

Coy Mistress

Everyone at University knows who Bre Sullivan is because she misses classes every now and again when she flies to New York, or LA, to do a photo shoot for a magazine cover or a full-page perfume ad, and not long ago her first runway show.

Eric recognizes Bre as soon as he walks in the University cafeteria. She is seated at a table eating and laughing with the girl sitting beside her; no one else is at their table. Bre is wearing jeans, a loose-fitting tee shirt untucked, a trucker's hat without a logo, and sandals. Her demeanor at school is quiet, withdrawn, transparent.

Eric puts his backpack on a table and rummages through it. Bre is twenty-years-old and in her second year at University, Eric is twenty-three-years old and dressed a little better than the average college student, today he is wearing dark blue Dockers with a black belt, a white, three-button pull-over, tucked in, and black loafers.

He takes a clipboard from the backpack, clips a sheet of paper to it, and walks over to Bre and her friend.

"Hi, my name's Eric, I work for Associated Distributors the company that provides most of the food service for the cafeteria. I'm doing a little survey and would like to ask you a couple of questions about the food offered here. May I sit down?"

Bre's friend, Sherry, looks from Eric to Bre, Bre shrugs, Sherry says, "Okay."

Eric sits, and asks, "Do you think the cafeteria offers a large enough selection of items?"

Sherry answers, "Yes, but more would be better."

"What else would you like to see offered here?"

Sherry again, "Pizza would be good, tacos..."

Eric appears to be filling in blanks on a form, "How would you rate the quality of the food that is offered here?"

This continues for a few more questions, then Eric says, "Okay, thank you, you've been very helpful. Now what are your names?"

They tell him their first names.

Then without looking up, Eric asks, "And your phone numbers?"

Sherry and Bre look at each other and frown, then Sherry leans over and pushes the clipboard down where they see that he hasn't written anything, it's a blank sheet of paper. They look at each other and laugh, Sherry says, "Oh my God, we've been had, this was just a con to get our phone numbers; you sly fox you."

Eric laughs, leans back in his chair, and says, "Okay, you caught me, but you can't blame me, it's not as if I could have come over here and asked Bre Sullivan for her phone number and she would have given it to me. Right?"

Sherry and Bre get up laughing and gathering their things, Bre says, "Nice try, and nothing against you, but I'm not seeing anyone at this time. I think I signed up for too many classes and between that and work I'm having a hard time keeping up so, thanks but no thanks."

A week later, Bre sits in her English Lit 202 class and looks around, everyone is there except the instructor, just then Eric comes hurrying in and goes to the front of the class. He puts his backpack on the instructor's desk, then writes on the blackboard, "Eric Brandt."

To the class he says, "Professor Carson had some kind of emergency and can't be here today, so they asked me to fill in for him."

He points to his name on the board, "That's me, you can call me Eric."

Noticing that Eric doesn't look any older than the students a young man asks, "Are you a professor?"

"Yes, I have a Ph.D in English Literature and I'm working on one in History of Western Civilization. My field of study is where literature and history come together, what was going on historically when different literature was written."

When he takes roll and Bre answers to her name he continues without looking up.

After roll call he asks, "What was Professor Carson's last instructions to you?"

Several people answer, "Andrew Marvel. He told us to read Andrew Marvel."

Eric goes over and looks out the window, "Ahh, Andrew Marvel, great name, eh? It was his father's name too. He was born near Hull in England and grew up there becoming fluent in French, Italian and Spanish, and most of his early poems were in Latin or Greek. One of his most famous poems is, *To His Coy Mistress*.

Eric sits on the front edge of the desk, looks down, takes a beat, then looks up and for the first time levels his gaze on Bre who sits in the back of the class.

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk and pass our long love's day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges' side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain.

Eric continues reciting while stepping over to a gray metal, folding chair beside the desk. He grabs the back of the chair and begins slowly dragging it noisily across the floor while still looking at Bre. Students look from Eric to Bre and back again.

I would
Love you ten years before the Flood,
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.

He starts down the aisle where Bre sits while dragging the chair and letting it bang against the desks. The class is hypnotized by his performance, every eye is upon him. A few students stand and lean against their desks to get a better view.

My vegetable love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes and on thy forehead gaze;

He stops in front of Bre and slams the chair down with its back to her then straddles the chair, sits and crosses his forearms on the back of the chair. She looks down with eyes wide, and covers her mouth with her hand. One of the young men in the back of the room says, "Go for it." More students stand and watch, mesmerized.

Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.
For, Lady, you deserve this state,
Nor would I love at lower rate.

