

LOVE AND HATE: BEN'S CASE

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Ben Lehman is traveling along a winding country road on a cold but sunny winter's day in early February. Snow is banked high on both sides; a blizzard had blown in from Canada only two days before. Ben began the trip shortly after noon in the old VW that he had purchased for a thousand dollars last summer. The price was a clear indication that the car required serious attention before it could pass the State Vehicle Inspection. He had done most of the work on the car himself and was quite pleased with the results. The time spent on making the repairs had provided him a therapeutic distraction from the pain he was suffering over the bitter breakup with his fiancé Eleni. She had walked out back in July, and the anguish of loss, like a form of madness, had intruded upon his every waking hour. He felt isolated, and in his unsettled state of mind he even thought that he was being shunned by all the people he knew. He found it very difficult to talk about his feelings with his friends, even his buddy Stacey. Stacey Poole was a fellow musician in the "Jolly Boys", the small band that had welcomed Ben to play his Gibson Les Paul guitar with them on occasion. Stacey had had an experience similar to Ben's and presumably could understand what Ben was going through. However, on the two occasions that Ben had tried to talk to Stacey, Stacey cut him short with the simple admonition, "you got to push aside all those obsessive feelings and get on with your life." Ben rationalized that Stacey was perhaps unwilling to re-open his own old wounds by being forced into the role of amateur therapist. Ben's younger brother Dean too was of little or no help. Dean was ten

years younger than Ben, and though they enjoyed a good relationship Dean was still just the kid brother. The few times that the subject of Eleni's departure came up between them, Dean's reaction was much the same as Stacey's—"Hey, Ben, you got to get over it and start living again"! Were Stacey and Dean aware that their responses trivialized the pain he felt?

It was for these reasons that Ben is making the trip to the small town where his cousin Herb lives. They arranged this meeting last week when Herb called to say that he would like to see Ben. He should have thought about talking to Herb a long time ago. Herb Lehman and Ben had grown up together and were very close as young boys. Herb was two years Ben's senior and often played the role of older brother to Ben. They had attended the same schools, but when Herb graduated high school two years before Ben and went off to the state university, their paths began to diverge. Herb had entered the college of engineering, and when Ben arrived two years later at the same university he entered the college of arts and sciences to study ancient history and archaeology. Different pursuits and new acquaintances soon conspired to push them even farther apart. Upon graduation Herb found employment as a civil engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, got married, and moved to a small town about sixty miles from the city. By the time Ben had finished the four year baccalaureate program he had already decided to pursue a career in Greek archaeology. Ben and Herb were by then grown men who had gone their own separate ways.

Ben's thoughts then move on to how he ended up in Germany instead of graduate school in the year after his graduation; how he had accompanied a group from Williams College conducting an excavation in southern France. After the summer in France he followed his plan to travel on to Heidelberg, Germany, where his family had relatives. His knowledge of the language was quite good, but this

plan allowed him a longer stay and thus an opportunity to gain greater facility particularly with spoken German.

He recalls how he had made friends with a group of students and others, all of whom were associated in one way or another with the archaeology program at the University of Heidelberg. He soon became interested in a young woman from that group. Gretchen Mueller was a student of architecture who had the good fortune to be invited to the newly re-opened excavations at the famous site of ancient Troy. Gretchen's task was to study the architectural data in order to reconstruct on the computer a scheme of the monumental remains found at the site. Gretchen had achieved therefore a kind of celebrity status within this group of friends. None of this was lost on Ben as he began to gravitate toward Gretchen. Life in Heidelberg seemed to be going well for him. It was then that Ben decided to enroll in the graduate program at the university to study Early Greek archaeology. By the following summer he was invited to accompany Gretchen to Troy as an official member of the German excavation team. As his thinking developed, his own growing interest in the Early Iron Age brought him into closer contact with the American excavation team. He befriended a couple of students from the University of Chicago who encouraged him to think about entering the flourishing program in Iron Age archaeology at the University of Chicago. Ben took their advice and applied that Fall to the University of Chicago and was accepted in the PhD program following the completion of his MA at Heidelberg.

