

Love's Labor Found

ELIZABETH ROSE

THE OCCIDENTAL LEATHER carpenter's belt first attracted me. The belt carried a square workman's pencil, tape measure, box cutter, pliers, and a hammer when all five pockets were fully loaded. Even at total capacity, the belt seemed to rest weightlessly on Jay's slim hips.



I first saw Jay wear it when I toured a room to rent in a communal house he managed. At that visit, he demonstrated how handy the thing was. What was the length of the wall where my bed might go? Jay whipped out his measuring tape, fingered it with authority, placed it on the floor, and took the measurements. Then he snapped it back with a professional click. I was watching every move.

I was in my midtwenties, breaking up with a boyfriend. I had also scoped out his large black dog, a husky malamute mix, as tall as me when he stood on his hind legs. Jay's van parked in the driveway had curtains on the back windows. Jay, his belt, canine child-stand-in, and domestic traits were just what I was looking for.

Once I had moved in and wanted a photograph hung, he had pulled the hammer from his belt and stood to his full 6'1" frame. With proficient skill, he pounded into the nail. I liked the

way his body moved while swinging towards his goal. As he hit the mark, a physical shot of sensual energy passed through my body.

It was the early 1970s and many of us lived in "communes." These weren't radical social experiments but more affordable housing options among unmarried baby boomers. We rented fancy homes in tony Boston suburbs where we grew a few heads of cabbage and smoked a lot of pot.

Jay had just moved back east from Venice Beach, California, following the end of his first marriage.

"It was hard to get married, and it ended after just seven months. I won't go through that again."

The two of us developed a nightly habit beside the hearth. Stationed nearby was his bottle of Jack Daniels and a cocktail glass with the bronzy liquid snuggling in a few ice cubes.

He was an enthusiastic teacher and liked demonstrating the finer points of fire starting.

"Take the newspaper from the corner and roll it in a big banana shape. Then twist it and tie it in the middle like a pretzel."

I noticed how his fingers mastered the newspaper as he confidently placed the kindling. I loved the ignition and blaze that followed.

I wished he would see me as the girl who could heal his ragged confidence. The one who would commit to love him unconditionally. I would never break

his heart. But he was still recovering and obsessively ruminating about another woman.

"That's unfortunate," I would say, pretending friendly concern, not a personal disappointment.

I assumed our timing was ill-planned and told myself it was a friendship.

One night, after several months, he carried me to his bedroom. There was no more conversation as we undressed each other.

One Saturday, we piled our clothes into Jay's work van and drove from Massachusetts to Pennsylvania. We wandered through a labyrinth of backroads, stopping at antique shops and flea markets.

This trip would satisfy many of Jay's passions. Among them were antiques, booze, marijuana, and hashish. He placed his knees against the steering wheel to free his hands while he packed his hashish pipe. Soon the cab filled with the sweet smell.

"Want any?" he asked through clenched lips, his voice tight like he was bubbling up from underwater.

"Do you think it's alright to get high any time of day?" I said.

"Of course!"

"It seems like day drinking. Somehow wrong. Like I'm wasting my life."

"I have the Puritan family, but you act like you all came over on the Mayflower."

"Hmm, maybe."

"Suit yourself. But I'm having fun," he said.

Soon, I changed my mind. We waved our arms and cab danced to Van Morrison. We appreciated the green hills and winding stone walls protecting fieldstone farmhouses and barns in shady valleys.

"This all used to be sheepherding land. That's why the stone walls. Sheepherding was huge in the late 1800s, and then it went flat, and the industry tanked," he said.

"Another history lesson from your blue-blood family?"

"My mother told me the history of the land. Five generations of art dealers. The family gallery carried the Hudson Valley Painters. My mother grew up birding in Mt. Auburn cemetery," he said.

"We have to go there. Was that an upperclass thing to do when she was growing up?"

"I suppose. I showed you Aunt Bee's mansion by the sea. They're so rich."

"I've never been in a house that big. Your cousin had his own wing."

"None of them think carpenter is a good career," he said.

"Do you think it's a good career? Anyway, you're getting your degree, class by class. Maybe you think it's a lowerclass job, but starting your own business is brave."

