

## ARTESIAN TANGO

### The Weekend Before Christmas

"Hey Carol, sleepyhead, Wake up!" Darryl paws at her shoulder. "I just had the most wicked dream! You've got to hear it while I still remember." Carol stirs at his touch only enough to nuzzle farther into her pillow.

"Come on, Babe! Be a good Wifey-Poo," Darryl crouches over her. "You're not fooling me with that snoozy-puss routine. So go ahead and lie there while I tell you about it. Then I'll let you win at rasslin' later. Deal?" Carol breathes a low moan and stays motionless.

Slowly Darryl lowers his head toward her, till his mouth is at her chin. Tenderly he begins licking along her jaw line, until his tongue creeps close to her ear. Kissing her neck, he whispers, "You know I'm going to tell you anyway. So here goes." He takes a breath. "I was dreaming I was the Sultan of Artesia. Out for an inspection of my palace gardens. What a hoot! In every direction I looked - for miles and miles - there were thousands of fountains springing from the ground. With pools and exotic flowers spreading all around. After a few minutes, with all that water flowing, I had to get up for a whiz. You know me." He lays his bristly cheek against Carol's soft face. "But when I got back to sleep, I was instantly boppin' through Artesia again. Whoo-wee! But this time it was even better. Whenever I passed a fountain, the statues of the Greek goddesses beside it started to come to life. Hello! And as I kept walking from fountain to fountain, each new statue was more gorgeous than the one before. And the best thing of all happened just as I woke up." Darryl gently nibbles Carol's earlobe. "The last goddess, who was the most beautiful yet, looked exactly like... you."

Carol's eyes flutter, but she still doesn't move. "You're just making that part up about me and the statues," she mutters into her pillow.

"What the heck." Darryl raises his head. "I think I'm entitled to get lucky in my dreams once in a while."

Carol turns and rubs her palm over Darryl's chest. "In your dreams is right, Morning-Breath." She gives him a quick kiss. "Sounds like quite a manly fantasy to me. All those Artesian wells gushing and spurting. Where is Artesia anyway? And why don't the Artesians have a dog to commemorate their forgotten civilization? Like the Dalmatians or the Pomeranians."

"Search me," says Darryl, rolling onto his side and propping his head on his arm.

"Then what exactly got you excited about being the Sultan of Artesia? Of all places."

"Undoubtedly that rum-and-raisin eggnog your father forced on me last night. I'm convinced it curdled in my vital organs and invoked some deeply suppressed subconscious memory. Going back to Miss Prussy from high school."

"Miss Prussy? That old prune?" Carol frowns. "I don't see the link between our Grade Eleven English teacher and Artesian nobility."

"Since you were the top student in the gifted class back then, I thought you'd figure out the connection instantly." Darryl presses a dimple into Carol's cheek. "And even though, as you always remind me - I was just in the class to swell the numbers for smart girls like you - as I recall, Grade Eleven was the only occasion in my life when the topic of Artesian wells ever sprang up. So my dream must have had something to do with Miss Prussy. Don't you remember? Whenever she wanted to illustrate an

example of an interrogative sentence, Miss P. would ask - 'Do you know how to make an Artesian well?' Her question always made me squirm in my seat and look off toward the flag above the door. Hoping she wouldn't call on me for an answer."

"I'm sure even back then I knew it was just one of those smart-Alec jokes. As any truly gifted girl would," Carol smiles slyly. "Like 'What's a Grecian urn? - Forty drachmas a week.' Or, 'How do you make a Maltese cross? - Kick him in the shins.' So if you want to make an Artesian well, you tell him to take two Aspirins and call back in the morning. Case closed."

"You're right as always, my dear," says Darryl, giving Carol's nose a poke. "But my sense of humour wasn't polished enough to recognize double Artesian entendres when I was in Grade Eleven. And I still find it difficult to believe Miss Prussy's was either. Besides, in our geography course at the same time, we were learning about the way Artesian wells actually worked. Something about pressurized water shooting up to the surface when it found a weak spot in the ground above. It seemed the friggin' things just happened in nature, and no one needed to make them. So Miss Prussy's question wasn't even relevant. But I didn't think Miss P. wanted that kind of geotechnical debate in her grammar class. Jeepers. What a traumatic year Grade Eleven was for a marginally-gifted fellow like me."

"You remember the craziest stuff from high school," says Carol. "All I did back then was plot out ways to get a hunky football player like you to notice a gawky girl like me. My ultimate wish was to see you with your shirt off."

"Somehow all our school daydreams come true eventually, my little Snookums," says Darryl. "And boy, my reign last night as the Sultan of Artesia was sure worth the wait."

