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## A HEART IN SASKATOON

THE GIRL, SIX OR SEVEN YEARS at the most, Winnie-the-Pooh patches on the knees of her jeans, slid into the seat opposite Casey. She glanced over her shoulder then whispered that she was hiding from Daddy; she inched toward the window, folded her legs beneath her and wrapped her scrawny arms over her head. Casey, the mother of two girls a few years older than this child, didn't see a fatherly figure in the aisle. She saw no one.

The girl flipped herself upright and pointed at the book on Casey's lap. "I've got a book like that," she said.

"A scrapbook?" Casey asked.

"No. A journal. Mommy got it for me. She said I could draw pictures or write in it. So I can remember things that I'm happy about. So far I've only made a picture of our dog."

"Good for you." Casey checked for the father again.

"Can you see my dad?"

"I don't know what he looks like."

"He's probably reading his book. He told me to get lost. Do you have a picture of a dog in your book?"

"No." Unlike the child's journal, Casey's book, which she'd not opened in a couple of decades, was not filled with happy remembrances, although the creation of the book had been Casey's attempt at holding on to happiness when there was so little around her. "What's your dog's name?" Casey asked.

"Skippy."

"That's a nice name."

"I better go back now." The girl held out her hand; there were remnants of red nail polish on the tiny fingernails. "It was nice meeting you."

"You too."

Watching the girl skip down the aisle Casey wondered what would have happened if she'd shown her scrapbook to the girl. She'd not shown it to her husband, Randall, or either of her daughters. And as for the man,

Anthony, whom she was travelling across the country to meet, she didn't know yet if she'd let him have a look.

The CN tower, white and slender, slipped by, and then the scintillating green-and-silver condominiums that overlooked Lake Ontario and Toronto Island. Casey rubbed her fingertips over the pebbly surface of the scrapbook.

When the giggles and squeals of children usurped the creaks and groans of the train, the roll of metal over metal, Casey thought of her daughters: eleven-year-old Samantha—tall, gangly, reticent; and Erica, a pudgy, impulsive and affectionate eight-year-old. Casey had been the same age as Samantha the day the policeman came to her house. The events were fixed in her mind with the tenacity of chewing gum in long hair. Short of excising that part of her brain, there was no getting rid of the details.

1. RCMP officer arrives at the house. Young, clean-shaven. Black pants, perfectly pressed, canary yellow stripe down each side.

2. Officer Barton leaves twenty or thirty minutes later.

3. Casey's father pours a tall glass of whiskey, the first of several that day.

4. Casey's mother pulls half the pink curlers from her hair, then bursts into tears.

5. Casey buys scrapbook two days later.

6. Casey makes her first entry in the scrapbook June 17, 1984.

In her yellow baby doll pyjamas—she was sick and off school—Casey had crouched at the top of the stairs. Officer Barton rubbed constantly at the brim of his hat. By the time he left there were dark stains in the armpits of his shirt. Terry, Casey's brother, had been killed in a fluke accident at school. The basketball backboard broke from its fittings while Terry was beneath it.

The train slowed, swerved slightly, then came to a full stop. In the distance a red truck pulled out of a farmyard and onto a side road. Casey followed the truck's progress until it was obliterated by the blur of another train speeding by on the main line. When her train started to move again the truck was gone.

Casey stared at the first page of the scrapbook. She pressed her index finger on a couple of the red dots that surrounded the photograph, a picture of Terry at the end of the dock. He was wearing the red swim trunks Casey had thought were too tight. It was the last picture taken of him; he was fifteen. She could almost taste the sweet cinnamon. Fifteen faint red circles, in the shape of a heart, surrounded the photograph. That was all that remained

of the cinnamon hearts. Now it seemed dumb that she had licked all those candies. But at the time, sticking candy hearts on newsprint, rubbing each candy until her tongue was red, raw and stinging, was the right thing to do.

Within seconds of the police cruiser pulling away she and her parents were in the car, heading to the hospital. Her parents wouldn't let her see Terry. All the while they talked to the doctors she hoped it was a mistake. Every time the door of the chapel opened she thought it would be Terry. Maybe he'd only been knocked out, not knocked dead.

