

f**k xmas

by Kimberlee Smith

Tonight, the third Saturday in December, is the coldest, fiercest night of the year so far, as predicted by *Farmers' Almanac*. A chicken sits quaking in the crook of my arm as flames from the fire lap at us, jump out to snag us, from the cavernous stone hearth. With my free hand, I massage petroleum jelly into her black-tipped, shriveled blue comb to alleviate the frostbite. The golden acorn charm hanging around my neck flickers in the firelight, absorbing the heat. The nugget warms the soft dip between my collarbones. It's the only part of me that doesn't feel frozen.

In the morning, the pale, buff-colored hen pokes her beak through the grate of the plastic crate. I filled it with thick straw for her to recuperate in overnight. I thought I would wake to her stiff carcass but she's alive.

I can't cope with having to dig another hole this year. The hen's body stops seizing but her comb is still droopy and she needs to be fed cornmeal mush by hand and fortified water through an eyedropper. There are 39 more like her in the drafty barn. I wonder how many dead chickens I will bury, smothered in lime for decomposing, come springtime.

The quality of this hen's life is debatable--but she will ride out the rest of her days partially paralyzed, droopy eyed and stumbling when she should be fluttering her once-vibrant wings--not in a chicken coop with the rest of her flock, but in our sun porch as I nurse her every few hours. It is a responsibility I cherish; we are *simpatico*, needing each other just the same, two inconsequential, damaged birds.

My teenage daughters are at their father's loft in Tribeca, zombified by the Apple-this and X-Box-that they received from him and his girlfriend (a 25-year-old pole dancing instructor) for Hanukah. So when I call to say hello, I am met with grunts and silences provoked by preoccupation with gadgets and fancy

technology. They arrive home tomorrow afternoon, two days before Christmas, because that's the agreement Jordan and I have. It is verified, signed, and stamped by the judge who finalized our divorce papers. I have *custody* of them this holiday. The wording scares me, but I am thankful they are mine and they will be here. It is the first Christmas since our divorce, and I cannot bring myself to think of what I will do with myself, alone for the holidays, when he has *custody* next year.

This winter, I promised myself, there would be a New Year's I won't spend alone, one where the warm body next to mine in bed won't just be my dog's in the absence of my children who will be with their father that festive evening. It's paralyzing, this cold, and a warm body sounds precious.

Jordan and I separated four years ago, nearly five. How did I get here? I ask myself with such regularity that it should be my mantra. *Ohmmmm*, how did I get here, *ohmmmm*.

I look for someone, but in this brutal climate, I no longer look beyond my farm. I sleep with the arborist who comes by to check the dormant apple trees and the young man who delivers hay to my barn.

I've tried. Dirk and I decorated the Christmas tree this year with dozens of ornaments I had been collecting for my daughters since they were born, just like my mother had done for my sister and me during our childhoods. There were two porcelain pineapples, one for each of my daughters, Olivia and Rosie, from when our family lived on Maui for a year (Jordan and I were married there); spiky starfish strung on cream ribbons I picked up on a trip to the Caribbean island of Nevis when I was newly separated and turning 40; quilted felt Buckingham Palace guards from when I went to Europe this past summer, the summer my divorce was finalized.

And then there I was, was with a man I hardly knew, trimming the tree in a room where cardboard moving boxes lined every wall and were stacked to the ceiling because I could not bear to consider this to be permanent. It was a mistake,

Neither Olivia nor Rosie cared about decorating this holiday season; they were sick of opening boxes and putting things in their place (which is what decorating the tree seemed like this particular year).

I met Dirk mid-October at an online dating site. I had been going through a bout of loneliness since I hadn't seen my married lover who lives in Los Angeles in over three weeks and he wouldn't be in New York on business for two more. We had been together off and on for two years and my heart was heavy, never knowing if the next time I saw him would be the last. Now I know.

I was desperate for companionship. Early August of that year we had settled into our new farm in this small New England town, and I hadn't yet made one real friend.

A while back as I struggled with the illicit relationship with my lover Jon, my therapist told me that one of the reasons he believed I was so attracted to him was because we shared the same cultural reference points. I recognized a similarity in my rapport with Dirk; we both loved Echo & the Bunnymen, Otto Dix, and rickety wooden roller coasters. Through our emails and subsequent phone conversations I thought he could fill the void for the time being.

He emailed me a gritty, kind of blurry, newspaper photo of himself. He had a wide dimpled grin, chiseled features, and foppish surfer hair that hung over his forehead.

I agreed to a face-to-face after two months, having been ashamed to follow through with an online date. What desperation!

