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Valentine

Holly opened an art file called "Broken Hearts" and watched as they appeared on her computer screen. Slackened pulmonaries. Swollen ventricular chambers. Bruised aortas. A collection of cardiac parts in various states of disease and distress, all rendered with the improbable calm of a classical painting. She was a medical illustrator with clients all around the world. Her latest assignment, for a Swiss pharmaceutical company, was to show how a new drug could dissolve arterial plaque. Clicking onto a half-finished drawing of an artery, she enlarged it so that it looked like a corridor. Then she began the meticulous task of lining its walls with plaque, making them look like gritty plaster deposits that could never be scraped off.

Her studio was on the third floor of her house, insulated in a dense winter quiet that permeated the soft jazz playing in the background. As she drew platelet after platelet, the silence pressed in. Then she heard the front door open; her daughter Nicole home from school.

"Nicky. Up here," she called, printing out what she had done so far on her new printer. It sat on a shelf next to plastic models of the skull, heart and intestines. To lessen their macabre effect ("It's like the set of a slasher film in here," her ex-husband Carl had once remarked), she had added deliberately arty touches. Plants. Posters. Homemade pots in upbeat colours that couldn't remotely suggest blood.

"How was school?" she asked, when Nicole appeared, conscious that her voice had the eager bounce of someone who hadn't spoken to anyone for hours.

Nicole shrugged. She was fourteen. Submerged, as usual, in a pair of mammoth overalls that puddled into lumpen folds at her feet, stunting her height by several inches. Slouched in the door frame, she reminded Holly of an overgrown toddler waiting to be set in a Jolly Jumper.

"A good day? Bad?" Holly prompted.

"It was all right," Nicole replied vaguely. "Are you working on the computer tonight?"

"I don't have to. Why?"

"I need to use your colour printer."

"Not a problem." Nicole had her own computer, which contained video games and the Net. (Holly suspected also, but never asked, secret journals divulging her true feelings about the divorce three years ago.)

"What are you printing?"

"A card," Nicole said, then hesitated. "A Valentine's card."

"God. Is that here already?" Holly asked, although she was well aware of the assault of cupids and hearts in store windows.

"Two weeks."

Holly restrained herself from asking if the card was for anyone special. So far Nicole and her friends had shown no signs of being interested in boys-not that Holly was certain what these signs would be. (Or maybe she didn't really want to know, the topic being too close to her own predicament of thinking of starting to date again at an age she considered to be well past her "best before" date.) But she imagined that interest would involve wardrobes more beguiling than their group uniform of asexual overalls.

What did her daughter's body look like under all that cloth, she wondered. Nicole had become very private of late, undressing only behind closed doors. The cropped tops she occasionally wore revealed no jutting ribs, ruling out at least, the likelihood of an eating disorder.

"Do you want some help with the printing? The printer still has a few bugs."

"No, I can do it," Nicole murmured, heading downstairs, leaving Holly with her magnified artery. Almost finished, it looked like a calcified catacomb, access narrowed to a slit. Just like my own feelings, she thought grimly, adjusting the hue. And there was no wonder drug that could open them up.

Holly could become lost in these drawings: awed at the infinite diversity of an anatomical structure; a cell, which up close became a landscape with shapes resembling rivers, lakes and forests. She was glad of this, for she felt self-conscious about her work, even embarrassed at the science geek associations. But drawing was something she did well. Even as a child she could replicate life around her, a skill she didn't show off, but pragmatically honed, like typing to be used at a later date. She'd been in arts at university when she met Carl, a shy, civic-minded graduate student with an unfinished thesis on racial biases. When he went into law, she switched to medical illustration, a lucrative specialty that could support them until he finished his degree. It also enabled her to be a stay-at-home mom. It doesn't get any better than this she often thought in the halcyon early days of their marriage, Nicole in her playpen behind the art table, teething on a piece of plastic intestine. When Carl would come home, frazzled by the transition from academe to the corporate world, he would hug her and gratefully murmur, "My rock."

