

Old Love

Julie's boyfriend Mark was good friends with his ex-wife Marissa, which puzzled Julie. It wasn't that Julie disliked her own ex. She didn't even hate him anymore. But friends? All Julie felt for Greg was an enormous, yawning lack, a disinterest so complete she could barely keep her mind from wandering when the kids talked about Greg's latest girlfriend.

It hadn't always been like that. When their nineteen-year-old marriage was in its terminal stage, she'd been obsessed with researching every Like on Greg's Face Book posts. By the time their relationship was in a state of ripe decomposition, she'd progressed to ripping up their wedding photos.

Greg had been just as bad. He scissored her Home Sweet Home cross stitch, left motel receipts lying around, and removed her as beneficiary of his life insurance policy. The Saturday morning she threw him out for good, he threw all her fancy lingerie out the bedroom window and laid on the horn before he drove away in case there was still anyone on either side of the street who wasn't watching her retrieve thongs and garter belts from the front yard.

Now, though, she and Greg were as well behaved as characters out of a Jane Austen novel. When they ran into each other at kids' soccer games and school open houses, they politely said hello but never added, How are you?

Mark and Marissa were different. They *were* friends, and Julie had to admit there were advantages. You could all go out to lunch together after a child's eighth grade graduation, for instance, instead of having two separate parties. And if, like Mark and Marissa, you called each other just to chat and opened gifts as a quasi-family on Christmas morning, your children might remember what good role models you'd been

when they went through their own messy divorces. They might even say less horrible things about you when they went into therapy. And wasn't that every parent's goal?

"Look how mature I'm being," Julie said to the mirror as she carefully did her make-up. She and Mark were meeting Marissa and her boyfriend Al at the Big Horn Steak House. Double-dating with your lover's ex-wife and her boyfriend struck Julie as vaguely incestuous, but she reminded herself that all middle-aged lovers had baggage that didn't fit neatly in the overhead compartment. It didn't matter that Julie thought an ex-wife was one bag you'd happily leave unclaimed at the airport. If you loved each other--and Julie did love Mark, in a mature, middle-aged kind of way—you made room for each other's stuff. That's what being mature was all about--doing things you'd rather not.

Her reflection regarded her with the cynical expression she was used to seeing on her teenagers. Other people got to have sweet, appealing inner children. Julie's was a critical adolescent. *Are you really being mature, it challenged, or are you still doing whatever it takes to keep your boyfriend's love?*

Julie had met Mark's ex-wife once before during an exchanging-of-the-child ritual several weeks earlier, so at least that awkwardness was out of the way. Julie had intended to wait in the car while Mark walked his daughter to Marissa's house. When he waved for Julie to join him, she'd waved cheerily back and pretended to be looking for something in her purse. Then she heard flip-flops slapping the pavement and looked up to see a squat woman in baggy men's pajamas, her hair dripping wet. When she leaned in the car window, Julie saw mascara smudges in the deep creases around her eyes.

"So you're Julie," Marissa had said. "Mark must have told you all about me. No wonder you look so terrified."

Julie felt foolishly overdressed in her carefully chosen date clothes--such was the power of former wives. "I'm sorry," Julie said. "I should have come to the door, except, well, you know . . ." Except she knew how she'd feel if her ex brought his younger, thinner, carefully made-up woman to her house when she'd just gotten out of the shower, but she couldn't say that.

"Looks like you finally got your blonde," Marissa said to Mark when he joined her on the sidewalk. "Mark's always had a thing for blondes," she told Julie. "I like that shade, by the way. What's it called?" Julie wishes she'd said, "It's called natural," but it hadn't occurred to her until hours later.

Marissa and Al were already at the Big Horn sitting across from each other at a table for four when Julie and Mark arrived. "You can sit here," Marissa said to Julie, indicating the seat next to hers. "I don't bite." Mark and Al snickered.

Al was a good-looking man with thick, wavy hair and precise, boyish features. If Julie had seen him at a crowded party and had to guess who he was with, she would not have guessed Marissa. Even with her hair and makeup in order, Marissa still looked like one of those cousins at family reunions who'd never married.

When, Julie wondered, had she become so preoccupied with looks? When she first suspected Greg didn't find her attractive anymore? When he started abandoning her at parties to talk to those younger, more attractive women? When he started having affairs with them? Or had she always been shallow? How would she know? How could a shallow person recognize her own lack of depth? That's why Greg lost interest. She was shallow. It had nothing to do with her looks. That made her feel a little better. More evidence of shallowness.

During dinner, Al asked her polite, neutral questions that required only one-word answers--where she worked, what she drove. Julie was grateful. She'd always been

uncomfortable around men as excessively handsome as Al, but in addition, she had privileged information that made it hard for her to meet his eyes. She knew from Mark that Marissa had been seeing Al on the sly for over a year before they split. Mark said he'd ridden out several of Marissa's affairs during their twenty-four year marriage, but this time, he told her, it just didn't seem worth the wait. Mark suggested a divorce, Marissa said they could try to work things out one more time if he wanted; Mark said, Nah, that's okay; Marissa said, All right then. And just like that, they went from being married to being friends.

That was Mark's version, anyway. Julie doubted it had been that simple. Hadn't Mark and Marissa ever screamed at each other all night then held each other with a leaden sense of hopelessness as dawn lit the windows?

"Did you hear Larry and June are *grandparents*?" Marissa was saying. "They're way younger than us!"

"Maybe it doesn't count if your kid's still in high school," said Mark. "I guess you heard about Delores."

"Oh God! Pregnant at her age. There *are* worse things than being a grandparent."

