

LOVE REVISITED

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I'm at a small airport in Ireland anxiously waiting for Rob to arrive. I loved him once, wanted to marry him, but excepting our recent phone calls to plan this rendezvous, I've neither seen nor spoken with him in eleven years. I want to be spinning gleeful little pirouettes in the arrival lounge but I can't. In the last week my fantasies of a rapturous reunion have curdled and turned to dread. We've both changed since we said good-bye over a decade ago and my queasy guts know bad chemistry when they feel it. I wonder seriously whatever made me think I'd want to see Rob again.

A plane swoops down, lands on the tarmac. I watch each disembarking passenger, hoping fiercely that Rob has missed his flight. Then I see him, walking slowly, carrying a pillow in his arms. Minutes later, we embrace coolly at the gate. He looks older of course, but still attractive. I don't care.

"Are you ready?" Robby asks me in the parking lot?

Huffing, I heave our suitcases into the trunk. I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

It's a cheap B&B on the edge of town. We've booked separate rooms, choosing to dip our toes into the water rather than risk total immersion. There's a bouquet of flowers in a vase beside my bed. A card reads, "For my lovely Max with warmest love. Rob." I thank him and as I unpack in solitude, I think about first meeting this dimpled, blue-eyed stranger so long ago.

I was single then, as I am now and at age thirty-nine had just bought a plain little house on bulldozed a lot free of any living thing – but with heaps of garden potential. I was on vacation and Rob was a tour operator giving me a one-on-one introduction to English gardens. I was so excited, I chirped and blathered from Hidcote Manor, to Sissinghurst castle to Barnsley House, gathering contraband seedheads at every stop. Rob was quiet, shooting me shy glances, probably wondering what crime he'd committed in a previous life to deserve the numbing force of my irrepressible American-girl enthusiasm. In fact, while I found him appealing, I had no idea how he felt about me.

On our third and last night on the road, the hotel goofed and gave us one room instead of two. Once a manor house, the hotel was gloomily romantic with stone walls, stark wooden beams and red velvet hanging at the windows. Our room had two beds' a huge four-poster in front of a burning fireplace and a teeny little cot in a cold dark corner. A few drinks in the pub and a drunken stroll through a foggy graveyard, brought the two of us close enough to resolve where we'd be sleeping that night.

For me, it was a vacation fling but, to my surprise, Rob had stronger feelings. Soon after, he came to America for a week and I returned the visit by going back to England. Every occasion could have been lifted from a paperback bodice-buster. Fire Island after the summer crowds had gone in September, Vermont when the leaves turned, the Hebrides Islands, just before snowfall.

When he came to see my little house, he gave it story-book name it still has; Broccoli Hall.

Rob was on the cusp of his divorce, living alone, when I met him. Eight months later, Rob was still married. He asked me to understand how important his family was to him, and I did, but I was counting my eggs every month and couldn't wait. Within a year, Rob was divorced and his wife had remarried. He called and wrote to me, but it was too late. I was quite in love with someone else. Years passed. I'd found love, misplace it, loved and lost again, but my cottage garden dream came true. When it was written up in a magazine, I remembered Rob and sent him the story so he could see how my garden had grown.

That was a month ago.

Rob wrote back, "I'm having waves of fantasies and I wonder what's real. Are you free? Are you up for an adventure?"

I was, indeed. I'd already planned a trip to Ireland and since Rob was dying to go there, I imagined a passionate romp with an old love.

"I feel there's a reason we're getting together now," Rob wrote me. "Perhaps we can pick up where we left off before."

"I wasn't sure of that."

The last decade had been rough for Rob. His divorce had cost him his home and the daily presence of his children. Then, he'd lost his business. His understandable depression gave way to a new outlook that included men's group, drums, and a diet of nuts and berries. He sent me a copy of a painful poem he'd written in the throes of heartbreak over someone else. "I'm afraid of being hurt," he said.

The more he told me about himself, the less I wanted to know. He seemed less just a sensitive guy at a vulnerable time, he sounded fragile. and I didn't want responsibility for his emotional welfare. Call me old-fashioned, but I like to be won over by a sturdier kind of man. The romantic scenario I'd envisioned started to stink of bad casting and potential disaster.

Spend two weeks with this guy? Was I crazy?

"Let's take separate rooms and see how things go," I said to Rob, a week before shoving off. "Better to entertain the idea of intimacy than to find ourselves locked up together with no way out."

Rob readily agreed, and once the fear of being too close too fast was gone, I got excited about our plans again. I got my legs waxed, my hair cut, smoothed sunless tanning lotion on my winter-white skin. I was lining my suitcase with new lace panties when Robby called from the hospital with bad news. He'd fallen from his bike and had fractured vertebrae. He was in terrible pain, couldn't walk. And although he was sure we'd be together soon, he wouldn't be able to meet me in Ireland the next week as planned.

