



Heartbeat
Away

The title is presented in a highly decorative, black-and-white style. The words "Heartbeat" and "Away" are written in a classic serif font. "Heartbeat" is positioned on a curved banner at the top, while "Away" is on a similar banner below it. Between these banners is a central graphic featuring a heart shape formed by two crossed arrows. The entire composition is framed by intricate, swirling scrollwork and flourishes. Two birds are depicted in flight, one above and one below the heart, adding a sense of movement and grace to the design.

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PICCADILLY PRESS • LONDON

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‘Why don’t you go outside for a walk or something?’ asks Joe.

‘No, thanks.’

I’m curled up on the sofa, supposedly finishing work Mr MacNamara set me centuries ago, but quite happily doodling pictures of swans in the back of my maths book.

Why swans? I haven’t a clue. I don’t even like them. When I was little, Mum, Dad and I had a picnic by a river and this evil, hissing bird flapped up and grabbed my sandwich in its big orange beak before Dad could shoo it away.

But my swans are different. I’m getting the hang of drawing the sweep of their long elegant necks, I can curve them this way or that and still make them look realistic. Feathers are tricky, but practice makes perfect.

‘So how about a little jog round the block, then?’ Joe persists, drawing the curtains fully open. ‘Bit of exercise?’

‘It’s really cold today,’ I say, shading in the beak of my latest attempt.

‘Apart from your check-up every week, you haven’t been out since you came back from hospital.’

‘Maybe tomorrow,’ I tell him. But I know tomorrow never comes. I don’t want to go outside – I want to stay right here in the house where I’m safe and not going to catch something horrible.

‘Becky, Dr Sampson said you must exercise.’

I bite my tongue. I want to tell him to mind his own business. To keep right out of it, because no matter how much he tries to be, he’s not actually my dad . . . and never will be.

‘Well, how about doing thirty minutes on the treadmill?’ He nods at the machine parked in the corner of the sitting room, a bulky and constant reminder that I need to get fit again.

‘All right . . . OK!’ I say as I get off the sofa, realising this is the only way I’m going to get him out of the room. ‘I’m on to it.’

‘It’ll do you good, Becky,’ he says as he goes out.

I put on my headphones, step onto the treadmill, wipe the handle with an anti-bacterial tissue and start steadily pacing in time to the music. As I’m mulling over why I’ve got this thing about drawing swans, I’m suddenly aware that, instead of just the brown stripy wallpaper, I can see vivid splashes of colour in front of me. Surprised, I screw up my eyes and blink in confusion. I’m looking at green grass and a blue sunlit sky.

My heart thumps faster. Like a succession of photos flashing before me, I see an old-fashioned bandstand with

elegant ironwork pillars, surrounded by deckchairs, their brightly-coloured canvas seats flapping in the breeze. Encircling the deckchairs are neat flowerbeds full of white roses. I can almost smell their perfume. I haven't a clue where this place is, but it all feels familiar and, for one brief moment, I'm overwhelmingly happy.

Within seconds it's all gone. Bewildered, I peer at the dull sitting room wall. Everything is as it should be. The clock is ticking on the mantelpiece, my cross-country trophies are sitting on the sideboard, and I can hear Danny outside, playing in the garden. I take a deep breath, turn off the treadmill and, feeling uneasy, try to persuade myself that I must have been daydreaming.

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I'm on edge for the next few days, but nothing else happens. I chat to Leah online, but freeze when she invites me to come with her, Alesha and Jodie to see Alesha's boyfriend's band play at the Community Hall. Knowing it'll be crowded, I type in some lame excuse. I hear Mum calling me from downstairs. Secretly relieved, I tell Leah I have to go now.

I'm sitting in the kitchen, biting into a sandwich and Mum's saying something to me about going back to school sometime after Christmas. I'm half listening, feeling bad about lying to Leah and staring into space, when out of the blue, I suddenly see an old house with green wooden shutters.

Surprised and alarmed, I try to focus on something else: the taste of peanut butter in my mouth and Mum clattering about making mugs of tea. I'm totally aware that I'm still sitting here at the table, halfway through my lunch, but it doesn't stop me seeing this house with its dark green front

door and shiny gold doorbell, which I know will only give a muffled 'glug' when pressed.

The surrounding garden has neatly edged flower borders, brick-paved paths and a big magnolia bush near the rickety front gate and, although there's no sign of them, there'll be daffodils in the spring, and clumps of bluebells under the magnolia. Wondering how I could possibly be so sure of this, I search my memory, but I'm convinced I've never been to this house in my life. And yet, I know and . . . somehow . . . love it. The faint smile on my face vanishes and the hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle. The image fades, and I can hear Mum asking me if I'm OK. I nod, then swallow my mouthful of sandwich with difficulty.

'I'm fine,' I tell her, 'just daydreaming.'

