

No Harm Done

No Harm Done

By Loren McAuley

503 13th Street

Brooklyn, New York 11215

718-788-5127

lorenmcauley@aol.com

No Harm Done

"You know you're getting old when you stop getting a freaking Christmas tree!"

Her husband Gerard picks up a piece of tinsel which has fallen to the carpet, fingers it then places it on the sofa table.

"We *have* a tree, silly. It's right there." Claire points to the tree balanced on a cross of wood, barely three feet high. She'd bought it at Walgreen's, \$19.99, a ridiculous price.

"You call that a tree? More like a twig on steroids. Piece of shit. How much did you pay for it?"

She's told him twenty times already. "9.99", she says. He'll never find out; the receipt long ago crumpled and flushed down the toilet.

"Piece of shit," he mumbles again and makes his way to the bathroom where he fights with an unopened roll of toilet tissue, *piece of shit!* then finally a tear and silence. She settles in her chair, a cup of coffee growing cold by her side. Her eyes go to the tree; it barely holds a tenth of her ornaments, the ones she'd collected so enthusiastically over the years. The blinking lights and tinsel were already attached when she bought it. *You call that a tree?* No, I don't, she thinks sadly, no I don't.

"Do you think Debbie will come down next year? In the spring?"

No Harm Done

Gerard back out, his large brown eyes, the feature that had attracted her to him in the first place decades ago, now veiled in folds and rheumy, yet still liquid and warm, a place to drown.

She gets up, the need to touch him suddenly tremendous.

"Debbie hasn't said. She needs to see the kids' school schedule first."

A lie. She already knows that their daughter isn't coming down. A phone call last week, so flip, *no mom, it simply won't work out this year, the timing's off* Both knew the real reason, though they couldn't articulate it; not a strange occurrence, more unsaid than said between them anyway. Why change now? Claire knows things don't work that way, even when things get up sided.

Gerard stares at the tree, bites on a finger then points it outward.

"Where the hell is the truth ornament?"

She'd wanted him to forget, but of course *that*, he hasn't.

"I can't fit everything on such a piece of shit, now can I?"

He searches the branches as if she were lying to him.

"We do it every year, don't we? Don't we? Yes, we do! The truth ornament thing! Jesus H. Christ! Can't we keep one freaking tradition around this house? Does everything have to be different?"

No Harm Done

Claire had bought the ornament at a garage sale years ago when they still lived in their Cape in Northern Jersey. Their daughter was young then, barely out of diapers. It was mercury glass, pitted and hand painted, or so the woman selling the crap from her household had claimed. It was an odd piece. It had nothing to do with the holidays, it wasn't a star or a tree or a stocking, instead it was a dog bone shaped plaque with the word "truth" spelled in disappearing rhinestones. When she'd brought it home Gerard laughed out loud and said she'd buy anything not nailed down and under a buck; but later he put it to use, he gave it a purpose.

Claire hoists herself out of the armchair and goes to the spare bedroom, the one her daughter will stay in if she graces them with a visit. She thrusts her arm into the closet and finds the box she's looking for. Inside tucked in tissue is the ornament she'd hidden there, and she holds it up, the old silver reflecting the sun going down through the window hit by golf course sprinklers, the word "truth" further smudged by another year of life and mishandling. She takes it to the living room and hangs it on the tiny tree. She wonders if Gerard will even notice.

No Harm Done

When they had moved to Florida, the triple wide seemed enormous, yards and yards of space, room after room, not a stair in sight. Of course that had been the point, everything on one floor, to avoid the strain on old knees, the possibility of slipping. It was gracious and generous, elastic even. Yet after a year, like everything else in their life down there, it grew small. She felt like a dog kept in a yard and never let out to go anywhere else; she came to know every inch intimately till she felt it closing in, till it felt like maybe what it had been all along, a prison.

Claire washes the lobster tails gently in cold water and pats them dry with a paper towel. Hardly in their budget; but what are they saving it for? Carols are on the radio and their whine feels like department store music, Macy's on 34th Street, God, how long has it been since she's been *there*? Her mind swirls back, Debbie dressed up, on Santa's lap, a hellish day, rushing, flushed, more gifts, then Christmas morning, Debbie in her pink plastic curlers, Barbies and Kens and their miniscule outfits, paper everywhere. It was always chaos, a blur, over before it started. Later a teenager, embarrassed at her mother wearing a bow in her hair when her friends came over, her father tipsy from his whiskey sours, handing over his car keys, *don't do anything I wouldn't do!* a wink, a shared joke.

No Harm Done

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Gerard sneaks up, his large hand on her waist. "Well, maybe a nickel, inflation!"

Always the jokester. That hasn't disappeared.

'We have to do the truth ornament you know, Claire. Did we do it last year? I forget."

