

SHE  
TUMBLLED DOWN

*a short story*

Lorraine Devon Wilke

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by Lorraine Devon Wilke

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For the woman who tumbled down...

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The grit of sand was sharp; the sense of surreal so strong there was no way to process the event unfolding. She felt speed and motion, the scraping of flesh as impact propelled her across the gravel. She'd often wondered how death would feel, what you'd think as it came upon you, *if* you'd think, but this moment unfolded in abrupt, poorly edited jump cuts that left crucial details on the floor, hurling her blindly towards inevitable conclusion. No thoughts emerged... she just tumbled down until all motion stopped and everything went black.

Behind the shattered windshield he shook so hard he could barely breathe.

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Lainey Pastouras talked about parties and blind dates with a vigor that implied both were essential to the day, but Charlotte Frame, the reluctant birthday girl, had quite a different view.

"I want nothing more than Marjolaine cake, good champagne, and the joy of platonic friends."

"And I want to be instrumental in making you a little happier than you are now," Lainey persisted.

"I'm plenty happy. Marjolaine would be the tipping point."

"You're past due for a personal evolution, Charlotte. You've been lonely too long, you'll be thirty-five on Friday, and it's time for love to round the sharper corners of your life."

Charlotte liked her sharper corners.

But she was also aware that embracing any element of the dating process would go a long way toward getting her circle of friends, particularly Lainey, off her lonely back. This had always been more easily pondered than done, however. Despite sincere appreciation for the rituals of romance, it remained true for Charlotte that finding men of merit was not easy in the 21st century. That it hadn't been much easier in the 20th century, when she was younger and men of merit (or otherwise) were exponentially more receptive, was irrelevant to the conversation.

So in a moment of birthday vulnerability she relented, allowing her best friend to sell her on the idea of inviting someone she'd never met to a party she didn't want, with assurances that this invitee was a man of honor, financial solvency, and a "great ass." As much as Charlotte admired all three, she was generally against these sorts of amatory arrangements, convinced they were too forced and artificial to ever end well, but it *was* her birthday. And for some reason she felt anticipatory and so ripe for change that Lainey, with admirable statistics in finding good men in a haystack, seemed the perfect arbiter of that change.

The party was planned, Marjolaine cake was ordered, Hugh Raymond was invited and, to Charlotte's blushing surprise, he accepted.

Happy birthday, dear Charlotte, happy birthday to you.

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The leather seats of his car had a smell he'd always liked, a scent of luxury and impeccable taste. It was an expensive car and there'd been arguments about even considering the purchase so soon after they moved to the expensive house. But to him it signaled success and he told her as much. It would be good for "the brand," he insisted when she made comment about him showing off and "reaching beyond our means." Though she ultimately acquiesced, she never particularly liked the car... or the smell of those seats, which, she said, made her feel like she was riding around in a hide factory. He told her to get used to it; he'd never have a lesser car, he proclaimed.

Now, in this swirling moment of dust and panicked breath, those luxurious seats were sprinkled with glass shards and gravel bits and gave off an odor that struck him as gamey. Strange, really, how pungent it was. He'd never noticed that before and had the illogical thought that he'd have to mention it to his wife.

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Charlotte hadn't had sex since the last half of the second year of her marriage, which was two years before her divorce, which was now four years ago. This was enough sexual downtime that the idea of letting a man she barely knew not only into her home but her bed and her body was unfathomable at evening's commencement. By dessert the heat between her and her blind date was so palpable others circling the table gratefully peeled off to the bar, where Lainey cast frequent glances back to revel in her success.

And success it was. Charlotte appeared to have lost all remnants of her characteristic wariness, acting out a version of herself no one could have pictured and she only imagined in late-night fantasies: hot, beautiful, and sexually rapacious. This translated, for the moment, into comically discreet but undeniably public displays of affection. Which, it seemed to her in the heat of the moment, were patently unavoidable.

Between breaths, she noticed Hugh wasn't drinking, which intrigued her. But she'd had several, more than usual, in fact, making her less clear about why things were happening so fast. Retrospect later clarified that Hugh had simply melted her core.

Attractive as advertised, funny, articulate and just heedful enough to hold her attention, he exceeded every criteria in ways that both surprised and delighted her. He was a successful pediatrician, the father of two functional young men, divorced for two years, and clearly primed for his next chapter, given the lack of ambiguity in his flirtations.

The most immediate next chapter led to her home and the cocoon of her long-neglected bed, where everything changed amidst tenderness and hard passion. It was one of those nights when the ephemera of life shifts. The walls open, the ceiling rises, the air sweetens; even the hope for a better world is suddenly imaginable. Love and sex may not possess such powers in reality, but on this night, in this bed, with this man, they were a force for good. Charlotte's good, in particular. Hugh was the healer of heart and by virtue

of his touch she became a new woman.

It was an excellent birthday.



The whisper of branches tapping as the ocean breeze cleared fireworks from the post-midnight sky was the most salient sound that remained. In some distant place the laughter of New Year's Eve revelers still tinkled from time to time and the occasional car whizzed by on the adjacent street, but here the night was over. The revelry was done.

