

Together Only in Dreams

Monday, 30 November 2009

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A tale woven of the hard choices one is forced to make between two loves; one Bretonnia would welcome, and the other would see a man hanged.

Family dinners were a tedious affair. On a good day the children would fight and squabble, and their mother would have to take them upstairs and end the ordeal early. But not that day; the children hummed quietly to themselves as they ate; lullabies their mother had sung and folk songs picked up from the peasantry. And so it fell to myself and my darling wife to fill the void with hollow talk. "The day has gone well, Louise?" I said, after finishing chewing.

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She laid down her fork and rested her eyes on mine. "As well as can be managed, without a man to tend to the house. It has surely been almost a week since you laid eyes on me, or your children. What business should come between a husband and his family?"

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Chewing slowly, I mulled over my choice of words. "War, my Lady."

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"There is no war that I am aware of."

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"The game of politics is as much a war as any fought on the plains, my dear. The court is a deadly battlefield as any."

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Anger flashed across her face. "Politics? This is the justification you give for turning your back on us? You choose to quarrel with words rather than raise your children and share the warmth of our bed? This house grows cold without you here, as do I!" she said, smashing her fist down upon the table.

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"Dearest please, these are not matters to be discussed in front of the children!"

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"And why not? They hear what they say about you in the town as well as I do! Lecher they cry, adultery they condemn you with. Many a man I have caught lending their eyes to the sight of me. Have you no warmth left in your heart for me? Will you sell us off to the highest bidder and skulk off with whoever has caught your eye this time!?"

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I stand, fuming. "We will not discuss this before the children! Jean, Pierre, to your rooms, this instant, and do not let me catch you listening at the staircase."

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They scurried off, at pace, talking in hurried whispers. Their voices slowly faded into nothing, then my head whipped around to Louise. "What are you playing at woman? You challenge me before my children, bark insults and speculations you haven't the faintest knowledge about! I will not stand for it Louise, I am your husband and so long as I live you shall not challenge me as such! Imagine what the court would say if I cannot even hold a leash on my own woman's tongue!"

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"Am I even your woman still? Do you share your bed with another now?"

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“I have not betrayed you for another. You are my woman yet, Louise.”

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“And how am I to believe you? When you leave at night without word or reason, and return with the stench of another about you. What happened to the man I married so long ago?” She took a step closer, and in her eyes I saw the same love I had for so long depended on “Where is the trust we used to share?”

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My anger softened as I heard her words. I clasped her hands in my own, and tried to sound sincere. “It is whole. I do not relish that I must be away from you, nor our children. I have no explanation to give to you, only a truth that is as true now as it was the day we met. I am in love with you, still.”

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Her face remained stern for one more moment, before she melted into me, crushing me in her embrace. Coiling arms wrapped their warmth around me as she rested her head against my chest. Her voice was soft. “Let me hear it again Jean. Whisper it to me, and hold me as you used to.”

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My body soon granted her wish, strong arms curling about her waist while open lips moved to her ear. “I love you.”

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She tilted her head until her eyes nestled in mine. Tears glistened in their opal casing as her lips crushed against mine, hands clutching desperately at the base of my neck. My lips responded in kind, and desire flamed in my chest. Too long. Her lips were warm, moist, yet firm against mine. Pale skin smooth under my fingers. We stayed there for a while, before she pulled away, a modest smile on her face. “Show me that you love me. Tonight.”

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I kissed her again, softly. “Anything, for you.”

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Morning brought blankets. Soft, warm, comforting. They stirred next to me, and I turned my head to behold the sleeping beauty of Louise. A smile graced her face while she slept, giving her features a wholeness that made her all the more brilliant. My hand crept beneath blankets to cup the back of her neck, and my lips pressed against hers. Softness consumed me again, and a wild hunger rose.

“I came so close. To giving up the day in exchange for a blissful parody of the night before. So very close. “ But I pulled myself away from temptation, sliding beneath the bed covers. A groan broke from Louise’s lips as she curled back to sleep. I stood admiring her, smiling fondly. It had been too long since I had seen her like this. Too long since I had looked at any woman like this. I sighed, pulling myself into my clothes. “I’d have to be careful from now on, I had been reckless in my urgency to be sure, final about it all. In my haste I had shirked other responsibilities. I had forgotten my love for Louise. Something I should never have allowed to happen. I would have words with Claude today; this couldn’t be allowed to continue. “ The morning was silent as I closed the front door; no dignified steps of nobles or scurrying of servants. Silent and cold. Such affairs were most fitting in this setting, I thought, as I walked towards the stables. A sleeping servant snored loudly as I opened the doors, and I covered my nose to counter the stench. Disgusting. I placed my foot into the stirrup of my horse’s saddle. To think my horses had to sleep in the presence of such a disgusting thing. Perhaps a decent flogging would discipline the wretch, I thought, beginning to ride.”

