
MARK McCAWLEY
LOVE BITES

Patricia was a striking redhead from Surrey, B.C. She had an insatiable desire for sex, matched only by her tendency to run the lives of everyone she knew. She also had a strong streak of black Irish blood running through her veins, which meant she was very easily aggravated.

It was the most intense affair I had ever had. All the affairs I had since were bland by comparison. We fit together like two broken pieces. Only later did the cracks begin to show. We lived together for half a year. We were both in our early twenties.

We met at a New Years party, in a nightclub called Crackerjack's. She had asked me what I did for a living. "Nothing," I said.

"Then what don't you do for a living?" she asked.

"I write poems," I said.

She brought her lips to my ear and said: "I've never fucked a poet before."

Two weeks later I moved into her small, one bedroom apartment off Jasper Avenue. Mostly everyone in the building were around our age, looking as if they had just moved out of their parent's homes for the first time. People were coming and going at all hours.

From the beginning, we were constantly having sex. We just couldn't get enough of each other. We fucked everywhere we could possibly imagine. In the river valley. On a toilet in Crackerjack's. On the kitchen table. The hallway floor. In the middle of a blizzard. We fucked so often, my balls would begin to ache at the mere thought of sex.

While our first two months together were devoted to sex, the next two were devoted to arguing, arguments we often settled on our sperm-stained futon. It was becoming clear this relationship had risks, both physical and emotional. We were like fire and gasoline. Any spark could and would set us off. Night after night of this was taking its toll.

All the while, Patricia was busy making plans. She had our future together completely worked out, right down to our white wedding and our house with a white picket fence around it. To her, there was no detail too minor. Whenever she brought up these plans, my walls of resistance would spring up. We were like two people screaming from separate rooms, only our ultimatums managing to break through.

Her obsessive need to plan didn't stop there, either. She was constantly making lists. What to do lists. Where to go lists. Lists of what to buy, whom to see, chores to do. She wrote so many lists, she had lists for her lists. She was always passing me a list for something or other, so much so that the pockets of my coat were full of bits of folded paper.

After months of this, I had had enough. I felt we were moving too fast to be sure if it was in the right direction. I could no longer recognize the woman I had first met. The only things I had in common with this woman were the bathroom and the bed.

Near the end of our sixth month together, she would berate me for anything. For leaving my clothes on the bedroom floor. For finding orphaned socks, or soiled fruit of the

loom in the most unlikely of places, reeking of sweat and fermenting urine. A simple dirty cup in the kitchen sink was enough to fling her into frenzy.

I had begun to repeat the phrase “I’m sorry” so often it had become my own private dirge. I felt as if I was living with a time bomb with a short fuse. It had reached the point I no longer relished the thought of going home after work. I would stay out later and later. Then when I entered the door to our flat, she would be at me again. Where had I been, with whom, for this long?

“It’s over between us,” I told her. “This constant arguing can’t be healthy ... for either of us.”

Patricia, though, would have no part of it, and we argued late into the night, Patricia alternately scolding and then rebuking whatever I said. I was so tired, I agreed with her idea that we should see a therapist. I spent the rest of the night on the couch.

The next morning, Patricia woke me up before she left for work. She handed me a piece of yellow paper.

“I just made our appointment with a family therapist,” she said. “It’s at 5:45 ... meet me there.”

“All right,” I muttered. She kissed my cheek, then left for work. I scanned the yellow paper. The appointment was at the Inglewood Unit of the Edmonton Board of Health. I crumpled it in my hand, dropping it on the floor. I had no intention of showing up.

The first thing I did was call in sick to work. I gave some lame excuse that I had food poisoning, and I had to rest in bed for two days. They bought it. I called up my friend Joe. He said he would let me stay with him for a couple of weeks. I packed what things of mine I could carry and pack into my car.

But that was only the beginning of my troubles. I soon learned there was no such thing as a clean, quick break-up, no matter who initiated it. The next two months were to be the most painful and messy I remember. I was to discover what anger and bitter fury a jilted lover was capable of.

Immediately, Patricia had begun calling everyone we knew, calling me up at my work and screaming at me over the telephone. I had nothing to say. It was over. But the calls continued. Whenever I heard her voice, I would simply hang up.

Then she showed up one day where I worked. She sat in her car, parked in the street, and waited. When I left at the end of the day, she followed behind me. For several hours I drove around the South-East Industrial part of the city trying to lose her. I finally lost her by parking inside an abandoned steel yard, between two large stacks of piping.