There was no prolonged moment of disorientation or pain, no sliver of consciousness to clarify the unfathomable; no respite from the stunning fact of what had just happened. She lay tucked under a smattering of fallen leaves, half hidden and bent in ways bodies do not go; her face white and streaked with blood, her eyes lost in a glaze of shock. Hanging at the precipice with no awareness of the imminent fall.

And though alive as he'd been before colliding with a woman in a crosswalk, he knew his own life was now a thing of shifts and changes. Awash in booze and late-night weariness, he'd simply not seen her. In the same split-second she experienced, he could only watch as her body smashed into the windshield with a fearsome thud, then flew across the gravel and down the embankment.

The silence that followed that unimaginable moment was eerie; horrible, jagged-breath silence as sweat poured down his cheeks. The redolence of leather he'd noticed in the moments before seemed to have ratcheted up to the point that he thought he would vomit, so he sat motionless long enough to quell the nausea and formulate a cogent plan.

He peered through the broken glass. There was nothing to see. The night was dark, no cars approached; no one appeared. He leaned forward; was she lying there? Right there in front of his car? There was no movement he could detect, but dizziness hampered his view. More pertinently, he was profoundly inebriated, a state that left all logic and compassion elsewhere. His mind darted amongst various scenarios, each one more inconceivable than the next, until he ultimately rejected all but one.

He pushed aside the airbag, brushed the glass off the seats, restarted his engine, and tore away in a roar of gravel. To crawl deeper into what was now an irrevocable event would surely end his own life and that paralyzing thought drove him much too far to turn back.



They were weeks into it now, lost in the moist, creamy center of new love, so exquisite that reason slipped through the cracks. But Charlotte wanted no part of reason anyway. Like a child, a needy thing, she craved only him, warm and real in her bed, wanting nothing but to curl into his love and stay there forever. Gratefully, he opened his arms to welcome her and she tumbled down.

They laughed at their own besottedness. Both had endured enough heartache to find their mutual enthusiasm refreshing. They held tight and moved fast, unwilling to waste a moment on caginess or calculation.

Lainey was initially thrilled with the rapid advancement of her matchmaking but when Charlotte announced she was moving into Hugh's stunning waterfront home, a matter decided only the night before, the response was muted. "Wow. I'm slightly stunned. Or are you joking?"

Charlotte, high on the fog of love, was immediately annoyed. "No, I'm not joking and why would you be stunned? You brokered the damn deal. Aren't you the one who's been lecturing me on the virtues of love for years now? I thought you'd be thrilled."

"I *am* thrilled. Thrilled that you're happy, thrilled that things are going well; I'm just stunned that you're moving so fast. It's only been... what? Three weeks?"

"It's been over a month and why is that relevant?"

Lainey cocked her head. "Charlotte. I've known you for over ten years and you're not a silly woman. You know why that's relevant."

"Oh, I see. You don't believe in love at first sight. And we're too old for that sort of thing anyway, right?" Charlotte sounded like a petulant teenager.

"No, I *do* believe in love at first sight – though in most cases 'lust' is the more appropriate word." Lainey winked; Charlotte rolled her eyes. "But what's also true, and what we *are* too old for, is believing we don't need time, real time together, to know if 'first lust' translates into real love."

Charlotte sat down with a thud and little-disguised pique. "Buzzkill."

They both laughed, though briefly.

But as Lainey poured another cup of coffee, Charlotte persisted. "Seriously though, I get all that, really, I do, but why are you being hesitant? Is it *specific* hesistance? Like, there's something about Hugh I don't know?"

"I'm sure there are many things about Hugh you don't know; it's only been a month! You'll get there, girlfriend. If you move in, you'll likely get there sooner than expected." Lainey glanced over to her brooding friend. "Why, are you worried?"

"No, he's... incredible. He's everything I could ever want. Which is why I'm terrified. Is it possible he's too good to be true?"

"Probably," Lainey laughed. Charlotte's flush of anguish indicated a more sensitive tack was in order. "Look, Char, in all the years I've known him, most of which were spent discussing my children's fevers and when to give them what medicine, he was never anything but a stellar guy. He went through a rough divorce, that was dicey for a while, but as far as I know everything is civil now. His boys are both spectacular, he's considered one of the best pediatricians in the city, and he has a busy pro bono clinic, so yeah... he's a pretty great guy. Which, if you remember, is why I wanted to fix you up with him in the first place."

"Then why do you think I should wait?"

"Because I'm a realist. And I think time can be useful. Trust me, Char, I'm all for this, but moving in is a big step. I just want you to be sure."

Charlotte sat pondering for a moment then looked up. "I'm sure." Quiet, definitive... sure.

So Lainey squeezed Charlotte's hand and they went on to discuss what should be done with Charlotte's condo, if the longer commute would be a problem, and what, if any, hesitation she had about the potential of moving toward something even more permanent (none so far). It was a good girlfriend conversation.

Charlotte moved in with Hugh the next weekend.

(To be continued...)