

*The Heart of the Matter*

The day after she was given her diagnosis, she began the letters. The doctors and her husband assured her that she could tell her daughter these things herself, years later, but she insisted.

She was sent to the best cardiologist in the state, a man in his late fifties who kept photographs of his favorite patients and who fought against others' failing hearts as though the organs were his own personal enemies. She and the cardiologist got along well, and he assured her that her prognosis was hopeful and positive. She smiled and assured him that she was both hopeful and positive, but a mother has to be thorough, no matter the prognosis. The doctor argued this was not reflective of a positive attitude, but she did not argue back, because she knew in her damaged heart that she had to write the letters. Her husband and the doctor shook their heads at her. But she had never been one to be deterred by head-shaking.

The three of them plotted the best course for treatment, then the doctor saw them out of the cardiology wing and suggested a good local restaurant, where she and her husband enjoyed an overly expensive lobster dinner. A silent agreement prevented them from discussing the matter at heart; instead they discussed their daughter, who was nine years old and about to enter the fourth grade. They agreed they would relent and buy her the light up sneakers she had coveted for so long. No time like the present, after all.

The next day, she wrote her only child the first letter.

*Dear Daughter,*

*This afternoon, I sat with your father on the back porch as we watched you do cartwheels under the maple trees. It seemed like you would never tire of it. As I looked on, I remembered a*

*day in early summer eight years ago when you were just learning to walk. You hobbled on chubby legs across your yellow blanket, which was spread across the grass, and stretched your arms to the sky, squinting your eyes at the sun. I think you believed you could touch the yellow ball of light, if you could just stretch a little further. I tried to get your attention away from the sun, afraid you would hurt your eyes. Your father put his hand on my arm, shook his head at me, smiled.*

*“Leave her alone,” he said. “She’ll learn too soon it’s out of her grasp.”*

*So I did as he said and settled back on my elbows, and I watched you. You opened and closed your tiny hands, tilted your head, furrowed your brow with concentration. The summer breeze ruffled your thin brown hair. For several minutes, you stood there on uncertain legs and held up your arms to the sun, oblivious to the futility of your efforts.*

*A cloud soon floated over the sun, blocking it from your sight. Your eyes widened, your rose petal mouth blossomed into a toothless grin. You turned to look at us as if to say, “I willed that cloud to do that!” And we believed you. You looked back up to the sky, still holding up your arms in a hallelujah, and laughed at the rays of light that burst out from behind the cloud.*

*Embrace the light, always; forget the uselessness of fear.*

Her prognosis was considered positive because they had caught it early, despite the fact that no one in her family had ever had what she now had: hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. The cardiologist did not know why or how she had contracted the disease; he explained that many times, it is unclear how and why the disease occurs and progresses. Her heart walls were slowly thickening. The cardiologist prescribed blood thinners to ease the stress on her body. She felt

good on the blood thinners, after a while, once she had adjusted to the slight dizziness and headaches that plagued her for the first few weeks of taking the medication. The cardiologist was pleased with her quality of life. She went to see him once every few months, and he often called between appointments to check in and make sure that they were winning the battle.

*Dear Daughter,*

*When you were four, you told me you wanted to be a ballerina. I was not surprised, since you had been twirling around the house since you could walk. We enrolled you in your first ballet class. Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, as soon as we returned home after your class, you would run to the mirror in the hallway, still in your black leotard and pink tights, and practice what you had learned in front of your reflection. I can still remember the sound of your voice, endlessly reciting, "First, second, third, fourth, fifth, back to first, all over again!" You moved your feet and arms into the correct positions, over and over, grinning madly, until finally it was as though your little body couldn't contain itself any longer, and you burst into your own dance, pirouetting, swinging your arms in the space around you, shrieking with laughter.*

*Try to remember yourself in such moments of unconfined joy, dancing for no other reason than it made you happy. Indulge yourself in such dances often, laughing loudly, lifting your arms towards the sun, pretending time does not matter, that it does not exist at all. I promise you, you are never too old for dancing.*

