The Heart Is a Muscle Still

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THERE IS NOT MUCH POINT in waiting outside Edward's condominium complex because Edward isn't coming back. Edward is dead. He has been dead for twelve days. I am on leave from my job, which involves research for a television station. I'm the one that finds out things like the number of telephone-related injuries in 1985 was 175,000. Or in Alaska, one percent of all people walk to work.

Edward's condo is an old Victorian split up into twenty units. Edward's place is on the first floor, back. Yesterday I actually got into the building by pretending to visit someone else. I rifled through Edward's mail, piled up outside his shellacked oak door, but couldn't bring myself to open his letter from the anesthesiology medical board notifying him of his test results. The most I could do was heft the envelope in one hand, hold it up to the thin sunlight, and place it back down on the sill among the dozens of letters, bills, and advertisements accumulating there.

The only thing left now is to wait for Edward's brother to drive up from Little Falls, New Jersey, to take Edward's worldly goods away forever in the back of a rented truck. This stuff includes a fishing tackle box full of old photographs that document Edward's entire life, including the other women he has been involved with. The picture I most resent is of Edward and a woman who was a ballerina as a child. Her long hand languishes on Edward's shoulder, her feet turned out just so. Arabesque, you fool, I want to yell at the photo. Second position! Besides the tackle box, there's also Edward's black leather jacket, never worn, riddled with silver studs, that was purchased in Cambridge and a bottle green river driver's shirt from L.L. Bean, which I gave Edward last Christmas.

Just eight days ago, I drove to Little Falls, New Jersey, with our best friends Lucia and her husband Rob to bury Edward. On the drive there, a kid on a Harley Davidson roared past us. I was still drunk from the night before and had my shoes off, my feet up on the back seat of the car. I remember
that much. I was wearing a denim jacket and a plaid cotton skirt. I had on a pure white blouse with a Pilgrim collar because Edward would have had a laugh at that. I remember saying to Rob, "Harley Davidson. That's the only motorcycle born in the U.S.A." Rob laughed at that. He was drunk too.

A while later, just like people say, like a dream, I saw the Harley again. It swerved beside a Mason-Dixon tractor trailer. Then the bike changed lanes and a woman with a fantastic flowered hat driving a powder blue Honda tipped the rear wheel of the cycle with her car's bumper and sent it spinning into the wheels of the truck.

Rob said, "Oh, Christ." He pulled our car over to the side of the highway, got out, and started running uphill through all those lanes of stopped traffic. I could see the biker rolling on the pavement. I said to Lucia, "Where's Rob going?" She said, "He's a doctor, Megs. For goddess's sake, you know that."

When Rob got back to the car he told me and Lucia, "That kid is circling the drain." He told us how the state cop had said to him, after Rob had told him the kid needed to be kept warm until the ambulance arrived, "Go down to my cruiser and get the blanket if he needs to be covered up." Rob said to the cop, "I'm a doctor. The patient needs me here. You go down to the cruiser and get the damned blanket." Rob slapped the steering wheel and said, "Goddamn kid lost most of his skin."

Rob was frequently edgy. Cocaine. He had a handgun in the glove compartment of his car. I have seen him take it out and drive with it beside him on the console. Lucia is no match for that. She's all natural, no red meat, whole wheat brownies, all cotton undergarments tinted with vegetable dye. She won't even get a tan in the summer. Instead she takes carotene capsules that turn her skin the color of Orangeade.

The rest of the drive to the wake, I remember, Rob and I spent saying things like, "What's with all these Indian names?" referring to the highway signs along the Turnpike. "How well did the Indians fare in Jersey?" And I answered, "Not well. Matter of fact, they lost the World Series." And we would both laugh. Lucia told me to be quiet, put my feet on the floor, and meditate on the immortality of the human soul.
Rob said how the old bastard Edward owed him a lobster dinner from some wager they’d had on a patient’s chance of survival, which Edward lost. I said how Edward owed me an engagement ring. Lucia turned up her African mass music tape on the car stereo till we couldn’t hear each other talk anymore.

I have to say how ironic it is that Edward had worked his whole short life to get out of New Jersey and then goes and dies and gets stuck there for an eternity, how he made Phi Beta Kappa, how he went away to Colorado to study medicine, how while interning there a machine malfunctioned during a routine operation, I’m thinking elective surgery, but I couldn’t swear to it, and a twenty-eight-year-old mother of two lost her entire memory bank. Edward would only say that the machine malfunctioned and that there was a supervisor watching him, so how could the mishap be his responsibility? That was as much as I could get out of him regarding the episode. But whenever he mentioned the incident, I felt I was seeing a tiny piece of something scary that made me wince and turn away before I saw more.

