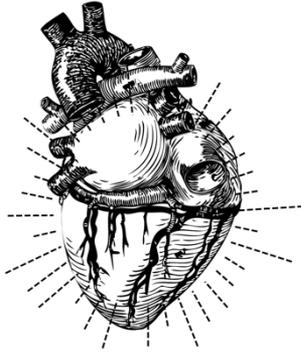


PREVIEW COPY ~ Not for SALE

My Heart Is A Muscle



By
David Jurasek

Initial Reviews

“It made this grown man cry...

a few times. Fuckin’ hell. I’ve been to prison and count myself as rough and tough. And then this book knocked my head sideways, yanked my guts and ripped my heart open.”

“I don’t even read fiction, usually. A man I admire and trust handed it to me. It’s deceptive... a tonne of practically effective strategies and tools are packed into this gripping novel. It’s become a bible to me.”

“I didn’t think I could relate to Bill. Annoyed by some of his initial choices... But, gradually I was blown away by how much what he went through in these seven days is so close to what I am going actually through, right now. We’re so different and yet inside so similar. It’s astounding!”

“I’m a friend of David’s and part of the PAL community, so I expected something rich and deep, but this whole world that Bill discovers. Wow, I am even more dazzled and grateful to be part of the real magic...”

“As a busy, sleep deprived dad, I have no idea where I had the time to read 450 + pages! But,

I could not put it ...

Prologue

Dear Robert,

You never told me what to do. But you lit the fire within me, instead.

I'm not a writer. I don't even know where to start.

But how else do I repay you for what you have done for me?

I can only imperfectly stumble around trying to best tell the story of the last seven days ~ as unbelievable as they seem to me now. And I hope that in doing so, I may honour you and how you saved me.

I cannot thank you enough.

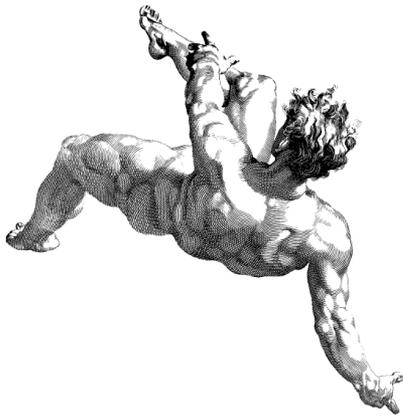
May you rest in arms of your two greatest loves.

Bill Stone

My Heart Is A Muscle

Monday

When everything that can,
unravels...



Chapter 1

Deviating from My Plan

I bolt up, awake, beads of wetness running down my back, my night shirt drenched in sweat. My is heart pounding fiercely like it might crack open my chest.

What a strange feeling.

What was I dreaming about?

I can't recall. Grabbing my phone, I see it's 4:33am.

Shit!

My trusty alarm didn't go off.

I can't be late! Not today!

The events of today have been years in the making. I don't want to make such a big deal out of it, but the pressure in my chest and a fire in my belly call my mind's bluff.

One leg in pants, and another. Doing one thing at a time is like putting a shaken snow globe down, letting my mind settle and my nerves cool down.

Donning a clean undershirt and moving to the kitchen now, I seize the reigns of my mind and walk through all the steps I need to take this morning - again for the seventh time. I don't *ever* catastrophize, but today is the kind of day where one false move could have actual life altering consequences. All my ducks need to be in a row.

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I grind my jaw, irritated that my dad's open heart surgery has to happen the same morning as my big day at work.

Slow the fuck down, Bill. Breathe.

Back to basics. I usually start my day at 5am. Today, Monday, is an exceptional day. I need all cylinders revved up and working smoothly...

Focus. Bend time to your will.

For a moment, the tightly wound rope inside the centre of my body loosens. I really do believe that there is power in how we start and end something. And beginnings are the most important: setting the ball in motion for how everything will go from there on.

Would you not agree?

I like my routines. Well-worn grooves that keep the train on track.

After a piss, it's calisthenics and a run.

Followed by a cold shower.

The mind is my servant, not my master. I grab the steering again and review my agenda while I sip a cup of hot water.

Then, I prepare Julia's ~ my daughter's ~ lunch.
Done.

Now, Jess, my wife, is a nurse who works weird hours, and so is often unpredictable and grumpy in the mornings. Being a good hubby, I would normally go and massage her feet and wake her at 7am.

But, not today. After my shower, I down a protein shake, hastily prep Julia's favorite breakfast, a toasted blueberry waffle with cheese. I leave a kiss on Jess's forehead and one sweet one on the nape of her neck (her favorite spot) and then I rub her back three times, darting out the door by 5:32am.

I try not to rush now as I notice that I am catching up and only 2 minutes behind schedule.

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The fire in my belly is blazing with coal and my whole body feels like a steam engine, in full throttle now. I am on track and on route to pick up my dad at the home for seniors - run by the company I work for, Golden Years.

The staff there who know me say I'm a chip off his block. But lately he has really deteriorated. A more pale and miserable version of me, I guess. I hope to age more gracefully.

Thankfully, the residence is only a few blocks away.

I'm in his room now. He's even more cranky than usual. I visited him a couple of days ago to pack his essentials and set his alarm up.

But, he's snoring.

Surgery prep is in 37 minutes.

The hospital is also close by. It's no coincidence. I set it up years ago so as to have all the essential pieces nearby. I always plan ahead and for contingencies.

There he lies, not playing his part, refusing to move!

Heaving and snoring instead.

I don't think surgeons are flexible with their timing!

"Damn it dad!"

Getting him up is like grappling with a stubborn mule, with the added bite of an old rabid dog. He used to be such a reliable, overly accommodating type, a real people pleaser next to mom. Now, I need him to just get the fuck up!

He pushes me away. "Piss off!"

Good thing I'm stronger. I hook his arm and start pulling him up.

He growls, literally.

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Seeing him in his underwear acting like a toddler, I have to remember he's not an adult any more. He is more childlike. We're all going to be like that as we age. I'm reminded of this often at my work with seniors.

Compassion could be helpful here.

I can hear Jess' voice reminding me.

It's hard to find it right now. "You're going to die if they don't fix you up, dad."

He looks up at me, suddenly his expression shifts to look like that of a scared boy within a hunched and weathered body.

"Why? What's wrong?" He asks fearfully.

Where do I begin?

He does *not* have any degenerative brain or loss of memory conditions, that I know of. This whole "*I have no idea what's happening and I'm helpless*" routine is wearing on me.

I don't want to turn into my mom, she was always the bossy and critical one. But, I don't have time for this. I need to get him there so I can get to my meeting. I bet I sound petty and selfish, but I hope you'll understand soon enough.

Picking him up now and dressing him. Not for the first time. I've gotten pretty good at it.

Driving as if there were a fire under my ass. I am the engine that has momentum, hell bent and breaking through anything on it's tracks now.

Dropping him off at the hospital. A nurse is standing by, ready to take him in.

He gives me a look that says, "*How could you leave me here? My own son!*"

I roll my eyes.

Really? You were always terrible at playing the guilt card. That was something mom was a master at.

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I kiss his ornery head. "Love you dad." My hand on his shoulder, I feel his neediness. His frail and rigid body reminds me that this is also a huge deal. There is a chance he might not come out. We've already prepared ourselves and talked it over a dozen ways. I know he is scared but the nurse comes in and starts tending to him.

I give my reassurance one more time, "You're in good care. I'll be back to check on you soon."

He grabs me suddenly, very tightly, with an intense frozen glare, pulling me down, whispering in my ear, "You gotta take care of everyone. Don't drop them. Don't drop them."

A rush of a cold chill flushes through me. It's as if he's said out loud what's driven me my entire life. My core operating system. The primary directive is his contribution:

"Take care of others, ALWAYS"

And the secondary one, is mom's addition...

"Don't fuck anything up."

Hearing it spoken with desperation, I pull away, determined to not let that get in my way also.

Seeing him wheeled away, I nod along, pushing behind me the waves of worry.

Finally, alone.

