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—CYNTHIA D'APRIX SWEENEY,
author of *Good Company*

THE PARIS NOVEL

RUTH REICHL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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SHE NEVER CALLED HER MOTHER Mom or Mommy or even Mother. From the time that Stella was very small, her mother insisted she call her Celia. “I was not born to be anyone’s mother,” she explained.

Which pretty much said it all.

So now, hearing the lawyer say the words “my daughter” gave Stella a very odd feeling, as if they had been written by a stranger.

SÉVERINE



Paris, 1983

LILACS, RAIN, A HINT OF bitter chocolate: Stella sniffed the air as she entered the small shop, enjoying the soft golden light that enfolded her. A bell pealed, an old-fashioned sound that gave her the oddest feeling, as if she had stepped off the Paris sidewalk and straight out of time.

A curious old woman, whose beautifully manicured hands contrasted with her severe haircut and drab dress, was seated at a small oak table, wearing a smile that looked simultaneously reluctant and triumphant. *Cat*, Stella thought, *canary*.

At the sight of Stella, the woman's face lit up and she leapt from her seat. "I have been waiting for you." Her voice was deep, gravelly, the words emerging as if rusted from disuse. "What took you so long?" Her reproachful tone implied that Stella was shamefully late for an important appointment.

Stella was stunned. Perhaps the woman had confused her with someone else. Maybe she was crazy. Stella backed toward the door, reaching for the knob. But when the woman cried "Stop!" her voice was so imperious that Stella obeyed. The two stood for a moment, eyeing each other.

It was Stella's first day in Paris. She'd stumbled blearily through the morning streets, jet-lagged and wishing she hadn't come. The remaining days of her trip stretched before her, a vast uncharted landscape. What would she do with herself, alone in this unfamiliar city? Back in her apartment in New York she'd done her homework, walking her fingers across maps of Paris so she'd know her way around. But now, traversing actual Paris streets, she felt disquieted. Leaving the quaint hotel in the Latin Quarter, she'd tried to shake anxiety off by joining the stream of tourists crossing the Seine.

She had passed Notre-Dame—one day she'd go inside—and recited the name of each bridge as she crossed it. Yet despite her preparation she felt like an alien. She didn't understand the language. She knew nobody. What was she doing here?

Heading to the Place des Vosges, she'd wondered if it would be as lovely as the guidebooks promised. "Le Pavillon de la Reine," she had whispered to herself, as she began circumnavigating the ancient square. The stones seemed to be breathing ancient air, she thought as she surveyed the orderly little park with its tidy fountain. When she ducked into the arcade, she spotted a shop with *Robes des Rêves* etched in gold across the antique glass and stopped to study the ornate

letters. There was a single dress in the window, waves of fabric in the most extraordinary shade of violet. Velvet? It looked so soft that Stella had longed to touch it. She had opened the door.

Now the proprietress was staring at her with that peculiarly Parisian arrogance. Her rudeness made Stella so uncomfortable she looked away, eyes darting around the shop. The walls, thickly layered with vintage garments, turned the crowded space into a time machine, as if the city's entire history were spelled out in chiffon, linen, silk, and lace. Her eye fell on an austere wartime uniform standing stiffly at attention and moved on to a Pucci pantsuit in colors so exuberant she imagined it leaping from the hanger and boogying out the door. The woman simply watched, saying nothing. The small white dog at her side was equally alert. The silence stretched, uncomfortable.

What did I do? Stella thought, convinced, as usual, that she had done something wrong. She stood hesitating for a moment, then headed toward the violet dress in the window, brushing past an Edwardian lace-trimmed peignoir, a bugle-beaded flapper dress, a silk shawl the color of dawn. She reached to touch the dress.

"Stop!" the woman cried again.

Stella jumped away, put her hands behind her back, apologized. "I'm sorry." She could see, up close, that the antique dress was very frail.

"We have been waiting." The words were even more reproachful now, almost angry.

"I'm sorry?" This time it was a question.

"We have been waiting for you." The woman repeated the words, louder and slower, as if volume could compensate for vocabulary. Then, with a contemptuous look—clearly she thought Stella impossibly stupid—and an impatient wave of her hand, she vanished into a back room. The dog sat, body quivering, ears pricked, eyes on Stella, daring her to move. Stella stood very still. An eternity passed before the woman returned, balancing a long flat box on outstretched arms.

"Come!" She gestured imperiously. When Stella did not move, the woman set the box down, took her hand, and began towing her inexorably toward a curtained area in the corner of the room. The little dog followed, nosing the box forward along the floor.

Bewildered, Stella did not resist; perhaps this was the way all Paris shopkeepers behaved? "Your dress"—the woman pulled Stella into the makeshift dressing room and turned her roughly around—"is from the fifties." In the hazy mirror Stella caught sight of her own reflection. Slim, boyish body in neatly pressed jeans; cool gray eyes; straight brown hair falling to her shoulders. White shirt, tweed jacket. She took off the jacket, slowly unbuttoned the shirt, and

slipped it off as the woman tugged at Stella's jeans. As her bare stomach emerged, Stella crossed her hands to hide it. In her adult life nobody had touched her in such an intimate manner, and she felt her cheeks grow red with embarrassment. The woman gave a small, disapproving shake of the head. "Do you think I have never seen a naked woman before? Me, who once dressed the great models as they prepared for the runway?"

Muttering to herself, the woman bent down, opened the box, and began peeling off layers of soft tissue. The sound was like Christmas. She lifted a cloud of fabric and began to carefully unfasten tiny buttons on the back of the garment, releasing each one with surgical precision. "I was at Dior the year this dress was made." Baffled and intrigued, Stella leaned in to hear the words. "It was the first year Monsieur Saint Laurent was with us—he was only twenty-one—but even then we knew he had the talent. This was his first design for the house of Dior, and as I helped the great *vedette* Victoire Doutreleau into this dress, Monsieur Saint Laurent fussed about, tugging at the fabric, looking distressed."

She paused, looking off into the distance. Stella waited. "But when Victoire walked onto the runway, the entire audience gasped. We all heard it. Monsieur Saint Laurent gave that little smile of his that was so rare. We knew at once that this dress was"—she searched for the word—"magique. So imagine to yourself my joy, all these years later, when that very dress waltzes into my shop. *Ici, chez moi!*" She shook her head, unable to believe her luck, and her mouth did something that was meant to be a smile. "I had not seen it for almost thirty years, but when I opened the box, it was like meeting an old friend."

Humming softly, she tossed the dress over Stella's head, blocking the light. In the darkness Stella became conscious that the fabric was infused with the scent of apricots and vanilla. Slightly dizzy, she thought of Dorothy in the field of poppies.

The woman was still talking. "But I knew that this dress was not for everyone. And so I packed it away. And I waited." She looked down, addressing the dog. "Zaza, am I not patient?" The dog regarded her with bright black eyes, ears cocked forward in silent assent. "I knew the right person would appear. And when you walked through the door, Mademoiselle, my heart gave a little leap. I knew, *mais tout de suite*, that your dress had found its destiny."

What a sales pitch! thought Stella. *Does she do this with everyone? Does anybody buy it?* She wondered what extraordinary story the woman would manufacture next.

"You know, both Monsieur Dior and Monsieur Saint Laurent occasionally gave their dresses names. *Pas toujours*, just the special ones. There was an Artemise. A Zemire. A Laurette. But this dress was different. After that gasp from the audience, Monsieur Dior came into the atelier and reached out, fingering

the fabric as he walked around and around the model. ‘This dress is Victoire,’ he said at last, and Victoire gave us all a pitying smile. It was a rare honor.”

She continued, eyes on Stella. “But Monsieur Dior shook his head and patted Victoire’s arm. ‘It is just for now. *Pardon, ma chère*, but this dress is changeable as perfume. A chameleon that will look different on each woman. And so it will always bear the name of its wearer.’ ”

“So the dress is named Victoire?”

The old woman shook her head. “How do they call you?”

“Stella.”

“How perfect! This dress is now Stella.” She dropped to her knees, preventing further conversation. Her nimble fingers were light as butterflies as they moved slowly up Stella’s back, closing the buttons. When Stella tried to look into the mirror, the fingers changed, clamping down like iron bars, holding her in place. “Not yet!”

She didn’t mind. As each tiny button snuggled into its hole, the dress became an embrace, the cloth warm and soft against her skin, comforting as a lullaby. Stella closed her eyes and surrendered to the sensation.

“You can look now.” Startled, Stella opened her eyes. She had been somewhere else.

The person in the mirror was no one she had ever met. Slim, boyish Stella was gone. In her place stood an exotic creature who looked as if an aria—“*Casta Diva*,” perhaps—would come pouring out when she opened her mouth. The dress had turned her into a woman of such voluptuous promise that it transformed every feature. Stella’s pale, serious face now looked touchingly sensual. She had never bothered with makeup, but her lips now begged for a slash of red. Her gray eyes had gone smoky, mysterious rather than drab, and even her mousy hair suddenly seemed sleek and glossy. Stella stared at this woman who was nothing like herself.

“*Et voilà!*” The little saleslady was fierce. “Did I not tell you this was your dress? Would you not prefer to be this beautiful woman rather than the ordinary creature who walked in my door?”

“How much?” Stella whispered the words. She had always been a caterpillar, but now, suddenly, she longed to be a butterfly.

“Fifty thousand francs.” The woman’s voice was brusque. She snapped her fingers contemptuously beneath Stella’s nose. “A mere nothing for a piece of art, a slice of history.” She opened her hands in a benevolent gesture. “But I will make you a bargain. If you pay in dollars, I will give you a good rate. The banks offer seven and a half francs, but me, I will make it eight.”

Stella stared at the woman in the mirror as she did the calculation. Six *thousand* dollars? For a dress? She had the money—Celia’s money, every penny

her mother had left her—but could she be the kind of person who spent it on a dress? She turned again to the woman in the mirror, yearning to be her. But it was wrong. She was not a frivolous person who wasted money on clothing. She took one last look and turned away, relinquishing the vision. “This dress”—the words were reluctant—“belongs in a museum.”

“No dress belongs in a museum!” The saleslady reached out and patted the dress, as if consoling a wounded creature. “Dresses are created to be worn. And this dress was meant to be worn by *you*.” She looked her up and down. “This dress desires to be a Stella.”

And now Stella heard another voice. It was passionate, insistent. Fierce. *For once in your life*, her mother was hissing in her ear, *make me proud*. She stepped out of the dress, willing the voice to go away. *Live up to your name. Be a Stella*, Celia’s ghost continued to murmur as Stella left the dress crumpled on the floor and fled.

New York, 1957

THE YEAR STELLA TURNED SEVEN, her mother hit the dating jackpot. Tall and regal, Celia had a ripe body and deep-black eyes the shape of almonds. Her strong face was softened by very full lips that were never without bright-red lipstick. Men found her irresistible: She was always bringing some new “friend” home.

But this one was different. Each time Mortimer arrived at their apartment, he brought a present for Stella, as if he were wooing her as well as her mother. For reasons Stella could not verbalize, this made her extremely uncomfortable. “He’s very wealthy,” Celia boasted to her friends, “but Mortimer is so much more than a rich businessman....” She stopped, in that way she had, allowing the drama to build. “The real Mortimer, the man I love, has the soul of an artist.” She told them about his fine collection—“He owns a *Renoir!*”—and the studio he’d created in the penthouse apartment, where he painted on the weekends.

Fabulously wealthy and superbly elegant, Mortimer Morris sat on the board of the city’s major cultural institutions; he squired Celia to the opening of the opera, the ballet, galas at the museums. He bought her jewelry, took her skiing in Gstaad and yachting in St. Bart’s. “And,” she told Stella in the early days of the affair, “he wants to teach you to paint. What a lucky little girl you are; you’re going to spend Sundays in his studio.”

Stella was wary, but she could not come up with a good reason to refuse. And that first Sunday when Celia dropped her off at 930 Fifth Avenue, Stella could not help noticing the way the elevator man looked at her. She had the oddest sense that he felt sorry for her. When they reached the eighteenth floor, she thought the man seemed reluctant to open the elevator door, and she stepped out hesitantly, afraid of what she would find.

But it was beautiful! The light was dazzling, and Stella ran to the windows, taking in a view that stretched across Central Park. She looked down on Conservatory Pond, the boathouse, and the statue of Hans Christian Andersen, her particular favorite. Mortimer led her to a long table where he had assembled an impressive array of cookies, cakes, and soda. “If there’s something you’d rather have, little girl”—he flicked her cheek with a careless finger—“you have only to ask.”

He took her hand and led her to a large cupboard. “These are for you.” He pointed at some paintbrushes. She hesitated; they were so lovely she was afraid to touch them. “Go on,” he urged, putting one in her hand, “they’re yours.” She stroked the pale wood and touched the furry tip; it was so soft that, without thinking, she ran it across her cheek. “The best you can buy,” he said magnanimously. “It’s kolinsky sable imported from Siberia.”

He showed her how to prime the canvas, handed her a palette, and pointed to the pristine tubes of paint. He squinted at the view. “Just paint what you see.”

It was so green out there! She squeezed viridian onto the virgin palette, liking the way the vibrant color came splashing out. It seemed a shame to dip the clean fur into that greasy glob of paint.

“Relax,” he cried, pushing his own big brush into a large splotch of carmine and swooshing it across the canvas on the easel in front of him. She thought of blood. He pointed to a woman wearing a red sweater down below. “That’s her.” He squeezed a blob of blue paint onto his palette, dragged the brush through, tossed it onto his canvas. “And that’s the water.”

Stella just stared at him. She didn’t *want* to spew paint on that lovely clean canvas; what Mortimer was making looked primitive, raw. Ugly. She stared down at the nursemaids pushing perambulators, the little boy flying a kite, the tiny boats on the lake.... She ran her fingers across the soft fur of the brushes, unwilling to sully them with the thick, sticky paint.

Mortimer’s lips turned down as he looked down his aristocratic nose. “You’re not much like your mother, are you?” he asked.

“No,” she whispered, “I’m not like her.” They were so different that nobody—least of all Celia—could believe they were related. Outgoing Celia loved meeting new people; Stella was shy. Celia sought adventure; Stella always played it safe. And, of course, Celia was beautiful; when she walked down the street, people turned to stare, and she was often mistaken for Maria Callas. Nobody ever gave Stella a second glance.

“Speaking of your mother...What’s she going to think if you arrive home covered in paint? I think you should take your dress off.”

Stella didn’t want to.

“Shall I help you, little girl?” Stella looked down at her new patent-leather shoes and slowly shook her head.

“Oh, Stella,” he said, “show a little spunk.” He sat down, drew her forward until she was standing between his knees, and began to unbutton her dress. She counted slowly to herself, wishing there were more buttons, until the dress fell, a puddle at her feet.

“I think it had better all come off, don’t you?” He tugged her panties down until she was standing in only patent-leather shoes and lace-edged white socks.

Her heart pounded.

“Now you look like a painter!” He handed her a brush. “Go ahead, toss some paint.”

Naked, Stella felt humiliated and afraid. She wanted to go home. She had to pee. She didn’t want to look at Mortimer, so she ran the clean tip of the brush through the fat glob of green paint and made a half-hearted swipe at the canvas.

“Not like that! A true artist has to be bold, show the canvas who’s in charge. Here, let me show you how it’s done.” Mortimer came behind her, smelling of turpentine and expensive cologne. He picked up her hand, the one holding the brush, and moved it through the paint as if she were a puppet. Then he drew her arm back and made the paint fly onto the canvas. It landed with a *thwat!* Stella jumped, and Mortimer reached down to calm her. His hand was on her back, on her front, all over her.

Then he was pushing her off him, telling her to go into the bathroom, clean herself up, get dressed. Wordlessly, she obeyed. In the bathroom, with its hard marble counters and glittering mirrors, she turned the taps as far as they would go and scrubbed her hands over and over in the achingly hot water. When she was done, she leaned over the toilet and threw up. And threw up. And threw up, until there was nothing left inside except a small hard ball of self-loathing.

“Thank you, darling.” Celia wrapped herself around Mortimer when he brought Stella home. She looked down at her daughter. “Did you have fun, sweetie?” Stella could smell the gardenia perfume her mother wore, and it reminded her of turpentine. She was afraid she was going to be sick again.

“She’s a regular little artist, aren’t you?” Mortimer looked down at Stella; his smooth face was bland, but his eyes were dark and menacing.

Stella swallowed hard.

Celia sighed. “What do you say?” she prodded.

“Thank you, Mortimer,” Stella said dutifully.

“Come back, little girl, I’ll be ready for you.” He turned his big face to Celia. “Bring her again next weekend. We’re going to make an artist of her.”

“That’s settled, then,” said Celia. She smiled and smiled. “The sitter’s here—we’re late for our dinner reservation.” She looked down again at Stella. “Tomorrow morning you have to tell me all about the painting lesson.”

But in the morning—and all the other mornings—Celia did not ask. Stella was grateful; if she didn’t have to talk about it, she could pretend it hadn’t happened. And by the middle of each week she was even able to convince herself that it was all in her imagination. Because she knew, deep down, that if this awful thing was real, it was all her fault.

Later, when it was over and her attempts to block the memories failed, what Stella remembered was Mortimer’s wolflike leer as he looked down at her, week

after week, saying, “Come back, little girl, I’ll be ready for you.” And the taste of vomit in her mouth.

How long did it last? One year? Two? Until one Sunday morning, as they were on their way to 930 Fifth Avenue, Celia asked, very casually, “Does Mortimer ever do anything funny to you?”

Stella nodded.

“Would you like to stop the painting lessons?”

Stella nodded again, praying that her mother would not ask any more questions.

And she did not. Stella never saw Mortimer again, although she suspected that Celia continued to date the man, because she sometimes smelled that nauseating mixture of turpentine and cologne on her mother’s clothing. Celia, she supposed, could not resist the lure of Mortimer’s money and prestige, and if this bothered Stella, she did not allow herself to know it.

As for Celia, she never asked another question.

Not then. Not ever.

Making It Up

AT FIFTEEN, CONSTANZA VINCENTE LOOKED in the mirror, scrutinized the long lashes around those sparkling dark eyes, the large mobile mouth, and the shining black hair, and knew she was beautiful. Picking up her purse, she walked out of her parents' crowded apartment, leaving behind her Brooklyn accent, her boisterous siblings, and her name. It was 1930, and the newly minted Celia St. Vincent talked her way onto the cosmetics counter at Bergdorf Goodman, where she scrutinized her wealthy customers, copying the way they talked, dressed, and wore their hair so accurately that people assumed she was a down-on-her-luck debutante, another victim of the Depression struggling to make ends meet.

She became such an accomplished personal shopper that the most affluent clients all demanded her attention. No one else, they insisted, would possibly do. They went into the dressing room, slipped off their clothes, and opened their hearts. One rainy afternoon the mayor's wife, who was weeping on Celia's shoulder, wiped her eyes and said, "Nobody knows more about what *really* goes on in this city than you do."

"Hmmm," Celia replied noncommittally. It had given her an idea.

She assumed yet another name—Charlotte Knickerbocker—to write a column for the *New York Herald Tribune*. "Have You Heard?" quickly became the talk of the town. Although she no longer needed the money, she stayed on at Bergdorf's because her customers, unaware that their beloved Celia now had a pseudonym, continued to tell her their troubles. Had anyone suggested that she was the author of the scandalous column, it would not have been believed; Celia, a consummate chameleon, showed people exactly what she wanted them to see. Even her closest friends did not know that she repaid their admiration with wry contempt; privately she referred to them as "the acolytes."

Men adored her too, and although Celia's appetites were voracious, none of her lovers ever seemed to touch her heart. Over the years there were many men in her life, but she was so intent upon her independence that when she became pregnant, she acted as if no man had been involved. Later, when Stella asked about her father, Celia would say only that he'd been a handsome man she had met in a bar.

“We were drinking Stella Artois, so I guess you could say I named you for him. And, of course, I hoped you would be a star.” She gave Stella one of the scornful looks that told her, on an almost daily basis, what a disappointment she was.

Celia undoubtedly had some notion of how a mother ought to act, but the role did not appeal to her. After all, motherhood was one of the few failures of her life—and it was certainly not *her* fault that her child was such a dud. She gave Stella a home and kept her fed and clothed. What was her reward? An ungrateful little girl who did not exert the smallest effort to live up to her standards.

Left largely to her own devices, Stella created rigid routines for herself. “It’s like living with a nun!” Celia complained to the acolytes. “All we’re missing are the bells.” She made endless fun of the calendar Stella hung in her room, each day’s activities carefully penciled in, hour by hour. Stella left nothing to chance; it made her feel safe. When she was not in school, she was studying, reading, or visiting museums.

When the Mortimer mornings came to an abrupt end, Celia suggested art-appreciation classes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Stella went reluctantly; she was now wary of art and knew this was simply Celia’s way of getting her daughter off her hands for a few hours every weekend.

The classes began badly. The first Sunday, she joined a group of children clutching crumbling red rubber mats as they trailed a curator through the museum’s vast halls. Whenever the man came to a halt, they set their mats on the chilly floor and crouched down as he told them what they were supposed to see in each important work.

He led them past marble statues missing various body parts. Through halls of medieval armor menacing them with battle-axes. Past Egyptian tombs and up an imposing stairway to rooms filled with golden Madonnas and endless Christs on crosses. At last he came to an abrupt stop before a painting of a little boy in bright-red clothes holding a bird on a string. “This,” the curator announced, “is a very famous work by Francisco de Goya, who painted it in 1787. Take a good look, children. What do you see?”

Stella raised her hand.

“Yes?”

“Those cats want to eat the bird he’s holding,” she said. “And he’s not paying attention. Disaster is about to strike.”

“No, no, no.” The man frowned at her. “You’re the one who’s not paying attention. Look again.” It turned out the animals were beside the point; the curator had planned a lecture on how different childhood had been back then, and he was annoyed that she had neglected to notice the boy’s splendid red suit, his lace collar, silk shoes, and long hair.

The tour continued, but as the afternoon wore on, Stella never saw what she was supposed to see. She did not raise her hand again, and the following weekend she faded silently away from the group to wander through the museum on her own. She did the same the next week, and the next. Celia never knew: “They do such a good job there,” she crowed to the acolytes, “and it’s much cheaper than a babysitter.”

On the fourth Sunday, Stella moved morosely through the high-ceilinged rooms, barely seeing the paintings she passed, simply killing time. Then she came upon a girl her own age holding her father’s hand.

“I saved the best for last,” he was saying. Stella looked at a watery image of a bridge over a pond of water lilies. “Isn’t it peaceful?”

When they moved on, Stella stayed, staring at the painting until she had dreamed herself into the canvas. It *was* peaceful. She half-closed her eyes, feeling the soft earth beneath her feet and the gentle breeze that rippled the water. Until that moment she had not known a painting could make you feel that way, but now she became greedy for the experience.

After that, she dreamed herself into dozens of paintings, walking through foreign landscapes and getting to know long-dead people until they felt like old friends. Long after she had outgrown the children’s art-appreciation classes, she continued to visit the museum on a regular basis. The calendar on her wall had “Metropolitan Museum” penciled in almost every day. It was her sanctuary, a place where she could be alone in a crowd.

It was certainly better than being alone in the big apartment on Madison Avenue with no one for company except the dark, handsome man whose portrait hung in the living room. Celia said she had bought the painting in Paris because she liked the man’s looks. Stella thought he resembled a pirate as he strode through a street market as if he owned the world. Dreaming herself into the painting, Stella could smell the lemons at one stand, taste the strawberries at another, and she took comfort in talking to the man—although she was careful not to do so when Celia was around. Which wasn’t very often: Busy with her career, Celia spent little time at home. When she was at the apartment, she was either closeted in her study, writing the column, or in the kitchen, whipping up one of the dinners for which she was famous. Celia had learned to cook in France, and invitations to her chic soirées were highly coveted.

Stella loathed them.

As soon as Stella was old enough to totter around with a tray, Celia pressed her into service. “Remember the ‘R’s,” she said each time she handed the little girl a platter. “You serve from the left and remove from the right.” The guests cooed over the adorable child, but as she grew older, she faded into the

background, and by the time she was a teenager, Stella felt like little more than hired help.

“That is the most put-upon child I’ve ever seen,” one of the acolytes whispered to her neighbor one night. Stella, who’d felt invisible, was shocked and humiliated. She hated being pitied and allowed herself a flash of anger. Then, as she always did, she buried the rage. It was easier that way.

“I’m going to miss you at my soirées,” Celia said as Stella packed for college. Then, aware that she should try to be more motherly, she quickly added, “And it’s going to be lonely around here without you.”

“Thanks.” For a moment Stella hoped that Celia really would miss her. Perhaps, she thought, now that she was grown, they could become closer.

But four years later, when she returned from Vassar and announced she had landed a position at a small publishing company, Celia asked pointedly, “Where will you live?” When Stella timidly asked if she might use one of the spare bedrooms in the spacious rent-controlled apartment while searching for a place of her own, Celia grudgingly agreed.

“Have you found an apartment?” she asked every day. When Stella finally answered in the affirmative, Celia offered to help her move. She carried one suitcase up the five flights to the minuscule studio in the East Thirties, ran a finger across a dusty windowsill, and beat a hasty retreat. After that the two women saw little of each other. On the occasions when they did meet—holidays and birthdays—Celia could barely hide her irritation. They were both relieved when the obligatory two hours elapsed and they could go their separate ways.

Stella was, in her own quiet way, content. She enjoyed her job at Vanguard Press, a small publishing company run by a tiny woman named Evelyn Shrifte, who told her, on an almost daily basis, that she was the best copy editor she’d ever employed. Unaccustomed to compliments, Stella basked in the appreciation.

Miss Shrifte (no Ms. for her!) was a legend in the book world, famous for taking on works by first-time authors after other publishers had turned them down. Her little press had published the first books by Saul Bellow, Dr. Seuss, and Marshall McLuhan, and had famously bought a sneakily subversive manuscript called *Auntie Mame* after thirteen larger publishers had passed. “But,” she had sighed to Stella on her first day of work, “they all eventually move on to more-prestigious publishers, who can give them bigger advances and better publicity. You can’t really blame them.” She patted a copy of Joyce Carol Oates’s *Wonderland*. “Joyce was remarkably loyal; I always knew she was bound to leave, but we published a score of her books before she finally did.”

Stella would have liked to make friends with Miss Shrifte, but she’d never really had a friend and didn’t know how to go about it. When she shyly suggested

they might have lunch one day, Miss Shrifte smiled and said that would be very nice. It never happened, and Stella was too timid to bring it up again.

When not at work she continued to follow the routines of her childhood. She set her alarm for 6 A.M.; made coffee, toast, and a boiled egg; packed a sandwich; and then walked the fifteen blocks to the office. She liked those early hours best, when she had the place to herself and she could throw herself into her assignments. She once spent weeks on a novel called *Murder in the Church*, poring over maps and pictures of the Abbey of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine in Vézelay until she was positive every detail was correct.

At 6 P.M. she put on her coat and trudged home to simple suppers—chicken breast, rice, salad, and the occasional scoop of ice cream. Loathing Celia's complicated cooking, she never realized that food might be a source of pleasure. Pleasure, in fact, was not part of her program. She occasionally went to the theater or ballet, but mostly she stayed home and read.

On the weekends she went to the place where she was most comfortable: the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She grew fond of the Museum of Modern Art as well, and over time she got to know the city's other museums; she had a particular affection for the Frick Collection. It wasn't an exciting life, but it was calm, she felt safe, and she was grateful.

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WHEN THE CALL came, Stella had not seen her mother for six months. It was one of the acolytes. "We were crossing the street and the taxi ran a red light." The woman paused; Stella heard her blow her nose. "The injuries were massive, but Celia was so strong!" Another sniff, a pause to pull a tissue from the box.

The woman wept some more. "I know she didn't want a funeral, but so many people loved her.... You must arrange a memorial. I don't know how I'll manage without her." She mentioned the memorial a few more times, waiting for Stella to respond.