Disappointed, I commiserated with poor Rob, then, postponed my flight. Two weeks later, still bedridden, Rich suggested I start my vacation without him, adding that he'd join me in Cork in ten days' time.

I flew to Ireland emotionally suspended between hoping to see Rob and determined to have a damned good time without him. I've traveled alone often, but Ireland is best seen by driving through it. I'm too anxious a driver to both navigate and drive on the left side of the road. So I planned a rail/bus vacation choosing spots to visit from a train map provided by the Irish Tourist Board.

Ireland is a sensational place for the single traveler. During my first ten days, I knocked myself out having fun. I walked out over the great limestone carapace of Inishmore, one of the three Aran Islands and became enchanted by the millions of lambs I saw nuzzling their mothers in the endless green countryside. I did city shopping, buying gorgeous sweaters and a tweed jacket, treated myself to a massage at a fabulous resort and toured gardens that gave me ideas for my own. I found that Irish people are nice to strangers and especially like Americans. I made new chums in pubs and on the train as I stitched together my bus/rail journey from point-to-point.

I spoke with Robby every few nights.

"How are you feeling?"

"Coughing is out. Sneezing is definitely out."

I said, "If its true men are only good for sex and heavy lifting, you've pretty much nullified yourself."

He laughed which hurt his back. I was glad.

I wanted to punish him for injuring himself, delaying my vacation, for sounding weak. I knew my anger was unreasonable and it bothered me. I tried forcing happy historical memories of the two of us into my mind; drinking tea in the bathtub, exploring gardens together. I knew that once I wanted to bear his children, and remembered the longing I felt when waiting for his calls and letters. Some people dream of having a second chance at love, but I was having a sickening realization. I hadn't left Rob because of my diminishing egg count. I'd left him because our love had died.

I wanted to say, “Don’t come. I’ve changed my mind.”
But it was too late. I’d arrived in Cork.

Now, in the hotel, I tell Rob good-night and close my door. With the lights out, I realize that all this time I’ve been thinking “romp,” and he’s been thinking “relationship.” I awake in the morning resolved; I’ll give it forty-eight hours and if after that, I’m miserable, I’m outta here.

Breakfast with Rob is comfortable enough and we plan the first full day of our adventure together. We split the hotel bill, and because Rob can’t lift anything heavier than a teacup, I drag the luggage down the stairs. By late afternoon, we arrive in a seaside town of Ballycotton. The hotel is fantastic, serving up luxurious rooms and a wide blue panorama as promised. We have mussels for dinner and although I’m keeping my distance, Robby and I start to talk about the way we were.

To our mutual amazement, we find that we remember totally different things.
Rob remembers a water taxi ride in Fire Island.
I remember how much he was drinking.

He covers his face with his hands, but recovers with a happy memory of me picking him up in a limo, naked under my coat.

I cough up recollections about the distance Rob put between us when he was paralyzed in his marriage. I remember verbatim conversations Rob had with his wife back then but have no memory of what Rob says were beautiful letters I’d written him when I was hoping he’d soon be free.

I snap to attention. This is all very nice but could be covered over a long lunch in New York. I tell Rob that I’ve already had a lot of vacation before he got here and I’ll be leaving for home in five days.

He’s disappointed, but typical of him, he doesn’t pressure me. He doesn’t own a watch, and in days to come we seem never to be able to leave any hotel before 11:30 a.m. He’s trying to relax and I’m trying to speed things up. “I’m in the process of becoming a human ‘being’” Rob tells me the next day. “Not a human doing,”

Barf on this yucky new age blah-blah.

While I’m having fun with Rob, he’s doing the same with me. He’s too nice to tell me where my foibles lie, but I pretty much know. He’s ticked off that I steal his thunder, rush him around and stick him with sharp little word pins.

I’m pissed that he won’t read what I write.

He’s pissed because I’m writing *this*.

He tells me that he’s not much of a reader.

I tell him that I write to eat.

We glare at each other from ten paces. Then get over it.

Rob tells me often how very powerful our relationship was to him. I don't remember it that way. Always single, I've become accustomed to the romance arc; infatuation, consummation, disintegration. Rob had been long married when we met, and our relationship was his first outside his marriage.

"It was as if I rang the doorbell and the building fell down," I say to Rob. "But the building was already wired for demolition and would have blown up, anyway."

"But you did push the button, didn't you?"

Another sunny day dawns. We visit a beautiful garden in Shanagarry with a magical folly completely lined with seashells. We climb rocks, see basking seals, walk small streets in pretty towns with bright facades. Rob accompanies me into shops, a fun thing lots of men won't do. We travel well, eat a lot, laugh at the same things. We tell people about our reunion. "You must be so excited," they say.

