

Till Death Do Us Part

By

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"So, was it worth the wait?" Lorrie Nolan asked.

"Did it hurt?" Pat, her husband of just under ten hours, replied.

"A little, but then it felt good."

Pat remained silent. He placed his right arm around Lorrie as she turned on her side and pressed against him. Overhead, moonlight spilled through a small skylight, covering them with a silvery blanket. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her strawberry blonde hair spilling like liquid gold over his shoulder and down his arm. Through the cabin's screen door, which was only a few feet from the foot of the bed, he could see Lake Tahoe, black and sparkling in the moonlight. His orgasm had been mind blowing, but the tension of the last two days had not drained out of him, as he hoped it might once they made love. It was foolish of him, he realized, to think it would. He was the same person now as he was twenty minutes ago. Lorrie had said once that she saw his core and that it was strong and beautiful. What core?

Lorrie got up and, taking the towel she had placidly placed under her earlier, stained red now, she went to the bathroom. Pat watched as she crossed the small room, afraid to think of what a great body she had and how beautiful she was. He would be twenty-one in two weeks, a milestone that meant nothing to him, since, until recently anyway, he was sure he was already a man. An amateur boxer with fourteen wins and a draw under his belt, a heavy equipment operator since the age of eighteen, working on bridge sites in Ohio

and Kentucky and a tunnel in Canada, helping support his widowed mother while his older brother, Frank, was in the service: if anyone had asked, he would have said that he had earned the right to call himself a grown man.

But that was before he met Lorraine Ryan, the incredibly beautiful Lorraine Ryan, with her long silky red-blond hair, her green eyes and her dazzling smile. She had laid down a couple of rules: *no sex until we're husband and wife, quit the boxing, go to school for something*, and he had obeyed, a boy again, desperately in love, despite his struggle to retain what he thought of as his dignity, which led them into a couple of terrible rows early on. *Was that only six months ago*, he asked himself, *could it only be six months?*

Lorrie came out of the bathroom, still naked, and sat cross-legged before him on the bed. Like they had been hanging out naked together all their lives.

"You didn't answer my question," she said.

"What question was that?"

"Was it worth the wait?"

"Yes, Lorrie, it was."

"Are you sure?"

As she said this, Lorrie began stroking Pat's thighs through the clean white sheet of their bed. Up one and down the other, coming close, but never touching his penis, which shortly began to lift the sheet as it grew. Pat blushed when he realized what was happening. He watched her breasts hanging heavy and free as she leaned forward to increase the pressure of her stroking. Before he met Lorrie, he had rarely blushed, even as a boy. Now his face was hot and red, like a teenager's at a whorehouse.

"Kiss me with the kisses of thy mouth," Pat said. "For thy love is better than wine."

At this Lorrie quickly pulled the sheet away and knelt over Pat, straddling him, looking him directly in the eye.

"The Song of Solomon," she said.

"Yes, I've been saving it." Pat was breathing rapidly now, and pressing his crotch up into Lorrie's.

"You know, Paddy," she said, reaching down to guide him into her, "you may have potential. You just may."

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Six days later, they were in their rented car, Pat at the wheel, headed north on Route 522 in northern New Mexico's high desert, looking for a bar called Elmo's, where they would turn to head down into the Rio Grand Gorge to a hot spring they had been told about on the river. They had gone from Las Vegas, where they were married, to Tahoe for two days, down to Lake Mead to tour the Hoover Dam, then to New Mexico. Yesterday they had hiked up Mount Atalaya, outside Santa Fe, and made love at 9,000 feet. At breakfast they had heard about the hot spring up near Pilar and decided to pack a lunch and make a day of it, free and easy like any near-penniless, naïve young couple would be on their low-end honeymoon.

Except that Pat was not completely free and easy. He could not believe his luck in landing Lorrie, and worried that it would not last once she realized that, though he could throw a killer punch and move the earth and build things, big dumb Irishman that he was, he did not know the first thing about loving someone or being a husband. And, now that they had made love twenty times or so—he was insatiable which so far she didn't seem to mind—there was something new. He could not entirely repress his feeling

that their use of condoms—most of the time—was a mortal sin. He had thought he had shed his parents' Irish Catholic guilt years ago, along with stopping going to mass and confession and *all that hooplah* as he called it. But he was now learning the lesson, as everyone does, that theory was one thing, practice another. And neither, Pat was learning, was Lorrie all that naïve. She had definitely been a virgin, but how then did she know so much about making love, about how to please him?

