





A Heart for Christmas

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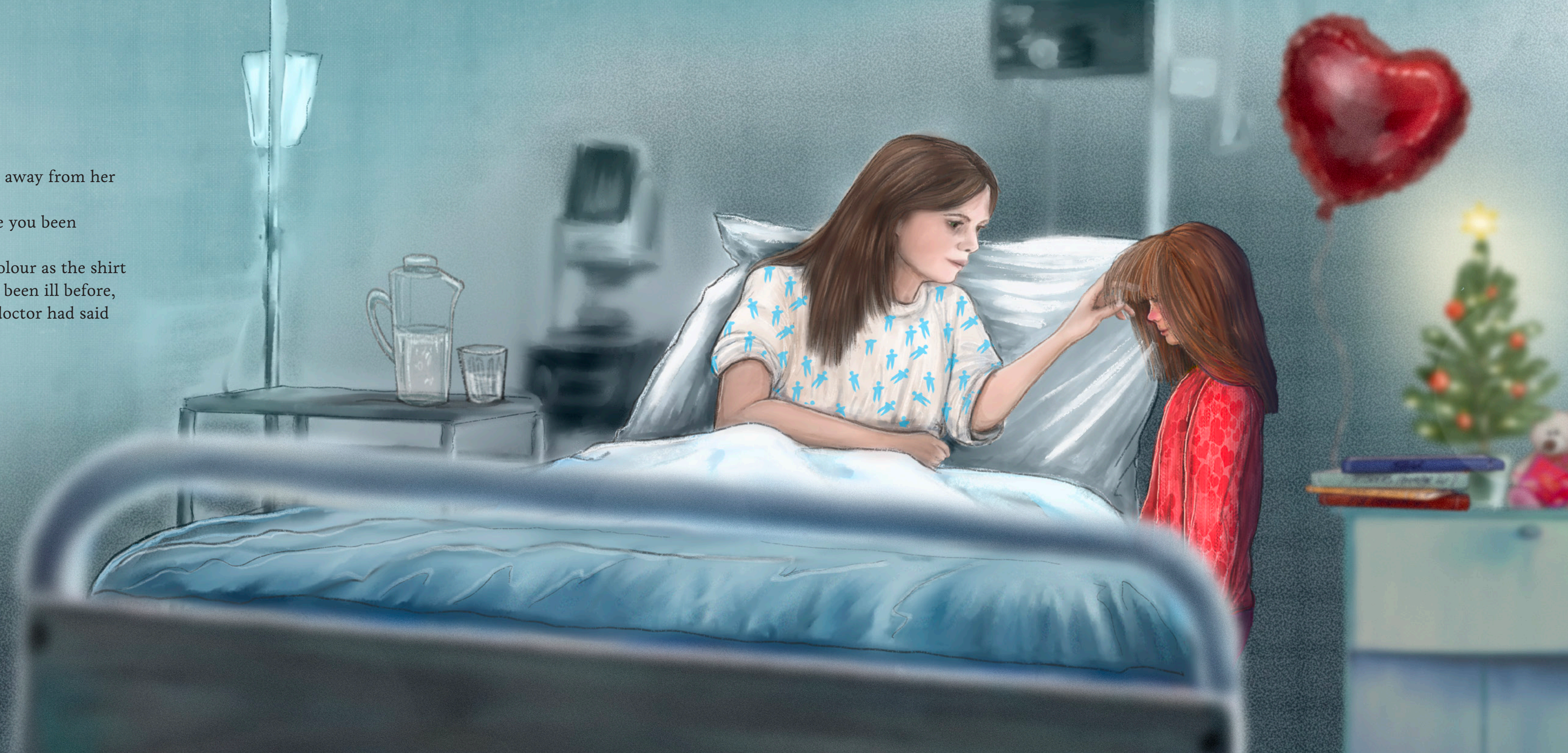



Nora reached for her Daddy's warm, broad hand. It was a hand that was never completely clean, no matter how much he washed it. He said her fingers were like icicles. Grey slush splashed up their legs as they walked towards the door. It opened and shut automatically, closing on the winter behind them. The warm air from the ceiling fan pushed them on as they went further and further into the hospital.