"Practicing on me, are you?" he said, referring to my profession as a psychotherapist.

"Well, my mother wanted my dad

to be a self-starter. To have the balls to strike out on his own, like my rich Uncle Rudy. She just wanted to be as rich as her brother, basically."

"Oh yeah. Sounds normal."

"One time my dad told me the story of watching his father close their store for the last time. He said he was standing in their hallway when his father came home midday and hung up the keys. He was crying," I said.

We browsed small antique shops. I bought a dark cherry dropleaf with hand-turned legs, which would become our dining room table. Jay bought a cloisonné bowl to hold his pot paraphernalia.

Whenever Jay suggested new hobbies and adventures, I was game. One winter we bought cross country skis. We pushed off from our door, traversing the large, interconnected estates surrounding us. We were always alone. One New Year's Eve we went skiing, skipping the parties we'd been invited to. The silver snow sparkled in the moonlight. Jay seemed depressed, as he did from time to time. He was withdrawn and quiet.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No."

When we returned, we started a fire, trying to ignite our previous lust. We went to bed early, each turning our back on the other.

Two years later, we moved to a wreck of a lakeside bungalow on a



neglected peninsula. There was still no long-term commitment, but I hoped it would materialize after we lived on our own, testing the viability of our relationship separate from exhausting housemates.

Our first night, as I shelved copies of *Fear of Flying*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *The Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, he gathered up his old Chinese coins, concentrated on a question, and cast them like dice. Whenever he performed this ritual, I liked to watch. The coins pinged and rolled to their final stop. When collected and arranged, they pointed to a passage in the *I Ching*, an ancient compilation of poems that resemble a literary horoscope. The answers were a tangled riddle.

On this night, his oracle read: "Ties with stranded ropes, sent away to the dense thorn hedges. For three years,

you will see nothing. Trap!"

"That sounds ominous," I said.

What did it mean? The question he posed pointed to danger. I was tired of ambiguity, but Jay's inner life was as mysterious as the riddles he consulted.

As he rolled and pondered, we heard a *hoo h'HOO hoo hoo, hoo h'HOO hoo hoo*.

"It's a great horned owl," Jay said.

Of course he knew the call. He knew everything about birds.

We raced outside. It was a moonless night and nearing midnight. The owl was as large as a nightstand. It was perched on the tall metal pole of an industrial-sized streetlamp. Its feathered feet and needle-pointed talons grasped the tippy top of the pole. The light from below cast the shadows of his large ear tufts against a backdrop of stone black hemlocks.

He made several soft low hoots as we looked on.

"It's a lucky omen for us. Our first place to ourselves," I said.

"He's not so happy we're here. It's you or me, guys, he's saying," Jay said.

"He'll stick by us. I know it."

"He won't stick around. Great horned owls are very private."

In addition to spending time in nature, we acquired antiques and specialty knick-knacks, including tables, armoires, bookshelves, candlesticks, oil lamps, and eventually a canoe. We shared an interest in decorating a future home, yet we never committed to living there together. Jay remained steadfastly against marriage.

Jay tracked our possessions carefully. He placed a value on being fair. We each bought within our individual budgets, except for one piece. We both fell in love with an oak armoire with glass doors, which neither of us could afford on our own. We went in on the purchase fifty-fifty. I let myself believe that this meant he was getting closer to a commitment.



One winter day, while we were seated at our cherry table sharing heaping portions of Chef Robert's chicken and home-cured sauerkraut, I suggested a summer trip. "Want to fly to Minnesota and borrow my parents' car? We could drive from there to

Wyoming and backpack in the Tetons. I want to show you the Badlands on the way," I said.

"I go to Yosemite every year. I would have to miss that," he said, finishing a beer.

He traditionally took two weeks every summer for a solo backpacking trip through Tuolumne Meadows.

"It might be fun," I said, clearing the table.

"But you don't know how to backpack," he said as he opened the refrigerator, looking for leftover apple pie.

"I can learn," I said, stroking my long-haired white cat, Loretta Young.

Together we bought gear for a ten-day hike in the Grand Tetons. I ordered hiking boots from L.L. Bean and began breaking them in on daily runs. We perused the aisles at Eastern Mountain Sports, looking at gear and deciding on meals we wanted to test.