Driving to my meeting, the inevitable swirl in the pit of my belly starts to dampen the fire that has been fueling me thus far. I know this guilt, creeping in, despite my trying to keep it at bay. A stream of *shoulds* fill my mind.

I push back against them, raising a wall, to clear my mind.

Fuck off! What am I supposed to do?!

Sit there all day in a hospital, helplessly fretting? And sabotage my life's work?

I tell myself a story.

My Heart Is A Muscle

In his right mind, he would understand. We are both doers. Needing to have our hands building something or in the dirt making something grow. Helping people is who we are...

I have a mission, bigger than me, that has waited for years to launch. It happens to be that today, this morning in fact, is when my team and I get to unveil it. My focus shifts to the actual presentation, picturing our CEO, senior management team and the owner nodding along and giving us the final approval.

But, not till we bring it home.

I need to be at my sharpest and most compelling. Three years of research, asking everyone to work on weekends have gotten us here. The presentation is solid. Our approach tested and some preliminary results proven.

But still, the premise is innovative and bold, in a field that has not evolved in a century. We're also asking for a leap of faith and a huge investment.

My mind clears, thankfully, like a fog lifting, as I walk through the details of the pitch, for the hundredth time.

THIS is my PRIORITY right now.

Dad will be ok.

That's what I tell myself.

DING...

It's Jess, texting me. Hmm... Wants to meet me? Sigh. She's been acting strange lately. Doesn't she know what day it is? The whole reason I've stayed in this company so long: 22 years. I'm pushing mid forty. My whole adult life so far.

I don't like surprises... especially today.

I text her back:

What's up? Dad is at the hospital. All good?

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DING! She texts me a screen pic of where she is...
in the ravine down the street from my office. I reply,

Looks nice. Busy. Hon. Big
meeting, remember!

Jess:

Of course! I know. But I saw your
calendar. You have a window,
right now.

And I'm already here, on route.
Come on. You won't regret it.



This is not like her.

Somehow, I can't say no.

Is this my flaw or the better part of me?

Saying yes to her makes me feel less bad about my
dad.

I text back:

Ok. On my way.

Chapter 2

The Rug Pulled From Under My Feet

There's an entrance to the massive ravine system hidden just a block away from where the meeting will be. It cuts through the entire city. Once you walk down, there is a cool relief from the concrete jungle. Lush, green and buffered.

I tend to live in my mind - planning and evaluating. But my belly is churning and my body tingling now. Hard to ignore.

Maybe this will help to settle my nerves.

I meet Jess there. She's in her scrubs, assuming she's off to work next. After we discuss dad, I look at her confused about why we're here. She takes my hand in hers.

"Don't worry, Jules is with mom, remember."

I'm taken aback that I didn't even know that. Missed seeing her off to bed last night.

"I've been so wrapped up in this presentation and preparing dad", I blurt out to assuage my guilt perhaps.

"I know. Always taking care of everybody. It takes a village, remember?"

I nod, appreciating her understanding.

We walk for a bit without words. She breaks the silence, "So, how do you feel...?"

"I'm... good, I guess. It's not a big deal."

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"Everybody will be there and you finally get to share your brilliant plan. Not a big fucking deal?"

"I like..."

"I know... 'to manage expectations'... Well I'm excited and full of butterflies *for you*. You know what else...?"

I shake my head.

"I think since you have a couple of hours, instead of over-thinking things, as you tend to do, and get yourself wound up... I think the best thing for you to do right now is to..." She suddenly breaks contact and runs ahead, calling, "...follow me!"

I chuckle and chase her, leading us into a thicket of high grasses, eight feet tall, with cattails.

The sun is warm and it's really the first day in late spring that I've noticed the vibrant green of the foliage around me. I'm hyper practical but not usually so oblivious to the beauty that is around me.

But the ground is squishy. Wearing my best shoes, I hesitate.

She pulls me in and then weaves into the grasses and disappears.

"Jess... ! Come on... what's going on?"

She calls from one place.

"I'm here!"

And then seemingly another, "You have to find meeee..."

As I follow the sound of her laughter, I smell something that throws me. It's intoxicating... like a flower that is so sweet. Then a pungent smell, like that of a swamp.

My shoes are soaked. Arrrh.

"Ok, where...?" I'm getting a bit exasperated by this *game*.

"Here! " she grabs me from behind.

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I spin around. And find her stark naked.

My instinct is to shield her with my arms, but it's obvious we are alone and no one can see us here.

"What the...? Wow..."

She kisses me with full wet lips.

She reaches to unbutton my pants, while pulling me down with her other hand. She's always been skillful with her body.

"I don't..."

"Don't worry..." She mumbles and I see she's even placed a tarp and blanket to where we would fall. She's planned it all ahead of time, my girl has always been practical and crafty that way.

I admire her making this happen, but... I pull away. My mind reeling.

A boxer doesn't have sex before the fight. Doesn't she get that I can't lose my focus right now?! What's wrong with her? I can't tell her this. Don't need to start a fight right now.

She stops. Staring at me with her big doe-like eyes. I hate it when I've done something she thinks is mean or cold and she gives me that look.

But right now it's more like surprise.... and something else I can't describe... yet.

I stare at her.

My mind feels stuck now like a tight fist turned to stone, unable to open.

There's a vast space between us. A frozen wall goes up. I don't understand what's happening. Feeling cold all over. I can't seem to break through. Then it feels like something is blending my insides. My chest feels tight and sinks like a brick. My gut swirls with nausea and is full of thorns.

Finally, aware how my silence is making things worse, I blurt out. "I can't do this right now." I bite my lip as soon as the words come out.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Her brow furrows and then her nose curls for a moment. And then her face flushes red and she turns to get her clothes on.

I look at my wet shoes and feel my socks, now soaked with swamp juice. That gross smell takes over.

Dressed, she sighs, gives me a peck while her hand slides in a caress across my face and falls to rest over my heart. She looks at me with so much emotion. I can't compute.

"I can't keep waiting for you."

She looks down briefly and then turns away, walking off, leaving the tarp and blanket.

I don't understand what's happening.

"Wait!"

My hands flail towards her, but grab emptiness. She's gone.

I chase her up the trail past a woman with a baby carriage and a bunch of people speeding by on mountain bikes.

Stumbling for words, "Jess. Please..."

She turns at last. Putting her arms in front of her.

"Don't. Don't apologize... or try to smooth things over. You always do that. You are a master at sounding reasonable and trying to do the right thing, Bill. I'm a big girl. Even if..."

She tears up.

More people walk by: a couple, one young and one old ~ I tend to notice and obsess about details and this is pretty fucking memorable...

My cheeks flush looking back at her.

"I'm okay to cry. You know why?"

I shake my head.

"Because I care about *us*. And this... This..."

My Heart Is A Muscle

Gesturing to the space between us.

"...has not been working for a while now."

The words hit me as if I just walked into a brick wall.

"I know today is your big day. Oh my god. I was crazy enough to think that this could actually *help* you. To loosen up and feel joy together *before* you went into the lion's den. But there's always *something*. Some meeting or more plans in the works. Something that takes you away from me and *us*. And I thought, naively, I thought that going back to where you once took us... When we were so wrapped up in one another, something might happen..."

Frozen in place, my mouth full of cotton and my legs stuck in cement.

"You don't remember, do you?"

I search through my mind. *What is she talking about?*

The memory flushes in. Our first date... 25 years ago.

What's the date today? June 11th. It was today. Shit.

My face betrays how terrible I feel.

I remember now. Our first time out together without it being on a double date or with adults accompanying us. I just wanted to get out of the house, to not go home that sweet night. Lots of fighting at home. So, I took her for a walk here in this ravine.

But it was she who... no wait... I did lead us to the swamp... but I was not intending to seduce... or was I?

It's all kinda hazy now. Whoever started it, we made love. For the first time I could remember, I let myself go and forgot the world. I knew then she was special, and there was something I'd even call *magical* between us. Was I so sappy back then? Anyway, somehow I

could drop trying to be someone for a while and just lose myself, falling into her arms.

Jess snaps me out of it.