"Do Artesian wells still make you nervous?" asks Carol.

Darryl sighs. "I believe I've turned my Prussy-an demons into Artesian beauties at last."

"So what makes you nervous now?" replies Carol. "There must be something."

"I don't know," Darryl reflects. "Your father's eggnog for certain. But if there was anything truly significant, I'd probably avoid it and simply eliminate the stress."

"But everyone needs a little spice in their life to keep them on the edge and add some zip."

"That's why I married you - Miss Zippety-doo-da of Fairmount High."

"Well then, O Ye of Great Faith, if the decision's in my hands, it's a done deal," says Carol.

"What's a deal?" asks Darryl. "Did I miss a conversation while I was dreaming of Artesia? Or are you finally taking me up on my rassling challenge?"

"The deal, O Even-Tempered One," says Carol, flashing her killer smile, "Is this. We agreed that our trip to the Sugar Shores Resort was going to be our only Christmas present to ourselves this year." Suddenly her eyes widen. "Oh my god, our vacation's only a few more sleeps away - how awesome!" Then turning directly toward Darryl, she slinkily runs her fingertip down his arm. "But now, just for fun, we're each going to give one another an extra gift. Nothing extravagant - unless you think I'm worth it. But it has to be something that'll make us a little nervous when we receive it. Or at least when we use it."

"It sounds like an offer I can't refuse," replies Darryl. "I've got butterflies in my tummy already."

"And so you should," says Carol. "Now we're gonna rattle our pajamas off. And I'm not going to *let* you lose. I'm going to *make* you lose."

"Yeeoww!!! But Lambie-pie, we're not wearing pajamas ..."

"It's just an expression, Goof-ball. Didn't Miss Prussy teach you anything?"

"I think she warned us to fear geeks bearing gifts ..."

"Did you say geeks? I'll show you ..."

"Hey ... You're pinning me!"

"And YOU'RE pinning ME!"

"That's because I'm the Sultan. And I can. Tell me how good it feels."

"Oooohh Sultan... May you live forever."

"Only if you stay with me always."

"I love you."

"Oh Babe. I love you so much."

"You're the best."

"YEEaaAAAHH!!!"

"UHHHooooohhh ..."

"Wow! How totally over the moon was that?" Darryl is panting. "But Kiddo, it's time to get up and giddy-up. We've got the Christmas thing happening with my folks today."

"My allergies ... My gout ... My PMS ..."

"Sorry, my dear. As your husband and protector, I must be firm. Your weaker-sex giddiness cannot be condoned when there are traditions to uphold. If I had to endure your dad's eggnog, you're going to smile and pretend to enjoy my mother's Christmas cake. When it comes to Yuletide miseries, we're a team."

"Is there no end to the annual revenge of Baby Jesus? I thought he came along to put a stop to suffering, not cause more," Carol grimaces.

"Just stiffen your upper lip and think of the Caribbean. And you know I'll be doing the same."

"Yeah. I desperately need a week in the sun. Away from people. And from smiling."

"There's the Christmas spirit!" With a tweak of Carol's nose Darryl jumps out of bed.

"So long snow drifts! Hello sand dunes! Here's to ... Sh-ugar Sho-rrshh!" Darryl sprawls as far as he possibly can in his economy airplane seat.

"And to happy landings," Carol peers into his face. "What have you been drinking?"

"Rum and anything," says Darryl. "Except eggnog. How 'bout you?"

"Scotch and water. But they ran out of water somewhere over Tennes-see-hee-hee-hee," Carol titters.

"I always say that getting sloshed on an airplane is a sure-fire way to lift anyone's spirits," Darryl raises his drink and snorts with glee.

"Or overcome your fear of flying." Carol gives him a jab in the ribs.

"Ooow! Me? Afraid? That's ridic-ulous!" Darryl clutches his glass.

"Then why are your knuckles so white, and your toes all curled up?"

"You can't even see my toes."

"But I'm specially gifted. And I know everything about you. I've seen your feet naked."

"Then you should be aware that I have never felt so val-our-ous as I do at this moment."

"My hero!" Carol tousles his hair.

"OK Carol, Honey, it's true." Darryl suddenly becomes pseudo-soberly serious. "You understand me too well. I don't have to tell you I'm not always brave. Remember the other day we were discussing Miss Prussy's class, and what made us nervous? Well, I have to admit there was one time back then when I was really scared shi-rrtless."

"If you were scared shirtless, you could've come to me," leers Carol, sipping her drink.