When Stella realized the woman was not about to let it drop, she finally gave an answer. "I don't think so."

"But we need some closure," the woman wailed. "A world without Celia is just too sad."

"Not to me."

Stella still wasn't sure if she'd actually said the words out loud.

—

THE FOLLOWING DAY she went to see Celia's lawyer. "Your mother was very explicit about her last wishes. She left this for you." Looking perplexed and disapproving,

he read the words “For My Daughter” from a sealed envelope addressed in Celia St. Vincent’s pirate-bold hand.

Staring down at the handwriting gave Stella the oddest sensation, as if it had all been a hoax and Celia wasn’t really dead. To her surprise, what she felt was relief: In that moment she understood that she’d continued to hope that she and Celia might one day get to know each other, maybe even like each other, perhaps become close. There was so much unfinished business! Then she remembered that this envelope contained the last communication she would have with her mother and finally knew it was too late.

“I don’t know what’s in *there*”—the lawyer pointed to the thick cream-colored envelope—“but her instructions to me were crystal clear. No funeral; the body goes to science. Everything else comes to you.” He sighed. “I’m sorry to say there’s not much. There is a painting that might fetch a few dollars, but she insists it be put in storage.” Stella remembered the portrait of the handsome Parisian man; she hadn’t thought of it in years. “I’ve never heard of the artist, but she seems to think it will be worth something one day.” The lawyer tugged irritably at his monogrammed cuffs, the very gesture indicating exactly what he thought of that idea. “There are no stocks, no bonds, no annuities. No real estate. She lived large. Her bank account contains the princely sum of eight thousand dollars. As far as that money is concerned…” He stopped to offer Stella a thin-lipped smile. “It comes to you in a very odd fashion. I am to purchase an airplane ticket to Paris and convert the remaining funds to traveler’s checks. It’s an odd whim.” Another cheerless smile. “Perhaps you understand it.”

Stella did. “She’s having the last word.”

“I don’t take your meaning.” As he ran a hand through perfectly combed black curls, Stella realized he was quite handsome. A bit young for Celia, but that had never stopped her. They had probably been lovers.

“It’s her final attempt to turn me into the daughter she wanted me to be.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re wrong there. She was extremely proud of your accomplishments. She talked about them all the time.”

“I’m sure she did.”

You had to admire Celia’s ingenuity. She could not abide the idea of a daughter who was neither brilliant nor beautiful, so she simply invented a new one. It was, after all, what she had done for herself. But while she had been satisfied with two new identities for herself, she’d made up a dozen different Stellas. Which version, Stella wondered, had Celia offered him? Over the years her mother had turned her into a human-rights lawyer, a textile designer, and a Harvard professor of Chinese literature.

“She *told* me you didn’t like to talk about your painting. But I know you’re very close to Andy Warhol and that he’s enormously impressed with your talent.

She mentioned”—the lawyer smiled benignly, showing off his expensive teeth —“that you were very modest.”

“It always bothered her.”

“There was certainly nothing modest about your mother!” *Definitely lovers*, Stella thought as she watched him appraise her. It was as if Celia were sitting next to her, and he was looking from one to the other, comparing her own unassuming demeanor to Celia’s stunning forcefulness. She felt herself grow smaller. Ripping open the envelope, she read Celia’s last words to her. There was just one line written on the paper: “Go to Paris.”

The lawyer stood up and held out his hand. “Let me know when you want me to buy that ticket.”

STELLA HAD NO intention of doing her mother’s bidding. Why should she? But six months went by and she found that the safe, predictable life she had so carefully forged began to feel hollow. She went through the familiar routines, but they felt different now that Celia was gone. She had thought that by avoiding her mother she could erase her from her life, but now she saw she’d been fooling herself; everything she’d ever done was in opposition to Celia. Without her mother, nothing made sense. All her questions remained unanswered.

Did she have aunts and uncles somewhere? Grandparents? Did they even know that she existed? And what about her father? Who was he? Celia had refused to talk about him, but Stella should have insisted; she had a right to know who she was, where she came from. Now it was too late.

And then there was Mortimer. Had someone told Celia what he did to little girls? Or had she simply intuited it? Why did she keep seeing him after everything he’d done? How like Celia, Stella thought, to simply ignore reality when it suited her purpose. Wasn’t that what she’d always done?

But she knew that if Celia were alive, she still wouldn’t ask. Just the name “Mortimer” brought back all the fear and the shame. It was so much better to tamp it down, keep it buried. She did not want to think about Celia’s many secrets, so she threw herself into her work, spending more and more time at the office, meticulously over-researching every manuscript that came her way. She spent weeks on a book about scientist Alan Turing and the Enigma project before moving on to her next assignment, *The Vice Trust*, a scholarly book about human trafficking in the early twentieth century. It was gruesomely fascinating material, and she borrowed mountains of books from the library and stayed late one night, vanishing down a rabbit hole, lost in the minutiae of transportation, immigration laws, and women’s rights. When she looked up, she found her boss walking into her office, pulling off her gloves.

“What are you doing here?” asked Evelyn Shrifte. “It’s almost midnight.”

“I might ask you the same,” Stella replied.

“Actually, you might not,” the woman replied tartly. “It is, after all, my company.” She gave Stella one of her appraising stares and said, “What you need is time to grieve. You’re running away from your pain, thinking work will help. I want you to take some time off.”

“I’m okay,” Stella replied. “Really.”

“Go away for a while,” Miss Shrifte insisted. “Take a vacation. You’ve earned it. Your job will be waiting when you return.”

“But—” Stella began.

“This is not a suggestion. You have an orderly mind, and you’re the best copy editor I have ever met. Doing without you will be difficult, but in the ten years you’ve been working here you’ve taken no time off, and you need to get away. Didn’t your mother leave some money? Go somewhere, do something nice for yourself. I don’t want to see you for at least six weeks.”

Stella panicked. She hated change, feared travel, and certainly did not want to go anywhere. But staying in New York with nothing to do would be even worse. The last thing she wanted was to spend weeks without work, trapped in her own head. “My mother wanted me to use the money to go to Paris.”

“Perfect!” Miss Shrifte beamed. “That is exactly what you should do! Go to Paris. I’m going to give you the name of my favorite hotel. It’s quaint and very inexpensive; you’ll love it.”

In the morning Stella called the officious lawyer. “Your timing is good,” he said approvingly. “The franc is so weak right now that your money will go very far. You should have a wonderful time!”

Bread Crumbs

MISS SHRIFTE'S HOTEL IN THE fifth arrondissement dated from the seventeenth century and promised views of Notre-Dame. Stella carried her small suitcase up a dusty staircase and found a tiny room containing a bed that seemed as old as the building and an equally antique armoire. If she leaned dangerously out the small window she could, indeed, catch a glimpse of the great cathedral.

After her strange experience in the dress shop that first day in Paris, Stella knew she could not take any more chances with her itinerary. She created rigid schedules that filled each day, leaving no room for deviation. She made sure to check off all the major sights—the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Luxembourg Gardens. She spent an entire day at Versailles, marveling at the splendor of the gardens and the excesses of the palace with all its gold and many mirrors. She was so tired by the time she left, she felt as if she had visited every one of the 2,300 rooms. One afternoon she bought a ticket for a lunchtime boat ride down the Seine, and although the watery views were lovely, she was surrounded by exuberant groups who only made her feel lonelier. She was far happier quietly strolling the banks of the river, perusing the stalls with their ancient books. On another day, she made a dutiful pilgrimage to the Père Lachaise cemetery, seeking out the graves of Colette and Molière and the strange Egyptian tomb of Oscar Wilde. She walked miles, visiting famous churches and museums, returning to her hotel with sore feet, exhausted. Other people, she knew, were enchanted by this city, but all she felt was that she did not belong.

The Americans she encountered were, for the most part, a boisterous bunch who were openly annoyed when waiters and shopkeepers did not understand English. She was embarrassed when they flaunted their money in the struggling capital. Paris was poor: At night, the bridges along the Seine turned into sleeping quarters for the homeless, and the lines for food at the Salvation Army stretched for blocks. She had never gone to fancy restaurants, and she was certainly not about to join the ugly Americans and do so now. Instead, she followed Arthur Frommer's recommendations in *Europe on \$20 a Day*, existing on roast chicken or tough steak with delicious *frites*. These bargain meals always included a vinegary salad and a small carafe of acrid red wine.

She longed to go home; she missed her snug apartment and tiny office at Vanguard Press. She missed her routines. But somewhere in the back of her mind was a vague hope that if she could just figure out why Celia had sent her here, she might finally make peace with her mother's memory. She counted the money: At the rate Stella was spending it, Celia's legacy would last a long time. Perhaps she should spend more, but when she contemplated lavish meals and luxury hotels, she felt nothing but distaste. That was Celia's world; she wanted no part of it.

She parsed the mysteries of the Métro system, buying packets of second-class tickets. Celia, of course, would have traveled first class (such an easy opportunity to feel superior), and Stella reveled in this tiny rebellion. She learned to dash through the tiled tunnels when the strange, sickly sound of the alarm blared, squeezing through the barriers just as they closed. She carried coins for the street musicians, who were everywhere, and packs of tissues for the Turkish toilets, which she loathed. She found squatting over them slightly disgusting.

In the mornings she bought the *International Herald Tribune*, sitting for as long as she dared over a *café crème* at Le Départ, the bustling bistro on the Place Saint-Michel. But for the waiter who greeted her with "*Bonjour, mademoiselle*" and the hotel's surly receptionist, she spoke to no one. She missed the sound of her own language. She was waiting for something to happen. Celia must have had a reason for sending her here. What could it possibly be?

She'd spent almost a month in Paris when her schedule dictated a visit to Victor Hugo's home in the Place des Vosges. She remembered the strange little dress shop and, as she walked past, noticed another extraordinary garment in the window. Made of bias-draped cloth of gold, it captured the sunlight coming through the window. With each cloud that drifted by, the dress seemed to disappear. She stood, fascinated, watching it wink in and out. *Another museum piece*, she thought, remembering the absurd price of the black dress the proprietor had forced upon her that first day. Then she recalled the way the dress had made her feel and, on a sudden impulse, entered the shop. She wanted to experience that feeling again.

"I knew you would come back." The voice was even rustier than last time, as if the woman had not spoken in the intervening weeks. Or changed her clothes—she wore the same shapeless black dress, the same starched white apron tied at what must once have been a waist. She bent to pet the fluffy white dog. "We knew, did we not, Zaza, that she would return? We did not even put her dress away."

The woman reached for the froth of black fabric hanging behind her, stroking it like a beloved pet. Eyes on Stella, she cocked her head and said reproachfully, "This dress has been waiting such a long time. When you walked away..." She

closed her eyes dramatically, as if warding off pain. Then she produced a Gallic shrug. “But I knew you could not stay away.”

Stella had forgotten how strange the woman was.

“*Suivez-moi.*” Follow me. The words were labored, as if the effort of standing made speech more difficult. Crooking a gnarled finger, she began to move toward the curtained area in the back of the shop. The little dog rose, trotting behind her. Stella turned and looked at the door. Was this a mistake? But she followed.

With a regal gesture, the woman swept the heavy curtain aside and marched into the dressing room. She beckoned. “*Entrez, entrez, ma chère.*” She held up the dress, and for a moment the words “What big teeth you have” flashed through Stella’s mind. She shook her head; she was being ridiculous.

Sheltered by the curtains, Stella slowly removed her clothes as the woman began the tedious work of unfastening the tiny buttons. Humming happily, she held out the confection, gesturing for Stella to bow her head. As the garment fell, Stella caught sight of a hand-sewn label: *Christian Dior*, written in black thread on a small rectangle of white silk. And, just above, *Séverine*. Stella said the word out loud.

The woman drew in her breath. “I had forgotten.” She sounded cross with herself.

“Who is Séverine?” Stella asked.

“I told you! Monsieur Dior declared that the dress would take the name of the woman who wore it, instead of the usual number that identified each dress. It started as Victoire, and then when it was purchased, this dress took the name of the owner.”

“So this dress belonged to Séverine? Who was she?”

“How would I know?” The woman pinched her to make her stand still. “I was a seamstress in the atelier. We rarely mixed with the customers. Unless you were very easy on the eyes, Monsieur Dior kept you upstairs. And me, I was never a beauty.”

She turned Stella away from the mirror and stood behind her, busy fingers working the buttons, slowly fluttering up her back. Once again Stella had the sensation of being embraced by the dress, and once again she surrendered to the feeling. It was so comforting. At last the woman closed the final button and twirled Stella around.

Stella had forgotten the effect of the dress. Now she stared, incredulous. The shopkeeper reached out, put her hand beneath Stella’s chin, tilted it gently upward so that the woman in the dress, the woman in the mirror, looked not merely voluptuous but haughty. “When you wear this dress”—the woman gestured at the image—“you are a queen.”

“But it’s just a dress.”

The shopkeeper drew in her breath, seeming more horrified than offended. “Do not say that! Wait and see.” She regarded Stella in the mirror, muttering something to herself. Then she nodded briskly, as if she’d just won an argument, and said, “Yes!” She spun Stella around and around, forcing her to see herself from all sides. Stella laughed, dizzy. “I will make you a bargain, Mademoiselle. Buy the dress, wear it today, and do exactly as I tell you. Tomorrow, if you have one single regret, I will return every franc.”

Later, when she tried to understand why she had done such a crazy, impulsive thing, Stella blamed it on the woman in the mirror. Stella watched, bewildered, as her reflection pulled out the traveler’s checks and began to sign them. When she had finished, only two twenty-dollar checks remained. She winked at Stella in the mirror, determined to have her moment. Tomorrow the real Stella would return the dress, retrieve her money, and go back to being herself. But for now...

“You’ll wear the dress.” It wasn’t a question; the woman was already pushing Stella’s clothes into a heap on the floor.

“Why not?” She was feeling reckless, giddy, ready to do whatever the woman told her to.

“But the shoes!” The little shopkeeper looked pained. “*Impossible!*” Even the small white dog whined, as if she too was horrified. The woman gave the dog an approving pat and glanced wildly around the room until her eyes landed on a pair of plain black ballet flats. She pointed, and Zaza trotted over, picked up one shoe, and presented the scrap of leather to her mistress. She bent and held the shoe out. “My gift to you.”

It fit perfectly. The woman pointed and the dog trotted off to retrieve its mate. “*Comme Cendrillon,*” murmured the woman as Stella slipped it on. Cinderella. At that moment the telephone began to ring, that strange French buzzing tone that always made Stella think of a very cross cat.

“*Allô?*” The shopkeeper’s voice was cool and distant. “Ah, *c’est vous,*” she began, almost accusingly, before the French became too rapid for Stella to follow. At one point she thought she heard her say, “*Séverine,*” but she couldn’t be sure. At another point she thought there was something about more dresses from Saint Laurent, but perhaps she had misunderstood. The saleslady’s “*au revoir*” was clipped and cold, and she hung up the phone with a bang.

“Now!” She turned to Stella. “I shall tell you exactly what to do.” She went to the window and peered out. “It is a beautiful day. You will walk through the Tuileries to the Seine and along the Seine to the Pont des Arts. Cross the bridge and walk up the boulevard Saint-Germain to Les Deux Magots. Order a glass of Chablis, very cold, and a dozen Belon oysters. Then you will go to...” She studied Stella for a long moment. “Have you been to the Musée du Jeu de Paume?”

Stella shook her head; she'd been saving it for last. "Then that is where you must go."

"Why?"

"You will know when you get there."

Stella thought the instructions rather strange, but she was a person who appreciated a plan.

The woman was not finished. "*Après ça*, you will return to your hotel, where you will take a long, luxurious bath and drink a glass of champagne."

Stella thought of the shabby little hotel, wondering where this woman thought she would find champagne. But what she said was, "But who will help with the buttons?"

The look on the woman's face implied that she had just said something remarkably stupid. "Who do you think? You will call the maid and ask for her help. And when you have finished bathing, she will come again to help you dress."

Did this woman think Stella was staying at the Ritz? She imagined how the officious receptionist would laugh if she called downstairs requesting help with buttons.

"And after your bath," she continued in her heavily accented English, "you will call a taxi and have him take you to Caviar Kaspia. It is Monsieur Saint Laurent's favorite restaurant, and he would be happy to know that his first creation was there. And who can tell, you might even run into him. Then you will go back to your hotel, have a beautiful sleep, and tomorrow you will come to retrieve your"—she looked disdainfully down at Stella's discarded garments—"clothing. And you will tell me of your day."

She would not tell the woman that while she might be able to afford oysters and wine at Les Deux Magots, it would take all her remaining money. Dinner at the fancy restaurant? Out of the question. But all she said was, "And you will take the dress back and return my money?"

"Should you desire it." For the first time, she offered Stella a genuine smile. "But I assure you, Mademoiselle, that will not be the case."

Oysters

HER REAL SELF WOULD HAVE cringed at the idea of strolling the streets of Paris in a gauzy black gown, and Stella did not recognize the carefree young woman who floated through the springtime air enjoying the appreciative looks of passing people. *What has happened to me?* she thought. For the first time in her life she understood how Celia must have felt when she waltzed out of Brooklyn, leaving Constanza behind. The freedom! With each step, the scent of apricots and vanilla came wafting up. What had she been like, this Séverine who wore black chiffon and smelled like pastry?

For a moment she stood hesitating at the door of Les Deux Magots. The outside tables under the awnings were filled with couples in animated conversation, and she suddenly felt terribly alone. Then a handsome man brushed past her, turned to give her that appreciative look Frenchmen wear so well, and opened the door, sweeping his arm in a gesture of invitation. Without allowing herself to think too much, she preceded him into the restaurant.

A maître d' bustled forward, eager to be of assistance. His manner was so solicitous that she instantly understood why the saleslady had sent her here: She wanted Stella to experience the way the world would treat her when she wore the dress. As she took her seat on the red leather banquette, her skirt a billowing cloud around her, she realized that Celia had always known this. And with that knowledge came a tiny bit of sympathy for her mother, who had grown up poor, longing for luxury and attention.

When the waiter offered a menu she waved it away, laughing a little at herself as she obediently ordered oysters and Chablis. She looked around the grand old room with its high ceiling, appreciating the huge windows that invited the sun to fill the air with buttery light. Then she caught sight of herself in a mirror, lifted her chin, and sighed.

It was warm in here, and the first swallow of Chablis was deeply, shockingly cold: She thought of melting snow rushing down a mountainside as she took another sip and then another, holding the chilled wine in her mouth until it grew warm enough to swallow. She had little experience of alcohol, but this was nothing like the rough red wines she'd been having with her meals. No wonder

people liked drinking wine! She could feel her whole body become softer, as if the strings that tied her up had all been cut.

The oysters arrived on a deep bed of ice. She had never eaten an oyster, and she stared down at the platter. A ruffle of black encircled each opalescent heart; she thought of orchids. Triangles of lemon sat on the ice, and she picked one up and squeezed it, inhaling the prickly aroma. Then she reached for an oyster, tipped her head, and tossed it back. The oyster was cool and slippery, the flavor so briny it was like diving into the ocean. She closed her eyes to savor the experience, make it last.

“You eat with such intensity!”

Startled, she opened her eyes, feeling her cheeks grow warm. She put a hand up, as if she might wipe the blush away. A pair of cornflower-blue eyes regarded her with open curiosity.

He was old, the man at the next table, but remarkably beautiful. *Like a Modigliani*, she thought, taking in the silver hair and pale white skin. His long, rather disdainful nose would have made his face haughty had the corners of his wide mouth not seemed to be hiding a smile.

“Picasso ate oysters like that.” His voice was low and so musical that she did not even notice that he was speaking English. “Avidly. Hungrily.”

Stella never talked to strangers, but this man was old enough to be her grandfather. He had to be harmless. For just a moment Mortimer’s shadow passed over the table; *he’d* been old and anything but harmless. With an effort of will, she pushed him away. She had left that Stella, the frightened one who did not know how to say no, back in the shop with her old clothes. She ran her hand across the fabric of her dress, and the scent of apricots and vanilla rose up, lending her courage. She was not about to tell him that what he had taken for sophisticated intensity was simply the shock of the new. But that oyster had been...wonderful. She closed her eyes, picked up another, and tossed it back. As the oyster slid down her throat, the taste resonated through her entire body, and she followed the flavors as they changed. How was it possible that eating could give a person so much pleasure? It must be the dress. She opened her eyes and said, “Did you actually know Picasso?”

He nodded. “I met him at the start of the first war. I was just fourteen. That morning at breakfast my father told us the Germans were outside the city gates, and suddenly the idea of classes seemed trivial. I rode my bicycle to school and then, without thinking—just kept going. Oh, the freedom! I’d never done anything like that before. I rode all the way to Montparnasse, where I saw Jean Cocteau walking into a café.”

“How did you know it was him?” The words were out before she could stop them.

“Everybody in Paris knew Cocteau! He’d joined the war as an ambulance driver and, when he discovered they had no uniform, designed one on the spot. The newspapers all wrote about it; it had a cape and a bright-red cap. He was so dashing! When I saw him walking into the café, I dropped my bike and followed him. He joined a friend—a fireplug of a man—and they ordered oysters. When one platter was finished, they waved their arms and another appeared. I was fascinated. I took the table behind theirs, ordered a *café crème*, and sat eavesdropping, hoping they wouldn’t notice me.”

“What did they talk about?”

“About art. And life. There was another man there, and he looked at the fireplug man and said, ‘When I first saw your *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, it made me feel as if someone was drinking gasoline and spitting fire.’ ”

“So that was Picasso?” She realized nervously that this was the longest conversation she’d had in Paris. But what harm could there be in talk? It was so good to hear her own language, and she had been so lonely.

“Yes. And he replied, ‘The world today doesn’t make sense. So why should my art?’ ” The man gazed across the room, as if he could see the artists sitting at a distant table. “I’d never heard grown-up people talk like that, and I was so excited by their conversation I forgot to be quiet and laughed out loud.”

Stella picked up another oyster. His eyes followed her hand, watched her throw back her head. She shivered as the mollusk slid down her throat. *Oysters*, she thought. *Where have they been all my life?*

“They saw me, waved me over to their table,” he continued, “gave me a glass of wine, fed me oysters. I felt I had become a man.”

Stella took another sip of wine. “Did you ever go back to school?”

He laughed. “Rarely. That war made me greedy for freedom. My father went to the front, and my mother was too busy to concern herself with me. The servants had all gone, and she had to learn to cook and clean. She spent all her time trying to gather enough food to keep us alive. Nobody paid me any attention, and you cannot imagine how that felt; before the war, there had always been someone telling me what to do, how to speak, where to go, how to think.”

She found herself leaning into the conversation, trying to understand why she found this so fascinating. *It’s this dress*, she thought at first. Then it hit her: He was describing the opposite of her own experience. Did children simply want what they didn’t have? The freedom he craved had always been hers, but she had found it burdensome. Faced with Celia’s indifference, she had invented rules, creating rigid routines to make herself feel safe.

“I suppose,” he was saying, “if you were not a teenager tasting your first freedom, the war years were awful. It was so cold and there was no coal. We wore all of our clothes all the time, trying to keep warm.” He stopped himself and

threw up his hands. “But why am I boring you with all this? A beautiful young woman does not want to hear about the cold winter of 1916. Allow me to apologize for this dreary conversation by offering you another glass of wine.” He waved a hand—Stella thought of Picasso and the oysters—and a waiter materialized with a glass of Chablis, the outside frosted with cold.

“I am far from bored.” *Is this*, she wondered, *what life is like for other people?* Or would they find this unanticipated encounter as exciting as she did? Nothing about this day had been ordinary, and she found herself looking forward to whatever was going to happen next. It was an unfamiliar sensation.

He shook his head. “Now it is your turn. Where are you from?”

It hit her suddenly that his English was far too fluent for a Frenchman and that he had a decidedly British accent. “Why do you speak such good English?” she asked abruptly.

He laughed. “Mother was English. She insisted we speak English at home. And we spent summers at my grandparents’ Sussex estate.”

As she sipped her wine Stella’s logical mind filled in the details. He’d come from money—all those vanished servants, the mother who could neither cook nor clean, the estate in the English countryside. Now she conjured up a solid house on one of the prosperous boulevards filled with ponderous furniture. Lion-footed chairs. Tiffany lamps. Heavy drapes on long windows. Walls dense with family portraits...

“And you?” He broke into her reverie. “Where are you from?” he asked again.

“New York.”

“What do you do?”

“I am a copy editor at a small literary publisher.”

“And what are you doing in Paris?”

“I’m not really sure.”

“Oh, I like that very much.”

Was he making fun of her? She studied his face, saw that he did not seem to be, and once again allowed the dress to guide her. “It was my mother’s idea. She passed away a few months ago and left a small amount of money with instructions that I was to come to Paris and spend it all. I was not supposed to return until it was gone. I don’t know why she did that. I guess I’m trying to find out.”

“How romantic!” He made another one of those imperious hand gestures, summoning the waiter.

“No more wine!” she protested. “I’ll be drunk.”

“Nonsense! This excellent Chablis is only mildly intoxicating.” The waiter arrived, and as he poured the wine her neighbor said, “On a spring afternoon at

Les Deux Magots it would be wrong to allow our glasses to grow empty. Especially when you are wearing that beautiful dress. Do you mind if I ask where you acquired it?"

"Isn't it wonderful?" She lifted the froth of skirt so it was table-height. "On the first day I was here, I went into the strangest little shop and the proprietress insisted I try it on."

"And you bought it!"

She shook her head. "It would have taken almost all my money! But today I went back just to try it on again. It feels so good to wear it, and the woman promised that I can return it tomorrow. It's the craziest thing I've ever done, and I don't understand what possessed me."

"Perhaps you did it because you knew it would make your mother happy?" He said this casually, as if they were old friends.

"I can assure you," she snapped, "that is *not* the reason." Still, she was surprised to realize that he was partly right. Some piece of her was still hoping for Celia's approval. How this purchase would have pleased her!

"I see." His tone implied that she'd just revealed something important. She squirmed; she did not want Celia spoiling this day. "It is an extraordinary dress," he added. "Saint Laurent for Dior, is it not? He would be charmed to see you sitting here in Les Deux Magots drinking Chablis in one of his very first creations."

"Do you know *him* too?" She was beginning to wonder if anything this unusual old man said was true. Or perhaps this was just normal for upper-crust Parisians.

He looked away, seeming slightly embarrassed. "A very little. I have not seen him since my wife passed away. He was very fond of her...." Again there was that tantalizing glimpse of privilege. "She was one of his first customers. When he came to Paris, he was painfully shy. And still only twenty-four when he took over at Dior. He could hardly look anyone in the eye. But my wife had a way.... She made people comfortable, and Saint Laurent opened up to her. He told her she was his muse." He stopped and added with a self-deprecating little smile, "I suspect he said that to all his best customers."

Stella mentally upgraded her image of his home; you couldn't be Celia's daughter without knowing that Saint Laurent's best customers had to be very rich indeed. "I can't imagine what that's like, having a dress created just for you. This dress feels as if it *was* made for me. I must be the same size as the person it was made for."

He smiled. "And of course there might be another reason why you bought the dress."

"And what is that?"

“Because, as you said, it makes you feel good?”

“It does. But I’m not the kind of person who spends a lot of money on clothing.” And then, realizing that might have been rude, she added, “I’m not French like you and your wife, and it makes me uncomfortable.”

“I had forgotten how puritanical Americans can be!” He seemed to realize that sounded condescending and quickly continued, “I hope you have plans to take your new dress to a wonderful restaurant tonight.”

“Food has never mattered much to me.” She thought of Celia’s soirées and how much she had hated them.

The man looked genuinely horrified. “My dear,” he said gently, “you may say that in New York. You may even say that in London. But you must never say that in Paris. Besides, I cannot believe that a woman who eats oysters as you do has no interest in food.”

“Is there something special about the way I eat oysters?”

“You eat as if it matters, and with your entire body. Each time it is as if you are leaping into the ocean.”