"You're not telling me something, Paddy," Lorrie said.

"Huh?" Pat replied, his reverie abruptly broken.

"Something's on your mind."

There it is again, Pat thought, she knows things. I can't anticipate it, and I can't fake her out once she throws that first pitch.

"You've been brooding," Lorrie said. "You're too serious, I keep telling you that. I'm not smart, but together we can be."

Pat looked over at his wife, who looked back at him, her head slightly down, as if to say, *stick with me, Big Guy, I'll navigate. I'll get us there.*

"Is it the sex?" Lorrie asked. "It's not a sin. We're married."

"Come on, Lorrie."

"Then what is it? You think I'm a brazen hussy?"

"I've actually heard that before." Pat smiled as he said this, as did Lorrie. After dating for a few weeks she had told him that she had decided that she would be trying out lots of words and phrases on him that he may not have heard before, as, she had said, he was such a *tabula rasa*: a big, dark-eyed, incredibly handsome, muscular, sexy,

blank slate. He had not been offended, so madly in love was he, and so obviously affectionate was her teasing.

"The Jesuits again?" she asked.

"I don't remember."

"Your prior girlfriends, whom you're supposed to have totally forgotten by now?"

"Possibly."

They both stared ahead for a moment, their eyes on the empty two lane highway that was now cutting through a vast, flat Indian reservation, their compact car chugging along at a steady 55 miles per hour.

"What is it, Pat?" Lorrie asked after this moment passed.

"I've been offered a job."

"It must not be your average, run-of-the-mill type of job."

"No, its not."

"What is it?"

"Operating a dozer in Paraguay. They're building a dam."

"Paraguay!" Lorrie said.

Pat snuck a look at his wife, confirmed that she was, for once, dumbfounded, then quickly returned his eyes to the road.

"Jimmy King," he said, "is putting a crew together. The pay is unbelievable."

"How much?"

"A thousand a week."

"A thousand a week!"

Dumbfounded again.

"Plus a place to live."

"What did you say?"

"I said I would think about it."

"You should have said you had to talk to me."

Shit, Pat thought. *I can't win.*

"That's what I meant," he said.

"When do you have to tell him?"

"When we get back."

"When does it start?"

"September."

"Are wives invited?"

"Yes," Pat replied, lying, and immediately feeling guilty. He didn't know if wives were invited. He hadn't asked. Jimmy King—Pat's boss, a boxing fanatic and the owner of King Excavation—had mentioned the roughness of the jungle site, where they would be moving the Parana River, creating a new mile-long channel where the dam would be located. Pat didn't know which he loved more, the idea of moving the Parana River, or his new wife. He literally did not know that he did not know this. It was not a question he would think to ask himself until later, when it was too late.

"We have to discuss it," Lorrie said.

"Of course," Pat replied. "It's a big move," thinking, *please God, let her say yes.*

"There's Elmo's," said Lorrie, pointing to a building ahead on the left. "Let's stop and get beer."

* * *

A sturdy concrete bridge took them over the Rio Grand. Midway across they spotted the hot spring, a semi-circular outcropping of rocks jutting into the river about a half mile north. On the far side, they parked in the dusty day use area and headed for the path that would take them to the spring. The path, hugging the gorge wall, wide enough

for one person at a time, ascended steeply to a plateau that overlooked the river. This area they had also seen from the bridge, along with the small group of people standing on it smoking and talking. The climb was difficult and slow, the path narrow and rocky. They stopped often to catch their breath and to look down at the deep blue river flowing through the gorge. The late morning sun blazed down on them through a cloudless pale blue sky.

