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“The Heartsmith”

3555 words

A young boy wandered into my store today. He laid a heart, cracked on one side, on the counter and looked at me expectantly.

“Can you fix it, mister?”

I scooped up the heart and looked at it. The damage was miniscule, hardly more than a scratch, but I knew that appearances could be quite deceiving.

“Let me take a look at it, son. Ok?” He nodded at me, his lip quivering and his eyes wide. I walked to the back room and took a closer look. The crack had been inflicted quickly. This heart had been dropped, though the person that dropped it probably didn't realize it had been damaged, and the boy who it belonged to would never speak up. Cracks could never be completely fixed, but the heart would remain functional regardless. I patched it to a degree that only an expert in this craft would never be able to tell it had been dropped. The damage would be a secret between the boy and myself.

I brought it back to the boy and handed it to him gently.

“Can you promise me you'll take care of it from now on?”

“Yes, sir! I won't let just anyone hold onto it anymore!” I smiled. I wasn't naïve enough to believe him, but he wouldn't understand if I said so. I patted him on the shoulder and let him go, taking the cost of the minor repairs out of my own pocket.

A while later, though I don't remember exactly how long, a teenager wandered into my store, his eyes shifting side to side, his face hidden behind a confused expression. Was that denial tugged messily over on his hands like a glove? And what were they cupped around, stuffed into his pockets like that? Ah, I had seen this type before. I asked the lad to step forward, as no one else was in the store save for us.

Business was slow, as it usually was when I had a customer to assist. I preferred it that way. I could take as long as I wanted tending to each customer, and I never had to rush.

He took his hands from his pockets and laid them on the counter. He gently laid down a heart, fractured right down the middle. It was broken, and it struggled to keep a beat as it kept time for itself. I cradled it softly, taking care not to rock it too harshly. I asked him what he had done to it. He muttered under his breath, rubbing one hand up and down the other arm in embarrassment and staring at the floor as if it could offer him some respite from his shame.

“Sir, I uh... I lent it to someone.”

“I see. Did you ask them to take care of it?”

“I did, but it isn't her fault! She didn't know it had been cracked before.”

“You were a bit too quick to think she was ready to hold onto it, son.”

“I know that, now. Please, sir, can you fix it?” I smiled at him.

“Let me take a look at it.” I brought it to the back. I couldn't remove the damages completely, but I could make it keep time again, and I could harden it just a little so it wouldn't break as easily the next time. I patched it up, though anyone that looked closely enough would be able to tell that it had been damaged before. I brought it back to the front.

“Now, son, you should take care of it from now on. It can be broken again, and the damage will only get worse.”

“Thank you, sir. I'll save it for someone special this time, I promise!” He bolted out the door before I could doubt him. I took the cost of the repairs out of my own pocket.

Years passed, and on a particularly cool evening, a young man stepped into my shop. Dressed cleanly, his mood betrayed his attire. He looked like a mess. I paused from polishing the counter top and asked him to step forward. He frowned, then slowly shuffled his glossy black shoes over to me. He removed his top hat and held it beneath his arm, and he lifted his eyes so I could see the tears streaming down his flushed face. His eyes were red with confusion and anguish. I knew what was ailing him, but I have a policy about suggesting service to customers unless they specifically ask for it. This lad struggled to retain whatever composure he had left as he spoke.

“Sir. I wonder if you might do me a favor.”

“What would that be, young man?”

“You repair hearts, yes?”

“Indeed. It has always been my trade. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Can you replace them as well?”

“Pardon?”

“I've lost my heart. You are the Heartsmith. Can you give me a new one?” I knew he was lying. I had seen this before, but I couldn't accuse him. He had to admit it himself if he wanted my help.

“Sir, what have you done with your heart?”

“I gave it away.”

“And the recipient?”

“She threw it out. It is lost. Can you help me or not?” I put the polish and rag I was using beneath the counter and leaned forward.

