

2. SUITE FOR A SOLO MONTICELLO

The great sins of life cannot go unpunished. And the indiscretions of youth cannot be ignored or they set a pattern of profligacy for adulthood. Helena wondered why the penalties were so severe when she was really the innocent in the whole affair. But she thought that maybe this was a good time to leave London. So she agreed to exchange the elite fashions of a the bustling metropolis for cashmere sweaters and roaring fires. She was giving in to forced exile in Charlottesville, Virginia. The University would be a challenge. She tried to stay clear of the sorority parties and the Cavalier booster rallies. Instead, she sought refuge among a group of self-described artists. Prominent among the Saturday Supper Set, Lance had the vision rooted in the small community.

There is a view from Jefferson's Monticello to the University. Jefferson designed it this way. Lance was carrying on this legacy of liberty. He championed himself a free-thinker among his more conservative fellows. Helena found him immediately attractive even if she was put off by his more absurd speculations. He was a good complement to her artistic studies. Lance wanted to be an architect. He sought to pattern his emotions after the same sense of his order that he applied to his designs. This was quite a change from the haphazard style that she had encountered in London. It was hardly the same approach to privilege. Lance felt that he was creating a new world one brick at a time. In his most creative moments he felt that he was channeling Thomas Jefferson himself.

Helena welcomed the appeals of his new frontier. He was rather naive. His dreams would face a hard reality if confronted by the squalor of a London East-End tenement house. But in the Appalachian wilderness, it seemed to have its perfect locale. They both breathed deeply breathed the air and felt reinvigorated. A short drive and they could watch the sunset over the golden dusted hills. They were still friends, but Helena could already feel the attraction. She just wanted the chilly night air to remind her what was real amidst his gentle seduction.

"It's almost starting to feel like home," she shared with Lance.

"It is home. Isn't it so wonderful here."

Darkness was about to set in.

"We better get back. I should have worn something warmer if I knew it would get like this."

"Come closer, and I'll hold you."

She found his advance a little clumsy.

"I really am cold!"

"Helena, you are a strange one to figure out."

She smiled.

"What's the mystery?" She knew that she was being coy. But everything had moved too fast in those London parties. She didn't want to commit her life to the unknown. And she found him a little quaint. Although she couldn't let on.

In the car, he was silent. He wasn't mad. Just a little confused. She was much more confusing than the other girls that he had met. With them, he knew immediately if they shared a romantic interest. Helena let her emotions simmer inside. This was something new for him. It was like reading a novel. He had culture. But he was more a man of clear lines and defined

shapes. Now he was seeing his world through a glass darkly. And it didn't make sense. The ghosts were gathering around the rotunda of Monticello, and for the life of him, he couldn't divine their intent.

He dropped her off at her residence. He hoped that the daytime might shed a cleared view of his passions.

Claire was Helena's roommate. She had been fortunate as if the residence service had paired her with a like-minded girl.

"He's a little scary."

"What do you mean?"

"Claire, you've known him longer than I have."

Helena hoped to benefit from her roommate's wisdom.

"Are you asking if I went out with him?"

"I know that you did."

"Helena, I tried to. But his heart was too tender. I didn't want to break it."

Helena felt uncomfortable touching such protected territory. She could see that her roommate was looking for a cigarette.

"Claire, I thought that you quit."

"I have. But I just go through this meaningless fumbling.

"Are you a bit nervous? Have I touched a sore subject?"

"No, I want to talk about it." She looked right at Helena. At first, Helena took this as a sort of warning.

"I'm not trying to tell you what to do."

"Claire, I can hardly tell what to do myself. I like the boy. But I don't know if there's any kind of spark."

"I think that our great loves only destroy us. Sometimes it's better to settle for much less."

"I don't want to think of my life as just settling.

"I'm not saying that. But Lance is a boy with a future."

She wondered about Claire's intent. She wanted a cigarette herself, and she didn't smoke.

"We need some coffee."

"I need to get some sleep. I have an 8AM class."

"I can't sleep. My head is turning around."

"Let's just go for a walk."

"If we do, I better get my coat. It's chilly out there."

They felt like they were planning a robbery. They were both a bit light-headed.

That late there was really no one on the streets. They both absorbed the night to settle them down.

"Do you miss London?"

"Do I! I'm trying to adapt. Trying to get into my studies. I really like art. I love to draw. I've been getting in to painting."

"Why are you studying design if you love art so much?"

