

GUMBEAUX

Kimberly Vargas

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Michael
For the person that he is,
For his ability to inspire others and
For loving me just as I am.

All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are too many to list, but you know who you are.
Thank you for touching my life.



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January 5, 2010

J.P. Deacon
Orion Publishing
One Market Place
Bethesda, Maryland

Dear Mr. Deacon:

I wanted to express my deepest appreciation that you have agreed to write my biography. Your reputation as a journalist of factual integrity was one of several reasons I approached you for this assignment. There have been many inaccuracies and misperceptions printed about the Fait family over the years, and this is an opportunity to set the records straight.

After much deliberation/consideration, I have decided to disclose my diaries for your perusal. They span the years of 1986 to present day. Through them you will gain greater insight into the Fait “art empire”, as you described it during our last conversation.

Thank you and please know if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing your reaction.

Regards,

Mary Fait
Musée Fait
100 NW Embassy Avenue
Washington, D.C.

1 DEAR DIARY

January 1986

I've never kept a diary before. Scary stuff. Let's see how it goes. My name is Mary Veronica Fait and I'm sixteen years old. I lost my parents about five years ago. They died on the way back from Chesapeake Bay. They were driving home with my Uncle Claude. One minute they were all excited about coming home, the next Claude was calling Grandma Marguerite in a panic, crying because he lost control of the wheel and drove the car off an embankment. My parents both died and Claude survived. I survived too, but am not quite the same. The shock fractured my soul, and the loose part keeps shifting around, edgy and restless.

Claude (Dad's brother) is now my guardian. Grandma Marguerite is in a nursing home so there is no other option. Claude used to do a decent job of taking care of me but started drinking a couple of years ago. Things have gotten progressively worse. He gets very mean when he drinks. When he's sober, everything is fine. Lately, he's not sober much. Losing my parents has been hell every day on earth. It's been hideous and frustrating and lonely and angry and mad and sad and miserable and sometimes I just want to walk off a tall building.

We're not a normal family for many reasons, but primarily because my grandfather was Jean-Luc Fait. In case you're not an art person, Jean Luc-Fait was one of the most successful artists of the 20th century. He was a Modernist, a contemporary of Picasso and a he-man in general. Granddad lived from 1890 to 1980. He died when I was ten. He came to America in 1921 and set up residence in New Orleans. About thirty years later, he and

Grandma Marguerite moved to Washington, D.C. They bought our present home, a huge place on Capitol Hill.

Things were just starting to normalize after the death of my parents when Claude decided to turn our family home into what it is today, the Musée Fait. He brought back all my grandfather's paintings from their worldwide tours and traveling exhibitions and had them displayed at home. Then, with the assistance of our family lawyer, Dante, Claude followed the appropriate steps to turn our Victorian on Capitol Hill into a museum.

People are more than happy to pay a shitload to visit the home of one of America's greatest painters. We had always been comfortable, but with Claude running things, the money really started rolling in like you wouldn't believe. It was terrifying to see how powerful he became in a very short time. Celebrities rent our house during off hours and use it as a bed and breakfast. Our backyard has become a hot spot wedding location. Granddad would have hated it. He was a private man who wouldn't have wanted strangers running around his house, touching his things.

Grandma Marguerite thinks all of this is a great way to celebrate Granddad. She told me to play ball, so I play ball. Claude uses me as his companion to accompany him to fundraising events. I know when to laugh at his stupid ass jokes, when to smile at guests and when to excuse myself so the adults can discuss adult business. Claude and I really know how to work a room. He says I'm his lucky charm, his ace in the hole. He says that as long as I'm around, nothing is impossible for him. That was very flattering for a while. He's the closest thing I have to a father figure, and my options are limited.

Claude took some wine courses to become a sommelier a while back. Just to let everyone know how cultured he is, probably. There is no telling which bottle it was, but he crawled inside one and has yet to come out. Ever since he became a certified wino, his behavior has become increasingly disturbing. I confronted him about being such a cheesy snob (he insisted on a Ralph Lauren Christmas one year, in which all our decor had to be only from that designer). Claude didn't appreciate my honesty

and we started not getting along so hot. Then, when he started drinking not just wine but all things alcohol, things went from bad to worse.

