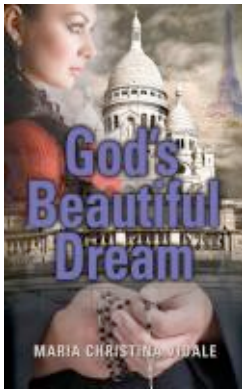


# God's Beautiful Dream

MARIA CHRISTINA VIDALE



*The year is 1972, but even in Paris, Father Luke Lomell can't shake the spiritual crisis he grapples with day and night. Then he encounters the beautiful and enigmatic Maya, whose path intersects with his in the City of Love. With his fierce attraction to Maya growing, Father Luke finds himself on yet another crossroads: to yield to his desire for her or to embrace his ordained path as God's servant.*

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# God's Beautiful Dream

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A Novel

Maria Christina Vidale

Published by

Angel Raphael Press  
Pismo Beach, California

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ISBN: 978-1-63490-752-1

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Published by Angel Raphael Press, Pismo Beach, California, U.S.A.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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Angel Raphael Press  
2015

First Edition

## Chapter 1

I met my occasion of sin in Paris in June 1972.

Until then, I had been a normal young priest—that is to say, abnormal—wrestling my way through a dark night of the soul, madly trying to stave off confusion and despair. Yet I was determined to teeter along this spiritual plank without sin, without cynicism, or even without drugs, which was very hard to do in 1972.

That late June evening I sneaked out of our grand residence, La Maison Universitaire on Boulevard Raspail in the Montparnasse district, to take an evening stroll around the nearby Jardin de Luxembourg. In the midst of this immense, strident city, the Luxembourg Gardens created a cocoon of serenity within nature, but nature inspirited with French style. Tree-lined walkways and formal flowerbeds were interspersed with riotous bursts of pink, blue, and yellow flowers. In grassy areas under shade trees, I could grab a metal chair and sit anywhere. Sculptures and overflowing flower pots invited me to dream by the many fountains. There were great water

basins where children sailed toy boats, an ancient carousel, and a little puppet theater. Palm trees in wooden containers decorated the sidewalks.

A perfect place to contemplate how I was going to appear and act priestly to the group of students who had arrived from New York at La Maison late that afternoon.

Their plane had been detained for seven hours at Orly. Something weird about a student without a passport. Wrapped up in my own dark spirit, I didn't want to rush into introductions with starry-eyed students speaking murdered French. Since their delay had given me a reprieve, I took full advantage.

Purposely I had set out for my walk without my Roman collar, a practice that Father Alain Shanahan heartily disapproved of. "Being a priest means to walk a tightrope daily, Luke," he kept repeating. "Stay on the straight-and-narrow."

Unmindful of his words, I wore a black button-down shirt, which I recklessly left open at the top to reveal some love beads. Of course a cross hung from them. But the cross would not be a dead giveaway since the Jesus Freaks were in full swing

everywhere, even in Paris. A pair of wrap-around sunglasses completed my cool, incognito look. Tonight I felt the need to spend a few stolen hours in Paris being just Luke Lomell—not Father Luke.

Through the Jardin de Luxembourg, I passed into the Latin Quarter where the University is, then made my way over to St. Germain des Pres, a fashionably hip neighborhood. There I stopped at *Les Deux Magots* (The Two Buddha Figurines), the area's most famous café, to have a bite to eat. Well, if you could call a steak, French fries, and salad a "bite." After, I strolled around the square and side streets of St. Germain watching the people: lovers strolling arm-in-arm, old men on benches tapping their feet, and hippies sitting on blankets, selling beads and singing Beatles songs.

For a while I listened to two guys with Dutch accents sing and play a not-bad rendition of "*You've Got to Hide Your Love Away*." I gave them five francs for their effort. The taller guy with scraggly hair offered me a toke of his joint. I fingered my cross and shook my head no. He smiled. "Sorry, Father!" he said.

Sorry, *Father?! So like, what? Even without my collar I just look like a priest? I guess my disguise wasn't too swift. Or—no. Too eerie to think about.*

Then a flash lightning storm hit, crackling in spider tendrils across the sky. I ducked into the closest metro station.

By the time I emerged from the Vavin metro stop near La Maison, it was around 9:20 p.m. But it was still light. The gray clouds had parted, spiriting away the electric storm that had also drenched Boulevard Raspail and all of the Montparnasse area. The sun had not yet set and the moon had risen; both were beaming down on Montparnasse and its strands of cafés and tabacs. The long summer night had a rebirth.