Dirk offered to meet me somewhere nonthreatening, at a cavernous warehouse store where both dish detergent and fizzy Italian wine are sold by the case, a last-minute stop on my holiday to-do list. We could walk the aisles together and he would help me load my car. That's different, I thought. Fine. I'll get out of my comfort zone and do it. We agreed to meet at the grandstand of poinsettias right inside the bank of sliding doors.

When I arrived at the rows of red plants choked in gold foil, there he was. Thin as a rake, he was wearing round

tortoiseshell glasses, knee-high Uggs boots, and had a blonde pageboy haircut with a slick, bald dome like a Franciscan monk.

One of his eyeteeth was missing. This was not the Erik I expected, but given the circumstances, what was I supposed to do?

I invited Dirk home to decorate the tree with me. It was heartbreaking watching a stranger of a man, who was nothing more than an acquaintance online up until that night, unwrap the memories of my marriage and family and hang them on the tree.

I opened a bottle of wine, put on the Barenaked Ladies Christmas CD, yet the phone rang incessantly while Dirk and I hung decorations. I obsessively checked the caller ID, hoping however shamefully, that it might be my lover calling from California, but deep down I knew it wouldn't be. It was an unspoken rule that he spent every weekend with his wife and children and I wouldn't hear from him until the workweek came again. Instead, it was my ex-husband calling each and every time. Eventually I picked up the phone. He was screaming and slurring.

"When I call, answer the motherfucking phone!"

"Where are the kids? Can they hear you?"

"You're a whore. Who's there? Is it Jon?"

The sound of my daughters shrieking at each other in the background is unmistakable.

"I can hear the girls in the background. They can hear you! Stop it, now!"

"If you don't tell me who's there, I'm calling Jon."

It was a Saturday night. Surely he didn't have his home phone number. I didn't even have it.

"I'm gonna call his studio and leave a message for him to leave my wife alone."

"I'm not your wife! You live with your girlfriend! You can't bully me anymore," I said, struggling to bluff.

That night Dirk and I slept back to back, like siblings sharing a bed.

After a restless sleep littered with nightmares, I felt Dirk slide his arm around my shoulder.

"You kept talking in your sleep."

I turned to him and opened my eyes, already burning and pooling with tears.

"*Jon*, you kept saying *Jon*."

"I'm sorry, you better go now. I'm not ready for this."

"Understood," he says, as he slipped on his boots and the front door slams shut behind him. Later that day, a shiny black town car pulls into my driveway and my daughters come home to me. The Monday morning phone call from Jordan that follows hits me like the stomach flu.

"So, I just got off the phone with Jon," he says, all chirpy and without pause.

We hadn't been discreet during our three-year-long affair that began once I separated from my husband and I was about to pay for it.

"What?" My guts flip-flop and my hands go clammy. I am speechless.

"Funny, right? All I had to do was call the studio and ask the operator for the president. Turns out he's accessible to everyone, not just you," says Jordan with a laugh.

"I told him to be careful how he treats you. He said you're a great friend—a FRIEND! and for me to call him any time."

"So you did me a solid? You helped me out? You guys had a pleasant chat about how fantastic I am? He was placating you. Massaging your ego. He knows you're a fucking wild card. He only talked to you because he had to put the fire out!" I slam the phone against the wall.

I stumble through the next few days groggy, angry, and fragile.

"Mommy are you ok?" Rosie asks, her words were slow, almost a stammer.

"It's a cold. Snotty nose. That's all, love."

"Mom, are you crying?" Olivia seems genuinely interested.

“Oh, I was watching some silly commercial on TV that made me weepy for no reason. I'm sorry.”

I hug her, and she lets me.

I am a bad actress. Maybe also a bad mother. Probably a bad everything.

In a fog for the approaching holiday, I swap out the brown corrugated moving cartons in our living room for glossy gift boxes, swath the banisters in evergreen roping, make hot chocolate with homemade whipped cream, and stuff a turkey. I wear a fissured smile ready to crack at any second; I am a teenage girl suffering the heartbreak from her first love all over again at the age of 42.

I think I love Jon more than I had ever loved my husband. Jordan's infidelities had had given me a reason to leave him and file for divorce. He didn't want me, but he's making it clear that no one else can have me, either.

Christmas Eve arrives with a relief that the season of joy will soon be over so I can feel the pain I am denying myself. Rosie presses her face against the kitchen window, leaving ghostlike impressions of the tip of her nose and her lips on the glass that would evaporate in a flash. She's been waiting for hours for new ice skates, my Christmas present to her, to be delivered. The sky turns a deep slate and a smattering of stars flickers. A freezing rain blew through this morning, leaving a skin of ice on cars, trees, and streets and freezing the pond beyond the meadow to a glassine sheath.

