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Smooth as Silk

James Mechem

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played cards, when I fixed sandwiches you fixed sandwiches, when I rolled over in my sleep you rolled over in your sleep. You followed me to the ends of the earth. When I turned there you were. I didn't have to shout. "Fanchon," I said in a normal tone of voice and you appeared before me. "I love you, darling," I said.

You were always there when I needed you, quietly eating popcorn beside me and listening to the talk of my friends. They learned to accept you. They never got a chance to ask me that but you never gave them the chance, did you, darling? I could kiss you.

Have I been cruel to her? Yes. There's no getting around that. I've been cruel. I say I want to be kind and gentle.

Of course

I'm gentle. I show my gentleness. I show tenderness. Underneath I'm both of these. You have to see underneath—but don't call me cruel. I'm not. I'm gentle but I'm not always so overt and obvious about it. Sometimes I almost feel compassion. I respond with whatever I respond with, but underneath there is a gentleness. I think. Underneath the suspicion, the lust, the anger, the unresponsiveness, there is a potential gentleness, if nothing else, and an attempt at warmth. So my gaze is analytical, peering, disapproving, rebellious, complacent. But I believe in gentleness and kindness and I don't like to be cruel.

Yet

*I've been cruel. I'm cruel to my children when I lose my temper. When I feel she has hurt me I'm cruel right back. It doesn't matter the rationalization . . . I was cruel. You always hurt the one you love. The one you shouldn't hurt at all . . . Why am I laughing? It's not funny. (from "Mona" in *A Diary of Women* and from *Della*)*

Smooth as Silk / James Mechem

What was I doing when you approached me? I was playing checkers with an old man, my father, in Acacia Park. I kissed your hand and introduced you as my betrothed. Your smile won him over immediately. Then you and I went up into the mountains to our cabin and you took off every piece you were wearing. After supper we had wine and lay on the day bed under the bare light bulb. Your solitaire game was spread on the counter-

pane and we tried not to disturb it but some of the cards fell to the floor.

In the morning we walked down the road as far as the Iron Water Springs. About noon we went downtown. We played Bingo. When it got dark we pushed shuffleboard saucers under the lights. Two old men were playing checkers. One of them was my father.

We took him home with us and stayed up half the night playing Monopoly. My father was a real estate dealer and Monopoly was his game. He lived in the Springs year round. He won the game of Monopoly. He cooked breakfast for us. He has always stayed up late and got up early. He was born on a farm but I don't think he lived there long.

His favorite breakfast was buckwheat cakes, bacon, orange juice and coffee. "I like my coffee black as sin, hot as hell and sweet as charity," he said, for at least the hundredth time in my hearing. He poured it out into the big white china cups that hung on hooks in the kitchen cupboard. We didn't have an icebox but the water leaked continually on a tea towel wrapped around the milk and butter in the sink . . .

The sun was blotted out by your shadow over me as you grabbed up your towel . . .

I imagined many grotesque things. I imagined that I knew French. My life's ambition that I've never been able to realize . . . you rubbed your shoulders and legs . . . smeared them with cocoa butter that was melting fast . . .

You spread out the beach towel . . . your eyes were serious and blue . . . not black and soft . . . life was stormy with you . . . the black bikini tight across your Planet Mons Veneris . . . embarrassing . . . frightening, really . . . I was a mere male and no stud . . . a lot of woman for me . . . but I wanted you . . . LIKE A MOTH TO ITS FLAME! YOU HEAR! JUNO! JUNO! . . . and you spread your legs . . . reaching for the sand with your toes . . .

I shudder to think . . . the gates of oblivion . . . en route to Hades . . . something like that . . . blue skies above . . . a pleasant past . . . once more around the Horn! Dear Lover! Stormy seas! A lot of woman for me! I poke at your brown belly!

"BELLY GOOD! BELLY GOOD!" Your belly dances. Your belly laughs. I poke fun. I Bearded the Goat Man. I crawled on my belly like a reptile . . . Or something.

We left the beach at Prospect Lake. Your shadow was cold as the water.

You were an apparition on the day cot when I came back from the outhouse. A lady in bed. You winked at me. We were roughing it. No indoor plumbing. No icebox. You were waiting for your lover.

There was the sound of your breathing and water murmuring in the sink . . . deer feeding on the mountainside.

In the evening it was like that . . . the slap of your cards . . . creak of the

ore train crossing the bridge below . . . from Cripple Creek . . . for ten, fifteen, twenty minutes sometimes . . .

In the summer it was like that . . .

Smooth as silk . . .

I like to make lists of poets I like the best, and then send cards to them soliciting poems. My favorite poets at the moment, that I sent cards to just last week, are Judy Grahn, Marge Piercy, Ellen Bass, Carolyn Kizer, Erica Jong, Lucille Clifton, Diane Wakoski. If I hear from just one of them I'll feel lucky. I like to do it even when I get no response at all. That doesn't seem right. I must always get a little return or I wouldn't feel that way . . . (from a letter to the editor)

James Mechem Wrote Me a Letter / Ursule Molinaro

James Mechem wrote me a letter. On graph paper; tall, well-rounded characters fat & black on a background of tiny squares. I'm attracted to his handwriting, which indicates an outgoing, generous mind, firmly rooted in fantasy.

Yet, how can I trust him? His name reads alike backward & forward considering ch as a phonetic unity & I learned to distrust these two-faced names when a man named Laval was premier of Vichy France, during the Nazi occupation.

But then again, Mechem begins & ends with M, the most trustworthy letter in the alphabet. The first hum that broke the primordial silence: Aum
Mama Mamal Man & ME.

Numerologically, too, Mechem is reassuring. He adds up to 11, the second master number, the higher octave of 2.

M	e	ch	e	m		
13		38		13		
$\frac{13}{4}$	5	$\frac{38}{11}$	5	$\frac{13}{4}$	-	11

11 means: sensitivity toward other people's psyche an intuitive tuning in on their hidden selves a dowser sensing the seeds of situations.

It is composed of: