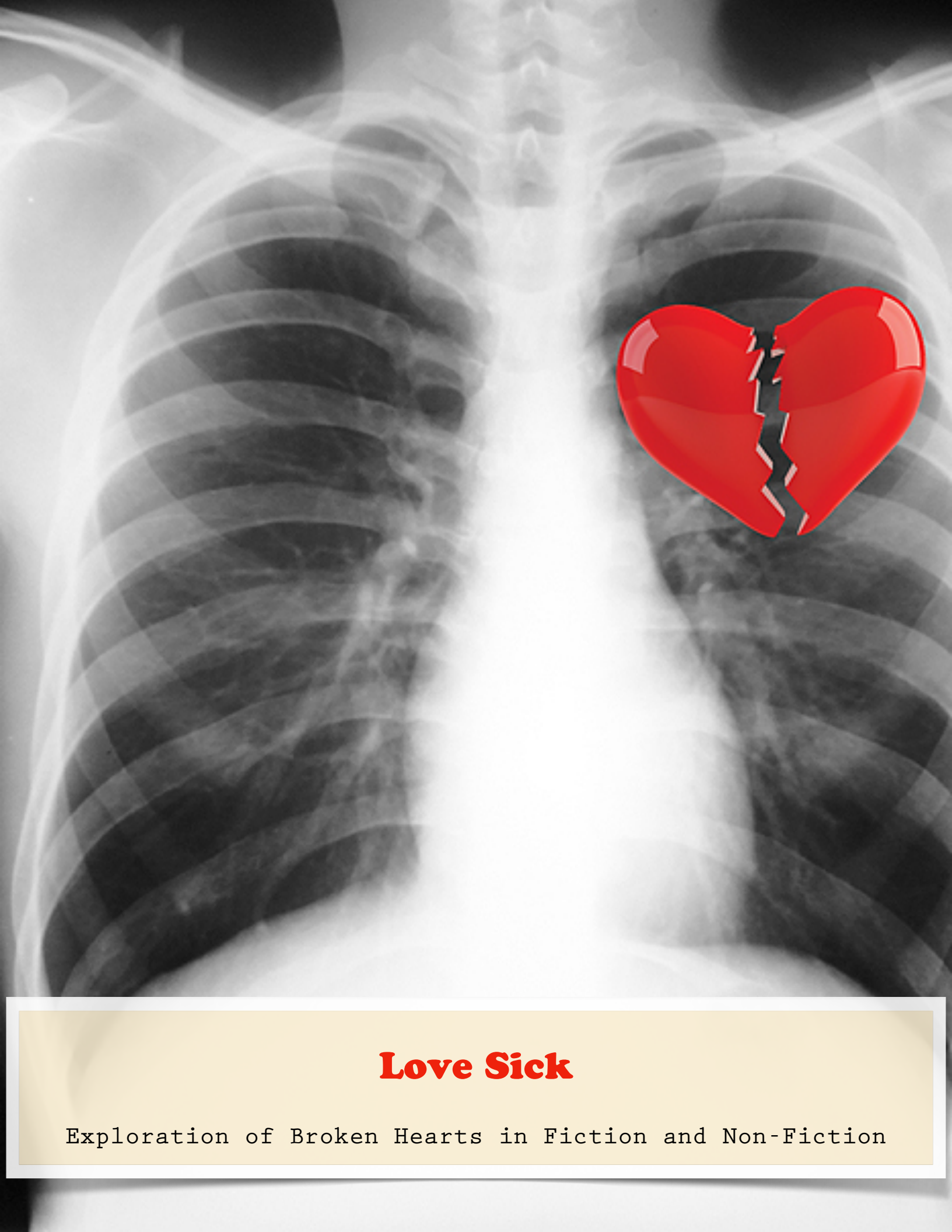


Love Sick

Exploration of Broken Hearts in Fiction and Non-Fiction

Fiction:
The Little Hunters at the Lake

by Yalvac Ural, retold by Jennifer Bassett

The sky above the little lake was full of birds — small birds, big birds, birds of all colours. We sat in the rain by Hikmet's garden wall and watched them.

"Winter's coming," I said to my three friends. "The birds are beginning to leave and fly away to warm countries."

Then a hunting dog came by. It stopped and smelled all of us, then went away.

"Is that Tekin's dog from the village?" asked Peker.

"Yes, it is," said Hikmet. "But what's it doing here in the rain?"

"Perhaps the hunters are coming out to the lake," I said. Then we saw them. There was Tekin, the driver Nuri, Halil, and two more men. They wore hunting clothes and carried guns. We all wanted to go with them. Peker spoke for all of us.

