

## HENRY AND ELIZA

*Hannah Wilson*

The love story began on Tuesday morning when I went in to take Henry's blood pressure. Henry was recovering from pneumonia and also suffered from hypertension, which I was making a point of keeping an eye on. Age spots had settled over his skin like an eclipse of resting moths, and he smelled vaguely of lawn clippings and Dove soap, along with that noxious cologne he insisted on spritzing himself with all through the day, and all through the night too apparently.

Beyond the blue curtain lay Eliza. She too was in her early seventies and had been admitted to the nursing home's temporary respite care unit after a stroke. I remember talking to her, reassuring her about the day's routine even as she shrank away from me. Eliza's natural shyness was exacerbated by her obvious embarrassment at the way her hands trembled as she sipped from cups of water – always plastic in case she dropped it – and her inability to shower and dress without me or another nurse.

I glanced at the screen on the blood pressure gauge after the cuff on Henry's arm deflated. "132/90," I said. An improvement on the night before.

"Well, whaddaya know. Just call me Mary Poppins," said Henry from where he lay nestled in a cotton cocoon of sheets. "Practically perfect in every way." He smiled wryly. His false teeth weren't in this early, so it was an alarmingly gummy smile. "Whaddaya say to a glass of sherry to celebrate?"

From the other side of the curtain, Eliza stifled a laugh.

"Well, I'll leave you two in peace," I said, slipping back through the curtain that defined the edges of their world.

Jess stood in the doorway in a pair of indigo scrubs, her freckles a dusting of cinnamon on steamed milk foam. "Hey." She adjusted her plait which curled down one shoulder. "How was Henry's blood pressure?"

“Better.” I looked away, knowing that I was blushing. I rocked back and forth on my feet. “Henry and Eliza have met.”

“A nursing home romance,” Jess said.

It was hard to tell in the fluorescent lights, but I thought she smiled.

By the next day, a tentative friendship had formed. I found myself spending more and more time seated by the window in the room that I came to think of as Henry and Eliza’s. I pretended to gaze at the street below, occasionally getting up and walking around as if to check all was in order, but really, I was with Jess, listening to the conversations that passed between Henry and Eliza. I would watch their interactions through the blue curtain that separated them with the same compulsiveness as when turning the pages of a riveting novel.

I would think of my flat; dishes from the last fortnight piled unceremoniously in the kitchen sink, the broken heat pump the landlord hadn’t fixed yet, leftover lasagna waiting for me like a stood-up Tinder date at the back of my fridge. I knew then I would rather bask in the warmth of other people’s happiness than return to my own life.

When the menu card came with breakfast, Henry would say “Right, what can I get you today, my darling?” in a voice as rich as chocolate pudding. As if he and Eliza were out to wine and dine at a classy restaurant, attended by waiters in crisp cocktail suits instead of nurses grafted to crumpled scrubs. Every meal was a new adventure, another opportunity to learn each other’s eccentricities and rewrite their pasts together.

Carbonara and they were ambling, arms linked, down the cobbled streets of Rome, standing where Caesars once stood, gazing at the crumbling ruins of human history. Two overlapping dots on a world map.

Egg sandwiches and they were picnicking at Brighton Beach, lounging on collapsible beach chairs, rubbing in sunblock and shouting, “Race you in!” while the sunlight turned the sea into a glittering jewel.

Schnitzel and they were wandering through Christmas markets in Vienna, catching snowflakes on their tongues, the whole world lit up in gold under a blue infinitely deeper than the curtain between them.

Vanilla ice cream and they were in a gelateria in Florence, smiling at each other across the table. They would take each other's wrists like wedding vows under the watchful gaze of Botticelli, Caravaggio, and da Vinci at the Uffizi, posing for portraits at the birthplace of the Renaissance and their life together.

Henry and Eliza didn't talk all day. They were just as content wrapped up in cosy blankets of silence. Because it was their silence. They didn't need to fill it with words.

After they fell asleep, I would return to the window, watching the stars and the shadows the trees made in the relentless flicker of ambulance lights. Sometimes Jess would sit beside me. I'd catch her looking at me, but she always turned away when I noticed. I wanted to fill the silence between us, but I didn't know how. Instead, I closed my eyes and hugged my arms to my chest.

One night, Henry awoke, crying and trembling. He kept saying her name over and over like a prayer. "Eliza, Eliza, Eliza." A nightmare. "Another stroke," he whispered. "And it took her." Henry didn't believe me when I reassured him Eliza was still alive; she was in the next bed, beyond the blue curtain just as always. So, I pushed his bed close to hers.

"Eliza?" he whispered. When no reply came, he turned to me, eyes wide.

"Henry?"

He released a shuddering cry of relief.

"It's alright." Eliza's hand appeared through a gap in the curtain, fluttering. "I'm here."

Their hands connected across the gap, still trembling, but united.

The day Henry was discharged from the temporary respite care unit, I watched from the outskirts of the events as they happened. Slowly, he opened the curtain around Eliza's bed for the first time. Eliza lay in a blue and white gown. No makeup, hair unbrushed and frizzy, haloed across the pillow. Henry traced the lines of her washed-out cheeks, reading the poetry they carried. "My Eliza," he said.

"My Henry," she whispered back.

She embraced him and he promised to be back soon.

Henry visited Eliza every day after that. Every day he brought her a new bouquet of roses. The roses bled life into the beige walls, illuminating the indigo shadows under my eyes, the smudges in my lipstick, and the dusty windowsills with their sensuous red glow.

When Eliza was discharged, Henry picked her up dressed in his best suit.

Jess and I waved goodbye as Henry and Eliza walked away hand in hand, breathing in air that tasted of caramel leaves and dew on tall grasses.

"It's quiet without them," Jess said.

And I knew she didn't just mean the silence.

The roses would stay on the windowsill, safe within the walls of their vase, slowly wilting and crumpling into themselves, while Henry and Eliza continued their love story someplace else. I imagined them returning home to one or the other's house where there'd be fresh flowers and a checked tablecloth. Photo albums of Rome, Brighton, Vienna, Florence.

I followed Jess into the staffroom. It was raining outside, the windows fogged just enough to write on.

"Sugar?" Jess asked.

"No, just milk."

“Alright.” She leaned against the bench, looking at me thoughtfully. “I guess we’re back to our own lives now then.”

“I guess we are.”

We sipped our tea in silence.

“You look worried,” Jess said.

“Do I?”

“Yeah. Something on your mind?”

I examined the murky depths of my tea as if there were any actual tea leaves to read. As if I was the type of person who reads tea leaves. As if they would give me the answer I needed.

Jess stepped towards me. “Your hair,” she said. “It’s in your eyes.”

“Oh.”

I held my breath as Jess tucked the strand behind my ear. She smelled of tea, which was unsurprising, and, for some reason, rain on warm concrete.

“We could go out some time,” she said. “You know. Croissants and we’re in Paris?”

I was gripping the mug too tightly, my knuckles turning to red and white blotches. I imagined the porcelain collapsing in on itself, the shards of a trick mirror scattering across the floor, tea seeping into fabric like warm blood.

I could only be trusted with plastic. Cheap imitation.

The croissant would crumble to dust in my hands.

“No,” I said softly. “No, I’d rather not.”

She was quiet for a while. “Okay. Well. See you. I guess.”

I nodded. “Yeah. See you.”

I looked away so I could pretend not to see her crying.

Feeling numb, I dunked our mugs in soapy water, now empty, and set them on the rack to dry.

The mugs dripped soapy tears.

I sighed.

Adjusted my hair, which I didn’t really like tucked behind my ear anyway.

And headed back into the unit, the love story over.