She nods at him yes. She had told him some ridiculous unimportant truth; but he was satisfied, he always was. Big truths, small truths. The Florida years have been small truths, and she realizes, how *apropos*.

Gerard had thought it a funny idea to use the ornament as a talisman for telling a truth, something each had kept secret the past year, on purpose or not. He said they should do it on Christmas Eve, after Debbie was asleep, and that they should take it seriously, no goofing around. She didn't want to; but Gerard insisted, and as usual, he got his way.

The following years Gerard told her transgressions she hardly cared about; lies about going out with his co-workers for drinks when he was supposed to be at a meeting, buying a set of golf clubs and then hiding them in a friend's garage. She felt obligated to act angry because he was earnest

No Harm Done

about the process, though it seemed to her he mocked her when her turn came; as if she couldn't possibly tell him something that would shock him. She often made something up, which she realized later, could be her next year's offering.

Claire brushes butter on the lobster tails and puts them under the broiler. Gerard busies himself with the two remotes, cursing when he can't remember which goes to what. She had one truth she could never bring herself to tell Gerard. It comes back to her at odd times; maybe it's the time of year, the carols on the radio. If she had unburdened herself those years back, what would have happened? Tommy Hastings. Their old friend, really Gerard's friend. So long ago, she was what? Thirty five? Six? She was still slender, her hair brushed back in the style of the day, short and left slightly wild, off the forehead. She wasn't *pretty* though, as so many of the other wives were, or she never felt pretty. That evening it started however, she felt more attractive than usual, she didn't know why. She remembered her cheeks blazed with the pre-party drink she and Gerard always shared before a night out, her lips too. It gave her a glow. Gerard noticed; he snorted at her as they left for the Reynolds cocktail party, *I wonder if your*

No Harm Done

boyfriend's going to be there? He had been kidding her for months about Tommy, that *he had the hots for her*. Gerard always said it with a sarcastic tone, as if he didn't really believe another man would find her desirable.

"Christ! What's with this god dam tree! This isn't our tree! Who brought this tree in here? Where's our tree? Where the fuck is our tree?"

She runs to him and braces him with her two buttery hands; the complaint about the tree as easily gone as everything once in his grasp, slipped away, like an unmoored boat. She eases him down in his chair, trying to calm him, knowing that the explanation is something he'll forget almost as soon as she says it.

The Reynolds party had been one of many; fifteen or so couples took turns every weekend, a dizzying schedule that Claire couldn't imagine doing now. They barely leave their house anymore. Back then however it was expected; dressing up on a Friday night, pearls, evening wear, men in suits and ties, a spread of cocktail food on toothpicks, a full, well stocked bar. Sometimes there was a band if the hosts could afford it; usually it was a stack of records on a turntable, furniture pushed aside and dancing. She had noticed Tommy the moment they entered, in his usual spot, leaning against

No Harm Done

the bar, a full-to-the-rim tumbler of scotch. He was a heavy drinker, as were many men in those days. Did she encourage what came next? What happened? Maybe she did. She knew there was interest there. He'd always follow her out to the kitchen at her parties, a hand on her arm, *let me help you with that* and at the club, asking her what she wanted to drink before her own husband did, his eyes taking her in when he thought she didn't notice. But still. It was innocent, he was, as Gerard had her believe, kidding.

"There it is! The truth ornament! You found it!"

She smiles up at Gerard, his moments of lucidity something always to be happy about. She watches him as he fingers the silvery dog bone as if he'd never seen it before, then he drops it and looks like he's disappeared again. Just like that. It still shocks her, the speed of what's happened, what's happening right in front of her. Like watching an ice sculpture melt, or a snowman, her husband is dwindling to a pool of water a fraction of what had been there to begin with. Soon it'll be over, he won't know where he is, who he's been. He won't know her.

"I made your favorite Gerard, lobster tails!"

No Harm Done

He comes over and gazes down at the plate, the twin tails steaming, the color bright red. He doesn't say a word, she can feel his brain run like a caught engine, whirring futilely in an attempt to catch.

"And asparagus and red skin potatoes, just the way you like them!"

She knows she sounds like an imbecile; like every annoying, cloying nurse ever caricatured on television. What else can she do? Set him adrift? Not share anything with him, ever again?

"Let me help you with the crackers."

She takes the shell crackers in her hands, clumsily, Gerard had always done this, and she tries to catch the slimy thing in her grasp, but it slips out time and again, till nearly in tears, she flings it down and catches herself, turning so he won't see her cry. He doesn't say a word, he sits staring at the lobster tails as if they had just landed from Mars.

