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Last Winter in Eden

by Marsh Haris

Every now and then I cannot help but lie back and let my mind take flight, over that span of time the calendar calls a year, but which my heart knows to be only a moment. My thoughts, like gently drifting moon birds, soar away, only to alight high upon a mountain-top, in the very core of a black, frozen night.

I am transported to a small ski lodge in New England. It is past the hour of midnight and all the excitement and motion of day have vanished. Outside, the moon does not cast faded purple shadows across the dunes of snow, nor do the tall evergreens stand like Christmas decorations, weighty with their glittering burden. Instead, save for that small, illuminated area about the windows, there is a thick blackness everywhere. The air is unbelievably cold, and the wind breathes deeply. It will snow again.

Inside the large, rustic lobby there are but two sounds: the brittle, industrious noise of the immense fireplace, and the occasional puffing of my pipe. The other guests have taken to their rooms for sleep, leaving me alone with the fire and the quiet. I have such a clear image of myself, slumped at one end of the couch, with my stockinged feet upon an ottoman, making ridiculous silhouettes against the yellow flames. I lean back and let my eyes play above me among the rough-hewn beams. Perhaps, I think to myself, perhaps tomorrow I shall leave.

Then quite suddenly, without being aware of a presence, I found myself staring up into a broad, sturdy face with gently waving black hair. He was tall, this almost smiling figure, with the most extraordinary, *luminous* eyes I had ever seen. Without a word, he walked around my outstretched legs and sank into the couch a cushion away from me. The faintly broken silence returned again.

At length, however, I got to hear his voice. It was soft, and mellow, and of a surprising gentleness. «There is nothing,» he said, with his unusually large hands lying across his stomach, «nothing on earth like a fireplace to make you happy and contented.»

My head turned slightly until I could just see his face. «Are you happy? Are you contented?» Perhaps they were not the proper words to begin conversation with a total stranger.

His very strong mouth smiled, though his eyes did not. «No, but the fireplace helps. As a matter of fact I'm really very unhappy.»

No, I thought to myself, no—how very wrong it is for such a magnificent animal to be unhappy, to be anything but ecstatically happy. Just as it is wrong to put fences around wild stallions, or to put eagles in cages. «That's hard to believe. You disguise it very well. Besides, I don't think I've ever met an unhappy person at a ski lodge before.»

«Ah, how interesting,» he said, still smiling. «Now you can go home and tell your friends, 'At last I have met an unhappy person at a ski lodge.' Are *you* unhappy?»

«Not really, Just bored, I think.»

«Oh, I'm sorry. I'm afraid I do that to people.»

«No, no, I didn't mean it that way! I meant my life in general. It's

rather like a single note in my ear, monotonous and unchanging. But let us not talk about me. No one is more boring than a person who is bored. You know, if this were a melodrama I would sooner or later have to ask you if you have come here to run away, to hide from whatever it is that makes you unhappy.»

He had an unlit cigarette in his mouth and seemed to be searching vainly in his jacket pockets. Quickly I produced a pack of matches, struck one, then offered it to him. His broad shoulders bent closer to me and those amazing, massive hands caressed my own for a brief moment.

«Thank you,» he said, disgorging the smoke into the dryness of the room. «If that is the case then I'm unaware of it, although a psychiatrist might want to disagree. No, mine is the sort of unhappiness you can't really run from, I'm afraid.»

«Is it too complicated, or is there anything anyone can do?»

«I know that's mere curiosity, and yet you almost make it sound like an offer to help.»

«Come to think of it. I suppose it was curiosity. Human beings aren't quite that sympathetic, are they? But I would help if I could. If it were possible.»

«Oh, this is bad,» he said in mock seriousness. «I have known you no more than five minutes and already I have discovered a weakness. You're too innocent, too gullible. It hasn't even occurred to you that I might be a con man, or some such. I might be sitting here playing on your sympathy, with some foul plot in mind.»

I didn't look at him when I answered. «Are you?»

«No,» he said quietly, «no, I'm not. No foul plots whatever.»

«Then perhaps I *can* help.»

«I don't know; perhaps you can. But then you see, I would not ask.»

«Little things mean a lot, you know. At least I'm someone to talk with. Or of course you might prefer I leave. It is rather late; I should be getting to bed.»

