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BATH ROMANCE

BY KARA MAE BROWN

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As the train swept around yet another green hill, I caught, or thought I caught, my first glimpse of Bath. The hills nestled the city in their folds, like it was cupped in the palm of a giant grassy hand. A translucent mist, leftover from the afternoon rains, clung to the sides of the hills, shrouding the valley. The buildings, made of the famous, creamy Bath Stone of the region, glistened like gold where the sun pried through the fog. The chimneys and angular roofs hid behind the trees that ran along the tracks, making it difficult for me to get a good view of the city. Bath finally showed itself to me fully as the train slowed coming into the station, but still the city shimmered and wavered in the mist like a mirage. Even at first glance, Bath honestly seemed too good to be true—a mysterious, hidden city blessed by Midas' touch.

My own condition couldn't have helped my dreamlike impressions of the city that would be my home for the next couple of months. I had spent the train ride from London banging my head on the table in front of me, where I passed out as soon as the train left Paddington Station, having lost my battle with a raging hangover. I was scheduled to begin a semester's study of Shakespeare at a college in Bath, sponsored by my own university back in Ohio and I was dreadfully late for our first meeting. I had a hard time leaving London, where I made friends with some interesting Finns in the hostel near Hyde Park but, alas, the Bard, and Bath, beckoned.

The taxi I hailed outside the train station wound around the city in incomprehensible spirals. Bath is an old city, dating back at least to the time of the Romans' settlement of Britain. Like all old cities, Bath grew in a chaotic manner, so the roads are a mangled twisted web, ill-suited to modern automobile travel. At times, like Alice, I thought I must have eaten the wrong cake and the taxi and the driver and I were all shrinking in order to fit on the cramped roads. It seemed that at any moment the cab would take a wrong turn and I would find myself down a rabbit hole. On the other hand, there was something undeniably charming about the cramped cityscape that rushed by the windows. Especially for a Midwesterner, accustomed to a landscape that seems to be constantly sprawling out of reach, the way the buildings of Bath huddled together and crowded the street was remarkably intimate and inviting.

I was dropped unceremoniously at the top of a steep hill in front of my new address, Somerset Place. Somerset Place is a dormitory in one of the crescent buildings that Bath is so well known for. The crescents are regular townhouse structures that are curved back from the road. The graceful arc of the building made the uniformity of its three stories and rows of windows seem less menacing than they might be on a flat façade. As the cab pulled away, I was struck by the quiet that settled in this place. I checked my watch again and saw that I was now almost an hour late. I had expected to find a place bustling with students, but instead

found myself all alone at the top of a windy hill, confronted with a building locked up like a fortress, with a worsening headache and no clue as to what I was supposed to do.

I hoisted my backpack onto my shoulders and started walking around the building, hoping I would eventually happen upon a cluster of students enjoying the arrival of sun after the afternoon rain, but the place seemed deserted. As I rounded the left corner of the building, crossing a patio area and continuing on a walkway that climbed further up the hill, I encountered the first person I had seen since reaching the school. He was a man of about 30 or so, dressed sharply in boot-cut jeans and a vertically striped maroon and grey button-down shirt. As he drew closer, I could see that the rest of the man was as attractive as his clothes. His wavy, light-brown hair was short, but long enough to be lightly tousled. He had just the right amount of stubble across his chin and a nose that dropped just a little above his mouth. As we passed, he nodded in hello, looking me straight in the face with warm brown eyes under some serious lashes.

After he had gone by, I was embarrassed to notice that my heart was pounding and that my face seemed stuck in a smile. Even the fog of alcohol lifted a bit and the world seemed a much clearer place. Hell, maybe even the sun shone brighter. Then I became more aware of my own appearance, tattered jeans rolled up above my goofy looking high-top Chuck Taylor's, my tangled hair pulled into a limp ponytail and secured with a navy bandanna. I was a mess and in no shape to be approaching an attractive man who I assumed must be a graduate student at the college, maybe finishing up some research before the summer break. Just as I was about to push the alluring stranger out of my thoughts for good, I heard a voice call out behind me.

