Nobody's In Love This Year

by GreenWoman

Summary

This one is for Catseye.

Nobody's in love ... yet..

With thanks and apologies to Walter Mirisch, John Watson, Trilogy Productions, CBS, and Warren Zevon, and proceeding under the assumption that forgiveness is easier to ask than permission...

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We keep walking away for no reason at all
And no one says a word
We were always so busy protecting ourselves
We never would have heard
And the rate of attrition for lovers like us
Is steadily on the rise
Nobody's in love this year
Not even you and I

NOBODY'S IN LOVE THIS YEAR ~ Warren Zevon

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He knew she wouldn't ask him to stop. Chris stole another sidelong glance at Mary, knowing her eyes were trained on the grove of trees in the middle distance. She would be thinking of the shade there, of the river flowing beneath the cottonwoods, of the chance to slide out of the saddle she'd been in for far more hours than she was used to. Chris kept his horse on a steady course down the dusty road. He knew Mary wouldn't ask him to stop, and it made him want to force her to.
Something about her strength made him want to test it. It was only fair ... she frequently, and knowingly, tested his patience.

He saw her shoulders straighten and her eyes leave the trees and fix on her saddlehorn. She lifted the back of one hand to her forehead and used her sleeve to dry the perspiration that trickled from beneath her straw hat, frowning at the brown smudge that her sweat and the trail dust left on the white cotton cuff.

Stubborn, he thought, and smiled to himself.

Mary stood in her stirrups to stretch her legs, and her horse danced at the misunderstood signals the shift of her body conveyed. She reined the mare in and settled again in the saddle. A small sound escaped her, and Chris frowned; it was a sound of pain. Abandoning subterfuge, he looked directly at her face and saw the tight lines at the corners of her mouth. Her horse sidestepped and Mary flinched.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said. She did not look at him.

"You're hurtin'. What is it?"

"Nothing," she repeated. "I'm fine."

He nodded. Without warning, he reined his black in close and her horse danced again, and she could not choke back another soft cry. Leaning over, Chris took one of her reins in his hand and pulled both horses up.

"Tell me."

She glared at him. "It's nothing. I'm just a little tired." She tugged at her reins and shifted in the saddle, and he saw her wince once more. He decided to concede the battle of wills.

"River's not far off. We'll rest a bit there." He dropped her rein and kneed his black off the road, forcing her mare to do the same. Together, they headed for the trees.

The cottonwoods dipped so low to the ground that the leaves brushed the riders' hats as they entered the grove. It felt as if they were riding into a cave; the air temperature dropped noticeably as they walked their horses into the dappled shade. A small beach of white sand defined the riverbank where giant trees had forced the water's course to take a graceful turn, and the bleached corpse of a lightning-shattered trunk offered a sheltered and inviting place to rest. Chris swung down from his gelding and reached out for Mary's reins, holding both horses and waiting for her to dismount.

Mary's face paled as she stood in her stirrups and swung her leg over the broad hindquarters of her brown mare, then slipped to the ground. Her hands gripped the saddlehorn, knuckles white, and her forehead dropped against the saddleblanket.

Chris was alarmed now. He threaded the reins to their fullest length and looped them around a root of the fallen tree, then stepped quickly to her side. "Show me," he demanded.

She shook her head, her eyes shut tight against the unknown hurt, and he blew his breath out in frustration. A dark stain low on the stirrup flap caught his eye, and he ran a finger over the dampened leather and frowned, then turned again to Mary with angry comprehension in his blue eyes. To hell with propriety, Chris thought, and slipped one arm around her shoulders and the other behind her knees, scooping her up as he had her son Billy many times.
"Mr. Larabee!" she protested, but he ignored her, and smiled to himself when he felt her body tense, then relax against him. He carried her to the tree trunk and seated her gently on it. "Show me," he said again, and without waiting, knelt and lifted the hem of her skirt.

"No...." she said, but it was too late. He had seen, and he drew his breath in sharply at the sight.

"Dammit, Mary, why didn't you tell me?" he said.

She wore white cotton pantaloons, trimmed with eyelet lace ... and stained bright, wet red below her knees. With quick, decisive motions Chris pulled the boots from her feet, then drew his knife, slit the pantaloons gatherings at one ankle and gently pushed the fabric up to reveal the raw abrasions on her inner calf. "Dammit," he said again, not realizing he had said the word aloud, and repeated the procedure on her other leg. It too was blistered from calf to knee, seeping blood and clear fluid, and malevolently red around the edges of the sore.