Chill night air swallowed me as I rode into the town, watching as the manor houses subsided into smaller houses and market stalls. Even in stillness, there was an ambience here; a scent of activity. The imprint of decades of hawking and merchanting, of trade and of wealth could be seen everywhere the eyes cared to roam: the clock tower and its great digits, the maze of carts and stalls, the discarded barrels and broken boxes that littered the heart of the town. Claude

always spoke of how he loved this square. He had dubbed it "the crucible", for it was here that the endless squabbling masses converged to create something altogether purer and magnificent.

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Just this simple memory of Claude's words was enough to make me usher my horse into a canter. Images of the young, crushingly handsome man seeped through the cracks in my mind; the parting lips of his smile as he greeted me, the long, golden hair that flowed to his shoulders and the glistening opal shells of his eyes. My trousers tightened as a flood of more passionate memories came over me, and I felt a burning longing for Claude far greater than anything I'd ever felt for Louise.

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The canter broke into a gallop as the first rays of light broke the horizon, and in the distance I could make out the meadow where Claude was surely waiting now, wanting to be with me already. I didn't notice anything else until I could see his waving hand, at which point a euphoric laugh escaped from my lips. Slowly his features became more and more distinct, and my love for the man blossomed. He was, without question, the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes upon. I accepted his hand as I dismounted. His skin was smooth.

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"It is good to see you Jean. I have missed you."

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"And I you." I said pleasantly, embracing him. He smiled fondly back at me, and I saw my own desires reflected in his perfect eyes. But business first. He would taste just as sweet in a few hours as he would now. "There are things we need to talk about."

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He waved a hand. "The words of gossips are never worth talking of Jean, they know nothing about you and I. I wouldn't have risked coming here if they had. I would sooner cut out my own heart than risk harm to you."

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Affection blossomed in my heart at his words, but it was marred. "It is not the gossips I speak of Claude, it is my Louise."

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His smile broke, and a haunted sadness entered his features. I had never wanted to comfort somebody more. "You still care for her then."

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I clasped his hand in my own. "Not as I care for you Claude, but please, try and understand. She suffers without me there, she has said as much. She grows lonesome, as do our children. It pains me to see them suffer."

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A pained smile returned. "It does not surprise me she misses you, anybody would miss a person as caring and charitable as you. If you feel you must choose your family over me, I will not begrudge you for it."

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I grimaced at his words. "Please, do not talk as such. I do not wish to choose between the two great loves of my life. I will not have either of you pained over me."

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"We both know that choice is inevitable Jean. It is alright to leave me. I understand perfectly. You have a family, a title, lands. I would never expect you to give up that much for me."

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â€œI would give up that and more. You have opened my eyes Claude, without you I would be living a lie.â€•

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â€œBetter to live a lie, than not live at all. Our love can only end one way Jean, once they find out about us they will kill us both. You know as much.â€•

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â€œWhat would you have me do?â€•

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â€œTell Louise. Show you still care about her by telling her the truth. If she truly loves you she will not say a word against you, and if she does not thenâ€¦ there is nothing to keep you here.â€•

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â€œYou would have me run away with you then? To some far distant land.â€•

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He smiled â€œThatâ€™s exactly what I would have.â€•

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A sense of purpose filled me as I strode towards the front door of the manor. There was a gait in my step that meant I flew over the ground rather than moved along it, like I was skipping. For indeed, my heart skipped within my chest. Today is the day I tell her. Today is the day I am free. My hands trembled with nerves, but I refused to let it spread. I couldnâ€™t let my spirits be dampened.

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Doors of a deep red Mahogany swung inwards to greet me, and from inside the house came the laughter of song birds; musical and light, no doubt enjoyed over a glass of wine between friends. Louiseâ€™s joy seemed to mirror my own, and for a brief moment I swayed on my feet, overcome by the surreality of it all.

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Best to let Louise lie for awhile, I thought, progressing through the manor. I wanted to speak to her when she was alone, not with friends. I went then, instead, to the gardens. Trickling giggles wafted through the grand windows and I could make out the blurred shapes of Pierre and Jean, running through the bushes and trees. â€œLady, bless my banner!â€• cried Pierre, dipping a large stick into the silver waters of our pond.