"It's fine..." She puts her palm on my chest. Then, her eyes close and she shakes her head, "No! Actually it's not fine, Bill!" Her hand slides down. Her voice becomes sharper. Her eyes pull together like those of a fox, fierce and protective. "We have no more spark. You have lost your balls and worse..." She pauses.

I am struck by the woman before me. So much has changed. She's older, hardened, worn down. We both are. At this moment, her attack reminds me of my mom.

And yet I know she is hurting and still the woman I love, but I can't hide the way her comment cuts and burns. I can't shake it off. My face turns red.

I should just walk away before this turns ugly...

Her expression breaks open, tears returning. "I'm sorry. I am *not* trying to attack your manhood... You are a great father and a good man. A reliable, trustworthy man..."

"But..." I spit back.

She pushes me back a step, with her open palm. The force of her strength is stunning.

"You don't feel anything!"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

She comes forward and cradles my head.

"Listen carefully."

Everything else disappears for a moment. This feels like a do or die moment.

"I am not *in* love with you any more, but that's not the problem. I still love you and I want to make this work. *But...*"

She scans my face trying to read me. I feel squirmy, wanting to turn away but hold my gaze steady, frozen in my body, with turmoil inside.

My Heart Is A Muscle

She continues, "I need to feel alive with the person I am with. I need your heart to be open and beating more strongly. I will not have an affair or suddenly leave you. At the same time, I am telling you now, that we *both* have to wake this marriage up or I will..." Her eyes well up as more tears come... "...let it die."

She looks at me hoping for a sign.

The last words echo in me. Emptied and gutted.

She turns and walks back up the path.

Seeing her walk away, I have no energy or desire to follow her.

Bereft.

The earth beneath my feet feels like it's shaking, cracking open up to swallow me into a bottomless crevice. My legs buckle and I stumble a few steps off the path to a clearing under a large weeping willow tree. Grateful that the grass is dry... I feel vain to be thinking of my favorite shirt, but I need to be at this meeting and presentable, in 74 minutes. Aware that I've set alarms and reminders on my phone. I try to re-focus.

Ok. What's next?

My joints give way completely, like a puppet whose strings were cut.

I feel sleepy.

Like being sucked into a vortex I cannot resist, I lay back on the soft grass and the bed of moss under a willow tree, closing my eyes.

It's dark.

I find myself on a roof top of a tall building, the entire city around us.

Dark clouds ahead. I turn to look around and see blue skies behind me.

The wind is fierce pushing the ominous darkness closer.

My Heart Is A Muscle

My daughter and wife are on the edge. I feel a wave of panic flash through me. I start walking towards them. They are talking and holding hands, pointing down ahead of them.

The dread tightens in my chest and gut, I start running. The wind forms a wall pushing me back.

I lean forward and push against its force, using every ounce of strength, reaching them just as they step off the ledge.

"Noooooooo!"

I lunge forward to reach for my wife Jess's hand, but it slips through my fingers.

They both look up as they are falling.

My body seizes and I can't breathe.

Then someone's hands come around my shoulders. I hear a woman's voice, familiar, yet strange and shocking, whispering mischievously, "You're it, mother fucker!" Cackling as she pushes me forward...

I'm falling...

I suddenly jolt awake. My body feels numb. Head full of cotton, again.

My phone alarm is vibrating, I'm drenched in sweat. I need to get to that meeting!

No time to go home. I'll grab a new shirt in my office. But my pants and shoes.

Damn it.

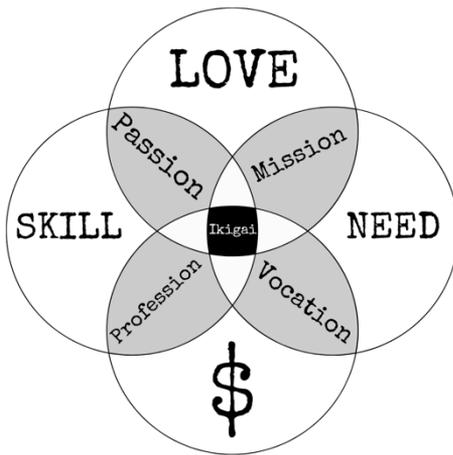
I stink.

Chapter 3

Stealing My Fire

Everything until now has felt important, yet also a competing distraction trying to keep me from what comes next.

It may be vain to admit it, but I have a mission in life, a vital purpose: my “IKIGAI”, as some would call



it, where all my gifts and talents, my calling to help others overlaps with what I get paid for, I am most passionate about *and also* with what is desperately needed in the world.

For 22 years, I have worked at Golden Years, being taken under the wing of the late and great

founder, Fred VanderHooven. Working closely with him, as his protege, I got to understand the big vision he had -- to help seniors experience good health, ease, joy and renewed meaning late in life. Because Fred saw me as his equal and gave me room to test my ideas, I got to see my part in this vision. And getting to know the clients, many of them personally, I saw their heartbreaks. The loneliness. The void they face as

their younger families often forget them. Seeing almost all of them pass away, many with regrets, emptied husks of their former selves, I was humbled and heartbroken myself at times. But also, we saw ways to reach them and help them thrive.

4 years ago, after Fred died, it dawned on me that we could do much more. If we dared to do something radical and new. Something so simple and “obvious” that could change everything. We could bring even more joy, connection, meaning and purpose back into their lives, if we thought out of the box and expanded our sense of what care can be.

My pragmatic and evidence-based nature led me to spend these last few years doing the research to prove that this idea would not only double our social impact but certainly re-vitalize our business, lowering our costs and... Well, I'm here and it's time to tell *them* all about it.

“All dates are all in line with our previous targets. Now, I would like to present my plan for optimizing and innovating care.”

“Sorry Bill,” John cuts me off. He's the CEO and someone I am on good terms with.

I'm thrown off momentarily.

“We have limited time today and we've slotted in a prezì from Gary... Take it away hombre.”

This is our one chance. Once a year when everyone important is assembled next to John, including the owner.

What the fuck is going on?

My team is looking at me also, having prepared and trying to contain our surprise. Something is not right about this. My heart sinks and my body stiffens. For a moment, I stop breathing. My heart is thumping harder.

“Excuse me, John. Sorry, but this has been scheduled for months. We've worked on it for almost 4 years.”

My Heart Is A Muscle

"Yes, but, it's been bumped." John looks annoyed. People defer to him and give me wide eyes. I don't want to seem flustered. Collecting myself, I inhale and lean forward.

"When could my team and I...?"

John puts his hand up to dismiss - "Next time, Bill, I promise. You have the floor next month."

That's a lower level meeting and a brush off.

Gary, the presenter, is an expensive consultant who's been at the company hovering around for six months. He's a young shiny rockstar, famous for founding some tech company and then cashing out.

He slides in to begin, "Alright, time for the unveiling of our golden egg. We've been cooking this up for a while also, doing all the R&D in secret because we believe," shooting John a knowing look, "this will not only massively *disrupt* but also *transform* the aging care and wellness industries."

A large screen shows a slide with a slickly produced video behind it. Dark scenes of seniors isolated contrasted with someone opening the curtain, letting the light in.

Ugh. So emotionally manipulative - like those drug ads in the US.

Now, we see their beaming smiles as a young man and woman wheel them around in the park.

Wow, like magic!

Besides my team being "bumped", something else feels array. My gut is twisting.

Gary shoots up from his chair, looming over us, "Question for you! How do we cut 32% of our skilled labour costs while improving the lives and longevity of our clients by 50% or more?"

He pauses for dramatic effect.

So cheezy and predictable.

Everyone is waiting to find out.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"The same way we radically and positively disrupt the housing crisis in Toronto and eventually every city in North America."

He's using that word - *disrupt* - a lot.

I feel my body stiffen again. My pulse quickens, pounding in my chest like a fist.

Gary goes on to describe - in detail - a proposal which is exactly like the one we were going to present.

The essence of it is identical: pairing together young people in their twenties struggling with rent with seniors in a shared housing arrangement that involves volunteering and sharing of care with helping professionals.

Our proposal is further along, emphasizing exactly *how* we would do it.

His is more selling them on the idea, the benefits.

It's a surreal experience. I must be in shock. My body feels numb.

