

Authority

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I enjoy writing different variations of their “first” moments. This is merely one of many..

She often spoke with an unlived sense of authority on topics she surely couldn't have been an authority on. Topics such as love. She loved to talk about love. She was only nineteen, and straight out of a Convent at that, so perhaps it wasn't surprising that she was so enamored with the idea of love.

Of course she would be. She was nineteen and straight out of a *Convent*. A girl whose lush sex appeal would've gone wholly unappreciated had she remained there, been wasted entirely on the envious, resentful eyes of old nuns who woodenly walked about corridors thoroughly hollowed-out.

But the authority with which she spoke about love was entertaining. Remarkably, he liked listening to her prattle on with charming certainty, chin high, shoulders straight, padding her lofty statements with information she had surely stolen from advice columns lining the glossy pages of the French glamour magazines girls her age liked to pass around. She seemed to have already lived an entire life through magazines and movies alone.

"Men want a woman who's elegant," she said one day as they sat out under the late afternoon sun in the grass beyond Hoffmann's back patio. "But she must also mysterious. She can't give too much away." She was holding herself propped up on her hands, her legs stretched out before her.

"Is that so?" he said, his bare forearms resting across his knees. He had rolled his white shirtsleeves up right after she had kicked her heels off, and he kept glancing back and forth between her exposed knees and her small, stockinged feet. They looked downy soft in the sun. He kept fantasizing about pulling them into his lap, running his hand up her leg, kissing the inside of her ankle.

"Yes," she said with a nod. "Mystery creates desire."

He gave her an indulgent, patient look. "And how do you know that?"

"Why, every intelligent person knows that."

She was so often trying to impress him and that was rather cute.

It was only when he would prod with careful, murmured language that this youthful surety would fade into a guilty blush. Her voice would drop in volume to match his, both because she had been caught out and because the size of her world had shrunk so fast that it was disorienting. Words spoken beyond that point would go no further than the two of them and she would sense that, the weight of that. Two adults speaking softly of private, adult things. Not explicitly, but implicitly. She recognized and understood that regardless of whatever years or experience she lacked.

He'd come to quietly favor her, and what had once been accidental moments of sequestration were slowly but incontestably becoming premeditated. Her interactions with him were so genuine and sincere, and there was hardly a gift of his that went unreciprocated, a behavior that was singular to her and touched him in a way he wasn't used to. It was rare that he was given something purely because the giver thought he would take pleasure in it—and nothing more. These gifts, modest but thoughtful in nature, came without strings or unspoken, self-serving agendas. And it was precisely the unpretentious quality of these gifts that stirred him so deeply.

She was not trying to buy his favor or ingratiate herself into his circle of influence. She was not trying to take advantage of their proximity. She was not playing psychological politics.

She was merely thinking about him, even when he wasn't around. They had no set schedule nor routine. He showed up mostly at whim. Which meant she was carrying these gifts around with her day after day in anticipation of the unannounced pop-in, refusing to let him to catch her empty-handed. Just as he never showed up empty-handed himself. It was a delightful little ritual they had extemporaneously dedicated themselves to.

He plucked a blade of dry grass from the hem of her patterned skirt, his fingers brushing over the smooth hill of her knee. He knew from previous conversations that much of her wardrobe was crafted by her own skillful hands, and that had bestowed a favorable impression

upon him. He followed up in a low voice, “Creates a desire for what, exactly?” as he tossed the offending blade of grass off to the side.

She blinked and then blushed and then proceeded to look down at her knees as she rolled her ankles; and said in an equally low voice with an almost shy smile, “A desire to make love.”

Then her focus cut back to him, bright and knowing from the corner of her eyes, almost challenging. “Obviously.”

He smiled simply in return. “Obviously.”

Contrary to her silly, naive philosophies about love, it was not mystery that was more and more drawing him into her company (although her secrets did intrigue him)—it was, in fact, her open and unpolluted nature within his presence that had inflamed both his lust and his bona fide interest. He liked catching her off-guard with her eyes wide open, her body caught between trepidation and excitement for reasons that had little to do with his curated persona or his expanding social connections and everything to do with simply *him*.

