

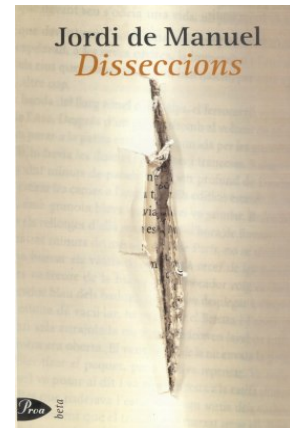
# The Heart

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*There is no misfortune in a weak heart. Bad luck takes a strong heart.*

FEODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

In a Catalan city, in the not too distant future.

“Don’t breathe!”

...

“OK, now breathe!”

Ricard Puig felt relieved as the stethoscope, its metallic surface cold and gray, separated from his chest.

“You can get dressed,” said the nurse outside of the X-ray room. “The plates look fine.”

While buttoning his shirt, he realized that the hair had regrown on his chest, seeming even thicker and curlier than before.

“Remember that tomorrow, at 10, you have an appointment with Dr. Pons. Please don’t forget to bring the continuous heart monitor.”

“I thought the signal arrives directly to you by satellite.”

“We get the signal, but we don’t record it. We only access the data in emergency cases,” she added. “It’s best that you bring the instrument so the doctor can make a direct assessment.”

“See you tomorrow,” he said, just as the young woman took a phone call.

Puig did not take the elevator as he descended from the fifth floor. The doctor had recommended moderate exercise, so he took every opportunity, no matter how small. Upon reaching the reception area, he ripped off the non-allergenic bandage on his arm. Blood work, electrocardiogram, urine sample, monoclonal antibodies, echocardiogram and thoracic radiograph -- these were the tests he had submitted himself to once a month.

Two years before Ricard Puig had begun an interminable tour of doctors and hospitals. No one knew what to tell him about the cause of the nausea, migraines and sudden fainting spells that he was experiencing with increasing frequency. Too much work, anxiety, stress, depression, low blood pressure, viral infection and psychosomatic illness were the hypotheses he heard repeatedly from the mouths of the medical professionals. What was more, some did not spend a minute examining a single inch of his body much less the least physical symptom.

Finally, he had decided to turn to the public health service and arrived at the office of Dr. Salvador Pons, a reputable cardiologist. After two weeks and a long series of tests that Ricard found unbearable, Dr. Pons diagnosed him with a congenital malformation of the tricuspid valve. The illness affected not only the quality of Ricard’s life, but also his hope for survival beyond a few months.

He had not forgotten what the physician had told him when he looked directly into his eyes to deliver the diagnosis:

“We are going to have to replace this heart. Whether you want to or not, a donor has to be found. Soon.”

It has been that last word – *soon* – as much as the doctor’s recommendation that Ricard could not get out of his head for a long time.

Driving straight home, he thought he had better remember to tell Teresa that tomorrow he could not accompany her to his brother-in-law's house until midday, after he got back from his appointment with Dr. Pons. He put the car in the garage. No one else was home yet. He plugged the tiny lithium batteries of the heart monitor into the charger and set it on the table next to the videophone. That way he was sure not to forget it tomorrow.

It was exactly nine months and six days since Ricard Puig had gotten the heart transplant. From then on all of his examinations went swimmingly. "Everything's looking good -- no problems," he was always assured in a convincing tone by Dr. Pons after going over the results of the tests.

Ricard leaned on the edge of the windowsill. All at once a gust shook the dogwoods at the edge of the garden and a cascade of red leaves came loose, settling slowly over the green of the lawn. Many ended up floating in the pool. Ricard, who had never before paid attention to such things, marveled at the beginning of autumn.

After the scare with the heart, Ricard often reflected over the meaning of his life. He could not complain. Until then fortune had smiled on him. He had professional success. He was one of the first stock market traders who left the *Borsa*, the stock exchange trading floor, and opened his own virtual agency. He had married a brilliant and attractive woman and had raised a son, all in due course and without deviation. At that particular moment Francesc Xavier was finishing his last high school course in the United States, at the prestigious California school where Ricard had done his college prep work 30 years earlier.

Ricard was convinced that he could have been spared the whole unpleasantness with his heart if the government, instead of introducing mandatory genetic identity documents for the entire population a half year after the operation, might have done it a couple years earlier. Probably he would not have had to endure that Purgatory of doctors and specialists. The disease was a misfortune, a capricious combination of genes that provoked upon adulthood a deadly and irreversible malformation, which had significantly damaged the interior of his heart. Until the first symptoms of the illness appeared, one could say that Ricard had lived a frantically busy life. Nonetheless, he drank little alcohol, ate good food, and shunned tobacco. Perhaps due to such moderation, Dr. Pons suggested, his first symptoms had not manifested themselves until his late 50s. And that is why, the doctor said, he had recuperated so quickly after the transplant.

