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Setting for a Fairy Tale

Jennifer Gilmore

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In Prague, Vaclav Havel once kissed my hand. I lived with Max and made art, taking in just enough money for rent and food by posing nude for anyone who thought they were an artist and by selling Jeanine’s handmade hats. I met Jeanine at the Globe, which, back then, was the only bookstore that sold English titles and was where all the Americans hung out. It’s stupid how we all moved so far away from home and yet still clung to each other. We’d sit around and talk about all the things Prague couldn’t give us. Green apples, we’d say. Convenience stores. Maple trees. Parking garages.

But Prague was beautiful. Castles and cathedrals dotted the city like stars.

I would model about three times a week. I’d take off my clothes and stand still for twenty minutes at a time, hear the scratch of charcoal and the breathing noises of people concentrating. Then I’d twist my body into another position and listen to those same sounds again. The rest of the time, I painted my face white with red cheeks like a harlequin, pinned Jeanine’s bright hats to my long skirts and twirled for the tourists.

Max lived off his investments — his CD’s, his stocks and bonds. Max, with his long, red hair, his stringy beard, his dirty fingernails and his talking over the phone to his broker in New York City is a memory I keep. He was going to write. Each morning he’d tell me, today’s the day, and every night I’d come home, my body tired from either standing still or spinning around, and he’d be on the mattress staring up at the ceiling. “Soon,” he’d say.
“It’s all up here.” He’d knock on the side of his head with the knuckles of his bent fingers.

And yet from all that money he made from that trust fund that made money from itself, he never once paid for anything — not for the movies or for dinner, not for the trains we rode through Slovakia and Poland, not for the abortion. Max never wanted to appear as if he had money. He had me apply to the Czech government for a waiver. Time was going, this baby was growing in me. I could feel it making itself into something like art and I had to wait around for the government to sign a piece of paper allowing me to have it sucked out free of charge. I think it stayed inside me too long. Art can do that.

I didn’t even think, Max could pay for this, easy. I didn’t think to ask him to pay. I am used to working for everything. When Max and I were in college, I worked in the cafeteria mixing powdered eggs and slicing cheese while he took LSD and opened yellow books in the coffee shops in Harvard Square.

When we met in Massachusetts, Max and I were eighteen. The world was this huge space I had never seen. Max came into the cafeteria for breakfast one Sunday. “Eggs,” he said, sliding his white plate over the counter. When I scooped a serving spoonful onto his dish, he shoved it back with the tips of his fingers and said, “More.” I stacked the plate high like an ant hill or a small mountain.

I don’t mind working. And I like to look in city places for the things I make art with — the telephone cable, balls of wax, long, metallic cord. I like that I fished my winter coat out of a dumpster. Making what people called trash into something I need is something Max enjoyed, too. He liked living as I was living. There’s a dif-
ference between poking through junkyards for the fun of it, though, and doing it because you need to.

In college we would roam the campus together on winter nights, the pond reflecting stars, wind blowing tree branches high above our heads. The dumpsters outside the dorms were filled with things we collected — bits of carpet, popcorn poppers, magazines and stubs of pencils. We’d go back to Max’s and dump what we’d found into a heap between us. Sometimes we cut the magazines into strange shapes and pasted them on his cinder block walls with rubber cement. Often we were up until dawn, rummaging through the found appliances, pasting heads of women in perfume ads onto the bodies of wingless birds.

Most nights the pipes were busted and the clang and hiss of the heat didn’t warm us. Max and I would put on clothes from his closet. I’d take the striped socks with individual toes and a turtleneck and Max would wear the wool mittens his grandmother had knit him and we’d watch the sun come up through the stiff fingers of the trees. We hardly had sex at all, though I lay beside him, the two of us propped up against the cement wall, his arm around my shoulders and my face in his small chest.