Grandma Marguerite used to keep Claude at bay, but now he just walks all over her. Dante told me that Grandma is getting rather old and doesn't have the same kind of joie de vivre that she used to have. I know Dante well enough to understand that he's gently implying that senility is setting in. So you see, I have absolutely nowhere else to go.

There's a good person deep inside of Claude. But he's very sad, as I'm very sad. We are both very sad. We're mourning the situation in our own ways. I "love" Claude or whatever, but I don't like him when he drinks. He drinks all the time, so there you go.

There's no one to talk to, and I'm scared to be writing all this stuff down but will explode without some kind of release. All the people who work for us act totally weird now. They're scared of Claude. He's paying their salaries so they walk on eggshells all the time.

Only my tutor, Dr. Jonas, knows what's going on. He noticed a cut on my wrist and knew it wasn't really an accident. He said that life can be amazing, so there's no reason to check out early. He said to study hard and to get good grades on the entrance exams for college. He said college would launch me to liberty. Then he got a small book out of his briefcase and handed it to me. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance." He said it would give some illumination to these dark days. The writing certainly made an impression. Here's what I mainly got out of it:

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . . What I must do is all that concerns me, not what people think. . . . The reliance on property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance. . . . Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.

What does all this really mean? It means that we came into this world alone, and we will go out alone. You can't put your faith in anyone. You're better off doing everything alone because you can't count on anyone except yourself. You're a sailor out at sea, alone on the ocean. Your decisions symbolize the course you charter. Your thoughts steer the movements of your boat through life. Are you going to pave the way yourself or listen to others? If the people who you listen to are wrong, you'll hate them for steering you badly. If you are internally guided, you will have made your own decisions—and will have no one else to blame. So, pick your poison and live with the consequences.

January 1987

I haven't written for a long time.

Tonight a visitor to the museum set fire to our velvet curtains. He was obviously nuts and security removed him. Living here totally sucks now. We have no privacy and live in a freaking fish bowl. It's all Claude's fault. He used me to build this empire. I helped sell out granddad's legacy. I would like to kill Claude, but don't know how to get away with it. Jail is not an option. He's not getting any more of my freedom. Screw that noise.

January 1988

Sometimes the only thing that gets me through life is my cat Matisse. He's a fat Siamese cat with blue eyes. He follows me everywhere like my shadow and sleeps on my head at night. His purring is very soothing and helps to relax my nerves. Matisse and I hang out in my room, listening to music for hours. Our favorite bands are Oingo Boingo, The Smiths, New Order, The Cure, and The Police.

I made the regrettable comment to Claude that it would be nice if people didn't have to feel their hearts pounding in their chests all the time. Apparently not everyone feels that way. Five minutes later he was driving me to the nearest hospital like a madman.

The doctor said I was abnormally stressed for a teenager and had some serious anxiety issues. This was contributing to my

racing heart. On the way home, Claude was still pretty loaded. He was trying to hold it together for my sake but he's a lousy actor. I told him to try not to lose control of the steering wheel and he smacked the shit out of me. My face still hurts.

Someday it will be time to go off to college. We both just have to survive until then.

January 1988

A new year, a new hope.

These days I'm home schooled because Claude doesn't want me too far out of his sight due to the heart condition thing. I'm seeing more and more of Dr. Jonas, since he's no longer just my tutor but basically my teacher of everything. He's one of the only people I know. Sometimes I catch myself thinking that Dr. Jonas is cute, and then feel bad about it because he's a happily married man. Besides that he's got to be like thirty years old or something.

Today I was sitting in the library, filling out college applications. Claude gently took them away and placed them on top of the crackling fire before us. He smiled like a deranged game show host and said, "You're going to Georgetown. I've placed some calls, and they're expecting you for the 1989 fall semester."

