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Random Acts of Heroic Love

Danny Scheinmann

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THE MIND AFTER A SHARP BLOW TO THE HEAD IS LIKE A HOUSE after a hurricane: unrecognizable shards, shreds and splinters.

Fragments of memory lie scattered in the wreckage. All the pieces are there, somewhere – but the landscape is so distorted that, stumbling across them, the brain has no idea what they are or where they are from.

'Where is Eleni?'

'Muerta,' says the doctor.

Leo's eyes close, he is oddly calm watching the bomb hurtle towards him. One last look before he is swept away. He searches his mind and does not recognize the view. A thick fog smothers everything; he can just make out a few faintly familiar shapes. Muerta. He already knows she is dead. At the point of asking he had no idea but when he hears the answer it sounds like the confirmation of a memory he can't seem to bring to his mind. Something lurches out of the blur into sharp focus. Eleni. Droplet brown eyes, rich mane of ebony curls, bundle of electric energy, singing.Always singing, like others breathe. For a fleeting moment he feels her brightness and warmth. They were like a single atom, indivisible.

The bomb is almost upon him. The atom is about to be split. The energy to be unleashed, ferocious and uncontrollable.

'Can I see her?'

'No es buena idea.'

'Where is she?'

'Here, in another room.'

A game is being played. The doctor doesn't want the patient to see his dead lover – at least not yet. He is saying, 'Let's pretend she is not really dead. Muerta – it's just a word.' This is a game of damage limitation. Leo plays along. He doesn't know where he is or how he got there. He has no memory

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of recent events. He knows only that he loves a girl called Eleni and that he must see her at all costs. He senses the panic in the doctor. If he shows any sign of cracking the doctor will keep them apart. So he plays calm.

'Please let me see her.'

The doctor clocks the steely determination in Leo's eyes and seems reassured; maybe the boy can cope after all. He doesn't know the story of these two young foreigners. He doesn't know the strength of their relationship.

'Venga,' he says softly and indicates the door.

It is only then that Leo realizes he is lying on a bed and that he must have been unconscious. His waking words were for Eleni. Something of that delirious soup lingers with him.Why does the doctor speak Spanish? The question hangs in his thoughts like a piece of string whose other end is lost in the haze. He pulls it and a thread emerges from the fog. A memory clings to it. I'm in Latin America. I came here with Eleni. But where? Guatemala? No, we flew to Colombia from there. Colombia then? No. He tugs at the string harder. No, not Colombia. After Colombia came Ecuador. Ecuador, what comes after Ecuador? Where were we going next? He pulls harder, the twine is fraying. Peru. From Ecuador to Peru. How? How did we get to Peru? The string snaps. No memory of getting to Peru. I must be in Ecuador or Peru. Probably Ecuador. I can't remember Peru. He contemplates the broken thread; he has no idea where to find the other end.He is at the edge of a hole whose size is as yet unfathomable. He stares into the void like a senile man who in a moment of lucidity knows that his mind is lost.

He pulls himself to his feet. His head swirls and he puts his hand on the bed to steady himself. He blinks hard and tries to focus on the enamel basin on the wall opposite. One of the taps dribbles annoyingly; it must have been leaking for years because the water has left an ugly brown stain in the sink.Wherever he is, it is in a state of neglect. The paint peels from the walls and thick spiders' webs hang undisturbed in the corners. A solitary gecko surveys the scene from the ceiling. The doctor takes him by the arm and leads him down a corridor.

They stop in front of a closed door. Leo knows she is on the other side. The doctor pushes it open. Eleni lies on a trolley bed. There is blood on her blue shirt; her shoulder is out of joint. There is a graze on her cheek.Now the bomb hits. Something inside him yields and the full implication of events explodes inside him. His blood thunders out of control, coursing through him like a river that has burst its banks; legs shudder and give way at the knees; breath shortens and rasps in his throat. His heart rejects the returning blood and empties itself; stomach locks, sending undigested waste crashing into the colon; anus pulls tight to prevent evacuation. His nose charges with fluid mucus, eyes blink obsessively, vision blurs with tears. He collapses to the floor and screams a high guttural scrape. Nurses three rooms away stop in their tracks like mothers responding to a baby's cry. People come running from all directions. The doctor closes the door. A

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murmuring crowd gathers outside. Some of the people know what has happened. They are witnesses who are being treated in the clinic themselves. They have been wondering what would happen when the gringo came round and was told his girlfriend had died. 'My God,' they have been saying, 'when that boy wakes up... it is too terrible to contemplate.' And they cross themselves and thank Jesus that they will see their loved ones again.

