



Black Adder

by Karen Christensen

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He wouldn't tell me where he was living. He wouldn't even give me a phone number where I could reach him. He would call me late at night and ask me to meet him in the parking lot of a small strip mall, and like a fool, I would go - hoping that I would glean some piece of information to help me understand what was going through his mind. We would climb into the back of his truck, make love (though "screwing" is probably a better way to characterize what we were doing) - and then I would drive back home in tears, in the dark, and none the wiser about what was transpiring in his life or mine.

So, when he invited me to spend Christmas Eve with him at the cabin he was renting, I thought we were approaching some kind of breakthrough. I packed an overnight bag, mustered up my courage in anticipation of what might occur, and set off. When we had first separated back in September, I had given him my wedding ring and told him to put it away until he was ready to be married again. A brave, courageous speech on my part - of course, I thought he would thrust the ring back into my hand and tell me to keep it, desperately pleading with me to explain how I could imagine that he did not want to be married any more. He had simply slipped the ring into his back pocket, and now, as I drove along the highway to the country address he had given me over the phone, I was hoping that being asked to take back the ring might be one payoff for this uncertain encounter.

I was surprised to find that the cabin was not really all that far away from Missoula, where we had purchased a home a year and a half before. Actually, I can't tell you how long I drove to get to the secret hideout, since I never was able to figure out the relative location or distance of places beyond the Missoula city limits. I was clearly a person who was born to live in big cities with tall buildings, human-fashioned landmarks, and grid street systems. Though I spent three years in Montana, once I left the neighborhood and the general vicinity in which I lived, worked and shopped, I was hopelessly lost. I simply could never get a map of the area in my head. The mountains surrounding the valley made no sense to me. There was no Lake Michigan to the east to keep me oriented and grounded. Whether in my car or on my bicycle, I never could venture very far from town without being certain that I would end up stranded and disconnected, wandering aimlessly forever.

One of his friends, a real estate agent, had identified a handy hideout in Stevensville that he could rent while he was on hiatus from marriage and the pressures of life with teenage step-daughters. The cabin was owned by a wealthy couple who spent their summers in Montana and had the good sense to go to California when heavy gray clouds descended for a solid six months each year, creating air inversions, suffocating the valley, and blocking the so-called Big Sky. When he invited me out for Christmas Eve, he forgot to mention that there was no central heating system in the house, and that he didn't know how to open the damper for the living room fireplace. I froze during my visit, since I hadn't thought to pack long underwear or woolen socks.

We had been struggling since we had moved from Illinois. One evening after a dinner in which we exchanged no words - pleasant or otherwise - I suggested that we take a ride somewhere for a cup of coffee and a chance to talk, uninterrupted by kids, t.v., or other distractions. I couldn't figure out what was

going on in our relationship, other than it seemed to be quickly going south (his favored expression). We pulled up to *Food for Thought*, a local hangout near the university, and before we even climbed out of the truck, he told me that he wanted to move out. I don't think I was surprised, but I was certainly shocked. The big problem with my intuition is that it's usually right on target...I know for certain when something is amiss - I just seldom know how to react, or what to do about it.

I spent the next three months alternating between crying and being really, really pissed off at this person who had convinced me to uproot my two teenage daughters, leave family, friends, a decent job, and all that was comfortable and familiar, for western Montana, the place of his dreams. Of course, in typical fashion, I hadn't thought too hard about whether or not this was going to be the place of *my* dreams. He had been unemployed for over a year, fired from a good job because he had gotten into a fight with a board member. He had spent the time sullen, miserable and depressed, hiding out at the public library and half-heartedly looking for a new position. When he was offered a job in Montana, we hardly even discussed whether or not accepting it was the right thing to do. He just assumed we should drop everything and go - and that's exactly what he did. He left almost immediately. I spent the next five months trying to get our house sold while the girls finished out the school year -all the while an energetic cheerleader for the big western adventure instead of sorting things out in my own head, listening to my gut, and deciding whether or not it was really wise to follow him. Such thoughtful consideration would have been so uncharacteristic of me; my approach to the world is generally to go with the impulse and clean up the mess later.

