

## Restoration

There's been a new arrival. Laid out perpendicular to the porch, nearly blocking the little path leading to the sidewalk. Tall, thin cardboard over green lawn and red brick. Scuffed, bent corners. Enough scotch tape to rebind the Titans. Most intriguing, however, is a little blemish near the bottom right corner, flush with the ground, almost hidden by the grass. A stain on the box's tan skin. Dark red, almost rust. You lift up the box and smell. Metal. As you feel the stain, your finger punches through into the cool world of the box. It hits something soft, covered in an oozing that sticks like honey. It gives slightly under your touch, slowly springing back as you try to extract yourself. Lift the box again. Taste.

Metal.

It's the kind of day you hope for every time you go out to check the mail, the kind of day that makes you wish Christ had never come and made Sundays so important. Today, and for many tomorrows to come, you will have a *project*. Of course, there is always a project, some forgotten relic sitting in the workshop waiting to be stripped of rust or sandpapered or repainted or repolished or reassembled, but this work. *This* work. This work is what you crave.

Craving does not make getting the package up the stairs any easier. You move around to the other side and grasp the underside of the box. Your fingertips brush rough tape, smooth cardboard, but no soft stains. Which is for the best, honestly. Transport is hard enough without your prize punching through its holdings. You turn the box around, grabbing it by the narrow end, and try and get the worst phase of the project over with as quickly as you can. A tug. The box is on the steps. Another tug. It hovers between second and first. Another. The second step has been conquered. Another tug, another hover, another summit. Now it is on the porch. You lay it flat a moment, one end resting on the doorstep like a pillow. Catch your breath. Just a little more. You approach the box from behind now, pushing it through the threshold like a tobogganer gathering up speed. It crests the hill, sliding into the little spot in your house that is no longer the entryway but not quite the living room.

Thankfully, there are no stairs between the box and your workshop. You take it up again, dragging it along the hardwood floor. It glides clumsily across, like a novice figure skater, you the steadying hand leading it across the rink. Ready to catch it if it falls. Your project has never stepped onto this ice before, but you are its denizen, its lord, its subject, its apostle. Its devotee, heart and soul. Into the workshop, now. Follow my lead.

The bench is open because it is always open. Imagine how terrible it would be, to bring your project in here and find pieces of ordinary metal cluttering the wooden surface! Imagine having to find a place for it all, having to sort and categorize and put everything away *just so* while your project languishes on the floor. Just when it'd made it home! Just when you were supposed to lavishing it in your blood, sweat, and tears! You'd felt that sting a few times, in the early days. Back when you weren't sent enough for all this to be anything more than a hobby. Back when metal and wood and plastic were still enthralling. Back when they were more than an amusing means to an end, camera fodder to keep the lights on as you pursued your true passion. But no more. No, you have another bench now, a place of miracles, a shell for your Aphrodites to stand on. And this is where you lay the box. Nudge it a little. Get it perfectly centered. This is the big moment, after all. You can't ruin things for your project so early.

There.

*Click!* One.

*Click!* Two.

*Click!* Three.

The X-Acto knife sings.

You attack the sides first, severing tape like tendons so that when you open the box there will be no resistance, nothing but that one sublime moment. Cut away from you. One smooth stroke. Another. That's it. Now for the main event. You breathe in. Let yourself luxuriate. Wonder what kind of project you've been given today, this blessed day! Now to work. Slide the knife across the box's stomach, gut it like a fish. One smooth stroke. A flourish now, like a magician. No harm in enjoying yourself. The knife sings its staccato finale, *click-click-clicking* away as it recedes. Back in the sheathe. Back in its place. Two fingers probe the wound. The cardboard gives beneath them, almost eager.

You lift the flap.

Inside the box is a man, or what's left of him. Judging by the uniform, some sort of factory worker. No surprises there—out of all your projects, a good 37% come from factories. No nametag. Moderate height. Short, black hair. Tan skin. Stubble. Not thin, but not fat either; he bears the slight paunch you've seen in so many middle-aged men, both inside and outside your projects. Hands are covered in calluses. Nails bitten to the quick. Feet are likely in a similar state. You grasp his chin gently, pry it open, and inspect the mouth. The teeth within are slightly

crooked and slightly yellowed—a smoker, perhaps. Time for the eyes, now: a nice, deep brown, but woefully bloodshot. Deep bags underneath, too. Poor thing.

