

LO NE CONTEM PORARY



ISSUE N°1 2010
£6.00 / US\$9.00
CAN\$10.00 / AU\$10.95
PRINTED IN THE USA

A TALE OF LOVE AND FEAR

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I

On Saturday afternoons in winter Lisa loved sitting by the window-sill, sipping her favourite Yogi Relax tea, watching the people rushing about in the hectic street below. She loved imagining the stories behind the people passing by. This Saturday was no different. Wearing her Chloé dress and colourful striped woollen socks, she smiled to herself as she caught sight of a mother-of-two going to meet her secret lover, a businessman on his way to his weekly pole dancing class and a young Goth buying flowers for her mom “just because”. She loved taking the seemingly insignificant moments of everyday life and putting them together- like a puzzle. She found the pieces everywhere: on the street, in the library, in grocery store, at the movie theatre. She thought it was fascinating and fun. Her boyfriend, The Moose, thought it was a waste of time.

On the green leather sofa, The Moose was obsessively retouching his artful photographs for a big client he had worked for yesterday – or was it the day before? Or was it last week? Lisa wasn’t sure anymore. He had had photo shoots almost every day for the past two years.

She glanced at him and felt a sense of longing, an overwhelming ache of indescribable emptiness heavy on her chest.

Staring at The Moose, thinking of his big hazelnut eyes, Lisa silently chanted this mantra: *Please, look at me! Come and touch me! Take me now if you love me!*

But, The Moose kept on gazing at the screen of his MacBook Pro. Lisa turned back to the window and fiddled with her fringe that needed a trim. Her blond bob was still a bit wet from the shower.

Outside an 80-year-old couple were holding hands, peacefully strolling along the street. They sat down on a bench and the woman handed a light blue handkerchief to the man, who blew his nose. Then they kissed and the woman rested her head on the man’s shoulder. It started to drizzle. He opened his umbrella and shielded them from the

rain like he was sheltering them from the whole world.

The raindrops were quietly falling on the window, blurring the image of the couple. Tears welled up in Lisa’s eyes.

“Come and take a look at this,” The Moose shouted from the sofa. “These are the photos I took in the studio three days ago and the idea was to...”

“Do you love me?” Lisa interrupted.

“What?” The Moose replied, being all at sea.

“Do you love me?” She asked again.

Moose didn’t even look up from his work. “What are you talking about? We’ve been together for five years.”

II

The cool, new cellar bar downtown was crowded with Alice Dellal inspired half-shaven heads. Unsurprisingly, an elite gang had been squatting the new haunt ever since Opening Ceremony had organised a party there a week ago. Lisa was relaxing in her favourite corner sipping her second Caipirinha when The Badger barged in and apologised for being an hour late (as usual). Snapping his fingers at the bartender, he started an energized monologue about yet another new band he had formed last night at an after-party at some artist’s huge loft space.

This time it was going to be more experimental than basic indie rock, more like a mixture of Animal Collective and A Place to Bury Strangers. Rock enough but still easy to listen to – a recipe that would definitely get the girls. This time last year, he and his geeky buddies were playing shoegaze pop, until he realised that the girls who liked it and came backstage were too shy and cute. Or something. He *had* tried banging a couple of girls of that genre but they either talked too much or not at all, or had weird accents or cats. He got bored easily,

and then one slapped his face when he tried to get her best friend to do a threesome- slapped him hard! Hence the beginning of The Badger’s new musical era and new mission: find a rock chick to go to the free love party that was being organised just outside of town.

Lisa laughed, nodded her head and wished him good luck with his new challenge. Even though The Badger was usually making a fool of himself, you had to love this fool and the honest, crazy ideas that he wanted to carry out. Not everyone could do that. Most people worried too much about what others were going to think of them. The Badger never did. He did whatever he wanted or dreamed about.

That was also his problem.

A third Caipirinha arrived at the table without even being ordered. The Badger knew everyone in town.

