

FOREVER YOURS

By

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I'm fairly certain, nobody ever talked anyone into or out of love. It can't be done. I know. I've tried. It's like trying to convince someone to believe in God or vice versa. A waste of breath. If falling in love was rational, Helen of Troy would never have run off with Paris. I mean Helen was not dim, she knew her Greek husband was not going to take this news without a war. Love is not reasonable, if it were, I never would have married Hardy Stewart instead of Scott Chapman.

All my friends, and even my mother, loved Scott. Well, that was understandable. Scott was dashing and kind. He reminded me of a modern Indiana Jones, which is exactly why I didn't marry him. I couldn't keep up with him. The last time I saw him was twenty-one years ago. He was boarding a plane to Mongolia. Then this afternoon, I'm sitting in my Seville waiting for a light to change and I see Scott outside Marshall Field's in downtown Chicago. At least I think it was him. I only got a quick glimpse of the man through the Seville's windshield. There was Scott crossing in front of the car Hardy gave me for my forty-third birthday. He gives me the same gift every year. Hardy owns a Saab/Cadillac dealership. I recognized Scott's distinctive

lope, the tilt of his head as if he were about to butt someone out of his way. A teenage girl hurried alongside him. His daughter, no doubt. Tall and leggy like her father. Amazing how much you can see in a glance. I once read that the brain processes four hundred things a minute.

I pressed the button to open the car window, and called Scott's name just as the traffic light turned green. The Lexus SUV behind me leaned on his horn. Scott looked in the direction of the noise. The SUV loomed alongside me blocking my view. The driver, a petite man with black spiked hair, waved his cell phone at me. "What's wrong with you lady? Can't you see the light is green?"

When he pulled away Scott and his daughter was no where to be seen.

There are other diners in the lakeside restaurant, but Hardy and I sit in a booth and it feels as if we are eating alone. I love my husband. He treats me well. He doesn't abuse me, run around with other women or gamble away our savings. Hardy brings me flowers on the right occasions, takes me to dinner at the best restaurants Chicago has to offer. He plays golf for worthy charities and we are on the board of trustees at the children's hospital. I know he finds me attractive. I'm just under five feet six inches tall, have honey blonde hair and weigh exactly what I did in college; one hundred and twenty-five pounds. Hardy and I fit well together. He respects and admires me. He just doesn't love me. A disadvantage in any relationship.

"Is your lobster okay?" Hardy asks.

I look across the table. Hardy is wearing a light gray Armani suit with a pink shirt and navy blue tie that has his initials. He hasn't filled out over the years. His cheeks have hollowed slightly. He has a family history of wasting diseases. Although he is barely fifty, Hardy has an MRI, a colonoscopy, and an endoscopy once a year, and a biannual prostate test.

“Everything is fine,” I say. Perfectly normal just like his test results. Nothing there. Nothing to worry about. “I don’t know why I ordered lobster.” I prefer crab.

“Not in the mood. Do you want to order something else?” He is very solicitous on Wednesday nights. More so than usual. We dine out every Wednesday. Then we go home. Hardy lights the fire and the candles and we make love. He is very good. Very patient. I am always satisfied. It is not his fault that he doesn’t love me, nor mine, but I think it is why I have never gotten pregnant. Children should have a welcome home.

The question has been asked, why I love Hardy, most recently by my therapist. The answer is, I don’t know. It just seems like my center of gravity depends on him. When he goes away on business I am can’t sleep at night until he returns. When he is around, I feel calm inside. It has been suggested I get a dog. Hardy is allergic to animal fur.

“Hardy?” I start to ask a familiar question. He looks at me with his lasik eyes and I think better of it. On the occasions when I inquire of him, my heart pounding like a wheat thresher, if he loves me, Hardy assures that of course, he does. But I know his secret. He loves routine. I saw that right away when we began dating our last year at the University of Chicago. I thought I would become a fashion designer, but I’m not really the competitive type. Hardy had dreams of being a dolphin trainer.

“Do you ever miss not having become a dolphin trainer?”

He scratches his ear with his pinky finger. “No,” he says. “Have you decided where you want to go for our anniversary?” I haven’t given it a thought, but before I can answer, Hardy has a plan. “We could go to Paris, and then fly to Cannes.” He smiles. His new dental caps look great. They’ll last a lifetime.

