SHORT STORY

Practical

by Johan Smits



"Nostalgia" by Yewon Kim

Tint Journal, no. 14 (September 2025), www.tintjournal.com

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

They said it'd be risky, that I was being taken for a ride, that it wouldn't be worth it and God knows what else, but I'm glad that in the end I took the decision and stood by it. Granted, the surgery was complicated and risky, yes, but I came out of it alive and now I feel like I'm a different person. At least, I think so. It's said half of healing happens in your head — placebo effects and all that — but in my case there's little room for doubt; facts are facts and linoleum is linoleum. Much progress has been made lately, the doctors assured me; this is medical-grade, they explained, not to be compared with what's on your floor. And besides, they said, it's been tested on countless numbers of pigs and every single one of them is as happy as can be! I thought, how can you possibly know how happy a pig is? But even taking some exaggeration into account, they did sound convincing, those doctors.

Back home I made myself a pot of coffee, darker than the world and extra, super strong — you can have all the caffeine that exists now, the doctors had assured me, it's completely caffeine-proof, ha ha! Yes, ha, ha, I had replied — then sat on the sofa and skimped through the manual. The frontpage shouted in confident, bold print, *LOOKING FOR A HEART OF GOLD? WE DO BETTER: A HEART OF LINOLEUM!* and the next page listed all the advantages, which is something I never understood about manuals — why do they still try to convince a new owner even after she's already bought the product? — but it did feel reassuring, yes.

A staggering seventy-nine percent of people worldwide suffer at least once in their lifetime from a bleeding heart, they claimed, and I wondered who could possibly be the other twenty-one percent. *No more!* promised a text balloon that was linked by a flash of lightning to the mouth of a heart-shaped smiling face with little legs and arms, but no torso, which is odd given this was a product designed by health professionals. But anyway…

Feel the onset of a bleeding heart? Drink one and a half litres of water every morning and evening for up to three days, it instructed, which, it said, would wash away the disturbance. It went on to inform me that my new linoleum heart was highly washable and if any disturbances were still lingering after a wash, adding a drop of Dettol per litre of water would do the trick. *Sick and tired of having your heart trampled all over?* was asked in point two, which I assumed was a rhetorical question since there was no QR code or anything, and yes, the answer appeared handily on the following line, *Well, let them! Our linoleum has been tried and tested on thousands of floors for decades and can withstand all sorts of trampling. Goodbye nasty in-laws, heartless narcissists or abusive partners.* And so on.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

There were some instructions for care and maintenance too — *Linoleum can turn yellowish if exposed to sunlight for long hours every day* — but nothing important that applied to me; no risk of sunlight coming into my own heart, and besides, who cared about the goddamn colour anyway? Then I lost interest and fell asleep, reassured, just like the advert had promised I would be.

And you don't feel funny or weird or anything? friends kept on asking, even weeks after the surgery, but, eventually, once they realized all seemed to have gone well, they too lost interest. They probably thought me snobbish, or even arrogant, spending all my savings on heart-replacement surgery and, on top of that, on something of which the result couldn't even be shown off about on Instagram. Maybe it's because I had never bothered trying to explain that there were no other options for me and that on three occasions I had nearly bled to death after yet another casual butchering — but they wouldn't understand, and how could anyone anyway without having it ever having happened to them?

What's more — and new — is that I couldn't care less about what they thought now, whereas before I'd worry and fret over what had been said and left unsaid and how they'd react and so on and so forth. Now I simply drank my one and a half litres of water and felt refreshingly unconcerned. The linoleum really did its job.

It's me, he said, and I answered, who? without my heart skipping a beat, which was a first whenever he called. Me! Jackson! he said with a funny mix of despair and irritation in his voice, and there was also a hint of curiosity and surprise — or maybe this was all wishful thinking on my part because, really, that's a lot to read in someone's voice. Still, Jackson sounded confused, which was very unlike him. It'd normally be always the other way around so I opened a bottle of water and kept it within reach, just out of caution.

I heard about your heart, he said. Are you rich now? How so, I said, rich? Well, I bet you must have sold it, that famous heart of gold of yours, ha ha! … Hello? You still there? Yes, I said, sorry, I was drinking water, doctor's orders.

You sound a bit weird, he said — hey, that about selling your heart was only a joke, yeah? Yes, I know, I said. Hey, how about dinner tonight, just you and I, to celebrate your new heart?

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

I emptied the bottle with one swig. Sorry, I can't, I said. You can't? Why not, for God's sake, it's not as if you've got a red-hot agenda bursting with dates, have you? He let out a few chuckles, which was his predictable way of feigning jest. I have to wash my hair, I said, and unscrewed another bottle. Your hair? Yes, I said, that stuff that grows on heads? Then I think he hung up.

