

## Dr Takotsubo, and My Heart

*by Mike Fox*

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Takotsubo Syndrome: *A condition in which emotional distress damages the heart*, as my consultant put it. It took time to absorb this, but then I suppose it would. The heart, I now realise, can hide itself from scrutiny. Eventually, though, like a child who feels neglected, it will find ways to demand your attention. Mine did this, very convincingly, by deciding to simulate a cardiac arrest.

In consequence I find myself living by new rules: ‘nothing strenuous’ means space to think. Although the thinking I’ve been left to do is strenuous enough. My heart, I understand, isn’t physically broken; the metaphor is not that complete. I lie here with, not exactly a pain, but an odd sense of disconnection on the left side of my chest. My consultant says she’s come across this before, and in a strange way the very fact of her diagnosis is a relief. It confirms something actual has taken place. Loss might otherwise be little more than a void. But a medical condition, a rare medical condition, feels like my heart’s way of asserting its own reality. It knows I will never meet someone like her again.

Of course this could be true of anyone; the woman or man who cuts your hair, your postman, your first childhood friend. But that’s the paradox. Love has its own slant on uniqueness. That’s why it’s the ‘ordinary’ people who creep up on you. People who don’t announce themselves with a grand gesture, or look exotic, or

dazzle you with their personality. Instead they gradually seep into your pores, then deeper.

Or perhaps I'm thinking of just one 'ordinary' person.

You'd like me to describe her? That makes me wonder how she would describe herself, though frankly I doubt if she'd bother. We seem to have entered a time in which people need to explain themselves minutely to achieve identity: the human spirit redefined as an amalgam of choices or categories. She wasn't like that. Sometimes a cliché does the job – she was simply herself.

That's how it seemed to me, anyway. At first, I saw her as a nice person I worked with, no more than that. But work can be the best excuse for just being around someone. You see them every day – it's all arranged for you. It becomes a space for things to happen – the odd shared confidence, a smile you're not meant to see, the habit of arriving at the same time, that little bit early. Things that accumulate and start to mean something. She was not a casual person, and neither, I suppose, am I.

A day arrived when I found myself looking at her and wondering why I hadn't realised she was beautiful. Also, without wishing to get too mystical, I gradually became aware she was surrounded by something. I could feel it when I stood near her. It made me feel hopeful.

Hope, though, is like a guide dog, but without the nous. In the past it has led me, trusting, into more than one relational disaster. So I hesitated. It's easy to get tangled up in someone. Untangling is another matter.

But sometimes the tangling just happens, and you realise later. That would explain why, one morning, with both of us in before anyone else, I found myself standing behind her as she was looking at her computer. 'Would you like to go out for a meal?' I heard myself say.

She turned and looked up at me – I couldn't quite read her expression – then reached down under her desk for her handbag, pulled out her phone and flicked at the screen.

'How about tonight?' she said.

I found myself staring at her. I realised her left eyebrow was raised. 'Absolutely,' I said. 'Any dietary preferences?'

'French, Italian, Indian or Chinese.' The eyebrow came down.

'Leave it with me,' I said. 'I'll book a table.'

Does this sound strangely retro, when almost everyone is swiping faces on a screen to find their next hit? If it does I don't care. Compatibility does not rest on me aligning my longings and idiosyncrasies with yours. But tell that to any dating app, or whatever else passes for a lonely hearts column now.

Sorry about the rant, but there you are: lonely hearts. I wonder how many of those hopeful self-descriptions are heading for Takotsubo Syndrome?

‘You’re all up in your head’, she said, as we sat opposite each other that evening. She seemed amused. Perhaps it was the way I was looking at the menu.

‘They used to tell me that at school,’ I said. ‘It wasn’t meant as a compliment.’

‘It’s just an observation.’ She took a sip of wine. ‘Once I realised it explained a lot.’

‘Oh Christ.’ I had that sinking feeling you can get when your character is about to be deconstructed.

‘Don’t look so worried.’ Her eyes, I noticed, were grey with darker flecks. ‘It’s just that you have to think so much it takes you longer to get started than most people.’

‘Don’t “most people” think, then?’ I realised I sounded defensive.

‘Not to the same extent, I think.’ I could see she was enjoying herself.