But rocks can be moved whether they like it or not. She had sensed something was wrong one December. It was a foreboding that activated a frantic cheeriness, made her bake too many Christmas cookies, put up too many outdoor lights blinking out their bright message of alarm. "Another busy year has flown by," her annual Christmas letter began. Carl making partner in his firm, Nicole singing in the Grade six choir, the family room renovation, ski holiday in Vermont. But, she had felt like adding: The whole time we were skiing, Carl persisted on going on higher mountains where Nicole and I couldn't follow him. It was as if he were purposefully, willfully, increasing the distance between us.

"We've become like brother and sister," he had told her.

Holly had been making marzipan, rolling tiny balls of dough into coconut. All she could think of was the underpants she was wearing-beige, well-worn-and how she wished she were wearing one of her lacy pairs (although she wasn't sure they fit any more, confirming his opinion that she had let herself become too comfortable).

"Is there someone else?" she had asked.

"A woman I work with. Another lawyer. You don't know her."

"Let me guess. One of those young, fast-track, women who works and plays just as hard as the boys."

Carl had been fingering coconut flakes between his thumb and forefinger, one by one, like a rosary. There was a long silence, then his voice caught with a dark protectiveness.

"No, she's not that type of woman at all. She reads poetry. She can quote Rilke."

Holly had made the divorce clean and easy. She had seen a look in his eyes that went beyond pain, guilt or sorrow. It was pity. He felt pity that someone with her solid sensibilities would never know the love that had the power to break up a secure marriage. She had wanted to get out the range of his dramatic love, which by its very nature would devalue the one that had come before it. More importantly, she didn't want Nicole exposed to it. Not when she was about to become a teenager, a precarious time for self-worth-especially if you were female.

The next day Holly found herself experiencing another type of discord; her heart file wouldn't open. And the client had phoned asking to see the artery illustrations. She pulled down various files looking for the problem. Then a window came up saying it was with the printing port.

Of course. Nicole printing out her Valentine's card last night, probably screwed something up. New equipment was notorious for glitches. After a hopeful bout of clicking, the printing icon returned to normal. But when Holly opened her file, another image rushed up at her.

At first she thought it was soft porn from one of the Internet sites. Some weird transmigration that must have occurred with her tinkering. There were two photos of a woman in bed wearing a black bra, garter, panties, stockings and heels. Her face was covered by a heart. In the one photo, she was lying on her stomach, hands under her chin, legs crossed coyly at the ankles; in the other, she was seated with her breasts thrust out in an exaggerated cheesecake pose. Underneath the photos was a caption. It read: "How would you like me this Valentine's Day? Over easy? Or sunny side up?"

She realized it was Nicole when she recognized the bedpost. The one they had found at a garage sale and sponge-painted together. Barely breathing, she took in the figure that had lately been hidden from her. Taut waist. Small breasts. Long thighs that swelled tulip-like at the top giving every indication that they would one-day bulge like Holly's. And a pert little detail-the garter belt had bows at the side. Slowly enlarging the head, she saw that the heart had been cut out of red cardboard, and pasted over the face after the photo was taken, in a hurry evidently, for glue showed at the sides. Her heart began to race, sharp palpitations that nicked her chest wall. Then she shut down the computer, and let herself be swallowed into its harsh after-hum.

After Carl married the lawyer he left her for, he moved to Ottawa to take a prestigious government job. Nicole visited him a few times a year, and afterwards, Holly would resist the urge to probe for too many details about his new life. Too much potential for classless behaviour: obsessing, devising put-downs, (although she was pleased that an English professor friend considered Rilke a "sentimental" poet), and most demeaning, being goaded into desperate one-upmanship by latching herself onto any (if any) available male. As far as relationships went, she considered herself closed for repairs. Something of the good role model in this she thought. Rebuilding, not blaming, taking time to heal, and emerging, she hoped, with some wisdom for the pain.

"We have to talk," she now said to Nicole who was slumped in an armchair in the family room watching TV.