He’d come to realize that her attraction to him was rather disconnected to his celebrity status; which said a lot in light of the fact that she was obsessed with celebrity culture. She swooned and fawned over an assortment of older male actors and he didn’t much fit that image at all. Politics bored her and made her eyes glaze over, even as she bestowed upon him the proper amount of reverence and admiration. Yet her interest in him was there anyway, and strong. It was something else; something that felt raw and real. And real was fastly becoming a delicacy in his life.

It had become a game. One he enjoyed a little too much and had become a little too invested in. Finding out what was real and what was constructed. He had no doubt she believed firmly in her assertive theories of love; but what was more intriguing to him—for obvious, inappropriate reasons—was whether or not they were supported by empirical evidence. Scientific research.

What had she actually *done*? And how to determine this without giving too much away? No, he didn't want mystery. Nor did he want yarns made-to-measure according to what she suspected were his personal preferences. He wanted confessions. If she'd never been kissed before, that was fine and dandy. He enjoyed playing teacher. If she had been, that was fine too—he could show her better.

Thoughts like these had the ability to stop him in his tracks as he realized just how much his subconscious had started plotting without his notice.

Deliberately holding hostage her gaze in the manner that was unique to him and him alone, he said, "I hadn't realized you were so proficiently qualified in this matter."

The leaves of the trees behind her fluttered against the breeze. He could see her sorting through his words, turning over the implication. Her cheeks went from pink to red, the flush dripping down her neck as her eyes dropped. "Not all knowledge requires... doing," she shrugged with a dazed smile. He watched her run a finger under the hem of her dress, then use her palms to smooth it out over her full thighs. The hesitancy in her voice, suggestive of insecurity, inflamed his curiosity just as much as her body did.

She was from a seemingly respectable, middle-class family, had been unsuccessfully shipped off to that Catholic Convent to finish her studies; and as such, he suspected the boundaries of her intimate life were, at present, very narrow. But she had also grown up under the contemptible influence of the New Woman, and this was evident in her appearance, in her tastes, and in her behaviors: she hemmed her skirts short, wore delicate perfumes, occasionally played around with red lipstick, admired foreign fashion trends, spent her free hours dancing and listening to jazz, and often worked well into the evening hours.

Admittedly, this precise mixture of new and traditional had lured him in. She was both classic and novel in a way he was discovering to be unexpectedly, unsettlingly attractive.

"Yet you must certainly be a rather popular girl amongst your male peers," he teased.

This wiped the dazed look off her face. Her thinly shaped eyebrows were pulled together when she glanced over at him again. “What do you mean?” she said warily. She didn’t want him to consider her naive but she evidently also didn’t want him to assume her a hussy.

“You’ve surely broken a couple of hearts by now,” he said, his tone still light and playful, before continuing on with a grin when he saw no burst of awareness in her eyes, “Or perhaps you simply aren’t aware of your own potential trail of devastation.”

The boyish face of Hoffmann’s son flashed before his mind. He had on more than one occasion seen the poor, young lad, only a few years her junior, furtively staring at her in the throes of pure and unadulterated infatuation; followed by a flicker of dismay when the kid noticed how her countenance evolved from bright to radiant whenever she saw his father’s star client walk through the door in a way it did with no one else.

Sometimes he pitied the boy. But he was in no rush to convert her.

Her expression blanked out as she considered his question with an earnest thoughtfulness, a far away look in her eyes. “Devastation,” she repeated slowly, seriously, as if she’d never held the word in her mouth before. As she recognized the power within it. The birds up in the tree branches chattered back and forth, filling the brief silence. Then she refocused on him and smiled again. “That word probably suits you better than it does me.”

