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# My French Summer

by T.D. Arkenberg

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An impressionist painting of a man and a woman sitting in a field of flowers. The man is on the left, wearing a white shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a purple top. The background is a dense field of various flowers in shades of green, yellow, and purple, with a blue sky above. The style is characterized by visible brushstrokes and a vibrant, somewhat blurred color palette.

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T.D. ARKENBERG

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## Chapter 9

“This is it.”

“This is it.” Without inflection, my mother parroted my words as she studied her face in the lobby mirror of our hotel.

Standing at the reception desk, my father scoffed. “Relax, dear. Whatever *this* is, it’s not the end of the world. We’ll be back in Paris in two weeks.” He took her icy glare in stride before turning to me. “Could you take our luggage outside, A.J.? I want to settle the bill.”

After carrying their bags to the curb, I scanned the sidewalks on both sides of Rue de Rivoli. Conor promised to say goodbye to my folks. He understood the need to show them that they weren’t abandoning me in a foreign city. Despite warming to Conor, Audrey still had reservations about the arrangements. With my nerves on edge, I didn’t notice the green Renault pull to the curb.

A taxi driver, short with unruly hair, reached for the suitcases. “Gare du Nord?”

“*Oui. Pour ma mère et mon père. Attendez un moment.*” I held up my palm and nodded to the hotel.

“Gotcha. I’ll get Mom and Pop to the station in a jeeffy.” He spoke with a Brooklyn accent.

Glancing up and down the street, I flinched at my father’s arm on my shoulder. “No sign of our Boston friend?”

Shaking my head, I tried to hide my disappointment. “Maybe the Metro delayed him.”

“Probably. Not to worry.” Walt pulled me to his side. “All right, young man, you’re on your own.” He reached into the breast pocket of his blazer and handed me an envelope. It matched the one he gave me at O’Hare. “Happy for you, son. Proud of the man you’ve become.”

Thanking him, I shoved the cash into my jeans pocket. He began to say something when a strong waft of jasmine announced my mother.

Having lamented the sorry state of train station toilets, she returned to our room for a final “pitstop.”

“Hmm,” she uttered in her judgmental tone. “Still no Conor?”

I turned expecting to see annoyance, anger, maybe even satisfaction. Instead, I found watery eyes. She did her best to contain her tears. I pulled her into a hug. “Don’t worry, Mom. I’ll be fine.”

“You better be.” She spoke through light sniffles. “Or I’ll never forgive you, Alec Joseph Van Horne. Tell that Conor Walsh boy that I hold him personally responsible for your well-being. You hear?”

“Yes, Mom. Love you.” I kissed each of her cheeks. “Belgians give three.”

“Then give your old mother one more for good measure.” Her trembling arms drew me toward her. She looked into my eyes. “Promise to call tonight. I’d phone you if I could.”

Her raised eyebrow showed displeasure with my accommodations. Instead of equipping guest rooms with telephones, Conor’s hotel provided a single payphone in the lobby.

My father cleared his throat. “Come on, dear.” When he touched her, she jerked her arm and took a step backward. His brow furrowed. “Don’t want to miss our train. The young man will be along any minute.”

“He better! If he knows what’s good for him.” Her threat had teeth. Unable to dissuade me from remaining in Paris, she insisted that Conor share his parents’ address and phone number. As a joke, Conor included his father’s badge number. Offering a final kiss, she squeezed my hand, slipped me more cash, and whispered in my ear, “Enough to get you to Brussels.”

Watching my parents climb into the backseat, I felt my heart race. The thrill of liberation, the sweet taste of freedom. A great adventure to share when I returned to college. More importantly, time alone with hot-as-hell Conor Walsh.

I closed the taxi door. “*Au revoir, bon voyage, à bientôt.*”

Audrey stared through the open window, her expression a mix of fear and concern. The same look she wore when she and Walt moved me into my college dorm Freshman year. I blew her a kiss. Managing a brave smile, she pulled a tissue and cigarette from her purse. The driver accelerated and I waved until the Renault disappeared from view.

Concern over Conor’s absence tempered my exhilaration. Did something happen? He wouldn’t stand me up, abandon me in Paris. Would he? My head filled with a rising chorus of dark thoughts. I glanced at my watch. Less than an hour remained to vacate the room. Hurrying inside, I paused at the front desk. “I’m expecting a friend. American boy. Dark, wavy hair. Blue eyes. Name’s Walsh. Conor Walsh.” Rattling off the words, I hoped the young woman understood. “Send him right up. And don’t worry, I’ll be gone by noon.”

