

## Opposites Attract

Life on the "Other" Edge

Meg Stivison



"Garan, he's horrible to me," I whined. For the last two days, I'd been under a constant barrage of insults, always 3.2 seconds before I said it, from Stephen, my friend Alistair's English exchange student. For the last two hours, I'd been complaining to Garan about Stephen. It wasn't bad enough that he was insulting and sick-minded, he had to be stupid, too. Imagine thinking that Roger Moore makes a better Bond than Pierce Brosnan!

"You know why he's doing this, right?" Garan asked.

"Yeah, he has no social skills."

"Don't be so mean, Meg! I bet he likes you," Garan said.

"I did the same thing to Jen when I first met her."

"Jen is the love of your life." I sulked. "This is some freaky antisocial boys'-school British moron."

"Don't worry. They'll be gone in a week, anyway."

Quick recap: In November, my pal Alistair and I, along with some others from our high school, went to London on a student exchange. In April, our hosts came here, for 10 days of sightseeing in New York, which meant 240 hours nonstop shopping for Eva, my counterpart. So when the chaperones decided we needed groups of four, I agreed to go with Alistair, his match Stephen and Stephen's friend. My ice-cream scooping paycheck wouldn't have let me keep up with Eva and her friends, even if I'd wanted to go clothes shopping.

I checked in with Eva, and then the four of us set off. As we tour the Intrepid, decide not to wait to climb the Empire State, visit Chinatown and spend a few hours on a wild-goose chase for a restaurant Alistair vaguely remembered, Stephen and I swap bad pick-up lines and graphic insults. Although Stephen is evil, horrible and completely lacks manners, I've never laughed harder with anyone in my life. Not a bad bonus for doing a friend a favor, is it?

Alistair asked me for another favor when he left me responsible for getting the horrible Stephen home. "Are you sure you know how to get there?" I asked him, for about the millionth time when we get off the bus. He insists he does, and sets off walking. As soon as he's out of sight, my nervousness kicks in.

"I'm sure he can walk a few blocks alone" Eva says. She obviously has a much higher opinion of his intelligence than I do. We're eating dinner when the phone rings.

"Hi, Meg, it's Stephen. I'm lost."

"You're what? Where are you?" My paranoia in fullblast, I picture the hapless Brit wandering through the worst sections of Newark. "Tell me where you are, I'll come get you."

"Only kidding. Want to go to the pictures?"

One night, Eva came in sporting a nose ring. I thought it looked good (well, except for the blood), but my mom, who doesn't want me to get second holes in my EARS was less than thrilled. Another night, some kids from the group made a late-night pilgrimage to "this place in Little Italy where they don't card you" and missed the last bus home from the city. Then it was time to invent a visit to someone's fictitious American uncle in the city.

Anyway, their time in the US speeds by. Friday night, the English exchanges, American hosts, and a few friends we conned the chaperones into letting us invite along, go on a cruise/dance around the city. Stephen and I chose the cold over a loud dance beat masquerading as music, and spent most of it on deck, leaning on the railing, with the city lights in the background. It was like a scene from a movie, only freezing cold.

"We were talking!" I insist, when Garan teases me later. And it's true, Stephen's repertoire of blonde jokes rivals mine, and his British pick-ups are brilliant. Still, after a few hours mocking each other's accents, the cold gets to me and I hit the dance floor with Garan and another friend who needed a chick to dance with. We inch closer to a casual run-in with Garan's Flavour-of-the-Month, but haven't made actual contact before the final slow song starts.

The guys say "Stay here" and vanish. I'd sooner brave a minefield than this dance floor of very attached couples, so I sit on one of the billion crates marked with the DJ's logo, who seems to have hoped his expensive equipment would hide what a miserable DJ he is. He failed.

Then I see Stephen coming down the stairs.

"Would you like to dance?" he asks, taking my hands.

Would I! "I thought you didn't dance."

"Your friends put me up to it." Ok, so maybe having three guys, all over six feet, strongly suggesting he dance with their little Meggie might have had something to do with it. Suffice it to say we spend the rest of the week together, arguing violently or saying the same thing, at the same time.

Sunday afternoon, they left. I had to work. . . Fine, I admit it, I was more than pleased to avoid a teary airport scene. I'd had a great time with Eva; although we almost never hung out together on the group trips in London and New York, we would come home afterwards and talk it over until we were too tired to make complete sentences. I knew I'd miss her. But somehow, I wasn't as thrilled with Stephen leaving as I thought I would be.

A few days later, Garan and I are in his Volvo, coming home from the diner, just like every weekend. We ordered different things. . . then looked across the table and wished we'd ordered the other, just like every other weekend. I've spent my tip money on video games, we ran into Alistair and the rest of the crew, like every other weekend. The theme song to my life is playing again.

