

Inez Baranay

HEATHCLIFF AND ME

The Advanced Belief Changing course hadn't changed my life. "You talked me into this" I complained to Fran. I had visualised, shared, bonded and hugged, and considered new and exciting ideas about the potentials of life. But still I felt I was missing something.

"Like what?" asked Fran. Like I couldn't tell her.

I shrugged. "I got what I wanted but it isn't what I expected."

"So how are things with Milan?"

"I can't complain" I said. "But that's sort of the trouble. Living together, I never get exactly swept off my feet."

Fran was like "Romantic love is just a myth. It oppresses women, it doesn't last and you get hurt. A good relationship is one that works. Give and take, negotiate." She had done a previous seminar.

I didn't see it was wrong to be idealistic. At Advanced Belief Changing they told us you can have it all: the soulmate, the great body, career advancement, prosperity, ecology, world peace. You just have to believe it's really yours and go for it. The hard part is knowing what you want, truly.

I wanted to be away from everything normal in my life. I wanted to meet someone who would make me feel bold and beautiful and dangerous. I would be thirty in two years and then it would be too late.

"Even if it is a myth" I said. "What's wrong with a myth?" Seeing she had the brochures for a myth workshop,

"Myths and heros" Fran admitted. "It's supposed to be very empowering."

"Right" I said "like Byron and Heathcliff and those guys." I wanted to meet a romantic hero, a brutal, sensitive poet and warrior, an olden-days kind of guy.

"Byron was a real person and Heathcliff was fictional."

"Well I'll have Heathcliff."

At Advanced Belief Changing our trainer, Giles, was as per usual grinning like he had all our Christmas presents.

It was amazing, actually, as the exciting new process tonight was called Acting Fictional. Apparently we were all created by the Universal Mind like an author creates characters and moves them round til they get a life of their own. So one technique for making your life work was to act as if you were a character in a story. You were writer, actor, producer.

In another two weeks we would graduate and I had been holding one outrageous belief after another every Wednesday night. I'd do all the processes, believing I was a magnet for wealth, new doors were opening and the cellulite was dropping off my thighs. These things seemed true by divine right in the group situation with positive supportive energy in the room but I'd go home and find the garbage not put out, the bed not made and the videos not returned.

They kept telling us that your life is created by what you believe. Obviously I basically believed that I'd lucked out so far and this was as good as it got.

The following week the new process was called Own Your Anger. We spent the night bashing chairs with belts and screaming with fury, yelling abuse at mothers and fathers.

I rushed home to share this with Milan: I'd finally made contact with my anger; this was a real breakthrough. He wasn't there, and I got angrier which was very healthy I knew. I was angry with Milan for not being there, and angry that things weren't more exciting when he was there. I was angry with Fran for implying that I was naive for wanting some hot romance and I was angry with ABC for making anger such an issue.

I sat there alone, thinking about my anger because truly being brought up in society was shit. Some long dark hours passed and a wild rebellious feeling grew in my heart and possessed my mind. I was furious with my nice life and my nice boyfriend. I needed an angry romantic man and my desire would create his. He would know we were meant to be together. It was like the books, I missed someone I hadn't met.

Someone like Heathcliff. It was, in fact, Heathcliff. Heathcliff existed, and my yearning stirred his passion. He was out there, beyond some distant star — close by on some unseen plane of existence — stirring and responding. Reaching out to the unknown soulmate who stirs in response to him.

This conviction had a chilling reality. Dark shadows lengthened around me, and a sudden gust of wind blew papers around and rattled my teacup in its saucer. I shivered and came to my feet, impelled by a mysterious force that I could not understand but had to obey. The room's dimensions were altered by

the sweeping shadows that now inhabited it.

A low rumbling thunder sounded and a human shape stepped into the smokey do«dt that swirled before me. It was a wild-looking man with dark ragged hair to his shoulders. He was dressed in boots and riding breeches, and a waistcoat and shirt of interesting fabric and strange cut — but those details I perceived only in the memory, the after-image; at the time I was overwhelmed by the impression of a vigorous masculine force contained in a body that combined grace and brutality. How could I put it? He was a dark-skinned gypsy in aspect, in dress and manners a gentleman.

"Heathcliff!" I said, or rather whispered, barely able to form the name, stunned as I was by the dreamlike emotions this apparition had awakened in me.

He inclined head and shoulders towards me, a slight bow of thrilling insolence.

My voice returned to me. "God I don't believe it!" I exclaimed.

Heathcliff disappeared.

I was alone in our newly decorated room, stupidly staring at the TV and video on their limewashed stand.

I had managed to believe in Heathcliff but I wasn't ready to leave Milan. The magazine quizzes always turned out that we had a reasonably high compatibility score with shared values and the same taste in personal environments. Between us we'd had the deposit for a house. We discussed things pretty much — future buy-outs etc — but the real estate situation became such that moving out was not a soft option.

