

# The Comfort of Paper Trees

by Tamar Love

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Jane sits on the front patio of Café Sol with Tad, whose eyes follow her hands as she draws a crayon house on the paper tablecloth. They wait to order. Watch their waiter, mobbed, scuttle by without comment. It is sunny, a Saturday, and they are in love, although if asked, only one of them would admit it.

She colors the house yellow, picks up the blue crayon, adds two lines and a circle to the space next to the house. A blue tree. She draws another, considers an owl. Below the tree she sketches a happy paper family-mother, father, boy and girl-with round heads and beaked noses. Perhaps they are owls, after all. She leans over her cup to select another crayon and notices Tad speaking to her. He is asking about the trees, what's up with the trees, and she looks around, confused. Trees are seldom found in restaurants.

Tad sighs heavily, taps the paper, looks at her with the patronizing smile to which she has become so accustomed. She is dim, she sees him thinking, deficient in brightness. She wants to rip his face from his head-dig her nails into the flesh at the base of his hairline and peel his face away as though it were an herbal mask. She wants to shout at him, beg him to be nice to her, it is Saturday, a fine day, and they are in love. But she does nothing but smile. Because he is Tad. "What did you say?" she asks. "I'm sorry, I wasn't listening."

"These trees here," he points, "what did you mean by them?" She looks down at the circles she has, for no particular reason, colored blue. "There's a green crayon right here in the cup," he continues, stirring the crayons with his finger, "yet you chose the blue." He smirks. "Is everything okay in your world? Or are you feeling a little blue?" His mouth flat and hard, his eyes amused. Her fist in his face, once, quickly, so appealing this fine day. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks. "Am I drooling or something?" He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and examines it.

Jane keeps her mouth shut, a decision she has made with growing frequency in the two years Tad has been her lover. In the beginning, it hurt her feelings when he laughed at her. She sulked, which only made things worse. He invariably laughed harder: her silly emotions, her quirky acts of self-indulgence. She used to argue with him when he got that way, react to him, but she soon learned it was easier to just laugh back, even if it meant she was laughing at herself.

Her friends berate her, constantly. Ask her why she puts up with it, the teasing, the slighting and rudeness, the malicious, infantile jabs at her expense. She's tried to explain, but her friends—who have never seen that sugar-sweet puppy-love look in Tad's eyes, never seen Tad-in-Action, charming everyone from her Mom to the Ralph's checkout clerk, never seen Tad zip down Beachwood Canyon Drive in his steel-gray Kharmen Ghia, doing well over seventy on a recklessly narrow road—simply don't understand. And although it's true that Tad doesn't always treat her as well as he might, she consoles herself with the irrefutable knowledge that he loves her almost as much as she loves him. Besides, she thinks, it's better than being alone.

Tad asks her again why she has chosen to color the trees blue.

"Because they're sad," she says, for want of a better answer. Looks into his eyes and smiles. How blue they are, she thinks, his eyes, the color of ice melting in the sun.

It is then that he kisses her, leaning over the spill of olive oil in the center of the table, taking her face in both hands and laying his lips on hers, holding them firmly, teasing, for one minute, two. She feels the kiss in her stomach, blooming like spilled blood in a pool of water. She sits, motionless, while he withdraws, raises his hand to brush her hair back at the temple.

"Silly Jane," he says, tracing her lip with his finger, "sometimes I think I love you."

She stops breathing. Today is Saturday, she thinks, June 14th.

"Look," he says, "the waiter's coming." He opens his menu. "Are you ready to order?"

Jane would like to start over from the beginning, but she doesn't know where that is any more. Sometimes she feels as though she is standing alone, at the center of

time, able to see both forward and back, into and out of a great infinity. Here everything seems clear. Here she can stop and wait and take it all in, turn it over and make sense of it before going out into the world again. But as soon as she takes that first step, she slips and slides, like she's wearing new shoes, and she loses focus of everything. If the world moved a bit slower, she thinks, if she could just slow it all down for one damned minute, she might be able to walk in a straight line without falling. As it is, she has no idea of where she's going, and has long ago lost sight of where she's been. She'd like to examine herself, figure out what went wrong, what and when and why, but when she looks inside, all she can see is Tad.