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I laughed myself as I watched my namesake push his little brother into the water, who began a low wailing as the shallow waters drenched his clothes. I stepped out into the garden. â€œNow, now you two, no fighting.â€•

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Pierre instantly stopped crying. â€œPapa!â€•

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I laughed and braced myself as they both ran towards me, clutching at my legs and ruining the fabric with dirt and water. I didnâ€™t mind. Jean mumbled into my leg â€œDonâ€™t go again papa, we miss you.â€•

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I kissed his crown. â€œIâ€™m not going anywhere right now, okay? Letâ€™s just enjoy that.â€•

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Pierre carried on holding me tight, too young to understand what I said. Jean was wiser. He stepped back, tears welling in his eyes. "You're going to leave again, aren't you?" I didn't reply "You're going to leave us forever, pounding whatever flesh he could find. "Why Pa, why, why why!?"

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I took this small punishment, waiting for my eldest child to wear himself down. He did so quickly, descending into a sobbing mess at my feet. "Why pa, why are you going to leave us?"

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I told Pierre to go inside, and he did, looking confused. Then I looked down to Jean. His pearly eyes were spewing tears down his cheeks as he looked up at me, pleading with all his might. I went down on one knee. He looked away in agony. "Look at me Jean. Jean, look at me." He just shook his head, so I tilted his chin. He sobbed a little. "I need you to be strong for me, alright? I need you to be strong for Pierre, and for your mother."

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He shook his head "I can't pa, not without you."

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"Yes, you can." I said, rubbing his shoulders. "You carry my name Jean, you are my eldest. When I am gone, you will be the lord of this manor. You will need to be strong for me, alright?" I placed my forehead against his "I know you're too young to understand right now, but one day you will understand why I have to go. Until that day, just know that I love you dearly, and your brother."

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"And Ma?"

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"Yes, and your mother." I held him tight, my own tears falling on his head now "I love you all. Don't ever doubt that matter what people say about me when I'm gone. I do love you."

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"I love you too Pa." he whimpered.

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I loosened my embrace and looked at him again. "I want you to tell your brother for me, okay?"

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He nodded meekly and left me there, kneeling in a pool of tears. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve before gathering the pieces of my heart.

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I could already tell she was there, before I heard Louise's voice. "You're leaving."

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I turned to face her. She didn't look upset. Resigned was the word. Exhausted. Beaten. "I am."

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She walked towards me slowly, gliding across the freshly cut grass. Her white dress hugged her frame perfectly, and the sunlight kissed her skin in such a sublime way, she seemed to glow. If the Lady were a mortal, she surely stood before me. And I was about to turn her away.

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â€œWho with?â€• She asked, when she reached me.

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â€œClaude.â€• The name rolled off my tongue like a curse. Was this right?

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She didnâ€™t seem surprised. â€œYou love this man?â€•

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â€œWith all of my heart.â€• I said, as she started to circle me. And yet doubts swam in my mind as I beheld her.

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â€œAnd me?â€•

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â€œWith whatever is left.â€•

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â€œBut itâ€™s not enough to keep you here.â€• She scoffed.

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â€œIf I could choose you both, believe me my dear, I would.â€• And I meant it.

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â€œAnd your children? Your country? Your people?â€•

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â€œDo not compare to him.â€•

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She stopped in front of me. There were tears now, flowing down her cheeks, down to her breasts. â€œWhat does he give you that I canâ€™t, Jean? I waited for you. I loved you. I was faithful. What more can he give?â€•

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â€œWhat I feel for you Louiseâ€¦it is real. It is more than any other. But Claudeâ€¦what I feel is divine. It sets me free. Take comfort in the fact that even then I regret things must be this way.â€•

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She stepped onto my feet, and gazed deep into my eyes. She kissed me. Slowly.

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When she parted from my lips, her face was awash with anguish. â€œThere is nothing I can do to make you stay?â€•

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I clasped her hands, trying to achieve through touch what I could not with speech. I did not wish this to be a goodbye. I wanted this to beâ€¦a release. â€œDo not strive for what cannot be, Louise. Our love is not a lie. But even the most beautiful plants cannot weather a harsh winter. Do not mourn. For autumn has one day in it yet.â€• And with that I kissed her, with more passion than ever before. My tongue danced behind her lips, and her whole body washed into me, smothering me,

consuming me with her love. In that moment, flesh and fabric melted away. And I swear it, we were one. One body. One heart. One soul.

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I walked from that house, with a part of me gone. Left in the garden, and now lingering at the window. A fleeting glance at the future we were abandoning. I would heal. She would not. And so it was with pity that I looked back. To a woman leaning cheek upon hand. To a woman lending tears to the pouring rain. It was with mourning that I turned around, to gaze at the Sun that would light up my new world. To the man who would replace that which had been lost.

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Only in dreams would I look upon Louise again.

Â Ensemble, dans le rÃaves.Â Together in dreams. Â Â