

# The Speed Christmas

by Linda Griffiths

*Une actrice en quête d'aventures, fait la rencontre d'un étranger dans un bar. Après une nuit passée à boire, à prendre de la drogue et à faire l'amour, cet étranger fait une remarque qui réveille en elle les insécurités de son enfance et ébranle sa confiance en soi.*

I wasn't going to go home that night. I wasn't going to be alone and I wasn't going to go home. I realize now it was a habit of his, picking up women like me in clubs and bars, not women like me exactly because I don't think he was used to first timers. Not that I'm a virgin or anything, I've had my share of lovers. Several, several lovers, but I'd never gone home from a bar with an almost complete stranger before. I am an actress, I like to see the whites of their eyes. I realized later, his very tangible charm had been honed to perfection on just this street, in just these clubs. The hip party strip of our city. The only one in town. We found each other in seconds, in that electrical current fashion that happens on such nights. I drank and smoked drugs till I couldn't stand, leading on some poor stoop-shouldered fool who did me the indignity of thinking I would go to bed with him. There was no question who I was going home with. I have said, in an attempt to be shocking, that I would have gone home with an elephant that night, but not true, I would only have gone home with a writer.

It was like we pulled an elastic between us, the thick white kind that goes around white cotton underwear. We spoke and drifted apart, stretching the elastic to its limit, then pulled it hand over hand so it became inches long. I was shameless, I didn't care. I danced with whoever asked me, making sure he was watching. I danced like an abandoned gypsy with no home, no family, no friends. I displayed myself

before him, hoping he would see I had some sense of rhythm.

The gypsy lost him at some point, and thinking he had deserted her, staggered outside to sit on the steps outside the bar. I sat in my black coat and red tam, crying. He found me there, sitting in the December cold, snuffling into my mittens. He had been looking for me, which was what I wanted. I wanted to be found, like a kitten or a puppy. He looked down at me and said, "You look great in that hat, if I hadn't found you, I would have gone after the girl in the red hat." I thought, "any girl in a red hat?" But that didn't matter, he saw my tears and that didn't matter. What mattered is that he had appeared to save the night. When he saw I could barely walk, he said, "I think it's jammies time, we can just get on our jammies and go to sleep." That was good of him, it didn't matter if it was true or not, it didn't matter. He put his arms around me and helped me up the street. I thought, "he's mine because his arms are around me, because he's kind and smart and seems to understand." I didn't question his obvious experience at taking sodden and sniffling women home from bars and knowing just what to say. I trusted him with my life.

His apartment was a man's apartment who lives alone. Large and dirty and bare. I acted like I was used to such apartments. There was a concave bed, with what he told me were clean sheets. There was his bathrobe, which I wore, there was his body in bed, undemanding but ready. We made love in a quiet kind of way, part cuddling and part sex. At least that's how it felt to me, with them it's hard to tell.

I woke up to high ceilings, tall windows, lots of books, and him. It didn't look so bad. I knew one thing, I wasn't going home yet. I didn't know what the proceedings of such evenings were, but I

wasn't going to give up easy. I wanted some kind of adventure, if it was a little shoddy, that was fine. Then he said something which was both exciting and insulting and told me exactly where I stood. He said, "Don't read any of the papers in the front room, I'm sorry, but that's my rule." He was saying, "When I bring strange women up to my apartment and sleep with them, there are some liberties they are not allowed to take. They do not wander around in my bathrobe and read my novel." I was 'they', not me. I had finally done it. I was a fluffy. I was being treated like a fluffy and that made me happy. Fluffies seem to have an easier time of it.

Then there was a knock on the door. From the fear on his face, I concluded that there was a girlfriend or a somebody. We were hiding out. That was fine too, at least he didn't live with her, it was okay to be secret. He snuck downstairs to see if it was her. But it wasn't her. It was Bob, his friend who made furniture. Pretty soon we were all in the kitchen, drinking coffee and cheap brandy and having a whale of a time. This was home turf for me. I'd hung out in a lot of kitchens with a lot of men. I was wearing my white silk shirt and black jeans, sitting in a strange kitchen with strange men. I could hardly contain my joy. The apartment expanded, became elegant, it began to remind me of the French city I was from, it was a little bit exotic.