La Maison's tall wrought iron gates were not fully latched, so I pushed them, went under the entrance archway, and stepped into the vast cobblestone courtyard. Beads of rain sparkled on its stone walls and alcoves.

Now it was a clear June night with the sunset still a half hour away. The sun lingered above the oblong shadows crisscrossing the empty courtyard, the raindrops a thousand tiny prisms. The



trees overhanging the long courtyard wall dripped counterpoint to the song of a mockingbird. The air caressed my face, warm with the slightest chill.

The quiet courtyard was filled with an indefinable beauty. I hesitated to leave it, to open the huge doors, and climb the three flights of stairs up to my small apartment.

My great digs, a high-ceilinged studio with space enough for three rooms plus a tiny kitchenette and separate bathroom, felt stuffy and impersonal after the lively streets of Paris. The night seemed too beautiful, too mysterious, to remain inside. I opened my tall windows and stepped out on my balcony. Ahead, in the distance, was the Eiffel Tower. Down below was the picturesque courtyard.

*Mon Dieu.*

I would know it was her anywhere, anytime, without being able to see her shape or features. Capturing the last beams of fading light, her outline became a shimmering magnet, as if pulling in the radiant particles of a sun, which that night resisted setting over Paris.

Back inside I picked up a crystal decanter on the console. I poured a little

sherry into one of the glasses. What was this young woman doing all alone gazing at the sky? Was she in some kind of trouble? I drained my glass. Catching sight of myself in the beveled mirror, I told myself, what the heck. Souls *are* my business.

Fortunately, I still had on my beige slacks and light camel sweater thrown casually over my shoulders in the French style. And of course the black shirt—not exactly stylish, but neat, I thought, and appropriate.

Quickly I descended the staircases again. No use waking up everyone with the ancient, creaky elevator the size of a coffin.

There on the carpet of cobblestones stood the young woman in a kaleidoscope of deepening sun rays. I stopped in my tracks, about fifteen feet away. With her profile tilted toward the sky, she appeared incandescent, as if secret strands connected her to the sun's rays.

Paris? It seemed more like one of those starry worlds on that *Star Trek* TV show of several years ago. But outside the gates, the streets singing with laughter, festive shouts, and taxis honking—lay Paris,

reminding me which fairy tale I believed I was in.

She turned toward me in the shadows and approached shyly. The impression of internal light stayed as she moved toward me in the darkness. But it only lasted about another thirty seconds.

There was still enough moonlight for me to see her features: a classically sculpted face; the sheen of thick dark hair parted in the middle and flowing halfway down her back; her light tan complexion with a rosy under-glow, her enormous hazel eyes, a straight nose, and upturned mouth and lips.

The girl turned around and said hello, introducing herself in perfect French. Her name was Maya, an uncommon name at the time.

"I'm Luke," I said, extending my hand.

"I'm lost," she said, taking it.

Her oversized hazel eyes, rimmed in thick black lashes, widened. They made me want to keep holding her hand.

She pointed to a valise which she had left in an alcove under a statue. "Is this La Maison Universitaire? The gates were open but the office appears to be closed. I don't

know where to go. So many doors!" She turned and swept her arm around.

Maya explained that she was the student who got on the charter flight with a valid passport that somehow got lost during the flight. "I came here on my own, by taxi."

"Across the Atlantic?!" My way of acting cool.

Maya laughed, showing even white teeth. "No, from Orly!"

"Why didn't you stay with the group?"

"Ooph," she shrugged in the French manner, "you know, there was no reason to make the others stay and wait while the immigration officials tried to straighten out my dilemma. And besides," she added looking at the cobblestones, "the other students started getting impatient, so I... just finished there and showed up here."

"Indeed you did, Maya. Almost like you beamed down," I teased. "*Téléportez-moi à Paris, Scotty!*"

"*Comment? What? Vous vous-moquez de moi?*" She dropped her head down and swiveled her heel on a cobblestone.

"No, I...I'm not making fun of you. No...It's just that..."—I could hardly tell her what a beautiful vision she had made—

"you looked so, so...*lost*, as you said, almost like you had dropped in from another planet."

"Like *Le Petit Prince*?" she said her head popping up and her eyes glowing. She moved her long dark hair out of her eyes.