Was it only oysters? She took a sip of wine and once again experienced the sensation of a brook rushing down a mountain. She thought of all the exotic foods she had banished from her life and had the sudden urge to know the taste of caviar and lobster.

It had to be the dress.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, “If you do not take your dress to places worthy of her, she will never make you happy.” He stopped, as if a thought had just come to him. “Tonight you must join me for dinner.”

“But I don’t even know your name!”

“I am Jules Delatour.” He stuck out his hand. “And I promise that I have no evil intentions.”

She did not say yes. She did not say no. She simply took his hand and said, “Stella St. Vincent. And right now I have to go to the Musée du Jeu de Paume.” She stood up.

He rose too. “I once worked there.”

Of course he did, thought Stella. *Of course he worked there*. The day tilted on its axis; it was all extremely strange.

A New Way of Seeing

HE THREW SOME BILLS ONTO the table. She started to protest but thought better of it. Maybe she'd have enough left for that caviar place after all. He could surely afford it.

Following him out the door, she noted that his clothes were well made but old and rather worn. The dark-green corduroy slacks had the velvety sheen of geranium leaves, and the faded shirt retained the merest hint of blue. The cashmere sweater, the pale yellow of a winter sun, had patched holes at the elbows. She heard Celia's voice. *What's wrong with the man? His wife wore Saint Laurent and he walks around in rags?*

She turned to him. "You worked at the museum?" A memory of her first morning at the Metropolitan Museum flashed into her mind and she said, with undisguised hostility, "Are you a curator?"

"What do you have against curators?"

She colored; her voice had been sharper than she'd intended. "They hate it when you have your own ideas. And I don't like being told what I'm supposed to see."

"Who can blame you?" The old man gave her an indulgent smile. "I am not a curator, but I have spent most of my life working with artists, and in my experience a good curator does the opposite: They help you stretch your own imagination. During the war I worked with a remarkable curator. You would have liked Rose: She was smart, kind—and the bravest person I have ever met."

"Tell me about her."

"With pleasure. But first you must tell me why you are so intent on going to the Jeu de Paume."

She was embarrassed. "The woman who sold me the dress"—she was almost whispering—"said I had to go to Les Deux Magots and order Chablis and oysters. After that, she said, I was to go to the museum. When I asked why, she said I'd know when I got there."

"But how obedient you are! What else is on your program?"

"I don't think I will tell you." There was, she realized, something almost flirtatious about the way she had said it. She did not feel remotely like herself. *It*

must be the dress, she thought again, *or perhaps the wine*. But then, this man was old; if he'd been a teenager during the first world war, he had to be in his eighties.

They walked through the Tuileries, passing scruffy young Americans sitting on the grass, backpacks beside them, eating bread and cheese as they riffled through their copies of *Let's Go* in search of cheap hotels and cheaper restaurants. "There are so many places I've never been," the old man said wistfully, and she imagined that he was thinking of somewhere far-flung like India or Nepal, about how different freedom was today than it had been in his youth.

Approaching the museum, he took her hand as if she were a child. His palm felt cool and papery. "Since you do not know where you are going, we will begin with my favorite." She thought of the father all those years ago at the Met, taking his daughter to meet Monet's *Water Lilies*.

What painting would this man show her? She followed as he walked quickly through the rooms, and when he came to a halt, she was horrified to find herself staring at a naked woman lying on a silken bed. Heart thumping, she detached her hand from his.

As if he understood, he instantly moved away, creating space between them. "She's called Olympia. Tell me what you see."

Stella no longer wanted to be that scared seven-year-old. And so she stared at the canvas as if she were alone at the Met, straining to get inside the painting and see beyond the woman's naked flesh.

She was lying on silk pillows on a rumpled bed. Her skin was ivory, one hand covered her crotch, and a tiny black cat stretched at her feet. Beside her stood a Black woman holding out a bouquet of flowers. Stella smelled orchids, felt the weight of the heavy gold bracelet on the woman's arm and the warmth of the pearls in her ears. But as she took in the naked woman's face, she realized that these voluptuous details—the flowers, the fabric, the jewelry—were not the point of the painting. The woman was staring at her with the coolest, most arrogant gaze. Stella stared back, trying to discern what the woman was telling her.

"The straight line of her mouth—it isn't smiling and it isn't frowning. She's weighing us. Mocking us." Stella spoke without thinking, letting the words come to her. "She is saying, 'Stare at my body as much as you like. You know you want it. Take the jewelry too. All yours—for a price.' She knows exactly who she is and what it is that she has to sell. But what is more important is what is not for sale. Because that brazen gaze is sending a message. 'All these *things* can be yours. My body too. But you cannot have my mind. Because that belongs to me.'" Stella was surprised by how clearly she understood this bold woman's message.

"That," said the old gentleman, "is exactly why I love this painting. This is a modern woman and she fascinates me. But in her own time she was a terrible

shock. People were so horrified that men attacked the painting with their canes. Women said it was indecent. The reviews were vicious; one newspaper called Olympia ‘a gorilla.’ The Salon had to hire armed guards to protect the painting.”

“Just because she was naked?”

“Oh, no, nudes were not shocking. But a prostitute with no shame, a prostitute who dares to think she is a woman of substance—that was the shock. Remember, it was 1865 and French women had no rights.” He sighed, still staring at the painting. “How times have changed! They are about to move the painting to the Grand Palais, where it will be the centerpiece of the Édouard Manet exhibition celebrating the centenary of the artist’s death. Frankly, I’d be more interested in a show about the model.”

“The model?”

Stella studied the woman as he explained that Victorine-Louise Meurent was a favorite of all the major painters of the time. Known as La Crevette—the shrimp—because of her small stature and bright-red hair, she had modeled for many artists of the era. She was multitalented, a woman who gave music lessons and sang in cafés. “But her real desire,” he finished, “was to paint.”

“So why didn’t she?”

“She was a woman! Women were not admitted into the École des Beaux-Arts, which meant they had to be privately educated. The women artists of the time—the ones you’ve heard of, Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt—all came from money. Not one of them would have dreamed of posing in the nude, and they certainly would have looked down on Victorine for taking off her clothes.”

“She must have been so lonely.” Stella studied this cool woman thumbing her nose at the world. “I wonder,” she said slowly, “who she really was. Did Manet paint what he saw? Or was he the one who invented that steely gaze?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know enough about either of them to say.”

“Are you always so circumspect?”

“Copy editors do not guess. We appreciate facts.” She ran her right hand across the skirt, releasing the faint scent of apricots and vanilla. She turned to the old man. “Were they lovers?”

“Nobody knows. What we do know is that they had a falling out.”

“Why?”

“That is lost to history. If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say he was jealous. Because Victorine overcame all the obstacles and actually became a painter.”

“I’m glad.”

“She must have had talent, because one of her paintings was chosen for the Salon of 1876—while Manet’s was rejected. Imagine the blow to his ego!”

“What are her paintings like? Are they here? Can we go look at them?”

“No. Not a single painting of Victorine’s has survived.”

“None? Was there a fire?”

“I have no idea; it is very hard to find anything at all about Victorine Meurent. We only know she succeeded in becoming a painter because of the records of the Salon. Of her life, nothing is known; but for these paintings of her, she might not have existed.”

“How terrible!” Stella knew how it felt to be ignored and overlooked, and it came as a personal blow. Victorine had overcome enormous odds to accomplish her goal. And then, just because she was a woman, her triumph had been erased by history, leaving behind nothing but images made by men. Her heart went out to this woman.

He nodded. “When I was working here, I promised myself that when the war was over, I would try to find out about Victorine’s lost paintings.” He sighed. “But somehow, with one thing and another, I never got around to it.”

“You still could!”

“It wouldn’t be easy.” He looked down at her. “Didn’t you say you were a copy editor? Isn’t that a fancy term for literary detective? Why don’t you see what you can find out?”

“I might do that,” she said, “if I had more time in Paris. This dress has taken most of my money.” She felt a twinge of regret; for the first time since she had landed at Orly, she was glad to be in Paris. Finding Victorine would have been a perfect project, given purpose to her aimless days. If only she had met this man earlier!

“All the more reason why you must allow me to offer you dinner.”

“The saleslady said I had to go to Caviar Kaspia.” She was surprised by her own boldness; it was the dress again.

“I can see why she suggested that,” he replied smoothly. “But I have a better idea.”

Snips and Snails

JULES DELATOUR SAID HE WOULD pick her up at 8. At 7:50 she stood outside the hotel, anxiously watching the street. But ten minutes passed, then fifteen, and the street remained empty. He clearly wasn't coming. Unsure if she was relieved or disappointed, she went inside to get the address of the restaurant the saleslady had mentioned. There had to be something she could afford on the menu.

"Caviar Kaspia?" The woman at the desk sniffed. "It's on the place de la Madeleine. Here, I'll write the address down for you." She studied Stella and then added, "It is not exactly *cheap*." She pronounced it disdainfully, as if the word itself were a filthy animal.

Clutching the paper, Stella went back outside, where she found an antique silver vehicle, elegant as a piece of jewelry, daintily picking its way up the narrow street as passersby watched its progress. A good thing, she thought, no cars were parked on tiny rue Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre; old vehicles were much wider than modern models, and this one nearly touched the ancient walls on either side of the street. It glided to a silent stop. A door slid open. She started to smile, then realized that the stubby man who emerged was not the elegant old gentleman of the afternoon. She was going to Caviar Kaspia alone after all. Disappointed, she looked at the paper in her hand.

"Mademoiselle?" The man touched his cap in an old-fashioned gesture and opened the rear door. She bent to peer into the car's brown suede interior and caught a glimpse of silver hair.

"*Bonsoir*."

She climbed in beside Jules Delatour, and as she sank into the seat, she giggled. She couldn't help herself: Celia would have *loved* this car. "I wasn't expecting a chariot," she murmured apologetically.

"This is Paris," he replied, as if offering her a gift. "And perhaps tonight you will discover how much you have been missing."

She gulped; dinner was going to be at one of *those* places. Stella thought despairingly of all the nights Celia had returned from dinner rhapsodizing about asparagus tongs and cucumber spoons. She was about to make a fool of herself.

"L'Ami Louis is a very simple bistro." He gestured apologetically at his clothes, and she began to relax. He had not changed since the afternoon; surely

one did not use sterling strawberry forks while wearing a sweater with patches at the elbows.

He did not seem to mind that she was quiet, and she settled into the silence, staring out the window. The car crossed the Seine, purred past Notre-Dame, and floated along a broad boulevard before turning onto a series of small dark streets. They eventually glided to such a smooth stop it was a moment before she realized they were no longer moving.

She breathed a sigh of relief: They had pulled up in front of a modest bistro—dark-wood façade, windows hung with red-and-white-checked half curtains—indistinguishable from hundreds of similar Paris establishments. The chauffeur opened the door and, as he helped Stella from the car, asked Jules in a low murmur, “*Je vous attends, monsieur?*”

Jules shook his head, indicating that the chauffeur should find his own dinner.

The man made an odd sound at the back of his throat, peering at Stella with such frank interest she understood something of significance had passed between the two, some coded message. She was struck by the intensity of the exchange. She’d never met a chauffeur before, but this short, stocky man with his bristly black hair and lived-in face looked as if he would be more comfortable behind a plow than the wheel of an elegant car. Or in a boxing ring. They watched him climb back into the driver’s seat and ease the car away from the curb. Jules took her arm. “Paul and I have been together more than half our lives. My wife is gone and my son is busy with his own life, but Paul is still here. I find it a great comfort.”

She wondered how many servants contributed to this comfort. The car, the clothes, the estate in Sussex...Unable to imagine what his life must be like, she gave a little shake of her head. He looked at her inquiringly, but as she was starting to explain, the door of the restaurant opened and a couple emerged, bringing with them a cloud of aromas. She inhaled, remembering the afternoon’s oysters as she tried to identify the scents. Roasting chicken, garlic, the deep thrum of aged beef, and the high whine of vinegar. Melting butter.

The old man held the door for her, and they passed into a small dark room, where the aromas grew even more intense. Stella sniffed again, trying to place the deep, primal, and aching familiar smell. “Burning wood!”

Jules seemed amused. “Antoine still cooks the old-fashioned way; he believes in flames and fire. It is one of the many reasons that I come here.”

“And the others?” She peered through the murky darkness of the small bistro, barely able to make out the faces of the people in the room. A clatter from the rear caused a subtle change in pressure, and she saw a bearded man with a weathered face heading toward them, arms outstretched. He was wearing classic

chef's whites, but the jaunty bandanna around his neck gave him the air of a pirate.

"*Jules! Enfin, mon vieux. Je croyais que tu nous avais oubliés.*" The French was too fast for Stella to understand, but she saw that this was no pro forma welcome to a valued guest; the chef seemed genuinely delighted to see the old gentleman. Then his gaze moved on to Stella, lingering a moment too long before he placed one hand over his heart in a dramatically comic gesture. "And who is this delicious creature?"

He bent to kiss her hand, and when he stood, his eyes burned into hers. She took a nervous step backward; the man looked as if he wanted to devour her. "A new friend. Stella, permit me to introduce Chef Antoine."

"*Une Américaine?*" The chef said the word reverently. "All women are wonderful." He reached for his spectacular mustache and actually gave it a twirl. "But American women..." He gave Stella a wolfish leer, and she took another step backward. "I would like to show her my kitchen."

"I am sure you would." Jules put a protective hand on her shoulder. "But I know you too well."

The chef parodied sadness.

"And we have come on a mission. This young woman has been in Paris for a month and has yet to eat a serious meal."

The chef drew air through his teeth in shocked disbelief. "You wound me." He rubbed his hands gleefully together. "*Au travail!* Like old times, eh?" He cast an eye over Stella. "I remember the first time I saw that—"

"The foie gras to begin." Jules cut the chef off with a speed verging on rudeness.

"Foie gras," the chef agreed, clearly not offended by Jules's abrupt manner. His eyes slid sideways to Stella, and he added, "If only for the sake of the dress."

He gave a little wink, twirled his mustache once again, and turned toward the kitchen, muttering to himself. Stella caught some of his words—something about tiny birds, the first asparagus, and an urgent need to reserve the Charolais beef before some idiot awarded it to a less worthy customer.

A maître d' appeared. "What did the chef mean about the foie gras being for the dress?" Stella asked as he led them to a table.

"Did you notice the scarf?" Jules gestured to where the chef had been standing. "Romy Schneider gave it to him. It's been a year since she passed away, but he still wears it every day." He looked at her mystified face. "You don't know the actress Romy Schneider? You have not seen her movies?"

"I don't go to movies," she admitted, and tried to interpret the look on his face.

"And I suppose you never watch television?"

“I don’t have one. It seems like a waste of time.”

“She does not eat. She wastes no time. She avoids ordinary pleasures.” He gave a sad shake of the head. “Do you permit yourself any fun at all?”

“What does a dead actress have to do with my dress?” She had the oddest feeling that the dress had meant something to the chef and that the old man had purposefully cut him off when he tried to explain.

Jules steepled his hands and offered a rueful smile. “Antoine loves women almost as much as he loves food. But he likes a woman to look like a woman.” He offered her a slightly embarrassed smile. “This is France. He is old-fashioned. And these are casual times....” He gestured to the woman at the next table, who wore faded blue jeans, a tweed jacket, and boots; it occurred to Stella that they might be the very clothes she had abandoned at the shop. “I think it’s a fine thing that modern women wear what they want to, but people used to dress up when they dined at L’Ami Louis, and Antoine misses the old days.”

She felt he was being evasive. She pointed to his corduroy slacks, his faded sweater.

He laughed. “I don’t count; I am not a woman, and we are very old friends.”

“How old?”

“I’ve been coming here all my life.” He considered. “My father discovered the bistro when Antoine first opened his doors. It was just after the war—maybe 1924? He was so impressed with the quality of the chicken that he begged our cook to follow Antoine and discover the source. Coucou de Rennes is a rare old breed that was dying out even then.”

“Did the cook do it?”

Jules shook his head. “Our cook was so offended he gave notice. Mother was furious; she could not forget the war years when we had no servants.” He looked around and lifted his hand.

A waiter rushed over with a silver bucket. “We put the ’66 Krug on ice for you.” He set the bucket on the table and, like a magician conjuring a rabbit, produced a frosted bottle and poured.

Jules took a careful sip and nodded.

Stella picked up the glass and inhaled the yeasty aroma of the wine. She took some into her mouth and waited, feeling it blossom on her tongue. “Peaches!” The flavor was so unexpected.

Jules’s eyes danced and she had the impression, so rare for her, that he was enjoying her company. Too much? She shivered and tried to think of other things. Suddenly a young face, smudged with dirt but laughing, popped up in the window behind Jules. It hung there briefly, then vanished. Another appeared. And then a third. Three young boys were jumping up and down in an attempt to see inside the restaurant. Jules turned, saw the boys, and laughed. “Children!” he said

happily, and Stella relaxed, thinking he must have been a good father. Out of the corner of her eye she noted the maître d' heading out the door, a plate piled high with thin, golden fried potatoes in his hands. The heads did not reappear, and she imagined the gleeful boys burning their fingers on the hot shards.

The maître d' caught her eye as he returned and threw up his hands. "Today's children are tomorrow's customers, *n'est-ce pas?*" He seemed embarrassed at having been caught in this small act of generosity. "Please don't tell the chef."

"Of course not." Jules crossed his heart with his right hand. But when the man had gone, he leaned toward her. "It's Antoine who can't resist a child," he whispered, "and every urchin in Paris knows it."

"Did he like your son?" Stella could hardly believe she'd said such a thing. She had always kept to herself; watching Celia ferret intimate information from people she barely knew had made Stella squirm. "People *like* to talk about themselves," Celia had always insisted.

"But it's not your business," Stella would reply.

"It is, indeed, my business." Celia was smug.

And, of course, it was how she made her living.

Jules simply ignored the question; the waiter was approaching, walking slowly, carefully balancing four thick white plates in his two hands. One held a mountain of toasted bread, the other a rectangle of butter. The remaining two were topped with thick pink slabs edged in peach-colored fat. He set them down and turned to Jules. "The Sauternes?" The words were a nervous whisper, and he looked surreptitiously around in a parody of secrecy.

Jules nodded.

"You know the chef does not approve."

"The chef is wrong."

Stella sensed this was not the first time they had engaged in this particular conversation. She watched Jules slice off a corner of foie gras and put it in his mouth. She mirrored his action.

The soft, smooth substance filled her mouth. Chocolate cream, she thought. The flavor grew richer, rounder, louder with each passing second. It was like music, the notes lingering in her mind long after the sound itself had vanished.

He was openly staring at her. "You eat with such concentration and intensity. And, dare I say it, joy?"

Joy? The word was so foreign, especially in relation to food. It embarrassed her; she took a sip of the wine and concentrated on the way the flavors changed. She thought of music again. The sweet wine was like the trill of a flute, and suddenly the foie gras, which had reminded her more of pastry than meat, became robust, substantial.

“Antoine prefers red wine with foie gras. He says only snobs insist on Sauternes. Perhaps he is right, but I like the effect of sweet wine.”

“It’s like a gift.” The words were out before she had considered them.

His eyes crinkled as he smiled at her. “How sad that you have wasted all your Paris meals! You seem to have a genuine appreciation for food. What do you eat when you are at home?”

“Food has never interested me. To be honest, I’ve never paid it much attention.” Just thinking about Celia’s dinner parties made her want to push her plate away. “When I was growing up, everyone always told me what a wonderful cook my mother was, but I loathed her food.” If Celia loved something, she did not; it had always been that simple. “So I decided I must not have a taste for fancy food.”

“Have you ever considered that everyone else might have been wrong?”

The notion was so startling that she could feel the reaction on her face. The old man watched her. “Tell me,” he said slowly, “one dish you remember.”

“Veal Prince Orloff. She was very proud of it.”

“And there you have it! What an absolutely absurd concoction. Three sauces! The fact that you disliked it is *proof* that you were born with excellent taste.”

She stared at him in shock. Was it possible? She had neither liked nor trusted her mother, but she had never questioned her taste. Style, after all, was the currency Celia traded in. The entire notion was so unsettling that she took a big bite of the foie gras. The richness was both soothing and exciting, and as she tried to name the flavors, she remembered Jules saying that copy editors were literary detectives. Wasn’t this the same thing in another medium? As she took another bite, she reflected that being a taste detective was extremely satisfying.

The waiter arrived, carrying another bottle of wine. “The chef insisted.” He sounded apologetic as he thrust it toward Jules, who simply sat, awaiting an explanation.

“Ortolans,” the waiter whispered at last.

“Ortolans?” He smiled. “Then by all means we must have this Meursault to accompany them!”

The wine smelled like new leaves and grass, like springtime, but when she took a sip, the flavor was older, colder. Ripe melons by the seaside. She held the wine in her mouth, and the flavor changed as the weight increased and the wine acquired a smooth, slippery quality. She took a second sip. She liked it.

The waiter returned with two plates; on each one sat the tiniest bird she had ever seen. “Is that a hummingbird?”

The waiter stuck up his index finger and wagged it at her. “No.” He handed her a large napkin. “Put this over your head.”

“Excuse me?”

“Buntings,” Jules explained, “are always eaten with a covered head. When I was a child, my father told me it was to hide our shame from God, but the real reason is more practical. When you eat ortolans, you put the entire bird into your mouth. It is not a pretty sight, and this way no one can see you. More important, the napkin traps the aromas so you can experience everything taking place in your mouth.” He flung the large white rectangle over his head. “Feetfirst”—the voice was muffled—“with the beak sticking out.”

“Then what?”

“You chew.”

“What about the bones?”

“Ignore them! You eat everything: bones, heart, liver, brain. That is the joy of the ortolan. Do not feel badly; this bird died happy. He drowned in Armagnac.”

At first Stella was slightly appalled, not to mention frightened, but she wondered if this was what it was like to have a parent who enjoyed you and wanted to enlarge your world. If only to see what that felt like, she put the napkin over her head and the tiny creature into her mouth. Then every other thought was driven from her head by the sheer physical effect of the hot bird burning her overstuffed mouth. She tried opening it, to cool her tongue off, but her lips were stretched as far as they could go. Her teeth came down and a spurt of juice shot across her tongue. She almost jumped out of her seat; the flavor was so strong, so primal. She chewed again, and the sound of bones crunching clanged in her ears. She swallowed. Now she found the flavor had changed. It was all hazelnuts, sweet edged with bitter. She swallowed again. Figs, Armagnac, blood shot through her body. Another shatter of bone and she was tasting dark meat—the thigh perhaps—with its gamey flavor.

All her senses were concentrated in her mouth as her teeth crashed down again and again. She felt the skull crackle and tasted what must be brain. It was hot, it was primitive. It was exciting.

When the bird was gone, she realized she felt empty and slightly sad. She slid the napkin off her head and found Jules staring at her with concern. “Eating ortolans is rather...” He searched for a word. “Barbaric.”

“The word I would use is ‘astonishing.’” She was exhausted, exhilarated. She took a sip of the wine and described everything she’d felt as she was eating the little bird.

Jules was staring at her with obvious delight. He nodded to the wineglass. “Tell me what you’re tasting now.”

She took a sip. “Green. Spring. Garden...” The words flashed through her mind. “Water sparkling in sunlight.”

A radiant smile suffused his face. “My dear, you have a true talent for food. I cannot believe that no one has ever recognized it.”

Who would that have been? Celia? But Stella felt dizzy with this newfound notion that food could be as interesting as words and art. She was eager for another dish, for new flavors.

“What are we having next?” she asked.

“I had hoped for the roast chicken, but after the ortolans that would not be correct. If I were a gambling man, I’d bet on snails.”

“I’ve never had snails.” She tried to sound upbeat, but what she felt was disappointment; such a pedestrian dish after the thrilling bird.

“In Antoine’s kitchen, the shy creatures are transformed into something grand, heroic. Someone—I can’t remember who—called Antoine’s snails the manliest food of France.”

Had he read her mind?

“But it is not just technique. When my son, Jean-Marie, was eight—an entrepreneurial age—he decided to go into the snail business. One weekend he went into the woods near our country place and collected hundreds of the creatures. The gardener built him a sturdy wooden box so he could bring them to Antoine.”

“Did the chef buy them?”

“Antoine buys all his snails from his snail farmer.”

“There’s no such thing as a snail farmer!” What a strange country France was.

“There you are wrong. Snail farming is an ancient and respected profession.”

Stella was incredulous.

“Oh, yes. Snails require careful cultivation. In the wild they dine on disagreeable things, which make them bitter and occasionally poisonous. The best snail farmers feed their flocks a very special—and quite secret—diet.”

“What do they feed them?” She was still not sure she should believe him.

“I am no snail farmer. But Antoine invited Jean-Marie to bring his snails into the kitchen. This was obviously not the first time he had faced a young entrepreneur: He agreed that they were very fine specimens and he would be happy to buy them if Jean-Marie would follow his protocols. First he was to feed them on grape leaves, apples, nuts, and oats for two weeks. After that he was to clean them and remove the shells. When Antoine showed him how to do it, Jean-Marie came galloping out of the kitchen to inform us that he would much rather eat snails than sell them.”

Perhaps, she thought, Celia was wrong about people. You didn’t have to pepper them with questions. It might be possible to discover them slowly, bit by bit. “How old is Jean-Marie?”

“A bit older than you, I expect. Late thirties. And after the failure of that enterprise he turned his back on business. I used to hope that he would love art as much as I do, but his interests lie in other areas.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a professor of literature. Poetry, mostly, which has always enchanted him. He got that from his mother; the two of them could spout poetry for hours.”

“Does he still spend time at your country château?”

“I never said it was a château.”

The car, the chauffeur, the gardener. Of course it was a château. “Where is this non-château?”

“In Burgundy. A small town called Vézelay.”

She experienced a jolt of pleasure. “I edited a novel last year—a mystery—set in the abbey there. I spent days poring over pictures and studying maps to make sure the details were correct. It’s my favorite kind of work.” Her cheeks were growing warm; she knew she was being overly enthusiastic—like someone boring others with details of an illness—but she couldn’t seem to stop. “I think I could walk through the cathedral and name every statue.”

“But you must come see it in person! It’s less than three hours away. I need to go there soon; a friend who passed away a while ago donated his art to the city, and they’ve asked for my help. We could go tomorrow! There’s a wonderful restaurant—”

“L’Espérance?” Stella asked excitedly. “That’s in the book too! The murderer took his victims there before doing away with them. The chef actually makes an appearance.”

“Truly? In that case we must secure a copy for Chef Meneau. He would be delighted!”

Was there anyone he didn’t know? “It hasn’t been translated. It’s not that kind of book.”

“Meneau speaks excellent English.” He waved the inconvenience away. “What an adventure! Shall we meet at Shakespeare and Company tomorrow morning to look for your book? If there’s a single copy in Paris, George Whitman will have it.”

Noting her blank face, he explained that the proprietor of the bookshop had a secret passion for mysteries. “If we find the book, Paul can drive us to Vézelay.”

Celia, Stella thought, would be pleased to know that she was taking a trip in an elegant chauffeured car. The thought gave her pause.

“We might even spend the night.”

Alarm bells sounded. And just like that, sensible Stella was back, staring at the glass in her hand. She glanced across the table and saw a stranger sitting there. Jules suddenly reminded her of Mortimer. She felt ill.

Sober now, she realized she had no way of knowing if anything he’d said was true. All those stories about Picasso and Cocteau, the wife who had inspired Saint Laurent, the poet son. How gullible she’d been! The car was real enough, but that

meant nothing; it could be rented, or stolen even. And there was certainly something off about that “chauffeur.” Had the old man even given her his real name?

“*Monsieur Jules?*” The waiter was back. “*Vos escargots!*” With a flourish, he set the plates before them. The gigantic snails sizzled in a haze of garlic and herbs. A few minutes ago she would have reveled in the aroma; now it turned her stomach, making her nauseous.

