

Mars and Pete

By Coco Richter

First published in Imprint 15,

The Annual Anthology of Women in Publishing Society, Hong Kong

Copyright © 2016 by Coco Richter

I pulled into the Whole Food's parking lot hoping to find a spot by the entrance. It was pure Nor-Easter hell outside. Driving, sideways rain and a cracking, angry thunder. I wasn't in a good mood to begin with and now the weather was sending me to new depths of low. I inched forward just as a car began backing out of a choice spot. I thought my day was looking up until a white Range Rover snaked into the spot from the other end of the row. I wanted to lay on my horn, a cry of injustice to the world, but it was Nellie Grand, President of the PTA and the Garden Club, and someone you'd prefer to call a friend. Nellie. At barely five feet tall, I wondered how she could reach the pedals of that behemoth.

I motored to the far reaches of the parking lot in my ten-year old Volvo wagon, resigned to my fate. At least I'd worn my Wellington boots.

Though it was well before nine in the morning, the market was teeming with shoppers. It was New Year's Eve. What was I thinking? I kept the hood up on my jacket, planning to get in and out like a stealth fighter. I grabbed Boursin, a block of comte, a spicy, Italian sausage, and some french bread and

was third in line at the express checkout when Nellie got me.

“Mars!” she said.

That’s me, Mars. My mother, Antonia Alexandra Windenheim, in a 1960s, clearly drug-induced moment, decided to name her first born Marscapone after eating tiramisu for the first time. As the story goes, she was at a café on the Upper East Side with her best friend Patsy Ludwicke and after taking her first bite of the cakey, pudding thing, she announced that the baby growing inside her was certain to be a girl and would henceforth be called Tiramisu. Patsy’s allegedly protested that not everyone likes tiramisu and that even for those who do, it was inappropriate to name one’s daughter after a dessert. While my mother was not an ardent feminist, she apparently conceded Patsy’s point, but refusing to be wholly put off, decided to call her Marscapone.

Mars-ca-pone, not to be confused with the Italian cheese within tiramisu known as *mas-car-pone*. Whether Mom realized her mistake or thought it too minor a difference to be deterred, I’ve never been clear, but I’ve always been known as Mars.

Nellie was two checkout lanes over but there was no avoiding her. She had her hand above her head, waving, and her eyes locked in on me.

“Hi Nellie,” I said, forcing a smile. “Happy

New Year's."

"You too. It's sooo good to see you. God, it's been ages. We have to catch up. Can you wait for me a sec?"

I wanted nothing more than to dart back into the protective cocoon of my car but instead I said, "Sure."

Everyone wanted to "catch up" with me these days, and I indulged them and their ravenous appetite for all the juicy details. Dr. Penny, my therapist, says its because I'm averse to conflict and keep everything inside and that if I don't start asserting myself, I'm likely to begin strangling neighborhood cats. At first I thought she was just mean and a cat hater but, on reflection, I could see she had a point.

Nellie wheeled her cart beside me and clutched my arm. "Mars, you poor dear, it must have been just awful for you."

"Hmm," I mumbled, knowing full well that people were far more interested in sharing *their* thoughts about my situation than they were in hearing my own.

True to form, Nellie forged ahead, regaling me with the broad strokes of her cousin's divorce that came to a crescendo when his estranged wife ran him over in the courthouse parking lot.

"She said she didn't see him, that she'd been crying from the sheer exhaustion of waiting around in the court room all morning just to

be told that she'd have to move from her house and remove her kids from private school - Dexter, can you imagine? But Mars, I tell you, none of us believed her. She gunned him down, clear as I'm standing here talking to you now."

"That's terrible. Is he all right?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He's dead. She hit him forty miles an hour and dragged him under the car for sixty feet."

I waited for her to tell me that she was kidding, that her cousin was a bit bruised and battered but ended up with the Cape house and 401k but when she brushed aside a tear, I knew she wasn't.

"God, your kids must be devastated," Nellie said, swiftly diverting to the more timely marriage gone awry. "And I hear Pete's parading that girl around town like a show horse." She licked her lips, ready to feast on the juicy tidbits of marital destruction.

"Oh, Mars, you poor thing. What will you do?" She clenched my hands as though I'd just announced a terminal illness.

"I suppose I'll just get on with my life," I said. Nellie was clearly disappointed. She wanted theatrics, tears and cursing. Everyone did, but I just didn't have the energy for it.

Three months earlier, my life was upended. On an otherwise normal Tuesday afternoon, Pete arrived home from work early.

"To what do we owe this pleasure?" I'd

asked, my mind racing with the many things that could lead a middle-aged man to arrive home well before dinnertime. Unemployment, bankruptcy, an enlarged prostate.

He'd poured himself a beaker of vodka and loosened his tie before giving me the look I've come to think of as the pity stare.

"Oh, Mars," he'd said.