When I told him I wanted to go away to school, he just shook his head. "I need you here, Mary. You can't go away for school. You need to stay here with me to help run the Musée Fait. You're going to be in charge of this one day. Your destiny is to carry on the family legacy, same as mine. You'll go on to educate the whole world about my father and your grandfather. We have to carry on his legacy—that's why we're here."

Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Claude has cheapened everything Granddad was about. He's turned the great Jean-Luc Fait into a caricature, a cartoon. The Smithsonian and most of the Washington D.C. museums are free, and charge no admission to the public. But that's not how it's done at our museum, son. Not at the Musée Fait. Dante told me that Claude is making serious bank.

Nothing has been able to get me through the last few years except for fantasizing about escape. The most reasonable and socially acceptable means of vanishing appears to be via attending college out of state. Claude is drinking more heavily than ever. He gets hooked on one kind of liquor, stays with it for several weeks, and then switches to something else. Knob Creek is flavor of the month. Each time Claude gets sauced, I make sure to take something valuable from him. He buys a lot of fine art, but doesn't keep very good track of his purchases. It's fairly easy to rob his dumb ass. Claude's drinking keeps him from being observant. He's an easy target that way. Remind me never to drink. Drinking makes you unreasonable, belligerent, and stupid. Not a good combination.

I liberated (some may say "stole"; I prefer "liberated") a very nice vase from him last year. Ming Dynasty, it turned out. Long story short, The Girls and Boys Club got a huge check from Sotheby's. One of their representatives came over with a van full of children, and they all thanked Claude for his generosity. Claude knew it was my doing but took credit for the whole thing so he wouldn't look ridiculous. It's our little game, fun for me and not for him. Until he sobers up, he doesn't deserve to have nice things.

Going off to college is my first opportunity to get away from him. Since my parents died, all the things I loved about D.C. are no longer happy memories. They're painful ones, bittersweet and full of sadness. Our favorite ice cream parlor, the Smithsonian, weekends at Eastern Market, Embassy Row (drinking chocolat chaud at the French Embassy), Foggy Bottom, Dupont Circle, Tyson's Corner, the Watergate Hotel, the Kennedy Center. None of these things are fun to see or think about anymore. Out, out, out. Out, out, out. I want out, out, out!

February 1989

I've been applying for college under an alias: Veronica Fey. Veronica is my middle name, and I just changed the spelling from Fait to Fey. This alias has enabled me to apply for colleges without being asked if I'm related to the Fait family. No one gives

scholarships to people with Picassos hanging in their living rooms.

One school looks very promising—Audubon College. I'm interested in the school for several reasons. First, they have a recognized art program that's very impressive. I could learn to be a great painter, like my grandfather. Second, it's right outside of New Orleans, Louisiana. Granddad was French and loved New Orleans. Third, New Orleans is over a thousand miles away from Washington D.C. Fourth, it's very reasonably priced for a private school. If I could take out some student loans or earn a scholarship, I wouldn't have to rely on Claude for anything.

The school wrote back and said they were interested in meeting me. They offered to pay to fly me down there, along with a guest. It's time to tell Claude what I have been up to. He's been in Paris for some convention at the Louvre (I faked a panic attack just to get out of going). He gets home tonight, so we'll have to have a little talk.

March 1989

I will be visiting Audubon College soon with America's Finest Bastard. Why he is pretending to care this week is beyond comprehension. He finally agreed to go visit the school with me. He said he thought the alias was actually a good idea; he doesn't want anyone to kidnap and ransom me.

In return for his gracious appearance at Audubon College, I have to go with him to three society functions over the next month to gain even more support for Musée Fait. This is no way to live. It's time to get away from this pretentious, phony existence and move somewhere visceral and real. Louisiana seems to be those things.

March 1989

We're in Bayou Bend, Louisiana. Bayou Bend is a sleepy little southern town on the edge of New Orleans. Claude disapproves as usual. On our flight to New Orleans, he acted like the worst kind of bitch. "We have our own jet, why are we flying coach with all the losers?" What an asshole. He doesn't get it.