“I don’t think he loves me anymore,” Lisa sighed to The Badger who had asked how she was doing these days, expecting only to hear general chit-chat and new gossip.

“Well do you love *him!*?” said The Badger, who seemed to know little about love but bizarrely sometimes hit the nail on the head.

Before Lisa had a chance to reply, The Badger jumped to his feet and flung his arms around Peaches Geldof posing for Cobras-nake, a photographer who captured the cream of the nightlife with his snapshots. The fourth Caipirinha arrived at the table. Lisa smiled and shook her head. You had to love this fool.

Someone behind her was tapping Lisa’s shoulder. She rose out of her thoughts and turned around, annoyed. It was a man with dark brown curly hair and green eyes who was wearing jeans and a thread-bare white t-shirt. When he smiled, he had a little dimple on the right side of his cheek. He also had quite a big anchor tattoo on his left shoulder, peeping out from under his T-shirt, but she didn’t really see any of that, because for Lisa, time had stopped.



There was no noise, no thoughts, just a Zen feeling that was greater than the hundreds of yoga sessions she had already taken. She could feel her fingers, her toes, her hair, every strand sparkling. She was floating softly in the sky like a little feather.

“Do you have a lighter?” the man asked smiling.
Lisa’s focus was drawn back to the dimple and his sparkly eyes. Consciously not at all criticising his crappy first line, Lisa shook her head and stared back at him. His gaze sent a tingle up her spine but a different tingle than before. This one was overwhelming and scary. For a moment, she felt more exposed than ever.

The noise of the bar came back, Simian Mobile Disco playing loud on the speakers.

“But you’re not allowed to smoke in here,” Lisa said, raising her shoulders, hearing every single letter she pronounced with crystal clarity.

“My point exactly,” he said and took her hand.

Normally Lisa would have taken her hand back and made a sarcastic comment about tacky flirtatious gestures. This time she didn’t but couldn’t say why.

She grabbed her jacket and followed him, floating through the crowds towards the door. Her steps were so light that she forgot that she had borrowed somebody else’s vintage high heels (never a good idea when going out).

“Watch your step,” someone yelled, but Lisa just smiled at everyone.

The cheerful Badger shouted out her name from the bar while pointing with one hand at Alexa Chung who was standing next to him. His other hand held his pint, toasting the air. Then he looked confused and Lisa could read his lips: *Who is that guy?*

III

His name was Gaetan. His mom was French.

The name became a joke between them: Gaetan = Gay Town = Guetta as in David Guetta. Lisa was laughing. He was laughing at himself, too. *Gee, thanks Mom!*

They talked about everything:

The amazing Flaming Lips concert with balloons and aliens, (they had both gone to it by themselves some years ago but had never crossed paths),

Stupid, hype-media, fashion vocabulary like *Recessionista*, Mothers who loose their identity when they have children and fathers who think they have lost everything, *period*,

Annoying people who start clapping at gigs before the song is over, Cute, French bulldog puppies that have a tendency to fart all the time,

The wisdom that you feel transferred to you when meeting old people (although it’s not necessarily true),

Etc., etc.

They talked about happiness, sorrow, life and death and everything in between. Everything was very easy and open wide. They were finishing each other’s sentences but they didn’t always agree.

And, that’s what made it interesting.

Lisa was impressed when Gaetan told her that he was a freelance

children’s book illustrator. He had already been successfully published two times. But what really clicked was when he told her of his new part-time job as a cleaner at a luxury hotel downtown.

It wasn’t so much the job, but the stories around it. Three times a week he got to play the detective in luxury hotel rooms that he preferred to observe, rather than clean. It was his version of being Sherlock Holmes.

In every dirty room he found traces and clues that made him imagine all sort of different people, each with a different kind of life. A hint of what might have happened in that room last night. He loved knitting the pieces together and creating stories around them. He thought there was something magical about the moment when you get the first glimpse of a used room, then start to clean it up and in the end all the traces are gone, like nothing had ever happened.