A chill ran down my spine. It wasn't the words (clearly) but the way he'd said them. Somber but final. Present but closed off. In that instant, a short film known as the last year of my life played in my head. Pete's sudden impulse to mow the front lawn every weekend; his workout campaign that had him running six to eight miles and doing 100 ab crunches every morning and night; his longer hair style that gave him an artsy, flamboyant air; his macrobiotic diet that had him eschewing all foods containing gluten (pretty much everything we normally ate); his weekly use of Colgate White-strips; his zest to rake the leaves from the front lawn (while ignoring the back); and, his purchase of a pair of bright red, Adirondack chairs for the front lawn so he could "feel more connected with the neighborhood."

As the reel of the film came to a close, I realized what should have been painfully obvious before; that what Pete wished to be more connected to was our neighbor's thirty-one year old nanny, Penelope O'Leary.

“I’m in love with her,” he’d said, having the courage to look me in the eye but not to say her name.

While it’s all a bit fuzzy now, as best as I can recall, I turned off the stove, put down my spatula and left the room, and then the house, the town and the county, fully intending to soldier on until I couldn’t hold it any longer and pulled into an Olive Garden off the 495. Once there, I ordered some food and a glass of wine and tried to take stock of the situation. Taking stock began with the “Holy shit!” revelation that Pete was leaving me and I hadn’t seen it coming. At all. Now in fairness, I’d known Penelope for three years and always thought of her as a nice girl, once you got past her breasts, that is. They are literally the largest natural formations I’ve ever seen; oversized melons bulging out of every blouse, t-shirt, sweater or jacket. Their size cannot even be obscured by that most unflattering of East Coast wardrobe necessities, the North Face jacket.

Penelope had been the subject of many conversations around our dinner table about human development (or, in her case, hyper-development) and the line dividing acceptable commentary on one’s physical appearance from creepy, stalker-like commentary. For example, when Penelope was chasing down her two little charges – Charlie and Nicholas Masterson – and the sun was setting and

temperatures dropping, it was inappropriate for my son Jared to observe that “he couldn’t see past her headlights.” Similarly, Pete was often reminded that when talking to Penelope, he was to ask how “she” was doing rather than how “they” were doing. And when offering to help Penelope carry in the groceries from her car, “can I take that for you” was better than “can I hold those for you?”

On top of Penelope’s abundant upper-half, she was also endowed with a rather large mouth – some have said horsey – and ridiculously full lips that were perpetually slathered in shimmering gloss. To complete the picture, young Penelope had thick layers of long, auburn hair that offset her youthful, Irish looking skin. She was a tad chunky through the middle and a few inches shorter than she’d probably like but all said, she was a pretty girl.

Sitting in a tired booth eating a rubbery piece of teriyaki chicken, I tried to picture Penelope and Pete together and though I hated to admit it, they looked good. Take any middle-aged man and put him with an attractive younger woman and he loses ten years, just like that. Your 52 year old is instantly in his early forties. Your 70 year old is just beginning to think about retirement. It’s all that extra sex, and the surging hormones associated with new love and racing around with young missy to trendy restaurants,

museums, and Celtics games.

I'd taken a swig of wine to stop the film, berating myself for letting their life play out in my head before they'd even had the chance to live it. And could I blame him, I wondered? We only go around once so why shouldn't he trade me in for a new model? At least she didn't remotely resemble me. I'm on the thin side, relatively tall (5'8") and still think of myself as a blond. I knew some women in town whose husbands left them for an exact replica of themselves minus fifteen years. Now that would be insulting. It suggests that people are interchangeable and love is shallow. At least with Penelope, Pete was aiming for a whole new package and, as sad as it may be, that made me feel better about myself.

I still had the shakes and that hiccupy feeling that comes from crying for an extended period but it wasn't from anger; it was more of a slow burning indigestion from the realization that my life as I knew it would never be the same. The waitress brought me my check and it was getting late so I ambled out of the restaurant trying to decide whether I'd drive on to Vermont or turn back towards home. The former, while tempting, seemed to be putting off the inevitable. And after a little self-reflection, I accepted the new reality. For in that roadside Olive Garden, I'd put words to the feelings that had been creeping up on me for years. In that space that was once filled

with love and the promise of a shared life, a grainy malaise had taken hold.

I'd recognized this before that day but dismissed it as being part of getting older and the children becoming more independent, deluding myself that it would pass and my feelings would be restored. But love doesn't really work that way. It's a one-way road with no turning lane; if you make mistakes along the way, you carry them with you. If they're minor mistakes, you can put them in the trunk and move on down the highway. But if they're major mistakes, there's no room in the car. Our mistake was that we'd lost interest in each other, and even a sixteen-wheeler mack truck can't hold that one.

See how Mars fares as she navigates the New Year in the forthcoming novel, Bottom of the Bell Curve, available spring 2016.