*Last night, after your father and I tucked you in, we returned to the kitchen. He helped me with the dishes after we shared a piece of chocolate cake. We were listening to the radio, trying*

*to keep quiet so as not to wake you. One of our favorite Van Morrison songs came on. Your father walked up behind me and took the dishcloth out of my hand, tossed it back into the soapy water. He turned me to face him and wrapped his arms around me, whispered a memory in my ear. His hands on the small of my back guided me around the kitchen, effortlessly across the white tile floor.*

*Marry a man who will dance with you into the mystic.*

After four years on the blood thinners, her heart decided to rebel at about the same time her daughter began to insist upon going to her first boy/girl sleepover. She and her husband felt thirteen years old was too young for a coed sleepover, but their daughter went on for weeks about how it was unfair that all her friends could go to the party but she couldn't. It was a stressful time in their household, but despite this stress, her cardiologist assured her that her daughter's pubescent actions were not the cause of the sudden worsening of her heart muscle. "These things happen," he said with a sympathetic shrug, and allowed her and her husband five minutes alone in the exam room before he returned to plot their next attack.

Tests were ordered, she was poked and prodded by inept interns, all of whom appeared to have missed the lecture about how to properly, painlessly, insert a needle into a vein. The cardiologist's nurse, a large breasted, loud-laughing woman, brought her into a cold, dim room and performed an echocardiogram while her husband held her hand, all three of them staring at the image of her defective heart on the computer monitor. The images were not good enough and the cardiologist ordered a cardiac MRI. She spent two hours surrounded by the plastic walls of

the donut-hole shaped machine, willing herself not to open her eyes to see how the walls were closing in on her.

The results of the tests came in, and her cardiologist was not pleased. Even with all of her appointments over the past four years, even though she had not shown any signs of fatigue or shortness of breath until recently, her heart had deceived the doctor. Her heart muscle was too thick now; it was causing damage that could lead to fatal heart arrhythmias. The cardiologist delivered the disheartening news: surgery would be necessary. An open-heart surgery was the best option with the best outcome. They scheduled the surgery for early July, one month away.

On the drive home her husband pulled over at a gas station, where she got out of the car and walked inside to use the restroom. She paused on her way back to the vehicle and observed her husband, who was not paying attention to her because he was shaking with sobs over the steering wheel. She had only seen him cry once before, when his mother had passed away six years ago. The sun was out and the breeze was warm, but she tightened her sweatshirt around her to keep away the chill that shook through her body. She watched her sobbing husband for several minutes, until his shoulders slumped down and he was still. After a few more moments, he straightened up and settled back in his seat as though nothing had happened. She continued her walk back to the car and slid into the passenger seat.

Taking her husband's hand in her own, she said, "I love you."

He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. "Love you, too."

They sat silently for a few moments, each staring out the windows at the people walking in and out of the gas station. She could sense he wanted to say something, but knew that he would speak when he was ready.

Finally he turned to her again. "Please tell me you're going to beat this."

"I'm going to do my best," she assured him.

He did not say anything for a moment. Finally he frowned and said, "The letters."

"What about the letters?"

"Why do you write them? You can tell her these things yourself later. It's like you've already given up."

She shook her head. "I have no intention of giving up," she said. "But I can't bear the thought that if the worst does happen, she'll be left with none of this advice. I can't tell her these things now. She's too young. The letters are just reassurance, for me. So that I know she'll have a piece of me if I'm ever not there."

After a few more moments, he shrugged. "Okay," he said, relenting. "If it makes you feel better, write the letters. I'll even promise to give them to her myself."

As he kissed her, she felt the joy of being wholly alive, with the fluorescent light of the sign on the side of the gas station flickering down upon them.