Their good mood stays with them through lunch. Eggplant parmigiana. Smoked turkey with basil. A light Chianti. Tad picks up the check and Jane fixes her lipstick.

Afterward, they stroll down Melrose, peer into shop windows and laugh at the tourists. Tad buys her a small brass incense burner and a bunch of green glass grapes. When they cross the street to the car, Tad takes her hand and keeps it—even after she steps up the curb on the other side. It is a beautiful day.

Tad opens the passenger door for her and suggests they take a drive. "Not far," he says, "maybe through the hills along Mulholland." She smiles, nods and climbs into the car. Tilts her head back against the seat, opens her mouth wide to catch the sunshine. Tad flings the car toward Cahuenga, and they are off.

A little later they are parked on a low rise near Lake Hollywood. Jane sits on the hood of the car, legs wrapped around Tad's waist, her skirt fallen back to her hips, peering out from behind him, over his shoulder. Tad leans against her, pointing out houses of the rich and famous.

"See that striped house? It's Madonna's."

"No, it's hideous!"

"It is, it is. She paid millions to have it painted that way and the neighbors are suing her."

"For what? Disturbing the peace?"

"More like public indecency."

"You'd think they'd be used to it by now..."

Their conversation is unimportant. All that matters is her bare legs around his waist. The sun shining down on them. Heat. Warming the skin. She leans into him, crosses her ankles tighter around him, runs her hands up the back of his head. Kisses his neck. He turns. Imprisoned. Swallows her.

"I like it when it's like this," he says, some time later. "No one else does this with me."

"Does what?" she asks. "Parks?" They lay on the hood of the still-warm car, Jane's skirt in the dirt by the wheel. She laughs.

"Yes," he answers. She hears the gravity in his voice and turns toward him. "I mean," he continues, "I have to be so many people for everyone else, all the time. With you I can be myself. It's nice. Jane, I-"

Today is Saturday, June 14th. My God, she thinks, I can't believe he's finally saying it.

Tad leans down and kisses her, gently, with his eyes open, and Jane tastes salt from tears she didn't know she was crying. She pulls away. She cannot trust this moment. It may not be happening. He touches her cheek with the tip of one finger and holds it up to the light. It sparkles. Behind it the sky. A world of blue. The happy paper family.

"What's wrong?" He asks, "why are you crying?"

His eyes, she thinks, so blue. The sun behind his head. Dazzling. "Because," she says, "I feel safe." And she does.

He frowns. "Is there something wrong with that?"

She nods. "I'm afraid."

"Of what? Of this?" He gestures, expansively, the sky, the hills, himself.

She nods again.

"Why?"

"It will go away." She hears the truth in her voice and hopes he does not. She bites her lip, tries to stop crying. She's being a fool.

Tad laughs at her. "Silly Jane," he says, stroking her back, kissing her. "Don't be afraid. Everything will be fine."

Back in the car, careening down the hill, Tad turns the radio to the disco station she loves. Someone left the cake out in the rain...

They speed along Hollywood Boulevard, singing as loud as they can, shrieking at the pedestrians who turn to stare at them. The song segues into Captain & Tennille. They love Captain & Tennille. Jane shouts and turns the volume knob far to the right, singing her own lyrics, waving her arms in hula parody:

*Love-love will keep us together  
Think of me, boy, whenever,  
Some sweet-talking boy comes along,  
Singing his song,  
Blah-blah-blah-blah  
You've just got to hold on  
And stop, 'cause i really love you.  
Stop, I'll be thinking of you.  
Look in my heart and let love  
Keep us together.*

She collapses into a fit of giggles as the song ends. Tad looks at her sideways. "You're demented," he says.

"Am not!"

He doesn't answer, leans over and turns down the radio.

"Do you want to go out tonight?" she says.

"What?"

"Do you want to go out tonight?" she repeats.

"Where?"

"The Green Room...it's Disco Night...you like it there, remember? Moe's place, over off Sunset?"

He thinks it over.

"We'll have fun. It's been awhile since we've been out. Together I mean."