The most glaring issue, of course, is the metal cog embedded in his chest. Certainly one of the more dramatic reasons behind a package ending up on your doorstep, but overall tame considering this particular project's pedigree. If anything, it's surprising how intact he is—so often you end up with mangled half bodies, or haphazard collections of limbs and viscera, or packages *technically* containing all the original flesh, just with a good portion of it mangled into a consistency somewhere between paste and ground beef. Not that those projects don't have their own appeal, of course, but it's nice to have a simple restoration, where you can focus on the precise detail of repair work instead of the project unto itself that is reconstruction. It's just so hard to source materials for it! All those locks and guards and security cameras in the morgue. Even if you left that alone, the local cemetery has a shockingly robust night watch, despite the appalling quality of the supplies there. Sure, you know how to make these things at home, but even then you have to get the right cultures and chemicals and then after all that your little bundle of cells will probably decide that its singular passion in life is to become a cervical disk despite you giving it the clearest instructions man or God could conceive of telling it to be a gallbladder. Not to mention how hard making a brain is—so much mindless wiring and organization followed by round upon round of testing because if all those fiddly little electrical impulses don't travel *just* right all of a sudden you've given your project a terrible case of epilepsy, and you could never let such shoddy handiwork leave your workshop, you're not some kind of *hack*—but you're getting sidetracked. It'd be wrong to leave your project waiting.

The first order of business is to remove it from its packaging. It's served its purpose. You lift your project gently, like a bride, and then nudge the box off the workbench. You'll dispose of it properly later. You set the body back down on the bench, and go get your shears. The blade slips beneath the collar. The fabric stretches taut as you pull it higher, ever higher, until at last you can see the flesh underneath, see if you'd nicked it at all. All clear. It'd be easy to unwrap him in one smooth stroke, just like you did with the box, but the blades are too close to the skin now. Easily fixable, if you slipped, but a pain. And so reckless! You cut down to the cog first, peeling away the wet fabric. Despite the sheer quantity of blood staining your project's clothing, the wound itself is rather neat—no secondary gashes branching out from it. Right through the

heart, too, though slightly too slanted to be a perfect bisection. Good. Hearts are a favorite of yours, and you hardly ever get to stitch them back together. A wonderful project indeed.

The rest of the clothing falls away easily. Pull off the shoes, cut off the underwear, and your project is ready for disassembly. One hand on the cog. One hand on the body, for leverage. Pull. The cog slides up a bit. Wiggle it in the wound, try to loosen it. Pull. Readjust your grip. Pull. A slow, squelching sound, and then—

Out.

A cursory rinse, and cog goes to join its metal brethren, all similarly bedecked in the grime of use. Eventually, they will all be polished and clean, ready for rebirth. But that can wait. Your scalpel is sharpened and ready. It is tempting to open from the wound, like a child tearing into a Christmas present, but that would be improper. Instead, you cut that familiar Y shape into the chest, stretch out the skin, and begin surveying the organs. The left ribs have been hopelessly shattered by the cog, and the sternum isn't doing much better. You remove them as cleanly as possible, picking out every fragment of bone you can find while you're at it. They drop into the tray with a satisfying *clack*. The heart is mangled, all the delicate machinery of chambers and valves and ventricles smashed to pieces by unknowing and uncaring metal. Out it goes. The lungs, now—more intact, but with a little gash in the left one. Clipped, ever so slightly. You'll fix that later. For now, it is lifted gently out of the chest cavity. The rest follows soon after. That's the thing about disassembly—it's just involved enough to be interesting, but simple enough to get into a rhythm. Stomach. Out. Intestines. Out. Bowel. Out. Colon. Out. Bladder. Out. Liver. Out. Kidneys. Out. Gallbladder. Out. Pancreas. Out. Spleen. Out. No appendix—already removed, it seems. Now that the abdomen is empty, you begin work on the neck, severing muscle and connective tissue so that the spine will lift smoothly out with the skull. The skin fights you a little, but eventually comes off in one piece. Detach the teeth, sever the tongue, remove the eyes, and it's ready. Out. Brain, skull, spine, and nerves go into a tub for soaking, nine holes drilled into the top to ensure the liquid can fully surround the brain, lift all the gunk out. The same solution envelopes everything else. A stronger formulation for the lungs—cigarette ash is a stubborn thing. Line them up in jars, sort by size and organ system, and it's all done.

