

The Lost Heart

by

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No one ever determined exactly who or what he was—whether he was a businessman, a politician, or a lawyer—but his appearance was distinguished and his presence at a shareholder’s meeting, at the opera, or at an elegant cocktail party was sufficient to inspire in all a sense of security in the status quo. He was the quintessential Modern Man. A symbol of his times. The physical realization that Progress was the greatest good; that things were getting better and always would; that anyone, even the lowest, could raise him or herself to the highest level of society through hard work and perserverance. After all, rumour had it that even he had come from humble beginnings.

He lived in the most modern of cities: a metropolis where high-rise towers muscled skyward; where super-highways strained like whipcord veins pumping hot steel; an unsleeping city that thundered its presence upon the earth. Despite this, he had calendared his schedule to permit an interlude of peace, and each and every day he took an afternoon walk in the park near his building.

It was, in truth, a modest park, heavily treed, a narrow island of green lost in the oceanic mass of concrete and macadam. Once, long ago, eagles had soared high above the tree tops, screeching to one another. Now the skies resounded only to the whine of ascending jetliners taking off from the nearby airport.

On a crisp fall day, the man was out strolling in his long, cashmere coat, his manicured hands pressed deep into the soft pockets as he waded, ankle-deep, through the browns and golds of Autumn’s glory. As usual, he wore a black hat and carried an

umbrella. When he encountered other walkers, he would nod to them and—if they looked important enough—he would touch the handle of his umbrella to the brim of his hat in salutation.

On this particular day, he was mid-way through the park when he stumbled upon a shocking discovery—a human heart lying in the leaf mold in the middle of the path.

Horribly, the heart was still beating.

Disgust shuddered through him as he turned the loathsome organ over with the tip of his umbrella. In its bruise-purple nakedness, with wet leaves plastered to it, the heart unleashed a surge of nausea. He staggered backward a step, choking on his revulsion, and kicked it aside with the polished toe of his shoe. Although the organ still pulsed, it never occurred to him to question its presence. Instead, the man strode quickly on, and by the time he exited the patined iron gates, the affair had largely evaporated from his mind.

But on the following day he stumbled across the heart once again. This time, the sullen lump lay close to the edge of the pathway, as though it had somehow dragged itself there. As the man bent low to examine it, his features twisted with disgust. The heart was still beating. Sluggishly. Arrhythmically.

The man started at the sound of subdued voices, polite laughter. A group of well-dressed people approached from the other direction. Not wishing to be caught examining the vile object, he impaled the rubbery organ on the tip of his umbrella and flung it away into the trees with a snap of his wrist.

As the group passed—a middle-aged couple and a handsome young woman in chic fashion—he touched the handle of his umbrella to the brim of his hat, unaware that their eyes goggled at the bloody gore dripping from his umbrella's once-silver tip.

When he returned to his penthouse, a letter awaited atop the pile of daily correspondence. Instantly, he recognized the handwriting and the return address. When he opened the letter in the privacy of his den, his father's spidery scrawl informed the man that his mother had died. He read the letter again and again, and was surprised that he felt no emotion. He lurched up from his desk and shambled to a beveled glass mirror to gauge his reflection. His eyes were not red, nor was there any trace of grief or tears in them. A vague unease uncoiled within, as he realized he could feel no emotion at all. No sorrow. No happiness. Nothing. Standing there, gazing at the impressive reflection in the mirror, he placed a hand upon his chest and noticed that he could feel no heartbeat. Alarmed, he thrust a hand beneath his shirt, fingertips pressing hard against his ribs. No heartbeat. Nothing. Not even the faintest trembling.

It was only then that the man realized whose heart it was he had found in the park.

He snatched his coat and hat and rushed to the park. Once there, he flailed the paths with a manic gaze. But drifts of leaves had fallen and, as he looked about him, a gust of wind tossed the treetops and snatched loose a spinning cloud of brittle leaves.

The man hurried to the spot he had last seen the heart and began to search. But he found nothing and soon his efforts grew frantic as he threw off his coat and hat and fell to his knees, raking with bare hands through crispening piles of leaves. People strolling the park noticed the wild man crawling on all fours, gathering armfuls of leaves and throwing them overhead. Many recognized him as the distinguished gentleman who always tipped the handle of his umbrella to his hat in greeting. Of course, they were shocked and embarrassed. A few muttered that *something ought to be done*. None of them would ever be seen groveling in such a servile display.

Over the weeks the pathetic figure became an unsettling sight. To be closer to the search he took to sleeping in the bushes and searching from first light until the evening shadows wound themselves about the trees and dozed like lazy serpents.

All this time, the heart had been within inches of the man's grasp. He had bumbled past it a thousand times. But by now the rotting heart was barely recognizable. A colony of beetles had tunneled in through the hole the umbrella tip had punctured and colonized the left ventricle. The heart had been pecked at and fought over by squawking crows; gnawed and nibbled by squirrels and fleet-footed mice.

When winter's first flakes of snow whispered through the naked tree limbs, the heart had shriveled to a cold lump of gristle. Still, the man remained, searching for that which he had thrown away so thoughtlessly.

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