

Conversation Pieces  
Volume 17

# Making Love in Madrid

A Novella

by

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Published by Aqueduct Press  
PO Box 95787  
Seattle, WA 98145-2787  
[www.aqueductpress.com](http://www.aqueductpress.com)

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11 10 09 08 07 1 2 3 4 5  
ISBN: 1-933500-12-3  
978-1-933500-12-6

Cover Design by Lynne Jensen Lampe  
Book Design by Kathryn Wilham  
Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:  
[www.writersmugs.com](http://www.writersmugs.com)

Cover photo of Pleiades Star Cluster  
NASA Hubble Telescope Images, STScI-2004-20  
<http://hubble.nasa.gov/image-gallery/astronomy-images.html>  
Credit: NASA, ESA, and AURA/Caltech  
Printed in the USA

## *Acknowledgments*

To all my friends and family whose love and support make my life possible: I've refrained from listing your names for fear of excluding one who may have been the most important without my realizing it.

I extend my deepest gratitude to L. Timmel Duchamp and Kathryn Wilham for having faith in a book by a previously unknown author. Many thanks for your work on my behalf.

*For Kent*

## I.

There is a wave in the air and Alan rides it like a surfer, hair scorched black by time. He is an expert rider, landing in another place like Madrid and marching down the street in matador fashion, his crouched-low skulking a thing of the past. He glances up at his own ten-foot face, angled and leering, and laughs out loud. Nobody looks. He turns sharply into the door of his hotel, a permanent hotel, where people live who hate to admit that they are home.

Sheila is walking up the stairs, and he crosses from one banister to the other, skirting her and making the turn before she gets a good look, but she is still sure of who she's seen—ah, yes, him, residing in Madrid now, if that's really where this is. Her short-term memory hasn't been a problem since the incident, but she can't bring herself to trust any part of her brain. How important are spatial relationships anyway? The meat of the matter is the soul. She's going to the one who's going to help her unravel all of this.

John opens the door and sees her standing there. It was Alan's high-heeled boots he's just heard. A moment before his heart had leapt with the thought—he's back—and then came the knock at the door, so naturally, he thought his moment had finally come, the acknowledgement he's been longing for throughout

his tenure as neighbor to the famed writer/musician/superstar had arrived. At first he had raced to answer it, but then, with a drop of lucidity, he had stopped short. He knows that eagerness for such encounters is shameful, and so short-stopped, he places a hand over his heart, forcing himself to count beats until he has achieved a reasonable rhythm and is confident of his face's lack of flush. The first thing he notices is her amusement, as if she'd anticipated his confusion and took delight in being the cause of it. He quickly corrects his fallen expression. It's not difficult, since she is attractive and smiling. Her brown hair is bobbed tight below the ears and frames a face that has been carefully protected from sunlight. She is tall for a woman. Her loose clothes testify that she is newly thin. "You're the writer," she says.

"...a writer, yes...?"

"This is your book," she says, drawing it out from the bag on her shoulder.

He looks down on a frayed cover, years old. He reaches out a reverential hand, but withdraws it with rising self-consciousness. "May I come in?" he hears her ask.

She sits poised on the edge of the sofa, angled precisely in his direction with left knee over right, overtly feminine, someone clearly creating a role but perhaps herself unaware of it, more like a female impersonator than a born woman. In contrast, she speaks aggressively and directly, raising a limp-wristed hand to touch fingertips to chest when making a pertinent statement and allowing it to dangle down to rest on the opposing wrist during connecting phrases; he finds himself mar-

veling rather than listening—such a strange mixture of grace and crudity—while she prattles pertly on the topic of admiration.

Even as she talks, she is assessing his lack of composure, his evident ineffectualness in his slouch and dumbfounded expression. When he'd opened the door, she'd hid her surprise—so much older than she'd expected, not that that was a bad thing. It was the weariness that filled every crease of his face, and buried within it, his eyes were filled with a hopefulness she was dashing just by being who she was (a person she herself didn't know) and not Alan. From this accounting of their initial collision grows a sense of responsibility toward restoring him, so that even as it is becoming clear to her that she has come all this way to squeeze a dry lemon, she proceeds with prodigious force—“You see my dilemma. I find myself without a history, and I need someone to fill it in for me. Additionally, I will need some kind of personal quirk, because such things make for convincing fictions.” She pauses, and adds philosophically, “If the world really were populated by fictional characters we would none of us understand each other for our compelling eccentricities.”

John, struggling to comprehend, licks his lips before forming the question he hopes will clarify, “You want me to write a life for you?”

“Exactly.”

“And what will you do in the meantime?”

“I'll wait.”

“Here?”

“Do you mind? They tell me I have a husband in California, but I hate to live with someone I don’t really know.”

John sits silent for a long moment, but no sense comes to him other than that of his own inadequacy. He says, “I can’t even write a novel. I’ve been trying for years.”

She looks concerned. “What seems to be the problem?”

“I can’t find a subject.”

“Here I am!” she says, throwing off some little spark of enthusiasm that begins to enliven him.