"Carol Sweetheart, you've got to understand. It's not funny. I'm talking about the worst thing that ever happened to me at Fairmount High. Listen. Please?" He gazes beseechingly into her eyes. "It began with our literature homework. Miss Prussy assigned everyone a poem to learn off by heart. We were all supposed to recite it in front of the whole class."

"Who can forget that?" cries Carol. "The old witch made me learn Fern Hill. All six verses. And it didn't even rhyme!"

"I wouldn't have minded if she'd given me the complete works of William Wordsworth Longfellow. I could've handled that," says Darryl. "But instead, she told me I had to mesmer-ize this dumb poem by some loser called A.E. Housman, with a sissy-issimo title called 'Loveliest of Trees, the Cherry Now'. The words were totally silly too. It sounded like a kiddy's nursery rhyme the once I read it out loud when no one was around. Geez! I was already getting picked on by my football buddies for being the only player on the team from the gifted class. If one of those linebackers like Pugsy Parker had ever found out I was spouting off a Mother Goose song called 'Loveliest of Trees, the Cherry Now', they would have thrown me out of the locker room, and made me shower on the girls' side."

"I wouldn't have objected to that," smirks Carol.

"So you can ap-pre-ciate I had no alternative." Darryl ignores Carol's remark. "When it was my turn and Miss Prussy called on me, I refused to go up. I didn't even offer an excuse. I just refused. But that was when things really got tense. Miss Prussy made me stay after class - and was she boiling mad. She asked me why I wouldn't recite her poem, but what was I to say? She never would have understood about Pugsy and the others. So when I wouldn't tell her, she gave me the tongue lashing from Hell, and said, 'She had no intention of allowing an act of defiance from any of her pupils to go unpunished'. Then she took me down to vice-principal Krundt for some official discipline, and they both ganged up on me. They threatened to call my parents, and warned me that it was a privilege to be in the gifted class, and if I didn't earn the privilege, they'd transfer me out. That was when I got scared shirtless, Sugarplum. Because if I wasn't in the gifted class, I couldn't see you all day long. And I would've rather have died... Sorry," Darryl sniffs. "I need a drink."

While he takes a few gulps to compose himself, Carol puts her arm around his shoulder, and softly kisses his cheek. "Tell me ev-ery-thing," she says. "It'll make you feel better."

"Well, with all their carrying-on, it got to the point where I couldn't take any more harass-ment," declares Darryl. "They wore me down. So all of a sudden, I just blurted out what they wanted to hear. In one breath I got it all off my chest. 'Loveliest-of-trees-the-cherry-now-is-hung-with-bloom-along-the-bough-and-stands-about-the-woodland-ride-wearing-white-for-Eastertide-now-of-my-threescore-years-and-ten-twenty-will-not-come-again-and-take-from-seventy-springs-a-score-it-only-leaves-me-fifty-more-and-since-to-look-at-things-in-bloom-fifty-springs-are-little-room-about-the-woodlands-I-will-go-to-see-the-cherry-hung-with-snow.'" Darryl clasps Carol's hand. "I did it for you, Precious. It took all my courage to say those words. But I did it... Because I was terrified that they wouldn't let me stay with you." Passionately he flings his arms around Carol in a wild embrace, knocking their drinks into the aisle in the flurry of his fervour.

"Oh Darryl, I love to listen to that story," says Carol, blinking through her tears. "You tell it to me every time you're drunk. I've heard it so often. But I still cry when you get to that schmaltzy part at the end."

"That's because you're always just as looped as I am, my li'l pigeon," grins Darryl. "Merry Christmas. And welcome to Shug-ar Sho-rrsh." As the airplane taxis down the runway and comes to a halt, the two lovers sit slumped together in a peaceful sleep, with Carol's head resting on Darryl's shoulder.

### Christmas Morning

"Jumpin' Jesus, Darryl, it's Christmas!" Carol steps in from the balcony. "And look outside! It's sunny. And hot! Isn't that absolutely fabulous? Darryl... Darryl? Are you still on the phone?"

"Swell, Mom. Carol and I are having a super time... Up to now it's been so good, I can't even remember anything about it... OK. Who wants to talk now? Niki? Great! Put her on. Merry Christmas to you and Dad too ..."

"That phone call is going to cost a fortune." Carol stands at the door, with her hands on her hips.

"Hi Niki? Uh-huh, this is Uncle Darryl... A doll dressed like a bride? Wow, you're going to have fun with her... Hey Niki, tell me about the Christmas tree... What colour are the lights? Sweet... And is there a star at the top? A gold one... And a little wooden deer just below... See his nose, Niki? I painted it red when I was your age ..."

"When you're done, it'll be time to give each other our presents," Carol interjects. "I can hardly wait!"