"Mar...."

She tried to brazen her way through it. "Mr. Larabee, I am not accustomed to baring my legs to gentleman," she said huffily.

"S'okay," he said wryly. "I ain't a gentleman. Stay here." Mary watched the stark grace of his movements as he stripped the saddlebags and bedrolls from the horses, then unsaddled the tired animals and staked them near the water, in a patch of lush grass downstream from the little beach. She began to protest as he spread the saddleblankets and then the bedrolls on the sand, with the saddles against the base of the fallen tree.

"Mr. Larabee, surely you're not intending that we spend the night here!"

"No choice. You ain't riding any farther today."

"But I can't--"

"Four Corners will be there in the mornin'."

"Mr. Larabee--"

"Look, Mary," he said, rummaging in his saddlebags and pulling out a bandana and a clean shirt, "infection's already started. We've got to doctor you up now, and let those places scab overnight, or you could be in serious trouble." Chris bent over his saddle and loosed two canteens from the strings, then walked to the river, where he crouched on the sand and filled one of the leather-bound containers with clear, cold water. He looked down and she saw him pull his knife; with a few swift slices, he cut some fleshy leaves from a plant at the water's edge.

"But I cleaned them last night in Palantine," she protested, and winced as she saw his back stiffen; she'd said the wrong thing. He looked over his shoulder at her, and his eyes were ice blue with anger.

"You mean you got these yesterday, on the way there?" he growled. He stood and crossed the sand to kneel beside her. "You should have said something then."

Mary's chin went up. "I thought that our errand was rather too important to be delayed just because I had a few blisters on my legs," she said.

"We could'a hung that sorry bas-- that murderer a day later than we did," Chris retorted. "Judge and I never wanted you there in the first place. Just didn't plan on that fool sheriff lettin' the Jones
boys take out the only other witness." He began to tear the shirt into strips.

"Chris, your shirt!" He ignored her, fueling Mary's indignation. "Mr. Larabee, it was necessary for me to testify at that trial," she continued in cold tones. "And it was necessary for me to get to Palantine in a hurry to do so. While I appreciate your escorting me, I do not appreciate your lack of respect for my responsibility to appear in that courtroom. I am not a child, to be coddled."

"You coulda used some coddlin', it seems," he said gruffly.

"But I rode for weeks with the wagon train, and never had this happen," she protested. "I don't understand why--"

"With the train, you were pacin' horses and oxen pulling loaded wagons," Chris muttered, "not tryin' to keep up with me." Mary suddenly realized that he was as angry with himself as he was with her. Abruptly embarrassed, she watched quietly as he folded the bandana, then uncorked one of the canteens. The acrid odor of whiskey stung her nostrils. "This is gonna hurt like hell," he warned.

"Mr. Larabee, I have given birth to a child. I think I can handle having a blister cleaned," Mary said determinedly. But when she lifted her skirts and petticoats out of his way, he could see her knuckles whiten as she clenched her fists around the material.

"Okay," he said. He opened the other canteen and poured cold, clear riverwater over the angry sores, then tipped the whiskey onto the bandana and pressed it to the wound on the inside of her left knee.

Mary strained to bite back her cry at the harsh burn of the alcohol. Chris didn't dare look at her, afraid he would not be able to finish what he knew had to be done. He concentrated on his task, trying to ignore the guttural gasps that Mary could not control and the trembling of her limbs as he worked. Finally, both legs had been thoroughly cleansed, and he set the whiskey aside.

"You okay?" he asked, looking up. Mary's eyes were squeezed shut and her pale cheeks were wet with tears she'd been unable to hold back; all the weariness, worry and pain she'd refused to acknowledge were written blatantly across her white face. Chris made a decision and placed the whiskey-filled canteen in her shaking hands. Mary opened her eyes and considered the offer for a moment, then acquiesced; she lifted the canteen to her lips, swiftly taking three deep swallows. She choked and doubled over, but kept it all down.

Chris laughed, and immediately regretted it as Mary turned watery but furious eyes on him, then forced down two more gulps of the brutal stuff before he took it back from her.