“*Je comprends, monsieur.* I understand. I send Monsieur Walsh upstairs. I also ring.”

Too impatient to wait for the elevator, I trotted up the stairs muttering, “Conor will be here, I know it.”

I packed most of my things earlier as my harried parents swept through the room like whirling dervishes. Only my toiletries remained as well as a few odds and ends. Had I missed anything? I shook my rumpled sheet and blanket and ran my hands over the mattress. Kneeling, I scanned the carpet beneath the sofa bed. My outstretched arm snared a runaway cassette, *Simon and Garfunkel’s Greatest Hits*. The decade-old ballads were among those I turned to for solace. Songs of love, lament, and despair resonated with me though their subjects never resembled me. The world ignored the dreams and aspirations of people like me. Imagine the outcry over *The Graduate* if young, angst-riddled Benjamin Braddock had been seduced by Mr. Robinson.

Packing the cassette, I remembered Dickens. In the morning’s

chaos, I dropped the paperback onto the floor. Before I could retrieve it, my mother swept me aside to fold Walt's pajamas. I scanned the carpet but found the book on a nightstand. As I placed it into my backpack, I noticed the missing bookmark. I flipped through the book. Turned it upside down. Fanned its pages over the bed. Nothing. I knew where I left off. The chapter in which Sydney Carton, the tragic hero, confesses his impossible love for Lucie. The missing bookmark, the slip of paper given to me by my Greek friends, concerned me. Although I had no interest in courting their granddaughter, I intended to write her in Wisconsin to ask for their address in Greece. I wanted to contact the couple—offer thanks for their magic elixir and ask for the recipe.

“Where is that damn bookmark?” Housekeeping hadn't been in. In fact, they were down the hall, waiting for me to vacate the room. Dropping to my knees, I reached under bed and nightstand. I shook my parents' bed linens, opened the nightstand drawer, and lifted the brass lamp. I searched the closet to no avail. The last of the homemade hooch would be precious. Perhaps I'd share with Conor...if he ever showed.

With twenty minutes left till checkout, I paced the room, stared out the window, and talked to myself. “I'll wait in the lobby. If he doesn't show, I'll head to his hotel. Please don't make me look like a fool. Shit, shit, shit. Where are you?” Had unrealistic hopes set me up for disappointment? I willed myself to remain calm. I was zipping my backpack when a knock rattled the door. Reception hadn't called to announce Conor. No, housekeeping had grown impatient. “*Un moment, s'il vous plaît*. I'll be right there,” I said, my voice wavering.

The knob jiggled, but the dead-bolted door didn't budge. “*S'il vous plaît*,” I said louder. Unfastening the bolt, I pulled open the door.

Conor leaned against the doorframe. “I *plaît* very much. Gonna let me in or just stand there?”

His grin made me light-headed. I gawked at him. He sported a



fresh haircut that made him look even more handsome. “Oh, sorry. Of course. Come in.” With a sweep of my arm, I ushered him forward. “I’m just leaving. Gotta checkout. Where have—”

“Sorry I’m late. Tidied up. Didn’t want you to think you’re bunking with a slob.” His jeans and blue shirt retained the creases of new merchandise. Polished loafers were also new. I realized that clothes shopping and a haircut had delayed him. He was amazing and...*adorable*.

“Missed your parents, huh?”

“Yeah. They were a little put out.”

“You mean your mom, don’t you?”

I chuckled. “She can’t stop being mother hen, no matter how old her chicks.”

“Can’t make up my mind if she hates me or loves me.”

“Neither can she.” I turned to grab my backpack and suitcase. “Hotel’s anxious to get the room.”

“Not so fast.” Clutching my shoulder, he spun me around. His touch sent electricity surging through my body. Conor Walsh was the sexiest guy I’d ever been that close to.

He nodded toward my wrist. “What’s the time?”

“Eleven forty-five.”

“We got fifteen minutes.”

He squeezed my shoulders, his grip strong. He pulled me toward him. My heart raced. *Is this really happening?* He paused. His eyes, vibrant and kind, gazed into mine. I understood the unspoken questions: Shall I proceed? Do you want this too?

