

Melinda Crouchley

Sex and Reindeer Sweaters

Cassie Littleton has heard the age old wisdom about sex with co-workers. About how you're not supposed to dip the pen in company ink. If she had a pen, she supposes, she would write a thousand lines about how often she has peered over the walls of her cubicle to catch a glimpse of an adorable young man who sits diagonal from her. He puts together the company newsletter using fancy design programs and a college degree in communication from somewhere in the Midwest. Cassie has never been to a real college. And she's never been to the Midwest. She answers the phone and directs calls and enters data all day long. She and this man are the youngest people in the office. And every so often, in the guise of getting up to stretch her limbs – she watches him deep in thought, taking long sips from a mug of coffee or chewing absently on the end of a pen. That pen you are not supposed to dip anywhere. Certainly not in the company ink. If Cassie believed in the wisdom of the masses, she might be persuaded.

But Cassie feels like tonight, she needs more than ever to dip into something murky and black. She sits at the bar in McMenam's sipping a Ruby Red and quietly contemplating under what circumstances she might have sex with a co-worker at this evening's Christmas party. She watches the blinking lights of the planes taking off and landing across the Columbia River, and thinks that if sex isn't in the cards, she'll settle for sexually charged conversation. She'll accept anything to take her mind off the ache of another approaching holiday season with a miniature Christmas tree on the coffee table and a cold empty studio apartment. She would love to take her mind off the disastrous first dates – men from the internet and cafes and internet cafes who liked her enough in the IM conversations, and then at the Sports Bar or the Dance Club...but not

enough to claim her. Certainly not enough for a second date. She sits at the bar, unclaimed. Like her entire life is a Lost and Found.

The music playing over the loudspeakers inside is Louis Armstrong, and he sings about a Winter Wonderland, while outside the sky pours rain. Her mostly 50 year old female coworkers provide a steady humming under-current of chatter beneath the warble of Mr. Armstrong. They seem entirely disinterested in the 28 year old woman nursing a beer in her solitary corner of the bar. This disinterest is not driven by the party, but by a general lack of compulsion towards anything that reminds them of their aging bodies and lost youth. She is as ostracized here as she is in the office. The only difference is now she's wearing a fancy dress.

Cassie's eyes swivel from the 747's to their sagging faces and her eyes move through them until she hits upon Aaron Weiland – the young man who writes the newsletters. He looks good tonight, even though he's wearing a god awful knitted reindeer sweater. His reddish brown hair is teased with gel, and his hazel eyes are sparking. His bright pink cheeks betray a level of drunkenness he is somehow able to manage with an ease Cassie has never achieved. Adorable, drunken Aaron Weiland. It's too bad. Too bad he's with his fiancé, at their cozy table, sharing a single flute of champagne. Something sticks in her throat. She wants to talk to them. Really, she only wants to talk to him.

She downs the last quarter of her beer and moves away from the bar. She toddles in their direction, her high heels feeling as if her feet have suddenly shrunk two sizes. She looks like a little girl playing dress up, missing everything but the pearl necklace and big dark glasses. She bumps into a table alight with half full glasses of wine and aging career women. One glass spills all over the festive silver table cloth. Cassie curses, but offers no apologies. She brushes at her suddenly too-tight sequined red dress, and limps back to the bar. The women's eyes follow her

and they mutter under their breath. Cassie takes her seat again, properly humbled. She isn't sure where she was going any way. She should probably go home.

Aaron blinks as Virginia snaps her fingers in front of his face. It's the perpetual sign in their relationship that Aaron is in his own world again. He blushes a bit, as he realizes he's been staring off, over his shoulder in the direction of the bar, towards that blonde girl in the red sequined dress and those dangerously-high heels. He recognizes her from the office – the department secretary. But he can't remember her name.

"I'm right here dork-o," Virginia hisses.

Aaron refocuses his attention, "I know Virginia. I was listening."

"Mmm-hmm. If that's the case, what was I saying?" Virginia picks up the champagne flute and takes a sip, eyeing him petulantly.

Aaron sighs. He moves his hand away from her and begins to fidget with the collar of his sweater. "Babies. You were talking about babies. Lots of them."

"Sooo..." Virginia sets the flute down and leans into him.

"And I was about to say – let's enjoy the party. You want a drink?" He glances down at the half empty glass.

