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Title: Ways of Love

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Ways of Love – by Laurel Lamperd

Beth Herrick considered herself the proverbial spinster daughter. She'd left her job in a solicitor's office to help her mother look after her father when he became ill. Her other siblings, married with families, said Beth was the logical one and already living at home. They didn't bother to hide their relief.

Beth didn't tell them about the young man at the office, who showed an interest in her. Reluctantly she refused his invitations to the movies, knowing she had to be a bulwark for her mother and father. The young man, timid and reserved like Beth, faded away.

When their father died two years later, the family decided Beth should stay home with their mother to look after her though Clarissa, their mother, said she was perfectly able to look after herself and Beth should go back her old job and get into the world again.

The family ignored their mother. There's no need for Beth to work, they said. Their late parent had left his wife and youngest daughter substantially well off, but during the years since her father's death, the inheritance had shrunk, and Beth found it hard to make ends meet. She thought of returning to work, but time had moved on since she'd worked in an office. She'd forgotten half her shorthand and hadn't used a typewriter for years. She thought about taking a refresher course, but there were computers and systems that her nephews and nieces spoke about with ease. Beth couldn't remember the definition of a byte though the young ones told her over and over again.

She loved poetry and reading and thought she'd train as a librarian, but she'd lost confidence. So she put what spare time she had into babysitting nieces and nephews for a few dollars and doing a bit of cooking and cleaning for the woman down the road who had a high powered job in the city, and continually told Beth she'd give anything to stay home for a few days and sleep.

Beth wished she had a magic wand and they could change places, though she guessed the career woman would soon tire of her mundane life.

On her way home from her voluntary job delivering Meals on Wheels, which she did two days a week, Beth called in at her sister's house to find Molly full of news about her brother-in-law arriving on a flying visit. "Rob should settle down and stop all this gallivanting around the world. With his qualifications and experience, he'd have no trouble getting a job in Australia." Molly said when she and Beth sat down to a cup of tea. "But I doubt if he could. We're having a welcome home dinner on Saturday. You and Mum are invited. If you could do a bit of cooking and come early to help with things." Her voice trailed off.

Beth nodded. "What would you like me to do?"

Molly said it would be helpful if she made a salad and a sweet. "I'll get Edgar to pick up some cold meat on his way home."

Beth had never met Rob Garfield, a mining engineer, but she knew about him. Forty, unmarried and quite the ladies man, Molly said.

Beth knew Molly exaggerated at times. She imagined Rob Garfield would be tall and thin and reserved like Edgar, his older brother, but he was short and sturdy with a shock of dark greying hair and the bluest eyes Beth had seen.

He bounded into the kitchen where Beth and Molly put the finishing touches to the special dinner and hugged Molly. "You're becoming quite an armful," he said, a large grin over his handsome face.

Molly gave him one of her coldest looks. Her weight gain was a sore point. She muttered later to Edgar, "Your brother hasn't changed a bit."

Rob turned to Beth, saying, "So you're the youngest sister. You're quite the prettiest. Why haven't I met you before?"

Beth blushed, and felt herself drowning in those sparkling blue eyes and vibrant smile.

Rob clapped Christopher, Molly and Edgar's ten-year-old son on the shoulder who Clarissa described an afterthought. And added that she didn't think Edgar had it in him.

"You've grown since I saw you last year, Chris," Rob said. "Don't you think your aunt is a pretty girl?"

Girl! Christopher thought his aunt quite ancient and to stop from answering Rob's question said, "Aunty Beth makes the best lamingtons in the world."

Rob grinned, and didn't look much older than Christopher. "That's two reasons why I'll have to get to know your aunt better."

Beth blushed even more if that was possible.

At the end of the evening when Beth gathered Clarissa's bag and knee rug, Rob said to Christopher, "I hear it's the school holidays, Chris. What about you and me taking your Aunty Beth to the zoo tomorrow?"

Beth, whose last visit to the zoo was with Molly and her elder children, made excuses it was her day at the Good Samaritan Shop.

"I'm sure you can get someone to fill in for you," Rob said with a gleam in his bright blue eyes.

"Please come, Aunty Beth. You'll love the zoo." Christopher looked frightened Rob might renege on his invitation if his aunt didn't accept.

"Yes, do go, Beth," said Clarissa. "You haven't had an outing for weeks," she added, cutting off Molly's protests.

Molly frowned.

Christopher thought his mother behaved more stuffily than what she usually did.

"Oh, all right," Beth agreed. She didn't look at her elder sister.

*

Christopher had a marvellous time at the zoo. He ran up stone steps, down stone steps, somersaulted across green lawns, swung from trees, skipped along pathways, peered into the lions' enclosure, saw the elephants have a shower, watched monkeys who played on swings above their pool and dived into the water when they felt like it.

