

## Rose-Marie Mensis and Philip Morris

I am doing this the coward's way – on my back, on the kitchen floor. The sun has pushed winter straight into summer. Everyone is outside, except me. My body is confused: shorts? coat? sandals? boots? Snow still clings to the shadows of things in small crusty heaps. Bits of dog shit in little blue plastic bags and abandoned garbage slowly rise to the surface.

I'm stuck in this thinking about the mess that my life has become, but mostly, I am waiting for Rose-Marie and Philip. I'm sure if they will come. I'm not sure if I want them to come. Until now, they have been my lovers. They have been with me for what feels like forever. Philip always knew about Rose-Marie, but he didn't want to know anything more than that. I was always careful not to let Rose-Marie know anything about Philip. I worked hard to keep my worlds separate, but now the unraveling has begun. Rose-Marie, I knew would one day leave without notice. Philip, I must never see again.

At first, I didn't want to have anything to do with Rose-Marie. I hated her really, but mostly, I was afraid of her. She barged into my life when I was barely fifteen and adopted me like a little sister. She was in fact, a long-lost cousin, or some estranged relative from my mother's side of the family, so my mother said who adored her and insisted she was a good influence for me. "Rose-Marie will pull you out of your shell," and she was encouraged to come whenever she wanted. For a while, absolutely everything was Rose-Marie. Our home became her second home. She came and she went as she pleased and I never knew when to expect her. She laughed a lot then and still talks too much and too loudly. Her cheeks are always flushed and a bead of sweat comes readily to her upper lip. Not that she cares. "Rouge," she says, "is my favourite colour, roja even more. Just call me Roja-Maria," and she will laugh. With time, her rhythm became mine.

When I moved out, she followed me. I suppose I was flattered by her determination to be my friend. With each successive arrival and departure, she deposited more of herself. Her clothes, her perfumes, her jewelry took up more and more room. She never stayed long; she was always going somewhere and insisted on having her own place. Often, when she would first arrive, I would stay home from work. We spent long afternoons in bed, her tidal-wave of redness sweeping over me. When she leaves, I am completely renewed, but in Rose-Marie's absences, I ran to Philip.

Philip is the complete opposite. From my first kiss, I was hooked. Philip is the tall, dark and handsome type - one long, delirious inhale. There was a wild bitter taste on his lips that excited me. With his touch, every cramped and worried hollow inside me expanded and reached out to him. He expanded to fit perfectly into that sad, empty space inside me. He was my anchor and I floated up. This much pleasure was a mystery to me. I had to keep it secret. I was in love and I knew Rose-Marie would not approve.

In the beginning, Philip and I left much to chance, but somehow our paths would always cross. Soon, I lived for our next moments together. I began pre-arranging meetings in out-of-the-way places. The secrecy never seemed to matter to Philip. It just became our way of being together. He never asked questions, but any questions about his life were always deflected. I stopped asking. He has other lovers, I know, but I could always count on Philip. In his unfaithful, loyal way, he has always been there for me, always ready to give the little he gives whenever I need it. That is until now. Now I can feel the pinch at the end of his

touch; he let me down every time he leaves. Now he begins to take more than he gives. He demands more and wants to meet more and more often in more dangerous and less secretive locations. He needs me to be seen with him.

I started to miss work. Then suddenly, I would pull myself together and cut myself off - no contact, sometimes for days, months on occasion. And then, without warning, like a sleepwalker fully conscious, I can't stop myself. I return to him, my steps hurry, growing lighter and more buoyant as the moment of our embrace approaches. His arms are always open, always ready to embrace me once again and there I am, lost in him again.

And then, he's gone. I am alone and I want more. It's never enough. I wait and I imagine our next meeting. Why? Why the bated breath and kisses soured? Why can't I say, NO?

Rose-Marie never told me when she would be coming back, but my body always knew. A switch goes off, a tiny pinch inside swells to an ache and I know she is on her way. I hear the impatience of her footsteps at the door, feel the thud of her baggage on the landing and I jump to the urgency of the doorbell ringing. She's here and there is no room for anyone else. Is it pleasure; is it pain? Am I happy? Am I sad? I never know.

But, something had been throwing me off lately. Our timing is off. I sensed her retreat in the emptying drawers; her rings and necklaces disappearing. I confronted her, but she only shrugged her shoulders and smiled, promising instead a more dedicated and predictable presence in the months to follow. It hasn't lasted. Her visits have become shorter and unreasonably stormy or strangely long and eerily calm. Her regularity is slipping. Maybe she wants me to hate her again. Last night, she somehow managed to slip in the back door without me knowing and woke me up. She looked wild, her hair and clothing disheveled. Drunk? Maybe, I thought, but there was no smell of alcohol. Her usual, bright, red lipstick had smeared perfectly to look like she had purposely painted two sets of lips. I don't know what to think. She ages like a silk blouse, more beautiful with time. Who am I without her?

Last night, she caught me with Philip. She wouldn't stop screaming. Philip just got up and left. I didn't even notice him going. She went through the apartment like a tornado. I haven't been able to put anything back. My clothes are still strewn everywhere, socks on the kitchen countertop, knives, forks and spoons dumped in my bed. I slept on the kitchen floor, the only place somewhat clear.

I am stretched out with one eye on the front door, hoping they won't come back, yet hoping, still hoping that maybe they will.

It's so calm -this strange, fragile feeling of peace - quite beautiful actually. I wonder. Is it possible to live with that?

Karen Trask

2016

<http://karentrask.com>