The day after the funeral her parents told her they had given consent for Terry's heart to go to a man who had a heart problem. He'd die if he didn't get it. They used the words "harvest" and "transplant"; it sounded like a gardening project. Casey had been disgusted that her parents had allowed someone to cut into her brother's chest.

Streaks of rain sluiced down the windows.

In the inky night several hours north of Toronto she couldn't see, but knew they were passing through the Canadian Shield. Pristine lakes, spindly pines and mammoth out-croppings of rugged rock. Chilled and tired, she closed the scrapbook and drew a shawl over her shoulders. The smooth surface of the window was cold on her cheek. Randall, Samantha and Erica would have been asleep hours ago.

Casey worked as a graphic design artist for a small company; she'd not told anyone where she was going and why. She enjoyed her co-workers, but unlike some, for whom the details of their lives flowed as freely as salt from a shaker, she had always been more cautious in sharing about herself. Even with Randall. They'd met at university. He was a math major headed for graduate studies. She was an arts major planning for a job as a salesclerk, hoping to make enough money to support her artistic ambitions as a painter. It was the early nineties; Randall ended up in accounting; she in graphic design. They were comfortable financially, adored their daughters. And for a time Casey had been content.

When she woke the train was dark except for the tunnels of light showering down on those who were reading. She had a crick on the left side of her neck. In the tiny washroom with stainless-steel fixtures she splashed warm water on her face, relishing the fragrance of the citrus-scented soap. Leaning to one side, her hair cascading away from her body, she drew the brush through its two-foot length, gathered it together and tied it with a rib-

bon. Terry had loved her hair and said she must never cut it. She swatted hair from the sleeves of her white blouse and straightened the folds of her denim skirt, both pieces of clothing crisscrossed with wrinkles after two days of travel. Randall thought it foolishness that she was travelling by train, taking four days when she could do the trip in four hours by plane. She couldn't explain it to him, except that she needed time.

Time to look at the scrapbook. Time to prepare herself for the meeting with Anthony.

Back in her seat, although exhausted, she couldn't sleep. From the moment she'd boarded the train she'd been unable to curtail her excitement, her nervousness. Grateful that there wasn't another passenger beside or across from her, she flicked on her lamp and returned to the scrapbook. The pages at the beginning were crammed with facts and details she'd taken from encyclopaedias, medical books, old volumes of history and literature.

1. *The heart is the first organ to function in the fetus; it starts to beat by ten days of age.*

2. *The human heart is comprised of four cavities, two atria on the top and two ventricles on the bottom. The left ventricle contracts the hardest so you can feel your heart pumping best on the left side of your chest.*

3. *The planarian has no circulatory system, no heart. (Poor thing.)*

4. *The frog heart has three chambers — two auricles and a ventricle.*

She'd been fascinated with anatomical terms:

***Aorta Pericardium Tricuspid Valve***

***Superior Vena Cava***

***Inferior Vena Cava Mitral Valve***

She'd go to sleep whispering the words, imagining the flow of the blood from the left ventricle to the aorta, through the body, back into the heart through the superior and inferior vena cava and from the atria to the ventricles through the mitral valve on the left and the tricuspid valve on the right.

She closed the book, shut her eyes and was transported back to her parents' kitchen.

She'd asked her mother if she and her father would donate her heart if she was killed in a car accident or fell off a bridge. Her mother, at the sink peeling carrots, whipped around, paring knife in one hand, stubby tuber in the other.

"Casey. That's an awful question. Why would you even think that?"

She'd seen the flash of worry on her mother's face as if talking about such things could make them real. Why she'd asked her mother the question, she couldn't say. Maybe she wanted to know if she was valued as much as her brother.

Her mother had hugged her hard and long. One of the buttons on her dress left an imprint on Casey's cheek. Examining the square indentation in the mirror, she'd thought of ranchers' brands on the hips of cattle. Circle B. Triple A. Square 1 was her mother's brand.

She'd been relieved by her mother's response. At first. Then she wondered if there was something wrong with her heart. They donated Terry's heart. Why not hers?

The first few months after Terry's death it was a rare day when she didn't think about him. Or matters related to the heart. She told her parents she wanted a stethoscope so she could listen to her own heart. They told her she didn't need a stethoscope; she should be with her friends. Casey wanted to tell her parents to follow their own advice. After Terry's death her parents spent hours in front of the television; they used to hate TV. Her mother quit her part-time job at Getty's Florist. Instead of one whiskey bottle in the garage each week there were two or three.