In the spring of Ben's second and final year in Heidelberg, he and Gretchen were married. By June both had finished their work at the university before going off to Troy. At the end of the excavation season they were anxious to move on to a new life in Chicago. Those early years of their married life seemed happy. Ben had received a fellowship from the University of Chicago that allowed him to work full time at his graduate studies. Gretchen was employed by an architectural firm

that respected her desires to spend the better part of her summers working at archaeological sites. Their work careers were well complemented by an active social life, primarily with fellow graduate students and faculty from the Departments of Classics and Ancient History.

As Ben is driving and mentally skimming through these events in his life, he is well aware that it is not the first time he has performed this exercise. Each time he hopes that he might come up with different answers or a new insight. Will he maybe reveal some flaw of character and thus learn something new about himself? Inevitably he always comes back to the turning point, that moment that saw his life veer off into a whole different course. It started in the summer following his second academic year at Chicago. Ben was invited to accompany a small group going for the final season of excavation at a Greek site in the Peloponnese. It is a common practice at most excavations to hire native technicians from the area to perform certain tasks such as pottery mending and cleaning. One of these summer workers was a young, attractive Greek woman, Eleni Sougrou, a student from the University of Athens. She and Ben worked together on several pottery projects, and an easy comradeship quietly developed between them. The circumstances of the situation soon led to that stage where subtle, indirect protestations of innocent intent were made on both sides. He found himself having to say such things as: “I am a married man, you know...” or “My wife and I are meeting in Athens next weekend.” She offered equally lame scruples: “my father is a man of standing in our community in Athens and he would never approve of my becoming involved with someone who is not Greek.” There was more such blather, but it all amounted to the same thing – objections suggesting indiscreet endangerment were of little avail. As a matter of fact, the excitement of the risk involved merely fanned the flames, for the fire was already enkindled, and instead of being extinguished it engulfed them in an all out conflagration of uninhibited passion.

The moment their lips touched and their bodies pressed together, Ben lost all sense of self control and was immediately transformed into Eleni's love-slave.

Every time he reviews that moment in his memory he begins to sweat and his breathing becomes heavy. He had never experienced anything like this before. Never was his love-making with Gretchen as consuming or intoxicating as this thing with Eleni. "Thing"—he didn't have any other word for it. Even words like 'love' and 'passion' seemed so tame, almost pedestrian. At any rate, it seemed to them fortunate that the consummation of their passion occurred at the end of the season. In the close environment of an excavation, their amour would soon have been apparent. They left the site feeling smug that their affair had gone undetected.

Ben remembers the terrible emptiness that came over him when he had to leave Eleni in Greece and return to the U.S. with Gretchen. Back in Chicago he moped about, while the struggle inside him raged. The strain of trying to keep himself under control was becoming too much. While visiting the home of one of his professors, he suddenly lost it and burst into tears. After a few minutes he began muttering between his sobs something about his need to take a temporary leave of absence to return to Boston to be with his "dying grandmother"—that common fabrication used by students as a pretext to take time away from their studies. As he flew out of Chicago several days later the decision was forming in his mind that he could not live without Eleni, but part of the problem was that no one else was even aware of the relationship between himself and "the Greek girl from Athens". What was he to do? To whom could he confide the story of the storm that raged mercilessly within his soul? How could he face Gretchen? How could he return to Chicago and resume his graduate career? A week later he gathered the courage to make a couple of telephone calls to Chicago: one to resign his fellowship; and the second, which he postponed for a few days, to tell Gretchen

that he no longer loved her and wanted a divorce. Gretchen was absolutely stunned by his pronouncement. The full impact had not hit her at the time, and she agreed to a divorce by mutual consent. Thus the divorce was a simple uncontested filing of documents.