I try to temper myself. We spent years testing it *and* learning from the cutting edge work of care facilities in Scandinavia and Japan. I could write a book about what we learned. Again, the benefits are tremendous. A small part of me is glad that it's on the table and likely to move forward *but* not like this!

A gut punch hits me. A searing sense in the pit of my stomach.

They're stealing our project. My life's work, right in front of my eyes! And making it a superficial PR stunt rather than digging into the real potential of it.

I knew for months that he was up to something, but I held back from saying anything.

Why was I so stupid?

My mind races for answers and explanations.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I guess I wanted to wait and flush him out. If I said anything, it would've made me look jealous, old and out of touch with the hip and new. He's also East Indian, apparently having risen up from the slums. Would not have been a good look on me, a middle aged white guy, to accuse him then, but...

I inhale deeply and sigh, angry at myself.

I decided then to save face and quietly and patiently plod on. Guess I assumed, the better man would prevail. "Keep calm and carry on" and all that feels like bullshit now.

Here I am now, glued to my chair, paralyzed. The stunned feeling is starting to wear off as my face flushes with shame.

Words ring in my mind...

"It's because of nice guys like you that
assholes like him rule the world..."

Who said that?

Seething and ready to explode, my palms turn into tight fists.

I'm flexing every known muscle of restraint I have. Breathing in. Breathing out. If anyone looked at me, they'd wonder if I was having a panic attack.

Think of the mortgage.

Expenses to pay for Julia, getting the help she needs.

That's my daughter. She's the most incredible girl in the world. And she needs help with her learning disability. I would die to protect and provide for her.

Overwhelmed, I put my hands under the table and stab a pen into the inside of my palm. Then the pain... Ooow...Fuck! That actually hurt. But, immediately, the pain rushes in and erases everything else. I hadn't done this since I was a teenager. A familiar trick. I become steely cold and calculated. My body is numb. My mind, a sharp razor.

My Heart Is A Muscle

The pain re-focuses me.

I did this on purpose, taking control where I can.

My phone buzzes. I check. Unlisted number. I ignore it.

So, what can I do, right now?

Gary goes in for the kill, quoting every piece of research that my own team supplied.

"We've tested it. Thanks to 36 trial tests with 32 success stories. Annual cost savings for us run between 16 to a staggering 24% and here's the best part... satisfaction and loyalty ratings have the potential to go through the roof, increasing 45 to a staggering 87%. Unbelievable when we first saw the data."

I look up and I want more than anything at this moment to kill somebody. John, his accomplice, watches with a wry smile acting as if he wasn't involved in this but going to claim credit also. The owner, Evelyn, is next to them but I can't read her expression at all.

I turn and hyper focus on Gary's face. His every gesture. The sneer of his nostrils flexing pride and victory over me. I notice how manicured he keeps himself.

I see myself grabbing his perfectly coiffed hair and slamming his face against the desk. Blood everywhere. I'm sickened and delighted by the imagery.

The leash is off.

I can't keep it all bottled up. My whole fucking life I've played by the rules.

Suddenly, I jump out of my chair to speak. "Excuse me, I..." The vice grip around my throat and chest tightens. Words seem to come out but they fall flap before me.

No one seems to notice.

All eyes on the shiny man with the golden egg.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I excuse myself.

As soon as I reach the bathroom, I check around to assure that I'm alone.

I pump my left hand against the wall of the first toilet stall.

A flash of rage and release.

Then the pain... *Ooow...Fuck.*

That actually hurt.

Again. The same trick.

I pour cool water and look it over: no cut or bruise (yet). Just stunned and sore.

What now?

Being a rational thinker, deliberate and strategic in my response, I pace around.

Am I over-reacting?

Hell no! Every single detail from his presentation is stolen from ours. He just made a slick cover for it all.

How did they get this far?

Was I too transparent?

Who leaked my data?

Stop being paranoid.

I spin around looking for something to do. To regain a sense of control.

Walking back down the hallways to the meeting, I feel blood rushing back into my body.

A buzzing. Ugh.

It's another call from an unlisted number. Normally a spammer, but they are usually not unlisted.

Shit.

Government.

Hospital.

I answer.

It's the voice of a reassuring young woman with a British accent named Monique, an assistant to the heart surgeon.

"...Dr. Greenfiled wanted me to update you as soon as possible, Mr. Stone..."

"Ok. Uh. Please, call me Bill. So, what's his status?"

"You may want to sit down. There's been an unexpected development. Of course, I can't disclose details on the phone but it's critical that you as the next of kin and with primary consent that we need your input, as soon as possible. Can you come in to see the doctor today?"

"Yes, certainly. Where are you?" I scramble to note the details she will tell me.

"Don't worry, I will send you the details to this cell number that we are speaking on right now... In the wing of St. Michael's... 3rd floor. Across the street from where you dropped him off."

DING...

All the details. Damn, she's good.

"Please call me if you need anything. Your father's care and yours also is our top priority."

I wish I had someone like that to manage my chaos right now. As I hang up, the smell of swamp returns, my armpits wet with rancid smell of high stress sweat. My entire body wants to hurl, but I suck it in.

It suddenly hits me that something life threatening has happened to dad. He's not ok. Why else the urgent call? It's like a punch to my head and a sharp stab to my chest.

Not intending to stay, I come back into the meeting to get my things and bow out.

Everyone is laughing and glowing at something I missed walking in. I shoot a look at Paula, my

My Heart Is A Muscle

colleague. She has a good poker face but I sense she is furious. I guess she is on my side. Not a leak. The rest of the team is playing along.

I can't stand it. Walking over to where I was sitting, I stay standing, unable to let this go, I feel my grip on the back of the chair tightening.

I start to speak, but my voice sounds distant, my ears have popped, everything sounds like I am wearing ear muffs.

Gary stops and looks at me, grinning.

My face flushes as all eyes turn on me.

I push that feeling away. Rage finally boiling over, I lift my hand to exclaim...

"This is..."

But the room turns askew.

I feel my body going numb as I fumble and collapse to the ground.

Black.

Suddenly, something grips me by the chest and sucks me upwards...

I'm in the room. I see all the people standing up and huddling over my body, while I am floating upwards, pulled by a force that is determined.

What's happening to me?

Your heart has
stopped.

A deep and calm voice resounds all around me.

No. This can't be happening. I'm dreaming or I fainted or something...

No. You're dying.

My Heart Is A Muscle

What?!

I look down and see the faces looking gravely. My friend Paula has opened my shirt and is palpating to check my pulse. The sounds are muted, but I can make out reading her lips that she is calling for a defibrillator on the 2nd floor. And telling an assistant to call 911.

It can't be.

It is.

The voice is so clear. Reality sinks in.

Yeah, but that's NOT what I want. Not now.

And yet, you
created this.

The response confronts me with a crushing sense inside.

What? But, how?

You're trying to control
what is out of your control.

Your heart has been
weakened and exhausted.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I search for an answer. Something in me does want to give up.

But... Julia, Jess and dad. They all need me?

Do they?

All of a sudden, a dread fills me. I'm not so sure.

Paula is now pumping the chest of my body below, then breathing life into my lips. I can't feel any of it.

Anger and desperation ignite. This is not how I wanted to end it. I lash out.

How come you get to decide?!

I don't.

The response feels undeniable and true, taking the wind out of my sails. But, there is growing turmoil as I continue floating up and now through the ceiling. As if I am losing a hopeless battle, I want to collapse, but instead I summon all the energy I have left to protest.

Nooooooooo! I want to go back!

Why?

Everything seems to pause and hold. I'm caught off guard by the question.

I don't know.... Because there will be so much pain for them, if I leave now...

Yes. And that is life.

Why do you need to stay?

All of a sudden, I feel like a puppet whose strings are cut, free falling completely now.

I don't know why.

I guess, I never lived truly.

I never did what I wanted.

Something in my mind clicks like an old lock mechanism falling into place.

I want to let go of...

Trying to control.

And see what life brings.

Your heart is weak

but it can grow stronger...

I spin around, like a baby on its back, facing a warm and blinding sun. I am captivated by the light.