You can't fly under the radar in a jet. A kid behind him kept kicking his chair, making him nuts. It was awesome. Claude ordered six travel-sized bottles of Bailey's and drank them one after another, right out of the bottle. No ice or anything.

Our driver took us through New Orleans and into the French Quarter. We turned a corner and the strains of jazz playing became more and more audible. Europe and the Caribbean had been blended together; it seemed, to create a whole other country. We walked around for a while, looking at Jackson Square. Claude did appreciate being able to walk around the French Quarter with a drink in his hand the whole time. After a cursory look at old New Orleans, we left for Bayou Bend, which was about a twenty-minute drive from the French Quarter.

Bayou Bend is the essence of southern hospitality. The town is darling. Most of the buildings and houses are at least fifty years old. The people here really know how to make a person feel welcome. Upon arrival, the hotel staff served us the most fantastic iced tea you've ever had in your life. It came garnished with succulent orange slices and fresh mint. They were presented to us in silver goblets, which were super icy cold. I'm going to have another one in a minute because it's pretty warm outside. But before teatime, I want to tell you about the man I met today. He knocked me out. He really, really did.

His name is Dr. Richard Landry. He's the head honcho of the art department. I was sitting in the lounge with Claude, waiting to go on a tour. Dr. Landry came out of his office and was pretty cute for an old dude. He had dirty blond hair and emerald green eyes with gold flecks in them. He should get his eye color patented, like UPS brown or Barbie pink. He was very nice, showing us around, looking at my sketches, asking about my favorite art media. He knew what he was talking about. It was cool hearing him talk about the great painters who had influenced his life. The more he talked, the more interested I became. Yes, he was very attractive for an old dude. Uncle C seemed to zero in on my brainwaves and started hurrying us out of there. When I shook Dr. Landry's hand good-bye, my whole arm went to Jell-O and warmth surged through my body.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate to have teachers that look like *that*,” sneered Claude. What a reaction. Dr. Landry was completely professional and polite the entire time. It’s not like he was dancing around in a thong or something. And then—get this—Claude said, “If we were married, you wouldn’t act like that. You can’t act like that around your future husband. Just so you know.”

“I really don’t understand the connection,” I yelled. “Why are you referring to married people and to us in the same sentence? Don’t get *confused*, Claude. I’m your niece, your brother’s *child*. What the hell is the matter with you?” Claude knew he was wrong and crawled further into his bottle, pulling the cork in behind him.

Claude doesn’t want me to go away for school. He views Louisiana as a cultural wasteland and a total joke. He’s pissed off at Audubon College for trying to help me. I don’t think he’ll be donating a building anytime soon. They’d be lucky to get a shrub out of him. He’s even offended by the attractiveness of the staff—but my mind is made up. It’s time to light out for the territory.

April 1989

Today Claude got so drunk that he threw me against a bookcase and kissed me on the mouth. I finally got away from him but it was a serious struggle, there are bruises up and down my arm from where he nailed me with a candlestick. After brushing my teeth five times with peroxide and baking soda to get rid of his nastiness, I went hunting for black widow spiders outside by the recycle cans and eventually found one.

It cast a fearsome shadow. The red hourglass on its abdomen was absolutely beautiful, a work of art. It was a pretty big spider. Two or three would have been better, but you have to work with what you’ve got. I scooped it into a jar and brought it inside. Claude was passed out drunk in the library, across several nudie magazines. NC (no class). I dropped the spider on the cuff of Claude’s bathrobe, near his wrist. So easy.

But there was a picture of my parents on the wall over his head, and my conscience went nuts. I put the spider back in its jar

and returned it to the recycle bins. I was so frustrated and angry with myself—went to bed and cried for hours. What a coward.

I don't have the guts to rid the world of him. He is responsible for my parents dying. It should have been him. It really should have been him.

May 1989

For a while there, it didn't look like escape would be possible. Douche Boy has been so against my decision to go to Louisiana that he refused to pay the tuition. That dirty bastard isn't holding me hostage. My parents would have never allowed this to happen if they were here. He needs to die. There's got to be at least one hungry thug out there with nothing to do.