A short time after the operating-room mishap, Edward met a guy at a take-out counter. Edward always ordered too much take-out food. Last New Year’s Eve I counted seventeen white containers of Chinese on the table in front of the two of us. This guy and Edward became fast friends. Then the guy started borrowing money from Edward, his hunting rifle, stereo equipment, finally threatening Edward with long, rambling letters whenever Edward mentioned the debts. Edward went to the man’s house, and when his new friend wouldn’t answer the door — Edward insisted he’d seen a long shadow moving across the screen-darkened windows — Edward sprayed the open windows with water from a garden hose.

For this act Edward was arrested one bright Saturday Colorado morning. For this transgression, he had to turn down a two hundred thousand dollar a year job in Princeton, New Jersey, because he couldn’t face telling the chief of surgery there that he had a record for criminal mischief in Colorado. When Edward told me the story, he got down on his knees and cried. When he finally came out with it, I couldn’t believe the lengths he’d gone to hide the whole thing from his family, friends, and
associates. So unless I say something, that criminal record is another thing that will die in Little Falls, New Jersey, a gray place full of dinette factory warehouses and linoleum showrooms, forever.

As we were walking into the funeral home, I asked Rob if Edward's wrist would still be in a cast. Rob said he didn't know about mortuary science procedures. As a doctor, he dealt only with live people. Edward's wrist was still in the cast. The mortuary people had dressed him in a gray suit. He would not have been pleased with his presentation. Already dead for four days, he was puffy looking and the color of taupe-colored nylons. Death bothered Edward. I remember one time he called me after his late shift at Boston City Hospital. "This woman," he said. "Her boyfriend shot her in the head and her brains were dripping out onto the OR floor. The chief of surgery told us we had to do our best to save her. Megs, her brains were on the soles of our shoes."

He didn't cry that often.

When it was my turn to go up to the coffin, Rob held my elbow. It is against Lucia's religious beliefs to view dead bodies, so she had waited in the car with a book of meditations for every occasion. I had this poem that I'd typed up for Edward. It was about selling love and how the poet didn't think she'd trade her lover's love for food or air. That's how I felt then. I put the paper in Edward's pocket, the chest pocket of his gray suit jacket right on top of his still heart.

Rob took me by the arm and lifted me off the pew. He said, "Other people want to see him too, Megs. You have to get up now." As Rob led me toward the door, I announced to all the family and loved ones sitting before me on folding chairs, "The average American spends five years waiting in lines." They looked at us as though we were some fantastic parade float run amok.

Outside the funeral home all the doctors were talking to each other in little clots. They were talking milligrams, chemical reactions, things that leave the ordinary listener out. You had to be a doctor to make any sense of the conversation. I said to Rob, "Are they saying that Edward killed himself?" Rob said, "That's what they're saying." Then he said to me, "Megs, do me a favor.
Don’t tell Lucia any of the suicide stuff because then we’ll have to listen to her theory of how Edward will have to come back to this life as a sea sponge.”

Later that evening Rob and Lucia drove me back to Boston. I thanked them for their hospitality, which included staying at their house in Connecticut the days before the wake, eating eighteen-dollar-a-pound shrimp, drinking good wine, and riding Lucia’s Appaloosa named Chinook until Lucia made me get down off her. They left me in Boston, hugging me, promising to visit, but I know I’ll probably never see them again. Death changes everything.

That’s as close as I came to marrying Edward, a hot-shot doctor from Little Falls, New Jersey, who made eight hundred dollars a day medical-freelancing. I almost got the life my mother has always told me I deserved. I almost got to marry Alphonse Edward Zaretsky, who had dropped his legal first name, who left a woman in Colorado with no memory, who was actually a man with a record for criminal mischief in Colorado, a man who couldn’t hold an erection if his life depended on it due to the fact that his life depended on hits of epinephrine for his asthma.

Edward Zaretsky was a person whose professional associates believe did not die like the newspaper obits said — of a heart attack — but in fact, medicated himself to the point that his heart stopped beating. Thirty-four years old and right on the verge of launching his sterling career as a cardiac anesthesiologist. That’s the thing.

