



The Burden of a Borrowed Heart

By
Matthew G. Mastromatteo Jr.

A Short Story

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Chapter 1 – The Gentle Soul

Elliot Marston was known in his neighborhood as the kind of man who never let a stranger pass without offering a smile. At sixty-two, he carried himself with the quiet dignity of someone who had lived simply, without scandal or quarrel. Widowed for nearly a decade, he filled his days volunteering at the local library, tending to the community garden, and spoiling the neighborhood children with homemade cookies.

But behind the gentle gestures, Elliot's health was failing. A congenital heart condition, worsened by age, had left him breathless with the simplest tasks. Crossing the street, climbing a flight of stairs, even laughing too hard at a child's joke — all of it left him clutching his chest, gasping.

Doctors told him bluntly: without a transplant, his days were numbered.

Elliot accepted this prognosis with grace. "If it's my time," he would often say, "then I've been blessed already. Not everyone gets to love and be loved in this life."

But privately, he prayed for more time. Time to watch his grandchildren grow. Time to finish the book he had promised to write for the children at the library. Time to plant next year's flowers.

So when the call came — a donor heart had become available — Elliot felt both relief and dread. Surgery meant risk, and the thought of surviving with another person's organ lodged inside him was strange, almost unearthly. Still, he whispered a prayer of thanks, signed the consent forms, and prepared to step into whatever life waited for him.

Chapter 2 – A Second Chance

The surgery was long, the recovery grueling, but Elliot was strong in spirit if not in body. When he awoke in the hospital's sterile white room, bandaged and weak, he could barely comprehend that the steady thrum in his chest came from someone else's heart.

"Everything went well," Dr. Patel assured him with a rare smile. "You've been given a new lease on life."

Tears filled Elliot's eyes. Gratitude surged through him. He clasped the nurse's hand, whispering, "Thank you. Thank all of you."

Days turned into weeks, and Elliot's strength slowly returned. For the first time in years, he could walk around the garden without collapsing. His skin regained color, his laughter was less labored. Neighbors rejoiced at his recovery, and he basked in the miracle of being alive.

Yet at night, when the lights dimmed and silence blanketed his room, he would press a hand against his chest and wonder about the person who had given him this chance. Who were they? Did they have family? Did they die young? Did they die well?

The hospital told him only the basics: the donor was a man in his forties, no surviving family willing to meet. Nothing more.

Elliot prayed for the man's soul. He owed him that much, at least.

Chapter 3 – Whispers of a Past

It began subtly. A stray comment from a nurse. A snippet overheard in the hallway.

“Shame about that donor,” someone muttered. “Not the cleanest record.”

“Criminal, wasn’t he?” another voice whispered.

Elliot’s ears pricked. His donor... a criminal?

He tried to dismiss it. Rumors, surely. Hospitals didn’t gossip, not about life and death matters. And yet, the seed was planted. He began to search online, typing vague queries into his tablet: *organ donors criminal past*. Most links dismissed the idea as myth, but one news article caught his eye.

The headline read: ***Local Man Killed in Car Chase: Ties to Organized Crime Suspected.***

The man’s age matched what Elliot had been told. His body had been rushed to the hospital. His organs saved lives.

Elliot’s chest tightened. Could this be his donor? Was the heart inside him once the engine of a man who hurt others?

The thought unsettled him deeply. He had always believed in goodness, in redemption. But now, when he placed his hand on his chest, he felt not gratitude but unease. Whose pulse was this? Whose blood had once surged with violence?

Chapter 4 – Shadows in the Mirror

The dreams began soon after.

In one, Elliot stood in a dark alley, fists clenched, rage boiling inside him though he had no reason for anger. In another, he ran from flashing red-and-blue lights, sweat pouring down his face. Once, he dreamt of money — piles of it, bloodstained and scattered across a concrete floor.

He woke in terror, drenched in sweat, his heart pounding too violently for comfort.

During the day, he found himself irritable in ways he never had been before. A child spilled water on the library floor, and Elliot snapped at him — the first time he had ever raised his voice to a child. A driver cut him off on the road, and Elliot shouted curses he didn't even know he remembered.

Each outburst was followed by shame, then by fear.

“Is this me?” he whispered in the mirror. “Or is this... him?”

The thought was unbearable. The man whose heart he carried had been violent, lawless. Was that violence leaking into him, shaping his thoughts, bending his gentle spirit into something unrecognizable?

Chapter 5 – The Weight of Guilt

Word spread in town. Elliot heard the whispers at the café, the grocery store, even among his neighbors.

“That’s the man with the criminal’s heart.”

“They say it changes you, you know. Makes you like them.”