«No, no, please,» he said all of a sudden, grabbing my arm with his big hand. «No, it's very nice of you to sit here and talk with me—and about me. Not everyone would do that. Nor would I want just anyone to do it. Please stay.»

«You said a moment ago that you wouldn't ask for help. I wish you would. Otherwise I don't know what to do for you.»

«And what could you do? Lend me money? Give me advice? Offer sympathy?»

«Whatever your problem is, I think it's made you somewhat bitter.»

He seemed a trifle amused at this. «You're very frank. It isn't everyone would be so candid with a perfect stranger.»

«Correction: We are none of us perfect. But we could at least introduce ourselves. I'm Erik Bergman.»

«Well that at least accounts for your very blond hair. And perhaps also the fact that you're at a ski lodge. I'm Bob. It is enough that you call me Bob.»

«Bob,» I repeated, feeling the small word contract my lips. «Somehow you deserve better than that. I'd have expected something large and powerful, like perhaps Maximilian. You're the kind who has no trouble

carrying such names as Charlemagne, Prometheus, Alexander, Goliath, Samson.»

«What a remarkable imagination you have. Actually it is we Samsons who always get such names as Timothy Lovelace, or Percival Throckmorton. And so I am Bob. After all, when my mother named me I was no Samson. However, be that as it may your frankness still surprises me. I like it; it's refreshing. Are you always so open and straight-forward with everyone?»

«Oh no. Very rarely, as a matter of fact. The truth is, it's you, I think; you can blame yourself. Somehow I don't feel I have to be diplomatic with you. I'm relaxed and at ease.»

«It's the fireplace again. There's no resisting the spell of a fireplace.»

«I believe you're right, in an odd sort of way. Yes, I'm afraid I am under a kind of spell.»

Now where had my frankness gone? I could not tell him that *his* was the spell I was under, that his firm, outstretched thighs, his great hands, his devastating face, his dark wavy hair, his broad, quietly rising and falling shoulders, his gentleness, his phosphorous eyes, indeed, his entire being had mercilessly laid siege to all my emotions, and all my passions. I could not tell him that he was causing such a pain, such an awful desire as my poor mind and body could scarce endure. All this, while the best I could do was sit so near him and talk of *his* unhappiness.

For a time we fell to silence, almost in pace with the dying fire. Then a thought came to me.

«I have not seen you before this evening. Will you be here long?»

«I only arrived this afternoon, while most everyone was out on the slopes. I don't know how long I'll stay. Three days at least, possibly a week. How about you?»

«I had thought of leaving tomorrow. I've been here almost a week myself.»

«Leave tomorrow?» he said, suddenly turning to me. «Oh I wish you wouldn't. You're the only one I know here.»

«But then you make friends so quickly. And I happen to know there are a number of unattached, single girls here who aren't at all bad looking.»

«Oh very good,» he said pleasantly. «Naturally that's the main reason I came.»

«It's late,» I sighed, hurt by his last remark. «I think I'll be getting on up to bed.»

«I'll walk with you.»

We got up and slowly ascended the stairs. I turned to the right, he to the left.

«Mine's down this way at the end of the hall,» I told him. «Goodnight; I enjoyed talking with you.»

«Goodnight, and thank you for listening so patiently. I hope you don't leave tomorrow.»

He turned, and I stood and watched his sensuous stride until he had disappeared through his door.

Long I lay beneath the weight of the hand-made quilts of my bed before sleep would come. One image pressed upon my senses, one god-

thing I wanted more than anything else in all the world. Lying on my side, I let my hand extend slowly across the sheet to the vacant spot beside me. Those strong, firm shoulders could be there, the full, warm chest could be there, that head of soft, raven hair could press upon that pillow. I could enfold my body about his . . . Dear God, I could know a happiness beyond imagination!

But at great length sleep did come. When at last I awoke it was late. Breakfast had been taken and the lobby was teeming with skiers preparing to go out and try the new snow that had fallen during the night. After having my usual panacean cup of coffee, I had just begun to wonder about getting into my own gear when I suddenly became aware of Bob's electrifying presence, and saw that he had entered at the far end of the room. He was wearing a bright red turtleneck sweater, and his black trousers hugged disturbingly about his hips. I watched him excitedly, hoping he wouldn't look my way, at least not for a while. Then on an impulse I turned to a near-by guest with whom I was casually acquainted.