"It gives me a chance to apply my creativity. I can be so much more practical. Especially

with my tendency to get into little scrapes, it's good to have something to help me keep my feet on the ground."

"You almost sound like you're parenting yourself."

"Claire, it's been that way for most of my life. My mother couldn't accept the fact of being a mother. And my grandmother has never understood what it's like to be girl in the modern world. I suppose that it's really the same for all of us."

Claire really valued her new friend. She had a wisdom that seemed the perfect accompaniment to her own immaturity. She had never thought of herself that way. But Helena's influence made her wonder things about herself. It was good to be able to take flight on her own. Helena seemed to encourage her independence.

Claire started to think about her relationships with guys. She had thought this was the source of her maturity. She was never clingy. She made her own way. And if a guy hurt her in the least, things would immediately end. But she realized that this was her out. She could hurt others. But she never wanted to feel pain herself.

Perhaps this was what bothered her so much about Lance. He was too nice to hurt. So she had sent him on his way. In her heart she still wondered if he was the one.

Claire was studying English Literature. She was adept at discovering the secret codes that made novels work. Her articulate style allowed her to communicate her insights with a personal flair. She had a love of Austen in common with Helena. Some nights they would stay up until dawn discussing the vicissitudes of Emma's heart.

"She can never see the love that is right in front of her."

Claire went white. She realized that this was her sin.

The three of them, Lance, Claire and Helena, took supper together that Saturday. It was the first meeting of their club. There were others who tagged along. But this was the core. This was an executive meeting. It gave Claire a chance to relive her time with Lance. During the appetizer, she kept staring over at him. He caught her glance. She took this as a signal to go.

For his part, Lance wanted to get Helena alone. He felt that he was in the presence of an art work. He was a little taken aback with his own desires. He could sense this desire to possess. He had never known love in this way. It pleased him. It absorbed all his being. It shocked him.

He wanted to run his fingers through her luxurious dark hair that flowed to the middle of her back. He could imagine it flowing on to her bare skin. He could already feel the magic of his caress. The kiss was a source of a deep meditation. The touch was hot. There was something forbidden in this desire.

As he ate his soup, Helena caught his eye. He shied away from the contact. For such a social event, the three of them were hardly talking. They were letting their bodies communicate for them. Someone needed to break the ice.

"This is good soup."

The other two looked at Claire as if she had said something obscene. Then the three of them laughed.

"Did you have the supper club before I came here?"

Claire piped in, "We used to do poetry readings in the woods."

"But in the summer, the mosquitoes were nasty."

Lance glared at Claire. Lost love is only put away with difficulty.

“So, are there special things that I’m supposed to say as I eat my dinner.”

“I taught Lance a few love spells. But I don’t think that he learned them right.

“I just have difficulties with my own language.”

“Is that English?”

The three of them laughed. As the dinner progressed, Helena realized that Lance was trying to get her alone. She didn’t want to dispense with the security that Claire offered.

“What do you want to do after dessert?”

Lance was looking for a cue.

Helena applied her caution, “We could read poetry in the woods.”

“I need to read a novel for Monday.”

Helena didn’t want Claire to abandon them, “It’s only Saturday night. I know how fast you read.”

“You’re really no fair. You know all my secrets, and you use them against me.”

Helena wondered if Claire had more in mind. The three of them settled on a joy ride. It was Claire’s convertible, but they pretended that they had stolen it. They were running from the law.

When the blue lights finally rode up on them, the reality of the game hit home.

“Just my luck,” Helena mumbled. Lance was almost passed out in the back seat.

“License and registration.”

The officer was very business-like.

“You kids haven’t been drinking?”

“We had some dinner together. And then we wanted to get away from the city. So we went for a drive. The wind through my hair has a sense of bringing me back to life.”

The cop gave her the weirdest look. He was used to wild students. Claire was a piece of work, something that was strange for even him.

“I was surprised that he let us go.”

“Lance, Claire has some kind of magic.”

“The cop was looking right in your eyes. He must have had a hard on or something.”

“I just gave him the puppy dog look and said, ‘Who, me?’”

“It was crazy. You turned on that Southern drawl and your poetry. It was like giving him knock out drops.”

“Well, Lance, you nasty criminal, I better get you back to your place.” Claire managed a tidy resolution to what had become a crazy night. Lance gave both girls a big hug and then meandered to his door. He turned back to wave at both of them.