*Dear Daughter,*

*We caved. You are at your first boy/girl sleepover tonight. I still think you are a bit too young for this, but I am willing to let go of my worries and to place my trust in you. Earlier this evening, I drove you across town to your friend's house. Before you got out of the car, you admitted you were nervous. You've had a crush on Matthew for ages now, you confessed, and some of the girls had threatened to lock you in the closet with him for a game of Seven Minutes in Heaven. "Should I wear any lip gloss? What about gum? Mom, what if I'm bad at kissing?"*

*Your questions were endearing to me because they were the same questions I had wanted to ask my mother so many years ago. I didn't ask her those questions. But I answered yours. "Probably don't wear lip gloss. It might surprise him, and boys don't like to have that on their lips like we girls do. Mints are a better idea than gum, especially if he has braces. And here is a secret: no one is good at kissing their first time." With that last fact, your eyes opened wide in terror. I rushed to assure you that in time you would learn to be an expert at kissing. This seemed to calm your anxiety. You made me promise that I would tell you stories of my first adventures in kissing the next day over a batch of cookie dough, and I had difficulty not leaping out of my seat to celebrate my new Cool Mom status.*

*I can't believe you are thirteen years old. When you have children you will understand how quickly time goes by, my dear. Do not waste time, do not mourn the passage of time, do not attempt to prevent your children from growing up. Teach them what they must know, and let them teach you. When you first become a parent, you will think you know everything you need to know. But your children will inevitably and continually teach you things you hadn't realized you never knew. Let them.*

The open heart surgery went well. Before sending her home from the hospital, the cardiologist gave her strict orders to rest and to take things slowly for the next few months. She was put on an extensive regimen of medication, which her husband administered several times a day for a couple weeks, until he had to go back to work. She had a constant stream of visitors to help her: her parents, her brother, her sister-in-law, her closest girlfriends. She made sure her daughter was taken care of as well; she worried because just before the operation, her daughter

had gotten her first period. She fretted that she was not doing her job as a mother to help her daughter through such important changes. So in between doses of steroids and pain killers, and in between long naps in the middle of the day, she wrote another letter to her daughter. She considered this letter to be one of the most important of all the letters she had written, which by this time, after four years, numbered close to one hundred, all handwritten on creamy, ivory paper that years later her daughter would imagine still held the scent of her mother's rose and lavender scented perfume.

*Dear Daughter,*

*We have told you for the past four years that though my heart condition might slow me down, it would not stop me from living a long life. I still hold onto this hope, but it would be my biggest regret if I took time for granted and left you with these things unsaid. If anything should happen to me, these are the things you should know.*

*Don't be tempted to wear body glitter to prom; it might sound like a good idea at the time, but you will forever afterward cringe at the pictures of yourself looking like a disco ball.*

*Also, many girls think it is romantic to lose their virginity at the after-prom parties, but believe me when I say that there are more romantic times and places. My first time was with your father when we were eighteen, one summer afternoon, in a field that smelled like hay and freshly tilled dirt. His car was parked near us, with the doors open, and we could hear a Fleetwood Mac song playing on the radio. It may not sound romantic to you, but my point is that when you have sex for the first time, it should be with someone you care about, who cares about you, and it should be special to both of you in a way no one else completely understands.*



*If Fate does not allow me to attend your wedding, here is my advice. During the ceremony, fix your sight upon your love, and focus on him and him only. At the reception, do not drink much, dance to all your favorite songs, and take time to sneak away with your new husband so that you can have a few minutes alone. Your wedding will be emotional for your father. Please spend some time with him before the ceremony and during the reception, to remind him that he was the first man you ever loved, and that you will always consider yourself his baby girl. He may act stoic, but do not believe it. He loves you more than life itself, and letting you go into the arms of another will be difficult for him.*

*It breaks my heart to accept that I may not be able to tell you everything you must know, that I may not be able to answer every question you have. But here are some of the remaining things on my mind today: Do not be fooled by boys who look away from you when they tell you they love you. Don't forget about or neglect the things that make you happy, such as dancing, reading, playing piano, climbing trees. Travel.*