He wishes she would finish the drink. He wishes she would ease up this evening. But her tension and his growing fear seem to be coalescing into one massive ball of ill feeling. They are receiving counseling at the St. Nicholas Catholic Church where Virginia attends services with her parents, and the Priest wants them to talk about children. Aaron says whatever Virginia wants to hear, but deep inside he suspects she is aware of his lies. He's always been a horrible liar, even unable to surprise her with a birthday present most years if she feels particularly nosy. But this – this is bigger than a gift. This is the kind of thing fatal to relationships. From the tight

line of her lips and the dull squint of her eyes, he understands it's only a matter of time before everything is exposed. And when contemplating that, he feels a bizarre sense of relief which makes him uncomfortable and confused. He wants to get away from the table. He wants to get away from Virginia and the fatherly, questioning voice of the Priest which rings in his ears. His eyes wander towards the bar again. He wants to get a drink.

Virginia has also been watching the woman in the red dress, who at this moment has her breasts and upper half of her body pushed up onto the bar. She feels a surge of irritation at the lovely swan shape of this mystery woman's neck, hugged by tendrils of curling blonde hair. She looks back to Aaron, whose head is again swiveled in the woman's direction. She bangs a fist on the table to get his attention.

Aaron looks back at her – startled out of his musing.

Virginia's face crinkles up in a look of disgust and frustration, "I want to go home."

Aaron shakes his head, "Come on, I just want one more beer."

Virginia makes a nasty sound in the back of her throat – the Virginia specific sound of contempt and she throws back the rest of the champagne in a single defiant gulp.

She says, "Look, this is stupid. You're too drunk to drive, and you know I can't drive a stick. I'm really pissed off since you obviously weren't thinking about THAT. So I'm getting a cab. I'll be at my parents when you feel like having an actual conversation about our life together. Until then – I'm going to assume you DON'T want a life together."

Virginia grabs up her purse and coat and bolts from the table. Aaron opens his mouth to protest but his eye catches on the diamond engagement ring she's left behind her on the table. He reaches over and picks it up. It isn't small and petite by any means. It's rather large actually, and big enough to fit on his own fingers. He slips it on his pinky. The ring fits perfectly. He snorts a

little at this and wipes at the tears gathering in his eyes, almost without his being aware of them. He blinks a few times and laughs like he's choking – all the while staring at the white gold ring with the heart made of small diamonds. Not his choice – the ring or the design. It was Virginia's...she'd picked it out.

The burn in his throat is back, and it demands to be sated. Aaron forcefully pulls the ring off his pinkie and jams it in his pants pocket. He gets up from the table and walks towards the bar, where Cassie is seated.

Cassie takes the fresh beer from the bartender and stares down into the frothy golden liquid. She thinks about the engaged couple sitting at the table behind her. Wonders how she might start a conversation with them. Not him. Them. She decides maybe the conversation should start with her name, an introduction. She spins around with the beer in her hand just as Aaron comes up behind her. It spills on both of them.

“Holy crap, I totally didn't see you coming. Oh geez, sorry bout the outfit,” Cassie eyes his sweater, “Really sorry.”

Aaron swipes a napkin from a nearby table and dabs at his clothes. “It's alright, I hate this thing anyway.”

“No, you shouldn't. It's very...seasonal,” Cassie holds her hand out for the towel. Aaron laughs and passes it off to her.

“I think you got some – all over,” Aaron motions towards her chest and then blushes.

Cassie smirks, “Good eye. Thanks.” She takes a half-hearted swipe at her cleavage.

“I'll get you some soda water. I don't know why, but I heard somewhere that's the thing to do,” Aaron catches the attention of the bartender.

“Wisdom of the masses,” Cassie mutters at his back and dabs at her dress again.

Aaron returns with the glass and hands it to her triumphantly.

She accepts it with a lop-sided smile, "You're sweet."

Aaron's cheeks redden even further and he clears his throat, "That's a terrible thing to say."

"Well it's true. And while my dress can't be salvaged, I think you've reaffirmed my faith in the male gender tonight," Cassie sets the glass of soda water on a nearby table.

"Just doing my part for a pretty lady in need," Aaron smiles and meets her eyes.

His gaze is intense, despite the playfulness of his words. Cassie isn't sure what is happening beneath his slightly flagging eyes, but she can feel her earlier resolve slipping. She wants to let him go. She wants to go. But something about him traps her there. Some underlying sense of desperation she can see in the sloping shape of his mouth, and the downward sag of his bright pink cheeks. She fights a bizarre urge to put a hand up to one of those cheeks and stroke it.

