

The Heart Outside the Body

The first thing Elisa asked was whether the heart would remain whole.

Marcos was still holding the surgery brochure.

"Whole how?"

"After they take it out."

He looked at the drawing on the page: an open chest, vessels marked by arrows, the new organ represented by a red shape that was too smooth.

"I think so."

"You didn't ask?"

"I asked other things."

"What things?"

Marcos almost laughed.

Operative mortality. Rejection. Infection. Arrhythmias. Time in the ICU. Whether he would work again. Whether he would survive.

"Surgery things."

Elisa ran her thumb along the rim of the cup.

They were in the hospital cafeteria where they had met seventeen years earlier. Back then, she had been fifty-two and had just buried a son. Marcos had been twenty and had been living with his heart for four days.

"I wanted to ask you something."

Marcos set the brochure on the table.

Elisa did not look at him when she spoke.

"I want the heart."

She did not say back.

"After the surgery?"

"After."

"What for?"

"To bury it."

Marcos waited.

"With Daniel?"

She nodded.

He turned the brochure face down.

"I need to find out whether the hospital allows it."

Elisa's face changed before she could stop it.

"I said I'll find out."

"I heard you."

They left the cafeteria without hugging.

In the first months after the transplant, Elisa called on Sundays. She asked whether Marcos was sleeping well, whether he felt palpitations, whether he was eating. Once she asked if the heart beat faster when he was nervous.

On the first anniversary of the surgery, she brought a cake.

On the second, a photograph of Daniel at nineteen.

Marcos did not want to take it.

"You don't have to keep it."

He kept it.

In the third year, Elisa asked whether she could put her ear against his chest.

Marcos let her.

She cried.

After that, he went almost three months without answering her calls.

When he started answering again, neither of them mentioned it.

Years later, Marcos began dating Helena. He told her about Elisa in the third or fourth week, once he already knew that hiding the story would only give it more importance.

Helena listened.

"And do you like her?"

"I do."

"Then that's that."

"It's not that simple."

Helena waited for him to continue.

Marcos did not.

When Helena lost the pregnancy in the fourth month, Elisa showed up at the hospital with a bag of food.

She said nothing about God. Nothing about purpose. She did not say she understood.

She asked,

"Is there laundry to wash?"

Helena pointed to a bag on the floor.

Elisa took it.

There were months when she and Marcos did not see each other. There were weeks when they spoke three times.

During one argument, Elisa called him son.

"Don't do that," Marcos said.

She stood still.

"I'm sorry."

He almost took it back.

He did not.

She never said it again.

The possibility of another surgery arose after two episodes of heart failure in less than six months.

The graft was failing.

Marcos preferred it when the doctors used that word.

A graft did not have a mother.

Daniel did.

The experimental program had been following Marcos for years. Cells taken from him had been reprogrammed and used to grow compatible cardiac tissue until, for the first time, the team believed it might be possible to replace the entire organ.

When the surgeon told him the new heart was entering its final stage of maturation, Helena cried.

Marcos asked,

"When?"

"Six to eight weeks."

At the next appointment, he waited until the doctor closed the medical-record screen.

"What happens to the heart you take out?"

The doctor opened the screen again.

"First, analysis."

"And after that?"

"Usually, hospital disposition."

"Usually."

"Your procedure isn't exactly in the 'usually' category anymore."

The doctor explained that there was an exceptional protocol. Mandatory tests, temporary preservation, a review by the responsible committee, and authorization for any later release.

"Can it be released?"

"There is that possibility."

"To the donor's family?"

The doctor hesitated for a moment.

"That complicates the question."

"Then release it to me."

The doctor watched him.

"We can register the request."

At home, Helena was chopping an onion when he told her.

"She wants to bury it."

Helena wiped the knife on the cutting board.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"I don't know what you want me to say."

Marcos sat down.

"If I let her, it feels like I'm giving it back."

Helena pushed half the chopped onion aside.

"And if you don't?"

"I don't know."

"Then maybe you haven't decided yet."

She went back to the knife.

Marcos put a hand on his chest.

The old scar began below his collar. In the first years he avoided looking at himself without a shirt. Then he stopped avoiding it. Helena knew the hollow beside his sternum, the drain marks, the small patch of skin that remained numb.

Marcos had never believed the stories about transplant recipients acquiring the donor's tastes.

Daniel fished. Marcos hated fishing.

Daniel played drums. Marcos could not keep time to a song by tapping his fingers on a table.

But that heart had raced the first night Helena slept with him. It had been inside his chest when the police called about his brother's accident. It had carried him through fevers, trips, night shifts, arguments, and the hospital room where Helena lost the baby.

It was a heart he had received.

Then it became the heart with which he had done everything.

The week before the surgery, Elisa called.

"Can I see you?"

Marcos went to her house.

He had not been inside for two years.

Daniel's photograph was still in the hallway. Long hair, dark shirt, the same incomplete smile.

Elisa served coffee.

"I spoke to the cemetery."

Marcos set down his cup.

"You did what?"

"I only asked how it would work."

"Before I answered you."

"I needed to know whether it was possible."

He stood and went to the window.

Across the street, a man was washing the pavement with a hose.

"I've spent seventeen years trying not to be anyone's grave."

When he turned, Elisa was looking at him.

"I'm sorry. That was horrible."

"It was."

She took a tissue from her purse. Tried to open the packet and tore the plastic in half.

"I know you're not."

Marcos sat down again.

"Then why?"

Elisa blew her nose.

She took so long that Marcos thought she might not answer.

"Because I buried a box."

He said nothing.

"The coffin was closed. I knew what had been donated. I knew where some things had gone. And I was happy."