I felt I should introduce another topic.

‘I read an article recently,’ I began, ‘about distinguishing hope from optimism. According to the article, hope allows us to contemplate an outcome, whereas optimism tries to bias that outcome favourably.’

‘And?’

‘I was trying to work out if I feel hopeful or optimistic.’

‘About what?’

‘Being here with you.’

‘I’d say there’s scope for both. Why else would either of us be doing this?’

At that point the waiter arrived and we ordered food.

It can be strange to be with someone you think you know when you, and they, are suddenly transposed to a different context. It’s not exactly like meeting a new person, but it’s impossible not to see them afresh. That can be a good or bad thing. In this case as Claire (did I mention her name?) pointed out, there was reason to feel hope, even optimism. But gradually, as we sat together talking, eating, sipping, I realised I was beginning to feel something far less complicated: happiness. A sort of floating, undifferentiated happiness.

I doubt if love, or whatever else might pass for it, is ever entirely unreciprocated. A tendril comes towards or goes from us and, if it takes hold, inevitably draws a response of some sort. A feeling of flattery, perhaps, a certain gratification, a sense of feeling disarmed, or, as seemed to be happening now, a feeling that life was suddenly full of unforeseen possibility. I became aware that tendrils were reaching out in both directions across the table cloth, mine more

tentative, hers, I think, more assured, each binding us into some new entity that was bigger than we could be as individuals.

And that's the point I'm getting to. Love enlarges. The loss of love diminishes. Now she has gone I am physically and spiritually diminished.

'Come back with me tonight,' she said as the meal was ending.

She must have seen me hesitating. In fact I was trying to take this in. After all, things had moved very slowly until now.

'I have a spare toothbrush and plenty of soap and towels,' she said.

'We'd have to travel into work together tomorrow,' I heard myself saying. In retrospect, this is not what I would have chosen to say.

'You can always take the train after me if that's a problem. Or do you need time to think?'

'No, of course not. Thanks.'

But she was right. I did. The idea of going home with her was utterly wonderful, but hard to assimilate on the spot. She made me realise that thought, for me, was not only the curtain raiser, but also the first and second acts. If by chance there was a third act, it might include action.

Her flat, when we reached it, was clean, white walled, and aesthetic. If that

makes it sound neutral or impersonal I've given the wrong impression. Because as soon as I entered it reminded me of whatever I'd felt when I stood near Claire at work. That memory is as near as my life has come to mystery.

I have a theory about sex. Admittedly it's based entirely on my own experience, which is not that extensive, at least for a man who has been married, twice. It seems to me that the sort we remember, the sort that in retrospect can define a relationship, is as much about what we are left with as what actually happens in the moment. I can clearly remember lying awake that night as she slept beside me, wondering quite what I was feeling, it was so new to me. Gazing into the darkness I began to realise I was experiencing something I'd never really considered, or consciously sought from a relationship. Peace.

Does that sound dull? If so I don't mean it to, because if it's possible to be thrilled by peace, then that was what seemed to be happening to me. It was peace with an unmistakable ambience, like, I couldn't help thinking, the peace that people must feel when conflict ends.

In the morning, it was as if the situation we found ourselves in had caught up with us. We were a bit shy. Not, I think, of nakedness, but of our new proximity. Sex is one thing, the small habits of life something else.

'You use the bathroom first,' she said. 'There are towels in the airing



cupboard, and just take whatever you need from stuff round the bath or in the cabinet.’

I walked along the corridor. Her flat was on the ground floor of a large Edwardian conversion, and seemed to stretch back a long way from front door to garden. It was light and airy in the morning sun, with a particular quietness. I imagined that few, if any, arguments had taken place there.

I showered and brushed my teeth, then took care to leave the bathroom as I’d found it. Two failed marriages had taught me to respect the power of petty domestic friction, and to avoid it where possible.

Soon we were eating breakfast. At least she had a bowl of cereal and I had coffee.

Does it sound ridiculous that, in retrospect, I view those few mundane minutes as the high point of our relationship? I can explain. That was the moment when the longing was released and the magic was fresh, when hope and actuality combined. After that, much delayed in this case, came the realisation that longing is really a drug, and magic has components, and once you see what they are it’s no longer magic.

