

Lilo

From *Mara, Marietta: A Love Story in 77 Bedrooms* by Richard Jonathan

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To Alexandra V.

Marietta, I'm sitting in a chalkboard café on Ostertorsteinweg, drinking a cloudy beer called Haake-Beck Kräusen. I like this city on the Weser River; I like the look and feel of the town. Laid-back shabby chic urban pastoral. Have you seen Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*? It's brilliant. Julie Christie, what class! She gives a very fine Gertrude. But let's not talk about mothers. Kate Winslet's Ophelia is fine too. But let's not talk about daughters. Have you heard Anna's got a book out? Photographs of vodka and heroin in the land of Lenin, red-light nights and blue-morning snow. I met Gudrun in Madrid. Told me the two of you got together when the Tanztheater performed in San Francisco. Yesterday I finished the *Katie Quickfinger* script for Liselotte, an artist who's turning *Memoirs of a Kleptomaniac* into a graphic novel. Lilo's really gotten inside Katie's skin. I made a video of her kickboxing. She'll use it for Katie.

Three nights ago we saw Garbage at a club on Neustadtswal. Outstanding! Opened with 'Queer' and closed with 'Girls Don't Come', with a marvellous 'Milk' in-between. There's venom in Shirley Manson's lyrics, venom that comes from dignity's fangs, not a pose but experience. After the show we went to Litfass. Over martinis of potato vodka and blackberry liqueur, Lilo told me why she feels such an affinity with both Katie and Shirley.

– Conforming to expectations, there's nothing worse. It's only when you live by your own principles and stand on your own two feet that you become worthy of interest.

There's a metallic edge to her grey eyes; kohl-rimmed, they sparkle under a sheen of silver shadow.

– I think you give far too much weight to family, Sprague. Comes a time when you have to say goodbye, in your heart and your mind.

She takes off her scarf, exposing a butterfly charm on a leather choker.

– I was raised by my grandparents, with my mother coming in occasionally. My father took off as soon as he'd knocked up my mum. Silence ever since. Can't say I've suffered. Not in the least! I never felt I lacked anything. How could I, since I never knew him?

Her off-the-shoulder top confirms her insouciance.

– I never had a clear image of authority. My grandparents tried to play the role of parents. Never convinced me. My mum and I were more like sisters than mother and daughter. More complicity than obedience.

A black rose in a thorn wreath, her ring shows off its intricacy as she sips her drink.

– Not a model family! Probably explains why, very early, I began to throw everything into question.

I sip my martini: Wet stone and mild spice, the vodka comes through the bitter fruitiness of the blackberry.

– Reading sustained me. I could read at two-and-a-half. Never stopped since.

The black lacquer of her fingernails glints as she caresses her glass.

– I was a year ahead at school. They called me ‘frog eyes’, they tormented me.

But I pulled through. I enjoyed learning. Did my homework with pleasure.

– And when did drawing come into the picture?

– End of primary school.

As she shifts in her chair, the butterfly in her sternal notch becomes a death’s head.

– Drawing allowed me to cultivate my taste for the bizarre. Became a new outlet for my imagination. Do you draw?

– No. As soon as it became clear that whatever I draw ends up looking obscene, I gave it up.

Lilo laughs. She takes my hand and traces the fate line with her fingertip.

– You have beautiful hands, Sprague.

I smile into her eyes, eyes no longer metallic but misty.

– At seventeen I moved as far away from my mum as I could. Our relations had become unbearable. I started university, got a job. Paid my own rent! That was exciting, being responsible for myself.

She sips her drink.

– Of course my mum is still dear to me. My grandparents too. But the thing is, I saw them in action, I observed them. I figured out why they do the things they do. That gave me a distance, and that’s why their influence on me is not significant.

On the stem of her glass her fingertips show discernment; graceful, her hand glows with intelligence.

– I’ve always been attracted to the dark. Bordering on the sordid! Shirley’s lyrics really hit the mark for me. And the band is simply glorious!

– I’ll say! I particularly like the slow numbers.

– Not surprising. You’re romantic, Sprague.

– Am I?

From the dark, dark purple of her lips, there comes a bright shine.

– Sometimes, when people know my tastes, they think I’m a monster of indifference. But I’m not. In fact, I have a great capacity for empathy.

