

# ***BENT*** ***HEART***

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A SHORT STORY BY JESSE KOEPKE



# ***BENT HEART***

**T**HE CEREAL BOWL GLARED AT Roger, its white ceramic taunting him with memories of milk. Inside it waited his cereal, dry and naked.

With a grimace Roger tossed one of the small O's into his mouth and deliberately ground it between his dentures. The powder coated his throat and made him cough, but he could just barely taste a hint of whole wheat

goodness. Quickly he took a swig of coffee and rinsed away the dust.

The rain had stopped by now, though clouds still covered the sky. Their gray underbellies muted the morning sun to a dull glow. Leaves twirled just outside the kitchen window, betraying a wind. If he ventured out to the store, he would need a jacket.

A calendar hung in the thin space between the refrigerator and back door. Its letters and numbers were large, intended to be a joke gift from one of the grandchildren. Off a look from the boy's mother, Roger had muttered a thank-you,

but next Christmas he would have to tell him how useful the calendar actually was. Even without his glasses, from his seat at the table he could make out the words, *Memorial Day*.

In other words, not a day that groceries were delivered.

That had been Emily's idea. She and her brother had talked about a nursing home—they didn't suggest it, to their credit, only mentioned it as one of the possibilities. Roger had waved off the idea with a scowl and chosen a different option: hire a house cleaner and someone to deliver groceries. It

had worked well; Roger hadn't had to step off their property since.

No, *his* property. The singularity made him grimace and he quickly pushed back from the table.

A cane leaned against his chair, its wood smoothed with age and faded to a pale brown. Roger slipped it into his hand and shuffled toward the living room, scooping a handful of O's into his sweater pocket as he went.

The house was old, like him. Some days as he walked this hallway the walls seemed to lean inward, tired after so many years. He had hoped that removing the

pictures would lighten their load, but somehow the hallway only felt smaller. Rectangle stains marked the empty location of pictures like headstones.

He stopped to straighten one of the two photos still on the wall. Emily smiled back at him, those faint dimples in her cheeks peeking out.

These walls could be repainted. They *should* be repainted.

A soft tolling of bells in the living room noted the time as half to the hour. Roger put his back to the dimples and graves and made for the front door.

His hand trembled as he drew a raincoat down from one of three hooks beside the door. He glared at the fingers and gave them a shake. *It's just going outside*, he thought, shrugging on the coat. *A quick bus ride, purchase the milk, catch the bus back. Piece of cake.* A felt hat hung from the second hook. He jammed it onto his head and hurried out the door before the emptiness of the third hook could stop him.

The porch steps creaked as he worked his way down them (Emily had had the ridiculous idea of putting in a ramp) and then he

was on the path to the sidewalk. The rain had looked nice from inside, but it also made the air thick with humidity. To top it off, the sun had found a crack in the clouds and was shining hungrily. Roger soon felt sweat on his forehead as he worked his way toward the sidewalk.

Something squished beneath his cane and he looked down. Two halves of an earthworm coiled in agony amid the puddles. Several others were scattered about the path, moving almost as slowly as he was. Roger muttered a quick apology, then rounded the gate



and turned left toward the bus stop, only to freeze in place.

Other houses sat next to his, each lined with tall maple trees. Down at the end of the block he could see the blue metal and glass of the bus stop, but in between lay an obstacle course. Cements slabs popped up at awkward angles as roots pushed their way underneath. Broken branches from last night's storms were scattered about. The ground, out of reach from the sun, was still wet and slick.

Roger glared at the sidewalk over the rim of his glasses, trying

to stare it back into position. Slipping a hand into his pocket, he drew out two small cereal O's and tossed them into his mouth. He ground them between his molars and let the grains sit on his tongue before swallowing with a grimace. It made him cough, but it also made him start walking.

The trees leaned in closely as he made his way up and over the cantered sidewalk slabs. The branches were thick with summer leaves and formed a canopy overhead. The sweat on his brow now chilled against his skin, and he was grateful for his coat. His

pace settled into a rhythm. *Shuffle shuffle, shuffle shuffle, tap of the cane for stability, heave up, hip pop, settle in, repeat.*

The trees creaked. A dog's bark echoed dimly off their greenery.

He hadn't always walked this path alone.

Furiously he shook his head and chucked cereal into his mouth. He chewed and thought of only whole grain. From far off came the sound of traffic.

There had been no traffic sounds, when she was here.

He tried to swallow. The powder caught in his throat.

When she was here it had been just wind in the maples, these tall trees which he had planted as a wind break for their farm. Not the sound of cement under rubber-soled shoes but that of bare feet trailing through lilting grass.

If he imagined, the wooden handle of his cane almost, just almost, could feel like her fingers, gently entwined with his, her soft thumb tracing the veins on the back of his hand. Warm breath next to his ear whispered words that made his side shiver.

A dog's bark exploded at his side. Roger cried out and swung

his cane like a scythe. There was a yelp of pain from the dog and a clatter of metal as Roger crashed into a neighbor's fence.

