

Heart like
a Starfish



A L L E N
C A L L A C I

Heart Like A Starfish by Allen Callaci

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STARTS, STOPS, AND STARTS.

Conscious again. Looking at yourself, your reflection. How many pounds have you lost? 20...25...30? Your goatee has gone all ZZ Top. Your arms are pencil thin. Dozens of IV lines protrude out from your body like tentacles. Your stomach and chest is a tightly bandaged dead field of staples, stitches and dried brown bloody blotches.

Where am I?

Your fingernails and toenails have grown into claws. You look down at your feet. They look like they could be Yoda's.

WHERE THE FUCK AM I?

How long have I been out?

Weeks?

Months?

Years?

Is Obama still president?

whereamI?...where am I?...WHERE-AM-I?..

You get no response to the questions frenetically ping-ponging from one side of your mind to the other, only the discomfiting

muffled, distorted beep coming from the medical monitor to your left.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?... WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?... WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?

...where am I...

...where am I...

...where am I...

The medical monitor lets out another muffled cry.

Confused, salty tears begin to form in the ducts of your swollen eyes.

How did I end up here?



I awaken on the bathroom floor with a slightly bleeding tongue. I must have bit down on it when I blacked out. I must have blacked out hard. I grab the side of the white porcelain toilet bowl to hoist myself up. Still dizzy I look down at the cold white tiles. There is no blood.

No, no blood.

Thank God.

I've never been one for doctors except for Dr. Seuss, Dr. Who and Dr. Bones McCoy from the original *Star Trek* series, but as I gaze at my colorless reflection in the tiny medicine cabinet mirror I know I'm in need of some serious medical attention.

Don't panic.

MAINTAIN.

MAINTAIN.

maintain

Holy shit what would have happened had I passed out like this while driving home on the freeway?...what's happening I've never even really

been sick...thank God my head didn't crack itself wide open like an egg when I hit the tile...please God don't let this be anything serious...I take out my cell and leave messages with my younger brother, Dennis, and older sister, Loretta, letting them know I'm not feeling well and looking for a lift to go to Urgent Care...please God don't let this be anything serious...

And then I call *her*. Things have never been as strained between us as they've been lately but I call and she picks up. I tell her as much as I can as gently as I can: I went to work... I left early... not feeling right but hoping it's nothing...would she mind driving me to Urgent Care? I should say more. I should at least tell her the part about blacking out across the bathroom tiles. I know. But I also know Jen. I know how much she worries and how fiercely she internalizes those worries. "I'll be right over," she says in a frightened hush "... stay right where you are."

...please God don't let this be anything serious...



Jen arrives. She looks at me and looks every bit as worried as I was afraid she would be. I could say something to her but I don't. Neither of us want to go there.

"Where's your medical card?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Her eyes roll. "They're not going to see you at Urgent Care without your medical card."

"It'll work out. It always does."

"You're really unbelievable," she says with an exasperated sigh. "Were you even able to eat something and keep it down today?"

I tell her about the strawberry smoothie and the slice of pizza I just couldn't finish.

"And how nutritious does all this sound to you?"

“A strawberry smoothie doesn’t sound completely unhealthy to me.”

“It doesn’t? Unless you made that smoothie yourself—which I know you didn’t—it’s probably got 30 plus grams of sugar in it.”

God how she worries.

“But smoothies seem healthy. Strawberries are healthy. Whoever thought there’d be tons of sugar in a Starbucks strawberry smoothie?”

“What am I going to do with you?” she responds tugging at the windshield visor as her eyes once again roll reflexively to the back of her head. I can’t help but laugh at her patented eye roll as if I were watching a favorite episode of Seinfeld.

She lets my laughter float a solid 3 seconds.

“Are **YOU** done?”

“I’m just trying to bring a little levity, Jen.”

“Stop.”