The waiter filled their glasses. As he retreated, she followed him with her eyes, newly aware that this little bistro was rather peculiar. She pictured the deserted street outside—where were they?—and the silly charade of feeding the children. What a fool she’d been: the perfect target. Had she not told him, within minutes of meeting, that she was friendless, motherless, and penniless? She had practically invited him to take advantage of her.

“Of course,” he was saying, “if you’d rather not eat at L’Espérance, our cook could make us a light lunch. It’s lovely in the garden at this time of year.”

I bet it is, she thought, looking down at the snails. What were they anyway? Insects? Reptiles? She extracted one from its shell and gave the gray blob a look of loathing. Were they always this big? She put it into her mouth. It was huge, chewy, unpleasantly rubbery: She fought the urge to spit the revolting creature out. The thing caught in her throat and she could not swallow. As discreetly as possible, she put her napkin to her mouth. “Snails must be very nutritious,” she said when the gross thing was safely swathed in linen. Five more to go.

“You don’t seem to be enjoying them.” She knew he didn’t really care, but the man did an excellent job of feigning disappointment. He lifted his glass. “At least admit that this Meursault is excellent.”

She put the glass to her lips, pretending to drink. She was wiser now.

“In Vézelay we have quite a cellar.” He swirled the wine in his glass. “My father bought so much of the great 1900 vintage—it was called the vintage of the century—that I will never be able to drink it all. And their time is passing. As for the ’28s and ’29s—both great years—Jean-Marie will have to finish them. It would give me great pleasure to share a few bottles with you.”

Imagining a dank cellar, she grimly extracted another horrid little beast from its shell. Why had she trusted him? She had spent her entire life ensuring that she would never again be as helpless as she’d been with Mortimer. What was she doing here? Why had she come? The thick scent of garlic seemed to be growing more intense. With great difficulty she managed to choke down the snail.

He was speaking again. “Are you an early riser?”

She should make her excuses and leave, but somehow the words would not come.

“We could meet early for coffee and then hunt for your book. If fortune is with us, we can be on the road by...say ten-thirty, which would put us in Vézelay in time for lunch.”

She nodded; safer to let him think this excursion would actually take place. Struggling to swallow another snail, she was filled with the old familiar self-loathing. She had no idea where she was. She felt her face go hot and begin to prickle with sweat.

“Are you all right?” He gestured to the hovering waiter. “Henri, please rid us of these snails. They do not seem to agree with Mademoiselle.”

The relief as the creatures were borne away!

Another bottle of wine was poured, tasted, commented upon. She tried to compose her face. What was he talking about? Now an enormous haunch of meat was heading their way, its aroma preceding it like the blare of a trumpet. Stella tried to ignore it, but the scent was insistent, refusing to be denied. There was no way she would be able to swallow it in her current state.

“This will not taste like any beef you know. You have no Charolais in the United States.” The waiter sliced into the crusted beef, and she watched the bloody slabs fall. It was gruesome; the idea of eating it made her feel faint. Her gorge rose.

“I’m sorry.” She stood up. She had to get out. “I’m not feeling well.”

The old man stood, feigning concern. “You are white as a ghost. Could it be an allergic reaction? I’m so sorry; I will take you back to your hotel. I doubt that Paul has returned from his dinner...” He raised a hand and eased her back into her chair. “A taxi,” he said when the waiter rushed over.

“At once, Monsieur.”

Murmuring sympathetically, the waiter removed all vestiges of dinner. The chef came out of the kitchen, his face creased with worry. “Promise me”—he bowed to Stella—“that you will return. You have not had my potatoes. Or my chocolate mousse.” Stella’s stomach lurched. She closed her eyes, wishing she was back in her little hotel room, safe and alone.

“The taxi has arrived,” the waiter announced at last, and the old man rose, came around the table, helped her to her feet. She shuddered at his touch. “Really,” she said, “there is no need. Stay and finish your meal.”

“There is no question of that.” He led her out the door. “I cannot abandon you when you are looking so ill.” He leaned into the taxi window, said something in French that she could not understand.

She should not get into that car. *Say no!* she told herself, desperately struggling to think up an excuse. But her mind was blank, and she climbed meekly into the taxi, hating herself. She slid across the seat and huddled miserably against the window. She had only herself to blame.

As they drove, she peered anxiously out at the dark streets. Nothing looked familiar. This was not the way they'd come. Where was he taking her? Heart thumping, she shut her eyes, cursing herself. No one had forced her into the taxi. Why hadn't she refused? She was such a coward!

The taxi began to slow. Where were they? It came to a halt. Jules stepped out, and as he opened her door, Stella slowly opened her eyes.

They were at her hotel.

Relieved and embarrassed, she shuddered. What a fool she was. Her imagination had run away with her.

"If I have said or done anything to alarm you, I am truly sorry." He helped her from the taxi. "I have very much enjoyed your company, and I regret that the feeling is not mutual."

Lost for words, Stella bit her nails. This man was not Mortimer. He had been kind. Generous. She had behaved badly, allowed the past to overwhelm her. "I'm sorry," she finally managed. "I don't know what came over me."

He offered a sad smile. "No need to explain. I hope your beautiful dress will give you more pleasure the next time you wear it." He hesitated for a moment. "May I offer a word of advice?"

She nodded.

"You have a remarkable gift."

"I do?"

"I have rarely met anyone with the imagination or the ability to appreciate food and art as you do. It would be a terrible shame to neglect that talent. It could bring you much joy if you allow it to." He reached for her hand and, in a move that surprised her, gently kissed it. Then he climbed into the taxi and she watched him drive away.

Take What You Need

SHE WOKE WITH HER STOMACH churning and her nostrils filled with turpentine. Mortimer had rampaged through her dreams, calling, *Come back, little girl, I'll be ready for you.* Stumbling into the minuscule bathroom, she splashed water on her face and stared at herself in the pitted mirror. Her hair was matted, her skin the color of parchment, her eyes empty.

She wanted to throw up. She was leaning over the toilet when Olympia's stalwart expression flashed through her mind. She stood up straight, threw on some clothes, snatched the dress, and marched out the door. Her certainty surprised her; this felt absolutely right.

The little dog barked once when she entered the shop, and the shopkeeper gave a start of surprise. But when Stella thrust the dress at her, she looked shocked.

"You did not follow my instructions." It was an accusation.

"I did," Stella replied. "I went to Les Deux Magots. I drank Chablis and ate oysters."

"And then?"

"I went to the Jeu de Paume. And you were right: I found what I was looking for."

"Well then?" The woman looked puzzled. "Why are you bringing your dress back to me?"

"I gave you all my money and now I need it back. When I went to the Jeu de Paume, I realized I need more time in Paris."

The woman gathered in the dress, cradling it like a precious child, and hung it carefully on a hanger. "Your dress will be waiting for you." She went to the desk, opened a drawer, and retrieved the traveler's checks. Stella had expected anger, disappointment, recriminations, but the woman looked strangely content. "*Au revoir,*" she said. "We will meet again."

Everything she does is odd, thought Stella.

It was another balmy spring day, the air so fresh she could almost taste it. Her feet seemed to know where to go, and Stella found herself in the Tuileries. Overnight the tulips had burst into bloom, and the Judas trees were filled with blossoms. She arrived at the Jeu de Paume and ran up the steps.

She made her way to the painting and stood staring at that enigmatic face, convinced that if she waited long enough, Olympia would give her a sign. This time she was not seeing the beautiful courtesan but the model herself, a real woman who had once walked on the earth. She looked at the woman with the flowers—the Black woman in her lovely white dress—wondering about her as well. Who had she been, this dignified person who seemed to emphasize Victorine’s predicament? She, after all, had kept her clothes on.

Stella’s eye moved to the hand covering the crotch. Men had wanted Victorine to feel shame, and when she refused, they stole her future. Why should they get away with it? This was personal to Stella. She now had a mission: She would find out everything she could about Victorine and her lost paintings. She wanted to make sure that this woman would be remembered for who she really was. It wasn’t too late for either of them.

She kept standing there, gazing at Olympia. “Talk to me,” she implored. But Victorine-Louise Meurent just looked back with that cool, defiant arrogance. “If I were you,” she seemed to be saying, “I’d know what to do.”

All morning the gallery remained empty as the two women silently stared at each other. At lunchtime two Americans came in, arguing loudly about where to eat. They barely glanced at Olympia, but as they turned to leave the man said, “Let’s stop at the gift shop on the way out. They have a book about this painting, and I’m told it’s filled with delicious details.”

Was this the sign she’d been waiting for?

Stella followed them down to the gift shop. The book was shockingly expensive. She was holding a copy in her hand, trying to decide whether to buy it, when a stylish young clerk approached. “I know.” Her smile was apologetic. “It’s a lot of money for such a tiny book.” Glancing furtively around, she lowered her voice. “Why don’t you go to Shakespeare and Company and see if they have a used copy? George Whitman stocks a lot of art books.”

Hadn’t Jules said something about the eccentric bookseller last night?

“Go see,” the woman urged. “If he doesn’t have it, you can always come back.”

“Thanks.” Stella replaced the book on the shelf. The woman’s unexpected friendliness lent her courage. “Could you,” she asked shyly, “suggest a place along the way where I might stop for lunch?”

“Try Robert et Louise. It’s in Le Marais, which isn’t exactly on the way. But it’s not far, and the last time I went, *Jeanne Moreau* was at the next table!”

“That sounds expensive...”

“Oh, no; it’s very modest. They don’t even have a stove. Robert’s a butcher, and he cooks right in the fireplace.”

Intrigued—a restaurant without a stove?—Stella wended her way to the Marais. Passing through the vast courtyard outside the Louvre, she looked up at the magnificent old stone buildings, tempted to abandon her plans and seek refuge inside. She shook herself: She could come again tomorrow, or the next day. There was no hurry now. She was staying in Paris. Taking a deliberate left turn off the wide boulevard, she wandered through the narrow streets of the Marais until she found herself in the bustling square in front of the Centre Pompidou.

She stared at the pugnacious modern building, which dwarfed the graceful old homes around it. It reminded her of the dress shop and the way the history of the city had been spread across its walls. Paris, unlike her native New York, seemed capable of savoring the present while appreciating the past. She stood for a while, watching a juggler dressed like a medieval fool entertain the crowd, before turning the corner and finding her way to the rue Vieille-du-Temple.

FROM THE STREET, Robert et Louise looked very much like last night's bistro: wooden front, large window, red-and-white-checked curtains. Stella studied the menu posted outside, convinced that a place frequented by movie stars had to be expensive. But the saleswoman had not lied; nothing cost more than a few francs, and when she peeked inside, she saw that the room was pleasingly rustic. She stood hesitating in the doorway until a burly man with an open face came to inquire if she was waiting for someone.

"No," she replied.

"*Alors, entrez, entrez.*" He led her to a table near the window and handed her a paper menu. A minute later he was back with a glass of red wine.

"I didn't order this," she protested.

"It's a little present," he said cheerfully, "to welcome you and open your appetite for the *plat du jour*. Today we have little lamb chops from Normandy. This lamb..." He made a gesture to indicate its excellence. "And perhaps some potatoes and a little green salad? Now, how will you begin?"

"It's too much food!" she protested.

"But, Mademoiselle, you are in Paris."

She thought of Jules. "Bring me whatever you think best." It was, she thought, a kind of test. The dress was gone—had it taken her gift with it?

She took a sip of wine and held it in her mouth, straining to identify the flavors. *Cherry*, she thought. *Licorice*. *Thorns*. She imagined a forest in late autumn, damp leaves on the ground, a blaze of color. She took another sip.

The man—he must be Robert—set a dish in front of her and she looked down, dismayed. What could it be? She'd never seen anything like it. It glistened up at

her, a red-black sausage bursting from a shiny case. She inhaled the aroma: It was exotic, mysterious, almost intoxicating.

“Taste it,” he urged.

It was pillow-soft, very rich, laced with spices. She identified the prickle of black pepper, the sweetness of onions. *Parsley*, she thought, *nutmeg*, and...*was that chocolate?* Bite by bite she chased the flavors, but they kept skipping away.

“Did you like it?” Robert was back.

She gestured at the empty plate. “It was wonderful. What kind of meat was in it?”

“Not meat, exactly.” He watched her face as he said, “That was blood sausage.”

She felt her stomach churn. With an effort, she pushed the revulsion away. It had been so delicious. And had she not eaten a bird—bones, brain, and all—just last night? “Thank you for not telling me *before* I ate it. I’m not sure I would have summoned the courage.” She looked up at him. “And that would have been a shame.”

Robert gave her a broad, approving smile and topped up her glass. Even as she thought, *I shouldn’t*, she picked it up. This too *had* been a test, and she had passed.

Three tiny lamb chops arrived, sizzling deliciously on a chipped white plate. “These animals were raised by the sea,” her new friend told her, “on the *pré-salé*. No other lamb in the world tastes quite the same.” She took a bite, nibbling the crisp strip of fat at the edge, imagining a wild, windswept marsh, the tide rushing in and out. It *did* taste different from ordinary lamb, the tender flesh both sweet and salty. She ate slowly, consciously, grateful for every bite.

When her plate was empty, Robert returned with the bottle and poured wine into her glass, insisting she have a bit of Brie to go with it. “I get it from a farmer who makes it the old-fashioned way, with unpasteurized milk. You must try it.” Her first instinct was to demur, but she thought of what Jules had said about joy, picked up her glass, and downed it in a single gulp.

“A beautiful woman who appreciates food is always welcome *chez nous*.” He scribbled the bill on a greasy piece of paper. It was, as the woman at the museum had promised, remarkably reasonable. Stella hugged the words to herself, picturing a future in which she became a regular, eating here night after night. Why not? She thought back to all those pathetic meals in anonymous restaurants. Why had she wasted so much time?

It’s Celia, she thought, as she walked to the bookshop. She was slightly tipsy, and thoughts ran unfiltered through her head. *I was so determined not to be like her...but I was the one who lost*. She crossed the Pont Louis-Philippe onto the Île Saint-Louis and stood watching a *bateau-mouche* make its lazy way down the

river. She walked on, crossing to the Île de la Cité; as she passed the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation, she shivered. From here, two hundred thousand people had been sent to concentration camps, never to return. What more proof did she need that safety was an illusion? She squared her shoulders, crossed yet another bridge, and made her way to the bookshop.

She had passed Shakespeare and Company many times, but she had never felt the urge to go inside. Bookshops made her anxious. Each volume was like an eager animal at the pound, striving for attention, hoping for a home. "Take me, take me," they called out, until the chorus grew so loud she had to turn and flee.

And this shop, she was sure, would be particularly distressing. Her hotel was just around the corner, and she had seen the tourists going in and out. Young women, carefree beauties with hair to their waists and cigarettes in their mouths, strolled out of the shop like cream-fed cats. The men were even more unnerving: Citizens of the world, they walked out the door as if the streets belonged to them. These people came because the shop was famous. They came because it was a place to meet people. They came because they would be surrounded by other English-speakers. But they did not come for the books.

She hesitated at the door, putting her hand out but not quite touching it. Then she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and pulled the door open.

When she opened her eyes, she simply stared. This was not the vision she'd had.

Volumes were stacked everywhere: on shelves, in great heaps on the floor, in a zigzag line running up a ramshackle flight of stairs. Books owned the space. She took a long, deep sniff; this was not the industrial scent of ink, paper, and cleaning fluid of ordinary bookstores. She took another breath: People had eaten sandwiches and onion soup here, they'd drunk wine and beer as they paged through the books, fallen in love around them. Moving into the shop, she noticed a small blond girl roaming around, picking up volumes with grubby hands. Nobody seemed to mind; nobody stopped her. These books were not destined to sit sedately on tables or be shelved in alphabetical order; these books were meant to become part of your life.

Stella sighed. "They must be so sad to leave," she whispered to herself.

"What did you say?" The words were sharp, and she looked up to find a patrician man with grizzled hair and a pointed beard scowling down at her. His shirt gave off the musty odor of unwashed clothing. She took a step back. He moved forward, almost threateningly.

"The books." She was still whispering, embarrassed. "If I were a book, I wouldn't want to leave."

His scowl grew deeper. With his beaky nose and sharp features, he reminded her of a giant raptor, and she took another nervous step backward. "I'm sorry. I'm

being ridiculous.”

“Indeed you are not!” Now he seemed even more irritated. “But how would I make a living if all my customers felt as you do? Nobody would ever buy a book.”

“Charge an entry fee?”

He peered at her, and she saw that beneath the thick eyebrows the gaze was friendly. More than friendly—he had the smug expression of a bird-watcher who has just seen an extinct creature land on a nearby tree. “Would *you* pay to enter?”

She looked solemnly around. She looked up at the man. “Gladly.”

A light came into his eyes. “Come have a glass of wine. I want to talk to you.”

A tall, beautiful redhead glanced up from the display she was arranging. “When George offers you a glass of wine”—she swung a long lock of hair over her shoulder—“the smart thing to do is refuse.”

So this was the famous George Whitman!

He glared, but the woman did not seem intimidated. “George will serve you wine in a sardine tin. Maria Callas threw it in his face.”

“She did not!” he protested.

“Well, she refused to drink it.”

“I don’t want any wine, thank you.” Stella interjected, but seeing the man’s glare she hastily added, “Not that I would mind drinking it out of sardine tins. It’s just that I had a lot of wine at lunch—”

“So you wandered into my shop because you’re drunk?”

“I’m not drunk,” she protested. “I’m on a mission.”

Looking down from his great height, he leaned eagerly forward. “And that would be...?”

“Do you know Manet’s painting *Olympia*?”

“Of course.”

“I saw a book about it at the Jeu de Paume. The woman at the shop there thought you might have a used copy.”

“I’m sure we do. Somewhere.” He waved a hand at the teeming shelves. “I’ll have to see if I can find it.” He disappeared through a doorway; following behind, Stella looked up and saw the painted words above it: BE NOT INHOSPITABLE TO STRANGERS LEST THEY BE ANGELS IN DISGUISE. She whispered them to herself as she trailed him through a warren of book-haunted rooms and up the rickety staircase, passing broken-down easy chairs, a table holding an antique typewriter, and a sofa where a disheveled and very pale young man lay sleeping while two cats sniffed at his bare feet.

Hearing her footsteps, the young man sat up and pushed blue-black hair away from his face. “You wouldn’t, by any chance, have a cup of coffee?” he called after her.

Stella shook her head and hurried on, feeling like the White Rabbit. *I am late*, she thought, *I am late*.

George turned in to yet another small room. Emitting a cry of triumph, he pounced on a volume in the middle of a tall stack, seeming utterly unconcerned when the books above it all crashed to the ground. “There it is!” Dusting it off, he handed it to Stella. “So you’re interested in Manet?”

“I don’t care about Manet. I’m trying to find out about the model.”

He stared at her for a moment, then motioned to a rickety chair. Pulling up an equally disreputable specimen, he sat down. “Who are you?” He did not seem to feel the need to introduce himself. “And where do you come from?”

She told him.

“And so, Stella from New York, why are you interested in Manet’s model?”

He listened attentively, head cocked to one side, as she told him about Victorine’s lost paintings. “They must be somewhere,” she finished, “don’t you think?”

He nodded solemnly. “If she exhibited at the Salon, the paintings would be valuable. Nobody would throw them out. Most likely her family has them.”

He sat back in the seat, apparently thinking this over, then handed her the book. “I doubt you’re going to find your answers in this stuffy tome, but one never knows. You might glean something. What we need is a starting point so we can figure out the next step.”

“We?”

“I love a good mystery.”

The beautiful redhead entered the room, closely followed by the pale young man who had wanted a cup of coffee. “Ginsberg’s downstairs,” said the redhead, “asking for you.” She pointed at Stella. “A new Tumbleweed?”

“Not yet,” George replied, walking to the door. “But I sense potential.”

“What’s a Tumbleweed?” asked Stella.

“He is.” The redhead pointed at the pale young man. “Daniel wants to be a writer.”

“I don’t *want* to be a writer.” Obviously offended, Daniel said stiffly, “I *am* a writer.” He looked at Stella. “Are you? Are you moving in?”

“Moving in? Where?”

“Here.” He gestured around the shop. “Tumbleweeds live here.”

Stella gaped at him, confused. “In the shop?”

“Oh, yes,” he said cheerfully. “There have been a lot of us. At the moment we are four.”

“But where do you sleep?”

“Oh”—he was vague—“wherever there’s room. Right now I’m on the sofa in the Blue Oyster Tearoom. It’s pretty comfortable. But David Rakoff’s got the best

place. He sleeps in the alcove up in the Children's Room. It's quite private. I keep hoping he'll leave."

Stella pointed to the redhead. "Does she live here too?"

"Oh, no, Rachel's no Tumbleweed." Did she sense, Stella wondered, a touch of resentment? "She's an actual paid employee. I don't know how she talked George into hiring her."

"It wasn't that hard." Rachel's hazel eyes seemed to change with the light, going from brown to green and back again. "I simply convinced him that he could use a responsible person to help run this madhouse."

"Don't flatter yourself," said Daniel. Definitely resentment. "This madhouse has done fine for thirty-two years without any help from you." He turned to Stella. "Thousands of people have lived here."

She looked around, trying to imagine it. "Thousands?"

"Thousands," he said firmly.

"How long do they stay?"

"As long as they want. Or until George kicks them out."

"What about you?" she asked. "How long have you been here?"

"Almost a month."

"Do you pay rent?"

"Oh, no," he said vaguely. "I just help out here and there when I'm needed."

Rachel tugged on his sleeve. "And right now you are needed. George found a trove of first editions at the flea market last weekend, and the boxes just arrived."

"But I haven't read my book yet," he was moaning as Rachel ushered him out the door.

Stella followed them, looking for a place to read. She walked through room after room filled with people curled up with books. Which of them, she wondered, were living here? At last she found an unoccupied chair, stuffing poking out, in a corner of the Piano Room. As she sat down in the tattered chair, Stella wondered if this had been someone's bed last night. She opened the book.

The academic treatise offered erudite ideas on everything from Manet's motives to the history of women in France. There was a long digression on Zola's reaction to the painting and an even longer essay on the role of spendthrift courtesans in nineteenth-century France. But the model herself was mentioned only twice—and her name was misspelled. Stella was grateful she hadn't wasted her money.

Still holding the book, she made her way downstairs. George Whitman was standing with a large, bearded man, and both were gesticulating wildly. A sign on the table next to them declared, GIVE WHAT YOU CAN. TAKE WHAT YOU NEED.

"There you are!" George Whitman said it as if he had been waiting for her. "Meet Allen Ginsberg." As she held out her hand, she felt a thrill go through her.

I am meeting Allen Ginsberg! “He’ll be reading in a few days. You should come. But tell me what you’ve discovered.”

She held the book out to him. “Nothing useful; you were right. There’s more about the cat in the painting than the woman who posed for it.”

He gave an appreciative grunt. “Not surprised. But I’ve had an idea. I know the perfect person to help us. I’m going to give him a call. Stop by tomorrow and I’ll let you know what he says.”

He turned back to the poet, and Stella walked to the door. She had almost reached it when Whitman called out, “Wait!” He came toward her and flicked her chin with his thumb. “Should you need a place to stay, remember that the door to Shakespeare and Company is always open. We are all homeless wanderers, but I never fail to recognize a Tumbleweed when I see one.”

Things Sound Better in French

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING AS Stella handed in her key, the grim receptionist gave her that particularly disapproving French stare. “You will be leaving us tomorrow.” Her voice was flat, emotionless; she was simply stating a fact.

“Actually”—Stella bit a nail—“I was thinking I might stay on a while longer?” She hated the way her voice rose as the sentence ended, turning it into a question.

“But you should have let us know earlier!” Now the receptionist was brusque and annoyed. “You cannot keep your room; a new guest will be taking it over.” She flipped open the reservation book and drew a finger down the page. “We could move you into a larger chamber, but that, of course, will be more expensive. And you must let me know by tonight. Without fail.”

“I will.” As she walked to Le Départ for her usual coffee, Stella berated herself for her docility; she was sure Victorine would not have been so meek. Still, when she walked into the bistro, her waiter nodded and pointed to her table with his chin, and she felt a little surge of pleasure; there was such comfort in familiarity.

Despite the early hour two working men in blue smocks were already standing, their bellies crammed against the counter, smoking cigarettes and drinking red wine. She ordered coffee and croissants, considering the hotel situation. Perhaps a new room would do her good, be a fresh start. Why not move to a new hotel? The thought was strangely cheering. She would begin again, erase the sad Paris weeks, pretend they’d never happened, as she began the hunt for Victorine’s lost art. In her mind’s eye she reviewed the dozens of budget hotels she passed each day, trying to remember which seemed most congenial. She would check in at the bookshop to see if George Whitman had located the friend who might help search for Victorine, and then she’d spend the afternoon looking for a new hotel. Tonight she would dine at Robert et Louise. Happy with her plan, she ordered a second café au lait.

THE THOUSANDS OF WRITERS, poets, and artists who had briefly made Shakespeare and Company their home came in singles and in pairs, occasionally with children

in tow, leaving behind reverent notes detailing the many ways the shop had changed their lives. The notes were everywhere: You couldn't take three steps without encountering a poem or an essay dedicated to George. As she moved through the cluttered rooms, hunting for George, Stella stopped to read them.

Dear Mr. Whitman,

My son ran away from home. Now I know that he's been sleeping in your library that he loves very much. Thank you for the help you give to everybody.

. . .

We met here twenty years ago and now we've come back with our daughter. I hope twenty years from now she too will become a Tumbleweed.

. . .

I will always remember my time at Shakespeare and Company. George Whitman changed my life by showing me what is truly important.

Stella knew all about Shakespeare and Company; you could not work in publishing without being aware that Sylvia Beach, the original proprietor, had opened the shop in 1919 and famously published James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922. All the American expat writers—Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Miller, Baldwin—had frequented the place. But the idea that people actually lived here—slept here—was new to her.

How did they do it? She wandered upstairs, looking around. Where did they bathe? How did they eat? George had called her a Tumbleweed, but he was wrong; she could not possibly sleep among strangers. The very idea was terrifying. And yet...He had obviously seen something in her. She thought of what Jules had said about her hidden talent.

"I see you are reading our history."

Stella jumped. She had not heard Rachel approach.

"It's so odd," she replied. "I don't understand how people can actually *live* here."

"I know what you mean." Rachel ran a hand through her hair. "I couldn't do it. There is absolutely no privacy." She sighed. "But some people seem to find it very freeing."

"Did Sylvia Beach come up with the idea of Tumbleweeds?"

"Oh, no, that's all George. This location never belonged to Sylvia Beach. When the Nazis arrived, they arrested her and burned all the books in the shop. She was locked up for six months, and when they finally released her, she came back to empty shelves and never reopened."

"So where does George come in?"

Rachel sighed again and crossed her arms; Stella saw that she had told this story many times. "He was one of the soldiers who liberated Paris, and he fell in

love with the city. Then the army, for some obscure reason, began giving out book vouchers to GIs. As you might imagine, most of the men who waded ashore on D-Day had more than books on their minds, but George began buying them up. Before long, his hotel room was so crammed with books there was no place for him to sleep. He rented a storefront and called it Le Mistral. All the artists and writers in Paris started hanging out there, and Sylvia Beach became his best customer. She was the one who urged him to adopt the name of her old store. Even though she preferred women, I've always thought she was a little in love with George—" She stopped talking so abruptly that Stella turned around to find out why.

The man himself had barged into the room. "Just who I was looking for!" George gave Stella a satisfied smile. "What good timing you have! I forgot to call the friend I wanted you to meet, but he just walked through the door. Kismet! Isn't it wonderful how things work out? Come! Let me introduce you."

He clattered down the stairs and as she followed, he pointed to a man with his back to them. "Oh, no," she breathed, as he turned around.

Silver hair. Faded clothing. That long Modigliani face. She felt her own face flush with embarrassment as she remembered the end of the evening.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked.

"You know each other?" George eyed them both with evident curiosity. "Where did you meet?"

Jules ignored him. "What do you think? I *told* you I had to visit Vézelay. I think I have found the perfect space to house my old friend's collection, and I'm taking the city fathers on a tour. But I thought I might see if George has a copy of that book you mentioned for Chef Meneau."

