

The Last Valentine

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It was early morning, James and Lois were on their way to clean out their son's apartment. A chore they hoped they would never have to do, although they feared it for years. The funeral was just a week ago but it felt like months. The numbing sting of grief and sadness was still raw and overwhelmed Lois's thoughts and emotions. She was trying hard to get it together and function.

Ethan moved into a split-level house two years ago. Lois remembered the day he texted, "Hi Mom! I found a great little basement apartment! I have my own entrance with a nice patio, chairs and a grill. A fireplace. My own full bathroom. I met the landlord yesterday. Great Guy. 4 other guys in the house all renting rooms independently. All young cool people. It is perfect!"

Ethan's text included pictures of the house and the nearby tennis courts. He knew his mom would like it if tennis courts were nearby. Lois helped him get set up with a real bed donated by his older brother, Sam, and stocked the shared kitchen. The previous tenant left a chair and a dresser. Ethan lugged in half a sectional sofa he had when he lived with his wife, Clare. There was a large closet for hanging clothes and storage, and an open set of shelves for supplies. Lois gave him her old college trunk to use for a coffee table. Ethan was right, it was perfect for him.

James and Lois had not been back to the house since Ethan's body was found crouched over on the bathroom floor. On that tragic Saturday, the detective called to the scene would not let them enter the house, which was encircled with yellow police tape. The house was considered a crime scene until they declared Ethan's death an accident. The initial lab report showed no heroin in Ethan's system, but there was fentanyl. A highly potent opioid pain medication prescribed for Ethan after his surgery.

As she walked across the threshold into the basement, Lois had no idea of what to expect. Of all the places Ethan lived, she had been to this place the most. Because his driver's license was suspended much of the time, she was often his driver to go to the grocery store or when they met up for tennis or dinner. When Ethan's continued use of heroin caused crippling varicose veins in his legs, Lois was there to help with his recovery. By the age of 36, using heroin had destroyed his veins and taken a physical toll on his body. When Ethan crawled into the emergency room one afternoon, a CT-scan revealed the damage to his legs and he was rushed into surgery. Memories of those scary days flooded in as Lois looked around the cozy home Ethan had made for himself.

Lois got to work separating out Ethan's clothes, many of which were riddled with cigarette burns. James took on the dreadful task of clearing out the bathroom; Lois refused to even look in the bathroom. Ethan's bed had not been slept in and was made with clean linens and a comforter. Ethan was telling the truth when on the day before he was found he told Lois he was doing laundry and chores. While Lois was emptying out the dresser drawers, James noticed a small door in the wall adjacent to the dresser.

Opening the door, they could see it led into the dark crawl space under the main section of the house. They bent down on their knees and peered in. After their eyes adjusted, they noticed a string hanging from the low ceiling. One tug on the string and the crawl space lit up. The crawl space floor was dirt with a gravel cover.

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The height of the space was only four to five feet but they were able to crawl in and take a closer look around. To the right of the door was a crude set of shelves put together with boards and cement blocks. The shelves extended down the inner side wall to the outer wall, and were neatly organized with computer and electronic equipment, cardboard boxes, and plastic crates. Other than the shelves, the space was empty and dry. Lois looked around expecting a green creature to lunge from a dark corner and rip them apart. A cold chill ran through her. She felt like an intruder in a sacred place as she turned to James and said, "Do we want to know what's in those boxes?"

Without another word, Lois scooted out of the crawl space and back into the apartment. James began passing items through the small door. Once piled on the apartment side of the basement, there weren't as many items as it seemed in the crawl space. They sat on the trunk and stared at the small pile. James lifted the first crate's lid to reveal what looked like thousands of used syringes and tiny inch-by-inch-sized baggies stamped with colorful symbols. He slammed the lid back down and kicked the crate toward the door.

The second crate was full of plastic CD holders, no CDs, just the square holders. Ethan loved music. During one of his jail terms early in his addiction, he begged Lois to fund his jail's commissary account with enough money to buy a Sony Walkman. At the time, Lois was testing out tough love and only funded what she thought was enough for essentials such as deodorant, soap, toothpaste, and t-shirts. Soon after, when Lois was at the jail for one of her weekly visits, Ethan appeared with a Sony Walkman plugged into his ears. Lois shook her head and thought about the day when all her CDs and some of her jewelry went missing. Ethan left a note confessing and promising to get the items back by the end of the week. That day, Lois and James had to face the grim reality of Ethan's addiction. Ethan was out of control and beyond helping himself. They swore out a warrant and had Ethan arrested for theft to get him off the street and hopefully into treatment. The police report showed that Ethan had become a regular at several pawn shops around town.

The third crate was full of spirals, journals, papers, folders, old photos, greeting cards, letters, certificates, and a few books. Long isolated days in jail had turned Ethan into a reader. Lately, most of their conversations centered on what Ethan was reading and what he wanted to read. Reading was his escape from the life he said he would leave when he was ready. Most of the papers were copies of arrest warrants, traffic tickets, long overdue bills, and paperwork related to treatment programs. Flipping through the spirals and journals revealed lists, poetry, and random scribbles. Lois was going to need some time with this box.

The computer equipment turned out to be out of date and mostly useless, but the content was accessible. There was a small laptop that needed charging, and a receiver and turntable with nothing to connect to. An old 13" black and white TV was interesting. Both boys got a TV for their room and a laundry basket on their 13th birthday. It was Lois's way of saying they were old enough to choose their shows and it was time to learn how to do laundry.