"Hey, can I buy you a drink or something? For the chivalry?" She asks, unable to stop the question from tumbling out of her mouth.

"Uhm, I'm sort of here with –"

Aaron glances over at the table where he and Virginia had been sitting. The only thing on the table – the champagne glass - is empty. His hand clamps down hard on the ring in his pocket.

"- a dorky sweater on. Are you sure you want to be seen with me?" Aaron asks, and there is a strange depth to his question which Cassie picks up on immediately.

She also glances over at the empty table. Her stomach twists agreeably, and a small part of her brain cries out in defiance. She looks back to him and her eyes cannot escape the odd crinkle in his forehead, the tortured tilt of his jaw. He seems so much more human up close.

She tilts her head in mock contemplation. “You know, my mother did say you can always trust a man with a hand knitted reindeer on his chest.”

Aaron’s hands instinctively covers over the reindeer, “Your mother is wise.”

Cassie smiles and hesitantly bites her lip, “What’s your name?”

“Aaron. I think we work together, but I don’t know yours.”

“I’m Cassie. I think I like you Aaron.”

She extends her hand and Aaron takes it. He doesn’t shake it, but instead holds it firmly. His hand is hotter than she imagines. It sizzles against hers in a pleasing way.

“It’s nice to finally meet you Cassie,” Aaron says, “please, let me buy the drink – my treat for being a clumsy jerk.”

His voice catches a bit on the word “jerk” and Cassie watches him swallow – the sound of the dry click in his throat is audible. Her stomach dips again, but not in an enjoyable way. She feels the contrary voice in her head getting louder.

She attempts to shake it away and says sternly, “Only if it’s two shots of gin.”

“Well, how can I refuse that?” Aaron asks.

He finally releases his hold on her hand. Cassie is surprised at how cold it suddenly feels without the touch of his skin. She wants it back.

“I get to buy the second round,” Cassie says and turns towards the bar.

They both move forward and as they do, Aaron’s hand accidentally brushes against her waist. She feels another agreeable jolt of electricity. Within a few feet of the bar Aaron leans into her, his mouth inches from a curl of golden blonde hair and whispers, “Thank you.”

“For what?” She asks.

Aaron's forehead wrinkles and Cassie has another weird urge, this time to smooth it away with the touch of her hand. He says, "I don't really know."

Half an hour later, Cassie and Aaron are making out frantically in a men's bathroom stall. Aaron slams Cassie up against the door and a free hand tugs the bottom of her dress upward. In the dim light of the bathroom – the sequins throw off strange red sparkles against the walls. Cassie moans and reaches down towards the zipper of his neatly ironed slacks.

20 minutes after that Cassie and Aaron are in the restaurant parking lot, standing next to a tan 1998 Ford Taurus. It's stopped raining, but everything is coated in a thick layer of moisture. Cassie is bent over, and Aaron holds her hair back while she vomits into the neatly landscaped shrubbery off to her right. She wipes her mouth and looks up at him.

"I don't usually do this on a first date," She says apologetically.

"Vomit? I sure hope not because that would make for some awkward first dates," Aaron grins a little at his own joke. Cassie rolls her eyes.

She struggles to stand upright and Aaron holds her steady. Her footing is regained, though it requires both hands gripping his arms to do it. The flex of his muscles underneath the dark green of the sweater is comforting. She takes a deep breath to fight back the nausea.

Cassie says, "Ha ha. No, I mean, the sex part. I don't have sex on a first date. Usually."

Aaron reaches into his pants pocket and his hand closes around the ring for a brief moment, but then discards it for a different object.

"I don't know if this really qualifies as a first date. It's the company Christmas party...which is kind of worse. You know what they say about the company ink and all that. Here, take this. No one likes to taste like vomit," He presents her with a stick of gum.

Cassie accepts it, "Thanks. Really, I don't usually drink this much either."

“Is there anything you *usually* do?” He asks.

Cassie appears to consider this and shakes her head, “No, sadly. I spend most Friday nights knitting and watching telenovelas with my ferret.”

Aaron laughs, “That’s amazing – I don’t know anyone who will admit to watching telenovelas. So if you don’t *usually* drink, why tonight?”

Cassie shivers and rubs her arms, “It’s freezing out here.”

Aaron shrugs out of his black coat and hands it to her, “You’re avoiding the question.”

