

Lionel

by

Alain Elkann

Winter was extremely cold and long that year, endless. There was much more snow than ever. The Dollar was weak against the Swiss Franc and therefore there were less American tourists and more Russians and Arabs. Years before the very rich foreigners came from Italy, Germany, Iran, Greece. Some of them had their own chalets, others stayed at the Palace Hotel.

John Zweig did not like the mountains anymore because he disliked the presence of too many young people on snowboards and he hated the very tall plastic ski boots that were not only terribly uncomfortable but also very ugly. It had become harder to find good places to ski in powder snow and plus, with the new short skis it was different from the long ones that he was used to. But besides the element of nostalgia for his past he did not like going to the mountains anymore. In the last few years, one way or the other, each time he went there he got sick.

Nevertheless, like every year, he had to go there for a week. Otherwise his friends, who were so proud to invite him to their chalet, would have been offended. Max and Fred had lived together for many years and had recently got married in New York. Max was not convinced that marriage was the best thing for two lovers, but Fred insisted that since it was possible for gay couples to get married they had to do it. Commitment and responsibility would be a new adventure for their lives.

Like every year, Natasha, an English friend of Max, and her son Lionel were spending a vacation in the chalet, but that year they changed when they came to March instead of February. Natasha was a friend of Max since the time she was modeling and later working for a Fashion Magazine in New York. Then Max was still at the very beginning of his interior designer and architect career.

Natasha had gone back to Europe, where she married Jeff Bird who, at the time, was a successful rock star. She married him against her parents will and they had two daughters: Camilla and Wendy. They divorced after a few years because Jeff had become a drug addict and Natasha found it impossible to raise her daughters in such an atmosphere. And also her love for Jeff had faded. Soon after she fell in love with Roman, a Polish actor who had spent almost his entire life in England and they had a boy, Lionel.

Roman was a moody and violent man but he loved Natasha with an uncommon passion. He had a very romantic temper and when he was not desperate or drunk because he could not find the proper play in which to act, and therefore was obliged to do some commercials to make a living, he was very poetic, and Natasha found him sexually attractive. They loved each other for a few years with mutual passion until suddenly they could not stand each other anymore. They had a real repulsion. At first a physical repulsion and then they matured a repressed hate for their diversity, becoming more and more intolerant and aggressive.

Lionel was a shy little boy, short-sighted he spent most of his time reading or playing solitary games on his I-Pad. Natasha adored Lionel beyond anything else and was also very close to her daughters Camilla and Wendy. Over the years Natasha had changed quite a lot. From a fragile, very thin top model she turned into a strong woman, much less vain about her looks she had decided not to fight her age. She did not try to look younger and dressed, as she used to say, "Like a Romanian refugee". Some friends thought she should not neglect herself quite so much. Others found her attitude great and found her more and more attractive and sexy.

Max became one of the most famous architects in the world and fell in love with Fred, a younger man who loved to cook and walk his dog. Fred was very good at sports and had a collection of old Italian motorcycles. They lived together in New York and in the mountains because, as much as they loved to play tennis in the summer, they wanted to ski all winter.

When Natasha and Roman divorced she became closer to Max and Fred and joined them in the

summers on a Greek island where they rented a house or in their chalet, usually during the month of February. Sometimes the girls came with her, but most of the time she was only with Lionel. Max and Fred adored Lionel and considered him like an adoptive child. But Lionel's feelings towards them were mysterious. He was always kind and polite but his real feelings were a secret. He was elusive and silent. He was close to his mother but with boundaries. He did not much like to be touched, caressed or kissed. He did not much like to talk and he was rarely smiling, any more than laughing. He did not go skiing and spent hours in his room reading, daydreaming or watching films. Max and Fred spoiled him, gave him lots of presents, but he did not appreciate the fact that they spent so much money on him. He was very careful with money.

John Zweig arrived at the chalet after a long train journey. He was an old friend of Fred and since their adolescence they both had the ambition to become poets. Then John became a poet and Fred a cook. John was in his late fifties, slightly bald with large blue eyes and, like Fred, loved motorcycles. He had a certain number of girlfriends and wives but apparently he preferred not to live with a woman. His manners were excellent, he was American from the Mid-West and over the years he had become a citizen of the world. He was not afraid to admit that he was a dandy. Always dressed in a posh way, he liked to be American and have lots of European friends. He loved Greece, Italy and England but his favourite city was Paris. He had spent some time there as a young man and had learned a few words of French, but he only felt at home and well in his apartment in New York on the Upper West Side. His passion was to dress like a gentleman, to have beautiful women around him and to collect a small number of friends. He was obsessively secretive about his life and to protect himself he was always saying, "I am working." He used to eat by himself in an Italian restaurant, always at the same table.

Fred was not at all jealous of John's success as a poet because he was not ambitious in the proper sense of personal professional achievement. Max was ambitious in a conventional way and sometimes even if one was an architect and the other a poet there was a little bit of competition

between John and Max.

When John arrived at the chalet he found Lionel alone in the living room and he said, without knowing who he was:

“Hello young man.”

“You are the famous poet,” said Lionel

“I am a poet.”

“I knew you were coming and I read some of your poems. I wish I could be a poet myself. I love the fact that poems are synthetic and short.”

“Not always. Think of Dante or Homer.”

“It is true, but you have to teach me how to write poems”

“Impossible. You have to learn by yourself.”

“But I am too young.”

“Nonsense, poets have no age. If you are too young, I am too old.”

“Yes, you must be old and you look rather pale, tired. Are you sick?”

“For God’s sake, not that I know.”

“You probably are. I am myself very often sick. It is a good excuse to stay in bed and read and you don’t have to speak to anyone. It is also convenient, you only eat soup.”

John interrupted this conversation and went to say hello to his friends.

Lionel went to see his mother and said, with unexpected enthusiasm, “A poet has arrived. He will have dinner with us tonight.”

“How do you know this?”

“Because I just saw him and we spoke together about poetry.”

“I see,” said Natasha affecting a total indifference.

“You know he is a very special person.”

“Old?”

“Yes I think so, as old as you maybe.”

“I see. Is he handsome?”

“Yes, very handsome. You will like him so much.”

Natasha and Max were gossiping and drinking champagne when Fred came in with John and Lionel. John was introduced to Natasha by Lionel. The food was excellent. Fred had cooked a delicious cheese soufflé, next they had blue trout with celery puree and then home-made apple pie with cinnamon ice cream. The wine was French.

During dinner Lionel asked John questions all the time and John was a bit embarrassed vis a vis Max and Fred. Natasha was amused by her son's unexpected attitude.

After dinner they moved from the dining room back to the living room. Lionel had just gone to his room to look for something.

In this moment of general distraction, John asked Natasha:

“Do you want to marry me?”

She answered without any doubt:

“Yes.”

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