

The Love of a Good Woman

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Kath and Sonje have a place of their own on the beach, behind some large logs. They have chosen this not only for shelter from the occasional sharp wind--they've got Kath's baby with them--but because they want to be out of sight of a group of women who use the beach every day. They call these women the Monicas.

The Monicas have two or three or four children apiece. They are all under the leadership of the real Monica, who walked down the beach and introduced herself when she first spotted Kath and Sonje and the baby. She invited them to join the gang.

They followed her, lugging the carry-cot between them. What else could they do? But since then they lurk behind the logs.

The Monicas' encampment is made up of beach umbrellas, towels, diaper bags, picnic hampers, inflatable rafts and whales, toys, lotions, extra clothing, sun hats, Thermos bottles of coffee, paper cups and plates, and Thermos tubs in which they carry homemade fruit-juice Popsicles.

They are either frankly pregnant or look as if they might be pregnant, because they have lost their figures. They trudge down to the water's edge, hollering out the names of their children who are riding and falling off logs or the inflatable whales.

"Where's your hat? Where's your ball? You've been on that thing long enough now, let Sandy have a turn."

Even when they talk to each other their voices have to be raised high, over the shouts and squalls of their children.

"You can get ground round as cheap as hamburger if you go to Woodward's."

"I tried zinc ointment but it didn't work."

"Now he's got an abscess in the groin."

"You can't use baking powder, you have to use soda."

These women aren't so much older than Kath and Sonje. But they've reached a stage in life that Kath and Sonje dread. They turn the whole beach into a platform. Their burdens, their strung-out progeny and maternal poundage, their authority, can annihilate the bright water, the perfect small cove with the red-limbed arbutus trees, the cedars, growing crookedly out of the high rocks. Kath feels their threat particularly, since she's a mother now herself. When she nurses her baby she often reads a book, sometimes smokes a cigarette, so as not to sink into a sludge of animal function. And she's nursing so that she can shrink her uterus and flatten her stomach, not just provide the baby--Noelle--with precious maternal antibodies.

Kath and Sonje have their own Thermos of coffee and their extra towels, with which they've rigged up a shelter for Noelle. They have their cigarettes and their books. Sonje has a book by Howard Fast. Her husband has told her that if she has to read fiction that's who she should be reading. Kath is reading the short stories of Katherine Mansfield and the short stories of D. H. Lawrence. Sonje has got into the habit of putting down her own book and picking up whichever book of Kath's that Kath is not reading at the moment. She limits herself to one story and then goes back to Howard Fast.

When they get hungry one of them makes the trek up a long flight of wooden steps. Houses ring this cove, up on the rocks under the pine and cedar trees. They are all former summer cottages, from the days before the Lions Gate Bridge was built, when people from Vancouver would come across the water for their vacations. Some cottages--like Kath's and Sonje's--are still quite primitive and cheap to rent. Others, like the real Monica's, are much improved. But nobody intends to stay here; everybody's planning to move on to a proper house. Except for Sonje and her husband, whose plans seem more mysterious than anybody else's.

There is an unpaved crescent road serving the houses, and joined at either end to Marine Drive. The enclosed semicircle is full of tall trees and an undergrowth of ferns and salmonberry bushes, and various intersecting paths, by which you can take a shortcut out to the store on Marine Drive. At the store Kath and Sonje will buy takeout French fries for lunch. More often it's Kath who makes this expedition, because it's a treat for her to walk under the trees--something she can't do anymore with the baby carriage. When she first came here to live, before

Noelle was born, she would cut through the trees nearly every day, never thinking of her freedom. One day she met Sonje. They had both worked at the Vancouver Public Library a little while before this, though they had not been in the same department and had never talked to each other. Kath had quit in the sixth month of pregnancy as you were required to do, lest the sight of you should disturb the patrons, and Sonje had quit because of a scandal.

Or, at least, because of a story that had got into the newspapers. Her husband, Cottar, who was a journalist working for a magazine that Kath had never heard of, had made a trip to Red China. He was referred to in the paper as a left-wing writer. Sonje's picture appeared beside his, along with the information that she worked in the library. There was concern that in her job she might be promoting Communist books and influencing children who used the library, so that they might become Communists. Nobody said that she had done this--just that it was a danger. Nor was it against the law for somebody from Canada to visit China. But it turned out that Cottar and Sonje were both Americans, which made their behavior more alarming, perhaps more purposeful.

"I know that girl," Kath had said to her husband, Kent, when she saw Sonje's picture. "At least I know her to see her. She always seems kind of shy. She'll be embarrassed about this."

"No she won't," said Kent. "Those types love to feel persecuted, it's what they live for."

The head librarian was reported as saying that Sonje had nothing to do with choosing books or influencing young people--she spent most of her time typing out lists.

"Which was funny," Sonje said to Kath, after they had recognized each other, and spoken and spent about half an hour talking on the path. The funny thing was that she did not know how to type.