In desperation, I wrote Dr. Landry a letter. To paraphrase, it was all like, "Thanks for showing us around, but my Uncle won't pay for me to go to college unless it's within a ten-mile radius of our house. This is because he is a complete tool." Then I pulled out the big guns—the death of my parents. As shameful as it was, my letter disclosed that my parents were deceased and that my guardian was an alcoholic. Using that to get a scholarship was pretty low. It was completely out of line to open up like that to a stranger, but playing the sympathy card seemed like my only hope.

In retrospect, the end of the letter was way over the top. The last line was something about wanting to "reside amongst the bayous." Pretty pathetic, I'll admit it—but it worked. Who knows what kind of connections or savior complex Dr. Landry has, but Audubon College offered me a scholarship two weeks later. A totally free ride. Fifteen thousand dollars per year! Enough for tuition, room, board, and financial independence.

To maintain the scholarship, all I have to do is take Louisiana History classes and have dinner annually with the couple that foots the bill. They're super old and apparently give a ton of dough to the school. They must like to see the kids their money is shaping, so they don't get buyer's remorse.

I can't believe this is happening, it just seems too good to be true. My tutor was right; it was worth working so hard and

getting good grades. Freedom is sitting across the table. Time to grab for the brass ring. There is only one downside to moving. They don't let cats in the dorm, so I won't be able to bring Matisse. But eventually I will probably be able to get an apartment or something, and will bring him to Louisiana with me then.

August 1989

I just told Claude about my scholarship to Audubon College and he went ballistic. No surprise there. I didn't mention it until the dorms were open, so I'd have a place to go. Claude said he was cutting me off without a cent. He's probably been having fantasies about doing that for years now, ever since my parents died. He said to forget about any financial support whatsoever and that defying his authority + moving away = no \$\$\$\$. He said I was a spoiled princess and was in for a real shock once I left the castle walls. He said that I was choosing what kind of people I wanted to be around for the rest of my life.

In response, I calmly cut up my credit cards as Claude watched. He's quite the voyeur. Then I tossed the pieces over our heads like confetti. He grabbed a fifth of amaretto liqueur and started to drink it straight from the bottle. As he ranted and raved, his overly sticky sweet breath hung in the air.

"I don't want any part of you or the Musée Fait," I finally said to shut him up. "I'm out of here. I'm starting a new life under a new name. You can have the money and the art. You can have all of it and all of this. I don't want it if you're part of the total package."

He was dumbfounded. Apparently he hadn't received the memo RE: You can't always get what you want. "You can't do that, Mary. You can't do that. This is so selfish of you. It's so unlike you."

"That's right. It's time for me to be selfish. I'm tired of being your ventriloquist's dummy all the time. I'm going to go and live for myself. Not for you, not for Musée Fait—for myself. And if you don't like it, I suggest you punt."

"You are a stupid bitch, Mary."

“No. You’re just jealous. You were jealous of Granddad because he was a star. You were jealous of my parents because they had each other. You’re jealous of me because you think you need me, and you actually resent me for it.”

“Why would you say something like that?” he slurred, face screwed up into fake devotion.

I laughed with disgust. “Because you told me so, Claude. You have no recollection of it, though, because you’re a raging alcoholic.”

Oscar Wilde once said that if you’re going to tell people the truth, make them laugh. Otherwise, they’ll kill you. Oscar was a very smart man. Perhaps I had expressed a little too much honesty, because Claude struck me in the face with excessive force. He used the heel of his hand, as if spiking a volley ball. He sent me flying into a table. My tooth didn’t go all the way through my lip, but enough to produce a significant amount of blood on the oriental rug. I recalled that the rug had once belonged to Elizabeth Taylor, and then passed out. When I woke up and was able to turn my head enough to look up; he was gone.

I’m going outside now to go see if there are any more black widows out by the trash bins.

