

Jeffery Conway

Beyond the Pale

She has long black hair, wears low-cut blouses, struts her stuff up and down Main Street in a boring mill town somewhere in Wisconsin. Rosa Moline is a slut. Married to Dr. Lewis Moline, she's having an affair with Neil Latimer, a Chicago millionaire, who owns a nearby hunting lodge that's watched by a caretaker named Moose.

Rosa fakes an injury during a fishing trip with her husband, gets Moose, an alcoholic struggling to stay sober, drunk, sneaks out of the cabin, struts over to Neil Latimer's, seduces him in the main room of his hunting lodge by the glow of a roaring fire. She longs to escape to the Big Town, but Neil leaves the next day without her, effectively ending their affair. The train's *Chicago, Chicago, Chicago* beckons Rosa like a desperate slut.

Rosa screams insults at her "red Indian" maid Jenny, who also wears sluttish attire and has long, jet-black hair. Rosa secretly tries on the mink of Moose's daughter during a dinner party, stands on a chair and has a love affair with the coat, preening and luxuriating in the feel in front of the mirror, struts across the living room like a cat. Lewis won't finance her trip to the Big Town, so she tracks down his patients who haven't paid their bills, thrills in the hunt.

Rosa heads for Chicago, discovers she isn't an urban sophisticate, hunts down Neil Latimer who says he'll marry a young socialite, not some know-nothin' slut from the county. Indignant, Rosa gets out of his car in a seedy part of town, is harassed by prostitutes and cops, flees for home, back to her hubby, Jenny, Moose, et al. She settles back into life as wife, gets pregnant, and even struts her stuff at a square dance at the lodge, where Latimer shows up, re-ignites their affair.

Neil tells Rosa that he wants her to divorce Lewis and marry him—that his affair with the socialite is over. The two conspire the next morning just before a hunting party to cut out early, fly to Mexico for a quickie divorce, then strut down the aisle together. But Moose overhears their plan and threatens the slut: “You tell Latimer [about the baby], or I will.” Rosa shoots and kills Moose, says she mistook him for a deer when she goes on trial before the entire town.

Cleared of the crime, Rosa gets into drag as maid Jenny, heads out of town and attempts to get an abortion after coming clean with Lewis about her affair. He foils her “appointment,” forbids her to leave until baby is born; she admits Moose’s death was murder, not an accident, pointing out her perfect aim on hunts. After inducing a miscarriage by jumping off a highway embankment, the slut slips into a high-fever delirium, staggers toward the train, and dies—her final strut.

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In 1949, you didn’t buy Jack Warner’s thoughts on *Beyond the Forest*: “It’s the role of a lifetime! A man-hater supreme, Rosa is scheming and climbing and ambitious. They’ll eat it up!” “Don’t give me that shit,” you screamed, “it’s trashy and cheap, junk for the lowbrows! I didn’t work all these years for better pictures to be relegated to horseshit like this!” Bette, it was always about you.

Still seething over missing out on Ethan Frome and Mrs. Lincoln, you were determined to give all concerned a hard time on *Beyond the Forest*. By hook or by crook, you wanted to transform the material, get a good picture out of it, despite your objections: “How’ll I look young enough for Rosa? Christ, I’m forty-one!” You got your revenge—the film wasn’t cheap, cost Warner as much as his others—your tantrums held things up.

You uttered the classic line “What a dump!” and set yourself up for drag queens who’d begin turning in their cruel imitations of you. Critics called your “sheer hysteria” and “overexposed histrionics” simply cheap, said you panted and ranted your way out of Warner Bros. in *Beyond the Forest*. In black vampira wig, mask-like face, and hip-swinging gait, as Rosa you commit adultery, have an abortion, and murder in this over-the-top picture.

You were in the throws of an abusive marriage yourself when the picture was filmed, although it was the man doing the abusing, not the screwed-up, selfish, psychopathic wife who nags, cheats and steals like the indelible Rosa. Your husband didn't like being "Mr. Bette Davis," though you said he gladly accepted domestic duties like the good doctor in *Forest*. In order to be free, you paid alimony for three years; the divorce wasn't cheap.

The Legion of Decency insisted that the office door Rosa enters to get a cheap abortion carry the title of attorney rather than doctor; you railed that the picture suffered from such puritanical nonsense. Totally over *Beyond the Forest*, you asked for a release from your contract, reluctantly agreeing to finish-up the film. After eighteen years and two Oscars, you ended your brilliant Warner Bros. career in an unfortunate finale as Rosa.

One of the highlights is watching the S/M relationship between you (Rosa) and your maid (Jenny). You scream and yell at her, hurl racist, cheap insults—"Don't just stand there like a cigar store Indian!"—when she tries to help you. Also good parts: when you almost attack Jenny for disregarding magazine pictures of Chicken à la King—she mutters, "Who can see if there's toast under all that goo?" & up-stairs in bed you spit out, "Everything deeluxe!" à la Daffy Duck in *Beyond the Forest*.

The Love Letters of Jeffery Conway and Various Elizabeths
(after The Love Letters of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning)

Jeffery C. to Elizabeth M.

I love you because I *love* you; I see you “once a day” because I watch re-runs on TV; I think of you all the time, in dreams I tour the world with you—Gay parades, Salem witch fairs, Axe-Murderess Remembrance Days—because I could not certainly think of you less if I tried, or went to Hollywood, or “abroad” (in every sense) (especially at nighttime—ha ha!©) in order to be happy.

Elizabeth M. to Jeffery C.