"Did you know their daughters are going to be co-godmothers?" said Mark. "No godfather. Just two godmothers."

"Yes indeed. I got my invitation to the Christening, too. Did you know she and Drake already have the fetus on the Montessori preschool waiting list? I'm watching my mail for an invitation to the kid's high school graduation party."

Julie kept her eyes on her plate. She had a feeling Al was doing the same. If they did look at each other, she'd be tempted to roll her eyes, and somehow that seemed disloyal to Mark. But maybe Mark wouldn't mind if Julie and Al established a flirtatious

little alliance based on their status as current lovers of former spouses. Maybe those were the roles she and Al were expected to play--the appreciative audience, or more accurately, the understudies. Julie signaled the waitress for another glass of wine.

“Speaking of high school graduations,” said Marissa, “isn’t your thirtieth reunion coming up?”

“They might have to hold this one without me.”

“But you’ve never missed one!” Marissa said. “I always had such a good time at those things.” To Julie and Al, she said, “The girls fall right back into their old high school cliques and ignore their poor husbands who are naturally bored out of their minds.”

“Until you show up,” said Mark, smiling.

“Unattended husbands were going to waste. Someone had to flirt with them.”

“No one ever seems happy to see *me* at my reunions,” Mark said. “Instead it’s always, Where’s Marissa? Is Marissa here?”

“Poor baby,” said Marissa. “I’m more popular at your high school reunions than you, but what about my mother? My own mother still likes you better than me.” To Al and Julie she said, “Mark and Mom know all the lyrics to *The Sound of Music*. They’d watch that damn DVD every time Mom was over. The two of them would sit on the sofa singing I am sixteen going on seventeen while I was in the kitchen gagging into the garbage disposal.”

“Mom’s doing okay?” asked Mark.

“Oh, yeah. She’ll live forever, God help me. She says thanks for the birthday card and flowers, by the way. Dear Lord. This chocolate cheesecake is to die for. Anyone want a bite? Mark? You look like you could stand a few calories.”

“Mark’s watching his diet,” said Julie. “Doesn’t it just kill you that men can lose five pounds in a week by eating two cookies instead of three after dinner?”

Marissa reached catty-corner across the table and took Mark’s chin in her hand. “You *have* lost weight,” she said. “I can see it in your face.”

This time Julie did look at Al. She’d had three glasses of wine by then and had decided that if he did meet her gaze, she *would* roll her eyes, and when they parted, she’d tell him, “This was fun. Let’s never do it again.” But his eyes were fastened on Marissa.

Julie wasn’t particularly enthusiastic in bed at Mark’s that night. She kept seeing how Mark looked when Marissa talked about him, that sheepish, self-satisfied expression husbands typically wore when their wives told little stories about them in company. Anyone in the restaurant would have guessed that Mark and Marissa were the happy couple while she and Al were the ones with communication problems.

Julie waited for Mark to ask if anything was wrong. When he seemed about to drift off, she finally had to speak. “I just don’t get it,” she said.

“What,” Mark said sleepily.

“I just don’t get why anyone would willingly sit at the same table with their ex. Not without a lawyer present, anyway.”

Mark didn’t answer.

“I guess I feel like I’m *supposed* to hold a slight grudge against Greg,” she said. “I think it was in our separation agreement. Wasn’t it in yours?”

“We stayed friends,” he said around a yawn.

“All right. I admit it. I’m the one with the problem. I just can’t make myself feel friendly toward Marissa.”

“You don’t like Marissa?” he said, more awake now. “She seems to like you.”

“I don’t have anything against her, not personally. Anyone who gags at *The Sound of Music* can’t be all bad.”

“See? You have all kinds of things in common.”

“But it’s like in high school. Remember how your best friend’s enemies were your enemies, too, even if they’d never done anything to you personally?”

“Actually, I don’t remember that.”

“That’s why no one’s happy to see you at your reunions. Trust me. If someone hurt your best friend, you hated that person forever on your friend’s behalf.”

“Please don’t beat up Marissa on my behalf,” said Mark. “She’s not my enemy. She didn’t hurt me. Plus, you’d get creamed.”

“You’re not even a little angry at her?” Julie persisted. “Not even a little, way down deep inside?”

“Not really,” he said.

Why not? she wanted to cry. Mark had every right to hate Marissa--in fact he owed it to her, if he’d ever valued her at all.

Again, she saw Marissa reaching across the table to take Mark’s chin in her hand. The scene could easily have taken place at their twenty-fifth anniversary dinner--if Mark had said, Yeah, okay, they could try to work things out one more time. Marissa would have looked just as tired and hopeful, and Mark, being Mark, would have looked back with the same mildly interested, affably blank expression.

Julie had dated enough since her divorce to know it was never a good sign when you started seeing things from the ex-wife’s perspective, but still, poor Marissa, going to so much trouble to ram a dent in that obstinate pleasantness of his. And it was a lot of trouble to find and keep lovers when you’d just as soon watch Netflix in ratty pajamas with someone you could take for granted.

“You must be a better person than me,” said Julie, though she didn’t believe it, not for a second. Honesty was for the young who thought they had forever to work out their differences.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate everything *about* you!” she’d once screamed at Greg in an orgiastic fit of truthfulness. Greg, his face ugly and twisted, screamed back that he hated everything, everything, *everything* about her, too. Of course it hurt--it was supposed to--but in a strangely satisfying way.

You didn’t cheapen that kind of honesty by staying friends.

“What about us?” said Julie. She kept her voice light and playful, but her heart pounded. “Will we still be friends, after we break up?”