"Hey Bro', Thanks. I was just having Niki describe the tree to me. I missed getting 'round to see it this season ... Yeah, Yeah, I know it looks the same every year. But it's still magic... Anyway, you've got quite a house-full, so I'll let you get back to it... Don't worry, Carol's reminded me about that already... Darned right. I'm sure we'll have plenty of stories... You too. See ya next year. Bye!"

"Finally, I've got you to myself!" Carol wraps her arms around Darryl's chest and gives a squeeze. "Isn't Christmas at Sugar Shores terrific? I'm dying to get out there and do all sorts of things I've never done on Christmas before!"

"So, my pet, let's end the suspense and exchange these gifts of ours," replies Darryl, hugging back. "Then we can groove on down to the beach."

"I'll go first!" She pulls a small package from her suitcase, and places it into Darryl's hand.

"And now! The moment we've all been waiting for..." He stares at Carol steadily as he unties the bow and removes the shiny paper. "Hmmm... It's awfully yellow. And light. And... tiny."

"You can use it to... make a statement," suggests Carol. "And by the way, I took those bathing bloomers you'd packed out of your suitcase and left them at home. So there's no Plan B."

"But... a Speedo? Does the world want to see that much of me?" he asks.

"I think you should give the world the opportunity to decide for itself," Carol reassures him. "What have you got to lose?"

"A few pounds. All my inhibitions ..."

"Honey, this is part of our adventure," coaxes Carol. "We're in a strange and wonderful place, where everyone's here to have fun. Take advantage of the freedom!"

"I'm just concerned about the statements people might make about my '*statement*' when my backside is turned," counters Darryl. "But here, it's time for your gift." He produces a plain white envelope. "Merry Christmas."

Carol pulls out the paper folded inside, and begins to read. "The Sugar Shores Resort is pleased to welcome you to our special daily class in Karaoke..." Suddenly her eyes pop open, her jaw drops, and the hand holding the certificate falls to her side. "You signed me up for Karaoke *pole dancing*? How ... How could you?"

"It was easy as pie," says Darryl. "I did it on-line a few days ago. The classes are at five o'clock every afternoon. Each participant spends all week working up her act. And on New Years Eve, you perform a solo in the Lizard Lounge. What a blast that'll be!"

"But I'm such a klutz... You know I... I can't sing or ... or wriggle! All the other girls... I could never compete in their league..."

"Who declared this a contest?" asked Darryl. "As you said, everyone's here to have fun."

"Aaarrh," seethes Carol. "Darryl, don't you understand anything about women? We're our own worst natural enemies. I can't conceive of anything more venomous than a room full of girlie girls trying to outdo each other performing sleazy stunts for their men. That pack of snake-charmers will

slither past me in a second and leave me floundering in their slime. It'll be horrible.

"Snake-charmers. That's a good one, Cupcake," laughs Darryl. "I was hoping you might do your 'Hey Big Spender' routine. Throw in a little striptease... That always makes my viper hyper."

"Whatever I did, it would go down in history as 'Nude Dork, Nude Dork'," Carol sulks.

"Hold on. Wasn't the purpose of these gifts to put our fate in each other's hands, for the thrill of exploring where it might lead?" asks Darryl. "It seemed like an intriguing concept, to let someone else control our vulnerabilities. At least till now we've arrived at the consequences."

"You hate your Speedo," accuses Carol. "Admit it."

"I'll admit it makes me nervous," says Darryl. "Which is what it was intended to do. But I'm also afraid it could make me embarrassed, which is a line I hadn't anticipated having to cross."

"If you couldn't handle *'embarrassed'*, why did you inflict *'totally humiliated'* on me?" demands Carol. "This was supposed to be our Christmas holiday. How can I possibly enjoy it, when I'll be constantly worrying about making a bloody fool of myself with a floozy striptease show on our final night?"

"As these gifts were your idea, I just thought I was playing by your rules," shrugs Darryl. "So far, at least, we've been successful in arousing our passions. Isn't the next step to find some way to channel our feelings into an outcome we can handle?"

"So this whole thing is my fault now, is it?" Carol shrieks. "Sure. Take the easy way out. Blame it on Miss Zippety-doo-da! Well, Buster, let me tell you something. If you think Karaoke pole dancing is good enough for me, go and do it in my place and see how you like it. And zippety-doo-da is all I want for Christmas from you."

"Unfortunately the course is for girls only," says Darryl. "Which is too bad, 'cause I now have a perfect costume for it. And by the way, Toots, I looked up all things Artesian before we left. You might be interested to know the word pertains to the Artois section of France, which actually does have its own home-grown dog."

"WHAT?"