Most of the time nothing really *had* happened. He knew that. “How many boring, lonely and rich businessmen can there be in this city?” he asked rhetorically.

The harsh truth was that he needed some extra money and couldn’t find anything else at the moment. He was sure to get fired soon because hotel room cleaning was apparently Very Serious Business- “V.S.B.” as his boss would say every time he missed a spot.

Lisa was smiling and nodding excitedly while listening to his stories, which sounded very familiar.

Gaetan was smiling at her. With the smoke wafting quietly around his face, she felt like she was watching a Godard movie in slow motion.

She told him she was a free-lance graphic designer. He wanted to know more about her, and while explaining herself Lisa felt like the most interesting and sexy person on the planet. But when his shoulder accidentally touched hers, she couldn’t think of anything she wanted to do more than to tear his clothes off, *that moment*, and have wild sex all night long.

Something was vibrating in Lisa’s bag. It was The Moose. She checked the time. Shit, it was already 3am. She had forgotten that she had promised The Moose to be at home by midnight. She switched her phone to silent mode.

“Sorry, I have to get going. It’s late,” Lisa said, apologetically.

“Shame, I could have stayed here forever,” he said smiling. Lisa felt stupid, as if she were a naughty girl who had exceeded her curfew and had to go home and feel guilty about it. And, she did feel guilty – but for a different reason, though.

“It was really, *really* great to meet you,” Lisa emphasized.

“Hope to see you again soon,” Gaetan answered.

Lisa turned around and started walking. She was smiling and shaking her head at the same time. *What am I doing? What is happening to me?* Her steps were as light as the smoke from his cigarette.

IV

Winter Saturday afternoons were not the same anymore. The Moose was still lying on the green leather sofa with his MacBook Pro, re-touching yet another pile of shots from last week’s photo shoot, but

Lisa was not sitting by the windowsill anymore. She glanced outside while humming to herself, trying on a new pair of Louboutin shoes in front of the mirror. She didn’t want to stare from the window anymore; she wanted to be out there. On every corner, on every street, at every party there was a chance to meet Gaetan. He was drawing her towards him like a magnet.

And they did meet, accidentally, everywhere- at openings of new exhibitions, at gigs, in bars, in cafés, on the street, in the metro, at the grocery store. The encounters turned into four-hour conversations or little, tingly, unseen touches. And every single time, it felt like magic.

With Gaetan, Lisa felt so scared and so safe at the same time. A voice in her head would tell her to go, be reasonable, you shouldn’t do this, but she didn’t feel like leaving. Something made her to stay.

But then, there was The Moose; on the phone, at home, sleeping next to her every night. Gaetan knew about him. She didn’t try to hide anything. On some level she thought Gaetan would leave her alone if he knew. But he didn’t and in the end she didn’t want him to.

Lisa glanced at The Moose who asked where she was going that night.

“Just to some party with friends”, she replied and felt bad.

It wasn’t a lie though. It was just another random party at some random model’s apartment in some random part of the town. What was not so random was that she knew that Gaetan was going to be there too. He had found out her cell number through a mutual friend.

Lisa had tried so hard to avoid the whole phone number episode. It made things too real, too up front. Phone numbers were demanding- they tried to force you *right then* to make a decision about everything your life was based on.

Without phone numbers, Lisa had been able to pretend it was all just an innocent series of accidental encounters- nothing more, nothing less.

You never know whom you’ll bump into, Lisa had lied to herself, though at the same time she knew she just wanted to jump and let go.

When she received the message,

I think the first night we met summed it up pretty well: life, death, love and some dancing. Are you free tonight? If not, I’m going to be as sad and sentimental as a Nicholas Sparks novel.

- Gay Town

Lisa began to smile like an idiot.
She received another one right after:

I want you.