It's well into the night now. You haven't eaten lunch or dinner. All of the places selling decent food are closed, so you clean yourself up and go to the drive-through. You order two combo meals, and when the cashier hands you your food, tendons flexing and straining against

the skin of their hand as they clench the bag and bring it towards you, eyes half-lidded and bruised underneath like your project's, you wonder what it would be like to take them apart. You do not say this, of course. You just smile, and watch how their skin wrinkles as they smile back. You drive off, and wonder how easily you could reconstruct any of the people around you if they were to swerve off the road and crash. Burns are so hard to get out, after all.

Dinner is quickly dispatched. You know your work is intensive. You know that it distracts you from eating. And yet it is still a surprise whenever those two combo meals disappear into you. You are always surprised that you need this much. It was hard to accept in the beginning, not because you are particularly strict about your diet but because you had eaten a meal. Agreed upon as sufficient. A whole meal, and you were still hungry. Even now, you still think you will probably not eat all of the second meal—half at most, and then you will be done. Every project-night you think this, and every project-night you are wrong. For weeks on end. You are not particularly strict about your health. But when you look at all the wrappers, multiplying like bacteria, piling up and up and over one another, you wonder what this is doing to you. If you were to deconstruct yourself, would there be grime caking your insides? Would your gums have receded? Would your teeth have rotted in your mouth? Would you survey yourself and marvel at how thoroughly this new project wrecked its digestive tract? Have to re-up the stomach lining, sew in new cilia? Infuse new gut microbes, ones that know how to live on something other than grease? That would be fine. It matters little what happens to *your* organs, after all. So long as this does not interfere with your work, it is fine. Not ideal, but fine. You need fuel, and if this is the only way you can get it, then you will live with that. You already do.

You wake up at 6:00 am sharp the next morning. Breakfast is a single yogurt cup and a black coffee. You check your porch for mail. Nothing. You enter your workshop. You shoot some footage. Viscera from a 70s stand mixer gets sandblasted and polished. Little globs of metal are welded on and then ground down until they are flush with the original surface. Indistinguishable. The video is progressing nicely. Good.

You move to the other bench. It is time for cleaning.

It is a satisfying part of the process, but not without its unpleasantness. You've gotten used to scraping waste out of the digestive and excretory organs, but that does not make the smell any more pleasant. You tackle those first. Slit down the middle. Dump the contents. Go in and scrape away what remains. One final rinse with water, then back in the jar. Fresh solution, so that they

aren't stewing in their own impurity. The lungs are a special treat, mainly because of how blackened they are. Even after their soak, a thick layer of gunk clings to the membrane like mud. You scrape a little. Wipe off your scaler. Scrape a little more. No smooth strokes, this time. It's caked on too thick. Instead, your movements are small and measured, chipping away at that filthy layer like a painter's knife in reverse. Scrape away until the pink flesh is revealed. Gather up the little pile on the hook of your scaler. Wipe it off. Repeat.

The black falls away and away and away, accumulating on your towel.

Left lung a quarter done.

Halfway done.

Three quarters.

Clean.

Right lung, now.

A quarter.

Halfway.

Three quarters.

Clean.

Left bronchioles, now. You hold the syringe lightly. Stick it into the sac. Pull back the plunger. Watch it fill with greyish liquid. Empty it out. Jab. Pull. Purge. Jab. Pull. Purge. Jab. Pull. Purge. Jab. Pull. Purge. Jab. Pull. Purge. Jab. Pull. Purge.

You aren't even a quarter of the way done with the left lung when you catch a glimpse of your watch. An accident, a tilt of your arm just a little further than usual. It is 1:32 am. You cannot continue in good conscience. What if you make a mistake?

You clean off. Go to the drive-through. You don't have to say your order. The employees know it like the rise and fall of their chest, start preparing it as soon as they see your car approach. You're not sure if they like you, but they seem to like the known variable you are. Someone might order twelve burgers at once for a suite of stoned college students, someone might shout rank abuse over not receiving the pickles they wanted omitted, but at some point you will appear in the drive-through, asking for two combo meals and giving them a smile. It's strained and distracted, but they seem to appreciate the effort. You're satisfied with that.

