

Summer school

Romantic. That's what I was. I'd always told myself happy stories and I saw no reason to make an exception for love. But love, of course, makes you blind; my most recent man had turned out to have someone else.

I decided to rub my eyes. I went to Bavaria to learn German at a summer school in a little town like a picture postcard, all snug within its defensive wall. We students gathered in the beer gardens looking out over those walls; Japanese, Chinese, Algerian, Texan, Italian, Spanish and English, we all drank beer from a *stein* and learnt to say *noch ein*, meaning 'more', with varying degrees of conviction.

People started to pair off. A Japanese monk fell in love with me but I told myself nothing about his story. (He made his own instead, as I found out later.) Someone else was filling my mind, haunted-looking, alone, brooding, smoking or reading. Soon I knew he was also watching me. Before long, I was constructing my new story.

When we first touched my story unravelled a little. I understood how thin he really was, saw that his eyes were somehow too large for his face. And although he was reading books I loved, we did not discuss them. So I hired a car instead; I wanted him to see the beautiful countryside and its impressive castles. The bewildered Japanese monk, a cocksure Texan girl and even the homesick Chinese professor of maths squeezed into the car's back seat for the day, laughing and talking. Next to me, in the front seat, he sat still and silent.

That evening, under the falling twilight below the town wall, on a bench in a public car park, he shook as he told me about his fears, his uncaring family, about alcohol, about his research in Cambridge. I revised my story for the two of us and fell in love. I knew I could make everything end happily. We were lovers; I could wait.

My story returned to England; I went to Cambridge for the first visit. Birds were singing and the windows of King's College glittered in the autumn sun. Young people walked together and apart, wrapped in their lives. Warm, I ran up the stairs to his door, knocked, pushed it open. The room was low and asymmetrical, an elegant Venetian window let into the mediaeval space.

He's sitting in the gloom. He looks straight at me and, startled, I look straight back. We don't move, or say anything. His clear, dark eyes hold my eyes deep in his. Why did you come here? I know you. Your romantic story. Your country views. Your castles. Don't come near. I'm unhappy. I'm dangerous. There are knives. Pills. Leave. Leave. My darling.

Romantic? No more. I had finally lost the plot and ended up crying in a cold railway siding at Royston. A guard asked me to leave the train and I got off. I still couldn't see clearly; that was the tears, of course. But my stories had stopped. Dead.

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April 2010