

LOVER'S GAMBIT

"I'll be home soon, Jo. This blasted rain. It's got these trucks filled on the motorway."

"Ok. See you soon, my love."

Jocelyn walked towards the apartment windows and leaned against the stone cold wall. She gazed at London's rainy cityscape and watched the cars travel across the Westminster Bridge. The rain came down hard and steady from the sky of dark blue velvet. The air filled with petrichor knocked against the windows, seeping through the steel cracks. The Big Ben chimed at exactly 7pm. Thomas had been arriving home late for the past 3 weeks. He'd been so busy, Jocelyn thought he'd forgotten it was their 8th year wedding anniversary.

Jocelyn headed to the kitchen to set the dining table for a candlelit dinner and prepared to surprise Thomas with an anniversary gift – a painting of Strelitzias which Jocelyn had been working on for the past month. She stood by the door with the painting in her hands, waiting patiently for Thomas to arrive.

Finally, Thomas had arrived.

"Happy Anniversary, baby." said Jocelyn coyly with blushed cheeks.

Thomas grinned and placed a warm kiss on her forehead.

"Happy Anniversary, honey."

Thomas handed her a bouquet of roses and a heart-shaped box of chocolates.

"Thank you, my love. Do you like the painting?"

"It's a stunning painting, Jo. Its your best work yet. I'll hang it next to the others."

Jocelyn helped Thomas out of his grey coat and checkered scarf. Thomas left to seat himself for dinner whilst Jocelyn ran a lint roller through his clothes. She noticed a feminine, gourmand smell that made her nose tingle as she lint-rolled his scarf. She continued to pick at the scarf only to find a thick strand of curly blonde hair entangled between the tassels. Jocelyn picked at her scalp as she briskly left to accompany Thomas at the dinner table.

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After entrée and a couple glasses of wine, Jocelyn fetched 2 Grand Marnier souffles from the oven and a platter of fruit and placed it on the table. Thomas pulled her onto his lap and snuggled her.

“Thank you, Jo. You’ve really gone all out today.”

“It’s my pleasure, Tom. How was work today? You seemed a bit sapped.” She asked, taking a seat across Thomas.

“Same old shit. It’s just project after project. And that daft secretary of mine...She doesn’t seem to make my life any easier. That blonde is always late and-”

Jocelyn interrupted Thomas with a spoonful of dessert.

“Don’t you feel like life has been mundane lately? Everyday feels the same and I’ve barely gotten to spend time with you. Don’t you agree?”

“Well, sort of, honey.”

“We should vacate to the countryside or perhaps visit my parents in Cape Town.”

“There is a lot going on at work right now.” He stated, shoving a couple grapes in his mouth.

Thomas had been tapping his foot against the wooden floors irritably. An unfavorable silence hung around before Thomas left to fetch a new bottle of wine in the cellar. Jocelyn anxiously waited. She looked to her painting above the book cabinet. “*The Rosy*”, as Thomas called it, was an abstract painting of a couple in a garden of freesias. Jocelyn painfully gulped. She reminisced about how easily swooned she was when she had met Thomas. “Vanilla love” she called it. That love she described ever so plain and elegant but so rich and lovely. It was love without complication like that of the simplicity and decadence of vanilla. She ran a toothpick under her fingernails to remove her scalp scab remnants that had gotten stuck in its deep cervices. Thomas returned a new bottle of wine, hastily shoving his phone in his back pocket.

“Do you remember how we used to play chess back in varsity?”, Jocelyn asked as she walked towards the book cabinet to grab the black box of chess.

“Those were the days, hon. I remember when you’d attend my tournaments.”

“Let’s play. You’re white.” insisted Jocelyn as she set the pieces on the chessboard on the dining table.

“Challenge accepted.” Thomas replied with a sly smile.

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The rain began to subside as the night grew older. The vulnerable candle flames suspended in the air, only twitching at every alternated move on the chessboard. Not a single sound peeped from one another. Jocelyn and Thomas sat at the edge of their seats on opposite ends of the dinner table, eager to be the victor. Whilst they intensely strategized the movement of their pieces, the Big Ben chimed. It was already 11pm. Feeling uncomfortable in the silence, Thomas chuckled at Jocelyn.

