

## To Tell the Truth

Natalie considered herself an honest person. She never lied to herself, only to other people and only when necessary. That's how the situation with her boyfriend Richard and his room-mate Steve came about. Although it was Steve Natalie loved, it was Richard she was dating, had been for about a year now. It had to be that way because Richard was her means of access to Steve, who wasn't interested in her. Yet. But she was working on him. In time, after observing what a kind, loving, and scintillating companion Natalie could be in a relationship, Steve would come round to appreciating her merits. Watch and learn, she signalled to him when she arrived with a bowl of dip, a plate of crudites and a pan of brownies to spend the afternoon watching football with the guys at their place. She didn't like football, but she did like sitting beside Steve. And beside Richard too, of course. She didn't dislike Richard. She wasn't being completely dishonest in dating him. Also if she said there was nothing she liked better than just hanging out on weekends, this was not a lie as long as Steve was in there with them. If Richard thought she meant she liked hanging around with him all the time, that was his misinterpretation, and not her fault.

"Ah, that's mean," Natalie's friend Maureen told her. They sat in a fern-shaded booth at Oenomania where they were in the habit of meeting after work on Fridays for a couple of drinks and a good, honest, no-word-of-a lie gossip session. "You're using the poor guy. And he really, really likes you, which Steve doesn't."

"Yet," Natalie corrected. Maureen was her oldest friend and the one person Laura never lied to, even when she maybe should have.

"But he's already hooked up with that girl from Vancouver, you told me."

"Yeah," Natalie admitted. "For now." He'd come around eventually though. She'd seen glints of interest in his eyes from time to time.

"What's wrong with Richard anyway? He seems like a nice guy to me," Maureen said.

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Sure he's a nice guy. He's thirty years old and he still lets his Mum shop for his shirts and ties. He's been saving up to buy a house for the past three years and meanwhile he rents a room in his friend's house. He has a good, safe office job with the government and he's going to work it for the rest of his life. That's nice, but it's also boring."

She poured out another glass of Pinot Grigio from the bottle they were sharing. “Compare and contrast: Steve’s the same age, has the same education, has his own business, his own townhouse. He’s a go-getter; he does things, he goes places. Richard goes to his folks for dinner every Friday and to choir practice on Thursdays. A day hike in the Gatineau is his idea of a great date; mostly he likes hanging around the house, gardening, reading, watching tv sports. I mean which of those two guys would you choose?”

“Okay, so if you don’t love Richard, why do you keep telling him you do?” Maureen asked.

“I do not tell him I love him!” Natalie was wishing she hadn’t let herself in for this conversation.

“Yes, you do. You end phone conversations with him with ‘I love you you too, honey.’ I’ve heard you say it.”

“Oh that. That’s just something people say. It’s like ‘Good bye.’ ‘Good bye’ really means God be with you, and we don’t exactly mean that when we say it. It’s the same with ‘Love ‘ya.’ It’s just an expression.”

Maureen disagreed. “Lots of people mean it when they say it. Richard does. You owe him the respect of telling him your true feelings instead of playing him along, just so you can keep tabs on Steve.”

Maureen always told it like she saw it. That was one of the things Natalie liked about her. And now, in her heart, she knew her friend was right. Still, she tried to justify herself. “I’m not playing him along; I’m just not disabusing him of his assumption that I’m in love with him. And it’s not like I’m moving in with him or anything that serious. I’ll break off with him. Soon. I’m just waiting till I’m more sure of Steve.” The truth was clear in her mind: she loved Steve. If that meant dating Richard she had to do it. Just for now.

“It isn’t all that easy either,” she said, swirling the wine in her glass moodily. “It takes courage and determination.” Like when Steve would settle onto the couch at the townhouse for a Skype call with his girlfriend, Caroline, and she’d have to listen in; she couldn’t help it. And whenever Caroline came to Ottawa for a long weekend - which she did far too often in Natalie’s opinion - it was even worse. Then the guys would make plans for the four of them to double date. Natalie hated this. She couldn’t bear to see Steve and Caroline draped around each other. Richard’s arm around her own shoulder felt like a vise. She’d have to struggle not to push him away.

“So don’t go out with them.” Maureen offered the obvious solution.

“I have to. I have to keep myself in the picture.”

“You’re obsessed, girl,” Maureen said.

“Here’s to obsession.” Natalie drained her glass.

Matters came to a head when the Corona virus overwhelmed the country. Caroline’s office closed, and she flew to Ottawa to be with Steve. She got one of the last flights for non-essential travel. “We’re going to get through this together,” Steve said. He was laying in groceries for the two-week quarantine.