“Tell me again what happened to you,” he says, and she can see him straightening a tiny bit, as if pulled up by an invisible string.

“They told me I was the victim of Islamo-terrorists.”

John comes fully erect. “You too!” he exclaims, throwing his hands out in a wide gesture and grinning as if he’s discovered an unexpected compatriot in a foreign land.

Sheila answers with a puzzled look.

“Have you heard of a *fatwa*?” he fairly bubbles.

“You’re him?”

“Well—” he turns sheepish— “you’re probably thinking of Salman Rushdie. His book did much better than mine. The *fatwa* against him was big news. Mine didn’t get so much attention, but they take it seriously nonetheless. Why do you think I’m here in Madrid? That whole thing in New York—who do you think they were after? And then I came here and—you can put two and two together as well as I—but they’re not going to chase me off this time. I’m well hidden. They’re trying to flush me out, because they know they



can never find me where I'm at. Do you know who my neighbor is?"

"I saw him in the hall."

"Then you know it's safe here."

She looks skeptical.

"They follow me," he says meekly, his conviction waning under her scrutiny. "I have to be careful how I go about. Lucky for me, they have a high turnover rate. I rarely see the same ones twice. It's stifled all of my creativity, all of this looking over my shoulder, but I am determined to write one more book."

"What's it about?"

"What? The *fatwa*?"

"No, your book."

"I already told you, I don't have a subject." She watches as he sinks back into himself, recedes into the cushions. He looks to her hopefully, "Why were the terrorists after you?" he asks.

"Random act of violence?" she says with a shrug.

He gives her a knowing, pitying look, and she thinks to herself, I'm not going to be pulled into his paranoia. The thought tickles her brain, indicating that it had been there before, but the connection remains frustratingly unclear.

"Aren't you scared?" John asks.

"I doubt that they were trying to kill me specifically. Most likely it was some isolated crazy." And then she suggests, "Perhaps it was a subway bombing and I just happened to be there, or a show where I was in the audience."

"So, how do you end up here?"

“Something about your book resonated with me and I thought you’d be the one to write my history, make me a person again.” She pleads, “Give me a life to remember so that I can go on.”

He looks at her with compassion, “You don’t know how many times I’ve promised myself to give up this whole business. I keep telling myself, just one more, one more book and I’ll quit forever.”

“Oh, let it be mine, please...”

He is sitting straight again, buttocks pushed to the edge of his seat, knees pointing resolutely to the ceiling, “Yes, Sheila,” he says, “I will do it for you.”

“Oh, John, how wonderful! We should make love!”

His shoulders grow wider as he pulls her to his chest, her hair tumbling over his withered bicep. Thusly clasped, they twirl around the room in mincing steps, mouths mashed together. They rock tables they fail to notice as John guides her through the door to his bedroom, where they fall upon the matted sheets and proceed in frenzied disrobing. “Wait,” she says, looking stern, “I have to warn you before we go further. I’m not a quiet fuck, and I come so much it’s embarrassing, I mean, I lose all control of myself. Knowing this prevents me from being rabidly promiscuous, because I could easily. I have an incredible sex drive, really, I’m insatiable. You have to be certain you want to take me on, because I’m not going to leave you alone after this. I’m going to want more.”

She screams, the headboard thumps, and behind the wall an accompaniment starts up—heavy, straight-fingered chords are being pounded out on a piano. They rock and sway to a swirling crescendo from which

John falls back sated. Empty of semen and filled with masculine pride, he curls himself around her, the soft murmur of a resolving melody caressing the plaster between performers. John and Sheila, witlessly, are lulled to sleep deep, their dreams in tune with the music that plays on through the night, alternately leading them on horse chases and floating them on clouds, until morning's first light breaks. The sleeping couple wakes gently to the piano's trilling bird songs. John sits up first, stretches and groans with pleasure. Sheila arches on the bed, twisting to release a night's worth of kinks from her long body. John watches her happy writhing for a moment before rising to prepare their breakfast.

On the other side of the wall, Alan stops playing. His fingers curl into his palms with relief as he lies down for a brief nap. He falls off instantly and is assailed by dreams so beautiful they defy remembering.

While Alan frolics in his alternate universe, Sheila drapes herself atop a barstool to watch John fry eggs. He is chattering— “That’s what’s stifling me—my inability to observe people, being cooped up in this apartment all day, alone with my own juices.” He pours the orange juice as he says this and chuckles to himself in the way that writers do. “I need to get out of here,” he says, sliding a full plate in front of her. “I need to find some inspiration.” He sits down beside her and shakes out his napkin. Sheila’s spoon scrapes the orange interior of a melon, bringing up a sliver of flesh that looks like a goldfish sliding between her lips. Her eyes are half-closed in meditative ecstasy, tasting for the first time, when he puts a hand on her wrist. Turning, mouth full, she sees his eyes rimmed with concern.

“You’ll be alright here by yourself?” he asks. “Just for a little while, no more than a couple of hours?” She nods and resumes chewing. John watches her for a few seconds more, searching for signs of distress, and detecting none, he picks up his fork.

