

YOSHIMOTO BANANA (1964-)

DREAMING OF KIMCHEE

Translated by Ann Sherif



In just about every women's magazine you pick up, you'll find an article about extramarital affairs. The contents don't vary much:

Keep in mind that married men who have extramarital affairs rarely leave their wives to marry their lovers. If you can cope with that reality, then an affair with a married man may be just the thing for you. A woman is wise to regard such relationships as temporary, and something to learn from, rather than hoping for something more permanent.

I read dozens of those articles, but never took them to heart.

I didn't ransack the magazine stands trying to find magazines with 'men who cheat on their wives' articles. I just liked buying a magazine on the way home from work when I knew I would have enough time to read it, on the rare occasion when I got out of work at a decent hour. Could I help it that they always featured a 'loving a married man' article?

I relished those days when I had a few hours to relax at home. I wouldn't make a big deal about dinner, because I preferred to spend my time watching TV, or writing long-overdue letters to friends. Sometimes I'd just gab on the phone for an hour or so. Later in the evening, I'd never miss my soak in a hot bath, after which I'd jump into bed, ready to read my new magazine from cover to cover, including the obligatory blurb about the difficulties of getting involved with a married man. But I really just skimmed them without paying much attention, which is hard to believe, considering.

I adored the apartment I had then—my little castle, with a decorating job by yours truly. I chose every detail down to the towels in the bathroom. I looked for ages before I found dishes that I liked. Once ensconced inside my warm, safe haven, I forgot about everything, and even tried to banish work from my mind. And I looked forward to the nightly phone call from my boyfriend, at

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10:00 p.m. sharp. Waiting for his call was part of my routine, even if I was too bushed to do much else.

I liked my life then. Those magazine articles didn't bother me at all, even the 'true confession' type, which were depressing and reeked of despair. I was so unaware that I could even resist the devastating pessimism of the trained professionals. I was in control. I'd sit there in my happy home, paging through my glossy magazines, until I found yet another article on the topic. I'd skim through it coolly, as if the subject didn't apply. When I was done reading, I'd take another bite of whatever cookie I was devouring that night, flip to the next page in the magazine, and forget all about it. Very odd, now that I think about it. It depresses me to recall my emotional state then.

Even though our love was strong and constant, we had our share of disagreements. I remember once we argued on the phone, and, after I'd slammed the receiver down, I swore to myself that I'd never talk to him again. And then there was the time when I had a conversation with his wife in person—that blew me away. But the most unbelievable thing was me in my wonderful, cozy, warm little room, watching TV, and sitting there reading articles about infidelity as if all the pain and doubt and uncertainty they talked about had absolutely nothing to do with me.

I can picture myself now, like someone I'd see through a window, a woman safe in a warm asylum. I would imagine that she needed a hug, though I'm not sure why, because ultimately no one can comfort her, not her lover, not her parents, and certainly not the present me, the victor.

'You really don't want to be reading articles like that,' I want to tell her. 'You pretend to be strong, but I know it hurts a lot.'

If there is a God, I bet She watches over us like that. Memories are energy, and if they aren't defused, they remain to haunt you. Of course God would worry, and hover around me, as I lay there leafing through my magazine, and shake me with an invisible hand.

'It's right here. Don't pretend you don't feel it,' She would yell, in a silent voice.

In the end, I married my lover. He left his wife and we got married.

The moment we met, I felt certain that he and I would spend some part of our lives together. There was no way around it. I didn't

intuit the inevitability of our relationship, or will it into being. I simply knew it would happen. Our relationship came about naturally, without dreams or desire.

It wasn't as easy as I'm making it sound, of course. After all, I was in love with a married man, and sometimes the stress of the relationship hurt me tremendously. I'd get so sick of the whole thing that I'd feel like giving up. Every time we'd hit a snag, I'd find myself wondering why. We'll end up together eventually, so why all this backsliding? Sometimes it didn't even seem worth it, and I would stop trying, ready to give it all up. Gradually, though, I stopped holding back and just went with the flow. There was no point in resisting, because he and I were born into this world to be together.

I found out that only 5 per cent of couples like us end up getting married. I felt uncomfortable being made into a statistic like that, though, because I knew that we weren't just like every other couple.