The words had made her heart pound and her whole body began to tremble as if it was shouting on fire: *Take me now, I’m all yours.*

Lisa wanted to cry. She knew that if she answered there would be no way out. But still, her Nokia’s screen was flashing: “Message sent”.



Outside rain was falling from the magically dark blue sky. The raindrops sang a quiet, gentle song in Lisa's ears: "...*Hearing guitars like someone in love...*" The maple trees were bending towards her, dropping their last leaves from fall. They made the sound of soothing, jazzy drums, in perfect harmony with the rain. The whole world seemed to be preparing for her to meet up again with the person who'd turned everything upside-down, downside-up.

The northern wind was caressing her but didn't make her cold. She was getting warmer and warmer inside. It was like she could feel Gaetan's hand on her face, his sparkling eyes gazing at her, his hand moving down, leaving an imperishable mark on her quivering skin. With his lips pressed against her collarbone, he slowly unbuttoned her dress and ran his hand all the way to the tip of her breast and down to the inside of her thigh.

Lisa came back to earth. Her dear girlfriends, The Owl and The Hare, were calling her on the street. They were looking exquisite as usual.

After kisses on cheeks, *how are yous* and *fine fines*, they headed to a classy new bar mentioned in the latest issue of *Harpers Bazaar*. The Hare had been working manically at *Harper's* for years as a stylist's assistant, desperately waiting for her promotion to become head stylist. The Owl was a psychologist whose latest self-help book, *The Art of a Long Relationship*, had sold out just one month after its release.

They both told Lisa that she was glowing.

A facelift? New yoga teacher? New dress? Pregnant? Finally engaged? They interrogated her.

What could she do? She had to tell them. She wanted to.

"Screw you woman! I wish I could meet someone like that, too!"

The Hare seemed exhilarated and craved more dirty details about the new special guy.

"Are you insane? You don't know the first thing about this guy," The Owl said, shocked.

"I feel like I've known him for all my life. I think I'm in love," Lisa whispered like she had finally found out the biggest secret in the whole world and wanted to protect it as earnestly as she could.

"Are you kidding me? You just want to get laid with a hottie! That's nothing to be ashamed of!" The Hare shouted so loud that half of the customers in the bar turned their heads.

"I'm serious. I have never felt this way before. Never."

"What does The Moose think about all of this?" The Owl asked in her typical psychologist's way, inquisitive but very straightforward.

The question made Lisa feel nauseous.

"He doesn't know about it. I know, I know, don't give me a lecture. It's not like I chose this, it just happened and I never expected it and I haven't done anything."

"- Yet," added The Hare.

"It never 'just happens,'" The Owl disagreed.

"Yes it does!" the Hare shot back. "Sometimes you only realise you're not with the right person when the right one does comes along. It's that simple," She ordered them a round of raspberry Daiquiris.

"Then you were already looking for something else but were

unaware of it," The Owl said, turning her head round to the bartender, tugging gently at his sleeve and discreetly ordering a mineral water instead. Though no one knew (not even her husband), The Owl was three weeks late on her period.

"So tell me what that something was then?" Lisa looked stunned.

"Sex on the table!" The Hare grinned.

"Not everyone bases their whole life on their libido. Not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that but you have a heart, too, whether you want to admit it or not." The Owl grinned back at The Hare who was rolling her eyes. "Relationships need some work too," she added.

"Yes, but how do you know when you've worked enough and it's time to move on?" The Hare wanted to know.

"There are no rules. You just know it in your heart, if you're careful enough to listen," The Owl said.

"Oh here we go again!" chuckled The Hare. "Why do I bother reading your books when you come out with the same catch phrases all the time?" This made Lisa laugh too.

"Ha. Ha. I'm just saying that you have to take a look deep inside and be honest with yourself," The Owl looked at The Hare. "It's *that* simple."

"But, how do I know that I'm not making a huge mistake? What if he turns out to be a total douche bag? What if I'm just completely blind? Or what if The Moose is just going through a rough patch and will change if I just wait," Lisa sighed.