I remember the night Lucia called to tell me he was dead: It was ten minutes past midnight on a Thursday night the week before Easter. Lucia said, “Megs, I have some very bad news.” I said, “Edward is dead. Fast cars or fast women?” She said, “Megs, listen to me. He really is dead.” And I said, “I know. I’ve been expecting your call.” Right at that moment I thought I could actually see a giant sky above me, and in the sky was this little star shooting higher and higher instead of falling.

Then I heard Lucia say, “That’s it. We’re coming up to Boston to get you. Just sit there. Have some tea. We’ll be there in two hours.”
While I waited for them I thought about the last time I had heard from Edward. He had called from California and left a message on my answering machine the day of the anesthesiology boards, and he had sounded down. “I did OK, I think,” he said. “OK. Some parts OK, some not OK. So what’s the worse thing that can happen?” he’d asked. The thing is, with Edward, the worst thing that could happen always did.

His father died before the two of them could go on their big fishing trip to Neptune, New Jersey. If operating room machinery was going to malfunction, it did so when Edward was on duty. If an anesthesiologist has to break a bone, the wrist bone isn’t an especially propitious one.

So after the boards, after calling me, Edward went out to a taco restaurant and club with an old friend he’d met at the boards. Edward ate lettuce. In California they put some chemical on the lettuce at salad bars to keep it green and crisp. Some doctors at the wake said that’s what killed him, what threw his heart into cardiac overdrive. Edward was a person who spent a decade of his life studying organic chemistry and missing out on life because of it. Edward always told the story of how he missed seeing Frank Zappa sitting at the next table in a Roy Rogers Roast Beef because he had to study for a nutrition exam. Of course he aced the exam. How could that person not know a rule as simple as always avoid eating the tainted lettuce?

Then they danced. This I do not think was fair to our relationship. The only time I ever cheated on Edward was with a Marine recruiter who promised to teach me to repel and then backed out by saying I was too fragile. Too fragile? Just last summer my brother and I beat a truck driver and a former commando playing tug of war on my mother’s front lawn. My brother and I had those guys, dead still, and my brother who is good at this sort of thing kept saying in my ear, “Baby, don’t move, baby, don’t move.” With one yank, I know it was him because it certainly wasn’t me, he jerked the rope suddenly and caught them off guard, pulling them both over their t-shirts on the ground marking the boundary line. They had one hundred and forty pounds on us. We all went out for beers, and I could hardly hold
my glass, my hands bleeding through the bar napkins I kept wrapped around them.

OK. The marine. I was angry. Edward kept disappearing. He'd have a job interview in Wyoming or an out-of-town medical conference. The last conference brochure he'd shown me was full of glossy shots of casino lights and overloaded buffet tables. He held the brochure out to me and said, "Look at this. Doctors can take their wives for free. If you were my wife, you could see Vegas for absolutely nothing." I said, "Are you asking me to marry you?" And he said, "I'm not sure."

So one of the times he was missing I went to a party. A man, who turned out to be the recruiter, asked me to dance. While we were dancing close, he tipped me back and said to shock me, "I shoot Bambies." I said, "I'd like to see that." I never told Edward about the marine, but he was half Cherokee and the most gentlemanly man I'd ever dated. My brother told me, "Never trust a service man, leastwise an Indian serviceman that's been through the Corps' freaking charm school." But late one night, the marine lifted me off the rainy sidewalk so I wouldn't get my feet wet. "You're a china doll," he said into the hair covering my ear, and I couldn't stop the hot wash of feeling his warm breath drew out of me.

Once I rode in his car when he was trying to sign up this poor kid from a slum in Brockton. When the marine ran back into his office for some papers he'd forgotten, I turned to the kid in the back seat and said, "Don't sign up. You're mad at your father, at your choices in life. Go back to school. Get a part-time job. Don't sign up." The kid looked at me, white showing all around the brown of his eyes, and I said, "He looks like a Marine Corps poster boy, doesn't he?" And the kid laughed.

So Edward went to the taco bar with his old friend. This old friend from the University of Colorado was named Higgie. His real name was something like Theodore Parker Higginson, but Edward always called him Higgie. Edward said I could never meet Higgie because I'd like him too much. Higgie and I would gang up on him. We'd both wear faded flannel shirts. We'd open the car doors at red lights and yell, "Footsoldiers of the Imperialist Army, the fucking light is green. Move it!" We'd like each
other too much, this Higgie and I.