They had lunch at the zoo tearooms. Christopher chose a hamburger dripping with onions and sauce. Both he and Rob ignored Beth when she declared a salad roll healthier than a hamburger.

Rob just smiled and said you could have anything you like when at the zoo except make a meal of yourself for a hungry tiger. Then he quoted Blake's poem,

"Tiger tiger burning bright,
in the forests of the night."

"That's Blake," he said to Christopher.

After lunch they found a quiet spot under a tree.

Rob stretched on the lawn, his head under his arm. Even Christopher felt tired after his hamburger and strawberry shortcake topped by huge dollops of whipped cream for dessert. He stretched out not far from Rob and pulled a comic from his pocket, but he was soon asleep too. Beth leaned against the tree trunk and from her tatty old bag, took a poetry book to read, but even she closed her eyes after a few minutes.

Later, Rob handed Christopher twenty dollars to buy milkshakes from the Zoo tearooms.

"I've never been overseas," Beth said when Christopher returned with the milkshakes. "The further I've been from Perth is Albany." Which was where she'd gone each summer to help Molly with her children during the school holidays.

"I'll take you to Ontario," Rob said. "It's where my next job is."

"I couldn't possibly go...." Beth began.

"Yes, you could, Aunty," Christopher said. "I'll visit you on my school holidays."

"Great idea," said Rob, and he looked like he meant it. "We'll nip down to Niagara Falls when I have a few free days." He turned to Christopher. "That's where the honeymooning couples go. What about a Kentucky Chicken for tea, Chris?"

"Whoopee!" Christopher cried.

Beth made excuses that she had to return home to get her mother's tea.

"Grandma can cook her own," Christopher broke in quickly. "She's a whiz at doing scrambled eggs on toast."

Beth looked doubtful. "Your mother will expect you home before dark, Chris." She'd started calling him Chris too. "We've been out all day."

"She'll be glad we're eating at Kentucky Chicken." Christopher sounded desperate they'd have to go home to curry and rice he's seen his mother preparing that morning. "She won't have to get my tea or Uncle Rob's. She says Uncle Rob eats like a St Bernard."

Beth blushed. Molly had complained to her that Rob had just about eaten her out of house and home.

Rob grinned. "That's a perfect reason to eat at Kentucky's." He turned his laughing eyes to Beth. "Two against one. I think Kentucky Chicken wins, don't you, Chris." Before Beth could protest further, he pulled out his mobile phone and

telephoned for a taxi. While they waited, he texted messages that they'd be late on Clarissa and Molly's phones.

"What will the family say?" Beth said when the taxi pulled up by the curb.

"Don't worry. I'll take the blame, my dear," Rob whispered, his mouth a kiss away from her cheek.

Beth blushed like a young girl and hoped the taxi driver hadn't seen as Rob opened the door for her and Chris to clamber into the vehicle.

Christopher looked like he hoped the day would never end.

*

During the two weeks, the three of them went everywhere together.

Rob told Beth one had to savour the moment. There came a time in every man's life when he wanted to settle down with a good woman. And he only had two week's before he had to start his new job.

Beth blushed and tried not to look if she knew what he meant. She couldn't believe he intended anything permanent. Not even the shy young man at the office had courted her so assiduously.

*

"I'm glad it's holiday time." Christopher knew the stuffy adults would have made him go to school otherwise though he thought Rob a bit soppy when he quoted poetry. Rob knew reams of poetry by heart. So did Beth. They spent hours discussing their favourite poets. Beth liked Elizabeth Barrett Browning the best.

Rob talked about Canada and promised to send Christopher a present from Ontario. Beth said she'd like to see Canada.

But when Christopher asked Beth when she was going to Canada, she said not to say silly things. She was too old to go anywhere.

Christopher glanced at Rob and saw he laughed.

Rob gave him a wink as if to say, that's all she knows.

Rob said. "When you come to Canada, Chris, we'll pop down into the old USA and take a hot air balloon flight through the Grand Canyon."

"Wow." Christopher wanted to jump in the air and give a yell.

*

When Molly had an inkling of the way the wind blew, she said it was ridiculous a woman of Beth's age contemplated marriage and to a womanizer like

Rob. "You'll have to talk to your brother," she told Edgar. "I won't have him kidnapping my sister."

Edgar said it was none of his business if Molly couldn't control her sister who had a touch of spring fever ten years too late.

Molly warned Beth of the dangers she'd face marrying a man of the world like Rob. "We mightn't see you for years," she said in genuine concern.

"Rob returns to Australia once a year," said Beth, who really didn't have any intention of marrying and heading off into the Canadian unknown.

"And what about Mother?" Molly said. "She'll be heart broken if you go to Canada."

"You have it wrong," Beth said. "I told Rob I wouldn't leave Mother."

"So he has asked you to marry him?" Molly accused.