*The average adult heart is about the size of a clenched fist and weighs about 11 ounces. The heart never stops pumping; it contracts and relaxes about 70 to 80 times per minute without ever having to think about it.*

People had said that Terry had a big heart for such a young person. Back then it flipped through Casey's mind that Terry's heart weighed more than eleven ounces. She knew they were talking about how thoughtful he was, how he'd look out for the younger kids at school, volunteer at the veterinarian's on weekends and shop for Miss Entwhistle who'd lost a leg to diabetes. Did her parents have big hearts because they'd donated Terry's heart? It bugged her that the doctors wouldn't tell her parents who got Terry's heart.

Casey grimaced at the next page in the scrapbook.

The infamous photograph of an actual heart. As a child she'd squirmed every time she looked at it. The vibrant, glossy colours—deep red and purple with a hint of blue—had faded. She'd cut the picture out of a library book. She'd felt terrible but justified her action by telling herself there were two copies of the book and she'd returned the book on time, although she had left it in the after-hours slot, hoping that the library staff wouldn't flip through the pages too closely. The following week she ran outside whenever the phone rang.

She was sure it was the librarian, Mrs. Finni, calling to say that someone had found the desecrated book and they'd determined that Casey Whitherspoon was the last borrower.

A few months after the transplant her parents received an anonymous letter thanking them for the donation. A name wasn't given but they were told it was a thirty-year-old man, the father of a two-year-old son and a six-year-old daughter.

On her thirteenth birthday Casey announced that she was going to find the recipient of Terry's heart. Her parents asked if she was missing Terry. Of course she was missing him. Every day. He'd been a wonderful brother; not like those of some of her friends. Her parents said they would like to know too, but it was against the rules, relatives of donors weren't permitted to do that. When she said she didn't care about the rules, her parents told her it was a bad idea. Did she want to know a criminal was walking around with her brother's heart? What if the person was a drug addict, obese, doing things that were known to be harmful to the heart?

*In 1967, Christiian Barnard, a South African surgeon, did the first whole-heart transplant from one person to another.*

She remembered how obsessed she'd been with Dr. Barnard. What kind of person would tackle that kind of surgery? He was an astronaut of medicine. His hands had the power to give life. Dr. Barnard said that the greater risk was not to take the risk.

At some point she'd learned that many transplants failed. The new organ was seen as an intruder. She worried that Terry's heart had been rejected. If that was so, what had happened to his heart? She couldn't bear the notion of Terry's heart being ground up, dumped in some land fill, pecked at by seagulls and crows, torn to shreds by stray dogs, itinerant foxes.

With the first light of day she knew they had passed into Manitoba. Voluminous sky and the endless flat expanse of prairie. By the evening they would be in Saskatchewan. Even thinking the word brought a rush of anxiety.

She'd spoken to Anthony a couple of times on the phone. They'd exchanged one or two letters before that. He'd answered an ad she'd placed in a Saskatoon newspaper; she'd run several ads and was losing hope when he'd responded. Anthony seemed keen to meet her. But their circumstances were hardly the same. He had nothing to lose. She had everything. Even if she thought he was an unworthy recipient, even if she disapproved of how he was caring for her brother's heart, there would be nothing she could do.

Maybe her parents were right. What was the point of complicating her life by chasing up the chest that provided a home for her brother's precious heart?

She needed to know.

If Randall or her parents asked why, she could tell them nothing more. Like a craving or an itch, her need to know was impossible to deny.

It wasn't really a scrapbook, she thought, twisting the bent corners of the book. The word did a disservice to what the book had been for her. Scraps were left overs, meaningless pieces of cloth, food or paper. Or, they were the entrails of fish tossed to seagulls by fishermen.

The conductor strode through the car announcing the next stop.

At the outskirts of Winnipeg the train slowed; the lights flickered. A baby cried, then settled, enveloped within maternal shushing. They passed a scrapyard. Piles of flattened cars, reduced to chunks of metal, waited to become car doors and bumpers, toasters and pots.

