

Cream-colored Berets and Big Fish

by Foster Trecost

Alone on the platform, I waited for a train. I stared down the rails until they ran together and wondered what I'd say. Shuffling sounds behind me broke my trance and I turned to see a familiar face. The name Carl Timmons came to mind, along with a hidden cringe.

He kept his distance and I wasn't sure if he remembered me. English teacher at some girls prep. Preppie himself. My hidden cringe was beginning to show.

Jenny was coming home for the holidays; Christmas closed in and I looked forward to spending it alone. I just had to find a way to tell her. The train came and she stepped down wearing that cream-colored beret, of course, and I thought it wouldn't be so hard. I wasn't sure what to say so I asked if she was hungry.

She fidgeted, looked around, shrugged shoulders.

"There's a place around the corner." A last meal--perfect!

She noticed me struggling with her suitcase offered to get a cab, even offered to pay--and that was my first clue. Never before had she offered to pay for anything, neither movie nor meal, and certainly not a taxi. "Tell you what," I said, "you buy lunch and we'll call it even." I didn't expect her to buy lunch, I just wanted to start a fight. I thought it'd be easier if we were fighting, but she said sure and for the second time, I wondered who I walked with. I'd wait no later than dessert.

She asked for a table in the front, but the hostess took us to the back. After we were seated, she reached to brush away the skeleton of a leaf clinging my collar; her hand grazed my cheek and she jerked it back. Then she asked about my parents, asked if I was ready for Christmas. Small talk. She knew what was coming, of course she knew. How could she not?

Finally she took off that silly hat and her hazel eyes seemed different. Her turtleneck sweater looked warm and made me feel warm. "I really like school," she said. "I've got a lot of friends, but it's good to be home."

And I felt the change. If she'd just put the hat back on; I hated that hat, it allowed me to hate her. But she didn't. Four days till Christmas, plenty time to buy a present, something nice...

A waitress appeared, but Jenny looked toward the window and said she wasn't hungry. I offered a drink, but she asked only for water. She was so upset, she'd lost her appetite! I reached to grab her hand, hoping the gesture might ease her mind, but she lowered them both to her lap and asked if I planned to finish college.

That's when I saw it, an old picture of a man holding a fishing pole in one hand, a big fish in the other. He was proud of that fish and I wondered who he was and if he knew his picture hung in a restaurant, or if *he'd* gone to college.

"Maybe next year we can take a class," I said. She lowered her head and I asked, "Aren't you going to college?"

And she started to cry. "I can't see you anymore."

"*What?*" I asked. "*You're ending this?*"

"I got accepted to a college in California. Carl-" she cut herself short. "I mean my English teacher pushed me to apply and I got accepted."

Carl?

"But it's Christmas. How can you do this at *Christmas?*"

"I've got to go. Say hi to your parents." She pulled from her coat pocket the cream-colored beret, styling it down just a bit further on one side. She looked beautiful. This time, when she looked toward the front window, I looked with her and standing there was Carl Timmons. Everything made sense. "Oh, I almost forgot, this is my treat." She fished a twenty from her pocketbook, laid the bill on the table and tapped it twice. "Merry Christmas." She grabbed her bag and left.

I looked back at the man holding his fish. "Son of a bitch," I said, and motioned for the waitress.