“Why’d you do that?” came the anguished cry of a child.

Roger opened his eyes and saw a young boy grasping the neck of a wriggling, wide-eyed Labrador. The boy looked to be no older than six. His blonde hair was tinged with dull red streaks.

“Your dog near gave me a heart attack!” snapped Roger. He planted his cane in the ground and struggled to push himself up from the fence.

Tears welled up in the boy's eyes as he hugged the dog tightly. "He's not trained yet."

A rattle of wheels and metal sounded in the distance. Roger looked back down the sidewalk. A woman was rushing forward with a stroller, concern on her face, but beyond her, through the trees at the end of the block, he saw light glint off moving windows.

"Well get him trained," Roger growled. He yanked his hat into place and headed for the bus stop.

His cane tapped wetly on the cement. Muscles strained in his legs, unused to the brisk pace to

which he set them. The cool air beneath the trees now clung to his skin with a chill.

Heavy metal rumbled behind him and an instant later the bus sped by. The sound of squealing tires echoed off the trees, and then there was a whoosh of mechanical doors opening. Roger ducked his head and hurried forward, but he wasn't fast enough. The doors closed and the bus ground through first gear as it powered away.

He slowed just behind the bus stop and leaned on his cane. Intermingled with the sounds of

the city was the thudding of his heart. His breath wheezed.

Another sound that hadn't been there when they walked beneath the trees.

A clatter of plastic wheels approached behind him. The dog sprang into view with boy in tow, and then the double wheels of a stroller stopped beside him.

"Hey, are you alright?" asked a woman's voice.

Roger glanced up. The same red as the boy's glinted in her hair, though darker and thicker. She was young, but her eyes were tired



even as she smiled. An infant lay cuddled in the stroller.

“I’ll be fine,” Roger mumbled. He watched the bus turn around a distant corner and pass from view. “Thanks to your dog, I won’t have milk today.”

She cringed. “I’m really sorry. The pup’s not trained.”

“So I hear.” He sighed and turned back the way he had come.

“I have milk at my house,” she offered hesitantly. “I can give you a container.”

There was one cereal O left in his pocket. Roger rolled it between

his fingers and looked back down the broken sidewalk.

"I live just around the corner."

Finally he nodded.

She gave the stroller a push to get it rolling.

The boy and his pup—Wendell and Fiefel, she explained—ran ahead as they walked. The downed twigs from the storm were quickly turned into swords and things to be broken.

The mother, Angela, hovered just to the side of his vision, walking slowly to match his speed. Roger kept his head down and focused on walking. He gripped

the cane's wood tightly and tried not to think of a different mother with whom he had walked and something different which he had held.

A small cry came from the stroller. Angela peered down and shushed softly to the baby. She pointed to Roger's left. "This is us."

It was a pale blue house, with two steps that led up to a porch and two narrow windows on either side of the door. A shaggy line of pine shrubs followed a fence on the left, and flower beds lay untended, though it was April.

The pup raced about the yard with Wendell close behind, the boy screaming something about an attack and waving two branches furiously. At the steps Angela scooped out the baby and led Roger to the front door.

“Come inside,” she said. “I’ll have the milk ready for you in a moment.”

One hand on the railing and the other on his cane, Roger slowly worked his way up the steps and across the shallow porch. He stepped through the doorway and immediately tripped. He flung out

his hands and barely caught the door.

His eyes adjusted and he peered down to see a yellow dump truck lying on its side. Scattered across the entryway's linoleum floor were several other toys and a backpack tossed in the corner next to a pile of shoes.

The rest of the house was no cleaner. The entryway opened into a narrow living room, with a couch near buried in laundry to the right below one of the windows. Across from it was a battered desk; papers and ripped open letters obscured an old

computer. Next to the desk and a door that probably led to the kitchen sat an infant's swing, now rocking and occupied. It was doing little to calm the baby, though. Its cry had turned into a squall.

Above the desk was a framed picture of Angela, still pregnant, and Wendell. Just to the left of it Roger could make out the faint discolored corner of a removed picture.

“Is whole milk okay?”

She appeared in the doorway next to the desk, a plastic container in one hand and its lid

in the other. “It’s all I have.” She struggled to fit on the lid as she walked over and some milk splashed onto the carpet. “Oh good grief. Sorry about the mess. You know what it’s like to have kids, right?”

“I’d forgotten,” Roger muttered with a glance at the screaming baby. “Preciate it.”

“Do you want to stay for lunch?”

“Nope.” He turned to go.

The screen door popped open and Wendell rushed in, only suddenly it wasn’t Wendell, but Emily, her small hands covered

with mud and her dress stained yet again. It was a different mother that hurried forward, one with brown hair loosely pulled up and hands wiping on an apron. *What is it this time, Em? Did your raccoon escape? Is your toad okay?* Then she glanced up at him, sharp eyes peering through hair strands that had broken free and a mouth that asked him so gently to help.

