

## ***A MUSE IN LOVE***

***Jennifer Johans***

*Scottsdale Community College*

*Third Place, One-Act Play*

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CHARACTERS: INTERVIEWER, a well-dressed journalist whose appearance, age and gender are unimportant.

GAVIN REYNOLDS, an attractive, dark-haired young man in his early-twenties.

SETTING: The play unfolds in an outside café in Minneapolis, though most of the stage remains unlit to focus on the small, round table center stage where GAVIN and the INTERVIEWER are seated.

TIME: The present.

*As the curtain rises, GAVIN and the INTERVIEWER are already seated at the table center stage and it's apparent that they're mid-conversation but just now settling into the interview itself. The interviewer is drinking bottled water while GAVIN freely sips wine throughout the exchange.*

GAVIN: With Natalie, I guess I don't really know where to begin.

INTERVIEWER: How did you meet?

GAVIN: I attended a lecture she gave, sponsored by the University of Minnesota. It was at the Walker Art Center. Afterwards, I walked up to her like a schoolboy and asked if I could take her picture—this was before I'd started to paint. To this day, I don't know why I was so unafraid—you've seen her in interviews—she destroys the journalists, attacks, shocks, dazzles and her lecture that night was no exception. I'd never seen anyone so alive before—completely sexy, comfortable in her own skin—an incredibly attractive quality to me given my age and the awkwardness that went with it. I've always preferred direct, confident women. She was thirty—wise and witty and there I was at eighteen, ignorant and completely head over heels. She knew it, of course. Women always do and Natalie ate it up. A week later, I was working for her.

INTERVIEWER: As?

GAVIN: Her assistant. That was the official title, anyway, the one they would use if they were writing a job description but Natalie called me her muse.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do for her?

GAVIN: Everything. *(laughs)* I cleaned her studio, took the trash out, fetched the newspaper, made the coffee, bought her supplies and found her models. She'd admired a series of photographs

I'd taken of local musicians and aspired to sculpt one for her Male Creativity series. The idea of such being most appealing to her—male everything being irresistible but creativity even more so. She knew I loved her and even confronted me early on, treating me like you would a child, patting me on the head and telling me that I mistook admiration for affection but I knew my heart even then, as inexperienced as I was at the time.

INTERVIEWER: It must have been hard.

GAVIN: We had a great rapport for awhile though at first, it was incredibly difficult to work with her—I'm sure I blushed and stammered like an idiot for the first week but the thing about Natalie is she used my insecurity as fodder for her work. Honestly, I never got my feelings under control—I wanted her every waking second and twice as much in my dreams but I was just content to help her create her art—to think in some small way I was helping her sculpt was enough for me.

INTERVIEWER: Did you neglect your own art?

GAVIN: At first, yeah, the photography stopped until she encouraged me to paint. I'd always wanted to paint but felt foolish when I tried— I'm uncomfortable with failure and because I wasn't happy with my first attempts, I gave up but she kicked my ass. Still, I couldn't paint under her gaze without comparing my work to her own and feeling incredibly self-conscious. I only had one thing on my mind and that was Natalie. I must have painted her portrait a hundred times and then burned them because they weren't quite right—though I think it was just the ritual of it that seduced me. I liked to paint her; when I was home, alone, it made me feel closer to her so I did it repeatedly. Meanwhile, I kept every newspaper clipping of her and was touched every time I was mentioned in the article although it was a masochistic satisfaction because she'd always refer to me as her errand boy. I liked the teasing, flirtatious way she'd used the term like I was her own private groupie but to condescendingly lump me with her other boys' was cruel as hell and I felt betrayed. Then, I'd go home and make the decision to quit my job but in the end, I'd always go back, like a puppy willing to forgive his owner abuse just for another chance to play—the attention and the wonderful, anything-could-happen feeling of the reunion.

INTERVIEWER: Did she ever see any of your paintings?

GAVIN: She never asked and I never offered. The only thing Natalie wanted to do was concentrate on her own work and she was completely overwhelmed with the Male Creativity series.

I helped her find models—she liked the pretty, vacuous men—chiseled features, long lashes, androgynous like seventies glam rock stars. I would agonize over the hours she spent alone with them in her studio. I know she slept with most of them but I was more jealous of her sculpting their bodies—felt that was much more intimate than anything of the physical nature—maybe because like most men, I realize sex can be just sex but intimacy is something altogether different. Sex took less time than art and therefore meant less to me.

INTERVIEWER: How did you react?

