

Indebted

Richard Hill

Do you think a lot? - I do, all the time. I quite often get to thinking about meself and me life. I don't think I've been a bad man. I'm pretty normal really. I've got a pretty ordinary job at the local college - audio/visual technician. I like ordinary things: fishing, football and photography. I'm not religious or anything like that.

Just yesterday, I was thinking about the first white power march I went on a few years ago. I was around 17 at the time. Me and me mates were proper skinheads, wore the proper gear and looked the business: cropped hair, tats, khaki bomber jackets, Levi's, Doc Marten boots with white laces. White power man! - White power.

I've also been thinking about when I went on a riot. Proper riot with the Anti-nazi league, National Front and the BNP which I had joined a year earlier. The BNP I mean. This was between us whites against the asians and blacks, who had gathered near a chip shop which got smashed up. Why shouldn't we have a go at them? It's our country. White, British and proud of it. They get our jobs, our houses, our benefits and a fuckload of other stuff. But the governments' too scared of them. But we're not. You have to look out for your own. We give it to them good.

And what else have I been thinking about? I'll tell you. This is for the skinheads who are pissed off with the fucking foreigners stealing all the jobs. England have forgot its own and thats why its fucked. Don't worry, I won't expect you to be on my side.

A few years later I went on another march. But something else was happenin to me. On this march I had really bad pains in me chest. It was a fuckin awful burning pain like someone was puttin a fag out on me chest. I put it down to really bad indigestion and when I got home, I went to the chemist down the road from me, and asked the bloke, another asian, for something for the pain in my chest. He said it was probably stomach acid and said I should take Gaviscon. On the way down the street I took a swig. Soon, after not very long, the pain in me chest was starting to get better. I now know it's because I had a break from walking in the chemist's shop. By the time I got indoors the pain was back and I

was well out of breath. I was knackered. It'd been a fucking long day. A lot's happened since then.

Over the next few days, the chest pains got worse and more often. They weren't too bad when I was doing nothin. But when I tried to go out, to the shops or something or walk the dog, they came on, and even the Gaviscon didn't help. I had to stop taking the dog for a walk and started to stay at home.

It got so bad, I made an appointment to see the quack. It's a nightmare gettin an appointment and you never get to see the same doctor from one day to the next. This one was black. How is it you can never get to see a proper fully-trained doctor - a white one? Still, I had no choice. He asked me what the pain felt like. Did it feel tight, dull or heavy or a sharp stabbing pain? "All of those," I told him. He asked me if it spread to my arms, neck, jaw or back? "Yeah". Was it worse when I was doing stuff, like walking or lifting? "Yeah". Did it stop when I took a rest? "Yeah". Was I breathless, or did I feel sick? "Yeah". He asked me if there was any history of heart disease in my family? "Yeah, my dad and grandad both died of heart attacks when they were in their fifties." He examined me some more and told me I needed to go to hospital straight away. He told me to sit down and keep calm. How I was supposed to keep calm when he'd just told me I needed to go to hospital? God only knows.

Then, in a while, two paramedic blokes turned up with a stretcher trolley thing. What all the fuss was about I dunno. To cut a long story short, they took me to hospital with blue lights and sirens. The works. Fuckin scary!

I spent the next few days in hospital having loads of tests and stuff and in the end they kicked me out with tablets and a spray to go under my tongue when I got chest pain. They too told me to take things easy, not exert meself and not get stressed out.

Over the next few weeks things got worse. I was gettin chestpains more often and gettin out of breath. They said - the hospital had said that they'd send me a follow-up appointment but I hadn't heard anything, and couldn't stand it any more, so I went back to the doctor. He looked me over and told me to go back to the hospital and gave me a letter to take with me. The local hospital did some more tests and almost straight away sent me to Harefield Heart Hospital which wasn't too far from me, but they sent me in an ambulance. I was fuckin scared.

The heart hospital did more tests, including somethin called an angiogram which wasn't nice. They kept me in again. Dressed in nothing but a t-shirt and shorts, I didn't feel like the skin I was. I felt like a wooffer.

A couple of days later the cardio-bloke told me that I had a serious heart condition and that I needed a heart transplant. A fuckin heart transplant! I asked him why. "Heart failure is the reason you need it," he told me, and some medical jargon which I'll never forget, "Dilated cardiomyopathy, where the left chamber of the heart becomes enlarged and weak so that it can't pump blood properly". And you thought because I was a skinhead, I was too thick to remember all this medical stuff!

He told me they were puttin me on a 'transplant list'. I asked him for how long? He told me they didn't know because I had a rare blood group, AB-positive, and that any donor had to be the same. After a few days of trying me on different pills, they sent me home and repeated that I would have to take things easy and to try not to get stressed. They also said I'd need to have oxygen at home. They told me that without the transplant, I would probably die. They told me I'd have to give up the fags, the drink and the drugs. I asked them how they knew, especially the drugs? I hadn't told them. "The blood tests," they said.

Life at home took on a different turn. There was going to be another march, but this time, I couldn't go. Apart from not being able to walk far, I was tied to the oxygen cylinder thing. But one of the lads was posting photos and video clips online, so I could follow the action. Apart from that, I was bored. Every day was the same. This went on for a couple of years and every few months, I had to go to hospital for checks.

Eventually I got a call from Harefield to say that a heart had been found. Suddenly, the stress was back. Me stress levels were eleven out of ten. The hospital told me not to eat or drink anything, take all me medication with me, and a bag of clothes with toothbrush and razor etc. I went into Harefield and after some more blood tests, an ecg, and check-over, and straight away got taken into theatre. This was really fuckin happenin!

I remember nothing after that until comin round. I still had a mask over my face and tubes everywhere. And that was it. I had a new heart, someone else's heart, who had died which got me wondering. It got me thinking again; whose heart did I have? How did he, or I suppose, she, die?