“Why did she throw it out, lad?”

“She didn't know it had been broken before. She claimed it was in no condition to be used. I can't blame her. Who wants a heart that has been beaten and bruised?” I sighed and scratched my nose.

“I'm afraid I can't just make a new heart, sir. I have to have something to work with. Materials are expensive these days, as fewer people want to fix old hearts, they simply stop using them once they don't work anymore.” The young man hung his head.

“I see. What will it cost me?”

“I don't think you understand.”

“I'll do anything for a new heart. Please, sir, you must help me!”

“You'll do anything?”

“Anything, yes!”

“Will you trust me to try to fix your old heart first?” The man was indignant, yet he realized he was defeated. Still, he made one last attempt.

“But I don't have it.”

“Then how do you know it no longer works?” His shoulders sank. He removed his gloves and sighed before reaching into his suit's breast pocket and carefully removed several fragments, bent, broken, shattered, I think one may even have had bite marks on it like the indentations of

two molars grinding against each other in frustration. He placed his cupped, shaking hands on the counter and let the pieces cascade in a depressing heap onto the counter. He jerked awkwardly, nervously to make sure not a piece rolled off the surface or was lost. Finally, he placed one hand on his face and sobbed quietly.

“I’ve ruined it, haven’t I?”

“What’s that?”

“There’s no way to fix this. I don’t deserve this heart.”

“I think you’re being a bit hard on yourself, sir.”

“But it’s in pieces! How can even you fix this?”

“Time.”

“What?”

“You asked me what it would cost to mend your heart, or rather, to give you a new one. I can make this one like new, but I need time. Is that alright with you?”

“So, what, I can’t use it until it’s fixed?”

“Oh, no, on the contrary, you can use it, and you should, but you must be gentle. Every day, return to me with your heart, and I will work on it, bit by bit, until it is fixed. Okay?” The man in the suit adjusted his vest and tie and stifled his tears with a handkerchief.

“Alright. How long will it take?”

“Don’t worry about that. Focus on getting it fixed. I’ll worry about the timing.”

So the young man left me with his heart that night, came back the next morning to pick it

up, and continued the cycle for a few months. By the time it was nearly ready, he seemed to be growing impatient, thus, naturally, I asked him what the matter was.

“Why do you pace so when you are here? Didn't I tell you to trust me with the timing, and you should simply focus on getting it here for me to tend to it?”

“Sir, you do not understand. There is someone I wish to show my heart to. In exchange, I should like to see hers. If I have no heart to offer, how can I expect her to show her own?”

“Hmm, I see. Still, I ask that you be gentle. Your heart isn't ready to be exposed again just yet.”

“No! If I dawdle, she may find someone else to share her heart with.”

“If she would give herself away so easily, perhaps she isn't patient enough for you.”

“But I don't want just anyone to pursue her. I know I will treasure her heart, but how can I trust men I don't know?”

“Are you not doing the exact same thing by rushing your own heart simply to offer her something incomplete and broken, that you may gain her favor lest she find someone more ready for her?” The young man seemed peeved, but he knew he was defeated yet again. Yet again, however, he offered one last rebuttal.

“I don't know that I can find another heart like hers. Should I risk consignment to solitude because you cannot work faster, sir?” His face was a mix of angry acknowledgment and defiant ignorance. I understood his pain, but I could not give him permission to endanger himself again. Neither could I force my services upon him.

“I will give you a choice. I can finish your heart tomorrow, but you will need to come in

early and stay all day until it is done. Alternatively, you can take your heart tomorrow morning and keep it. I will subtract the cost for the rest of the repairs, but your heart is unlikely to ever function fully again. The pain of living with a broken heart out of stubbornness will surpass any discomfort you have ever faced, and the damage to your heart may very well become irreversible, even for me.”

