

Watchers

There were ducks on the pond, she said. Coming north again, getting this far in mid February in the hope that by the time they got way north the lakes would be clear of ice. They were shy; if you just walked up to the pond you'd never see them, so the thing to do was to get up in the dark and go to the bird blind and wait for light. That's what we did. I got out of bed at 530 and went quietly downstairs, not waking my parents. I walked along the little path to her family's house, with the yellow circle of my flashlight on the ground in front of me, and met her by the gate in the white picket fence. She led me along the path through the trees and down across the dunes to the blind. She seemed to know it well. The blind was a small low structure of wood and canvas half dug into the earth at the side of the pond. You went in at the back, crawling along a little passage until the floor got deeper and you could crouch in a shallow space with your eyes level with the observation slits.

The day was just beginning to get light, and streaks of gray spread over the pond, becoming streaks of dull silver until slowly our eyes began to receive colors and the streaks became dark red, light red, then silver again. Iridescent, like wing patches. But no ducks. And it was so cold. She turned her head to the right, looking beyond where I could see, and I moved over beside her for a better look. Still no ducks, and certainly no warmer. Not a flutter, not a quack; our breath clouds condensed in frosty webs on the edge of the blind. She turned back towards me, our noses collided. She put her lips to my cheek, and I put an arm around her shoulder. We watched that way for half an hour, slightly warmed, and the sun was about to rise. I put my other arm around her, she raised her chin. I had never done that kind of kiss before. I don't know what practice she had had. We certainly discovered a lot for ourselves in the next half hour, pressing our shirts together, rubbing our jeans against one another, touching one another's hair, discovering the shape of one face to another, but mostly just inhaling each other's presence.

There was a movement outside the blind and we turned to look. A wind was moving the bullrushes, and it was light enough to see the whole surface of the pond. A thin sheet of ice stretched all the way across, too cold for ducks. But there was a sound, a quiet honk-quack from somewhere near. Not on the pond, not between the pond and the blind: behind us. We turned. It was too dark to see at first, but slowly we made out a ledge to the right of the entrance, and there, protected from the weather, two ducks and a drake, mallards. Their bright little eyes met ours, curious and careful, taking in the scene as they had since the first

scraps of light entered the blind.

©Adam Morton 2005

Silk

There are many benefits to silk underwear. Several layers will fit under your clothes in as much space as a sweater or woolen tights. I knew Steven was in a hurry; that was clearly the kind of man he is, always with a destination in mind and a sense of the routes and the stations. And I knew I fancied him, though I didn't fancy the idea of jumping on his express train to delight. He had proposed that we meet late Saturday afternoon, and I had agreed, though in a way to make it difficult for him. I said I'd meet him in the park, by the monument in front of the duck pond. The pond would be frozen, of course, the February ice covered in snow that would not melt for another six weeks. And it was cold that day. But the park is near my apartment, and much as he dislikes the cold that must have warmed his interest, so he said he'd be there.

And so he was, in a parka with a woolen hat under the hood, thick mitts, and ski pants. I was a minute late; he was standing there stamping his feet and blowing into his mitts to bounce warm air over his face. I walked up to him and took his hand and led him off the path into the snow. I giggled and bumped against him, he tripped me and we fell into the snow, all over one another. Angels, I said, do you remember making them? and we lay on our backs and swung our arms and legs to make wing and aureole outlines. I got up and as he followed I grabbed his hat, and pushed his hood down. A kiss, and while kissing I wiped some snow off his forehead. Probably a little went down his neck.

We needed to get warm and I remembered a coffee shop between the park and my apartment. Not what he would have had me remember. Hot chocolate for me, Irish coffee for him. He finished his coffee and went off to the men's room. When he came out I had my coat on and was holding his. "Off to my place now, but I'm holding this." He was puzzled but content, and along the way he gave me a hug with one arm while removing my hat with the other. We held hands. He slipped a finger onto my wrist and made an affectionate little circle there, then hooked it under the edge of my glove and removed it. So we were just a bit chilled when we arrived.

The two wine glasses surprised him, standing on the table near the door. Once I had taken off my coat, we sat on the sofa and drank, a rich

invigorating red. And since it was such a large comfortable sofa we became more and more horizontal, until we lay beside one another kissing and slowly grinding our hips together. I put my head on his shoulder and he began to stroke my hair. I jumped up. A snowman! We've got to make a snowman. I pulled him to his feet and pushed him out the door. In the snow again we rolled two little snowballs into a larger and smaller sphere, in the traditional three dimensional version of a small child's drawing. He began to look for things to make arms and facial features. As he bent over to pick up a stick I hugged him from behind and ran my hands under his sweater and over his chest. I lifted my arms and brought the sweater over his head, and ran with it over to the snowman. I lay the arms of the sweater along the top of the sticks Steven had supplied for arms, twisting them around so that it stayed in place.

It's amazing what men will put up with for a woman. But they are rarely quite passive. He gave me a treacherous look and grabbed my wrist with one hand while the other removed my sweater, not neglecting an incidental exploration of my breasts along the way. That sweater became a turban-like hat covering most of the snowman's head. I could see he was shivering now, but when I threw a snowball at him he threw one back, using his bare hands to shape the snow into a really dense projectile. I drove him back to the apartment with a volley of snowballs and chased up the stairs behind him towards the half-open door.

As I came through the door he pounced from behind it, grabbing me around the waist and lifting me off the ground. He carried me into the bedroom. I can't say I struggled. On the bed the usual pleasant preliminaries began. After a few minutes he was down to a teeshirt and a pair of very elegant calvin kleins. As for me, I was reduced by as many layers but still covered in silk. He supported himself on one elbow and reached across to the elastic of my long silk knickers. His eyes were vague and dilated, without losing their direct predatory focus.

I paused, he paused, and during that moment a ring began to echo through the apartment. At first one tentative chime and then a loud insistent echoing din. The fire alarm. We might be in danger, and certainly nothing we could make in that noise could count as love. I took his hand again, to prevent him getting dressed, and rushed him through the door and down the stairs and out onto the street. Other residents were gathering too, and they stared at us, they really stared. We moved off around the corner where we could be alone, and Steven, bless him, scraped a large heart with his bare hand on the frost of the garage window, with Xs and initials inside it.

The caretaker shouted that it was a false alarm, a scheduled test

that should not have sounded but someone had blocked the override switch. So after everyone else had gone in, looking over their shoulders in the hope of seeing us, we dashed back in. Steven headed for the shower, stripping as he went, and stood in the tepid water waiting for it to come hot. I waited long enough to remove my silks, then reached into the shower to turn the tap off and drag my dripping man to bed. He was cold, very cold; it slowed him down a lot. It was wonderful, our frozen bodies softening until we melted together.

©Adam Morton 2005