With a relaxed sense of fullness, Sheila watches John wash the dishes. He whistles as he rinses. She looks at the plates lined up on the drying rack, while he scurries through the bedroom applying his attire. He comes out wearing a long coat and lopsided fedora. He goes to her, bends to kiss her cheek, and says, “So, I won’t be gone long.” He glances nervously around the room. “Make yourself comfortable. You’re sure you’re okay here?”

She nods, waves goodbye, and with a knowing smile, watches him step through the door and then lean back in. “If you’re at all uncomfortable with this, I mean, being here alone, I can stay. I don’t have to go out.”

She laughs and shoos him with the backs of both hands. He ducks his head out and closes the door behind him.

Sheila stands behind the big sofa in the living room, resting her hands on its long, humped back. She massages the mauve velveteen cover and trails her fingertips over it as she moves around to its side and stretches out her opposite hand to the bookshelves that line the wall. She closes her eyes to trace the book spines, feeling the differences in texture, some worn, some smooth, the jacketed ones as opposed to the ones in soft cloth bindings. She avoids the bumps and ridges of embossed titles she’s afraid might interfere with whatever words she is hoping to draw to the surface of her mind. Her fingertips creep over the tops to explore their paper edges,

slipping on the gilding, jumping where the pages are jagged, threatening her with razor thin cuts. Her nostrils flare as she takes in their various scents—new glue, old thread, decaying Scotch tape—all somehow familiar to her. The saliva filling her mouth takes on a flavor. Her tongue rolls it front to back, examining its components. There is something here. A memory? A collection of memories? She can't make it out. These could be her books, or like her books. They could be books she has seen before, or perhaps she has lived next to a used bookstore. The thought of grappling with so many scrambled possibilities exhausts her. If only she could blink and make it come clear. Her head sags on her neck, rests itself against the sturdy spines of the books that make a solid row, a bank her river of thoughts can't breach. Her fingertips hook to the wooden lip of a shelf whose veins transfer a subtly shifting vibration through the ridges of her prints. The tingling reaches into her blood and completes the entire circuit of her body before her ears register the sound of music coming from the other side of the wall. The sound grows louder as she lifts her head and tilts an ear in its direction. It dawns on her that this is not the first time such sounds have provided a backdrop to the activities of this apartment.

The effort to remember dissipates in her urgency to make the muffled melody come clear. She leaves John's apartment, closing his door behind her before approaching the next one. Her fist rises, poised to knock, but she hesitates, knowing that when it falls the sound within must stop. She savors it for a moment longer before steeling the resolve that makes the wood ring

out its own clear note. One thump of the bass and he is there. The door opens like the turning of a page that reveals the most unexpected and vivid representation of a character. He is standing in the portal, eyes open to the bright light of the hallway that sets him in relief against the deep shadow of the room behind. Sheila blinks her eyes rapidly, willing them to adjust to the apparition and realizing that it is the difference in the light that makes it look like his form is resting on a sheet of dark paper. He reaches out a hand to her. She slips her own into its curved palm that is like the cool porcelain arc of a teacup; his fingers close on her fingers, and their digits entwine like chain mail. Her eyes encounter the top of his red tornado of hair. This explains the encrustation of red dye beneath his long fingernails, which would otherwise suggest that he's just dissected an animal whose carcass is still hanging, dripping, in another room. She looks down into his face, and he smiles, showing long yellow teeth that contrast with the luminescent pallor of his cheeks. Deep inside, Sheila feels the stirrings of love.

He leads her into a sitting room that has at its center a grand piano lit by a candelabra, whose dripping stumps add wax to the stalagmites growing up from the wood. Leaning in each corner is a different instrument—a banjo, a guitar, a doboró, and a mandolin. Alan gestures toward a small couch that has been pushed against one wall, and she sits. He stands before the keys of the piano. He bends his elbows and rears his hands back to his shoulders, fingers snarled out in all directions. His lip curls as the hands lunge like a pair of striking vipers. Music jumps into the air, filling the

space between Sheila's buttocks and the cushion before she has a chance to resettle. The melody carries her into a mindless reverie, all the tiny hairs of her body thrilling to what can only be an original composition.

Sheila's skin is still thrumming to the silence that follows the music's cessation, when she feels Alan's smooth hand on her hand. She stands, but feels lifted. He ushers her into a hallway filled with guitars, all hanging from the ceiling by their necks. First mistaking the instruments for victims, she jitters with fright until recognition makes her laugh. She ducks and dodges as they weave their way through this forest of swinging hollows. Alan's hair folds and recoils, brushing against the strings and causing them to ring with unintended melodies. They emerge from the tinkling trees into a bedroom anchored by a huge round bed suspended by cables from a single hook in the ceiling. A spiraling canopy of red brocade curls around the bottom of the mattress, so the entire construction looks like a giant bottle made of terra cotta. Against each of the room's four walls stands an upright piano. Seeing them recalls a memory of the night before, but Sheila can't seem to make it come clear. Alan parts the curtain, and she gratefully climbs inside the vessel.