"What book?" asked George.

"*Murder in the Church*," said Jules. He turned to Stella. "It is a little-known secret that George has a passion for mysteries. One night when he was in his cups, he confessed that he hides them beneath his pillow."

"I should never have told you that!" Whitman was almost growling. "As for that particular book—pure trash."

"So you *do* have a copy!" The old man was triumphant. "I knew it!"

"It's nearly unreadable. It becomes bearable only when the author describes the cathedral. The description is so detailed, so beautifully written, that it might have been penned by an entirely different person."

Stella felt a little glow of satisfaction. That was her work.

"I'll try to find it," he continued, "but we have more important business. Stella is trying to locate some lost paintings, and I want you to help her."

"Is that so?" Jules raised a sardonic eyebrow. "I wonder what those paintings would be?"

“She can fill you in on the details.” Whitman was impatient. “But she doesn’t know how to begin. I was certain you’d have some advice; you’re an art consultant, after all, and you know everyone. And didn’t you work at the Jeu de Paume during the war?” He turned to Stella. “You still haven’t told me how it is that you and Jules came to know each other, but I’m betting he hasn’t told you that he was a hero of the Resistance.”

“Stop! She might believe you.”

“Don’t be so modest; I’ve heard the stories.” He turned to Stella. “You should know that standing before you is an extremely rare specimen: an old-fashioned Frenchman. He comes from a noble family, those people who still address intimates using the formal tense. He has houses and horses—”

“I have no horses,” Jules objected.

“—and a family crest. Have you seen his car?”

Jules squirmed, looking visibly uncomfortable. “Stop it!” he said forcefully. “I have no time for this. I’m expected in Vézelay.”

“Take Stella with you.” Whitman was imperious. “Treat her to a good lunch. Look how thin she is! In return I’ll give you the book. If, that is, I can find it.”

Jules shot her an inquiring look. Stella stood, agonized and undecided, unable to speak. She thought of all the grateful notes she’d just read; surely she could trust George Whitman?

“I assure you that you will be perfectly safe with Jules. As I said, a gentleman of the old school.” George Whitman seemed to have read her thoughts. “And while you’re there, have him show you around the cathedral; you could not have a better guide. Of course you must go! Now let me find that book.”

Before she could reply, Rachel entered the room. “My favorite customer!” She threw her arms around Jules. “Did you read that new edition of Lorca I recommended?”

“I did,” he said. “I enjoyed it. More to the point, my son says it’s the first really good edition, and he’s an expert. As for me, I’d prefer to read your own work.”

“Next time,” she promised.

“In the meantime, do you think you might persuade this young woman to accompany me to Vézelay? I’m having lunch at L’Espérance.”

“L’Espérance?” Rachel’s voice went up in a squeak of such open envy that she covered her mouth in embarrassment. “Why haven’t you invited me?”

“Next time I’ll take you,” he was saying as George returned, holding the book, “but only if you promise to share some of your writing.”

Rachel looked happier. “It’s a deal,” she said.

“WOULD I,” JULES asked as Paul navigated the *périphérique* out of the city in the elegant old car, “be correct in assuming that the paintings you’re looking for are Victorine’s?”

“Do you mind?”

“Not at all. But I must say I’m surprised. When we last met, you seemed determined to leave Paris. What made you change your mind?”

“It was partly you,” she admitted. “I was embarrassed by the way I behaved that night. I was such a coward. And I saw that it was exactly how I’d behaved the entire time I’d been in Paris. I’d just wasted it because I let my fears get the better of me. I felt I had to give it another try.” She was silent for a moment. “There’s something else too, but I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then we will not. But you led me to believe that you were out of money.”

“I was. But I returned the dress and got my money back.”

“Oh, that’s too bad.” He seemed genuinely chagrined.

“It was either the dress or Paris, and I chose Paris. Only this time it’s going to be different. You will be pleased to learn that I went to a restaurant and tried to pay attention to the food. And I enjoyed it!”

“Hunting for Victorine’s paintings should be enjoyable as well. But what made you decide that this is what you want to do?”

“It just felt right.” She was embarrassed, but she owed him this much. “The woman in the shop said I would know why I was at the Jeu de Paume when I got there. And I did! Standing there in that dress, it was as if Victorine was looking right through time, staring straight at me. I could almost hear her voice. She’s been erased from history and it just seems so wrong. I felt she was daring me to do something about it.”

It was more than this, she knew it. It had to do with Celia somehow and the way she had erased the real Stella to create a daughter more to her liking. But she was not prepared to share these thoughts with Jules. “The problem,” she said, “is that I don’t know how to begin.”

“It’s very simple, really. If you want to find Victorine’s paintings, you begin by finding her. When was she born? Where? What did she do, where did she go, how long did she live? Once you have the details of her life, you will know where to look for her paintings. It will give you a kind of road map.”

“But where do I start?”

He considered for a moment. “At the Bibliothèque Nationale. They keep the manuscripts about art at the Département des Épreuves on the rue Richelieu—it’s not far from the bookshop. There won’t be anything on Victorine herself—after all, she was just a woman in a time when women didn’t count—but if you begin with the biographies of the artists she modeled for, you’re sure to find references.

She worked for many men: not just Manet but also Degas, Alfred Stevens, Norbert Goeneutte, and Toulouse-Lautrec.”

“She modeled for Lautrec?”

“She did. I read somewhere that he called her ‘my Olympia.’ ”

“I bet she loved that!” said Stella.

AS THEY DROVE to Vézelay, Jules entertained her with stories of the artists he had known. He was easy company, and she could feel herself begin to relax. By the time they turned off the *route nationale*, she had grown completely comfortable. He looked at his watch. “My appointment with the city fathers is early this evening, but we have time to visit the cathedral before lunch.” He pointed at the church, which sat, large and rather squat, on the hill above them.

“I imagined it more graceful,” she said as Paul pulled up in front of the cathedral. Disappointed, she got out of the car.

“Wait.” He took her hand and laid it against the façade. The stones were warm. “Now try to imagine yourself into the body of a twelfth-century peasant. In your entire life you have never been farther than a mile from this village. You cannot read, have no movies, no poetry, no art. But there is the church, and every day you look up from your miserable hut to see the great edifice on the hill. And on Sunday, your only day of rest, you climb up to be welcomed by this.” He pointed to the lintel.

Stella closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun until the colors were pulsing orange and red against her eyelids. She opened them—the sky was very blue—and lowered her gaze, straining to see the sculptures with twelfth-century eyes. She took in a man with grotesque elephant ears, a person with a snout where his face should have been, another covered in feathers. “It’s a comic book!” She saw it so clearly. “Fantastic images of unknown creatures in unimaginably far-off lands.”

“Exactly!” He was pleased. “These infidels are horrible monsters who must be conquered to make the world safe for Christianity.”

“Propaganda carved in stone.” She wondered if he had brought his son here. He would have been a wonderful father, opening up the world for Jean-Marie. And so she looked again, imagining what it would be like to know nothing outside this village.

“To doubt that these creatures existed”—he pointed to a tiny pygmy using a ladder to mount his horse—“was not only wrong, it was blasphemy.” Jules pointed up to the giant figure of Christ, arms outspread among the crazy chaos of fantastic creatures. “The second and third Crusades were both launched from this very spot. Look at Christ and tell me what you see.”

Eager to please him, she replied, “He’s kind.” She looked at the beseeching arms. “Welcoming.”

“These peasants were raised on a forbidding Christ, bloody beneath his crown of thorns. It must have been a shock to encounter a benevolent God.”

“But what is he offering?”

“What else? Salvation. Come on Crusade and all your sins will be forgiven.” He took her hand, as if she were a child. “Come.”

Inside, as her eyes adjusted, she suddenly saw it. For just a moment the walls vanished, replaced by a soaring, ethereal light that made the air shimmer and glow. “It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“*This* is the promise. The reward for faithful endurance. The kingdom of heaven.”

Again, she felt the desire to not disappoint. She gave herself to the light. “They must have been cold in winter and hot in summer.” She was whispering. “Haunted by hunger. Worked to the bone. Tormented by insects—fleas, lice, mosquitoes. How easy they must have been to seduce! So much pain, so little joy.”

He looked at her. She realized that, but for the physical details, she might have been describing herself and that Jules knew it too. So much pain, so little joy. He patted her hand. “We’ll come back. But now we must go eat; it does not do to be late for a reservation.”

They walked to the village of Saint-Père, winding their way down a road dappled with apple blossoms. Above them the cathedral stood, vigilant and always visible. “I feel,” she remarked, “like Dorothy walking down the Yellow Brick Road.”

“Would that make me the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, or the Cowardly Lion?”

She considered. “You obviously lack neither a brain nor a heart. So I suppose you must be the lion.”

He produced a little grunt. “I’ve always considered courage overrated. It’s responsible for so many of the world’s troubles.”

She recalled Whitman saying that Jules was a hero of the Resistance and wanted to ask about that. Then, remembering how loath Jules had been to discuss it, she stopped herself. She wasn’t Celia. Not her business. “How do the French say Cowardly Lion?” she asked instead.

“*Lion Lâche.*”

“*Lion Lâche,*” she repeated. “It sounds so much better in French.”

“Most things do.”

They walked on, not saying much until the restaurant came into sight. Stella gaped at the elegant stone structure set in a verdant park; the low building, with

its rows of long shuttered windows, looked like a regal animal sleeping in the sun. “It’s so grand! I can’t eat there. I’m not dressed for it.” She gestured at her jeans.

“Nonsense.” He took her hand again, leading her through the garden and into a greenhouse attached to the restaurant. She entered reluctantly, slowly, feeling that she did not belong. But sunlight poured through the glass, and as the *maître d’* led them to a table, she began to savor the serenity. It was the most romantic room she had ever seen.

Then a man in a white coat—tall, his features strikingly large—was bearing down on them, his face radiating joy. “Monsieur Delatour!” Marc Meneau’s voice was deep. “*Je suis ravi de vous voir! Françoise!*” He called out to his wife, “*Viens vite!*”

A thin, beautifully dressed blonde appeared. She would have been intimidating, Stella thought, had her elegant clothing not been tempered by large hoop earrings and a warm and generous smile. She took Stella’s hand and then turned to Jules. The two of them began a lively argument with the chef; from what Stella could understand, they were discussing the meal.

Dishes began to arrive as soon as they sat down. There was a cool, slightly bitter aperitif and a dish of small, innocent-looking fried squares. The chef held out the plate: “*C’est très chaud—very hot—faites attention!*” Jules put one in his mouth, and Stella watched an expression of pure pleasure capture his face.

Stella followed suit, and when she bit down, she was shocked by the burst of liquid that ricocheted through her mouth. At first it was so intense she experienced only richness, but the savory notes shyly came forward to introduce themselves. Just as she was getting to know them, the profile shifted, growing increasingly sweet. She followed the flavors as they danced, teasing, changing. She closed her eyes, remembering the ortolan. And then she had it. “Melted foie gras!” She reached for another.

The chef was a master of texture. Oysters trembled, suspended in jellied sea water, as if Meneau had caused the tides to stop. He transformed lobster into a limpid broth so powerful the entire animal seemed to have melted into liquid. When he spooned a cool cream of caviar over the hot soup, the temperature changed in a way that reminded Stella of wading into water. She imagined sea lapping at sand. “He owns the ocean!”

Jules gave her a sharp look and she felt foolish. She sensed her cheeks flush. But all he said was, “Now you understand why Meneau is called the poet of the kitchen.”

He continued, “My wife loved this soup; I’d forgotten that. She never failed to order it.” He said it wonderingly, as if he had stumbled upon something important that he’d carelessly misplaced. She looked up, expecting sadness, but he was glowing, a man rediscovering forgotten pleasure.

“We used to bring Jean-Marie here; when he was small, he would follow Marc into the kitchen and come out with some concoction he’d just invented.”

“Remember that chestnut soup he made when he was—what—ten?” The chef was back, and Stella realized that he planned to serve them himself. “Your son was so creative; the entire staff loved having him with us in the kitchen. I hope he’s still cooking?”

“I wouldn’t know.” The glow had gone, and Jules’s voice was sad.

“It was always a joy to cook for Madame Delatour as well,” the chef interjected quickly. “We all miss her. I have made the next dish in her honor.” He held out a ceramic terrine and lifted the lid; fragrant steam cascaded into the air. Stella peered into the pot: an entire lobe of foie gras, pale and grave, rested on a dull bed of lentils and onions. A somber winter dish. Puzzled, she glanced at the flowers bursting into bloom outside. “*Au revoir à l’hiver*,” the chef whispered. “Goodbye to winter.”

“But...more foie gras?” Jules sounded puzzled. He looked up at the chef. “I have never known you to repeat yourself.”

“And I do not do so today.” With a flourish, the chef stuck a fork into the liver, pulled it out, set it aside. “*Au revoir le foie gras*.” Then he scooped the lentils onto their plates. “I have always wanted to do this. And I knew *you* were one who would appreciate it....”

“Vatel,” murmured Jules.

The two men exchanged a conspiratorial glance. Stella looked at them, waiting for an explanation.

“Vatel”—Jules steepled his fingers and sat back in his chair—“was one of the original creators of French gastronomy. His most famous exploit was a banquet for two thousand in honor of Louis the Fourteenth. It did not, I might add, end well for him, but that’s another story. The tale I like best is the time he asked his employer for fifty head of cattle to make a consommé.”

“Fifty head? For soup?”

“Which was, of course, exactly what his employer said.” Jules held up the little finger of his right hand. “‘Monsieur,’ Vatel replied, ‘I will reduce those fifty head of cattle to an elixir no larger than this.’ That is, I believe, more or less what Monsieur Meneau has done to the foie gras.”

Meneau bowed his head, clearly pleased at being so perfectly understood.

Lobster arrived in a coat of lard, which transformed the animal into something soft and fragile enough to eat with a spoon. Afterward, the tiniest leg of lamb, in delicate pink slices resembling no meat Stella had ever tasted.

The meal marched on. Time vanished. “Is there anything he *isn’t* serving us?” Stella whispered. She glanced out the window and saw that the day had slipped away. Had Jules forgotten his appointment?

“He’s trying to impress you,” Jules replied.

“Me?”

“Well, he has no need to impress me!” She looked at his face, which radiated a kind of joy she had not noticed at L’Ami Louis. She thought back to that other meal and realized that there had been a kind of tension to his demeanor, as if he sensed that someone was there, looking over his shoulder, judging him. *Who?* she wondered. But if anyone was here at L’Espérance, it was his wife, and the mere thought of her seemed to make him happy.

A waiter set a small tart of caramelized pears before each of them and added a dab of licorice ice cream. Next came bananas topped with passion fruit and black pepper, little pirouettes of pleasure.

The meal was as large and generous as the chef himself, and by the time he was serving them aged Armagnac with a ripe Roquefort, Stella’s head was spinning. Although they were now surrounded by people eating dinner, new dishes kept arriving. Petit fours appeared, and then chocolates. A basket of fruit. Jules and the chef toasted each other with fragrant fruit brandies. Stella struggled to keep her eyes open. But it was too much, and she cradled her head on her arms, closed her eyes, and drifted off, letting their conversation cascade across her, soothing as water in a brook.

“It was a pleasure to cook for her,” she heard the chef remark. “It is rare to find an American who truly appreciates food. Where did you find her?”

“*Aux Deux Magots*. You remember, Marc, the way my wife used to eat, as if each bite was reverberating through her entire body? The way this young woman was eating reminded me of that. Like my wife, she has a talent for food. But she is utterly unaware of it.”

The chef was quiet for a moment. And then Stella thought she heard him say something curious. Or maybe she was dreaming. “So you intend to introduce her to herself?”

“Something like that. But I very much doubt she will permit it.”

“You must bring her back to me. Please. It is so rare to find people who eat with such intelligence.”

Jules bowed his head. “I’ll try.”

—

WHEN STELLA WOKE, she opened her eyes to a darkness so profound that she saw nothing. She had a vague recollection of the evening’s end. They had been in a restaurant. Then a car. And then—was it possible? Had someone carried her to bed? Where was she? Totally disoriented, she reached out her arms, patting about in a blind attempt to explore her surroundings.

She racked her fuzzy brain. A memory surfaced, and she snatched at the sneaky flavor of passion fruit dancing on her tongue. Another: Bananas. Licorice ice cream. Slowly the meal returned, and with it the memory of the day. The old man with the Modigliani face. The golden light in the cathedral. The meal that stretched from lunch past dinner. She must have fallen asleep at the table. What then? She strained to remember.

She sat up, still slightly tipsy, trying to figure out where she was. The bed was enormous, the sheets lightly scratchy—linen?—and trimmed with lace. She touched the cover, which was luxuriously soft. Rolling to the edge of the mattress, she realized the bed was enclosed by curtains. She hesitated for a moment, then pulled one aside.

Moonlight streamed through antique glass windows, illuminating a serene room papered in an old-fashioned floral print. An antique wooden armoire stood in one corner, a carved straight-backed chair in another. The air was still.

A hotel? She looked for a phone, but there was none. It hit her that this must be the château Jules had mentioned, and for a moment she was glad the alcohol had not worn off. Sober, she would have been terrified, but what she felt now was mostly curiosity. Climbing down from the enormous bed, she went to the door, fumbled for the knob, and peered into a dark hallway. She could see nothing, so she edged out of the room, waiting for her eyes to adjust. Taking tiny steps, hands outstretched in front of her, she moved carefully forward until she felt a wall. Pivoting so her back was against it, she began sliding slowly through the dark. She wanted to know where she was.

But the hallway was endless! Groping her way along until she came to the end, she stood, not knowing which way to turn. She turned right. When she came to another corner, she went left. It seemed that hours passed as she went down one long hallway after another, encountering nothing, seeing no one. Her bare feet felt like blocks of ice on the cool wooden floors. She turned, intending to go back to her room, and realized she had no idea how to find it. Utterly lost now, she chased up and down strange drafty halls, hugging herself to keep warm. At last she found a stairway and, heaving a sigh of relief, crept down it.

But the ground floor was equally deserted. As she walked through what seemed like dozens of grand, furniture-filled rooms, she felt the effect of the alcohol wear off, leaving fear in its place.

It was a relief when the wooden floors gave way to cold slate: She had found the kitchen. In the dim aura of the pilot light, she could just make out the large, squat form of an ancient oven in a corner. She was moving toward the light when something brushed against her leg. Her heart stopped. She jumped and let out a frightened squeak.

It was only a cat. Staring up at her, eyes glowing, it began to wind seductively around her legs. Relieved, she bent to pet it. “Are you hungry?” she asked, grateful for the company of another living creature. “Lead me to the refrigerator,” she continued, “and I’ll give you some milk.”

Tail high, the cat obliged. Stella opened the door and extracted a bottle just as a loud male voice shouted, “*Qui est là?*” She jumped, dropping the bottle, which shattered loudly on the slate.

A light blazed on and the kitchen leapt into vivid color. In the shocked silence she was aware of the hum of the refrigerator, the quiet hiss of the pilot in the stove, the ticking of a clock, and the cat placidly lapping spilled milk. Legs shaking, Stella turned to find a man she had never seen before glaring at her with suspicious eyes. “*Que faites-vous ici?*”

“What?” She had lost whatever French she’d had.

“What are you doing here?” His English was accented.

“Jules...” she stammered.

His blue eyes studied her with disdainful suspicion. “How do you know my father?”

This must be Jean-Marie. He looked like Jules; even tired, half drunk, and disoriented, she registered how striking that Modigliani face was on a younger man. His feet and chest were bare, his jeans unbelted: He looked as if he had leapt naked from bed and pulled on the first item of clothing that came to hand.

She stared at him, not knowing what to say; even her English had deserted her. At her feet the cat continued lapping milk while they stood there, silent and motionless. *We’re like a film that has been paused*, she thought, afraid she would start laughing and be unable to stop.

They might have stayed there forever, staring at each other, unmoving. But a door opened and, as if a director had shouted, “Action!” they both turned toward it. Even the cat looked up from the milk as someone entered the room.

“I see you have met.” The light illuminated his long Modigliani face. Jules.

“Have you made the introductions? Stella, allow me to present my son, Jean-Marie. Jean-Marie, this is a new friend. She has come to visit the cathedral.”

The young man’s eyes narrowed. He did not offer his hand. “I see.” The words were scornful, an insinuation. Then he began to speak in rapid-fire French.

They were speaking too fast and angrily for Stella to follow, but Jules seemed to be trying to placate his son, which only annoyed Jean-Marie further. She caught a few words—“*pauvre vieillard, risible, pathétique*”—and watched the father color. At last Jules drew himself up and said very coldly, “*Ça suffit. J’en ai marre. Taisez-vous.* Be quiet.”

Stella was surprised when the son closed his mouth on whatever he had been about to say. Surprised too by the formal way they addressed each other. They

had used the formal *vous* instead of the familiar *tu*, as if they were strangers.

“I have not finished.” The young man planted himself, face set, arms crossed defiantly over his chest.

“*Assez*,” said the father. “Enough.” And then, wearily accepting the inevitable, “We will talk tomorrow. Go to bed, Jean-Marie.”

The son turned to leave, his steps reluctant. Then he took an audible breath, walked through the door, and slammed it behind him.

Jules stared at the thick slab of wood, his face yearning rather than angry. Stella thought he was willing his son to come back.

At last he sighed and looked at Stella.

“Did he frighten you?”

“A little,” she admitted.

“My apologies. You fell asleep at the table. It was too late to drive back to Paris, and there were no rooms available at L’Espérance.” He shrugged. “So we brought you here.”

“How did I get upstairs?”

“Paul carried you. My apologies again. It must have been frightening, waking up in a strange place, not knowing where you were. I should have thought to leave a light on.”

“Your house is so big! I kept getting lost.”

He gave a rueful laugh. “It is absurdly large, one of those old monstrosities that every generation has felt compelled to add onto. My wife used to say you had to be born here to know your way around. She insisted that she kept discovering rooms she’d never seen before.”

“I couldn’t find a way back. I was so relieved to find the kitchen. Then your son came rushing in. I guess he thought he heard a burglar.”

“He thought no such thing!” Jules stepped across the shattered glass and extracted a fresh bottle of milk from the refrigerator. He reached for a pot, poured the milk into it, and lit a burner. “One of the servants called to inform him that I had arrived with a young woman, and Jean-Marie came racing down from Paris to save me from myself.” He sighed. “I suppose I should be flattered.”

They both watched little bubbles form around the edge of the pot. He poured the milk into a mug, added a drop of vanilla, and handed it to her.

“I don’t understand.” The adrenaline had ebbed, leaving Stella with aching muscles and a strange sense of peace. In the dark warmth of the kitchen, she sipped the thick, rich milk.

“You don’t need to.” Jules took the empty cup from her hand. “Come. I will guide you back to your room. The milk should help you sleep.”

The Movement of the Sun

SHE WOKE DISORIENTED. OPENING HER eyes, she saw the curtains around the bed, and the memory of the night came flooding back.

She stumbled to the bathroom. In the mirror her face stared back, pale and smudged, as if someone had taken an eraser to it. She washed and washed, hoping to put herself back in order as her tidy mind attempted to organize the day. But she did not know what lay before her, which filled her with a familiar sense of dread.

She sat on the bed, chewing her nails. This is what happened when you went sailing off with strangers. She had to get back to Paris, but she did not even know how to find the front door. Never again! Trying to calm herself, she imagined her room on the rue Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre and hung a mental calendar on the wall. At ten every morning she would be at the Bibliothèque Nationale. She would find a nearby café for lunch. At five she would walk back to the hotel, have a rest before dinner. Then she would dine at Robert et Louise. It was a fine little plan. Now all she had to do was get back to Paris.

She tried to straighten her rumpled clothes, then made the bed, smoothing it over and over until no trace of her occupancy remained. Then she went to the door.

She stopped. Someone was out there! Opening the door a stealthy crack, she nervously looked out to see a young woman in a white apron, standing very straight. Her blond hair was plaited in two braids that looped around either side of her face, lending her the innocent look of a figure in an old Dutch painting. How long had she been there? What time was it?

“Follow, please?” The woman headed down the corridor. Stella obeyed, and the heels of their shoes clicked on the wooden floors as they went along one hallway after another. At last they reached a stairway much grander than the one she had crept down in the night.

Downstairs they passed through cluttered rooms overflowing with furniture. Brocades, chintzes, Turkish carpets—a kaleidoscope of textures and colors unfolded before Stella. Her guide scurried ahead, moving so quickly that Stella had only the vaguest impression of the dark old portraits and murky landscapes on the walls.

The woman came to a stop before a large wooden door, pushed it open, and indicated that Stella should precede her. Stella took two steps, looked up, and came to an abrupt halt.

THE DINING ROOM seemed to belong to another house. Spare as a monastery, it was all clean lines and hard surfaces. The walls were white and utterly bare, and a table hewn from a single plank of an enormous tree stood in the center of the room. One entire wall was glass. A huge yellow spray of forsythia in the corner seemed to gather all the light in the room to illuminate a tall soaring curve of white marble standing in front of it. Without thinking, Stella walked over and ran her hand across the smooth stone.

“I can never resist doing that either.”

Entranced by the room and the sculpture, she had barely noticed his presence, but now she saw that the old man was seated at the far end of the table.

Jules continued. “After the war—it must have been 1923—I walked into Brancusi’s studio and there it was. I thought I had never seen anything so beautiful.”

“I know what you mean. There’s a Brancusi at the Guggenheim that I used to visit when I was little. I always wished I could take it home.”

“*The Seal?*”

“Yes! I love Brancusi’s simplicity. It’s as if he had the ability to listen to the marble and know what it wanted to be. His sculptures seem so natural, as if they were not made by human hands.”

Jules’s smile warmed her; she had pleased him. “This one is called *Bird in Space*. He made it over and over, as if he could never quite achieve what he was aiming for. He preferred the ones he cast in bronze, because he liked the way the luminous metal nearly vanishes in certain light.”

“Like the cathedral.”

“Exactly! But I’ve always preferred this marble one. The moment I saw it I knew I had to have it. I sold my car and bought it for my mother for her birthday.” He said it so casually, as if everyone could simply buy great art when they encountered it.

“She must have loved it!”

He made a face as if he’d tasted something bitter and gestured toward the rooms Stella had just traversed. “You’ve seen the house! Mother was unwilling to acknowledge that time has passed. She exiled the piece to one of the small drawing rooms no one ever enters.”

“Oh, poor bird!” Stella caressed the sculpture with a protective hand.

“She was delighted, though, when an American gallery imported the metal version for a show, and the customs people famously taxed it as machinery. ‘*They* know this is not art!’ she said triumphantly. ‘Please remove it from my house.’”

“Did you?”

“Of course! I was living in a small apartment at the time, and my bird and I were very happy there. Then my future wife saw it.... When I asked her to marry me, she said she would marry the bird and I could come along.”

Stella laughed. “She had good taste *and* a sense of humor.”

“Yes,” he said simply. “There was no one like her. She—” He started to say something, then stopped himself. “Coffee?” he asked instead.

She nodded. She would have liked to ask about his wife, but she had no desire to intrude. He obviously missed her, but despite yesterday’s happy memories, she thought it might sometimes be a painful subject. Instead, she asked about this visit to Vézelay.

“My friend Christian Zervos and his wife were great collectors, and they’ve left everything to this city in their will. Vézelay plans to open a modern-art museum, and they’ve asked for my help. I remembered that the writer Romain Rolland had a beautiful townhouse near the cathedral, and I thought it would be a perfect setting for the art. I came to show it to the city fathers. But...” He looked slightly embarrassed. “I’m afraid Marc fed us too well. I’ll have to come back next week.” He poured steaming liquid from a silver pot into a blue porcelain bowl, picked up a pitcher of hot milk, and cocked his head inquiringly. She nodded again.

“So you’re an art consultant?”