"*Exactement!*" I concurred. The image of The Little Prince by St-Exupéry fit perfectly. "Say, you must be hungry!"

She nodded and smiled broadly. "What about you?" That she said in perfect English.

I picked up her valise and crooked my arm, "I'm starving!" I lied, beginning my career in sin.

## Chapter 2

Off we walked those two short blocks to Boulevard Montparnasse and Le Dôme Café, famous for being a literary hub, along with its neighboring cafés, La Rotonde, La Coupole, and Le Select.

Maya had never been to Paris as an adult. I told her a little bit about the Montparnasse neighborhood.

"Back in the day, maybe thirty-forty years ago, Montparnasse was a bohemian hangout. Artists and writers of all kinds lived and hung out here."

"Like who?"

"Like Hemingway, Joyce, Degas, Sartre."

"Ick. I don't like him, Sartre. Too depressing."

"You've read Sartre?" I was surprised that one so young should have been tackling the existentialists.

"Tried to, but stopped. You know, if life is one gloomy café with no exit, and all they serve you are empty donut holes without meaning—I'd rather not go there."

"Well," I informed her, laughing, "according to our concierge, Madame Cordier, Jean-Paul Sartre's our neighbor."

He lives with Simone de Beauvoir a few doors past La Maison, and still frequents Le Dôme where we're going. But," I added, "the Dôme is not really an existential cafe—it's well-lit and the food is not imaginary!"

When we turned the corner and she saw how busy and exciting Boulevard Montparnasse was, she seemed to catch its edgy, fun energy.

"Oh, see that couple, Luke? I'm sure they're those actors on *Days of Our Lives*!"

In her excitement she grabbed my arm.

Jacques, Le Dôme's popular Maitre D', oozed charm and, thank God, discretion. He glanced at Maya hanging on my arm and then the valise, and then raised one eyebrow at me in a questioning—yet also admiring—way. He swept us back to a coveted booth along the back wall. "*Oh, my Lord. I thought. What am I doing?!*"

"Oh! Cool menu!" Maya decided the Dôme's menu was "darling"—a tall pale pink card cut out in the shape of a domed kiosk with photos from the 1930's—and busily studied it.

While she did that, I had a few free minutes to beat myself up. Why not just tell her I'm a priest? She'll find out

tomorrow anyway...What if she starts to get interested in me? What if the moon is made of green cheese? I'm too old and out of her league. And besides—I couldn't let that happen.

Jacques himself set down a bottle of Evian, a basket of bread, and a half carafe of red wine. I took his lingering presence at our table as a compliment to Maya.

I passed the bread to her and poured her some water and wine. Here in the café, under the artificial lights, she looked just as beautiful—but far more vulnerable than she had standing bravely in the courtyard. Under these lights her skin looked even more translucent. She began to shiver a little.

"I have a sweater in my suitcase."

Taking the suitcase, Maya excused herself for a few moments, and I watched her walk away. Her long dark brown hair swung sweetly against her shapely derriere.

Vulnerable, lost, and with a man at least ten years older. And the man was a priest. By vocation I was sworn to be her protector, a gentleman, and a counselor. She would find out about my priesthood



soon enough. I just couldn't let her get interested in me.

And me? No, I just couldn't. I mean, seduce her? No, though the thought had crossed my lower mind already. But I wanted a different seduction or taste of one: I wanted her to get to know and like me for me, not for my priesthood, not for my role. Just for Luke.

Maya reseated herself and gave me a big smile. "This is a great place!" Her lush dark hair fell against her cheekbones as she carefully pulled off a piece of bread. Again she seemed so vulnerable, so human. Suddenly I wanted to be just human too, not a priest.

"Okay, Maya the Mystery Lady, tell me about yourself."

"About me? There's really not much to tell," Maya responded after swallowing an end of freshly baked baguette, the kind that melts softly down to the sweet crust, creating an exquisite explosion in one's mouth. She was definitely hungry.

"For someone who's lost a passport, held up a transatlantic flight, disappeared for seven hours, and appeared alone at La Maison at nearly ten pm—I must say, I have to disagree with you! I'll bet there

are loads of juicy mysteries in you just ripe for the telling.... "

She put down her unsipped wine and giggled shyly. "There's really nothing mysterious about me!" she crooned in that sexy voice, like warm cognac lining a throat that was slightly sore.