"I'd like to have a gun and be a hunter, too," he said.

Then Hikmet got up and ran into his house. He came back with something in a bag under his arm.

"What is it?" we said, but we already knew.

Hikmet opened the bag and we looked at the long, beautiful gun.

"Hey, that's wonderful!"

"Of course it is!"

"How much is it?"

"Forty thousand."

"Wow!"

"Your father's going to be angry."

"Yes. But I can put the gun back before he comes home."

"OK," we all said, and began to walk to the lake. First Hikmet carried the gun, then me, then Peker, and then Muammer. We were all hunters now.

“We’ve got five bullets,” Hikmet said. “So we can all shoot once. Then I can shoot a second time, with the fifth bullet, because I brought the gun.”

“And when we’ve got five dead birds, we can cook them and eat them,” said Peker.

At the lake we could see the hunters and hear the noise of their dogs. We, too, waited by the lake and watched. It rained, and stopped, then rained again. But there were no birds on the lake or in the sky — not one.
We waited, but then we began to think about Hikmet’s angry father.
“Shall we go home now and put the gun back?” said Muammer.

Then, suddenly, we saw three ducks. They flew down to the ground not far from us. Hikmet stood up quietly and tried to shoot one of the ducks. He didn’t hit it, of course, and the ducks flew away. But the gun made a very loud noise, and now the sky was full of thousands of birds!

During the day the birds hide around the lake, and the hunters wait for the evening before they begin to shoot. But we learned all this later.

Now the birds were afraid because of the noise. They all flew away and so the hunters had nothing to shoot.

The hunters began to chase us, shouting angrily. But we could run faster, and so we escaped. Soon we stopped, and began to talk and laugh.

“Where’s our duck dinner, then?” said Muammer.

I laughed. “Wait until tomorrow,” I said. “Or the next day — when Hikmet can shoot!”

”Hunters don’t always come home with lots of dead birds,” said Hikmet. “Listen. The birdseller Ali shoots birds. And who does he sell them to?”

“To the hunters!’ Peker said.

“Right!” Hikmet said. “And why? Because people laugh at hunters when they come home with nothing. So the hunters go quietly to Ali, buy his dead birds, and then they can talk about all their exciting hunts!”

Suddenly I saw some birds in the sky. “Be quiet,” I told my friends. I took the gun, put a bullet in it, and waited. When the birds were right above me, I shot. Two birds fell out of the sky and down to the ground. Shouting happily, we ran to the place. But just then, one of the birds flew back up from the ground, high into the sky. We were very surprised.

We soon found the other bird. It was big, with a long neck. Hikmet looked at it.

“It’s dead,” he said.

“The second bird was only hurt, perhaps,” said Muammer.

We looked carefully at the dead bird, but we all felt a little afraid. Was it really dead? High in the sky above us, the second bird flew round and round in circles, giving long, sad cries.

We began to carry our dead bird home, and after a time the bird in the sky flew away.

“When are we going to eat this bird?” asked Muammer.

“Tomorrow,” said Hikmet.

“Who’s going to cook it?”

“We are!” “But we don’t know how!”

“Let’s go to the birdseller Ali and ask him.”
We put the gun back in Hikmet’s house and ran to Ali’s shop. There were a lot of dead birds in the shop, but our bird was different.

“Hello, boys,” Ali said. “What can I do for you?”

“We shot a bird,” we said, “but what is it, and how do we cook it?”

Ali smiled. “Well, you boys are better hunters than the men!”

We put the bag with our bird on Ali’s table and opened it. Ali stopped smiling. He quickly put the bird back into the bag, and for a minute or two he said nothing.

Then he said, “Look, children, you don’t understand. You can’t eat this bird! Take it back, and bury it in the ground.”

We looked at him with our mouths open in surprise. Then Ali asked, “Was his mate with him there?”

“There was another bird, but it flew away,” said Hikmet.

“Good,” said Ali, and smiled. He began to say something, but stopped.

“Did we really do something terrible?” asked Hikmet.

“Listen,’ said Ali. “These birds are called cranes — you know, the famous ‘crane’ in our songs. Hunters never shoot them because they are the ‘symbols of love’.”

We did not understand this, but we understood the words ‘take it back and bury it’. It was nearly dark, but we went back to the lake and found the right place. Then we dug a hole and buried our crane there. I think we all cried a little, because we felt so sad.

_____

After that day we never talked about hunting. We had a long cold winter that year. In the spring, we began to play outside again, but there was still some snow on the ground.

“Let’s go and look at our crane’s grave,” Hikmet said one day.