"You can't change anyone, darling, and you can't know anything until you try. Don't be a coward! I vote a big YES for taking risks," The Hare said.

"Maybe you've changed too, Lisa. Besides, you can never predict the future." The Owl pointed out. "We're not prophets. We only have this moment and these feelings, right now."

Lisa still wasn't sure. "I am so scared. I have never been this scared in my whole life. I just need a place where I can hear my thoughts clearly."

More drinks came.

"Relationships change and love can change forms, but you can't love two people at the same time," The Owl said.

"I feel like a horrible girlfriend," Lisa sighed again and leaned her head against the wall.

"Oh come on," said The Hare. "The Moose can't be happy either if you're not."

"Apparently he can. He's always too busy working. Even when I told him I wasn't happy and that we needed to talk, he's just fine being busy! He's drowning himself in work, and he doesn't seem to want to surface. And I can't make him. Believe me, I have tried."

"If that's what he wants and you don't want the same thing, it's the end," judged The Owl. "It's nobody's fault really."

"Hum. The Moose sounds like my dream date for the moment. Doesn't want to take up much of your time, check. Not ready to commit, check. Doesn't want to talk about love, check. Is he good in bed?" The Hare winked.

"Shut up!" Lisa laughed.

"Sorry. God I'm horny today!" The Hare huffed and began scanning the men in the bar.

The apartment was on the top floor of an old building. Dark red brick walls, black wooden floor, 60's movie posters, a library room with ladders and cosy couches, and a huge bedroom with a perfect view of the beautiful park opposite. In the gigantic living room The Misshapes DJs were playing some new wave pop that nobody in the room was paying any attention to.

The Gazelle, whose house it was, must have a rich father, cool boyfriend, personal decorator or all three, because she definitely lacked personality face to face. Lisa had to reach high in order to kiss her perfectly blushed cheek. Casual small-talk revealed that The Gazelle had been chosen for America's Next Top Model two years ago but hadn't made it to the final ten. Now she wanted to become a painter or a photographer or a writer or maybe a musician – she wasn't sure yet. Anyhow, words like *smizing* ("smiling with your eyes," The Gazelle explained and demonstrated) and *fierce* were among the top three in her vocabulary. Last week she had done an editorial shoot for *Cosmo* that had been "awesome".

Lisa wandered around in the apartment, discretely looking for somebody, (Gaetan). The Hare had already found one target for her needs and had herself wrapped around some young fashion designer's neck prattling on about how she *loved* what he was doing. (Turns out, in the end she was talking about someone else. Oh well!) The Owl enjoyed her fame in the library room where tipsy female guests were asking for her love advice (as usual).

In the living room Lisa bumped into The Fox who was dancing, eyes closed, in the middle of a trendy group of beautiful boys. Together they looked like a ready-made commercial for Calvin Klein.

Lisa used to have a huge crush on The Fox almost ten years before. She still thought his red hair and freckles were the cutest thing on earth. She couldn't help but wonder how she had failed to realise back then that The Fox was a male model and 100% gay.

He introduced Lisa to his new boyfriend who was working as a journalist for Vogue. They cuddled and caressed each other while talking to her. She had never seen The Fox so happy.

Lisa felt someone's hands softly touching her hips from behind and a hot voice whispering in her ear: "You're so damn sexy."

She recognised the special tingle running through her body and started to smile. She turned around and his sparkling eyes were all that she could see.

After a staring competition that lasted a good 20 seconds, Gaetan and Lisa could finally start talking. They counted the black cocktail dresses in the room (46!) and pointed out the brave ones (21 prints, 6 red, 5 green, 3 orange, 2 white, 1 yellow). Greys or browns didn't count.

Lisa felt good in her Stella McCartney blue dress but didn't want to admit to herself she was wearing it because it would be easy to pull off later on.

Gaetan's hands were magnetically moving along her hips while they floated forward to the kitchen to get a drink. She wanted to grab his dick in her hands, straddle him and slowly sink down on it.