Maya told me about her passport problem. When she spoke quickly, the grainy cognac took on a little melody on the higher registers. Astoundingly erotic, her voice.

Apparently she had received the passport in Princeton, New Jersey with the help of the family lawyer. She had tried to find her birth certificate but failed, but he came up with it.

As with all the students on the program, she had to send her passport to the program administrator in the States, a Miss Johnson, who sent them in a batch to get the proper visas.

The passports and visas were passed on to the purser on the flight, a young man of 25. If Maya's passport was missing in New York, no mention was made of it. "I saw it in his hand in New York!" she insisted.

When the charter flight landed in France, Maya was the last in line. All the

passports were given out, but she was left there standing without a passport or visa. "It's like, it just disappeared into thin air!"

The purser claimed no knowledge of it. A search was made of the plane, but nothing showed up.

The French authorities insisted on seeing a birth certificate, which she didn't have either. She had brought only her driver's license.

"It shouldn't be hard to get another one," I offered brightly.

"Yeah. Maybe there's another Maya Chanda and I can borrow hers."

I put my napkin down. "Impossible! There can't be another like you, Maya, anywhere!" I said, then instantly knowing I should not have.

She looked down shyly at her napkin. I switched into logical mode.

"The birth certificate should be in public records!" I said, trying to give her hope.

"Maybe." Maya shook her head, looking forlorn. "It's a long story."

"Well," I managed, trying to be optimistic and reassuring, "Surely tomorrow your parents can straighten this

out. If you want, tomorrow we can go to the post office and phone them."

Maya stared at me with an odd expression.

"Let me explain," I apologized. "In Paris, you make your long distance and international calls at the post office—assuming you don't have your own home phone. No, really it's okay, they have private phone booths."

"Call my parents?" she said flatly. "I'm afraid they'd be no help."

I looked up quickly, my piece of bread in midair.

"They're dead."

"I'm so sorry," I said lamely, putting the bread down on my plate.

Now I was the protector of an orphan, too. I started to feel split: One side of me was scared of getting out of my depth as a priest and counselor. Another side of me was scared of the strong feelings I had developed for her, a total stranger, in such a short amount of time. A third side of me was feeling irrationally annoyed at God for taking away this beautiful young girl's parents and leaving her stranded.

She was still huddled in her seat, her bottom lip trembling. I tried again. "I'm

really, really sorry, Maya! What I meant was—we can figure these things out tomorrow. I'll see if I can help. Please don't despair." And oh God, please don't cry, I thought.

But she didn't cry. She slid a glance over my face and probably saw how sorry I was. Then she rallied. She poured herself more Evian water, drank it down and poured another. I asked a busboy for more bread. She seemed to be starving.

Fortunately, the waiter provided a needed diversion as he delivered our orders: a cheese and mushroom omelet for Maya and a Niçoise salad for me. She took a bite and looked up at me. A little color brightened her complexion and she seemed to perk up.

"So tell me about you, Luke..." She dabbed her lips with her napkin. "What are you doing in Paris?"

"I'm assisting Father Shanahan with his program, French Language Studies for the Introduction to Catholicism in France. I'm teaching a course in the Basics of Catholicism so that people can understand the history and the architecture better."

"Oh, yes. He came to the airport to meet us briefly. So you're very Catholic!"

"You could say that!" Little did she know.

"Hey, that's the program I'm on, too!"

"So you're Catholic too?" I diverted, unoriginally.

"No," she said shaking her head. "I've just come for the French language part. And for the excursions. And for the waiting."

I laughed and she joined me in the most charming way, like we were co-conspirators. "Maya, you say the most original things! So...what is it you like so much about waiting? Most people, including me, hate it."

"I know. I mean, we Americans think waiting's a huge waste of time. But my grandfather grew up in India. Waiting, he taught me, can bring its own gifts if you, like, try to make friends with it."

I lifted my eyebrows.

"Yes, think about it." She paused for another bite of her food and a little wine. "When you wait, you can do lots of things: think, learn, pray, solve problems, observe things—even make friends like we did!"

I broke my bread and considered this for a moment. "But, I feel like if I'm stuck

waiting, that I'll miss out on everything, that Life will pass me by."

Maya wiped an un-mystical piece of omelet off her mouth. "I guess I feel it's the opposite. Because if you can wait calmly with awareness, you'll find yourself in the present moment. You know, truly living."

