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about 2125 words

THE WEATHER OF LOVE
By Paul Lambrecht

America's premiere relationship coach is Paul Nelson Turner. His teeth gleams with polish. His hair is perfectly coiffed, a little shaggy, and he sports a day-old stubble beard.

This year he coached Brad and Angie back from the brink. Years ago he had steered Siegfried and Roy out of the tiger's maw of death and back into each other's sequin-studded arms. He'd been sued and counter-sued in British courts for professional misconduct when he'd seduced Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Thankfully the magistrate had seen what he had diagnosed as the central flaw of the relationship: Michael Douglas was an asshole. So the judge had thrown out the case.

Paul Nelson Turner reduced people to a subset of their most withering, abrasive, and impish component personality traits, and strove to show the players in whatever relationship existed just how these sadistic proclivities made the other partner in the relationship feel small and weak. He got paid the big money to show people just how sick they really were.

And they were generally very grateful, and not a little surprised. When the couple realized just how psychotically they were behaving, they would generally feel awful and make nice.

The symptoms of the sickness: passive-aggressiveness; hostility; blind rage; money fights; intelligence envy; mad jealousy; alcoholism; infidelity; impotence.

The weather of love. Paul Nelson Turner often thought that man had crossed the oceans without ever having descended from the trees.

His wife, Michelle, had died, bless her. She'd been mauled by a pack of dogs while jogging. They'd caused every limb to have to be amputated leaving her melancholy and branchless. She'd convinced the hospital chaplain to help her end her suffering.

Case pending.

Thus passed Michelle Turner, beloved wife, into the ether. He had not reopened his laboratory to love since. The years had marched on in solemn order. Business dropped off. He lost his share of the market to Linda Walsh-Lesley. She retained clients undesirable to Paul because she avoided all mention of the sickness.

He thought her as useless as a manicurist at a leper colony. Love, thought Paul Nelson, he'd always known just what to think about it, just what to say about it.

Love was like a drunken gargoyle running through a smoldering forest. Love was a vivid Technicolor bouncy ball rolling down a street rendered in stark monochrome. Love was a disease, the treatment of which put food on his table, but it was nutrientless food, and just whet an insatiable appetite for more of itself.

Love was a charity for the rich and powerful. It was a terrible name for a boat. It was the only known cure for loneliness.

Love was a vanquished gladiator, staring with searching dead eyes at the downwards dipping thumb of the Caesar.

Paul Nelson was not an especially introspective man. Prone to outbursts of towering hypocrisy, his gift of perceptual acuity was a scalpel which opened others' fleshy abscesses up to scrutiny. But the state of his own organs was a mystery to himself. The thought of his own blood, coursing inside him, made him queasy.

Like a healer, he could use his gift to kill or cure, but not to reason. He'd never paused to consider what the sickness actually was, or that it might actually be gradually consuming him from the inside. This committed abnegator of love couldn't help but fall victim to its corrosive potential. As surely as birth leads to death.

He stared at the wall as if it was a mirror.

He wondered if Linda Walsh-Lesley could help a man who hated love. Who had no one to love and no one to love him back. She could foster understanding, compromise, optimism, realism. But this was sacrilege. Believing, as he did, without hesitation, that love was a sickness.

He picked up the phone and called her. To her, love was a Frankenstein monster, cobbled together with decomposing graveyard finds like hyphenated surnames, separate vacations, and other love stunts. Adulterated, sullied, impure. A healthy admixture of love and the realities of co-existence.

She picked up the phone.

"Paul Nelson?"

"Paul Nelson Turner, yes, Hi Linda."

"To what do I owe this unexpected honor?"

Paul Nelson struggled with the necessary first fusillade of what would be explicatory, weak words. He was already beginning to compromise.

"Linda, I don't know how to love anymore," he said.

She sighed, but it was a knowing sigh. A commiseration, really.

He breathed softly.

"Paul, I can't talk now. Can we meet later, tomorrow, maybe?"

Paul sighed in fear and disappointment, but after agreeing tenuously to a meeting, subject to the vicissitudes of his calendar of course, he went to bed that night with the reawakening stir of anticipation for his life and what was to come.

Perhaps he wasn't as big an asshole as Michael Douglas. Or as much of a lightweight as Michael Douglas said he was.

They met for lunch the next day at a little bistro called *le cirque*.

"Merry Christmas, Paul Nelson Turner," she said.

"And a Merry Christmas to you as well," he said, overcoming the urge to smile. She became pert and business-like.

"So, you can't seem to love. Is there anyone in your life?"

Paul Nelson shook his head, a touch ashamed.

"Are you open to anyone coming into your life?" she asked.

Paul Nelson nodded.

"Any prospects?"

Paul Nelson shook his head.

"You know, a lot of people are going online nowadays."

Linda was short, a little mousy, but well put-together. Her face made sense in a reassuring way. He wondered how much she owed her career just to a seemingly credentialed face.

He wondered how he must look to her. Sheer unattractive desperation.

Online dating was a new life support system for the sickness. He thought about Mr. Walsh-Lesley, whatever his name was? What a nice accomplished man he must be. Come to think of it, he seemed to remember a Dr. Lesley from some function.

"Come on Linda, a man of my fame and professional reputation can't be cruising Eharmony for a date to the Friday night fish fry."

This was meant to come off as haughty, but Linda accepted it as a simple statement of fact.

Maybe he made sense, too, at times.

"The holidays are a difficult time for a lot of people. It's okay to be lonely."

She was so compassionate, so understanding. No wonder she was enjoying such success.

"And how is Dr. Lesley?"