"Excuse me!" He called, his accent twisting around the words.

I turned to see the man standing in the open patio area, considering me with an openly inquisitive look. I instinctively began walking back towards him.

"Are you one of the Ohio students?"

"Yeah..."

Before I could say much more to explain myself, the man became all animated, a charming smile breaking across his face. He held out his hand, "Hello then, I'm Greg. You must be Kara. You're the last to arrive; we've been waiting on you."

Taking his hand, I replied, "I am. Sorry. I got caught up in London..." Greg. Greg was the name of our British program director and professor. A month earlier, at the first orientation meeting back in Ohio, two girls had spoke to us about their own experience in Bath the prior summer. When they got to the subject of Greg, they just smiled at each other knowingly and said, "Well, you'll see about Greg."

Indeed.

Greg didn't seem to need any explanation of where I had been, or why I was so late. He seemed only interested in welcoming me, "Alright then, shall I help you with your luggage? Did you bring a cab?"

"I did, but actually, this is all I brought," I said, shrugging my shoulders to emphasize the pack on my back.

Greg hesitated, "Really? Well, I'm impressed."

I was glad to hear it.

Greg had a personality that hit like a tornado and I was swept up in it. Talking at breakneck speed, flailing his hands around in hyperbolic gestures, asking questions and supplying answers all at once, Greg gave me a tour of the dorms at Somerset Place. We whirled past the kitchen and descended on some of my fellow students there. I noticed that Greg's mere presence seemed to cast a spell over everyone in the room. He had a kind of magic that, when he was around, you forgot anything else existed and time froze for however long he was near.

Male and female students alike were drawn to him. All the boys talked to him like they were childhood friends and all the girls eyed him, shifting their weight into more flattering poses. He had a way of addressing everyone in the room in only a matter of moments. He made everyone feel comfortable and important. He was a force to be reckoned with.

Finally, Greg led me to a door near the end of the hall. He opened the door with a key and showed me into the room that would be my own for the next two months. His voice became more hushed and his frantic pace seemed to slow as he pointed out the obvious in the tiny, plain room.

"This is your bed. And here's the desk."

I sat down on the lumpy mattress and just watched him as he roved around the room. I knew that he had done his part by showing me around and that soon he would leave and I dreaded it. He didn't seem to want to go. When he finally stopped moving, I stood. He held out his hand again, looked me in the eye, and said softly, "It was nice to meet you, Kara." Maybe I imagined it, maybe it was a part of his spell, but there seemed to be a moment then, before he dropped my hand, that something significant transpired. I felt like the train had just come around the hill again, and like Bath rising out of the mist, something important had been revealed to me.

If there was a moment between us, it passed quickly and Greg left, leaving me devastated in his wake. I took a deep breath and sunk back onto the mattress. I had no reason to believe that the pounding in my chest was more than the excitement of arrival or if the glances between us meant anything at all, but, as Greg stepped out of my room, for the first time since I had arrived in England, I felt utterly alone.

Bath is a city imbued with romance. In the 18th century, the city's preeminent citizens conspired to make it so by building the graceful limestone buildings that still stand today and by luring visitors with the promise of healing waters, cards, theatre, and dancing. Bath was England's biggest destination next to London, especially for young, single women looking to make a propitious match with the many attending gentlemen at the balls. Because Bath was also the center of high fashion, these marriage seeking young ladies would visit the shops in Bond and Milsom Street to deck themselves out in the latest high-waisted muslin gowns and decadent, fruit bejeweled hats, which they could then wear to the infamous Assembly Room balls.