Helena was the first to say something, “That was too easy.”

“That cop helped.”

“I really think that it scared Lance more than the two of us.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong. What did I have to fear?” There was a feeling of relentlessness in Claire’s voice. Helena wished that she could be that nonchalant. She was still getting over Lance’s full court press. She agreed to see him a few more times that week. But midterm exams and projects became a convincing excuse the next week. She needed to take a break from matters of the heart. She could be like Claire and derive some sensual delights from a good novel.

Meanwhile, Claire had made it through another guy. She left him nameless. It made it better that way.

“Sometimes, I feel like I’m just ordering a fast food meal.”

“You’re not really like that.”

“I know. I want it to mean something. I see him like a poetic vision. An Apollo lighting up the sky. But then reality crashes in. It’s already too late. I just wish that I could give them a script.”

“You loved his body.”

“I probably could get any guy on campus. The problem is keeping them.”

Claire’s curse rang through to the heart of Helena’s being. If Claire was a captivating creature to some, Helena was a wonder to behold. She hated to admit that deep down she knew her fate. But it seemed to be more accursed than her friend. She would need some deep magic if she going to fend off the monsters that would cross her path.

This was the perfect time to throw herself into her work. She compared her artistic propensities to Lance’s. It was like imagining his body. Only in this dream, she was the artist. What did she see that seemed to elude him in his ordered Thomas Jefferson world. How had things really changed since the Eighteenth Century?

Helena accepted the vagaries of the heart. Behind the mirth of shared caresses and longing kisses, she knew of a darker impulse. He could make light of his need to possess her, but his heart had little place for this understanding. For her, design offered the opportunity to expose us in our most covetous state. The cupidity of the consumer staring at a print ad was a fine example of this realization. A fashion model beckoned, “Buy me!” while all the time realizing that her victim could never afford to full price for his wanton desires. The fine lines of architecture only concealed this ghost in the machine. And its rebelliousness was the thief in the night searching for a passionate treasure.

In her heart, she felt that she was sculpting the image of her desire. It was a mix of fine lines and certain curves. She could give in for nothing less. She wanted Lance to meet this image. He was such a beautiful soul. But he fell short. His fate left him wanting. He couldn’t see the elves in the garden.

She thought that maybe she could try. She could follow Claire’s lead. Believe long enough to let the body do the talking. Then let the soul take over after she had got herself in too deep. Only this left the heart out of the equation. Helena wanted more than physical delights. She just needed to let go. She needed to live!

The ground of the campus offered a great place for an early morning walk. Bird darted from tree to tree. She was enlivened by the robin’s song. When she made it back to her room, she was ready for a hearty breakfast. This would be a wonderful day.

At her painting class, she looked closely at the model. Perhaps, this would be a time for her to broaden her horizons. She didn’t want to leave Lance hanging. If Helena wasn’t going to give him what he needed, perhaps he needed to see other people. She wondered what she was telling herself. It almost suggested that she liked him more than she did.

She had lunch with him after class.

“It’ll soon be great to ski around here. Do you like to ski?”

“I did a bit in Switzerland. I’m not really a cold-weather girl.”

“I could go with you. We’d have a blast.”

Helena wanted to say something to him. She didn’t have the heart. That evening she went for a long walk with Claire.

“I still don’t know what to do about him.”

“You’re making him sound like a puppy that you’re putting out of its misery.”

“That’s almost how I feel about the whole deal.”

“Do you like him?”

“Yeah. But, Claire, he just seems too eager to please me all the time. I want more of a challenge.”

“There’s a bunch of football jocks if that’s what you call a challenge.”

“No, thanks.” Although she knew what Claire really meant.

“A girl has needs.”

“Like three meals a day and a good night’s sleep. I’m not getting much of that with all this work.”

“You’re in college now.”

“I have to admit this is easier than St. Ingrid’s. There’s just so much busy work.”

Helena was excelling at her classes. She had a fine academic preparation. And her artistic hand was steady and assimilated the lessons well.

It was January and she was still seeing Lance. They had kissed a few times. She had lost herself in his passionate embrace. She was a modern girl but all this seemed just enough for the present.

“Are you still waiting to let him down easy?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Do the right thing. Be like a guy. Sleep with him, and then break his heart.”

“I think that it would be my heart that would break.”

“You’re too sentimental.”

“Sentimental nothing. I have to live with myself.”