"Easy," he murmured. "Got a bit more to do here." Mary didn't seem to hear him; she gripped her skirts and closed her eyes again. Chris smiled to himself, then picked up the fleshy leaves of the aloe he'd cut by the river's edge and crushed them between his hands until his palms were covered with the pungent stickiness of the plant's juices. As gently as he could, he pressed the soothing stuff into the weeping sores. Mary moaned again, but this time in relief as well as pain. Chris's strong hands moved beyond her wounds and began rubbing her calves, easing the cramped muscles with a sure and steady massage. The liquor burned sweetly in her throat and chest and limbs, and Mary began to relax.

Chris, however, grew more tense as he reacted to the feel and the thought of what he was doing. Mary sighed, and her legs fell open in trust and ... invitation? A flash of hunger flared through Chris; swiftly, he withdrew his hands and wiped them clean on his dungarees, then began to bandage the sores with torn pieces of his shirt. "All done," he said finally, and with gentle hands he pulled Mary's skirts from her clenched fists, settling them around her ankles. He stood and
lifted her once again into his arms, and in moments she was settled on the blankets of her bedroll and he was easing her head back against the saddle's seat.

"Better?" he asked.

"Mmm," she whispered.

"Good."

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Mary didn't realize she'd slept until she was awakened by the clean smell of woodsmoke tickling her nose. She opened her eyes to the golden light of sundown filtering through the leaves of the trees. Chris was bent over a small fire, carefully turning a stick that supported two fair-sized trout. Mary stirred slightly; he noticed the movement, and looked back over his shoulder with a small smile.

"How do you feel?"

"Hurts," she murmured wearily.

"It will, for a while," he nodded. "Hungry?" Without waiting for her answer, he lifted the cottonwood branch from the fire, slid one smokey trout onto the damp, river-rinsed bandana, and brought it to her. A strong arm slipped around her shoulder and brought her to a sitting position. Mary smiled in gratitude, but merely picked at the fish, downing only a few bites before putting it aside.

"May I have your canteen again?" she asked.

He offered her the river water, but she shook her head and reached for the whiskey. Chris studied her carefully before handing it to her, watching with concern as she opened it and drank, and allowing her only a little before reclaiming the canteen and laying her back against the saddle.

"Thank you," she said.

"Welcome," he answered.

"Do you always travel with a canteen full of whiskey?"

"Yep," he nodded, taking a draw himself before he pushed the cork firmly back in place. He flashed a tight small smile. "Don't always drink it. Always carry it." The fact was that more often than not, in recent months, the canteen had been little used or untouched. Another subtle change that his residence in Four Corners had wrought.

"I see." Mary shivered; night was falling, and the cool breeze seemed suddenly chilly. Chris put the back of his hand to her forehead and frowned. He pulled the blanket to her chin, then shook out his black duster and draped it over her as well. Mary shifted a little to settle the curves of her body into the sand beneath her.

With eyes half-closed, she watched as Chris banked the fire to keep it burning through the night, then sat cross-legged on the bedroll next to hers. He tossed his hat down and shed his gunbelt, hanging it close to hand on his saddlehorn, then stretched out next to her. His blond head settled on his own saddle and he glanced at Mary, meaning to offer a smile of reassurance, but her eyes were closed again, her face and hands composed and still.

The dusk turned to dark. Moonlight sifted through the cottonwood leaves as they danced in the
evening breeze, causing the shadows to quiver on the sand and water. The only sounds were the murmure of the river, and the occasional shuffle of the horses. Chris stared up at the stars, his mind uneasy with thoughts of the woman lying next to him; certain she was sleeping, he was startled when she spoke.

"Where do you think they are?" Mary whispered.

"Who?"

"Stephen. And your family."

Chris was speechless. He turned to look at her; moonlight defined the clean profile of her face, making it stand out stark against the shadows, and he could see the tears on her cheeks.

"I don't know," he said finally. His throat was suddenly too tight, his heart too sore, to say more.

"It's hard to remember Stephen's face, sometimes," she said drowsily. "It's even harder for Billy. Sometimes we sit on the back porch, and he asks where his daddy is, and I tell him to look in the stars," she said. "And he asks me how he'll know if he sees his father. And I don't know what to tell him."

Chris didn't want to talk about this. Hell, he didn't want to even think about it. He knew it was the whiskey and the weariness causing Mary to give voice to things she would never discuss with him under ordinary circumstances. But there was something in Mary's voice, something vulnerable and hurting, that demanded he respond.

"Sometimes...." he coughed and started again. "Sometimes, I look for them in the stars, too."

"What were their names?" she asked.

"Sarah. And Adam." His eyes stung, and he was ashamed because he knew that even though the dark kept the secret of his sadness from her, the tone of his voice betrayed it.