Leo is sobbing in a crumpled heap. He has never been so alone. Lost in some nameless South American town with his mind half gone. He stands up and goes to Eleni. He caresses her face tenderly.Her skin is still warm. Perhaps she is not dead,maybe she can be brought back to life. He looks at the doctor with a wild stray optimism in his eye. The kiss of life, maybe he can bring her back with the kiss of life. He pinches her nose and opens her mouth and breathes his desperate hope into her. Again and again he pours his life into her. Then he beats on her heart to make it beat. Harder he pummels. He knows that he is hurting her, that she will be bruised, but it is the only way. The doctor puts his hand on Leo's shoulder. But a pathetic tenacious hope has gripped Leo.

'Electric shock. Have you got shock treatment? Er . . . choc electrico. Tienes?'

'No hay, señor. Esta muerta.'

She can't be dead, he will not believe it.He continues to breathe into her.He begs for a miracle and a miracle happens. A low raspy breath comes up from deep within her. It is a sound he will remember for the rest of his life.

'She's alive. She's breathing. Did you hear it?'

The doctor is motionless. Leo is suddenly animated, he doesn't need this stupid, lazy doctor, he can resuscitate Eleni on his own. He fills her up feverishly and each time she responds with a breath.

'Señor, señor!' The doctor places his hand again on Leo's shoulder. He ignores it, his heart is flying, he almost wants to laugh.

'Señor, she is not breathing. It is your breath coming back from her lungs.'

Leo feels for Eleni's pulse. There is nothing. Once more he plummets into despair. He kisses her forehead and whispers words learned from her native Greek: 'Matyamou, karthiamou, psychemou.'My eyes, my heart, my soul.

He strokes her hair as he used to sometimes when she was sleeping. Slowly the heat leaves her body. A minute later he is howling like a dog. How long this lasts he has no idea.

The old doctor looks on from a corner. He battles back his own tears, he does not want to let his feelings conquer his professional dispassion. Later he will return home and weep in his wife's arms and hug her hard for many minutes, savouring her breath, her perfume and her love.

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The story has spread through the hospital and the crowd outside the door have been overcome by that unsavoury curiosity that grips people in the face of tragedy. Someone pushes open the door. They see a man ravaged in grief, his face raw and twisted, and next to him a small woman lying gnarled and lifeless on a bed. As one they draw in a sharp breath, and for a moment their faces mirror Leo's.

'Go away, clear off. This is not a freak show. Leave me alone . . .' And even as he speaks Leo's voice cracks and fades away. They have seen enough, they are ashamed and someone closes the door.

The episode triggers a thought in his clouded mind. Why do I recognize those people? He turns to the doctor.

'What is the date?'

'It is the second of April, señor.'

'The second of April?' He searches desperately inside for a connection.

'Where am I?'

'Latacunga, señor.'

Latacunga – he knows the name. Yes, now he remembers that he has been through Latacunga before. There is a busy market in the town square. He changed buses there with Eleni to go into the mountains. He is in Ecuador.

'What date is it?'He forgets that he has just asked this question.

'It is the second of April.'

'The second of April? What happened?'

'You were in a bus crash, señor.'

Nowhere in his memory can he place this information. It does not even create the slightest ripple across his psyche. He sits with the idea for a moment. No, he does not remember a bus or a crash. The thought hangs outside him like an alien trying to gain entry. His brain refuses to connect this information to any synapse or nerve ending. And yet somewhere lost in the internal wreckage sits the little black box, the flight recorder which carries the truth of what happened. A strange protective mechanism has kicked in which prevents him getting too close to the epicentre of his trauma. Like a witness in a court case who is not obliged to give evidence which could implicate him, so the body refuses the mind access to the information which could damage it.

'What date is it?' He wonders if he has asked this question before.

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'The second of April, señor,' the doctor repeats patiently.

'What year?'

'1992.'

Leo grapples with the year. He set off in 1991. When in 1991? The end, near the end. December 1991. So what happened over the last four months? A small light switches on and he sees himself lying on a beach with Eleni. It is New Year's Eve; they have taken a day trip from Cartagena in Colombia to a tropical island. Eleni is wearing her pink swimsuit. They lie there in sunbleached bliss with the surf at their feet. He turns to her and kisses her warm cheek.

'You know, I can't think of anything in the whole universe that I want. I've got you at my side and I love you and that's it. There's nothing more to life than this.'

Eleni smiles, leans over and kisses him. 'Let's photograph it,' she says. She takes out their small instant camera and holds it at arm's length above their heads and points it towards them. They check their positions in the reflection on the lens and take the picture. Click.

He looks down at her corpse. The memory acts like a pair of hands that plough through his breastbone, rip open his ribcage and expose his heart to the elements. His spine melts away and he stands before his dead lover like a piece of limp flesh. He cannot breathe. His only thought now is that he wants to die and go with her.

From nowhere he feels a shooting cramp through his leg. He looks down and notices his jeans are ripped and covered in blood. Next he feels a throb in his hands. They are cut and bleeding. Shards of glass stick out from the skin. For a moment he becomes quite self-absorbed picking out the splinters.