He remembers vividly how low he was beginning to feel about himself as he realized how he had lost his sense of self-respect and integrity. What integrity he asked himself? His life had become a deception. He started with a lie and discovered that he had to tell countless more to cover the first. With these thoughts weighing on his conscience, he decided that he needed Eleni by his side. He phoned her in Greece and begged her to come to Boston. And to Boston she came. From the start they decided that they needed a plan, something to give structure and purpose to their life together. The plan was to enroll at Boston University: Eleni would continue with her undergraduate education; Ben would take the courses required for a teaching certificate. Both would be preparing for teaching careers in high school. In the meantime Ben would continue with his new part-time job as night watchman at a nearby factory, and he would remain playing the occasional gig with the Jolly Boys. Things would be a little tight, but Ben was earning enough to sustain the two of them.

Ben does not care to continue with the memory of the events that followed. The recollection of the next three years has hardly been nostalgic for him. Instead it brought back sordid memories: Eleni's profligacy and the temper tantrums she would throw when she did not get her way; the two times she stormed off to the airport and flew home to Greece; his tearful imprecations on the phone begging her to return, granting her all sorts of concessions; the many nights he drank himself into a stupor. Under these conditions it took Ben three years instead of one to complete the certification program in education. Eleni, for a variety of reasons, never completed the requirements for her baccalaureate degree.

These painful memories are always with him and whenever he tries to shun the remembrances of those three years; his memory seems to go on automatic pilot and turns instead to the happier, intimate moments they shared. Oh, how he loved her, how he adored her. For him, love-making with her was an act of worship. His heart, even now, begins to beat harder as his thoughts turn to making love with Eleni as though all those numerous instances could be bundled together in one idealized and protracted act of intimacy. The fantasy always begins with an embrace and a lingering kiss unlike the kisses of other women. The rush of warm feelings, the sudden hypersensitivity that infused his whole being as his body pressed more tightly to hers, the touch of her breasts burrowing into his chest, his right hand slowly tracing the lower curvature of her back as the initial embrace succumbed to the unconstrained need to remove the clothing that impeded the fusion of their flesh in the erotic dalliance of exploration by hand and tongue until culmination in coital ecstasy. These emotions with all their compelling momentum, however, suddenly recoiled. Ever since Eleni's departure this sudden reversion of emotion was becoming more and more the familiar pattern that this recollection always invoked. Increasingly the rapture was replaced by something almost the opposite and certainly antithetical to that palpable desire of erotic possession. It was a signal that their loving embrace would likely never happen again, except perhaps in his torturous dreams and fantasies. The pain of what he thought to be unrequited love gradually morphed into a feeling of aversion, even antipathy, toward Eleni. He noticed too that this antipathy was growing ever stronger and was beginning to rival in intensity his enduring passion for her.

Suddenly the car lurches out of control on a patch of ice in a curve of the road that he had not foreseen because of the snow bank along the edge. Ben quickly removes his foot from the accelerator and begins lightly pumping the brake pedal. His braking maneuver along with the inch or two of snow on the road helps

to decrease the speed of the car which he soon brings under control and pulls to a stop on the side of the road. After catching his breath and thanking his lucky stars that there had been no traffic to complicate matters, he puts the car back into gear and resumes his trip. “I guess I had better concentrate on the road”, says Ben to himself. Then unexpectedly his thoughts shift back again to Eleni, and his memory conjures the vivid vision of her angrily strutting away in rhythm to the dramatic sway of her hips. Captivated by this enticing reverie he begins to mutter, “What an excellent ass. . . I want her. . . as I always want her.” Just as suddenly as the trance had appeared it was broken, and a sense of loathing overcomes him as he begins to curse her. “Damn her, damn that screwed up bitch”. Again he brings the car to a stop in the shade of a large stand of trees along the side of the road. He is shaking as he sits there gazing into the dark woods trying to clear his mind of such reveries and turn his concentration to driving. He gets out of the car and walks about examining the surface of the road. Patches of ice are detectable here and there under the light snow cover, but there is hardly any traffic. He judges that he should not be more than a few miles from his destination. Glancing again at the woods, he says, “I need to get myself under control. I need to stop thinking about her. This road, this weather, these woods remind me a lot of Eleni – Fraught with danger.”

