

The First Heart

Reflective Objects Occasionally, you will be required to photograph medical specimens that are in glass containers. Most of the time, you will not be able to remove the specimen from its container. The best way to photograph such a situation is to ask to have the specimen brought to the lab, where we have various-sized light boxes. Set up a light box vertically on top of a black velvet-covered table, and use that as your photographic background. All of our light boxes are balanced at 5500K. Be sure to use daylight film, not tungsten; otherwise, your results will come out with a bluish tint.

At thirteen years of age, Dempsey Maxwell McCall, otherwise known as Max, saw his first human heart—a large, grayish-yellow clump of bulging veins at the bottom of a jar of formaldehyde. Mr. Orendorf, the biology teacher, kept prodding his students to keep the jar moving up and down the rows of lab tables. “People, stop lollygagging!” he said. “If you’re shocked, think of it as a piece of raw chicken.”

Max looked at Orendorf, who had a tendency to quiver his lips after speaking, and then over to Flathead, his lab partner, who had the jar in front of him. Flathead was pale and looked ready to make a dash for the lab sink to upchuck. He sat there heaving, his eyes fixed straight ahead at the Periodic Table of Elements, as if the atomic numbers and symbols provided a calming effect. Max did Flathead a favor and took the heart. It bobbed around the bottom of the jar, waving its cut veins with endings flared in perpetual screams. Max took a long look at the heart, noticing through the murky fluid in the jar that on the seat in front of him, Carolyn McCormick’s slip was showing its frilly lace. His eyes began to

water. When Orendorf gestured for him to pass the jar along, Max lifted it over to the next student—who seemed as eager to see the heart as Flathead was. Max’s eyes stopped watering. He realized they’d been affected by the jar’s fumes, not by the excitement of seeing some creamy skin and lingerie.

Even though the jar hadn’t yet made it halfway across the classroom, Orendorf opened class discussion by scribbling on the blackboard: “syphilitic aortitis.”

“Would any of you ladies and gentlemen like to take a stab at the meaning of these two words?”

Max looked over at Flathead, silently trying out the words on his lips. His color was back.

“Hello? What’s the matter, folks, are you deaf?” Orendorf rapped his knuckles on the board.

A redheaded kid with bad teeth leaned over to Carolyn, cupped his hand to her ear, and whispered, “No, but Max is.” Both of them snickered. The kid had cupped his hand from Orendorf’s view, not from Max’s. Max was able to lipread in plain view. He thought about what the consequences might be of removing the jar lid and upending the contents over the kid’s pimply face. The kid caught Max looking at him.

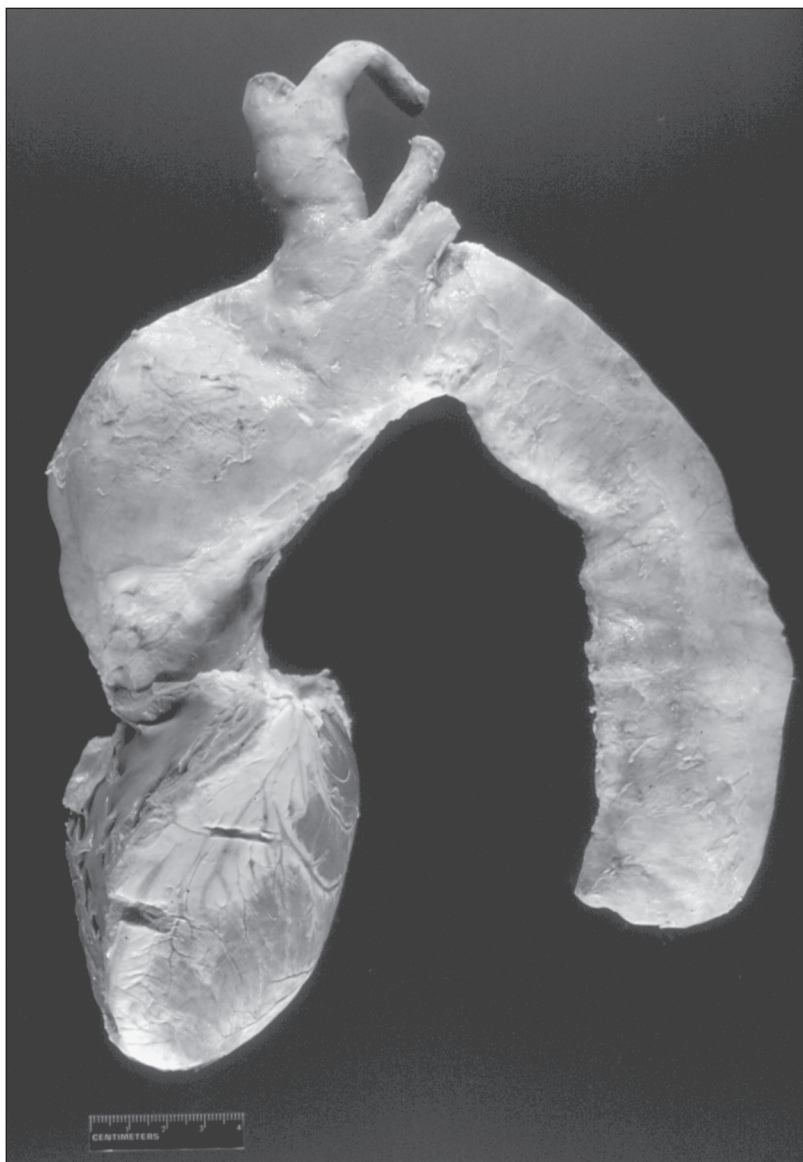
“Why don’t you take a picture, it’ll last longer,” said Redhead. Max kept his eyes on him, daring Redhead to maintain eye contact.