This raised the question of where Natalie would stay for the duration. Occasionally she did sleep over in Richard’s room at the townhouse, but never when Caroline was staying and getting up to who knew what in the adjoining room with Steve. Besides, moving in with Richard, even for just the two weeks, would be going too far. Even she admitted that. She couldn’t do it.

“But if you don’t move in with us before Caroline arrives, you won’t even be able to come for a visit, not for two weeks,” Richard pointed out. “Nor will I be able to visit you. Imagine that.” He drew her close for a long kiss. “I don’t think I could bear being apart from you so long,” he said after a while, still holding her close. “Could you?”

“We may have to,” Natalie said. “I’m thinking of my parents. They shouldn’t be going out anywhere. Dad’s pretty frail, and they’re both old. They need me to do their shopping and run errands. I guess I’d better stay on with them. ”

Richard was obviously disappointed but how could he argue against such an altruistic plan? He pulled himself together. “Yes, you’re right. I was being selfish. It’s so like you to think of others in need; you’re a kind person.”

That was not quite true, Natalie knew, although she didn’t mind taking credit for it. It was convenient for her to keep on living at home. Her parents were easy-going; she got on well with them. They’d always assumed she would stay on with them until she married. Recently they’d begun to think that Richard was the man. They liked him. He often came over for Sunday dinner. He helped her Dad with the garden and praised her Mum’s cooking and sometimes they all played Scrabble together.

Britannia College, where Natalie taught English as a Second Language, closed. She began working from home, organising virtual lessons for the Intermediate Level course. All the lesson plans had to be revised, new methods devised, new materials found. She had to co-ordinate her curriculum

with the teachers of the Basic and Advanced Levels in Zoom meetings and consult with the tech experts about setting up a forum for question and answer sessions for the students. It was interesting work. She enjoyed the challenge of it. She was at it all day. She barely had time for a Skype connect with Richard at the cocktail hour.

He sent her texts about every hour through the day, telling her how he missed her, how he was longing to see her again. He was supposed to be working from home too, but apparently not as hard as Natalie was. He said he was finding the social distancing difficult. He was lonely. He liked to be with people. Now the Y was closed and choir practices cancelled. He missed Monday Happy Hour with his office colleagues; he missed Friday dinners with his family, and Sundays with Natalie and her family. Most of all he missed Natalie. He loved Natalie.

Natalie, on the other hand, was almost ashamed of how easy she was finding the distancing. She was too busy to miss people. She had her work. She was keeping fit with a three-mile run every morning. Her parents were fine. Her mother did the cooking. All Natalie had to do was a weekly shopping run. She couldn't honestly say she missed Richard anymore than she missed Maureen and her other friends. She began to feel guilty about replying 'Love you too' to his 'I love you's.' She started saying other things instead like, "Stay safe!" or "Stay strong!"

Steve and Caroline joined the Skype talks with Richard a couple of times in the first week. Early in the second week, Natalie noticed their absence. "How are Steve and Caroline?" she asked.

Richard looked around and lowered his voice: "Actually, maybe not so good."

"Oh? Don't tell me they've got the virus!"

"No. Maybe it's nothing. They just seem to be a bit cranky, kind of touchy with each other. Steve's got big worries now. His company's finished; he's looking into branching into something new." Steve was owner and manager of a company that organized conferences. Nobody was doing venue conferences these days; it was all on-line meetings. Companies could take care of the logistics themselves.

"Government grants, maybe?" Natalie suggested lamely. Steve was a big spender. He would find it difficult to cut back. Was his free spending part of his attraction, she wondered. Along with his movie star looks, his charisma, his smarts?

"So anyway," Richard was going on, "he's working his ass off. What he's getting into is virtual parties. He's got great ideas, but it's taking a lot of work lining up the right contacts. It'll take a while to get it all going. So of course he's worried and kind of snappy with Caroline I tried to explain that to

her, but she doesn't get it. It seems like she was looking forward to a kind of romantic cocooning holiday: like cooking, watching videos, playing monopoly, listening to music, dancing by candlelight. And it's not working that way at all. She's pissed off, says she wouldn't have come all the way from Vancouver if she'd known it would be like this. And she's got a point. If any of us had known what this would be like, we would have made different choices, eh?"

"I don't know." Again Natalie felt guilty. So many people were suffering in so many different ways, but she was doing well. The choices she had made were the right ones. "I guess it's normal to feel antsy when you're in isolation," she said. "If you and I, for instance were in isolation together, we'd be throwing the chinaware at each other by now."

Richard laughed. "I don't think so!" He believed her lies, but not her truths. He was a bit slow on the uptake, a nice guy all right, but not too smart. He would make someone a loyal and loving husband. But not her. She would tell him so once the Corona thing was over. Right now was no time to upset people.

