I aim my ear in the silence of the car I think I can hear the wet knocking of her heart. *Womp-womp, womp-womp.* Valves open, valves close.

I can’t stop thinking about the other half of his headstone, those lonely grey reaches that will remain empty. Her warm body in someone else’s bed, a long forgotten promise. The heart that will always be half. Soon the woman is dozing, curled up on the seat and I have nothing but the stillness and silence of the road. I grip the wheel a little tighter and think about work, I think about idle hands and the solitude of grief.