Thinking about it now, I realize that a strange, invisible kind of pressure had taken control of me then, a pressure to conform. It's like when you go out to a restaurant with a group of friends and you plan to all split the bill evenly, you can't very well order a whole meal for yourself if everyone else is just having a cup of coffee. Just like you're obliged to go on company trips, even if you don't want to. Your superiors will look down on you if you don't. That's the way the world works.

Of course, it's natural for taxi-drivers who are working late at night to look for a fare with a long trip. If a single woman goes bar-hopping by herself, people conclude that she's loose. If you have lunch with a single guy from the office, the women you usually eat with get upset. All these things seem so trivial, yet the rules are hard and fast. It's weird. Just like it's strange how everyone automatically makes assumptions about people who are having affairs before they've heard the particulars. And then they feel like it's their place to judge the morality of those involved.

In my case, I promised myself that I would ignore what other people thought, and do what I needed to do for myself. And I realize now that I was waging a psychic battle with other things as well—and it wasn't just with him, his wife, and myself. It's the way society is now. You're not supposed to be by yourself. You get caught in the net, and you can feel it tugging at you as you try to get away from it, just as if you've walked into a spider's web. You

struggle to free yourself, but you can't. It's in the air; there's no escape from this force, one so inferior to the life force, the energy within us. You can pretend to ignore it, but it still obscures your vision.

We'd been married for two years. We didn't have children, and I'd quit my job a year before. We had one cat and lived in a condo that we had bought together.

Every morning before he left for work, he'd promise to call if he'd be late getting home. Then he'd switch off the TV, and go. Silence filled up the apartment. My husband didn't eat breakfast, so I would usually still be in bed. I'd just lie there, quietly, watching him leave. When I heard him close the door behind him, a feeling of regret would flash through the room, and for a moment I would feel so lonesome. I could see the rays of morning sunlight shining across the dining room table and smell the coffee. The cat would wander into our bedroom, jump onto the bed, and curl up by my feet. As I gazed down at her, I'd drift off to sleep again.

At first, I wouldn't know where I was when I woke up. Sometimes I'd call my little sister's name.

'Kyon-chan? Are you there?'

During the last part of our 'affair', he would come to my apartment every night. We'd eat dinner together, have a couple of beers, and then go to bed. In the morning, he'd go off to work, and all that I had left were a couple pairs of his socks and some shirts, and his pillow next to mine. Eventually, I tired of this arrangement, and asked my sister if she wanted to share an apartment with me. She loved the idea, because it meant we'd be able to afford a bigger place by pooling our money.

Partly, I made the move to test our relationship, although I didn't relish the idea of hunting for hotel rooms where we could make love. If something like this would make our love go sour, then it wasn't meant to last anyway. But everything turned out to be fine, even when I didn't have a place of my own. Our future together seemed bright.

And I felt better, too, I'd been losing weight and was feeling down, but life with my sister agreed with me. She was like an ice pack when you have a fever, or a pot of bubbling stew and a soft cozy blanket on a cold winter day. I hadn't realized how stressed out I'd been.

We got along well, my sister and I. I'd wake up in the morning

to hear her filling the teapot with fresh water for tea. She'd take charge and tell me what to do, like 'Get off your butt and go clean the bathroom.' One of my favorite things was to buy sweets from the bakery on my way home from work, so that she and I could spend time together having tea and talking about all the things that had happened that day. She always understood what was on my mind, but never tried to second-guess me. Plus, on my days off, I no longer had to spend the evening in front of the television watching variety shows all by myself.

I was starved for that kind of ordinary companionship and routine. A relationship with a married man totally lacks those aspects, of course, because he can get his creature comforts from his wife at home, if he wants to. That's one reason extramarital affairs are better avoided.

Every morning, I'd wake up and hear my sister bustling around in the next room. I'd just lie there half asleep, thinking about her, innocently, like a child. I knew that she would never do anything to hurt me. I felt absolutely safe with her. I could drift back to sleep without a care in the world, knowing that she'd be there when I woke up, and that she, at least, didn't have another home to go to. Her place was with me. My sister loved me as much as she loved her boyfriend, though in a sisterly way, and I knew that she would never cause me pain. Not like him, even though he loved me as much as he had loved his wife.

Most days, I'd eventually fall back asleep, nestled in my warm comforter, at peace with the world. Life was good.