My eyes and smile conveyed my answer. *Yes. Most definitely, yes!*

His full, tender lips met mine. They remained there. Closing my eyes, I draped my arms around him. I drew him to me. My nose filled with his musky scent and traces of sandalwood aftershave. His warm, muscular chest pressed into mine. How I wanted that first kiss...that

magical moment...to last forever.

“Housekeeping!”

## Chapter 10

“No, Mom. Haven’t changed my mind.” I lost track of the number of times during our long-distance conversation that I repeated my intent to remain in France.

I’d waited until late evening to phone. And only after downing a generous pour of Jack Daniels that Conor kept in his room. I fretted the call, cautioning myself to keep my guard up. Unbridled joy would arouse her suspicion. Since that electric kiss, I wanted to shout Conor’s name over and over. A more handsome face and perfect body never existed. His every word was share worthy. He gave me his Red Sox cap, which I vowed to take off only to shower. Unlike my library crush, Conor was real. Flesh and blood, not photos and fantasy. I had to contain myself or risk disclosing the terrible truth to my parents about their precious son. I wasn’t ready for that.

I dreaded the call, but ignoring my mother came at great peril. She might call Conor’s parents, phone the local gendarmerie, or worse, catch the overnight train to Paris. Brussels was only two hundred miles to the north. I shuddered, picturing my parents bursting into Conor’s room and finding us naked, wrapped in each other’s arms.

Audrey picked up on the first ring. Without as much as a hello, she launched into a series of questions about my health, safety, and well-being. Satisfied that I wasn’t strung out on drugs or speaking under duress, she probed right where I knew she would—Conor Walsh.

“Yes, Mom. He arrived right after you left.... No, he didn’t plan it that way.... No, not hungover or out late with a girl. He was disappointed he couldn’t see you off. Told me to tell you how sorry he was to miss you.... What?”

“What delayed *your friend* this morning?”

Her emphasis on *your friend* teetered dangerously close to *that boy*, her term of disfavor for Annie’s boyfriend. News of Conor’s

makeover might raise suspicions. I had planned to blame the Metro for his delay but his demotion to “your friend” required something stronger to elicit her sympathy. My concocted story would also stroke her ego.

“You were right, Mom. Conor got squirted with mustard. All over his favorite jersey.”

“No!”

“Yep. An entire gang. Made for his wallet and passport. But he was too quick. Elbowed them away. Chased them from Notre Dame onto the Île Saint-Louis. Lost them in the maze of streets. Gave ’em a good scare though.”

“I warned you. Poor Conor. Tell him we’re very sorry.” Her voice conveyed both triumph and sympathy. “Have the dear boy soak that jersey in cold water and soap.”

Satisfied that Conor hadn’t abandoned me, she steered the conversation into a travelogue. Her flowery words and cheerful tone were reminiscent of a glossy brochure. Speaking in superlatives, she cooed over the train. Smoothest ride ever, countryside simply divine. Their hotel was a heavenly oasis worthy of each of its five stars. It had an indoor pool promised but unfulfilled in Paris. The plush mattress, satin bed linens, and complimentary toiletries were fit for royalty. She couldn’t fault a single thing. “The women here are even prettier than the French.” She heaved a dramatic sigh. “Oh, the grand time you and I would have had.”

I rolled my eyes. Her motive was clear. The twin nags of conscience—guilt and regret. “Terrific. But I’m still not coming to Brussels.”

“Remind me,” she added. “Does your rustic accommodation have a private toilet or is it communal like the telephone?”

“We have our own bathroom.”

“Ours has marble floors, heated towel racks, brass finishes, and

thank God, a bidet.”

I refrained from describing Conor’s room. The toilet ran, the tub dripped. Rust and other stains marred the chipped porcelain fixtures. Bathwater flowed in two temperatures, ice cold and scalding hot. None of that mattered, however, because I shared a bed with Conor Walsh.

She cooed. “You’d love Brussels. It’s so much like Paris. They speak French. Did I mention how positively wonderful our hotel is?”

“A few times.”

“And the indoor pool? Stunning. Hotel deserves a sixth star.”

I let her repeat herself without interruption. After all, the more she spoke, the less I had to. “Happy you’re happy, Mom. I’m still not leaving Paris.”