“Purely by accident. I was brought up to believe that gentlemen did not work and even talking about money was vulgar. My father and his friends thought of their investments as hobbies.” He produced an ironic little smile. “And yet they were always impressed when those hobbies proved lucrative. When my father saw that the art I bought was growing increasingly valuable, he began asking for introductions to my friends. Artists always need money, so I was happy to oblige. Before long, my father had gained a reputation as a connoisseur. The strange thing is, he believed it.”

“But he wasn’t?” The coffee was strong, hot, and slightly sweet. She inhaled the steam.

“Oh, no. Art brought him no pleasure. To him it was just another investment, no different than stocks or jewelry or real estate.”

“And to you?”

“I buy what I love. I support the artists I believe in. Money has never mattered much to me.”

Easy to say, she thought, looking around. “It took money to build this beautiful room for your bird.”

“It was my wife, actually, who built this room.” She started to protest, and he raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “But I see your point.” He nodded to the handsome objects around him: a blue egg perched in a delicate porcelain cup, a sterling-silver spoon, a crystal pitcher filled with orange juice. Even the clothes he wore—a lemon-yellow shirt beneath a faded russet sweater—had an effortless beauty. “The irony, of course, is that in the end all the things my father considered serious investments were worth nothing, and our family’s most valuable possessions turned out to be the result of our passions: mine for art and his for wine.”

Suddenly the door burst open and Jules’s son stormed into the room. Jean-Marie would be so handsome, Stella thought, if he bothered to smile, but now his angry face was lined, as if he had slept badly. As he stood glaring at his father, she thought how striking Jules must have been when he was in his prime.

“She could be your granddaughter!”

Jules sighed and fiddled with the coffeepot, looking deeply embarrassed. “My great-granddaughter, actually,” he replied, and then glanced at Stella and switched into French. “*À mon âge, vous savez, il faut profiter de toute occasion de bonheur qui sert. On n’en trouve pas souvent.*”

His son sputtered until he grew so apoplectic that he could not speak.

Stella could hardly look at him, but then Jules shot her a mischievous glance. Was he baiting his son?

“You’d like me to be a sad old man.” Jules had switched into English. “But why should I?”

He was baiting his son!

Jean-Marie’s foot took over for the lost voice. He stamped it. “But you are making yourself ridiculous! It is painful to watch.” He looked at Stella and switched back to French. “*Vous allez me donner un frère qui pourrait être mon fils.*”

Jules looked at his son and said something in French that Stella did not understand. But the subtext was plain: Jean-Marie seemed to think his father was looking for a young wife. Did he not know the man at all? Even Stella could tell, despite their very brief acquaintance, that Jules was still in love with his late wife.

Jules watched his son with the most extraordinary expression on his face: equal parts pain and amusement. At last he said, “Enough! It’s not a very flattering picture that you paint, but at least you’re being honest.”

“*Mais non, Papa.*” Stella watched Jean-Marie attempt to rearrange his face. “Of course I hope that you will enjoy the time that is left to you.” And then, obviously unable to control himself, he blurted out, “But I worry. It’s not just the

woman. I think you are losing your touch. That awful art you keep buying!" He patted the air, fending off protests. "Spare me the lecture. I know you did very well in your time. The Picassos, the Braques, and the Brancusis were all excellent investments."

"Not to mention the—"

"But that was then!" Jean-Marie was still sputtering. "You're an old man now, and these contemporary artists are another matter. You are ruining your reputation, buying paintings by those Americans you think so much of. I'm pretty sure that Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol will soon be forgotten."

"Sometimes," Jules murmured, "you remind me very much of your grandfather."

Jean-Marie stamped his foot again. "And now you show up with this girl we know nothing about! What do you think Maman would say?"

"What do *you* think she would say?"

"She would call you an old fool."

"But as you know, your mother had a great respect for fools."

It was clearly too much for Jean-Marie. He turned on his heel and stalked out of the room. Stella followed him with her eyes; she couldn't help it. On a slim young man, that Modigliani face was really striking.

Jules poured more coffee into Stella's bowl. "My apologies. He worries too much. About all the wrong things." His face crumpled and he suddenly looked old. "He was the most delightful little boy, with a charming sense of humor and enormous curiosity. But his mother's death hit him very hard—they were very close—and the timing could not have been worse. He had just met the awful woman who is now his fiancée. She saw her opportunity, seized the moment, and now he's turned into someone I barely recognize. I feel as if Eugénie has hijacked my son. I know the real Jean-Marie must still be in there, but I can't seem to reach him."

"I'm sorry." It was all she could think of to say.

"I have to believe that Jean-Marie will come to his senses. I only hope that he does so before it's too late." He sighed and glanced at his watch. "We can talk about this later, but right now I need to go to the cathedral. The service starts at eight."

"Do you go to church every morning?" He hardly seemed like the religious type.

"I never miss it when I'm here," he said solemnly.

THEY JOINED THE queue of worshippers walking through the massive doors of the cathedral. Inside, light shimmered down from the clerestory window and the air

vibrated with sonorous music. White-robed nuns and monks were singing as they walked solemnly through the church. The sound eddied through the space like water, the musical voices soaring through the columns, out the rose windows, up to heaven.

“Oh, my,” she said. “Oh, my.” She abandoned herself to the joyous sound.

When the music ended, the monks and nuns, quiet now, moved solemnly down the nave and out the door. “I was somewhere else,” she admitted. “The air was alive and I did not want to return.”

He drew her arm through his. “There is something else I want to show you.” She could still feel the vibration of the music in her bones as they walked slowly down the long nave, following the path of the vanished singers. He pointed to the stones beneath their feet. “Exactly at noon on the summer solstice, the sunlight comes through the clerestory windows and casts rings of light, perfect circles, all the way down the nave.”

“Really?” She stared at the floor. “Is it an accident?”

He shook his head. “Surely not.”

“So you are telling me that in the twelfth century they calculated the movement of the sun so precisely they were able to create a building that is, in essence, a giant sundial?”

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

“Are you sure? It wasn’t in any of the literature I read about the church.”

“Come back on the summer solstice and see for yourself.”

“Why wouldn’t something like that be in the books about the cathedral?” Stella cast her mind back to her research.

“A good question. I don’t know the answer. But I suspect it has something to do with our thinking about the Middle Ages. Admitting that they could calculate the orbit of the sun challenges everything we think we know.”

“Yes. Yesterday you were telling me they were illiterate peasants who knew nothing of the world.”

“And both are true. Were true.” He gestured around the church. “There is so much to learn here, if only one takes the time to look. But come, you’ve had no breakfast. And music always makes me hungry.”

Her arm still tucked into the crook of his elbow, he led her outside. At the door she turned for one last look. “I’ll be back,” she murmured.

He led her through the echoing town, past stone houses with tiled roofs and beneath buttresses bridging narrow streets. Curious about his son, she wanted to ask about the scene he had made in the dining room, but she couldn’t think of a discreet path to the question. Instead, she took a detour. “Did your father,” she asked, “like L’Espérance?”

He gave her a sharp glance. “Why do you ask?”

“I was thinking about last night. You seemed much happier than you were at L’Ami Louis.”

“You are very perceptive. My father was not a fan of L’Espérance.”

“Why?”

“Snobbery, mostly. Marc Meneau’s mother had a modest grocery store in Saint-Père, but when he was courting his wife, he taught himself to cook. He thought that if he turned the shop into a restaurant, she might agree to marry him; that’s why he named it ‘hope.’ ”

“That’s lovely!”

“My father didn’t think so. He believed that people should know their place. Even after L’Espérance had a Michelin star, he refused to patronize the restaurant. It would infuriate him to know that Marc is expected to get his third star in the next few years....”

“Do you think that would change your father’s mind?”

Jules smiled. “Oh, definitely. Three stars in Vézelay! Still, I can hear him saying”—he dropped his voice into a deep baritone—“ *‘Il faut respecter le foie gras! What kind of a fool uses foie gras to flavor lentils?’* ”

“But your wife liked L’Espérance?”

“Oh, very much. But she was a person who appreciated beauty and imagination. And she was utterly without snobbery.”

“You said this morning that she had a great appreciation for fools....”

Jules gave her a look of respect, as if he’d been wondering when she was going to ask about Jean-Marie and was surprised by the deft way she’d handled it. Above them, a bird let out a little trill. They were passing a bistro, tables spilling onto the sidewalk, and he crossed the narrow street, as if he didn’t want to be overheard.

“I told you that Jean-Marie was very close to his mother. Looking back, I think we were not like other families. We had him rather late in life and we were grateful. We both enjoyed Jean-Marie so much that we had no nannies and simply took him along wherever we went.”

“How nice for him.” Stella knew her voice was wistful.

“I’m not sure. Perhaps we were selfish. When my wife fell ill—it was an aggressive cancer that took her very quickly—I retreated into my grief, and when I emerged, Jean-Marie had turned into someone I no longer knew.”

“How is that possible?”

“I blame myself. And his fiancée. Eugénie is a cold, beautiful, and manipulative creature, who I suspect wants him only for his money. I’m sure that if his mother had lived, the relationship would never have lasted. But in his moment of need, she was there.” He gave a sad shrug. “And I was not.”

“You love him very much.” She wondered if Jean-Marie appreciated how lucky he was to have this man for a father. He gave her a sharp glance as they wound their way through the narrow streets, passing a bakery, a fishmonger, and a butcher before Jules spoke again.

“My wife and I both loathed the woman. We secretly called her ‘the Empress,’ but we didn’t worry. We were convinced that, despite Eugénie’s beauty, Jean-Marie would soon see through her. But now, I am sorry to say, he is completely in her thrall. He grows stuffer by the moment.”

Stella knew how it felt to be overwhelmed by a manipulator and now her heart went out to Jean-Marie. Remembering the conversation at breakfast, she gathered her courage and asked, “I had a feeling you were teasing him this morning....”

Jules had the grace to look chagrined. “I can’t help myself. When he starts in with his absurd theories about how I’m going to find a new young wife and have another family...my sense of the ridiculous gets the better of me. The old Jean-Marie would have laughed with me, but the new one always takes the bait. Surely it was the Empress who filled his head with this nonsense and sent him speeding down here to protect me from the beautiful young American fortune hunter.”

“Me?” She laughed and he joined her, and they were still laughing as he pushed open a thick wooden door set into the side of a building on the corner. He ushered her into a shadowy room filled with rustic furniture. “*Pas maintenant,*” a rough female voice growled from another room. “We are closed.”

“Even for me, Mathilde? No one makes an omelet like you.”

“*Monsieur Jules, c’est vous? Je m’excuse. Pour vous, nous sommes toujours ouverts.* We are always open for you!” A small woman with short gray hair and a cheerful open face came bustling toward them, wiping her hands on a blue cotton apron. “And you are not alone. *À la bonne heure!*”

She led them through the empty restaurant, opened a door, and ushered them out to a vine-covered arbor perched on the edge of the village plateau. They sat down at a little table swathed in a cloth printed with bluebirds. Sunlight filtered through the arbor and vineyards stretched below them, surrounding a cluster of whitewashed houses with red tiled roofs.

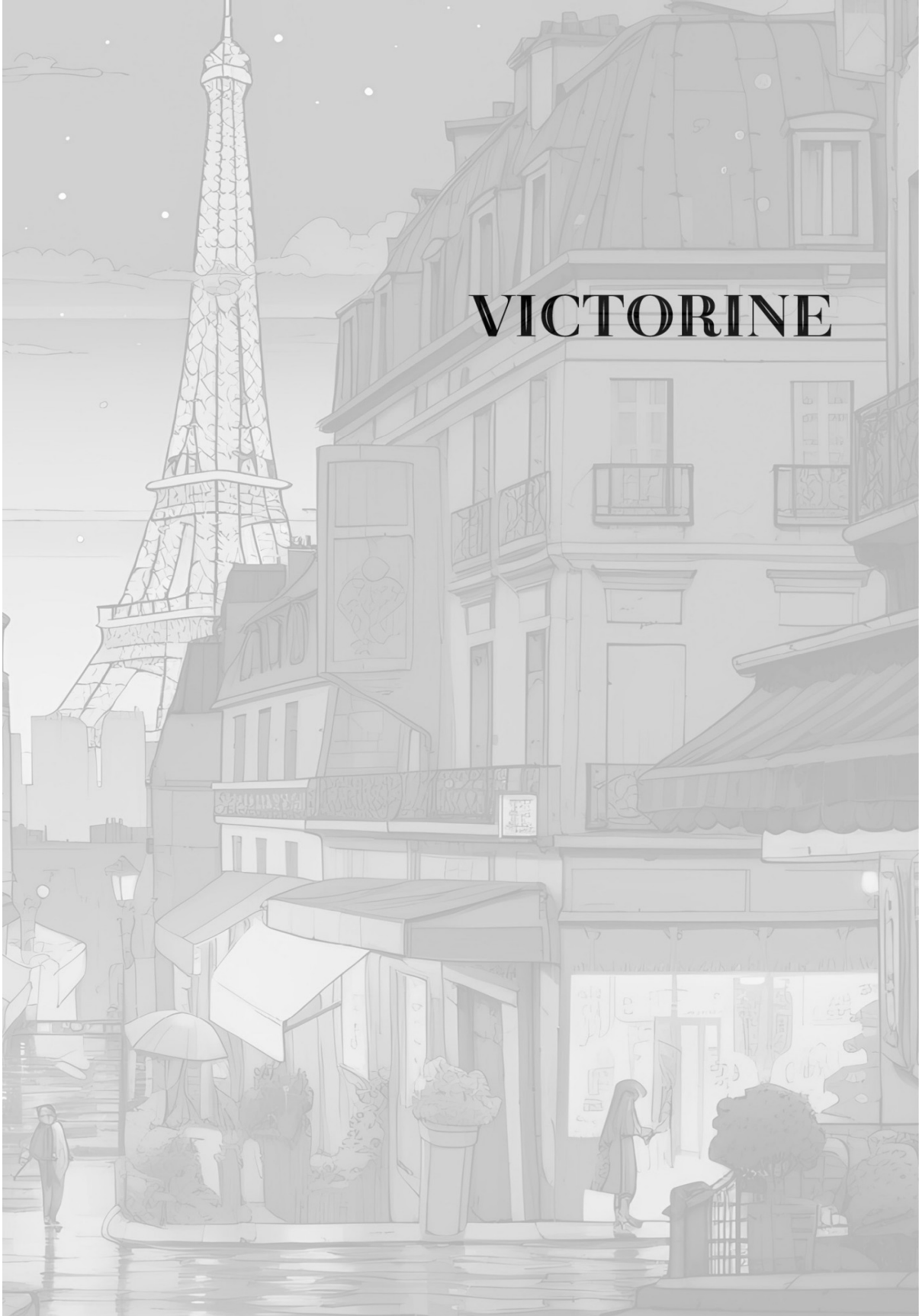
Baskets of croissants arrived, along with an entire baguette, still warm from the oven. Cold chunks of golden butter; pots of thickly fruited jam. Mathilde handed them each a deep bowl of café au lait and began covering the table with little dishes. Small pungent goat cheeses. Wild strawberries. Thick creamy yogurt. Honey still in the comb. “*Servez-vous,*” she called from inside as she made their omelets.

Stella spread the cold butter and watched it melt onto the warm bread. She added apricot jam, and when a spoonful fell onto her shirt, she swiped at it with a

finger, which she then put into her mouth. “I feel as if I could eat everything on the table.”

“Then by all means do.”

“That music...” She struggled for words. “It filled me with awe. Something so simple. It makes me hungry for the world.” She blushed and said, “I know I’m babbling. But I feel as if the world is filled with music I have never heard. I wonder what else I am missing?”



VICTORINE

Tumbling

WHEN STELLA RETURNED TO THE hotel, the receptionist glared at her and admonished, “Where have you been? I had to personally pack your things! You paid only through last night, and”—she checked her watch—“checkout time was hours ago.”

“I *told* you I might stay a bit longer.”

The woman breathed out quickly, like a snorting horse. She was furious. “And I told you,” she continued, “that if you desired to prolong your stay, you were to advise me of that fact. Did I hear one single word? I did not. It is April in Paris, and we have no rooms to spare. *Nous sommes complets.*” She gave the bell on the desk a smart slap, and the sad old man who was the bellboy appeared. “Jacques, fetch Mademoiselle’s luggage.” The man gave Stella an embarrassed look, as if he was responsible for the woman’s rudeness.

“Wait!” she whispered, following him. “Can I leave my luggage while I look for another hotel?” She handed over a few francs.

He pocketed the change. “Try the Henri IV, on the rue Saint-Jacques. The rooms are small but clean.”

But the receptionist there shook her head. “*Pas de chambres,*” she said. “Perhaps the Saint-Séverin?”

At each hotel the receptionist suggested another one, but every place was fully booked. “I’m sorry,” said the receptionist at the Hôtel de Notre-Dame, “in April the whole world wants to be in Paris.”

By the tenth hotel, Stella was exhausted and still in need of a room. Dispirited, she made her way to Shakespeare and Company, eager for a friendly face. Instead, she found a disheveled George Whitman, who took one look at her and said with obvious relief, “Just in time!”

“Excuse me?”

“I have to pick up some books, and *someone’s* got to watch the shop.” He gestured around, as if his books required a live companion. “Rachel has gone off God knows where, and everyone else seems to be sleeping.”

“At four o’clock?”

He scowled as if she’d said something stupid. “At the moment we seem to have an inordinate number of nocturnal Tumbleweeds. It’s a very good thing

you've come." With that, George Whitman threw a scarf around his neck and walked out the door. Seconds later he was back. "Oh, yes. My daughter Lucie's around here somewhere. She'll need something to eat soon. There's soup in the pot on the stove, and I'm pretty sure the baguette is still edible." He moved to the door, stopped, turned back. "One more thing. Allen Ginsberg is coming to read tonight. We'll surely get a crowd. Bake some gingerbread when you have a moment. And don't sell anything that isn't marked." Then he flung the door open, jumped onto the old Mobyette parked outside, and vanished, smoke trailing behind the wheezing machine.

Stella sat down and put her head in her hands. This was not what she'd hoped for; she'd come looking for company. She was still trying to decide what to do when the little blond girl she had seen the other day appeared. She addressed Stella plaintively: "I'm hungry! Where's Rachel?"

"I have no idea," Stella replied.

"It would be very nice if you could please find me some food." The little girl—she must be Lucie—offered her an ingratiating smile.

Stella was not good with children; she never knew how to talk to them. But Lucie was not like any child she had previously encountered. Obviously accustomed to strangers, she was a gracious little hostess, taking Stella on a tour of the shop before showing her upstairs into the kitchen. Lucie frowned at the strange-looking soup in the pot and requested a scrambled egg instead.

"Your father asked me to make gingerbread." Stella broke eggs into a cracked bowl. "But I don't know how. Do you?" She looked down at the girl. "How old are you anyway?"

"I'm seven. So of course I don't know how. But I can show you where we keep the cookbooks."

By the time Rachel showed up, they were sitting on the floor in the Writer's Room, open cookbooks spread around them. Rachel pushed red strands away from her pale, slightly apologetic face and pointed at Lucie. "I hope you fed her. Her mother's away at some artists' retreat and I'm supposed to be looking after her." She shook her head, muttering, "I didn't come to Paris to be a babysitter."

"I'm not a baby and I don't need a sitter!" Lucie put her hand in Stella's. "But I have a new friend."

"What an excellent arrangement." Rachel beat a hasty exit.

"Rachel doesn't like children," Lucie confided. "But now I have you."

Stella was surprised by the surge of pleasure that radiated through her body.

They perused all the cookbooks in the shop until they found a simple recipe in a stained copy of *The Silver Palate Cookbook*; Stella found it hard to believe that a few modest ingredients—flour, an egg, boiling water, a couple of spices—could actually produce a cake, but as the kitchen filled with the welcoming scent of

ginger and cinnamon, she began to think that cooking might be fun. They pulled the dark, fragrant cake from the oven and she cut a slice for Lucie.

“You’re a good cook!” The little girl solemnly held out the cake and Stella took a bite. It was delicious; she felt rather proud of herself.

Hours later, George Whitman returned to find Lucie and Stella sitting on a broken-down sofa in the crowded Children’s Room with his dog, Baskerville, curled up at their feet. A huge pile of children’s books surrounded them.

“There you are!” He said it as if they had gone missing. “Anyone interesting appear in my absence?”

“You’ll have to ask Rachel. We’ve been holed up in here.”

“I like her.” Lucie laid a possessive hand on Stella’s knee.

“Good.” He pointed to an alcove above their heads enclosed by red velvet curtains. “You can sleep up there. David Rakoff just left, so you can have his place.”

“No, no, no.” It hit her that George thought she intended to take him up on his offer. “I’m not a Tumbleweed.”

“Of course you are! You just don’t know it yet.” He gave her a fierce look. “I *always* recognize a Tumbleweed when I see one.”

“I’ll stay tonight,” she conceded. “At the moment I don’t actually have a hotel.” She peered at the rickety ladder leading to the alcove, wondering if it was sturdy enough to climb. And if she had brought her suitcase, where would she put it?

“Stay as long as you like,” Whitman said magnanimously, “but we do have rules.”

“Rules?”

“You help out when we need you. You read a book a day. And nobody leaves until they have written an autobiography.”

“An autobiography?”

“All Tumbleweeds do it.”

She thought about her daily routine back in New York. “But there’s nothing interesting about me.”

“Interesting people are the only ones who ever say that.”

“But it’s true!” He looked at her so skeptically that she tried to think of a way to convince him. She found the perfect words. “I’m not a writer. I’m just a copy editor.”

He grunted. “Do you know what Thomas Mann said about writers?”

“‘A writer is someone for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people,’ ” she quoted.

His bushy eyebrows rose—he hadn’t expected her to know that. “I am sure you are an excellent copy editor. Am I right?” His eyes drilled into her. “Tell the

truth, now.”

“A copy editor is just a boring person who likes cleaning up the messes made by other people.”

“Who said that?”

“I just made it up. But it’s an accurate description of me.”

His face lit up. “I *knew*, the moment I laid eyes on you, that you would prove useful. I’m thinking of starting my magazine up again, and if that happens, we will be in desperate need of a copy editor. How providential that you have arrived. You are *exactly* what we need!”

Stella felt her body go limp; until she came to Paris, very few people had ever appreciated her. She was going to be too busy at the Bibliothèque Nationale to become a Tumbleweed, but there was no harm in helping out from time to time. It felt nice to be needed.

“I LEFT FOR Paris the day after I graduated from Radcliffe.” As they set up chairs for the night’s reading, Rachel told Stella her life story. “I intend to be the female Ernest Hemingway.”

“Do you mean you want to live like him or write like him?”

“Both,” Rachel replied. “Working here seemed a good place to begin.”

“How did you persuade George to hire you?”

“Easy. I told him Sam Beckett is my godfather.”

“Is he?”

Rachel didn’t answer. “How did *you* find your way here?”

“I came looking for an art book. But despite what George seems to think, I’m no Tumbleweed; I couldn’t possibly sleep here. It’s just that I got kicked out of my hotel today. Tomorrow I’ll find a new one.”

“I wish you would reconsider,” said Rachel frankly. “I hate babysitting. And Lucie seems to like you.”

“I like her too, but I don’t have time to take care of her. I’m working on a project about the woman who posed for the painting *Olympia*.”

“You could do both; it wouldn’t take that much time.” Rachel was practically pleading. “Besides, if George wants you to stay, you’ll have a hard time saying no. He’s a stubborn old mule when his mind’s made up.”

“It’s not for me.” Stella was firm.

“We’ll see.” Rachel put the last chair down with a thump as the poet walked in.

Stella had been so thrilled to meet Allen Ginsberg on her first visit to the shop that she hadn’t paid attention to his looks, but now she took in the stumpy man with round glasses and frizzy gray hair. He looked more like somebody’s uncle

than an incendiary poet. Even his clothes were ordinary. He gave the audience a remarkably sweet smile and then, nicotine-stained fingers clutching a cigarette, began to read.

His voice was deep, low, resonant, and she felt much as she had in the cathedral, as if she was receiving a gift. He looked her way, caught her eye, and she had the sense that he was seeing straight inside her. His eyes were incredibly kind. “‘I saw the best minds of my generation...’” he read, and she shook herself; she was sharing space with the most famous poet of their time. It occurred to her that he probably read often in New York, and had she not been so fearful of new experiences, she could have done this before. Many times.

Later, after Ginsberg had finished reading and the denizens of the bookstore were all sitting at his feet, drinking terrible wine out of grimy jam jars, George looked at the faces around him and pointed a finger at Stella. “Why,” he demanded, “are you in Paris?” It sounded like an accusation.

She licked her fingers—the gingerbread she and Lucie had produced was slightly sticky—and wished she’d prepared a lie. “My mother died and left a small legacy. According to her will, I had to use the money to come to Paris.”

George’s ears wiggled. Stella had noticed they did this when his attention had been truly captured. “What an interesting idea! What did she do, this dead mother?”

As she told him about Celia’s life, he stared intently at her face, as if seeing her for the first time. “Did you ever tell me your last name?”

“It’s St. Vincent.”

“*Celia* was your mother? Oh, you poor child!”

Why am I surprised? Stella asked herself. Of course they would have known each other. Celia had been to Paris; she’d learned to cook here, bought the painting that had captivated Stella when she was small. And if important people found their way to Shakespeare and Company, she would have been right behind them.

George turned to Ginsberg. “Did you know her?”

The poet shook his head.

“Count your blessings! She devoured everything in her path.” George put his hand on Stella’s shoulder. “I hope your father is more sympathetic.” He used the word in the French sense: likable, amiable, a good person.

“He might be.” She bit a fingernail, stalling before she admitted, “But I have no way of knowing. I’ve never met him.”

He frowned. “What kind of person doesn’t want to know his own daughter?”

“I have no idea.”

“Excuse me?” He leaned forward, ears wiggling.

“I know nothing about him. Celia wouldn’t even tell me his name. I don’t think he knows I exist.”

“That’s dreadful!” He glanced at the sleeping Lucie, curled up on a pile of pillows, blond curls peeking from a blanket. He pulled on his beard, clapped his hands, and declared, “Every child deserves a father. You ought to try to find him!”

“I gave up on that long ago.” George said nothing, just continued looking at her speculatively. “And,” she added, hoping to put an end to this uncomfortable scrutiny, “at the moment I have another mission.” She felt as exposed if she were standing naked beneath a spotlight. She was, she realized, both irritated at being made to explain herself and comforted by his concern. She stood up; it was time to find a bed.

Count Your Blessings

SURPRISINGLY SNUG IN HER LITTLE alcove, Stella listened to the sounds of the bookshop coming to life as she awoke the next morning. Reaching into the shelf behind her, she took down a poetry anthology and leafed through it, enjoying the sound of the words. At last she climbed down—she planned to go to the Bibliothèque Nationale to start her research in earnest—and made her way through the labyrinth of books to the front of the shop, where she found George impatiently tapping his fingers on the desk. “Good morning, sleepyhead.” He smelled like burnt toast and cigarettes. He handed her a cup of lukewarm coffee. “Drink quickly. There are errands that need running.”

“But I have things to do,” she protested. She had her schedule.

“Nonsense.” He waved this away. “Do them later. Right now I need you to go to this address”—he handed her a scrap of paper—“and pick up some saffron at Chez Le Marocain.”

“Why can’t someone else do it?” He was impossible!

“It has to be you. I just got a *pneumatique* from Jimmy Baldwin. He’s coming tonight and bringing white asparagus from the Landes. He insists we must have saffron aioli to go with it. Jimmy’s very particular about his food. We’re fresh out of saffron, so you’ll have to visit Taeb. Make him give you the very best he has. He won’t give it to just anyone, but I have faith in you.”

James Baldwin? Coming here? This was interesting. “But,” she protested, “I wouldn’t know good saffron from bad.”

“Taeb does. But he rarely parts with the good stuff, and only with great reluctance. I’ve never been blessed, and Rachel didn’t make the grade either. I am hoping you will.” When she did not move, he said impatiently, “What are you waiting for? Go!” He handed her some bills. “And don’t tell him about the aioli; I doubt he’d approve.”

