

Hearts

by Phillis Ideal

It was cold and Alice was bundled up in her black parka, with the hood covering her ears. She sipped coffee. The Sunburst Café was always freezing in the winter, as the locals lined up for coffee and left the door open. There was no shelter from the weather or good cheer from the clientele. Patrons hunkered down into their newspapers and rarely talked to those sitting next to them. The winter gloom had gotten the best of everyone.

Alice looked across the communal table. Her eyes met those of a frowning face that glanced up at her from some figures scratched on a piece of paper. The man's eyes looked through her, as if she were in the way of his trance. He mumbled to himself and counted on his fingers. He was handsome, with white blond hair that had dried in unruly curls, dark mysterious eyes, and strong hands. He wore an off-white cable-knit Irish turtleneck sweater. The second Alice sat down she heard a little *"Oh, my God"* in her head as her pulse quickened. This guy was hot, and it was infuriating that he could look at her and not see her. She thought that at any moment he might pack up and leave, so her focus crystallized around talking to him. Her heart stopped beating for a second - her throat went dry and tight; and she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. She was embarrassed to hear what came out of her mouth.

"Why can't they shut the door? It's freezing in here!" He looked back — annoyed; but she didn't drop it. "Do you live around here?"

Pinned by his dark gaze, Alice watched his lips curl slightly and his face register her interest. His eyes held hers for a moment, dropped to her lips, down to her breasts and back up. She thought of an animal checking a scent before mating, and imagined that he was thinking, *"All I need is for this woman to be hitting on me."*

And she was hitting on him. The thought shocked her. Like a petulant child marching up to a stranger on the beach and getting his attention by dumping her pail of water on his nearly finished

sand castle, she had insisted that he come out of his fog and look at her. This was unlike her, since usually she was shy. Now she wanted to take it all back or start over. Her heart was racing, skipping beats to catch up to some semblance of normalcy.

He did answer her, though. "I don't live in the neighborhood, but I just had a doctor's appointment next door. I thought of getting coffee at the trendy coffee shop a block away; but decided this place looked less affected."

"And at a place where no one would bother you?"

He smiled at that. The ice had been broken and he started talking a mile a minute. Now it was hard for her to get a word in edgewise. As he talked, he seemed more and more familiar to her. She had met men like him before-lots of women must start conversations with him. As he talked and talked, never asking her anything about herself or giving her space to insert a comment, a gentle melancholy settled over her like dust.

"I live in Greenwich Village but happen to be in this neighborhood because I found this place where you can get a state-of-the-art imaging for detection of structural heart disease. It is a new process that gives a razor-sharp picture of the coronary arteries without the insertion of catheters. I just did it and it was painless. I had a hard time getting my primary physician to order the test, but I insisted and he finally gave in. He said that my heart was in near perfect shape, but I needed to know for sure. If your heart doesn't work, nothing does!" he said emphatically.

Alice asserted herself and asked, "How did your test come out?"

"It showed I have a strong heart with a very good ejection fraction of 65%, the upper limit of normal. I was worried that I had what I saw on the Internet - lack of proper contraction of the heart muscle." He shuffled through his papers and handed her a diagram showing six stages of a heart muscle, compromised by its small size, struggling to pump blood through its chambers. "I thought I might not be normal. You can't ever be too sure"

Still taken by his physical presence and mesmerized by his voice, Alice listened much more intently than if the man had been

unattractive. Her focus on him dizzied as he chattered on about aortic stenosis, coronary angiography, mitral insufficiency and his cardio numbers. There was more, but he was talking to himself, not to her. As the monologue continued, she felt he would barely notice if she left, gave him back the heart diagram and said goodbye. She glanced over her shoulder as she walked through the door. He was scribbling beside his heart results again.

The next morning Alice was surprised to see him sitting in the same seat as the day before with his medical manila folder on the table in front of him. He was watching the door. When he saw Alice enter the café, he motioned for her to sit next to him. "Did you come looking for me? I hoped you would be here again today and came here especially to see you"

"I come here everyday to have a cup of coffee before I go to my studio." Alice struggled to keep him at a distance as she thought trusting him with her heart was like giving your car to a crank mechanic.

He ignored her brisk response, smiled and said, "That's good to know."

Alice was stunned. Yesterday he wasn't interested in any one but himself, and today he's pursuing her. They finished their coffee; and he followed her down the block to the paint store, zigzagging through the aisles as she picked up art supplies - talking non-stop, flirting, and playacting.

"You're asking if I have a girlfriend? No. I have eight girlfriends. Yeah, it's no big deal. They all get together and swap recipes so they can learn how to cook my favorite food. But I don't care if you can't cook. We'll go out." He was making her laugh along with him. They were now in the sandbox again, six year olds in a make believe zone. Against her better judgment, Alice had caved to his unwavering attention.

They both hesitated at the exit of the store before going their separate ways. He looked at her and then down at his feet, took a deep breath, paused several times and spoke in a low, faltering voice. "Maybe, I... I could have your number so we can meet again.

And your name. I ... I don't know your name. I would like to get to know you."

She looked down at the paper he handed her to write her number on and saw it was his cardio chart with his figures scratched on the margins. She could see a flurry of numbers, landed on the page, like birds that had dropped from their flight formations, never to reach their destination. She took his pen, " I hope you don't get my phone number mixed up with your heart measurements."

As she began to write her number, she thought, *this is hopeless*, and gave him a fake number.

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