Cassie accepts the coat and wraps it around her shoulders. It smells like aftershave and the wool is scratchy against her bare skin. She burrows into it. They start walking through the parking lot and Cassie feels steadier on her feet, despite the oversized high heels.

“This is nice,” She says, “It’s a nice night and a nice coat and – “

“Still avoiding.”

“It’s complicated. There are lots of men – wow, that sounds awful. I don’t mean it like that. I’ve dated A LOT since I moved out here, and it seems like after the first date, there is always the rejection text, or email, or phone call, or IM. Yeah. I just can’t seem to meet a nice guy,” Cassie sighs.

“I’m nice,” Aaron shrugs.

Cassie surveys him, “You are, but you’re complicated. I can see something else going on with you. I just can’t seem to figure it out.”

Aaron furrows his brows, but doesn’t respond.

They move off towards a playground nestled in the park across the street from the restaurant. It’s full of tall fir trees which block much of the brightly colored play structures from

view of the parking lot. They are comfortably quiet for a few moments, until Cassie spots the Merry Go Round.

She grabs Aaron's arm and tugs him to it. "I love these things! I haven't played on one of these since I was twelve."

"Yeah, I've heard spinning in circles is great for nausea," Aaron surveys the Merry Go Round hesitantly, a small smile on his lips.

Cassie sits down on the cold, wet metal. She pushes off with her feet and completes one full rotation until her legs softly bump up against Aaron's. He looks down at her, his expression unreadable but noticeably less intense than an hour ago. She clears her throat and holds her hands up to him.

"It might not be the smartest idea, but no one's ever mistaken me for the smartest girl."

Aaron reaches down for her hands, "You seem pretty smart to me, with the exception of having sex with strangers in the men's room."

Cassie tugs on his outstretched arms, "Hey, you're not a stranger. You're a co-worker."

"It's kind of almost the same thing, just for the record," He reluctantly sits on the section right next to her with a grimace. A wave of moisture creeps through his pants.

"This is a terrible idea," he says, "my ass is soaked."

Cassie laughs and tells him to help her push. They spin for awhile on their backs and look above them, but there is nothing to be seen – the overcast sky is thick, dark and impenetrable. At least it's not raining.

A few silent moments elapse until Cassie sighs loudly and drags her heel along the pavement. They come to a complete stop. She props herself up on her elbows and surveys him.

“Fine, we’re strangers. But to make it less awkward, you should tell me something that only good friends would know about you. Then we’ll *be* good friends. Because honestly, the idea of having sex with a stranger is kinda freaking me out,” She bites her lip.

Aaron rolls over and props his head on his hand. He squints at her and appears to be in deep concentration.

“Are you sure you want this?” He asks, studying her solemnly.

“I’m positive,” Cassie says, “Now quit stalling.”

Finally, he closes his eyes. Cassie leans forward in anticipation.

“I got a vasectomy two years ago,” He swallows loudly, “without telling anyone.”

Cassie is silent for a moment, chewing furiously at her lips. The electricity in the air between them has blown out. She’s not sure where it went, but the change is disappointing and right. She feels as though she knew this moment was coming and plunges into it.

“What about your fiancé?” She asks, her voice a little unsteady.

Aaron’s eyes pop open and he sits up, “Wait, how do you know I’m engaged?”

“You work in an office full of 50 year old women. Word gets around,” Cassie taps at her temple with a red finger-nail.

“I know that, but you didn’t even know my name,” Aaron protests.

His face is contorted with confusion and his fingers unconsciously dive into his pocket and wrap around the ring. Cassie draws a deep breath. She should have gone home, and let him go. The worst part is, he doesn’t seem to understand anything.

Cassie shrugs and looks sheepish, “Of course I knew your name. But you didn’t know mine. Don’t you think it’s funny we work in the same department, and you don’t even know my name?”

Aaron shakes his head and turns away from her, “I don’t seem to know anything. I don’t even know if I’m engaged anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

Aaron takes his hand from his pocket. The ring rests in the middle of his palm - heavy and silver. Cassie wants to pick it up and slip it onto her finger. Aaron can’t take his eyes off it, as if it’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen in his life.

Cassie says quietly, “It’s very pretty. I’m sure she wants it back.”

Aaron starts and looks over at her curiously, as if he’s really seeing her for the first time.

“You think so?” He asks timidly.

“That’s not the kind of ring a girl just gives up for nothing. I’ll bet you she is missing it right now.”

