

Gifts from a Breaking Heart

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FEBRUARY

Dark and red and bold, the odd assortment of letters marched across a pale vanilla field of paper. Each one squiggled a bit, demonstrating how his hand had betrayed him all those decades before in penmanship class. Legibility was not his strong suit. Neither was symmetry.

Largest of the group was the F, erect and firm, pointing toward the far right margin of the paper. Had the remainder been written by another hand, they would have obediently taken their cue and formed a straight line comprised exclusively of lower case letters. They would have formed up on an even baseline, leading the reader's eye to the exact point predetermined by that F. These letters did not do that. They randomly wandered, selecting their own case and destination. They almost didn't fit on the front of the envelope, scrunching up near the end of the paper and bending down along the edge of the paper. There almost hadn't been room for the little heart he'd drawn. He knew she would see those letters, and in them she would see him.

He hadn't hand lettered all of them. The first had been April, which was cut letter-by-letter and blossom-by-blossom out of a Gurney's catalog he'd found in the doctor's office. The good folks of Hallmark had preprinted January. His trusty old dot-matrix printer had hammered out the months of August and October. The rest, though, all came from his hand, decorated in the rainbow hues of markers that hid here and there in his desk.

2-2-2 ... in his desk.

Envelopes were the easy part. There are only so many months in each year. Selecting the treasures and the boxes and the wrapping had been much more of a challenge. Writing the letters was difficult at first, but they flowed easily the day he started writing November. That's the day he just started writing what he felt. Grammar and form went into the trash, along with the three months he had already finished. Suddenly each word had a meaning he hadn't had time to appreciate before, saying things he wanted her to know and feel. In three short weeks he had blossomed into something of a poet.

Each envelope was hidden somewhere around the house. He'd prepared maps and added them to the envelopes, each showing where she should look in the following month, so she couldn't possibly miss any of them. June was out there in the shed, as were all of the June surprises. That way, she'd have to get out in the beautiful Minnesota summer at least once a day. August was up in the garage. January, July, and October were in the bedroom where so much love had been shared. February was here, in the warm brown den.

There was at least one package for each day of the year, except for those special days he'd taken care of with the help of conspirators.

Two of the February boxes were big ones. The one for the first contained a new pair of scuffies, and the one for the second could barely hold the creamy soft angora sweater he'd special ordered just for her from Bishop's. There was no box for the fourteenth. That was the day the flowers would arrive, one rose an hour starting at seven

3-3-3 ... deliver the ...

eleventh rose. The twelfth would be brought to the restaurant by the same courier who would deliver the diamond pin.

November had a lot of interesting twists to it. Nine of those boxes were out in the woods, stored in the bench he'd built into her deer stand. The last of those nine contained a gift certificate from the travel agency. It could be redeemed for travel anywhere she wanted to go, so long as she got there by the twenty-first. He hoped she would use it for a cruise. God knows he'd left enough brochures about cruises. Wherever she was on the twenty-first, though, she'd have strawberries and Asti. Julie down at the travel agency would see to that. It was just one more touch of the heart on their anniversary.

There were other happy little things he'd arranged, like the party on the day before her birthday, so even if she expected something to happen she wouldn't expect it then, or the twelve extra Christmas goodies. The semi-occasional flowers, just because. The private little jokes he'd put together - some old, some new, some holy and some lewd.

They had spent many years creating their relationship. Each soft glance, each gentle touch had added to the strength of it. This year of happy events was something special he wanted her to have, a private testament to how much she had given him.

He sealed the envelope and placed it on top of February's packages, then closed the glass cover to the chest that held them. One more little gift of love to arrange and he would be finished.

Deep inside his body the enemy stirred, draining away his energy. Twenty sweaty, dizzy steps got him to the side of the bed, where he lay heavily down. That safe

4-4-4 ... That safe ...

haven gave him the strength to swallow one, then two of the tiny tablets that were supposed to make this bearable. He closed his eyes.

Five minutes later he sat up on the edge of the bed and began removing his clothes. A cool shower would cleanse away the fuzzy stuff in his brain. He stood, dropped his pants on the floor, and began the short walk to the bathroom. As he passed the full-length mirror he'd hung for her, he paused to examine what was left of him.

Six months ago he had weighed in at a healthy two-ten. Some muscle, some fat, but all in all not a bad looking package for a man of his years. The sparse hundred-sixty pounder looking back at him from the mirror reminded him of some skinny high school kid in a Halloween outfit. Thank God there wasn't any acne. At this rate, he'd be down to his birth weight within two years.

He grinned a morbid little grin and chuckled. Within two years he'd be even less than his birth weight. Cremation has a way of doing that.

The shower worked. He put on the sweater and slacks she'd bought for him the week before. He'd protested then that she shouldn't be buying him new clothes at this stage of his life, but she wouldn't listen. It was her way of trying to keep things normal. The computer whined, beeped, and sizzled as it glowed to life. He opened the word processor. With one ear listening for the bustle of her return, he began to write the last note. He would rough it out and polish it over the next few weeks. There would be time to make it perfect, he knew, but no time beyond that. She would read it only after

5-5-5 ... it only after ...

the fight was over. The words created themselves, beginning with the line that started each of the notes that had preceded it:

My darling, you have given me such a splendid life ...