You wake up at 6:00 am sharp. Breakfast is a single yogurt cup and a black coffee. You check your porch for mail. Nothing. You enter your workshop. You shoot some footage.

You resume cleaning.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

On and on and on.

You catch your watch again. It is too late again. You go to the drive through again.

You wake up at 6:00 am sharp. Breakfast is a single yogurt cup and a black coffee. You check your porch for mail. Nothing. You enter your workshop. You shoot some footage.

You resume cleaning.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

Jab. Pull. Purge.

The lungs are done.

Heart and circulatory system, now. Scrape the gunk from the chambers. It's easier than usual—the cog smashed the walls so thoroughly that there's no need for you to cut through them. Then you snake tubes through arteries, trying to pick up every last bit of cholesterol stuck on the sides. Sometimes it is smooth and effortless. Sometimes there will be a place where the tube stops moving. Grip the artery. Pull it towards you. Push the tube further in. Back up. Repeat. If even that doesn't work, blast it with water. Then try again.

You get through the entire circulatory system. That is good. You do not sleep. That is bad. It is now 7:34 am. Breakfast is a single yogurt cup and a black coffee. Two coffees, actually. Three. You check your porch for mail. Nothing. You enter your workshop. You shoot some footage.

Time for cleaning.

You make good headway, but your work is slow. Imprecise. You make a pot of instant Mac n' Cheese and eat it. Better.

Time for cleaning.

Dejar. Slit. Scrape.

Clean.

Dejar. Slit. Scrape.

Clean.

Dejar. Slit. Scrape.

Clean.

Dejar. Slit. Scrape.

Clean.

Done. Except for the brain. You could go longer. You want to go longer. But your eyes are drooping. Your hands shake slightly. It's barely evening. There's so much more time. There would be more time, if your body was not such a traitor.

But you cannot allow for mistakes.

You go to the drive through. You eat. You collapse into your bed.

You wake up at noon. Breakfast is a single yogurt cup and a black coffee. No time to shoot, today.

The skull comes out. You turn it upside down, solution streaming from it like a macabre watering can. Onto the bench. You grab your saw, a long, serrated thing that gleams in the light. It *shk-shk-shhhks* its way through the bone, leaving a straight, even line in its wake. The top comes off easily. Casually. And then it is just you and your project's brain.

It is harder to clean it with the nerves still attached, but reattaching those nerves is even harder. It's easy enough to get to what you need, anyways. First, a cursory rinse. You watch as the fluid wells up in the brainpan and spills over, starting off the greenish-gray of an estuary and ending up perfectly, impeccably clear. You take your Q-tips. Wet them in cleaner. Hit each and every wrinkle, part the flesh with your fingers so you ensure not an inch of this wondrous machinery goes neglected, watch it come apart beneath your practiced hands and then watch those hands bring it all back together, clean and new. You rewire a few worn connections, prick each substructure with a needle to rejuvenate those tired old synapses, really get it running smoothly, running like a dream. When your project wakes, his thoughts will be clear and flawless like a pane of glass. He will feel like a new man, not because he is but because you have stripped away all his imperfections to reveal what he could've been all along, all he *will* be now that he has passed through your glorious workshop, through your loving hands.



You wake up at 6:00 am sharp. Breakfast is a single yogurt cup and a black coffee. You check your porch for mail. Nothing. You enter your workshop. You shoot some footage.

It is time for reassembly.

How long has it been? You remember, vaguely, going to the grocery store at some point. Most likely after your meal, because there's been a bag on the floor of your car for a while that you can never quite get around to picking up. Your trash can is overflowing with wrappers, spreading around it on the floor like a patchwork dress. You uploaded a few restoration videos to your channel. How often do you put those out, again? You paid a bill at some point, you know you did that.

Why are you wondering about this? It doesn't matter. Who cares about losing time, if it's lost so wonderfully?