They were speaking of drinking. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon. His birthday was soon, Christmas was soon, I began rehearsals soon, there were reasons to give up and celebrate. I decided to go drinking with these men as long as they would have me. They spoke of being broke, but that didn't matter, I would pay for it. The next thing I knew we were in a perfect jazz bar across the street, drinking tequila with beer chasers.

Then his girlfriend walked in the door, the sunlight streaming behind her into the dark drinking hole. She was dark, with one of those plump, pretty faces, and she held a blond little girl by the hand. His daughter.

I immediately tried to pretend I was with Bob, the friend who made furniture. I leaned across the table, smiling at him, but I don't think she was fooled. She stood at the table, tied by the child, yet justified by the child. I knew that if she sat down at the table and had a beer with us, everything would have been diffused. That was all she had to do. I felt like saying, "You want a way out of this one? Just sit down,

that did it, I could see Bob starting to slow down and I didn't know if the party would continue without him. Sometimes the third wheel is the only wheel if things are tense and uncertain. I had to act soon or lose everything. I had something up my sleeve that I had been saving for a moment like this. I needed to change things, to up the ante. I looked the writer dead in the eye, and said, "I have some speed." His eyes narrowed, "You what?" I replied with a flourish, "Speed, I have some speed." "How much?" he asked quietly. "Eight or ten little pills." "What kind?, he whispered. I could see I had him. "I don't know, but it's speed."

oh boy, a man with a mind."

He didn't think much of actors or acting, but I was untouchable. What did I care what he thought of me or my profession? I'd gotten him to my house, hadn't I? He was lying stretched out on my bed, wasn't he? This actress had gotten his eyes as clouded as the snow falling outside, she watched him falling with the touch of every flake, she watched him drifting as the wind-swept banks of glistening powder against houses and walkways. He felt nothing, as he launched on lengthy attacks against the theatre, all he knew was that I was surprisingly self confident in the face of his disapproval.



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order yourself a drink, the kid can have an orange juice, and by the time you're finished, I'll be gone." But instead she stood there, smiling and disapproving, the child guarding her like a sentry. She didn't know how to take the electricity out of something by being excessively normal. She wanted to be right. I can understand that. So she left with the little girl and I went to the bank.

We visited upstairs bars and downstairs bars. We went to a big bar that looked like a church basement, we went to a black bar where everybody was really dressed up, we went to a long wooden bar with perfect leather stools. We drank tequila and whiskey and beer. It's hard to say if the spell started with the booze or with the snowstorm, maybe it started the night before, it's hard to tell. All I know is that as the snowstorm was building and the drink was filling us up, the spell began to take shape. You could call it a spell of binding, or a love spell, but there were no charms, you can't work these things from nothing. But sometimes, with the right electricity, some thinly disguised desperation and a good snowstorm, something can happen. There was Christmas too, there was always Christmas.

We stumbled from place to place, knee deep in soft snow, the kind with big flakes and sparkles. Finally we made our way to the market, and wolfed down Jamaican chicken and rice. I think it was the food

Bob went home and we went to my place.

We are in my room. My room that is the kind of room you can spend your life in. My room with the alcove for the bed, the bay window and the fireplace. He is lying on the bed, having just downed two or three pills. I am kneeling by his side, looking down into his eyes. He's trying to tell me he's taken. Everyone knows what 'taken' means. It used to mean a ring, then it meant a ring again, now it only means a ring to some people. Well, he was in my bed, and I didn't see a ring. "You don't feel like you're taken," I said, letting the spell spread slowly, like soft hands. "Maybe you're not taken."

