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The Cruellest Month

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Published by Headline

Extract

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ONE

Kneeling in the fragrant moist grass of the village green Clara Morrow carefully hid the Easter egg and thought about raising the dead, which she planned to do right after supper. Wiping a strand of hair from her face, she smeared bits of grass, mud and some other brown stuff that might not be mud into her tangled hair. All around, villagers wandered with their baskets of brightly colored eggs, looking for the perfect hiding places. Ruth Zardo sat on the bench in the middle of the green tossing the eggs at random, though occasionally she'd haul off and peg someone in the back of the head or on the bottom. She had disconcertingly good aim for someone so old and so nuts, thought Clara.

'You going tonight?' Clara asked, trying to distract the old poet from taking aim at Monsieur Béliveau.

'Are you kidding? Live people are bad enough; why would I want to bring one back from the dead?'

With that Ruth whacked Monsieur Béliveau in the back of his head. Fortunately the village grocer was wearing a cloth cap. It was also fortunate he had great affection for the white-haired ramrod on the bench. Ruth chose her victims well. They were almost always people who cared for her.

Normally being pelted by a chocolate Easter egg wouldn't

be a big deal, but these weren't chocolate. They'd made that mistake only once.

A few years earlier, when the village of Three Pines first decided to have an egg hunt on Easter Sunday, there'd been great excitement. The villagers met at Olivier's Bistro and over drinks and Brie they divvied up bags of chocolate eggs to be hidden the next day. 'Ooohs' and 'Aaaaahs' tinged with envy filled the air. Would that they were children again. But their pleasure would surely come from seeing the faces of the village children. Besides, the kids might not find them all, especially those hidden behind Olivier's bar.

'They're gorgeous.' Gabri picked up a tiny marzipan goose, delicately sculpted, then bit its head off.

'Gabri.' His partner Olivier yanked what was left of the goose from Gabri's massive hand. 'They're for the kids.'

'You just want it for yourself.' Gabri turned to Myrna and muttered so that everyone could hear, 'Great idea. Gay men offering chocolates to children. Let's alert the Moral Majority.'

Blond and bashful, Olivier blushed furiously.

Myrna smiled. She looked like a massive Easter egg herself, black and oval and wrapped in a brilliant purple and red caftan.

Most of the tiny village was at the bistro, crowded around the long bar of polished wood, though some had flopped down in the comfortable old armchairs scattered about. All for sale. Olivier's was also an antique shop. Discreet tags dangled from everything, including Gabri when he felt under-appreciated and under-applauded.

It was early April and fires crackled cheerily in the open grates, throwing warm light on the wide-plank pine floors, stained amber by time and sunlight. Waiters moved effortlessly through the beamed room, offering drinks and soft, runny Brie from Monsieur Pagé's farm. The bistro was at the heart of the old Quebec village, sitting as it did on the edge of the green. On either side of it and attached by connecting doors were the rest of the shops, hugging the village in an aged brick embrace. Monsieur Béliveau's general store, Sarah's

Boulangerie, then the bistro and finally, just off that, Myrna's Livres, Neufs et Usagés. Three craggy pine trees had stood at the far end of the green for as long as anyone remembered, like wise men who'd found what they were looking for. Outward from the village, dirt roads radiated and meandered into the mountains and forests.

But Three Pines itself was a village forgotten. Time eddied and swirled and sometimes bumped into it, but never stayed long and never left much of an impression. For hundreds of years the village had nestled in the palm of the rugged Canadian mountains, protected and hidden and rarely found except by accident. Sometimes, a weary traveler crested the hill and looking down saw, like Shangri-La, the welcoming circle of old homes. Some were weathered fieldstone built by settlers clearing the land of deeply rooted trees and back-breaking stones. Others were red brick and built by United Empire Loyalists desperate for sanctuary. And some had the swooping metal roofs of the Québécois home with their intimate gables and broad verandas. And at the far end was Olivier's Bistro, offering *café au lait* and fresh-baked croissants, conversation and company and kindness. Once found, Three Pines was never forgotten. But it was only ever found by people lost.

Myrna looked over at her friend Clara Morrow, who was sticking out her tongue. Myrna stuck hers out too. Clara rolled her eyes. Myrna rolled hers, taking a seat beside Clara on the soft sofa facing the fireplace.

'You weren't smoking garden mulch again while I was in Montreal, were you?'

'Not this time,' Clara laughed. 'You have something on your nose.'

Myrna felt around, found something and examined it. 'Mmm, it's either chocolate, or skin. Only one way to find out.'

She popped it in her mouth.

'God.' Clara winced. 'And you wonder why you're single.'

'I don't wonder.' Myrna smiled. 'I don't need a man to complete me.'

'Oh really? What about Raoul?'

'Ah, Raoul,' said Myrna dreamily. 'He was a sweet.'

'He was a gummy bear,' agreed Clara.

'He completed me,' said Myrna. 'And then some.' She patted her middle, large and generous, like the woman herself.

'Look at this.' A razor voice cut through conversation.

