THE MISTRESS CONTRACT

by

She & He
She and He first met in graduate school in the 1950s, when they were part of the same group of student friends. Then her husband transferred to another university and she left town. He, too, married and transferred to another university.

By the time they met again, nearly twenty years later, both had young children. He was somewhat older than she was; he was also smart, self-made, witty and – she could tell – brave. She was intelligent and watchful, yet somehow seemed always to speak her mind; certainly she
made her own decisions, regardless of what anyone might think of her choices. Men said she was beautiful. And this time around, when they met they recognized in each other a similar rebelliousness that left them both free of conventions and expectations. They began to have an affair. From the beginning, they were frank and honest with each other; it was, after all, an enlightened, postwar world.

Through the late 1970s they saw each other regularly, though the relationship was never exclusive for either of them. They were together perhaps two or three times a month, but they spoke frequently by phone. Even so, as time went on their worlds remained separate. She was in one part of the country raising her children and teaching at alternative elementary schools; he was in a city several states away, attending board meetings, making investment decisions, monitoring corporate income projections.

In 1981, following a phone conversation that had made her unhappy about all of this, she had a bold idea. She sat at her typewriter and created a document she labeled simply “CONTRACT”. It proposed a unique set of terms for their relationship. He would provide her with a home and
an income, while she would provide “mistress services”: “All sexual acts as requested, with suspension of historical, emotional, psychological disclaimers.” For the duration of the contract, she would become his sexual property. She smiled when she re-read it, and then she faxed it to him. Almost immediately he phoned her, delighted to accept her extraordinary terms. She’d surprised herself by suggesting the Contract – she considered herself a progressive woman, and was no stranger to feminism. She was even more surprised that he was willing to define their future together in that way too. But he was a practical man whose attraction to her had not lessened over time, and he intended to assume that she was serious.

And so, suddenly she had a kind of security she hadn’t known since long before her marriage had ended in legal battles and recriminations, almost fifteen years earlier. And by power of the Contract, he was now committed to her in ways he might not have considered before she made this particular offer to him.

The Contract did not bring them together any more often, even though she soon had a house in the hills where they could meet in privacy. It was the first of several houses he
would provide for her. Their independence remained the most important thing. And yet the connection between them was different. They had made promises to each other on paper, and they knew this had real implications, even when they weren’t thinking about it.

On a small tape recorder that fit in her handbag, they began to tape their conversations about their relationship, conversations that took place while travelling, over dinner at home and in restaurants, on the phone, and in bed.

This book is based on those tapes. It is a candid record of what they had to say to each other privately about the arrangement and its power relations, their physical relationship and the sexual forces that shaped it.

Although there was a ready escape clause in the Contract, the terms of the agreement have been in force for over thirty years. They never had any children together, but they now have several grandchildren between them. They live in separate houses in the same city on the West Coast of America.

They speak by phone nearly every day they are not in rooms together.

She is 88. He is 93.
AGREEMENT

1. This Agreement is for mistress services to be performed by Ms.___________ for Mr. _____________.

2. The compensation for these services shall be at whatever amount is required to provide Ms.___________ adequate accommodations and expenses accrued in the normal course of her activities.

3. In return for this compensation, Ms.___________ will provide the following mistress services:

   a. All housekeeping duties requested by Mr.___________ when he is in area, unless unusual schedule is temporarily necessary.

   b. All sexual acts engaged in when requested by Mr.___________, with suspension of historical, emotional, psychological disclaimers for duration of time requested, to be determined by Mr.___________.

      For duration of Agreement, Ms.___________ becomes sexual property of Mr.___________.

      She ____________

      He ____________

      Date ____________
She: We began our recording of conversations on Saturday after buying a Sony tape recorder that could fit in my purse. I felt strengthened by the device. We tried it first in Hilary’s for coffee, and it sucked up our words in spite of a speaker on the wall nearby, and we continued later at the same place for dinner – many guests, yet the words fairly clear. Over dinner, our words gradually became slurred with wine, and often our mouths were full.

I have transcribed one tape. What emerges:

1. He is fluent, pedantic, complex-compound,
archaically eloquent, long-winded, and occasionally – when he switches to simple diction – comical. He dominates the conversation by his flow, but it is apparent that the subject interests him, that he has many thoughts on male-female boundaries and wishes to understand. He listens.

2. I am much less skilled at speaking and confine myself to that which I feel or know, or think I know. Several times I confess to feeling confused about where we are going and say so. We get back on target.
Scene: HE and SHE in bed with tape recorder.

Time: A night in April, in California in the 1980s

She: Sometime we’re going to have to talk on tape about this agreement we’ve signed.

He: The content of these tapes should appear in a book, and if the content is as outrageous as the contract, it’s going to outrage some people … one thing I find fascinating, and which makes me fall in love with you every time I think of it, is … where did you get the audacity (I wouldn’t
call it courage) to try something like that? The sheer genius? When I go back over all of our arguments, all the times when we were thrashing about on the issue of your bending your will to another, other figures loomed up, shadows from the past. If we did something together, all the other men you’d done it with interposed themselves.

**She:** Do you remember when I wrote that letter offering myself as mistress? I wrote it because I was angry at myself for feeling miserable. I sat down and in the petulant heat wrote a suggestion. I got carried away at the typewriter because it was so much fun …

**He:** … as is your wont …

**She:** … so much fun to give away all of my freedom and to give up all my other roles of feminist, analyst of what was happening to me and other women – to just throw it away and be paid for all I had previously, supposedly, done out of love. What’s a letter? **Send it.** He’ll either never respond, or he’ll laugh. I didn’t expect you to accept it.
He: I thought it was the greatest offer I’d ever received.

She: By phone, immediately, you accepted. And I can remember feeling soaringly happy at the whole antic. For weeks and weeks after that, I tried out what it felt like to be a mistress, which I certainly had never been. It’s not even a category available …

He: … to a modern woman.

She: I, modern woman, went dancing around, took walks, thought, and wrote not a word of it in my journal. I didn’t want it to be literary. I needed it to be real.

He: You’ve grown into the role beautifully.

She: There was a big payoff besides happiness. Housing, money. It’s not too fair.

He: Why? Just because you happen to have someone who is madly in love with you and would give you anything he had?

She: But if you were as penniless as I am, this kind of agreement wouldn’t work at all.

He: You wonder what I’m getting out of this?