

## Never Been to E-pluri-bus-unum (One Thousand Kisses)

'A kiss is nothing divided by two. Ha. O, and this one - *An insipid morsel, which becomes delicious and delectable in proportion as it is flavoured by love.* That last definition won the competition. The London magazine Tit-bits ran this thing, had to define a kiss. What a nutty name. 19th century. Whatever gets you through the repression, I suppose.' Raven tossed her head, dark hair back behind her shoulders now and read silently to herself.

Bear carefully stood up and wandered to the edge of the pavillion where they'd set up camp. The embroidered, colourful canopy, previously rolled up in three pieces which later domed together, carried with them on one of the horses. At least ten square metres covered for shelter, tall poles which held it up appeared secure. He hoped Raven would keep reading so he could think. She'd brought them here, he'd agreed to the journey but didn't realise when she'd said she'd never been here, Raven really knew nothing about the place, except that they'd be safe and provided for. Using horses and a wooden wagon painted with gypsy flowers, they'd crossed a seemingly endless black plain for days and nights, manufacturing an oasis wherever they pleased, just by tapping one of the simple white lines that crossed the plain. But seeing nothing else unless they arranged it, he was worried this could go on indefinitely. Bear wanted to avoid grander words like 'forever' or 'infinitely' though, he certainly could not fathom any measure of their time together in this strange place as an impossibility.

Delicious food packed away now. He took stock. They'd no shortage of fruit, nuts, vegetables, oil, rice, beans, eggs, wine, spirits, juice and water. It wasn't possible they'd starve or get tired of their diet. That evening they'd eaten a sumptuous tagine, cooked in a pointy-lidded vessel like Berbers had done for centuries, on an open fire with wood Raven said would appear and it did, in the small, portable metal barbecue they carried on the mule. An area of sweet grass sprang up for the livestock as soon as they'd stopped for the night too. It was as if they lived in a computer-assisted drawing, an animation, programmed to provide whatever was necessary; akin to a three-D printer, he supposed.

'What now?' Raven spoke loudly beside him and he jumped. The firm but somehow padded, warm surface of the smooth, black ground didn't make a sound when they walked upon it. 'Bear, I can't read my life away. We need an occupation.'

'We're writers.' He smiled.

'I know but can we live on that? Poetry? Or struggling with some play that no one will ever produce? Do we have to be tragic figures for some future film-maker to romanticise? Caught in the hype-loop, again.'

'You told me, food, drink, shelter, adventure they'll appear as we need them. This is the blithe land of...!' He looked puzzled. 'What was it?'

'One Thousand Kisses. I named it after One Thousand and One Nights, only that was a frightening story and I want this story to be, erm...less, o, I'm scared enough most of the time. I don't want any more worry.' She coughed, spoke slower, 'It's funny I'd rather be scared than sad, but sad passes. Maybe I'd be better off feeling sorry, unhappy than going on these crazy journeys?'

'You don't want to be scared? Why did you bring *me*, then?' Bear looked down at her, at least two heads shorter than him and older. He smiled, pretended to snarl.

'I have to have someone to cheer me up and you can cook.'

'No one else here to distract me, either.' Bear put a hand on her pale hair and stroked it, lovingly, bent to kiss the top of her head and she nestled into his side a moment. Then he ranged across the view, the broad, open, black plain criss-crossed with white lines, the darkening sky above, the lack of stars or moon. 'Then when the sun sets, if it is the sun, there's nothing but us here and our lanterns, books, the horses and the mule in the background, making those snuffling noises.'

'Am I selfish? Do you need more people? I can make more,' she spoke quietly.

'You make them?' Bear sounded a little frightened.

'No, I think they appear because they're already here but I don't notice them unless I need to, and

neither do you.' Raven walked to the edge of the canopy and stood with her arms akimbo, stared out at the darkness almost entirely black now. 'Maybe we only need to want lights, trees, houses and they could appear? But we have to decide, first, choose.'

'So I can decide they're there and people will appear?' He looked hopefully out from under the multi-coloured canopy embroidered with birds, trees, sprites, unicorns, star signs and dragons.

'Try it.' Raven stood beside him and watched the black plain, the white lines, the darkening sky but nothing changed. It was so dim now, any white lines appeared grey and disappeared completely after about ten metres, into nothingness. 'Maybe you don't want them as much as you think you do?'

'I need a cold beer.'

'There's a box of them over there by the divans.' She gestured behind them to the stack of books on a small table, two divans hung with red and purple draperies, gold thread edging, beside a heavy wooden shelf with beer on it in a wooden crate, amongst games and various objects like a carved wooden ball inside another ball and another, a fine china statue of a mermaid brushing her hair and a three pronged candelabra with unlit blue candles in place.