She takes my hand again.

– You have a water hand. Makes me want to protect you.

– From what?

– Yourself. You’re too sensitive.

– Katie toughened me up.

– She’s magnificent! I love the way she *lives* her questions, *lives* her way into the answers. Did you have any model for her?

I smile into her eyes.

– Marietta?

A movement of my brows suffices for affirmation.

– You’ve got to tell me about her, Sprague. She must be amazing.

– Later.

– You’ve been saying that for days!

I down the last of my drink.

– Shall we go, Lilo?

– I could stay with you forever!

Lilo’s in love with Karen Blixen. She told me so, last Saturday over wine and cheese at the Café Engel. All day she had Katie skipping across the gutters, from panel to panel, her quick fingers rifling cosmetic counters and racks of silken lingerie. Come evening, the work having gone so well, she was euphoric.

– Isak Dinesen’s right, Sprague. Playing with personas is more rewarding than pretending to be yourself.

She dabs some pear jam on her pecorino and bites into the rustic bread.

– It’s naïve, pretending to be yourself?

She sips her wine, a dark Valpolicella.

– Yes. It means you have no distance, you take yourself too seriously.

– And what were Blixen’s masks?

– Spiritual courtesan, Baroness, witch, siren, Isak Dinesen. That’s what kept her free, those aliases.

The wrap bodice and dolman sleeves, the low-cut crossover tucked into the deep waistband: She wears it well, Liselotte, the vintage top I bought her for her birthday.

– Don’t you think Karen’s example could serve you, Sprague?

She pops a hazelnut into her mouth and dabs onion jam on her burrata.

– What do you mean?

– Well, your letter to Marietta—she’ll never read it. Why don’t you just write more stories like *Katie Quickfinger*? Something less personal. Wear a mask, forget yourself.

Revelling in the burrata, she mops up more with a piece of bread and pops it into her mouth.

– Like Isak Dinesen?

– Yes.

I sip my Tocai Friulano, ordered in honour of Pasolini.

– I play the hand I’m dealt, Lilo. I play it the best I can. Time will tell whether I’ve wasted my time. Do you know the hand Karen Blixen was dealt?

– Yes. I’ve read *Out of Africa*.

– That’s another mask, that’s mythology. You can see Isak’s hand in it, but not Karen’s cards.

– And do *you* know the hand she was dealt?

– I do.

– Tell me.

And thus I came to speak of how syphilis forfeited Karen’s claims to a real human life. Of how, when she was ten, her father hanged himself in a boarding house

because he couldn't bear to live with the disease. And then, as if by some transgenerational curse, she herself, within a year of her marriage, contracted the disease from her husband. 'Light comes from darkness', she'd written, 'daybreak from night': Stoical, undaunted, she believed her talent blossomed precisely because she had decided to *live* with her syphilis. Her sexual life sacrificed, she fell back on her imagination. The scandal of the disease, the secret, the taboo, meant that she led a double life, shuttling between intimacy and alienation. And thus, isolated, self-absorbed, condemned to *be* her body while feeling herself *other* to it, she developed an ironic distance to herself that was both alienating and liberating—and made her the artist she became.

Liselotte sips the ruby-red darkness of her Valpolicella.

– So you see, Lilo, every artist has their own curse.

Over her grey eyes comes a blue cast; over her face, a shadow.

– Give me your hand.

I do so. She takes it and examines the palm.

– You've got a double fate line, Sprague. These two parallels. It means you found your soul mate.

– I found her. And I lost her.

– Yes. Exactly as your palm said you would. Look.

I follow her finger as she traces the lines.

– Your heart line ends in a fork, but a branch drops down to touch the life line.

– Which means?

– Failure in love.

Furrowed field, barren land.

– So what can I do?

– Let *me* love you!

She's got the cutest nose, Lilo. She's the only girl I know who can show lechery with her nostrils.

– All right. Let's go back to your place.

We went back to her place. She loved me. She loved me good.

