

Landmark Days

by Patricia Watson

Une femme divorce après seize ans de mariage. Elle raconte comment elle passe son premier Noël en célibataire et comment, avec le soutien de ses amies, elle célèbre la journée officielle de son divorce en en faisant le commencement de sa nouvelle vie.

Fran found it in a pile of mail, sandwiched between her Visa bill and a notice for an upcoming cosmetics sale. An envelope marked Elizabeth Stoddart, Barrister and Solicitor. Inside was a six-page, double-spaced document stating that Brian's petition for divorce had been heard and granted. The terms of their separation agreement would continue to be binding; either was free to remarry one month from the date of the hearing. Which, Fran noticed, had taken place on January the 6th.

It was now January the twenty-eighth.

I've been divorced for three weeks without knowing it, she thought. What had she been doing the morning of January the 6th? Sixteen years of her life had been undone, surely she must have felt something. She glanced at the calendar. The 6th was a Friday, a workday. She had probably been sitting at her desk drinking coffee. Or on her way to the bank to deposit her paycheque. Indecent. But no, that wasn't the word. Perhaps there wasn't a word for what she was feeling. It was like the day she found out Uncle Will had died while she was out of town. He'd been dead and buried for six weeks by the time she heard about it. No one had thought to write, no one had expected her to be so upset. It wasn't just that Uncle Will had died—he had taken his memories with him, his memories of her as a girl. No one else had known her in quite that way.

Well, Brian would be free to marry Carol in nine days.

She picked up the phone and dialed her neighbour's number. Ruth, the person she turned to at moments like this.

*Sixteen years of her life
had been undone,
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felt something. Perhaps
there wasn't a word
for what she was feeling.*

"Gail's here," Ruth told her. "We'll be right over."

Minutes later they stood in Fran's front hall, stamping snow from their boots.

Ruth looked at Fran, like a doctor looking for symptoms. "I know exactly how you feel."

"You can't know how I feel," Fran said. "I don't know how I feel."

"You're going to be fine," Ruth said. "Just fine. I'll throw a party to celebrate."

"Celebrate?" Fran said. "Oh I'm not up to that."

"Not your divorce, silly. The beginning of your new life."

"I would never have thought of it that way," Gail said. Gail was the youngest of the three; her husband Richard was still with her. "I'll put the kettle on," Ruth said. "What do you want, coffee or tea?"

"Whatever you like." Fran sank down on the chesterfield, aware that Gail was watching her. Blonde beautiful Gail. As resolutely slender and fit as Ruth was unapologetically plump and comfortable. "I can't imagine what you're feeling," Gail said finally.

"That's okay. There's no reason why you should."

The three women had been neighbours for almost twenty years. They had moved onto the street while it was still a slum, drawn by low prices, the potential charm of their Victorian houses, and the park across the way. They had raised their children together, trading toys and baby clothes, organizing block picnics, New Year's Eve parties. All the advantages of the suburbs right downtown, Brian used to joke. But as the children grew, and the women went back to school or work, the husbands began to leave, even though the neighbourhood was now one of the most fashionable in town and the houses were worth a fortune.

Ruth came back into the room with three cups, a jug of milk and a teapot. "We'll celebrate the day the decree becomes absolute. It's one of those landmark days."

"That's what you said about Christmas," Fran smiled.

"Did I?"

"You did."

* * *

"Christmas is one of those landmark days," Ruth had warned her after Brian left. "It's like the day you divide up the furniture or the day you sign the separation agreement. The day your divorce comes through."

They were in Gail's living room, sitting in front of the fire.

"Talk to any divorced woman," Ruth continued, "and she will tell you the story of her first Christmas alone."

Ruth had been on her own for nearly three years so she knew. "I'm dreading mine," Fran said.

"You'll be all right," Ruth said. "But it's important to be prepared, it really is."

Gail looked from one to the other. "I'll be back in a minute, I promised Amy I'd tuck her in."

"Our conversation is making her nervous," Fran said.

She caught a glimpse of their reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. Two attractive women in their prime anyone would think, relaxing together without a care in the world.

"What have you planned for Christmas day?"

"I'm spending my first Christmas alone with my mother, my children, and Lucy." Fran said.

"Lucy? That's nice."

Lucy was Brian's daughter from his first marriage. She had spent Christmases with them for the past seventeen years.

"The children will have dinner with me on Christmas Day and again on Boxing Day with Brian and Carol."

"That sounds sensible," Ruth said. "Just make sure you buy yourself something for under the tree. You don't need Brian to buy you gifts, you know."