Mummy brushed Nora's fringe away from her forehead.

"Your cheeks are so pink! Have you been out much today?"

Mummy's face was the same colour as the shirt she was wearing. Mummy had been ill before, but it was different now. The doctor had said she needed a new heart.



The background is a light blue chalkboard. In the top left, there is a colorful rainbow. In the top center, the letters 'A B C D E F G' are written in various colors. To the right, 'L M N' are written in pink. Below these, there are more letters: 'B' in red, 'V' in blue, and 'A' in purple. In the bottom left, there are drawings of a house, a tree, and two figures. In the bottom center, there are green scribbles and the letters 'S' and 'B' in red. A large, realistic illustration of an adult's hand holding a child's hand is on the right side of the page. The adult's hand is at the top, and the child's hand is at the bottom, with the child's hand wearing a red sleeve.

“Mummy, can you draw on my hand, like you used to when I was little?”

“When you were little?” Mummy smiled and nodded. First she drew an N for Nora, then she drew her and Daddy’s initials, and last of all she drew a heart.



“Is there a nice young lady in here?”

It was Ingrid, the nurse with the purple shoes. Mummy and Ingrid chatted and laughed like they were best friends. Nora was excited to see whether Ingrid would like the little angel she had made her. It was going to be a Christmas present.

“Can I tell you something, Nora?” said Ingrid. “I have an uncle who got a new heart.”

She pulled two sweets out of her breast pocket. Nora’s favourites.

“Thank you,” said Nora. “How was he? I mean, with the new heart?”

“He was almost completely better. It was like having a new uncle!”

An icy feeling spread through Nora’s body. What will happen if Mummy is like a new person, she wondered. Will Mummy forget that she loves me?



Drops of moisture clung to the car window.
Nora thought they looked like tears.
“It’s weird that Mummy’s going to get a heart
from someone. From a complete stranger,” she said
to Daddy.
“Yes, it is strange to think about,” he replied.
“Will we know who the heart
comes from?” Nora asked.
“No,” Daddy answered. “The heart will come from
someone whose brain has been so badly hurt that
they won’t be able to survive. That’s all we know.”
Nora found it hurt to hope for Mummy to get a new
heart. It meant that someone had to die.





The car pulled into the courtyard and stopped.
Our house looks sad, Nora thought, as though it
needed someone to hold its hand.
The phone rang.
Daddy rushed to answer it.
“Hello?” he said.

Nora watched his face as he talked.
“Okay,” he said and hung up.
“Have they found a heart for Mummy?”
“No, that was Grandma. She’s waiting for you,” he replied.
“But when will there be one? What if there’s never a
heart for Mummy?”
“We have to be patient, Nora.”
Nora’s gaze drifted towards Grandma’s house. She
gestured for Nora to come in. Grandma was like a star
lighting up the dark night sky.

Grandma had decorated her front door with a wreath made of bells. They jingled when Nora closed the door behind her.

“Come in, I’ll tell you all about the Christmas tree forest!” called Grandma from the living room.

Nora hurried in

“The Christmas tree forest?”