This statement caught him off-guard. It was his expression that was wiped clean this time. The muscles in his jaw tensed, bestowing an inadvertent edge unto his voice. “Why would you assume that?” he asked sharply, wanting to know precisely which sordid stories drawn up from the gutter had reached her ears. There were so many of them nowadays, in the papers, in people’s mouths. They populated like rabbits and mutated like viruses, spreading with the ease of a plague.

She shrugged again, still smiling, unaffected by his abrupt change in mood. “All the girls in the shop are smitten with you,” she said, mollifying his indignation. Yet the relief left him feeling a bit hollow. “Even the Boss’ wife loves you.”

He considered her for a long moment as the tension thawed out from his body. Then, through a rare and inadvertent display of transparency induced by an unknown impulse, he said somewhat forlornly, “They’re intoxicated by fantasy.” Even if their purpose was to bolster his image rather than tarnish it, stories crafted and encouraged by his own careful efforts were, nonetheless, still stories. Being above the crowd—which, make no mistake, was precisely where he belonged—naturally resulted in distance and isolation. Emptiness. Distrust.

She cocked her head to the side, the sinking sun glittering across her eyes. “Fantasy?” she said softly, trying to dress up her intrigue with considerate, friendly innocence. But he could see and hear the fire of curiosity roiling just beneath the surface. Her body shifted as she rolled her hips to face him and tucked her calves up flush against her hidden thighs. “What fantasy?”

Her knees were now within easy reach. All he would have to do is drop his hand. And he was fairly certain that was the invitation being presented.

But he went back on the offensive, modulating his tone back to teasing. “You tell me,” he said, nodding in her direction. “You’re in a better position than I to hear their secrets, being a fellow member of that nosy flock of hens.”

“Oh,” she said, looking off into the distance as the breeze dislodged a few strands of her hair from their precise arrangement. Her tone fell dull and flat as she studied a white cat slinking silently across the garden wall. “I don’t bother with all that nonsense most of the time.”

He leaned in closer to her, nudging her shoulder with his own as he tried to lure her attention back. “What, you don’t participate in the act of sharing secrets?” he baited skeptically in an attempt to bring her disposition back around to simple and easy flirtation. He didn’t like seeing the features of her otherwise soft countenance drawn so severely. She was meant to look gay and coquettish.

But she was unmoved. “Sure I do, sometimes,” she admitted solemnly, still serious. “But I don’t talk about you like that with them.”

Once again, he was caught off-guard. His mouth went dry, and his throat and his chest became tight. He turned physically nauseous with giddiness.

'Like that'?

He'd never known a woman who could keep her mouth shut where it mattered. So why did she, at nineteen, with surely no real experience in love already seem to sense that there could be immense value in discretion? He was well aware she kept her parents in the dark concerning their friendship, and she seemed to be in no rush to change this condition. But for what purpose? Fear of judgment? Of condemnation? Of prohibition?

Why was she already willing to poison the well of familial trust for the preservation of her personal association with him? Did she *want* to have her *own* secrets?

He didn't trust his own blossoming inclination to trust her. It wasn't that he suspected she was lying or feigning a calculated reliability for her own profit. She was still too young and too morally decent for such scheming. Rather, he feared a dereliction of duty on the part of his intuition, a likelihood that he was seeing precisely what he wanted to see in her because he had, strangely, become a little attached.

He had little reason to believe she would be content to remain in concealment. Yet that's precisely where he wanted her. In a private corner of his life, inaccessible, unreachable. A dark corner where he could indulge in various ways without prying eyes or moral evaluation. Without hesitancy or uncertainty. There was an invisible quality to her he hadn't yet been able to identify that unnervingly triggered a paradoxical sense of safety within him.

He was assaulted by an urge to take her in his arms and crush her against him. To leave his mark all over her. To mold her to his needs and desires. To ruin her for anyone else. He wanted her to be his secret, and he wanted in turn to be hers.