The young man shifted uneasily and tugged at his gloves in anxiety. For him, this was a serious decision, a dilemma that needed to be resolved in the moment. He opened his mouth to speak multiple times, but closed it each time when he realized he had nothing to say.

“Alright.”

“Alright? Good, so, go home, I will see you bright and early.”

The next morning, the young man came in and, without a word, laid the incomplete heart on my counter. He lingered about my shop all day, questioning from time to time how I did my work, even asking once why I never had any other customers but him. I explained that my trade secrets would astound him and confuse him, and he would never be able to take it all in. And as for customers, I had plenty, but not all of them visited at the same time, and not all of them entered the shop directly; in fact, many would ask that he visit them in their homes or on rainy street corners in the middle of the night. Being a master of my trade, I could work anywhere. The day passed slowly, and I tinkered at his heart until I had it beating on time again. I hardened it enough to protect it from all but what the owner allowed into it. I patched up cracks and fractures until it glowed like new, though anyone who spent any time with it would be able to see the damage that had been done to it. I handed it to the young man, who sighed in relief that the work



was finally done, and he yanked out his pocketbook and asked what he owed me. I told him he had paid enough and was free to go. I told him to be wary, as the only things that could hurt him now would be the things he let in. He seemed to understand as he nodded solemnly.

“I can't promise this won't happen again, sir. I may have need of your services again some day.” I smiled. He was learning.

“I know you will. I'm always open. Drop by anytime you like.” The young man placed his hat on his head, his heart in his pocket, and stepped out onto the sidewalk, where he glanced both directions intently before heading down the street.

Only a few minutes passed before the young man entered the store again.

“Oh? Forget something?” The young man opened his mouth, removed his hat and squeezed the brim between his fingers, then stammered for a bit. I merely smiled and waited. I had a feeling of what he wanted to say, but I couldn't make him say it. He had to figure it out on his own.

“Sir.” He said nothing more, but stepped to the counter and produced his newly-repaired heart.

“Yes, is something wrong?”

“I can't be trusted with this. I don't want to go through the pain of breaking this one like all the others. Can I... can I ask you to take care of it for me?” I knew I had to be beaming. The young man seemed so humbled. To have brought himself to this point was nothing short of a breach of pride.

“If you give me your heart, I can give you a new one, and I'll see to it that nothing can

ever break it again.”

“There will be no pain?”

“I cannot promise there won't be pain; in fact, there will almost definitely be pain and sorrow. But your heart will always keep beating. You will always be able to love, no matter how much it hurts.”

“Then I want your heart.”

“May I have your old one?”

“As far as I am concerned, sir, this one was yours after the first time you fixed it for me.” And with that, he handed me the heart, hard as stone, nearly impenetrable. He was fighting tears, and I knew that everything in him wanted to clutch back the hard heart and flee to what he knew, what was comfortable, but he held himself back. I held it, gave the young man a look to wait there, then I walked to the back. I took the heart and broke it down. I applied a salve to the cracks which filled them in. It left scars, but they were faded and would be nothing more than memories as time went on. I gave special attention to the fractures which had merely grown under the pressure of the hard casing. I restored the heart, replaced the pieces which were worn with new ones which would never grind down completely. I wound the heart back and set it to a new time signature. A graceful bound that was not deterred by wrongs, a gentle breeze which blew stronger than the strength of tyrants while preserving the innocence and gentleness of youth. I made it new. I brought it back to the front and handed it to the man. He immediately thought something was off.

“I thought you would give me a new heart.”

“I have.”

“Isn't this just my old heart?”

“This is the heart you were always meant to have. The one you deserved. While you can recognize the damages, no one else will be able to unless you tell them. The past of this heart is between you and I.”

“So... the new heart you promised me is the same as the old, but rebuilt to be what it was supposed to be?”

“That is correct.”

“Why didn't you just rebuild it the first time it was damaged?”

“Because not everyone wants this heart.”

“But why not? It's so light, and you said it will never break completely. Why wouldn't anyone want this?”