As it happens, Ben is only a few miles from Herb’s house. The house sits back about two hundred feet from the road, just outside the edge of a small town. The wooden fence embracing the southern and eastern sides and a line of trees bordering the northern and western edges of the property suggest that Herb owns about ten acres of land. The house rests on a slight rise behind several large oak trees. Behind the house he can see several other buildings. Everything appears to be well-maintained. Ben drives up the well-cleared driveway into a large paved

area from which the snow had been neatly plowed. Here he turns the car toward the snow bank that faces the field on the southwestern side of the house. As he climbs out of the car he catches sight of Herb walking out to greet him with a welcoming grin. “Hello, stranger, you finally made the trip out here. You didn’t have any trouble finding us – it’s pretty much a straight shot on highway 119 after I-495. The highway was plowed the morning after the blizzard. You shouldn’t have had any trouble driving.”

Ben responds to the warmth of his cousin’s greeting, “your directions were great, and yes, the surface was pretty well cleared, but there are some spots where the light snow is covering patches of ice. I had a little scare a few miles down the road from here. If I leave when it is still light, I shouldn’t have any trouble. By the way, I am quite impressed with the house and the acreage. I had no idea that you had become a gentleman farmer. You should have some sheep grazing out here to complete the idyllic picture.”

“Hah”, cries Herb, “you jest, but wait till you taste my wine. If the weather allowed, I would take you to the back field and show you my little vineyard. I have about two acres devoted to a couple of varieties that are able to produce decent grapes in this climate. I’ve been making wine for eight years, just enough for myself and a few friends. It’s a nice hobby. However, I don’t think you want to be regaled with the details of wine-making. Anyway, it’s a little chilly out here. Let’s go in the house where I have a warm, toasty fire going and a bottle of my fine red waiting for us.”

“Sounds inviting”, says Ben, “I could be quite comfortable curling up in front of a fire with a glass of wine.”

As they enter the house, Herb informs Ben that his wife Millie, and their two boys, Herb jr. and Michael, will be gone through the late afternoon and early

evening. There is a hockey game at the school, and the mothers are providing a pizza party after the game.

“When we get hungry, you and I can go into town,” says Herb. “Our little hotel has a fine restaurant with a great cook. Afterwards we will come back here. Millie and the boys should be here by then. We would like you to spend the night, if you can.

“Thanks”, answers Ben, “but I will ask for a raincheck on the later festivities. Like I said, I want to start back while there is still daylight, given the condition of the highway. I would dearly love to spend the evening with you and the family, but I have to be in Boston early tomorrow morning, so I have to get back there tonight.”

They now settle into two large over-stuffed chairs before the fireplace in the den. Two glasses of wine had been poured. Cheese and knife on a board and crackers in a basket were placed on the coffee table between their chairs.

Herb mentions that he had talked with Dean several times over the past few months. Just a few weeks ago Dean had called him. “Your brother is worried about you”, says Herb somewhat pointedly. “He gave me some details about your break-up with . . . what’s her name . . . Eleni? He also mentioned that he had had a long talk with your friend Stacey Poole. I think it was last summer she left you? Right? At any rate, Dean and Stacey are of the opinion that you need to talk with someone. He feels that he himself, as your younger and inexperienced brother, is not up to the task. He remembers how close you and I were when growing up and thinks that I would be the most suitable person to do it. Stacey strongly agreed. Also, he told me that you would not discuss this sort of thing with your mother, who was very upset by your divorce from Gretchen and never accepted your friend from Greece.”

“All of that is quite true,” answers Ben. “When you had called me last week and urged that we get together and talk, I knew then that I needed to talk with someone like you. I need to explain what happened between me and Eleni and how I feel about the whole thing, the pain that I suffer, the depression, even despair that has taken hold of me.”