I will bring you back.

You will have seven days

to find your own spark...

I'm grateful and daunted.

So many questions swirl within me.

My Heart Is A Muscle

What do you mean? My own spark?

I feel myself pulled down by gravity, like something has been settled and decided.

Wait! Who are you?

His deep voice resounds, with so much warmth and tenderness,

...Papa...

Suddenly, as if a vacuum force has sucked me back fully into my body laying on the ground.

THUD.

I am in darkness.

I have a pounding headache. And my body feels cold, numb, dead. Desperate, I beg for answers.

How am I supposed to...?

Another voice interrupts. This one sounds like my own, yet unlike how I feel, it is calm and certain.

*My heart will need to break, again and again...
So that it can mend and grow bigger, braver,
and stronger...*

A moment later, every nerve in my body tightens in an electric convulsion. I hear the "ZAP!" as the defibrillator jolts me awake making my entire body convulse. Another "THUD!" as it releases me and I land backwards.

Now I am gasping for air! My eyes flash open and I see the epipen pulled out of my arm. I hear the clicking of a stretcher being opened behind me and the voice of a first responder, "EMT! Paramedics! Clear the room, please!"

They crouch down to shine a light in my eye, but I push the hand away and stumble up to stand, buoyant.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Every muscle in my body is on fire and my joints are aching painfully, but I feel such a surge of energy.

Holy fuck! I'm alive. I'm back!

One of the EMTs, a short woman with a serious expression, meets my gaze and confronts me, "Sir, your pupils are dilated. You're in shock."

"Yes, I am."

"Until we assess you for any damage, please lie down on the stretcher."

I argue for a second. Then I see Paula's face of concern and become aware of how high I am feeling ~ must be the adrenaline hit.

I comply. Being taken through the building on a stretcher, carried down the halls which I have dominated as a manager for 22 years, I might feel embarrassed, but instead ~ buckled in tightly and aware of my body ~ I am just elated to be alive and breathing.

We pass Gary, John and Evelyn, the chairwoman of the board, all huddled in the CEO's doorway. They look at me with mixed expressions.

I don't care.

They could be statues made of stone, but out of habit, I attempt to smile and inform them of my condition as I am carried past.

I take a split second to register John's expression of concern - can't tell if he gives a damn, feels guilty or is faking it.

Evelyn, I can't read at all.

Did I just seriously try to manage the situation?

This is all surreal.

I close my eyes. "Pinch me. Is this real?" I whisper.

Chapter 4

Good News Or Bad News

Having been cleared in ER, and through a battery of tests, I'm anxious to know about my dad. I feel perfectly fine. But, I am being held in a bed for observation. Wanting to talk to Dr. Greenfield, I call his assistant, who is very reassuring. She says that he's on his way to see me, apparently.

I only hate three things.

The first is waiting, indefinitely. It's been 3 hours and 12 minutes since they called me wanting my input on something related to dad. Over 2 hours since I was checked in and 45 minutes since I have been lying here on this bed. Feels like an eternity.

Check.

Second is not having anything I can do about what's happening around me.

Completely fucking powerless.

Sigh.

But that's what I agreed to let go of, wasn't it?

My body inhales deeply, of its own accord, and sighs.

I'm reminded of the vision I had after I "fainted". Seems like a lifetime ago and a crazy dream.

The third thing I hate is... hospitals.

Some exceptions over the years but this one, though adorned with beautiful art, is no different. Could be the smell of sickness and death. Could be the beige or dental green walls. Then again, I chose to work with seniors and the dying.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I must be a masochist or something.

A thought for a later time, perhaps.

A terrible exhaustion settles in and my joints feel weak. I close my eyes.

DING...

What now?!

It's a text from Julia. My darling girl who I would die for.

"How did your big
meeting go, daddy?!
Cheering for you!!!

Followed by 7 lines of various emojis such as...



Don't know how to process this.

But I can't ignore her.

It sinks in.

She still believes in me. Naive and innocent,
but her love is the only real thing I can count on at
this moment.

Tears burn behind my eyes.

I crane my neck to check that there is no one
around.

A damn of grief swells up, threatening to burst
out of me.

I sob for a moment.

My Heart Is A Muscle

This is unusual - for me. I haven't cried in decades.

Clearing my eyes, I see a tall man of African descent in doctor's attire standing at the foot of my bed.

Looking up at him, I feel small and very self conscious.

He looks at me with a sympathetic smile, "Mr. Stone?" He asks with a deeply resounding and warm voice, and with seemingly endless patience.

Embarrassed, I wipe my tears, "Uh. Bill..."

"Please son, it's okay to cry. I do so often."

He reaches out a hand, clasping mine with his left palm to hold me for a moment.

"Dr. Greenleaf. Call me Marvin."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" He jumps in. Sliding a chair to sit at my bedside. "I understand you had your own near death experience today."

"Yeah." It sinks in, still unbelievable. "It's been a hell of a day so far and..." Noticing fear rising up into my throat as I dare to ask, "How's my dad?"

"Yes. Much to talk about there."

I notice that I'm holding my breath.

"I'd like to know how you're doing, first." He lifts his eyebrows expectantly.

"Good, enough, I think. Physically that is. Great actually. What about my dad?"

"In a moment, Bill. I do have to go over some things about you and your condition." He looks down at his clipboard briefly and sighs with a half smile, "You do know that you have had the same heart condition as your father. Diagnosed in 2004?"

"Yes. And I take... try to take good care of myself. My family's counting on me. I..." I start listing

off all the vitamins and mineral supplements I take in addition to the heart meds, how often I do light cardio, details about my diet.

He cuts me off by raising his hand gently, "Bill. You look half your age. I'm slightly jealous in fact. And you strike me as a striver. Always trying really hard..."

I nod along. Not sure if that's praise or a criticism, yet.

"I wonder..." He looks thoughtfully, "Your heart has been arrhythmic and yet, now after several tests, it seems to be pumping regularly. Astonishing. I've heard it could happen with shock. But usually, that would cause a stroke or a deterioration, not a positive correction like this."

He looks back down to check and shakes his head, "And, then there are still weak areas, an artery is thinner than it should be, some blockages in another." Pausing thoughtfully, "Well, it's pumping strong... As if the heart attack you suffered didn't even happen a few hours ago. In the end, I don't know what to tell you. It's like a new lease but the car is still used and parts may need fixing..."

He looks at me gravely, with raised eyebrows, "Bottom line, we need to watch you. But, then again you won't get better lying around here. Have you ever tried relaxation and meditation, or prayer?"

"I'm a certified Mindfulness facilitator at work." I respond.

He chuckles. "Of course you are. Well, then, I guess that you know best how to take care of you. I'll back off. Now, about your father... Do you want the good news or bad news first?"

"Usually I'd take the latter, but give me something hopeful first, please."

"Alright. Your father is a real fighter." He smiles through his calm face. "He came through the CABG... coronary artery bypass grafting... open heart surgery... very well. Initially, we had more

My Heart Is A Muscle

complications than we imagined, but something must have guided our hands because we got him closed up in record time and he stabilized, showing signs of a strong recovery. Bottom line is that his heart is stronger than ever."

Sigh.

A new and grave expression on his face.

"Here's the bad news. Unfortunately, during the surgery, he slipped into a coma. Suddenly. To be honest, we're not sure what's going on. I suspect an aneurysm. Unrelated or, by the grace of... (opens his arms out) may be part of his response to the stress. We don't know. That's why you can't see him, just yet. He's being tested and moved around in his condition so that we get to the bottom of this. But, I do believe that once he is stabilized, your presence at his side might be exactly what he needs to come back to the waking world."

A silence.

"I imagine this is a lot to take in."

"My whole day has been a series of shocks..."

He takes a deep inhale. "Tell me about it."

A long moment. He looks at me expecting a response.

"You mean you want to know?"

He nods, his eyes smiling warmly.

"I don't mean any offence, but I'm not used to a doctor having time or caring..." Sometimes I can't hold my tongue and be diplomatic. This is one of those times.

He smiles broadly and nods, "I know, son. I am not your usual kinda doctor."