Claire seemed more intent. “I live with myself just fine. You have to live, girl. This is not the Nineteenth Century. Girls need to have fun.”

“I saw the perils of that kind of living back in London. I’ve sworn off my wicked ways.”

“Wicked nothing. Show him a good time. Enjoy it for what it is. Then his foibles will be really exposed. You can dump him at that point.”

“What if I start to love him? I’ll be really messed up.”

Helena took up his offer to go skiing. There were some great hills near Natural Bridge. The air was crisp. They huddled together. He kissed her at the foot of the mountain. It was a kiss full of poetry. She pulled him closer in the hope that she could believe it even more.

“I’m so crazy about you.”

She was speechless. She didn’t want to lead him on any more than she had. Maybe Claire was right. She needed to follow through. They would share a bed together tonight.

She knew that Claire was so wrong. She couldn’t love him. The sex would make it all too confusing. She needed to say something that night.

After an exhausting day on the slopes, her body ached everywhere. She welcomed the chance to rest and get warm. They sat beside a roaring fire in the bedroom. They were wrapped

in blankets close to each other. He had brought her hot chocolate. She felt so good inside. He reached over to pull her next to him.

She had felt that warmth spread through her whole body. His kiss added to that feeling. She could feel the heat of his body close to hers. They were still wrapped in the blankets. His hands fumbled beneath these covers. She wanted him inside her. She felt the kisses grow more passionate. Her heart was racing. This was going to be the night. She had dreamed about this moment forever. She looked into his eyes. She needed to believe the fire, the passion, the love.

He kissed her neck. She felt herself melt. Her will vanished. She rocked back and forth with his body. He could feel one flesh with his. She was lulled by the sense of being together. She needed this. She lived for this. She let it become her living art.

The fire seemed to burn brighter. The heat was more constant. It passed into their bodies. She was so vulnerable. Nothing could stop them.

She tried to speak. She could not. She wanted to say something. The dream had its nightmare side. She had wanted to whisper words of love. Now she just wanted to scream. She couldn't. She needed to get out. She wanted to scream. Silence!

Then a death-defying wail.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I just panicked. It's not you. Something from my past. A nightmare. Something weird from when I was a kid."

She seemed incoherent. He couldn't think about lost love. He only wondered what had made her like this. He couldn't let it bother him. She needed his support.

He held her hand through the crisis. The fire offered protection.

"Just hold me."

Something had taken over. It frightened the both of them. He took her over to the bed and helped her under the covers. She needed rest.

The next day on the slopes she tried to make up for the night before. She knew that she would never be a great skier, but she gave it all that she had. He was more adept. It made up for his social awkwardness. They joked with each other. She tried racing him down the hill.

"There's another hill here. It's a little scarier."

She wanted to take his challenge. If she didn't she'd have to remind herself of the night before. As she looked down from the top, the fear of heaven was sent through her bones. What had she been thinking. None of the errors of passion were worth losing her life for. She had taken the dare. But this was too much.

"I think that I'm getting over my head."

He gave her a weird look. It was almost mean.

She repeated to herself, "This is not worth losing my life for."

She meant it too. She wanted to turn back. From the moment that she took off, she knew that she could not stop the runaway fate. If she lived through this experience, her course in passion would be obvious.

She left her heart near the top of the slope. And her stomach was already shot. She couldn't even hold her breath. She called on her meager skills. She looked over. He seemed white as a sheet. He had bit off more than he could chew. He didn't want to let on. But it was obvious.

“You could have got the both of us killed. I was told that they actually closed that hill last year after an accident. I think it was fatal.”

“I thought that it would be OK.”

She actually admired his daring. She thought it made up for the panic of the night before. She was still depressed. She coaxed him into letting her have an afternoon nap. He was off at the bar.

She had a warm shower and then fell asleep. It was a deep dreamless sleep. She needed to separate herself from the drama of the night before. When she woke up, it was almost night time. She found him down at the bar.

“Can we still get some food? I’m starving!” She felt like she hadn’t eaten for days.

“They’re still serving.”

She stuffed herself with mountain stream trout and boiled potatoes. She went light on the wine.

“I still feel that I could sleep forever.”

After dinner, they took coffee and a liqueur by the lobby fire. They sat close to each other. But now the embrace seemed more that of friendship.

“I don’t believe it. You sound like some crazy witch. And you put him through all that shit without giving him something.”

“Should I have provided a service by the lobby fire.”

Claire and Helena both laughed.