That's why, after he got divorced, I wasn't exactly overjoyed when he asked me to marry him. Of course it made me happy that he had proposed to me, but I was finding life with my sister very comfortable. I might not have made it if I hadn't spent that time healing and trying to feel whole again. At the same time, I realized that I couldn't live with my sister for the rest of my life, and that's why I decided to take the leap into a new existence, one fraught with difficulty.

Our relationship had started out under rocky circumstances, and marriage itself did not alleviate all of the problems. For me, this meant that I was condemned to a role of eternal waiting, a state of anticipation of the day when the fatigue and tension implicit to our love would disappear.

To give a concrete example, something very strange would hap-

pen when he'd called to let me know that he'd be home late from work. By the time he'd phoned me, I'd usually already have dinner made, but I never spent much time on cooking anyway, so it didn't bother me that he wasn't going to eat at home. In fact, I couldn't believe how considerate he was. Not only would he keep me informed of his plans, he'd say, 'Instead of sitting at home by yourself, why don't you go and have dinner at your sister's?'

For a while after saying good-bye and hanging up, I'd be fine, but in less than half an hour I started to feel it, something like a chemical reaction, completely beyond my control. I would sit there staring into space, under the influence of this imperative to wait that filled the apartment like a mysterious vapor. Within a couple of hours, it had circulated throughout my body, and immobilized me completely. Eventually, I became impervious to everything around me, and couldn't respond to the sound of the telephone ringing, or recognize my books, the TV screen, the bath, anything, as if I had been enveloped in an impenetrable membrane. Only my mind was active, as all of the terrible possibilities visited me like evil spirits.

I longed for my old, simple life with my sister, when I could be myself completely. At the same time I had to remind myself that I had chosen to leave her, and to live with him as man and wife, but to no avail. I still felt just awful. What did work like a charm was chanting to myself, 'This is the way life is, and I can't change it.' I even tried saying it out loud, and somehow that made the clouds clear. I never spoke with my husband about it. There was no point talking. It was a really rough time for me.

The time I met his wife, she let me know the score in no uncertain terms. She's awfully harsh, I thought, with amazing nonchalance.

'In case it's never occurred to you, men who are unfaithful once are bound to cheat again. I promise you that's how he is. He can't resist.'

Could she possibly be right? I wondered. There's nothing for us to hold on to, no one we can keep forever as our own. Our souls are simply floating, anyway, waiting to be swept along with the current.

I remember her saying to me, 'I waited for him every day. Even after I found out about you, I was still waiting for him, every day, for months and months.'

She would also write me letters telling me about her many days of

waiting. Even though I expected some pain from loving a married man, I had not anticipated how much it would actually tear me apart. At times, I felt tremendous sympathy for her, despite my position as adversary. After all, we loved the same man.

The last time I saw her, I felt overwhelmed by the weight of her pain. All she could do the whole time was complain about what a monster he was, and how much he had hurt her, but eventually my sympathy turned to anger. I said to her, 'You're obsessing. You've got to let go of him,' and without hesitation she raised her hand and slapped me hard across the face. The sting brought tears to my eyes.

It was the touch of her hand that had implanted the compulsion to wait for him in me, and eventually it spread throughout my body and grew, as if I'd been possessed by an alien. It sucked away all my energy, and the gauges in my body registered near empty.

How else could it have worked? From her point of view, I (Party A) stole her (Party B's) dreams and hopes for the future. (This is B's take on the situation, by the way, not mine. I think that no one individual possesses the power to alter the natural course of things. Besides, Party B is hardly guaranteed a happy future simply by remaining with her original partner.) So all the energy that Party B had been concentrating on her own future is now focused on Party A. If that energy becomes a negative force, then something like what happened between the two of us is inevitable. At least, that's how it looked to me, ever since she put her mark on me.

I worried, as all newlyweds do, that my new husband might fall in love with someone else, just as he had fallen in love with me. Then there was the additional twist to my fears. From early on, I realized that my daily life would be plagued with such anxiety, and I tried to avoid the pain of contemplating our future together.

Long ago, people would have said that I was possessed by evil spirits; now, we label it neurotic. I was suffering under the stress of her resentment. For my part, I saw it as the inevitable result of what I did. I altered the course, changed the plot. Of course, the spin-off from that glitch came to rest on me.