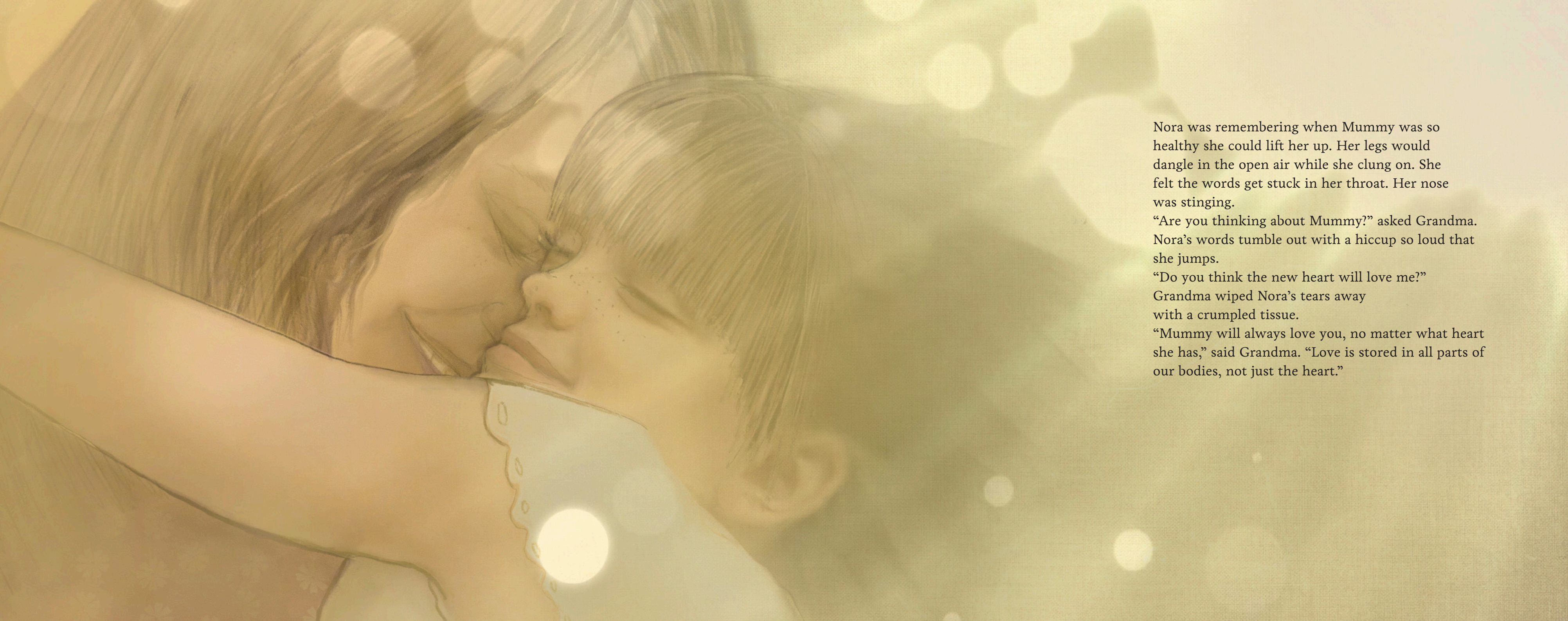
“Yes, the Christmas tree forest that’s so well hidden that most people just go straight past it. Not me though. I know that that’s where you find the most beautiful trees!

Grandma’s eyes were bright. The wrinkles around her eyes were like sunbeams.

“The first time I went there was a terrible snowstorm and it was bitterly cold. So cold that I got frostbite on three of my toes! Toes turn white as chalk when it’s that cold outside,” Grandma said. Nora’s gaze was fixed on the socks Grandma had given her, red ones with reindeer on.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Grandma.





Nora was remembering when Mummy was so healthy she could lift her up. Her legs would dangle in the open air while she clung on. She felt the words get stuck in her throat. Her nose was stinging.

“Are you thinking about Mummy?” asked Grandma. Nora’s words tumble out with a hiccup so loud that she jumps.