Suddenly the speed hit us both, right along the jaw line, and we started talking. There seemed to be no end to the talking, to the possibility of more talking. His suspicion of everything was enticing. I got the feeling he didn't talk to many people about writerly things, or political things, or scary subjects of any kind. Certainly not to many females. He liked stories, though, especially stories of past revenge. He would praise me like a child if I said something he thought was insightful or cruel, and I already began to look for the thoughts that would elicit his praise. I liked surprising him. Meanwhile, inside I was singing, "Oh boy, a man with a mind, oh boy a man with a mind. He doesn't know me and I don't know him,

He was like a detective, searching for my credentials, he wanted something proven, but I've never been sure if it was validity he wanted, or just to make sure I was a nice safe fluff. He didn't seem to be feeling very safe. I gazed into his eyes, full of vivacity and speed. He looked back, and suddenly said, "You're the real thing, aren't you? You are. What if you're the real thing?"

I thought of several answers, my favourite being, "That's right, honey, I'm the real thing and you better believe it." But that was too harsh for this kind of spell, besides, I didn't think I could pull it off. Instead I curled against him in my kittenish way, willing him to love me. Under my transparent wiles, I was bleeding and desperate, it was only because of the snow that he didn't smell the fear. The question cut deep, deeper than he knew. I had felt real for a long time, real by virtue of hard work. Yet there had been a time when I had been haunted by that question. I was still haunted.

The truth was, that question hit me like an ice pick through the throat.

I was twelve years old, playing in my girlfriend's back yard, running back and forth under their garden sprinkler. I was conscious of her older brother, sulkily watching us from the fence. I knew what I looked like. I had stood naked before my parents bedroom mirror only that morning, taking stock. My legs seemed good,

my hair hung long and straight down my back, my stomach was flat, my buttocks a little wide, but acceptable. My mother thought I would suffer from the size of my breasts, but then her mind was filled with Lana Turner, and mine with Twiggy, so I thought they were all right. I had not entirely forgotten the image in the mirror as we raced around the backyard like children. I was laughing loudly, leaping through the jets of water like a ballerina, proud to be wearing my mother's bathing suit with the padded bra, squealing and laughing, and yes, almost certainly, acting a bit. Her brother got me as I landed with a shout, my arms above my head, my whole body gasping and glowing as in the very crests and peaks of imagined sex. He slouched over to me, curled his fuzzy lip, and snarled, "Are you for real?"

I stood dead still. The sprinkler lost its power and turned to five tiny spikes of dribbling water. The ground under my feet seemed soggy, I saw worms curling at my toes, the skin on my elbows felt old and slack. If he had raped me or beaten me, burnt a cross on our lawn, made my mother cry and get another headache, if he

had thrown lighted candles through my window, ripped a rusty nail along my eyeball...then I could have stood my ground. But he had exposed my darkest secret, one that I had hoped to hide for my whole life, or run from to the darkest corner of the globe. I lied. I lied with my voice, my body, my emotions. Not even my laughter was real. All false, all phony, not real, not even for real. I felt my lies as I faced him. The rubber padding at my breasts stuck out oddly and smelt moldy, the hair on my legs was only shaved in front, so the back of me was like the pelt of an animal. I lied with open mouth, with my jutting pubic bone, with the spread of my arms and legs in the air. I lied walking down the street, I lied in school, I lied to my friends. I lied with my smell my skin my breath, I lied while sleeping. You could call it pretending. When you're a child they call it pretending, adults often enjoy the strange and exotic airs of such a little girl. But later it comes to be something else. Phony baloney. And, worst of all, if this pimpled sloucher could see it, everyone could see it. They all knew I was truly a worthless being.

It was the shattering of a very ordinary thing. It usually happens around twelve when the hair grows freely on a young girl's legs and she wanders the fields reading Byron. It's a thing that gets shattered and never comes back again. No. Not true. For the pieces have joined together time and time again, rallying in spite of themselves, rallying for no good reason, brave for no good reason. Loyal to a worthless twelve year old girl, a liar who flies through the sprinklered air.

Ever after, when arms and legs spread outward in moments of real or false abandon, a pimpled face appears with squinting eyes, and asks me whether or not I am real.

The Speed Christmas is part of a novel-in-progress, *Virtue or Death*. Linda Griffiths's published works include five plays: *Maggie and Pierre*, *O.D. on Paradise*, *Jessica*, *The Darling Family* (to be released as a feature film in 1994), and *A Game of Inches*, as well as a prose piece co-authored with Maria Campbell, *The Book of Jessica*.



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