For however long, you have been working on your project. Kneading the knots out of each and every muscle. Scraping off the calluses. Draining sebum from pimples. Softening the epidermis until it was almost silk. Closing the gap over the heart. Crimping the skin like pie crust. Flattening the raised edges. Sandpapering and smoothing. A final layer of hair. Like nothing ever happened. Slotting rib into rib like ivory puzzle pieces. Gluing and polishing the cracks into non-existence. Filling degraded bones with new marrow, mending the ghosts of past fractures. Greasing and grinding the right knee until it finally stopped catching in the socket. Sanding down the pelvis to let the hips move smoothly. Same for the fingers. Same for the toes. Reinforcing the spine. Correcting its bend. Anchoring the muscle. Twining the nerves through bones, through flesh, through organs. Polishing each tooth to a shine, filling cavities, leaving no trace. Putting them one by one into gums once again the bright pink of health, all perfectly in position. Not even a millimeter off. Strengthening the connections between taste buds and brain to make each bite that little bit more vivid, a pop of flavor rather than a blunt dragging across the senses. Reshaping lenses so that the light focuses right at the back of the eye. Easing out the itchy redness that rooted in the whites. Ensconcing a few new hairs deep in the ears, to stop the higher frequencies from slipping away so soon. Plastering new lining on stomach walls. Giving the intestines a new carpet of waving cilia. Scouring the liver of impurity, all the damage alcohol ever did dissolved like cotton candy in rain. Lungs clean at last, pumping free and unhindered just like they did in your project's youth.

And the heart.

You reconstructed the walls from mush, turning homogenized flesh back into the cathedrals of blood and hemoglobin they once were. Fashioned each door between them with the utmost care, pale little triangles you carved away at until they were exactly the right shape. Slotted them into their ring, watched them open and close in perfect synchronicity as you tested. Joined severed tube to severed tube until there was nothing left to reconnect. Watched as it beat to the tune of electrodes, so natural you could cry.

*Ba-dm. Ba-dm.*

It is already nested deep in the chest. Everything is in its place, really—when reattaching nerves and arteries it's so much easier to just sew each organ in as you go, adding and adding until your little bundle is complete. You just need to reattach the skin. You snake the legs through the Y you made so long ago, pulling the toes through like you're helping someone put on a glove. The arms are next. The fingers are poked and prodded until each nail is exactly centered. The face wraps back around the skull. Finally, you close up your Y. A bit of kneading, a bit of polishing, a little reapplication of hair to where the lines were, and he's done.

The clamps come on. Admittedly, you aren't particularly enthused about your jump-starting method. You can't argue with results, but galvanization is just so *cliche*. Expected. And you don't take too kindly to sharing the technique with that butcher Frankenstein. Oh, were the little arteries and nerves too *complex* for you? Is that why you made a patchwork wretch instead of lovingly refurbished antiques?

Amateur.

You flip the switch, and your project gasps.

Like most, he is confused. He wants to know where he is, who you are, what happened to him, wasn't he at work—and then he remembers. And then you explain the work you've done. He looks a little lost, and clearly thinks you're more than a little insane, but overall he's taking it like a champ. You give him some new clothes. You order a proper meal for the two of you (poke, at his request), and explain what happens now. You will call his family and let them know his restoration is done. They will come pick him up if they are able, or you will give him the necessary funds to travel back himself. No need to worry about the legal side—officially, he was *missing*, not dead. Yes, of course—yes, a lot of people saw, but the factory was quite keen to sweep things under the rug. He should really try and get out of there, by the way. You have a few references you can give him, if he's interested. (He is).

The phone rings. His family is coming.

The two of you watch a documentary to bide the time. He keeps commenting about how he feels better than he has in a long time, so much better, not yet able to believe the perfection of his restored body. You smile. A job well done.

A car pulls into the driveway.

Your project launches himself down the porch stairs, towards a woman with shiny, bobbed hair. He is glowing. So different from that corpse in your workshop, worn down and mangled by the debris of his work. So *alive*. He's reached her, now. They're crying, clinging, skin crinkled and stretched by the force of their joy. A tall, slender figure in black stands apart, unsure of how to approach, mouth slightly agape—but not for long. She is pulled in by her father, and she grips him with such a ferocity that you become a little annoyed at how she's already marring his newly-flawless skin. But only a little. After a time, they break apart, your project and his wife chatting a mile a minute, dizzy with relief. As they move towards the car, the tall, thin girl lingers a moment. She looks up at you, on the porch. Her eyes are wide, ringed with layers of smudged eyeshadow. She wipes at them with her sleeve. Subtly, almost imperceptibly, she mouths something.

“Thank you.”

Then she turns. Gets back in the car. You watch as it disappears down the road.

You smile.

A job well done.