I was so enjoying this present moment that I put my fork down and leaned into her. Pleased, her color-shifting eyes grew even larger. I noticed her eyes tilted slightly upward at the ends, accenting her medium-high cheekbones.

Encouraged, she said, "My grandfather taught me that it's only in the present moment you can encounter God. You won't find Him in the past or in the future. Not that I personally expect to meet God, but I always want to be in the present, in case God shows up, you know?"

I was intrigued. I grinned at her, not dropping my gaze. "No...I'm not sure I do know. Tell me."

"Well, wouldn't it be a pity if right now God were sitting here in this café,—but we missed Him because we weren't in the present moment?"

I was stunned speechless by her words. Voilà! Here was the question I had been trying to articulate, the question that I couldn't even formulate for years. And here this lost college girl bares my soul and answers it! In a café like Le Dôme, over a *salade Niçoise*.

All I could do was stare into her eyes and smile. Her eyes had taken on the deep blues of night. Fleetinglly I got that impression again of a subliminal light surrounding her face. I also thought what it might be like to kiss her, then felt guilty.

It took a demitasse and two apple tarts for me to get back into my usual boring self.

Watching me devour the pies, she straightened up and spoke. "Hey, but I'm curious about one thing. What do you do when you're not teaching? What else do you do in Paris?"

She was sharp, this one.

"Unofficially, I'm here doing what most people under 35 are doing: experimenting with a new identity—the real me." She considered me intently. "You know, the classic search for self and God."

Without dropping her gaze, she laced her fingers. "And...you're here alone, on



this search? In Paris, with a group of students?

She made it sound like I was a snake handler in the gypsy circus. "Yeah—why not?"

"Well, doesn't your wife miss you?"

I thought my heart would stop. I turned toward the wall and caught my reflection in the gold-flecked mirror. I looked uncomfortable, as if in the midst of an asthma attack.

"I have no wife," I finally exhaled. At least this wasn't a lie. Exactly. Technically I am married to the Church.

"Wow! You're just...super handsome—so I just assumed..." She looked down and took a sip of her tea. "So anyway. How is your search coming along?"

"Better since about ten p.m. tonight, thank you."

Maya opened her mouth in surprise then turned her head toward the mirror, blushing slightly.

Foot in mouth disease. "I hope I didn't make you feel uncomfortable, Maya." I put my hand over hers for a brief few seconds. "It's just that you seem to bring out many new and good things in me."

She smiled shyly. With the blushing, the effect on me was devastating—I longed to hug her. “I’m not uncomfortable—I’m flattered! But you don’t even know me yet.”

“And I don’t think I ever could, completely, that is.” *Yet I feel I do!* I decided to lighten up. “But isn’t this search the fun of it?”

“What search?” We were looking at each other intently.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glanced around. Despite the late hour, the café was very busy. Like New York, Paris has a lively night life. Most of the surrounding tables were filled with locals, actual French people. They were looking over at us with sweet expressions on their faces, as if cooing over two people falling in love.

“Well, the search for God...for the meaning of life! You say you search for God in the present, right?”

Maya leaned into me over the table, her brilliant eyes still holding my gaze.

“No, I wait. That’s the difference, Luke. I don’t seek: I let myself be found.”

Struggling with strong emotions of attraction and remembering her in the

courtyard, I finally managed to say, "You certainly do!"

"So you see," she said, dreamily, leaning back slightly. "I'm not sure I'm on a search. I suppose one could say I'm a seeker who doesn't seek but enjoys what comes. Like you, Luke!" she said brightly, sitting forward again. "I like you, too. You treat me with more respect than most other men. It's cool. How old did you say you were?"

"I *didn't* say I'm thirty-three, almost thirty-four years old. And let's see...you are, what, twenty maybe?"

"Twenty-two!" she said defensively.

"Well, Beautiful Twenty-two-year-old Lost Girl Who Waits Without a Passport—maybe you're on a search too. Maybe God meant us to be on the search together!"

"Maybe!" she said, taking both of my hands in hers.

This time I blushed. I got my hands back by paying for the meal. "We have to get going. It's almost midnight and we need to find you a place to stay."

Midnight, and soon the pumpkin would turn into a priest.