Before I got discharged, I was told to do certain stuff. I had to take me tablets twice a day, take care and clean the operation site, attend all follow-up appointments and exercise regularly to put strength back into my muscles and stuff.

When I got back home, bored again, I spent a lot of time thinkin about me 'new' heart. Who'se was it, how and why did he die? Would I have a change in personality? Is the heart the source of feelings, emotions, love and stuff? Would these change? I got depressed and thought a lot about the person who'se heart I now had beating inside me.

Six months later, I found out. One morning, I got this letter, see. Postmarked 'Liverpool'. Inside was a letter from the 'Donor Family Care Service' and another plain envelope.

The letter said that the donor's family had wanted to write to me, and send a photograph. They said that my identity had not been given to them and everything was anonymous. I opened the envelope and took out a handwritten letter and photograph and fuck me, the donor was a black bloke! I had a fucking black man's heart keepin me alive! I nearly bloody choked! Did I want to read the letter? No, I didn't. I never thought that the donor wouldn't be anything but white and english. There must have been some kind of terrible mistake. I demanded to see someone in charge, Now!

While I was waiting, I decided to read the letter. I unfolded it and started reading:

*'To the recipient of our dear Son's heart.
It gives us immense pleasure knowing that he is still alive albeit inside you a year on. We sincerely hope that there has been a perfect match between both. You now have the heart of a prolific athlete pulsed by the brain of an academic who graduated at Oxford. A Master of the discipline of Tae Kwon Do and College Rugby Captain. Our beloved son was murdered in cold blood, a swift stab wound to the neck. He didn't stand a chance. The hospital kept him on life support and told us that he was brain dead. In opting to donate we hope that you will grasp every opportunity to propel your life in a way that maximizes your true potential. We wish you good health and prosperity in the knowledge that with the love of God beside, you will survive.
Yours truly, his Mom and Dad.'*

Oh no, no, no, no! I have the heart of a black man inside of me! Why me? Why me? Why? My life has been spared by one of them! A race I

have no love or care about! Get out! Out! Out of me! Arrrgghhh! I'm alive aren't I? Breathing healthily! Healthier than I ever have.

Eventually, a registrar bloke came to see me. I asked him how come I'd got the heart of a black man? To cut it short, he said that we both had the rare blood group and were a good match. That was the only consideration.

All those years I've abused, cursed, ignored and now saved by 'one of them' How can I honestly live with myself? How on earth can I rid myself of these evil subhuman thoughts? How do I? Oh my God. Help me. Help me. Forgive me, please!

It got me thinkin. Were we, black or white, that much different? I suppose not. Outside we look different, but inside, we're all the same. Same thoughts, same emotions, same angers, same loves, same happiness. But me and me mates had an emotion that this lad didn't seem to have: hatred. What was behind my hatred of anyone who wasn't white and english? I had thought that we were a race superior to others. I 'googled':

'Many experts believe self-interest is the root cause of racist beliefs. While the media is a reflection of a culture at large, it keeps racial stereotypes alive and well and therefore fuels racism. People aren't good at recognizing racism in themselves. This failure to recognize prejudices, accept responsibility, and be better is a key reason why racism is still so persistent.'

A bit deep for me, but I get the drift. I guess I'm a racist, but now I don't feel so happy about it. My new heart has come from a bloke who's better than me, in lots of ways. Better at school and in sports probably. He even went to University! I could never do that. His mum and dad must hurt terribly at his loss. What was it they said?

'Our beloved son was murdered in cold blood, a swift stab wound to the neck. He didn't stand a chance.'

Another six months down the line, and that letter continues to haunt me. What was I thinking? It could have been me, or one of me mates that stabbed that lad. The thoughts that his mum and dad had when seein him lying in that hospital bed, lifeless, his body just tickin over with those machines keepin him alive. Did he know who was there, who was prayin for him? And whoever stabbed him, did they know what could happen, that they had killed him? I can't imagine even stabbin him. Yes we rioted and fought the blacks and asians, but I reckon no-one thought of stabbing one of them. It got me thinkin. All of them had friends, family, fathers, mothers and all. I think about my own family and mates. What

makes anyone, racist or not, want to seriously hurt, maybe kill one of them. But one of us went out, with a knife or summat, meaning to stab one of them. What makes someone do something like that? I couldn't do anything like that and wouldn't think of anything like it.

We didn't want any of them in our country. But whose country is it really? I call it my country, and before I read this letter, I thought that England was for the english, no-one else. But this lad was english, as good as. He was born ere. His mum and dad were christians. I didn't really understand that.

And then there's his fuckin heart. Beatin away, keepin his body alive, yet they said he was brain stem dead. I didn't really understand so had to look it up on the net.

'For a diagnosis of brain stem death to be made: a person must be unconscious and fail to respond to outside stimulation. A person's heartbeat and breathing can only be maintained using a ventilator. There must be clear evidence that serious brain damage has occurred and it can't be cured.'

It's easy to read online, or in some medical dictionary, but hits home when you think about it. A machine had been keepin his heart going, the same heart that is now keepin me going. Fuckin amazing. And what was our rare blood group? AB-positive they'd told me. I googled it: *'4% of white people, 3% of blacks.'* This was one of the things we did have in common then. We both had the same rare blood group.

But I began to think that there was more to it than sharing the same blood group. The only thing that was different about us was the colour of our skin. Does it really matter that the heart was from a black bloke? Does it fuck. I believe deep down in my heart - his heart - that things will get better.

Now fitter, I'm gonna go on another march soon, this time a 'Black Lives Matter' march. Why? Because that bloke gave me something. He gave me the gift of life.

-ENDS-

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