



Painful Amore

A SHORT STORY
BY GAIL TAGARRO ©





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Tarzan turned up at our place in the springtime. His real name was Trevor Andrews, but we kids started calling him Tarzan soon as he arrived, and Tarzan stuck.

He was tall and brawny, had big meaty arms like Popeye the Sailor, and was tanned with it. Reason we called him Tarzan and not Popeye was because he looked a bit jungly and wild and the first words he spoke were, ‘I just swung by to see you folks...’

Also, we were going through a real Tarzan phase: comic books, cartoons, the old movies starring Johnny Weissmuller. So when Tarzan turned up at our very own house, I guess that half-knowing and half not in the way of kids, we wanted to believe this really was Tarzan of the Jungle, our very own Tarzan.

In the springtime days of cool misty mornings and white shadows when he came, we weren’t at the house when he arrived. We were out in the orchard, which was just as well. Tarzan in a car did not fit our image. So we happily imagined he’d come swinging through the trees to land on our porch, because that was where he was when we came running up to the house, out of breath and laughing from our games.

He’d heard we were looking for a handyman, he told Mum.

Our dad had split two years before, his and Mum's having been a painful amore at the best of times. One night he must've decided he'd had enough of Mum and us kids because he'd taken off and we hadn't seen him since. We didn't much miss him; he'd always been a surly customer, not the affectionate sort, but he'd been useful at mending things, so the house had gone to rack and ruin after his departure. Poor Mum, frightened by mounting debts, had gone out to work but her salary didn't stretch to things like fixing the peeling paint underneath the windows. It was all she could do to keep the four of us clothed and fed.

One day, though, fortune must've smiled down on her because she came into a bit of money from a dear departed uncle. Being very house-proud, she decided it was time to get the house spruced up a bit and so she put the word around town that she wanted a fix-it person. Folks in our town those days were pretty laid back, not to say downright lazy, so Mum's chances didn't look too good.

And then Tarzan suddenly appeared to fill the vacancy.

He was an undemanding kind of bloke, seemed more in need of human company than work or money, and just asked Mum for bed and board. Then he noticed our mum's poor red-raw hands. His eyes misted up and he impulsively took her hands between his sturdy paws and said, 'Ma'am, I ain't just any old handyman, I can *cook* too,' and he said 'cook' with long vowels that made our mouths water in anticipation. So Mum and Tarzan came to an agreement then and there that he'd cook the meals weekdays when she was working and she'd cook Saturdays and Sundays.

Tarzan fitted so neatly into our lives he seemed like the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle finally located. We kids were unquestioning in our obedience to

him, we adored him that much. Before we knew where we were, another springtime had come around, and he was still with us.

Then the shadow of painful amore lengthened over our house. The old man turned up. We were fearful for Tarzan. We'd noticed how his eyes always softened when they settled on Mum, and how he hovered around her like a protective shadow.

The old man had a good sense of dramatic impact. The night he came back, the moon hung huge and pale and low, suspended in a dark-sapphire sky. Mum's softness was intensified by the silvery light of the full moon; she seemed transparent, illuminated, pure goodness. She couldn't turn my father down. Tarzan saw this and understood that our mother was under a spell which had to be broken for her sake and ours – and he realised it had to be broken for his sake too.

It was time.

Never a man to waste words – he treated language like a cherished woman, just like he treated our mother – he addressed our father:

'Now, Nico, you walked out and left this good woman and your children without so much as a by-your-leave. And you know what? Without you, they've prospered. They've suffered and they've worked their fingers to the bone, but they've got along just fine without you.'

My father was starting to look fierce, but Tarzan wasn't about to be intimidated.

'Now, Nico,' he repeated, as if to a none-too-bright child. 'I understand you've seen hard times too and might be in need of a bit of cash.'

I saw my father's eyes glint.

‘So what I suggest, Nico, is a little loan, in the nature perhaps of a permanent little loan. I lend you something to take yourself away, start a new life for yourself, and the only payback I ask for is that you stay away. Forever.’

The glint in Dad’s eyes hardened.

‘I want ma wife back,’ he menaced.

Tarzan looked as though he’d been expecting a reaction like this. He also looked as if the ground beneath him had become unsteady, because he swayed slightly, but then he took the risk.

He looked at our mother. I felt a lightning flash of understanding pass between them in that instant, and saw Tarzan’s shoulders relax.

My mother raised her chin, gazed levelly at our father and responded quietly, ‘Ah, but I don’t want *you* back, Nico. Trevor and I will marry as soon as the divorce comes through.’

We kids were a bit emotional. We’d lost a father and gained a father in the blink of an eye, and we were sad and glad all at the same time.

Tarzan noticed, and asked if we’d like to visit the old man sometime, he’d take us if we wanted to, he said. Two of us said yes and the younger two said no; they could barely remember him anyway. Then Tarzan gathered us all up in his meaty arms and planted a noisy kiss on each forehead.

‘Tarzan’s jungle is right here. He’s never leaving it.’

And we knew he meant it.

