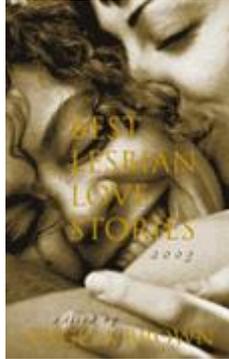


Every Day is a Good Day

by Siobhán Houston



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I lay on the rumpled bed, watching Christa get ready for sleep. Twirling a strand of hair in my fingers, I smiled as she shed her jeans and sweatshirt, and put on her favorite sleeping outfit, a paint-splattered, stretched-out, faded and ripped periwinkle blue T-shirt. I liked to tease her that this piece of lingerie was the height of butch eroticism, and how aroused this particular costume made me.

“So, if she’s coming to your opening, do I have to go too?” I sounded like a disgruntled third-grader asked to do an especially onerous task, like copying out times tables or cleaning the guinea pig cage.

Christa turned to look at me, and laughed incredulously. “Of course you do, Leigh! I mean, you’re my partner and it’s my first solo show. I can’t believe you’d even consider not going.”

A few minutes ago one of Christa’s ex-lovers phoned to announce that she planned a visit to Denver to briefly escape the doldrums of the Midwest. I thought it must be pathetically dull in the Plains if she was coming here for excitement. I still longed for my adopted hometown of Boston and periodically railed against the Fates, who had decreed that I live in this provincial hinterland. Anyway, Lexie, who had lived with Christa for several years at one time, wanted to spend a few days at Christa’s house, do some day trips into the mountains, and generally hang out with her former lover and current friend. Christa, whose kindness and generosity I could only hope to attain after arduous austerities and many incarnations, immediately agreed to the visit. She also invited Lexie to her Saturday night opening at a prestigious gallery in LoDo, the chic and happening [*sic*] district of downtown Denver.

Christa expected me to be thrilled with this plan, and she envisioned how all three of us would pal around, hiking in the mountains, bathing in waterfalls, and reminiscing about old times. Since I had never met Lexie, however, I wouldn’t be in on the nostalgia part—I’d be a spectator as they relived their common past. In my mind’s eye, I saw all three of us sitting around some run-down mountain diner, my eyes glazing over while they told tales of whatever folks did in their native Midwest: fleeing tornadoes, watching the weevils eat the corn, and so forth.

That's not what really bothered me, though. All I had thought about since hearing about Lexie's visit was that this was a woman with whom Christa had *lived* and *made love*. Visions of Lexie and Christa writhing around on their bed, of Christa's head between Lexie's legs, of Christa wearing a harnessed dildo and topping Lexie—my mind went spinning out of control, imagining all the permutations of their sexual congress. Plus, this woman had known my lover for many years and had reams of intimate memories with Christa. Our accumulation of shared remembrances, while growing after a year together, looked slight in comparison.

Christa and I are alike in a lot of ways, but we differ greatly in the way we relate to ex-lovers. She keeps in contact with a number of them—I see their names on the social justice alerts she sends out to her email distribution list. Even though I've been a lesbian for decades, I find certain elements of dyke culture bewildering. To be honest, this compulsion of most lesbians to include their ex-lovers in their close family group completely escapes me. Admittedly, I've never been one of those toe-the-party-line lesbians. In college, the majority of my sisters ostracized me because I refused to wear the regulation denim and cropped hair, flaunting instead a high-femme sensibility coupled with a devotion to Camille Paglia.

In regard to ex-lovers, my motto is "keep the past in the past." I'm sure Dr. Paglia is with me on this one. I pride myself on my ice-queen demeanor towards my former girlfriends. Not only do I not talk to them, I don't talk *about* them. When Christa and I first met, she kept asking me about my past love life. My attempts to evade her questioning didn't go over well, so finally I threw her a few tidbits about previous lovers. Most of these were even true, or at least loosely based on events that may have actually happened.

Although I never inquired about her ex-lovers, she told me about them anyway, and I cringed whenever she mentioned them. I think this visceral reaction is rooted in the idea that if they each could end up as her ex, then so could I, and to consider that possibility is more than I can handle. I know some archaic abandonment complex underlies this attitude, but there it is. It's not that I hadn't been trying to work through this with every relationship book, homo and hetero, that I could get my hands on. It appears, though, that my progress in this area has not been satisfactory to The Powers That Be. They've obviously decided to dramatically increase the learning curve and adjust the intensity of my life curriculum to high.

I've had it especially hard when I've spent time in her house, which is full of mementos of past lovers. Photos and souvenirs of her trips with Christa festooned the walls and decorated the window ledges, and birthday cards and other knickknacks and gewgaws from her past relationships vied for precious space on her bookcases and unexpectedly popped out from drawers and cupboards. Not to mention that she's been babysitting one of her previous mate's dog for the past year and a half, for god's sake. You can see how the prospect of actually *meeting* one of her former flames brought me to my knees emotionally. My body felt hollowed out, as if it had been bombed and strafed and now sat blackened and burning and empty. Nausea assaulted me, and my head throbbed with pain. My psyche felt as devastated as Dresden after the firebombing.

