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## **SCENES FROM AN OPEN MARRIAGE**

By Erica Jong

Long before Martha Stewart was a convicted felon or sprouted synthetic angel wings from going to jail for a few months, she was a college classmate of mine who became a caterer who became a conglomerate and who was famous in Connecticut for treating her employees like disposable paper plates. I have no idea whether she still goes around telling everyone I ruined her marriage, but I do wish I had the sexual power she attributes to me. Actually I believe had very little to do with the problems in her marriage. I was just a pawn in a power struggle, a spear-carrier in her opera.

Simone de Beauvoir, one of my literary heroines, who had a tortured longtime relationship with philosophical soulmate Jean-Paul Sartre, once wrote that when she embarked on writing about her life she felt she had begun “a somewhat rash adventure.” It cannot be otherwise. One’s life is full of mortifications, blind fumbings in the dark. It is terrible to have to

write them down—especially when you have pledged honesty—to the point of embarrassment.

Martha Kostyra was very pretty when I first saw her at Barnard. I knew she had “made” the cover of *Glamour’s* College issue, an envied desideratum of my day. She was blonde and tall and had married while still a coed. Like most Barnard girls she was fiercely independent and had a life apart from the college. Barnard was no bubble. In those days it was a commuter school. Lots of students were married and some had kids. It was a college for smart outsiders—which is probably why it has produced so many writers.

I didn’t meet her again until she had become a caterer in Connecticut. I was living in the next town, and we had several friends in common whose sons’ bar mitzvahs she catered with elegant hors d’oeuvres like caviar wasted on 13-year-olds. She had a rare attention to detail. Her food was delicious. It was also extremely expensive.

Martha’s husband, Andy, was a publisher of illustrated books, who was just then enjoying a great success with a book called *Gnomes*. It had humorous illustrations of all sorts of little creatures—gnomes, elves, sprites and fairies. Each of these creatures satirized a recognizable contemporary figure, complete with his or her accoutrements.

*Gnomes* was the sort of book no one could have predicted would be a blockbuster. Both the author and the illustrator were obscure, but somehow the satire and fantasy worked. And now there were gnome dolls, gnome cereals, gnome clothes, gnome pop up books.

One night Martha and Andy and my third husband, Jonathan Fast, and I were at the same dinner party in the country. Her husband began talking about doing a sequel to *Gnomes*—a book about witches. I had just published *Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones*, in which Fanny becomes a witch, a pirate, a highway woman and a high-class 18<sup>th</sup> century London hooker. I had steeped myself in research about witchcraft and paganism for *Fanny*. I was convinced that most of the things written about witches and witch-hunts were dead wrong.

In my research notebook for *Fanny*, I'd written:

Witchcraft--another name for the survival of paganism under the cover of Christianity in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. Paganism--never really extinguished, Figures of the horned God or the Mother Goddess never really replaced. They lingered on but had to go underground to survive. Witches' covens were pagan rituals practiced in the fields, under the full moon. Women were skyclad—or nude—and the peeping Christians saw iniquity where there was nature worship. It was a case of projection of lascivious desires onto innocent ancient practices.

Andy was intrigued. Here I was, an author ready to write—and passionate. The research was done. Publishers love that. They always suspect we will be dilatory in writing books and usually they are right. We are so scared of being judged that we look for every excuse to procrastinate. Here was a quick book by a famous writer.

Of course we both overlooked the fact that gnomes were fantasy creatures and witches were real. Nobody had been burned for being a gnome. Women had been burned all over Europe and America for being witches.

From then on, the Stewarts wooed me and Jon, sent us beautiful books, baby gifts (Molly was two) and invitations to dinner. Their dinners were spectacular theatricals—vodka bottles encased in flower-filled blocks of ice, hand-dipped candles, roses from their own bushes, eggs from their own hens. There were plenty of rich people in Connecticut then as now but nobody lived like that—but the Stewarts.

The husband often spoke of his “chores”—collecting the eggs, cleaning the henhouse, weeding the vegetable patch. He seemed somewhat bitter. And he was extremely flirtatious with me.

Then it happened that Andy and I were both due to be at the Frankfurt Book Fair at the same time and when I arrived I found a note from him

saying, “I can’t wait to see you.” I thought nothing of it. *Fanny* and I had a hellish schedule ahead. Both my German and Italian publishers had paid for my trip and my French and Dutch publishers also had claims on my time. I spent the five long days in the lobby of the Frankfurter Hof giving interviews, literally not leaving the hotel till after sundown. My mailbox was stuffed with requests from journalists, but there were also messages from Andy urging, “Call me!” and giving his room number.

“Hotel rooms inhabit a separate moral universe,” Tom Stoppard says in his play *Night and Day*. The same should be said of The Frankfurt Book Fair. Nothing said or done there should morally count. Everyone is exhausted, sure they are missing the best parties and anxious about their futures.

What happened next is not hard to imagine. I found myself in Andy’s room at the Frankfurter Hof one night. There I got to hear endlessly about his Martha.