## Chapter 3

We walked up and down the Rue Delambre inquiring at the little hotels for a room. I kept praying none of the parishioners at the local little Notre Dame des Champs church would recognize me. At one point, we got separated by a jostling group of young men who purposely bumped up against Maya. After that, I offered to hold her arm and she agreed. In between going into the little hotels on all the nearby side streets, we silently took in the sights and the people. Not talking was just as comfortable as talking had been. But everywhere we went the inns were full. Not a big surprise in Paris in the height of summer.

I didn't dare try to wake up Madame Cordier, who was the concierge of La Maison. It was the concierge's business to know everyone's business—and how would this look?

It was now nearly one in the morning. I took Maya's elbow and turned her back down Boulevard Raspail, which appeared formal and grand in the moonlight. "Maya, I have a solution: you can stay in my room."

She cocked her head and looked at me wide-eyed but said nothing. Then a few steps later she thanked me in a very neutral voice.

"Don't worry. I have a friend I can stay with," I lied again. Well, twice because I didn't add "regrettably."

La Maison's courtyard was uncharacteristically dark and quiet when we reentered. I figured that it was the planeload of jet-lagged students that accounted for this.

Just the same, it was nerve-racking sneaking up the men's wing to my floor with a beautiful woman and her suitcase in tow. Fortunately, my studio was situated just at the top of the oak staircase. So from the top of the stairs, it would be easy to look down the corridor then sneak into my door.

Still, I kept looking behind me, sideways, and hesitated at every little noise. I had to keep casual yet open about my doings, and have a good explanation on my lips. My paranoia accelerated when I swore I heard a door open and close swiftly behind us as we walked up to my studio.

Hurriedly, I shook the keys out of my pocket. As I sifted through and found the right one, Maya caught her breath, as if she had a premonition of something. I put my hand over hers to reassure her. "No, I'm alright," she said. "Just so exhausted I'm going to fall on top of the bed."

"Let it be so!" I turned on a dim light, so maybe she wouldn't guess about my priesthood tonight. She would find out tomorrow anyway, but I wanted to keep this memory a few hours more.

After I settled her in briefly, I closed the door and had her lock it from the inside. Crossing myself, I prayed to the Lord that Father Shanahan would not pay one of his unannounced visits to my room. Hopefully by now, he would be in his alcohol-hazed sleep.

Holding my big key ring—the French are big on large keys and lots of them— I descended on the old, creaky elevator. Once in the courtyard, I looked around to see if anyone was there. Not a soul. No one on his or her balcony; no one at a window as far as I could see.

And way at the back of the property, behind the three wings of dormitories, the mysterious apartment we called "La Cave"

(the cellar) was as dark as usual, nestled inside its fancy fence and padlock.

I went down under the entrance archway, made a right to reach the front wing on the Raspail side of the building. Offices and the cafeteria were housed in this wing. No one would be on this side of the building until 6:00 a.m. when I would get up to attend 7:00 a.m. Mass at little Notre Dame des Champs.

With the aid of the flashlight, I took the stairs up to the second floor.

Somehow I felt like a thief as I opened the half-glass door with the program name on it. I flipped on a light, loosened my clothes, and settled on the old vinyl sofa that sat on one side of the room, across from two desks, three file cabinets, and an assortment of chairs. It smelled of vaguely coffee and furniture wax. No cigarette smoke, which was highly unusual. Someone was keeping awake and tidying up.

I lay my head on the hard armrest and stuffed my sweater under my neck. The street noises, the honking, shouting, and whistling, were louder here, but the noises didn't bother me. Paris had somehow become more alive for me.

No, I thought, amused and sitting up. *I* had suddenly become more alive for me!

Flipping off the big light and removing my shoes, I sank down again, more content than I'd been in ages. The nature of Maya's sudden and mysterious appearance in my life kept circling my mind, but it was a good obsession, unlike the obsessions I had been having about the presence of God in my life.

Or rather His ever-present absence of late.

Hey, wait! I realized. Tonight's encounter could not have been a coincidence—God must have placed Maya here on my doorstep.

Could she really be part of a divine plan? Or just coincidence?

Even my very presence in Paris seemed mostly coincidence. Back in the spring, I put in for a leave from teaching and parish duties. For over two years I'd lost my spiritual connection, my personal relationship to Christ. I could not feel his presence. The "still small voice" inside me grew mute. Decisions were torture because I floated rudderless. I felt dead inside, and even thought went about my duties—saying Mass, giving sacraments,



teaching—I did them as if I were a sleepwalker.