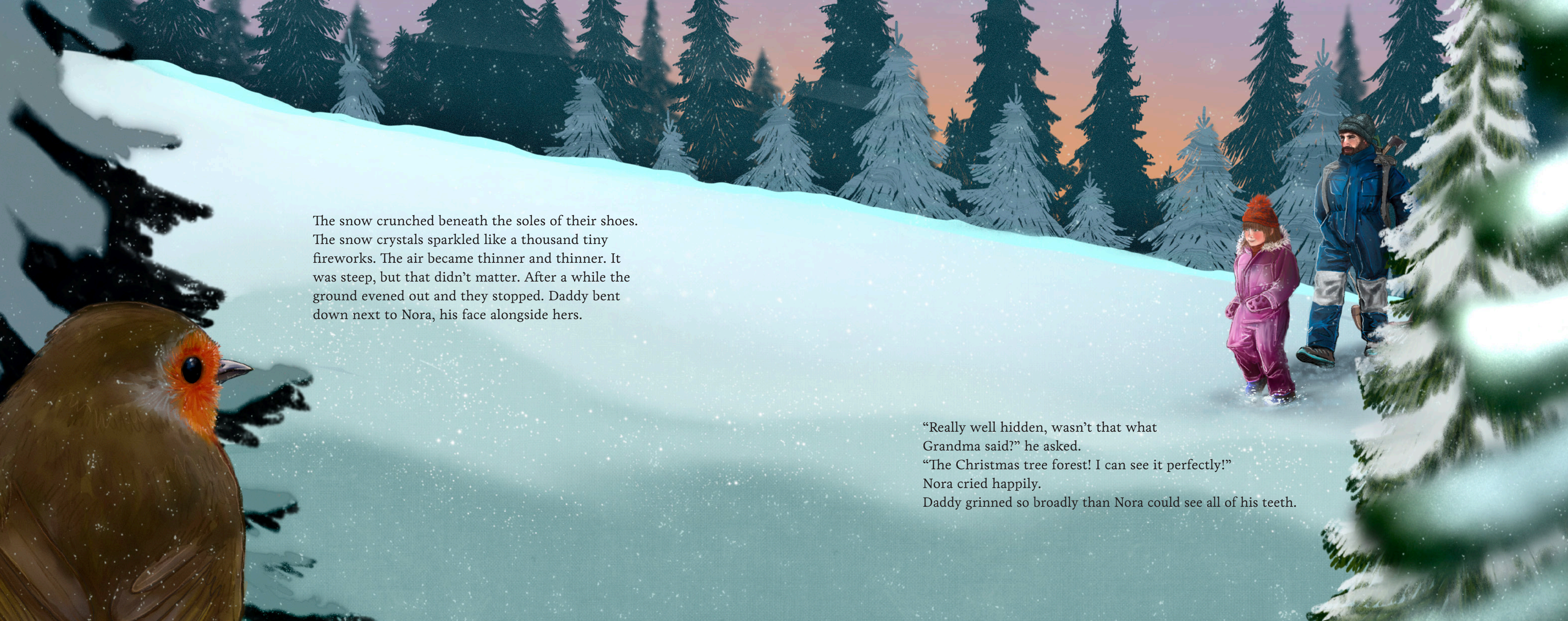
“Do you think the new heart will love me?”

Grandma wiped Nora’s tears away with a crumpled tissue.

“Mummy will always love you, no matter what heart she has,” said Grandma. “Love is stored in all parts of our bodies, not just the heart.”

“Daddy and I have organised a surprise for you. Do you want to go and get a Christmas tree? In the Christmas tree forest?” Grandma asked. She pointed out the window. Peering through the densely falling snowflakes, Nora spotted him. Daddy!
She ran into the hall and hurried to pull on her outdoor clothes. She got her boots on in one try and leapt out of the door like a deer.



A winter scene with a man and a girl walking through a snowy forest. The man is wearing a blue jacket and a grey hat, and the girl is wearing a pink jacket and a red hat. They are walking through a snowy path. In the foreground on the left, there is a large, detailed illustration of a robin with a bright orange-red face and a brown body. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees covered in snow, with a soft, hazy light in the sky.


The snow crunched beneath the soles of their shoes. The snow crystals sparkled like a thousand tiny fireworks. The air became thinner and thinner. It was steep, but that didn't matter. After a while the ground evened out and they stopped. Daddy bent down next to Nora, his face alongside hers.

“Really well hidden, wasn't that what Grandma said?” he asked.

“The Christmas tree forest! I can see it perfectly!”


Nora cried happily.

Daddy grinned so broadly than Nora could see all of his teeth.

A digital illustration of a winter forest at night. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow, and several evergreen trees are scattered throughout. One tree in the middle ground is brightly lit from within, casting a warm glow. The sky is dark with a hint of purple and blue, and small white particles, possibly snow or stars, are falling. The overall mood is serene and magical.