GAVIN: I began slacking off at work until one day I didn't show up at all. I'd walked in on her with one—getting the full view was even worse than imagining it. She didn't notice my absence right away or maybe she did but wouldn't give me the satisfaction. Eight days later my phone rang. It's funny because actually, I don't think I ever saw her use the phone—she was fond of letter writing and the fact that she picked up the phone to call moved me unexpectedly but I wouldn't give in. I said I was working and she told me to take a few weeks off. I did. I really felt like I was quitting Natalie cold turkey, like this was the end of it because I would never have her and needed to accept it but the 'what if' never left my heart. The thing was, I did work eventually—it took awhile and it was only the night before I'd told her I may come back that I could actually sit still long enough to paint. Naturally, the only thing I could paint was Natalie but this time I didn't burn the finished product.

INTERVIEWER: Oh?

GAVIN: The next morning, I threw my painting in the back of my Jeep. I knew I couldn't face her. It was pouring outside. I left the painting on her front porch with an umbrella over it and having expected the rain, I'd wrapped it in the sheets off my bed—an erotic touch, I remember thinking and knew that she wouldn't fail to miss the significance of it. I didn't ring the doorbell. I just left but she was already awake and called out to me as I climbed back in the Jeep. I told her I wasn't feeling well but she noticed the painting and bid me to come inside. She made me coffee and I swallowed it too quickly and it burned my throat badly on the way down but most of my suffering came from watching her slowly unwrap the painting. She smelled the sheets and looked up at me with a sideways grin, knowing my scent and said, "It smells like you." That killed me. Again, more coffee scalding my lungs and I held my breath until she'd finished looking over the portrait. She wiped her eyes and I couldn't tell if it'd been just

the rain or tears because I don't think Natalie ever cried. She set the painting down and led me to her studio. She began showing me the work she'd completed since I'd been gone and chatted rapidly about some new technique and I looked over the exquisite nudes and no longer felt jealous. Something unspoken had passed between us and I could sense that for a change, I'd become the one to make her nervous—she was speaking way too quickly and her voice wavered strangely. "Sculpt me," I pleaded and she didn't look me in the eye for a moment and then did. I noticed her eyes crinkle a bit in the corners with amusement. I'd give anything to know what she was thinking at that moment. I repeated my wish and she grabbed a pad for sketching and started getting ready. She pointed where she wanted me to stand and I did. As she started to sharpen her pencil, I began to undress, awaiting further instruction. She waited only until my shirt was off before coming over to me but before she could say anything, I kissed her. I was eighteen years old and she was the first woman I ever kissed and I still can't believe I made the first move.

INTERVIEWER: Did she finish the sculpture?

GAVIN: Eventually. It's in her private collection. She won't give it to me.

INTERVIEWER: And all that time, you never knew about her marriage to Benjamin Stark?

GAVIN: No. She never told me. It wasn't until he showed up after the drunk driving arrest in New Orleans that I found out. He figured hiding out in Minneapolis would be a good idea—a way to avoid the press—we're far less glamorous in the Midwest. They'd married twelve years earlier in secret but she'd left him a few years before I met her after he'd moved his mistress into their home. I learned from your newspaper shortly thereafter that before becoming his wife, she'd worked as his assistant and felt a painful jolt of irony when you wrote that he referred to her as his "girl muse" as Natalie had called me her "boy muse."

INTERVIEWER: When he returned, did the affair end?

GAVIN: Initially, yes. I felt betrayed. We had an awkward dinner—the three of us where they discussed their open marriage—lectured was more like it—and, as usual, Benjamin had too much to drink. He started to insinuate about Natalie and me, to scold and jeer and I walked out with a childish "fuck you"—the only thing I could think to say at the time. She followed me home and we had our first fight. She told me how hard life with Benjamin had been when she was my age because that's when she met him—how she couldn't bear that she was doing the same thing to me

and then said she'd go if I wanted her to go but...(*pours himself more wine, lost in delicious memory for a moment*)...she made a pass at the same time and I gave in weakly. It's hard to be strong around Natalie and I told her I didn't want to try, that I didn't want the relationship to end and she still came to me often.

INTERVIEWER: Stark knew?