Fearing she might follow me back to Joe’s flat, I slept there all night. Joe had already dropped not so subtle hints that I should find another place to stay. I was sure he had had enough of my problems, and I couldn’t really blame him. Patricia had already staked out in front of his apartment. Once he even discovered her in the building’s laundry room, hiding in the dark. I rested my head against the side window of the car, and tried my best to get some sleep.

When I awoke, I had a bad kink in my neck. I drove to the McDonald’s near where I worked and bought myself an Egg McMuffin and a coffee. The coffee tasted like liquid tar, and the Muffin had no taste at all. It was as if I were eating cardboard.

When I got to work, Patricia was waiting in her car. I hurried into the shop, Patricia

following after me. I asked Craig, the manager, to keep her busy. I slipped out the back, got back into my car and headed back to Joe's place. Joe had packed up my things and left them against the wall by the door. The note he left read: "Sorry buddy, but enough is enough, please push the key under the door after you leave."

I crammed what I had into the back seat of the car. I lit a cigarette, then pulled out into the street. I had no idea where I was going to go.

That was ten years ago.

I wasn't sure if I had read it somewhere in a magazine, or in a book, or if I had heard it on television. It was something about looking at pictures of crowds around a building on fire, or people witnessing some horrible event. Anyway, it said that if you look at the pictures for long enough, you could actually see someone smiling, but that if you looked away or simply blinked, you could not find them again.

That's how I felt when I saw Patricia approaching on the crowded sidewalk along Whyte Avenue. It was as if a porthole had opened from the past, out of thin air, and out stepped Patricia among the jostling pedestrians. It was like I had seen a ghost. I stopped dead in my tracks. Passersby whipped around me, bumping into my arms as they passed. At first, I half-hoped she wouldn't recognize me, that the last decade had aged me enough. I tried not to stare, tried not to give myself away by looking directly at her. But even after ten years, those old feelings were still strong. As were the painful memories I still attached to them. I thought I had forgotten her completely, exorcised her memory. But I had only been kidding myself. When Patricia's face lit up in recognition, I knew there was no way out.

She gave me one of those patented hugs of hers, her hands lightly touching the back of my arms, pressing her body against mine, cheek to cheek. She blew a faint kiss at my ear.

"Is it really you?" she cooed. "How long has it been?"

"Ten years," I said. "Give or take a few months."

"Ten years ..." she repeated as if it were a question. "We simply must go for a drink and catch up on old times ... I know a place around the corner. Let's go."

I had no chance to reply as she led me by my arm through the crowded sidewalk, and around the corner. She was still as aggressive as I remembered, almost despotic in her determination to have her way, to get whatever she wanted no matter the situation.

It was late afternoon, and the dining lounge was full of well-dressed businessmen. Patricia took off her coat and handed it to the coat check clerk. She wore a tight, short leather skirt and a silk blouse. She looked as if she had just stepped off a cover of *Cosmopolitan*. I felt out of place in my faded jeans and T-shirt. As the waiter led us to a table, I noticed that every man in the room was watching Patricia, turning their heads as we passed by them. She had always been the center of attention, no matter where she went, and had perfected her entrances into a fine art. I had never really been part of her spotlight. More like a prop in its afterglow.

Patricia ordered a martini. I ordered a Molson Canadian. The waiter left, then returned with the drinks, setting them down on cork coasters. There were figures of bullhorns on the coasters. I took a deep gulp of the beer, and then set it down. I didn't quite know what to say.

“Ten years,” she said once again as if it were a question. “Has it really been that long?”

“Seems just like yesterday,” I said. I took another gulp of my beer. Patricia reached over the side of the table and rested her hand lightly on mine.

“You haven’t changed at all,” she said. “The same struggling artist I remember.”

“Well, maybe just a bit,” I said, patting my belly.

“Are you still writing poetry?” she asked.

“Not since I turned thirty,” I said. “A man’s got to grow up sometime.” I rested my other hand on hers.

“What are you writing now?” she asked, pulling her hand from between mine.

“Some short stories, a novel. Lately, I’ve been working on a play. Nothing big, though. I do some editing to make a few bucks.” I said. “You’re looking great, Patricia,” I added. “Even better. What’ve you been doing with yourself?”

The waiter returned with another Canadian and a martini, and then took away the empty glass and bottle. With her right forefinger, Patricia stirred the martini. She sucked the liquid off her finger in her mouth, her lips forming a bright red pucker around the knuckle. There was a faint pop when she pulled the finger from her mouth.

“I’m a real estate agent now,” she said. “Quite a saleswoman, if I say so myself. I’m a member of the Million Dollar Club.”

“Mustn’t have been easy,” I said. I was starting to feel a little lightheaded.