"Look, Leigh, if Lexie's visiting is so upsetting to you, I'll call her and tell her it's not a good time. I should have talked with you before I agreed to have her come." Christa leaned over and switched on the window fan, and then slid under the sheets next to me, her breath smelling sweet with the scent of peppermint toothpaste.

I'd die before I'd admit how distraught I was over this. "No, no," I heard myself say. "I don't mind if she comes and if she stays with you. I just don't want to meet her."

Christa looked at me, irritated and uncomprehending. "What's the big deal? We broke up six years ago and we're not even that close anymore. I'm not planning to rekindle some

flame with her, if that's what you're worried about. Anyway, I want her to meet you and see what an incredible person you are."

"You mean you want her to see that you're doing so much better romantically since you two broke up so she can feel envious," I joked.

Christa laughed. "Exactly." Then she pulled me close to her under the covers and nuzzled my ear. "Leigh, baby, you know you're my main drug, don't you?" she murmured, quoting from my favorite Lucinda Williams song. As she burrowed into the crook of my arm and I stroked the soft skin of her belly, I felt her breath already slowing down. She'd been putting in long hours at the gallery getting ready for this show and seemed tired most of the time. I kissed her forehead and lay back down on my pillow, trying to fall asleep even though my mind whirled with foreboding thoughts of the impending visit.

The next day at work, I moved through the hours like an unearthed zombie. Unable to concentrate, incapable of composing the most innocuous email or conversing intelligibly on the phone with my colleagues, I gave up the idea of accomplishing anything productive. I closed the door to my office, pulled out my cell phone, and called a friend in Massachusetts, a woman who is psychically gifted. Her intuitive reading of the situation left me aghast. "Christa is having a hard time right now, with all the stress in her life," she informed me. "There's a good chance she'll leave you to go back to this woman, whom she sees as familiar and comforting. I don't see you staying with her much longer." This was so completely at odds with my sense of our relationship that it only momentarily shook me up. I remembered that psychics aren't immune from projecting their own issues onto clients' readings, and decided that this was one piece of advice I wouldn't buy into.

I then logged on to the Internet, looking for anything to help me cope with the runaway train of emotions on which I was riding. I didn't find much on difficulties dealing with your lesbian lover's ex; it seemed that the majority of dyke writers assumed you'd welcome these women into your life and home with nary a whimper. One straight psychotherapist sermonized about how her former boyfriend had become a good friend of her current husband, and was welcome to stay in their home any time. After a good hour of Web crawling, I still couldn't find a worthwhile reason to maintain my position of avoidance. Damn. I'm sure if I'd visited Dr. Laura's web site, she would have backed me up and said not to let the ex stay over, but then again, she wouldn't be too keen that we were talking about a girl-on-girl relationship in the first place.

I called Christa at work and told her in a conciliatory tone that I'd go to the opening, and meet Lexie. And that I would *try* to sleep over at her house while Lexie was there, and do some socializing with the two of them. I warned her, though, not to expect me to be my usual vivacious, charming, coquettish, and witty self. I'd aim for civility in this encounter, not charisma.

As soon as I hung up, I galvanized myself. I remembered that I'd been through some difficult and seemingly insurmountable situations in my life. For example, I'd been homeless in San Francisco as a teenager and later spent time (did time?) as an Ivy League grad student—it was a toss-up as to which was the more harrowing experience. I knew from the past that I needed a game plan to successfully navigate through my complicated paranoia about Lexie.

My inbred inclination as a native Californian consisted of turning to my huge collection of spirituality and self-help treatises when under stress. Unfortunately, reading them for pleasure and the illusion of spiritual advancement wouldn't cut it this time—I'd really have to do some substantive inner work. The thought appalled me, but my desire to keep my relationship with Christa on an even keel and extending into infinity egged me on.

I sat on the floor in my living room, surrounded by volumes with titles like Companions on the Inner Way, The Sacred Magic of Angelic Healing, and, most apropos, When Things Fall Apart, strewn all about me. There were dozens more such books on the shelves and packed

away in boxes in my basement with alphabetized inventory lists taped to their tops. I picked up an old favorite that had nourished me through my undergraduate years—Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties. Whenever I felt depressed over yet another fizzled college romance, I slept clutching various collections of Rilke poetry, especially this one and *Neue Gedichte* (New Poems), which he wrote during his time as Rodin's amanuensis in Paris. I sensed the poet still existed in another realm, protectively watching over his fellow tragic romantics as they blundered from one ruinous affair to the next. I randomly opened it and read a line aloud: "Are not the nights fashioned from the sorrowful space of all the open arms a lover suddenly lost?" No, no, no! I slammed the cover shut and impatiently shoved the book back on the shelf, where it sat crookedly next to a collection of Christina Rossetti poems.