I pulled into the gravel driveway, which was lightly dusted with snow. I noticed the neighbor's fence, beside which a small horse was walking slowly toward the trees, head down, looking for something to eat underneath the frozen leaves and branches that littered the yard. There was the cabin - built of brand new honey-colored logs, relatively unremarkable compared to the typical Bonanza-style multiplex spreads that were rapidly taking over the western part of the state. Resentful Montanans whose families dated back many generations hated the fact that outsiders could take big profits from inflated real estate prices back in their home states and come out here to build expensive, picturesque rustic hideaways. They fled crowded cities back east, in California or Oregon, bringing with them overpriced coffee shops and chic boutiques. These intruders also imported their burning desire for laws to impose zoning and protect the wolves, all the while assuming that the local volunteer firefighters would heroically rescue them from wildfires, though the nouveaux Montanans refused to trim the brush or trees close to their oversized homes as a practical preventive measure. Those homes, of course, were hardly rustic; volume ceilings and "western" touches directly out of Robert Redford's *Sundance* catalog were what distinguished them from the worn-out, tumbledown asbestos-sided buildings that they frequently replaced.

He came out the door to greet me, awkwardly. A look crossed his face that made me think he was not sure it had been such a good idea to invite me out here, to reveal his hiding place. Maybe he was feeling like a child who had been caught in a lie or some act of vandalism. I grabbed my bag from the backseat of the car and followed him silently inside for the tour. Though I didn't think it was possible for my heart to sink any further, in fact, it could, and it did.

Small kitchen, small bedroom, small bathroom, and huge living area - replete with the requisite log furniture outfitted with big cushions covered in faux red and brown Native American print fabric. I had a quick vision of Jay, the Blackfoot

graduate student who rented a small house on our property in town. Jay suffered from constant tension over attending the “white man’s college,” the University of Montana, and retaining his connection to the reservation in Browning. The furniture in this living room looked like it couldn’t decide whether it was “Cowboy” or “Indian.”

He invited me to take a walk outside to feed an apple to the neighbor’s horse. My stomach was churning, and I was growing more and more uncomfortable. He hadn’t hugged me or kissed me hello, and I was doing my best to hold back the tears that had become inevitable every time we encountered one another in this awkward space between “are we together or are we apart.” I stood in the yard at the fence, listening to him recount details about the couple from whom he was renting the house, but my mind was replaying a recent scene in which I had been walking downtown with a friend at lunchtime and had seen him crossing the street on his way to the post office. I grabbed my friend’s arm to keep myself from collapsing. I was having a hard time keeping myself focused, and my knees were in danger of buckling. Until that moment, I had no idea how physical this kind of hurt could be...a frightening mix of sadness, anger, nausea, and cold paralysis that was so visceral I believed I really might drop dead right there on the sidewalk.

I took a deep breath, straightened my back, and started walking along the driveway in the direction of the main road. He followed me, silently. We moved along for awhile, not leaning in toward each other or consciously putting distance between us, just in motion, listening to the crunch of the gravel under our boots. At the end of the driveway, we turned and made our way to the house. Maybe he was talking - I don’t really remember. All my attention and energy were directed at getting a grip on myself, and keeping myself from running away. I had come out to this place for so many reasons: closure, understanding, his touch. So far, none of those looked like they were going to happen, but if I left now, I’d never have any of the things I needed.

Dinner was mushroom omelets - a meal we had enjoyed cooking together, long ago when we had spent Sunday mornings in that happy, oblivious place before all the trouble begins. I rose from the table to gather up the dishes but quickly caught myself. This was not my kitchen, not my home, and, I thought - ironically - probably soon - not my husband. It was his place - he had made that clear - and I was a visitor - not even a guest. I sat back in the chair with a strong sense of bewilderment. Why had I come? Why was I letting myself be toyed with in this way? I forced myself not to say anything, to let him take the lead in the conversation. He had made things so hard for me...I didn’t want to make things easy for him.

