

Undercurrents

by
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Another Christmas story for my daughters
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“Your body language says it all George. Arms folded, legs crossed, head down. Where’s the eye contact? Where’s the sense of listening? The engagement?”

She was sitting in the shadow of the Christmas tree, brow furrowed and leaning forward, intense.

“These conversations are so one-sided. I put something out there and it just drops into a black hole.” She flung herself back in her chair, clearly exasperated.

A long silence followed, disturbed only by the muffled sound of the traffic outside. George continued to look at his foot, draped across his leg and jiggling nervously. Not for the first time he felt trapped. His life with her seemed to be a constant search for the right reply to impossible questions. Like continually being asked “does this make me look fat?”

He unfolded his arms, uncrossed his legs and looked up. “Do you think a cup of tea would help? Shall I make one?”

“George! You can’t keep running away from it. We have to sort it out.”

A pause.

“If you insist on getting us a drink, make mine a rum and eggnog.”

Ten minutes later George returned with a tumbler of eggnog laced with rum and a tea that just happened to be in her favourite mug, the one with *Everyone’s Entitled To My Opinion* down the side. She was flipping pages of a magazine, one of her fantasy travel getaway things, and drumming her fingers impatiently on the arm of the chair. He retrieved two coasters from the edge of the bookshelf and carefully set down their drinks.

She tossed the magazine on the end table and before he'd even settled into his seat she challenged him once again.

“Well?” she asked. “Anything to contribute now?”

“I don't know what to say. It's not that I don't want to sort it out. I do. I just don't know whether now is the right time. You seem so sure. That we should have another one. But for me it's too soon. Too...” he paused, searching for the right word, “disrespectful, I guess.”

“But that's the point. It's been nearly a year now. As long as we keep waiting we just dwell on the awful memory of last Christmas. If we have another, then it takes our mind off the sadness and begins the process of healing, bringing the good memories back to the fore.”

He still blamed himself. If he hadn't left the gate open she wouldn't have wandered out. But he couldn't tell her. Couldn't own up to his mistake. He imagined the recriminations, forever condemned to having it thrown back in his face whenever – and it was all too often – she had cause to berate him for his inherent carelessness. Why couldn't he be more mindful? More in the moment. But he just wasn't. That's all there was to it. You'd think that this would have taught him, he thought. It should have. It hadn't though. Just yesterday he'd been excoriated for leaving the car unlocked overnight ... again. Even after all these years she didn't seem to understand him. It's just who he is, but she still wasn't willing to accept it. Keeps trying to pretend he's someone else. Someone more organized. Someone more like her.

He sat there with the mug clasped in both hands peering above its rim at the painting on the wall behind her. He tried to drag his mind back to their conversation. To formulate some kind of response. He knew how frustrated she was, aggressively focused on him, expectant. Instead his mind drifted to when they'd bought the painting, the trip to the Charlevoix. Those were better days for them. Holidays usually were. The break from

day-to-day tedium seemed to draw them back to reveling in their differences, the way they relished their complementarity in their early days.

She persisted.

“And much as you seem happy to procrastinate for a few years, we don’t have that luxury George. I’m no spring chicken. It wouldn’t be responsible to have another if we don’t have enough good years of health and high energy left to give.”

She was right. He’d read about how marriages suffered after such tragedies unless they had something new on which to re-focus. He should welcome anything that would drag his mind away from that awful scene. There’d been the squeal of tires, the dull thud, and then the silence, finally broken by the knock on the door from the distraught driver.

The momentary silence, its sense of impending disaster, that’s what had really got him. A sinking feeling right into his bowels. A certainty that it was her. It had reminded him of those sickening car accidents outside his house when he was growing up. They’d been disturbingly frequent at the unmarked crossroads. Their stomachs would lurch with the knowledge of another accident. But each neighbour responded as if part of a team, slipping into a well-oiled routine at the awful crunching sound of metal on metal. Filling the foreboding silence with rote behaviours. The Parkins called the ambulance and the Faircloughs fetched Dr Talbot from #31. They, somehow drawing the short straw, rushed out with blankets and bandages, greeted by moaning injured or just dazed occupants staggering around in shock. He often wondered what kind of sub-conscious trauma all this had caused. Perhaps that’s why he’d had such a feeling of dread that day. At the silence that followed the squealing tires.

“I think maybe you’re affected by the Christmas season,” he offered, tentatively. “Surely we’re not in that much of a rush. It’s a big decision, all that responsibility.”

Part of his hesitancy, if not all of it, had nothing to do with respecting her memory. It had to do with being tied down.

She was dismissive. “A bit late for that concern isn’t it? What do you think Carrie and Devon are? As teenagers they may not be as dependent as when they were in diapers, but we’ve still got to be there for them. We’re bound together by our responsibilities for a few more years yet dear.”

Is that how she sees it too, he thought. Bound together by responsibilities. Tied by a sense of mutual obligation. These joint commitments were now the main glue holding together the relationship. He’d actually been looking forward to being liberated from them in a few years. Free to do what he liked when he liked, unencumbered. Not that he didn’t love the twins. He absolutely did. When his friends and colleagues waded through newborns in their early thirties he’d consoled himself with the knowledge he’d be free by his early forties and they’d still be tied down into their fifties. There had to be some compensation for those years of financial struggle in his twenties when the others had all been off having a great time. And about the only aspect of the accident that could be seen as positive – at least for him – was hastening the arrival of that day of freedom.

“Maybe we should ask them what they think?” he ventured.

Of course Carrie would love the idea. She was such a nurturing type. He’d thought for some time now she’d become a nanny, daycare teacher or something like that. Devon not so much. She’d be more concerned about the competition for attention. Little narcissist that she was. He thought it more likely she’d become a television presenter, actor or even a model if she could shed some of that persistent baby fat.

“Certainly not. For starters, it’s not their decision, it’s ours. And in any case, it wouldn’t be fair to put that burden on them.”

A predictable response. She was always protecting the kids from his attempts to treat them like grown-ups, involve them more in family decisions.

“You’re just looking for ways to procrastinate George.”

Procrastination wasn’t the problem. He knew he didn’t want another one, he just didn’t know how to tell her. She’d ask why and that would open up a can of worms. He wasn’t ready to tell her why.

“I suppose you’re right ... about the burden, not my procrastination,” he quickly added.

“They were as affected as we were, you know. They may not show it now, but I’m sure that image is just as indelibly imprinted in their minds as it is in ours,” she said.

That image.

He knew what she was referring to. After the knock on the door all of them had rushed out to the street. They shouldn’t have. She’d lain splayed and twisted on the pavement, the unnatural pose of her limbs warning enough of the outcome. But worse than that the blood, not great pools of it – somehow that would have been better – just an ominous trickle from her nose. Since then they had hardly talked about it. Not the immediate event. Within days the twins were back into the school routine, just two breakfasts now and an empty bowl, two packed lunches, dinner-time with one less mouth to feed. Now there were just the endless inquisitions from her about what to do next.

Nothing, just let it pass and bring on the freedom. That’s what he kept thinking. But how could he tell her what really came next? A few years sharing the burden of teenage angst before he departed. Before he left this dog-eared relationship, claiming his freedom. He’d always loved them, always had one in his life, but getting another right now would just be one more thing to fight over at separation time. Another encumbrance.

“Okay dear. You’re right. Let’s do it. Another black lab? We can put it under the tree and surprise the girls.”