

## *Riddled by Love*

New Year's Day 2014. The empty computer screen stared at him as he pondered the previous evening's oscillating course. As much as his resolution had been for greater peace and harmony in his relationship with Sarah, the night contained too many elements of the irrationality that had come to characterize the arguments that were erupting more and more frequently. Political discussions that turned into rabid diatribes and Sarah's propensity to broaden specifics into vast generalizations were wearing him down, killing slowly the love he so wanted with her, was certain they could have.

It was their third time around. Twenty years earlier they had begun an affair. She ended up divorcing and he went back to his wife to try and make it work, in vain. After all the debris had been swept away, the torrid intensity of their passion told them they had to be together, and six years after the start of the affair they decided moving in together made the best sense.

Within a year he left her after discovering she'd lied to him about contact she still had with another man she'd met during the time he'd returned to his wife. It was a stunning breach of trust he couldn't overcome. Although she denied it, he was sure she'd been intimate with him. All the lying and subterfuge that were part and parcel of their own affair was what he wanted to make up for by loving her well and being the best stepfather he could to her four children, though he hadn't been totally successful in the latter area; it wasn't an easy role.

A year later they came back together but lived apart this time. It started off well but slowly an irrepressible irrationality in Sarah's logic pestered the harmonious elements of their love again. He wanted to show his commitment, that he really loved her. When he proposed they buy a house together, she agreed. Outside of the hope of cementing their allegiance to one another, he also wanted the two youngest kids to have a more stable environment to go through high school in, as well as give Sarah and him a firmer direction, something that had never been strong in her, something he needed.

On a family holiday to Alassio in Italy it all went inexplicably haywire: Sarah's illogical behavior befuddled and frustrated him, and he could not bring her to reasonably explain it. She accused him of absurd untruths about his feelings that were based only in fantasy. In the end she went back to Switzerland with her children on a train, and once home, canceled the signing for the house. He dragged himself back distraught, downhearted, and wracked by the thought of having to pick up the pieces once again.

He never stopped loving her, though, even during a five-year relationship with Sale, an Estonian woman eight years his junior. He'd been absolutely smitten with her and her Eastern European beauty and mystique. Like so many women in his age range, she had children, a 13-year old son. He'd become used to it. He came to be close with him. Teaching him guitar, playing pool together, and sharing a wicked sense of humor all made it feel like Arthur was his own child. Regardless of his feelings' intensity for Sale, the not always satisfactory moments in bed from the love's onset plagued and bewildered him. But she'd been compassionate and understanding: "The man has all the pressure," she had said. She could have balked but instead showed earnest willingness to deal with the situation, and this convinced him of her feelings' sincerity. With the help of Viagra, oils, and open-mindedness things were soon set right, though he did not enjoy the drug's side effects, but what could a fifty- one year old man in love do otherwise? In the current cultural conditions

a man had to be hard on call. Why else would a pill be invented for it? Obviously, he was not alone: Viagra sales were rocketing.

Sex's salience had lessened for him over the last few years, but of course, he wanted to, knew he had to transmit the love he felt without words, knew she needed to feel it. But true love ran far deeper than just sex for him now. That stranger below with whom he'd lived his entire life seemed to have a mind of its own, and it was frustrating, but was it not just part of aging? He kept this question at bay, for it was not easily answerable. He thought of all the middle-aged relationships of his aunts and uncles back in the 60's, as well as other marriages he had watched over the years, and sexual attraction would not be a consistent part of their description. In the end, it wasn't sex that brought things to a close, but rather that Sale turned out to be a lover looking for a free ride to Switzerland and a man who'd support her higher lifestyle. And conversations predominantly limited to interior decoration, real estate, and investment did not bring him anywhere near penetrating the tinted glass that he concluded shielded her soul. The hard and bitter break-up left him down on women, a development in himself he rued and struggled with along with the nagging notion he'd been a fool. But he was no fatalist.

Six months after it was finished with Sale he found himself longing for Sarah's company again, so he contacted her through Facebook. He never did social media, but knew of no other way to find her. At first came no reply, but eventually she wrote and they made a date. Their feelings had not evaporated on the night they met. A good sign, he thought. But he had deliberated long and hard about what had ailed their relationship's history, and before they truly resumed the liaison of love between them, he had three conditions for starting up again: the priority being they would need to be a team, a pair alone, particularly because all the children were grown and functioning in the world; she had to agree to return to the States with him for 5 years in 2016, which would entail marriage, and in turn he would live in Australia, her homeland, for a time afterwards. Beyond that there was no plan. Lastly, and most important for him, the relationship had to be guided by a greater rationality than it had been in the past. It was mindless simply to go forward without hindsight.