And I'm not the type to find her own flat and then wonder what to do in the evenings. I've heard Fran admit that for dinner by herself she'd eat a bowl of muesli.

Plus, this town is full of single women whose healthy self-esteem drives their career moves. They've got silicon lips, gym membership, and go on holidays to Malaysia. One of them would jump on Milan the moment I even thought of moving out. Straight single men have got it made, even if they can't dance. I was lucky to have a boyfriend with a degree, a job and a car.

We had to revitalise our relationship so he enrolled me in some personal growth. His own affirmations had improved his sales scores at work. So far nothing had seemed to change but we were told this stuff can work on deep unconscious levels.

It was hard to feel like the all-powerful being creating it all when I caught the crowded train to work knowing I'd be the one coming home to wash the breakfast dishes. You don't end up being the only one in a household of two to wash up if you're coming from high self-esteem. A shallow but conscious change would have been good by now.

Plus I had to keep working on changing my belief that when Milan's mother comes over with a bag of groceries, starts cleaning the house and pretending she can't speak English, she's making comments about my suitability for her wonderful son who if she only knew it was his turn to clean the bathroom and I left it that way in protest and out of support for him to take responsibility which she never taught him. I now choose to believe she might find something more fulfilling to do for herself.

I listened carefully at the last seminar. It was a gentle loving process where you contact the person in you who gets it right. This was one advanced belief I wanted to have again and to keep. Even if there was no future in the fascinating foreign man who was no long term threat to my stable home life.

As soon as I was alone I believed just as hard as I could. I thought of miracles. Spontaneous remissions. Dolphins rescuing shipwrecked fishermen. Inexplicably missing a plane that crashed on that flight. All had been documented. And such improbabilities meant that a disturbingly potent romantic hero could materialise from the fantastical realm wherein he existed and find in me the answer to the tormenting questions that drove his restless and unsatisfied spirit. I believed!

Still, I quaked when that fog blasted into the room. Like clouds blowing off some wild wide space, some duskish domain ruled by elemental forces. When he appeared striding moodily towards me, I felt my legs go to jelly and would have swooned but for the cold glare from his dark eyes, the slight sneer that played around the corners of his cruel sensual mouth.

He had seen me and stood still. I awaited a pleasant remark but he only stood with his arms folded arrogantly, and glared.

"Hello" I said uncertainly. "I hope this wasn't an inconvenient time."

He unfolded his arms and spoke. "I should not allow anyone to inconvenience me if I could hinder it" he growled.

I peered into the wuthering space behind him. "It looks so cold and windy out there" I said. "And so enticing. I makes me want to gallop wildly on the moors, and climb trees."

"Ha!" he exclaimed. "Do you dare?"

For an answer, I stepped closer to him. I was feeling totally fictional by now.

He grasped my arm with such strength I gasped in pain. He kept his grip tight and led me to the border of the space whence he had stepped. At that thrilling edge he paused and gazed deeply into my face, searching intently. His eyes were deep black pools smouldering with pain and defiance. Deep within my abdomen an answer pulsed and I gazed back at him alight with brilliant daring of my own. He seemed satisfied and pulled me roughly closer to him.

We leapt upon a huge black horse that was pawing the ground nearby. The fierce beast was restrained by Heathcliff's touch. Seated on its broad, bare back with Heathcliff pressed up behind me, I felt indescribably safe, infinitely strengthened. The wind howled, a flash of lightning rent the sky and a fine mist of rain stung my cold, burning face as the great beast gathered speed. We thundered along where there was no horizon.

Eventually we slowed down to a canter, then a gallop, then a slow walk. The wind had died down to a gentle caressing breeze, and the rain was now but a sweet dampness in the crisp air. The black storm clouds rolled away and the moon emerged, with a silver halo around it. We stopped. Heathcliff's arm still held me close to him and as he dropped the rein the other arm joined it; my spine was pressed against his body, his chest still heaving. From his rough clothes rose the odour of mists and moors and dizzying masculinity.

He seized my waist and leapt from the horse and we landed lightly. Through the mists presently we arrived back at the boundary beyond which I could see my Remo lamp carelessly left on in my lounge room.

I was still gasping. I was going to ask Heathcliff if he had to rush off or if he'd like to come in for a cup of coffee. But he was stepping back, the swirling darkness enveloping him like a velvet cloak. He paused one moment.

He squinted his eyes at me and winked. "Hey" he said. "We must do it again."

And he disappeared.

Next time the crepuscular mists breathed into the room it did not astonish me.

Heathcliff took my hand and we wandered into the moors. It was day, but the sun's light was smothered by thick banks of clouds, its warmth diminished by chilly breezes that blew in from distant fields of ice.

He was brooding and taciturn, but I knew this was his way. As we wandered into the arid wilderness of furze and whinstone, that landscape at once desolate and alive with fierce life, I felt fierce and desolate myself.