He clearly remembered the day, January 17, when the hospital called. He felt worse than ever, and hour by hour his courage was slipping away. The call informed him a compatible organ was available and that he must be admitted immediately. He did not get his hopes up because a couple months earlier there had been two false starts. He drove himself nervously to the hospital. There was in Admissions another heart patient: One Llorenç Pla, a Majorcan from Lluçmajor. At 5 o'clock they took the islander straight to the operating room. They took Ricard down a little later, at 7.

"Everything is ready," Dr. Salvador Pons told Puig with an assurance that put him at ease. Holding up his hands, ensconced in surgical gloves, just as the nurse finished tying off his surgical mask from behind, the doctor whispered into Ricard's ear: "It's the best heart you could get." Those words, imparted moments before consciousness dissolved with anesthesia, had been burned into his memory.

The months following demonstrated that the doctor's opinion, whispered into his ear in the operating room, was quite on the mark. Puig had been transformed into another man. He only took three weeks off from work. It was all he needed to feel himself bursting with energy to start the new life that suddenly was before him. The doctor had recommended that he not go to physical extremes, but from three months on each day he went running – minding always to keep his heart rate under 120 beats per minute. And his appetites had returned, much stronger than in his younger days, though now his tastes were more refined, more sensuous. And with Teresa...Ah, Teresa! Never had he desired her so. There were instances that he was able to make love her three times in a row, as had sometimes happened twenty or thirty years ago (but he was not even sure about that). And she: "That's enough, Ricard, enough..." All at once his desire for women reawoke. He even considered calling up Marta, a fiery lover with whom he had broken off relations ten years earlier.

But what obsessed Ricard the most, what robbed him of hours of sleep, was imagining the former owner of the heart -- the heart that turned him into another man. Every morning, naked before the mirror, he looked at the pink scar that ran from his abdomen to his sternum, and asked himself the same question: "Whose heart saved my life?"

He only knew that the regulations that governed information about donors and recipients of organs were very strict. Donations were confidential and under no circumstances was a recipient permitted to learn the identity of the donor. But Ricard, a stubborn man with an indomitable will, had never accepted the status quo nor given up. Unable to live with that disappointment, he had decided to put in play all of his talents to resolve the question.

At times he thought that perhaps the heart now beating inside him had before been in the chest of a young person. Maybe a boy about the age of his son. But he also thought that the heart might have belonged to an adult male, possibly as old or even older than him, but of an enviable degree of health and vitality.

He felt riven by an imperious need to thank the survivors for having agreed to the donation. It was difficult to imagine how a family, after suddenly losing a son or loved one, had the capacity to accede, for purely altruistic motives, to the extraction of his organs to benefit other persons. Ricard had not been a registered donor – he had never even considered being one – but had since gone and signed up for everything from the cornea to bone marrow.

It was thus, spurred on by that desire and by the uncertainty, that Puig began to investigate. He frequented newspaper libraries, searching for daily notices of accidents happening on that January 17 when he was reborn. He reviewed the death notices and lists in Catalonia, and also outside of its territorial limits as the heart could have come from far away. He then decided, however, to limit the research to the boundaries of his own country. Ricard was a man of intuition, and he grasped that the heart beating within him was Catalan.

Following an exhaustive search, he found upon that date in Catalonia that 221 persons had died. Ricard Puig was certain that one of them had owned the heart he now possessed.

From the total number of the deceased, he eliminated 193: those that corresponded to persons of less than 10 and more than 70 years of age. The list whittled down to 27. He consulted the hall of records where the official death certificates are kept to learn the causes of death – which required a few bribes. He necessarily discarded persons who had died of heart attacks, of whom there were 15. So the list narrowed to 12 finalists, and he focused all efforts on that dozen. He discovered that three had died from AIDS, so these were excluded as possible donors. Nine remained. He was disquieted to discover that six were women and three were men. Had they transplanted a female heart into him? No, no...that was impossible. He removed them from consideration. The most likely candidate was one of the three men: an adult aged 39, a 47-year-old, and a boy of 20. They were all younger than him. Naturally, that explained all that had happened to Puig.

There was a way to done with this speculation. Dr. Salvador Pons surely knew the identity of the donor or had the means to know it. But Ricard was certain that the physician would fiercely guard the secret. Perhaps if he set the list of the three names before Pons, the physician would not be so ethically

compromised. Pons could read each name and merely nod his head yes or no. Surely this approach would be less problematic, Ricard thought.

