

Kitty Beer
Imagining

I used to smoke a pipe. As a woman, I loved the dramatic effect. It was a big mistake, of course. It helped me give up cigarettes, but became another dirty little habit maliciously leading to asthma. So when this smallish, eager man tapped me on the breast with the stem of his pipe, I was unsurprised at the mix of repulsion and eroticism it evoked. We were standing in the sumptuous library of a mansion outside Gloucester, looking at tapestries.

I had just turned to him and said, "What's it like to live here all winter with nothing but ocean, and then experience this rush of summer tourists?"

As soon as I fully looked at him, noted his bemused expression, I realized he was the wrong person. I had thought the curator-owner was just behind me. I began to apologize but he was already replying, with that lunge of his jaw forward I came to know as his engagement with a conundrum.

"I quite agree," he said, stepping closer and jabbing that pipe stem at me. He reeked of pipe smoke and professorship. "I was thinking the same thing myself. This gorgeous spread of kings and horses everyone is so admiring, could that be enough every damn bleak January day?"

"Sorry, I thought you were...Never mind. Glad you agree."

We were almost the same height, and he was about my age, mid-forties. He had curly, graying, balding hair that was awry on one side as if he hadn't combed it since he woke up. He wore glasses and a green T shirt printed with, "Clue Me In." He had wonderful big dark eyes that gleamed with more than scholarly intent.

I'm not bad looking, I'm used to male attention, though it has begun to fade in recent years. I don't mind. I look forward to the day I can walk into a bar without being stared at. But I do admit I keep my hair blonde and my body athletic, if only so I can enjoy looking at myself.

He continued, "I imagine he comes in here every winter morning even before breakfast to ascertain his ongoing ownership of timeless beauty, historical drama. Keeps him sane when he has to dig out his car, if he can, I'll bet it snows insanely out here on Cape Ann. Would it tide me over til spring? Would it tide you over?"

"I would like imagining I was a grand lady in the fourteenth century admiring my dowry."

I withdrew my gaze from his luminous eyes, resting it instead on the view outside the broad window, rocks and gleaming water, boats, sweep of summer sky. It was very hot out there, I knew, but rather weirdly cool in here, as if the time warp came complete with weather switch.

"That wouldn't last through your buttered toast."

His slightly mocking tone intrigued me. He was more interested in winning than in charming. I liked that. I smiled, he smiled. I put out my

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finger to touch the tapestry, disappointed to feel protective plexiglass instead of centuries old wool.

"Look here," I said softly. "Take a look at this lovely little pear tree. You can just smell the fruit, can't you?"

"It's exquisite," he agreed, without pretense. "It just might get me through January."

"I'd like to go back to 1346, for one day. Or maybe a few days."

"I often long to do that. My specialty is the early seventeenth century but the Middle Ages are so exotic."

"The smells would have been pungent," I chuckled. Now I'd turned to face him fully. This was an intriguing man. I had one at home, but he was wearing a little thin at the time. Besides, his clear fascination with me when mixed with his creative pedantry drove home a need.

"You would've been wearing a low necked dress with enormous sleeves, little buttons all up the front."

I laughed in reply, "And you would've been wearing tights." I kept on laughing, he seemed so mesmerized by the inside of my mouth.

After that, we moved along side by side to view other magnificent pieces, exclaiming and sighing in unison. I found out that he and his family, a wife and two little kids, were renting a cottage in nearby Rockport. He learned that I was only up for the day from Cambridge, with a group of women friends who were at the beach. I was to pick up lunch and join them soon. He also learned of the husband and teenage daughter I was not eager to talk about. I mentioned my work as publications editor at Tufts University. But mostly we explored our mutual world of porous time, the intrigue of passing from one age to another, what it would be like to return to the past knowing what we knew in the present. The future didn't interest us. We wanted to invite Mozart to dinner, or Voltaire, or Caesar. We found ourselves at the exit, excitedly arguing how those three would get along.

The air before us was shimmering with heat. We pulled back into the cool of the building for one last exchange. We were in a sort of drawing room, plush with Victoriana, though obviously lived in. I wanted to comment on the owner's taste, but my new friend had reached out to lay his hand on my shoulder, thumb at my neck. That silenced me. I knew what he was going to say.

"Can we meet again?"

My reply was falsely chipper. "What, for more arguments about time machines?"

He moved his thumb a little. "Of course."

"Harvard Square?"

"My office is in the Yard. Emerson Hall. Coffee?"

"Next week okay?"

"We'll be back the twenty-third. Drop by any time. I'm counting on it."

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"Sure," I said casually.

"Erica," he said, savoring my name. "Erica."

"Goodbye, Stan. Don't dash away to 1346 without me."

With that, I was practically running to my car, excited and embarrassed at what might

result from this. It could so easily come to nothing, so it was still simply fun.

Stan and I had coffee a couple of weeks later, toward the end of July. We chose a place that also served drinks, so it was easy to graduate to a glass of wine. He was wearing a vanilla colored jacket that gave him a jaunty, sailorly air, and what was left of his springy hair was combed almost calm. I was very self-consciously showing off a lime green sheath that fit perfectly. We both confessed to be leaving soon for weeks-long vacations, he to Martha's Vineyard, me to Paris. So these few hours together felt like stolen time, the kind of stolen time we loved to imagine experiencing in other centuries.