The green bottles all had a plain label showing only a horseshoe pointed upwards, gold on red.

While they drank beer Raven spoke about plans and Bear nodded. 'Decide what we really want to do. We're friends. Only two people, how can it be that difficult? I've got a degree in communication, years of experience running businesses and a household. I've avoided some of the worst people you can imagine too. Hope I can still do that.'

'I want to write poetry and garden, that's all I like doing and all I'm good at. Not working in other people's gardens either.' Bear folded his arms. 'We need a garden here. Fruit trees, vegetables, flowers, a nut tree or two, that's on the list. Also, animals. A cat, at least a cat and maybe rabbits or something, uh....' He opened another beer.

'We need money. How can we make money?'

'Will all this stuff stop appearing eventually?' He gazed at their fanciful camping equipment. 'O I

guess, sell what we grow? Sell books? Perform? You run workshops, you tutor writing. I know you do I've seen the ad's before we, uh, before we came to this place.'

'Nothing illegal.' Raven frowned at Bear and he looked surprised.

'How is any of that wrong?'

'Your tone of voice. Like this place is capable of anything.'

'Unless my life is threatened or something. I mean, I'd steal rather than starve. I'm not stupid.' Bear spoke angrily but then calmed down, drank his beer a while. 'It'll be fine.'

'Our realm, whatever we like, or no, let me think, yes, what's best for us. We could populate it with Ondines, they're Paracelus' water creatures. Can marry men and bear children then they gain a soul.' Raven leapt to her feet and danced about the space wafting her arms like she was swimming breast-stroke. 'Sometimes I feel like I'm an Ondine,' she stood still, 'a creature not quite human. That's why I have the name of a bird.'

Bear looked at Raven closely as he could from a metre away and murmured, 'Yes, it's that distance. I am not sure writers can ever lose it. Can we? For a long time I thought I was some kind of magical thing. Other people seemed so dull. Sounds crude to say so but....'

'A sylph perhaps? Air sprites, you're light-hearted.' She danced on the balls of her feet then sat down again beside him on the colourful divan. Her arm hooked through his, she beamed. 'Or a salamander, they're fire and gnomes are earth elements but you're too tall for a gnome.'

'I like their pointed hats.'

'My name was chosen for me by a good friend, I was wearing a hat at the time. Black, wide-brimmed.' She mimed the shape in the air about her head and smiled at him. 'The raven is a solitary creature and does not much care what others think of her, she is also curious to a fault. There have been times when I've tried things to see what happens and almost done myself in.' Her arm free of his now she curled up beside Bear and hugged her knees.

'I chose *my* name myself. It's powerful and also, has that shaggy connotation.' Bear smiled.

'Bears are clever too. I know for instance that ravens are heard to utter a sounds like the Latin word for tomorrow, they're oracles. You can tell the future.' He stood up and walked to the edge of their pavilion, but turned before gazing out at the complete dark like he didn't want to truly acknowledge it was there.

Behind him, Raven tidied away the empty bottles then padded over to where he stood and stroked his back. He leaned into her touch, a little, affectionately.

'I write the future and step into it.' Raven nodded. 'They also told me when they gave me the name that I'm good at conveying secrets to those who need to know them, and communicating powerful, important messages. Mystery and intrigue are my core business. Maybe I should be a spy in this new world of ours?' Her laugh wasn't much.

'I'm here to protect you from anyone who could try to make you quieter, or force you to do anything wrong,' Bear murmured and smiled. 'We don't need spies or look-outs.'

'The Inuit people believe ravens can trick monsters into submission. Humanitarian raven flew out of the void, from the dark womb of the cosmos at the very birth of the world to bring light to people. My ability to communicate with the hidden side of myself and the obvious, in-your-face things, this works together in wisdom.' She spoke a little jokingly, but then matter-of-fact, 'My constant task is to search beneath, to turn over the depths and expose what's kept hidden to the light so I can see them. Absorb new ideas, understand myself and go on with more strength, developing understanding. It's humbling however since the work is never done.'

They each stood there in the silence, the small colourful patch of space lit up only for them. Horses quiet now tied up behind the canopy. His arm went about her shoulders, he whispered like he didn't want to wake someone else up, 'So, we're looking in places most people never do, for our ideas, aren't we? It makes us strange.' Bear looked amused.