The girl with the journal wiggled her fingers at Casey as she and her father, along with others, left the train. New passengers settled into place. Through the open doorways the smell of diesel fuel came strong, then faded. The train jerked forward and slid away from the platform.

Casey returned to the scrapbook.

*The heart has its reasons  
which logic does not know.*

—Blaise Pascal (1613–62)

*What comes from the heart,  
goes to the heart.*

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

What if they had taken Terry's liver or a kidney? Would she have had the same reaction? She whispered: "what comes from the kidney, goes to the kidney"; "the liver has its reasons which logic does not know." Did the man on the street know what the kidneys and liver did for the body? The heart was the organ tied to emotion—excitement, fear, love or panic. People spoke of "the heart skipping a beat," "the racing heart," "her heart stopped."

She went back to the photograph she'd taken from the library book and zoomed in on the left ventricle. While she stared at the photograph Terry's left ventricle was pumping in another man's body. Because of Terry's left ventricle a stranger was loving, working, running, chopping wood, having sex with a lover or his wife or both.

Two thirds into the book, the entries were more infrequent, every few months, rather than daily or weekly. Finally there were no dates. Near the end of the book, in different colours with stylized script, swirling letters for the h's and s's, she'd listed heart songs.

*Heartbreak Hotel*                      ***He Will Break Your Heart***  
*Heartache*                              **Hearts of Stone**  
***Don't Go Breaking my Heart***    *Danger, Heartbreak Ahead*  
*Heart and Soul*    **Only Love Can Break a Heart**

She hummed snippets of the songs.

Perhaps there were, but she didn't know any, songs about the liver or kidney, the knee or the hip. Even though her parents had kept Terry's photographs all over the house she had been terrified she would forget him, terrified that she'd wake up one morning and wouldn't be able to hear his laugh—he could get her giggling and keep it going until her stomach hurt—the deep timbre of his voice, the stomp of his shoes on the stairs.

She was ready for the trip to be over. Legs grumbling for movement, she strolled to the dining car. The wood-panelled room with plush royal blue seats and photographs of Canadian scenery traversed by the rail line—mountains, glacial lakes, prairies—was almost empty. She ordered a glass of the house wine, a Riesling from a winery in Ontario. As the waiter approached with the glass of wine, she leapt up.

"I'll be right back," she blurted.

Approaching her seat she wondered if it would be better if someone had taken the scrapbook. What would anyone want with her scrapbook? A child's grab bag of quotations, pictures and random scribbles. She snatched up the scrapbook and hurried back to her glass of wine. Red wine was supposed to be good for the heart, but it didn't agree with her. Did Anthony drink red wine?

In the last months of her pregnancy with Samantha, when her abdomen was firm and orbicular—like an eyeball with a belly button, someone said in prenatal class—Randall would lie with his head pressed against her body, waiting for a kick, or a flutter of fetal heartbeats. Terry's heart would be beating the same way (although not as fast, the fetal heart rate was about 200 per minute compared with the average adult rate of 60 to 80) inside Anthony's chest.

She doubted that she would lay her head against Anthony's chest.

It was almost midnight when the train pulled into Saskatoon. With the time change it was even later in New Brunswick, but she called Randall



from her hotel room. His voice was scratchy with sleep. She told him she missed him, that she wanted to curl up in his arms. He said he missed her too and the girls were fine. Then there was silence. She could hear his yawns and felt guilty for waking him. She said she was afraid. It was stupid what she wanted to do. She'd spent two-thirds of her life hoping for this moment. What if she didn't like Anthony? Randall said she didn't have to like him. She said she was a terrible person, not really caring about the man, just interested in his body, seeing him as nothing more than an extension of her brother. She was no better than those people who raised horses for the drug companies, saving the horses' urine so the drug companies could extract hormones to make pills for postmenopausal women who couldn't put up with hot flashes. Randall told her to knock it off, said she'd feel better in the morning. He said he was tired, he loved her, and he'd see her at the airport. She said she loved him too, hung up and crawled into bed.

That was one of the things she loved about Randall; he could be so sensible. When she was strung out, hopping around like a kid in a candy store, he'd swat her, with his words, and help her get back on track.

