

Love with the Proper S-t-r-anger (!!!)

By Cameron SpenCer

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Cameron Spencer's "Love with the Proper Stranger" is a tale as old as time.*

When the marriage that you're in is violent, stuck, and dragging on what do you do? Our protagonist is trapped. Living with an abusive husband, drinking to soothe the pain but being told that she drinks too much, being threatened after commenting how her husband can't pick an episode of Law & Order, this woman is both classically battered and classically deflecting all of his actions upon herself – tossing away being clocked in the face as just another evening.

At the heart of this story lies the lines in which we allow violence to be perpetrated against us the violence that we must do to save ourselves; defining the boundaries that we establish for ourselves in our relationships and the way in which we react when both sides of the line get crossed; when we decide that enough is, and, if we looked hard enough, has always been, enough.

What Spencer does well is to acknowledge the games that we play with each other at times and the inability of others to deal with the consequences of their actions:

And so they began their favorite ritual: a sharing of sexual fantasies. He would encourage her to imagine scenarios of trysts and couple-swapping. At first she'd felt guilty; were her fantasies an indication of a dissatisfaction with reality? Would her husband be jealous of an imaginary lover? Perhaps fantasies were necessary to enjoy long-time married sex. Then again, she knew that cerebral adventures could make reality tolerable.

There is a finesse written here between what one does to save their marriage, themselves, and the consequences of years of physical and sexual abuse.

"Love with the Proper Stanger" is a story that walks a delicate line between reality and fiction, what could happen and what already has. Spencer has crafted a story that may make you uncomfortable, and that is okay.

You should read this story to see it through to the other side. You won't be disappointed. Perhaps left wanting more from the decency of the world, but knowing that there is always a release from our cages.

Enjoy.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language*)...

He bent down, wrapped his fingers around her throat, and shoved her deeper into the chair. “I’m going to do it right here, in the living room, and I am going to knock you down and bash your head in. And then I’m going to call everyone and tell them I’ve killed you. And I’ll go to prison for the rest of my life, but you know what? It’ll be worth it because I will have shut up your fucking mouth once and for all.

Love with the Proper Stranger

Sometimes she felt as if she hardly knew him; at other times she realized that she knew him too well.

One workday evening toward the end of summer, they had settled to watch television after dinner. She’d had three glasses of Merlot, which was one glass too many. He had been surfing with the remote, and she had grown tired of the constant flickering of images on the screen.

“Geees, you’re making me dizzy! Can’t you settle on one thing? Talk about ADD!”

“Shut up. I am trying to find at least one goddam *Law and Order* that we haven’t seen already.” He’d had four glasses of wine, but he, of course, was bigger than she and could hold his drink.

“Yeah, right. Shut up. Shut up. That’s a real nice way to talk to your wife. How’d you like it if I talked that way to you? Oh, no! That would never do. If I told you to shut up, I’d find myself flying through a wall or something. You’d —“

His nose appeared two inches from her eyes, and she could feel the tickle of his breath on her eyelashes. “If you say one more word—just one more word—I am going to knock you out. I am going to kill you. And you know how I’m going to do it?” He bent down, wrapped his fingers

around her throat, and shoved her deeper into the chair. “I’m going to do it right here, in the living room, and I am going to knock you down and bash your head in. And then I’m going to call everyone and tell them I’ve killed you. And I’ll go to prison for the rest of my life, but you know what? It’ll be worth it because I will have shut up your fucking mouth once and for all. Think I’m kidding? Go ahead; try me. Just say one more word, you cock-sucking, mother-fuckin’ bitch! Go ahead! Say something! *Say something!* You stupid cunt!” He jammed the remote into her cheek, slapped the top of her skull, and stomped out of the living room. She heard the door of the spare bedroom slam. She rubbed her cheek. Damn! She hadn’t had a bruise on her face for at least four months. Things had been going so well. She should not have complained. She should not have had the third glass of wine.

Three weeks later they were sitting on the beach, reading and sipping Chardonnay that they had brought in a cooler along with a wheel of brie. It was a particularly good day to be by the ocean; there was a soft September breeze that swept sand gnats and horseflies away but left the sun warm enough for her to wear a bikini. He looked up from his Dean Koontz novel. “Happy?”

She put down her collection of Joyce Carol Oates and smiled. “I’m always happy with you--when you’re happy, that is.”

He took her hand and caressed her knuckles with his lips. “Listen; I am very much in love with you, but sometimes—especially when we’ve been drinking—I feel like I don’t know you. You turn into a woman I don’t know. And one I don’t like.” He leaned over and planted a brief kiss on her lips. “But at other times,” he said, grinning till his eyes crinkled at the corners and squeezing her fingers, “you are incredibly sexy—and a woman I’d like to know. Very well.”

And so they began their favorite ritual: a sharing of sexual fantasies. He would encourage her to imagine scenarios of trysts and couple-swapping. At first she'd felt guilty; were her fantasies an indication of a dissatisfaction with reality? Would her husband be jealous of an imaginary lover? Perhaps fantasies were necessary to enjoy long-time married sex. Then again, she knew that cerebral adventures could make reality tolerable.

"It's just sex," he had told her. "When are you going to get that through your head? It doesn't mean anything. It's just fun. And anyway, we'll probably never get a chance to actually act any of these out, though I'd welcome it."

"Let's say," he began on this day, "that we decided to stay here at the beach tonight. We get a motel room, and you put on that black backless dress that shows off your legs and your boobs. You know which one I mean?"

She nodded.