Simultaneously annoyed, flattered, and intrigued, she considered her options. She could refuse, of course, but hadn’t she promised herself to be more spontaneous? Wasn’t she trying to conquer her fears? Would Victorine refuse this adventure? Stella squared her shoulders, pocketed the money, and walked out the door.

CHEZ LE MAROCAIN turned out to be a tiny emporium in the eighteenth arrondissement. She entered to find herself in a very small room with very high ceilings. Shelves stacked with a dizzying array of jars reached all the way to the top, filling the air with exotic scents.

A bearded man approached, wearing a long robe and a fez. As she began to describe what she wanted, he held up a warning hand, palm outward. “Tea first,” he declared in heavily accented English.

He busied himself at a hotplate in the corner; soon the scent of mint was added to the delicious aromas wafting through the air. As he worked, she stared, fascinated, at the strings of herbs and flowers drying above her head. A tiny pink bud detached itself from its stem and drifted lazily downward, coming to land in her hair.

The man returned, balancing two minuscule glasses on a small copper tray, lowered himself onto a thick pile of rugs, crossed his legs, and pointed at the space across from him. The tea was hot, almost thick with sweetness. A line of poetry she had read that morning—“We have heard the music, tasted the drinks, and looked at colored houses”—ran incongruously through her head.

The man set his empty glass onto the tray and held out his hand for hers. “Now,” he said, “we shall discuss saffron. What is the dish you are cooking?”

She remembered what George had said about the aioli as the man peered at her inquiringly. “I’m not sure,” she said finally.

He frowned. “If you are not knowing, how can I be telling which saffron you will need?”

“Does it make a difference?”

He drew back, obviously offended, and she began to apologize. The open palm came up again, cutting her off, and he rose in one liquid motion and went to the tall library ladder that accessed the upper reaches of the room. Climbing to the very top of the shop, he removed three small jars, secreted them within his robe, and climbed carefully down, one slow rung at a time.

He opened the first jar, sending the scent of honeyed hay into the air, and extracted a single tiny thread the color of marigolds. Thick at the top, it was deep red down its entire length, pulsing with color. “From Kashmir.” He set the thread on a piece of paper and opened the second jar. The scent this time was a bit sweeter and slightly less intense. “From Iran.” The thread he fished from the jar was smaller, the color paler; he set it on the paper and opened the last jar. “From Spain.” He held up an even smaller and paler thread, then put it down beside the others. “Which do you choose?”

She pointed to the Kashmiri saffron, the color so intense it seemed to be pulsing; it was irresistible.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded.

The man’s smile reached his warm brown eyes. “That is the most expensive spice in the world. It comes from the Valley of Flowers, where everyone’s hands are red from separating the saffron from the blossoms. Each flower has just three strands, so it takes seventy thousand flowers to make a single pound.”

She held out George’s money. “Is this enough?”

He made no move to take it. “You must promise not to use it for paella!”

“No paella,” she vowed.

“No risotto either!” he continued.

“I promise.” He peered solemnly into her eyes, as if trying to make sure she was telling the truth, and she was tempted to ask which dishes he considered appropriate for the finest saffron. But that might be a dangerous path, and so she just stared back, hoping he would trust her. At last, and with obvious reluctance, he reached for the money. Fetching a small scale, he painstakingly weighed her purchase and wrapped it in a twist of newspaper. Then he held it in his hand, studying Stella as if weighing her as well, trying to ensure that she was truly deserving of the precious spice.

“There are ten thousand flowers in here.” He handed the package over with a grimace of pain. “Do not waste them.”

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WHEN SHE RETURNED to the bookstore with her booty, George and Rachel both rushed over to greet her. “Now,” George said, “we will see if you passed muster.” He tore open the newspaper and stared down at the thin strands pulsing with color. “I knew it!” He was triumphant. “Taeb gave you the Kashmiri saffron!”

Rachel peered at the vivid red saffron, her expression decidedly miffed. “How did you do it?” she asked. “I begged and begged but he just kept shaking his head.”

Stella flushed with pleasure. “I didn’t do anything special,” she said modestly. “And he made me promise not to use it for paella or risotto.”

“Paella!” George pounced on the word. “What an excellent idea! Why didn’t I think of that! We should have enough left for it.”

“But I promised,” she protested.

“Nonsense!”

Rachel held out her hand. “You’d better give me the saffron. George will just file it away in a book and forget which one.”

Stella handed Rachel the packet and picked up her purse. “I’m off. I have work to do.”

“But you can’t leave now.” George pointed at the door. A short Black man was standing there, his arms full of chubby white spears of asparagus. Looking at his ugly-beautiful face with those hooded, expressive eyes, she felt a thrill run down her spine. It was James Baldwin. In all the photographs she’d seen, his wide mouth and sparkling eyes gave him a slightly impish air, but in person his mobile face kept changing, so that it was elegant one moment and penetrating the next. Just then he smiled, and his gap-toothed grin was joyous. She couldn’t take her eyes off him, and it occurred to her that although she had worked in publishing for ten years, she had never met any of the writers whose work she copyedited. In two days at the bookshop she had met two of the greatest writers alive.

“You get the saffron?” Baldwin asked. “We’ll need bread too.”

“You didn’t mention that.” George went to the till, extracted a fistful of francs, and handed them to Stella, nodding toward the door.

“I can’t go bread shopping.” She shook her head, irritated. “I really have to go to the Bibliothèque Nationale.”

“It will still be there tomorrow. And right now you have the chance to spend time with one of the most interesting minds of our time.”

Stella hesitated, then accepted the money. Had she not promised to be more adventurous?

“Poilâne,” Baldwin called out. “The bread must be from Poilâne.”

Stella looked at Whitman. “Poilâne?”

“Take Lucie,” he said. “She’ll show you.”

“Can you?” She looked dubiously down at the little girl. She was, after all, only seven.

“Lionel is my favorite baker. He makes the best cookies.” Stella imagined this Lionel, a jolly fat man wearing a white apron in a cozy shop. “And”—the little girl slid her hand into Stella’s and tugged her out the door—“you can tell me a story while we walk.”

Stella looked up at the sky, seeking inspiration. Above them, a balcony was strewn with the day’s washing. Of course! She pointed. “Once upon a time, a poor but beautiful woman named Victorine lived just up there.”

“When?” the little girl demanded.

“A long time ago. More than a hundred years.”

“That is a long time.” The child gazed at the colorful clothing dangling over their heads.

“This woman wanted to learn to paint, but they wouldn’t let her into the Academy of Art.”

“Because she was too poor?”

“Because she was a woman.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Back then, the men had all the power, and they did not want to share it with the women. French women weren’t even allowed to vote until 1944.”

“So she didn’t become a painter?”

“Let me tell the story.” Stella smiled. “Victorine thought and thought, and then she made a plan. She was, as I said, very beautiful, so she decided that she would become a model and watch the men as they worked. It was kind of like sneaking into school and getting paid to do it.”

“My mother is a painter,” Lucie interjected. “Sometimes. She says models have to stand still for a very long time. I wouldn’t like that.”

“I don’t think I would either,” Stella admitted. “But Victorine was good at standing still. She also had the ability to turn herself into anyone the artists wanted her to be. One painter, named Édouard, used her often, making her wear lots of different costumes. Once he painted her as a gypsy, and another time she was a fine lady. He turned her into a young boy and even a bullfighter.”

“Didn’t she ever get to be herself?”

“What a very good question.” Preoccupied with describing Olympia to the little girl, Stella barely noticed that they had arrived at the bakery. Then the aroma hit her.

It was deep, rich, earthy. Breathing it in, she looked around: This was unlike any bakery she knew. The shop was as elegant as a jewelry store, and the dapper man behind the counter looked more like a man of letters than a man of bread. His pale, handsome face was framed by a shock of black hair, and in place of the usual apron he wore a suit and tie. He did not smile but merely considered her gravely, as if trying to determine if she was worthy of his bread. Were all Parisian shopkeepers so judgmental?

But when he saw the child, his face changed. “Lucie!” He extracted a cookie from the case, came around the counter, and knelt, offering it to her as the two broke into rapid French. From what Stella could glean, their conversation roamed from white asparagus to Salvador Dalí and the state of George’s health.

At last the baker stood and addressed Stella. “She says the bread is for a famous author?”

As she explained about James Baldwin and his asparagus, he lifted a wheel of bread from a shelf and pushed her money away. “Have you read what he wrote about bread? I have it by heart: ‘It will be a great day for America, incidentally, when we begin to eat bread again, instead of the blasphemous and tasteless foam rubber that we have substituted for it.’ Blasphemous! Such a good word. Will you ask Monsieur Baldwin to sign a copy of *The Fire Next Time*? That would make me very happy.”

“Of course,” she murmured. “I’ll bring it by later.”

“Whenever you happen to be passing,” he said politely. “I’ll trade you for another loaf. You Tumbleweeds are a hungry crowd.”

Stella was shaken by his assumption that she was a Tumbleweed. She had never belonged to a group, and for a moment she wondered how that would feel.

“Story!” Lucie insisted when they were outside again. “Did Victorine get to make her own paintings?”

“She did!” Then, noticing that the street was not familiar, she stopped. “Are you sure this is right? This isn’t how we came.”

The child nodded. “I’m taking you back a different way. I want to show you the lions.”

“Lions?”

“You’ll see. Tell me about Victorine.”

Stella continued: “It turned out that Victorine was very talented. She sent one of her paintings to an important art show, and it was accepted, which was a great honor. But here’s the best part: Her painting was accepted, and Édouard’s was not!”

“Was he angry?”

“What do you think?”

“I think he was *so* angry that he never had her model for him again!”

“Lucie! That is *exactly* what happened.”

“I knew it! And here are my lions.” They had made their way to a church so vast it dwarfed Notre-Dame, and Lucie was pointing at the huge fountain in front of it. “Do you have a coin I can throw in? I always like to make a wish.”

“What are you wishing for?”

“If I tell you, it won’t come true.” Scrunching up her eyes, Lucie tossed her coin toward a snarling lion and then, with a little skip of satisfaction, put her hand in Stella’s and asked, “Then what? Did she become famous?”

“I don’t know what happened next.”

“It’s your story.” Lucie said it with the confidence of a child who had spent her life among writers. “You can make it end any way you want.”

Stella thought about that. “True,” she admitted. “But Victorine was a real person, and I’d like to know what actually happened to her.”

“You mean you don’t know?”

“Nobody does.” They were passing a crepe stand, and the scent of melting sugar was so seductive that they simply stood for a moment watching the cook spread batter until it was thin enough to see the pan beneath it. She deftly flipped it over, sprinkled it with sugar, and rolled it into a cylinder. Stella gave her a few francs and accepted the hot, paper-wrapped crepe. She and Lucie passed the sweet hot pastry back and forth as they crossed the boulevard Saint-Germain, lips burning as they headed homeward.

“What about her paintings?” Lucie insisted as they approached the bookshop. “I want to see them.”

“You can’t. They’ve all been lost.” Stella put her hand out for the door handle. “I want to find them. It’s why I am in Paris.”

“Can I help?”

“We’ll see,” she was starting to say when George yanked the door open and pulled them inside.

“You certainly took your time!” He seemed angry. “Go find Baldwin. He’s disappeared.”

They found the writer holed up in the Piano Room, a collection of John Ashbery poems in his hand and a cat curled cozily by his side. He looked up, put a finger on the page, and closed the book. “Just two black cats in search of solitude. We’re waiting for George’s storm to pass.”

“What happened?”

“Some Irish guy began reciting terrible poetry. George went stomping about, saying he’d made a mistake and never should have invited him to be a Tumbleweed. The two stood there shouting at each other until everyone else ran for cover.”

“He told me to find you.”

“I don’t wish to be found.” Baldwin opened the book and pointedly went back to reading.

Downstairs again, she discovered George glaring at a very tall man with skin the color of paper and coal-black hair. His eyes, she saw, were a startling emerald green.

“And who is this new Tumbleweed?” His voice was low, ingratiating.

“I’m not a Tumbleweed!” Stella insisted. Couldn’t she become a regular at the bookshop without moving in? It was an extraordinary place, but she had no desire to spend another night sleeping here.

“Someone you’ll leave alone,” growled George, “if you know what’s good for you.”

“But, my darlin’, you know I never do what’s good for me.” His Irish brogue was thick. He stuck out his hand. “Patrick O’Hare. Pat to my friends.”

“A bounder, a rogue, and a terrible poet.” Whitman was still growling. “Not to mention a mooch. He comes and goes but never fails to show up when there’s something good to eat.”

“My instincts”—the man winked at Stella—“never fail me.” He was, she thought, almost too handsome.

“Then make yourself useful.” George’s voice was still an angry snarl. “Can you cook asparagus?”

“Was I not the finest cook in Belfast?”

“Then get to work.” He pointed at Stella. “And take her. She can help.”

“Stella can’t,” said Lucie loyally. “She has to go to the library.”

“She can go tomorrow.” George’s voice was almost back to normal. “You go with Patrick too. One is never too young to learn to cook.”

THE KITCHEN WAS a mess. Dirty plates covered the counters, and wine-splashed glasses filled the sink. “Where’s Daniel?” Patrick looked around with disgust. “Lucie, go find him. We need this cleaned up.” The little girl obeyed.

When Daniel appeared, Rachel was right behind him. While Daniel grudgingly washed dishes, Rachel flirted with Patrick, becoming surprisingly coquettish. The poet remained cool, which seemed to infuriate Rachel, who eventually flounced off. Patrick watched her go, then pulled a stool up to the table, stood Lucie on it, and handed Stella an apron. “Lucie and I will wash. Find a paring knife; you’ll peel.”

“You have to peel asparagus?”

“White asparagus are bitter on the outside.” He held out a spear, coming so close she could feel the heat of his skin beneath the shirt. “Taste.” She took a small bite, and her lips began to sting. “They’re like women—it takes a bit of coaxing to uncover the sweet tenderness hidden inside.”

“I sincerely hope your poetry’s better than that,” Stella retorted.

He laughed and picked up another spear, gently shaving off a diaphanous layer, which floated onto the table like an exotic butterfly. He handed her the knife. On the first try, her attempt was so clumsy that her peel sat next to his like a thick slug.

“Maybe *you* should peel and I should wash,” she suggested.

“No, darlin’, you’ll get the hang of it. Keep trying.”

By the time George stuck his head through the door, Daniel was reading in a corner while the three worked steadily, Lucie carefully washing each spear and handing it to Patrick, who sliced off the bottom and handed it on to Stella.

“No, no, no!” George pointed to the garbage pail, which was overflowing with asparagus peelings. “What do you think you are doing? I am harboring profligate wastrels!” Bending down, he meticulously removed each discarded bit. “Call yourself a cook, do you? Nobody this wasteful deserves the title. This will make a lovely soup.”

“And I shall be very honored to try it.” Behind Whitman’s back, Patrick winked.

“If I were you”—Whitman gave him a baleful stare—“I would not hold my breath waiting for an invitation.”

WHEN THE ASPARAGUS had been steamed, Baldwin himself strode into the kitchen to make the aioli, carefully macerating the saffron threads in lemon juice before whisking them into egg yolks and olive oil. He worked carefully and deliberately as Stella stood with Lucie, whose nose was practically in the bowl, watching the oil become one with the eggs as the color blossomed.

They piled the asparagus spears onto a platter and headed to the Piano Room, Lucie carrying the aioli as if it were liquid gold. They set the food on top of the display of Baldwin books Rachel had arranged on the central table.

“Beautiful!” Stella had noticed that when Baldwin was happy, his voice turned to velvet. He picked up a spear, stabbed it into the golden sauce, and ate it with his fingers. “Only way to eat asparagus.” He handed one to Stella. “Tell me what you think.”

She took a bite, closed her eyes, and concentrated, allowing the flavors to roll through her body and then her mind. A line of Proust floated into her mind. Eyes still closed, she said, “‘Their white feet, still stained a little by the soil of their garden-bed: a rainbow-loveliness that was not of this world...’”

“‘These hinted rainbows, these blue evening shades...’” Baldwin didn’t miss a beat. He turned to Whitman. “Who is this Tumbleweed who quotes *Swann’s Way* while eating asparagus?”

George eyed Baldwin with a speculative air. “You were here in the late forties, weren’t you?”

“Came in forty-eight.”

“You might have met her mother. Celia St. Vincent?”

Baldwin gave Stella a long appraising look, head cocked to one side. “St. Vincent? That crazy woman who was in love with the beautiful chef?”

A *chef*? thought Stella. Celia had been in love with a chef? She remembered her mother’s self-satisfied smugness as she casually mentioned learning to cook in Paris and suddenly saw the dinner parties in an entirely new light. Maybe Celia hadn’t simply been showing off.

“What beautiful chef?” asked Whitman. “I don’t recall a beautiful chef.”

“You must remember! That woman was always talking about how she’d found the perfect man. She only had a few words of French, and he spoke no English at all. She actually said, ‘We have the language of love. What more does one need?’”

George pulled a face. “And you’re surprised I don’t remember?”

“But surely you have not forgotten the night she brought him to Richard Olney’s place in Belleville?”

“Who’s Richard Olney?” asked Stella.

“An American who came to Paris to paint and ended up writing cookbooks,” said George. “He gave a lot of dinner parties, but I don’t remember ever seeing Celia at one.”

“Maybe you weren’t there this night,” said Baldwin, obviously irritated at being interrupted. “Celia showed up with the chef—it was the first time she’d let us meet him—and we all got it. The man looked so exotic you expected him to pick up a guitar, throw back his head, and break into flamenco.” Stella thought, all at once, of the portrait Celia had brought back from Paris. “He had that feline walk—sexy, graceful. He looks around the room, goes over to the stove, picks up a knife, and starts chopping an onion. You know Richard never allowed anyone near his stove? But Richard didn’t say a word, just moved over and made room. I’d never seen anyone use a knife like that; the man’s hands were dancing. Somebody picked up a horn and started riffing along, and we all just stopped and watched.”

“I must not have been there. I would remember that.”

“It was like the two of them were making love while they cooked. And the food! Richard Olney never made a bad meal in his life, but this was...” He stopped for a moment, eyes slitting almost closed. “That night with Celia’s chef, he was flying.”

Baldwin opened his eyes, looking at something nobody else could see, conjuring the evening until he seemed to be watching it play out on the far side of the shop. “I remember the pissaladière. We stood there watching them cook and eating that soft, oily bread. Back then I was so poor I was living on bread and cheese, and the flavor of olives and anchovies went straight through me.”

He stopped, and when he spoke again, his voice was lower, as if he was summoning the words from the air. “The wine was flowing, and the celery was crisp. Richard had found some old farmer who gave him a great ripe wheel of Brie that dripped off the edges of the bread. Richard and that crazy chef kept arguing, but it wasn’t a fight, it was a seduction.”

Stella wanted to ask what they had argued about, but she was afraid to interrupt the rhythm of his words.

“Richard wanted to keep it simple—you know how he is—but that chef had his own ideas. I remember he started dicing fish and mixing it with onions, tomatoes, and little bits of celery. ‘Limes!’ he said. ‘I must have limes!’ None of us had ever heard of ceviche, and we were astonished. Then Richard concocted a chicken gratin with a cheese custard on top, and the chef made the most beautiful salad I’d ever seen. He threw everything into it—pieces of lemon, bits of cheese, and then he took the violets out of the vase and tossed in the petals. It was beautiful. Richard put the platters on the table, and we all sat down.”

Baldwin paused, still looking off into the distance, still watching the invisible action. “Richard took his fork and threw it on the floor, and the chef did the same thing, and then they began feeding each other with their fingers. The cat who was playing that horn, he started wailing, and the room filled with a kind of electric tension.”

He stopped once more. Nobody said anything, and Baldwin let the silence bloom. When he started speaking again, his voice had lost the dreamy nostalgic quality. “And then, all of a sudden, Celia stood up and her chair banged into the wall. Everyone turned to see what she was going to do. Time slowed. Then she put her hand into the casserole, took a big gooey gob of gratin, and threw it at her man.”

“She threw it at him?” Stella had never seen her mother lose control.

“It was like a storm had blown into the room. He stood there, cheese and eggs dripping off his hair and down his face while Celia raged. On and on she went, a long, loud, angry wail. The horn guy started playing again, the sound beneath her words. I don’t know if it was because the beautiful chef wasn’t paying attention to her or if she was just discovering that he went both ways, but that woman was *furious*. Finally she screamed, ‘You men are welcome to each other,’ and ran out into the street.”

“What happened then?”

“Richard went to the window and pushed it open. A huge gust of rain whirled into the room. ‘She’s going to get wet,’ he said, then closed the window, came back to the table, and filled everyone’s glasses. Then, without a word, he and the chef went back to the stove and began concocting an apricot tart, feeding each other little morsels as they cooked. It was very erotic. We were there for hours; some poets read their latest works, Mary Painter opened a bottle of whiskey, and after that I don’t remember much. It was almost morning when I left—and the chef was still there.”

“Can you remember his name?” asked George.

Baldwin shook his head. “Long gone. We all thought he was going to be famous, but I never heard anything more about him.”

“Well, that’s no help.” George sounded irritable. “That man might be Stella’s father.”

“What!” It had not occurred to Stella—Celia had so many lovers—and she found the notion extremely unsettling. “If he is,” she said, “I’d rather not know.”

“Aren’t you curious?” George was looking at her with what could only be disappointment. “Shame on you. You should at least find out if Richard is still in touch with him.”

“Leave her be, George,” said Baldwin. “It’s not your business.”

“When a man has a child, he has a right to know it!”

Baldwin turned his warm eyes on Stella. “Richard Olney lives in a cave in Provence, and he doesn’t have a phone. So you’d have to travel three hundred miles to ask a man you don’t know if he remembers someone he met more than thirty years ago. I can see why you have no desire to pursue this.”

“Have you no spirit? No sense of adventure? What’s wrong with you?” George was irate. “The man might be your father. And you’re letting a little distance put you off?”

“Let it go, George,” said Rachel. She looked happier now than she had when they were cooking; the handsome Irish poet had his arm around her shoulder. With his green eyes and her red hair, they made a stunning couple. She turned to Stella. “Help me put the chairs away? It’s getting late.”

With a jolt, Stella realized George had kept her so busy she’d never looked for a hotel. What was happening to her? She would have to spend another night in the bookstore. But this one, she resolved, would be the last.

Lost Souls

AS A CHILD, STELLA HAD dreamed about her father, imagined that someday he would ride in on a horse, climb up a ladder, and steal her away from Celia. It had been a long time since she'd had that dream, but now he was back, walking through her dreams in a tall white toque. She awoke, disgusted with herself; she was too old for fairy tales. Whoever he might be, her father would surely be both disappointing and disappointed. It was so much better not to know.

Looking around the book-lined cocoon in which she had passed the night, she vowed that today would be different: She would not allow George to send her off on distracting errands. She would begin the hunt for Victorine, find a room in a hotel, settle down to work. Climbing down from her aerie, she went into the cramped bathroom, brushed her teeth, and ran her fingers through her hair in a desperate attempt to comb it. Then she walked through the shop, searching for a cup of coffee.

She found Daniel in the Piano Room. "I made this for you." He handed her a bowl of warm café au lait. "I thought you might need it. Last night was a bit rough; George doesn't understand boundaries."

She took it gratefully. "Do you know anything about Richard Olney?" she asked.

Daniel shrugged. "Never heard of him. Ask Rachel. She seems to know everything."

She found Rachel reshelving volumes of poetry. "He writes cookbooks," she told Stella. "He came to Paris in the fifties to be a painter and ended up as Julia Child. Although," she added quickly, "he apparently still paints." She went to the cookbook section and pulled down a volume called *Simple French Food*. "He's a purist. It's all about the quality of the ingredients."

Stella reached for the book, stared at it for a moment, and then put it back on the shelf. One thing at a time. She had another mystery to solve. *After I find Victorine's paintings, she promised herself, I'll decide if I want to look for the mysterious chef who might be my father.* She had a plan, and she would stick to it.

"This came for you." Rachel fumbled in her pocket and pulled out an envelope.

"For me?" Stella was puzzled.

“Jules’s chauffeur—Paul?—brought it. He tried your hotel, but when they said you were no longer there, he decided to bring it to us.”

Inside, she found two pieces of paper from Jules. One was a scrawled note: “The library at the Département des Étampes is reserved for scholars. You will need a letter of recommendation to gain entry. This should help.” She unfolded the second, a business-like letter on heavy stationery introducing her as a foreign student doing research for him. She tucked it in her pocket and asked Daniel for directions.

“Go now”—he pushed her toward the door—“before George sees you and finds some urgent new task.”

Stella headed out of the shop and skirted the river, crossing the Pont Neuf and making her way across the cobblestone courtyard of the Louvre. It had rained in the night, and the sky was washed clean and dappled with clouds. As she walked up the rue de Richelieu and through the lovely gardens of the Palais-Royal, she thought how much nicer this was than her daily trudge through the grimy streets of New York. She listened to the water splashing across the beautiful fountain in the Square Louvois and gasped when she caught sight of her destination. The Département des Étampes was housed in the Site Richelieu; built in the seventeenth century, it looked more like a palace than a library.

Inside, she walked up to a guard and stammered out her mission in hesitant French. The man silently pointed to a small office across the hall.

“*Vos papiers.*” The bespectacled man behind the desk held out a hand. Producing the letter, she held her breath as the librarian read it.

“Ah.” It was a long, almost reverent sigh. “*Vous travaillez avec Monsieur Delatour. Très bien.*” Handing her a pass, he indicated the entrance to the Salle Labrousse. Slightly stunned—it had been so easy—she walked to the door and simply stood, gazing around.

She had never seen a more beautiful room. Huge and airy, its high ceilings were domed, its walls covered in books. Long wooden tables topped with old-fashioned lamps ran the length of the enormous space, which was filled with an almost musical quiet. Stella thought she would like to move in.

She went to the reference table and was directed to a tall, rawboned woman, whose short gray hair looked as if it had been chopped off with pruning shears. MADEMOISELLE DUSEIGNE, read the tag on her shirt. The woman frowned as Stella began to speak in the halting French she had practiced with Daniel, making her distaste for Americans instantly clear. Treating Stella with icy disdain, she pointed out that the request she had submitted was not in the correct form. It took three more attempts before she condescended to produce an ancient biography of Toulouse-Lautrec.

But it was worth it. Stella gave a little gasp of satisfaction when she found Victorine's name. According to his biographer, Lautrec always introduced her as "my Olympe."

She turned the yellowing pages, hoping for some tidbit about Victorine's paintings. To her dismay, all she found was Lautrec squiring a friend to the very top of a dilapidated building in a disreputable district of Paris in 1898. There they found Victorine lying on a bare mattress, dead drunk. She was, the author opined, old and utterly ruined, a trollop who had wasted her life.

Did he really say that? Stella painstakingly studied her French/English dictionary, carefully translating each word. Yes, "trollop" or "prostitute" was the correct translation. Then she did the math. *Olympia* was painted in 1863; the Victorine who posed for the painting was probably still in her teens. So in 1898 she would have been...

"No!" Too annoyed to remember where she was, she shouted the word as she slammed the book closed, dropping it heavily on the table. A shock wave ran through the room; all the scholars looked up. Stella barely noticed. Victorine was in her fifties when Lautrec supposedly found her in that attic—hardly an old hag. Had he simply made the whole thing up?

"*S'il vous plaît!*" Mademoiselle Duseigne hurried from her desk, a finger pressed to her lips. "*Un peu de tenue!* In the library, one maintains silence." Embarrassed, Stella picked up her sweater and fled. She had her pass now: Tomorrow she'd look into Alfred Stevens. Perhaps the Belgian painter would prove more sympathetic. Right now she had to find a hotel.