But my mind's racing in confusion. I don't feel hungry any more. Some odd things have been happening to me since my transplant. I think back to that night and can't stop asking myself, who was my donor?

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‘Well, Becky, you’re our star patient this year. So far, your new heart’s working like a dream.’

I smile in relief at Dr Sampson. ‘That’s fantastic. Thank you.’

He gives a small, modest nod. Despite his dubious taste in bow-ties, I have to admit he is pretty amazing.

‘We’re so grateful to you, Dr Sampson,’ says Mum. ‘Everything’s turning out brilliantly. It’s like we’ve won the lottery!’

‘We can’t thank you enough,’ Joe adds. ‘If it hadn’t been for you . . . Becky, she . . . well . . . she might not . . .’ His voice trails off. Surprised at his concern, I throw him a look, but he avoids my eye.

‘We’re not out of the woods yet, but things are looking very positive at the moment. We’ll carry on with these weekly check-ups and then in a few months, if all’s well, we’ll reduce them to monthly visits.’

‘That’ll be good, won’t it, Becky? No more trailing up

here each week . . .' The room falls silent and I finally realise Mum is staring at me curiously. 'Becky?'

I'm trying to budge the image of some tall gates that I can see in front of me.

'Um . . . yeah, great . . .' I say, nodding eagerly, trying to look as if I'm not a million miles away.

'Not that we mind coming up here weekly, do we?' Mum adds, not wanting to offend Dr Sampson.

I shake my head automatically, relieved as the gates fade away.

'Seeing our patients less frequently is a sign of our success,' says Dr Sampson with a smile. 'Each milestone you cross is another one we can all celebrate.'

'And Becky is definitely OK to go back to school next term, isn't she?' asks Mum. I knew she was going to ask this. She's been dropping hints to me about getting back to 'normal' for a couple of weeks now.

'Yes. I don't see why not. At the end of January,' replies Dr Sampson. 'You've made a great recovery from your operation, Becky.'

'And it's all right for her to mix with other kids?'

'Becky can't live her life in a bubble . . . although it would be sensible to steer clear of anyone who's obviously ill,' says Dr Sampson, as he turns to me. 'I bet you're looking forward to getting back to school after all this time, aren't you?'

I slap on a grin and nod enthusiastically. I'm dreading it.

'OK. Questions?' Dr Sampson looks over at me.

This is my chance.

'Dr Sampson, I . . . I just wanted to ask about my donor.'

He pulls a face. 'I'm afraid we're not allowed to disclose names, Becky, or any information about them.'

'Nothing at all?' I ask, disappointed.

'The whole procedure is totally anonymous. That's the way it works best,' he says, picking up a folder and peeking inside. 'But . . . I am allowed to tell you that your donor was young, healthy . . . and lived in this part of the country. Donor hearts often have to be flown here from hundreds of miles away. They don't always reach us in such good condition.'

'It really doesn't matter who the person was, Becky,' Mum jumps in. 'I mean, we're incredibly grateful, Dr Sampson, please don't get me wrong, but the thing is, whoever it was is dead now and, although that's dreadful for their family, there's nothing we can do about it . . . except be thankful they signed that donor card.'

Dr Sampson nods then looks at me thoughtfully. 'What do you want to know about your donor, Becky?'

'I'm . . . I'm not sure.' I avoid his eyes and think for a moment. He waits patiently for me to speak. But what can I say? I'll look like a right loony if I start going on about the places I've seen, the swans I can't stop doodling and the way I see and do things differently now.

'It's just . . . well, it's just, since this transplant, things have changed.' I look up at him and he meets my eyes inquisitively, his head on one side. 'I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I've changed and I don't understand why.'

He doesn't answer me straight away. He presses the long elegant fingertips of his two hands together and inspects them thoughtfully for a few seconds.

‘Becky, most kids your age will never have to face even a tiny fraction of the difficulties or dilemmas that you’ve been through over the last two years. Transplant surgery is traumatic . . . even when it’s successful.’

‘But I feel so different.’

‘You’re on a cocktail of extremely strong drugs. Some of their side effects are psychological, I’m afraid. You’ll get mood changes. You will feel different, but it’s perfectly normal in the circumstances. To be frank, I’d be a little concerned if all this didn’t affect you.’

‘So I might have different likes and dislikes or do stuff I didn’t do before the transplant?’

Dr Sampson nods. ‘It’s possible.’

‘But I don’t feel I’m just me any more. I’ve got a part of someone else inside me.’

‘It’s natural you feel a link to your donor – guilt even. They were a living person and you’ve got their heart. It’s a huge emotional thing. Life-changing. But the organ you’ve received from them is just purely that – a muscular pump to transport your blood around your body.’ Dr Sampson looks at me with his serious blue eyes. ‘Would you like to talk to someone about all this? In depth, I mean?’