We all wanted to do this, but Hikmet was the first to say the words. We walked quietly to the lake, then Peker said, “I asked Dad about ‘symbols of love’ one day.”

“And what does it mean?” asked Muammer.

“It means that cranes know how to love. Their love is the best and the strongest in the world.”

There was still snow on our crane’s grave, but we could see two snowdrops too. Snowdrops are always the first flowers of spring. Hikmet began to move the snow away from the top of the grave, but suddenly he stopped. There was something under the snow. Then we saw it.

It was our crane. It lay there on the ground, icy cold, on top of its grave. We felt very sad.

“Who took it out?” said Peker.

“Perhaps it was wild dogs,” answered Hikmet. “And then they couldn’t eat it because it was frozen.”

“Oh, why didn’t we dig a deeper hole?” cried Muammer.

“We can do that now,” said Hikmet. “God stopped the wild dogs from eating our crane, so now we must bury it deeper.”

Sadly, we began to dig. Soon the hole was open, but then we suddenly saw something, and stopped very quickly. There was another crane in the hole. We looked at it, and felt afraid. Nobody could speak.

Hikmet took our crane out. Then he put it on the ground and began to cry. We all cried too, but we did not know why.

Hikmet stood up. “I was afraid of this,” he said, “and I didn’t want it to happen.”

We did not understand.

"Cranes, symbols of love, please forgive us,” Hikmet said quietly. Then he looked at us. “Cranes are very loving birds,” he said, “and the male and the female stay together all their lives. Cranes always live in warm places, but when a crane dies, its mate goes to a cold snowy place. Then it dies in the snow, and nobody can eat it. People do not eat birds that die in this way. And hunters never shoot cranes because they know all these things.”

Our hearts were very sad. We buried the two birds together in the hole and put snowdrops all over their grave. And after that day, every time we heard the word “love," we thought about the cranes. And we never forgot to go to the grave every spring.

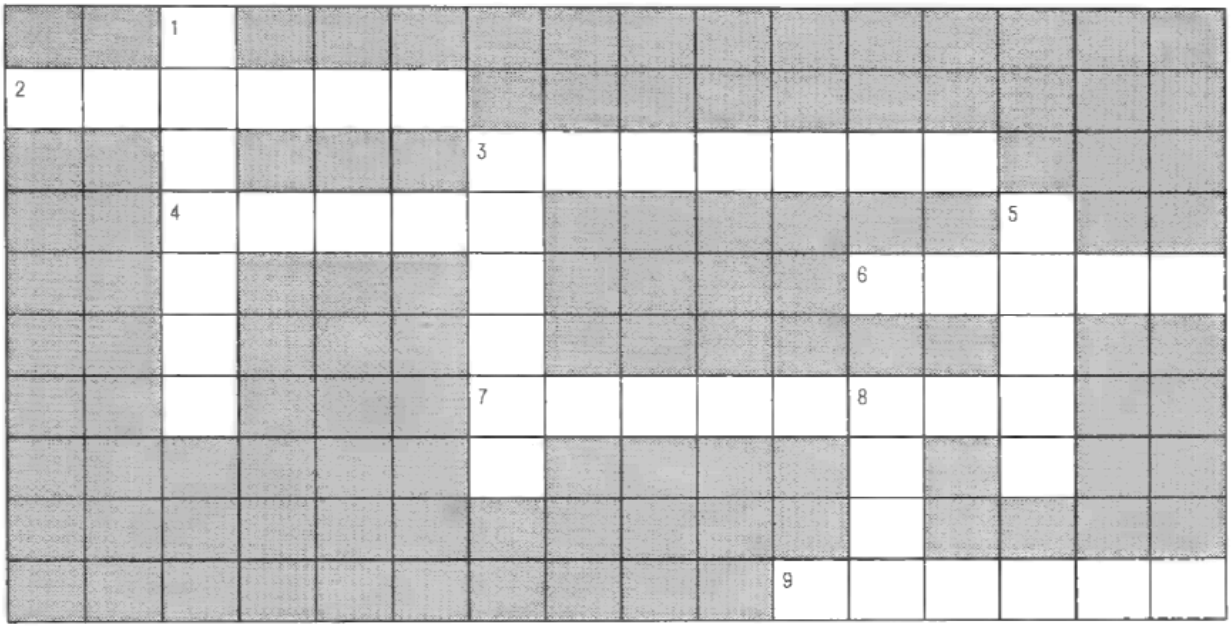
One spring morning when I woke up, I saw a pair of cranes at my window. I ran to the window, but they flew away. Then I saw some snowdrops there. I took the flowers in my hand, held them to my face, and began to cry. Some minutes later, I heard someone at the door.