He fiercely held on to his teasing inflection. "You talk about me?" he asked—and boldly reached out to capture those errant strands of her hair, tucking them back into place securely

behind her ear. He let his fingertips graze down the wall of her neck upon their retreat, and to his immense satisfaction the ghost of her blush swept across her cheeks again.

“Everyone talks about you,” she said simply. A basic fact. But there was a stiffness to her words and her body language that betrayed the existence of something lurking behind the clear, inherent truth of this statement. Of course everyone talked about him. And this seemed to have gotten under her skin.

“Does this bother you?” he asked with a conceited grin, finding pleasure and self-confidence in poking at her sweet and girlish sensitivities.

“Of course not,” she said, lifting her chin a meager inch. “Why should it?”

Why should it, indeed.

“Then why the reticence?” he said. “Women would happily redefine their standards of beauty if gossip resulted in them becoming physically fat.”

“Because,” she huffed, her round cheeks now pinking from frustration, her pupils darting back and forth in front of her as she deliberated over precisely what and how much she intended to draw the curtain back on. She drew her legs up against her chest and wrapped one of her arms around her knees, lips pursed. She dropped her other hand to the ground beside her ankle and began to indiscriminately pick at blades of grass with her thumb and forefinger, ripping them from the dirt one by one with a snap.

He waited, observing the destruction of nature in silence with an amused expression. At last, she said, “Because their thoughts and opinions are... presumptuous.”

He suffocated a snicker by clearing his throat. *Presumptuous*. This had certainly not been a word native to her vocabulary when he had first met her. How absolutely darling.

“And distasteful,” she added with a twitch of her nose.

He grabbed her wrist and raised her hand before his face, palm up. He brushed away the grass that was sticking to the inside of her fingers; and then, while squeezing those fine fingers in

one hand, the other shackling her small wrist, he planted a kiss at the spongy, hot center of her palm. Plenty of times had he kissed her on the back of her hand, a fun albeit meaningless, formal act of flirtation he could perform with just about any woman. But the palm was different. It was soft, intimate, often hidden from view. Kissing her here was not a stroke of habit, done without a second thought. It was purposeful.

Emboldened by this act, she fell against him, her head rolling onto his shoulder, and sighed. He wasn't expecting this. The nerves of his body ignited with the ease and intensity of a dangerously thirsty brush fire, spreading rapidly as the heat and the weight of her body bled through his clothes. A heavy, demanding ache, familiar and maddeningly insistent began to well up from deep within the core of his groin. His body wanted more. More of her heat, more of her weight, more of her touch. He was terribly curious as to how well the lines of her body would match his own.

"They say things just to upset me," she finally admitted. He was able to make out this reluctant confession only because of how near her mouth was to his ear.

Motivated by both a libidinous eagerness to touch her still further and a purer paternal instinct to comfort and protect her—a solid knot that now came standard with her presence—he carefully wrapped his arm around her back and laid his hand firmly over her shoulder. "What sorts of things?" he said, pressing her fingers still in his hold against his chest.

"Stupid things" she said as she boldly laid her thumb over his fingers, signaling that she didn't want him to let go. He stroked his thumb across the flat planes of her fingernails. Their hands were becoming hot. Her flesh was so soft and moldable in his grip. Suddenly, she heaved another heavy sigh, and said quickly with a shake of her head, her face turned in against his shoulder, "Oh, forget I said anything, please. It's all so silly and stupid."

He could easily hear the words she was refusing to say. It wasn't merely the fact that other women were discussing him in a way that she personally found to be distasteful. His name had become a weapon in their mouths, deployed to needle and demoralize her—and it was evidently working. This both flattered and annoyed him. It wasn't hard to guess at what type of

remarks, driven by envy and competition, had the ability to cheapen her confidence in herself and redefine his attention. The magazines had apparently left her exposed on this front.