6 months later I will receive a not-so-subtle e-mail from her:

I looked it up online. There are exactly “41 GRAMS!!!” of sugar in a Starbucks strawberry smoothie. Just thought you should know-Jen.

Some people say we act like an old married couple.

We’re not.

We’re as different as The Beatles and The Stones. She is “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” to my “Strawberry Fields.” She is a health-care professional at the nationally renowned City of Hope. She knows



her shit. I know her frustration. I am the farthest thing from being a healthcare professional at a nationally renowned hospital. I sing in a lo-fi rock 'n' roll band that defiantly issues its music to a non-waiting world on dead formats such as cassettes and vinyl. As with so many other rock 'n' roll singers you may have heard of, I spend my downtime between recording, live shows, and supermodels working at a public library and teaching English part-time at the local community college.

I can deconstruct any passage from Anna Karenina you care to throw at me but when it comes to the world of medicine it's a language I've never learned. I have learned a separate language. One that sees signs, loaded meanings, and hidden metaphors everywhere and in everything: Jen's car that takes me to the Urgent Care is a perfect example of this tendency. It's an Isuzu "Ascender."

To Ascend.

To rise from a lower plane to a higher one.

Jen's Ascender is silent the rest of the way to Urgent Care save for the sound of Aretha Franklin singing "Let the Good Times Roll" from a CD mix I burned for her a lifetime ago.



Urgent Care will be closing in 20 minutes. It is a cramped rectangular building located in the corner of a poorly planned stew of a strip mall: A Chinese buffet, an Aaron Brothers, and a THERE IS HOPE foster agency.

There is nobody else in the waiting area besides Jen and myself. *Dancing With the Stars* plays on the small waiting room TV. While Bristol Palin dances on I make the necessary calls and stay on hold the necessary time tracking down my medical card number. Jen's eyes stay anxiously fixated on her phone.

"I told you they weren't going to see you without your medical card, didn't I?" she mutters under her breath. "We should have gone

to the ER.”

I see how fragile and concerned she is.

She thinks I can't.

I can.

My sister Loretta and Harmonie, my 14 year-old niece, join us at Urgent Care. Harmonie is excited. She actually gets to watch *Dancing With the Stars* tonight. “Oh my God,” she exclaims flicking her sandy blonde hair. “My mom never lets me watch this show!” Harmonie’s *Dancing With The Stars* excitement is tempered by Loretta’s concern. She hugs me tighter and longer than usual and wants to know exactly what’s going on. I tell her what little there is I know. I wish there were more.

I wonder what my brother Dennis is going to make of all this. If our roles were reversed I’d want to know something/anything and know it now. I’d want all the guaranteed reassurance I could get that everything would be snapping right back to the way it was by sunrise. I’d want to hear that come Sunday we’ll all be gathered round Loretta’s table, like last Sunday and the hundred Sundays before that, surrounded by orange juice, strawberries, French toast and each other.

I so can’t wait to be the hell out of here.

I can’t.

My God, what a pain in the ass it all is. The magazines. The cramped padded chairs. The forms. Now I know why I’ve always been so averse to doctor visits. This is limbo. I wish I could just type “why the hell did I pass out across my bathroom floor earlier today” into Google and get an instantaneous answer.

Don't think about it too much. Don't say too much out loud. You don't want to scare Harmonie.

You don't want to scare yourself.

They take me back. Draw some blood. Ask their questions: “Does this hurt? What about this? What about now?” They think it’s the appendix. I’m no medical expert by any means—I’m certainly not Jen—but I know it’s not my appendix. Still they keep pressing down and asking how it feels and I keep answering “like nothing really.” They don’t believe me. They are closing for the evening and want me sent to San Antonio Hospital overnight in case the appendix bursts. Jen is in the process of moving and going back east in a few days to check in on her sister who just had thyroid surgery. She’s got a world going on as always. The plan becomes for Jen to go home and drop Harmonie off at Dennis’ while Loretta and I make our way east to San Antonio Hospital.