He looks at her.

"I mean, we can go somewhere else if you want. We don't have to go there."

She shuts up. Doesn't want to spoil things.

"Why not?" He turns the car toward her apartment, tires screeching madly.

Love, love will keep us together. She can smell him on every part of her body.

Back at her place, Jane fixes herself a drink while Tad studies her closet. He likes to dress her when they go out. She's not sure why. It might be a weird part of his bisexuality. Or maybe he just thinks her incapable of making herself fit for public viewing. Whatever. He always does a good job.

She used to mind this ritual when they first started dating. She thought it might be a bad idea to let him shape her into something she wasn't or into something she didn't want to be. Her friends agreed. But then, like in so many other things, she gave in and let him have his way. Much easier. Besides, she likes this masquerading business. It's fun, like playing dress-up with Mommy's lingerie. And after all, they're her clothes to begin with. It's not like he tells her what to buy-Tad never tries to change her. He just rearranges things a little. If she were alone, it wouldn't matter what she looked like. She reminds herself.

Tad shouts, triumphant, and Jane puts down the drink. Heads for the bedroom. She can hear Lou Reed crooning on the stereo.

Forty minutes later, Tad steers her into the bathroom to admire his artistry. She is astounded. While he always does an interesting job on her, tonight he has taken her to a place she's always wanted to go but never had the directions. He's dressed her in a tight orange halter-top and low-slung, frayed brown jeans. Her Halloween glitter platforms. Giantly teased hair and shiny, shiny makeup. A smear of gold glitter gel on her arms. She can see her nipples through the cloth of her shirt.

She turns to him and squeals, throwing her arms around him, smearing burgundy lip-gloss down the side of his face.

"Stop," he says, holding her arms to her sides. "You've already ruined your lips. Do you want to fuck up your hair too?"

In the car, Jane breaks a rule.

"What do you mean, 'what am I wearing?'" Tad throws the car into third. "I'm wearing clothes."

"Yes, but I mean tonight. What are you wearing tonight?"

"Do you have a problem with what I have on?" Tad, clad in over-sized jeans held up by a homemade rope belt, an A Team T-shirt and a yellow windbreaker, looks at her down the bridge of his nose.

"No," Jane says, "I mean, you look fine."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Nothing, I just thought that since I changed-"

"You expect me to drive all the way back to UCLA to change my clothes? Just because you changed? I have news for you, dear. I don't need change." He slammed the car into the left lane and downshifted. "Now chipper up, we're almost there."

"Where?" She asks, voice small.

"Tony's," he says. "You don't think I'm going to this thing sober, do you?"

Jane, fingernails breaking the skin on the palms of her hands.

It is nearing midnight when they finally arrive at the club. Jane, who used to go to bed at eleven, feels a proprietary smugness as they walk to the head of the long line. The door guy sees them and beckons them forward.

"Tad, man, howsit goin'? You alone tonight?"

Jane slips her hand into the crook of Tad's arm and smiles.

"No," Tad replies, removing her hand from his arm. "Jane, you've met Danny right?" He looks sideways at the door guy, lips curved. Coy.

Jane, who watched Danny kiss Tad on her balcony two weeks ago, feels mildly nauseous. She hates it when he flirts with men in front of her. She affects a look of mild confusion. "I met you at Tony's, right?" she says, but no one is listening.

"Tad, man, you spinning tonight?"

"No, I'm just here to listen."

"Good deal. But hey, look, the guest list's pretty full, and I got busted last night for letting in too many comps. Is it cool if I comp just you?" He does not look at Jane.

"No problem," Tad says, "Jane has cash." He smiles over his shoulder at her.

"Okay, honey?"

"Sure," she says, fumbling with her purse.

He kisses her cheek. "Don't be too long," he says, walking through the door.

Jane's purse slides out of her hand, spilling change and lipstick. The door guy groans. "I'm sorry," she whispers, bending down to retrieve her things. Idiot. "I'll just be a minute."

"Whatever."

At least he didn't make her wait in line.

Down the hall, she finds Tad schmoozing the bar guy. She can't remember his name, but she's pretty sure Tad hasn't slept with him.