My pack became a new oversized pocketbook. Every week I stuffed it with gear and went on practice walks. I filled, emptied, and refilled the pockets with several combinations before I was satisfied with the arrangement. I wanted my knife, snacks, and water handy in the side pocket. I wanted the cookstove, waterproof matches, Band-aids, and water filter easily retrievable in the outside pockets. Everything else went into the big chamber belly of the pack. Jay would carry the tent, but I would carry my sleeping bag and pad. I tested out various cords

to secure them. I studied photos of other backpackers, and it looked cool and made sense to have essential equipment hang off the pack. I decided that my canteen, flip flops, raincoat, and a small pair of binoculars would be lashed to the outside. Around my neck, I would wear a kerchief that would wipe away spills and sweat. It could also be used as a tourniquet in a medical emergency.

I studied the flora and fauna of Wyoming and learned to identify the Indian paintbrush, cottonwoods, willows, elk, and alpine plants that would be in bloom.

All the wilderness guides included final chapters on hazards such as blisters, sunburn, hypothermia, losing the trail, wild animals, and insufficient equipment. I obsessively read these chapters, memorizing the precautions and solutions. They listed preventive measures and remedies for everything, even grizzlies. My anxiety swelled with my excitement.

In secret, I ruminated about bears. There were grizzlies out west, different from the black bears of our home, the White Mountains. The only prevention to becoming viciously torn apart and every tissue, muscle, organ, and bone eaten by a four-hundred-pound hungry grizzly was to stay home. I considered the option.

"They have grizzlies in the Grand Tetons," I said.

"Not many. Mostly black bears, and

they are easily scattered. It'll be fine," he said.

"Did I ever mention my bear phobia?"

"Uh, no," he said, drafting a bill for a new customer.

"My parents took us to Yellowstone when I was nine. They stood back but they let me get really close. I really loved all animals. I'd seen pictures of their teeth and enormous nostrils. But after that, I imagined bears hidden under my bed every night. I had to leap into bed and dive under the covers. If I let a leg or arm overhang, I was sure it would be gobbled," I said.

"You'll be fine," he said, licking the stamp and switching on the TV to the Celtics game, his beloved team.

When we arrived at the Grand Tetons trailhead, we approached the ranger station to purchase our ten-day wilderness pass. A ranger stepped up to the cashier's desk.

"Just to inform you, we're letting everyone know that there was a grizzly bear sighting on the Webb Canyon trail yesterday. Now, it might have wandered away by now, but I see you folks are heading that way, and you should take precautions," he said as he swayed back and forth on his heels, driving his hands into his pockets.

"What would those precautions be?" I said, feeling my knees wobbly.

"Sometimes hikers carry bear bells or bring a whistle. Do you have your bear spray?"

We stepped away to confer.

"Can we wait until tomorrow?" I asked, my hands sweating.

"They're being overly cautious. They have to tell us so we don't say they never warned us and a bear steals our food or something," Jay said.

"What something? I don't want to see a bear."

"Oh geez. OK, we can spend another day in this boring town."

We busied ourselves visiting the W-Y Restaurant, where we ate pancakes smothered in real maple syrup and sausages from local pigs. We stopped at the local backpacking store for nail clippers and bear spray. We bought bells. I practiced singing.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"I thought my singing would keep bears away."

"It's going to keep me away. Could you not do it around me?"

"What? Sing? You want me not to sing?"

"I'm serious. It's not meant as an insult. You don't have a pretty voice."

"That's seriously insulting. It's like saying I don't like the way you sound. In fact, that is what you just said."

I convinced Jay to delay a few more days. There wasn't much to do in Jackson Hole other than filling up on supplies before a hike. We were already prepared, and we floated in limbo without purpose. Finally, we had to hike or admit defeat and go home.

One crisp fall morning, after

convincing myself that the bear had moved on, we set out on the trail. My mouth was dry from worry and sleeplessness. I hoisted my green pack onto one shoulder and wiggled into it. As we took our first steps, I glanced back at the parking lot, wishing I could retreat to my parent's blue Pontiac, drive to the closest MacDonalds, and order a Big Mac. I was supposed to be a tough woman about to bravely face the vicissitudes of the wilderness. I was no longer a regular day hiker, looking forward to a short walk followed by a Coors and shrimp cocktail in town.