'Not to each other.' Raven touched Bear's hand which hung over her shoulder. 'You're a free spirit,

grand as the mighty wind, unpredictable and strong but usually careful, quiet and methodical. Bears dance you know, they celebrate birth of their young, the good sunshine, they show their respect with something akin to art.' She hugged him with one arm. 'This gives life meaning the way our writing provides others and ourselves with something more than the obvious. We're doomed in a way to be peculiar, yes, but we're courageous about it.' They both stood straighter at the same moment.

'I can be brave.' Bear nodded. 'They say bears are unpredictable in the ways they may use their strength, patient and quiet, but can have sudden flares of anger, defensiveness. That's when I'll stop them hurting you.'

'Will anyone dare try with you near?' She smiled up at him and they in one accord turned to walk back and sit on the divan.

'I won't always be around.' Bear hunched over his hands now, looking at them like he was thinking he'd have a lot of work to do.

'We're both solitary and yet, we need each other. Okay, what have we got going for us? We need to plan, make a list, get things sorted out.' Raven searched the books and found a pad of paper then a pen in a case under the divan. 'You need to make your own list. We will always see the world differently. There will be people and places you go I know nothing about, and even if we share an experience it can never be the same even if we agree on some details.'

Bear gaped at her, 'You said all of that without hardly a breath.'

'Yeah, well, I think and talk fast sometimes.' She grinned and then wrote down a line.

Bear watched her writing but kept glancing out to the darkness, the nothingness surrounding them.

'I'm cautious, I'll always help you to take care. This what you want to know? Do we write this down? You write mine okay?' He stood up and walked about a while. Sat down again. Took a deep breath. 'My fierceness will be good when we need to be brave. As long as I stay fit and free I'll provide confidence and victory over adversity. Most of the time I much prefer a calm day-to-day life so we'll live in harmony. You know the bear is akin to people like a relative.'

Raven regarded him with wonder. 'Now, *you* said a lot really fast.'

'I caught it from you.' Bear shifted in his seat, stroked fabric on the divan, the purple velvet.

""The bear lifts me up so my view of the world is greater than before.""I read that somewhere. You also remind me of two people who are truly dear to me, and I like the thought they could stay near. Old, good friends.' Raven allowed tears in her eyes to spill over her cheeks while Bear watched her with some consternation. She wiped them away. 'I miss them. They love me though, I can feel it.' She stood up. 'I buried all the others.'

He gasped.

She shook her head, took his hands in hers. 'No, no, not really. I mean, they're not in my mind now. People who hurt me and I got away from. You know like in that darkness out there, they're gone.'

His eyes searched her face and he appeared to believe her, the way he smiled. 'Yeh, I've buried a few too. The gully in the back of my mind.'

'I like how quiet it is and our voices don't echo.'

'Good, old friends shall visit us here.'

They sat in silence a while. His last words kind of like a third person or more people now in the romantically lit place. They each could've been imagining who they'd invite to see them.

Bear regarded the tent-like area. 'What's our house going to be like?'

'O secluded and cheerful, a bit of room but not cavernous. You're asking me? What do *you* want?'

'A wine cellar and a brewing room. Make my own beer.' Bear looked for the crate but it had disappeared. He took up a glass of water from a small insulated box, sipped at it.

'Bear's Beer. We would market that.' Raven grinned.

'Let's not get ahead of ourselves.'

'I need a studio, an office of my own, Virginia Wolfe said so. A room of one's own.'

'Don't go putting stones in your cardigan pockets and walking into the river, will you?'

'I have several cardigans. My wardrobe's rather complete really. I have shoes, bags, clothes, dresses, trousers, leggings, socks, stockings, even night attire which is all good quality, I must say.'

'That tired me out. Have you brought all that with you?'

Raven ignored his question.

'My wardrobe's basically costumes and jeans.' Bear gazed out at the darkened day, they were now almost completely surrounded with darkness. 'All the world's a stage. I want to try dressing as a scientist next.'

'We're alchemists. What do they dress like?'

He gazed at her for a while, a bemused expression on his face, then spoke laughingly, 'O, robes I guess. We could have capes too. Long pointy shoes. Wizard hats.' In a second Bear was up, dancing around the open room of light and colour, embroidered canopy overhead and various lanterns about the covered space. 'Casting spells and not aspersions.'

They laughed and laughed, with each gale of laughter out in the darkness a tree appeared unbeknown to them. Soon many trees, hundreds covered hills and valleys, lined roads and pathways, reached up into the deep dark sky where dreams brewed and waited, until Raven and Bear slept to discover what could await them the next day and the one after, since we all dream our lives to come.