

The Love Sequence · *Sandra M. Gilbert*

You Fall

You were the proud one, the kid in the secret room
lit by organdy curtains white as milk,
the one who had a special destiny
inscribed on her forehead with invisible ink.

April evenings sparrows lined up on your fire escape
to tell you their tales of old verandahs,
palm trees, Florida afternoons:
you were going to walk on warm sands, marry

the master of the plantation, command
the fountain that gushed cream.
Love would rain on you like geranium balm, love
would fortify your heart against everyone

except the one who was just, the one who loved you
more than his own bones, the one
whose beard shone in the wind
like the wild grass behind the schoolyard.

What happened? Who took you to the door of the grimy
oven? Who walked you into the cooking pot? Who
introduced you to the vizier of silence with his
wand of ice, his cape of dead leaves?

You knew he'd enlisted under the blank banner, knew
he was missing crucial fingers, knew
he was the agent for somebody else.
But it didn't matter, you stayed put,

you baked in the cave of change,
your hair dampened, your
secret organs hummed with love.
When you came out,

he turned toward you, his pale gaze fell on you
like the headlights of a dark car
rounding a bend in an empty road at midnight.

He told you how little you mattered.

Behind him you heard the sea
falling and falling onto terrible rocks.

You were sticky and thick with love
like the broken windowpane the witch painted over with sugar.

You Meet the Real Dream Mother-in-Law

In the anteroom of silence you waited to meet
the dream mother-in-law,
fingering old magazines, their exhausted edges, the places
where recipes were torn away. . . .

You sat straight as a washboard in your
naugahyde chair, holding your breath,
never complaining: you knew
she was in there and how it would be—

the long still room with blood-colored rugs,
the tables on eighteenth-century stilts, the hair
Atlantic gray, the bone china cups
with blue frost, the silver-tipped cane, the misty

voice of Ethel Barrymore, saying
I've waited so long, *he's* waited so long,
but how glad we are, my dear,
that you're the one!

And then the talk would unfold like fine lace,
the talk of women who'd take a lifetime
to trace this intricate design.
Silk the color of tea leaves, fingers keen as crystal,

she'd love your sonnets, give you
sherry that had slept in the cabinet
since her impudent sister ran off with that
bad metaphysician: she'd

want you to have her grandmother's sapphire,
tell you legends of somber attics,
clasp your hand between ivory gloves
and make you hers, hers. . . .

When they opened the double doors and led you in,
you were surprised to find a naked waitress
sulking on a shell-shaped sofa.

Her son winked and blew poison darts at you
like the bad kid next door, the one
who was always stoned on something rotten.

She accused you of doing awful things in the dark,
told you to hurry up and start sorting grain, said
you should remember there was a mountain you'd have to climb.

You stared like a fool at her granite breasts, her great
snowy belly, her whole
ferocious body.

Smoke
curled from between her thighs
like the terrible breath of factories.

You Discover You're in Love with the Dead Prince

You thought, He must be pale, he must be silent,
he must sit by the river all morning gazing at nothing.
And when he sat on the bank, his eyes focused on nothing,
you thought, It's me he sees in the middle distance,
he's watching my dance, he's in love
with the dance of my invisible bones.

For him you turned your skin to cream.
He'll lick it away, you thought, he'll sip my body
like a spirit potion, and come to the secret
place of my heart — for he's the one
who loves my eyelids, he's the one
who bathes his wrist in the cold stream
because he dreams of the blue vein behind my ankle.

And all the time he was dead, he was the boy king
in the coffin of ice, the one with the mirror splinter
caught in his left eye, the royal child
attended by women and mourners,
whose long trance was demanded, they said, by mystic
signs from the stars.

In his dead cellar,
among the jewels and mirrors,
the sacred nurses feed him cream through tubes,
they bathe his silence in sweet wine.
All night a fire of thorny twigs
flickers cold, cold. . . .

You looked into the pale flames. You watched
the ceremonies of shadow. You wept.
You said you couldn't believe it.
You said, O prince, O friend, O lover,
climb out of that snowdrift
and come to this meadow where the blackberries ripen
and the bees hum like summer.

And he smiled in his trance, and said,
What snowdrift? What meadow? What summer?

The One He Loves

She's the figure skater you've always hated,
the princess of the spelling bee, the ice queen
in velvet and fur
with muscles tough as tusks
and hair the color of charm bracelets.

Next to her you're flabby and noisy, something
made of jelly instead of sinew,
something that shivers and whimpers
and passes out in the dark, a princess of pain
with weak ankles and a head full of misspelled sentences.

Once you asked her the secret: how do you
always keep your skates on, how do you memorize
the whole dictionary? She smiled and talked too slowly,
a native telling a foreigner
the way through an inexplicable city.

In the palace of his mind
they reign forever on twin frost thrones.
Suave servants in black and white
circle them like gulls, offering trays
on which odd canapes swarm thick as wishes.

She nibbles, royal, muscular, silent.
He watches, a furtive cat on the edge of shadow:
he wants her to burn his skin, wants her
to crack his bones, wants the fine spray from her skates
to baptize his wrists like radioactive sleet.

Around them expensive dancers loop and spin.
She and he yawn, hum, play chess, play Scrabble.
A cold flame flickers between them
on polished granite: only they
know what it means, only they
know there's never the slightest need
to touch or talk or spell things out for strangers.

You swoon with desire, you beg him to stroke your forehead
with his chill fingers, you offer him your knuckles, your wrists,
your ankles, and all your fingernails.

He declines.

Polite but cold. Explains he's allergic to your skin.
Implies you have a noxious odor.

His icy instruments flash, the chains he fastens to your ribs
are colder than the waters of Lapland, they're made of black iron
dug from the trenches of death.

But even as you cringe from them,
you smile, you toss your curls like a cheerleader in Houston,
show him your eyelids, invite him
to a picnic in the honey-colored meadow
you found last summer.

He says never, he says
forget it, he looks at your bones the way a logger
looks at redwoods: he wants to chop you down, only
he wonders which way you'll fall.

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So you fall for him, thinking
what a beautiful axe he has, what a shame
to dull that shimmering blade with blood.

Now you're very far down, among stumps and tufts: now
the cure begins, here where the granite banks
cut off the sun and the nettles teach your skin to hate.

A fine dust of dislike rubs in through your pores,
your nostrils inhale contempt like swamp gas,
you thrash and grunt in the furious ditch

until the acid takes hold, your blood floods
with the dark brew that collects under stones, rots logs,
lops trees into witchy shapes.

You get on your feet slowly, you're as strong as anyone now,
at last you can stand up for yourself:
you've become a natural marvel, a beautiful pink nettle.

Even your mother would scream
if she touched you.