2 AUDUBON COLLEGE

August 1989

One magical summer night—a night that will live in infamy or what have you—I packed up all my things and got the hell out of Dodge. You have to drive across like ten states to get from D.C. to Louisiana. Driving across the Louisiana state line was so liberating. A huge sign greeted each driver warmly: *Welcome to Louisiana*. It looked like a code of arms, a family crest. Cobalt blue with a pelican on it. An intoxicating and cathartic freedom began settling in. Fresh start! Clean slate!

I read somewhere that the lawless drift as far away from the seat of government as possible, throughout history and across all cultures. New Orleans is ridiculously far away from D.C. I envision Louisiana as a somewhat defiant state where people do what they want. A place for people who want to enjoy life and have a good time and to have life experiences and adventures. Where do you go when you disappear? The answer is different for everyone. I chose Louisiana.

Upon reaching Baton Rouge, I sold my car at the first opportunity. Right off the highway was a dumpy little second-chance style car lot. Most college students don't drive Bentleys. Fitting in was the name of the game, so it had to go. I bought a Volkswagen Rabbit convertible, white exterior and interior. The ultimate sorority chick mobile. The car salesman raised his eyebrows a little, but not nearly as much as one might have back in D.C. He seemed eager to assist me in my mission, whatever it was, and he didn't ask any questions that weren't required for the actual sale. I was going to like it here just fine.

Dante had insisted I come by to see him before leaving town. Dante is not just our family lawyer, but also head of legal counsel for Musée Fait. He helped me forge some stuff so I could

get away with the alias and escape Claude. Dante tries to be professional, but you can tell he hates Claude and enjoys thwarting him. It's nice to have an ally.

Dante told me that Louisiana is like a whole other country and gave me a synopsis of what to expect in the Deep South. This next part is unreal—he gave me a gun! Does he think I'll be trapping furs with Cajun Pete or something? The only person I need protection from is Claude. Dante said going to Louisiana is like going to a parallel universe and one might as well go armed. He said everyone else would be.

Then he handed me this tiny little gun which looked like a toy. He said, "Just a Derringer, see? No big deal. That's a good gun for women. Very easy to handle." Dante insisted that Dad would be upset if he didn't do what he could to protect me. I tried to tell him I was just going to college and not appearing in a James Bond film, but he wouldn't listen. "The gun is rather valuable, so make sure it doesn't get into the wrong hands." He wouldn't reveal the prior owner's identity. Our family is nuts. You can't throw anything away for fear it once belonged to Napoleon or something. I packed the gun in the bottom of my bags. Thank goodness there was no going through customs. Speaking of which, I guess I should finish unpacking my things.

October 1989

I love it here at Audubon College! The freedom has been intoxicating. It's great to finally be in charge of my own schedule and time, what I can eat and drink, and who I can interact with. These are now decisions for me to make on my own. The peace of not having to get approval for every little thing is exhilarating. School is going really well. This should be a good place to heal. No one knows me or my life situation.

I've taken on a new identity: Veronica Fey. Mary Fait is a person who lives in D.C.; Veronica Fey is an art student at Audubon College. Veronica is fabulous, men dig her, and she's an awesome artist. She is way cooler and more interesting than me. She's going to live the life Mary Fait couldn't possibly live. Mary Fait lives under a microscope and does as she's told. Veronica

lives for herself and nobody else. She's smart, self-reliant, and a survivor. She is the best version of me I can aspire to be.

October 1989

Louisiana has really folded me into the warmth of her embrace. Everyone has been warm and welcoming. I've already met a ton of people and been to a million places. The weather has cooled into Indian summer, and leaves are turning a little—not that much. There are oak trees everywhere; they look mystical and ancient. Spanish moss descends gently from the branches, giving them a deliciously haunted quality. So many people have decorated for Halloween; the intensity around the holiday is surprising.

Earlier tonight I turned in a paper to Dr. Landry. It was about Georges Seurat—easy as pie. I was excited to turn in my paper because of how awesome it turned out. I left our dormitory and walked across campus towards the art building. The art building looks like a huge plantation house. It has huge white columns and about a zillion rocking chairs across its huge, sprawling front porch. All you need is a few hound dogs and Southern belles and you're back in the Old South.