I smile with him. Suddenly, everything wants to spill out. "Uh... my marriage is... I don't know. My life's work was stolen. I..." I go on to tell him way too much of the story, unable to contain or focus myself as I

normally would. I feel like a blubbering mess. "And of course, my dad.... Is he dying?"

When I look up embarrassed, I see him unfazed, like a rock of solace and understanding.

He leans back thoughtfully, "Wanna know what my gut tells me?"

Unrestrained, I nod intensely. I feel this childish feeling take over, of wanting to just fall into his arms and have him tell me everything will work out.

"Between us. I got a strange sense. As if he's in limbo. A sort of purgatory, if you believe in such a thing. I've seen people when they are ready to go and it feels very different. Of course, my colleagues who specialize in this tell me that every coma case is utterly unique. But, with your dad, I'm getting a sense of needing to pause. And maybe to process something. Might he be waiting for someone...?"

He shrugs. What a strange and disarming doctor he is. He looks at me, as if he suspects something for a moment, but then he smiles and looks away.

"Please." I nudge him.

"Well, it could be wishful thinking. No science to back up anything I just said. Now, please don't sue me. Just a father and a son myself trying to make sense of that which is mysterious, perhaps."

"I appreciate it. I really do." I don't know why because I don't know what to do with his suppositions, but I feel reassured somehow. Suddenly I remember the procedures I heard about in such cases. "Oh, was there something you needed from me?"

"Yes. I hate to have to bring it up so soon, but there are hospital regulations and arrangements that need to be made if he stays in the coma longer."

"Of course." I gulp down some saliva.

"I'm told by the lawyers - not my realm as you can imagine - that sometimes it's short and they

My Heart Is A Muscle

recover but other times they need more time, in which case it gets... complicated as to what we do.”

A sense of dread fills me.

He pulls out an envelope set against the clipboard he has at his side. “Being his next of kin, you’ll have to read these and make some decisions. I would advise you don’t sit on it. If there *are* complications, well then some big decisions may have to be made rather quickly.”

I’ve dealt with this in my work with elders, but holding the package and thinking of dad, I feel utterly helpless and confused about what to do.

“Right now, I gather, is not the time to walk through it all, so please arrange it with Monique... That’s my daughter by the way, who called you. She or I can discuss it with you when you’re ready.”

“Thank you... for taking the time and being considera...”

“Only wish I could do more. Actually. May I ask you... do you pray?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m not religious.” Left the Catholic upbringing far behind me as a younger man. Never sat right with their blind faith in something invisible.

“May I have your permission to pray for him and for you and your family?”

I nod, feeling both strangely reassured and very awkward.

It seems like a natural place to end but he stares at me as if I was about to say something else.

I find my mouth opening and speaking almost involuntarily, “I wanted to ask you something else. I had these strange dreams and when I fainted...”

“Bill, your heart did *stop*.” He interrupts me emphasizing, “We *know* from the woman who was trained in first aid who tried to resuscitate you and from the first responders afterwards.”

"I find it all so hard to believe. Everything feels surreal."

"That's the shock, certainly. But, you're also wondering about something else aren't you?"

I nod. "I think... So when my heart stopped, I saw myself floating and then I heard this man... Who sounds like... you."

Dr. Greenleaf takes off his glasses and doubles over laughing to himself, while looking at me.

"That's not the first time someone's had a near death experience and heard a voice inside and then swore on the bible that it sounded like me. But I have to tell you, Bill. If you spoke to my 1st or 2nd wife, or even my current one, they would each tell you I am not that almighty and perfect."

He leans in, all laughter and tears easing back. "All that to say, I do believe he has spoken to you."

"Who?"

He points his finger up to the ceiling.

"But, I don't believe..." I protest.

He pats the bed, looking pensive, "Well... Before today, you had a heart condition. Likely genetic, nearly identical to your father's. And somehow, after your "fainting" spell or some other "event" today, there seem to be no signs of it. Could be a series of flawed tests - highly improbable - or may be a miracle. We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?"

He gives me another warm handshake, clasping with both hands. "We shall meet again, I am sure. Especially because I have an appointment with you next Monday." He smiles warmly, "May you and your family be well."

He begins to walk away, with a slow deliberate rhythm. Turning back, he winks at me and says the strangest thing, "You can see that I do things differently here. Please contact me or Monique, any time, really."

My Heart Is A Muscle

His words hang in the air after he leaves the room. I have no reason to doubt him but it seems unreal that someone would care so much.

After getting dressed, I walk out of the hospital with the envelope of papers he handed me under my arm, squinting in the bright sunlight.

Everything rushes in on me.

A bubble of shelter evaporates.

I'm a powerless little man, and dad... What is he? An image of him frozen in a pod, asleep, floating in space somewhere in one of these massive concrete and glass buildings.

And then there is my career. I laugh at my naivety. 20 years of my life. Corporate bullshit 101.

What an idiot I've been.

My marriage... *Does it even exist any more?*

Everything is slipping away... the pieces of my life like flakes of clay crumbling in my fingers.

I feel faint. Sick to my stomach.

My legs are weak. My gut an empty hole.

I look around and see my shameful escape.

Chapter 5

The Ugliest Fish

They say that everyone has a guilty pleasure.

I wouldn't call this a pleasure but a craving that is never met.

An empty hole that is never filled.

I walk into the Krispy Kreme storefront.

I do this thing. Ever so often --less lately -- but at least once a month.

I find a fancy french bakery. The most expensive and tastiest one and stuff my face full, starting with croissants, pastries and cakes. Sitting there in plain sight, pretending to be savouring and waiting for a friend, ordering way more than any mouth and stomach can hold.

Right now, the hole in my gut is so raw and aching, I'd stuff myself with garbage waste if it was in front of me.

Sugar. Salt, oil, fats, creams...

I also happen to be lactose intolerant... so watch out for the aftermath.

I buy a dozen. Taking the box to the park away from glaring cashiers, whose eyes I avert, certain they are judging me.

I don't even care what it is. No joy as I stuff three donuts ~ one after another ~ into my mouth, foaming with cream and splattered with jelly. Wiping myself, I scan around to make this scene look normal and uneventful to any onlooker or passerby.

My Heart Is A Muscle

The envelope of papers sits next to me.

I try to open it but it rips.

Fucking great!

I get red jelly and sugary cream stamped with my fingerprints on the pages.

Sitting here in broad daylight, I must look like a creepy dude, a fucking animal.

I feel out of control.

A wave of nausea comes over me.

Then, a moment of a switch clicking inside me. A sense of being interrupted.

What am I doing?

My arm reaching for another feels weak and too heavy to do it's job.

Why am I doing this?

The voice from earlier, it's spacious godlike presence, resounds within me.

May I show you?

It's unnerving. My breathing stops as my body rhythm slows down drastically, as if I were submerging in for a scuba dive. Then, my body inhales slowly and more deeply. My mind clears.

Papa?

I ask tentatively.

Yes.

I feel unnerved. Coming back to the donuts, packed like a tight fist in my belly, the hole is there still: insatiable. I let the nausea wash over me. There's a battle being waged within me: to give in to the blind

My Heart Is A Muscle

devouring darkness or to listen to this voice that feels peaceful but which could very well be an early sign of dementia or madness?

Yes. Show me.

Close your eyes.

It's a relief to not have the bright sun in my eyes, tuning out the people walking by my bench. And most of all to hit pause on this ritual of binging and what usually comes after. Instead, I am here, oddly relaxed, held in a strange bubble of peace, awaiting instructions.

The craving is still there, calling me but I feel his presence. Though I see nothing but murky darkness.

Look up.

I tilt my head up.

In your mind's eye.

I see the darkness fade into a vast body of water which is clearer above me. There's a small silver fish flickering above me reflecting a rainbow of colours off its sheen. Incredible. To be seeing it so vividly and with lucid clarity. I want to touch it, and also feel myself hungry for it, wiggling up like a fish myself, I gobble it up.

All of a sudden, I feel caught and trapped, being pulled upwards.

It's ok. It's just me
helping you along.