At the top they were hot and sweaty and stopped to share a beer from the six-pack Pat was carrying in his knapsack, sitting on a fallen tree trunk bleached to a whitish-gray by the sun. The group of people they had seen from the bridge turned out to be three young men, in their early twenties or a little older, all dusky, black eyed and black haired; probably, Pat thought, Indians from the nearby reservation. Their clothes—boots and frayed jeans and cut off shirts—were covered with dust, as if they had been recently doing hard labor somewhere. They were drinking beer and smoking and listening to Santana on a boom box that had been placed on a pile of rocks near the edge of the cliff. The tallest of the three returned Pat's stare a little too long and a little too hard for Pat's taste before turning and flicking his butt over the edge of the cliff. Pat surveyed the scene. To the left of the Indians was the plateau's edge and the river some hundred feet below; to the right he could see their weather-beaten pick up, and beyond it a long expanse of pale brown dessert dotted with brush and stretching to the horizon. After their beer, as they passed the group, Pat smelled marijuana and heard one of them call out, *"Sexy chica, muy sexy lady."*

The descent to the river was gradual and easy, and the spring, collected into a man-made half-moon shaped rock retaining wall, well worth the drive and the hike. Lorrie had on her bathing suit under her hiking shorts and cotton blouse. Pat stripped to his boxer shorts and they sat in the 90-degree water with their backs against the low rock wall and luxuriated. Occasionally they slipped over the rocks and into the bracingly cold Rio Grand for a minute or two, holding on as the current swept by and over them, before climbing back into the naturally heated water of the spring. At the foot of the path was a small hardpan area where they had left their gear. Beyond that was a wide, low cave entrance at the base of the gorge where they could make out the shape of another pool, this one bubbling: the source of the spring.

On what turned out to be the last of their hot-cold-hot sorties, when they returned to the spring, they found the tall Indian standing a few steps up from the bottom of the path, about fifteen feet away, staring at them. He seemed a bit older up close, maybe twenty-seven or-eight. His black hair was greasy and long, almost shoulder length. There was a mixture of contempt and amusement in his coal black eyes, in the slight curl of his upper lip. He had, Pat realized, been watching them as they climbed back into the spring, shivering and laughing, Pat effortlessly lifting Lorrie to help her over the rock wall. The Indian was wearing a sleeveless denim shirt, which showed to good advantage his shoulder-to-wrist tattoos, an uncoiled rattler on both arms, the snakes writhing under well defined muscles, their forked tongues ending at the back of each hand.

"Are you going to fuck?" he said.

Pat felt Lorrie's hand on his forearm under the water, but there was no need for her to calm him, if that's what she was doing. He was fine.

"We were just leaving," Pat said, rising to his full six-foot-three. He reached for Lorrie's shorts and blouse, which she had draped over a rock near the path, and handed them to her. They stepped out of the spring together and Pat stood in front of his bride, keeping his eye on their new friend, while she dressed. When she was done, she grabbed Pat's arm again, but Pat was in no hurry. He put his *Garvey' Gym* T-shirt on, pulled his khaki shorts on over his wet underwear, then sat on a rock outcrop not far from the Indian to put on his hiking boots and socks. Lorrie did the same, sitting close to him. When they had their boots on and laced up, Pat, who fought in the heavyweight division at 205 pounds, but now weighed closer to 220, rose to face the Indian. Lorrie also rose and held Pat by the bicep. He could tell, from the pressure she was exerting, that she was afraid. This did not occur to him until this moment, but it did not bode well for the Indian.

"Excuse us," Pat said.

"You are leaving so soon?" said the Indian.

"Yes," Pat answered. "We have to get going."

"But the spring is so much fun," the Indian said. "My girlfriend and I have fucked here many times."

"Pat!" Lorrie said, "let's just go."

Pat had not moved a muscle after their friend's last remark, but he was about to punch him in the solar plexus. Not too hard, not so hard it would give him a heart attack or kill him. Just hard enough to collapse him to the ground, the breath knocked out of him. Lorrie's sharp calling of his name had stopped him.

"After you, *pendejo*," the Indian said, turning sideways to let them pass.

"Let's go, Lor," Pat said, nudging her to go first. "Take your time."

Half way up the cliff path, Pat turned and saw the Indian following them, about twenty steps behind. Pat smiled as they made eye contact. At the top, the other two Indians were still standing a few yards from the plateau's edge, drinking beer, listening to their boom box. They stopped talking and stared at Lorrie and Pat as they emerged from the path onto the plateau. Pat did a quick one-eighty: the desert, the pick up with pieces of what looked like scrap lumber sticking up from its bed, the two Indians, the cliff's edge, the river below. In the distance he could see the bridge and at its near end the parking area, where four or five people were sitting on beach chairs next to a Volkswagen bus.

Pat took Lorrie's hand and started across the plateau. As they were nearing the two Indians, one of them, short, but stocky and well muscled, stepped in front of them.

"Not so fast," he said. "Have a beer with us."