"Let's pretend we're in Louis XIV's court," I said. "Versailles. You're a conspirator. A Musketeer, maybe?"

"And you're the King's mistress."

"No, how about I'm the Queen."

"Erica, my sweet, you don't want to be Queen Maria Theresa. How about a young ladies maid?"

"Ok, so I can be in on the conspiracy with you. An intrigue."

"An intrigue," he repeated sensually. "A ladies maid and a young Musketeer. What shall we plot? Shall we have a love affair?"

"We shall plot to steal the Queen's pearls."

"Oh, that's too materialistic. Let's murder the prime minister or the archbishop."

"I can't do murder. Too serious."

"Just like a girl. Ok, we'll kidnap them. Okay? Satisfied?"

I agreed and we shook on it, laughing like kids.

Stan walked me to my car, parked up on Brattle Street. It was a gorgeous summer evening, cooling off like a baby. I got in, and he got in beside me. I opened my mouth to protest but he was already kissing it. Our kisses were sloppy and frantic, mixed with not a little fear someone would see us. I could only get him out of the car by promising to meet him the following day. But I was determined to break the promise, and I did.

The next thing I knew, I got an invitation to a cocktail party at Stan's house, addressed to both my husband and me. What could be more on the up and up? But it excited me beyond measure. I knew I was extremely attracted to this man and should not go near him. I billed him to my hus-

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band as a stodgy old pedant I'd known in grad school. He bought it, and we went.

Here I am, walking in the door of this impressive Colonial style house on Lowell Street, on the arm of my handsome if somewhat pudgy husband, straight into the home of my co-conspirator and his wife. Danielle is resplendent in colorful silks, but there's a great deal of her. She's not exactly fat, just plentiful. I muse, if Stan's that into buxom, what's he want with me?

Stan is cool towards me, just exactly right, very cordial with my husband, but I'm annoyed. I miss his heat, his alarming pressure, his probing, intimate gaze. I don't smile in return. The children are there, apparently they have refused to go to bed, and mommy indulges and scolds them alternately. Stan frowns and orders them upstairs, but they only giggle. They make a terrible mess of canapés and milk on the living room rug.

There's a nice mix of folks old and young, but there are too many of them, and the food runs out. At one point, as respite from the crush and noise, I slip out to a cool shaded back porch, and there Stan finds me. His hands are on my arms, he says, "Erica."

"My Musketeer."

I am too playful, he is too serious. We only have a few minutes. The upshot is, I okay his coming to my office for lunch the next day. What can be the harm in that, I tell myself. But lying in bed that night listening to my husband snoring in the next room, I know what I'm going to do.

Stan and I start an affair that graduates from fiery to routine. What holds me, after the first thrill of naughtiness and his insatiable skinny, hairy body, are the elaborate scenarios of our lives in faraway times. We build castles. I love being Anne Radcliffe, re-inventing Gothic dramas with endangered heroines. He becomes Chaucer, balancing brilliant poetry with clever power moves as a courtier. We play Lancelot and Guinevere, hiding under the covers from her husband King Arthur. I am wildly grateful to Stan for freeing me to be a child again.

We meet sporadically, whenever we can arrange suitable cover—a dentist appointment, a car fix, an important client—our invented obligations are part of our imaginary wanderings. Our favorite rendezvous is a B&B run by an old schoolmate of mine. We have keys to her suite in the renovated barn decorated country style, with actual chintz curtains and hand hooked rugs. It has a small, brass framed, ridiculously soft bed, like a cloud.

Carefree summer moves into more sedate fall, with the intensely augmented duties every university finds upon the return of students. One afternoon we're getting dressed, clucking amazement that it's already getting dark outside although only five o'clock. Stan puts on his black belted raincoat, flips up the collar.

"I've got a conference in France coming up. It's in Annecy, but I thought..."

I pause in pulling on my boots. "Paris? Are you serious?"

"You love Paris."

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"Stan." I finish with the boots, get up to hug him. "I would so love to love you in Paris."

"I thought so."

We get to kissing so hard, it's an effort to stop. He has my freshly applied lipstick all over his face and we have to clean it off with soap, laughing. We're still laughing when we hurry out into the chilly dusk, a delicate rain descending. How am I going to find an excuse to go to Paris in November? This will take some convoluted machinations.

When I get home around six, with a few groceries in tow, my daughter Angela is sitting in front of the TV with her boyfriend. Now this is not forbidden, but something about it gives me pause. The girl is fourteen, pretty voluptuous already, not very adept in school, and mouthy to her parents. But she obeys the curfews, and most of the rules. This boy suddenly looks too mature to me. He's got a stubble, he must already shave, meaning hormones. My husband isn't home yet, so what have these two kids been doing all this rainy afternoon?

I flash back to my fourteen year old self, back home in Ohio. I had a job after school, but Wednesdays off. It was on a Wednesday that I saw my first erect penis. It was downhill from there.