Nicole nodded, stiffening at the over-rehearsed quality in Holly's voice. Once again she was submerged in cloth: flood pants and an oversized

lumberjack shirt, the collar of which brushed her eartips. With her hair pulled back, her face was moon round, the burgeoning cheekbones still layered in baby fat. How would you like me this Valentine's Day? Over easy? Or sunny side up?

"I found your card in my computer. Apparently when you used the printer it screwed up something on the hard drive and got into my system."

Holly held up the offending disc where the image was now stored. Ignoring it, Nicole sank deeper into the chair, and crossed her arms tightly around her chest.

"I don't know what to ask first. Who was it for? Are you having a relationship with this person? Is this what fourteen-year-old girls do these days, send cards like this?"

"It was a joke," Nicole blurted, shamed and hostile.

"A joke."

"I was just fooling around. I didn't send it."

But you posed for it, Holly thought. When I was out, or even when I was upstairs in my studio. Snapping on garters while I was hunkered over an arid artery drawing. The thought of having to deal with this, when she had already dealt with so much, gave rise to a new rage. Focusing on a plaid pocket that puffed up from Nicole's crossed arms, she asked, "Where did you get the lingerie?"

"Not from your underwear drawer."

Holly flinched, then recovered. "Obviously not. You went out and bought it?" Nicole stared harder at the TV, an inane commercial with dancing cats. Holly wanted to march over and switch it off except her legs had turned to plaster. Who was this guy (or boy-surely he wouldn't be more than sixteen?), who had gotten her daughter in garters and heels? He would no doubt be arrogant, blasé from the daily spectacle of girls throwing themselves at him, flaunting their neediness (and this is what upset her most; how could her daughter be so obvious?). Since the divorce, they had fallen into a polite reserve around each other-a shared pride, Holly thought, in not exposing one's wounds. Now an unsettling realization crept in. Maybe Nicole hadn't appreciated the stoic way she had left the marriage. Maybe she felt contempt that Holly didn't fight for her man.

"We're going to have to talk about this again when we can both deal with it better," Holly said, her voice starting to shake.

"I told you I didn't send it. Just forget about it, OK?"

She had read somewhere that it took three years to heal after a divorce. Which seemed about right for her. It was not to be underestimated, a lengthy recovery period. There was absolution there, respecting the frailty of the hobbled ego, honouring lowered expectations, admitting you weren't up to certain things.

But her metaphorical retreat under the covers was ending. And the whole reason for taking time to heal seemed lost, like a computer file floating off into cyberspace. What she had emerged to was the probability that her adolescent daughter was having sex. And not just sex. Wild sex. Kinky sex. The kind that had always been slightly beyond Holly, and which mocked her hopes that Nicole's first boyfriend would be a nice, safe sort, non-threatening to both of them. Since their

last exchange, they hadn't spoken to one another. But who could Holly talk to about this? Not Carl who would judge her child raising. Not her friends and family with whom she was trying to appear more intact. And not herself, certainly not herself, because even thinking about the subject made her thoughts contract into an immobilized crouch.

"We've become like brother and sister," he had told her.

But the truth was, hadn't they always been? The question would bob up in her mind over the past three years, and she would push it back, refusing to let it surface. Now she wondered, had she been a kind of test run for Carl? Representing the shallow, safe end of the pool where he could practice growing into what he wanted to be, always knowing he could touch bottom until he had the confidence to venture out into deeper waters?

The silence between her and Nicole continued into the week. Then one afternoon after school, Holly heard her walking up to her studio, a slow, shambling step she used to rejoice in when the house was booming in emptiness. But it wasn't the same daughter anymore. It was one who was scaling the peaks of sexual cunning, who had judged her mother as not up to the challenge of keeping a man. Hardly a role model to aspire to. Holly was finishing the "after" part of her artery illustration, showing how the client's drug could dissolve plaque as easily as soap bubbles. When Nicole entered the room, she didn't turn, but focused more intently on the screen. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Nicole dawdling about the shelves, picking up the plastic intestine model, setting it down.

"Do you have a moment?" Nicole finally asked.