Curious thoughts sounded in my head. "I am Heathcliff" I thought. "Yet if he had been born where laws are less strict and tastes less dainty he should treat himself to a slow vivisection."

He pulled me down beside him on some hummocks of whin. I resisted, and he pulled harder, with harsh glee. His superior frame gave him the benefit and brought me tumbling down to lie sprawled beside him. Like the untamed infants of savages we tumbled about in the gorse, like me cubs of wild beasts we bit and clawed each other in a tempest of innocent play.

When we paused, I reached out to wipe the smudges of dirt from his jacket. He moved away from me with a snarl but I caught him fast.

"You look perfect, it's just that you are so dirty!"

"You needn't have touched me!" he answered, snatching away his hand. "I shall be as dirty as I please; and I like to be dirty and I will be dirty."

What did I want from this relationship?

Although he remained sullen he escorted me to the border between our worlds. Before I left him. I remembered to say "I really want to see you again".

The first flicker of uncertainty passed across his face. "Sure, why not" he said. "I like you, but I'm not ready for commitment. Call me soon, or whatever."

"When I think about it" I confided to Fran "it seems impossible, but when I'm with him it's unbelievably real."

"The sex is really good huh" she said like she knew what I was talking about.

"It's beyond sex" I said.

"Yeah really?" she goes, like I would say more. "As in, not in bed?"

"Bed!" I said. "This is not an indoors kind of man." How could I tell her we would gallop recklessly about on the heath, and that his grip on my arm was so firm that I thought I would faint. "He knows different kinds of places than anyone I've gone out with before" I said.

"So is this serious?" she said. "Should you tell Milan or what?" Like, cut to the crisis.

While Milan and I had agreed on the principal of monogamy, I wasn't actually betraying him. Heathcliff kind of didn't count. Heathcliff stood outside the restraints and laws of convention and society.

"Maybe" I answered. "Not. Not yet."

I told Milan I was thinking of signing on for another course. We had a five-year plan. He'd be supportive, seeing he would benefit from whatever helped me grow. He didn't have to know everything. I mean, I didn't know everything about selling computer software. We'd work on openness one day.

"Yeah nothing might happen or work out" Fran agreed.

I went out galloping and gambolling with Heathcliff a few more times, expecting things to develop. What was developing was the way that Heathcliff's look of wild rebellion would change into this really modern anxious look. Instead of throwing me onto his steed and galloping away, he would sulk a while and then say he had a lot of responsibilities, and couldn't go out galloping among the furze just any old time I felt like it. I'm like, guys.

I mean it was great when Heathcliff and I cavorted on the moors, exclaiming tumultuously and pouring forth our zeal in showers. But I'd ask when would be a good time to see him again and he'd get this trapped, evasive expression, and say there were many tasks to attend to and many demands on his time. Why aren't they over it when we meet them?

Milan didn't make it to the ABC graduation, which had been full of sharing and new choices. "Don't you want to eat? Are you up to something?" Fran asked when I didn't go out with the others. I came home to a message from Milan saying I could call him at work and meet him for dinner.

Milan would never know I'd been home early enough to ring him.

When Heathcliff appeared I was in the right mood. A stirring storm raged on the moors and I was aching to be swept up in it.

But Heathcliff only stood there and started muttering about being more realistic. I got mad. "I have abandoned elegancies and comforts to come to this wilderness with you" I exclaimed bitterly.

"You abandoned them under a delusion" he answered "picturing in me a hero of romance and expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard you in the light of rational creature, so obstinately have you persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character and acting on the false impression you cherished."

This got me bemused. "Where am I supposed to have got these false impressions from?" I demanded. "Did all that galloping mean nothing to you? I didn't make that up."

"I have no pity! The more worms writhe the more I yearn to crush out their entrails!" He stamped on the ground like an infant.

"Get real" I said. "Who's writhing?"

"Pray don't imagine" he snarled "that I conceal depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior."

In the vast spaces beyond him, the winds lashed at twisted black trees and I longed for us to throw ourselves into that tempest.

"Lighten up" I coaxed. "Or be stern, stern is OK. I accept you as you."

"I am no rough diamond — a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic" he continued with savage persistence. "I am a fierce pitiless wolfish man." He waved his slingshot like a lasso.

"I hear you, I really do. I acknowledge you're an amazing creation. Hey, don't we have fun? Let's get out of here."

I expected Heathcliff to howl like a savage and seize me fast in a deluge of flaming ardour. I opened my eyes, and he was only looking defensive and abashed. He said "I'm sorry. This isn't working for me right now. I need my own space for a while."

He leapt back into the fierce storms on the moors behind him, and the whole tumultuous scene faded. I was looking at the magazines on our coffee table. We had a new copy of Wired and a coffee cup had been sitting on it since last night.

I quelled my lamentations and had a bath before Milan came back.

First published in

LiNQ

Volume 22, number 2, October 1995