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Ouvroir de L'amour Potentielle

If she wasted the hours in unseen thoughts of him, this was not for the present of them, which, as he was away, did not exist.

But for the future.

The queer future.

What was the queer future for two heterosexuals?

She wasn't sure where she was with him. Or where she was with herself, to be exact.

She had watched his body, half naked, doing astonishing feats and fallen in and out of love with it and him.

Sun setting, world icy blue and gold.

Her child, not so young a child, naps.

She had to make dinner which meant she had to go shopping which meant she had to figure out what to cook and then what to buy. Then she would have to clean it and chop it and cook it and eat it and clean up after it. It was 3:52. Perhaps she should go to the store before the sun set.

She didn't want to leave the house. But she also didn't want to hit the grocery store too late and have to haul in wood in the dark. She remained immobile, it was so pleasant here in the darkening room.

She had met him at a gathering for photographers working in different fields. The meeting was in a German-style beerhall and the group had been seated at a long table where they were served sauerkraut and sausages and good German beer. Beerhalls were a novelty for her and she was pleased when he took the empty seat next to hers. They had both arrived early.

She noticed how strong and clean he looked. His straight blond hair was cut short, his eyes were blue, he had a WASPY name to complete the package. Medium build and like her he wasn't tall. In the course of the evening she learned he raced bicycles, climbed mountains, and made nature documentaries. He invited her for a bike ride, but she declined. She was not that kind of girl.

A few days later however she was sitting on the ground while above her he was scaling, shirtless, what were to her eyes unimaginable heights. So that finally he was only a speck at the top. Something about that distance and the vertigo she experienced looking up at him turned her on.

She had to admit, though not to him, she wasn't so keen on nature photography. She judged his work as skillful and unimaginative. This seemed to make no difference in her desire for him.

She herself was half Puerto Rican, half Anglo. Not tall, slim body, large breasts, elegant face. Brown skin. Her looks were always labeled "exotic." She'd married young, married "well," had a child, divorced, collected alimony, worked for a while as a travel agent.

Now in graduate school in this foreign-to-her mountain town, she was getting an art degree. For her thesis she'd been working on self-portraits. But portraits not just as herself as a woman, but also as a man. She used dildos, wigs, prostheses, make-up, whatever it took. Of course everyone played with gender in art school and she was aware that her work could easily slip into cliché. But her double portraits of herself, mostly naked, though with creative use of props, as both large breasted man and large breasted woman, as a couple clearly in love, had an uncanny quality. The quality of desire that illuminated each photo created a strange unsettling tension in the viewer. She was in love with herself as a man.

She had thought first to simply call her work *Drag*. But, at the time she'd been reading about the Oulipians, the members of the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, the Workshop of Potential Literature, and the idea had fascinated her. Though the Oulipians were mostly men playing with words, she knew at once her thesis would be titled *Ouvroir de L'amour Potential*. Workshop of potential love.

She learned that in French *ouvroir* had male connotations as craft or trade, of working with tools and with the hands, but that the designation was condescending when applied to females, for *ouvroir* had also referred to a place where impoverished and underpaid women worked on projects in a communal room, or where wealthy women worked on needlepoint to raise money for the poor. And she knew that the modern Oulipians had been criticized because as an almost exclusively male club, their heady word games were privileged over feminist body based art.

So she had thought to try to combine the male idea of the workshop with the female connection to the body. In the Oulipian way, she worked with her hands, sewing costumes for herself, making stage sets. Joining male and female work as background to the joining of herself (herselves?) in the photographs.

Naturally it was not possible to see all this thought in her finished pieces, in which, for example, an exotic nude male with perhaps a mustache and large realistic looking penis

gazed longingly at an unavailable and equally exotic woman. The thought that went into her work was the secret unseen part of her. Although, as she was so naked in her photos, it appeared she revealed so much.

When she first showed him her work she worried she would spook him. But perhaps the sensuous character of the images muted the disturbing quality. At any rate he had looked through them, admired them, and never mentioned them again.

Now that she was falling in love she wondered how this would play out in her already existing workshop?

Her friends could not understand the attraction. Sure, they said, he's cute, but so ordinary. It's hard to figure out what someone like you sees in him.

But he, in his handsomeness, his athleticism, his love for the wilds, remained mysterious to her. She reassured herself by remembering they shared the same need to be working with images, she in her studio, he off in the larger world. But while her photos were nothing but bodies—or rather, her body—his world was completely unpopulated by the human form.

Would he let her photograph him?

They were both in their mid-thirties, but he was childless. She had had her son young. Raised him on her own. Naturally, she had functioned as both Mom and Dad. She was aware that the fact of her child, of her warm attentive mothering, added to her appearance of normality.

Now the boy, age 11, was recovering from a cold and sleeping.

She really had to go to town. Her son would be ok on his own for the short while she would be away.

The temperature dropped. The roads were icy. In the car, on the radio, the opera *Fidelio*, in which a woman disguised as a man goes to rescue her (male) lover. And in which another woman falls in love with the disguised woman, thinking she is a man.