Rob tells me about his last four romances, all of which ended in the dust. "My neediness scared them stiff," he tells me. No kidding. "I guess I want to find someone who'll be the good mommy I never had," he says.

Not the best line with which to lure a woman who's turned on by Tarzan, but I begin to understand. I get down from my high horse and talk more than I mean to about a love disaster of my own. I want to explain the whole thing to Rob. I want him to understand me.

I worry about his back. He never complains. Just needs to rest for a while. I tease him obnoxiously about the sex we're not going to have. "How many push-ups can you do, Robby? If you drop the car keys can you pick them up? He gets sick and I slip a thermometer under his tongue that has taken on the appearance of an industrial carpet. "That thing is revolting I tell him." I'm not going to me a really good mommy. Just mommy enough. How did he get me to do this?

"Are you good at massage?"

"No, terrible," I shoot back. Don't push it, buddy. I'm so mad at him. Why?

Rob has no fever and recovers quickly.

I buy him a mug with his name on it.

Three days pass. Rob's back improves. We're together nearly every sunlit minute and talk about everything, each conversation taking us deeper into the other person and ourselves. I admire Rob's bravery. Quicker than me to reveal his feelings, he wants the mirror of my reactions to him. I tell him things I was afraid to say before, how put off I had been by his seeming desperation. I feel no trace of it since we've been together and tell him so. Still, I feel bad about the awful sleepless night he has after I've divulged this.

While Rob with his dependency issues that he thought he'd overcome, I confront myself with why I have to be such a hard-ass bitch when Rob is so sweet. Then I know. I don't want to encourage him, because he's not the man for me. I've got fine reasons for this determination having to do with our conflicting goals, styles, and philosophies on life – not to mention that he's geographically far-fetched. But despite all of this, I care about Rob as he seems to care about me. And since we have this new and tender connection, we don't want to cause each other harm.

Robby notes that we haven't had the slightest physical contact. True. and it's safer that way. "Just because you think a thing, doesn't mean you don't have to do it," I tell him.

Rob agrees. "If we slept together now, I'd worry about how you were feeling the next day," he says. "and once you were gone, I'd be bewildered."

"Let's not and say we did."

Since we're not going to have sex, it laughs at us.

"How's your back?"

"It hurts."

"Oh, wanna do it, Robby? Say 'No thanks. I'm tired and my back hurts.'"

"I can't."

He kisses me good-night and we lock up our libidos behind respective bedroom doors. I like the kiss and hope for a midnight visit, but it's not to be. In the morning, Rich says, "I'm a sexual time bomb. I was awake all night. Whatever you do, don't touch me."

Whether because of Rob's meat-free influence or because I've seen too many itty bitty baby lambs that will soon be suspended from hooks in butcher shops, I can't eat anything with a face.. We're eating cheese sandwiches in the warm embracing pub of a wonderful old hotel in Dingle. In thirty six hours, I'll be going home.

And I'm tired of being a human doing.

"Two nights in Dingle, then?" Rob asks.

"Yes," I say. "Let's stay here."

Rob's expression is strained. He mutters into his Guinness, "I'd like to take you to bed right now."

I flush with desire, stop short of saying "Let's go."

"I want to bathe," I say, "then see the town and get some dinner, Okay?"

Rob nods miserably. I take my key and go up to my room. In the center of it is a four-poster bed, like the one I shared with Rob many long years ago.

I take a good long bath and think about Rob. He's not going to wear a watch or pick up the tab or break down my door in the middle of the night. But what he is, is decent and dear and devoid of deceit. Why am I torturing him? I add bath oil to the water and decide that for both our sakes, I should get off it and be a soft and gentle woman.

I dry myself, put on lace underthings. Knock on his door.

“Now that I’m clean,” I tell him, “I don’t want to go out. How about you?”

“I want to stay here with you,” Rob tells me.

Do come in.

I wake up in a four poster bed with my new-old lover on our last morning together. He reaches for me. I look at my watch, and he laughs at me.

“I’m just checking to see how long before the wake-up call,” I tell him.

We eat the obligatory full Irish breakfast and race for the airport. It’s apparent by our laughter and demeanor that we’re both okay, that our fears of the savage cost of making love to someone you care about and plan to leave were greatly exaggerated. It makes me think of other times I’ve been afraid of some unnamed emotion and simply fled.

Rob sits beside me in the departure lounge.

“I’ve had so much fun,” he tells me.

“Me, too,” I say and wonder what each of us will remember ten years from now. We hold hands, promise to write and I’m seized with deep humility. I’m grateful for the six days I’ve spent with this good man. I tell him so.

Then, I thank him, hug him and kiss him goodbye.

He waves and waves until I’m entirely out of sight.

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