He placed the dishes and the cooking pan in the sink and walked over to turn on the television set. Ah, the wonders of technology...even out here in the country, it was easy to break the sad silence by flipping a switch and bringing animated voices and public broadcasting into the cold room. And, how fortunate! *Black Adder* was on - the old BBC comedy that poked sarcastic fun at the Middle Ages. A blast from our past - we had both loved this show. Maybe its presence was proffered assistance from the heavens.

Except, I knew I wasn’t going to be able to sit back and laugh. At that moment I realized how hopeless this situation was, how far away we were from each other, how certain our final breakup would be. It was just a matter of time. How long did I want to keep pulling the scab? Who was going to give in first and admit the sorry defeat? I didn’t want to sit on the couch and pretend we were a happy couple. I wanted to have a knock-down, drag-out fight. I wanted to scream

about how hurt and angry I was. I wanted him to confess that he was immature, irresponsible, hateful, and heartless. I wanted him to sob. I wanted him to crumble up in pain the way I had been doing on a regular basis for the past three months.

Of course, instead of making a scene, I joined him on the sofa, wrapped up in an afghan, and pretended to focus on the television screen. He jumped enthusiastically into his typical role of supplying his own witty commentary and running dialogue as the show progressed before us. I listened in a state of open-eyed simple-mindedness, wondering why it had taken me so long to realize that his “goofing” (his term) was his natural way of coping with everything and avoiding everything - all at the same time. I didn’t laugh.

We climbed into bed. He fell immediately into a heavy sleep. I lay awake for what seemed like hours, waiting for enough moonlight to break through the window so that I could see to grab my bag, my purse, and my keys, and make my way out into the frozen night for the drive back to town.

In January he called me and announced that he had decided he wanted to move back home. His tone was as casual and unaffected as if he were making a date for a haircut. Of course I welcomed him back and, with childlike, naïve hope, suggested marriage counseling. He joined me for one appointment. I struggled in a fog of uncertainty for the next four weeks, and then, in a lightning strike of bright clarity, took the morning off from my job, signed a short-term lease for a cheap, cramped apartment, picked my daughters up from school after lunch so we could empty the house of our belongings before he got home from work, and set in motion a plan to move back to Illinois three months later, in June, when the girls were done with school.

He and I sat together around our dining room table once more - this time with a paralegal - to sign a settlement agreement for divorce. It was his task to drop the papers at the courthouse for processing; in laid-back Montana, no courtroom appearance by either party was necessary.

We exchanged a couple of cards and spoke a few times by phone. He expressed no regret or indecision about the ultimate split. He didn’t ask me to reconsider. Nonetheless, he procrastinated, failing to file the divorce papers until December, six months after I had left. Maybe the state of Limbo was really his preferred place in which to live. I finally stopped caring. I never did get my wedding ring back.

Karen Fullett-Christensen has been writing poetry and short stories for as long as she can remember, and has self-published nine poetry manuscripts. She volunteers as an ESL tutor, sings in the Fox Valley Festival Chorus, and serves on the board of Directors for L.I.F.T. Aurora, a nonprofit organization committed to fostering a vibrant arts culture by providing high quality, free and affordable programming, education and events. She leads a local book club (Books and Bread) and *A-Town Poetics* at the Culture Stock bookstore. Born and raised in Chicago, she now resides in Aurora, Illinois. She is a 1972 graduate of Northern Illinois University, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Sciences. She has worked in a variety of positions, such as office administrator, a high school social studies teacher, a middle school language arts instructor, a real estate agent, an urban planner, and, before her retirement in 2012, as a municipal grants administrator. She is married, with two adult daughters and one granddaughter.

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