

From Here to Eternity



"My fans may be shocked. I hope I don't lose them, but if I do
I hope I'll pick up some like those who adore Marilyn Monroe."

Soon after I fell in love with Deborah Kerr, I discovered movie magazines at our grocery store. *Screen Stories* carried photos from her actual movies; *Photoplay*, *Movieland*, *Silver Screen* often had articles, or little bits about her, pictures. Standing at the scarred green wooden magazine stand, as soon as they came out each month I scanned them all cover to cover for anything about her.

In August of that summer when I'd first fallen in love with her, I opened the new *Screenland* to find an article featuring a shot of her, wrapped in a towel, and headlined, "The Duchess Disrobes".¹

It was the announcement of her role as Karen Holmes in *From Here to Eternity*. It told of Deborah's frustrations at having been type-cast as a "lady", and her relief at this image change, this "sexy" part. "I hope my fans won't be upset with me," she said. "But if they are, I hope I'll get some like the kind that adore Marilyn Monroe."

...I bought the magazine anyway. I wanted *any* news about her, no matter what it was. But when we got home from the store, I ran to my room, burst into tears. After a while, Mom came in, asked what was wrong. “Oh... Deborah Kerr... wants to be... sexy!” I sobbed. I felt silly and embarrassed for caring so much about that; but still I truly did.

Deborah had said the roles she'd been stuck in were boring. I *knew* those women weren't *boring*; they were the *most exciting* women I'd ever *seen*!

I thought about writing her to try to explain this. I lay awake until late into the night, heartsick, trying to find the words to tell her. Then I thought: “You don't even know where to send it. If you sent it to the studio, she'd probably never even see it. Some secretary would. Or nobody.”

Then I thought, “Well, what if I killed myself? She'd probably hear about that. I could

write her a letter, and then kill myself, and leave it by my body. She'd know it was really important, then, and she'd probably read it, and take it seriously."

But how could I do that? I thought of the knives in the kitchen drawer. I tried to imagine plunging one in to my heart.

...I knew then

I wouldn't have the courage.

...Besides, it would really upset my family.

So I didn't do it. I lived on, a sadder and wiser person. I *was* curious to see the movie.

By the time *From Here to Eternity* came to town, with its famous kiss in the surf advertised everywhere, and with what Deborah Kerr had said, I went expecting to see her be sexy. What surprised me when she first appeared was how not-sexy she was: what was clear was Karen Holmes' hardness, her anger, what a shell she kept within, looking at the world with a cynical defiance.



There is, of course, the famous beach scene: its obvious symbolism as the kissing couple, stretched full-length together are washed by white foam. Then the run to the blanket, her diving onto it, her breathy Marilyn-Monroe voice.

Looking at the scene now, none of it seems very sexy to me. That is not how she talks; in passion, Deborah's voice would be lower, more expressive. All the music is gone from that high whisper.

This scene is always evoked to show how sexy she can be.

To my mind, sexier by far is the way she glanced at Cary Grant with interest

at the odd moments he wasn't looking at her,
in *An Affair to Remember*.

Sexier, in this movie, when they took off their
clothes in the cove, leaving their bathing suits
on, how she glanced at his body.

Sexier, too, a nightclub scene where she
snuggles into his arm around her shoulders,
nibbles his hand contentedly.

Sexier by far, her courting of Young Bess,
their embrace.

Immeasurably sexier than anything
performed by anyone before or since,
the ending moments of *Tea and Sympathy*,
the play.

But not this famous screen moment.
This was only sexiness as the world
could recognize it, using the symbols

of the time, the rituals of what 1953
Hollywood thought sexy, posing for
cheesecake shots, bleaching your hair
and rolling in the surf with Burt.

...One thing about that kiss strikes me:
who's on top? who arches hungrily over him,
into the kiss? who rises like a
suppliant serpent to it?

I suppose it could be that it's this moment
of Burt's surrender that makes him turn nasty
so soon afterwards. He gets jealous, they
fight, she picks up her stuff, starts to leave.
He grabs her, she slaps him, then collapses
onto the sand.

And, kneeling there, the sea framing her face,
she tells -- how her faithless, alcoholic
husband made her lose the child she was
carrying, and any chance for more.
She shows the bitterness of understanding
how deeply she was not loved.



She admits her long search, since then, for a decent man. Karen Holmes is defenseless as she kneels there, the ocean sighing and shining behind her, her eyes sad and round, not “beautiful”, not breathy, not tough, simply telling her story. It was then that I understood why Deborah had wanted this role.

[The only picture I can get of this moment is snapped from the TV, the still photographers evidently not having found this part of her performance worth memorializing.]



Perhaps no lesbian would miss the fact – at twelve I did not – that at the end, the story’s two women meet for the first time, Deborah and Donna Reed, the prostitute “from a little town in Oregon.” (How the audiences in Medford and Ashland chuckled at that line.) From the ship’s rail the two stand watching Hawaii recede. Deborah undrapes two leis, throws them on the water.

Donna is last seen chanting her dead lover’s name, and Deborah is gazing back to “the loveliest place she’s ever known”, sailing off into an unknown future, still attached to her unloving husband, knowing of no possibility besides some husband or other.

(Little did she think that in a few years, when she next encountered that actor she would be a single woman and he would be respectfully offering her a great newspaper job writing a Hollywood column.)

Deborah did notice Donna,
glimpsed something of their connection,
each involved with different men
caught up in the same military subplot,
Donna's man now dead
in the attack on Pearl Harbor,
and Deborah's having turned out to be
"already married - to the army."



...It would be good if this ship
takes a long time getting where it's going,
and Donna and Deborah, finding themselves
in adjacent deck chairs, perhaps,
should truly make friends,
have long talks,
lean side by side on the rail,
watching sunset after sunset,
as the ship makes its slow way
back to the West Coast.

But the movie does not tell us.
We'll have to leave it at this,
as aloha music swells:
two rings, made of flowers,
circling on the tide.



1 August 1953 Screenland