

LOVE'S LOST

by
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Another Christmas story for my daughters

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She always looks so Goddamned attractive. It's all that time she spent living in Montreal – caught that femme fatale virus the women have there. Even when she's hung over she turns heads with some artfully draped wrap or seductively displaced shoulder strap. And that oh-so-perfect skin. Bitch. She gets *that* from Mom and Dad's genes. Look what I got.

"I remember this time last year," she's saying, sipping from her wine glass, somehow leaving no lipstick on the rim, "When he put on that Indian accent with the cab driver. It cracked me up. He was so funny. You're so lucky to have found him sis."

"And he's not lucky to have found me?"

"Yes, of course. I just meant it in comparison to all those losers before him."

Oh so like her. Her specialty – drown a compliment with an insult. She can't bring herself to be unconditionally positive about anything I say or do. For her, our lives are a zero-sum game. Give me a compliment – Christ, even agree with me – and it somehow diminishes her. She's not like that about Cam now. Suddenly he's the recipient of all kinds of compliments. Actually, where is he right now? Haven't seen him recently. Where'd he get to?

"Maybe losers, as you call them, are better than a life of serial one-night stands like your weekend fancies. Or have you finally seen the value of some long-run commitment?"

Not really a fair comment, but she deserves it for being so mean.

"No time for that – too much travel, too many unpredictable work hours. But don't worry about me. I've lots of friends, some with benefits. They keep me satisfied. I'd be bored with marriage, same partner all the time. I'm not like you sis, no need for loyalty and commitment." Then, with a 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' kind of look, she adds "That is, assuming yours and Cam's fidelity."

"Of course! I've never cheated on Cam."

But him on me? Shit, there she goes again, planting her little toxic seeds. I'm going to ignore them. Water off a duck's back.

"Must be lonely for you with no stable relationship. You've no one to share your day with. Someone who knows when to leave you alone, when to give you a hug. No one to make plans with, reminisce with."

"Pebble's pretty good for that. She curls up on my lap and purrs contentedly in agreement while I share my secrets. I can see how that might not be enough for you though." She looks out the window just as Cam walks by with a snow shovel slung over his shoulder. So that's where he's got to. "You've always needed the security of a trusted confidant in your life – one of Cameron's strengths, I know. I've lost count of the number of times I shared my innermost thoughts and insecurities with him when hanging out."

Hanging out with him? Her? When, outside family get-togethers and Christmas-time like this? Sharing confidences? Where'd they get the privacy for that? About what? Cam never mentioned these little tête-à-tête's. Don't get sucked in. Change the subject, move on to something else.

"So besides being busy, what else is happening at your work?" I ask.

"Well, there's a big push on to develop our international markets, particularly Asia. We've got this new V-P who lived in China for a while and so of course she reckons it's the next big thing. All very predictable, but it means I keep having to hop over to Beijing and Guangjo. There's all sorts of office politics about *that*, with this colleague Bill – I think I've told you about him before – he thinks"

She's off and running with her work-driven monologue. Doing the usual 'I'm busy so I'm important' thing. I guess I set her off on purpose – gives me a break from scrutiny. Not difficult getting her to talk about herself – another of Cam's strengths, getting people to talk about themselves. A couple of clever questions and next thing you know some stranger at the bus

stop's telling him their life story. Maybe that's what she means about him being a confidant for her. But is that the same as those cozy tête-à-tête's she's alluding to, or is there more to those? Is there something going on between them? Shake it off, move away. Stop watering the toxic seeds. How did I get back here?

".... nothing I can do about it, it's just part of being in a big corporation. Usual problem."

It's back round to Cam again. And what does she know of his struggles?

"Sorry, what kind of problem?"

"The distant head office thing. You know, they always think they know best even though the branch office is thousands of kilometres away in another country."

"Of course. Yes, yes." She does know about Cam's problems. How? "You and Cam talk much about work?"

She gives me a strange look, like she's not really following the logic of my question. I think I must have missed something during her monologue. Or maybe not, perhaps it's that I *haven't* missed something that I was supposed to.

"Okay you two, time to come help in the kitchen."

She's the first to do Mom's bidding, jumping to her feet and asking cheerily "Can I pour you a glass of sherry? Bring it with me as another little kitchen helper."

"Sounds lovely dear, yes I'd like that."

I traipse in behind Mom, greeted by the smell of roasting turkey mixed with the fading whiff of morning coffee. As usual there's disarray on the counters and I set to tidying some of the mess. Mom exhibits her love in the only way she knows how – concern and worry.

“So how are you managing dear? On your own, that is.” She doesn’t look at me, just busies herself looking down while chopping onions.

“Fine.” What else does she expect me to say? Now that Cam’s away all the time I find things lonely at home, but I’m not going to tell her that.

“Do you not think it would be better to get back to work soon?”

I’ve been waiting for this. They all think I should be back at work. They don’t understand how much there is to do at home. All the bills to pay, the house to keep clean, the investments to tend, the garden, his clothes to keep in order, keeping track of his whereabouts on those trips. And now I’ve got to sort out what’s going on between him and Jen. No, no! Don’t go there again. Stop. That’s him laughing outside the kitchen window. He and Dad joking around while they shovel the drive.

“Not yet, Mom. There’s plenty to keep me occupied at home and they really don’t need me at the moment. I think they’re glad I’m off as it’s really quiet there this winter.”

This line of questioning comes to a halt as the kitchen door swings open and Jen puts the glass of sherry down on the counter.

“Here you are Mom.” She reaches for an apron by the stove. I see she’s freshened up her own glass. We all get to work peeling, basting, steaming and stirring. It’s nice to be on familiar ground, putting together all the ingredients of our Christmas culinary traditions. Conversation’s innocuous enough, focused on Jen’s work – again – and Dad’s life as a retiree. Apparently fine, although still lacking a major challenge that will keep him occupied. Just on cue he enters.

“So, how’s the kitchen brigade doing? Lots of shoveling out there but eventually I got the driveway cleared, and I’ve set the fire in the living room. Anything else you need?”

“You could start setting the table if you like,” says Mom. “We can use the boxed silverware again – our family one with just the four place settings. And remember the red napkins.”

Hey, that’s Cam’s job. He always sets the Christmas table. What are they doing? Why are they stealing it from him? And four place settings?

“Stop!” I yell. “You can’t do that! Cam’s going to do it. He always does.” I’m shaking with rage. How could they be so inconsiderate? They’re all looking at me. Staring at me. What have I done? Now Mom’s putting her arm around me. I shake it off and jump away, backing off until I’m against the wall. They’ve got me cornered now.

“There, there dear. We know it’s hard. It’s just been a few months, but it will get better. Really, it will.”