But abortions aren’t found or free and the Czech government paid for mine while Max waited with me. The doctors and nurses screamed at each other in Czech, and I longed for sterile, American hospitals, for a language it wasn’t a struggle to understand. Right when Max went to get some food was when they called my name. It was done in an hour, not like in the States where I hear you get counseled beforehand and a chance to recover in a special room afterwards. Max wasn’t in the waiting area when I got out. I took a taxi home. It was
the first time I had done that, but I thought, I’ll treat myself. The flat was locked and Max had the keys, so I walked to Jeanine’s and cried while she stitched gold thread into black velvet. Max showed up around midnight and told me, “Come on, let’s go home.”

“Where were you?” I asked him, and he said, “I was walking.”

I knew what he meant.

When we got to our flat I ran a bath for myself which involved heating pots of water over the stove and putting it into this metal basin we had sitting in the middle of the room. After I had filled the tub and just as I had inched my way into the water that had somehow managed to stay scalding hot, Max walked over to the edge of the basin. He stood over me, the steam rising around him. He almost looked angelic.

“Can I come in?” he asked me.

“All right, Max,” I said.

He stepped into the basin and I watched the water cloud over from his dirty feet. He took up all the room and he cried these big, hot tears. He put his head on my chest, his long hair spreading over my breasts like tentacles. “Ella,” he said, “I don’t think I love you anymore.”

This was not the first or the second or even the third time he’d told me this in Prague. I didn’t care right then. I just wanted him out of my bath.

I cried for days. I was losing everything. It was wintertime which is gray and dark in Prague. I didn’t leave the flat. Max wouldn’t speak to me, to show just how he didn’t love me, and it was at this moment he decided he needed to begin writing. With two fingers he pecked at his old, manual typewriter — click, pause, click
click, pause — until I thought I would go crazy. I knew he was writing about how much he didn’t love me. Click click click pause. I stayed under the covers, weeping, filling my journal. I used a quiet, felt tipped pen. I wrote things like this: It would have been a beautiful baby,, a thing from Max and me. And: What use is a body, anyway? Click pause click click.

Everywhere I turned in Prague would have been an incredible photograph. I remember selling Jeanine’s hats on the Charles Bridge and how the tourists reached at the hems of my skirts to finger the hats’ felt rims. They looked up at me and smiled. I wonder, did it change for me after the abortion, when Max officially stopped loving me, or when Newsweek came to take my picture for their piece on “The New Prague”? That was my first time in a magazine. After that article came out, the bridge became thick with tourists clicking cameras at all the vendors, at me with these hideous hats like growths pinned to my skirt. I started wearing a sign around my neck that said: “Photographs, 40 kronen,” which is about 15 cents. I just kept thinking, I’m working hard to keep my head above water. Do you know how cold it gets here in the wintertime? All these visitors to Prague in August, they’ve got no fucking idea. I mean 40 kronen is a metro ticket. It’s nothing.

The tourists should have paid me anyway, for taking my picture, my face painted like a circus clown’s for their enjoyment. They took the city that was my home before anything was translated into English, before the green signs pointed to the Castle, to the Jewish Cemetery, before the brittle bones of scaffolding propped up the insides of churches, and cranes came in to pile dirt over the old stone streets. Those people just took my
picture as if I were part of this changing scenery.
They should have paid me for that.

I finally did leave Prague for Paris that spring. Everyone in Prague was posing as something; if Prague was the new Paris, I wanted the old one. When I had all my belongings packed into a green duffel that I’d found in a trash can over by Saint Tyn, Max said, “You know, I made as much money as we spent here.”

“Really,” I said. “That’s great Max.” I was happy for him.

And then I thought, though only fleetingly, just like he could have paid for the abortion, Max could have afforded to make a family.

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Here in Paris there’s no Globe Bookstore. Americans don’t get together the same way. The people in Prague wanted us there in the beginning; they needed Americans to teach them English, to boost their economy. But in Paris we spread out to be more inconspicuous. We know we are hated, and we stay away from each other.