The high-society and romance of Bath in its heyday was perhaps best captured in the works of Jane Austen that take place in the city where the author once lived. In *Persuasion*, "Prettier musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy could never have passed along the streets of Bath" when the pushed-around Anne Eliot is finally reunited with her beloved Captain Wentworth. Also, in *Northanger Abbey*, the plain, common Catherine Morland experiences the bedlam of the Upper Rooms during her first ball, where she also meets her future husband, the "strange" Henry Tilney. Indeed, the balls of Bath must have been affairs to remember, where the most-esteemed of English society crowded against one another in a way uncommon in an era where propriety kept men and women chastely apart. The ladies in their finery would be hoping to catch the eyes of a rich gentleman and a man down on his luck might encounter an

independently wealthy young woman. They would dance the night away, with hopes of love and marriage filling their heads.

Another one of the longest standing traditions of Bath arises from the fact that the town is built on the site of naturally occurring hot springs. Indeed, this is what first attracted the Romans to the site during their British invasion in the first century. The Romans channeled the natural hot springs into a bath complex and built up the town from its Celtic roots. The town was referred to as Aqua Sulis, or "the waters of Sulis," for a Celtic goddess with much in common with the Roman's Minerva since they both valued wisdom and healing. Although the town fell into disrepair and Aqua Sulis was lost to time and erosion, the baths would rise again. The remains of the old Roman complex were gradually uncovered during the 18th century and the town, now known as Bath, was revived to its former status as a place of healing and leisure.

The characters of Jane Austen's novels, as well as the real life people they were modeled after, would have also flocked to Bath to "take the waters." The spring waters are heavy in mineral content and said to have healing powers, a general curative for almost any ailment. In the late 18th century, the Pump Room, another sophisticated meeting place, was built to accommodate the process of taking the waters in style, while socializing, eating, and, most importantly in Bath, being seen.

Not much has changed in Bath. It is still a popular tourist destination, where the well-heeled shop the boutiques and bask in the general luxury of the town. The Roman baths are open to tours, although actually coming in contact with the water is discouraged since it still runs through the Roman lead pipes. One can even still visit the Pump Room, where a servant in 18th century garb pumps the vile tasting water into a plastic cup to drink. Given the history of Bath, the writings of Jane Austen, and my own experience of enchantment upon arriving in Bath, one must wonder if there really is something in that water. Although, I might argue that the powers of such water are far from healing, but rather, induce a romantic fever.

But, I knew basically none of this when I came to Bath in the summer of 2004. I ended up in the city almost by accident when I decided, on a lark, that I wanted to study abroad. Early in the academic year, I had gone to the Office of International Education and scanned the bulletin board for programs for English majors during the summer. I finally found, and settled on, the two month summer semester on Shakespeare, to be held in Bath. I only cared that it was *not* in Ohio. I wasn't really in the program for the education, since my own focus of study was on nonfiction writing, decidedly not about Shakespeare. I even wrote so much in my application, where I stated that my main reason for wanting to study abroad was to cultivate some interesting writing material. I can only assume that the Office of International Education had a good sense of humor, or a lack of interested applicants.

Of course, if I had been completely honest in that application, I would have admitted that study abroad was really just an excuse for an escape. I was only two quarters away from graduation and college life had become tedious and grueling in a way I thought a trip abroad might alleviate. My personal life was also in shambles. I had a habit of pursuing doomed relationships with men who Miss Austen might have considered "inappropriate matches" for someone like me, who had often been referred to, in all honesty and care, by friends as "too emotional" (which is a nice way of saying: depressed-and-whiney-and-clingy-and-dependent-on-attention-from-men-and-prone-to-fits-of-hysterics-and-overall-closing-in-on-bat-shit-crazy). In many ways, the trip to Bath was my attempt to escape from my miserable romantic habits and to be alone for awhile, to try to be happy on my own. I promised myself during the flight across the Atlantic that the only love affair I would have over the summer would be with me. I had no idea that I was throwing myself into the most romantic city in England.

