

## **Cold Hands, Warm Heart (Secondhand Bruises, part 2)**

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*“You’ve got cold hands, but a warm heart.”*

*~A patient.*

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Finally, the end of 2020. I am grateful for my dog, Aurelius, our friend group, named “*Bacon*” by yours truly in the group chat, my apartment, Wayne (my roommate), my truck.

*December 31, 2020*

Our plan was 6:00 pm, potluck with Baconettes, 8:30 pm the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree friends would come over to pregame, 10:00 pm we would all go out the bars to celebrate NYE.

Rachel invited friends. Kimberly and Noah. Two other blond girls that Alex knew. Jason showed up late, as usual.

Obsidian Nightclub. Jason paid for everyone to get in. He’s always the one that wants to go there. He paid like \$200. I don’t know why. Different bouncers tonight. I asked where the normal guy was. Sean Mata.

“His car went off the road and he died the night before Christmas.” The smooth faced bouncer said. I am annoyed at his carelessness. I might be tipsy.

No. I hate myself for the tears that are streaming down my face instantly. Hold it together. What? I had thought I was supposed to work that night, but then it turned out I didn’t. Where? Did he go to Maple Valley Medical Center? Would it have made a difference if I’d been there?

"Where was he? Did he get brought to Maple Valley Medical Center?"

"I don’t know, I think they said he died at the scene."

Inwardly I think, *He must not have been wearing his seatbelt. F%\$&.*

SM. He was one of the first people I met in Maple Valley. Randy and I went to Obsidian Nightclub after going to Lakeside Steakhouse. I danced salsa with some old guy in the empty bar. SM came in and watched.

SM. He reminded me of Daniel, the bouncer from Sweet Water’s with his tattooed arms and long beard. Both have...had...deep wrinkle lines in the corners of their eyes.

SM. I would walk by Obsidian Nightclub with my longboard on my shoulder and we'd trade the nod of acknowledgement and respect. My chin would bob upwards briefly, and he would tilt his black baseball cap, a smile in his eyes. I offered him a hot dog once. He declined.

I'm still crying as we get inside the bar. My friends are drunk and concerned, so they all try to buy me a drink. I am still frustrated at the water leaking out of my eyes, but I accept gladly. Tequila makes me warm and happy.

I understand that I am not actually crying for SM. I am crying for all the MVC victims that come in the ED on a backboard and C-collar in various stages of lifelessness or death. I am crying for Todd and Tabitha, the two young people that died in one night. I am crying for the things we do to try to keep them alive and the living people that they hurt when they left everyone else behind. I know that this is displacement of my emotions, I am projecting grief about my patients onto a familiar face that I knew and cared about, even if only superficially. I know that this just means that I still have stuff inside that I need to deal with. I know that I am not entirely whole after this month on the trauma/critical pod in the ER.

I will not drive on the interstate anymore. The drivers terrify me. The few times that I drive, I am overwhelmingly grateful for my bright blue truck with her big grill and trailer hitch. It makes me feel safer.

I don't keep anything heavy or metallic in the cab because I worry that in a rollover, it would hit me or Aurelius. I keep a knife, a military grade tourniquet and a first aid kit in the door on my left. I have shears, mace, and a box cutter in the center console. There are zip ties and a lighter too. If I am in an accident, pinned and bleeding, I hope that I can reach one of the things that might help me.

Nils Bohlin, the man that invented seatbelts declined to patent them. He worked for Volvo. He and Volvo decided that seatbelts were so important in preventing the loss of human lives, that they gave the technology away for free to all the other auto manufacturers. The seatbelt has been required in American cars from 1968 onward, and since that time, it has saved an estimated one million lives in those four decades.

I always wear my seatbelt. Obviously. There are 85-year old's who come in from serious accidents with a small amount of bruising, a broken leg, a cut to their head, and a seatbelt sign across their chest or abdomen. We cut all their clothes off, immobilize their neck, mash on the bony parts to find what hurts and send them off the CT scanner. Those are the ones that live.