Her thoughts quickly shifted on to Steve. So he and Caroline weren't getting along! This could be the beginning of the end for them. Her chance was coming!

On the Wednesday, Caroline felt ill. She suspected she could have caught the virus on the plane. Steve thought she was just playing for attention, and wouldn't drive her to the testing centre, so Richard had to. She didn't have the virus. "The doctor told her it's probably some other kind of flu," Richard reported in his evening call. "But Steve's really annoyed. He's told Caroline she has to move out of the bedroom down to the family room. He wants her to self-isolate down there. He won't even let her watch t.v. in the living room. He says he can't concentrate on his work if he has to breathe germs all day, even if they aren't Covid- 19 germs. It's a very unpleasant atmosphere here. I wish you were here. You'd keep things happier."

"Would I?" Natalie doubted it.

Things went from bad to worse. Steve got ill. He blamed Caroline. He was convinced she must have the virus, even if she'd tested negative, and she'd passed it on to him. When she reached out to comfort him with a hug, he hit her.

"He actually hit her! In the face!" On the Skype screen Natalie could see Richard trembling with shock. "Her nose bled. It was awful. I couldn't believe he would do that to anyone."

"Are you sure?" It was indeed hard to believe such a thing of beautiful, savvy Steve.

“I was there. I saw it. He said he was just trying to stop her touching him in case he does have the virus, but I have to say it didn’t look like that. In the end, I got him to apologize and she agreed to accept the apology, but things are still tense. Steve wants her out of the house. She wants to leave. But she can’t. We’re all stuck here together for another week at least. ‘We have to learn to live together,’ I keep telling them. ‘Try to understand each other’s point of view.’ ”

It couldn’t be easy to be stuck in the middle of that situation, especially for Richard, a guy who could always see different points of view, a guy who always wanted to like and be liked by everyone, “Could you just hide in your own room and let them fight it out?” Natalie asked. That’s what she would probably do.

Of course Richard couldn’t do that. He was a caring person. He cooked the meals for all three of them. He brought Caroline’s down to the family room for her and chatted a while with her there to keep her company. He was careful not to disturb Steve at work. He’d e-mail him a message, ‘Your dinner is ready in the microwave when you want it.’

“They don’t feel well, either of them,” he explained to Natalie. “They need me for the cooking and the cleaning, and I think maybe for peace-keeping as well.”

Natalie’s parents came in as they were talking and asked for a moment to say hello to Richard, as they sometimes did during his calls. Afterwards, when they were eating dinner, her Mum said, “I thought Richard was looking pretty haggard, didn’t you, Natalie? I hope he’s not coming down with something.”

“Nah,” Natalie said. “He’s fine.” But later, when they were watching some episodes of Schitt’s Creek on CBC streaming, she hit Pause. Her Mum was right. Richard was looking thin and tired and harassed, and no wonder. She told her parents about the situation at Steve’s house.

“I’m going to cook meals on wheels for them,” her Mum decided instantly. “That’s too much for Richard to be stuck with. He’ll have cleaning and sanitizing and laundry and what not to do as well. Natalie, you can deliver the meals every day at around six. Phone him back and tell him that right away.”

Natalie did that. She was glad to help. “Actually, I’m wondering, could you make one more portion?” she asked her Mum. “I’m thinking I could drop one off for Maureen as well. Nurses are working so hard these days. We could save her one chore a day anyway.”

“Excellent idea!” Mum said.

Richard called after the first delivery. “The food was wonderful. What a treat. You’re an angel for bringing it for us. So thoughtful of you.”

Natalie was embarrassed. “My Mum did the cooking. I just delivered the food.”

He asked to speak to her Mum then, to tell her how delicious the meal had been. “Your cooking is always so good, Mrs. Patterson.”

“There’ll be more coming tomorrow,” Mum said, pleased with the praise.

Then Steve came on. “The beef stroganoff was terrific,” he said. “Delicious! I just wanted to ask you, though, the next time you do salad, could you make mine without tomato and onion, and with the dressing on the side? Thanks.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mum said, looking a little deflated.

Richard called back later to apologize for his room-mate. “Steve’s kind of picky about his food,” he explained. “Plus, he’s working under a lot of stress now. Caroline loved everything though. She can’t come to the phone, but she wants me to tell you and your Mum she really liked the food and thanks very much.”

Maureen too was grateful. “I’m so tired when I come off shift. It was great to have a home-cooked meal waiting and such a good one too. Thank you, Mrs. Patterson.”

“You’re welcome, dear. You nurses are the ones we’re all grateful to.”