I open my eyes and the "real" world rushes back in. People walking by, on their way somewhere.

My face flushes with embarrassment. What kind of a professional. A father. A son. A husband... A man... sits downtown in one of the busiest parks, in broad daylight on a weekday stuffing his face, with sweet, candied streaks, with dirt and swamp stench all over him?

Looking around, I realize that no one is minding me. The hum of the city goes on. I am just here, sobering up, confounded. Left to myself. Reassured, I close my eyes and the image is there again.

Pulled upwards, gently but firmly, I break the surface and gasp for air.

It's ok.
You can breathe.
Look around.

I see endless waves, in every direction, a vast ocean with no land in sight. Above us is the blanket of a calm blue sky with only a few clouds and the sun's warmth.

And there, a giant weathered hand approaches...

Look outside yourself.

I see myself now, the fish having been caught, from the bird's eye view, watching the scene from above. There is an old man with weathered skin in a small wooden boat. Reminds me of Hemmingway's story "The Old Man And The Sea". It feels so real.

He is holding me, as he unhooks my flapping body.

Disgust fills me as I see myself, a brown pock-marked bottom feeding scavenger. "What an ugly disgusting creature!" I hear myself commenting.

Look through *his* eyes.

Suddenly, my perspective zooms in to rest within the old man. Seeing myself through his eyes, I am overwhelmed with a feeling of tenderness and something vast and unfamiliar enveloping me.

Love?

Yes.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Tears sting my eyes.

It can't be that he loves me.

I do.

Jolted, I pull myself out of this “reverie” and bolt up.

I can't be talking to an imaginary voice in my head!

I start walking. Anywhere. Just away from here.

A moment later, I turn back and grab the package of documents. Leaving the box of donuts behind.

Chapter 6

All Who Wander Are Not Lost

As I round the corner. Something clicks in me.

My girls.

What the fuck am I doing?

I go back into the Krispy Kreme.

Bathroom first.

One of those single family rooms. Thank god someone cleaned it recently. I douse myself with water and use up a lot of paper towels to clean up... Feel like a homeless guy who is "trying" at least.

I'm at the counter buying a couple of blueberry donuts.

The girl at the counter remembers me.

"Almost forgot. For my girl," I mumble.

I walk down the street.

I'm walking. I don't know where yet.

Feels good to move and feel the rhythm.

I need to get out of the downtown core. Endless towers of commerce. A sea of people, seemingly wound up and driven like robots on a clock, wide eyed and distracted, hungry for something. Under a spell.

I feel aimless.

Trying to clear my head. Not think too much.

A sense of being lost. Nothing to buy. Nowhere to go.

My Heart Is A Muscle

But, glad to be wandering. Not looking back.

I get to the pier to be near the water. Sight of passing factories, ferries, and warehouses.

At the side of the road, now, cars zipping past me ~ important people heading home, I imagine.

As the sidewalk ends, I walk in the gutter to avoid a fence post sticking out and then on the rocky side of the road.

I feel utterly alone, as if no home awaits me. Knowing that is not true, I think this may be what feeling sorry for myself looks like, but it feels real enough.

I used to walk like this as a teen, by the railroad tracks... At night, staring into the windows of homes and buildings, looking for... don't know what... another reality other than my own.

Walking now reminds me of the vast emptiness.

The hole.

Still there... quivering and pulsing less intensely. Muted or eased somewhat.

Instead, my legs are restless.

Where can I go?

There's nowhere to hide.

I find myself in the residential areas now, staring and looking aside.

Families coming home.

Old people forgotten, sitting on their porches, with lonely stares as they soak in the evening light.

A young couple, holding hands. Shivering close and sharing a pulse. Now kissing...

Really? Ugh...

My heart sinks.

Thank God. I see a bench in a park I know. It's empty and quiet.

My Heart Is A Muscle

I sit and hear a bird chirping. I don't know the kind.

Dad used to love watching them.

I never got into it. Too busy I suppose.

This one seems to be all alone.

He's calling out. I imagine he's talking to me.

What a fucking idiotic thought! Have you dropped your marbles, again, Bill?

Though the thoughts are my own, I realize that sounds a lot like my Mom's voice. She really knew how to tear you down.

No. I shake my head. I'm...

If you can't say nuthin' good, don't say nuthin'...

Now, my dad's maxim.

Fuck it. I'm 44 years old. Why am I debating the voices of my parents in my head? Haven't I gotten past all this? Made my own life?

I whistle back.

Pause.

No bird.

Flew away?

Then I hear a sound like a whistle back.

Haha...

He's copying me. *What are you... a Mockingbird!?*

I remember. *Yes, you are! You imitate other birds to steal their nests and food. Something like that. Hmm...*

Suddenly, I feel like not trusting him either. Crazy to be suspicious of a bird. *What could he steal from me?*

I turn the thought over, then:

My Heart Is A Muscle

*Maybe I'm a mockingbird myself... homeless... a
fake.... without my own...*

*Enough bullshit! Stop feeling sorry for
yourself!*

I don't know what else to do...

There I go talking to myself.

Yup. I am talking to myself.

What do I do...?

Silence...

The bird is gone.

I stand up to go.

My feet stop in place. Something holds me there.

There's a cool breeze. I feel my hands holding
the bag of blueberry donuts. I feel my blood flowing
and the cool breeze on my skin.

My senses focus on a boy who's arguing with his
mom as they walk through the park. It looks to me like
she trying to micro manage and shame him. He is
fighting back, being stubborn and throwing a fit. I get
her frustration. But I also respect his anger.

I too need to stand up...

The only poem I ever remember comes to mind.

“Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

Is that about dad?

Or me?

Or both of us.

I get an idea...

It sends a chill of fear up my spine.

Chapter 7

The Fateful Email

I start to walk again now.

Pensive. Weighing whether to do this or not.

It's just a fucking email.

Think of your career.

At least it's something...

What about your family...?

I have to do something.

Don't be impulsive.

I can't let this go. If I do, I'll be cowering like dad used to with his tail between his legs.

I need to restore my reputation and my integrity.

I stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Pull out my blackberry - yes, I still use one. I may be dating myself or living in the past, but I prefer the keypad. And, it's a hack for avoiding touch phones, which are productivity destroying distraction machines.

Anyway! Here goes...

Dear...

No.

To John and Evelyn,

My Heart Is A Muscle

... I'm not going to attack Gary D... Don't want to look like the jaded and jealous co-worker. Besides, John and him have likely conspired. Need to keep it impersonal.

Who has the power to step in here and mediate?

Dear Evelyn,

I straighten up as I type, feeling righteous.

Get clear. Let it all go... Bill.

Remember your philosophy. How do you write to be most compelling?

ETHOS, LOGOS and PATHOS.

***Ethos.** Establish authority to speak... be honest and direct.*

I believe in your father's vision of Golden Years and though I don't know you, I imagine you were compelled by it also to step in to oversee the company last year. I left a higher paying job 21 years ago to work with your father because I also believe in providing the most effective, efficient and highest quality of life care for seniors.

***Logos.** My logical argument.*

The reason I am writing to you and eschewing protocol is because this vision is now being threatened by various actions which break with our policies and ethical standards.

My Heart Is A Muscle

Here's the tricky part. I need to keep it impersonal. Take the I out.

The presentation you saw today was one which described a bold new initiative which aligns with our mission, however, this proposal was...

- ☒ Stolen – too emotionally charged.
- ☒ Co-opted – not strong enough
- ☒ Swiped – makes it sound lighter than it is...
- ☒ Taken – too direct
- ☒ Poached – too colloquial.
- ☒ Misattributed or Plagiarized – we're not in academia any more.

Looking for the right word...

...misappropriated. My team and I have worked on this proposal for 4.5 years. It was common knowledge and encouraged by our CEO.

Pathos. Emotionally compelling...

If a culture is enabled where colleagues (and perhaps even supervisors) can take ownership over one another's work so brazenly, then the integrity of our work with clients is also in question.

Need to clarify and shoot down any dismissal.

My Heart Is A Muscle

This is not about wanting credit.

It is about handling this innovative, evidence based and highly promising proposal with utmost transparency and effectiveness.

