

Lady Friend

I look at the flower, uncertain what it is, then recall Lady Slipper from a distant, childhood memory, a grade school lesson on provincial flowers. Newfoundland or P.E.I., I think. No matter. It was Melanie's annual joy to find one on our frequent walks down the cottage lane. She'd take photos of this delicate orchid, later choosing the best one to blow up and frame for the cottage walls, like the one now hanging over the toilet. Melanie continued this with other flowers as well, ever the botanist. I recall the Trillium, as every good Ontarian should. But it was the poisonous one, the one with the white berries, which had fascinated her most...especially in her last months.

"You could poison me with these, you know. Cut to the chase," she'd said, while focusing her camera on the berries. From my vantage point, I admired her neck under her duck-bum of short, brown hair. She did this often, joke of her imminent death. At first, I'd ask her not to speak in that abhorrent manner. I thought a positive attitude was the best medicine, even though the situation was hopeless. When she began tripping over herself and required a cane, she'd still make the same jokes. Then I began to joke back to humor her.

"Should I mix it in with your cereal? Or spike the jam?" Mel, taken aback by this new pranking, stopped walking. I heard her footsteps behind me drag to a halt on the pebbled lane. Mine did too. I turned and looked back at her leaning on her cane. "Sorry."

"No, it's fine. I was just thinking you should put it into a sweet smoothie instead. Baneberry's terribly bitter. And I'd likely need a truckload of it...maybe intravenously."

I smirked, but it was too much. I walked back to her. "You've had enough needles, my love." I kissed her forehead.

Today, I walk the same hilly laneway with another woman, a woodland walk with wildflowers, grandfather trees and Melanie's whispers carried through their branches. My lady friend holds my hand, then swings it. She doesn't notice the flora or the south-westerlies. She's talks of her life in a way of getting closer to me, but I'm missing some of what she's saying. I do that sometimes; more so, lately. I simply like her company...and the sex. I don't want to tell her how Melanie and I laughed until our bellies ached when I performed a pirouette on this walk. She wouldn't understand. Or how Melanie was the only person who could beat me at Cribbage...sometimes, or how, without asking, she could make a room full of people pay attention to the story she was telling. Mel could hold an audience.

I've waited the unwritten, customary six months before dating, though I could have used a woman's comfort the day after Melanie died. Few understand the pit it left in my soul and even now, I find it pinches. My lady friend laughs and kisses me, sutures to the reopening incision, the place where my heart once lived. She pulls me back to the future, back to possibilities of happiness, though she may not be *the one*. Simply a Band-Aid, the second Band-Aid to be honest. The first was a disaster. My in-laws knew her. Of all rotten coincidences, I hadn't imagined: Sue being my father-in-law's physiotherapist.

"Don't look so blue," my second Band-Aid chirps, as we reach where the rock face lines the road. It startles me, because for a second, I was alone with my thoughts. This intrusion is a welcome one. I do get morose.

"Sorry." My cute boy-grin that she likes props my face.

"Oh, don't be. You're entitled."

I don't get it. She asks me not to be blue, but then gives me permission. I pull her in for a cuddle. She's warm and soft, and a human being who likes me.

“There’s time for that later, Mister.” She laughs and runs ahead, her arms swinging wild and free. Yes, she’s younger than I am. I know it’s crass. I know Melanie would disapprove.

Sometimes, I ask myself what I’m doing here with these women, but when my sense of propriety kicks in, so does my grief.

Later, we eat burgers by the fireplace, our trivia game scattered across the retro table that Melanie found at an auction. We give up. She gives up; a question from the dark ages, apparently.

“I am from the dark ages,” I say, amused.

“I know.” It stings, the flat reply.

What did you expect? Mel asks me later, when I’d had a few too many. *Did you expect her not to notice you’re a good two decades older than her? Doesn’t she play crib?*

“It’s all your fault,” I slur.

My lady friend, Chrissy, who’s been reading the trivia cards in a loud, obnoxious, baby voice, stops and turns to me, with a “huh?”

“No, I didn’t mean you. I think I fell asleep,” which could be true. I usually drink too much and doze, but she’s caught me this time.

“You can’t fall asleep on me now. It’s only ten o’clock! Let’s go skinny-dipping!”

Skinny-dipping?

Melanie loved to skinny-dip. For years, she’d do it solo; I was too proud, too...reluctant to take the plunge in my birthday suit. Eventually, I succumbed and came to love the feeling of nakedness underwater, the naughtiness of it. Melanie did too.

Now, we end dance down to the dock, where Chrissy treats me to a striptease. Yes, it works a charm and though alcohol normally stunts my growth, muscle-memory and a naked young woman revives the sailor.

