

Practicing the French Kiss

by Sonya Lea

"In dreams and in love there are no impossibilities."

Janos Arony, Hungarian poet

For three months we lived in a village in Brittany, in a 400 year old watermill on an island surrounded by a fast flowing river, guarded by a goose. It was a time of quiet because my husband had lost his memories of our former life and he had lost his desire to speak, the result of a brain injury. We could live in a new rhythm in that place, our days composed of rural pleasures: dreaming, walking, reading, watching nature, building fires, retrieving the daily baguette, going to the village market and creating food a la Francoise.

We were house-sitting for a friend's father, counting the days until we had to return home, and confused about what 'home' was anymore. In the airport lounge where we waited to return to the U.S., the first thing I notice is the loudness of the American voices. Some woman in a tracksuit who hasn't eaten red meat for a week shouts out her need for a rare steak. A pair of American women discuss their children, strident enough for us to hear about their GPA's, their summer programs. A belligerent man takes to smoking in the no smoking zone, yelling at his wife to "Fuck Off! Leave me alone! I told you I wasn't going to take it!" The change in tone is so abrasive that I start to do tonglen, the

meditation that Pema Chodron teaches, on how to breathe in and transform difficult situations. This is not working fast enough. The young bohemian couple across the room is transfixed and appalled by the way the man demeans his wife. People try to look the other way and can't.

There must be an injection of love in the room, I think. I throw my arms around my husband, kiss him in the way I've watched French couples kiss each other in museums, on the streets, in the train stations. I run my hands along his hair, adoring him. Because he has been living in France too, he kisses me back, heartily. In the airport we fill ourselves up with love, suffuse our hair and skin and words with sensuality. Not the shout it from the billboard kind of kissing, but the kind we saw in front of the frightening Rousseau painting at the Musee' d'Orsay -- the young man and woman turning their heads toward each other under "War," their kiss an antidote, a communication of what could not be said, a politeness even, a way to hold the exposure to tragedy inside, amongst a room of visitors.

The kiss showed itself to us, consumed us really in our trips to Paris. In the Marais one Saturday night we had dinner at a communal table, our ears trying to pick up the patter of a barely known language in the two men sitting next to us. It was no matter because we understood everything in the way the curly-headed one twirled the ring on the finger of the one with the sideways grin, then leaned over and kissed his palm. The next morning, rushing to find a cafe' that served

omelets, I stopped to watch the reflection in a patisserie window: a middle-aged woman wrapping her arm around another woman's head, leaning in, biting her ear. I had been hungry for this, as it turns out. In another country I was satiated by the calm ease with which the gestures transpired, an effortlessness so transparent that it made me grieve for the loss of it on the streets of my own life.

The kissing in the airport calms me; I'm not sure what effect it has on the screaming man, but he stops the tirade. Ten hours later we are in a hotel room in Detroit where we will wait for the next flight. My husband, he of the magnificent French kiss, turns on the television. Across the room I see him flip through ESPN and local news and stock exchange rattle, and the world we created over there starts to slide away. All I can manage is: "I can't watch this crap. I can't do it. I'm going out." But he doesn't let me. He turns off the television and we banter back and forth a few minutes, and because we have been to many countries that have changed us, because we act as if the world we have agreed to let in is kind, we go back to trying to understand each other. We make a compromise, one that will involve his need for a film in English, and my desire to soak in hot water. Later we eat pizza and a hamburger from the hotel restaurant. We ask, "What do you want to keep from over there?"

I want to keep turning towards the person I disagree with, respecting them through exchange. I want to know when to kiss in silence, when to erupt in hearty dialogue.

I tell my husband about the day at the Pompadour, the museum of modern art, when I'd watched two men, an American and a French man get into an exchange about architecture as they exited a design exhibition. "It's the functionality, the ability to work," said the American. "But if there are no quality materials, then the design is a failure!" said the French man. And then the American hung back, his silence holding his disagreement, unwilling to go out on the limb of conflict. "We rely on the quality, n'est pas?" said the French man again, wanting the conversation to continue. Behind him a large color photograph of a Madonna concert glared, its circus aspects amplified by the giant stature of the camera frame. This is how our country is, I think: we are big and bold especially when the way is ours to take, when the performance is one that we control. We often cannot hear the question mark that entreats us into conversation; our discussion ends when the world's is just beginning. The American man nodded his head; that was enough. The French man walked with him explaining more.

We hold hands across the table and remember one of our last hikes along the canal, trying to hold in our memory the people milling in the charcuterie, the polite, 'bon soir' we hear along the trail as other couples perform this daily ritual of the sunset stroll. We ache to remember the polite exchange, the peaceful gathering of such places, the way it has both civilized us and brought us to our wildish heart. That day, as we crossed the street towards the woods a strange form moved into in my sight line. In the sky a flock of about a hundred birds moved across the sky from south to north, in a revolving motion that replicated the movement and shape of a DNA strand. "Oh my God!" I said, as I stared,

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" My husband, transfixed, shook his head. As the birds rotated within their shape they also flew across the sky, a sphere moving on an axis, each bird holding its position through flight and stasis. We speculated on what held them in this exact shape without the form disintegrating: perhaps their calls, perhaps their relationship to each other, perhaps a flutter of the wing. The birds disappeared behind the towers of a castle, and we stood for a moment to breathe, holding hands, trying to take in what we had witnessed. It was too much to speak of -- we didn't have the meaning, and yet the birds were already inside us, shaping us, the fact that their form did happen, this magic at twilight.

Over the first American dinner my husband hands me the olives from his drink, keeps one for himself. "What's necessary now?" I ask, "How do you want to live?" He's ready to go back to work, but he also wants the quiet of rest, the spaciousness of naps, the inner sanctum of reading. "What else?" I press. He looks at me, open-eyed, wonder streaming through the jet lag. He tries to speak but cannot find the words. It's okay because when I kiss him later I will understand: he wants to remember that it happened; he wants to keep all the unknowing that sits at the center of a mystery.

Sonya & Richard are kissing somewhere in Seattle.