

Holiday Cheers!

Stories to Celebrate Your Year

by

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I love to write – books, stories, blogs. My head is always full of stories from the people I've known, the snippets of conversation I hear, and above all the important moments in life. These stories and blogs swirl around the special days that connect us – the holidays. I hope you will find pleasure and entertainment in all these versions of Holiday Cheers.

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The Cookie Conspiracy

A Valentine's Day Story

The February sky was spitting again – alternating between a malicious drizzle and a clinging mist. Jessica pulled her damp hoody tighter over her head. A useless gesture on a useless day.

As far as she was concerned, Valentine's Day was plenty of reason to sue Hallmark for pain and suffering. She had made all the ooh and ah sounds required when her friends got candygrams, heart balloons, and even singing telegrams (fund raiser for the jazz choir). Nobody sang for her. Not that she expected it. Great skin wasn't enough to attract a boy when it was stretched over an extra twenty – no face it – forty pounds. She'd gotten her perfect complexion from her Grandma Sal, along with thick shiny hair, and a love of sweets. Grandma Sal had been a pastry chef at a five star hotel before...well, before.

Jess stomped down the sidewalk, just as a delivery guy wheeled into the driveway and dropped a few dozen red roses on the stoop. For her mother, Maureen. One of the things she really, really hated about her parents was they still were gooshy. Okay, a nasty divorce might be cosmically worse, but hand holding, smooches and romantic flowers when they'd spawned a lumpy teenage daughter who was still waiting for her first kiss, should be grounds for Child Protective Services to step in.

The world was seriously a mess.

Instead of going into the house, Jess swerved down the driveway to the cottage out back. Grandma Sal had taken up residence there ten months ago when she couldn't work any more. Her parents had fixed it up so there was an old lady bathroom (a place to sit and a door – get that, a door into the tub!), phone, medic alert buttons, and a nice bedroom, living room, and full kitchen. Grandma Sal refused to come without that kitchen. She said cooking was her life and if her life didn't allow cooking, she would pack it up then and there and go track down Jack in heaven or hell, or wherever the man was. Her chin had quivered only an instant and then she'd gotten brisk again and yelled at her daughter for good measure.

Jess knocked on the door. “Grandma Sal?”

“What? Oh, come in, honey. I made you Valentine cookies.”

Jess felt a curl of relief and pushed her way into the cottage. She undid her boots and dropped them by the door, talking all the time. “Today completely sucked.” She eyed the pan of frosted hearts on the table. “I hate Valentine’s Day and I probably hate all my friends too.”

“Valentine’s, yes. Did I meet your friends?” Grandma Sal pushed back a strand of long hair that hung in her face. Then she wiped her hands on her streaked apron.

“No, you didn’t meet these ones,” Jess said. “And you don’t want to.” She headed straight to the kitchen and with short sharp breaths, grabbed a sponge and began wiping the dried smears from the day’s cooking. She picked up a bowl that was filled with some kind of buttery batter. The edge was crusted as though it had been sitting some hours.

“Do you still want this?”

“What?” Grandma Sal came over and peered into it. “Oh...oh it wasn’t turning out so, you can just throw it away.”

She sat down at the small table, and with deft strokes of a spatula piled the cookies onto a plate. “Here. Come sit down. I made

your favorites, Maureen, because you're my best girl."

"Jessica," her granddaughter said.

"What? Oh...oh yes. But you do look like Maureen," her grandmother's eyes looked puzzled.

"I'm your granddaughter, Jessica. You'll remember soon." Jess blinked her eyes a couple of times and took a cookie. "These look great."

She bit in and kept her face smiling. Except for the thin layer of frosting, there was no sugar in these cookies. They were hard and mouth-puckeringly salty. This was the second time in a week that her grandmother had messed up a simple recipe. Jessica ate it all, and then another, so her grandma wouldn't realize. Wouldn't have to be brave, wouldn't have to remember again that each creeping second was turning her lifetime of tastes, smells, dreams, thoughts, and loves into lifeless cement. Salt where there should have been sugar.

Her grandma took her granddaughter's hand and squeezed gently. "Love you, Jessica."

Jessica smiled and squeezed back. "You too, grandma."