I'm realizing that Stephen is in another country, continent, timezone. This, here, is my life, and right now he's probably sleeping off his jetlag, and reconnecting with his mates for whatever their weekend patterns are. I have no place in that, as he has no place here. By the time Garan drops me off, I've filed last week under E for Events I'm Going To Put In My Best-Selling Novel Someday.

The light flashes on my machine. Messages. I deliberate a moment, do I really need to hear that my boss needs me to work another shift? Then again, it could be the UMass admissions office calling to offer me a scholarship.

"Hello, Meg. It's the crazy little Brit here. Just thought I'd run up my phone bill saying hi to you."

Guess I'll work an extra shift. After all, I need to get a phonecard.

Meg Stivison is a high school senior in New Jersey who puts out her own e-zine, *Violet Eclipse*.

## FROM THE LOWER LEFT CORNER

A Superficial Beauty  
Victoria Stoppielo

We followed the trail through pines down toward the bay. At the last dune, the trail became a small wooden platform, with steps beyond that dropped to the sand. I was reminded of other, similar approaches to other similar waterside vistas—one in particular on Hatteras, or was it Okracoke, or even more striking, at Cumberland Island?

Reminded of those other places and my first reaction upon seeing them, I realized I've seen this view so many times, I've lost any idea of what it looks like. Its familiarity dominates my perception the same way familiarity clouds my idea of what my husband looks like, and I have to think back to our first meeting and remember the initial reality of his appearance; I had expected something different.

Driving up Stackpole Road reminded me of the lonely roads that led to the North Carolina coast in mid-July. Steamy weather, mosquitoes, deep green, and roadways almost grown over with vegetation led us to the ferry for the Outer Banks, as the barrier islands are called. Stackpole feels similarly mysterious. Large spruce oversee a tangle of vegetation: alders, twinberry, salal, salmon berry, fallen trees, mosses and ferns. I tried to imagine what I would feel and perceive with fresh eyes, instead of with my blinders of memory. I speculated about what I would think of this peninsula if I were visiting for the first time: the ticky-tacky towns, the shotgun scatter of mobile homes, the gravel driveways disappearing into the temperate jungle, the historic village here and there, the open beach, the old pastures riddled with manufactured homes, the carved hillsides, and now the long curve of Willapa Bay reaching to a forested knoll, forming Ledbetter Point.

The tide was up, the wind calm and the waters lapped the sand in rhythmic soft curls. Gray sand, gray water, and far across the bay were hills, which would be called mountains in other places. Too quickly we noted the clearcuts, the bare places, the eroded shutes from winter storms.

The Long Beach Peninsula would be a treasure of solitude, a sanctuary for the harried urbanite, a respite for the wildlife lover—if it were located somewhere on the east coast where

access to undeveloped areas isn't taken for granted. Looking at the view, walking north along the beach, lugging a lunch, binoculars and birding scope, we were aware of our good fortune in living so close to such a beautiful place.

But this beauty is only skin deep. The distant green on the Willapa Hills is mostly tree farms, typically monocrops of one or two species, planted in neat grids, sprayed to keep them free of alders and other less marketable types. Some people enjoy the tree farms' tidy order, like lawns manicured by a greenskeeper with every blade and needle under the control of a human hand. The messy diversity of a natural forest, with its young and old, growing and rotting, large and small, evergreen and deciduous, like our own human population, presents problems. So much better to have everything grow at the same rate, live the same way...better, or just efficient.

The waters of the bay are beautiful to the eye, but that too conceals a problem. As we started down the trail, I read the posted notice: the bay too will get its dousing with something man-made to make it more suitable for our intentions. During six months of potentially dry weather, the bay will be sprayed with an herbicide, but we're assured by the yellow sign that we'll be safe. It won't hurt us; the manufacturer says so and so do the regulations. There are a lot of people here who are unemployed, but better to make a few passes with a crop duster than hire them to remove the interloper by hand and machine. Besides, it's cheaper and we've been putting this stuff on our lawns for decades, haven't we? And those tree farms across the way have done well with it also, haven't they? That's the real difference in my perspective: I know too much. On the Carolina coast, I was just ignorant. I saw the superficial beauty and didn't know what lay beneath it; they don't tell tourists much about things like that. It's only when you live in a place, or when your job is to find out, that that wonderful face, just like with the one you love, is just the beginning of a relationship, and that the living body has scars, and pains, and flaws and problems. As you get to know it, your original perception is altered and you can never get back to it again.

Victoria Stoppielo is a writer living in Ilwaco, at the lower left corner of Washington state.

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