Ben recites the story of how he met Eleni on excavation in Greece; how they shared the excitement of risk in their illicit love-making. He confesses that he had become so enthralled with her that he could not imagine living without her. Here he stops the recitation of his story. A dark, unhappy look clouds his face and slowly he begins again to speak. “You know, Herb, I’ve become a loser, and the losses are getting worse. I began with the loss of a sense of discretion, of decorum, my career in archaeology, and now of self-esteem and well-being, and last of all I have lost Eleni for whom, ironically, I had sustained all other losses. Our three years together were a nightmare, a living hell. I allowed myself to be enslaved to her will. Any transgression on my part, real or imagined, was met with screams of abuse and threats. My submission to all of this outrage was degrading. My self-loathing had reached the pitch at which my very sanity seemed endangered. When she threw that last fit of rage, I was able to summon the final ounce of self-preservation that made me stand up to her and tell her that I could not go on living this way, that I would no longer grovel at her feet in abject repentance. Eleni flung her final threat, ‘I will leave immediately for Greece. And this time to get me back – and you will want me back – you always do -- you must then come to me in Athens on your hands and knees, begging forgiveness and promising eternal devotion.’ That was eight months ago, the last time I saw her.”

Ben stops speaking. Herb turns and notices tears streaming Ben’s cheeks. After a moment, Herb quietly speaks. “Someone once said that in a love affair generally one person is the lover and the other allows himself or herself to be

loved. So, it appears that what you and Eleni had was in reality just a rather typical love affair in which you were the lover, the giver, and she the taker, quite ungraciously, allowed you to love her at a terrible cost to you.

“You remember how we studied Latin back in our high school days. Later, at the university, I had an opening in my schedule one semester that allowed me to take a course in Latin Lyric Poetry. When I read Catullus in that course at the university, I found a number of his poems to be deeply moving, some of the finest poetry I ever read. Anyway, when Dean told me about you in that phone call two weeks ago, it brought Catullus to mind, particularly his brilliant epigrammatic poem #85;

*Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.*

*Nescio. Sed fieri sentio et excrucior.*

I hate and I love. Why do I do this perhaps you are wondering.

I do not know. But I feel it happening and I am in torment.

Do you remember ever having read this poem?”

“Yes, I read it in a class I took in college,” Ben answers. “I didn’t give it a whole lot of thought. At the time, the idea of loving and hating somebody simultaneously didn’t make much sense to me.”

“Do you now find something strikingly similar in your own experience of the paradoxical emotions of love and hate followed by the torturous ambivalence they create?” Ben’s thoughtful silence compels Herb to be more explicit, “what I am asking, Ben, do you recognize the same or a similar dilemma in the way you now feel as a result of your affair with Eleni? Are you feeling the torment that these emotions have created?”

Ben heaves a deep sigh and slowly turns his gaze toward Herb. “I loved her as I have loved no one else. She was the very breath of my life. I wanted, and I hoped that she would love me in the same way, with true, uncompromising

fidelity. I realized soon enough that my expectations and hopes were too much . . . too much to ever be true. I discovered early on in our relationship that she was sleeping around with other men. I was made aware of it as early as our first semester at Boston University. I often tried to meet her after our classes. One day when she was not among the students leaving at the end of her class, I began wandering around the campus in search of her. I caught sight of her in the company of a young man. From an advantageous position I was able to watch the two of them long enough to surmise that a physical intimacy had to have existed between them. She was screwing him, I was sure, and in time I came to discover that there were others. She was becoming increasingly indiscreet. She had an entourage of suitors, all of whom she was screwing. Once, when I tried to approach her with the timid suggestion that maybe she had become interested in someone else, she launched into a near-violent tantrum accusing me of infidelity and betrayal of our love. Her unexpected counter-attack had the effect of reducing me to a quivering mass of human flesh humbly begging forgiveness.” Ben’s face is now contorted into a mask of sickly pallor. His voice is hoarse as he whispers, “I had to eat that kind of shit before I could lick her well-used pussy.”

A funereal-like silence suddenly enshrouds the room. The only other sound is that of the flames licking a maple log in the fireplace.

Herb finally breaks the silence with the observation, “wow . . . you have your own variation on the theme of love and hate, and quite graphically expressed I might add. I got the picture.”

Ben turns to Herb and asks, “Catullus knew how to analyze the problem, but did he know how to fix it?”