The hotel restaurant, furnished in tones of forest green and teal blue, was the place she and Anthony had agreed to meet. Perched on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River, sixty or seventy years old, the Worthington was Saskatoon's premier hotel, part of the CPR chain.

As she sipped her coffee she realized there was little she wanted to say to Anthony. She hadn't been rehearsing questions or platitudes. The meeting would be a sensorial experience, much like going into one's garden. She wanted to see and smell, hear and touch, as much as was socially acceptable, how the transplant had grown.

She flattened the napkin on her lap. Anthony was late, but only five minutes. And she had arrived early. He could have been caught in traffic. The waitress swung by with a pot of coffee and she took a refill.

She hadn't brought the scrapbook. The girl on the train had affected that decision, especially the comment about her mother telling her to record happy times. Casey realized that much of the time she'd been happy planning and making her entries into the scrapbook, arranging colours, experimenting with different scripts. She'd enjoyed searching out the answers to her questions (even the photograph theft had brought a certain thrill), trying to make sense of her brother's death, as best as a child of that age could do.

Casey flipped through the menu even though she knew she'd order a poached egg with whole-grain toast.

Anthony was forty minutes late.

She felt foolish about the time she'd taken, the money she'd spent. On the telephone Anthony had sounded so eager, so certain. She had an early-afternoon flight. She wanted time to shop for presents for the girls.

Her order came. She ate little.

Maybe it wasn't meant to be. Maybe he was just being nice on the phone, not wanting to hurt her feelings. No. She didn't believe that. Something must have happened. He'd had a heart attack. Finally his body had rejected her brother's heart.

She counted out the change for the bill, closed her purse and drank the last of her coffee. She was on the verge of leaving when she saw him surveying the café. He was wearing the maroon sweat shirt with bold white letters, University of Saskatchewan, as he said he would.

"You must have thought I wasn't coming," Anthony said. "I'm so sorry. I was so anxious to see you I smashed into the neighbour's car when I was going out of the driveway. I couldn't just drive away. I should have called the hotel." Beaming, eyes moist, he wrapped both hands around hers and held on. "It's so wonderful to meet you. I can't tell you ..."

These hands, Casey thought, are full of blood that has passed through my brother's heart. She blinked away tears.

Scientists had written about the drives of hunger, thirst and sex, but what about the drive to know, to dispel mystery. Surely that desire was as great as the others.

As Anthony spoke his sweatshirt and chest wall disappeared. Casey saw thick purple muscle pumping sanguineous fluid to arms and legs, lungs and bowels. Crimson-red arterial blood passed through large arteries. Burgundy-red blood flowed through the veins. The thump of a beating heart was thunderous in her head. Then came images of Terry.

Terry charging after a basketball.

Terry sucking strands of spaghetti in loud slurps until their father shouted STOP.

Terry balancing a pyramid of brown paper grocery bags for the neighbour.

Terry swinging screaming children with splayed limbs in wild airplane rides.

Terry hugging Casey until the bones in her back cracked. Until she screamed. Until he laughed and called her a wimp.

Embarrassed for the antics of her mind, Casey hoped Anthony didn't notice she was blushing.

"I saw my kids grow up. I have a two-year-old grandchild," Anthony said, pulling a photograph from his wallet.

A week later Casey would remember almost nothing of what Anthony had said.

The plane bumped onto the tarmac and turned toward the terminal and the setting sun.

Another time she'd be impatient waiting in the aisle for other passengers to retrieve baggage from the overhead bins. This time she allowed herself to be swept up in her images and fantasies of the three of them—Randall, Samantha and Erica. The triumvirate of her heart. Erica was running toward her, arms extended, calling out, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy," before leaping onto Casey's body. Samantha, trying to be more mature, had wrapped an arm around Casey's waist and was bursting to tell her mother of the 95 she got on her math test.

Randall would give her a peck on the cheek and take her suitcase. Just before they got into the car, he'd grab her and hug her hard. He'd say the girls were driving him nuts. Later that night, when they were alone, he'd listen while she talked about the trip. He'd hold her while she wept. He'd tell her he loved her. Terry, he'd say, would be proud of her. Not that night, but another night, she'd show him the scrapbook. That night they'd make love.

At the door of the plane, she paused, sucked in the salty New Brunswick air, then hurried down the steps.