

CULLENE BRYANT  
**PARTY TIME**

THE TRUTH IS—IF JAY HAD JUST BEEN sane and healthy—he might have been my kind of man. It was something other than his physique: his trim red beard like my father's; his stocky build like George, my husband, before he died; his voice, golden like the radio broadcaster introducing Duke Ellington tunes before the midnight news. Maybe it was his lust for life. Sometimes when I arrived for work I would find him standing outside the front door, leaning against a pillar, his face lifted to the sun. He was one of the few residents who knew the code to get out of Grenville House, go for a walk, pick up biscuits at the grocery store, sit in the adjacent park and feed the squirrels—which he often did. His dementia hadn't gone that far yet.

“What sins do you have for us today, Jennifer?” He loved to tease me.

It was a joke he wouldn't let go of, like a dog shaking a favourite slipper between his teeth. My job as Recreation Therapist was to organize activities. One of my favourites was the hymn sing; Chaplain D'Arcy played his guitar. One day I handed out the song books and tossed a question over my shoulder, “What sins, I mean hymns, do you have for us today, Chaplain?” A roar of laughter from the residents. Jay never forgot my slip of the tongue.

“Come on. Quit it. Carpet bowling, today.” I hid my blush in the sleeve of my coat as I pressed the numbers on the pad to open the door.

The laidback atmosphere of the place made me both uncomfortable and relieved. Once I had seen Rhoda, the young music therapist, walking with a resident hand-in-hand down the hall. I was shocked. Then I realized he was probably confused and needed to be led. I am a recreation therapist and used to rules. All games have rules. Obey the rules or you're out of the game. My longest job was in a rehabilitation wing of a hospital. I felt at home with the formality of medical centers. Don't sit on a patient's bed—you might spread germs. Don't touch a patient unless it's part of their medical care—it might be misinterpreted. These directives were no problem to me. My strict Baptist upbringing tuned me to protocol. But Jay proved to be my undoing.

In the afternoons, I often found him slumped on the bench in the foyer, sleeping off his medication. What heartache did these pills dull? I would sit beside him; shake his shoulder, “Jay.”

He would wake with a start, as if he preferred his dreams to real life. He smiled broadly, then rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “Oh, it’s you.” He would immediately recount a fishing or hunting anecdote with all the inflections and dramatic pauses of a professional actor.

“Ever tasted fresh fish fried on an open fire?”

“Yes. My dad used to take us with Indian guides into Quebec.”

“Really Jennifer? Nothing like it, eh?”

“Rainbow trout. That’s what we ate.”

“Got lost in the woods once. All I had to eat was what I caught.” He proceeded to tell a tale of survival in the wilds: he ate wild berries; slept in a cave with bear droppings; followed a river downstream; got caught in a mud slide; dug his way out and finally surprised his rescuers.

“You should have carried a compass.”

“Did your Indians carry compasses?”

“We followed a trail.”

“Better to get off the path.” He yawned, stretched and walked away leaving me open-mouthed at his courage and resourcefulness.

Over the course of a few weeks he told me that he came from somewhere in Northern BC—worked in logging camps, a stint as a truck driver, managed a gas station.

“You never mention your wife, Jake.”

“Lost her when Owen was born.”

“How sad! You never married again?”

“Nope. She was a diamond.”

“I lost my husband, too.”

“How come you never married again?”

“Guess he hasn’t found me yet.”

One morning Jake asked me into his bedroom. “I want to show you something.” I hesitated. I don’t venture into bedrooms, especially men’s bedrooms. Some have a red circle on the door, warning staff they could be violent. Beats me why but I followed him. It was clearly a man’s space with a stuffed eagle on the window sill, a wildlife calendar on the wall, and a flannellette red plaid hunting shirt draped over the chair. He patted the edge of the bed and I sat down beside him. Then he pulled open the bedside table drawer, and retrieved a handful of old black-and-white photos; handled

them tenderly like a gambler with his favourite pack of cards. His boys in their early teens held up salmon caught on the Fraser River. “Those were the days when it teemed with fish.” Then pictures of the boys and Jay with rifles posed before going hunting, grins of bravado on their faces. No pictures of their mother, nor the sons as men.

“This one’s the youngest, Owen. He lives in Edmonton. Married, no children, yet. And here’s Robert. He’s in Hope. Not far away.

“Married?”

“No. The boys will be coming to see me at Christmas.”

A few days later, I was getting ready for the Halloween party. Most of the residents couldn’t afford to buy or didn’t know how to make costumes. So we hung up lots of decorations—black and orange balloons, paper witches on broomsticks and a carved pumpkin on top of the piano in the living-room. There was even a local duo who had been hired to sing country-and-western songs.

Jay only ventured into the social programs when there was food. Pumpkin tarts, this time. He joined the table with Dana and Don who were more or less a couple at Grenville House. I sat down with them in an empty chair. The two performers sparred with each other before they began to sing. The wife accused her husband of talking for too long between tunes. He looked mournfully at the audience, “See what I put up with?” Jay ate more than his share of tarts and I wondered if he might leave as soon as he downed his coffee. But when they sang an old Hank Williams love song, he tapped his feet and hummed along. *I’m so lonesome I could cry*. Soon the entertainment was over; the room emptied out of wheelchairs and walkers. Jay stayed.

“Fun night, eh?” I held out the garbage bag as he gathered up the soiled paper plates.

“I used to go to the bar in Nelson. They had a singer, a real good-looker. Tried to pick her up but she wouldn’t have me. Sure miss those days. The bunch of us, we had a lot of fun.”