"Angela," I say nonchalantly when the boyfriend has left. "Let's have a little talk."

She looks so startled I realize that I have never said this before. Immediately I feel guilty. I want to be a good mother. Oh boy. Take a big breath.

But she's all innocence and cheeky indignation, no matter what I say. She has her well-worn teenage retorts instantly ready, from "It's none of your business" to "You think you know everything" to "I didn't ask to be born." We wind up in her room, because I have followed her there. It's dark outside the pink curtained windows. Teddy bears and shaggy dogs piled up on her unmade bed, and a huge poster of a rock star with his pants pulled down to just above his crotch. What a mishmash of pleasures! I can't get a clue of what she's thinking or feeling or who she is. I study her face while she's yelling at me, but see only the blotched and bloated red face of a stranger.

In Paris the first thing Stan and I do is visit the Cluny Museum. I'm in a little hotel on the rue Saint Severin, just around the corner, so Stan picks me up. A few months earlier, we would've rushed upstairs to make love first, but now we're more excited about the unicorn tapestry. I'm waiting in the hotel lobby that's decked out like a drawing room, graced with red velvet chairs and a hotel cat. Stan saunters in, gives me the French greeting of kisses on both cheeks, but I doubt the concierge is fooled for one minute.

At the museum we sit in the shadowy low light that illuminates only the scenes before us, larger than life, the delicate yet sexy ladies, prancing dogs and horses, gorgeously attired princes, unicorns with the grace of ethereal beings and the sensuousness of bedrooms. Gardens, flowers, fruit trees, gentle landscapes, magnificent castles. We get up and prowl

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past each scene in the drama, holding hands without worry. We can't tear ourselves away. Both of us have been here before, but never experienced such oneness with the imagination, passion, and humor of the people who created this masterpiece. Stan and I are there, in the sixteenth century, and we stay there when we go to bed, the rest of the day and night. Stan insists on being the unicorn.

It's only the next day, as I'm wandering the sixth arrondissement still catching up with jet lag, that I begin to realize. I have strolled to the middle of Pont St. Michel, leaning on the thick concrete balustrade, contemplating the velvety gray swath of the Seine. There's a chilly wind at my back but the sun is out, gilding wavelets, enhancing the sumptuous gilt of further bridges. For a small moment I treasure a memory from last night, Stan's beaming face, then the edge of dissatisfaction cuts in. I realize like a blow that I have never had what I wanted. I did not marry the man I most desired, nor did I have a child I adore, my profession is simply the best I could do with a B.A. in English, I have to live in Cambridge when I long for Paris or London. I didn't even get the parents that suited me. My mother was always depressed, my father while he lived never got over his traumas in Vietnam.

I allow the thought: Stan is not what I really want either. I dream of a tall dark stranger, a poet or painter perhaps, who will worship me. Sex with Stan has come to be a lot like it used to be with my husband, when we were still having it. I'm tired of Stan, I'm tired of everything. And I am having this illumination while blessed with a view of the most beautiful, intriguing city in the world. I'm tired of Paris.

Stan and I go back to Gloucester in January. We've chosen a splendid winter day, bright white sunshine, temperature near melting, still-clean snow padding front yards. But we have not grown cheerful speeding away from our responsibilities. On the contrary, as we follow the familiar narrow roads out to Eastern Point, we grow more taciturn. I am almost bored. Was this outing worth the elaborate skein of lies I concocted for my family? The invention of a cousin with cancer in a Rockport hospital was almost more fun than the trip itself. I find myself hoping Stan hasn't planned a motel room on the way. He takes a gloved hand off the wheel and guides my hand to his thigh. But I let it rest there, don't take the hint.

We pull into the broad curve of driveway, no longer lined with cars, now empty. The mansion looks totally altered without leaves on the grand old trees, abandoned. The ocean seethes dark and menacing. We'd called ahead for special permission to view the tapestries. Off season tourists are not encouraged, but the man on the phone had been more than eager to welcome us. He seems older and sadder, though it was only seven months ago. Stan and I ask good questions, dutifully sigh in admiration, but the scenes that so enchanted us, the scenes that drove us into each other's arms, hang limp and uninspiring in heartless snow-bleached light.

"I was right," Stan mutters as we return to the car. "They can't get us through January."

Stan and I vowed to remain friends. But when Spring came I realized

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we'd only had coffee a few times since our last rendezvous, which was about a week after our Gloucester trip, bordering on February. We made love in the renovated barn. Stan was Beowulf and I the monster Grendel's mother, which we dubbed a thrilling concept, but the whole thing fell pretty flat. Half dressed, we sat looking at each other and called it quits.

"I've never really had what I wanted," I offered, grandly sharing my insight.

Stan lit his pipe, though he knew it might make me cough, and commented with irritating professorial condescension, "Perhaps, then, you should want what you have."

That bitter barb hit home like an arrow. I never forgot it.

I started pulling on my blouse. "We'd better get going."

He nodded, puffing smoke. "Besides, Danielle is making pot roast tonight and I promised to be on time."