

Leftover Mud Pie

By Mona Leigh Rose

I've roomed with the Black Widow for four semesters. Two college years. That's like ten in dog years. She's a love addict. Meets a new guy in study group or at a bar, lets him sweep her off her size six pumps, charms his family, makes fevered plans for the future. A few months in, she loses interest, takes up with a new guy. Problem is, she can't bring herself to break-up with an old "the one," tell him he's been replaced by a new "the one." That's my job.

"It isn't you, it's her," I coo into the phone.

"Only saying that to make me feel better."

"No, really. You're a great guy, [insert name here]. Any girl would be lucky to date you." Twist the phone cord around my finger, wonder whether tonight's *Seinfeld* is new or a rerun.

"But she said she loved me, said," *sniff*, "I was the one."

"That's the problem. She loves you too much, got scared. She's not ready for--" pause for effect "--*true love*."

Lost count how many times I've delivered those lines. My Nana told me a man in love is dumber than a post. Roomie's castoffs taught me a new lesson: A man with a broken heart will believe lies so brash even a post would thumb its nose.

Not that Roomie ever asked me to be her muscle. I can't stand loose ends, unfinished business, even someone else's business. Not much of a social life of my own, unless you count days spent in the library shoosieing undergrads who use the deserted stacks as a hook-up spot. So I helped her out of a tight spot or two, and soon enough, her chore became my calling.

The overture goes something like this:

Her: "Can you get the phone?"

Me: "You know it's him. He's called, like, ten times today."

Her: "Can't he take a hint?" Exaggerates eye roll. "Besides, [insert new guy's name here] is waiting for me downstairs. Taking me to Monty's for dinner. He might be the one." Rubs lipstick off teeth, smiles at reflection.

Me: "Fine." Mimic exaggerated eye roll. "I'll take care of it."

Her: "You're the best. I'll bring you my leftover mud pie in a doggy bag." Blows kiss, bounces out door.

I'm a darn good breaker-upper. Sometimes we even become buddies, bond over his heartache. That's how I got to see Glenn Close play Norma Desmond on opening night, learned to roller skate on the Venice boardwalk, hiked to the Hollywood sign for the first time.

Everyone was happy until Mr. Boomerang came along. Roomie put Boomie through two spin cycles. For their first break-up, I used all the usual comfort words, told him he was a catch,

he'd meet the right girl, yada, blah, et cetera. He moseyed into the sunset, bent but, thanks to my soothing tones, not busted. Fall semester he showed up again, first on the answering machine, a week later at the door.

Seems they ran into each other at Three of Hearts, shared a pitcher of Amstel Light. Another round of sunset hikes in Runyon Canyon, weekend trips to Ojai, long walks on the beach. He was "the one" for the second time. I like Mr. Boomerang, nice guy, smart, psych major. Had high hopes for him. But when Roomie casually dropped a new man's name in conversation over Cheerios, when she stretched the phone cord around the corner and behind her bedroom door, when Boomie's voice on the answering machine veered from cheerful to concerned to suicidal, I knew my big solo wasn't far off.

Pick up the ringing phone one rainy Friday night in January and prepare to cut him loose.

"It isn't you, it's her."

"Bullshit."

"No really, I'm not trying to make you feel better. You're a great guy, any girl--"

"I brought you chicken soup from Langer's when you had a cold."

"Um, right, thanks. Anyway, any girl would be lucky--"

"I told you which box had the See's Candy at the white elephant gift exchange."

"Wait, what?"

"Don't bullshit me."

"I'm not bullshitting. She loves you too much--"

"Cut the crap. She met someone else, didn't she?"

“She’s scared--”

“Are you reading from a script?”

“Of-- of course not.”

“So spit it out. Why is she ducking my calls?”

An ant crawls out of a crack in the plaster wall, then another. Smash them with a paper towel. “She’s not ready for--” one Mississippi, two Mississippi “—*true love*.”

“What do you know about love?”

My stomach lurches. “I know enough . . .”

“When was the last time your heart shot fireworks when you held someone’s hand?”

“I have connections with people, feel sparks.”

“To hell with sparks. I’m talking about a raging fire, an inferno of feeling that incinerates all reason. Do you even date?”

“What’s this got to do--”

“And don’t count meeting a study buddy for coffee.”

Close my eyes, need to focus. “This isn’t about me. You’re hurt now, but you’ll meet someone--”

“Of course it’s about you.”

“I’m trying to help, let you down easy.”

“Exactly my point. If you had the first idea about real love, you’d never think having your heart stomped on by a self-absorbed bitch could ever be easy.”

“Don’t call her a bitch.”

“Why do you protect her?”

“I don’t protect her. I help the men-- I mean, I’m helping *you*.”

“You enable her vile narcissism--”

“Vile?”

“--and how does she repay you?”

The light from the microwave shines on my finger, bloodless in the tightly wound phone cord. “I-- um, I like mud pie?”

“Jesus. She breaks your heart every fucking day and you don’t even see it.”

“I’m not gay.”

“Didn’t say anything about gay. I see the way you look at her, same way I do.”

“She’s my friend.”

“She’s not your friend. She’s your idol, your goddess on high. And you’re her pet, her toady, her maid and her minion.”

“No, she . . .”

“She uses you like she used me, and is probably using some other poor fool right this minute. Do yourself a favor. Don’t break up with me, break up with *her*.”

The dial tone bounces against the kitchen wall, echoes in my head, even after I hang the receiver back in its cradle. My legs feel heavy, my head light. Can’t muster up the energy to move. A line of ants marches across the counter now, dozens stagger single file under the

weight of crumbs and cereal bits twice their size. One collapses, struggles to right himself. The others make a tight detour around him, continue on with their loads.

I flinch when Roomie bounces through the apartment door, flips the light switch. “Why’s it so dark in here?” She tosses a gold foil swan on the counter, narrowly misses the ants. “Tonight was a-mazing. Bradley brought me a dozen white roses, hired a violinist to serenade me while we sipped champagne.” She twirls, skips down the hall. “He’s taking me to Big Sur tonight, need to pack a bag.”

The foil swan stares at me, my face reflected in its creased wings. Look like a little girl in a broken funhouse mirror.

“I really think Bradley could be the one,” Roomie shouts over the slamming drawers and clanking hangers.

Unwrap the foil, smooth the edges flat. The sliver of coffee ice cream half melted, the fudge congealed in clumps. Slide it next to the line of ants. One changes course and the others follow. The whole army converges, crumbs still balanced on their heads. They swarm over the gooey mess. Soon a wriggling mound covers the foil from crust to whipped cream.

Roomie sashays past the kitchen, an overnight bag slung over the shoulder of my new raincoat. “We’ll do your birthday dinner another time. You’re cool with that, right?”

The foil shudders, then slides slowly toward the crack in the plaster.