Edward liked to be on the move, doing something. That’s why he and Higgie went out to celebrate after the boards. Edward took me to a Greek restaurant once and ordered octopus just to say he did. But it tasted like bad tuna, was very chewy, and still had suckers on the tentacles, not to mention the staring, tiny marble-black eyes. Edward pushed it around on his plate and ended up sharing my chicken soup. “Am I adventurous enough for you?” he kept asking me on the drive home.

After Higgie and Edward ate tacos, they danced with women. Edward and I were going out to a wild bar in Kenmore Square one night. I was wearing a white shirt with wide shoulders that showed off a lace camisole underneath. I had come to his condo to pick him up. Edward had totaled his car. For most of the time I had known him, I had to drive him everywhere.

I was with him the night he wrecked his car. We were heading out of his parking lot and we had our headlights off. Edward just hadn’t gotten around to turning them on yet. A Jamaican man in an old Plymouth came down Washington Street and plowed right into us. Edward did all the right things to a point. He asked me if I was all right. Then he went over to see about the other driver. He came back and asked me my view of what had just happened. I said, “You were edging out onto a major road, no headlights on, and you were looking at me saying, ‘Do you know Joe Jackson’s Memphis, Where the Hell is Memphis?’ That’s what happened.” Edward said to me, “Here’s my house key. Go back inside the condo and wait for me there.”

Then I knew he’d tell the cops he was a doctor and that the Jamaican, who barely spoke English but hadn’t done anything wrong, had hit him. When the cab I called came later to pick me up, I wouldn’t kiss Edward goodnight. The next day he called me from Boston City Hospital saying, “Kunevitch and Lau, your whiplash specialist lawyers,” and I laughed.

Anyway, when I went in to get him to drive us to the club, he had his pants on, his socks, his shirt falling open. He didn’t have on an undershirt. His chest was smooth, hairless, and broad from years of hard breathing. The asthma had worked to his advantage that way. He was barrel-chested with big shoul-
ders. This is a point with me, because I have large shoulders for a woman and am more comfortable beside men with big shoulders. He said, "Does this shirt look all right?" I wrapped my arms around his neck and pressed my tongue into the hard bony spot right behind his ear. He kissed me, and then he pinned my arms behind my back and kissed my throat. We never went out dancing that night. Later he said, "We've been in bed for three hours. Three hours." As though that were a world record or something.

So of course I was angry when I found out later from Lucia how he'd gone out dancing with Higgie. Dancing reminded me of that night.

After dancing and sitting back down to catch his breath, he had the heart attack. Two blocks from a trauma center and in the company of a physician. Once he was in the clutches of the trauma unit, strapped to a stretcher, he said to Higgie, "I am going to die." Not tell Megs I love her. Not tell Megs I wanted to marry her and get the conference rate on the Las Vegas hotel. Tell her I meant to ask her. That the ring is forthcoming now that I've passed my boards and am making eight hundred righteous dollars a day freelancing and even more when my wrist heals completely.

I know I forgot to explain this. Edward, three weeks before he died, broke his wrist. He called me on a Sunday night with the bad news. He'd been skating at Walter Brown arena with an intern when he made a one-point landing on his wrist. The emergency room doctor told him, after examining him, that she could see signs of osteoporosis in the x-rays. His bones were thinning. Thirty-four years old, remember.

Back on that Sunday night, after the fall skating, he called me and I went over to his condo to check on him. His face was red from crying. He was wearing a pink sweater I had never seen before, and seeing that he was blond and fair-skinned, he looked terrible, like some hugely monstrous fake pink flower in forced bloom. I had to keep telling him to keep the cast up, to exercise the fingers to keep up the circulation, don't forget the thumb. He drank enough Benedictine and took enough Codeine to stun a rogue elephant. I said I would stay with him that night, and he
said, "I hope I don’t bludgeon you to death with this cast." In the city’s crime light glare, the cast looked like a supreme instrument of death. When he left three weeks later for his boards in California, his wrist was still in the cast.

After the wake I called Edward’s apartment daily. His answering machine said, in Edward’s fake-cheery voice, "I’m in La Jolla presently. As soon as I’m back, I’ll be in touch.”

