



Kiss Me Again. She Did.

By

Renate Stendhal

NIGHT WANDERER

The Seine was lapping up high, swollen and excited from the rain storms of the past days. The illuminated Gare d'Orsay across the river threw a lick of polish on the cobblestones of the quay. My youthful follies with Frantisek and other lovers seemed like a story invented by someone else. My imagination had been stirred by women as far back as I could remember. A little girl with a dark page cut mesmerized me at age five because she was half French and her parents had a marble statue in their garden in Berlin, where I grew up. I remembered a children's ballet I saw at that time, the little girls dolled up in brocade like in a painting by Velazquez. I was permitted to touch one girl's crinoline dress, entering a magical realm I never completely left.

The fairytale of femininity...

What made it so fascinating was that I was never entirely part of it. I was and I wasn't. I was in love with the tale but didn't fit the bill, no matter how hard my mother tried. There wasn't a day in my childhood and youth that wasn't touched by this dream my mother, my older sister and I were supposed to share – graceful manners, beauty, charm, all difficult to define and difficult to escape. We didn't have money but my mother, cook and baker par excellence, was endlessly creative in making up for this fact, tailoring entire

wardrobes, ball gowns and coats, making us look like members of a social class she was determined to belong to. We sometimes joked that she'd also make our shoes if only she had time. My inclination for being a trickster, which I considered second nature, had perhaps originated with my mother, after all. While she baked and bustled and hosted, my sister and I smiled, curtsied and pirouetted in apparent unison. Our planet of womanly virtues was graced by admiring visits from "outer space": my father circled around us at a distance, but always brought his favorite toy, a camera. His thick, leather-bound photo albums filled a prominent space in the book shelves and fed my mother's hunger for family stardom.

Looking back at it now, how early was I aware that my mother controlled everything, even my father? As a child already? My father -- the discreet royal consort, my sister and I her doll princesses. My mother was wearing the pants, ambitious, demanding, commandeering, while her "better half," my father, served her, adored her and shut up. I watched his discrete victories, however, like calling me Luise, the name he wanted me to have against my mother's will. He liked to trace his family line back to the Prussian Queen Luise, a claim my mother resented and refused to believe. But he kept calling me by his pet-name (picked up by Frantisek and the friends who called me Lou.) I knew it was his secret male privilege to get a piece of his daughter away from my mother and fantasize having me all to himself.

Masculine, feminine. How arbitrary those points of view were. It was all make-believe, a mere fantasy, as far as I was concerned. Shifty as a mood. I had taken femininity to an edge and then stepped out, leaving my ballet slippers behind with everything else.

I leapt at a branch of a sycamore bent low over the river bank, letting the rain drops splash over my face and hair. Feminine, not feminine. The same kind of fantasy declares, “Paris is a woman,” makes me the lover and her the beloved. Paris, a woman in perpetual performance, brilliant, showing me -- as she did everyone—exactly what I longed to see. Like Claude, the treacherous, in her uncanny ability to guess my desires.

She’d gone missing a good six weeks ago. It wasn’t the first break in our off-again, on-again story. But this time there hadn’t even been a fight. I was left with a puzzle, a doubt that kept worming its way through my veins.

A Bateau Mouche was chugging up the Seine toward the Pont des Arts, ferrying along the warm-wet glow of a private party, now disappearing under the bridge on its way upstream to the Quai des Grands Augustins, Quai des Orfèvres, melting into the haze.

I flipped the butt of my cigarette into the river and continued along the quay toward Notre Dame. Passion was a roller-coaster, you just had to hang in there.

I was whistling Ferrando and Dorabella’s duet when someone whistled back at me like a mocking bird. It was a good-looking guy sitting on a bench with provocatively spread legs, presenting his packet. I grinned at him.

“Hey,” he said, “in the mood for a tête à tête?” Of course he didn’t say tête à tête, he said an obscenity that sounded just like it.