When I went inside the building, it was pretty much empty. Only the cleaning people were still there. I took the stairs instead of the elevator. The odor of fresh paint permeated the air. The fumes were dizzying—in a good way. I felt a little light-headed, walking up the stairs. Dr. Landry's office is on the second floor. His door was open and there was a light on inside, but he wasn't around. I put my paper on his desk. Then I arranged it a little differently, then centered it a little better, then turned around—and there he was.

“Why hello, Veronica, I didn't mean to scare you.” One of Dr. Landry's best qualities is that he's literally one of the most personable and friendly people you could ever hope to meet. People love him. Why? Because he has a secret power, same as Batman or Captain America or what have you. I figured it out one day in class. Dr. Landry makes every person around him feel

special. He's a completely present person. He's so attentive. He hangs on your every word and makes you feel important. He even does it with the payroll clerk who's so old she keeps forgetting to close the vault every time she has to make change for students. People are drawn to him because of how he makes them feel about themselves. A power like that is no joke. Imagine the possibilities.

"I didn't mean to scare you. Are you turning in your Seurat paper?" asked Dr. Landry. He's a Seurat fiend. We have one hanging on a bathroom wall at home. Maybe one day I'll give it to him.

"Yeah," I said. "Thought I'd get it in today. Tonight. Since Halloween is tomorrow. Night." Whenever I was around him, I started sounding really stupid.

"And what are you going to be for Halloween?" Dr. L wanted to know.

"Princess Leia."

"Oh, with the white dress, right?"

"No, in her slave costume from *Return of the Jedi*." I know what you're thinking. But that's what I'm wearing, and he did ask.

He blinked, and then cleared his throat. "I see. Well, don't wear it to class. Let's keep it professional."

"I wouldn't wear that to class." I laughed at the suggestion (but in all honesty would have if he'd wanted me to).

"Well, Veronica, are you interested in joining the Bayou Bend Art Club?" He sat down behind his desk and put on these very professorial glasses that he wears in class. *Super* cute.

"What's the Bayou Bend Art Club?" I sat down in one of the chairs in front of his desk. His desk had piles of paperwork everywhere. The piles themselves seemed to have some semblance of organizational structure, but he had way too much stuff.

"It's a club here at Audubon College," explained Dr. Landry. "We create venues for the student artists to have their own showings and get some exposure.

"Sure, why not? I'd be into that."

Dr. Landry leaned back in his chair, smiling. He was so comfortable in his own skin, like a lazy panther lounging around. “What else are you into?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I like all the artsy stuff, of course. I like food a lot. I like guys a lot.” What the hell was I saying? That sounded terrible.

He raised an eyebrow ever so slightly, and said, “Well, Veronica, I’m sure they like you too. What’s not to like? Listen, I just have to finish up a couple of things, and then I’m going out for dinner. There’s a place across the street from the college. It’s called Gumbeau’s. I like to think of it as Bayou Bend’s version of Les Deux Magots in Paris, a watering hole for some of the world’s greatest artists. Care to join me?” He asked.

I wasn’t really dressed to go out to dinner, so I declined the invitation, left his office, and exited the building. The sun had set completely. A convertible drove by, and a song was playing on its radio: *When you wish upon a star... it makes no difference who you are... when you wish upon a star your dreams come true.*

The October air was full of spices. I was suddenly starving. Dr. Landry’s office desk lamp was the only light against a midnight black backdrop. I could actually see Dr. Landry in his office, typing away. On his face was that contented peace you only see in those who love what they do. Happy people who love what they do are as rare as Renoirs. I wanted to know the kind of peace he had, so I lingered another moment, shivering in the cool, quiet darkness.

As I walked back to the dorm, I wondered what kind of conversation we would have had at dinner. Not that it really matters, of course. Adoring him from afar is the only option. I know what happens to mortals who get involved with the gods.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kimberly Vargas manages Modern Postcard's
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Gumbeaux received a gold medal in the 2011
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