When I confessed my fears to friends, they would conclude that I just wasn't accustomed to married life. 'You're just exhausted from trying to learn to live with another person!' they'd say, or 'It takes a long time to adjust.' I admit, that was a large part of it, for me, and for him too, for that matter. He had been with his wife for a long

time. Another aspect of it, I must confess, was that guilt needling at my conscience.

Then one day, when my exhaustion was at its peak, something happened. I was taking it easy, trying to fight off a cold and a headache. He had called to tell me that he wouldn't be home in time for dinner, but then appeared at a reasonable hour anyway.

A smile on his face, he fished inside his briefcase and pulled out a bag. Through the translucent plastic, I could see a jar with something bright orange in it.

'Look what somebody gave me!' he exclaimed.

'What is it?'

'It's kimchee, the spicy Korean pickles.'

'Somebody at work brought you kimchee?' I asked curiously. He handed the bag to me, and I could smell the spicy, luscious odor of cabbage and garlic.

'Oh, sorry, I thought I'd told you. I stopped in at the office this morning, but then I went over to Mr Endo's house and spend most of the day there. We needed some time together to discuss a design he's doing for us. Anyway, his wife made that kimchee. She's Korean, so it's the real thing.'

I knew that he was probably telling me the truth. If he were that good at making up complicated lies, he could have led a double life without ever having to marry me at all. But how was I to tell? He might be lying. He could have bought the kimchee at the store, and then just torn off the price tag. I could find out easily enough by looking at the package.

But I didn't inspect the bag or its contents because I hated the thought of stooping so low. If I let myself get carried away, and gave in to paranoia, I wouldn't be able to trust myself, much less my husband or anyone else.

'Thanks,' I said feebly, and my eyes averted, shoved the bag into the refrigerator. I could barely manage that.

My headache finally went away and I tried calling my sister to chase away my blues. I even took a leisurely bath, but nothing worked. I wasn't surprised when he asked, 'What's the matter? Is something bothering you?'

'No, everything's fine,' I replied, but I couldn't even manage a smile. I was like a faded flower, devoid of energy.

Later that evening, we sat down together in front of the TV with

some beers and a dish of kimchee to nibble on. We chatted as we watched some silly program, and, at one point, he commented that I seemed under the weather lately. I tried denying it and claimed that I was just a bit worn out, that's all.

And then something amazing happened to me. I felt so clearly that I was changing inside, at that very moment, that I glanced at my watch to check the time. It was 10:15 p.m. To my utter astonishment, my head had cleared completely. I felt as if the fog that had been clouding my eyes had lifted. I don't know how it happened, but it occurred to me that such lucidity wasn't entirely new for me. Once, long before, I had been able to see clearly.

Or had it been that long ago? That was how I had felt when I first met him, as though I could relish each of the many flavors that life offers.

Love had given me energy and clarity of vision. Everything appeared vivid, down to the smallest detail, and I felt convinced that I could triumph over everything. To ensure my victory, and so as not to forget, I doted over every moment of our time together, and tried to absorb the details as if they were full of essential bits of information.

The bittersweet feeling of beautiful mornings when we made a date; the scent of the breeze during our brief times together; the steep slope of the street, down which we walked so fast, too fast. Glass, asphalt, mail-boxes, guardrails, fingernails. The display windows of department stores; sunlight reflected off the windows of tall buildings.

Those days, everything looked beautiful to me, and good. The things around me appeared distinct, their outlines graced by a fragrant presence. I could feel the excitement, that exhilaration deep inside. When I closed my eyes, I saw waves of energy swirling about, like patterns in a marble block.

Then I began to wonder what had just happened to me. Why had I been so overtaken by these sensations? Precisely at that moment, the phone rang. My husband answered it.

The call seemed to be for him so I gathered up the empty beer bottles and carried them into the kitchen. I felt refreshed, maybe even a little happy. Something was changing inside me. I decided to celebrate with another glass of beer. As I opened the refrigerator door, it struck me that I was very lucky woman. My future was secure, my marriage happy, and we even had our own space, a place

we had chosen, just the two of us. I had the good fortune to have a roof over my head, a cozy place where I could make my bed. What on earth had been bothering me?