She wasn't fired, but she had quit anyway. She thought she might as well, because she and Cottar had some changes coming up in their future.

Kath wondered if one change might be a baby. It seemed to her that life went on, after you finished school, as a series of further examinations to be passed. The first one was getting married. If you hadn't done that by the time you were twenty-five, that examination had to all intents and purposes been failed. (She always signed her name "Mrs. Kent Mayberry" with a sense of relief and mild elation.) Then you thought about having the first baby. Waiting a year before you got pregnant was a good idea. Waiting two years was a little more prudent than necessary. And three years started people wondering. Then down the road somewhere was the second baby. After that the progression got dimmer and it was hard to be sure just when you had arrived at wherever it was you were going.

Sonje was not the sort of friend who would tell you that she was trying to have a baby and how long she'd been trying and what techniques she was using. She never talked about sex in that way, or about her periods or any behavior of her body--though she soon told Kath things that most people would consider much more shocking. She had a graceful dignity--she had wanted to be a ballet dancer until she got too tall, and she didn't stop regretting that until she met Cottar, who said, "Oh, another little bourgeois girl hoping she'll turn into a dying swan." Her face was broad, calm, pink skinned--she never wore any makeup, Cottar was against makeup--and her thick fair hair was pinned up in a bushy chignon. Kath thought she was wonderful looking--both seraphic and intelligent.

Eating their French fries on the beach, Kath and Sonje discuss characters in the stories they've been reading. How is it that no woman could love Stanley Burnell? What is it about Stanley? He is such a boy, with his pushy love, his greed at the table, his self-satisfaction. Whereas Jonathan Trout--oh, Stanley's wife, Linda, should have married Jonathan Trout, Jonathan who glided through the water while Stanley splashed and snorted. "Greetings, my celestial peach blossom," says Jonathan in his velvety bass voice. He is full of irony, he is subtle and weary. "The shortness of life, the shortness of life," he says. And Stanley's brash world crumbles, discredited.

Something bothers Kath. She can't mention it or think about it. Is Kent something like Stanley?

One day they have an argument. Kath and Sonje have an unexpected and disturbing argument about a story by D. H. Lawrence. The story is called "The Fox."

At the end of that story the lovers--a soldier and a woman named March--are sitting on the sea cliffs looking out on the Atlantic, towards their future home in Canada. They are going to leave England, to start a new life. They are committed to each other, but they are not truly happy. Not yet.

The soldier knows that they will not be truly happy until the woman gives her life over to him, in a way that she has not done so far. March is still struggling against him, to hold herself separate from him, she is making them both obscurely miserable by her efforts to hang on to her woman's soul, her woman's mind. She must stop this-- she must stop thinking and stop wanting and let her consciousness go under, until it is submerged in his. Like the reeds that wave below the surface of the water. Look down, look down--see how the reeds wave in the water, they are alive but they never break the surface. And that is how her female nature must live within his male nature. Then she will be happy and he will be strong and content. Then they will have achieved a true marriage.

Kath says that she thinks this is stupid.

She begins to make her case. "He's talking about sex, right?"

"Not just," says Sonje. "About their whole life."

"Yes, but sex. Sex leads to getting pregnant. I mean in the normal course of events. So March has a baby. She probably has more than one. And she has to look after them. How can you do that if your mind is waving around under the surface of the sea?"

"That's taking it very literally," says Sonje in a slightly superior tone.

"You can either have thoughts and make decisions or you can't," says Kath. "For instance--the baby is going to pick up a razor blade. What do you do? Do you just say, Oh, I think I'll just float around here till my husband comes home and he can make up his mind, that is our mind, about whether this is a good idea?"

Sonje said, "That's taking it to extremes."

Each of their voices has hardened. Kath is brisk and scornful, Sonje grave and stubborn.

"Lawrence didn't want to have children," Kath says. "He was jealous of the ones Frieda had from being married before."

Sonje is looking down between her knees, letting sand fall through her fingers. "I just think it would be beautiful," she says. "I think it would be beautiful, if a woman could."

Kath knows that something has gone wrong. Something is wrong with her own argument. Why is she so angry and excited? And why did she shift over to talking about babies, about children? Because she has a baby and Sonje doesn't? Did she say that about Lawrence and Frieda because she suspects that it is partly the same story with Cottar and Sonje?

When you make the argument on the basis of the children, about the woman having to look after the children, you're in the clear. You can't be blamed. But when Kath does that she is covering up. She can't stand that part about the reeds and the water, she feels bloated and suffocated with incoherent protest. So it is herself she is thinking of, not of any children. She herself is the very woman that Lawrence is railing about. And she can't reveal that straight out because it might make Sonje suspect--it might make Kath herself suspect--an impoverishment in Kath's life.

Sonje who has said, during another alarming conversation, "My happiness depends on Cottar."

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That statement shook Kath. She would never have said it about Kent. She didn't want it to be true of herself.

But she didn't want Sonje to think that she was a woman who had missed out on love. Who had not considered, who had not been offered, the prostration of love.