"A moment. I have to get this drawing done."

"I want to talk about the Valentine's Day card."

Her voice collapsed on the last word, confused and lost. Holly faced her daughter, the effort of feigning composure pinching her mouth into a prim line. But was there anything to feel threatened about? Nicole slumped forlornly against the shelves, her hands crammed into the pockets of a pair of overalls, the crotch of which barely floated above the floor. The baggy shirt she wore with them made her body look not only shrunken, but flaccid too, as if all her bones had been removed. Nonetheless, Holly looked back at her computer, terrified of spotting a black bra strap peeking behind the shirt collar.

"All right. Talk," she said coldly.

"It was a joke."

"So you said."

"No. It wasn't what it seemed. I didn't even do it for guys. I did it for girls."

Are you going to tell me you're a lesbian? Holly panicked. Did this explain the tight-knit group, the willfully asexual wardrobes?

"Oh no. It's not like that," Nicole blurted, seeing her look. "It was like this...this...dare we decided to do for Valentine's Day. Like a contest to see who could come up with the raunchiest card. We were going to send it to some guys we liked with our faces covered so they'd never know who it was. We were just fooling around."

"A dare? You did it on a dare?"

"Yeah. We didn't even send them out because..." Her shoulders jerked as if suddenly poked. "Everything's gotten really weird between us."

It all poured out. A misunderstanding in the group. So-and-so not speaking to so-and-so; a typical teen tiff that could be lifted from a 50s sitcom. The blurry incoherence of Nicole's speech, her raw distress about the disharmony between her friends brought Holly's guard down a little. Was there a chance she was telling the truth? Could it be peer pressure, rather than kinky sexual exploration that had led to this card? Nicole had always been a follower, deeply loyal to her friends, probably too eager to please. There was nothing in her carriage to suggest that she was anything other than what she appeared to be: an adolescent temporarily unmoored from her peers, with no recourse but to reach out to her mother.

Holly's jaw began to relax, then re clenched at the possibility that she might be deluding herself. "So what you're saying is, you didn't send these cards?"

"No. I don't even know if we were going to. They were pretty embarrassing."

"Who took the picture of you?"

"I did. I put my Polaroid on a tripod. I had to jump on and off the bed to set and reset it every time I did a pose. My face looked really stunned in the pictures. I'm glad it had a heart covering it."

"Did the other girls pose like you?"

Nicole flushed, and glanced away. "No. We all did different things."

Holly nodded, shutting off images of crotch shots and leather collars. No, it was too much to absorb for now, the topic had to be closed, fast, fast.

"Was there any particular... person you were going to send this card to?"

Another flush, this time deeper. "No...not really."

"Where did you get the underwear?"

This last question (which Holly had not intended to ask) hung in the air with a portentous weight as if it were the definitive answer to something. To her relief, Nicole screwed up her nose like a grossed-out child.

"From The Bay. I told the salesperson it was a gift so I got to take everything back but the stockings. And that kind of made me mad because they cost like six bucks and I'm never going to wear them again. They felt...so weird against my skin."

Of course it could all be a lie, Holly thought later as she clicked in the finishing touches on her drawing. A ruse devised by her sexually precocious daughter to lull her into a false sense of

security, keep her off her back. It was past midnight, her studio throbbing with a disjointed quiet that comes from thoughts that won't stop spinning. Holly decided to accept for now that Nicole was telling the truth, that it was all misguided peer pressure. Not entirely innocent, but at least not malignant. The cyst that scares, but doesn't spread. A false alarm that might be hiding a deeper devastation, but for now, a reprieve.

She looked at her drawing, which depicted the inner lining of the artery after the drug's treatment. Plaque-free, clean as a whistle, the hard chrome of a car that had never been scratched. A fallacy this. In real life, the artery would be pitted and pocked from scar tissue, its corroded surface always susceptible to more damage. Yet wasn't that the great lie about healing, she thought as she printed out the page. Sometimes it didn't mean getting well at all. Sometimes it just meant adjusting to another kind of pain.