Trauma

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

He woke up in hospital. He was puzzled at first. He had no idea why he should be there. The memory of the train crash only came later, after questions were asked. He remembered the girl who had been sitting beside him, and how she had fallen into his arms as the railcar left the tracks. They could feel that moment of weightlessness as gravity seemed to no longer apply, just before the impact. He had held her tight, and she had held him.

“What happened to the young woman who was with me?” It was the first question he asked. But she was not with him, except in that terrifying moment when they were united in terror. They had been strangers on a train. She had not even told him her name. Why would she?

“Yes, there was a young woman,” said the woman taking notes – a police officer he guessed, but she did not look like one and she was not in uniform. “She did not survive. I did not understand that you were travelling together?”

“We weren’t,” he said. But no two people could have been closer, in that moment. She had died and he had survived. It was wrong. He had nothing to live for and it seemed that she had everything. Although she had barely spoken to him, he seemed to know that. She was happy. She was making plans. He was depressed. He had nothing to plan for. He got on the train that day with even knowing where it was going, just to be moving as if that might help.

“I understand that they thought that you were more badly injured because of her blood all over you, and in your chest wound,” said the woman with the notepad, seeming to take a ghoulish pleasure in such details. “Something passed right through her and into you. She was killed outright.”

“What was her name?” he asked. She leafed backwards through her notepad. He examined the bandage around his chest. It seemed to be swollen right and left.

“It looks like cow im hay? Cow im hay Reilly. That was her name.”

“It’s pronounced Kiva. C O A I M H E. People always have trouble.” But had she even told her his name? If she had, would she have spelt it? How would he know it was Irish? He had never heard the name before, so how could he say that people would mispronounce it?

“Has anybody come to see her?”

“She is dead,” the woman reminded him coldly. But then she leafed through her pages and added – “Her fiancé was out of town, but he should be here this afternoon.”

“Would you ask him to come and see me when he does,” he said fervently.

“Do you have last words or something? Did she say anything that might be relevant to our inquiry?”

“We were passengers,” he said. “Victims. One minute we were riding, and then we heard the brakes squeal and then we the in the air and the railcar was coming apart. How would we know anything?”

“I already have your ID and the details of your injury, so if you have nothing more to add I will move on and leave you to recover,” she stood to leave. “I will pass on your bed number to Kiva’s boyfriend, as you ask.”

He had no idea why he would have suggested that. Had they spoken in those seconds? He remembered that she smiled at him in a way that suggested that she smiled often. He had probably looked at her blankly and thought her dim witted, as people who smile like that seem to be to a man carrying the burdens he had.

But strangely, he had forgotten what those burdens were. Perhaps it was the painkillers that had emptied his head. There must have been painkillers. His chest was swollen and his groin was a little sore. He reached down.

His genitals seemed to have retreated, probably from the shock of the injury, with only a plastic catheter coming out to a jar on a rack under the bed. Everything was there, but hiding. It seemed that his body had been shaved as if the doctors had expected widespread wounds, but there were none, expect the two swellings under the chest bandage.

It was a multi-person ward, but he was near the window screen from other patients by a curtain. Outside it was a nice day with a feeling of warmth even in the enclosed atmosphere of the hospital. It seemed that his room was a level or two up level with the treetops. There were birds singing – he could hear the song even through the double glazing. It was a beautiful sound. It was a beautiful world.

How could he ever have thought otherwise?

It seemed that perhaps he had been spared death for a reason. Was this a second chance at life?

He reached up to his face. There was a plaster across his nose, and it seemed that he had suffer two black eyes, although the swelling had disappeared. Somebody has washed his hair. It seemed even longer than he remembered, his having neglected having it cut for many months. And somebody had shaved him too – his face was smooth – smoother that he could remember, not that he ever had a strong beard.

His arms seemed pale and thin. He had not been eating well for many weeks. What muscles he ever had were wasted away so that he seemed as weak as a child. The left arm had a shunt installed with saline drip hung from a stand by the bed, seeming to drip life back into him one drop at a time.

When he boarded that train he had not cared whether he lived or died. Now as he watched the drip into the tiny capsule level with his eyes, he welcomed life coming back.

The future seemed blank, but that was no bad thing. It was a canvas for him to paint his own work upon. He just wanted it to be bright colors. No blacks or greys. He wanted to look at the world like that. He found himself smiling for the first time in years. It felt good.

It may have been minutes or it may have been hours, but a man stood by his bed.

“I am sorry, they did not give me your name,” the man said. “I have just been down to the morgue to identify my fiancée Kiva, or what is left of her. I just knew her by the had they showed me from under the sheet. I have held that hand many times. And it carried the ring.” He held up the engagement ring.

It was something that he had seen before, on her hand.

And somehow, he seemed to know this man too. This man was not crying. He was a strong person and he looked it. But he was talking to a stranger because he was in shock, and that showed too.

“I am so sorry for your loss,” he whispered.

“You’re Irish too,” the man said. “I love the Irish accent. I fell for it when I met Kiva.”

Irish? He was not Irish. Was he speaking with an Irish accent? It barely seemed like his voice.

“I’m Mark – Mark Cavendish,” said the man. “I now have to make contact with Kiva’s parents in Ireland to tell them what has happened. This will not be easy.”

His hand appeared from under the bed covers and it reached out towards Mark as if it was not in his control. Why was it there? Mark took it gratefully, and just held it gently. He responded to the smile too – the sad smile of somebody who genuinely feels sorrow and seeks to make it lessen.

“Did you know her? Did she say anything to you?” asked Mark

“We met on the train,” he said. “But now it seems as if we did know one another. I think that we really had a meeting of minds, if you know what I mean. It was like we were the same person, or maybe we weren’t when we started, but we were by the time … by the time her life ended.”

“Did she speak of me?” Mark said.

“She didn’t have to. I know who you are and what you need. I know that you need this now, more than anything in the world.” He raised their clasped hands. Again it seemed as if all of this was somebody else – not just the actions but the words.

Mark forced a smile, but it seemed to become real.

“Are you badly hurt?” asked Mark.

He pulled down the covers with his other hand, saying – “nothing serious. I was unconscious so they will keep me in for a while I guess.”

“Your breasts are injured?” said Mark.

Breasts? How odd for him to use that word. It was as if this man thought that it was a woman lying in the hospital bed.

“Nice of you to call them breasts, because there is not much to them, and any red-blooded man would notice.”

This time the smile was real. He said – “That is just the kind of thing Kiva would say. You could be her, you know.”

“Could I?” the voice answered. “To be sure that would be a happy thing, to have a man like you holding my hand.”

He laughed, and so did she.

The End

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Erin’s Seed: “I had another idea about someone who goes through a very traumatic experience like a train derailment … he survives but a young woman dies and now he is convinced that the girl's psyche switched places with his, that he is now her and the original him is dead. Her family is even convinced because of things he tells them then her fiancée shows up...”.