“Buckle up, little brother,” Loretta calls to me in a light nervous tone that floats across the empty, dimly lit strip mall parking lot as I climb into the passenger’s seat. “Let’s go get this over and done with.”

“I’m sorry about all this hassle.”

“Don’t be.”

As we drive on to San Antonio Hospital I give everything I have to reassure my older sister that it’s going to be ok, not to worry, this is nothing, we are all going to make it through. She turns to me and says, “hey thanks for all your reassurances, but really shouldn’t I be the one reassuring you here?”



With both parents gone we have only one another now. Dennis is the baby. Loretta the oldest. I’m the proverbial middle-child. Sometimes it seems like we were born in the wrong order. Dennis seems the oldest (in spite of his penchant for sometimes breaking into a squawking chicken dance at family gatherings). He possesses all the trappings and traits you would expect an older sibling to possess—wife, children, house title—and is the one always reminding us to look both ways before crossing that metaphorical street. Loretta seems more the middle-child—widowed,

singlehandedly raising her daughter, the strong arching bridge connecting and keeping things together. And I play out my life out as if I were the youngest—still single, collecting comics, listening to Iggy Pop at volumes I probably shouldn't be, and constantly needing to be reminded to look both ways before crossing that street because you never know what might come hurtling towards you.



“Now show me how high you can lift that left arm. You’ve been opened up quite a few times. Let’s see what you can do.”

You lift your left arm 4-inches and cringe.

“Is that as high as you can go?”

You nod. Your arm is so heavy it feels like it is made of solid concrete.

“Ok, now show me what you can do with the right arm.”

You can’t do a whole lot more with the right arm than you could with the left. It must have been made from the same batch of concrete.

It’s not always going to be like this you tell yourself.

“Let’s try lifting each arm one more time.”

It’s not always going to be like this.

You try to remember when it wasn’t.



The emergency room waiting area at San Antonio is like every emergency room area I’ve ever been in. Anxious curtains of worry draped over everything. Till now I’d only ever been in an emergency waiting room as a concerned, worried visitor. They are sad uncomfortable places whether you are the one doing the worrying or the one who is being worried over.

I make my way down the list of questions in the clipboard in front of me and start making my circles. Circle Y for Yes. N for No. Alcohol Use? That's a Y. Regularly? Ok, ok you got me. That'd be another Y. Regular Exercise? A most definite N. I keep circling an endless parade of Ys and Ns regarding everything from irregular bloody bowel movements to genital warts. The process of filling out the form begins to feel less like standard paperwork and more like a sordid confession of my lapsed Catholic soul. I never knew how fortunate the simple act of circling the letter N could make a person feel.

Dennis comes rushing in and hugs me. A bright yellow T-shirt, a pair of worn beige corduroys, and a troubled smile adorn his thin frame.

"Aint this the shit?" he says softly shaking his head.

"That it most definitely is."

Good old Pat is here too. Pat and I bonded twenty years ago at Chaffey Community College over Raymond Carver and Batman graphic novels. Pat is 6-foot-9 and jokes loud enough for the entire waiting room to hear "this isn't about a weird venereal disease you may have contracted from some Pomona prostitute is it?"

We both let out some nervous laughter.

What conversations can we strike up as we sit and wait and linger not really knowing? We talk about whether the Avengers movie coming out next month will be any good. Will the Hulk look more realistic than he did in that last Hulk movie? God, I hope so.

"An Avengers movie is almost upon us! Can you believe it?" Pat excitedly goes on. "We've been waiting our entire lives to see an Avengers movie! I wish my current self could go back in time and visit my 8-year-old self and tell him how one day there's going to be an actual honest-to-God friggin Avengers movie! You and I, old pal, are going to be catching that movie together come hell or highwater. We owe it to our former 8-year-old selves."