Hikmet was there, his eyes red from crying. There were snowdrops in his hand too.

“They forgive us,” Hikmet said. “The cranes forgive us.”

WORD FOCUS

Use the clues below to help you complete this crossword with words from the story.



ACROSS

2 Ali told the children to bury the dead bird in the _____
3 Hikmet got his father's gun because the boys wanted to be ____ like the men.
4 The boys buried the birds together and put flowers on their____.
6 The big bird with a long neck was a_____.
7 In Ali's shop, Hikmet asked Ali, "Did we do something _____?"
9 Hunters never shoot cranes because they are a_____ of love.

DOWN

1 "Cranes, symbols of love, please ___us," Hikmet said quietly.
3 When the boys found the crane's dead mate, their ___ were very sad.
5 Cranes are loving birds and stay with their___ all their lives.
8 Ali told the boys to____ the dead bird.

STORY FOCUS 1

In a story, the narrator is a character who tells the story. What do you think about the narrator of *The Little Hunters at the Lake?* Choose one of these adjectives for the first gaps, and then write as much as you like to finish the sentences.

afraid, excited, happy, pleased, right, sad, sorry, surprised, wrong

1. I think that the narrator was____ because _____.
2. I think that the narrator was___to _____.
3. The narrator was _____ when _____.
4. When they found the second dead crane, the narrator was _____ because _____
5. When the narrator found snowdrops at his window, he was _____ because _____.

STORY FOCUS 2

Match these halves of sentences to make a paragraph of five sentences. Who do you think the narrator is here? _____

1. When I got home, . . .
2. I looked everywhere, . . .
3. Then I thought, “Hikmet took the gun . . .
4. I was angry . . .
5. Finally, when Hikmet came home, . . .

6. . . . because he wants to be a hunter.”
7. . . . .I locked the gun in a cabinet and told him to leave it alone.
8. . . . my gun was not in its usual place.
9. . . . but I could not find it.
10. . . . because guns are dangerous for young boys.

Non-Fiction:
"Yes, You Can Actually Die of a Broken Heart"

BY DR. SIAN HARDING

DECEMBER 1, 2022 7:00 AM EST - *Time Magazine*

Harding, a recognized authority in cardiac science, is Emeritus Professor of Cardiac Pharmacology in the National Heart and Lung Institute at Imperial College London. She is the author of The Exquisite Machine: The New Science of the Heart.

On May 26, 2022, Joe Garcia died suddenly of a heart attack just two days after his wife, Irma, was killed in the Uvalde, Texas school shooting. The papers reported a Garcia's family member saying, "I truly believe Joe died of a broken heart."

As a cardiac scientist working in this field, I am regularly asked to comment on tragic cases like these. Sometimes they are celebrities such as Debbie Reynolds, who died soon after her daughter, Carrie Fisher. But often, they are long-married couples who pass away on the same day or soon after.

These events can be rare and sporadic, so it is hard to find a pattern. But large and well-controlled studies are now confirming that this is a real phenomenon and are measuring its extent. A U.S. study on short and long-term associations between widowhood and mortality, following 12,000 people who are over 50 years old and in stable couples, showed that male participants were nearly twice as likely to die in the three months following their partners death, and that increased death rates were still seen over a year later.

Death from heart disease after bereavement can be sudden, especially when the circumstances are devastating as with the Uvalde shooting. Sudden cardiac death is usually caused by a massive disturbance in heart rhythm (or arrhythmia) called ventricular fibrillation, either as part of a heart attack, or just by itself. The heart twists and writhes in an uncoordinated way, and is no longer able to pump blood into the body. Without immediate CPR or access to a defibrillator, death occurs in around four minutes.

The key instigator of this disastrous effect is adrenaline. We know that adrenaline is the heart stimulant that makes our hearts beat harder and faster when we exercise or in times of stress. Adrenaline is part of the fight-or-flight mechanism that has evolved to get us out of danger, and it brings extra calcium into the heart cells to increase the force of beating. Blood levels of adrenaline shoot up when we are under threat.

But adrenaline has a dark side—too much can throw the heart into calcium overload and uncontrolled arrhythmia.

Bereavement is a huge emotional shock, and this can cause a rapid surge of adrenaline. Other extreme physical or emotional stresses can have the same effect: earthquakes and other natural disasters, unaccustomed intense exercise, arguments,

or taser stunning. Watching sport is a strong trigger, with cardiac admissions to hospitals regularly peaking during big football finals like the World Cup.