GAVIN: Of course. We had his blessing, he always gave her his blessing to fool around because he did the same thing and he'd even encouraged her in that direction after they were first married. He'd been impotent at the time—feeling a bit guilty about the fact that he was twenty-five years older than her and felt he'd been a failure to her as a lover. In my case, I think he assumed I was just one of her boys but later, learned that he was mistaken. I didn't realize it then but he'd corresponded with Natalie the entire time they'd been apart and both were brutally honest about their indiscretions. Honestly, I think it turned them on but I do feel that Natalie and I were in love—that even she knew our relationship was different right after it began—of course, as a naïve virgin, I'd assumed this was the case. The ironic thing was, I'd even been in charge of checking her mail when I worked for her and had handled numerous letters he'd written but Stark used aliases so I'd assumed it was just fan mail. I wasn't familiar enough with his writing to realize he was using character names from his own books—nearly daring me to figure it out but then again, I've never been a fan of his work.

INTERVIEWER: No?

GAVIN: I found his writing smug and aggressively chauvinistic. Really, he was the opposite of me as a man and maybe that's why Natalie took me on. We couldn't have been more different; the only thing we had in common was love for Natalie and the willingness to play whipping boy, to keep trying to be in her life when we were away from her—damn the consequences or the sense it made.

INTERVIEWER: How did you find out about the letters?

GAVIN: Stark told me—he was a good man, deep down. Crazy but genuine—he was completely honest and told me everything.

INTERVIEWER: When was this?

GAVIN: After my collapse, when he visited me in the hospital, coming in like God—booming voice, scaring the nurses who curiously peered through the doorway anyway, even though their mothers had warned them about men like that—beauties enchanted by the beast. He never looked back at them—played it so cool but

I know deep down it must have thrilled him—he was way past his prime by then and everyone wants to be wanted.

INTERVIEWER: You said your collapse? What collapse?

GAVIN: I fainted while shaving—left a jagged gash on my face (*lowers wine glass and tilts his head to the Interviewer, tracing his nearly invisible scar with a solitary finger*)...you can still see it in daylight if you look closely enough. Natalie had been asleep in my bed and found me upon waking—she thought I'd tried to kill myself—dialed 911 and left. She watched the paramedics arrive from a tree outside my apartment, hiding or so Stark told me.

INTERVIEWER: And by this point you hadn't told her you had cancer?

GAVIN: No, it never seemed integral to our relationship...when we were together we defied marriage so why not disease?

INTERVIEWER: When did you last see her?

GAVIN: Two months ago. It'd been the first time since my collapse three years ago after I'd been treated and was deemed temporarily cancer free. I'd tried afterwards to see her but she wouldn't answer my calls. She did write me one letter and from it, I honestly felt she feared she'd been the one to give me cancer. I tried writing her back but never heard from her although I think she received my letters. I dreamed she did and feel strongly that it was more than just a wish. I gave up trying to contact her and took a year off to work on my paintings—cut myself off from the world entirely, taking a cue from Stark, the hermit. I finally resurfaced with enough art to put together my first show and went outside, only to read in the paper that Stark had died in another drunk driving accident. I got into my Jeep and drove to her place—the first thing I'd done something that direct. I wasn't surprised when she didn't answer the door and learned she wasn't staying there anymore. Her brother Jack—my old classmate—was living there with his wife and daughter and he looked like he'd been expecting me. He handed me a painting; it was the one I'd done of Natalie. It's now hanging on the wall of my apartment. I won't give it back to her.

INTERVIEWER: How did the show go?

GAVIN: Great. She came actually with a large group of people—models and artists. She allowed me to speak alone with her and I assured her that her love hadn't been cancerous and she said, "It wasn't my love but my lie." So dramatic...Natalie was always so dramatic like an old movie star. She had the look for it and pulled it off marvelously—her drama was her best feature—

though, I'll admit that it's unbecoming in most women. I kissed her right there and she allowed me to. I told her I was going to see a specialist at the Mayo Clinic and that the Leukemia was back. She didn't say anything, just waited a moment and kissed me back. I asked her to stay after the show. She did and we walked around. Someone in her group bought one of my paintings though deep down, I wonder if it was Natalie.

INTERVIEWER: And how have you been since?

GAVIN: The cancer is back and it's everywhere.

INTERVIEWER: And Natalie?

GAVIN: Back and everywhere. I'm infected with her as well and it's spread throughout my entire body—that's the only way I know how to love and I wouldn't have it any other way. Besides, like cancer, there's really no cure for that anyway.

INTERVIEWER: Can you answer a question for me? Maybe put a stop to these rumors?

GAVIN: Depends.

INTERVIEWER: It's rumored that you're secretly married to Natalie. Can you confirm that?

GAVIN: I can tell you we write letters.

INTERVIEWER: That's all you'll say?

GAVIN: That...and she's given me a sculpture of our son, Benjamin.