I live in a flat above Maupin’s art studio in the Algerian part of town. Every time I come home, Maupin tells me in which way he’d like to fuck me, which seems to change depending on the moment. I don’t know if it’s because he says it in French, but it really doesn’t bother me. At least he wants me. It’s nice to be sexy to someone again. But when I think of Inez, his wife, and Raquel, his eight year old girl, and how the three of them eat their long dinners below my only window, the sun going down, the wine and cigarettes, Raquel dancing barefoot
in the little garden, then it starts to bother me. I wonder if I should stop posing nude for Maupin. He’s not even a very good artist and he still won’t put a lock on the door of my flat.

I just want to sit home and make art — long helixes of telephone wire covered with wax. I want to draw quick sketches of naked women, have Jean-Claude fuck me up the ass. Jean-Claude, who comes on girls’ faces for a living, is my manic-depressive lover. He stays in bed all day with the curtains drawn tight. We met at a photo shoot for Big Butt, and when we are together in his room I imagine the white lights, the makeup girl with her big, feathery puff, and it is so easy. We appear in lots of porn magazines, sometimes with each other, sometimes his eyes closed on one page, me knelt in front of a woman, opening her up with my tongue on the next. When I pick up a magazine and see myself, I get the same feeling I had with the abortion; I think, whose body is this that my face seems to be attached to?

I get 2,000 francs for a shoot. That’s rent and food for the month. I go to the studio for a couple of hours and I don’t have to worry about how I’m going to make it through January in Paris. That gives me lots of time to make things. Sometimes I stay in my flat all day and make collages of my sketches. I like to watch the charcoal smear and shine as I cover the paper with a mixture of glue and water. I don’t make art like I used to, though. I know something’s gone. Often I wonder, will I ever be able to get it back?

I miss Prague. Vaclav Havel kissed my hand at the opening of the Acropolis, the first night club in Eastern Europe. If I had only known more about European men at the time, I could have had an affair with him. But the city was already damaged for me; Max and I were split-
ting up for the last time, and the Germans and the Americans were taking over, gathering at the clock tower each hour to watch it chime, the twelve apostles peering out one by one at the tourists. I wish I had known I could have fucked Havel, his hand on my knee a sign I can't believe I didn't recognize, and me only struggling to think of something smart to say to him. Did I want to say I liked his plays or his speeches or simply his writing in general?

I used to talk to men all the time. I moved my hands in the air when I spoke as if I were compelled to, in order to fully express myself. Now I know it would have been easier and much more memorable to have simply slept with Vaclav Havel. Now, when Jean-Claude starts to talk, I listen to his French for a moment, and though it is a beautiful language, I put my hands over his face and wish he'd shut up.

When I can't sleep at night I walk to Sacre Coeur in Montmartre. There's no place to move around in Paris, to spread yourself out, but inside churches there is always space, and the musty dark always makes me think of Prague, that shadowed and foreboding place. I sit in the pews, and the other night when I looked up, I saw the baby Jesus. I burst into tears which is strange because I'm Jewish and have never been affected by Jesus. It's just that he looked so cherubic up there, and I knew that he'd only grow into another man with a beard. He looked so alone. I couldn't see Mary anywhere.

When I came out of the church that night, there were only a few people on the stairs out front smoking pot and singing old Doors songs. It's an incredible view from up there at Sacre Coeur, the city spread out below and sparkling with light. While I was looking out, trying
to recognize the places I'd been, this Arab man came up to me. He said, "I can help you," and I ignored him, my eyes on the skyline, until he said, "You have just realized something." It struck me that I had, but that I didn't know what it was and that I did need help. I started crying, and the hairy man hugged me and told me he would tell me my fortune. I really needed to know my fortune. We went back to my flat.

He told me to take off my clothes and I did. He massaged my back with his short, thick fingers and while his hands moved along my spine, kneading my muscles, he said this: "You must stay away from women; women will be bad for you." He said, "You are very beautiful and you must be careful of strangers. You must never marry a Jew." As the heel of his hand dug into the meat of my back he said, "Always be careful whom you kiss. You must only kiss men on the mouth or they will begin to hate you. Your baby would have been a boy and you would have hated him." My muscles must have stiffened then because his voice softened. "You are in love with a bad man," he said. "You are only what you come from. Be sure to wash yourself well."