A hemlock hit by lightning over the past Labor Day weekend had been dying a slow death. It slams across the road with the weight of the ice on its brittle limbs, taking down a tangle of power lines, closing the street indefinitely, and cutting out electricity for miles. Merry Christmas. The back-up generator hooked up to a massive propane tank behind our home allows everything to continue running as if the house were alive, glowing and warm.

Police barricades set up at the near end of the ridge and flashing hazard lights cast a golden pallor through the long stand of

naked silver birches that stand as a wind break three seasons a year. In winter, I notice they are nothing more than skeletons.

Olivia scoops the remaining stew from the Dutch oven into a plastic container. Now that it's only the three of us, there are always leftovers.

I take a highball glass, tumble in a handful of cranberries, and crush them with a whisk still caked with cookie batter. I drop in a few ice cubes and walked through the dining room, empty except for a round mahogany table stacked with unopened bills and holiday shopping catalogs that swallow it up.

Olivia shoots a look at me when I open one of the two cupboards flanking the fireplace.

"I'm just having one." I unlatch the door and reach for the vodka, filling my glass.

"A *big* one," says Olivia.

"Please, give me a break. So, if Rosie's skates show up after all, will you come with us?"

"It's too late for that."

"Okay, then. Suit yourself."

I drag myself back to the kitchen where Rosie is jamming her feet into her old skates. Her feet have grown two sizes since last winter.

"I promise if they're delivered, I'll take you skating tonight," I say.

"But what if it's bedtime?"

"Then we'll skate at bedtime."

"But what if it's too dark?"

"Can't be too dark. We have headlamps. Don't you want to skate?"

"I want to, I'm just afraid *you're* gonna say no."

"I won't say no, no matter what. If you want to skate, then we'll skate. And that's that," I say, raising a palm in the air to encourage a high-five.

A beam of light circles around the driveway and shines into the kitchen where Rosie waits.

“My skates!”

I tear a twenty out of my wallet and run outside without a coat, press the bill into the driver's gloved hand, and turn to go back inside.

“Hold on, sweet cheeks! There's something else for you,” he says, handing me a white, waxy envelope. The return address reads Jon's studio.

I hand the skate box to Rosie and sit, numb and steadying myself while I open the envelope. Inside there is a thick, creamy business note card with a hand-drawn cartoon sketch of Santa and the words, “fuck xmas! love, jon.”

It is an exact copy of the card he drew for me the year before. I stick my hand back inside and pull out a wooden box the size of a deck of cards, and inside that, there's a tiny midnight blue suede satchel. I've received many of these before. Jon's daughter is a famous jewelry designer. I've seen Jon's wife in photos in magazines and newspapers wearing the exact same jewelry he's given me.

The golden acorn necklace had not been wrapped, that he slipped around my neck as we were tangled up in sheets and I wore nothing else but the golden acorn. That was six months ago after I told him I had bought this old farm.

I work my fingers into the neck of the bag to loosen the drawstring pouch, loop my finger through a chain, and pull it out. In the palm of my hand lay a gold disk, the size of a half-dollar, with several good luck charms carved onto it: an elephant with an upturned trunk and diamond eye, a four-leaf-clover, and the Hebrew symbol Chai.

I know Jon well enough to figure his assistant started shipping out his holiday gifts to arrive on time, before Jordan had called him to guarantee the death certificate on our affair was signed.

Tears pool in my eyes as I fasten the chain around my neck and Rosie laces up her new skates, just beaming. We put on our rabbit-fur trapper hats and headlamps to maneuver through the inky

darkness, button up our downy-filled coats, and slip on our wool mittens, rugging up for a late-night skate, as I promised.

We make our way across the field as dead frozen grass crunched underfoot. The bushes rustle and a whitetail buck with a set of pale gray, velvety antlers spread out like a fan trips into our path. He stumbles as his front left hoof buckles under him. He collapses onto an elbow, turns his head to the flash of our headlamps, and then disappears, hobbling back into the bushes.

"He's hurt, Bad! Can we help him?" says Rosie.

"Oh, my goodness. He looks very strong, he'll heal on his own and we'll probably see his babies in the meadow next spring." The bitter air and sudden wind makes my eyes water. I loop my arm through the crook of Rosie's and pull her close.

A sign is nailed to a rotting tree trunk, "SKATE AT YOUR OWN RISK," and two aluminum canoes, spiked with ice shards, are chained to it, abandoned until spring.

A field of wildflowers on the far side of the pond turns into a glistening stretch of frosted seed heads and in the middle of the solid ice sits a single ladder-back chair that someone abandoned after using it to teach a child to skate, the same way I taught Olivia and Rosie a handful of years before. Rosie spreads out her arms like sails. A standing snow angel, she braces as a gust of wind blows her across the pond.

In the quiet of the evening, in its exquisite desolation, all I hear is the ice settling, like the sound of cracking bones.