His right shoulder is badly bruised and his hip joint fires sharp warning shots up his back.He realizes that he has suffered injuries all down his right side. But worst of all is his right knee.He cannot bend it or even feel it. How could he not notice the pain until now?

What is the date? he wonders. He is too embarrassed to ask again. The door opens. The crowd has disappeared. A policeman enters and asks Leo to accompany him to the bus station to identify his bags. Leo is reluctant to leave Eleni's side but he is strangely open to suggestion. There is no fight left in him and he obediently follows the policeman out of the room. The doctor follows and Eleni is left in peace.

'What is your name?' asks the policeman.

'Leo Deakin.'

'It is very close, Leo, it won't take a minute,' the policeman says in Spanish.

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They step out of the clinic into the blinding evening sun and a wall of heat. The huge central plaza sprawls before them. A bustling South American market in full flow. On one side live cattle are being auctioned, llamas and cows foul the floor and chickens, foot-tied in hanging clusters, fill the air with fevered clucking. The fruit sellers sit on blankets in rows with their produce fanned out before them, and the wealthy Ottovalo Indians, hair in long plaits, hawk their multicoloured hand-woven hammocks and ponchos. Leo breaks out into a sweat. How unbearable the world is, so callous and indifferent. He shudders and recoils like a snake prodded with a stick. Lives beset with trivia and humdrum chores. Tedious mundane pathetic existences spent serving material gain. He is looking at the world through binoculars held the wrong way round. All is small and distant, unreachable and detached. He belongs to another world now, a bubble where he can hear his heartbeat and feel his skin wrinkle. The marketplace is a muffle a million miles away. Sounds are cushioned and unreal. He is underwater and no one notices that he is drowning.

On his previous visit to that square he and Eleni could barely walk a yard before being swamped by hawkers and draped in clothes or jewellery they did not want. They resisted all offers until Leo caught sight of two tiny carved Inca heads, one male and one female. He bought them without haggling, and gave the male head to Eleni as a keepsake.

But now as he walks through the square the traders instinctively turn away. For once he is avoided and ignored. There is something in the eyes of this man who is locked in a state of tragic bewilderment that disturbs the stallholders and dries the throat. This man is definitely not on a shopping spree.

The policeman leads them to a small hut at the bus terminal. Normally it is full of bus drivers and ticket collectors but today they are huddled outside animatedly discussing the accident. They fall silent when they see Leo approaching. The hut is packed high with bags and there, right in the middle, are two large rucksacks. He clambers towards them, unsure if they are his. He tries to lift the bags but a wave of dizziness overcomes him and he totters and winces. The doctor steps forward and picks the two bags up. Leo notices an ice pick and a pair of crampons sticking out from one of the bags. He stares at them curiously. He double-checks the nametag and sees Leo Deakin written on it.

As they walk back across the square Leo's eyes flick side to side as he desperately tries to remember. Neurons and synapses spark inside him and suddenly something bolts out of the gloom. They are in a mountain hire shop in Quito. Leo loved climbing mountains; it was one of the most perfect pleasures in life. Perfect, because once you had gained the summit you knew you could go no further. You had a complete sense of achievement. This was a rare sensation for him in a life where so many activities were ongoing, never-ending, where you had to look into the future for any sign of contentment. Cotopaxi, which towered over the plateau like an alluring cone-shaped exotic dessert, was going to be a huge challenge. The assistant

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in the shop told them to spend the night at the mountain lodge at five thousand metres, maybe even two nights to acclimatize.He advised them to set off at 2 a.m. on the day of the climb so as to reach the summit for dawn, and return before the afternoon thaw, which would be treacherous. Crampons and picks would be a necessity, but if the weather held the walk would not be too difficult.

'Are you both going to the top?' he asked.

'Not me,' said Eleni. 'I'm climbing to the lodge and that's as far as I go.'

'Don't take any risks,' he warned. 'A couple of novices died up there last year.'

Leo recalls eating breakfast. They had gone to their favourite cafe near their hotel. He had eaten a fruit salad with granola and honey. 'Breakfast of the gods,' he had called it; pineapple, maracuya, mango and passion fruit. As he recalls it he tastes it again. Eleni had scoffed down a banana pancake with melted chocolate, and could not prevent the hot sauce dribbling down her chin. They had lingered over coffee. Afterwards they had returned to their hotel and picked up their heavy backpacks and set off for the bus station. There it was at last, the bus station. They were later than they had planned by over an hour.Would Eleni be alive now if they hadn't taken so long over breakfast? His memory stops at the bus station; he still cannot see any aspect of the journey in his mind. Perhaps it is better not to know, but he cannot seem to stop his thoughts racing. The holes are slowly filling up, and despite itself the brain will work until the job is completed.

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