Two Inches From the Heart

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Summary

Allison felt the bullet go through his shoulder as if it was her own body.

Notes

Title: Two Inches From the Heart
Rating: T for language, suicide
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Author’s Note: This whole idea literally came out of nowhere. I wrote it ages ago in a fit of random inspiration, and originally published it on ff.net, but I recently decided to tamper with it and tweak a few things that bothered me. Hope you like it!

Two Inches From the Heart

The Vernon phone was not in the habit of ringing after 8 PM, even on weekends.

So it came as a great shock when, at two o'clock in the morning, a sudden call rocked the husband and wife out of a deep sleep. After a moment of frantic searching in the dark with one hand,
Richard at last managed to grab the receiver.

"Hello?" he ground out, rubbing his eyes and forcing himself to sit up. Nancy turned on her bedside lamp and blinked up at him over her shoulder, unaware that one of her hair curlers had come loose. She watched her husband's face rapidly shift from annoyed to confused.

"I'm sorry, you said Bender? John Bender?" he spluttered. "That can't be right, why would he . . . well, what happened?"

Nancy propped herself up on an elbow, staring curiously at him. His expression sobered considerably.

She knew better than to question him when he hung up the phone and moved to get dressed.

The two of them tried to head upstairs quietly – it was pretty late, after all – but it turned out that John's father was still awake.

Considering all the wild stories John had told her about his old man, Carl Bender was not exactly what Allison had imagined. All she found was an older, balder, fatter version of his son, with the same dark eyes and complexion. A vision of John in thirty years.

The sight of him pulled the two teenagers up short, halting in their tracks. He was hunched over a bottle of beer at the kitchen table, his broad shoulders drawn up to keep the rest of the world at bay. He lifted his gaze up to meet them and took a lazy swig from the bottle.

The man was unmistakably drunk, which meant John had to be on guard.

"Hey," he began uncomfortably. "Uh . . . I was just getting Allie something to drink. We'll be heading out soon."

"At thiss 'our?" Carl belched, blinking unevenly.

"I'm taking her home."
“Not in my car, y’ain’t.”

"We were gonna walk, actually," John replied, slightly more defensive. Allison could already see the change in her friend's posture; his stance widened, his hands unconsciously balled into fists. She could imagine his chin jutting out ever so slightly, a taunt to hide the apprehension inside.

The older man turned his eyes on the girl standing beside his son. "You fucking 'er?" he asked her, leering.

Allison's eyes widened, and every muscle in John's body seemed to tighten all at once.

Carl snorted, taking another sip. “Christ. You got a new one every month.”

"Let's just go," she whispered, resting a hand on her friend's arm. John shook her off, still glaring at his father.

"She's my friend," he said icily, narrowing his eyes at the man before them.

"When was th' last time you had a girl here you weren't drillin', boy?" Carl asked, leaning back in the chair. The wood groaned underneath him. "'Sides, she's cuter than th' last one."

"Don't talk about her like that," his son shot back, a clear warning creeping into his voice. Allison bit her lip and backed away towards the door that lead down to the basement, where John's room was. Where they enjoyed at least the illusion of safety.

Carl stared long and hard at his son, remaining in his seat. He took another sip of beer and finally said, almost conversationally, "She left us, you know. Yer mom."

Allison's heart sank into the pit of her stomach, and she was suddenly very glad she couldn't see the look on John's face. The young man stayed where he was, perfectly still, but something inside him seemed to have wilted.

“When?”
"Few hours ago. Fuckin’ bitch left a note on the fridge.”

John glanced over at the fridge, but made no move towards it. For a moment he was silent, and then he managed a small shrug. "Well it’s not like you ever gave a shit about her in the first place, right?"

Carl slammed his beer bottle down so hard on the table that it shattered under his hand. Allison jumped. "The fuck ‘m I supposed to do now? Huh? Come on, smartass, you got any ideas?” he snarled. "What do I do now she’s gone? You gonna turn queer and keep this shithole straightened up for me? Gonna cook for me now? Huh?"

John took a step back, but refused to let go of his bravado. No way was he going to cower in front of Allison. "Why do you care?” he shot back. "You were a dick to her every day, and now you’re pissed at me ’cuz she got sick of it? What the fuck did I ever do?"