Liselotte lives in a maisonette; she's got the two upper floors of a townhouse. It's light, bright and peaceful. Upstairs, under a skylight, is her studio. It's currently taken over by Katie: Hair of flaming orange and eyes glowing emeralds, the quick-fingered girl circles the walls, covering her tracks in the storyboard. Just look at her! In Lilo's dexterous hand her sinister charm is beguiling; prancing barefoot or strutting in stilettos, her feline grace is winning.

Downstairs, the floors, ceilings and walls are white: Lilo makes the most of the Northern light. The kitchen extends across the whole width of the house. At one end, an island unit holds the hob and a breakfast bar; at the other, a work desk serves as a dining table. Look! Burnt-down candles in candlesticks; a vase, fresh flowers. In the living room, their backs to the window, two steel-framed wicker chairs stand discreet and elegant. Edith, Egon Schiele's wife, beautifully drawn in three crouching nudes in the last year of the artist's life, occupies one wall. The

others are bare. In the middle of the room, a round table on a textured rug gives off a black sheen. I'm sitting in an Egg chair, my feet on the ottoman. Lilo's sitting lotus-like on the sofa. We've just had lunch (*Braunkohl und Pinkel*), after a morning spent at the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum.

We speak of women artists, we find we share a love for Frida Kahlo, Tamara de Lempicka, Remedios Varo. We speak of Egon Schiele, dead at twenty-eight. Lilo says she likes the drawings on her wall, but she prefers Egon's earlier work. I agree that Edith's too old to be a girl like Rimbaud (my first gift to Lilo) but not Gerti, Wally and the working-class girls. I explain why I'm so moved by Edith: If she didn't have Wally's divine gift of lust, she did show Egon that to be moving he didn't have to be demonic.

– Sprague, you're so isolated in that Egg chair. Come here. Come and sit next to me.

I go and sit next to her. She unfolds the throw she'd wrapped around herself and gives me one end of it; I pull it till it covers me from the neck down.

We sat like that, wrapped in one blanket, for the longest while. Yes, in the fading Northern light we sat in intimate silence, Lilo and I, as if we'd been lovers for a long time.

– Speak to me of Marietta, Sprague. I know you're thinking of her.

– No, Lilo. I'm happy here with you.

– Come, tell me about her.

– No.

– Well, read me from your notebook then.

– No.

– Please!

– Fetch it. It's in my jacket pocket. You can read for yourself.

Notebook in hand, Lilo sits opposite me in the Egg chair. Opening a page at random, she reads out loud:

It's quiet here, on this island in the archipelago. I'm in a café looking out at the city. I like the charcoal-and-silver sky, the ever-changing grey of the sea. It's my favourite hour of the day, the hour when daylight blends with electricity. My coffee is good, it has a rich aroma; there's raspberry and rum in my tart. I miss you. No longer with vertigo, but with a quiet longing. I love you. No longer with self-regard, but with all that's good in my heart. Does this poem I've written here capture that?

Under a harvest moon
Grapes hang heavy on the vine
As the clusters distil their immortality
May night filter pleasure through your spine

Under winter skies
Saxifrage sleeps under snow

As the day relieves the night
May happiness set your heart aglow

Under a vernal sun
Bluebells spread across the forest floor
Before the canopy closes
May their glory come to your door

Under summer stars
The sand gives back the day's heat
As the sea breeze teases your hair
May the waves lay my love at your feet

Lilo closes the notebook.

- You're still crazy about her.
- Yes.
- Poor Spague.

Opening the book at random, Lilo reads out loud:

I'm sitting in a bar in Larsbjørnsstraede, watching the rain beating down on the pavement. It's the hour of the afternoon when Sisyphus is giving it one last go. I've washed down my fish pie with a pale, golden ale; now I'm drinking a more daring combination of drowsy malt and piquant hops. If you haven't guessed, I've had a late lunch and I'm feeling lousy. I felt elated this morning, though, when the twin digits of your birthday met my first glance at the digital clock. In the street, on my way to breakfast, my heart skipped a beat as a lanky blonde crossed my path with your spring in her stride. In the café, the Moroccan bangles of the waitress rang a disturbing bell when she put down my plate. After that I started to slide; I just couldn't get a grip on myself. At the SMK I was moved by Modigliani's *Alice* and Emil Nolde's *Child and Large Bird*, but then I found myself preferring the white walls to any of the paintings. At my Danish lesson my teacher was delighted with my pronunciation but appalled by my grammar. Then I came here to have lunch. Lingered over a beer, I wrote you this poem:

Precious one, today is your birthday
And I am all undone. Why can't I accept
That without you my dwelling place
Is the rain, the stars and the river,
And the wide open spaces the wind
Blows through? You gave me all your love,
You filled my spine with memories: True.
But ever since you left me
I've been living unsheltered, defenceless

Against the wind that blows
Your absence through my bones.