After feeling nothing for over two years, no connection whatsoever, I started to question my beliefs as well. Then I knew it was time for a break, a deep retreat where I could reconnect with the Lord—and myself—again.

My bishop was understanding. He was willing to send me to a monastery to sift through my inner desert. He had almost finished making the arrangements for a summer-long retreat for me when he got a call from his old friend from seminary, Alain Shanahan.

Alain asked if the bishop knew of any French-speaking priests who would like to spend the summer in Paris. I was sent here a week before the program began, hardly time to get my bearings. Until tonight, I kept thinking that however pleasant it was to be in Paris again, I shouldn't be here.

My consciousness was ebbing, but something was nagging at it. Sleepily, I stood up one more time and opened the blinds so the street lamps could shine in. Then I put a light on in a little supply

closet behind me, so I wouldn't remain in the pitch dark.

The reflections from the moon and street lamps flickered over me through the blinds. The little halo of light from the closet gave me reassurance. The thought came drifting back...

Oh, yeah. Being a great fan of Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, I was reading a passage just before my walk.

The line that stuck with me was, "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware."

Amen, I concurred. So, was Maya my secret destination?

My evening prayer got as far as "Our Father Who Art..." before I fell into a deep sleep.

## Chapter 4

I awoke to a full face of sun and a puzzled office staff, including Alain Shanahan hovering over me. I jerked up from the vinyl couch murmuring, "Sorry, sorry."

"What in hell are you doing here, Lomell? We gave you the best suite in the building—our hospitality not good enough?"

The rest of the staff suppressed some chuckles and discreetly sauntered out the door and down the hall toward the conference room.

"You drunk, Luke?"

My dried tongue tripped over itself as his face reddened.

"Or worse—drugs?"

I swung my feet over the side of the couch and sat upright. Then I mumbled unconvincingly, "Nothing like that." Shanahan continued to bore down on me with his ice blue eyes, demanding an explanation.

I rubbed my brows and then smiled up at him, "There's a beautiful woman in my bed, Alain."

"A what?!" Alain shouted turning darker shades of red.

"... A beautiful woman. And I didn't want to wake her up, so I came here and accidentally overslept." I smiled innocently.

"My program is already ruined, and it didn't even start yet! And you smile! Look at me, Lomell. Am I smiling? No. I'm thinking what people are going to say--the university, my bishop, the parents, the Director..." Alain sank down into the nearest chair.

"Nothing is ruined, Alain. Listen carefully to me." I calmly recapped the whole story of Maya as briefly as I could, including the missing passport, her late arrival, and our no-room-at-the-inn saga.

"And you two... You didn't... You never actually...?" He couldn't even say the words.

"Of course not!"

"Did anyone see you?"

"I honestly don't think so. I wouldn't worry about it—all between us is completely innocent."

"We will need a detailed explanation," Alain continued as if he hadn't heard me. "We can't have any scandal. There's a

rumor that M. Le Directeur himself will be here in a few weeks!”

Le Directeur was more legendary than factual: At least that is what I had gleaned during my brief time here. Though nominally the director of all the educational programs hosted by La Maison—ours was one of many—he was apparently the sole heir and owner of the large property that La Maison stood on. Mainly an absentee landlord, Le Directeur had an assistant, Mademoiselle Blanc, who apparently took care of most of the business for him. It had been close to nine years since his last visit, but sporadic rumors of his impending arrival kept everyone on his toes.

“No need to worry, Alain. I repeat, there is nothing between us,” I said as I was leaving.

*Except in my thoughts,* I added mentally. But Alain didn’t have to know those now. Of course I would tell them in confession, not to him, but to some French priest who would likely be more understanding.

I was standing near the office door but facing Alain, who now sank down on the vinyl sofa. Stretching back my hand

toward the doorknob, I encountered something soft instead.

There was Maya; worse, my hand was planted where it should not have been. Her deep hazel eyes, burning green, were blazing.

"Luke! You're a *priest*!"

"Good morning," I stammered. "Yes, I am. How was..." On the verge of saying 'my bed'... I stopped and coughed, feeling my face turn red. "Uh, did you sleep well, Miss Chanda?"

"Why didn't you tell me last night that you were a *priest*, Luke?"

Complete paralysis brought on by embarrassment and terror gripped me. I couldn't turn around or answer, yet I felt Alain Shanahan's eyes burning holes in the back of my shirt and Maya's in the front.

