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Approx. 1,500 words

THE ORGAN DONOR
by Melissa Moschitto

When the doctor informed him that he'd been removed from the heart transplant waitlists — his body having been deemed too much of a risk — he'd reacted poorly. He yelled. Kicked the leg of a chair. Threatened to go right to the DMV to take “organ donor” off of his license. (Did he even have any organs left worth donating?)

His wife patted his hand, attempting to shush and calm him at the same time.

Who could be confident enough to say that they were ready to transition into the great unknown? He was too much of a coward to admit that his life was done. Sitting there in the surgeon's office, with his dying heart, his desire to live was inflamed.

And so, an experimental treatment was offered.

A radical procedure, the doctor patiently explained, *never attempted before*. A heart was being developed — grown, actually — inside of a genetically modified pig. He would be the first to receive one. Unsettling phrases ricocheted around him: “revolutionary advancements” and “potential ethical considerations.”

You understand the risks involved?

There were always risks to living, whether you bothered to wage against them or not.

His wife wondered aloud if he was just going to be considered an elaborate test case.

A guinea pig! his son snorted.

How does it feel to be at the fringe of medical science? the doctor asked him.

He pictured the classic illustration of a pig, segmented into cuts of meat, the kind you’d see at a butcher’s shop. It was no different, he thought to himself, to kill them for a pork chop. Short rib? Heart? Same thing.

A pause hung in the room.

Yes, he nodded. *Will it make me oink?* he added crassly.

His wife sighed but this sophomoric “dad humor” was apparently precisely what the room needed. The doctors and residents guffawed, a little too hard. Permission to laugh, once granted, made them giddy. His first meal, he told them, would include thick slabs of salty bacon in his donor’s honor. *That’s what got you here in the first place*, the medical intern chuckled. They all had tears in their eyes.

Sleep on it, the doctor told him.

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He is standing in a massive grocery store bathed in toxic fluorescent light. He is completely nude and despite being in the refrigerated meat section, he is not cold. Before him are rows and rows of shelving stretching upwards, higher than he can see. Package upon package of pinkish flesh lines the shelves, sparkling in plastic wrap sheen. Pork chops, ground pork, round breakfast patties, engorged sausages, slabs of fatty bacon. He moves down the rows, packaged meat duplicating into trays of curled up tails, hairy snouts, coils of intestines, and droopy ears with whorled cartilage.

He feels a hollow in his chest. He looks down.

Lo and behold, there is a gaping hole exposing his ribcage, which is curiously empty of organs. His gaze rises and there, on the shelf, a package glistens. A styrofoam tray holding a hefty garnet glob, shiny as if lacquered. The heart! He reaches out for it and tears the plastic film away. Lifting up the slippery organ, he squeezes it between his ribs and into his chest cavity. A little suction cup sound tells him it's clicked into place. How satisfying.

What else is he missing?

#

The day before the surgery, he called his son to his bedside.

Is there such a thing as redemption, he wanted to know, of making restitution for ones crimes? To be honest, he had largely forgotten about the crime of his youth. He had lived long enough for remorse to fade. But, if this miracle of science prevailed and provided a road map to a successful future of bi-species transplants, would *that* be his redemption? Perhaps, then, his criminal past actually made him an easier choice to be the host for a porcine heart. Then again,

he may only survive for a day or a week. If the operation failed, only his wife and son and poker buddies would mourn his passing. And the doctors, disappointed to have failed.

Here was a thornier question still: could replacing his immoral heart cause his personality to change?

His son looked at him, baffled.

You're the sacrificial lamb, his son ribbed, *inheriting the artificial heart of a pig*.

He looked at his son, remembering him as a toddler visiting the zoo. The boy had only wanted to go to the petting zoo, depleting his father's pockets of quarters to buy handfuls of food for the barn animals. Pudgy baby hands overflowing with brown pellets, tumbling into the mouths of a dozen piglets pressed up against the wooden fence, snouts probing for food. The sow lay on her side, further back, offering up her tired teats. She locked eyes with him - exhausted, depleted, disinterested. A familiar look, like looking at his wife.

The only way to get his son to leave had been a trip to the food stand. He could still picture him, sitting at the faded red plastic picnic table, eating salty hot dogs.

The nurse interrupted the memory to prepare him for anesthesia.

#

He is a farmer, walking in pitch black with a flashlight, surveying his land.

He enters the animal pen and before him stretches a sea of quivering, snorting bodies. They shake en masse. A field of hefty, peachy porcine beings. Skin stubbly, bristling in fear. Each emits a glow — a beating heart inside them, a phosphorescence beaming out at him. The collective hearts beat in rhythm for him.

Their squealing bruises his ears.

#

He woke up in a cold sweat. A fever? The drugs? A reaction to the transplant? The machines beeped in the dark at an unchanging rate, indicating that he was still breathing.

Just to be sure, he looked down at his chest to watch it rise and fall.

And there it was - a faint glow through the hospital gown, right where his heart was. He fumbled around, trying to remove the gown, tugging and wrestling with himself, but the ties were in the back. He felt a release in the fabric and was able to lift it up. A big patch of curly white hair was missing where he'd been shaved smooth for the surgery. A pulsing orb glowed under his skin. He shook his head, agitated, and pushed the button for the morphine drop, dozing off in a stupor.

Waking up from the anesthesia, finally, local reporters with cameras were there to greet him. The surgery had been deemed a success. Cards and flowers started to arrive, and anonymous shipments of bacon. Gifts of candied bacon, chocolate covered bacon, great slabs of cured bacon, bacon-themed notepads and funny bacon-shaped pens!

He chuckled at first, offering this bounty to the nurses and staff, who happily accepted. It felt good to be generous. See? Already, he was turning over a new leaf, living as a better person! But when he offered a box to the surgeon who had helmed this miracle, he got a strange look in return.

Days turned into weeks. The extended hospital stay was wiping out his meager savings, tanking the limits of health insurance. Surely he'd be bankrupted. He received a letter from PETA: they were threatening to sue.

The exciting medical mystery nature of his existence was waning. He couldn't stop smelling bacon and eggs. He checked his skin each morning for its consistency, sure that it was turning a little tougher. He was peachy and porcine and pungent. Tubes emanated from him, enlacing him to the bed. He imagined himself splayed out over the white hospital sheets, as if being served up on a big dining table, his family seated around him with their forks and knives. He shouted that he was going to amend his will. To his son, he left his ham hock haunches, a nice Christmas dinner! To his wife, his ample side, with which to make bacon. To his poker buddies, his front haunches for pulled pork. Ears, hooves, snout — could they pay off his debt? Put them in a museum or a modern day side show. Nothing left to see here, folks, of the man who was cured by a pigs heart!

He moaned and lowed in his sleep.

#

He is in the barn. Night. Cool moonlight spilling in. A cacophonous din — the squealing of dozens and dozens of baby pigs. He covers his ears to block out the sound.

He is, as always, naked. He lays down on the ground strewn with straw.

The little piglets surround him en masse. The squealing stops, replaced by the sound of snouts snuffling. They quiver and vibrate around him, as if he were their mama and they were hungry.

So, so hungry.

END