"Mango! Mango!" says the bar guy.

"Guava!" Tad yells.

The bar guy laughs and takes out a colored bottle of Stolli. He looks over Tad's shoulder at Jane. "Hi, pretty lady. Need a drink?"

Jane feels herself blush. "I-"

Tad notices her. "Hey, Hon, why don't you grab us some wall while I get these drinks." He turns back to the bar guy, who laughs again, louder.

Jane, leaning against the wall by the bar, is having trouble seeing in increments of one. The passing faces smile too broadly. Begin to blur into groups of six or seven. It's not that she's drunk-she always gets like this when she's alone and sober in clubs. It's as if all the people are interchangeable, part of one master unit with which she is shockingly unfamiliar. Each a tiny sun, together a galaxy. Herself a lump of mud. The same story, why Tad dresses her-this in a moment of clarity one night-does not play well with others. An unproductive member of her peer group. Needs more socializing.

Tad had better come soon with the drinks. In Jane's opinion, clubs and sobriety are incompatible.

She's trying to regain her good mood when Tad approaches with two drinks and a blonde. "This is Lara," he shouts over the music, thrusting a martini in her general direction. "We had Modern Europe together. She's never been here before, so I

told her she could join us. That's okay, right?" He smiles and turns to Lara before Jane can respond. Jane, for whom this is not okay, takes her drink and begins to nuzzle it. She has become accustomed to his blondes, and his brunettes and redheads. At least they were women, and therefore unlikely to regard him with anything but amusement. She sips her drink viciously. The fucker.

Meanwhile, Lara, who apparently has no idea that Jane means anything to Tad, giggles and drinks her Mai Tai too quickly. Jane suspects her interest in Tad is based on the Free Drink Principle-which is fine and dandy provided she leave when her two-drink quota was met.

Tad leans in and whispers something to Lara. A joke, from her hyena laughter. Staring out at the mad, laughing crowd milling around the bar, Jane suddenly hates them all. They look just like ordinary people, she thinks. What makes them so fucking special? She's getting bitter, she knows. Can't help it. It's all about what you can get, not what you can give. Who you know, not who you are. Like the movies. Sick.

She throws back her drink. "Tad," she yells, poking him in the arm, "Get me another one?"

"Yeah," he says, moving away. "Back in a minute." Lara, next to him, gives Jane a little smile as they walk away. Bitch.

They don't come back.

Three martinis later Jane is dancing. Tad is gone. She doesn't know where and she doesn't care. She loves it here. It's bearable and possible.

Although orange and purple strobe lights have made the room into Disco Hell, cool waves of music wash over her like laughter, like the ocean. She bounces around the floor, all elbows and hair. Silly Jane.

Talkin' 'bout the rain and the snow, and there's no place to go...What was the name of that band?...and you're feeling like a part of you is dying...10-CC, that's right...you're looking for the answer in her eyes. You think you're gonna break up, instead she wants to make up...This bald guy in front of her, nice enough looking. Big and rough, maybe a little dim. Tad's type. She laughs and dances closer. He looks her up and down, slow, and grabs her by the hip...oooh, you make me love you...his hand

reaches behind her to grab her ass, pull her into his hard cock. Too close. She pulls back a little. He smiles, dances up and down the length of her body. She holds him by the shoulders and dips backward, hair touching the floor...the things we do for love...the things we do for love...

The song ends. During the moment of silence, the bald guy says hello. Touches her face. She shies away. He will expect flirtation. A phone number. Secret huddling in the dark of the upstairs room. He's nice, but Tad...

"Hi," she says, dancing away. She smiles so his feelings won't be hurt. Gives a little wave. The martinis are starting to wear off. "Gotta get a drink," she calls and heads for the side bar. Over her shoulder, the bald guy watching her with snake eyes.

Hours pass.

She's danced off most of her good drunk buzz, and it's time to find Tad, drop hints about leaving. She works her way through the lower room, chin slightly raised, smiling briefly at passers-by, looking away as soon as she identifies them as Not-Tad. Struggling through the crowds choking the hallway, she places her hand on the shoulders of those she wishes to pass, and they move away for her. She has learned some tricks.