“Because this heart is tender. It can be hurt unlike any other. You will experience pain that no other heart can feel. This heart can't focus on the owner. It's made to care for others.”

“Oh... I see.” He held the heart for a moment, then smiled meekly and placed it into his pocket. “How much do I owe you, sir?”

“Nothing.” The young man shook his head.

“No, you've paid my debts each time I've come to you for help, I insist on paying back what I owe you.”

“That won't be necessary.”

“Please, sir, let me repay you! I don't deserve this heart! What can I do to earn it?”

“You can't.” He looked taken aback and confused.

“What do you mean?”

“If you want to show me you value that heart, treasure it for your entire life. I gave it to you as a gift because there is nothing in this world worth what that heart is worth. I trust you with it. But there's a catch. I need you to trust me with who is allowed to hold your heart. I can help you figure out who to lend your heart to, but you have to be willing to trust me, even when what I have to say is hard to hear.” He looked perplexed, then he sighed, then the smile came back to his face.

“So, I should come back to ask your advice?”

“If you want it, all you need to do is ask.”

“Ok.”

“Ok?” He nodded and walked out the door, and I went back to polishing the counter top.

Customers came and went, some more than once, some only once. Some even tried to bring their friends or loved ones inside, but few of them were willing to step into the shop on their own, and they couldn't be dragged in. Years passed, business continued. However, I will never forget one particular day. It was a bright Sunday afternoon, and the town was sluggish. I didn't mind, the quiet was refreshing.

A gentleman entered the store with a young boy hanging on his arm. The man wore a beret the color of autumnal maple, and his hair had grayed evenly all around. He led his son to

the counter, though the boy shied behind him. The man coaxed him out and whispered to him to talk to the man. The boy swallowed hard and stepped forward. Those gleaming eyes. So young, so innocent, but there was a twinge of something else. Pain? No. Those eyes hadn't yet seen pain. Nervousness? Perhaps. That is a normal response I always expect from my new customers.

“Hello, young man, how can I help you?”

“Sir, my dad says you're the Heartsmith.”

“He's right, lad. That has always been my trade.”

“I could use your help.”

“Aye? What is it you need, boy?”

“Well, my dad told me that you helped him fix his heart, and one day you gave him a new one.”

“That is correct. Your dad had quite a time deciding the matter, too.”

“Well, my dad said he met my mom and she also talked to you, and you also gave her a new heart too.”

“Yes, I did, son.”

“I was wondering if you could... give me a new heart. Daddy says I'm ready.” I looked at the gentleman, who smiled back. I looked at the child. I leaned over the counter and leveled my face with the child's.

“Do you understand what's so special about this heart?”

“Dad says it never breaks. You can love forever and ever.”

“What else did he tell you?”

“He said that it also hurts a lot, and it will get hurt often.”

“Then why do you want this heart, my boy?”

“I get hurt but I always feel better later. If I can love Mommy and Daddy forever, then getting hurt doesn't matter, because I'll get better, right?”

“You're absolutely right, son.” He held out his heart for me to take. I cradled the soft gem and brought it to the back of the store. It took far less work than his father's heart, but I got it set to the right beat and brought it back to the front.

“Can you promise me you'll take care of this heart?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Such good manners. Your daddy raised you right.” I stood and looked at the gentleman. “And you have grown. How's the wife?”

“I'd have never guessed that the right one wasn't the one that kept my heart safe, but the one that gave it back in one piece. I wish I had listened to you back when I was a kid.”

“Many do. You have a son now, and he will need someone with experience to teach him. Can you do that?”

“You trust me with his heart?”

“I trusted you with yours.”

“This is true.” We exchanged one last smile as the father and the child left the shop. I opened the register and took the cost of the operation out of my own pocket. I dropped the

change into the drawer and slid it closed, then grabbed my old rag and started a fresh coat of polish on the counter top.