



DOUBLEBACK REVIEW



CURRENT ISSUE ARCHIVE  SUBMIT ABOUT MASTHEAD



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Say it was Love



It cannot be that a person misses out on love, that he doesn't have it, ever. It's not like oxtail soup. You can live a life without eating oxtail soup. Or encountering it, even, on a menu or in a store. Love is around. So it makes sense that a person would run into it, at some point, anyway.

I don't know that I have, though, run into it, "it" being the wallop or the slow boil, the peace, the hanging in time. I have children whom I love, desperately, and family and pals and work and puppies, but the other, no. I have been tingly and giddy, from prospect, from wonder. But not from fact. Not from actual, "Yes, I love you," fact, in decades of being around.

It is an unsettling realization, this absence of something that is supposed to be so desirable, so good for you. You live longer, the studies show, when you are in love. You look different, better. Is it better? I don't know. While I don't know that I want it now, particularly, I want to have had it. Now, it might feel in the way. Tomorrow, next week, who could say. But then, before, it would have seemed right. It would have seemed better.

So I say it was love, the thing that came closest. Closest not in miles or shared linens or Friday nights at the movies, but closest in my perception. Closest in my head.



We figured out that there were seven months. Seven months without girlfriends or boyfriends, spouses who would not be, or would be, entanglements. Seven months of possibility. Of course, as such tales go, we figured this out late—sixteen years too late.

“Why didn’t we know?”

“We should have known.”

Maybe the distance. Maybe the age. We were 25. You can’t think of 26 when you are 25. You certainly can’t think of 43.

We did the math over the phone while my marriage was completing its course. It was a continual disintegration, really, providing little surprise in how it fell out. But, still, it was a time for taking stock, for having the conversation with yourself. “What would it feel like if you never saw him again?” you ask aloud, sitting on the floor of your closet. And then you answer, and you get up.

I had hoped that there wouldn’t have been seven months, or seven minutes, or seconds, even. I had hoped that when we superimposed our respective romantic gaps, there would be no overlap. No common space in the Venn diagram. Nothing for me to have done. Nothing to blame myself for years later. Today. When I’m 90.

That is not how life goes. We all know that is not how life goes. Our overlap, in fact, provided more than enough time. Now that is a wallop.

So I have the dream. We are at the ballet, finding our seats. He wears a charcoal suit, white button-down. A tie I sent for a birthday, robin’s egg blue, a hint of pink, navy. I feel his hand on my back as we stop at our row, in the orchestra, right aisle. Here we are. He sits to my left, my prettier side. He likes my hair pulled into the chignon, low, a little messy. The lights fall, and he takes my hand.

I don’t remember which ballet we see, but it is modern, ethereal. The stage lights are lavender, costumes white. He holds my hand until we clap. I feel beautiful. I feel different. We walk toward the back of the theatre, talking of fouettes, jetes, pirouettes. It is there that it ends.

I first had the dream after counting up the months, the exact dream, nights in a row. It continued to find me for some time, though less frequently as the weeks



went on. We sit in the same seats. We are the same age, our age then. I wear the same sleeveless dress, black crepe, with a rakish satin sash tied low in back, a long slit up my right leg. Pointy heels, a slight platform. French.

I wake up, and in the instant that straddles bliss and reality, I feel swept up, fluttery. I feel embraced, alone in my bed. If you press your eyes shut, the dream will keep going. You can trick it. You can make it stay. Press your eyes, hard.

These days, we talk on the phone every few months, we write, send cards, photographs of our children, his wife. We are terrific friends. He does not know about the ballet. One of his sons will marry one of my daughters, we plot, the way other parents would, but not really. There is a lot that we don't say, or that we don't say anymore. I hope there is a lot that he keeps to himself, but I can't exactly know. I can't know if his feelings were as potent as mine, or what they are now. He tells me that one lucky man is waiting, somewhere. I am denying the world's male population by opting out. It is probably the right thing for him to say, though I'd rather he say something else, something about second chances or reunions so many years later, or the funny ways in which things work out.

When I was first divorced eight years ago, it made sense to go on some dates, to test what hadn't been tested in a while. It was strange, and it didn't fit into the clock. But I have thrived, I think, without the continued presence of men. Or, I have simply become used to it. I have a lot to do, raising kids, earning a living, pursuing a passion. All at once. It is a race each day. When it is done, I sleep soundly, the way I want. I could never manage with a person next to me, anyway, monopolizing the blankets, making sounds. I was always tired. I don't like other people's condiments in my refrigerator. I would rather drive the car. Yes, I would, I tell myself.

Now, I no longer have the dream. I miss the ballet. People used to look at us there and smile. We must have been a handsome couple. We must have looked like something to envy. I miss his hand on my lower back. I miss catching his eye during the pas de deux.

So, I try to have the dream. I try to make it happen. I don't know if it can be done, if you can will your subconscious to think a certain way, to draw specific images in your brain, but I feel that it is worth a shot. I wait for the weekend, when



there is more time, when thoughts aren't stuck on the daily routine. When the mood is right.

I look forward to the night and wonder what might happen, the way you do before a second date. I pouf up my pillow and settle under the covers, feeling hopeful and ready. Ready for possibility. Will the evening end as usual, walking up the theatre's aisle? Or, will we make it through the lobby and out the door? Will he turn and kiss me under the moon?

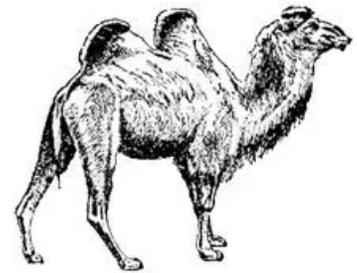
I close my eyes and feel a smile move across my lips. I put on the dress, tie the sash into a bow behind me, check it in the mirror before he arrives. I dot perfume on my wrist and ankles—it floats up, I'm told—and the doorbell rings. A hug, held, and an arm to the street. A cab scoops us inside, the city sparkles and falls away. It is love. It has to be. Say it is, someone, say it is. We find our seats, and I drift to sleep.

Pamela Gwyn Kripke's fiction, essays and feature pieces have appeared or are forthcoming in *Folio*, *The Barcelona Review*, *The Woven Tale Press*, *The Concrete Desert Review*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *New York Magazine*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *Medium* and elsewhere. Her essays have been published by *Creators Syndicate*, *Gannett Newspapers*, *McClatchy* and *The Huffington Post*. She has taught at

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