“You haven’t changed a bit, sweetheart.”

“What do you mean?”

“You still pick at your scalp when you’re distressed.”

Jocelyn unfixed her eyes off the board and moved her hand away from her hair. Thomas poured the last bit of wine into his glass and slowly sipped.

“Have you heard the news, Tom? A man fell to his death from a balcony. Poor lad, I wonder what had been going through his mind to do such a thing. Life has become so awry these days.”

“I couldn’t care less about the news, Jo. It’s just one massive, disappointing shitshow. I’d rather live a life of blissful ignorance.” Thomas slouched back in his chair and smugly moved his bishop to capture a pawn.

“Ignorance is bliss until it isn’t. Eventually, reality and truth will catch up to you.”. Jocelyn moved a bishop towards the middle of the board and leaned closer to the table edge.

“What you don’t know can’t hurt you. Life is more painless when you remain ignorant.”

Jocelyn sat with a visage of concern. She ran her fingers through her hair, resisting the urge to pick at her scalp again. The silence grew louder from Jocelyn, urging Thomas to move apace.

“Ignorance is protective. One can be comfortable without the perfect set of knowledge. Not all blanks need to be filled.”

Tom said, confidently moving a rook towards Jocelyn’s pawn, halting just before it.

“So, it’s better to be left in the abyss of oblivion...Is that not deceptive?”

“One isn’t deceptive when leaving another ignorant of truth. Keeping someone ignorant can be compassionate. It’s sort of... a form of love perhaps.”

Jocelyn looked at Thomas with an overtly sharp stare. She moved her queen to capture his rook, putting his king in check.

“Lying as a form of love. What integrity you have. Check.”

“There is no point in hurting one’s feelings in the name of honesty. There’s no nobility or virtue in it.”

“Much better to manipulate them, right? You leave them with the impression that you ‘care’.”

Thomas moves a queen to defend his king.

“I stand by my argument, darling.”

Thomas quizzically gazed at his wife with frowned eyebrows. He hadn’t realized until then that Jocelyn had cut her brunette hair to shoulder length and styled her hair into beautiful, tousled waves that sat gently on her collar bones.

“No one lies out of compassion, Thomas. One lies out of fear. You’re afraid someone will see you for who you really are – selfish and apathetic.” Jocelyn moved her bishop just a few spaces away from checking Thomas’ king for a second time.

“Oh, don’t be so brash, hon. There is no ‘who you truly are’. There are transient layers to a person. They don’t define this sort of ‘deeper inner truth’.” Thomas moved his queen to capture a hanging knight and hid his fisted hands under the table.

“You fear that when someone truly knows you, they’ll simply leave. Ha! You fear loneliness!” cackled Jocelyn as she moved her second knight, checking Thomas’ king.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jo.” Almost immediately, Thomas moved his king to the corner of the board and cleared his dry throat.

“There is no honor in deception, Tom. When one chooses the truth, one can nurture an honest connection. Protection isn’t found in the ignorance of truth either, Tom. Honesty allows for protection *in* love and *of* love. It gives you a real chance at happiness and true love.”

Jocelyn moved her queen to corner Thomas' king with a duper's delight on her face.

“Checkmate.”

Jocelyn sneered as she watched Thomas clench his jaw. He looked back Jocelyn and shared a weary smirk with her.

“You're one smart cookie, love.”, said Thomas hesitantly, gritting his teeth. Jocelyn came around the table to congratulate Thomas with a handshake. He pulled her into a tight embrace.

“Well, of course. I've only learnt from the greatest.” She said, looking at him.

Jocelyn's false grin began to subside the more she gazed into Thomas' hazel eyes. Her heart broke, aching with shards of bitterness tearing at her guts. It was neither disgust nor anger that filled her but rather grief. She grieved that in all her years loving Thomas, she believed that she had been the victor of love. Although she had won the chess game, she lost the one who she called “love”. She leaned on his chest and turned to face “*The Rosy*” painting. She swallowed her sobs, nauseated by the sweet floral scent on her husband.