Suddenly Carl lurched to his feet and hurled the remnants of the bottle aside, his eyes huge and round. It was only then that the teens realized he had a revolver tucked into the front of his jeans.

Chest heaving, he grabbed it and pointed it unsteadily it at John, his aim off from the drink. "Iss all yer goddamn fault,” he wheezed. "You . . . you ruined everything.”

Allison made a noise in the back of her throat – something between a squeak and a whimper – and John instinctively moved to block her, his body taut and afraid.

"Ca – Dad . . ." he pleaded, hardly in a whisper. "Think about this. Think about what you’re doing."

Carl's breathing slowed, and his eyes seemed to glaze over. "You know . . . I didn't want you,” he mumbled, staring at nothing. "But I had to marry ’er. Had to keep you. She’d a left me if . . . if I didn’t . . . stupid Cath'lic bitch. Stupid fuckin’ . . ."

"Dad –“

Allison felt the bullet go through his shoulder as if it was her own body. She was too stunned even to scream as it shattered through the wood of the doorframe next to her head, barely inches away. Warm red drops splattered on her, and she tasted it in her mouth.
John's right hand came up and covered the hole, and he stared down at it for a moment as if in a daze. He then turned sluggishly and blinked at Allison behind him, seemingly unaware of the crimson pouring out between his fingers.

Carl watched it spread over his son's torso, seeping through the cheap cloth of his shirt, and then looked down at the hot gun in his hand. "Maybe it was me," he said aloud, almost inaudibly. But Allison heard every word.

With perfect calm, he raised the pistol to his temple. "Maybe I should've . . ."

John tried to cry out, tried to do something; he even managed to take a wobbly step forward, but Allison stayed frozen against the doorway and didn't even flinch when Carl pulled the trigger. She knew she should have looked away, shouldn't have seen the way his skull seemed to come apart from the inside. Shouldn't have seen the spray that snowed crimson against the kitchen cabinets. His body fell with an earth-shattering thud that resonated through the whole house.

For too long, neither of them moved.

Then John staggered forward and made to kneel at his father's side, but stopped and turned back to his stricken friend almost as if struck by an afterthought.

The look on his face made Allison sink slowly to her knees. She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t feel her own pulse.

"It . . . it'll be okay," he muttered, dropping down in front of her. He blinked once, twice, hard, before his eyes began rolling back into his head. He lifted a bloody hand to touch her, but couldn't seem to find anywhere to place it. Instead he let himself crumple backwards onto the floor, landing with such compulsive dignity onto his side that remembering it later would bring her to inconsolable tears.

A noise began clawing its way up her throat, gathering momentum as it rose, but she shoved a fist into her mouth and bit down on her knuckles almost hard enough to break the skin. She swallowed the pain, along with whatever sound it was fighting so hard to escape. She took a few deep breaths, unable to tear her eyes away from his bent shape on the linoleum.

She lifted her hand, slowly, using all her strength not to get sick, to tug on the phone cord and pull
down the receiver. She dialed 911. The dispatcher was prompt, professional, and reassuring. The call was short.

And in the silence that followed, Allison couldn't keep from staring at the hole in her friend's shoulder. It looked like it was growing bigger and bigger with every second, threatening to consume him whole and drag her down too.

He woke up with a strange numbness in his chest, and a dim light buzzing overhead.

It stung his eyes, and he squeezed them shut for a moment. His head was swimming. He felt like his limbs were made of sand.

"Fuuuuck," he groaned. Right away he figured he was high on something, possibly some kind of painkiller. He felt bandages on his chest and noticed for the first time that his left arm was in a sling. It was only then that he really realized he was in a hospital, and felt an instant wave of unease.

Before he had a chance to think back, a weird noise caught his attention. A familiar yelp that made his heart stir a little in the numb cage of his chest – a sound he would recognize anywhere in the world.

He turned his head just in time to see Allison flinging herself on his arm. His good arm, thankfully. In the split second he had to study her before she buried her face in the crook of his neck, he saw tears in her eyes.

"Easy there, Allie-May," he grunted, trying not to reveal how painful her embrace was (good arm or not, she jostled him a little). She sniffled noisily and moved her arms to wrap around his neck instead, gently this time. He could feel her shaking.