Jackson and I go back a long way. When you're at the impressionable age of eighteen, it's not difficult to be awed by anything you're not. At high school Jackson dressed as smartly as he talked, mingling with the rich and glamorous kids like a shark in a swimming pool, sunbathing his ego in the limelight of attention generated by his controversial opinions; opinions he scattered around carelessly as if they came out of a confetti cannon. Loved to be adored and adored to be loved. Without trying, he made everything about himself look glamorous, even his misfortunes which, no matter how insignificant, were always turned into dramas worthy of a Greek tragedy. If he had been hit by a car, it would have to have been a lime-coloured Maserati, not a second-hand Volkswagen, and, later, when his first home was burgled, it was by exotic-language-speaking gang members at trauma-inducing gunpoint, not an uneventful incident in his absence.

Truth always gave the right of way to drama, and to other things too like considerations of whether something agreed with his view of the world. Even though in the back of my mind I always suspected him of recounting his stories with a certain nonchalance, when it came to reality, they were fun to listen to, and him sharing them with me made me feel part of that interesting, promising world that seemed to play out on a different plain, far removed from my mediocre existence. I consistently mistook his indifference for flamboyance, his divisiveness for eccentricity, and his foolery for free-spiritedness. And yet, there were also plenty of moments where compassion shone through and attentiveness stood out. In hindsight, that's maybe what made it all so confusing. Those annoying grey areas – nobody likes them.

He would die young, before he'd reached thirty, he made me believe when he was twenty-four. An old woman in Turkey told me, he said, a fortune-teller, when I was travelling. He spoke to me with a kind of fatalistic unconcernedness that meant he had already bravely accepted his fate. I remember admiring the bluntness of his dramatic statement, but when I noticed that he was deadly earnest and deeply convinced of his own premature demise, an overwhelming anxiety pushed me off-course. I didn't sleep for months, disturbed by the conviction that I would lose a close loved one within half a decade of my young life, and it was only much later I realized that what Jackson thrived on was the anxiety he generated in others and the empathy they felt for him. It was his oxygen, a cruel kind of reassurance that

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

he was being loved. What he failed to grasp was that over long periods of time, that kind of love turns mouldy, like badly-kept cheese. It's exhausting and heart-eroding, especially for hearts made of gold which are more prone to dents and bruises than the ordinary, more sturdy kind like, say, those made of stone, which is the price one has to pay for having something rare and precious, I suppose.

That's also how Jackson must have felt, I imagine — rare and precious. And special. Especially special, in that special kind of way where anything seemingly ordinary became special once he let it enter his realm. For example, the International Red Cross workers in Sierra Leone who became special only because he interacted with them and photographed them in action during his travels over there, thus granting himself the kind of legitimacy that allowed him to spin unverifiable tales of 'co-writing history' in a conflict zone, even though none of us had any clue whether conflict was still taking place there or not — and where the hell was Sierra Leone again? — but it sounded properly important. Or Jackson 'surviving' a coup d'etat in South America when local soldiers posed with him in front of their clunky tank.

What never made it into his travel pictures were scenes like that of a kid with cerebral palsy playing on a swing — I bet because she would not meet his stringent criteria of drama and glamour — and certainly not evidence of other travellers — let alone tourists, such a dirty word! — surviving *coup d'états* or co-writing history with him. Jackson doesn't share his specialness.

My deepening anxiety, his inexhaustible neediness and the long hours on the phone validating his worries, all undeniably contributed to wearing out my heart over time, but the one thing that really dented and cracked the gold was the casual dismissiveness of those occasional moments when I needed a compassionate ear myself, or, worse, the screaming absence of any ear at all. Cracks and dents in gold can be melted out, or at least re-shaped into something that might be a little different from before but that is still wholesome and beautiful, especially with the right kind of warmth and friendship — which doesn't need to be the red-hot temperature of passion that some base metals like stainless steel demand, no, just the kind of warmth generated by genuine empathy is sufficient for mending a golden heart. But if that warmth remains consistently absent over time, no matter how much you try to paint over the cracks and fill up the dents, the whole thing will eventually come apart.

Today, those debilitating feelings of worry and anxiety still pop up now and then, but they simply don't stick any longer — the linoleum sees to that. It's very practical that way. And with the right care, as instructed in the manual, there'll be no more cracks or dents to repair. They would be impossible to repair anyway — linoleum can't be melted back into shape,

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

everyone knows that, you'd have to rip out the whole damn thing and replace it entirely, which would defeat the very purpose of it, but luckily the manual promises this will never happen. It's backed up with a twelve-month warranty.

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.