So it commenced again. It wasn't long till he compromised on his need to be a priority over the children; and he did truly accept this, saw it as a fault in himself he could learn from. Soon five years turned to three in the States. But his quest for a relationship guided by openness, balanced consideration, respect, and, above all, reason, he could not relinquish. Things were good for a year, but slowly the irrational and unforgiving recriminations of the past that dwelled somewhere deep in Sarah's psyche, impenetrable, crept in and began to hack at the hopes he had of a new life with her. He worried he asked too much of her, but was the sharing of life's sensations, emotions, and truth too much to request? His yearning to know her soul, her deepest thoughts, and be entrusted with them, had remained, for all purposes, out of reach. At fifty-eight, choices were diminishing as his thoughts rolled, but he could not remain in a relationship solely due to the fear of being alone at the end. That would be a sell-out to his own soul, his ideal of love. He just needed to feel loved, but did not. His principles may have been the root cause he'd never been able to have the long relationship he longed for, but what was a life, a love, without deeper truth? Transience and superficiality had always been his nemeses.

The ubiquitous Apple sound toned. The blank screen filled up with his e-mail account. Slightly hung over from the night's champagne and brandy, he propped his head in his hands as he sluggishly looked to see if anyone had cared to write him. At the sight of a name his heart palpitated and his groin felt warm. Dinah!

Eleven years ago they'd met when they were assigned to proctor an area of a massive international business examination in Zurich. As they had both begun teaching jobs in the Swiss school system after starting their careers in international schools, they enthusiastically discussed differing methodologies, techniques, and approaches, showed each other the writing of Swiss students that they'd brought along to grade, and basically talked shop gladly. At the end of the day they agreed to meet sometime soon to exchange ideas more in depth, and they did.

A month later she came to his place. At day's end she had made her romantic inclinations known, ambushing him totally, especially since she was married with two teenage children. His remembrances of his affair with Sarah checked him from becoming involved despite the pull. Besides, he was in the second phase of his relationship with Sarah; they'd already put the deposit down on the house. He was totally turned on when Dinah kissed him out of the blue as they parted, but just kept the moment to savor.

In subsequent phone conversations she assured him she was ready to have an affair.

"Are you prepared to meet surreptitiously at hotels and live in a flurry of lies?" he'd posed. She was. He wasn't.

Even after he and Sarah had ended it the second time, two months after Dinah's visit, he didn't contact her because he couldn't enter into a relationship with a married woman. In the wake of their affair, he and Sarah had once agreed that they had acted out of character when they cheated on their spouses, swimming daily in a sea of mendacity. Neither wanted a repeat. He did not relish having hurt the only wife he'd had, either. Only future good deeds can erase the errors of the past, a concept he was committed to. So nothing ever transpired between him and Dinah.

However, in 2010, three months after the love with Sale had dissolved, he had written Dinah an e-mail in the hopes she might be single, but a reply never came. Then he wrote Sarah.

The words on the screen provided a life's update and wished him a Happy New Year. She was leaving her husband after 27 years. In fact, she'd already moved out. Could he and she meet for a coffee? He leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. He'd masturbated more than once to that missed opportunity in his home. He must meet her, had to kiss her just once. He justified these thoughts with the fact he'd tried to contact her before Sarah. The feeling was also driven by the unloved state he was in, as well as the need to see if the tingling in his crotch would become an erection in Dinah's presence. The inability to get it up had been plaguing lovemaking with Sarah, not to mention his own sense of manhood. He assured her it had nothing to do with her but could see it was impacting her despite the denials. How much was the question. But at his and Sarah's ages (she was two years older), it was the lasting elements of love – respect, caring, empathy, and mutual understanding of each other and the world – that would win the day, to his mind. There were many ways to turn someone on, and he employed them gladly. Lesbians making love flashed across his mindscape. He supposed there was really no replacement for a hard cock in a heterosexual relationship. If he could suddenly be sexually revived with Dinah, then he'd feel his assessment of things might be false. He needed to know.

A meeting was arranged.

An out of the way hotel bar near Zurich University was the place. His insides were quivering as he waited for her to arrive, and he made things worse by ordering a double espresso. He sensed her entrance and when they took each other in, both knew an eleven-year longing was about to be reckoned with. She nonchalantly invited him

to her place for more wine. Taken aback but pleased, his anticipation whetted, he accepted. During the twenty-minute walk they talked easily. She took his arm, something Sarah rarely did. It made him feel like a man somehow.