Fran had bought herself a book of paintings and a bottle of her favourite perfume. She bought the children what they told her they wanted plus a few little surprises. A black t-shirt for Sam, a tape of old Bob Dylan favourites for Katy, silver earrings and a silk batik scarf for Lucy. A sweater for her mother. When she got home, she hid them under her bed, then phoned her mother to discuss Christmas dinner.

"I'd like to cook a goose for a change but I'm not sure the kids would like it."

"Christmas is not the time for changes," her mother told her. "Have what you usually have. Would you like me to stuff the turkey?"

"I'd love it."

Brian had always done that Christmas morning. Dressed in his blue and white striped chef's apron, the radio tuned to his favourite FM station, filling the house with Christmas music while he peeled the chestnuts and sautéed the sausage meat.

Fran tried not to think about that.

"I'll make the kind I always make," her mother said. "Sage and onion, if that's all right."

"Wonderful."

"Have you got your tree?"

The tree. How was she going to manage the tree? Every year on Christmas Eve Brian drove to the corner and bought the biggest tree he could find. Which was invariably too big, so when he got it home he had to trim a foot or two from the

bottom using the rusty old handsaw that hung at the bottom of the stairs. Next he filled an old tin pail with coal, then he and Sam maneuvered the tree into the pail while Fran and the girls watched.

"Is it straight?" Brian would ask, rattled.

In the space intended for her date of birth, Brian had written the date of Helen's birth. He had written Helen's family name instead of hers.

"Not quite," she would tell him. "A little to the right. I mean, the left."

"Say what you mean."

Proud to be of service, Sam would hold the tree in place while Brian looped a rope around its trunk and fastened it to the door frame. It was exacting work, arduous work. Men's work. It took about an hour.

"There, how's that?" Brian would ask.

Invariably they would all agree it was the nicest tree they'd ever had. Pleased, Brian would pour himself a brandy and sit down in his chair to watch while the children helped Fran decorate the tree. Women's work.

Well, now she and the children would have to do both.

A few days before Christmas she asked Sam to go to the corner with her to get the tree; she didn't want to wait till the last minute. And she slipped a measuring tape in her purse, so she wouldn't have to trim any from the bottom. She chose an eight-foot spruce and Sam dragged it home, its branches trailing in the snow. Inside he leaned it against the living room wall while she went down to the basement to get the pail.

That was when she noticed the Christmas tree stand. Heavy iron in the shape of

a cross with a small container in the centre. Where had that come from? Then she remembered. It had come attached to the tree Brian had bought one Christmas Eve at eleven o'clock. Why did we never use it again? she wondered, carrying it upstairs.

Lucy and Katy, who had been sorting their favourite Christmas decorations into handy piles, paused to help Sam lift the tree into the container. Sam gripped it firmly while Fran tightened three large screws designed to hold the tree in place. It stood upright without any further adjustment. The whole thing took maybe five minutes.

They all laughed in amazement.

"I don't believe it!" Lucy said.

"What was that all about? All that stuff with the coal and the ropes and the..." Sam said.

"Don't ask me." Katy shrugged.

All three turned and looked at Fran, as if she alone could explain it.

"It's probably the way his father did it," Fran said. "That's the way my father did it."

Christmas morning Fran had allowed the kids to open their stockings as soon as they were awake but made them wait until everyone was downstairs before they unwrapped their gifts.

Her mother was pleased with the sweater. "Oh Frances, you shouldn't have."

Katy opened her presents eagerly but nothing seemed to please her. Not even the Bob Dylan tape.

"You can change it for something else if you like Katy," Fran said.

"It's not that. This just isn't my favourite Christmas." She glanced out the window. "Not enough snow, I guess."

Fran looked at Lucy. Lucy had told her that when she was Katy's age she used to wish her Mum and Brian would get back together for Christmas—that was the present she wanted. One of the nicest Christmases Fran could remember was the year Lucy wrote her saying that she had come to accept their marriage, hers and Brian's, and her own place in it. Well, now Lucy would have to adjust to another marriage, to the confusion of having three families.

Sam pulled on his new black t-shirt. His dark hair curled down over his shoulders, on his upper lip the beginnings of a black

mustache. Fran was reminded of a photograph of her father as a young man. Katy's hair was dark too, but she had Brian's features; she was a younger version of Lucy.

"Your present isn't under the tree. I'll bring it down," Sam told Fran and ran upstairs to his room.

"Do you know what it is?" her mother asked Katy.

"Uh, uh," Katy said with a smile.