I glanced nostalgically at the parking lot, which now looked like the epicenter of all progress and civilization. The shiny cars, parked in perfect rows, patiently waiting for their owners to return. How many would wait forever for the owners who never returned? I was about to take a long trek into the ineffable, disorganized wilderness. Soon, no white lines would be painted on my ground.

I understood the difference between me and Jay. He liked to test his mettle against the rules and the elements. He liked to be in charge and solve various life and death problems. He wanted to be AWAY from people. He was a sole entrepreneur. But I wasn't that kind of person. I was an anxious rule follower. I was the crossing guard captain in fifth grade, earlier than any other child in my grade school. I didn't



even like smoking pot in the middle of the day. What made me think I could do something so risky?

I remembered back to when I had purchased my pack. It had sparkled like a new Louis Vuitton pocketbook. Did I want army green or soft blue? I had obsessed over the number of compartments and hidden pockets, spending hours playing at packing. Now it represented the key to my survival. It was the only thing that separated me from nakedness, hypothermia, waterborne diseases, deadly mosquito attacks, and bear assaults. It was my closet, refrigerator, kitchen, bookcase, and emergency room. It was a 30-by-11-by-8-inch pocket, with a useless set of binoculars and flip flops

hanging from a flimsy buckle. Facing the disinterested wilderness, my backpack seemed foolish and meager. Lifting it was like shouldering the existential sum of my life.

My skin felt prickly as sagebrush. I was thirsty. We stopped frequently to fill my canteen with fresh water.

Each day, we walked five to seven miles before bedding down for the night. We saw no bears, but on the third night, a display of thunder, lightning, and a torrential downpour soaked my sleeping bag, clothing, and shoes.

The next day was cloudy.

"Could hypothermia be a problem?" I asked Jay.

"Nah."

The sky cleared, and the sun appeared. The day turned steamy hot. My clothing dried as we hiked. In the afternoon, we spread our sleeping bags and boots on warm rocks while we soaked our feet in a foamy stream. The sun and breeze warmed everything to a crisp. I believed a little more in the saving grace of the natural world to aid us if we followed our knowledge of its properties.

Nothing else unexpected happened, and I relaxed. In the daytime, work always needed to be done, which diverted my attention from thoughts of bears. I focused on the other hazards that could have been disasters: remembering our supplies, checking the direction of the trail, watching for markers, and being careful on slippery rocks, mud, and puddles.

Each afternoon we had to decide on a sleeping spot. I veered towards the shaded dales with the lake views or near a rippling river. He objected to the bumpy ground under trees near the shoreline and preferred an open, flat area near a rocky outcropping. I thought snakes or mountain lions might hide there. And I would never bed near a blueberry bush, a bear's favorite food source.

Every day we unwrapped our freeze-dried meals, which always disappointed. Each dish always fell short of its fancy name, such as beef Wellington or duck confit. When reconstituted, all were different versions of mystery chunks with added colors. But the "just add

water" promise was trustworthy. We gobbled our meals in under five minutes by sticking two forks in our tiny backpacking pot.

In the afternoons, we ate one of the dozen special brownies we had made. Each was a high-intensity energy buzz of double cocoa, peanut butter, chocolate, and maraschino cherries held together with a fudgy base.

Every night, Jay slung a rope over a high tree limb and ratcheted our packs off the ground. This kept the lingering odors of everything we carried, including toothpaste, a safe distance from hungry bears. Once inside our tent, I slept hard, comforted by the rank, familiar smell of our bodies immersed in our small patch of total darkness.

The physical beauty of the environment worked its magic. Amazement, gratitude, and wonder slowly replaced anxiety and fear. Our ribboned path ran between green meadows, each blazed with wildflowers. The earth was fragrant with the smells of wood, dirt, moss, and decay. The Tetons themselves huddled around like protective guardians. The peaks supervised our day, changing from blue to green to black as daylight rose and diminished. Cottonwoods, willows, and elms dotted the shores of the streams.