"You and Gran can visit Auntie Beth when she's married to Uncle Rob and living in Canada," Christopher told his mother. "Uncle Rob's invited me. I might go over Niagara in a barrel."

Molly glared at him and told him to go outside and play.

*

Christopher tried to think of a way to help his aunt escape from the family. If she stayed in that dark decaying house in which old Grandma lived, he'd never get to Canada and pop down to the Grand Canyon.

Old Grandma said she'd like to live in a sunny little unit like Myrtle, her old friend, among a lot of other people her age, and have Meals on Wheels delivered and go to Bingo twice week. "They only play twenty cents a time," Clarissa added at Molly's look of disapproval.

When Christopher accompanied Uncle Rob to buy a special present for Auntie Beth, he dashed into the secondhand shop to see if they had any comics. Rummaging through a bin full, he found a little red leather-covered book. He guessed someone had thrown it there and he nearly tossed it into the next bin of old books when on a whim he opened it and saw on the first page.

Sonnets from the Portuguese by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

And underneath someone had penned.

How do I love thee.

Let me count the ways.

Christopher dropped the book and found three comics he hadn't read. He was on his way to pay for the comics when he ran back and rescued the little book from where it lay and put it with his purchases.

The woman behind the counter picked it up. "It's an old poetry book."

"It's for my aunt. She likes Elizabeth Browning," Christopher muttered, not wanting the woman to think the book was for him.

"It's nice of you to buy it for your aunt. You can have it for ten cents. I don't suppose anyone else will buy it."

Christopher picked up the comics and stuffed the little red book in his pocket. When he stepped outside on the pavement, he saw Rob waiting for him in front of the jewellers.

"Did you find any comics," Rob asked when Christopher joined him.

"Yes." Christopher showed them to him. He didn't mention the little red book.

"Let's go in here." Rob nodded to the jewellers. "I should be able to get something nice for Beth. It will be a sort of leaving behind present." His voice didn't have the lilt it usually had.

Christopher guessed Beth had told him she couldn't marry him.

They entered the wide spacious jeweller's shop.

Christopher examined the glass cabinet filled with an array of glittering gold rings while the shop assistant showed Rob a selection of beaded purses. He guessed his uncle would have expected to buy a diamond ring for his aunt instead of spending all that money on an old bag studded with diamantes.

When they arrived home, Rob left the shiny black bag with the flash jewellers name in gold on the sideboard in the living room. He said he had some last minute packing.

Molly sniffed when she saw it.

"It's a present for Aunty Beth," Christopher said.

Molly went humph and hurried into the kitchen where she'd cooked a farewell dinner for Rob who had booked to leave on the plane to Ontario the next day.

Christopher flung himself on a settee and opened one of his comics, but he couldn't concentrate. He pulled the little red poetry book from his pocket and stared at it, then he glanced at the shiny black carrier bag on the sideboard.

After they'd eaten the magnificent roast beef and vegetables and devoured the delicious Coffee Liqueur Cheesecake Beth made, Rob took the shiny black bag from the sideboard and presented it to Beth.

"A memento of the two wonderful weeks we spent together," he said with a break in his voice. "I hope sometimes, you'll remember the fantastic time we had."

Beth's eyes welled and her lips trembled when she tried to stop the tears from coursing down her cheeks.

Rob handed Christopher a bag bearing the name of the local newsagents. "Something for you, Chris?"

Christopher pulled out ten new comics. "Wow," he muttered, fingering them.

Beth stared at the blue bag, the colour of her eyes, and which shone with diamantes of all colours.

Rob asked, "Do you like the bag, Beth?"

"It looks tawdry and not at all like you, Beth," Molly said in a disapproving tone.

Beth glanced defiantly at Molly. "It's a fun bag like the fun time I've had. I love it, Rob. It's just what I want." To cover her embarrassment, she fumbled in the bag and brought out a little red leather covered book. She stared at the title, embossed in gold and tarnished with age.

"*Sonnets from the Portuguese by Elizabeth Barrett Browning,*" she read aloud. She opened the book and recited the words penned by some long ago lover,

How do I love thee.

Let me count the ways.

Beth looked at Rob as if he was the only one in the room.

Everyone looked at Beth and the tears running down her cheeks.

"Oh, Rob," Beth cried, oblivious to everyone. "I will marry you."

Rob put his arms around her and kissed her long and hard while the family stared open-mouthed at them.

Clarissa clapped her hands. "Good on you, my dear Beth. I didn't think you had it in you."

Christopher wanted to clap too.

Before Molly and the family could say anything, Rob said, "Beth, my darling girl, can you be ready to leave for Ontario in twelve hours? We've got a date to marry in Niagara Falls."

Christopher snuck up to his room with his pile of comics. He didn't want his mother saying he could only read one a week. Even now, he didn't understand the impulse that had made him slip the little poetry book into the beaded blue bag.

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