Sam brought down a rubber plant, the sturdy squat variety meant to withstand just about anything. He had tied a big red ribbon around it.

"It's lovely, Sam!"

"It will bloom in the spring," he explained proudly.

Fran gave him a hug. "That was very thoughtful of you. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I thought you'd like it."

He watched, pleased, as she put it in the bay window to catch the light, then informed her innocently, "I bought two Birds of Paradise for Dad and Carol. If it's all right with you, I'll take them over now."

Birds of Paradise! The most beautiful, the most exotic of all flowers. The most erotic of all flowers. Fran pictured two long-stemmed birdlike blossoms seemingly poised for flight. Birds of Paradise for them, she thought, a rubber plant for me.

"No, it's not all right!"

"Mum, why not?"

"Because you're supposed to spend Christmas day with me, Boxing day with your father. That's why." She paused to lower her voice then added, "You can take the flowers to them tomorrow."

"Frances..." her mother cautioned.

"But Mum," Sam pleaded. "They won't be as nice tomorrow."

"Then you should have bought them something more sensible," she said evenly, "Like a rubber plant."

Sam was hurt.

"I'll make some tea," Lucy said, quietly gathering up her presents.

"Mum," Katy said. "You're being mean."

Mean and ridiculous, Fran thought miserably.

"Frances, let the boy go."

"Oh all right," she said. "You can go if you promise to be back by three."

"Thanks Mum."

Sam ran back upstairs for the flowers, then pulled on his boots and coat and hurried out into the snow.

Fran watched him go, aware that the others were watching her. For one awful moment, she thought she was going to cry. On Christmas morning, in front of everybody.

"When Brian and I had been together for three years, I figured Helen still had thirteen years of seniority on me."

"I'll be down in a minute," she said, and climbed the stairs.

In her room she lay back on the bed and looked around. This room was one of the few dependable comforts in her life. For months after Brian left, she'd gone on sleeping in their bed, their room. Brian could walk back in anytime, that room seemed to say, nothing irreversible has happened. Until the night she dismantled the bed and dragged it across the hall into the spare room. "Mum, what is it?" Katy mumbled, half asleep. "What's going on?" Sam demanded, sounding just like Brian. "Go back to bed," she told them and angled the bed to face the park.

The next day she searched the stores for new sheets. Her sheets. White and frilly with eyelet trim. That night she lay between them thinking, Brian's never seen this room, not the way it is now. The window onto the park was like a magic light box, the tree beneath the street lamp glowed a wonderful golden-orange. Intimations of happiness and peace, she had thought then.

Well now the trees were bare, the ground hard and dry beneath the snow. What would Ruth say, she asked herself. You can buy yourself two Birds of Paradise,

Ruth would say. You can buy yourself a dozen Birds of Paradise. You don't need Brian to do that. Besides, she thought, by the time my rubber plant blooms in the spring, their Birds of Paradise will be just a memory. Lurking beneath the surface of her mind was the fantasy that Carol was only a phase, that after Brian had found his way through the door to middle-age, he would come home. That was the present she wanted.

Six months later, Brian had phoned to tell her he had begun divorce proceedings.

"I want that settled," he said. "I've hired a lawyer, Elizabeth Stoddard. She'll be sending over the petition for your signature. Let her know if you find any mistakes."

"I'll look at it when I have a moment," she said, trying to sound like a busy woman with more important things on her mind.

As soon as the envelope arrived, she tore it open. The petition was written on a standard form, like a lease or a mortgage. She scanned it automatically, not expecting any mistakes. In the space intended for her date of birth, Brian had written the date of Helen's birth. His first wife. He had written Helen's family name instead of hers. She dialed Brian's number, her hand trembling.

"You lived with me for sixteen years, surely you can remember my name!"

"I'll have my lawyer look after that," he replied and hung up.

Fran dialed Ruth's number.

"I felt like a...like an old-age pensioner talking to the bank manager about a mistake on my welfare cheque."

"That's the way he wants you to feel," Ruth said.

Fran, Ruth and Gail were sitting in Ruth's kitchen, the glass doors open to the garden. A beautiful summer day, the air still, fragrant.

"Or maybe he really is confused. Maybe he's in a bad way." Ruth reached over and filled Fran's glass. "There's a word for what's happening to him. The something of confusion..."

Gail put her hand over the top of her glass. "I won't have any more," she said quickly.

"Crisis of confusion." Ruth said. "That's it."

"I never have any trouble remembering names, dates, that sort of thing," Fran

said. "Muscle memory."

"What in heaven's name is that?"