The contents of the smaller boxes included two old pairs of snickers; barbering tools; an old wallet and checkbook; keys; a square-faced watch with a worn out brown leather strap; a red collar with white paw prints their dog, Patches, once wore; a crushed up note from a little boy thanking Ethan for being the best barber in the WHOLE WIDE WORLD; a mug with "daily cup" engraved on it; a Redskins lighter; and a head lamp. Lois had to smile when she envisioned Ethan using that head lamp to read under the covers after being told lights out. Opening the last and smallest box brought

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tears to Lois's eyes. There in front of her were letters and cards she wrote to him while he was in jail and treatment.

Ethan's addiction took him down the same ugly road of other addicts. He manipulated and lied to people. He lost everything he owned many times, and then stole from others to support his habit. When in the throes of active addiction, he couldn't even keep track of his backpack. He had crashed more cars than could be remembered. Lois constantly worried he would kill himself driving to his dealer or worse, kill others. After his last release from jail, Clare provided him with a cell phone and Lois gave him an old iPad, both were with his things on the apartment side.

They hauled to the curb for trash pick-up what wasn't worth keeping. Clothes in good enough shape were packed up and taken home to wash and donate to the local halfway house. Lois kept a few items for them and Sam. The chair and most of what was under the house was loaded into the car. They left everything else for the young man patiently waiting to occupy the space.

Ethan's stash from under the house stood stacked in the corner of the garage for three months before Lois and James had the courage to dive deeper into the contents. Ethan's old laptop charged up with a loud whir. They discovered Ethan's unfinished novel, short stories, and essays. Reading Ethan's poetry was painful, forcing them to feel his struggle with the pleasure and pain heroin brought to his life, and revived their guilt at not being able to help him. Lois became a master snoop and was able to log into his email and social media accounts, and retrieve cell phone texts. Most of the people Ethan reconnected with were easily recognizable, except for HeatherT27@me.com.

Ethan's messages to Heather were polite and pleasant. Not like the fuck this and screw that in so many other messages to his buddies and Clare. His communications with Heather were definitely different. Heather would respond in a similar manner – timid, kind, and thoughtful. A few days before Ethan passed away, Heather sent him an email and said, "I have something for you that I forgot to add to the last load. I've left it in the usual spot. No hurry to pick it up. I hope you are taking care of yourself."

Ethan emailed Heather back the next day, "I can't thank you enough for not giving up on me these past few years. I'm wondering, could we meet before I pick it up? Soon? I would love to see you again. I fear time is not on my side."

"I would love to," Heather wrote back. "I'm not working this Sunday. Does 1:00 work?"

"One o'clock works great! Let's meet for lunch at the deli across the street. What did you leave in the box?"

"Oh, something I've wanted to give to you for a while now. See you Sunday!"

That was their last message. Lois became obsessed with finding Heather. She decided to use the only link she had and sent Heather a short and carefully worded email that said she was sending notification of Ethan's death to people who were on his email address list. Lois waited a week. When there was no response, she resent the email. Still no response. Lois waited another week and emailed again, but this time, she poured her heart out. Her pent up emotion and anger from slowly losing her son to addiction, and then death, flooded into a long email to a stranger. Two days later, Heather responded, "Springfield Bus Depot, Bin #2727."

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That was all Heather wrote. Lois had never been in the Springfield Bus Depot, but she knew it was across the street from her favorite deli. Maybe the depot bin would explain who Heather is and some of Ethan's stuff stored under the house. Lois was excited and didn't wait for James to get home. She grabbed her car keys and drove over to the depot. The depot was a busy place with buses circling the driveway, picking up and discharging passengers. A customer was arguing with the ticket master about a lost ticket and demanding a refund. A weary-looking woman and a small child were sitting close on a bench with a duffle bag stuffed underneath. Lois wondered if she was running away from an abusive husband. An old man was curled up and asleep on another bench. Lois walked to the back of the depot in search of the rental bins, and there it was, bin #2727! Lois stood in a trance looking at the wall of locked bins and broke down with uncontrollable sobbing.

James was home when Lois returned from the depot. She started to cry again as she told him about the emails, bin #2727, and her failed attempt to solve the mystery of Heather and the boxes under the house. James looked at his wife with sad eyes, shook his head, and said, "I don't suppose this Heather person told you where the key is?"

"No, only the bin number," said Lois.

James thought for a moment and asked, "Did you check the keys we found in one of the boxes under the house?"

Lois's eyes opened wide as she shouted, "No!" and ran to the garage. Sure enough, when Lois rummaged back into the box with the keys, she found a small silver key with 2727 scratched into its head.

Storage bin #2727 was midway up the wall of bins and large with an opening about three feet square. Lois and James stood before the bin and considered turning around and running back to the safety of their car where they wouldn't have to face another awful reality. Instead, James slid the key into the lock, turned it, and the door slowly opened. They peered into a dark space and saw nothing. Opening the door wider to let the light in, there on the bottom of the bin was a red satin Valentine heart box. On top of the box were two dried up rose stems. Crinkled red rose petals fell to the bottom of the bin when Lois lifted the Valentine box out. Opening the box revealed a six inch heart cut out from red construction paper. A smaller heart cut from white paper and trimmed in pink lace was glued to the red heart. Two tiny red footprints were stamped on the white heart. Lois turned the heart over and read to James the handwriting on the back, "Our daughter, September 1, 2021."