I got a letter from Higgie four days after the wake? Nice to meet you, even if so briefly. Too bad under such sad circumstances. He had advice for the bereaved — let us not try to make too much sense of such mysteries like life and untimely death, rather, let us remember Edward the way he was.

See, Higgie, that’s my problem. Just who was Edward? This Alphonse at birth who changed his name to Edward. This blue-collar asthmatic who spent his formative years in a hospital for child asthmatics. He once told me a story about the place his family sent him when he was twelve. He was lonely and finally got up enough courage to make a break for freedom, convincing his bunkmate to go along with him. Somehow the boys got down the long halls and past the heavy doors, the gate, and made their way over banks of snow toward freedom. The shortest way, Edward decided, was over a frozen brook. Edward made it across, but the roommate fell through the ice, caught a cold, and just before Christmas died in a blue choking fit. Edward had to stay in that room with the empty bunk above him, a silent re- crimination, for a month, until another boy was admitted to the facility.

Higgie, what about this Edward who didn’t out and out lie about his past, but didn’t tell the truth either? This Edward who spent his life trying to catch up to the likes of Rob and Lucia with their house in Connecticut, their paddock, their eighteen-dollar-a-pound shrimp, yet at the same time wanted to wear flannel shirts like you and I, Higgie, and order the chicken soup?

Higgie, you’ll believe me when I tell you that Edward said to me, and this was one of the times he cried, “How can I stay here in Boston with you, Megs, if they (some little suburban hospital) will only offer me ninety thousand? A school bus driver with a record for child molestation makes more than that. You
can’t come with me.” (He never asked, Higgie.) “But I can fly back from Pennsylvania to see you every time I get time off. Eight hundred dollars a day. I can fly back all the time.”

I said, “Your wrist is broken. How will you hold your laryngoscope?” I wanted to ask what about your asthma, your bones as thin as jackstraws? He said to me, and here’s our biggest clue, Higgie. “What does any of this matter?” I thought he meant the money, the prestigious positions in distant cities, octopus in trendy ethnic restaurants. I thought he meant nothing could keep us apart. Destiny and all that crap. But he didn’t mean that at all.

The day after the wake I remembered something else. Rob, Lucia, Edward and I were all going to a Halloween party last October. I was dressed as a geisha. I had on an antique yellow silk dress and red shoes that tied at the ankle. Lucia had done my hair on the top of my head with calla lilies. I must have looked convincing. A stranger at the bar sent a co-worker into the ladies room after me to tell me he wanted to meet me. I told him I didn’t date investment bankers, on principle. Edward was dressed as a rugby player. As the banker was asking me for my phone number, Edward turned away and ordered a gin and tonic with a twist of lime. I gave the banker a fake number.

But before all that, on the way to that party at a posh yacht club on Boston Harbor, Rob saw the flashing blue lights of a police car by the side of the road ahead of us. “Oh, Christ,” he said, and reached across Lucia for the glove compartment. We all knew the handgun was in there, beneath the detritus of everyday life. Lucia said, “Rob, don’t,” and put her hand in front of the latch. “Christ,” Rob said again, banging his fist on the steering wheel. Edward said, “Slow down, Buddy.” And then we were past the police car and everything was fine again.

Rob pulled over to the side of the road and laughed. He had a flask that he took from the sash of his Ninja costume along with a prescription vial. Lucia said, “I don’t need anything,” and looked out the window. We were just off the Southeast Expressway, the bad neighborhoods jammed right up next to the pricey Harbor condominiums and yacht clubs.

Edward leaned forward, his hand flat out, and said, “Party
favors.” Rob turned to me. I was sitting right behind him. “Let me see your little geisha hand, Megs.” He took my hand between his. That reminded me of New Year’s Eve when Rob kissed me in front of Lucia and said, “Edward must love kissing you.” Rob said, “Your hand is cold, Megs. These babies will make your hands warm.” I said, “All right. Just one then.” I washed it down with whiskey from the flask.

Later at the party, over salmon-stuffed pea pods, warmed brie with toasted pine nuts, and champagne punch, after the investment banker had tucked my hair stylist’s telephone number into the vest of his three piece suit, and Edward had consumed several more gin and tonics, I asked Edward what those pills were. “Inderol,” he said. “Heart medicine, medicine for the heart. Good for what ails you.”

When he told me that, I remember, I felt my heart suddenly shift in my chest, my heart never feeling more like an inert lump of stew meat, barely rising to the challenge of keeping me alive.