With her icicle fingers in his big, warm hand, they wandered from tree to tree. It was difficult to choose though. Either the tree was too small, or too tall, or the wrong shade of green, or too straggly! But then... There!

“Do you see what I see?” Daddy whispered.
“I do! It’s just perfect for our living room!” Nora exclaimed.
She could see it in her mind’s eye. The tree in the living room at home. Boxes of Christmas tree decorations. Mummy hanging baubles on the tree. She would be humming Christmas carols, just like she used to.



“I wish for Mummy to be here. Completely healthy,
with her own heart,” said Nora.
“Me too,” Daddy replied.
One of the stars blazed from one side of the sky
to the other.
“Look, Nora, a shooting star! Make a wish!”
Nora closed her eyes.



Crack!

Nora heard noises from the forest. Something was breaking branches in there. The sounds were getting closer and closer. Her breath caught in her throat. Could it be a fox? Or a deer? Snow fell from the branches, landing heavy on the ground. Nora knew that there weren't any bears around but...



“Ho, ho, ho!”

A red nose and two bright pink cheeks burst out from between the branches.

“Nice tree!”

Sometimes Grandma’s voice sounded like the chirping of a bird. Grandma had her threadbare bag with her. It was probably as old as she was. She got out a blanket, cups and a flask with hot chocolate. It’s really nice being here, right now, Nora thought. The saw went back and forth, deeper and deeper into the tree trunk. The tree fell to the ground, breaking the quiet, but the silence only lasted another moment.

Daddy’s phone rang.

Nora suddenly felt off balance, as though a really hard snowball had hit her in the stomach. Who was Daddy talking to? Why was it taking so long?
“Pack everything up!” Daddy shouted. He rushed over to them. Daddy had a funny look on his face.
Was he smiling?
Or...?
Then he nodded. Over and over again.

“Really?” asked Grandma.
Suddenly Nora understood everything.
“I’ve got to run,” said Daddy. “They’ve found a heart for Mummy! They’re going to operate tonight.”





How amazing that a new heart has turned up, thought Nora. And just before Christmas! Perhaps Mummy was already on the operating table. Nora felt as though there were two heavy stones in her stomach. One of them reminded her that someone had died, and the other that the heart Mummy would get came from a stranger. "Shall I trim your fringe?" asked Grandma. Nora shook her head. Her fringe was good to hide behind.

What if Mummy got a mummy-heart
from another mummy?
Perhaps it would be easier for Mummy
to remember she loves me then?



It's only been two days since we cut down the Christmas tree, thought Nora. It felt much longer than that. Now she and Grandma were on their way to Mummy's room. "For me?" Ingrid asked with surprise as Nora handed over her present. Nora nodded. "You're so sweet, Nora! Shall I open it on Christmas Day?" Nora nodded again. Her hair hung like curtains around her face. "Your Mummy is still weak and tired after her operation, but she really wants to see you." "Do you want me to follow you in?" Ingrid asked. Nora's legs felt glued to the floor. She didn't dare ask the question she had wondered so much about. About whether Mummy was back to normal. About whether Mummy still loved her. "Come on," Ingrid said.





Nora could see that Mummy was tired. She looked like herself otherwise though, didn't she?
"Have you managed to get any sleep the last two nights? I don't think your Daddy has. He's out like a light now," smiled Mummy.
She has the same voice as before too, Nora thought. Something still didn't feel quite right though.

“Come here,” Mummy said.
“Is it safe?” Nora asked. “With all the wires?”
Mummy nodded.
Nora crept up into the bed. She could feel that
Mummy was warm, just like before. Mummy
smelled the same as before too, like a mixture of
herself and the hospital.
Then Mummy took Nora’s hand. Slowly she drew
Nora’s, Mummy’s and Daddy’s initials,
and to finish she drew a heart.
It was as though time stood still
and nothing was strange anymore.
All of the stomach stones, hard snowballs and
icy feelings were gone.
Mummy was exactly like she was before.