“Not very. Men have trouble dealing with women who are more successful than they are ... it hurts their fragile little egos. I’m not the kind of woman who’ll lessen herself just to make a man feel comfortable. If a man can’t take it, he can go and fuck himself ... so to speak.”

“It must get lonely for you,” I said.

“No more than usual,” she said. “But enough about my problems ... how about you? Any girlfriends? I mean, did you ever settle down?”

“A few, but none lately. I don’t think I’m marriage material,” I said. I could feel the past coming into the conversation. I cleared my throat, then finished the beer I was drinking.

“That’s too bad,” Patricia said, rubbing her hand on my thigh. She leaned over, brought her lips to my ear and whispered: “I’ve never fucked a novelist before.” She poked her tongue into my ear. I felt a familiar ache in my crotch. “Let’s get out of here,” she said.

No sooner had we entered her hotel suite than the leather skirt she wore dropped to the floor, followed by her silk blouse. She was wearing a bright neon bra, matching panties and garters fastened to her pantyhose. She took me by the arm and then pushed me onto the double bed.

Unfastening my belt buckle, she popped the button of my jeans, pulled down the zipper, and yanked off my pants. I peeled off my T-shirt. If her appetite for sex had been insatiable ten years before, it had multiplied ten fold since then. She took my penis and put it inside her mouth. I could feel her teeth rubbing against my glans. I clenched the bed sheet with both fists. She kept on felating me long after I had come in her mouth, and continued until my erection returned.

She stood up, unfastened her bra, unfastened her garter clips and slid off her

panties. Her pubic hair was glistening red. She straddled my thighs, guiding my penis inside of her. Her vagina felt warm and smooth as I entered it, a warm sensation that increased as she ground her clitoris against my cock. She screamed as she thrust down harder and harder. She ran her fingernails across my chest. I could see small streaks of blood appear.

The next morning, Patricia was gone. On her pillow she had left a note. It read: "Last night was fantastic ... let's do it again, soon. I'm out of town on business for a week. Call me. Signed, Patricia." She had scribbled a telephone number on the bottom of the hotel stationery.

There were several loud knocks on the door to the suite. "Check out time," a voice said from the hallway. The voice sounded vaguely oriental.

"Just a minute," I said, pulling on my jeans. I heard whomever it was walk away from the door. I pulled my T-shirt over my head, and slipped into my shoes. I took the note from the pillow, folded it, and put it inside my coat pocket.

It was about six days later that I awoke in the middle of the night. My head ached and I felt feverish. My entire body seemed to be weakened. I had to piss. I went to the washroom and sat on the toilet. When I began to urinate, it felt as if I were passing liquid fire. I figured I had some sort of bladder or kidney infection, so that morning I looked through the Yellow Pages and made an appointment with a doctor. His name was C.L. Christian.

One of the nurses led me into a small examination room. She told me to undress except for my socks and my underwear, then to lie down on the examination table. She took my blood pressure, said the doctor would examine me shortly, and then she left. The room smelled like Lysol disinfectant.

Twenty minutes later, a woman in a white coat came into the room. She pulled on a pair of latex surgical gloves. "I'm Dr. Christian. What seems to be the problem?" she said.

"I'm feeling weak, nauseated, my whole body aches, and when I urinate it burns," I said.

She poked around my scrotum with her latex covered fingers. She held my penis between her thumb and forefinger, looking at the glans.

"It appears that you've contracted Herpes," she said, pointing at several lesions, which looked no larger than pimples. "I suggest you contact all the sexual partners you've been in contact with in the last few months," she added. The only sexual contact I had had in the last five months was with Patricia a week before.

"I'll make you an appointment for this afternoon at the STD Clinic. Stop at the front desk and pick it up before you leave," she said. After I spent a long, humiliating afternoon in the STD Clinic, I was ready to murder. How could she not let me know she had herpes?

When I got back home, I rushed to the telephone in the bedroom. I took her folded note out of my coat pocket, and flattened it on the dresser. I picked up the phone and pushed the seven digits she had scribbled down on the bottom of the note. I could feel a surge of adrenalin as I listened to the fourth and fifth rings. She had better be back from that business trip of hers, I thought.

The ringing stopped and a taped, computer-generated voice cut in: "The number you have reached is no longer in service ... If you require assistance, call directory ..." I hung

up.

I stared at the telephone, then at the digits scrawled in Patricia's handwriting. I read the date on the note. It had been ten years to the day I had left her without a word. The next day, in my mailbox, I found a postcard from Disneyland. It was from Patricia. "Happy Anniversary," was all it said.