“Peeee-ple!” Orendorf knocked on the board again. “Definition, please?”

Flathead hesitantly put his hand up.

“Looks like VD to me,” said Flathead. The class had been studying venereal diseases over the past week, and many of the words accompanied by medical photographs were long and scientific-looking, like the ones now on the board.

“SY-PHI-LIS!” said Orendorf, as if he were selling popcorn. “The poor gentleman whose heart is in that jar keeled over from syphilis. Ve-ne-rrrrreal di-seasse!” His lips trembled. “That’s right, ladies and germs . . . from that dirty, three-letter word . . .”



He turned his chalk sideways and wrote on the board in fat letters: "S E X."

"Let that be a lesson to the male of the species in this room who may be thinking about doing some hanky-panky in the woods with a loved one. Your heart might just blow up to twice its size, seize itself, and go blllrrrrttth," said Orendorf with a raspberry. To underscore his point, he grabbed a sheet of paper, squeezed it into a ball, and dropped it onto his desk.

Flathead squinted skeptically and glanced over at Max. Max kicked Redhead's seat. When Redhead turned around, Max gestured with his index finger screwing in and out of his fist, then withdrew his finger and wagged a shaming "no-no."

"Now, have you lads and lasses formulated in your nimble brains any intelligent questions for me yet?" Orendorf raised his eyebrows repeatedly in an effort to bait his students. What he didn't realize was that his attempt was negated by his shivery lips.

Max raised his hand and cleared his throat. He swished saliva around in his mouth in preparation for his clearest enunciation, to minimize the sound of his deaf voice.

"If that was a normal heart," said Max, pointing at the jar, "could you tell the sex of the person it came from?"

A few smirking heads turned his way. Max could tell Mr. Orendorf either didn't know the answer or couldn't understand him. Whenever that happened, one of Orendorf's pockmarked cheeks would flutter a little, and he would rub his fingers over the deep acne scars, scars that made Max wonder just how rough his teacher's teenage years had been.

June 8, 1981

My room, Photo House, RIT

Hi Guys!

I'M IN!!!!!! Come August, I'm heading for ~~Glavx~~ Galveston. The acceptance letter for the residency program arrived yesterday. Whew! Can you believe it??? Dr. Robb must've seen something in me. Went to the Red Creek last night to celebrate with my friend Roger. He couldn't fully celebrate 'cuz he was bartending, but he was able to quickly quaff a few with me when the boss wasn't looking. He also slipped me a copy of their secret recipe for making the chicken wing sauce.

The Creek has the best Buffalo chicken wings and artichokes in Rochester. Really crispy and spicy wings offset with a cool bleu cheese dip. But don't call them Buffalo wings to anyone's face around here -- they're Rochester wings. I don't call them that, though -- too confusing with the Rochester Red Wings, the Oriole's AAA farm team. Speaking of the Red Wings, I've been to a couple of their games already. Cheap entertainment and a great place to take a date. Been keeping my eye out on this one ballplayer -- #5 -- who looks like an up-and-comer; hits a lot of homers and is a great infielder. His name is Calvin Ripken, Jr.

All is going well. The summer resident advisor job has been a piece of cake. It's really nice not to have to worry about paying room and board for two months. Been doing a lot of swimming, and playing tennis. Trying to do laps to build

up stamina. It's hard and frustrating, but I know it's good for me.

I met up with Reuben Zagruder, the other biomed photo student who got selected for the residency. I only knew him superficially. We discussed a few things about Galveston, and agreed to share a place down there to save money. We definitely want to live on the beach. He seems like a super nice guy. He plays tennis too! I have a hunch we'll get along well. He invited me to visit him at his parents' in NYC later in July. Will join you for Family Week at the beach in Ocean City in mid-August, and then plan to leave for Texas from Baltimore on August 29th. Reuben volunteered to phone Dr. Robb to make arrangements to stay with him till we get on our feet. People who've been through the program before have told Reuben that Robb is a very hospitable person. Guess we've got the right man!

It was great having you up here for graduation last month. Thanks for forwarding the graduation cards, gifts, and people's mailing addresses. I've got most of the thank-you cards all written out. Hope to get them out soon before the post office does something ridiculous, like go on strike or something.

Love ya, Mmmmmmax