"You commented the other day that the Artesians should have a dog breed to make their region special," Darryl continues. "And there is one, called the Artesian Norman Basset. There was a picture on the internet. It's quite cute, with long dangly ears."

"How dare you change the subject when we haven't finished our original argument?" explodes Carol. "I don't give a damn about Artesian dogs. I want to hear what you've got to say about your utter lack of consideration, and my abject humiliation!"

"Mea culpa. Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa," answers Darryl. How's that for accepting the blame, the guilt and the shame? And if you want an official peace treaty, I'll sign that too. But frankly, what is there to be upset about? If I don't want to wear my Speedo, I won't wear it. I'll find another bathing suit instead. And Carol, there's nothing forcing you to take up Karaoke pole dancing. But if some kind of Christmas keepsakes are called for to replace the stuff we didn't like, I suggest we buy each other a couple of rubber duckies to play with in the ocean."

"You're deliberately choosing to miss the point," says Carol. "And furthermore, if Artois is a district of France, that means there's no such thing as an Artesian Sultan."

"It was only a dream," sighs Darryl. "Now I'm going to take a nap."

### Christmas Afternoon

"Darryl? Are you awake?"

"Kinda."

"I brought you some fruit from the banquet hall. An orange and a banana." Carol lays them on the table. "It's awfully nice out. How's about a stroll along the beach?"

"Ya, sure, Babe. That'd be cool."

"Hold my hand," says Carol a few minutes later, as they wander through the soft, wet sand.

"The beach really is pure white, like sugar," says Darryl. "And the ocean sounds so soothing. It reminds me of listening to a seashell."

Carol stares out over the turquoise water. "Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs," she quotes, "Time held me green and dying though I sang in my chains like the sea."

"Beautifully phrased, my loquacious one," admires Darryl. "Was it an original thought?"

"Of course," says Carol. "But not mine. They're the opening and closing lines of Fern Hill. Dylan Thomas stuck quite a few more words into the middle, but they all mean about the same thing."

"That was your Miss Prussy memory work?" asks Darryl.

Carol nods. "And oddly enough, it has the same cheerfully foreboding theme as your infamous poem."

"Apple boughs ... Cherry trees ... Hmmm ..." ponders Darryl. "Ah-ha! So you think Miss P. was obsessed with luscious fruits?"

"Well, metaphorically, wouldn't you say? All those ephemeral fruit-blossom references must have been a continual warning. Search out life's precious moments and capture them. Now!" Gently Carol increases the pressure on Darryl's hand.

"Golly," says Darryl. "Imagine those hordes of dead poets screaming at Miss P. to gather the rosebuds before her biological clock struck zero-hour. No wonder the poor spinster wound up losing her sense of humour."

"Let's promise - never to lose our sense of humour," says Carol.

"I solemnly swear on my Speedo, at my Speedo, but not particularly in my Speedo," pledges Darryl.

"I checked out some of the activities at the resort while you were sleeping," says Carol. "They're offering tango lessons in the Hav-an-a Ballroom every day. Would dancing of that sort be an affront to your masculine sensitivities?"



"As you well know, my gifted senorita, the tango is an expression of alpha male prowess, which I'm confident I could master with dexterity and aplomb." Darryl grabs Carol's waist and leans over her. "As long as you're not concerned about making a public spectacle of yourself on the dance floor?"

"Not if you're claiming responsibility for every move we make."

"What time does it start?" asks Darryl, releasing his grip.

"Five o'clock."

"You'll miss out on your Karaoke pole dancing ..."

"What's your point?"

Suddenly Darryl stops walking. "Carol, do you realize we've been at this pleasure dome for twenty-four hours already, and we haven't gone swimming yet? And those sparkling waves keep lapping at our feet, inviting us to come on in ..."

"Did you wear your Speedo under your shorts?"

"No. I wanted to be comfortable. Darryl smiles mischievously. "So there's no Plan B in there. Just me."

"Holy Commando! I don't have my bathing suit either," exclaims Carol. "Any wise advice, O Sultan of Sugar Shores?"

"We've strayed far from the Casbah, my succulent Sultana."

"The coast is clear, Almighty One.

"Both figuratively and literally."

"There's no one around to see us."

"What if they did?"

"Still, it's broad daylight!"

"That just makes it more enticing!"

"Squeeze the moment!"

"Last one in's a rotten egnog!"

"Are you nervous?"

"Only in a warm and fuzzy way."

"I love you, Honey."

"Merry Christmas, Darling!"

"The water's so warm."

"And clear."

"I can see your Plan B."

"We've finally arrived ..."

"Aahhh! This is what we came here for."

"Yeah! Life doesn't get any better than now!"

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