The day after my arrival, classes started with poetry. I had always had an uncomfortable

relationship with poetry. The words felt impenetrable, opaque. I was a sucker for a story, narrative full of action and character and dialogue, and the finer points of language, rhythm, and metaphor often escaped me. They certainly weren't getting through that day. I sat in a daze through the morning's session on Shakespeare's sonnets, guzzling coffee I had brought, French press and all, from the dormitory kitchen only a short walk down the pavement. I gazed out the glass doors of Cavendish Hall, which opened to a small lawn on the down-slope of the hill towards Bath, where one scraggly tree swirled in the breeze, casting dancing shadows in the grass. I only half-listened to my fellow students' intimidatingly brilliant insights on the depth of the sonnets, my ears perking up only when the conversation turned to the topic of the possibility of sex, scandal, and affairs hidden in the verse.

I tried to muster more enthusiasm for the afternoon session since it was Greg's class on Contemporary British and Irish poetry. Eager to seem eager, I arrived early and sat in the front row of desks. I tried to seem casual, joking amongst my classmates and looking over my notes from the morning, which were relatively uninformative. When Greg entered the room, in the same sleek yet casual style of dress, with the same bouncy step and mischievous smile, my heart hit my stomach and I couldn't hide the smile on my face.

Greg brought the same energy to his lessons that I had witnessed on our first meeting. He started the class by reciting Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses." Greg spoke the words loud and clear, his voice piercing the dust that hung in the warm air. He took long strides like a dancer across the front of the room. Every hint of a smile was erased from his face as he became the suffering Ulysses. The room around me disappeared and I was lost in his feathery, accented voice. No words had ever seemed so important, but their meanings morphed and disappeared altogether until all that was left was the sound of his voice. I was Penelope waiting forever for him to come home and as he chanted that last line, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield," it felt both like a battle cry and an intimate whisper, meant only for me.

In the silence that followed his recital, the world came rushing back to me. The faces of my classmates showed mixed reactions—some seemed about to laugh, being unaccustomed to such earnestness and animation from a professor, and others, like me, were enraptured. Whatever world he had taken us to vanished when he spoke again to ask, "What is the difference between prose and poetry?" We were to work in pairs to try to hammer out an answer to this unanswerable question, so I turned to the girl on my left, then immediately regretted it.

Jen's vibrant red hair tapered around her pale, slightly freckled face. Her wide toffee eyes were topped by severely arching brows, one of which was pierced with a silver barbell. She had a face that made you think she was a girl who didn't take shit from anyone, but yet she was one of those few who seemed perfectly comfortable around all the different students. I remembered her from the orientation meeting back in Ohio, where she had sat amidst a group of boys, holding court over a conversation on some literary matter. She was full of clever cultural references and a teasing wit. I decided then that I didn't like the girl, as I sat alone feeling under-read and under-dressed. Even though she was sitting, I could tell she was a petite girl. Compact, curvy women always made me feel uncomfortable in my tall, straight figure, which at 21, I was afraid I would never grow out of. In the end, I was able to acknowledge that my dislike was actually jealousy of this popular, smart, beautiful girl. So, since I at least wanted to make some friends during my summer abroad, when I turned to Jen that day in Greg's class, I was willing to forgo my first impression.

When it came to Jen, all was given away by her mouth, her thin lips able to convey a shocking range of emotion. When she turned in her desk to face me, I thought I saw a slight twitch, or a certain tenseness in her glossed lips that gave her away. I thought then that maybe this seemingly self-assured girl was really just as scared and shy as anyone else.

All I remember about our initial conversation that day is that we vehemently disagreed. Despite

my discomfort with poetry, I maintained that prose and verse were really pretty much the same thing, just words on a page, while Jen insisted poetry was truly a higher form of art. When we presented our argument to the rest of the class, I was disappointed to find that Greg agreed with Jen and they spent a good while rhapsodizing on the merits of poetry. Greg claimed poetry was more like music than prose, more about rhythm, sound, and recital and Jen fervently concurred. I thought to myself, rather smugly, that I had never heard a wicked guitar solo in any poem.