I could only faintly hear his side of the phone conversation from where I stood. I wondered whom he was talking with, and then felt pleasure in the fact that this question-mark no longer threatened me. Earlier that same day it would have been enough to bring me down.

I'll just ask him who called. It's no big deal. Maybe jealousy is an indication of a general lack of energy, rather than of problems in the relationship itself.

I heard him say good-bye as I carried the cold bottle of beer into the living room.

'Who was it?'

And he said the name of his ex-wife.

She had never called our place before, so I felt puzzled.

'Is something wrong?'

'Listen to this one. Remember I told you that she kept telling me that it was so unfair of me to leave her at this time in her life? "No man would want me at this age." Well, now she says that she's found a new husband, and he's younger than she is. They've got their marriage license already, and a new apartment and everything. She said that she hadn't been planning to tell me, but then she changed her mind.'

Suddenly, it all made sense to me. I know a coincidence when I see one, and this was no coincidence. Another line had converged to form a circle. Oddly, it felt so natural to me that I wasn't even surprised at how it had happened. A force, capable of liberating us from the burden of accumulated guilt, circled in to touch us that night.

'How are you doing?'

'Fine . . . relieved, actually, because now I feel like you and I can finally start our own life together,' he said. 'And I'm not saying that what we've had up to now hasn't been real. It's just that I couldn't stop feeling guilty about what I'd done.'

'I understand.'

Later, I realized why I'd felt so heady. It wasn't just because I'd been freed of the burden of negative feelings; I'd also come down with a fever. I decided to sleep on an ice-pack pillow.

'What smells in here?' he said from his side of the bed.

'Hmmm. I bet it's the kimchee.'

'So you think that we're the ones who smell, because we ate that stuff, huh?'

We both got up and sniffed about the room, trying to find the source of the smell.

'Oh, look,' I said. 'It's got to be my ice pack.'

He laughed.

'Yeah, you could smell it in the freezer too,' I said. After that, I tried wrapping a towel around the pack, but it still stank. Even so, I needed relief from the fever, so I decided to put up with the odor. We turned the lights off, and our bedroom smelled faintly of kimchee.

When I finally dozed off, I dreamed that I was strolling through a Korean market. The dream was brief, but quite vivid. In my one hand—I thought it was empty, but then I realized that I was holding someone else's hand. I looked up and saw my husband's face. And I remember seeing the bright sun, and all the goods in the market bathed in the sunlight, and the commotion, and the smell of garlic, and women with boldly drawn arched eyebrows. Red, green, pink, blue, in dazzling bright shades.

We were there to buy some kimchee. We saw big jars and barrels full of bright red pickles. He said that he wanted some special kind of kimchee. Let's go somewhere else to buy it, he said. Over that way.

And then reality broke into my dream; I had to pee. (Too much beer!) I sat up in bed, and felt my head. I was still feverish. When I got back from the bathroom, I could see well enough in the dark room to know that he was lying there with his eyes wide open.

'Having trouble getting to sleep?' I asked.

He replied drowsily, 'I just had a dream about kimchee. You and I were eating at a Korean barbecue restaurant.'

'That sounds like the dream I just had!'

'That smell goes right to your brain, doesn't it?'

'Unbelievable.'

We said good-night, and I lay down again. It felt good putting my feverish head down on the cool pillow, scented with kimchee. As I drifted off, I thought of our common dream, and the food, the odor, and the vibes in the room that had brought it about. Despite being bound as separate physical entities, we could share these aspects of

daily life, and I knew that sharing, this kind of connection, was what constituted our life together.

I thought about the complications of what I'd been dealing with lately. And then I understood that actually it wasn't just the relationship—I had so much baggage from my childhood, from before I was born into this world, too. I understood that for the first time that night. And I knew it would always be that way, until we die. Even after we're dead.

But at last I had a chance to rest, after that long period of strain. I was tired and wanted to sleep. I felt that when I woke up the next morning, I would start anew. I would breathe fresh air, and start a day of entirely new experiences. It reminded me of the feelings I used to have when I was younger, like after a big test, or the night after a major school event. I'd always looked forward to waking up the next morning, when a fresh breeze would come to sweep through me, cleansing me. And when I opened my eyes at dawn, I'd feel a glow, a radiant white pearl. I hoped, nearly prayed, for that to happen again. That night, I believed with the same purity and innocence.