Then there are the young, the bold, the brave, the foolhardy. These are healthy and hale. They have strong muscles and taut skin with full heads of hair. These are the ones who didn't wear their seatbelts. Or worse, who rode something that didn't have a seatbelt at all. They look perfect and untouched...except. Except for the neck that is just a little too rubbery as we change the C-collar and the curls rest softly against my plastic-lined arms. Except for the skull that is no longer quite as smooth and round. Except for the luscious, black hair that is thick and sticky with hidden, matted blood. Except for the pupils that are large enough to take in the world, because they will never be able to focus on a loved one's face again.

Wear your seatbelt, please. I can't bear to see you staring blindly back at me.

SM, I don't know what happened to you. I don't know what your injuries were. If you were a trauma, I don't know what code name they gave you. I can imagine some things. I can imagine the ER techs trying to start an IV through your colorful sleeves. I can imagine my gloved hands searching through your short, bristly salt-and-pepper hair searching for bleeding or breaks. I can imagine how your beard would be matted with blood and caught under the stiff plastic collar the paramedics might have put on you. I can imagine raggedy breath sounds—were you a smoker? I can imagine various breaks and bruises. Cuts and scrapes that might've marred your leathery, tatted skin. I cannot imagine the paramedics finding your corpse in a state so mangled that they decided not to even try to transport you to us. I do not yet know what that would look like. Either way. I wish I had been working that night. It is the unknown that hurts.

The next day, Jason invited us out with him to meet some of the ICU nurses. Bobby and I went out with them. It was fun, but we weren't trying to party tonight, so we meandered to The Dramatic Whisper, the Baconettes closing spot. All good nights end at The Dramatic Whisper.

Somehow, the Dramatic Whisper has managed to simulate a smoky speak-easy without the curling smoke. You enter through the back door, by the bathrooms and slip through heavy black curtains and a creaky push door to enter the bar. The waiter and the bartender are indistinguishable. Tall and skinny, muscular but in a pale way, perhaps lacking nourishment. Perhaps cocaine? Idk. They are good servers. We can communicate in industry speak, signals, glances. When I signal for the check, they see it instantly, the check is there now.

The couple next to us gives me side eyes as I sit. She is prettier than he is. He looks like a skinny WBG, Wanna Be Gangster. Her legs are crossed away from him, arms crossed over her chest. She's not impressed. Maybe he's rich? They get up to leave as Bobby returns from the bathroom.

A blond in a black crop top and high-waisted camo pants with 5-inch heels floats by, followed by a man with curly auburn hair that looks like a second-rate tennis pro. They were here last time I came. Previously her outfit was equally eye-catching.

Bobby and I order Cajun fries (our reason for coming), lobster rolls and drinks. The server seats a party of four at the table vacated by WBG and uninterested blond. They are young, our age or a bit younger, mid-twenties? They are sparkly and vivacious, befitting New Year's Day, talking and laughing with more energy than my hungover self can manage right now. I'm still dwelling on SM in the pauses.

Then, I can't help it. I imagine the girl with long eyelashes and bright red pants on a harsh yellow backboard in the trauma bay. She's telling a story right now, but my mind is flashing forward following silently as she walks to her car with her friend. A red Camaro maybe. They get in. Red and white. Red pants, white pants. Red nails, white iPhone. Red brake lights, white light from the stereo. Red lights, white airbags. Did she put her seat belt on? Please. Please say she wore it. Red blood on the salmon pink blankets, white bandages where EMS wrapped the bleeders. Now, her friend's head is in my hands. My eyes are closed as I feel for crepitus, bony

step-offs, or the slimy slick edges of jagged, hidden cuts under his hair. His crisp white hat is long gone, laying forgotten on the side of the road somewhere. Stickers on my paper, blood on my fingers. Red and white. I am drinking white wine tonight because I know I will need to write more.

There are things in my head that need to come out.

Cold hands, warm heart.

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*“It was just a matter of finding a solution that was simple, effective and could be put on conveniently with one hand.”*

~ Nils Bohlin (inventor of the seatbelt, 1920-2002)

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