

Excerpt from *The Republic of Love*

If Fay McLeod no longer loves Peter Knightly, there is still the question of whether she can live without him, live alone that is. She is thirty-five years old, after all, and should know something about compromise.

Toast, she says to herself, might be the test.

She is being whimsical, of course, which is one of the ways she protects herself, but she is partly serious too: can she bear to stand alone in her kitchen on a Saturday morning, or any morning, for that matter, and push down the lever of her ten-year-old General Electric black-and-chrome toaster and produce a single slice of breakfast toast? One only.

Other things she can do on her own. Traveling, for instance. Last summer, tracking down mermaid legends, she scoured half a dozen American libraries, California, Texas, Boston -- three happy weeks, traveling light, one suitcase, three changes of clothes, two pairs of shoes, that was it. She relished the ease of arranging single-seat tickets and the sight every night of a neatly made-up hotel room, avoiding, if she could, those pompous doubles with their giant puffed duvets and bulging headboards. "A very small room, please," she said to a succession of hotel clerks, interchangeable behind their crisp summer haircuts and narrow shirt collars and eager looks, and they'd complied, beaming as though she'd bent forward over the desk and smoothed their faces with the flat of her hand. Occasionally, vacationing families with young children called out greetings, but mostly she sat alone by pool sides or in hotel dining rooms with a book open by her plate. People looked her way and smiled, pitying or else envious, she wasn't sure which, and it didn't matter. She finds the bewilderment of travel rousing. Next summer she'll be off again, Europe this time, her mermaids again, a second research grant, more generous than the first. She departs at the end of July and will be gone for four intense weeks. Most of the arrangements have already been made - and the thought that she will be on her own adds to, rather than subtracts from, her anticipation.

The solitude of living alone does worry her, a grim little visitation of concern -- mostly in the late afternoons, when the day feels vacuumed out, but she's not at the point of paralysis, not yet. She's capable, for instance, of going for a walk alone. The street she lives on, Grosvenor Avenue, is old, lined with trees and with Victorian houses, now mostly converted to rental apartments, or to condominiums, like the one she shares with Peter Knightly. The snow is almost gone, the sidewalks more or less clear of ice, and she likes on Saturday afternoons to put on a pair of jeans and her suede jacket and strike off, saying to herself: I, Fay McLeod, have every right to breathe this air, to take possession of this stretch of pavement. (Occasionally during these walks, the word "single" presents itself. She makes herself sigh it out, trying hard to keep her mouth from puckering -- single, singleness, singlehood, herself engaged in a single-ish stroll.) Blasts of wind smooth the sky to a glossy blue-rose, and the sun sits weak and yellow. She can set her own pace, that is her right after all, and fill up her lungs with the chilly air, stop if she likes at the Mozart Cafe for a cup of coffee, come home when she chooses. Along the way, she smiles and nods at elderly couples or joggers or women dragging shopping bags, and each time this happens she feels her ties to the world yank and hold firm.

Sleeping alone is harder than going for a walk alone, oh yes, she admits it, but she's learned a few tricks of accommodation. And sex these days is everywhere, abundantly, dismayingly available.

As for the future, there will be other men. Or at least there probably will be others. This is one of the hopeful thoughts Fay has about herself. Before Peter Knightly, she lived for three years with a man called Nelo Merino, an investment consultant who was later transferred to Ottawa; she still feels swamped at times by her lost love for Nelo, who is married now, she's been told, and the father of

three children. Before Nelo it was Willy Gifford (two years), who produced business training films and was a philosopher of sorts, a Cartesian he liked to call himself, whom she might have married if his political views had been less rigidly anchored and less tiresomely voiced. Between Willy and Nelo, and again between Nelo and Peter, there had been short periods of living on her own, and she honestly can't remember these intervals as being lonely. She has her job at the National Center for Folklore Studies, her friends, her family (mother, father, brother, sister, all of them living close by), her summer trips, and her book on mermaids that she hopes to finish sometime in the next year. She's always busy, too busy, and is always reminding herself of this fact, so that the notion of an empty apartment, even an empty bed, holds no more than a faint flush of alarm. And only when she thinks about it - those late afternoons when her blood sugar dips and the overhead lights in her office go on. She'll manage, though. She knows she will.

It comes down, then, to just one brief moment, which is in-woven in her morning routine and located in that most familiar of rooms, the kitchen. Peter Knightly, with whom she has lived for three years now, will be making coffee, stooping in the manner of tall men and registering on his long face the kind of seriousness she finds silly but endearing. A temporary hood of domesticity and sexual ease hovers over them, sending down its safe blue even heat. He grinds his special French-roast beans and measures out water, and she, standing with her back to him, is making toast, dropping the seven-grain bread into twin slots, pushing the lever down and eliciting a satisfying double click as it first strikes the bottom of its long silvery groove and then locks into place. The heat rises gradually to her face. Her image bends on the satiny chrome -- a woman performing a simple but necessary task -- and inside the mechanism, down there where she can't see, separate molecules of bread are transcending their paleness and drifting toward gold. She imagines a pair of scented clouds, rectangular and contained, rising up and mingling with the coffee odors. The toastness of toast, its primary grainy essence. Peter is pulling cups from a cupboard, smooth white porcelain objects out of a cartoon, and heating a little jug of milk in the microwave.

Then the toast pops. It always takes her by surprise, those two identical slices bounding upward, perfectly browned and symbolically (it seems to her) aligned, and bringing every single morning a shock of happiness.