I have sometimes felt jealous of myself . . . of my own quirks:—my ability to make things disappear by twitching my nose, or to snap myself into high gear to clean the house, do the dishes, and thought that you cared for me only because of your “zany” gene—& that, without these attributes, you would pass me by on the other side:—I have thought that and vainly tried to cast a hex—well

Jeffery C. to Elizabeth I

I believe in you absolutely, utterly. I dig a shaved head on a woman, wigs. And those cloaks and gowns! Of course you could trust no one. Of course you were right to never marry. See how I go on and on to you—I who, whenever now and then pulled, by the head and hair, into watching eight hours of the lackluster goings-on inside your dreary castle, get sorrowfully on for a line or two—what can I say? *You*, my obsessive Queen, intrigue me.

Elizabeth I to Jeffery C.

Your life! . . . if you gave it to me & I put my whole heart into it; what should I put but anxiety, & more sadness—I know all about your sordid past! You and the mystery tramp your first year of college, how you drove across country with her, stuttering back and forth over state lines at her whim. That derelict house in Sacramento—the heat! And she liked it; she liked it.

Jeffery C. to Elizabeth T.

Now bless you, my dearest, best Ba, for this letter, which comes at the eleventh hour—which means at 3 o’clock: was I not frightened! [Have you had a stroke or something? I saw you on TV recently; your speech is all slurred and seems to come from only one corner of your mouth.] I was retreating as far as possible from that imaginary woman who called out, “Marc Anthony! Marc Anthony!” Geez, that enormous sound stage! And your khol-black eyes, dark wig. That Californian

sun of yours makes date-palms grow and bear outrageous amounts—you turn to the “hidden” camera and ask, “So you’re just another obsessed queen, right?”

Elizabeth T. to Jeffery C.

Ah—talking of palm trees, you do not know what a curious coincidence your thought is with a thought of mine, which I shall not tell you now . . . oh what the hell—I have been in talks, negotiations: they want me to do a reality show— hidden cameras (indeed) placed strategically throughout my Bel-Air manse. I’m not so sure—I’d want a million bucks . . . some day, perhaps. The slurred speech? It’s the meds—I’ve had yet *another* hip replaced.

Jeffery C. to Elizabeth B.

I do solemnly, unaffectedly wonder how you can put so much pure felicity into an envelope so as that I shall get it as from the fount head. That low-cut dress you wear clings to you faultless breasts like skin. I imagine the coach driver masturbating furiously as you, a heaven-sent nymph with “tolerably good” teeth, daintily climb up into Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s barouche-box (no hideous pun intended). God, how I adore a woman who is a great reader and who takes little pleasure in anything else.

Elizabeth B. to Jeffery C.

But one word before we leave the subject, dearest, and then to leave it finally . . . the “insurmountable” difficulty is for you to put down the fat cockheads (if I may be so bold) and pick up with a chick, I mean lady, again. There is something miraculous in that, you know!—Write just one word to say that it is all over with Providence [*where he was to have gone to get laid*]: which was a probable evil when I wrote last, & which I foresaw from the beginning with extreme vexation. But DON’T let us speak of it.

Jeffery C. to Elizabeth B. (*his first letter to her*)

I love your movie with all my heart, dear Miss Berkley,—and this is no off-hand complimentary fan letter that I shall write,—whatever else, no prompt matter-of-course recognition of your genius, and there a graceful and natural end of the thing: since the day last week when I first saw *Showgirls*, I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning and turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of its effect upon me. [. . .] Into me it has gone, and part of me has it become, this great living art of yours, how you spit out, effortlessly, such sizzlers as: “Dancin’ ain’t fuckin’, right?”

Elizabeth B, to Jeffery C.

I thank you, dear Mr. Conway, from the bottom of my heart. [. . .] Admiration is dear—very dear to me: but the admiration of a poet, & of such a *gay* poet, is the quintessence of admiration to me! [. . .

] Since you ask, no, I had not noticed the woman in the wheelchair behind me (who rolls herself past, between myself and the life-size cut-out of Cristal Connors advertising *Goddess*) as I'm exiting the Stardust, right after my tumultuous audition for a spot in the chorus line of said show. Yes, I suppose it *is* a kind of omen, because as you seem to know (well), I *do* push Cristal Connors down that flight of backstage stairs so that I might become the star of that stinkin' show. I do some of my finest acting of the entire film in that scene.

Jeffery C. to Elizabeth B-B

The first moment in which I seemed to admit to myself in a flash of lightning the *possibility* of your affection for me being more than dream-work . . . to traverse time and space—or your tiresome marriage, I should say! What in hell were you two thinking?—writing all those highfalutin letters. I've loved you since the first moment you intimated that you cared for me, & I cherish that first postcard from the villa of Casa Guidi where you wheel about from room to room in your chair wearing your Dark Brown Kitten Heel Pumps. Oh lordess—those shoes! And, of course, your poems. "*As for me,*" my precious little Portuguese, "*I am a watercolor. I wash off.*"

Elizabeth B.B. to Jeffery C.

So you think that I meant to complain when we first met, of your "*loving me only for my poetry*"! [. . .] I am not over-particular, I fancy, about what I may be loved for—or by whom, apparently: a middle-aged gay poet living out his summers on the tip of the Cape in an apartment above an old house/jewelry store—which I've been told is *tres* Grey Gardens. What a camp. You may, indeed, love me for my Prada shoes, if you like . . . except that . . . as you may surmise, they wear out.

**Elizabeths in order of appearance: Elizabeth Montgomery; Queen Elizabeth I (the Virgin Queen); Elizabeth Taylor; Elizabeth Bennet; Elizabeth Berkley; Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*