"No thanks," Pat said. "We don't drink."

"But we saw you drinking beer before. You have it in your knapsack. You don't like Indians."

The tall Indian had come up from the path and walked around to face them, standing next to his friend. The third was still standing near the boom box, about ten feet away, sipping beer.

"They don't like Indians," the stocky one said to the tall one, who was holding something in his right hand that looked to Pat, at his first quick glance, like a knife. Looking again he saw that it was a barber's razor, its

shiny curved blade fully extended. The sun was past its zenith now, but still blazing. In its harsh glare Pat could see the stocky Indian's teeth, white and even and glistening under his mustache as he smiled broadly.

Taking aim at these teeth, Pat stepped forward and hit the stocky one with a right-cross directly in the middle of his face. He crumpled immediately to the ground. Pat put Lorrie behind him as the tall one showed his knife, his eyes dark with anger. Pat nudged Lorrie backward, toward the pick up, away from the cliff, watching carefully as the third Indian also pulled a knife and joined his partner. At the truck, Pat reached behind him, grabbed a two-by-four, and in a long sweeping motion swung it at the tall Indian's head. He ducked but not quickly enough to avoid a glancing blow, which knocked him to the ground. Pat immediately swung the lumber again, against the Indian's rib cage, a blow that he knew would cause him great pain and debilitate him for days. As Pat was delivering this blow the third Indian rushed at him, his knife high. Pat turned toward him in time to see Lorrie swing the knapsack with five cans of beer still in it against the side of his head, spinning him into the front fender of the pick up, where he hit his head with a *clank* and fell to the ground.

"Fuck," said Lorrie, taking in the three Indians in various degrees of consciousness on the ground around them. "Fuck all." Her eyes were blazing as hot as the sun.

"You're not mad at me, are you?" Pat asked.

"Mad at you?"

Pat picked up the razor and the knife and with a heave of his long, powerful right arm, flung them as far as he could out into the desert. "We have to go," he said.

"Mad at you?" Lorrie said again. "Are you kidding?"

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On 522, not far from Taos, Pat found a spot to park, slightly elevated, in the evergreen forest just off the highway, with a view of the road of at least a mile or two in each direction. Behind them was a rushing stream and beyond that the outline of a small motel, probably a fishing camp. They waited in silence, watching the highway. Pat's adrenalin had been coming out of his pores, but he was calm now, able to think. His life had been a rough-hewn one since his father died when and he was fifteen and his brother went off to the army a year later. Away from home, working on different projects, he spent his nights in bars, where he had had his share of run-ins with the local crazies. But he had never faced a man with a knife before, or a weapon of any kind. He felt like he had passed a test, punched a ticket. And then there was Lorrie. If the Indians had hurt her, they would all be dead now. This thought, a simple statement of fact, confirmed for him that he had done the right thing in marrying her, despite the feelings of inadequacy that were more or less with him all the time.

"I'll go to Paraguay," Lorrie said, breaking the silence. "But I have one condition."

"What's that?" Pat asked.

"We save all the money. When we get back we'll buy a house."

"Will it be enough?"

"More than enough."

"That's fine with me. I agree a hundred percent."

"We can still work and go to Sacred Heart nights."

Lorrie, who worked days in a lawyer's office, had thirty credits under her belt going part time to the small

Catholic college in Bridgeport. In the past winter, Pat had taken a three-credit geology course there at night, selected by Lorrie. He had loved it and gotten a B, amazed that he could acquire an understanding of how the earth's rocks were formed, the very rocks he grappled with in his work.

Paraguay, he thought, we're going!

"How long should we wait?" Lorrie asked.

"They're not coming."

"You were unbelievable back there."

"Just doing my job."

"I mean it."

"It's a good thing you picked up the knapsack. You saved my life."

"No Pat. I saved you from killing him."

"Killing him? No way."

They were silent for a second. There was very little space between them in the front seat of their small car. The smell of the tall pine trees that surrounded them, cooked by the sun, wafted sweetly through the open windows. Lorrie turned sideways to face Pat. She put her hand on his shoulder and pressed down on the muscle and bone beneath.

"I don't know if I want to see that look ever again," she said.

"What look?"

"The look in your eyes when you hit the tall one with the two by four."

"How do you know it was a two by four?"

"I know my lumber."

"Do you know how much I love you?"

"Till death do us part."

"Yes Lor, that much and more."