“I want to show you something,” he said while pouring some Pinot Noir into her plastic cup.

“What?” Lisa asked.

“You’re going to love it,” he replied smiling, flashing his dimple, grabbing the wine bottle and her hand. A tingle was floating around the room.

The staircase in the hallway was a bit wobbly. Lisa held the banisters tightly while climbing up. Gaetan asked if she was scared.

“Hell yeah!” Lisa screamed laughing.

He told her not to worry. He was right behind her and ready to catch her if she fell. Lisa told him that wouldn’t be an option, falling she meant. At the same time she wanted to fall and him to catch her, to turn her around and press his demanding lips against hers.

She took the last step and arrived on a flat rooftop. The city lights were shining all around. The sky was filled with stars and a little breeze made Lisa’s blond hair wave gently in the air. She was amazed how beautiful her hometown looked.

Gaetan climbed up behind her and they sat down. He took off his well-cut, grey woollen coat and invited her to get underneath it with him.

Wrapped up and warm, Lisa didn’t want to say anything. He didn’t say anything either. Any single word would have ruined the magic.

“This is just... just perfect,” Lisa managed to articulate after a while.

“I knew you’d love it. It’s easier to hear your own thoughts up here, get a distance from the clamour of the city.” He stared at the lights and then at Lisa.

“I think I’m in love with you,” Lisa said without thinking and

immediately felt terrified of the words that had just fallen from her mouth. She wanted to cover her face with her hands and never look at him ever again.

“You think?” He smiled.

“No! I mean, yes! I mean, oh you know what I mean,” Lisa stammered feeling embarrassed.

“I’m in love with you too,” Gaetan said and added quietly, “You are the most beautiful person I have ever met in my entire life”

She looked straight into his eyes and he looked back, not in the least bit scared. His eyes were so incredibly beautiful and sincere. She took his face in her hands, closed her eyes and kissed him. His touch was soft and demanding. There was lightning and thunder, shooting stars and fireworks, tender touches and sex on the table, all at once. She felt like they were the only people in the whole universe, glued together. And when his hands touched her breasts through the dress, she wanted to scream with pleasure. She wanted him right there, right now. Nothing else had ever made more sense than this.

The first snowflakes of the winter began to fall from the sky. Somewhere sirens were wailing, cars were crashing, someone was giving birth, someone was dying & someone was falling in love.

EPILOGUE

On a certain Saturday afternoon The Moose was lying on the green leather sofa staring at the ceiling. The MacBook Pro was sleeping on the table. Lisa had just told him that she was not happy and that she

had tried for a long time but this was not working out. Since then he had been staring at the ceiling, saying nothing.

Lisa was packing her bag. She was going to move in with The Owl and her husband for a while to figure out her life. All that she knew was *this* was not it.

When going down in the elevator, her bag next to her, Lisa didn’t cry. She didn’t feel the ache of indescribable emptiness that had been heavy on her chest before. She felt alive. She felt like herself and she liked the person who she was. Not because she was leaving The Moose but because she had found herself again.

The sun was shining outside. It was that first spring day when you feel like you want to dig out some summer clothes even though you know it’s still too cold to wear them. Lisa took a deep breath of the fresh air. On the bench there was the same 80-year-old couple she had seen before from the window. Lisa walked by and smiled at them.

Something was vibrating in Lisa’s pocket. She grabbed her phone: “1 new message”. The Owl was welcoming Lisa to stay at her place. According to the message she also had some happy news she wanted to tell her in person. The Hare and The Badger were coming over too; apparently they had met at the free love party and clicked.

Lisa smiled as she read the message. Then she dialed a very familiar phone number for the very first time. When Gaetan answered the phone, she felt her heart burst. She felt the same tingle from the first night they’d met, and every time after. She had no idea where she was heading but it didn’t matter. Time and space didn’t exist anymore. Eternity was a continuation of what had just begun.