On our last day, I sensed a lighter pack and looked forward to a warm shower and a non-dehydrated

Whopper. I would soon sleep in crisp hotel sheets. After two hours, I noticed a subtle change beneath my boots. Instead of a smooth, grassy, pebbled trail, it was an ill-defined string of boulder-sized rocks.

"This doesn't seem like a trail," I said.

A few minutes passed.

"Are we lost?"

"I knew it a while ago,"

"What happened?"

"The trail we were on turned into a dry riverbed."

"Now what?" I said, tamping down panic.

"Search for the trail," Jay shrugged.

Later, he added, "We can always go down the mountain. Jackson is down there."

I looked the direction he pointed. The sun was shimmering off the distant specks of pea-sized rooftops.

I tried to read Jay, searching for signs of fear. He seemed confident, but maybe it was fake, put on to protect me from the situation or to protect himself from me. If he showed insecurity, I would also be afraid. If I panicked, he would have to handle two problems.

This was my ultimate test. Could I fake the cool, adventurous, non-neurotic girl I aspired to be? Could I have become that girl in the last ten days? I channeled his confidence and became as secure as he appeared.

After hours of searching in vain for

the trail, a young moose came into view and ran up the hillside toward us. Being the nature-loving, animal-adoring duo we were, we quickly began to admire the youngster.

"Look, he's so beautiful."

"He's so tall. His legs are so lanky."

"He's so thin."

"He's alone."

"Where could his mother be?"

We stalked behind when he stopped to graze, waiting for her appearance.

"He's as lost as we are. There must be salvation for all of us," I said, calling on my belief in animal protectors.

Jay and I shared a final meal of a few carrots, a dried piece of bread, and a can of tuna fish. A massive female charged up the slope as the sun began to sink. Ignoring us, she signaled for the young one to fall in lockstep behind her. We weren't to be left behind, and we scrambled along.

Soon, Jay noticed we had regained the trail.

I rejoiced at the worn gravel of an authentic path.

We peeled off from our guides, called out a hasty thank-you, hiked the last hundred yards to the trailhead parking area, threw our packs in the trunk, and drove out of the park as the sun descended. At the end of the hike, the parking lot looked dull and predictable. It no longer represented human civilization like the stunning technological achievement it had seemed ten days before. The evening

lights of Jackson flickered in the distance, promising cleanliness, sleep, and fresh fruit and vegetables.



After completing our hike, I was proud. I wanted Jay to acknowledge that he had seen me successfully fight my demons. I imagined that I had passed some tests and that he would commit to me fully, but nothing on his side changed.

As my thirtieth birthday approached, I decided to address our future. Thirty seemed like the year I should begin a family. We were canoeing in the pond near where we lived. It was spring, peepers were trilling, and the turtles trundled about on the soft lakeshore, looking for soft spots to place their eggs.

“Our friends have dogs and babies now. We just have a dog. And our dog is your dog,” I said.

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Well, Marlene and Steve, Dan and Barbara, Eric and Karen, Walt and Linda,” I rattled off every couple we had known who now had cribs in their second bedrooms.

“What, you want a munchkin, a rug rat, an ankle biter?” he laughed, repeating all the disdainful terms he had used for children over the years, all the terms I had previously written off as humorous. I had rationalized: he had a dog; he had decorated his

work van with cute curtains. From this scant evidence, I had concluded that he must want children. Surely it was an unconscious wish, natural to all, that would emerge later.

“I’d like us to get married,” I said, dipping my canoe paddle in the water.

“I don’t believe in marriage,” he said.

“I don’t even know what that means. What’s to believe in? It’s what everyone does?”

“I never told you any different.”

“We’ve had the same conversation for over five years, and nothing has changed.”

“That’s true.”

As the reality of my denial dawned, tears flowed. The canoe tipped as I sobbed.

“I thought you would change. I thought you wouldn’t want to lose me.”

He looked down.

“I’m moving out,” I said.

Although I had finally expressed what had been bugging me for months, maybe years, I still hoped for a different outcome. Perhaps now he would shed his own tears, drop on one knee, produce an heirloom ring, and vow his eternal commitment.

“OK,” was all he said.