The Avengers broke all opening weekend box office records when it opened a few weeks back. Carlos and Liz graciously left a bootleg of it yesterday when they were here at Cedars-Sinai visiting. “We figured you probably hadn’t gotten around to checking this out yet,” Carlos lightly laughed, as he handed it to me.

I am 17 minutes into the Avengers when Pat enters the hospital room. His eyes widen as he glances at the iPad. “My God,” he excitedly exclaims. “Is that an actual Avengers bootleg you’re watching!?”

“I can watch it later,” I tell him. “I know you’ve already seen it.”

Pat grabs a chair and scratches it across the floor towards the iPad’s glowing screen.

“I told you I wasn’t going to watch it without your ass. Remember?” Pat says. “Now turn the volume up a little will ya?”



They finally call my name out across the San Antonio Emergency Room waiting area. They shake my hand. Have me confirm my name and birth date. Needles get stuck in. Blood gets drawn. Urine taken. It’s well past midnight now. The good news is that the appendix will be staying where it is. The bad news is the blood sugar is 362. Looks like type 2 diabetes. They’re going to keep me overnight for observation and to have someone come in tomorrow morning to go over diet restrictions and insulin injections with me.

It could always be worse.



“Your heart...it stopped beating...you were dead ...”



The noises. The smells. The surroundings. It's weird waking up that first night at San Antonio. I'd never slept in a hospital bed before. I feel how Dorothy must have felt when she first landed in Oz. Stranger in a strange land. I wake up and it takes a minute to process and adjust to exactly where it is I am. I start taking inventory.

It's so bright in here. What a night. What time is it? When can I leave?

Last night. I blacked out. That's right. Shit. Jen took me to Urgent Care. She's probably going nuts. I'd better text her. Let her know what's going on. Contact Dennis. Let work know...

I text Jen: THEY KEPT ME OVERNIGHT AT SAN ANTONIO. NO WORRIES, OK? I THINK THE REAL REASON THEY ARE KEEPING ME OVERNIGHT IS BECAUSE OF HOW MUCH THEY JUST ADORE MY SENSE OF HUMOR.

Loretta is there at bedside. Her voice carries the carefully concerned tone that only an older sister's voice can carry as she asks me how I'm doing.

"I'm doing pretty alright...I think?"

"Really?"

"Well, I have had better days."

...I have. Most definitely. But there have been far worse days. Days of loss and regret. This is not one of those. I will be out of here in a few hours and this will all be safely behind us. This day will soon take its place resting peacefully alongside all those other days that preceded it. It will be all but forgotten by next week.



"Before we release you we need to make sure that you're comfortable with injecting yourself with insulin."

Ok. Fair enough. Truth is, right now I'd inject myself with Coca-Cola and baking soda to get back to basking in the comforts of home.

The nurse at San Antonio hands me a pamphlet on diabetes diet

tips and a syringe.

“Now practice on the pillow for me,” she instructs.

I successfully inject the small red pillow. It’s a brave little pillow. It doesn’t sweat. It doesn’t wince. It doesn’t bat an eye as the steel-tipped syringe digs in. And if it has some deep-seated neurotic fear of cold steel flesh-piercing needles it doesn’t let it show. I wish I could say the same about myself as the nurse tells me “now go ahead and try it on yourself.”

I’m not afraid of ghosts. Or rollercoasters. Or flying. Sitting through the Texas Chainsaw Massacre while eating a bowl of chili wouldn’t bother me. It’s needles that freak me out.

Don’t think about the needle. Think about anything but the needle. Think about strolling down a beach in slow motion with Jessica Alba in a blue bikini. Or a Radiohead song. Or strolling down the beach in slow motion with Jessica Alba in a blue bikini as she softly hums a Radiohead song into your ear...

“I need you to focus and concentrate on what you’re doing Mr. Callaci.”

“Ok, got it...no worries...no worries...” I tell her meekly.