A girl fans herself with her hand, another one whispers, "Oh my God."

Eric pauses, pretends to look over his shoulder, then looks back at Bre, their eyes meet, she can't look away.

But at my back I always here
Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.
Thy beauty shall no more be found,
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity,
And your quaint honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my lust:
The grave's a fine and private place
But none, I think, do there embrace.

A young man says, "Do it" a young lady says, "Oh my."

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may,

Half the students are standing, a girl slaps her hand on her forehead, another has her hand on her throat, a young man says, "Yes, hell yes"

And now, like amorous birds of prey,
Rather at once our time devour
Than languish in this slow-chap't power.
Let us roll all our strength and all
Our sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life:
Thus, though we cannot make our sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

Eric stands, slams the metal chair closed, and walks back up the aisle as the room bursts into applause and cheers. Bre's face is red, she puts her elbow on the desk, her hand on her forehead, and looks down, while breathing hard.

Eric finishes the class lecturing about Andrew Marvel's friend, John Milton and his epic *Paradise Lost*. Later, as the students file out of the room Bre goes to where Eric stands behind the desk putting things in his backpack. She slides a sheet of paper across the desk with her name, phone number, and "Best 7-8 PM" written on it.

He picks up the paper, glances at it, smiles, and says, "Great, you want to go get a coffee or something?"

"No, I have a class, but... we'll talk later."

They begin seeing a lot of each other. Their meetings often involve him going over to her place, where she lives with her parents, while she works on her studies, and he works on her, until she's get half-mad and says, "I have to get this done". Then he pitches in and helps her with her work, or leaves her alone while he reads, and looks up at her every few minutes.

At one point he says, "I don't come over here to be your tutor, you know."

She smiles sweetly, "Oh really? I thought there were things you wanted to teach me. Oh well, never mind, I guess that will have to wait."

Exasperation is his default.

One late afternoon he is at her house helping decorate the living room for a party. It is her parents 25th wedding anniversary, and Eric and Bre are blowing up balloons of many colors. They have emptied a small container of helium filling balloons and talking and laughing in squeaky voices and are now using their pursed lips to blow up more balloons. The ceiling, floor and furniture are alive with slowly undulating balloons like a bloom of jellyfish in a changing tide.

Eric, "I think it's really special that your parents have been together for 25 years."

"I know, and they still get along great."

Eric, "That's what I want when I get married. Both of my parents have been married several times and I don't want that. Whoever I marry will have to go into it knowing that it's forever."

He looks at her for a reply and she says, "That's assuming you could find someone to marry you."

"Oh, aren't you cute?"

He lets the air out of the balloon he is holding so it makes a squeaking noise and aims it at her.

Balloons bob around their feet, the aquarium make a bubbling sound.

She says, "I'm just kidding Sweetie, there might be a girl out there someplace who would have you."

“Thanks for that vote of confidence, Bre, and I think you’re right, having been with dozens of women from all over the world I think I might...”

She cuts him off, “You know for someone so well-educated sometimes you’re not very smart. I really don’t want to hear about all the women you’ve been with, okay? You wouldn’t want to hear about all the men I’ve been with, would you? Not that I’ve been with any men, but you know what I mean.”

“Okay, okay, sorry. It’s just that I wanted you to know that when I get married it will be forever.”

“Why are you telling me, I don’t care.” She thumps a balloon at him.

He looks down and doesn’t say anything.

Thinking she may have gone too far, she stands up and stuffs two balloons under her tee shirt that look like huge breasts.

He looks up at her and registers open-mouthed shock, then smiles.

She puts her hands on her hips and shakes the balloons, “Yeah, you like that don’t ‘ya? You men are all alike, I swear.”

He stands and starts toward her, she turns and walks away while looking over her shoulder, “Oh no you don’t, I know what you want.”

He quickens his pace. She starts to run around the room looking over her shoulder while laughing and yelling, “Stop, leave me alone,” and staying just out of reach. He finally grabs her, and they fall laughing onto a couch, her balloons pop, and she squeals. They kiss and arrange themselves on the couch as balloons swirl around them.

Later, they are sitting beside one another on the couch, he turns away and blows up a black balloon, ties it off, turns to her and says, “Look, this one has something inside it.”

He hands it to her and she holds whatever is in the balloon between her thumb and forefinger. He quickly pops the balloon, she blinks, and like magic she is holding a diamond ring between her thumb and forefinger.

He slides off the couch getting down on one knee, “Bre Sullivan, my dream girl, since we met at the University three months ago I haven’t stopped thinking about you, and I would love to spend the rest of my life thinking about you and trying to make all your dreams come true. I know you could have any man you want but I can only hope that you love me half as much as I love you. If you do... will you marry me?”