We went into work together. For a few weeks people talked, then they got used to it. The two friends I was left with after my divorces, both male, were glad

for me, although one emailed me an article about the benefits of living alone. It wasn't that he didn't like Claire, just that he was being protective. And perhaps, in a way, prescient.

Claire had a handful of close friends. As I said, she was not a casual person. A couple of them looked at me askance. One warned Claire to be very careful (Claire mentioned this, matter-of-factly). Two failed marriages: two red warning lights. All told me I was very lucky. And not one of them seemed to say much about her past.

That didn't worry me. Perhaps they thought it was for her to say. Although she didn't say much either. And it's never been my way to interrogate.

What more can I tell you? As the next few months unfolded she stayed at my place and I stayed at hers. We spent a long weekend in Cornwall. She read Terry Pratchett to relax. She smiled when she saw how much of my fiction dated from before either of us was born.

'Modern world not good enough for you?' she queried.

Strangely, I'd been asked that before. People meeting us for the first time thought she was younger than me, and she was, but by less than a year. Is it significant when other people see greater disparity than actually exists?

The thing is, I didn't mind our differences. I liked them. I liked the fact that if there was a concert, or a play, or a film she wanted to see she just went ahead and

booked, whereas I tended to mooch until the chance expired. I liked it that, although I've never found something you could reasonably call a niche, she seemed to be one of those people who never felt the need to look for one. An odd paradox that: some people fit in by simply being who they are. You don't see any effort. Others spend decades trying....

I don't mean to do myself down. But I began to wonder what I was adding to her life.

'What is it you see in me?' I asked, eventually.

'You're funny,' she said, 'often when you don't mean to be.'

'Is there anything else?' It wasn't that I was seeking a list of virtues, more some further enlightenment.

'Well,' she paused as if to scrutinise me. Perhaps my good points needed a bit of digging out. 'You're unassuming,' she said eventually. 'And you never try to stop me doing anything I want to do. And you think very deeply about things, a bit too deeply sometimes. There isn't a reason not to like you.'

I can't tell you how many times I've gone over those few short statements.

All I can say is I found I was happy with her. More than happy. Love isn't a mental construct, but the way you think about someone you love is a lot to do with why you love them. I suppose, somehow or other, I came to see her as ideal for me.

‘It’s just that you’re not ‘the one’. It wasn’t Claire speaking, it was her friend Ginnie. Claire had told me, with a piercing kindness I could recognise from previous experience, that we weren’t going anywhere, and it was time to be honest about it.

‘Is there ever a person you can call “the one”?’ I looked at Ginnie, and felt the pain of her kindness too.

‘Who knows?’ she said. ‘Not in my experience, but some people use up a whole life looking.’

It seemed that Claire was one such. Her search would continue, but I was crossed off the list. I didn’t see it coming.

I think it was having to meet her every day at work that brought it about, the potent cocktail of longing and sadness, the constant reminder of loss, the forced reversion to what had been before, or a parody of it. On a daily basis I was reintroduced to her habits, her mannerisms, her expressions, to seeing her wearing clothes she’d willingly discarded in my presence.

Did I always know, at some hidden level, that it would end? Was my heart preparing itself in anticipation? Why did this feel worse even than my two divorces? These are the sort of questions I ask myself.

To lose heart, become disheartened, feel heartsore – all literal truths in my case. My heart mimicked its own demise. And all this first recognised by Dr

Takotsubo: a remarkable man, I'm sure. I wonder how many broken hearts he came across in his clinical practice before he saw what was going on.

And now my own consultant, female, perhaps a little younger than me, businesslike and kind, tells me my symptoms will completely resolve in four to six weeks, that they always do.

But, I would like to ask her, what will I be left with then?



**Mike Fox** has co-authored a book and published many articles on the human repercussions of illness. Now writing fiction, his stories have been nominated for Best of Net and the Pushcart Prize, listed in Best British and Irish Flash Fiction (BIFFY50), and included in Best British Stories 2018 (Salt). His story, *The Violet Eye*, was published by Nightjar Press as a limited edition chapbook. A collection of new stories is being prepared for publication by Confindo Publishing in 2023. [www.polyscribe.co.uk](http://www.polyscribe.co.uk)