"Then we go out and buy you a pair of stiletto heels and go out to dinner and dancing."

"We haven't done that for ages," she said.

"I know. And while we're out, we strike up a conversation with another couple—about our age, but in good shape and attractive."

"I don't want a fat guy."

"Hell, no! And I don't want to screw some pudgy woman, either." He sighed. "So, anyway, we all have a few drinks, and one thing leads to another, and we exchange room keys."

"Oh, are they staying here too? They're not local?"

"Oh, yeah, they're staying here, but they're out-of-towners. We don't want to mess around with anyone from around here; that complicates things."

"Sure does. Good. So, go on."

“Well, why don’t you add something? What happens when you get to the room with this guy?”

She leaned back in her beach chair and licked her lips. This part was fun. She knew what would happen next. “First, I’d put on some music and dance for him. Sort of a slow, swinging dance while I took off my dress—I’d have a garter belt on, of course, and black hose.”

“Of course.”

“But no bra.”

He smiled. “Of course not. Then what?”

“Why, then I’d slowly undo his zipper—he’s sitting on the bed—and then I’d squat down and--”

“Okay. We’re in public, babe, and I’m getting horny. Time to go home.”

Good. He was pleased. Now he’d be in a good mood, and she knew how to keep him that way.

They started gathering their towels and folding up the chairs. She pulled on the white eyelet cover-up and slipped on her flip-flops. He dumped out the ice from the cooler. The wine bottle was empty. “Well, so much for the wine and cheese. We ate and drank it all.”

“So how come I’m hungry?”

“Are you? Well, we can grab something to eat, if you like.” He was being very agreeable. This is the way she liked him best.

“Ok, let’s go have a drink and a little something.”

“Fine.”

The barroom was crowded but breezy; the door had been left wide open to admit the beach air. The bar itself was a heavy dark wood horseshoe lit by suspended Tiffany style lamps.

Small booths lined the walls, and men and women stood chatting in clusters, holding bottles of beer and plastic wine glasses. Nascar posters and autographed photographs of drivers decorated the walls, and one section was devoted to a collage of locals in Hawaiian shirts in various stages of intoxication, toasting the camera or leering at each other over their leis. *Luau Night 2018* was scrawled along the bottom border. Beach chic.

“That preppy-looking guy over there is giving you the eye, I swear,” he said, returning from buying her another Chardonnay. “This could be just the opportunity we’ve been talking about. Do you see him?”

She did.

Her husband and the sturdy, preppy-looking man from the bar were strolling down the beach on either side of her. The three of them had been talking for hours, though she could not recall exactly what about. The sun had gone down long ago, and the wind had picked up to the point that she wanted a jacket, but none of them had come prepared for cooler weather. The preppy man brushed against her left shoulder once, and another time, when they were laughing at some joke, he had squeezed her shoulder in what seemed at first to be a comradely way but lasted longer than a simple friendly gesture. She felt her breath quicken in pleasant surprise. But it wasn’t supposed to be this way; there was supposed to be another couple, a woman for him.

Her husband had forgotten his cigarettes. The preppy man said that he did not smoke, so her husband decided to walk back to a walkover near a convenience store and pick up a pack. She and the man agreed to walk down to the water’s edge to wait for her husband.

They stood watching the white caps melt into the darkness along the edge of the sand. Low tide. She filled her lungs with moist salt air and felt her limbs relax.

“Let’s sit down,” he said. They sat on the sand in silence.

Later, she could not recall when they had started kissing, or how long she had had her head between his thighs. Certainly her bikini must have fallen off her of its own accord. She knew only that no fantasy could equal this reality. Conscious thought suspended, and she rode him in wave after wave of an exhilarating passion.

Then she heard her husband’s voice. *So this is how I am going to die*, she thought.

“What the fuck? What the fuck?” He had grabbed the preppy man by the collar and hauled him to his feet. Then he stood looking down at her. “Are you out of your fuckin’ mind? I gave you everything! Everything!”

“But it’s just sex! You said--”

Spittle was gathering on his lower lip and he spat his words at her. “What the hell do you want? Am I not good enough?” He reached down and twisted his fingers through her hair at the nape of her neck. Then he yanked her to her feet and thrust his face in hers. “Is that what this is all about? I can give you more than anything your bitch heart wants, but I’m still not good enough. Well, good riddance, you miserable cunt!” Then he hit her hard on the side of her head, and everything sounded far away.

He spun around and started to stalk back up the sand, but the preppy man was quick. He jumped up on her husband’s back and began pummeling his head, his ears, tearing and clawing at his throat. Her husband collapsed under the other man’s weight and fury. They rolled in the sand, kicking and throwing punches in the direction of each other’s face. Then she felt herself running and throwing herself against the man who had just been between her legs, knocking him off her husband. While he sprawled in the sand, she jumped astride her husband’s back and,

straddling him, she battered his skull, punching left, then right, then shoving his face further and further into the sand until he ceased moving.

The preppy man stood up, panting, and pulled her to her feet. Her heels felt rooted in the sand.

“What...?” he said. “What did we...what the Christ just happened here?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I would describe my writing style as that of a postmodern minimalist. Most of my stories explore the relationships between men and women inside and outside of marriage, between family members, and among coworkers or neighbors. My favorite writers include Raymond Carver, William Trevor, Denis Johnson, and Patrick DeWitt.*

AUTHOR BIO: Cameron Spencer lives in Savannah, Georgia. She writes short stories and, occasionally, poetry. Her work has appeared online and in *Savannah Authors Anthology*.