“What, sweetie?”

“Nothing. Have you spoken to Roger?”

“Your father phoned him. He decided to paint the house. As a distraction. His pastor gave him the idea. Roger isn’t one for manual labor. I phoned Debbie’s father in Ann Arbor.”

I understood why. Debbie’s emotions were still raw. And despite being a deacon, Roger stewed in too much guilt to share the whole sordid truth. Neither was a reliable confidant. Debbie’s father assured Audrey that his daughter wouldn’t take any irreversible actions she’d later regret. Although she asked her father to find a good attorney in Chicago, he didn’t think that divorce was inevitable. After speaking with Roger, he saw a path toward reconciliation. He and Audrey agreed to convene a meeting of both families after we returned from Europe.

“Everything’s under control,” Audrey concluded. “Your father can focus on business and I can enjoy my birthday trip. But it’s not all about me, is it?” *Um, yes it usually is.* “By the way,” she added, “where’s your fr—Conor?”

*Great question!* I wondered myself. But after finessing her back

into using his given name, I didn't dare raise a red flag. I shared just enough to satisfy her curiosity. Omitting our steamy scene on Conor's lumpy bed, I fast-forwarded to dinner. We dined on falafel sandwiches and drank beer on Rue de Rosiers. Afterward, we walked back to our hotel through the Place des Vosges where a trio of violinists and an accordionist entertained under the arches. I didn't mention that the musicians were gypsies or how Conor pulled me onto a bench where we listened to the music with interlaced fingers and our legs rubbing against each other. Nor did I disclose that upon our return, Conor slipped out of our room while I brushed my teeth. No good came from telling her that he'd been gone nearly two hours without telling me where or why.

"Looks like someone's waiting to use the phone, Mom. Sign says to limit calls to three minutes....Love you....Yes, I'll call again tomorrow....You and Dad be careful too."

Returning the receiver to the wall, I sighed. Talking to Audrey was exhausting. I hadn't lied about the sign. Hotel management tacked up *dos* and *don'ts* covering a multitude of subjects including at least half a dozen rules about payphone protocol. Their homemade signs and an array of personal ads covered every square inch of the wall. Postings included roommate solicitations, translation and tutor services, guitar, voice, and language lessons, as well as bicycle and motorbike rentals.

However, I hadn't been entirely truthful. Nobody breathed down my neck to use the phone. A husky blonde with a Dutch accent approached when I dropped in my first centime but told me to take as long as I needed. The wait gave her an excuse to banter with the front-desk attendant, a long-haired, bad-boy type from Stockholm named Karl. His chiseled features, moody blue eyes, snug white T-shirt, and tight, threadbare jeans drew second takes and ogles from female and male guests alike. Testosterone exuded from his every pore.

Sitting in the spartan lobby waiting to use the single payphone had

given me a ringside seat. Too smart to be pigeonholed, Karl coolly accepted flirtations from every guest regardless of age, looks, or gender. Smitten young men and women offered the brooding desk clerk invites for drinks, dinners, and drugs. One enterprising girl, a big-haired Texan with an exaggerated drawl even slipped a pack of Twinkies over the counter along with a pair of pink panties. With each tribute received, Karl responded with sexy aloofness that included a simple nod before he moved the offering to a hidden shelf below the counter. These unsolicited gifts could have stocked a small convenience store. Fawning fans groaned with disappointment upon learning that Karl planned to take the next few days off.

The tall Swede didn't sneer, smirk, or take offense at any of his varied admirers. Karl struck me as a guy comfortable in his own skin, confident of his sexuality, the center of his own universe who didn't give a rat's ass about what others thought. He seemed to have a natural immunity to self-doubt and insecurity, my twin afflictions. I envied him. As an uptight teenager from America's heartland, I lived in constant dread of revealing my truth. This fear intensified into a phobia with those closest to me. Would Conor change that? Would he give me the courage and confidence I lacked? Aware of getting ahead of myself and overanalyzing my eight-hour romance, I tried to shake the thoughts from my head.

After finishing my call, I walked to the front desk and informed the Dutch girl that the phone was free. Instead of gratitude, she shot me a dirty look, pissed that I interrupted her flirtations with the sexy Swede. I shrugged off her rudeness with a sarcastic "You're welcome" before making my way to the stairs. "Better grab the phone while you can, Anna," I heard Karl tell his fawning fan in a tone that sounded like relief.