*Above all things, reach for joy and grasp it in the palm of your hand like you tried to grab the sun that summer day twelve years ago when you were just learning how to walk. Hold the light within you.*

Three months after her surgery, the cardiologist determined that she was well enough to go back to her normal lifestyle, with the stipulation that she remain cautious. The operation had repaired most of the damage, but it was still possible that arrhythmias could occur and disrupt her heart's normal rhythm at any moment and lead to heart failure. Arrhythmias, the cardiologist informed them, were what most often led to sudden cardiac death.

She and her husband took their daughter to the coast for a long weekend in October. The tourists were gone, and the beach was quiet and mostly deserted. A family friend had let them use his seaside cottage for the weekend, and they spent their time either on the deck of the cottage or down on the beach, collecting sea glass and watching the waves roll in. One evening while her husband was cleaning up in the kitchen, she and her daughter took a long walk on the beach. The cold water rushed over their feet as they made their way along the wet sand of the shore. They had a heart-to-heart.

Her daughter asked questions about her condition, some she'd asked before, some she had not. As they made their way across the sand, her daughter hesitated before she posed a question she had never asked before. "Are you going to make it, Mom?" Her daughter's voice trembled as it used to when she had crawled into bed with her and her husband after a nightmare and told them about the terrors in her dream-world.

"I'm going to try my hardest, sweetheart," she answered as she draped her arm over her daughter's thin shoulders. She could not promise anything better.

She celebrated her fortieth birthday in November. Thanksgiving came, then Christmas, New Year's. She went in for a checkup in February. The cardiologist listened to her heart through his stethoscope and made grim faces. She told him she'd been experiencing fatigue and heart palpitations, symptoms of the possibility of those dreaded, fatal arrhythmias. Her doctor gave her strict orders to closely monitor her condition and to take things as slowly as possible. He didn't need to tell her there was nothing more they could do but hold out hope that her heart would heal itself. She understood.

On their way home, her husband made a sudden detour, and she knew without asking where he was going. They drove to the same field where they had made love for the first time over twenty years ago. Her husband parked the car and turned off the ignition, leaving the radio on. They held each other for a long time.

“Damn it,” he mumbled as he stroked her hair. “I’m scared.”

“So am I,” she said. “I don’t want to leave you behind.”

She pressed her ear against his chest and listened to the steady, strong hum of his heartbeat. She closed her eyes and spoke. “And I’m jealous of you.”

“Why?”

“You get to be with her, and I don’t.”

He pulled her closer, and for a long time, they told each other all the things that could no longer wait to be said. When he kissed her, she felt thirsty – for him, for life, for everything she would not have. And then, with only the sky and the rippling waves of timothy grass as witness, they conveyed the rest in words unspoken, moving slowly, as if they had all the time in the world.

That night, she wrote one more letter to her daughter. Exhaustion forced her to keep the letter short.

*Dear Daughter,*

*Remember, my darling, all that I have told you, in our conversations and through these letters. Do not spend your life in mourning. Do not be afraid. Reach for the sun and go forth, onward, onward, into the light.*

That night, she dreamed she was back on her wedding night, in the garden with her new groom, under the canopy of white lights and stars – a ceiling of glory and promise. Music echoed from the reception hall, notes of Otis Redding singing a lover’s prayer. Her husband mumbled the words in her ear as he held her, the two of them swaying back and forth, lost to everything else. The lawn under her bare feet was cool and damp with dew. The breeze smelled as she remembered it had that night – freshly cut grass, vanilla cake, and something new. The fresh, powdery scent of her newborn daughter’s skin after a bath. Her love’s hands on the small of her back guided her effortlessly in small, dizzying circles. As he dipped her backwards, she opened her eyes to see the white lights above her twinkling and blurring into a vision of blinding, dazzling radiance.