From the edge of the windowsill, contemplating the red leaves of the dogwoods as they began to sink into the water of the pool, he decided that tomorrow at the hospital, during his appointment, he would take the definitive step in his investigation. His only hope was that Dr. Pons might not take it badly, because Ricard really needed his cooperation.

He arrived on time to the appointment and had to wait 10 minutes for the doctor to arrive.

“Mr. Puig, you can come in now,” the nurse told him.

The doctor extended his hand. He had a strong handshake that Ricard reciprocated with yet more firmness.

“I see you are ship shape”, the physician said with understatement, gingerly massaging his smarting fist.

“Pretty much.”

Ricard handed over the heart monitor, but the doctor ignored it at first. Pons examined his patient with great care, fingering the surgical scar and listening to his chest from in front and behind. He read over the results from the blood and urine tests and echocardiogram, immediately comparing them with the data the monitor that had registered of the variations in cardiac frequencies over the past 72 hours. He unfolded the electrocardiogram sheet and hung up the x-ray on the illuminated screen and then assured himself:

“Looks alright – no problems.”

“No, doctor, everything is not alright,” Ricard said, surprising himself.

“What do you mean?” asked the doctor, scratching the back of his neck and moving closer to the table.

“I can’t live with the doubt. I need to know who had this heart,” he said, lightly thumping his chest with the palm of his hand.

“I can understand that, but what you want is not possible,” the doctor said seriously.

“It is not at all impossible,” Puig shook his head. “You don’t understand. I must know,” he insisted in a more strident tone.

“You have invented a need that will do you no good whatsoever. I can only tell you that it’s the best heart that you could get, like I said right before I transplanted it.” Dr. Pons absentmindedly grabbed a pen and began tossing it up, making it sommersault. Uncertain, he continued on: “Remember Llorenç Pla, the Majorcan gentleman who shared a room with you?”

“I remember him. How is he doing?”

“He’s dead. Three months ago his new heart failed. His body rejected the organ. And that one came from a very young, vigorous man.”

“I’m very sorry,” said Ricard. He immediately excluded the 20-year-old boy from the list in his pocket.

“Don’t torture yourself. The heart you have is much better – the best,” Pons assured, thumping the table with the pen.

“I can’t live with the uncertainty...I have to know whom the heart belonged to. I want to thank the family for the donation, to find out things about the person to whom I owe my life.” Ricard wiped his sweating forehead. “I bet that they would be delighted to know where a part of their loved one goes on living.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes. If I were in their place, I would want the recipient to know.”

“Look, Mr. Puig, the rules are clear. We cannot break the confidentiality of a donation,” said the physician, shaking his head from side to side. “You are fortunate, and if your luck holds out you could continue living on for many years. I can only tell you that.”

“It’s not enough – I have to know. It’s a weird feeling that I’ve had for months now. I just can’t control it.”

“There’s nothing I can do. I’m sorry.”

Then Ricard Puig decided to play his final hand. He had considered the possibility of trying to sway the physician by offering him money, but he was sure that Dr. Pons was not one of those people who let themselves be bribed. He tried another approach:

“Look, on this paper I’ve highlighted two names. All I ask of you is that when I say them, you reply ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Please,” Ricard implored, taking the paper out of his pocket.

The physician ignored the paper.

“So you think it would help you to find out who the donor was? You know perfectly well that I am not authorized to confirm anything for you -- or play this game you are proposing.”

“There are a lot of things that we aren’t authorized to do...You want me to tell you how many times, since I got out of bed, that I have done unauthorized things? You”, Richard wondered if he should continue, “you’ve never smoked in the hospital?” he desperately appealed, catching sight of an ashtray with two or three cigarette butts there on the desk half hidden amongst paperwork.

Dr. Pons took out his glasses and looked Ricard straight in the eyes.

“What do you think you can gain by knowing who the donor was?” he asked.

“Everything. I want to know whom I owe my life to. I believe I have a right to know.”

The doctor got up, opened a metal file cabinet and took out a folder. Ricard recognized his own patient history. He noticed how the heart – his new heart – began to pound inside his chest.

The surgeon turned, put on his glasses and sat down. He opened the folder, inclining over it slightly to block clear view of the documents. Ricard craned his neck and struggled from the other side of the table to discern a name, an initial – whatever detail might help him unveil the enigma tormenting him.

“Your heart...” the doctor hesitated, “...your heart is from a female.”

“I thought so,” Puig lied.

“A young, healthy female of 463 pounds,” Dr. Pons continued, ignoring the remark. “You have the heart of a sow. You owe your life to a female transgenic pig,” he said, slowly closing the folder.