Effectiveness – a word I have heard her use a lot.

Sincerely... No.

Cordially Yours...

I hate sign offs...

Bill Stone,
Senior Manager of Operations and
Development) for Eastern Canada

I hit send.

Gulp.

Did I really do it?

Chapter 8

In The Dark...

I wake up, finding myself lying in bed. It's dark out. The house is quiet. Must be that our girl is asleep. I forget how I got home. Must have fallen asleep.

I can't shake a bitter taste, the afterburn of anger, still seething and ready to lash out.

A moment later, Jess comes into the bedroom.

"What'd you tell her?" I ask.

"Daddy's a little under the weather."

"Hmm..."

I feel groggy but not wanting to go back to sleep.

"You brooding?" she asks.

A big sigh from me. "Yeah! I don't like this..."

"Mhmmm." She responds while changing in the closet.

"I'm serious. This is fucking unfair."

Now I know I sound like a sulking child.

She walks by picking up dirty clothes. I see a wry smile on her face.

"What?! What's that look?"

She stops and turns to me.

"I'm delighted that you're riled up actually. Finally. It means you give a fuck."

My Heart Is A Muscle

She throws a dirty sweater at me.

I block it, yet it whips me across the face.

“But, it's still all about you, baby. Unfair. Boo hoo.”

I can't fucking believe this.

“How about you bring that fire to fight for us...”
She dares me.

I can't hold back the rage now.

“Everything I do is for US!!”

“Really? Show me!”

I collapse, curling into myself. So much frustration inside but also exhaustion, “I don't have the energy to fight...”

I drag myself up and leave the room, feeling the weakness in all my joints, I plop my body on the couch.

Pull out my phone.

Woah. Evelyn responded.

Mr. Stone,

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I will meet you in your office to settle this matter at 9am, sharp.

Something definitive about that. I tell myself that's a good thing, but I'm not sure.

I can't fall back asleep.

I lay on the couch for 3 more hours, tossing and turning like an endless washing machine, my mind going over my day, spinning. Everything that happened felt like a ball of yarn unravelling further and further till my hands were empty holding onto air. Nothing left. Everything feels empty and temporary.

And I do NOT want to talk to some voice in my head.

I sit up.

3AM...

Why the fuck am I on the couch?

I go back into our bedroom and hit the switch to turn on our bedside lamps.

I hate being woken up. But, she does this to me when she has a problem ALL the TIME!

My turn.

I clear my throat.

She squints, her face scrunched in a pillow looking like a sour lemon.

"Why do *I* have to leave?" I say it trying not to sound like I'm whining, but the words seem to convey so.

"Bill! For fuck's sake."

She's cranky. Good.

She turns over and screams into her pillow - not to wake Julia I imagine. But at this moment, I don't care about shaking up the whole world.

She rolls over, "You don't. I never asked you to. I don't want you to!"

That doesn't add up. "But, you..."

She collects herself, "Sit down and listen, babe..." patting the bed beside her.

Reluctantly, I sit.

"Ok, first, I'm not your sex slave or your dutiful wife... I am your partner. That is why I am the one who is here with you at..." She checks the clock, "3 fucking am. And... and there is a boundary with me in how close I let you get, until the time is up and you decide..."

"Decide what?"

My Heart Is A Muscle

“To LIVE your fucking life as if it wasn't a script you had to follow but an adventure where *we* get to write the next chapter together...”

She pauses, enjoying my stunned expression, “And to LOVE me more... It may sound greedy... but there is so much more in your heart that you have to give.”

A pang hits my core. She continues, on a roll now.

“I want it. ALL OF IT. Right now, the door is shut. See, no deep emotion but this crust of anger protecting your pride.”

She may be right, but I don't want to concede it.

A long silence between us. I feel frozen, unable to thaw. She sighs. Turning to me she clasps my face.

“Did you know that your heart is a muscle? Pumping 100,000 times a day, five litres of blood each minute.”

She stares into my eyes, waiting for my amazed response. Still frozen, I wait for her to get to the point.

“It is so powerful the force can squirt your blood ten metres. But that's just the biology...”

Her warm hands slide down to rest over my chest.

“It is a source of everything you seek and have to give...”

I feel something softening in me.

“Why are you hiding that power from those you say that you love the most?”

I'm speechless.

She falls back onto her pillow, dramatically, as if to say, “What am I gonna do with you, my thick skulled man?”

So much emotion floods me. But a sleepy haze takes over, too tired to process. I slide over next to her. We lay back to back. It feels good, but I want to be

in my own space also. Lying in the darkness, together and alone, our skin touching, but a universe of empty space between us.

Jess turns the lights off.

I close my eyes.

A flash of thought wakes me, a moment later. I can't let it go, like a dog with a bone.

"Did someone tell you to do this?"

"He told me you might want to blame someone."

"Who?"

"Robert."

I startle and turn the lights back on again.

"You sleep with him?"

She laughs.

"What?!"

She sighs and shakes her head.

"What is so funny?"

"Well, he's... nevermind... why don't you go and meet him? He asked me to invite you. I bet he's expecting you."

She reaches for her night stand and hands me a round piece of wood.

I grab it. A slice of a tree branch the size of a drink coaster. The name Robert Young is burned into one side, along with his phone number on the other. Nothing else.

What the fuck is this? Some fucking hipster coach brainwashed my wife?

I look back at her. She now has blinders on her eyes and looks like she's doing some meditation. All peaceful, or at least trying to look the part.

"Hm." I snort.

My Heart Is A Muscle

"I dare you." She reaches over and turns the light off.

I can't help but think that she was waiting for me to ask her... to hand me this ridiculous "card".

Too tired to suss anything else out.

My head is hot and pounding.

I turn over.

Stewing, now I cannot go back to sleep. I feel her restless legs shifting.

Is she cheating on me?

Does she really want to stay with me?

Self-conscious, I realize how insecure I am, and how I feel unsure of myself.

"Jess?"

"Yes, darlin."

She does still love me, I can tell by the tone of her voice, even after everything. I hesitate whether to tell her, but I fear the blowback of not sharing it and am too tired to try and hide it.

"My heart stopped today."

"What?!" She spins around, now the startled one, placing her hand on my shoulder. "What happened? Tell me everything, in detail."

I explain to her the events. All of what happened with dad, work and the incident in the meeting.

"...So yeah, dad's in a coma. I may be looking for a new job. But..." I try to reassure her, not sure she will buy it, "I'm ok. All the tests show I am in great health, actually. It's unbelievable, really."

She hugs me close and tight. "We have much more to talk about."

I agree.

But, at this moment, both of us are exhausted, we drop the conversation.

A few breaths and everything turns black.

What seems like a moment later.

I wake up. Lucid.

Buried up to my neck. I can't move, encrusted by the weight of the earth.

This must be a dream.

What the fuck?

I look up. The stars are out. Twinkling.

"Isn't it dazzling and beautiful?" says a voice. It's a woman, the girl from my nap earlier. I know her, somehow.

Her dress sways in the cool night air, brushing past my face as she dances around me. My skin tingles. Her laughter is... comforting.

Then lights, piercing from the distance.

Two of them, growing larger.

The sound of a vehicle... coming right at me!

The end of the preview...

(there are 400 pages and 6 Days left)

What to find out...?

Who is this mysterious Robert figure
Bill will meet tomorrow morning?

Will Bill and Jess experience a break
up or a break-through in their
marriage?

Will Bill's dad wake up?

Is Bill going crazy or talking to real
spirits and a divine power?

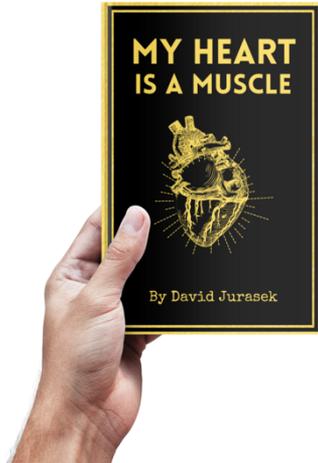
Will Bill get fired or regain status
and control of his life's work?



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