Good God this is going to be a bitch! If I didn’t have to keep my eyes open to make sure I don’t accidentally inject myself in the belly button I wouldn’t. How come they can come up with a new iPhone every year but the damn needle hasn’t evolved since the days of the wild frontier?

It’s not so bad. Really. Nothing I can’t get used to. They give me a meter to read my blood sugar and start working on the paperwork for my release. It’ll be an hour or so. Home. It’ll be so good to be back there. To shower. Rest. Relax. Maybe watch some of those extras on the Star Wars blu-ray I’d been meaning to get to and then go and...

Feeling dizzy...Is it me that’s swaying or just everything around me?...this isn’t good...this isn’t good...

I head to the small bathroom with the same sick shaky feeling I had the previous day before I blacked out. I don't pass out this time but feel I'm going to. Breathing isn't coming easy. Barely at all. It takes all I have to walk the few yards back to the hospital bed. By the time I reach the bed I am ready to collapse in on myself like a wet cardboard box.

...and then the small hospital room fills with Loretta's urgent voice calling out, "I'm getting someone **NOW!**"



SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

“He is sick. Really sick,” the doctor tells them. “His heart function right now is less than 20%. Two blocked arteries. A valve defect from birth. This is serious. This isn’t good and hasn’t been good for a long while. How active has his life been the past few years? I can’t imagine it’s been a very active one. Climbing a small flight of stairs must have been a challenge with the heart he has in him now.”

Dennis and Loretta let the doctor know that not only have you climbed a fair amount of stairs the past few years you’ve also been working full-time at a library, teaching an English class at the local community college, and singing in a rock band.

The doctor is taken aback, a little amazed, to hear of the life you’ve been leading. It doesn’t seem possible given the weak engine you’ve got pumping inside of you.



I imagine the part that took the doctor aback the most was the part about being a singer. I look like a librarian. An English Professor. Not a rock ’n’ roll singer. 5-foot-3...glasses...goatee...and a brown and graying patch of short curly hair that matches the goatee.

No one has ever mistaken me for Mick Jagger (see chart below).

Category	Mick Jagger	Me
Knighted by Queen of England	Yes	As of this writing "no."
Supermodels Romantically Linked With	17	0
Familiar with Dewey Decimal System	?	YES
Persistent Rumors of Having Once Slept With David Bowie	Yes	No



“Tell Uncle Allen he can borrow my CD player for as long as he needs it.”

Dennis tells you how Henry said that as he carried the small plastic Fisher-Price CD player out of his bedroom and headed to the hospital. Henry’s CD player is one of his prized possessions. The White Stripes. The Ramones. Black Sabbath. His musical knowledge and taste is impressive for a 7-year-old (or even a 17-year-old).

You turn your head slowly in the direction of the small plastic CD player. You close your eyes and hear an echo of Henry’s voice saying “Tell Uncle Allen he can borrow my CD player for as long as he needs it.”

You mist up. Smile. And mist up again.

Music is where I've always gone to heal. I was 7 when my parents divorced. And it was “Someone Saved My Life Tonight” by Elton John

that helped hold me together through their separation. When I was a small, scrawny, glasses wearing, acne covered, retainer fitted Junior High schooler, I lost myself in KISS. Where else was I going to go? After KISS came Quadrophenia by The Who.

You have no voice only two thin shaky arms and ten warbling fingers to communicate with. You motion to Dennis. You make a slow, trembling motion mimicking the turning of a radio dial.

“You need more ice chips?” Dennis asks trying to decipher your pantomimed code.

You shake your head “no” and make the motion again.

“Ok, ok...let’s try this again...You need me to go get the nurse?” Dennis guesses.

You begin to feel like a squeaking, bobbing dolphin trying to communicate with its trainer.

You shake your head ‘no’ again and point a finger to the white plastic Fisher-Price CD player.

“Ahhhh...I think I got you now!” Dennis exclaims looking over at the plastic CD player.