“Of course,” Roger answered.

“You will!” Wendell shouted and jumped up and down.

“You will?” asked Angela, her eyes wide with surprise.



Roger glanced beyond them out the front door. Fiefel was tied too closely and tightly to the porch. A dog biscuit rested on the steps just out of reach and he was straining for it.

“Of course,” Roger repeated, then shrugged. “This old dog has a few tricks he can still teach.”

Instantly Wendell was at his hand and pulling him toward the door. Somewhere in between Angela exchanged the milk container for his cane and took his hat and then they were outside. Roger blinked against the sunlight

and looked down at the pup yipping frantically.

“What do you want to teach him?” he asked.

Wendell pondered this. “Let’s teach him to roll over.”

Roger nodded. “All right, then. Untie him and bring that biscuit.”

It didn’t go as smoothly as Roger imagined. (But then, none of Emily’s animal escapades had either.) The boy was much too impatient; he gave Fiefel a piece of the biscuit any time the pup did anything. Only when he does something right, Roger kept reminding him.

Clouds moved slowly across the sky and covered the sun. There was a smell of rain in the air again. Roger took off his jacket as they worked. The cooling air felt good.

After going through several biscuits, at last Fiefel rolled over.

Wendell let out a whoop and ran around the yard screaming at the top of lungs, "He did it! He did it!" Fiefel strained at his leash and finally Roger let him go and a blur of black fur chased red hair. They circled the yard and then Wendell dashed back toward Roger and stopped.

“Roll over!” the boy commanded, and Fiefel rolled over. He looked up at Roger, beaming. “You’re a genius.”

Roger laughed. “No, I’ve just worked a lot with animals. I used to have a farm.”

Wendell’s eyes went wide. “You did? Where?”

“Right here, actually.” Roger looked around the yard, then pointed across the street at the other houses. “I used to plant hay over there, and the horse barn was there.”

He was turning now, pointing in every direction. She was at his

side now, a thin but wiry young woman who held his hand tightly in hers. “We’ll put pigs down by that stream so they can wallow, then plant a windbreak and put the house there. I’ll dig you the biggest garden you’ve ever seen.”

He looked down and she was beaming.

He looked down and Wendell was clinging to his dog. “How big was the biggest garden?” Wendell asked in awe.

A cough of wind blew through the trees and a few raindrops landed on Roger’s forehead. They trickled down his face, and he

glanced at the corner of the house. “Is there a shed out back?” he asked, but didn’t wait for an answer.

The tip of his cane sank into the soft ground as he walked around the flower beds and down a narrow space between the pine shrubs and the house. Slowly the backyard came into view. A clothesline covered with child clothes stretched across half of an unmoved lawn. Angela stood there, pinning up sheets. A basket for clothes and a basket for the baby rested at her feet.

Past her were two raised gardens, and past them was the shed.

Its wood was dull gray and cracked. Several wooden shingles on the roof were half in their places. A loop of torn canvas held shut the crooked door. The branches of a young maple tree overhung it from behind and underbrush grew thick around its crumbling foundation. It looked exactly as it always had.

Angela said something about hearing their success but Roger kept walking till his cane knocked against the shed's broken cement

step and his trembling fingers closed around the latch.

The musty smell of dirt rushed him as the door swung open. Light from the small window in the back wall showed dust in the air, and skinny silhouettes of rakes and shovels hung silently. The roof was low, supported by short rafters. Vestiges of wasp nests clung to the corners.

Roger stepped in. Old earth and old memories gritted beneath his shoes.

His cane was a hammer. The raindrops on his brow were sweat. “I absolutely love it,” she



whispered. “My handsome handy man.”

He turned and reached up toward the door frame. His thick fingers fumbled through the dust. The wood was brittle and empty. His breath quickened.

Then his fingers touched something.

Slowly, carefully, he drew down two nails bent around each other in the shape of a heart. Dark orange rust clung to the metal. It was small in his hand, smaller than he remembered. He cradled it, and blinked furiously.

Blonde hair tinged with red peeked over the edge of his hand. “Did you make that?” asked Wendell.

Roger nodded.

“For who?”

He swallowed twice. His lower lip trembled. “My wife,” he said, and his voice cracked as the rain began to fall.

Later, in a space cleared on the laundry-buried couch, he cradled a steaming cup of tea. Angela sat across from him and rocked the baby. The ceiling boomed occasionally, letting them know

where Wendell was. Rain filled the silence.

It all sounded like his house, when she was still here and the kids were still at home. He took a shaky breath and closed his eyes, letting past and present mingle.

“I should be going,” he said finally.

The baby was asleep in her arms. Angela gestured with her head toward the kitchen. “Don’t forget your milk.”

After retrieving the container, Roger turned to her as he drew on his coat. “I can come by tomorrow for....”

She had leaned her head back in the chair and followed the babe's example.

Softly, he slipped outside.

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