

The Ebsen Reaction

by Stuart Millard

We watched that first news report, as with everything we did, together. Snuggled on the couch, we talked about how sad it all was, me and Rach, a tragic indictment of our times that there even was a market for such a thing. What kind of mind would invent a drug that inhibits the feelings of romantic love? Those little pills of LC12 - Stone-Heart as it became known on the streets - blocked the synapses that flooded your bloodstream with Norepinephrine and Dopamine whenever you saw that face or heard that voice that sent your insides into a ticklefight. Swallow one 200mg tablet and you're numb for the day. Take enough, you're a permanent Tinman. How could they boil everything down like that? All those amazing moments; the moments that make life worth living, all that art and joy, passion and pain, they just degraded it into a hard, cold science you could wipe from a blackboard.

The media said that LC12 would aid the irrevocably broken hearted, flashing up statistics of post-separation suicide, and teary stock photos illustrative of the unending pain of rejection. They cut to a series of voxpops, starting with a lonely middle-aged man who talked about his new-found sense of freedom, finally unburdened of the terrible knowledge of that love he'd felt as a teenager and never been able to recreate. A grinning psychologist paraded a successful test subject, getting on with his life after a decade of being hung up on an ex, while an aggressive power-suited woman said she'd needn't worry about her career getting off track, or that a one night stand would accidentally lead to deeper feelings that would "just complicate everything." Faced with questions of morality and ethics, a pharmaceutical representative shook his head dismissively, and told the reporter in an overly glib tone that the world wouldn't end because of one little pill. He was right - nobody was forcing anyone to take it, and the people who did would still fuck. They just wouldn't kiss.

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“We're lucky,” she'd said, “so lucky we have each other.” Of course, she was right, always was. When you have that connection, you tend to get so lost in the secure glow of those overwhelming feelings that you can't empathise with those who'll never know what you do. I guess for some people, those emotionally stunted or so physically cursed they resemble breathing Henry Moore statues, the joy I feel when see the woman I love must feel like a fist to the gut over something you can never have. Now they had the option to cut out the part of themselves that makes them sad, even if it is the same part that makes them human. But then, we forgot all about those other people, and once again became lost in each other's arms, eyes and well worn in-jokes, and me and Rachel fell asleep on the couch, wrapped and tangled as one, like two streams intersecting in a rockpool.

Eighty-five days later was when I got out of bed to answer the door and a policeman told me she'd been killed. They'd found her car, crumpled at a concrete divider, scorched skeletal from a fire that had consumed everything inside. They took me to a room and showed me a body under a sheet, black and twisted, barely human, and for the first time in fifteen years, I felt truly, utterly alone. As I left, I wondered how they couldn't hear it. I wondered how they couldn't hear my heart splintering inside my chest, great, yawning cracks that tore my Earth from its axis, where I'd fall down inside the fissures and never hit the bottom.

Refusing intruding company in the home we'd shared, alone, I became the living, howling cliché of grief. Clutching perfumed pillows to my chest and pawing at a framed photograph of the two of us at a family wedding, I offering up desperate pleas to a hateful God with his fingers in his ears. I'd do anything, I wept, to see her again, one last time, anything to see those eyes, feel those hands. Cross-legged on the floor, I pored through our Memory Box, a

shoebox filled with trinkets and souvenirs, each with a connected memory that used to feel like warm sunshine on the chest, but now tore at my soul with slashes and aches like an old friend who'd suddenly turned nasty. Everything was gone, not just the future, but the past too. Ticket stubs from a bad movie we made sarcastic comments through; a sweetly grotesque street-artist caricature where our heads were bulbous and warped, but encircled by a swarm of little hearts; a piece of chalk from a day at the seaside she'd used to daub our initials onto the promenade, again and again, as the rain washed them away — all ruined, framed museum piece reminders of what I'd lost.

I went out into the night, feeling like I'd never return and not knowing how I could ever go back to that place, not caring if I found my way into a news story about a stab victim or missing widower. Stopping by a pack of youths on a corner, I was as surprised as anyone to hear the two words that blubbed out of my mouth; “Stone-Heart.” From the group, a kid with emo hair and eyeliner emerged, and as he placed his arm around me to lead me inside an alleyway, I noticed the word 'Magda' spelled out in barely visible scratches on his wrist. He asked how many, and I told him however many that I never have to feel anything again. I just wanted to shut it all off. I shoved my whole wallet into his hand and snatched a polythene bag with dozens of little pills, tipping them straight into my mouth like the dregs at the bottom of a packet of crisps. Halfway home, the crying had already stopped. By the time I put the key into the front door, I could barely remember what all the fuss was about, and wiped away a small trickle of blood that fell from my nose. That's the sign that you've disconnected yourself permanently, the fatal bleeding-out of the love receptors. They call it “Juliet's Tears.”

The floor in the living room was littered with the contents of the Memory Box. It's funny, but wading back through all those memories again, I could remember having the feelings, but not the feelings themselves. Rooting around in that old junk, all I felt was a mild

sense of logical cordiality, like you would over a polaroid of a reliable old fridge that kept working for a really long time, with a freezer shelf that was easy to defrost. I scooped it all back up and tipped it into the kitchen bin, scuffing away with my heel at an irritating chalk mark that'd been left on the carpet. The man on the news was right, it was so...freeing. I could appreciate that she'd gone, but there was no deep sense of loss, no hurt, and nothing inside me but rational, clinical organs, a heart filled with tubes that pumped the blood through my veins and that couldn't be broken without a hammer or a brick. I went to bed feeling lighter, and as I caught a whiff of her scent on the sheets, thought about how much extra space there was with a double all to myself.

My sound sleep was roused by the ring of a mobile phone at barely after sunrise. It was the police again, confusing my ears with words like 'car-jacking' and 'alive.' They said she'd been pulled out of the seat by a crackhead posing as a hitch-hiker, and left in the middle of nowhere with no money or phone, having to walk for miles through windy country lanes before finding any help. My wife was shaken, but unhurt, unlike the thief, who'd burnt to an unidentifiable cinder in the wreckage when he shot around a blind corner at 80mph. She was alive, and they were bringing her back to me. Breakfast cereal still in hand, I opened the front door. There stood Rachel, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, her large, brown eyes glistening with tears and her arms outstretched towards me.

"Hey," I said, reaching out and firmly shaking her hand, "welcome back." I ushered for her to come back inside and slurped the last of the milk out of the bottom of the bowl.