"Well, that's what our family therapist calls it. Last month when I got so depressed, I went to see her. 'What happened in June?' she asked me. What happened in June, I thought. Brian and I got married in June. Brian left me in June. Brian told me about Carol in June. What didn't happen in June?"

Gail looked from Fran to Ruth.

"That's muscle memory," Fran said.

"I'd call it reflex memory," Ruth said. "The body remembers."

"All the time I was with Brian," Fran said. "I used to count the years we spent together against the years he'd spent with Helen. They were married for sixteen years."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, they were together for sixteen years." Fran corrected herself. "They were married longer. Anyway, when Brian and I had been together for three years, I figured Helen still had thirteen years of seniority on me, after ten years, six and so on."

Ruth hooted with laughter.

"Finally, the weekend of our sixteenth anniversary, or the sixteenth anniversary of the year he left Helen, whichever way you want to look at it, I thought, we're even. Helen and I are finally even. That was when he left me for Carol."

"That says something about his muscle memory," Ruth said dryly.

"How perfectly awful," Gail said.

Fran opened her mouth to say something more, something funny, and burst into tears. Ruth stood up, put her arms around Fran and rocked gently back and forth.

"I'm sorry," Fran said wiping her tears on her sleeve. She grinned up at Ruth.

"I sometimes wonder about Carol. Maybe she's counting, maybe not. I do know that when their sixteenth anniversary rolls around, Carol will be forty-four and Brian will be seventy-one."

Ruth grinned back. "I wouldn't count if I were her," she said.

"I don't know how you manage, either of you," Gail said, "I think you're both terribly brave."

"It gets easier as time goes by," Ruth said, settling back in her chair. "As a matter of fact, it occurred to me while Fran was talking that I am no longer recovering from something that happened in my past. Gerald is part of my history—like my father or my brothers."

"Congratulations." Fran said.

"Well, it has taken almost four years."

"Richard would never leave me," Gail said quickly. "Marriage is too important to him. The family, children. It's everything to him."

"I would have said the same about Gerald," Ruth replied.

"I would have said the same about Brian," Fran added.

"I should go," Gail said without moving.

Ruth looked at Fran. "In some ways the second year is harder, in some ways easier. You'll no longer wake up thinking about Brian every day—it'll be every second day. And the questions you ask yourself will change. 'Will he come back one day or will I miss him for the rest of my life?' becomes, 'Have I lost the only man in the world for me or am I well rid of him?'"

"Which is it?" Fran said.

"I'm well rid of Gerald. I got myself back, I got the world back."

"Is that really how you feel?" Gail said.

"Most of the time."

"But you loved him. You thought he was the right man for you," Gail insisted.

"I knew marriage and a family were right for me. I wasn't so sure about Gerald."

"That's amazing," Fran said. "That's exactly the way I felt. Do you suppose all women of our generation felt that way?"

Gail looked at her watch. "I must go. I really must. Richard's got to drive the baby-sitter home."

"How's she working out?"

"Fine. A wonderful woman. I don't want to risk losing her."

* * *

The day of the party, Ruth phoned to ask Fran if she had thought of anyone else she wanted to invite. The new couple on the block were coming, the gay couple who used to live on the block, Ruth's

current lover—a pleasant man and a wonderful story teller—and, of course Gail, whose husband Richard had suddenly gone off with the baby-sitter.

"I can't think of anyone." Fran said. "What can I bring?"

"Nothing. Just come."

It was a lovely party. Ruth had poached a salmon, Gail brought dessert, and everybody brought champagne. The conversation was warm and optimistic, with lots of laughter. Talk about children, work, movies, the trip to Mexico the new couple planned for February, the trip to Italy the gay couple had made the previous fall. No mention of Brian or Richard. The only reference to divorce was when the new couple joked that the only reason they were still together was that they were just too old and tired to start again.

This could have been a terrible evening, Fran thought as she stood at the door, preparing to leave.

"Thank you," she said to Ruth.

Gail was watching her.

She's watching me, Fran thought, to see how I'm managing, to see how she'll manage.

"You'll be fine," Fran whispered and gave Gail a hug.

Patricia Watson, prize-winning filmmaker, has explored the experience of girls and women in dramas such as The Summer We Moved to Elm Street, and A Bird in the House and more recently, in her documentaries, The Best Time of My Life, and The Legacy of Mary McEwan.

Correction

In the Fall 1993 issue, "Women and Disability," a credit line was missing from the photograph entitled, *Head Above the Water—Four Aspects*, on page 21. This photograph was taken by Peter MacCallum. CWS/cf regrets the error.