I watched as they interacted, how they both seemed to forget where they were, or that there were other people watching. I remembered the moment in my dorm room before Greg left, that maybe wasn't a moment at all, and I thought for sure he and Jen were having one of those maybe-moments then, right in front of everyone. I felt the jealousy I had for Jen creep back in my stomach. Then I reminded myself that I had no reason to be jealous. Greg was just our professor, not a potential lover for any of us. I reminded myself that I wasn't looking for love or romance. I reminded myself I was trying to make friends.

Well, at least I tried.

The Hat and Feather Pub, where we went for drinks to celebrate the completion of the first day of classes and to see an unusual local D.J., sat halfway down the ridiculous hill upon which Somerset place perched. The Hat and Feather might have been one of the sleazier places in the touristy city of Bath, a place meant for residents rather than visitors. The windows were stained glass and dark, casting psychedelic beams of color over the proper British drizzle outside. Stern looking thirty-something locals sat around the bar in their dripping wellies, casting a disapproving eye at the large group of loud, American college students who had just entered their sacred space.

I sat on a bench looking out the colored glass at the park across the street. I was feeling down without exactly knowing why, although I suspected it had something to do with feeling alienated from my classmates. In all there were 22 students in the program. They were all from the same university as me, but I had never met any of them, owing to the ridiculously large size of our school. Already, many of them were starting to form little cliques, but I still felt uncomfortable because I didn't seem to fit in neatly amongst any of them. There was a core group who seemed to be average college students in every way—by dress, ambition, interests. They tended to behave and look attentive in class, wear sweatshirts with our college logo on it, and look for every chance to party outside of class. There were a handful of stoners, a small group of pretty girls who seemed to bond together based on that fact alone, an even smaller group of nerdy, serious students, and the rest of us—some who fit into one or more of the groups fairly easily, and some, like me, who didn't, but still tried.

I wasn't good at making new friends and on top of that, I was in a stage of my life when everything was a little rebellion and all my friends back home shared in my anti-everything sentiments, which made it even more difficult to try to reach out to people who seemed so different. I had recently stopped shaving my legs, wearing make-up, or even using deodorant to rebel against the insane beauty standards for women. I only wore second hand clothes and refused to shop at chain stores to rebel against capitalism. All of this made me perplexing to most the girls on the trip, most of who had brought at least two giant suitcases of their nicest clothes and spent the majority of their time in Bath's boutiques. They were equally perplexing to me. The boys were a bit more receptive to me, since I was pretty good at playing "just one of the guys."

I was approached by two of the boys on the trip, Phil and Jeff, two of the general fun-loving students, who were from Kentucky and Southern Ohio respectively and had the manners to prove it. They offered to get me in on a round of Jack Daniel's, which they were drinking in

copious amounts "to remind them of home." When the whiskey came we toasted all around, to our home, to Bath, and to each other and I found that the spirits began to lift my spirits, and our group's volume.

Before long, the infamous D.J. Derek took the stage, or rather, took the stance of someone taking the stage at the empty space at the back of the bar. He wore high-waisted trousers held up by suspenders and a khaki vest. His large, square glasses magnified his sunken eyes under his bushy grey brows. He hunched over his equipment, or rather just hunched, always, bobbing his head of thinning hair. D.J. Derek, Bath's premiere ska and reggae D.J., was certainly well into his sixties. The combination of his age, accent, and Rastafarian slang made him completely incomprehensible to us, but the music he played was often quite recognizable.

Greg was with us that night and was the first to take the dance floor. He jerked back and forth, back and forth, in a way that always made it seem like he would forget to pull the left side of his body to the right before he snapped in two. He held his chin up toward the ceiling with his eyes closed. His movements were completely uninhibited. I watched him for awhile from the corner, as some of the other students started grooving towards the dance floor too.

Soon, I felt someone tugging at my arm and I looked over to find Jen, the last person I had expected.