«Tell me, do you happen to know that man?»

«No, but I know of him. The keeper and I were talking about him earlier. Why?»

«Nothing really. I just have the feeling I've seen him somewhere before.»

«Oh? Came in yesterday afternoon. Seems to me his name's Robert Mitchell, or something. You know the type, doesn't ski very well, sits around looking unbelievably masculine, as though someone lifted him right out of a cigarette commercial on TV, then puts the blast on all the young women. Do you think you know him?»

«No,» I told him, without taking my eyes off the figure across the room. «No, I'm sure I don't know him now. Not now.»

«Matter of fact, I heard a strange thing about him.»

«Strange? What d'you mean?»

«Someone told me he's supposed to be dying. One of those 'six months to live' deals. I don't blame him for coming up here and preying on all the women. I would too if that's all the time I had to live.»

Slack-jawed with shock, I turned again to where Bob had been standing, but he was no longer there. I quickly excused myself and rushed up the stairs and into my room where I fell across the bed and closed my eyes.

As they say in detective stories, the pieces now began to fit together. Now I knew his problem, the reason for his unhappiness, and why he couldn't run away from it. And it might also account for both his bitterness and his gentle nature. He had said so many things, and I had so wrongly construed them all. I had merely talked myself into the problem I wanted him to have. («He is lonely, looking for someone. He needs someone to love him.») And all the while I had been firing in the wrong direction; here he was feeling out the entire place for whatever woman he could latch onto, to sneak her into his room and . . .

My pain and anger were suddenly split asunder by a quick, sharp rap on the door. For a moment I said nothing, then called for whoever it was to come in. The door opened slowly and I saw him standing there, as glorious as ever. And yet somehow I didn't want to see him.

«Good morning,» he said in his very friendly manner. «May I come in?»

«Yes . . . yes, by all means. You surprised me.»

«I couldn't find you downstairs, so I got the keeper to tell me which room you were in.» He stretched his great frame out in a chair across from me. «Aren't you going out?»

« . . . no, I don't think so. You see . . . I'll be leaving this afternoon. I thought I'd stay in and pack.»

«Oh,» he said, seeming to be visibly sad. «I had hoped you'd have changed your mind.»

«I did. But then I changed it again. Or more accurately, it was changed for me. I'm afraid I . . . have no further reason to stay.»

«Are you a good skier?» he asked, seeming to change the subject deliberately.

«Not bad. Why?»

«Because I'm not, I guess. Not good at all. But I have a chance to learn a little this time. I met a woman this morning who has offered to give me a few pointers.»

«I see. Was she blond?»

«Yes, I suppose she was. I'm partial to blonds. You know her?»

«I know of her,» I told him, getting that odd feeling as though I had been through the conversation before. «She's . . . quite a dish, as they say. Just your type.»

A burst of laughter suddenly filled the room. «Do you really think that?»

«I would say so, yes.»

«You're very amusing. Really, I'm so sorry you're leaving.»

«Well I must. As a matter of fact, I don't have much time left. You'll forgive me if I get on with my packing.»

«Is that a polite way of asking me to leave?»

« . . . I'm going to be very busy . . . »

«Fine!» he snapped, jumping up and going to the door. «It's my pleasure.» Then he paused for a second longer. «Amazing, isn't it.»

«What's that?»

«Just what a difference a fireplace can make.» In the next instant the door had slammed behind him.

In the moments that followed I felt as though my poor heart would break. I collapsed on the side of my bed and fought with all that was in me to keep from bursting into violent, uncontrollable tears. My eyes burnt with all the coals of hell, and my throat locked painfully. Oh if I had only stayed at home and never come to this accursed place! If I had never looked up into that heavenly face. If I could cease to exist, to simply be no more.

After the better part of an hour had passed and I had finished packing. I left my room and went in search of the keeper in order to check out.

«But so suddenly, Mr. Bergman? Is there anything wrong?»

«Not with your accommodations, not at all. I simply must leave, that's all.»

«Very well, but we certainly hate to see you go.»

He began to reach for the necessary papers when a man suddenly appeared at the desk, not Bob, but so like him in general appearance that for a moment I thought it was he. There was the same height, same build and complexion, and yet after closer inspection I found him somewhat coarse and rough.