As she drove she thought of how she dreamt fairly frequently about opera. Was a certain kind of person drawn to such things? A queer male. She was quite sure, from his taste in music, that he didn't listen to opera.

She found his relationship to music, to film, to art in general naive. She realized she thought in general he was naive. But for some reason she found his naivety exciting.

At the grocery store sexual tension seemed heightened, perhaps because those of them there—besides herself, mostly single men on Sunday night—had ventured out in this extreme cold. They exchanged complicit nods, glances.

At the meat counter, the butch female butcher.

When she had thought *Ouvroir*, she had also thought, simultaneously, *Abattoir*.

Abattoir d'Amour.

Slaughterhouse of love.

In the checkout line, a guy cruising the handsome young checkout clerk.

Would he even notice such things? How could she love someone with such a different imagination?

She drove home. She unpacked the groceries. She carried in more firewood, though it was her son's job. He was still napping. She'd have to wake him in a while and make dinner.

And now. Definitely dark outside. Moon waxing. She closed the shades to try to keep some heat in. She'd have to decide about drinking, cooking, waking the child. There were dishes that need doing.

As an undergraduate she'd studied French. And noticed the writers she loved most were all queer men — Gide, Proust, Roland Barthes. Thinking in French, which felt both strange and familiar, and yet somehow natural, also somehow made her feel queer.

He didn't know any other languages. He didn't read French theory, or any other kind. He spent months mostly alone in the wilderness, while she had never gone camping in her life. Yet somehow he was drawn to her as well.

She realized that in her reading, in a woman's body what she identified with were gay men.

She, of course, did not identify as queer. To do so would be to be like the white woman who identified as black and ran the NAACP chapter in Seattle. And yet.

Some women solved this particular issue by hooking up with transgender women. Women who were also men. Both sexes in one. But perhaps she herself was both sexes in one, straight woman and a gay man.

She wondered if he thought he was fucking a straight woman when he was actually fucking a gay man in a woman's body. She was delighted at the ways in which they misunderstood each other and yet it still worked.

The mislove of this.

She wouldn't be the only queer in love with a straight person. The question was, would he freak out if he knew?

Mais.

But. She wasn't sure this was even true.

Miss Recognition.

Maybe she was just a regular heterosexual with fantasies of otherness in spite of it all. Like the kinky submissive woman who finds the perfect Dom and then together they act out a traditional relationship in which she caters to his every wish.

She told herself she should stop thinking. Thinking was her biggest vice. She began chopping garlic for dinner. She checked her email. Nothing from him. Just people trying to sell her books and perfume.

The temperature was dropping and even though the fire was going the house was getting cold. She put on the vest that he said made her look like a Mongol after he said her boots looked like Atilla the Hun's. Maybe because she'd disparaged his soundtrack.

He liked what he called sexy secretary. Tight skirt and heels. Fortunately it turned her on to dress like that sort of woman. Another costume, another disguise.

It was his manly side that attracted her. There was something about his distances, the way he didn't express himself, the long silences required by his work off in the wilderness that drew her in.

When he talked to her about books he'd read they were about people traveling in Antarctica, about dog sled rescues. About mountain adventures.

What would it be like to photograph him looking at her?

He'd been away almost a month. So far they'd actually only had a few weeks together when he wasn't traveling.

She found herself frequently hoping for phone calls which, because he was often out of range, rarely came. As usual she turned to books to help her. Roland Barthes on love. That French thing, that gay thing. In which Barthes too waits for the phone to ring. To wring.

She made dinner, which felt good. Kissed her son when he woke. They ate together. He was feeling better, she helped him with his homework, put him back to bed.

Cold, wind, snow. She'd better put more logs on the fire.

Her head was full of trees, wind, night, a postcard of an Egyptian woman who reminded her a little of herself.

Mostly though her thoughts were filled with him. He was too straight, he lacked imagination, the music he chose for his films was maudlin. Thinking these things she stopped being in love with him, began reading a book of queer theory by Jose Munoz, got happy again, started daydreaming again, fell in love with him again. He didn't have to do anything. He didn't even have to be in the room.

Really in spite of not being in love with him she was in love with him.

A little beer, and she was all *je t'aime moi non plus*.

Because just that day she had stumbled across a YouTube of a tomboyish Jane Birkin singing that song to thoughts of the very gay Joe D'Alessandro.

And she had then learned the song was part of a movie about Jane Birkin being in love with a gay man who could only get it up when he fucked her in the ass. Which was physically too painful for her to bear.

Odd how she felt that being in or out of love with him did not affect her feeling for or fascination with him.

Tomorrow she would go to her studio. But first she must buy a blond male wig with short straight hair, she must study the photo she made of him, she must put on the underwear she surreptitiously stole from him, make her calves look more toned with make-up as if she frequently rode a bicycle. Surround herself with photos of beautiful empty wildernesses.

Would she recognize herself in her image of him?

Daydreaming she wondered if she would she accompany him into the wilderness someday. Leave her studio for a different world?

Next day, icy clear blue. Child in a bad mood. She drove him to school as he was late for the bus. A thought arrived, departed. The mountains appeared very new white under their snow. She went to her studio. She lay on the floor.