“She wants it back...” Aaron stares at the ring, lost in his thoughts.

Cassie reaches over and closes his fingers around the ring, giving his warm hand a tight squeeze in the process. Aaron wakes up from another lapse of contemplation when she does.

Cassie meets his eyes. She says solemnly, “She probably wants you back too.”

Aaron’s eyes mist over and his hands reach up to cover his face. Cassie averts her eyes, and hums a tune under her breath. She can’t stand it when guys cry.

After awhile, she hears a long sniff. Cassie turns back and hesitantly reaches out to put a comforting hand on his shoulder, but before she can make contact, he gets up off the Merry Go Round.

“I guess we’d better go,” he says, his back to her.

Cassie stands up and walks to him, tugging at his arm. Their touch is like bad static shock. He turns slightly.

She leans on her tip-toes and whispers in his ear, "I'm not going to regret this."

Aaron shakes his head and they start to walk across the park. He jams his hands in his pockets and kicks at the clumps of fir tree limbs littering the over-saturated grass with tortured indignation. Despite everything, Cassie can't help but find this adorable, if a bit melodramatic. He stops at a large pile of branches and stares down at them. His shoulders slump.

"She's going to leave me for real this time, when I tell her. And I do have to tell her, but I just don't know what to say."

"I don't know what to say either," Cassie nods her head towards his car, "But if you want to start saying something, she's right over there."

Aaron pauses and turns towards the parking lot. Through the barrier of trees blocking them from view – he can just make out the figure of Virginia leaning against the Taurus – tapping her heel, arms crossed.

With his back still to Cassie he says, "Look, I know you're thinking that I'm a total jerk for doing this to you and to her, but –"

She cuts him off, "How do you know what I'm thinking?" She smiles softly in the dark, and he doesn't see.

Aaron turns towards her, "I don't usually –"

Cassie raises an eyebrow, "Do this sort of thing? Don't worry. I get it. After all, I am a voyeur of the human drama. And internet café dates with bad endings. Kinda like this one."

Aaron holds a hand out to her, "Cassie –"

She holds her hands up in a defensive posture, "Stop. You don't have to. I may not be the smartest girl in the world, but I'm not the dumbest either."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry," his voice wavers.

“I already told you I’m not. I had a good time tonight,” she meets his eyes with steady resolve, “And if it’s any consolation, I still like you.”

Aaron laughs like he’s in danger of crying, “Thanks. It was nice to meet you, Cassie.”

He extends his hand and she takes it. The electricity flares and dies out. Then it’s just warm and quiet. Cassie smiles sadly, and fights a final strange urge to kiss him hard on the lips. She wouldn’t change his mind anymore than he would change out of that horrendous reindeer sweater, no doubt purchased for him by his horrendous fiancé. Nope – not this one.

“At least we’re not strangers anymore,” He squeezes her hand and drops it.

Cassie sets the jacket around his shoulders and pushes him away. He steps backwards easily, as if he weighs nothing and a light breeze could take him. He continues walking towards his car, and before he moves completely out of hearing range, Cassie says, “No, not strangers. Just co-workers.”

Cassie watches as Virginia and Aaron met up. There is a sharp voice, and a low, cowed one speaking, but she can’t make out the words. Then, they get in the car – the engine revs and idles for a moment. She thinks she can smell the sound of apologies and affirmations and excuses drifting out of the tailpipe along with the exhaust. She sniffs loudly and breathes out, enjoying the feel of the frosty air in her lungs. When she takes another breath, it smells clean and new. She doesn’t wait to watch them pull away. Instead, she heads back towards the Merry Go Round. When she’s within a few feet she kicks off her red high heels and grabs one of the bars, pulling it with her as she runs. The cold, wet night barely seems to bother her naked arms and legs as she moves. The playground equipment spins faster and faster.

And then she jumps. For the briefest moment, the world pauses. Her feet and legs in mid leap – her long blonde hair splayed out behind her – her red lips formed in a perfect circle of fear

and exhilaration and her arms wrapped around the bars. Then she gains her purchase and takes a seat on the icy metal surface. She pulls her legs up to her chest and wraps her arms around them, burying her face in her knees.

She stays this way for several minutes, watching the world turning at a slower and slower pitch. She doesn't feel drunk anymore. She doesn't feel lonely or bitter. Instead, she thinks that maybe the masses might have some wisdom after all.

She wonders if she can make it home in time for her favorite telenovela.