She had gone out to retrieve her purse that she'd left in their car and Tommy followed her. She knew he was behind her, she could smell his cigarette. He reached out for her and murmured something in her ear, to this day she doesn't know what, and she fell backwards, helpless she thought, then she turned and he pulled her in and kissed her, hard on the

No Harm Done

lips, his tongue tentative at first, then insistent. Why had she opened her mouth? Why had she let him? It went on forever, the kissing, the groping; she thought for a moment that they might have intercourse right there in Edmund Reynold's garage, with his son's hockey sticks precariously poised over their heads. It was the most spontaneous and physical thing she had ever done in her entire life. Standing now at her sink, pushing the mostly uneaten lobster and asparagus and potatoes into the garbage disposal, she could still feel his mouth on hers, his tongue, taste his breath, minty with the underlying tang of scotch. She could still feel the damp of the garage wall against her back.

"Do you want coffee Gerard? Do you think it'll keep you up?" Claire asks, not expecting an answer. The evenings are the worst for some reason. He wanders the house, then calls for her, or just calls, when he can't figure out where he is. The doctors say he's doing well on the medication, *as well as can be expected*, whatever that means. They've told her the steps, what to look for. He'll leave her eventually, completely, as final as death. She feels left already; alone.

No Harm Done

At first Tommy called the house after it happened. She'd hang up on him when he became too fervent, the pleading to see her, for only a moment, anywhere, any time. He finally came to see her, knocking at the kitchen back door, rapping hard on the glass, saying loudly he couldn't stay away, did she forgive him? They met in their cars, in the library parking lot two towns over, or by the railroad tracks where the weeds were overgrown. He wanted her, he loved her. He wanted to run away with her, leave everyone. It went on for months. They never made love; she wouldn't allow it. She had thought about it though, his desires. She wondered. That was the real truth, not the kissing or the feeling, but that.

"We need to do the truth ornament!"

Another lucid moment and she decides to grab it, wring it for all its worth.

"Yes, let's Gerard. You first."

He looks confused. "No, no. You. You first."

She knows this is their last Christmas. All those other Christmas Eves, small truths, silly lies, half lies. Never really the truth, never really about her. Gerard always chuckled slightly at her admissions, as if he found

No Harm Done

it amusing that her life was so insignificant. She gazes at him, still roughly handsome, a man's man, sure of himself, his place in the world. Sure of her.

"Do you remember Tommy? Tommy Hastings?"

He looks up, his face suddenly lit, "sure I remember him. Good guy, Tommy. Why?"

She searches his eyes for the dimming. No, not yet. He's interested, alert.

"Remember how you used to say that he *had the hots* for me? You always said that, whenever we were at the same party together, or he came over the house."

Gerard scrunches his brow in a gesture she knows well, information that for some reason, irritates.

"Yeah, sure. He liked you. A little too much I think!"

Joking. It was a joke to him. He made fun of her. No man would desire her, she wasn't pretty enough.

"Well, you were right ... he did have the *hots* for me, as you said." She waits, his eyes two beams of heightened awareness, staring at her.

"Come on, what are you talking about here? Tommy? Why? What are you talking about?"

No Harm Done

She gets up and takes the truth ornament off the tree, then holds it up poised between two fingers.

"You want the truth, don't you? Our tradition? This is an old, old truth. One I wanted to tell you years ago, but couldn't. Because I was ashamed, because I thought it would hurt you. Would it have hurt you Gerard? To know? To know about me and Tommy Hastings?"

He rubs at his forehead now pressed into deep lines, irritation, knowledge, disbelief, all there in the furrows. He looks like a shrunken gourd, a horror mask. How can she? But she does, she goes on.

"At the Reynolds party it started. After that we met every week."

"What? What are you talking about? You and Tommy? No, no, I don't believe it!" He gets up suddenly, the side table crashes to the floor, a lamp falls. So much racket, it's earsplitting. She watches as he catches himself with a hand to the back of the chair, then rights himself to his full height.

"You're crazy! You're kidding, that's what you're doing. What, you had an affair? No, I don't believe it. You never would. Never. You? *You?*"

Then he stops, a small chuckle bursts out, *heh heh heh* the old look, the old Gerard. "I know you. You would never. You and Tommy, come on!"

No Harm Done

She goes to him, close. "Tommy Hastings was in love with me. He asked me to run away with him, to leave you and Debbie. He was going to leave his wife."

"When did all this happen? The Reynolds party? Who are the Reynolds?" He's slipping, dimming, becoming less. Then, "Did you go to bed with Tommy Hastings? Did you fuck him? Did you Claire? Did you fuck Tommy Hastings?"

She pinches the truth ornament in her fist, the thin silver cracking like an eggshell.

"No, I didn't. We didn't. I thought about it though. I thought about all of it. I was tempted."

She stops, it's done. The knowledge settles, in shards, some penetrating, some scattered. It won't matter. It'll be gone, the next day, the next moment. No harm done. As if she had said nothing. She bends down to pick up the pieces of silver from the carpet, cups it in her hand and goes to throw it out.

No Harm Done