Forfeiting any further consideration, he turned his head and planted a kiss at the crown of her hair. She tensed in his hold, her body fidgeting and twisting as she shifted more of her weight over onto his while she turned her face in toward his neck. Her fingers clenched at his shirt. He let his lips rest against her hair and closed his eyes, breathing through his nose, the fresh, feminine scent of her shampoo monopolizing his senses—until he felt the softest, most delicate pressure against his throat, slightly wet. It lasted only a second. But within that single second, time stopped, and yanked his thoughts off track to an identical standstill.

His grip on her shoulder and her fingers tightened. The muscles in his back went rigid. He could feel the damp heat of her breath on his skin, coming at a subtly accelerated pace. His entire body became hot all over and he was thankful she couldn't see his face. Despite the current moment and all the comparable moments that came before this, he still felt unsure and therefore hesitated, waiting, hoping for an even more explicit demonstration of what she desired from him. From *this*. Whatever this sticky *thing* was between them. He wanted her to kiss him again; told himself that if she did, if *she* kissed *him* again, then he could once and for all liberate them from the often shifting, inherently ambiguous parameters of flirtatious friendship with absolute certainty.

But he knew this to be unfair. She had made her move, thrown another chip into the pot. This was not a kiss on the cheek or on the back of a hand. It was not a kiss that contained more than one meaning or one purpose. Friends did not deposit their soft kisses upon the soft, sensitive skin of the neck. Why she provoked such caution in him, such a fear of misinterpretation and misstep, he did not understand. What he did understand, however, was that it was now his move, and checking was no longer an option.

He glanced over his shoulder at the rear of Hoffmann's house: the back door, still shut; the curtained windows, still closed. Just as he knew they would be. Because while Hoffmann's overly agreeable complicity in the situation was propelled by a sincere respect to their friendship, it was also a very prudent business move. She was his shop-girl after all; and Hoffmann would

continue to deliver her to him on a richly arranged silver platter if it meant he could further sink his hooks into his most profitable client.

He decided to call her raise. He took her in both his arms, cupped his hand around the back of her neck and drew her in closer as he buried his nose in her hair again. “Evchen,” he sighed against her scalp, employing the affectionate diminutive of her given name that he’d recently started to use with her whenever they were alone. “Whatever am I to do with you?” His voice was low, muffled by her hair.

She shrugged in his arms; and then suggested hardly above a whisper: “Kiss me?”

He was silent for a moment, seeing nothing, focused on maintaining a steady rhythm for his breathing. His voice sounded dazed and distant when he asked, “Would that cure your melancholy?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” she said. Then she added after a loaded pause: “Unless you don’t want to.”

The leash restraining him snapped. Gently, firmly, he clasped her hair and pulled her head back, angling her face up towards his. “You foolish, sensitive girl,” he murmured, peering down into a pair of guileless gray-blue eyes whose spotlight he could sense even when his back was turned. Then his focus automatically drifted down to her mouth—and became stuck there. As much as he’d been distracted by it in the past, he’d never been close enough to gather all the intricate details: the minute indentations in the delicate, fleshy texture; the elegant design of the bowed ridge running along the top lip; the way the light snagged on the rim edging the bottom of her mouth, blurring out into a misty veil.

“Have you ever been kissed?” he asked, his voice rough and wavering and raked through with hunger. But this wasn’t what made those frankly biteable lips part in surprise. It was the switch from *Sie* to *du*.

She shook her head, wet her lips in anticipation. A fawn caught and snuggling deeper into the grips of his teeth. There was nothing left, not even ruins, of that practiced facade of authority

and expertise. All that was on her face now was an open plain of innocence and intrigue. Another invitation.

He looked over at the quiet house again. Then he took her face in his hands and fully laid his mouth down over her own. The kiss was neither soft nor was it hard. He was thoughtful in his motions, but he was not timid. There was no pity and there was no charity behind the act. Only submission to entitlement. He was not kissing her to placate her mood or to soothe her insecurities. He was not playing a part. He was kissing her because they both wanted him to kiss her. Because he knew she'd been thinking and waiting and hoping for him to kiss her. Because he had every right to take for himself what she was only too happy and too willing to hand over to him.