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By **Felix Kent** on April 14, 2014 in **HISTORY**

Descartes Goes To Stockholm To Teach Queen Christina Philosophy At Half-Past Five In The Morning, And The Early Rising Kills Him

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December 3, 1649

A footman in an ugly coat enters the embassy, hands Pierre a note, bows clumsily. Mr. Ambassador, he says. Pierre opens it. Rene, tomorrow it will begin, he tells me. I nod. No, he says, I mean it, no more delays. I nod again. I do not know if I am failing to show enthusiasm to prick at Pierre, a toadstool of a man, albeit my friend, or because I lack enthusiasm, or because I wish to

spite the Queen, who called me here and kept me waiting. Pierre says, you will love her, she is incredible. Yes, I say, I have met her. Quite incredible.

December 15, 1649

I had planned to begin, over time, to get up earlier and earlier. I was curious to see what effect this had on my temperament. But each morning is so dark. So although the bed is hard, the covers scratchy, and the mangy furs rank, each morning for as long as possible I stay where I am safe and warm, and my mind wanders where it will, seeking out new vistas.

December 18, 1649

I do not want to get up. It is cold, also I am not used to getting up this early. But I have promised, and also the footman comes. He tells me, Mr. Descartes, you must get up, the Queen wants you. If I don't get up, he brings another footman and first they look at me in a worried fashion and then they toss me across the room. I curse the rotting teeth of their mothers, and they tell me, in thick accents, that I cannot keep the Queen waiting. When I



get to the palace, I am told that the Queen is otherwise engaged. I tell the footmen who escorted me here that their mothers are whores.

December 23, 1649

I cough. Pierre said, my friend, your lungs are weak. My lungs were in no way weak until I came to this terrible country, full of rocks and bears and Queens that get up early in the morning, but I do not tell him that.

December 26, 1649

Sometimes I cannot understand her accent and she cannot understand mine and my nose runs and I wipe it on a handkerchief until it is raw and red and wish I were somewhere else.

December 29, 1649

Dark. I try to teach the Queen and she tells me breathlessly how wholesome it is here in her dark country. I pretend to listen, but mostly I think about when I will return to bed. But when I get back to where I am staying I want another drink and another song and then I am in bed and that is bliss, but the morning comes too fast and although it is morning it is still dark.



December 31, 1649

I woke up early but the Queen did not want to see me. My friend Pierre, although he is not really my friend, none of the people who keep me in this country are my friend, said, we will walk along the harbor and that will cheer you. We walked along the harbor and I said, Pierre, this is not cheering me, this only makes me feel as if I have already died, let us go

back to your house and have something hot to drink.

January 1, 1650

Every day the Queen is different, and every day she is annoying. Some days she is brightly intelligent and some days she wishes to cry and talk about love. She strides about like a young man or poses like a court lady, and she thinks that I should watch and pay attention. Sometimes she says this out loud. Sometimes she pretends embarrassment at my brilliance, my renown, and so she will not say out loud that I must pay attention, but still she looks at me shyly out of the corner of her eyes and bats her eyelashes. Another time, I would find this interesting and and pretend to be a fortune teller and read her fortune in her palm, but my nose runs and I am not interested in this little queen although when I planned the trip I thought it would be a good idea.

January 3, 1650

Today she wanted to talk about God and I told her I did not want to talk about God and she stared. I said to her, pardon me, but my head aches and my nose runs and it would be blasphemous, even to talk about God like this. That made her laugh, she repeated it to her lady in waiting in her barbarous voice, but I was not trying to be funny. Then she said, No, tell me about God and I said the silence of the winter teaches us about God. I said it to please this idiot who gets up at dawn, only there is no dawn, so she gets up at something quite arbitrary and cold. But it is blasphemous, I am sure of that, and I will be punished.

January 8, 1650

I receive a letter from a friend, who asks if my bright hopes have been rewarded. I cannot remember my bright hopes. Pierre tells me that the Northern Lights are so beautiful that I will be in ecstasy. Pierre says, wait until summer and it will be sunny all the time. I nod in agreement, so that he will stop talking. When he talks my head aches.

January 12, 1650

I put a hand on the plaster of the wall and it is so cold that I start to shiver, just from that, from touching the wall.

January 19, 1650

I pissed today and my piss was bright orange and I stared at it and knew I would die.

January 27, 1650

Steps one should take, when one's piss is bright orange and one's lungs are full to overflowing: a strong emetic, also cupping, in moderation. More than anything, one should turn one's mind to emptiness or to things of so little import that they relieve distress. One should not wake early and in a cold stone room expound on the meaning of existence.

February 6, 1650

Pierre told me that the Queen worried about her education. I am dying in her dark country and I do not care.

February 10, 1650

The Queen came to visit me today, and she laid her hand on my forehead and told me that she would build me a great monument but that she herself would be my greatest monument, and my teeth chattered and I murmured under my breath that she was an idiot and a cow, but so softly and rapidly that she could not hear. Pierre danced and scraped around her, miming a man grateful for the honors bestowed upon his unworthy self and his still more unworthy compatriot. I watched her leave, her bottom lurching from side to side like a ship-wrecked galley, and I knew that the time would come when I would slough off this body and I felt assured that in the warmth and safety of heaven I would look down on her suffering the torments of the damned and I burrowed deeper into this bed, which is my death bed from

which no-one shall rouse me. Now I lay down my pen, but before doing so I fix my mind on the precise shade of green of the patch of moss on the plane tree by my country retreat in Utrecht and open my soul with reverence to the fire of Our Lord.

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Words to live by.

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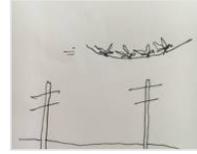
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