“Perhaps, if you were Mozart.”

I said it in my normal woman’s voice. At night, with my long legs and the long stride I have adopted, I am rarely taken for a woman. The world of the night is an unfair world. Men are everywhere on the go, hanging out around the *pissoirs* and bushes, on the benches in squares and along the quays, ready for some adventure. How many women are just as

awake at this moment, barely past midnight, and in the mood for a little adventure—if only there was something out there catering to them. But what? Little tea huts around the Tuileries with a sofa and a candle? A row of tents along the banks of the Seine, adorned with colored flags to signal sexual preferences?

An odd clicking-rolling sound approached from below the Pont des Arts. From the shadows a narrow figure rushed up with rowing movements – a girl on roller skates, sporting a phosphor-yellow cocks-comb. She stopped sharp in front of me and stared at me with smeared mascara eyes.

“Got a cigarette?” she said with a brazen voice.

“Sure do,” I said and pulled my cigarette case from my leather jacket. I usually prepared a few “active” cigarettes for a theater night in order to avoid having to roll them at intermission. The young woman blinked when I opened the silver case and held it out to her. She suspiciously peered at my face, the elegant case, my hands – then she got it.

“Can I have two?” she said with eager, childlike trust.

“Go ahead.” When she had fished two of the last four cleanly rolled cigarettes from the case I asked, “Anything else you need?”

“Got fire myself,” she grinned. With a brief military salute at her cocks-comb she added, “Have a good day, pal,” and rolled off clicking along the cobblestones. A moment later someone whistled. A young guy with a similar hair-do rolled out of the shadows and followed her. I heard them laughing as if they had just cracked a big joke.

I was strangely touched by her salute. What had she seen in me that would link us as “pals”? She had no idea that I’d been a rookie like her once, pretending to be invincible when I strolled through the city by day and by night, convinced that Paris belonged to me.

At first I, too, had a companion. Blue lived in Tanja's collective. He was a musician from Guadeloupe who played a mournful saxophone in the metro and at night, on a fresh high, set out to wander. I accompanied him and listened to his stories from the Caribbean Islands. Childhood stories about his grandmother who took him with her to the graveyards to talk with the dead. He told me he understood the cooing of the pigeons on the roofs. I told him about Gertrude Stein's "pigeons on the grass alas," and he assured me Gertrude was a great Shaman who understood them, too. He kept a privileged dialogue with God. When I smoked some dope and read a few pages of Castaneda I had no trouble keeping up with him. I'd been smitten with Paris even before I got there; I couldn't wait to make it mine. Without a second thought I slipped into the nomadic life style of Blue. I cut my hair and adopted his garbs – Jeans with a short Jeans jacket, T-Shirt, tennis shoes. He sometimes introduced me to friends and clochards and from the moment one of them took me for a guy he used my father's pet name, presenting us as "Brothers Lou and Blue." We got a kick out of it.

The last traces of youthful fat disappeared from my face. It happened that the women at the bakeries and cheese shops in my quartier greeted me, "*Bonjour, Monsieur.*" I was twenty-eight when I became invisible to the ordinary world of men. No more cat calls or marriage proposals coming at me wherever I went. The eager looks up and down my body now came from gay guys in the metro or in the streets, and I quickly learned to enter the fantasy game their eyes invited. When I exchanged a few words with them on occasion, I dropped without effort into the deeper voice I used in my conversations with Blue. I kept the tempo of his walk and the length of his steps even after losing sight of him for a few years. A good year ago Tanja told me that Blue was back in Paris. Some young theater

company had engaged him for a play. We went to see the performance at the Biennale des Jeunes Artistes, a festival for young artists, where the play got some attention, and there I met Claude, Aicha and the rest of the troupe. Shortly after the end of the run Blue disappeared again – I figured he had taken a boat to Gouadeloupe. But sometimes during my night wanderings I continued to be “Brother Lou” and felt his smooth gait next to mine as if he’d been one of Jean Genêt’s dark angels, forever chosen to protect me.