Natalie felt good when she made the deliveries. It was only a token job, really, but it was satisfying to be doing something, however trivial, to help. She couldn’t talk to her friends when she brought the packages; they wouldn’t even open the door. “We have to be careful,” Richard said. “We’re not even sure if six feet is enough of a distance. You mustn’t risk touching the doorknob. Just set the bag on the steps and call me to say it’s there.” Maureen’s package she left in a cooler beside her door.

The Skype calls with Richard had to be moved to a later hour and they got longer and longer. They talked about Steve and Caroline and the tension, and about the daily news and about Natalie’s work. “Your students must love you for helping them get ahead with their English while classes are cancelled. You’re doing an important job there. I bet Britannia will be using those lessons even after the crisis for people who can’t get to regular classes for whatever reason. You’re a hero, Natalie.”

Natalie did feel like a bit of a hero. She was working hard. Her lessons were being well-received by students and administration. She was getting lots of positive feedback. This was useful work, more than just a token gesture of good will.

Even though she couldn't go back to Vancouver, Caroline shot out of Steve's house the minute her weeks of quarantine ended. That meant Steve was free, though not quite available yet. Social distancing meant Natalie couldn't go over there. She would have to wait this out. On the positive side, Steve couldn't take up with anyone else under the circumstances.

She talked with him sometimes on the phone or on Skype with Richard. He was feeling a lot better with Caroline off his back, he said. He still thought he had the virus, but not too bad a case, fortunately. He was doing better financially too. He got some economic relief money from the government, and he'd sold his first virtual birthday party. Now he was working on a dynamite advertising video. "The business is starting to take off. It's going to really fly once this Covid thing is over," he said.

Nathalie was surprised. "You don't think people are going to be tired of virtual then? I mean, wouldn't they want to do real face-to-face parties once it's allowed?"

"Nah. People are getting used to on-screen gatherings. As far as parties go, you get a lot more bang for your buck if you go virtual. You can bring in big-name talent. Plus it's a lot easier for the host. No embarrassments. No unforeseens. Trust me, everything social is going to go this way."

Natalie was not convinced. It might be working now, because virtual was better than nothing, but once people could meet again, it seemed to her it would be sad to stare at a flat screen instead of meeting friends in person to touch and talk and laugh and dance together. She wondered why Steve was so sure of success for his new business. Was he super smart? Or out-of-it stupid? Or just confident that he could always persuade people to believe that what he wanted them to want was what they wanted.

Natalie was surprised to find herself thinking so critically. Her good works must be having some effect on her moral compass, she guessed. In its directional pointing, Steve no longer seemed all that wonderful. Yes, he was drop-dead gorgeous, yes he had a smile that brightened a person's day, but it was a smile you didn't see when things weren't going his way. She remembered how he had talked to her Mum as if she were a short order cook; how he'd blamed Caroline for being sick. Now he was busy getting people to spend money that many of them wouldn't have for something they didn't need and quite possibly didn't want. Did that make him feel good about himself? How did a man who struck a woman in anger feel about himself anyway? And how did she, Natalie, feel about such a man?

The infection curve was flattening. Restrictions were easing. Richard texted: "I'm coming over to see you. I have to." Natalie stood in the driveway waiting. Richard got out of his car and stood a



careful six feet away from her. Her mother, probably suspecting something interesting, was watching from the living room window. “Natalie, will you marry me?” he asked.

It was easy to see from his smile that ‘yes’ was the answer he expected. Of course he would. Her lying ‘I love you’s’ had led him to that assumption.

Natalie wanted to say ‘yes.’ She did love him in that moment as he stood with his eager smile on the grey asphalt of the driveway by beds of fading tulips and budding peonies. But she was a person who was always honest to herself, and she could no longer lie to others and especially not to a good man who loved her. He touched her heart, but she knew she’d soon get bored attending his choir concerts, eating Friday dinners with his parents, sweating along behind him on overlong trails in the Gatineau hills or hanging out watching football on tv with or without Steve and his next girlfriend.

She took a deep breath. “No,” she said. “I can’t marry you. I don’t love you. I never have, not in the way that matters, in the way that makes a person have to catch her breath with the truth of it. I’m sorry,” she finished. That was the truth and the whole truth.

He nodded and walked slowly back to the car.

The world returned to normal. People could visit again. Stores and businesses and schools opened a few at a time. Natalie’s on-line course had been so successful that the college decided to keep it on, just as Richard had predicted. She was offered a position as co-ordinator, but she declined. She was done with virtual. She saw an ad asking for tree planters up north. Reforestation initiatives had had to be cancelled earlier. Planters were badly needed now for what was left of the season.

Yes. That was exactly the kind of work Laura wanted. She looked on it as a way of atonement, a physical manifestation of a new direction in her life, working and seeking for goodness, usefulness and truth.