"Come dance with me," she insisted, trying to drag me out to the dance floor despite her small frame.

I declined, even as the smiles of my classmates and their laughing conversation with Greg enticed me. By then, there was a whole group of students in a circle with Greg, variously bobbing, shaking, shimmying, grinding, and swaying to D.J. Derek's beats. Even some of the surly locals had started dancing. Jen looked up at me with her big brown eyes. I always remember how she seemed so young to me then, even though we were the same age. There was something desperate about her. I saw some of that same glimmer of self-doubt from earlier. She asked me again to dance with her and in a quieter, pleading voice, she said, "I need you. I'm too shy to dance alone."

I believed her; believed that she did, and would, need me.

I let her drag me along, half drunk and half mortified. Jen made a beeline for Greg and stood beside him in the circle of dancing students. D.J. Derek started playing a remix of a Bob Marley song and we all shouted along.

"Sun is shining, the weather is sweet!"

I looked around at the group of smiling faces and felt my earlier anxieties start to melt away. Somewhere in the whiskey, or the music, or the soothing movement of dancing, we began to connect.

"Make you want to move your dancing feet!"

Soon the circle had shifted and Greg was at my side, his arm occasionally brushing against mine. Such inconsequential contact had never felt so good. I found myself obnoxiously happy, in love with this new place, these new people in my life. Jen and I laughed together, sticking close together all night, an unspoken alliance growing between us, any intellectual disagreements, or imagined rivalries, long forgotten. My other classmates danced with me too, some expressing their amusement at discovering that I was actually not a terrible dancer.

The group shifted again and Greg was across from me, dancing close to Jen, which I could tell she enjoyed. I couldn't get over the strangeness of it all, how I could be there in Bath, dancing

with a professor, something that would never happen back home, and forging a friendship with a girl I had only earlier that day despised. My own propensity for happiness, for love, surprised me. For a moment, I caught Greg's eyes, and even though we couldn't hear each other, we sang the next lyrics together.

"I want you to know, I'm a rainbow too!"

The nights in Bath ended earlier than in the U.S., since last call is around eleven. It didn't matter that night, because by eleven we were mostly drunk and worn out from dancing. The drizzle from earlier had become a downpour, and to save us from getting soaked from the trudge up the hill, Greg made several trips in his car between the Hat and Feather and Somerset Place, ferrying students home for the night.

Jen and I ended up in his car at the same time and were delighted to find that Greg was blasting an old Nirvana c.d. It turned out that Greg had a thing for early 90s American rock, Nirvana and the Red Hot Chili Peppers being amongst his favorites. For some reason, it struck me as charming and silly, that I would travel all the way to England to end up in a car with a bunch of Americans and one Brit who idolized American culture. I chuckled to myself and peered out the window into the sparkling rainy night.

When we reached Somerset Place, I was reluctant to get out of the car, but I was near the door and soon my classmates were pushing up against me to try to get out. I dashed through the rain to the door and let the other students pass. I watched Jen walk to the other entrance to the building, since she was in another hall. I wondered if we would speak again tomorrow. I stayed for awhile in the yellow light of the arched doorway, leaning against the cold stone of the building and feeling the damp of the night creep into my clothes, making me squirm. I watched as Greg's car came up the drive a couple more times, a group of drunken students tumbling out each time. I felt my crush on him start to evaporate, or at least change, since I knew that nothing could ever come of it. But I didn't feel disappointed at that thought, but rather relieved, since if no romance could ever come to fruition, there was nothing to ever mar the moments of intense flirtation. No future fights, or future physical contact, could overshadow the shock of his skin on the dance floor. This was no Jane Austen ball, where the woman always met the right man; this was Bath in the real—I could see it below me, shimmering again in the night.

When I knew that Greg would not be coming back again, I turned and went inside. In the plain white room I turned out the lights and got in bed. In my mind I replayed over and over again scenes from the dance floor and I tried to sleep.

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