

# My Smelly Valentine

*by* Lucile Barker

He asked me if I was going to buy Valentine's for the office this year, and I shook my head. We were in the dollar store, February 13, and I could get a box of twenty kids' Valentines with last year's favourite cartoon characters for a buck.

"No point," I sighed, and he nodded.

I was a temp and even though I had been there for twenty-three months, I still didn't have e-mail or voice mail. Getting office supplies was a hassle. I knew I wasn't going to have any Valentines and I sure as hell wasn't giving.

When he wasn't looking, though, I bought a package of tissues printed as Canadian hundred dollar bills, the chocolate brown more like dried blood than the real currency.

The drive home is silent. This is a hard time of the year for us. We are not together, we are not apart. Other people think it is romantic, I find it a pain.

"So I have to go to that church on St. Clair, first thing, I can give you a ride."

In the morning I give him the tissues and he laughs. We both know he needs real money. The day is horrid; everyone has stick-on hearts from management, everyone but me.

I remember a Valentine's, 1978, a Tuesday, like this year. We were still working through the backlog of weekend orders, job site to job site. I was just out of the hospital yet again, hair still sweaty, skin smelling of intravenous and steroids, the predatory babysitter overjoyed by her overtime.

"You gonna be okay?" he asked, and I could barely nod.

"Could we have that garlic chicken?" I asked. "Someone unthawed it so it has to be used."

"You strong enough to chop garlic?" he said.

I didn't answer. We had to stop at another hardware store. Always materials. What did we do with screws? Why did vise-grips wander?

When we got home, I collapsed in a kitchen chair, sent the babysitter to the movies, and looked at the chicken. It reminded me of the old lady who had been in the room with me last week.

He came into the chicken and handed me a bag. Royal Hardware, it said. It felt like vise grips.

“Happy Valentine's,” he said.

A one piece garlic press. It worked. It was the right size. I loved it.

When I left him, I took it with me. After all, I was the garlic eater. It fell apart after twenty two years. It was the best Valentines present I ever had. Even if every tissue in that package was a real one hundred dollar bill, I'd still owe him.