He goes to the player. He grabs *Quadrophenia* by The Who out of the stack of CDs he had brought along with the player. “What about this?”

You enthusiastically nod three times in the affirmative.

He throws the disc in.

Quadrophenia. It had been the soundtrack to your awkward adolescence. It was everything that you were at the time. Angry. Confused. Alienated. You connected with it intensely. It made you feel a lot less alone and a little more ok than you would have felt otherwise. For you it felt closer to a rite of passage than a song cycle. It feels like that again as Dennis presses play and *Quadrophenia* echoes, aches and rages from Henry’s small white plastic Fisher Price player.

You close your eyes. You are weak but feel yourself moving to

the rhythm. You can't really speak but find yourself squeaking along with the words as best you can. Grinding your teeth. Clenching your weakened fists as best you can. Closing your tired eyes a little tighter. You know this song. You were this song. You are this song. Sing it... sing it...sing it.

...and so you sing ...

To the world outside it may sound like a forced breathless whisper.

But this is not a whisper.

It is a roar.

Love, Reign O'er Me.



From: dennis callaci

Re: first few pages

Sent: Monday, December 17, 2012 9:18 PM

Allen,

It was draining to read but I'm so proud of you for having the strength to put it all down. I had to stop reading more than a couple times. It cut like a gentle knife. It brought back a lot of things I'd rather not have brought back.

When the cardiologist told us you had 4 days to live at San Antonio he followed it up with "Pull it together, you are going to see your brother in 5 minutes and you need to be positive." I stepped out of the waiting room, then walked backed in and to no one in particular (though Loretta and stepsister Chris were in the room), I said aloud "No, I do not accept this." I remember moving my hand in a motion you make when you are erasing a chalkboard and it was all slow motion out of body. God, I really don't want to revisit those scary times. It was the worst night of my life.

Love you

-Dennis



You've got so many questions regarding those days you spent

unconscious, opened up, sedated and desperately hanging from invisible silken threads. It's odd to think that there are days of your life that you will never have a single memory of. Like your life is a movie with missing scenes that were shot but have now been lost forever.



The voice of a 6-year-old girl fills in the darkness.

“All the time everywhere everything’s hearts are beating and squirting and talking to each other in ways I can’t understand.”

It is early August. It has been roughly two weeks since I’ve been cleared to go to see movies at a walk-in theater. I’ve been indulging on film like a man who hasn’t eaten in a week might indulge at an all you can eat buffet. Today’s film is “*Beasts of the Southern Wild*.” It’s about a 6-year-old girl adapting and surviving after a devastating natural disaster and how she braves on. It’s about cutting across and making it through the storms you were vaguely aware of but not fully prepared for.

I self-consciously wait for the theater houselights to dim before pulling the surgical mask over my face. A lot of the self-loathing feelings I acquired from having to wear my dental headgear in 4th grade and being taunted in the halls with “hey harmonica head” rustle from within. And then, another voice surfaces from within to drown it out. The voice sounds like the husky Sicilian baritone of my 90-year-old cigar smoking Uncle Joe:

For God’s sake just put on the mask already. Who the hell you trying to be here? Mr. Universe? Who gives a good god damn?

The mask goes on.

“The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right,” the young girl’s voice coming off the silver screen continues on. “If you can fix the broken pieces everything can get right back... bust even the smallest piece, the whole universe will get busted.”



Dennis was at the movies the night I got sick. He came home to a small post-it stuck on the fridge by Catherine that read “Harmonie is sleeping, talk to me.”

He still has that small faded post-it.

ALLEN CALLACI is the lead singer for the band Refrigerator, an adjunct professor, and a librarian whose work has appeared in *MungBeing*, the *Poly Post*, *The Huffington Post*, *BK Nation*, *Cinefantastique*, *Crumpp Comics* and various 'zines in the 90s. He lives in Southern California and is the proud co-founder of the Rancho Cucamonga Public Library's *Star Wars Day*.



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