Though no one said it to his face, Elliot felt the judgment. People looked at him differently, warily, as if the sins of another man could be transplanted alongside flesh and blood.

Worse, Elliot himself began to believe it.

He remembered one dream too vividly: standing over a man on the ground, fists bruised, the echo of violence buzzing through his veins. He had never harmed anyone in his life. But now he felt as though he had.

He started to avoid people, afraid of what he might do or say. The cookies for the children went unbaked. The community garden wilted without his care. He spent more time staring out the window, clutching his chest, wondering if he had become an unwilling vessel for another man’s darkness.

Chapter 6 – The Breaking Point

It came to a head one autumn evening.

Elliot was walking home from the library when a man bumped into him, spilling hot coffee down his shirt. The man barely muttered an apology before rushing off.

Something snapped in Elliot. He grabbed the man's arm, yanked him back, and shouted with a fury that startled even himself. His voice was raw, his grip unyielding. For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to strike.

But then he saw the fear in the man's eyes — the same fear Elliot had once soothed in children with a smile.

Horried, Elliot released him and staggered backward.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, trembling. "I'm so sorry."

That night, Elliot wept alone, believing he had lost himself entirely. The donor's past was no longer a whisper; it was a scream inside him. He was becoming someone he did not recognize.

Chapter 7 – Seeking Truth

Desperate for answers, Elliot requested access to the donor's records. It took persistence, letters, and the help of Dr. Patel, but eventually, fragments of the donor's life reached him.

The man's name was Victor D'Amato. Forty-five. Arrested multiple times for theft, assault, and suspected ties to a crime syndicate. Died in a police chase when his car struck a barrier.

Elliot's stomach turned as he read. His worst fears confirmed.

But deeper in the file, a note caught his attention: *At time of death, donor was attempting to flee with evidence against syndicate. Cooperation with authorities noted. Motives unclear — possible attempt at redemption.*

Redemption.

Elliot clung to the word. Victor had lived a violent, criminal life, but perhaps, in the end, he had tried to change. Perhaps the act of donating his organs — unwilling though it may have been — was the last trace of humanity in him.

Elliot began searching for people who had known Victor. He tracked down a retired police officer who had chased him in his youth. He found an old neighbor who remembered a boy who had once cared for stray dogs before falling into crime.

Slowly, a fuller picture emerged. Victor was not a monster, not entirely. He was a man shaped by poor choices, bad influences, and regret. And in the end, perhaps, he had tried to make amends.

Chapter 8 – Choosing His Own Path

Elliot realized then: he was not Victor. He was not bound to live the life Victor had lived. The heart in his chest was a vessel, not a curse.

He stood before the mirror one morning, placed his hand over his heart, and spoke aloud:

“Thank you, Victor. For this chance. But my life is my own. I will not waste it.”

The dreams still came, but Elliot learned to face them with calm. Instead of recoiling, he prayed for Victor’s soul. Instead of fearing the anger that surged through him, he redirected it into purpose — advocacy, volunteer work, mentoring troubled youth.

If Victor had been swallowed by crime, Elliot would use Victor’s gift to save others from the same path.

Chapter 9 – Redemption

In time, Elliot became a quiet beacon in his town again. He started a program at the library for at-risk teenagers, teaching them not just to read, but to dream. He shared his own story openly — the illness, the transplant, the burden of knowing his donor's past.

“Your past does not define you,” he told them. “What matters is what you choose to do with the second chance you’re given.”

The community that once whispered behind his back now rallied around him. Children flocked to his side once more. Neighbors who had doubted him saw instead a man who had faced shadows and chosen light.

Elliot carried Victor's heart not as a curse, but as a symbol — a reminder that even the darkest lives can contribute to something good.

Chapter 10 – Peace Restored

Years later, Elliot sat in the garden, older now but still strong, watching his grandchildren chase fireflies. His chest rose and fell steadily, the heart within beating faithfully.

He thought often of Victor. Not with fear, not with shame, but with a strange kinship. Two men, bound by circumstance, separated by choices, yet linked forever in flesh.

“Rest easy,” Elliot murmured one evening as the stars emerged. “Your story ended in darkness, but it gave me light. I’ll carry it forward.”

The trouble that had once haunted him no longer weighed on his spirit. Elliot had found peace not by denying Victor’s past, but by transcending it.

And as he closed his eyes, feeling the rhythm of life within him, he smiled. Because he knew at last: the heart did not make the man. The man made the heart.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Matthew G. Mastromatteo Jr.

With imagination, the author tries to find a way into the hearts and minds of the reader. Sometimes the topics will be serious or informative, thought provoking and up for discussion, and sometimes they will be humorous.

A believer of the short story, the author wants to entertain and not take up too much of the reader's time.

How can so few words get the story across? Let's see.