She laughed, a delightfully tinny cacophonous laugh.

"He's fine. He's on sabbatical. He's been smoking a pipe... In the house. I know, right. It's driving me bonkers."

That's right. Dr. Lesley was a professor. He had a PhD in Paleobotany or some such thing.

"Linda?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone, you know, about how I'm not feeling anything."

"Sure, Paul Nelson."

Paul Nelson Turner smiled. He liked the way his name sounded in her mouth.

That night he dreamed he was back on the spaceship again. The spaceship was being captained by an evil alien who looked a little like Michael Douglas. The crew didn't know that he was skulking around through the corridors and scaling the labyrinthine network of Jefferies tubes in the spaceship's innards.

He always woke up just as he was about to arm the self-destruct sequence.

"Dammit," he said, suddenly alert, draped in the darkness before dawn, his sheets damp from sweat.

He lay in bed for several more hours.

Then he roused and stretched. It was Christmas.

The day was chilly throughout under a woolen sheet of clouds.

He felt like Scrooge would have felt like if he hadn't been visited by any spirits, and was hungover to boot.

He turned on the TV and flipped through all the channels. He found it strange that every channel seemed to be running a *Basic Instinct* marathon, especially as it was

Christmas. Michael Douglas's menacing smirk and shallow naked chest taunted him until he couldn't take it anymore.

He paused the TV mid-arc of the scene where Sharon Stone uncrosses her legs, revealing her blonde mound, for so long flies began to buzz around the screen.

Was this love?

Paul Nelson poured himself a tall drink, red wine and ginger ale, and drank it all down in one gulp. Then he filled up another, and sipped it in between belting out a rendition of Beethoven's ninth.

Bubububuh.

Bubububuh.

He waved his non-cupholding hand like a baton. He could hear the music now bleating out of his expensive Bose speakers.

Sharon Stone looked at him dewy-eyed and expectant as if she were awaiting him beneath the mistletoe.

"Oh, you're a forward thing, aren't you? You'd like a kiss."

He bent down on his knees to kiss the screen.

Sharon Stone recrossed her legs and turned her cheek to him.

Suddenly she was replaced on the screen by Michael Douglas accepting her offer of a cigarette.

Paul Nelson screamed.

"It's him," he cried.

Michael Douglas smiled at Paul Nelson, a blank smug smile. Could have been trying to say to him a number of things, all bad, all menacing.

"Look, do you have something to say to me?" he shouted at the screen.

Michael Douglas continued his cryptic smirking.

"Come out of there and let's take care of this like men."

The TV turned off, the music stopped, and the doorbell rang, nearly all at once.

Paul Nelson set down his drink and gulped in terror, breaking out in a cold sweat.

He looked out the window below at the top of a white-maned head standing outside his front door. He flicked his intercom.

"Who is it?" he asked in a quaking voice.

"Ho ho ho. It's Santa Claus," came the crackling reply.

Nothing to be afraid of. I don't even believe in Santa Claus, thought Paul Nelson.

He knew Michael Douglas was at his door. He didn't know how he knew it, but he knew it was true. Michael

Douglas was coming from a place of truth to bloody his face.

Well, best to take his medicine and let this nightmare end.

But it wasn't Michael Douglas. Nor was it Sean Penn or even Ray Liotta.

"Who are you?" he asked the man with a narrow carriage and chin-length silverfox hair.

"Hello, Merry Christmas, my name is Raymond Patterson. I work for Hallmark."

He handed Paul Nelson his card.

It said Ray Patterson, Director of Marketing, Hallmark Greeting Cards Division.

"What are you doing here, though?"

"I wanted to give you a little pitch, inside though, where it's warmer."

"But it's Christmas."

The silver fox smiled stealthily. "I know. So where is your spirit of hospitality?"

Paul Nelson stood aside from the door, stunned, allowing the man to pass by.

"So what can I do for you?" he asked, recovering a little.

"Mr. Paul Nelson Turner, you are the most celebrated relationship coach in the world. Therefore, it's fair to say you must know more about love, the feeling, than any other man alive."

Paul Nelson enjoyed this pitch so far.

"Or woman," he added. "And please, Dr. Paul Nelson Turner, if you don't mind."

"Yes, doctor, sorry," said Raymond, tripping over his tongue in a mad assault to ingratiate himself with Paul Nelson by the use of the false credential.

"You were saying I know about love."

"Yes, you do. And as the world's foremost expert on love, we want your assistance in launching a new line of talking greeting cards. We want you to condense your philosophy of love into thought-provoking sound bites. Messages which convey the authentic experience of lovingness. In card-form."

This sounded very promising to Paul Nelson.

"And it will be my voice on the chip?"

"Yes," said Raymond, "Or a professional voice actor. We'll see."

"Fine," said Paul Nelson Turner, "So long as it's not Michael Douglas."

Raymond's eye twinkled with a bit of winsome mirth.

"Merry Christmas, Paul Nelson Turner," said Raymond.

"Merry Christmas, indeed," replied Paul Nelson. For just a second, it was as if the whole universe flowed through a loving heart.

There, he'd just thought up one card.

He knew love, after all, and he determined that it wasn't a sickness. Not quite. A burden, to be sure, but more like a nagging toothache or the phantom pains of missing arms and legs, and not the sharp pain of Michael Douglas's fist in your eye.

It could be exotic like a Catherine Zeta-Jones, open and inviting like a Sharon Stone, or prim and maternal like a Linda Walsh-Lesley.

Paul Nelson Turner had a new love for the time being.

Folks who bought talking greeting cards.

He was back.

END.