“Poor Lance!”

“Claire, you don’t know the half of it. We could have died skiing on that one slope.

“Hazard Mountain. You’re one crazy little bitch!”

That last night had been uneventful. She was glad to be back in Charlottesville. There was still too much to explain. She told Lance that she needed some time to be alone. Maybe she needed to see somebody.

“I don’t think that I’m afraid of sex. It’s just that we’re not meant to be together.”

“You need to find a stud. And let him do all the work.”

“I think that I’d end up killing him after it’s all over.”

“Let’s make hot chocolate.”

They both scurried around the kitchen getting it ready.

“Claire, I wish that we could make a fire in here.”

“We could, but the fire alarms would go off.”

“There’s not even a fire place.”

“We could start a fire in the middle of the floor. This night table is the ugliest thing. We could use it for kindling.”

“After hot chocolate, we’ll go to the Student Union. They have a fire place there.”

“I’ve never seen a fire in it. It looks like it would burn down the building just to light one there.”

“We could try.”

“I’ll bet the flu hasn’t even been cleaned.”

“I can see the headlines: Heiress caught in Union fire!”

“What heiress? More like hairless after the fire has been through with us.”

“Heiress caught in love nest.”

“That’s all that I’m going to inherit, heartache and scandal.”

“You can’t let it get you down. This is great hot chocolate.”

“I could use more than a warm heart.”

“We could use a little brandy in our chocolate.”

“That’s asking a little too much. Besides, I really don’t want to drown my sorrows. I have work to get done.”

“You’re just too practical.”

“That’s what he’s thinking right now.”

Claire put her arm around Helena.

“It’s not something to worry about.”

“I’m not worried about that. You were supposed to get us some brandy.”

“You were complaining about it being a school night.”

“And you were going to burn down the Student Union,”

They both laughed.

In class Monday morning, Helena looked around at the guys in her class. There was one painter, Henry who had very poetic presence. He had shoulder length hair and wore his white shirt open. He always gave her a bizarre look.

“Do you want to get some coffee?”

She turned, “Are you talking to me?”

“I saw you looking over at me. I just wondered. I heard that you lived in England. I always wanted to go there. I hear the galleries are great there.”

“Where do you want to go for coffee?”

“Benny’s”

“I get a little crazy when I get too much coffee in me.”

He wasn’t sure if she was serious.

They had a great time talking. It was real change after the time that she spent with Lance.

On another day, Henry took her back to his place to see his art. He was a very physical painter. The clumps of paint had been applied with a sense of aggression. She could see the same effect when she looked at his body. He wore a cut off white shirt that was half-open. He himself would make a great model for a painting.

“You like them.” He actually seemed modest about his work.

“I love it.”

“Really, I start with these great ideas, they never seem to work out.”

He was standing very close to her. She could feel the heat of his body. She brushed by him as she walked to the other end of the room.

“I love to paint myself. I just have to take more time with it. I haven’t really done too much since I’ve moved here.”

“You should come over when I’m working.” He was staring at her. She moved out of his sight line. Her back was now towards him. The exit was at the far side of the room.

“I better go.” She was afraid of the chemistry between them. As she walked by, he reached out for her. The gesture seemed so haphazard.

“I really should go,” she reiterated.

She was looking right at him. He wanted to kiss her. She wanted him to wrap those muscles around her.

“You don’t have to leave. I’ve got some drinks.”

“I’ve got work to do.”

“It’s still early.”

She was trying to beg out of the inevitable.

Henry made her feel so comfortable. She had none of the hesitation that she had with Lance. But he still made her feel unsatisfied. Helena didn’t feel that she was meant to be with him. When he was creative, he would brood. He wanted to keep to himself. She didn’t want her passion to be so difficult.

She talked to Claire about it, “I thought that we were getting along so well. But I reached this wall with him. I couldn’t go any further. We started fighting over little things.”

Other boys at UVA seemed to have that same problem.

Helena admitted, “I think that they’re afraid of me.”

“You just have to take the bull by the horns.”

“Claire, I’m just getting the bull.”

“You want too much from a man. Take it for what it is. You can’t have his soul.”

“I’m not worried about his soul. I just don’t want to lose mine.”

Helena realized that she had developed a sophistication that could never be satisfied by these college boys. She was part of high romance. They only wanted sport.

When she had the opportunity to again study in London, she snapped at it. It was an exchange program. It would give her just what she needed.