"Sarah. And Adam. And Stephen," she mused quietly. "Together, maybe ... looking down on us."

"Mmm." It was all he could manage. A fish jumped in the shallow pool, and Chris heard his horse snort in sleepy surprise.

"Chris?"

Dammit, he thought. Too much whiskey ... or not quite enough. "What?"

"What will you do?"

He was a man, and saw no deeper meaning to the question than the obvious. "About what?"

"Will you stay alone?"

Dammit, he thought again. "Probably."

"Why?"

"Mary, go to sleep."

"Why?" she asked again.

He smiled grimly in the dark. "Ezra would say it's the way my cards have fallen."
"Ezra can make the cards do whatever he wants," she murmured. "Can't you?"

Chris sat up, peering through the dark at the woman who lay, eyes still closed, led by the whiskey to ask him the very questions that he drank to avoid asking himself. It was dangerous ground, and Chris thought carefully of how to answer. "Maybe I don't know how I want the cards to fall," he said finally.

"When you were missing ... when you were in that prison, and none of us knew...." Mary swallowed hard, and he could hear her voice waver. "The town felt so empty. I thought about what my life would be like if you didn't come back." She made an undefinable sound.

It undid him. Chris rolled on his side and reached out for her, slipping one arm behind her head and bringing it into the hollow of his shoulder. She tensed at his touch and then, as she had earlier, settled against him; her hair, fragrant with the smell of roses and the scent the heat of the day had brought to her skin, brushed his cheek with a gentleness that made him shudder. "Mary, you're sayin' more than you mean to," he warned her. "More than you should."

He could feel the muscles in her cheek work as she spoke. "No, I'm not," she said. "Maybe I'm saying what I should have said a long time ago, Chris Larabee." She let the sound of his name hang in the air between them for a moment, as if she could see it there, shining in the moonlight. "Maybe there are too many things left unsaid between people. Too much heartache in the world, that words could heal."

A harsh snort of derision choked out of him, a reflex that he could not control, and Chris could tell from the way her body tensed that it had hurt her. He touched her cheek again, by way of apology. "Medicine's a bitter thing, sometimes. And it don't always work."

"So, I shouldn't have let you take care of me," she said.

Another bitter chuckle escaped him. "You should have been a trapper."

She lifted one hand to his cheek and pulled his face to her. "Vin says the Indians only hunt what they need to survive," she murmured. And he felt her lips touch his.

He pulled away like a startled animal. A mesquite knot popped in the fire, and the spell was broken. Chris turned his face from her, breathing hard. "Mary, this can't be," he said, his voice harsh. "I've killed men, and there are men who want to kill me."

"Stephen is dead. It doesn't make me wish I hadn't been with him."

"I don't have any money. I can't give you the life you deserve on a dollar a day."

"I don't care."

"Mary," he pleaded, "I can't--"

"Hush," she said sharply, reaching up and placing her soft hand over his mouth. "Do you want to know what I can't do any more? I can't stand to watch you living in a whiskey bottle. I can't bear seeing you sit alone on the boardwalk in the middle of the night. I can't take the look on Buck's face when you shut yourself away from him and the others. I can't keep telling Billy not to get too attached to you ... and I can't keep trying to tell myself the same thing. Not any more. I love you, Chris. I don't have a choice." She drew a deep breath and drew her hand away from his lips, resting it on his unshaven cheek. "But you do." He heard the painful question hidden in the softness of her voice.
Chris looked at the stars, and thought of Sarah, and Adam, and of how the danger that shadowed him had doomed them. Now he had brought that peril to the door of this woman. Still, she held that door open for him, spilling light out into the darkness he’d lived in for years. Chris felt himself caught in a moment of decision, a cusp of life or death, far more terrifying than those moments in which he’d merely had to draw his gun against a challenger. He wondered if he could match her courage with his own.

Mary took his silence as his decision, and turned away from him. "'No' is an answer, Chris," she whispered quietly. Her small hands pulled the blanket close around her. "Good night." She closed her eyes.

The chill night air swiftly stole away the warmth from where her body had curled into his. Chris looked down at the star-lit tears on her face, and found his courage, and with it, his voice. "Sweetheart," he started, and startled himself with the endearment. Her eyes flew open, and he rallied. "Sweetheart," he said again, "you're way too brave for me."

She smiled tentatively. "Well, I can be brave enough for the both of us."

"I don't doubt it," he answered, and kissed her.

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