I began to ascend the stairs when Karl's voice boomed with

uncharacteristic exuberance. “Back so soon, handsome?” I looked to the reception desk. Karl beamed with a rare grin. With surging curiosity, I followed his gaze to the front door as he added, “Find what you wanted, Boston?”

My stomach knotted. Conor was the recipient of Karl’s warm reception. Did they have a history? Conor had been at the hotel for more than two weeks. Long enough to earn one of Karl’s silly nicknames. *Boston for God’s sake! How unoriginal.* I recalled Conor’s lament of being lonely shared with my mother and me outside Galleries Lafayette. Had Karl satisfied that need? Next to the sexy Swede, I didn’t stand a chance.

Without a glance to where I stood in shock, Conor returned Karl’s chummy grin. Reaching the desk, he squeezed the Swede’s shoulder. “All’s well, good-looking. You’re the best. Come morning, we’ll be able to escape to—”

Conor’s gaze drifted to the stairs. His face drained of all color. “A...Alec. D...didn’t see you. Coming down to call your folks?”

I turned and ran upstairs. My heart pounded as I sat on our bed. I should have known that Conor was too good to be true. What a fool I’d been to fall for his fake charm. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.” I’d given my heart to someone who only wanted sex.

When he walked in the door, I launched into a tirade of nasty accusations. His face turned bright red.

“B...but Alec. You don’t under—”

“Don’t tell me what I do or don’t understand. I have eyes.”

His face flashed with anger. “You sound like a teenage girl. Shoulda known a newbie meant trouble. A really bad idea.”

“You’re right! A terrible idea. What the hell was I thinking?” I jumped from the bed. Storming toward the door, I caught my reflection in the mirror. Above my crimson-cheeked face sat the damn Red Sox cap. Pulling it from my head, I pitched it onto the bed. “Guessing your



beloved Karl will be thrilled to show me a train timetable to Brussels.”

“Alec, wait.”

I slammed the door behind me. After scanning the train schedule, I'd pack. I needed no further proof about Conor and Karl after I reached the front desk. Checking in a young American couple, the Swede reached under the counter and pulled out one of his many tributes. Before he put the cap on his head, I knew in my heart...a damn Red Sox cap.

## Chapter 11

“Here you go. But aren’t you and Boston—”

Too infuriated to let Karl finish, I snatched the timetable from his hands. The Red Sox cap on his head made my fingers twitch with rage. The American couple whose check-in I interrupted with my barking order backed away. I didn’t care if they thought me a raving lunatic. I’d never see them again. I hoped the same went for Karl and Conor.

I sneered. “I’ll return it when I’m done.”

The Swede replied with a suit-yourself shrug. “Can’t recall the last time a guest wanted to go to Brussels. Most head straight to Amsterdam.” Lifting his thumb and forefinger to his lips, he toked an imaginary joint, drawing laughs from the couple.

Having no patience for Karl or his druggie humor, I scowled. The face over which I recently drooled, now seemed smug, selfish, cruel. Conor’s too. The pair of them used looks and charms to manipulate others. They deserved each other, and I deserved better.

Anger wasn’t the only emotion surging inside me. Embarrassment and humiliation gripped me too. How did I let myself be duped? Conor may have been gay, but underneath the sensitive facade he was still a callous, insensitive jock. That my very first attempt at love and intimacy ended in disaster mere hours after it began enraged me. The universe wasted no time batting me down. I felt like a butterfly smashed by a sneaker seconds after it escapes the cocoon. The degrading smackdown didn’t bode well for my romantic future.

The sound of Conor’s footsteps thundering down the stairs sent me rushing out the front door. With timetable in hand, I dashed across the dark, narrow street. Didn’t matter which dive bar I chose. They all looked the same. Black opaque windows and wooden doors leading into cramped spaces smelling of stale beer, cheap wine, and acrid tobacco. Candles, low-watt bulbs, and glowing cigarette tips provided

just enough light to discern the gray shadows of other human beings. The ambience suited my dark mood.

“*Que bois-tu?*” I turned to the deep, gravelly voice of the bartender, a heavyset guy with thick, gray whiskers covering his ruddy face. Tattoos inked every patch of bare skin. Candles flickered atop the bar, animating fantastical beasts that covered his beefy arms. A collection of creatures with wings, horns, scales, and long tails. “What you drinking?” he repeated in English. “Toilets are for patrons only.”

