

Red Wet Dirt

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Red Wet Dirt
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The Yuletide Thing

It was a Monday Christmas, a *very* Monday Christmas, as not only did December twenty-fifth fall that year on the most notoriously dismal of all days of the week, but this day in particular was *particularly* dismal. The rising sun of Christmas Day's dawn hadn't yet begun to poke from out of the horizon like a *Kilroy was here* on my half of the globe yet, and I was already sure-as-shit certain this day was going to wreak havoc on me, really bring me down.

We were kicking back, nice and comfy, sharing two chaise lounge chairs at the end of a long dock jetting out from Yuletide Ranch & Cabins at Spark Lake, California, a beating human heart and I.

Looking out at the lake this time of morning, you wouldn't think its waters were murky and filthy, its shores full of seaweed, small but potentially lethal jagged rock, and duck shit. I wouldn't advise that you swim in it. I heard somewhere that Spark Lake used to be Sparkling Lake until a court order imposed a change in its name so it didn't intentionally deceive tourists, kind of like how Aquafina had to admit to its tap water resources on its labels.

The early morning air was chilly and clear, and though the weather forecaster on News11 had well driven home how it was going to be a *green* Monday Christmas and just as green throughout the days surrounding it, I'd seen *plenty* of snow so far.

And not one flake of it fell from the sky.

Already, power boats and pontoons were livened at their docks and setting forth into the distance of the Lake, and I found myself paranoid that the pulsing mass of veined glistening muscle seated next to me would be noticed and consequently draw attention. Some of the boaters from the docks on either side of us cruised by only twenty meters from where we sat, some rudely canvassing us and the waters with their spotlights and laughing. Not certain if they were laughing at us, at me, or at each other from merely enjoying themselves and in fact paying little attention to where their spotlights fell.

Upon my head I wore a generic dollar store Santa Claus hat I immediately thought to remove and place over the heart beside me in an attempt to conceal it. A difficult task, when a human heart is throbbing and pounding all by itself and you're struggling to hide it just enough so that it can still witness a Christmas sunrise with you.

Talia and I, each a stone throw past our thirty-somethings, packed our bags and set forth Friday morning up I-5 in my black Ford Focus to this place, a trip of over three hours north of the Sacramento home we shared with our 3-year-old son, Anthony, just after we dropped him off at her parents', with all of us to be reunited Christmas Day.

I'd scored online tickets six months prior to a *Toby Keith at Yuletide Christmas Concert/Winter Fireworks Extravaganza (weather permitting)*. The Yuletide Resort & Spa (where "*Every Day is Merry at Yuletide*") was regionally famous for concert venues, and throughout the entirety of our half-a-decade relationship, Yuletide came to be our refuge, our getaway for a weekend at a time, and at previous Yuletide getaways we rocked to Aerosmith, Big & Rich, Tom Petty, Bob Dylan, Alice Cooper on Halloween Night.

But the prospects of seeing the Big Dog Daddy of all big daddies balls-out live onstage with his red white and blue anthems and bluesy ballads, his bad-ass band, brass section and sax with his little whiskey girl on backups and blazing pyrotechnics, Toby was our ultimate conquest.

Talia's brother was a United States Marine serving in Iraq and had met Mr. Keith on his tour there to support the troops. My best friend and his girlfriend road-tripped to Oklahoma just to visit Toby's *I Love This Bar & Grill* restaurant, and I bitch at him to this day of my jealousy. *Let's Get Drunk and Be Somebody* has been Talia's personal anthem for awhile, whereas mine has been *Weed with Willy*, as far as his songs were concerned, and we owned every last recorded and widely distributed one of them.

And what were *we* like? Talia was a raging alcoholic and I chronically smoked the Good Herb in an overall excuse to distance my emotions from the results of her drinking too much, like the numerous times I'd come home from work to find her passed out cold while Anthony had trashed the house and sat naked in a dirty dish-filled kitchen sink. Or the instances, altogether countless, of the times when she'd drastically change her personality for no apparent reason other than vodka and Natural Ice, on a dime, on a comment I'd give about a television commercial she was watching, on a disagreement as to whether the bread was so old that we should throw it away, when she'd lash out at me, cuss and swear and try to kick my ass like I was a priest and she was possessed with the demon of No Reason for This Behavior.

I was hoping this Yuletide concert getaway would be for us the ultimate retreat, where we could both of us chill and get along like we used to, and maybe keep the peace going long afterward. After all, this would mark our first Christmas together, the first time I was invited to spend the holiday with Talia and her relatives.

For ambiguous reasons which always rendered me with deep feelings of rejection, Talia, each Christmas, had to disappear for a few days with her family, sans me, and she never took Anthony with her either.

There was always something about that which never seemed quite right. Not to me, not to anyone close enough for me to confide in.

"*She turns into a creature that time of year,*" my younger brother by nine years suggested once in jest. "*She goes away, becomes a werewolf or some shit, kills a bunch of innocents and feeds their entrails piled high on plates like steaming hot bloated spaghetti pasta to her werewolf family on Our Lord's blessed birthday in a jolly frickin' feast, man.*"

"Zach," I remember telling him as we shared a joint, "I wouldn't put that past her. But she becomes a *creature* nearly *every other night*....."

(cont.....)