It was the beginning of comparing Dinah to Sarah: she never answered the phone or text messages when they were in conversation, like Sarah constantly did; his meaning was not misconstrued; Dinah understood his humor better, and she never kept on walking ahead of him, like Sarah did when he stopped to photograph something that caught his eye; photography was simply one of his hobbies.

Intimacy was beckoning once inside her modest apartment in a 19<sup>th</sup> century building on a quiet street at the edge of Zurich, near Tiefbrunnen Station. As more than a bottle of red wine disappeared, an amorous languor gradually enwrapped them. Pleasantly intoxicated, he stood over her as she sat looking up at him, her wish stamped on her face. He glanced at his watch.

“Time to turn into a pumpkin?” she queried cat-like. “But you’re in a relationship, right?” she purred, staring right into his eyes.

His middle-aged knees were near buckling as he took her hand and pulled her to him. The kissing was sweet, explosive, and lasted till he left twenty minutes later. He abandoned himself to the sensations that rode wildly through him. But his cock was only mildly moved despite the lustful pawing at each other. His flaccidness soon overrode his previous abandonment of reason. Had she noticed? Without any circumspection they made a date to meet again soon.

On the train home he assessed his abandonment of the absolute morality he’d adhered to since his divorce; it did not upset him. He felt peaceful, calm, fulfilled. A relative morality constructed itself within him. Did he not deserve feelings of appreciation, of harmony, of love? Are we really meant to be absolutely monogamous? He’d once read that just 3% of the world’s animal population was. He scratched his hairless crown.

He’d never wronged another woman after his wife, but he was weary of the too-frequent cacophony he and Sarah seemed unable to escape; he needed to feel wanted. Though he did not lose his desire to make their relationship work, Dinah’s kiss, lake-blue eyes, scent, and flowing, shoulder-length blonde hair had swallowed him almost whole.

In the days leading up to the next meeting, reason reasserted itself, however, placing the power of their first meeting’s emotions under morality’s scrutiny. In a series of e-mails in which they admitted the potential of heartbreak for someone, they decided it was best to be friends and meet from time to time. Since they hadn’t made love, both thought it was doable, but their correspondence also hinted that their obvious attraction to each other might make things tricky.

Over the next few months they met three times and were consistently unable to keep their hands to themselves. They finally came to an agreement: a “romantic friendship” in which there would be everything but coitus. This made her comfortable because she would not have to suppress the feelings she had for him, though there would be no future, and she could go on searching for another partner. She was happy just to love him as things stood. It suited him because the fear of not being able to perform would be taken out of the equation, and he could continue to bathe in the exhilarating sensations her attentions gave him.

Dinah began dating on the Internet, met several men, had sex with them, sometimes seeing two at the same time. One week she thought she’d found the one. He even asked her to move in with him. The next week he was history because he hadn’t been much fun one afternoon, though she told him she was returning to her

marriage. She'd always concoct a story for them, which she explained was easier and less painful than telling the truth. Besides, she'd only known the men a short while, she said. She told him everything, even the lies. It unsettled him but nothing was revealed; his feelings for her did not change, in a way became stronger. He felt no jealousy, was just glad for the piece of her heart and time he could have.

Whenever they met he always suggested a restaurant or bar, avoiding her apartment booby-trapped with temptation. Yet she consistently managed to get him in there, pleading she needed help putting together a book shelf, moving some furniture, fixing her computer, all of which he did with an inane sense of duty. He conveniently and regularly forgot to remind her of the dangers they had discussed after their first love-laced encounter a few months back, so passionate embraces and kissing did not diminish. The excitement of the kisses and the groping was irresistible for both of them, but they never went all the way for real till one night in August.

Sarah was away for a week visiting her daughter in England. He'd told Dinah he could stay later this time but did not say he could spend the night, which he had been thinking about. She had recently promised she would desist from total seduction if the occasion of a longer time together ever arose. She'd promised.

They had drunk a considerable amount of Rioja, and as they were deep into each other's mouths, hands covering a lot of ground, she broke away from him abruptly.

"But I promised!" she said, looking at him in a frantic, crazy way that freaked him out a bit. Then she came to him again and kissed him even more fervently, and then suddenly pushed him away again, uttering the same words with the same expression on her face. This happened several times, and as it did she began to peel off her clothing. He found it all weird yet stimulating. Why didn't she just let it happen naturally and not bring in some great sense of forbidden fruit into the picture? It turned him off, basically. Nevertheless, he was bent on having her.