"Or should I say *Father* Luke?" Maya's calm directness, which would have charmed me under other circumstances, intimidated me.

"What's this? Speak up, Lomell! Why didn't you tell her you are a priest? Weren't you wearing your collar?"

I tried to move my mouth. "I told her...I was Catholic," I said lamely. "It's not what you think. We were concentrating

on getting Maya food and shelter, and I guess I just assumed..."

"Assumed? Assumed what?" Shanahan interrupted.

My survival instincts finally kicked in. "Maya Chanda, may I introduce Alain Shanahan, the program director for "French Language Studies for the Introduction to Catholicism in France."

Maya beamed a smile and approached Alain with her hand extended. Reluctantly he rocked himself up from the vinyl sofa, but pulled back his hand quickly as if to avoid spiritual contamination.

"How do you do, Father Shanahan. Please don't misunderstand. Last night L— Father Luke was so kind to me when I was lost and had no place to stay and no one to ask. I'm sure Luke told me he was a priest."

"Luke? Right. I'm sure he did." He threw a scowl my way. "Anyway, welcome Miss Chanda. Please, step over this way and we'll ask Sister Justine to work with Mme. Cordier to help you find *suitable* accommodations here."

"I have to go dress suitably as well. Excuse me." I shot out the door and tripped on the door jamb. I didn't care. I

took the stairs down, not willing to wait for the elevator.

In the courtyard a scattering of students turned and stared at me. I still didn't care. All I cared about was squaring myself with Maya.

All day I tried to forget about Maya and prepare my class. I was slated to teach the Basics of Catholicism and later help on the tours with some preview work on the architecture of the various churches and monuments the students would visit. I enjoyed studying architecture, which was a good thing since I knew little about it and had to prep for each field trip. Learning the furniture styles was harder. Fortunately, Father Alain Shanahan had a collection of French architecture books in his office, so I was fairly well supplied with references.

But nothing worked. All I could think about was Maya and our conversation the night before. Such amazing words matching such a beautiful face! That image alternated with her disappointed, annoyed face I saw this morning. And rightly so. She must have felt so betrayed by me. What was I thinking?



Shaking my head, I opened the books. I positioned my writing pad to write out my lecture notes. But her face came back before me, blotting them out. I knew I wouldn't be able to calm down until I talked to her again.

I picked up my pen. Okay. And after that happened, after we talked, I told myself, I'd be able to go back to being a priest. A mediocre priest perhaps, but a priest. After this program was over and Maya would shrink into a vague memory, I could fly home and seek the spiritual healing I needed.

I put my pen down and picked up a pencil. It broke in my hand. Frustrated, I got up. My desk—a Louis XV design with those curvy legs—was situated by my floor-length window with French doors in the living room area. We all had one, with a balcony outside it that was really more decorative than sturdy. But you could open the doors and step out and see the courtyard. I needed to get some air.

Below were students sitting and milling around the courtyard, but I didn't see Maya. Then I looked up and to my right. There she was, on her balcony. I couldn't help but stare. She was looking straight

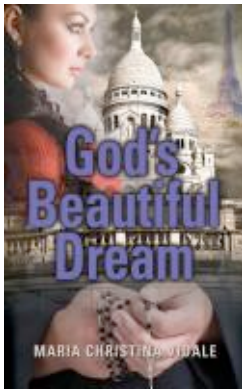
ahead when I saw her, leaning against the rickety wrought iron railing that was barely waist high. She had on white shorts and a white blouse tied around her waist. The white contrasted deliciously with her tan skin and showed off her hourglass figure.

But from the way she was leaning, I was afraid she would fall.

I stepped back inside. I couldn't exactly shout "I'm sorry" or "Be careful" to her across the building. Two minutes later I was back out there, my courage stronger. I waved, which she either ignored or didn't see. I said, "Hi Maya!" which got her attention and I waved again. She looked at me blankly, looked away, then turned and went inside. There was a slight wave of her hand as she vanished. I couldn't tell if it was a wave or a dismissal.

That haunted me all night.

So did the image of her falling.



*The year is 1972, but even in Paris, Father Luke Lomell can't shake the spiritual crisis he grapples with day and night. Then he encounters the beautiful and enigmatic Maya, whose path intersects with his in the City of Love. With his fierce attraction to Maya growing, Father Luke finds himself on yet another crossroads: to yield to his desire for her or to embrace his ordained path as God's servant.*

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