She notices, screams with delight, and jumps in the lake. When I swim towards her, she splashes at my face and screeches enough to wake neighbors and lake trout. It's fun, and I do catch her. She kicks me away and swims back to the dock.

"Let's get high," she says, and climbs the ladder. Her naked skin is smooth and firm, glistening in the moonlight—cliché, and God-given beautiful. The kind of beauty only someone over forty can appreciate.

"Okay." I know she brought pot. I could smell it in the car on the way up. And I'm not opposed to any kind of numbing.

She climbs the steps to the cottage, still naked, forgetting her clothes on the dock. I retrieve them, like a good dog, and traipse after her. She remains naked in the cottage and emerges from the bedroom, a joint between her lips and thick smoke curling above her head. I've felt wrong about most of this weekend, and how pathetic a case I've become, but when numbing is proposed with a naked twenty-something, I'm in with both feet. This is when Mel chastises me. *You gotta be kidding. When did you ever want to get stoned with me?* I try not to compare, it's impossible. Mel, the woman my friends wished they married. That was until...

The next morning, I'm up early, my guest still sleeps. Mel's here in full force, disapproving my perfidy. I despise myself for it, so she needn't bother. I can explain it away as a man's needs, but that wouldn't fly with Melanie. I'm desecrating her memory and debasing myself.

Snap out of it!

I hear the toilet flush and assume Chrissy went back to bed. We got high last night and my performance was less than stellar, but performance nonetheless. Then I see it.

A blue heron.

It flies low to the water and I move to the window to follow its route, hoping it's a fish he's after. Melanie had a thing for blue herons. When we first bought the cottage, we'd paddled in the previous owner's left-behind rowboat around the island. It was a scene pulled from an Andrew Jackson painting; on the opposite side of the island, we'd disturbed a heron and it took flight against the shady greens of cedar, pine, and hemlock. "Hi, Mel," I say aloud, following the heron's path. It dips into the water, but comes up empty-beaked.

"Who's Mel?" Chrissy asks. I didn't hear her get up. I'm not even sure how to answer this. "Is someone outside?" she asks.

I realize she thinks Mel's a guy. She only knows my wife died, not her name. "No, no one's here but us kids." I don't know why I say this, so stupid.

"Kids?" She guffaws, but is too polite to say, 'you're no kid.' Or too old to say, 'I'm no kid.' Either way, an awkward moment passes. "Got any cereal?"

"Yeah, I think I've got Weetabix, but would you like me to rustle up some bacon and French toast?"

"Real maple syrup?"

"100 per cent Canadian."

"You're on," she replies, and then walks seven paces to the living area—I can't say it's a room. She plonks herself down on the sofa then begins tapping her polished nails on her cell phone. She has so many friends, I can't keep track.

I start the bacon and crack a few eggs into an old chipped soup bowl. I slice the bread thick, just the way Mel... I put the knife down and stare out the kitchen window. I have to stop this.

At the end of the lane, I see a neighbor walking his dogs: his two dogs, his son's dog, and now a new one; four in total. He must be dog sitting. I turn off the stove burner and walk out. I don't need Frank sniffing around here just now.

The dogs see me and start bounding down the lane. I meet Frank halfway and we shake hands. It's been a while.

"How you holdin' up?" he asks me. The concern I hear in his voice is the same familiar tone I hear in everyone.

I don't understand what, exactly, there is to hold up. Myself? Well, I have two legs. "I'm fine, Frank. Getting there." There's no explaining how *getting there* means to burrow the pain so deep... "How about you? You've got a few extra pups here."

"Oh, one's my son's and now Dorothy bought herself a dog. A rescue, actually. She's away on business, so she's taken up her brother's habit of leaving the pooch with me." His eyes flicker to a spot behind me and I turn. Chrissy's emerged in her cut-off shorts and bikini top. Frank bemused look darts back to me. A question forms in his expression, head tilted slightly.

Raising my eyebrows, I perform a 'Yup' kind of nod. What is there to say?

"Hi!" she says, then grabs my arm with both hands and pulls me. "I'm starving!"

"Ah, Chrissy. Frank," I say, as a way of introduction. She yanks me backwards toward the cottage. I trip, but recover quickly. I'm the leashed dog here, while the others are free at Frank's feet.

"Hi Franky!" Chrissy waves, and then lets me go and stomps back into the cottage.

“Breakfast is cooking,” I explain with a nervous laugh. Frank stands there, stunned. I wave and go in. What does it matter anymore? Mel’s not here. Mel’s not ever going to be here.

I’m here, God damn it!

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