“I’ll bet you did. Cigarettes, whiskey and wild, wild women.” I expected a glitter of laughter but he got up abruptly and showed his back.

“It’s been a long time since I had a wild, wild woman.”

I was at a loss for what to say and turned to the singers.

“What a great audience,” the wife said while her husband helped her on with her coat. I flushed with a tinge of envy as he turned up her collar so she wouldn’t get cold.

“Yes, we must ask you to come again.” They walked away arm-in-arm.

I unlocked my office, slung on my own coat dreading the ride home. The words of the song drifted through my head as my car crawled along the endless road. *I've never seen a night so long.*

I started thinking about Jay and his wife. Was she a wild, wild woman, or did his muscled arms and gruff whispers turn her into one? The mood swings must have been hard to live with. Jay drank. Was he abusive, then? He seemed a gentle bear. Had they been as happy as he led me to believe? Happy as George and I thought we were? Tried to be?

My parents were not pleased when I married at eighteen. But since he was a Baptist minister, they were somewhat cheered.

“Well, at least he won't lead you down the garden path,” said my father.

The path we walked was straight and narrow: our holidays were spent at the cottages of parishioners, who lent us their cabins in the woods; I dressed in high-necked blouses and cardigan sweaters from the thrift shops; spent every New Year's Eve in church and toasted with orange juice and Seven-Up; never tasted champagne until George died. Never had an orgasm, unless I took care of myself. I was a good wife.

The weeks went by and I organized the usual bingo games and showed old classic movies starring Humphrey Bogart or Doris Day. Jay spent most of his time sleeping and, try as I might, I couldn't interest him in any of my well-planned events.

“Don't you like bingo, Jay?”

“C'mon. Is that what you do for fun?” He winked at me.

“You need to socialize.” Did I blush?

Christmas was creeping up and we planned the usual party, an accordion player, minced meat tarts, bunches of red and green balloons. Invitations went out to the families. Jay seemed to cheer up. “My boys will be coming.”

The great day came. Jay took a seat by the front door and didn't fall asleep. I noticed Don wander by and offer him cigarettes. He came from an affluent family and kept many of the residents in good supply, much against the wishes of the nurses. Jay didn't smoke, but he took a few. Perhaps he wanted to give them to his boys. The transactions over, Don left. Jay sat a solitary sentry at the front door. Afternoon slid into evening. Still no sons appeared. One of the nurses convinced Jay to go back to his room and change. His clothing was stained with egg from breakfast and dandruff clung to the

blue wool sweater. “We’ll let you know when they show up,” she said with exaggerated cheer.

I knew how hard it must be for Jay. Christmas is the most difficult time of year for me, too, even now, so many year’s after George’s death. If only we had had children. I’d have somewhere to go Christmas Day. It’s not that couples from the church don’t invite me out for turkey dinner.

Chaplain D’Arcy welcomed everyone and blessed the gathering—something about the baby in the manger being our most precious gift. The accordion player had started on his fourth carol, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” when Jay arrived. He looked spiffy in a clean white shirt open at the neck and grey vest. Good. He’s accepted his boys aren’t coming.

Don pulled out the empty chair at his table and cocked his head for Jay to sit down. Jay immediately gobbled up a gingerbread man, downed a coffee and didn’t spill it on his clothes. By then, many families had arrived. Residents who were lucky enough to have grandchildren dangled them on their knees. Some were opening presents: a box of chocolates half empty at Marjorie’s table; a hand-knit red scarf wound around Jack’s neck; a plate of home-made short bread wrapped in cellophane and decorated with a green bow, perched on Barbara’s lap.

I took some pictures for the Grenville House album, passed a second tray of tarts and wiped up a child’s spilled hot chocolate. Then I noticed Jay’s chair.

“Where’s Jay?”

“Gone to bed,” Don replied as he spilled the cream he was pouring into his coffee.

How could his sons be so cruel. The words of his favourite song drifted through my head, *I’m so lonely I could cry*.

The evening was drawing to a close. I collected the discarded carol sheets, threw the last of the red paper plates into the garbage, thanked the accordionist and helped him on with his coat. The last of the relatives had left; the hallways were dim; the place was locked down for the night. As I walked down the hall towards my office, I passed Jay’s room. A light shone from under the door. I heard a cry, like sob caught in his throat. I tapped gently. “It’s me, Jennifer. Are you okay?” No answer. I pushed at the door. It gave only an inch—barred with an armchair. A woman’s high-heeled black leather boots sprawled on the floor.

“Get outta here.”

I shut the door. I knew I should report the incident. Instead I continued on to my office, turned off the computer, and grabbed my coat. Just as I approached the foyer and the front door, a woman in her thirties stepped out of the shadows. Large silver hoop earrings snuck out from wisps of bleached blonde hair; she wore a red leather coat cinched at the waist with a silver buckle; black high-heeled boots.

“Could you let me out? The key pad’s not working.”

“Who are you? Look, this place has policies—”

“Don’s friend.”

I pressed buttons. The door swung open and a taxi was waiting. She swept out into the path of a full moon shining. The next morning Jay had taken his usual place at the pillar.

“That woman last night—”

“Leave it alone.”

“I won’t cover for you again. I’ll lose my job.”

“I hate this place.”

I thought, “C’mon Jay, if you’d just come to some of the activities! What about the bus trip to the suspension bridge?” But I didn’t say it. I just nodded. “Yeah. I know.” I began to key in the numbers on the pad.

Then, he kissed my cheek. “Jennifer, you’re a remarkable woman.”