The entire night he couldn't get it up. In his mortification, awkwardness, and blame, he cursed himself for not bringing any Viagra with him. The contrast of his feelings and his limp organ echoed like a morbid tune throughout him. Dinah, clearly disturbed, walked him to the train station the next morning after a rather sullen breakfast, leaving a tepid kiss in her wake.

He didn't hear from her for two months and longed to. Concluding he was being nixed, he finally wrote to say he understood why she hadn't contacted him (though he really didn't) and asked her to return some books and magazines he'd lent her. Her response was apologetic: she hadn't meant to neglect him. Complaints of being overwhelmed by work and the ugliness of her divorce were her excuses; he gobbled them up readily, like a famished mutt. They started up again.

In the week in March he and Sarah had decided to start seeing a counselor, Dinah gave him fellatio on her knees in her kitchen, though he wasn't completely hard. Afterwards as he sat before her computer installing a program for her, she stroked his arm lovingly, kissed his shoulder, leant her head on it. The afterglow was strong, his heart was in motion.

Less than a month later he had two days on his own and he stayed overnight. Desire gushed as if from a burst dam. They satisfied each other with tongues and fingers but there was no actual penetration. Lying in bed long, they felt deliciously emptied and fulfilled nonetheless, laughing at countless nothings. He wondered at the love rising within him even without intercourse; he sensed himself falling.

A few weeks later she was in his arms at a sidewalk café, kissing him like some Cupid's disciple. As he got up to go, they could not leave each other alone.

Counseling was clarifying the problems he'd always felt were at the root of his and Sarah's relationship, but the real learning wasn't taking place somehow, there was no tangible progress being made. He wondered why. In a week he would go on a three-week holiday with her but Dinah had ensnared his heart. He told her that Sarah would be visiting friends in the UK for 10 days after their holiday together.

"I want to go somewhere with you, I want to be alone with you for days," she said, a dreamy film spreading over her eyes. The sincerity of her tone and expression pierced him to the bone.

"We'll arrange it, I'll write you this week about it. I know a wonderful place on the Ligurian coast in Italy. There's a hotel right on the beach that's not expensive. I know you'll love it. We can be there in five hours by car!"

She unleashed a kiss that made him want to fuck her right then and there.

"My dear woman," simply fell from his lips unconsciously as he let himself fall into the wells of her eyes; he knew he was gone.

The next day he sent her the information about the hotel, and since she spoke Italian, asked if she'd like to book it. If not, he'd take care of it. He suggested four days, returning three days before Sarah.

She replied with a question: "How would you feel if you were on vacation and Sarah was seeing another man, even platonically?" She said she felt she would be betraying Sarah, that she couldn't go to Italy with him.

It was more the unspoken ramifications of her hypocritical logic than the cancelation of the plans that sent his heart and assessment of her plummeting, though his love remained unscathed. Her letter left a lot unanswered, too much open to the imagination. What would happen now?

He wrote back in desperation regarding the subterranean implications of her words, emphasizing that their relationship was born out of betrayal, even from the very beginning, now 13 years earlier. Why the sudden moral high ground? They simply had an undying attraction to each other. Was that wrong? Must there be guilt? He placated himself with the explanation he'd wanted Dinah before Sarah, and he had made no demands on her - she had been free to love someone else. Or did she now feel the need to make demands on him and it scared her? He felt himself reeling towards past places. Did this mean the "romantic friendship" was over? He demanded to meet her, for the answers to his questions had to be delivered to his face; e-mails made dumpings far too easy. Her about face was incomprehensible to him. In a single stroke everything was destroyed. He no longer was sure about who she really was, what her feelings were or where they truly lay about anything. Without trust, even friendship was an absurd proposition.

Two days later he sat across from her on her balcony. When he arrived she kissed him three times alternately on the cheeks, the typical Swiss greeting between men and women friends. His heart sank further. He knew he would no longer warm himself at the hearth of her love; he had been inexplicably, unjustly cast into a cold, dismal, sunless hallway inside of 24 hours. He sat astounded, almost deaf, while her attempts at honest truth ricocheted nonsensically, incomprehensibly around his brain. Her demeanor was icy, distant, a shadow of who she'd been. The stark switch impaled him. And because his affection for her had not abandoned him, he lugged his emotional mess down her stairwell and home to Sarah, and their impending, long-planned holiday.

On New Year's Day 2016 he sat alone at his computer playing solitaire, casting an occasional, long gaze at the majesty of the Swiss mountains outside his picture window, those symbols of endurance and time. He contemplated nature, the

nature of all things, and above all the elusive enigma that is love between a man and a woman - its thrill, its magic, its promise, and its dagger.