‘Yes . . .’ I say. ‘No . . .’ I shake my head and give a small sigh. ‘No . . . I don’t think so . . .’

‘You’ll feel better when you get back to school, Becky,’ Mum interrupts, eyeing me anxiously. ‘I think she just needs a bit of normal routine, Dr Sampson. Let things settle down a bit.’

Dr Sampson nods. ‘We do allow our patients to write to

their donor's families,' he tells me. 'A letter can be passed to them but mustn't have any details of who you are, where you live or any questions about your donor. But don't be upset if you don't hear back,' he adds quietly. 'Some families aren't ready to respond. You've got to remember they've lost someone very precious.'

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Over the next two weeks, I try to compose a letter to my donor's family. It's difficult to put into words how I feel, and once I've tried to express how grateful I am, I don't know what else to say. What can I say? I'm alive; my donor's dead. Just by writing to his or her family I'm rubbing this cold hard truth in their faces. I'm worried I'll say the wrong thing and upset them more.

After all the odd things that have happened to me recently, I desperately want to know more about my donor, but, even if I knew where to start, I'm not allowed to ask. I'm a stranger writing to other strangers and we have to remain this way for ever. I come to a stumbling halt on my fifth attempt, the day before Christmas Eve.

It's late. I've been going round and round in circles, trying to put the right words in the right order, and in the end I bundle all the letters into the back of the drawer in my desk. I get into bed, deciding I'll try again after Christmas. This time of year is bound to make everything worse for them.

Christmas is about being with your family.

As I shut my eyes, thoughts of Dad flood into my head. I try to picture his face, but it's so long since I've seen him, his features appear blurry and faded like in an old photograph. A lump forms in my throat as I wonder where he's living now and whether he ever even thinks about me. Throughout the night, I dream about him coming home again.

When I wake quite late the following morning, my room is unusually bright. I lift the curtain and peek through the window to discover our street draped in a thick white blanket of snow.

The peacefulness outside is punctuated only by the excited shrieks and yells from neighbouring kids having snowball wars and rolling huge lumpy snowmen in their back gardens.

'Becky, it's been snowing!' yells Danny, banging furiously on my bedroom door as if it's a national emergency. 'There's tons and tons of it!'

'I know, you dingbat!'

He bursts into my room dressed in about six layers of clothing including two hats, one jammed down on top of the other. I suppress a giggle as he rushes over to my window, peering out to check that the view from my room is no different to his. He whoops in delight. 'Whaaaaahay! I'm going to make a giant snowman! Big as this house! Race you out there!'

For a second, I feel a tingle of excitement. Then, as I stare out of my window, I have another vision. I'm inside some

sort of van, being driven through an icy, snow-covered street. I'm celebrating. There's joking and laughing until, without warning, we skid out of control and come to an abrupt halt. I'm frightened now. Someone's yelling. Distressed, I finally realise it's Danny.

'Come on, Becky!' he's shouting. 'Why are you just sitting there like a big fat lemon?'

I look up and shudder. My heart's thumping and Danny's jumping up and down in excitement by my window. One of his two hats falls off onto the floor and he scoops it up and jams it back on top of the other as, through the window, I glimpse a small girl with long, dark hair, standing in the road, crying.

And I don't know why, but tears start to prickle in my eyes too. For a brief moment, I want to rush out there and tell her it's all right. Not to cry. Confused, I quickly turn away so Danny doesn't see my face.

'You coming out to play or what?' he asks.

'No,' I mumble, quickly wiping my eyes with the back of my hands.

'You're so boring, Becky! Your head could fall off and you wouldn't even notice!' he shouts, running out of my room and charging down the stairs.

I look back out of the window but the girl's gone. Was she real, I suddenly wonder, or did I imagine her too? Bewildered, I fling open the window and crane my head left and right in case she's further along the street, but there's no sign of her. I tell myself that she must be one of the neighbouring kids from along the road.

Downstairs, Danny runs out of the front door, slamming it noisily behind him. He dances onto the lawn, scoops up huge handfuls of snow and flings them joyfully into the air. I watch him for a minute, deciding that snow is for tough, bounce-proof kids like him to roll around on, get soaked by and catch colds in. I realise I'm shivering, so I lean back inside and close my window, but it doesn't help.

As I try to block out the memory of that girl's tearful expression, I pull on an extra jumper and glance around my room. It still doesn't seem right. I can't relax. Carefully and quietly, so no one will hear, I push my desk back to where it was a few days ago. This looks worse.

Suddenly I know exactly what's wrong. It's been staring me in the face since I got home from hospital, but I haven't twigged. My wallpaper. Huge sugary-pink tea roses splattered onto a pale peachy-pink background. I chose this wallpaper when I was seven and Dad was living with us. I've loved it for years. I still love it. It's a link to him. I bite my lip to stop myself from getting upset, because, despite all this, I realise it just has to go. Right now.