Confronted with our breakup, Jay focused on the stuff. After the first glass armoire we bought together, we spent a sizable portion of our income on shared cabinets, dressers, and tables. His passion for these things and his worry about losing them

suggested he might request visiting rights.

Jay devised a plan: We would flip a coin for the first pick. The coin toss winner would choose the glass armoire, and the loser would be compensated with two selections from our co-owned spoils. Then, we would alternate turns. The system seemed fair.

“You’re better at breaking up than staying together,” I told him.

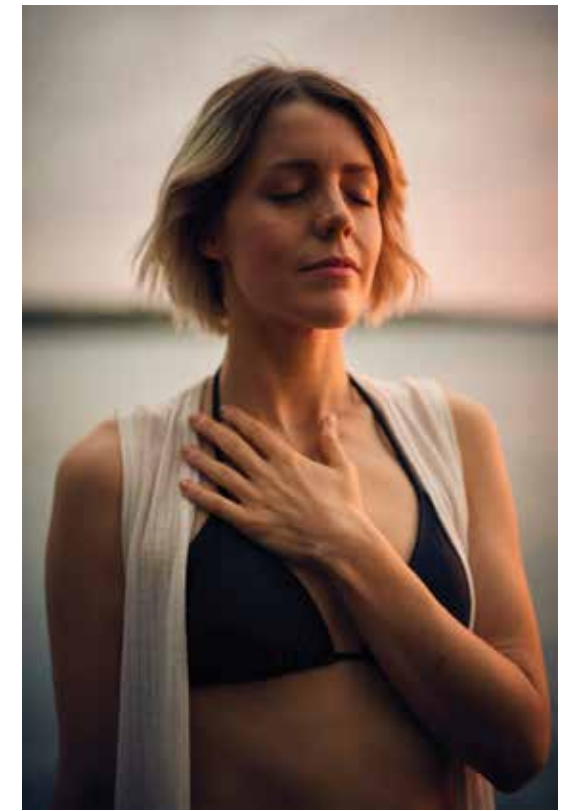
He didn’t disagree.

I didn’t win the coin toss. It only hurt for a nanosecond.

A month later I moved to a matchbox-sized house in a nearby town. The cottage was a wooden and stone barnlike structure built as an apple cider mill in the 1800s. Although tiny, my Apple House had all the necessities: pots, pans, ironing board, a miniature woodstove, and many bookshelves. It was set beside a slender country road across from an overgrown orchard. I moved the drop-leaf maple table into my dining room and adopted an older female golden retriever. Our household consisted of the dog, Cully, and my two cats, Loretta Young and Sarah Babes.

This was my first time living without an institution outside my door, roommates down the hall, or in a pretend marriage. I was alone.

On this property, far from a city and with thin wooden walls, the outdoors moved in on me, becoming my best



roommate. In the humid summer weather, the ancient fragrances of sweet cider traveled between the old oak floorboards and clung to the russet-brown wooden walls. Just at dusk, a melodic trilling of Carolina wrens swooped in from the woods and filled my cabin with their flutelike sounds. I listened as I ate dinner or lay in bed taking in the dark, knotty pine ceiling. Bushel baskets overflowing with red Macintosh apples spun through dreams where I paddled the hollowed-out fruit on waterways under misted skies.

I untangled my reliance on Jay’s knowledge of the natural world. I identified my first bobolink in the



overgrown fields a short walk away. In the mornings, I walked to his field to watch him somersault in the tall grass. I bought my own bird books and a tripod on which I mounted a long lens to view birds. I also identified plants and observed their behaviors.

The hardest work was relinquishing the story I had told myself about Jay and me. I had to take a hard look at how I had lived in wishful thinking despite the contradictory evidence.

My front door faced a wisteria that had colonized the next-door neighbors' clapboards, windows, and front door. They had been forced to use their back door because the wisteria had closed off the other access. I found its attachment disquieting and suffocating. I found their lack of boundaries and self-preservation disquieting. Why didn't they hack it back and reclaim their rights?

A month later, the wisteria produced a profusion of ardent purple blooms. I respected its explosion of color. It kept arching towards the light, secure in the impossible blue of each new sky. ❖