And then John remembered. He remembered everything, remembered why he was there, why his chest was wrapped up in white gauze, why his best friend was clinging to him so desperately. He remembered his dad falling, and how there was so blood red dripping down the white cupboards, it couldn't possibly have come from just one person —

His voice sounded hollow even in his own ears. "So. I guess my old man is . . ."
She nodded weakly against him. He swallowed and reached up with his mobile hand and rested it on her arm, the best he could do in way of a hug. He wondered if he should be feeling… something. More than this. There was a strange sort of nothingness. The near-total absence of a reaction. Probably shock. How long until it wore off?

Bothered by the silence, he finally let out a small, pathetic little laugh. Or at least, the closest thing he could manage to a laugh. "Well, I guess we should be grateful he didn't have the shotgun handy. You'd be visiting me in a morgue right now. And the kitchen would be a fucking mess —"

"Please don't," she whispered, tightening her hold on him. "That bullet missed your heart by two inches, John. Don't joke."

Slightly humbled, John patted her arm and fell silent. Two inches? He supposed being a wiseass wasn't the best way to deal with…this. But damn if he didn't know what else to do. His old man was dead. What was he supposed to do? Scream? Cry? Throw things? Nothing felt…fitting. Nothing felt real. This whole thing felt like a weird, slow dream.

After a while she released him and wiped her face with the back of her sleeve, looking paler than he'd ever seen her before. He licked his lips and tried to divert the subject elsewhere.

"Does anyone else know I'm here?"

"Just Brian. I knew he'd want to make sure you're okay."

He nodded. Good thinking. He wasn't sure how much, or even when exactly, he would want his friends to see him like this.

"Guess he'll be bulldozing through here soon, huh?" he snorted. "Flowers and chocolates and all."

Allison said nothing. She looked like she hadn't slept in years, her hair an agitated mess as if she'd run her fingers through it a hundred times. There were flecks of blood on her shirt. His blood. Which meant she hadn't even left his side to get cleaned up properly.

She caught his awed stare and smiled back awkwardly, before she abruptly remembered something. "I brought the note your mom left. Couldn't just leave it there."

A slight pang in his chest. "Hold onto it for now," he muttered, looking away. She stopped rummaging through her purse and glanced up at him. "I don't really wanna deal with that shit just."

She hesitated, but nodded and shook some hair out of her eyes. "Want anything?"

"Beer. Lots of beer."

"I don't think the doctor would approve —"

Somebody coughed uneasily at the doorway, interrupting her. They both looked up, and froze.

"Either there's something other than morphine in this IV," John managed at last, "or that's good ol' Dick Vernon standing in the doorway."

"What are you doing here?" Allison queried, staring at their principal in disbelief. She had never seen him in anything other than his 'Barry Manilow' suits, but it looked like he picked out his turtleneck and slacks while in the dark. His hair was tousled and wrought with cowlicks.

"I, uh . . . got a call from . . . well, here," he stammered, taking a cautious step into the room. "Told me that you, were . . . well, I had to stop by."

That actually surprised John. He hadn't expected much when, years ago, he had put down Vernon's information on his contact list after his folks finally got medical insurance. It had been more of a joke than anything – no way would Vernon actually give a rat's ass and come all the way down to Shermer Central Hospital just to make sure he was alive. As far as the man was concerned, John Bender could rot in a ditch somewhere. Or at least, that's what John figured. Apparently he was wrong.

Either that, or Dick just couldn't resist the opportunity to show the world what a decent man he was, condescending to help the school thug in his time of need.

His thoughts must have been reflected on his face. Vernon scratched the back of his neck, looking slight unsure of himself again, and Allison wordlessly excused herself from the room. She gave
John a lingering look as she left, and when the two men were suddenly alone, an oppressive silence took her place.

Vernon looked around him, sizing the room up, letting his eyes rest everywhere but on John's face. "I talked to the police. Heard about your dad. I'm sorry about that."

John stiffened and mentally inserted as much space between them as possible. "Whatever," he muttered, looking away. "No big loss."

The principal didn't seem to know what else he could say to sound sympathetic. He cleared his throat again and sat down on a chair a safe distance away from the bed.

"So where's your mother?" he asked. By the way John's expression darkened, he figured he probably should have avoided that question.

"No idea. Apparently she skipped town. For good, this time. Smartest thing she's ever done, probably," John shrugged neutrally.

Vernon looked almost afraid to speak again, in case he managed to bring up another painful topic. The two of them sat awkwardly together for a moment, before temptation got the best of him.