“She doesn’t only want to control everything everyone *eats* but what everyone *thinks* at every moment,” he said. “When I’m home, I have endless farm duties and household duties. I have no life of my own. Everything is about *her*.”

And in my view, everything was indeed about her. His romancing me was about her, his conversation about her, his rage about her. Rage is not a good basis for sex. Nor is revenge. He was getting his revenge for his chores. He was getting even with her about things I couldn't even imagine.

I remember him as big and blond and enthusiastic. I know he pulled the comforters to the floor and it was there that we tangled. Whatever people may say of the delights of adultery, there are always these extra people in the room observing. You are playing to them more than to your partner. And all the while your demon is mocking you.

“You couldn't be happy with me—you had to drag this big blond one to bed? You'll live to regret it. The wife's a problematic enemy—or soon will be. What a pathetically easy lay you are—a few handwritten notes and you fall into bed? Or onto the floor? What's the matter with you?”

“But isn't he cute?”

“Cute and a token will get you on the subway. Besides he's not cute enough for all the trouble this will cause! You and Jonathan may have an 'open marriage'—if such a thing exists—but the Stewarts are thoroughly bourgeois. He cheats and she pretends not to know. They live in Westport, after all. Wait and see! You just wanted to show her who's boss. But she'll get you.”

This demon sounds suspiciously like my father but he is always, alas, right.

Right before I left for summer school in Florence when I was 19, my father said: “ I have one piece of advice for you: Never drink grappa with an Italian man.”

Of course that was the very first thing I proceeded to do after Italian literature class at the Torre di Bellosguardo. In fact, I defiantly drank grappa with every Italian man I met. I drank grappa on trains, on motorcycles, in little bars along the Arno. Later on, when I was older, I drank grappa on vintage sailboats and in Grand hotels. I am not sorry for my defiance—only grateful I survived it without catching any communicable diseases. And what was I looking for in that glass of grappa? An old-fashioned cordial: love. I never found it there.

In the morning I crept out of Andy’s room hoping not to be seen by anyone. But the deed had been done. My one-night-stand must have gone home and immediately told the wife he’d slept with me—which was apparently the whole point of the exercise.

From then on she never lost an opportunity to tell the world: ERICA JONG RUINED MY MARRIAGE. ERICA JONG RUINED MY LIFE. She told mutual friends, trashy journalists, Barnard Alumnae who had gathered

to celebrate her. Sometimes she said: “That woman ruined my life!” Whenever she saw me, she gave me a killing look.

And who could blame her? I was wrong. My demon made me do it. Sleeping with married men is always trouble. I have forsworn it.

If I could take this incident back, I would. My regret is Dantean—and not just because Martha keeps telling tabloid journalists about this twenty-six-year-old gaffe and denouncing me as if she had no faults herself. But I accept the blame. I was always besotted by books and anyone who made them. Remember the story of Paolo and Francesca in Dante’s *Inferno*, who fall in love over a book and are condemned to chase each other like a pair of doves through all eternity?

*“Galletto fu il libro e lui chi fatto,”*

*Our panderer was that book and he who wrote it. . .*

Beware of books. They are more than innocent assemblages of paper and ink and string and glue. If they are any good, they have the spirit of the author within. Authors are rogues and ruffians and easy lays. They are gluttons for sweets and savories. They devour life and always want more. They have sap, spirit, sex. Books are panderers. The Jews are not wrong to

worship books. A real book has pheromones and sprouts grass through its cover. Whitman knew that.

I pick up my facsimile edition of *Leaves of Grass*, given to me by the previous publisher. This is the same edition Whitman sent to Emerson.

I read:

*The English language befriends the grand American expression. . . It is brawny enough and limber enough and full enough. . . it is the powerful language of resistance. . . it is the dialect of common sense. It is the speech of the proud and melancholy races and of all who aspire. It is the chosen tongue to express growth faith self-esteem freedom justice equality friendliness amplitude prudence decision and courage. It is the medium that shall well nigh express the inexpressible. . . The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."*

The writer's job is to absorb. Plenitude and amplitude are our watchwords. We are "hankering, gross, mystical, nude." We know that mistakes are part of wisdom and wisdom is made of plenty of foolishness.

If you learn to loaf and invite your soul, you will make mistakes you wish you could cancel with a word. You cannot. You can only confess and hope for the mercy of heaven.

“Oh, come on,” my editor says. “You don’t regret any of those things, Without them, you wouldn’t be the person you are today. You might not want to do them now, but those adventures were part of your life. Don’t disown them. You are a seductress. You always wanted to be a seductress.”

“OK,” I say. I realize he’s right—which is why he’s the editor for me. The most uncomfortable things I did, I did knowing in my gut that I would write about them.

“Amen!” says my demon. “Amen!”

And thunder breaks and lightning flashes because demons aren’t allowed to say “Amen.”

Whenever I see Martha on TV, in tabloids, in magazines, I think, Does she trust anyone? It’s hard to trust, and I didn’t make it any easier for her. When you can’t trust anyone, there’s no choice but to wind up alone. A blasted marriage can also blast your heart.

*Excerpted from Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life by Erica Jong,  
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