Downstairs, patio, bar. All filled with Not-Tads. All that's left is the upstairs room. The mellow-out room, with funky acid jazz washing over the clustered forms of the soon-to-be fucking. She hates it when she finds him here.

She sees him right away, sitting at one of the few small tables, lost in rapt flirtation with the bald guy she was dancing with earlier. She's a little surprised-although she had him pegged right away as Tad's type, from the way he was grinding into her she assumed he was straight. Maybe he goes both ways, she thinks with some irony, wouldn't that be nice for Tad? She grabs a drink at the bar and makes her way over to where they're sitting.

"Hi honey," she whispers, an inch from Tad's ear. "Who's your friend?"

Tad jumps, startled, turns his head. "Oh, hi. This is...what did you say your name was?" He giggles. So attractive.

The bald guy leans forward, takes her free hand. "Jake," he says, a slow grin spreading over his beefy face. She notices he's missing a lower front tooth. "Didn't we meet earlier?"

Tad looks at her. "We danced before," she explains, "In the disco room. You were with Lara."

Tad seems confused. "Here," Jake says, pulling a chair over from the next table, "Why don't you sit down?"

She slides in between them, spilling a little Manhattan on the table. "Whoops," she says, mopping up the mess with her cocktail napkin. She smiles at Jake.

"Why'd you leave before?" he asks. "Thought we were having fun."

"Oh, yeah, um I needed to get another drink, like I said. I came back, but you were gone." To Tad, "What were you guys talking about?"

"Jake Jarmel."

"Who?"

"Never mind. Hey, Jake, you want that drink we were talking about?" Tad rises and cocks his head toward the bar.

"Yeah, man, that'd be great," Jake says, making no move to rise. "Whiskey straight up?"

Tad blinks, then walks away. Jane feels a small thrill in her stomach. How weird, she thinks. This is definitely backwards. She leans toward Jake. "So what are you doing with my boyfriend?"

"He your boyfriend?" he asks, stressing the first syllable. "Coulda fooled me."

"What do you mean?"

"Looks like maybe he's your girlfriend."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Jake shrugs. "I don't know. He's cute."

"Oh." She takes a sip of her Manhattan, staring at Jake over the rim of her glass. Kind of blue-collar, but nice, very nice. Missing tooth and all. Bet he has a big one. She smirks. Begins to feel drunk again.

"So you guys have a thing going?"

"Yeah," she says, "For a while."

"Good thing?"

"The best."

"You know, they say variety is the spice of life." He gives her another long, drooly grin and takes her hand, running his index finger up her forearm. "Maybe we could see-"

"See what?" asks Tad, back with the drinks. He is clearly pissed. Jane sits up straight in her chair, avoiding eye contact. She tries to remove her hand, which is hot and cold at the same time, but Jake holds firm.

"See about a party later." His fingers on the sensitive part of her inner arm. Where Tad never strokes, although she's hinted she loves it. She feels herself getting hot. Wet.

"A party?" Tad sits down and slides Jake's drink across the table. He does not look at Jane.

"Yeah," says Jake. "After this place closes, how 'bout the three of us take off?" Under the table, Jane feels Jake's leg slide past her knee and come to rest, she imagines, on Tad's crotch. Tad slouches down and moves his shoulders. To the right, the left. Getting comfortable. He looks at her and raises his eyebrows. She shrugs. Almost starts laughing. You wanna? Sure, why not? As though they do this all the time. As though they've ever done anything like this before. It will make him happy, she thinks, testing the validity of the lie. He will have fun, and we will laugh about this later. Jake's leg, under the table, moving, rotating. A small noise from Tad. She could do this. Them.

"How about your place, sweetie?" Jake's hand on her thigh, squeezing the soft flesh next to her pussy.

"Okay."

Jane in her kitchen, mixing up some drinks. A nice spacious kitchen, she thinks, narrow cabinets and all. She keeps it clean, her mother taught her that much. Two lemons, sliced. A plate of sugar. Three shot glasses. She arranges everything on a

serving tray and grabs the bottle of Absolut Citron from the freezer. Tries not to think about what she's doing. Why.