“Well, you know the book convention is coming up,” I say, pushing the lobster tail to the side of my plate. I own a small new age bookstore on Chicago’s North side. I’m kind of proud I don’t own a home decorating or antique shop, like the other wives of rich men we know. I carry all of Oprah’s Book Club selections. Business is slow, but I have a feeling people are going to start reading more. I don’t know why I feel that way. I just do.

“No big deal we’ll stop at the convention and leave from New York,” Hardy says. He always has a solution for everything. It may be the wrong solution, but it’s an answer none-the-less, and not everyone can say that.

“How would you like to try something new this year?” I ask.

If he hadn’t had Botox shots there would be a frown on his forehead. “What?”

“I’ve heard about a travel agency that arranges stays with families in Mongolia.”

“I thought you loved Paris?”

The waiter appears like a magician dressed in black slacks and a white shirt. I pause while he removes the last of our dinner dishes and scrapes the table cloth clean with a little knife. “I do love Paris,” I say as the waiter leaves. “I love the little streets that lead to surprising restaurants and galleries, the way even the lowest paid French person acts superior to me for no other reason than they are French.” This is a form of patriotism to envy.

“Then we’re set.”

“Now don’t close your mind to this idea before you’ve heard about it.”

“Sweetheart, I’m not spending my vacation in a thatched hut with people who play polo with a sheep’s head.” He reaches for the check, scans it and then pulls out his billfold and chooses his platinum American Express card.

“That’s Polynesia. These are yurts. And I don’t think they do that goat head game anymore. Well, maybe some do, but not where we would stay.”

“Because we’re not staying there.” He slips his American Express card on top of the check, and the waiter swoops silently down like a hawk on a rabbit and lifts it away.

“No, because that’s ancient culture.” Scott would probably think it was a terrific idea. He’d probably known people there. “It was just an idea.”

Hardy puts his hand on the table and wiggles his fingers. I put my free hand in his. Foreplay.

“What are you thinking?”

I hadn’t been thinking about what I was thinking, but now I realize I am thinking I wish I’d never seen Scott, or the man I thought was Scott. I wish the confusion I feel would dissolve into thin air. “Me?”

“Is there someone else here?”

“I saw Scott Chapman Today.”

“Scott who?”

“We went to school with him at UC.”

“Your memory is better for people than mine.” You’d think that would be a problem, in Hardy’s line of work, but it isn’t. “So how is he?”

“We didn’t talk.”

“I thought you saw him?” He is expressionless. A *tabula rasa*.

“On the street. It might have been him. I’m not sure.”

Hardy presses his lips together. He rarely criticizes me. Just presses his lips together. A sign of impatience. “You saw someone on the street who might have been someone you knew in college.”

“I don’t know why I mentioned him. We used to date.”

“I think that’s why.” Hardy takes his hand from mine and lifts his wine glass. He never finishes his wine on Wednesday. He worries alcohol might impede his sexual prowess.

The waiter arrives at the table as if by magic carpet. He leaves the receipt and Hardy’s card.

“You knew Scott, too.” I press. “We used to go out after we studied at the library.”

“We double dated? Who was he with?”

“Me. You were both with me.” Why can’t Hardy remember the times the three of us had dinner in Little Italy, went to basketball games, took walks along the park? It’s as if we experienced two different histories. It makes me feel a little brainsick. “I don’t think it was Scott. Someone who looked like him, maybe.” Why am I back-peddling? “I almost married him. Actually we ran off to Maryland one weekend, but I didn’t have any identification, so we couldn’t get a marriage license.”

Hardy looks as if I’ve just upchucked my dinner on him. He puts his wine glass on the table in a very deliberate way and gazes at me. His blue contacts give his eyes an unearthly hue.

“Pam,” he begins. I love it when he says my name. “Are you angry with me about something?” He reaches for the receipt and winds it around his credit card before slipping it in his wallet.

“No.” He is the perfect husband.

“Why would you tell me this now?”

“I don’t know.” I don’t.

He leans back in his chair and looks at me. “Ready?”