"I gotta ask, Bender," he sighed at long last. "What were you thinking, putting me on your contact list?"

John shrugged as best as he could, still not making eye contact. "Figured it would be a good way to piss you off," he replied tersely.

Vernon gave him a 'look'. "Shocking."

He threw back his head a bit, shaking hair out of his face with an acidic smile. "You telling me you'd pass up this opportunity? A chance to appear like the bigger man here?" he asked scathingly. "You might hate my guts — and Lord knows you're an asshole — but you know better than to refuse a call like this. You've got a reputation to consider, Dick. And just think what the neighbours would say if word got out that you ignored one of your precious students in a time of need."

Richard frowned, and John raised an eyebrow. "What . . . you thought I'd call you a saint, or
"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Bender. It doesn't change the fact that, out of all the people on that list, I was the only one who answered that call. So what does that tell you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at the young man before him.

John gave a dramatic sigh. "It tells me that I need to seriously update that list. I could have sworn I put my grandmother on there. Crazy old hag doesn't even care about her own 'sonny boy'."

Richard curled his lip in disgust. "Cut the bullshit for two seconds, will you? Do me that one favour. You may have fooled your little girlfriend out there with this tough guy crap, but it doesn't work with me."

"Right, right." John nodded seriously. "I guess you've 'known dozens like me' and 'we're all the same' and --"

"That's not it, smartass," Vernon cut him off. "My father killed himself too."

What followed was possibly the most stunned silence either of them had ever experienced.

"Right when I was about your age, in fact," Vernon went on, slightly more calm. Now that it was out there, it seemed pointless to try and cover it up.

John snapped his jaw shut and tried to mask his earlier astonishment, but even though he was staring resolutely at the foot of his bed, Vernon seemed to know he was hanging on every word. Relaxing a little, he leaned his elbows on his knees and blew out a long, heavy breath.

"And man, my mother, she was . . . well, she was bitter," he admitted. "Hell, she'd been bitter for years. Bad marriages do that to you, I guess. My dad was a terrible husband. He drank, he cheated, ignored us, he was always between jobs . . ."

At his long pause, John finally lifted his head. Vernon looked older than he'd ever looked before, in John's eyes. "So I shouldered the burden. I grew up. Thought I didn't really have a choice in the matter. Thought that if . . . if I worked hard, brought in money to pay the bills, took care of her and all that, maybe . . ." he paused and shook his head a little, as if finding the whole thing stupid even today. "Maybe I could make her happy. Because as shitty as it was for the two of them, I don't think she knew how to live her life without him. I think she missed him. And I hated myself for not being able to fix that."

John could hardly stand the look on his principal's face. It felt like he was invading someone's privacy on a level that should never be touched. He didn't quite know what to do with himself. He wanted to fidget, like he always did when he was uncomfortable, but this time he was too afraid to move a muscle.

"How did he do it?" he heard himself ask.

"Hung himself in the garage. I found him while I was pulling the car in after school."

John couldn't help but feel just the slightest bit of respect for the man.

"Look, Bender," Vernon sighed, finally meeting his eyes. "I don't know what happened between you and your dad in those last minutes you two had. But you're probably doing what a lot of kids in your position do. What I did. You're blaming yourself for something that was out of your control, something you can't be held responsible for. I know how that feels, and I know what it's going to do to you in thirty years, unless you realize, right here and now, that there was nothing you could have done to stop it. And nothing you can do now to make up for it."

It would have been a good time to say something. Anything. And there were words hovering on the tip of John's tongue, but he couldn't seem to force himself to speak while those eyes were watching him so closely.

At his silence, Vernon nodded once and rose to leave, and John felt a moment of panic at the thought of being alone with all these revelations.

"I could have been a better son," he blurted.

Vernon turned sharply and, for the longest time, just stared at him. Then, slowly, he moved back towards the bed. "I hope you don't mean that."

"I –" John cut himself off, deciding he should probably think through his next sentence carefully. "It's just that . . . my old lady left because he made her unhappy. He was always mad because I made him unhappy. I was always pissing him off. I ruined his life, so he ruined hers. That's why she left. And that's why he . . ."