A pile of lemon rinds scattered across the coffee table. The bottle empty. Jake on her left, nibbling her earlobe. Tad in the bathroom. Jane, hot and moist, nearly unconscious. His hand on her breast. "You ready?" he whispers, twisting her nipple.

"Wait for Tad."

"Whatever you say." Kissing the back of her neck.

"Tad."

In her bedroom. The three of them. In a pile on her bed. Jane on her back, naked from the waist up, Jake straddling her, licking her nipples. Tad sitting next to her, hand on her stomach, biting Jake's neck. Little grunts of pleasure.

She hasn't touched anyone but Tad in two years. Not let anyone touch her. He feels strange, Jake, his hands doing different things to her, different from Tad. It's nice, but it's not Tad. She turns to Tad and presses against the length of his thigh. Puts her hand between his legs. Tad pulls Jake to him, kissing him deeply. Jake pulls back a little and looks at her. She smiles weakly and nods a little. Jake, mouth against Tad's, begins to unbutton her jeans. She lifts her hips. His hand slips down into her panties.

Tad breaks away and pulls off his clothes. Naked, he begins to undress Jake, biting his neck and licking his back. Jane's jeans are thrown to the floor. She reaches for Tad. Wants him in her. Jake next to her, stroking her. Tad panting. She feels him enter her. Feels him withdraw. He moves behind Jake. She closes her eyes. Now it will come, she thinks.

Jake grunts, lurches, and Jane opens her eyes. Tad is crouched on the floor, holding his stomach. "None of that, man," Jake says. "I ain't here for that kind of thing." He takes her wrists and raises her arms over her head. Kisses her left armpit.

"Then what?" Tad gasps, panting harder. He must have kicked him pretty hard, Jane thinks, struggling to get free. He must be hurt.

"For her," Jake says, holding her wrists tighter, biting her neck. "What did you think?"

This isn't supposed to happen, she thinks. This is supposed to be for Tad. A nice surprise for Tad. She cries out as Jake enters her. Feels a hand over her mouth. She struggles, opens her eyes.

Tad is standing next to the bed, looking down at her with something close to hatred. She pleads with her eyes, get him away from me, get him off. Bitch, he mouths, and walks away. She tries to scream, but Jake pushes his tongue into her mouth, thrusts it in time with his cock in her body. She bites him and bucks beneath him, but he only laughs, and slaps her across the face, holding her wrists in one hand, pounding into her, harder and harder.

"You like it like this, don't you baby? I can tell by the way you move."

And somewhere within her, beneath the horrible strangeness of his body and the screams he will not let her utter, she does.

Years pass and he ejaculates, spilling seed onto her stomach in a large, loose pile. Still holding her hands above her head, he traces the outline of her face with his free hand. "That was good, sweetheart. Real good." He grins, his missing tooth winking at her. "Think you'll be wanting more in a little bit?" he moves one of her hands to his cock, already getting stiff again. She squeezes it hard, and he grunts, releasing her. She twists out from under him and runs for the bathroom, sobbing and screaming. Get him out. Make him leave. Get him the hell away from her. Jake shouting behind her, "What's the fuck's your problem, bitch?"

Jane stands naked in the shower, shaking, the spray scalding her. She cannot get clean. Cannot stop crying. What happened? she thinks. What just happened? She will have to burn the sheets. Did he rape me? she wonders, or did Tad? She wraps her arms around her body and collapses to the floor. Who let this happen to me? She tries to speak, cannot.

Somewhere in the distance of the living room, she hears conversation. Jake pissed, not understanding why she got so freaked out. Tad, soothing, explaining Jane was easily upset, not very good with this kind of thing. Tad suggesting that perhaps they should talk later, another time. An offer of his phone number. Hers.

She finds her voice, screams, "No, no, no," again, louder. A slow cycle building. The dirt on her skin, the slime. The semen. She stands and pounds her fists against the tile. Howls. The bastard, the fucker.

When Tad slides open the shower door and steps in, she throws herself at him, sobbing. He takes her in his arms and holds her gently.

"Silly Jane," he says, "don't be afraid. Everything will be fine."