If my mother could see me now, I used to think. It was as if the city took me in and peeled my old skins away. Still, there seemed to be always another remnant of my mother’s Good Girl to be shed – an obliging smile, a readiness to turn my eyes away. Don’t look! The classical motto of so-called innocence as soon as there is anything interesting to see. Anything sexual, *louche*, forbidden. How is a girl supposed to take her place in the world if she isn’t allowed to see what the world looks like? I found out soon enough that a woman who can’t look also can’t desire. She can only entice in order to be desired. Women’s eyes are passive eyes; they wait for something to enter them and blow their minds.

I continued walking, feeling the ease of my stride. Had I wanted to, I could have stepped right into the gaze of that stranger at the opera and made her look at me, stop her in her tracks and take her by the arm: Let’s get out of here! I was free. My life was anything I wanted it to be. An adventure. A *coup de théâtre*. A loge with bordello-red chairs and velvet trimmings.

What if someone started an opera revolution that dedicated the first loge on the right in every opera house to women’s own purposes? Women are not eager, after all, to slouch on park benches, hang around pissoirs or crouch in the bushes at night, in the cold. I imagined repeating my opera adventure of this night with someone else, plunging some

more hesitant lovers into the fantastic tumult of the orchestra. What the battle cries of the Valkyries might trigger in some of them...

I was approaching Notre Dame. The cathedral looked like a dramatic stage set gleaming in the haze. We would need to divvy up the acts for the use of the first loge on the right: the romantic-morbid lovers would clamor for the last act in which the heroine dies of consumption, kills herself, is killed or buried alive. Nothing could be more enticing when *la petite mort* was at stake, the “little death” of orgasm, as the French call it. My newly discovered Dorabella, in fact, was quite a revolutionary. No problem, no effort with the little death. No hurry, no sticky sentiment, not even names.

I started up Blvd St. Michel. Shakespeare & Co was illuminated, probably after a reading. At the corner store of the boulevard, Gibert Jeune, with its thousands of second-hand books and paperbacks outside under the yellow awning, students were still browsing. A few young women were hanging out with them, visibly less interested in the books, their umbrellas tucked under their arms.

A limo stopped at a night club; I watched a gaggle of girls in sleeveless taffeta dresses peel out and run up to the line of cars that were looking for parking. They didn't have the least trouble running and skipping in their flimsy footwear, as if they'd worn stilettos since first grade. They were clacking excitedly across the wet pavement, sweeping up the taffeta skirts around their legs as they ran.

Chapter 3

LA COUPOLE, MIDNIGHT

On Blvd Montparnasse the night was in full swing. Cars were parked right down the middle of the wide boulevard, between the Dôme, Le Select, La Rotonde and La Coupole. There was a merry chaos of valets and people, some in evening attire, flagging down cabs, stepping in and out of honking cars, limousines, shouting, laughing. I felt drawn to my night hangout like a sugar addict to her favorite bakery. I scanned the crowd inside La Coupole, groups of revelers piled in between the frescoed columns; tables loaded with bottles, champagne coolers, glasses, plates. Waiters in long aprons zipped in and out of the kitchen swing door, large pewter trays hoisted on one shoulder, stacked with oyster pyramids on ice. It was the midnight speed, driven by alcohol and big tips. The rest of the day the waiters would be loitering at the tables for a chat. They knew their clientele. Legs crossed, leaning confidentially onto the tables, one thumb hooked into an apron string, they would be as oblivious to impatient patrons as to the couples huddled too closely in the corners of the red leather banquettes.

There were a couple of empty tables not set for dinner at the side of the bar where the view over the vast hall was limited. I ordered a glass of champagne in celebration of *Così* and the soon-to-follow last act of *Arabella*. I drank to the old adage that sex is best when there are no names attached. Well, sometimes. Anything is true sometimes.