After a few hours of pouring through these texts, I still felt, well, destroyed. Nothing seemed to help. I spotted a set of tapes from the library, lectures that Stephen and Ondrea Levine gave in Boulder on "Relationship as a Spiritual Path." I fitted a cassette into the tape deck and lay back on the floor to listen, my head pressed into the Moroccan kilim rug. The mellifluous and measured cadences of the Levines' voices soothed me as they spoke of how suppressing painful thoughts is not wisdom—the courageous path is to observe fear head on. "The willingness to watch fear builds so much courage," one of them intoned. As listened, I felt my breath become more languorous and my gyrating mind gradually slow down its revolutions, like a top running out of momentum. "Have mercy on yourself. Merciful awareness heals."

Merciful awareness heals. Merciful awareness heals. For some reason, those words resonated at my core, and I sensed an immediate softening of the mind, a quieting within. I remembered another Buddhist aphorism: "Every day is a good day." That is, every day you can use whatever presents itself as grist for the mill of awareness. Yes, yes, I exulted, as an influx of spiritual warrior energy flooded through me. I resolved to prevail over this situation. Not only would I impress Christa with my newly found emotional equanimity, I'd use this experience as an advanced placement class to expanded consciousness. I felt a rush of power, the same sort of force that sustained me through a multitude of self-induced crises during my crazed and tempestuous life thus far.

By the time Saturday night arrived, I knew I was up to the challenge. After helping Christa hang the last pieces on the gallery walls, I made sure the caterers set up the appetizers and wine in their proper places. Then I rushed to my apartment to get dressed—the owner wanted to do some publicity shots with Christa before the show opened to the public, and I'd agreed to meet her later at the gallery. Lexie planned to come by the show around 7:30.

I stood in my bathroom at home, doing my make-up and ruminating that all those years of *Vogue* subscriptions had paid off—I didn't look half bad. I slipped on my black embroidered April Cornell dress and wove my long hair into intricate coils. Noticing a pair of black silk gloves on my dresser (most recently worn for "Catholic Schoolgirls Gone Bad Night" at a local club), I pulled them on and considered the effect. Superb. Just the sort of decadent femme *noir* look I was after. Now, if the men would just leave me alone (they hadn't when I'd dressed up as a fallen parochial student), I'd have a smashing evening.

As I entered the well-lighted gallery, I took in the lustrous hardwood floor and the vases of freshly cut red and white gladioli artfully positioned around the spacious loft. Strains of the Kronos Quartet playing *Spem in alium* by Tallis lifted through the air. (Christa and I, both classical music aficionados, chose their *Black Angels* CD for the opening's background.)

There stood Christa as the triumphant artist, poised and smiling next to the largest painting, talking to small knot of admirers. She looked, well, great—after a year with her, my breath still caught in my throat every time I saw her. She wore black jeans, an impeccable white T-shirt topped with a black leather vest, and—*merde*—black motorcycle boots. She

knew full well that those boots were at the top of my butch-girl fetish list, I thought, along with electric guitars, tattoos and 4 X 4 trucks (curiously, SUVs didn't have the same aphrodisiacal effect on me). I only hoped that by choosing this footwear, she meant to signal her interest in a session of private frolicking later on.

She strode over to me, kissed me lightly on the lips, and grinned. "So, uh, where's Lexie?" I said as I glanced around the crowd, steeling myself by silently chanting "merciful awareness, merciful awareness" as my chest tightened. I couldn't see anyone who looked like the pictures of Lexie that Christa kept taped to her refrigerator.

"She cancelled. She's not coming to Denver at all. I checked my machine at home a few minutes ago, and she left a message saying she decided not to come. I told you that she's a little, um, flaky sometimes about plans. I half-expected this to happen."

"What!" I fumed. "I spent the last four days doing extreme psychic calisthenics to get ready for her, and she cancels! Damn it!"

"Yeah, I know you're really disappointed," Christa said, a sarcastic edge to her voice. I could tell she was stifling the laughter that threatened to bubble up at any moment.

"Well, since you have numerous ex-lovers with whom you feel compelled to keep in touch, I'm sure this situation is bound to come up again, and I'll be ready for the next time," I countered. I stood facing her, held her hands at my sides, and stepped down hard on the toes of her boots with the tips of my shoes. "So, you think you'll have any energy left after the show?" I said, looking into her luminous eyes with unmistakable longing. I always thought of her eyes as sea-misted, since they shifted color from azure to aqua to emerald and back again like the ocean mirrored the changing hues of the sky. *Los ojos del mar*, eyes of the sea.

"I think the chances are very good, *inamorata*," she said gently as she gazed back at me and tightened her grip on my hands. We stood staring at each other for a minute or an hour, I'm not sure which, as time seemed to expand infinitely. Christa and I did this trancing-out thing often, and even when we were apart, I could close my eyes and summon up a sense of the *eternally full and present moment* that I experienced so frequently with her. *Kairos*, I remembered the ancient Greeks calling this sort of limitless interval. In that all-encompassing instant, her ex-girlfriends and their pictures and paraphernalia and our respective histories and insecurities vanished, and I knew that there was nothing, absolutely nothing, to worry about.

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