After a moment’s reflection Herb replies, “In another poem he describes this terrible state of mind, the love-hate thing we have been discussing, as a ‘destructive disease’ that has driven all joy from his heart. He ends the poem with

a prayer to the gods to grant him mercy by driving out this dreadful illness. For Catullus it came down to the issue of forcing himself to look at and understand that the reality of what had happened between himself and his beloved Lesbia had been transformed for him into a loathing accompanied by a pathetically lingering sexual desire for her. There could be no return to the love that he had once idealized, and he had to exercise the disciplined restraint of resolutely closing his mind to even the thought of revisiting it in whole or in part.

“So I say to you, Ben, there is no pill, no medical or magical potion that can take away the pain and heal the heart. You must accept the fact that whatever you had with Eleni is irretrievably gone, and any fantasies you may harbor to the contrary can only be self-destructive, or in Catullus’ words, ‘a hideous disease’.”

“What you are saying then,” Ben replies, “is that no good has come from this whole experience? It has simply been a godawful exercise in self-destructiveness.”

Herb detects the despair in Ben’s reaction and offers in response, “if you are to find any comfort, perhaps it is in knowing that you are capable of loving, of giving yourself to another person in a very profound way. Maybe some day when this miasma of emotion subsides you may also find comfort in having weathered one of life’s very real storms.”

Small consolation, Ben thinks as he looks out the window, noticing that the sun had already set. Ben turns to Herb and says, “I want to thank you for talking with me, Herb. I realize that what you have given me is not a cure, but it certainly gives me something to think about. Maybe we can talk again soon and on a day when I can stay longer and spend some time with you and your family. Give them my best, but I need now to get on the road. It is getting pretty dark out there.”

Both men rise from their chairs. Herb presses his invitation one more time: “I wish you would re-think your need to leave, and instead spend the night here

with us. If you are meeting someone, perhaps a telephone call can take care of it.” Ben thanks him once again but remains steadfast in his determination to leave.

As Ben steers the car down the driveway, he is well aware that there was no pressing need requiring him to be in Boston either tonight or tomorrow morning. He actually is not quite sure why he had been so determined to leave, except for a nagging sense of unease, a vague feeling that his unsettled state of mind is unsuitable for normal social interaction. Furthermore he is feeling the need now to consider some of the things that he and Herb had discussed. He is skeptical about exercising mental discipline to overcome the awful feelings he is having. It reminds him in some ways of the smokers he knows who are trying to kick the nicotine habit. Whether this thing of love and hate was some kind of an addiction does not appear to be as important as his need to sort out his feelings, to separate illusion from reality, to learn just how his love for Eleni had turned into such a tempestuous contradiction.

He starts talking to himself, “I had always hoped that she would love me as I loved her in a mutual give-and-take. It just never turned out that way. I think I am beginning to see what she in fact felt for me. I thought that I had found true love, and she encouraged me to think that way, but what we actually had was a common, sleazy affair. Not only did she not love me, she never understood and never accepted my love as it was intended for her. She was just using me and in the process she gradually snuffed out my love and left in its stead this gnawing hunger for her sexual favors, the cheap counterfeits of love.” For Ben reality is now beginning to supplant his delusions, and it is not a pretty sight to behold. He becomes agitated and mutters to himself in angry caustic tones, “she is no better than a whore. Actually a well-paid whore would have been far less costly in time, money, and emotional energy. And as for me, I have become a fool. I play the

clown well.” The sardonic irony revealed in this moment of truth moves him to shout, “My God, what have I done?” and at the same time he increases his speed.

He is about five miles from Herb’s house when he draws up behind a car that is moving slowly. Ben glances impatiently down the left side of the car in front of him and notices nothing approaching from the opposite direction. He pulls out to pass and has difficulty picking up speed. He reaches that point of no return in passing the other vehicle when he recognizes the curve just ahead where he had stopped earlier beside the woods near the edge of the road. Suddenly the headlamps of an oncoming car come into view. Ben has the sickening realization that he has no place to go – snow drifts to his left and the car he is passing to his right. In the panic of the moment he hits his brake pedal. The car begins to spin out of control as the oncoming vehicle, a car larger than his, slams into him.

His last sensation is an awareness of his life passing in final review and receding into a web of shadows, the ultimate existential experience of melting into the immense passage beyond time.