Ruth Zardo stood in the center of the bistro holding aloft a chocolate rabbit as though it were a grenade. It was made of rich dark chocolate, its long ears perky and alert, its face so real Clara half expected it to twitch its delicate candy whiskers. In its paws it held a basket woven from white and milk chocolate, and in that basket sat a dozen candy eggs, beautifully decorated. It was lovely and Clara prayed Ruth wasn't about to toss it at someone.

'It's a bunny rabbit,' snarled the elderly poet.

'I eat them too,' said Gabri to Myrna. 'It's a habit. A rabbit habit.'

Myrna laughed and immediately wished she hadn't. Ruth turned her glare on her.

'Ruth.' Clara stood up and approached cautiously, holding her husband Peter's Scotch as enticement. 'Let the bunny go.'

It was a sentence she'd never said before.

'It's a rabbit,' Ruth repeated as though to slow children. 'So what's it doing with these?'

She pointed to the eggs.

'Since when do rabbits have eggs?' Ruth persisted, looking at the bewildered villagers. 'Never thought of that, eh? Where did it get them? Presumably from chocolate chickens. The bunny must have stolen the eggs from candy chickens who're searching for their babies. Frantic.'

The funny thing was, as the old poet spoke Clara could actually imagine chocolate chickens running around desperate to find their eggs. Eggs stolen by the Easter bunny.

With that Ruth dropped the chocolate bunny to the floor, shattering it.

'Oh, God,' said Gabri, running to pick it up. 'That was for Olivier.'

'Really?' said Olivier, forgetting he himself had bought it.

'This is a strange holiday,' said Ruth ominously. 'I've never liked it.'

'And now it's mutual,' said Gabri, holding the fractured rabbit as though an adored and wounded child. He's so tender, thought Clara not for the first time. Gabri was so big, so overwhelming, it was easy to forget how sensitive he was. Until moments like these when he gently held a dying chocolate bunny.

'How do we celebrate Easter?' the old poet demanded, yanking Peter's Scotch from Clara and downing it. 'We hunt eggs and eat hot cross buns.'

'*Mais*, we go to St Thomas's too,' said Monsieur Béliveau.

'More people go to Sarah's Boulangerie than ever show up at church,' snapped Ruth. 'They buy pastry with an instrument of torture on it. I know you think I'm crazy, but maybe I'm the only sane one here.'

And on that disconcerting note she limped to the door, then turned back.

'Don't put those chocolate eggs out for the children. Something bad will happen.'

And like Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, she was right. Something bad did happen.

Next morning the eggs had vanished. All that could be found were wrappers. At first the villagers suspected older children, or perhaps even Ruth, had sabotaged the event.

'Look at this,' said Peter, holding up the shredded remains of a chocolate bunny box. 'Teeth marks. And claws.'

'So it was Ruth,' said Gabri, taking the box and examining it.

'See here.' Clara raced after a candy wrapper blowing across the village green. 'Look, it's all ripped apart as well.'

After spending the morning hunting Easter egg wrappers and cleaning up the mess, most villagers trudged back to Olivier's to warm themselves by the fire.

'Now, really,' said Ruth to Clara and Peter over lunch at the bistro. 'Couldn't you see that coming?'

'I admit it seems obvious,' Peter laughed, cutting into his golden *croque-monsieur*, the melted Camembert barely holding

the maple-smoked ham and flaky croissant together. Around him anxious parents buzzed, trying to bribe crying children.

'Every wild animal within miles must have been in the village last night,' said Ruth, slowly swirling the ice cubes in her Scotch. 'Eating Easter eggs. Foxes, raccoons, squirrels.'

'Bears,' said Myrna, joining their table. 'Jesus, that's pretty scary. All those starving bears, rising from their dens, ravenous after hibernating all winter.'

'Imagine their surprise to find chocolate eggs and bunnies,' said Clara, between mouthfuls of creamy seafood chowder with chunks of salmon and scallops and shrimp. She took a crusty baguette and twisted off a piece, spreading it with Olivier's special sweet butter. 'The bears must have wondered what miracle had happened while they slept.'

'Not everything that rises up is a miracle,' said Ruth, lifting her eyes from the amber liquid, her lunch, and looking out the mullioned windows. 'Not everything that comes back to life is meant to. This is a strange time of year. Rain one day, snow the next. Nothing's certain. It's unpredictable.'

'Every season's unpredictable,' said Peter. 'Hurricanes in fall, snowstorms in winter.'

'But you've just proved my point,' said Ruth. 'You can name the threat. We all know what to expect in other seasons. But not spring. The worst flooding happens in spring. Forest fires, killing frosts, snowstorms and mud slides. Nature's in turmoil. Anything can happen.'

'The most achingly beautiful days happen in spring too,' said Clara.

'True, the miracle of rebirth. I hear whole religions are based on the concept. But some things are better off buried.' The old poet got up and downed her Scotch. 'It's not over yet. The bears will be back.'

'I would be too,' said Myrna, 'if I'd suddenly found a village made of chocolate.'

Clara smiled, but her eyes were on Ruth, who for once didn't radiate anger or annoyance. Instead Clara caught something far more disconcerting.

Fear.