How long can this missing you go on?
If no other lover
Can make up for your being gone,
Neither can my scribbling.

Because I know I will never take shelter,
I know it will never end. Because I know
Your memory keeps me alive, I know
I am condemned. To what?

To missing you till my bones ache,
To being a mourner at my own wake.

Lilo closes the notebook.

- Did I say you're still crazy about her?
- Yes.
- I should have said, 'You're still *really* crazy about her'.
- Yes.
- Poor Sprague.

Opening the book at random, Lilo reads out loud:

Insidiously the tide tugs at my blood, insidiously the siren sings.
The siren! Plug my ears with beeswax, keep her indistinct!
Swiftly I recite the twelve times table: Before seven her eyes
have turned amber, her windblown hair blonde. Desperately I
run through the Russian alphabet: Before 'и' sensitivity
emanates from her fingers, immediacy from her lips. The order
of the planets from the sun, the order of the visible spectrum—
her laughter rings in my ears, her smile melts my heart... And
thus you draw me to you, my beloved mermaid; and thus your
silence is as fatal as your song. Marietta, as the murmur of the
sea makes a boat of my bed, a moonbeam a sail of the
baldaquin, I know that tonight I will be stalled in horse
latitudes, haunted by memories of you...

Lilo looks at me with sadness in her eyes; she flips the page and reads:

Beat me like bedclothes on a rock by a river
Endeavour to make me immaculate
If love is dirty I am filthy
You'll never beat my love out of me

Turn me into a wolf, catch me in a trap
See me gnaw through my own flesh and bone
As much as I loved you on four legs

No less will I love you on three

Once I was your map, now I've lost my way
Once I was your compass, now I have no North

Turn me into a barnacle on a whale's back
Swim me through all the world's oceans
Swim me from Arctic to Antarctica and back
Never will you wash my love out of me

Stick me in a temple, I'll live like a monk
Let the decades roll until I'm enlightened
Then when I'm wise stare into my eyes
And feel the love pour out of me

Once I was your map, now I've lost my way
Once I was your compass, now I have no North

Lilo closes the notebook.

- You're tragic, Sprague.
- We live in a post-tragic world, Lilo.
- Not you. You're in love with a woman who won't see you. It's love that lasts that's tragic, not love that doesn't. You're tragic.

Opening the book at random, Lilo reads out loud:

Transparent as your absence
Juniper in gin
I am steeped in sadness
Emptiness within

Nothing is the sum
Of all things without you
Hollow and numb
I can't forget you

Lilo closes the notebook.

- You've got to try harder, Sprague. I can help you.
- You're a lovely woman, Lilo.
- Stay longer, then.
- Maybe I will. I'm happy here with you.
- You must!
- Maybe.

Opening the book at random, Lilo reads out loud:

The coin of Tyche, the stretched string;
Pattern, order and chaos:
Between contingency and necessity

Between reason and the absurd
I find myself adrift.

The gathering of thought, the mnemonics of pain;
Memory, forgetting and healing:
Between oblivion and presence
Between obsession and lucidity
I find myself adrift.

The sovereignty of the self, the question of self-concealment;
Love, knowledge and delusion:
Between action and introspection
Between melancholy and exuberance
It find myself adrift.

Marietta, what I am to do?
Won't you help me,
Help me to live without you?

Lilo closes the notebook and puts it down.

– She must be amazing, to have moved you so!

– Yes. Now come and sit next to me. You're so isolated in that Egg chair.

Lilo snuggles up next to me. I unfold the throw I'd wrapped around myself and give her one end of it; she pulls it till it covers her from the neck down.

We sat like that, wrapped in one blanket, for the longest while. Yes, in the lingering Northern light we sat in intimate silence, Lilo and I, as if we'd been lovers for a long time.