“Red wine. *Vin rouge.*”

I settled onto the only vacant seat at the weathered bar. The blank-faced beast keeper produced a glass and filled it with a generous pour. The stale aroma of sour grapes reminded me of the cheap wine we drank at school. Couples sat to each side. The pair nearest the door, two young guys speaking Spanish, sized me up. Whether they were gay or merely European *bons vivants*, I couldn’t discern. I didn’t have much experience with either lot. The other couple, slightly older women, were too engrossed in conversation to notice me. Their frenzied hand gestures mirrored the rapid-fire French flying from their mouths. Behind me were the muffled voices of patrons seated at tables. Dim lighting made it impossible to see them.

Unfolding the timetable on the bar, I lowered my head. *Shit!* Squinting proved pointless. Small print was indecipherable in that light. A candle offered no aid when I held the schedule over its flickering flame. Fearing a fire, I refolded the timetable. “Just drink the damn wine, Alec.”

Despite its sour notes, the wine would numb the sting of betrayal. I had to psych myself up for a final interaction with Conor. Fears of a messy confrontation sparked a cascade of muttered F-bombs. The bartender’s glare redirected my focus into the deep well of purple wine where I resumed my rumination in silence. Conor had been right about one thing. In relationship matters, I was a stupid newbie...in every

humiliating sense of the word. My breakup skills were as pathetic as my sexual prowess. How could I avoid acting petty, sounding like a silly, whiny child? He called me a teenage girl. The incident would scar me for life. Could I salvage a single shred of dignity?

“Got no choice,” I mumbled into my glass. “Gotta see him.”

Due to my mother’s counsel, I always carried my wallet and passport with me. But my suitcase, backpack, and cash from my parents remained in the room. I had to collect it all before heading to the Gare du Nord.

Thoughts of a humiliating retreat to Brussels made me cringe. I sipped the sour wine. My mother, Walt too, would be thrilled to have me back aboard the family vacation. But I’d face a grueling interrogation. The truth was out of the question. I needed a good cover story. After more wine, the answer came. Conor, I’d say, brought a girl back to the room. The old threes-a-crowd scenario. Like my fabricated story of gypsy thieves, Audrey would want to believe that Conor was a cad. My lie had an additional benefit, providing a smoke screen for my hidden sexuality.

As the wineglass emptied, my thinking shifted from anger to reason. I tried to convince myself of being lucky to discover Conor’s true character before investing too much. *Still have Eric, don’t you?* Dropping my head into my hands, I heaved a sigh. *Too late, Alec. Too late.*

Having sampled the real thing, I realized that my library crush was a Kodachrome fantasy. I pined for human affection for so long that when the first real guy came along, I surrendered my heart. *Too quickly, damn it. Too completely.* My deep feelings for Conor made his betrayal more painful. I wanted to reclaim my heart, but Conor retained a chunk of it.

After ordering a second drink, I had to pee. “*Toilette?*”

The bartender grunted as he refilled my glass. Both he and the

menacing dragon inked on his forearm pointed to the back of the bar. After taking a sip of wine, I stuffed the timetable into my back pocket, between my passport and wallet. As my feet began to move, I teetered. No doubt, a result of my beer, whiskey, and wine consumption. Steadying my balance, I plodded toward the toilet. Kicking a chair by accident, I tottered. My hands plummeted to a sticky tabletop. Squinting through darkness, I detected two people huddled at the table. As I offered apologies, I felt my head swoon. When the startled couple looked up, a wave of familiarity swept over me. *The hair. It's the hair.*

By a bizarre twist of fate, my escape from Conor brought me face-to-face with my father's redheaded colleague. Red's fingers intertwined with her companion's as mine had done with Conor on the bench in the Place des Vosges. Despite my prior suspicions, the other person with Red wasn't my father. My curiosity piqued. Short hair, plain face, and dark work shirt deceived me. Upon closer inspection, I saw that Red's romantic interest was another woman.