Most of us can cope with even very distressing events without tipping into drastic heart collapse. But what is it that makes the difference between dying of a broken heart and surviving a stressful event?

The clue has come from an unlikely source, another disease called broken heart syndrome, but with a very different demographic and outcome: Takotsubo syndrome. Takotsubo differs in that it is predominantly (80 to 90%) seen in post-menopausal women, compared to sudden cardiac death, which is 80% male. Exactly the same triggers are involved in sudden cardiac death, but the death rate is far lower—around 5%.

Typically, the Takotsubo patient comes into hospital after a stressful event and with all the signs of a heart attack: chest pain, electrical signal changes, and increased markers of heart damage in the blood. But when their heart is scanned, no blood vessel blockage or death of cardiac muscle is seen.

Instead, the cardiac heart muscle undergoes a very unusual pattern of partial paralysis, often around the lower part of the heart, known as the apex. New imaging picking up this pattern was first used in Japan over 20 years ago on patients being admitted for heart problems during an earthquake. The Japanese cardiologists named the condition after the tako-tsubo—a fishing pot meant for trapping octopus—because the left ventricle of the heart resembles this type of pot.

While there is an immediate danger to life from the heart failure, the most striking phenomenon is that recovery can be very rapid—days or weeks. Patients can walk out of hospital apparently perfectly well. Chronic heart failure this severe is usually very persistent and hard to reverse, even with the best treatments.

The triggers for sudden cardiac death are also the triggers for Takotsubo syndrome: bereavement and other strong emotional or physical stresses. Even pleasant but still emotional events, like a surprise birthday party, have been known to do the same. Two particular triggers stand out: an adrenaline-secreting tumor and the epi-pens used for anaphylactic shock, which contain adrenaline. Adrenaline (and drugs that mimic it) is the culprit in Takotsubo, as well.
But why is adrenaline now depressing heart function in these circumstances instead of stimulating it? And more importantly, why are post-menopausal women reacting in this very different way?

We decided to test this out. In a laboratory, we set up a system to explore the mechanism of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy. Rats were anaesthetised, and given a dose of adrenaline which would be equivalent (adjusted for their smaller body weight) to a single epi-pen treatment in a person. Amazingly, just this one dose was able to

produce the Takotsubo pattern of paralysis at the apex of the rat heart, and the effect was reversible as the dose wore off over the course of a hour.

Using this model, we were able to work out that very high adrenaline could switch to a new signaling pathway that temporarily depressed cardiac function. Intriguingly, this new signaling system was also linked to known protective pathways which act to shield the heart against damage.

At last, we were ready to see if blocking this new signaling pathway would prevent Takotsubo, hoping that we would have a targeted treatment for the disease. Patients with Takotsubo were being treated supportively with the hope they would recover spontaneously, but there was no specific drug to give.

Our rats were given the blocker together with adrenaline to try to stop the Takotsubo effect, and it worked. The contraction of the heart was not depressed. But, to our dismay, blocking the new pathway also triggered massive arrhythmia. The high dose of adrenaline was overstimulating the heart and flooding the cells with an excess of calcium. Now, the adrenaline was mimicking the effects seen in sudden cardiac death, with ventricular fibrillation and rapid failure of cardiac function.

Our hoped-for Takotsubo cure was a disaster. However, it gave us a new and important insight into the disease. Maybe Takotsubo is an effort by the body to avert the worst consequences of a massive adrenaline surge, by switching signaling to a protective mode. The heart is temporarily shut down to prevent a worse outcome, and maybe this protective pathway is active in most of us—but in a less dramatic form—to save us from the effects of sudden stress. For instance, during panic attacks, people can report feeling as if they are having a heart attack, but this quickly wears off as they recover.

Finally, what is the basis for the sex difference in this response to adrenaline? Estrogen, we know, is a powerful protector against arrhythmia, and younger women seem less likely to get either of the broken heart syndromes. The difference in risk of sudden cardiac death between men and women is greatest below the age of 50. My personal conjecture is that the risk from the physical and emotional stress of labor and birth has led to an evolutionary pressure for protective mechanisms against adrenaline toxicity in fertile women.

Women in the menopausal range will have decreasing levels of estrogen, but still some residual amounts. Perhaps they are moving from the protected status of the younger women towards the more vulnerable male situation, but with still some remaining advantage? Men were 90% more likely to die in the first three months after bereavement, but for women in the 50-year-and-older range this figure was only 50%.

So yes, you can die of a broken heart, but your risk depends on both your sex and age. Perhaps, then, the better question remains: if you can die of a broken heart, why are so many of us spared?