Bre bounces up and down a little on the edge of the couch, throws her arms around Eric and pulls him to her.

“Yes, yes, definitely yes. Now say that again while you’re putting the ring on my finger.”

He laughs, puts the ring on her finger, starts saying it all again, she leans to him, puts her hands on each side of his face and kisses him, he never finishes what he’s saying, “Oh Eric, this is so wonderful, I’ll graduate in two years then we can have a Fall wedding and...”

Eric falls back, “Two years! Are you kidding! I can’t wait two years, don’t you remember ‘Times winged chariot’? Two years? You can’t be serious.”

“Now Eric, take it easy, it’ll go by like that.” She snaps her fingers. “And yes, I also remember, ‘though we cannot make our sun Stand still, yet we will make him run’. We will make him run, like, time fly’s when you’re having fun.”

Eric stands up, “No, no that’s not what it means. It means that if we seize the moment now, time will fly.”

She stands up facing him, “Maybe, but maybe it means what I said.” She puts her arms on his shoulders and leans into him, “Anyway, if you really love me you won’t mind waiting.”

He exhales and looks away exasperated.

Bre and Sherry are sitting at a table in the University cafeteria looking at Bre’s ring when Sherry says, “What’d he say when you said two years?”

“Well, he didn’t like it, and I guess we kinda left it up in the air.”

Sherry, “Well, you know what you want, but I don’t think I woulda... two years, man, that’s asking a lot. You could go ahead and get married and still finish school. Are you gonna stay on the modeling career path?”

“That’s been on my mind a lot lately and some people may think I’m crazy, but I don’t think modeling is really being true to who I am. I don’t want to spend the next however many years using my looks to get by, swanning down runways with strangers staring at me, and posing for pictures.”

Sherry, “You remind me of what I heard someone say the other day about politics, they said that the best people don’t go into politics. And think about it, the best and brightest here at University aren’t majoring in Politics, they’re majoring in Medicine, and Law, and things like that. Maybe some of the most qualified people, like you, don’t go into modeling. So, what would you do career-wise if you don’t continue modeling?”

“I don’t know but it won’t be something where I just trade on my looks.”

“Good on you, Girl, but you’re right – most people will think you’re crazy.”

Bre shrugs.

At 10 PM, Eric drives into the Hilton Hotel parking lot, “I told you it’s a surprise.”

Bre, “I’m not going to a hotel room with you even if it is the Hilton.”

“I can’t believe you would think that of me.”

“Well, we’ve already had dinner, there’s no entertainment here, so...”

Eric laughs, “Take it easy Darling, you’re gonna love it.”

The Desk Clerk gives Eric a key card, “Everything’s ready Mr. Brandt, but if you need anything let me know.”

As they turn to walk away the Desk Clerk bites her bottom lip and gives Bre a raised eyebrow smile.

He leads Bre down a hall then uses the key card to open a door. The dimly lit ballroom is huge with a hardwood floor, one small, round table in the center of the room with two tall candles, an ice bucket with a bottle of wine, two glasses, and one long-stemmed red rose lying on the white table cloth. There are two high back, overstuffed chairs at the table and a cart against one wall with a cd player and speakers on it. Soft romantic music is playing, and near the high ceiling a mirror ball turns around slowly, sending little beams of light around the room.

Bre steps in, inhales a little gasp, and puts her fingers over her lips, "Eric, oh my God, this is beautiful. You are the sweetest fiancé a girl ever had."

He closes the door behind them, takes her hand and leads her to the table.

They sit, drink wine and talk for a few minutes, then he asks her to dance.

At first, they are a little awkward dancing together but after a few minutes she says, "I took dance for 3 years when I was little, but then I had a growth spurt and got all tall and clumsy. Now I'm starting to think you've had lessons."

He laughs, "No, but thank you."

Through one song after another they slow dance around the room getting better and better, and eventually becoming one fluid essence. Without being aware of it, for the next couple of hours they maintain constant physical contact. When a song ends they walk back to the table holding hands and sit at the table with his hand over hers, or their legs touching under the table. Eventually, while dancing, something aligns in them, and their hearts pressed together beat as one.

At midnight they go out to the dark, deserted pool, she slips her shoes off, and lowers her feet into the water. He takes his shoes and socks off, pulls his pants legs up, and joins her. They sit in silence watching the reflection of the moon ripple on the water, with his arm around her waist, and their feet touching underwater. After a few minutes she says, "I don't guess we really have to wait two years."

end