«Hey,» he interrupted, «my group is waiting for me. Could you keep my watch for me? I think the strap's about to break and I'm afraid I'll lose it.»

«Yes, of course, Mr. Mitchell. Have a good time!»

Quickly, the man surrendered the watch and ran off to rejoin his group.

«Mitchell, did you say? Is that his name?»

«Oh, you've heard about him. Talk of the whole place, it seems. Yes, Robert Mitchell. No relation to the other Robert Mitchell we have staying here, though. Funny thing, too. They could almost be brothers.»

«Which . . . which is the one who is supposed to be sick?»

«Oh, this one. He may be sick, but he's having himself a ball, though. Fancies himself quite the ladies man. Well, let's see . . . you checked in last Wednesday . . .»

«Uh . . . on second thought forget that for the time being. I'm going to be here for a *little* bit longer.»

«I don't understand.»

«Yes, but suddenly I *do*!»

Before he could say anything else I had all but run through the lobby and out the front door. Almost in a panic I searched the crowd for the handsome man in the red sweater. After no luck the first time, I scanned it desperately again, then raced back through the lobby and up the stairs. When I reached the top, my eyes shot down the corridor to the door I saw him enter the night before.

Panting, I stood before the door for a few nervous seconds, then knocked three times.

The door opened almost immediately and his face soured when he saw me. The bright red sweater had been replaced by a white shirt, open at the neck with sleeves rolled high over brawny arms.

«What do you want?»

«I'm . . . please, . . . let me come in. Please let me talk to you.»

«What about?»

«Please, I cannot leave without explaining . . .»

«All right. Come in.»

The door was closed behind me and I quickly sat down. He stood in the centre of the room lighting a cigarette.

I took a deep breath and tried to begin. My eyes were moist now, and my voice unstable. As I stumbled through the account of the mistaken identity, I watched his face turn from disinterest to amazement, and I felt that had I myself not been so distraught he would surely have laughed at the absurdity of it all.

«Now,» I went on, «what I'm going to say will most likely revolt and disgust you. But I am going to say it, even if it means being bodily thrown out. When . . . you sat down beside me last night on the couch I felt I had never seen a more beautiful creature in all my life. As we talked

before the fire, as your hand touched mine when I lit your cigarette, I wanted you as man has never wanted man. Every fibre of my body, my very soul itself, so ached that I thought I could not go on breathing. I returned to my room and lay for hours imagining you there beside me. My mind undressed you and put you there, and I let my craving fingers touch the smooth, vacant sheets. I loved you then, as I do now, with a love that words cannot tell. But please, please try to understand. There are such men as myself. We have no desire for women, but love our own kind. It's not a bad thing, no matter how different it may be from your way; it's a good thing, a lovely, many-splendoured thing. You may not be interested . . . but you cannot be offended by someone loving you. Now you understand . . . and now I'll go.»

He had sat with his eyes trained steadily on me as I made my difficult confession. He had made no sound, no motion, and indeed it seemed as if he had not so much as batted an eye. Then as I began to get up I noticed his hands tighten and his head drop. He muttered something which I didn't understand until he had repeated it.

«My God. Oh my God.» His head lifted, and I saw those incredible, crystalline eyes, pained and bewildered. «You could kill me with words alone,» he murmured as he came toward me.

In an instant I had been gathered up by his long, powerful arms and was being pressed almost violently to his warm, heaving chest. «What can I say to you?» he whispered into my ear. «Oh couldn't you see? Wasn't I obvious enough? And all the time I thought I was the one being rejected.» He pulled away just enough to look into my face. One large hand came up and brushed back a strand of hair that had fallen onto my forehead. «I love you, Erik. To the very bounds of endurance, I tell you I love you.» Then he whispered the words over and over to me, their very sound caressing me as did the man himself. «I love you, Oh how I love you, Erik!»

*

And then my lovely, winged thoughts come home. It is no longer necessary to imagine, to see as in a dream, for I have only to open my eyes and gaze upon the real thing . . . or extend my hand across the bed, and find that heaven itself is within my reach.

GREEK EPIGRAM

O say, and again repeat, fair, fair — and still I will say it —
How fair, my friend, and good to see, thou art;
On pine or oak or wall thy name I do not blazon —
Love has too deeply graved it in my heart.