Vernon leaned down and grabbed the rail at the edge of the bed, letting his head hang low for a
minute. "Jesus Christ," he muttered, so quietly that John almost didn't make it out. "Listen, son, you . . . you cannot carry a load like that for the rest of your life."

He exhaled heavily and lifted his head, looking incredibly tired. John was only vaguely aware of the fact that the man had just called him 'son'. He hadn't expected to feel oddly touched by that.

"Your mom left because your dad was a bitter, drunken asshole who was unfit to be a father. She left because she's an irresponsible woman who can't own up to her mistakes and do what's best for her kid. Now you tell me how any of that is your fault. Because I gotta say, from where I'm standing, it looks like you're the victim here."

He couldn't tell if the sudden flare in his heartbeat was out of anger or the fleeting hope the man wasn't bullshitting him.

Vernon’s tone softened a little. "Well, you've got one thing I didn't have back then. You've got yourself some friends, like Miss Reynolds out there, who, for some reason, seem to care about you. Don't screw it up and push them away like I did mine. Some bridges can't be unburned."

He straightened back to his full height and, amazingly enough, rested a hand on the young man's good shoulder. Without another word between them, he walked out of the room and left John sitting there with an uncomfortable weight in his stomach.

A moment later, Brian's concerned face poked cautiously through the door. "Hey, Bender. How are you holding up?"


Brian edged his way into the room. "I, uh . . . I would have brought flowers, but I figured you'd kick my ass for that, so . . ."

Allison slipped in behind him and gave his arm a little affectionate nudge as she made her way to sit on the edge of the bed.

John smirked a little. "I really do only need one arm to take you down."

"Well, um . . ." Brian went on, no less timidly, "I guess . . . I mean, I'm really sorry, Bender. About what happen –“
"You know what, man?" he interrupted, holding up a hand. "I've been down that road all night. Let's just not, right now. Thanks, but . . ."

"Yeah," his friend nodded. “Alright. Whatever you need.”

Allison reached down and gently took John's hand, giving it a squeeze, but didn't look at him. He guessed she was trying to hide tears again. Brian patted her knee, and then comically rolled his eyes at John, as if making fun of her attempt at subtlety. He half-grinned in reply, and then simply watched the two of them in a way he never had before. Brian, with his stupid jokes to lighten the mood, trying for all their sake to pretend that this was like any other Friday night. And Allison, quiet and still like a statue, with her occasional squeaks of laughter and piercing looks.

The realization that he could have died tonight was not too distant in his mind, and he felt a sudden weightlessness with the relief that he was still here. In spite of all the bullshit he was going to have to work through tomorrow, and the day after that, and the weeks and months and probably years after that, he was going to be okay. He wasn't, just yet. But he would be. Sooner or later he would have to walk back into that house and see the way the kitchen cupboards were painted with a fresh coat of white, and that his mother's coat wasn't in the hallway closet anymore. Maybe he'd see her again, maybe he wouldn't. But he wasn't going to carry anyone else's baggage ever again, especially not hers.

And he was never going to be a victim again, not for the rest of his life.

"Hey, Allie-May," he said quietly. "Feel like handing me that note my mom left?"

Nodding, she reached into her bag and fished around for a minute before pulling out the yellow slip of paper. Fighting to keep his fingers from shaking, John took it from her and stared down at it for the briefest of seconds.

Ignoring their sudden gasps, he tore it up and tossed the pieces aside, watching them drift to the dull, off white floor beside him. Brian and Allison exchanged baffled looks and then stared questioningly at him, but neither said a word.

His gaze sharpening on the girl sitting at his side. “I’m gonna be fine. We’re gonna be fine. Okay?”

Her eyes welling up, she gave him a watery smile and nodded.
He turned to Brian. “And you. Don’t you fucking go anywhere.”

The skinny blond couldn’t speak just then, too busy choking back his own tears, but he too nodded.

“Good.” John leaned back into the pillows and settled down to make himself more comfortable, closing his eyes. ”Now, if you two don’t mind, I need pass out for a while.”

“As long as you need,” Allie said quietly, rising from the bed.

Still unable to speak, Brian just squeezed his arm — much like Vernon had — before padding silently out the door behind her.

John felt as much as heard them leave, already succumbing to sleep. And for once, he didn’t fear that slow plunge into the dark. Didn’t need to hear any promises that the two of them would be there when he woke up.

There was no doubt in his mind.

No doubt at all.

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