

## **A Curse**

**By Emilie Lefrançois**

It was March 12<sup>th</sup>, the 92<sup>nd</sup> day of the school year, and there was a child's birthday in my class. As a kindergarten teacher, it would have been wrong to ignore it, so I had not, but a crushing headache sat behind my eyelids as I sang along cheerfully. Teaching in the north was full of discoveries, especially when it came to the closely knitted community around me. Most days, I was not sure if I liked the lack of anonymity or resented it. The last bell rang, signaling the departure of my last students. As I was pushing the front door of the school to get to my car, I heard a voice. 'Em! Did you keep some for me?' It was Val, a social worker I'd met earlier that year, walking towards me and inquiring about the empty cake dome in my hands. 'Nah, sorry, no sugar left, you know the rugrats, they ate it all.'

That is when I noticed him, next to Val. Not so tall, and not so handsome, but with something that made me understand the charisma cult leaders have. A man that could make you drink the Kool-Aid. He was standing next to Val, hands in his pockets, exuding something that could either be quiet confidence or arrogance. 'Em, meet Ash. He's our newest recruit, he'll help at the school.' I nodded, suddenly feeling the weight of my shoulder bag digging into my back. I looked at his extended hand, feeling flustered for no reason. I was 25 then, and just out of a four-year relationship. I had ended it with no drama, aware that I was more relieved than sad. The following fall, I had left everything for the north, keen to start a new life that did not involve my name associated with someone else's.

Ash's hand was warm and firm. He had crinkly brown eyes, and I was aware of his magnetic pull, but it was Friday 4 o'clock and I was a teacher. All I wanted was to put my feet up and sit in silence. And so, I left. As I was pouring myself a cup of tea at home, I heard the noise. 'You have a new message'. My heart pumped faster. I was a deer in headlights seeing Ash's name at the end of the message. 'Hi Em, Val gave me your email, and I hope that it's ok. You seem nice. I'm new in town and was wondering, would you want to do something tonight? Here is my number.' The last thing I wanted was to leave my house and my fuzzy slippers, or surrender my precious time to any man, but I found myself dialing his number before I could change my mind.

I suggested we go for a car ride around 8 o'clock. He laughed, surprised by my offer, but agreed to it. 'I'll pick you up' I told him. 'Watch for a 1993 Ford Escort'. He chuckled at that. My body tingled strangely at the sound of his easy laugh.

I only had to honk once and he came out of his house, wearing a goofy smile. My heart skipped a beat, unsure. What was I doing, inviting a stranger for a car ride on a lonely road? He was potentially a serial killer. I took a deep breath as he opened the door. My smile faltered a little when he said that something was missing. His hand opened, revealing two bags of Jellybeans. 'You know, my real name is not Ash.' He told me about his life in Toronto, where he had grown up listening to hipster bands. I kept stealing glances while he was in the middle of a story.

The road was incredibly dark, with gloomy pines on both sides, but I could still see his profile. He had long eyelashes and a beard that needed trimming, a modern Bluebeard sitting next to me. I giggled when he told me about his baby brother and all their old shenanigans. I frowned when he talked about his first few days in the north, appalled that I was already looking for reasons to see him again. I kept driving, looking at the narrow road and wishing for it to never end, while he was telling me about the Big Smoke. Somehow, in the past, I had stayed in control when it came to men. I liked them, but with an affection you might have for the family pet. A detached, calm love. While I was driving, I realized that it was already too late with this one. First love. I was done for, a fly caught in a spider web.

As he opened the second Jellybean bag, I wondered if love was a curse or a gift. My hand shook when it touched his, and I forgot what he was asking. 'Em? What do you think? I was asking if I could cook for you later this week.' A curse. Love was a curse. Of course I wanted this man to cook for me every day. I wanted to know who he loved in the past. I wanted to know his fears. I wanted this car ride to never end. I wanted to crawl into his house and touch him until we both became dust. I wanted him to leave forever. I wanted him to never look at me the way he was looking at me now. Like I was the only star in the sky. I wanted to be only me, not someone's. I wanted all of him and none of it.

Ash looked at me expectantly. 'No, thank you, I don't think that we should see each other again', I said as I stopped in front of his house. He just looked at me silently. I was not going to fall for man in the middle of nowhere, during my first year as a teacher. He would obliterate everything else; I could feel it in my bones. My heart was a drum, steadily keeping the beat. 'No, thank you', I repeated. My palms were sweaty on the steering wheel and the blush that crept up my face had nothing to do with shyness, and all to do with the pull I felt for him. 'No, thank you' I repeated feebly a third time. His eyes locked with mine. Symbiosis between prey and predator. His smile was slow as he grabbed a Jellybean from the cup holder and popped it into his mouth. 'Tuesday at 8, I'll cook beef Bourguignon?' I nodded, resigned. Love was a curse; love was a trap. That first love would cut the deepest.