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Love at the Precipice

by James Bellarosa

Alone with his wife Amy one Saturday afternoon, Larry Willis announced that he intended to end their fifteen-year marriage. He said that the demands and responsibilities of marriage were incompatible with the freer lifestyle he now longed for. He didn't elaborate but he did speak firmly and his wife, reacting to the shocking announcement, stared open-eyed at him as though he'd just arrived from Mars. Eventually, she recovered, folded his hand into hers and told him that his dismal news had wrung the joy out of an otherwise delightful day.

"I'm sorry this so sudden, Amy," Larry said. "There's no point keeping you in the dark any longer."

"Ignorance stinks," Amy agreed, "but after fifteen good years together I'll need time to recover from such a haymaker."

Larry nodded, confessed to a punishing guilt because Amy had been a "model wife". She winced, wondered when greener pastures began to "color" her husband's thinking.

"Were you drinking?" she asked.

Larry spun at her. "Don't ridicule me," he snapped. "This isn't easy."

"It must be excruciating for you if I've been a model wife," Amy said. "I asked because you left the country club during one of your....tsunamis. And your job, and now me. I'd just like to know if my marriage is drowning in a rip current because the relentless Big Alcohol Wave is still washing up."

"Dammit, Amy, I haven't opened a bottle for two years and you know that," Larry growled. "I had lunch with Tom Curran a month ago."

"Tom of ten two-timing trysts---that Tom?"

"Yes, and the subject came up," Larry said.

"Well, Tom's spread himself generously over so many green pastures that---never mind. Tom's not a person, you know. He's a /reputation./"

"We were chatting and our conversation drifted to divorce."

Amy tossed her eyes. "And he escorted you to the precipice?" she asked. "We're beyond hope, beyond negotiation?"

"I'm sorry, Amy," Larry murmured as he twirled his wedding ring on his finger.

Amy got up, reaffirmed her love for, and her devotion to, her husband, and added that as partners they'd forged a strong marriage and had very ably guided their two children toward their teens. "But I'm not one to chase after a commitment that has already collapsed in the breakdown lane," she said. "When are you leaving?"

"Next month," Larry replied. "If it's any consolation to you there's no other woman." "It's not."

Amy left the den to mix a drink. Returning soon she admitted that to establish some companionship for herself she might get in touch with Tim Kearns, a man she dated

briefly before marrying her husband.

Larry glared. "Tim Kearns? Him?"

"His wife died two years ago," Amy said.

"Tim Kearns! My announcement is still dripping off my lips and you're already shifting into mating mode?!" Larry snorted.

"Why not? Tim's smart, he's genial, well built, a tennis pro---"

"And he lost his wife---what impeccably convenient scheduling!"

"Cancer."

Larry smirked. "Amy, ever since I've known Tim he's lost things. In kindergarten he lost his marbles, later his shirt, his girlfriend, his composure, even his sense of direction. And now his wife---that's carrying carelessness too damned far. Mark my words, Amy, he'll lose you too. You'll vanish into thin air and spend the rest of your life as a small-time zephyr embedded in the peripatetic wanderings of a vagabonding cold front. Is a haphazard levitation all you want for yourself after I leave?"

Amy sniggered at Larry's characterizations, assured him she wouldn't link her prospects for the future to the whims of an ill wind.

"Good luck to you, Amy," Larry said. "And you say Tim is well built. Well, I remember when Tim had a job as a coat rack, when we called him The Wire, when he'd wiggle into a straw and drink himself silly. Don't be too enamored of his physique, Amy, because time has already begun his pulpification."

Amy noticed that her husband's face had flushed, that his gestures had lost their fluidity, that in his growing excitement he'd removed his wedding ring.

"And tennis?" Larry continued, "Well, how wondrous! A man tries to change the location of a scruffy ball by hitting it, but it returns. He tries again and again, but it just keeps coming back. For an entire afternoon he tries but it just won't obey---he's outwitted by a sphere no bigger than a mouse, and one with less manners. What swirling psychological mayhem prompts behavior like that?! Why, even a mouse would decode the folly in the farce after two or two three hits; he'd have the good sense to pick the ball up, autograph it, sell the damned thing, and saunter off the court with a fifty-dollar grin on his face."

Amy laughed that Tim had never revealed such deficiencies to her. "So much for Tim's judgment," she said. "Now I'm almost afraid to ask for your assessment of his intelligence."

"Ha!" Larry cackled. "Among a troupe of Chimpanzees he'd seem to hold his own. He'd razzle-dazzle them at the Scrabble board, rub his hands together, and then with his intellect functioning at its glittering outer limits, he'd proceed to thrash them by all of three or four points. Then he'd polish his chest with his knuckles, issue a press release, and go home to his village firmly ensconced as its resident laughingstock. And all he would have confirmed by his theatrics is that apes often play dumb so they can watch humans evolve into jackasses."

Amy frowned but noticed that Larry had become even more energized, more passionate. She promised him that she'd subject any of her serious suitors to both Rorschach and IQ tests.

"And you imagine that Tim is genial---ha!" Larry scoffed. "He's about as genial as a shrew in your shoe, as genial as a dumpster full of scorned whores, as genial as

Scrooge at a fund-raiser."

"Larry!"

"As genial as a tornado on a whirlwind tour, as genial as a dentist with a jackhammer." Larry picked up his wedding ring, rolled it in his hand momentarily, then slipped it back onto his finger. "Amy, I can't abandon you to your folly," he continued. "Nor when I planned to leave you could I have imagined your intent to replace me with a triumph of triviality so undistinguished that it hasn't the wits or will to recognize in a tennis ball its intellectual superior." Larry reached for and held Amy's hands. "Nor could I bear the thought of you zephyred and riding out your unhappy life holding the reins of the indiscriminately ragged meanderings of a low pressure system, one that not even a witch would allow herself to get swept up in. I realize now my that life is here with you, Amy, and that I can't in gracious conscience abandon you to the self-destructiveness lurking like a beast in your blessed naïveté."

Amy smiled, then unleashed a volley of bravos as she applauded wildly. Larry bowed, enveloped his wife in an ecstatic embrace. She rolled tightly against him for a few moments, bathed his lips with hers, then stepped back and suggested that next month they /do/ Bill Hall.

James Bellarosa is a graduate of Boston University with more than 200 publishing credits. They include 175 short stories that have appeared in *Detroit*, *Kaleidoscope*, *The Griffin*, *The Binnacle*, *Pointed Circle*, *Storyteller*, *Buffalo Spree*, *Thema*, *Art Times*, and many other journals. Several of my short stories are included in anthologies. His feature articles and commentaries have been published in *Time*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Yankee*, *American History Illustrated*, *Worcester Telegram*, *Modern Secretary*, *American Neptune*, *Boston Globe*, *Bittersweet*, and many others. He has published three books of fiction, a novel and two short story collections, one of which became a Library of Congress Books on Tape selection, and he has earned two Pushcart nominations. He lives with his wife Jeannine in North Grafton, Massachusetts.

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