I didn't understand the fortune. I told him, thank you, but it's time for you to leave, and he said, he wasn't done telling my future. I said, "Please leave," and I saw Maupin looking up from the garden. He must have really thought I was crazy. Who was worse, this hairy stranger I was lying beneath or Maupin, the stranger downstairs I stood naked in front of the day before while he carved me out of wood?

My body is replicated in pictures and sculptures and photographs all over this continent. When someone is making me out of something there is this thought in the back of my mind about the one thing I could have made, the piece of myself that got away.
“Go away,” I told the Arab man. He got up slowly from my mattress on the floor. I watched his fingers spread out on the bed as he leaned on his arms to stand up straight. He turned around. He said, “This fortune,” he smiled, yellow teeth, “this fortune I won’t make you pay for. And one more thing,” he said, “someone will be here soon.” I was trembling when he left.

I keep thinking, he’s talking about himself. That man’s going to come back here. What kind of prediction is that? He knows where I live and my door won’t lock. I’ve put a mustard jar on the top rim of my unlockable door so I will hear a crash if someone enters. Even though I have no idea what I’ll do if it breaks, I feel much better with the mustard jar over my door. No one’s come yet, but I keep it there when I am in my flat, sorting through old drawings, cutting up some of the magazines I find myself in and pasting my head on men’s bodies. I come in at night from my photo shoots under those bright lights, from screwing Jean-Claude in his closed, dark house, and I tiptoe past Maupin’s studio where he works at every kind of hour. Standing on the balls of my feet, I put the jar over the door. I am waiting for someone. The Arab man was right; someone is going to come here.

I hear Maupin hammering wood in his studio downstairs. I can hear people haggling with each other in French on the streets, and I understand them because I live here. It could be Max who will come. Jeanine wrote me that he lives in England now, and sometimes I think he’ll take the channel tunnel and show up here one of these days. He’ll just walk in like he owns the place and he’ll lay down on my chest and cry there. He’ll have been writing and he’ll show me his poems about how he can’t
see me anymore, but he'll stay anyway.  
I hope the man is Max.

Paris is a bright spot on a dark world. Everything glitters. The store fronts and windows are piled high with more pastries and meats and cheeses and breads than seems possible to consume. When I walk along the streets, peering in the glass, I feel like I am starving. I buy things sometimes, like a pain au chocolate, and it is deliciously sweet and also disgustingly sweet.

The girls wear lipstick and high heels, and the men — they are such sad, weepy people. I am sick of them.

I wonder what it would have been like with Havel, the loved president of a changing republic. I wonder who is going to come in here and break that mustard jar. I want to hear it crash. When he comes in, I want to be ready.

"Max," I'll breathe when he just walks in after a year and some odd months and breaks my mustard jar. When I am done sweeping up the shards of glass, I'll turn to him. "Remember Boston?" I'll say as I take off my clothes slowly. I won't be wearing any underwear, and I'll stand in front of him, my head tilted sideways like I do for the photographer.

Max will probably just stand there unmoved, and so I'll put my jeans and my T-shirt back on and cry because none of this is working. Maybe I'll say what I mean. I'll say, "I wonder what it would have been like, you know, if we'd had it, I mean —" and my hands will interrupt me, opening and curling just a bit at the pinkies. My wrists will twist in jerky half-circles, trying to finish the sentence that I can't.

I'll stuff my hands in the pockets of my jeans. I'll
feel the two or three francs, the tiny centimes, the last of the money I’ve got in this world until my next shoot, my next sitting. There will be lint collecting in the corners of the pockets, and I’ll roll it around with my index finger and my thumb, remembering what it’s like to keep my clothes on when someone else is in the room.

I’ll get the magazines from the top of my dresser.

“Look at my pictures,” I’ll tell him. “They even sell these magazines in the States.”

I’ll lay them out on the floor, opened to the photographs of myself. “Max,” I’ll say, “do you recognize me?”