Embarrassed by my drunken intrusion, I mumbled apologies in French and English before retreating. Red, I hoped, didn't recognize me. We'd never met. *Thank God!* Using my hands, I groped my way into the corridor that led to the toilet. A shout of *Occupé!* from behind the closed door gave me time to think. Why had my father denied seeing Red at the airport? Was he embarrassed that she was a lesbian? Did he even know his colleague was gay? *Of course not!*

People like my parents and their country club clique didn't know homos. Those out of the closet, anyway. If Walt and Audrey had suspicions about someone's sexuality, they never voiced them. Better to pretend such people didn't exist. Queers and dykes might style your hair, teach your kids, patrol your streets, preach your righteous gospel.... but they better have the f-ing decency to keep their deviant lifestyle to themselves. Family played similar charades. The Van Horne clan called my dad's younger brother Bob, a confirmed

bachelor and playboy. I don't think poor Uncle Bob ever screwed a woman. The photo on his bookshelf of a handsome young soldier killed in action seemed more than a tribute to a close friend. Mother's dowager aunt Louise and her long-term companion Stephanie were called roommates. I laughed every time someone said that Lou, as she was called, simply never caught the eye of the right man. The bed they shared should have been a dead giveaway. Bob, Lou, and Stephanie never corrected the myths shrouding their lives. It was easier that way.

"Life is one effed-up mess," I muttered aloud.

The bathroom door finally opened. Inside, loud music from the adjacent nightclub shook the walls. I expected pungent odors but the commode shocked me. The toilet consisted of a filthy floor-level hole. A foot imprint on each side of the dark abyss offered guidance to the uninitiated. Toilet paper was strictly BYO. I'd never been more grateful for the ability to pee from an upright position. Zipping up my pants, I sympathized with women and weak-kneed poopers who had to squat to hit the target. From what I observed, most had terrible aims.

The malodorous chamber's single redeeming feature was a bare bulb dangling from the ceiling. When it flickered, a gentle whack to the hot bulb restored the light. Taking short sips of air, I pulled the timetable from my pocket. Holding it to the light, I scanned its pages. One last train departed that night for Brussels. Mission accomplished, I elbowed open the door and inhaled. As the temperamental bulb went dark, someone came forward.

"*Désolé*, sorry," I muttered, attempting to step past.

"Alec?"

My stomach knotted at the sound of Conor's voice. At least I had identified the train that would put him behind me for good. "How'd you find me?"

Stupid question but it didn't matter. I had no time for conversation. I had less than ninety minutes to get back to the room, collect my

belongings, grab a taxi, reach the station, buy a ticket, and find the right platform.

Conor let out a nervous laugh. “Mind if we move away from the toilet?” I pushed past him and headed toward the bar. “How ’bout we have a drink together?” he called from behind me. “Talk this over.”

“Gotta train to catch.”

“What?”

Reaching the bar, I asked for the check and downed the last of the wine. I needed courage but couldn’t muster enough to look at Conor. “I’m going to Brussels. Shouldn’t have abandoned my parents.”

“Alec, you can’t do that. Not without telling me why. You owe me that much.” Conor dropped onto the stool vacated by a Spanish boy and patted my stool. “Sit.”

“Didn’t you hear? Got a train to catch.” I grabbed my wallet and threw francs onto the bar. Returning the billfold to my back pocket, I had a sudden sense of dread. Something was wrong. I shuddered as I patted my pocket. “Can’t be. Can’t be.” I emptied my pocket onto the bar. Only my wallet and timetable were there. I checked my other pockets. Empty. “Shit!”

“What’s wrong?” Conor asked.

“My passport. It’s gone.”

“Maybe you left it in the room.”

My mind rewound my activities. “Nope. Had it when I got here. Stuffed the timetable in my pocket...” I gasped.

“What?”

The adrenaline surge sobered me up. After a quick scan of the floor, I darted to the toilet. Conor followed. “I pulled out the timetable in the toilet,” I moaned. “Passport must have slipped out. That’s gotta be it.” I banged on the locked door.

“*Un moment*,” came the reply.

“My passport! *Mon passeport*,” I shouted. “*Je cherche mon*

*pasport*. I'm looking for my passport." My voice quivered with panic.

"Sorry. Don't see it. The damn light keeps going off."

Horror swept over me. Had my passport fallen into the disgusting hole? Had someone found and taken it? I groaned. *Shit!* Without a passport, I couldn't cross the Belgian frontier. I couldn't put Conor and my humiliation behind me.





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