She looked at the crumpled tissue.

"That's the part I never knew how to explain. I was happy because things were missing."

Marcos said nothing.

"You were alive. A girl got one of his kidneys. His liver went to a man I never met. I thanked God for that."

She passed the tissue under her nose.

"I thanked God because my son wasn't whole inside that coffin."

The man across the street turned off the tap. Water kept running along the gutter for a few seconds.

"Then I met you," Elisa said.

Marcos looked at the photograph in the hallway.

"And the others?"

"Almost nothing."

"So with me it was different."

"It was."

She did not try to explain why.

When Marcos left, both cups of coffee were cold.

The day before the surgery, he signed three forms.

Consent for the new transplant.

Authorization for analysis of the removed heart.

And the document that would allow the organ, after the tests, to be released under his responsibility.

In the field for the recipient, he wrote his own name.

The surgery lasted nine hours and twenty minutes.

Marcos learned that two days later.

When he woke, something heavy lay on his chest. He tried to breathe and had the impression the air stopped before it reached where it needed to go.

Then came the sounds.

Machines.

A voice.

His name.

The new heart was beating fast.

It did not feel new. It felt like a heart.

Helena was holding his hand.

"It worked."

Marcos tried to ask something, but his throat would not let him.

"It worked," she repeated.

Three days later, when he could speak without tiring so quickly, he asked,

"The other one?"

Helena understood.

"It's still in the lab."

"Whole?"

"I think so."

Marcos laughed and his chest hurt.

"That was the first thing Elisa asked."

The next days shrank until they fit inside tasks.

Sit.

Stand.

Cough with a pillow pressed against his chest.

Walk to the door.

Come back.

Eat.

Sleep.

The nurse handed him the pillow whenever he started coughing.

"Hug it."

Marcos obeyed.

Somewhere on another floor of the hospital, the heart he had protected for seventeen years lay still inside a container.

For the first time, he could die without taking it with him.

Elisa came on the fifth day.

She stopped by the door.

"Can I come in?"

"Yes."

She sat in the chair by the window.

She did not ask about the heart.

She complained about the heat. Said the hospital food was still bad. Told him roadwork had closed half her street and the crews started at seven in the morning.

Marcos listened.

When she stood to leave, she kissed his forehead.

"Elisa."

She stopped.

"They're going to release it."

Her hand tightened around the strap of her purse.

"To me," he added.

Elisa nodded.

"When I get out of here, we'll talk."

"All right."

Two weeks later, they met in a small room at the hospital.

Marcos was still walking slowly. Helena had dropped him at the entrance and gone to look for parking.

On the table was a sealed medical cooler.

It looked like equipment.

A staff member explained the deadline, the transport precautions, and the paperwork. Marcos signed where she indicated.

Elisa stood beside the table.

When the staff member left, she asked,

"Have you decided?"

Marcos ran his fingers along one of the cooler's handles.

"It's going to be buried with Daniel."

Elisa put a hand over her mouth.

"But I'm going with you."

She lowered her hand.

"All right."

"And I'm carrying it."

This time, Elisa took a moment before answering.

"All right."

Marcos pulled the cooler a few inches closer to himself.

"Seventeen years."

Elisa sat down.

"I know."

He looked at her.

Elisa lowered her eyes.

"No," she corrected herself. "I don't know."

Helena appeared in the doorway before either of them said anything else.

They went to the cemetery four days later.

The sky was low, but it was not raining.

Helena drove. Marcos sat in the back because the front seat belt still pressed against his scar in a way he could not stand. The cooler rested on his lap.

Elisa sat beside him.

On a turn, the container slid a few inches. Elisa caught one of the handles.

Marcos held the other.

Neither of them commented.

Daniel's grave was in an older part of the cemetery, near an almond tree whose roots had lifted two neighboring markers.

Daniel's read:

Daniel Vasconcelos

2022-2041

The gravedigger had prepared a narrow opening near the base.

Elisa knelt and brushed away with her fingers some dirt that covered the surname.

Marcos waited.

His chest hurt. The walk from the car had been longer than it looked on the cemetery map, and he regretted not accepting the wheelchair Helena had suggested.

The gravedigger asked,

"Here?"

Elisa looked at Marcos.

He nodded.

He bent carefully to pick up the cooler.

His chest pulled tight.

"Want help?" Helena asked.

"Wait."

Marcos managed to lift it.

For a few seconds he stood in front of the opening.

He thought about Daniel.

He thought about saying something to God.

He did not.

He began lowering the cooler.

Elisa stepped closer and placed one hand beneath it.

Marcos did not ask her to take it away.

For a few inches, they held the weight together.

Then they let go.

The gravedigger settled the cooler at the bottom.

Elisa kept looking.

"I thought I'd feel something."

Marcos rested one hand on the edge of the grave.

"What?"

She breathed through her mouth before answering.

"That he'd come back."

The gravedigger waited with the shovel in his hands.

Marcos looked at Elisa.

"Did you?"

She shook her head.

"No."

The gravedigger began closing the opening.

The first shovelful of earth struck the lid with a dry sound.

Then another.

Marcos went to the nearest bench and sat down before his legs made the decision for him.

Helena remained several yards away, near the path.

Elisa stayed by the grave until the gravedigger finished. Then she came to the bench.

They sat there for a while.

When Marcos tried to stand, he had to sit down again.

Elisa held out her arm.

"Slowly."

He took it.

On the way down to the gate, she matched her pace to his.

Halfway there, Marcos stopped.

"I need to rest."

Elisa stopped too.

There was a concrete bench a few yards ahead.

"Can you make it that far?"

Marcos looked at the distance.

"I think so."

They went.