She made her way back to the river, strolling slowly along the right bank, enjoying the tender green leaves on the trees. Crossing at the Pont au Change, she walked through the quaint glass pavilions of the Marché aux Fleurs, inhaling the fragrant oxygenated air. Like so much of Paris, the market had been here, unchanged, for almost two hundred years. Was there another city in the world with a flower market at its very heart? Her thoughts drifted back to her old life in New York. *A romantic marketplace like this, Stella mused, could never survive there.*

At last she made her way across the bridge to walk down the narrowest street in Paris, the rue du Chat-qui-Pêche, and into the heart of the Latin Quarter. With steely determination, she walked down one side of the street and up the other, methodically moving from one small hotel to the next in search of a room.

There were none.

At the Hôtel Marignan, her eighth attempt, the receptionist studied the reservation book. "I have a nice room available a week from today. Would that help?"

Stella sighed. She was tired. “I’ll take it.” A week wasn’t so long. A few more nights at the bookshop wouldn’t kill her, she thought as she went to retrieve her suitcase. But she desperately needed a bath.

“Try the hammam,” Rachel suggested later that afternoon, when Stella mentioned her longing for hot water. “It’s very picturesque. All Tumbleweeds use the Turkish baths.”

Stella shuddered. “I couldn’t get naked in front of strangers. I just couldn’t.”

Rachel shrugged. “Suit yourself. But in that case, you should probably cut your hair so you can wash it in the sink. Besides”—she studied Stella’s face—“very short hair would suit you.”

“I won’t be here that long,” Stella protested.

“Don’t cut your hair.” Patrick looked up from the books he was shelving. “I like long hair on a woman. But you should absolutely try the hammam. Wonderful place. I’ve written some of my best poetry there.”

“I’ll just bet you have,” said Rachel.

“Public baths,” Stella said, “are not for me.”

“Oh, come on.” Patrick gave her his most seductive smile. “This is Paris. Live a little.”

“Leave the girl alone.” George made one of his abrupt entrances. “I’ve never understood the American obsession with bathing.” He smiled at Stella. “Glean any interesting information about your painter? What’s her name again?”

“Victorine-Louise Meurent.” Stella recounted her discovery. “Toulouse-Lautrec’s biographer said she turned into a broken-down old drunk, but I don’t believe it. I think Lautrec made it up. Tomorrow I’m going to look into some of the other artists she posed for. Then I’ll go through the Manet archive to see what *he* had to say. I just hope they let me back into the library.”

“Did something happen?”

“There’s a librarian who does not approve of me.”

“It’s a public institution; they can’t keep you out.” He looked at her speculatively. “What is it about this Victorine that you find so fascinating?”

“She tried so hard. She wanted to be a painter and overcame incredible odds to do it. And then, just because she was poor and a woman, they took it all away from her. They trashed her work and rewrote her history until there’s nothing left but images made by men. It’s the ultimate humiliation. I want to give her back her own story.” Thinking of all the ways in which Celia had appropriated hers, she looked up at him. “Does that sound completely ridiculous?”

“Not to me. One lost soul looking for another. Doesn’t that describe us all?”

The Reluctant Tumbleweed

WAS SHE AN OFFICIAL TUMBLEWEED? For the first few mornings Stella woke up terrified, and each formless day without a plan still made her anxious. The knowledge that this was temporary helped. A little. Surely, she told herself, she could spend a week in the chaos of the shop and not go crazy.

To her surprise, it became easier with each passing day. There was safety, she found, in numbers, and knowing the others were there lent her comfort. When she was not at the library, she lay in her snug book-lined alcove, languidly moving from one tome to the next. She read poetry, biography, fiction. Hours might pass before she roused herself to roll up the sleeping bag, silently thanking the departed Mr. Rakoff for leaving it behind. Occasionally a customer would climb the ladder, pull the curtain aside and beat a shamefaced retreat when he saw her. After a few days this no longer embarrassed her. Rather, it gave her an almost giddy sense of belonging. Despite her reservations, she could feel herself slowly turning into a Tumbleweed, and by the end of the week she had grown so acclimated to life in the shop that she decided to forgo her room at the Hôtel Marignan.

Each morning she took inventory of her possessions: one toothbrush, one hairbrush, two pairs of jeans, two white blouses, one blue sweater, a tweed jacket, two brassieres, five pairs of underpants, five pairs of socks, a pair of Keds, and the ballet flats she'd neglected to return to Robes des Rêves. She'd stare at her single object of value—the plane ticket back to New York—wondering when she would use it.

Today, the need for coffee drove her from her perch. She wandered into the Blue Oyster Tearoom, where she found an abandoned bowl of café au lait sitting next to a copy of *The Paris Review*. She considered the cup for a moment—lipstick-smudged, it was half full and not quite cool—and then drank it gratefully, appreciating the sweet milky warmth. Then she headed off to the *bibliothèque*.

At first the forbidding librarian pretended to be unable to understand Stella's careful French. But on the fourth day, Mademoiselle Duseigne finally unbent enough to ask why Stella was requesting the papers of long-dead Impressionists.

"It's not them I'm interested in." Stella was proud of her ability to convey this in French. "I'm looking for information on a model who posed for them. Do you

know Manet's *Olympia*?"

"*Bien sûr*," she replied frostily, obviously insulted. "How not?"

"But did you know," Stella persisted, "that the model was an artist in her own right?"

At this the woman became visibly interested. "*C'est vrai?*" She leaned forward. "Truly?"

"Yes." Stella offered up her most recent discovery. "Yesterday I learned that she was initiated into the Société des Artistes Français in 1903."

"Where would one go to see her paintings?"

Stella shook her head. "One would not. Could not. They have all been lost. Monsieur Delatour and I are hoping to find them, but first we need to find out about the woman herself. Who was she? As far as I can tell, everything in these books are lies." The French word sounded so much better. *Mensonges*. She repeated the word.

"Lies?"

"Everything I've read is by men who insist she did nothing with her life. In 1898 Lautrec was telling people that she was penniless and a hopeless drunk, which makes no sense at all if she became a member of the Society of French Artists five years later. I think he—and all the other men—couldn't stand the idea of a working-class woman having a successful career, being their equal."

The librarian sniffed. "*Typique!* Do you know when and where she was born?"

"I'm guessing in the mid 1840s, probably in Paris."

The woman looked scornful. "You must do better than that! France has kept civil birth records since 1792, but you will need much more information than you have to find hers. You can file requests, but it will be slow. If you really think she was born in Paris, I suggest you begin by looking for baptismal records in the parish churches. Do you know which arrondissement she lived in?"

Chagrined, Stella shook her head.

"Do you know what her father did?" Mademoiselle Duseigne persisted.

"He was apparently an artisan."

"Now we are getting somewhere! In those days, the artisans lived in the third arrondissement. I'll give you a list of the churches in the parish. You must start by visiting them."

Stella walked back the long way, wending her way through the Marais. She skirted the edge of the Forum des Halles, thinking how sad it was that the old market, the one Zola called "the belly of Paris," had turned into this brash new mall. She consoled herself by peering through the window of Au Pied de Cochon, an ancient brasserie famous for pig's feet. What did they taste like? On her next visit to Robert et Louise, she'd have to ask. Perhaps they'd even make her some.

Later, when she told George that she was going to search for Victorine's baptismal record, he said, "Take Lucie along. She'll be very helpful. Have her tell them you're trying to locate her great-grandmother. You'll see: Nobody can resist her. You can start tomorrow, but right now I need you to bake some more of that gingerbread. Everybody keeps asking about it. One man said it was the best he'd ever had."

"Really?" Stella flushed with pride. She'd never cooked for anyone before, but she'd enjoyed her little forays into George's kitchen, liked the feel of the knife in her hand and the way the aromas rose around her, filling the air. "Is someone coming to read tonight?"

"John Ashbery. And that is one man who really likes to eat."

Stella remembered how the poet's words had come floating into her mind when she visited Taeb's spice shop. "He's so sensual," she said. "He writes the way artists paint, seeing color everywhere. We should cook him something spicy and exciting." The flavor of saffron filled her mind, and she imagined adding ginger, perhaps a bit of curry.... "I'm going to try to make an entirely new kind of gingerbread," she said, thinking of the careful way Baldwin had cooked, as if pleasure was waiting in the kitchen. She had enjoyed that afternoon.

"Oh, good." As was his wont, Patrick magically showed up at the first mention of food. "It would be nice to have some warm gingerbread waiting when I return from the hammam." He bestowed one of his dazzling smiles on Rachel. "Care to join me?"

Rachel went pink with pleasure. She looked down at Lucie. "Wouldn't you like to help Stella bake?" she asked hopefully.

They'd moved on from their first simple gingerbread, adding new ingredients, carefully discussing each one before stirring it in. Today, after much consideration, they added apples and orange zest but decided that saffron was far too fragile to stand up to ginger. However, Stella could not get the saffron out of her mind, and in the end they made a thin icing of sugar, saffron, and vanilla to pour over the warm cake as it emerged from the oven. Cooking, Stella thought, might be even more fun than eating.

"Ashbery's going to love this!" said Daniel, who was so excited about meeting the poet that he began quoting lines of his poetry as he set out the chairs. "Did you know," he asked Stella, "he's the only poet who ever won the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in the same year?"

"I know that," she replied.

"Of course you do! He's like you—interested in art. Have you read *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*?"

“Yes,” she said. “In fact, one day when I was gazing at *Olympia*, trying to find clues, I suddenly remembered two lines from the poem: ‘But there is in that gaze a combination / Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful in its restraint...’ ”

Daniel finished the line: “ ‘...that one cannot look for long.’ ”

The room filled quickly; Ashbery was a popular poet, and he had lived in Paris in the fifties. When he strode in—punctiliously on time—many of the people in the room jumped up to greet him. Stella stood watching; he was a lean and handsome man, his chiseled face topped with an unruly head of hair. He turned to survey the crowd with a gaze so penetrating you knew there was not much that he missed. He was also, Stella thought, very aware of how attractive he was.

The room went utterly quiet when Ashbery began to speak. He was that good. Listening to him, Stella thought that although he wrote about art, his words were like music, each one transforming the one that came after it and sometimes even those before. She could feel the words resonating and changing as he read.

When he had finished, Ashbery took a seat next to Stella, and Patrick leapt to his feet and began reciting his own poetry. Ashbery whispered, “Another Irishman who thinks he’s the second coming,” and began clapping loudly the moment Patrick paused. “Why don’t we hear from someone else now?” He looked directly at Daniel. “I’d like to hear what *you’ve* been working on.”

“It’s not worthy of you,” Daniel demurred.

“Please,” Ashbery insisted, “I’m interested. Read something for us.”

It took some persuading, but Daniel, very reluctantly, went off to the corner where he’d stashed his knapsack and returned with a notebook. His voice cracked when he began, but he soldiered on and after a while seemed to forget the audience.

“This is the beginning of the biography Mr. Whitman insists we write. I’ve called it *Coming Home*.” The words were simple and unadorned but so deeply honest that they all listened, rapt, as he described the loneliness of arriving, scared and homeless, in the shop. He wrote of a childhood filled with fear, hunger, poverty. “But here among the books,” he finished, “I have discovered all the things that I will never need.”

There was utter silence when he finished. Then John Ashbery stood and began to clap. As they all joined in, Daniel turned bright red. He looked down and mumbled, “It’s not finished.”

“It won’t be,” said Ashbery, “until your time here comes to an end. But whenever that happens, I very much hope you will send me a copy. You’re a poet.”

“I was so humiliated when my voice cracked,” Daniel told Stella later. Everyone had gone and they were folding chairs and picking up glasses. “I wish it hadn’t done that.”

“It didn’t matter,” she said. “What you wrote—it was lovely. I would never know how to say those things, but it was as if you had read my mind.”

It was true, Stella thought as she emptied the ashtrays. She had never imagined she could like living like this; it was so totally out of character. She thought of Celia’s constant complaint that living with Stella was like living with a nun. She’d accepted it as truth, but now she saw that Celia had no idea what that really meant. Being a Tumbleweed, even a reluctant one, was making Stella understand what it meant to lose yourself to become part of a community.

“At first,” she told Daniel, “it was frightening, but now it’s almost euphoric. I can feel myself surrendering to it, forgetting my fears. But I worry: What comes next, after the euphoria fades?”

“It hasn’t faded for me,” he said. “At least not yet. At home, with my family, I always felt like a stranger, like I didn’t belong. Being here, it’s like I’ve finally found the family I was meant to have.”

“What do you mean?” Stella had so little notion of family.

“George is kind of a perfect person: strange, demanding, unpredictable, but endlessly generous and so optimistic. Patrick’s self-involved but amusing, and Rachel is so capable she makes me feel safe. You just know nothing terrible is ever going to happen on her watch. Then you came and...” He hesitated.

“And?” she prodded.

“You came and you were like the missing piece.”

Stella felt her eyes begin to fill with tears. “Really?”

“Oh, yes. Lucie saw it right away. I think you’re older than I am, but you feel like the little sister I always wanted. I feel protective; I want good things for you. I want you to find Victorine’s paintings. And...” He stopped again, then plunged on. “Maybe you *should* try to talk to Richard Olney about that guy your mother had the affair with? I know you’re skeptical, but someday you might be sorry that you had this chance and didn’t take it.” He looked at her, eyes big behind his glasses. “Do you mind me saying that?”

“Last week I would have. But now?” She hesitated for just a moment and then surprised herself by kissing him on the cheek. “I’ll think about it.”

Treasure Hunt

SHE WENT TO BED FEELING almost happy and woke up with a sense of calm: She had a plan. Today she and Lucie were going to start hunting for Victorine's baptismal record.

"Where are we going first?" the child asked as they crossed the Pont Neuf.

"The church of Saint-Denys-du-Saint-Sacrement."

"Why there?"

"I did some research, and this is the one church that mentions that their parishioners are artisans. And it's right in the middle of the Marais, which seems like a good place to start."

Built in the classical style, Saint-Denys-du-Saint-Sacrement looked more like a Greek temple than a Catholic church. Huge pillars adorned the front, and the theme was repeated inside: Greek columns marched all the way down the nave.

Lucie skipped in and stood looking gravely around until she spotted a tall man in black with a white clerical collar. She waited politely until he had finished talking to a parishioner and came over to them. Lucie tugged on his sleeve, and he looked down from his great height. "*Oui, ma fille?*" he intoned.

Lucie began to speak, but he stopped her abruptly. "My office hours are on Tuesdays from five to seven," he said sternly.

To Stella's surprise, Lucie produced a fat tear. It rolled down her cheek as she insisted, in a quavering voice, that she must find her great-grandmama *now*. She spoke too fast for Stella to understand the reason she manufactured, but Stella watched the priest melt.

"*Oh, mais quel petit ange...Bon, allez, viens!*" The priest held out his hand and led them to the office where the parish records were kept. Taking down a huge ledger, he opened it up and the two bent their heads, poring over the names for every year of the 1840s. It took a long time to read every name, and the priest seemed genuinely chagrined when Victorine's failed to appear.

"Perhaps," he told Stella in heavily accented English, "you should try Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs. I do not know what office hours the curate there keeps, but..." The clear implication was that the priest there would not be so easily swayed by Lucie's charms.

“Don’t worry,” Lucie said as they walked to the next church. “I’ll get the priest to talk to me.” She held Stella’s hand as their journey took them through the walled garden of a vast pink wedding cake of a building, its paths lined with topiary shrubs that looked like green gumdrops. By now the endless beauty of the city had captured Stella, so she was not surprised when Lucie gazed up at the windows, saying wistfully, “It’s like a fairy tale. Do you think a princess lives here?”

“Maybe,” Stella replied, unwilling to lie but reluctant to thwart the child’s imagination. Undaunted, Lucie walked up to a policeman and repeated her question. The man gave a short laugh and replied in rapid French. Stella wondered how it would feel to be so adventurous, so free.

“He says,” Lucie translated, “that it’s called the Hôtel de Soubise and a princess lived here a long time ago. But now it belongs to the state.” She looked longingly at the beautiful building. “Wouldn’t you like to live here?”

“I bet it’s very cold in winter,” said Stella.

“I wouldn’t mind,” said Lucie.

When they arrived at Saint-Nicolas, they found a rather different church than the first one. Huge and Gothic, it was dark and, even on this sunny day, chilly. The people in the crowd gathered to celebrate mass hugged themselves to keep warm. “Let’s wait,” whispered Lucie, “and talk to the priest when he’s done.”

Once again, Stella watched the little girl produce a tear and charm her way into the office where the ledgers were kept. Once again, an obliging priest pored over ancient records. And once again, the priest seemed disappointed when it turned out that Victorine had not been baptized in his church.

Tired and dispirited, they went back to the bookshop. “This could take weeks,” she told George. “Paris has more than two hundred churches!”

“Good!” said Lucie. “It’s fun!”

“Did you look at the Delacroix in Saint-Denys?” asked George. “It’s quite beautiful. A *pietà*.”

She shook her head. “We missed it.”

“Hmm.” His eyes flitted across the shelves. “You should do a little research before heading out tomorrow. I’m sure we have some books on the churches of Paris. Where are you planning to go?”

“I thought we might try Saint-Paul Saint-Louis.”

“They’ve got a Delacroix too.”

Day after day they visited the churches of the third arrondissement. Stella worried that Lucie would tire of the game, but the child was intrepid. “It’s like a treasure hunt,” she said when a few weeks had gone by and they were still no closer to finding anything. “And I’m starting to believe that Victorine really was my great-grandmother.”

“Even I am starting to believe that,” laughed Stella. Others, she knew, might be dispirited by their lack of results, but she was not. Jules, she thought, had been right when he’d said that copy editors were basically literary detectives, and now she felt she was copyediting in three dimensions. After this her old job would seem rather boring. If she even had a job anymore. In March, Miss Shrifte had told her to take six weeks off, and it was now June. How unlike her usual self, she thought, with a touch of pride, to be so careless of time. What would Miss Shrifte think? Perhaps she should send word.

“There’s a post office near the church,” she told Lucie the next day as they walked to Sainte-Élisabeth de Hongrie. “I’ll just stop in and send a cable to my office.” She did not expect to find Victorine at this church, but Sainte-Élisabeth was famous for its organ, and there was a free concert today. She thought fondly of the wonderful music in Vézelay.

“I looked up Saint Elizabeth,” Stella told Lucie as they left the post office, mission accomplished. “You’d like her. She was a princess. When her husband, the king, went away on Crusade, she ruled in his place.”

“Is that why she became a saint?”

Stella laughed. “That would have been an excellent reason, but I don’t think the church rewarded smart women. Saint Elizabeth was famous for her piety; she gave away everything she owned.”

“Oh,” said Lucie, obviously disappointed.

The church was brighter than the others they had visited; light poured through the dome in the apse. And the acoustics were so astonishing that Lucie whispered, “I can feel the music inside me.”

“I know!” said Stella, thinking that this was not at all like Vézelay; the music here felt very private, as if each note was meant just for them. When it was over, Lucie found a priest so accommodating that she didn’t even have to make herself cry, and soon he was leading them back to the office.

“Mid-1840s, did you say?”

“*Oui*,” said Lucie.

He ran his finger down the great ledger book and suddenly stopped. “*Et voilà!* Your great-grandmother was born on Sunday, February eighteenth, 1844. She was baptized here the following day. Her mother, Louise-Thérèse Lemesre Meurent, was a milliner, and her father, Jean-Louis-Étienne Meurent, was a *ciseleur*.”

“What’s that?” asked Lucie.

“A stonemason. A man who uses a chisel.”

Stella felt breathless. “Does it give their address?”

“They lived at thirty-nine rue de la Folie-Méricourt.” He smiled down at Lucie. “So you are a true little Parisienne. Will you go and find the address where your great-grandmama lived?”

Lucie nodded.

“But first,” said Stella as they made their way outside, “I have to go tell Mademoiselle Duseigne. It was her idea to visit the parish churches.” A thought struck her. “I’ll have to take you home first. Children aren’t allowed in the Bibliothèque Nationale.”

“I’m not a baby,” Lucie insisted. “I know how to behave around books.”

“Tell that to Mademoiselle Duseigne,” said Stella.

“I will,” she said cheerfully. “You’ll see. It will be all right.”

Stella was too elated to argue. They had found Victorine! Indeed, nobody stopped them as they entered the library, and none of the scholars in the room seemed perturbed to find a child in their midst. Mademoiselle was another issue. They approached her desk nervously, and Lucie stood on tiptoe and used her best library voice to whisper something Stella did not understand. The woman’s stern face relaxed and she drew them out into the hall, where she began a rapid conversation with Lucie. Stella caught “Saint Elizabeth,” and Victorine’s parents’ names and then “rue de la Folie-Méricourt.” A great deal of Gallic arm-waving took place as the two repeated a word that sounded a lot like “popcorn.”

“Come!” Mademoiselle escorted them to a door, produced a key, and led them inside a small private room. Then she went off in search of documents.

“What did you tell her?” Stella asked.

“What we found out. She said the street was in Popincourt—that’s the eleventh arrondissement, right on the border of the third. She said it’s changed a lot since then, but it used to be the poorest part of Paris.”

Mademoiselle Duseigne returned carrying several large books. “You would have to read Zola to get a true sense of the *quartier*,” she said as she set them down. She described an industrial district, home to laundresses, fur tanners, and metal workers squatting in wooden hovels between huge factories. Open sewage ran down the streets, garbage was rampant, and the buildings were all in a ramshackle state. “Workers with too many children and not enough money spent their nights in the street, drinking up their pay,” sniffed the librarian with bourgeois disdain. “But let us see what we can discover.”

She opened a map book and began poring over it. “*Voilà!*” She placed a blunt finger on the page. “Number thirty-nine. A building of six stories divided into many tiny apartments of one or two rooms.” She perused the details. “There was an establishment in the building called Brasserie du Prince Eugène....” She wrinkled her nose and turned to Stella.

“It’s a start. But I hope to have some more information for you soon. The Morgan Library in New York recently acquired Manet’s only existing notebook. It is written in his own hand, and it covers the years when he was painting *Olympia*. I sent an inquiry last week, asking if he mentioned your model. A girl

from a very poor background would have gone to work at fourteen or fifteen, and she may no longer have been living with her family. Perhaps Manet wrote down her address. Or made some small note about how they met or even something she said.”

“How kind.” Stella was touched. “Thank you.”

The librarian smiled. “It is not right that history belongs to the men. Your research interests me. I have been trying to find out if perhaps Victorine exhibited at the Salon more than once. I will let you know. But right now you must find her death certificate.”

Stella’s heart sank as she thought of yet another slog through the parishes of the Marais. “More churches?”

Mademoiselle Duseigne shook her head. “No, this will be much easier since you now have all the relevant details. I suggest the Archives Nationales. It was established during the Revolution, and they have millions of documents. I have a friend who works at the museum there who can help you.”

“Where is it?”

“Not far. At the Hôtel de Soubise.”

“The beautiful palace where the princess lived!” Lucie gave a happy little skip. “Now we can go inside.”

Mademoiselle Duseigne ignored her excitement. “When you locate her death certificate, it will tell you where she was living at the end of her life. If it is here in Paris, and you can locate an address, you could go knock on the door. Perhaps you will find her family. It is not likely—but it’s not impossible. You might find someone who remembers her.”

“That,” said Stella, “is too much to hope for.”

A Stray of Civilization

THEY ARRIVED AT THE HÔTEL de Soubise the next morning to find the same policeman standing outside. He did not seem surprised to see them. “So you’ve come to see the Salon de la Princesse?” he said to Lucie.

“Not really.” She gave a wistful sigh. “But I wish we could.”

“It is the most beautiful room in France,” he said solemnly.

Lucie looked up at Stella. “Please,” she said plaintively.

“Come,” said the policeman, ushering them inside to an oval room where cherubs romped, mirrors shone, and gilded wood gleamed. This extraordinary rococo fantasy was illuminated by what seemed like dozens of lights on a huge crystal chandelier.

Only in France, Stella thought as the policeman escorted them through one astonishing room after another, *would they put the national archives inside a fantasy palace.*

But when they reached the archive museum, they found that Mademoiselle Duseigne’s friend was a calm man who exuded an air of efficiency. It was, Stella thought, as if he felt the need to counterbalance the rococo excess of his surroundings. “*Vous cherchez le certificat de décès de Victorine Meurent?*” he asked. “Are you related?”

“She was my great-grandmama,” Lucie piped up.

“I see. And in what year did she die?”

“That’s what we are trying to find out.”

“Our records go back only as far as 1916.”

Stella’s face fell. “I’m not sure she lived that long. It’s possible; she was born in 1844. Is there any way you can check?”

He nodded, scribbled the correct spelling of Victorine’s name on a slip of paper, along with her birth date, and vanished through a door.

“*Et voilà.*” He returned quickly. “My colleague has located the certificate.” He offered Lucie a congratulatory smile. “You have very good genes; your grandmama passed away on March seventeenth, 1927.”

“How old was she?” asked Lucie.

Stella did a quick calculation. “Eighty-three.” Her heart gave a triumphant little lurch. *Take that, Manet!* she said silently. *You died of syphilis at fifty-one,*

and she outlived you by more than thirty years. She looked at the clerk. “I don’t suppose you can tell me where she died?”

“A little village called Colombes.”

Her face fell. “Not Paris, then?”

The clerk sensed her disappointment. “It’s quite close. A suburb.”

“Do you have the address?”

He gave her a long, disapproving stare, as if she had carelessly misplaced an ancestor. “That, Madame, I cannot tell you,” he said stiffly. “For that you will have to go to the Mairie de Colombes.”

“How do we get there?” Stella asked. The man produced a shrug that said, very eloquently, that providing directions to a town hall outside the city was not in his job description.

“My father will know,” said Lucie confidently.

Outside again, Stella noticed that Lucie slowed her pace each time they came to a crêperie, examined the window of each cheesemonger they passed, and sniffed loudly when they walked by a bakery. She was obviously hungry. When they encountered a long line of people stretching down the rue des Rosiers, she simply stopped and stared at the modest shop where the line ended. “L’As du Fallafel,” Lucie read, sounding out the baffling words. “Do you know what that means?”

Stella shook her head. “Let’s find out.” They had, after all, something to celebrate.

The shop sold warm circles of floppy bread filled with the most astonishing combination of textures and tastes: crisp, hot chickpea fritters, cool crunchy salad, smooth fried eggplant, a tart sauce that prickled the tongue, and a dab of liquid fire. The flavors almost dizzied her, like a roller coaster rocketing her up and plunging her back down.

“It’s like a hot spicy ice cream cone,” said Lucie. Sauce dribbled down her chin.

By the time they reached the bookshop, they were both covered in sauce and redolent of spice. Daniel took one sniff and said, “I see you’ve discovered my favorite restaurant.”

“We’re celebrating,” said Stella.

“It’s a big day,” added Lucie. “We found Victorine’s death certificate! And guess what? She lived to be a very old lady!”

“So much for all those men who said she drank herself to an early death. Was she living in Paris?”

“In the suburbs. Colombes. Tomorrow we’re going to see where she spent the last years of her life.”

“Then what?”

“If we can get the address, we’ll go knock on the door. She didn’t die all that long ago, and it’s not impossible that her family still lives there. They could have her paintings. It’s worth a try.”

Daniel suddenly hit his head with his palm. “I forgot,” he said. “A telegram came for you this morning. I put it in the cash register.” He followed as she went to retrieve it. “I hope it’s not bad news.”

TAKE ALL THE TIME YOU NEED, Miss Shrifte had cabled. GIVE MY REGARDS TO GEORGE WHITMAN.

Just north of Paris, the Seine went slightly crazy, snaking around in deranged curves. Staring at the map on the commuter train carrying them out to the suburbs, Stella noticed the way the river encircled the town of Colombes, cutting it off from the city. In the early part of the century, she thought, it must have seemed like a remote little village.

It was, she saw when they exited the station, still remarkably quaint. They boarded an old bus, which meandered through the city at a geriatric pace and dropped them at the *mairie*. Within minutes the town hall’s helpful clerk had provided them with an address. He even drew them a map. “It’s really quite close,” he said. “Ten minutes if you walk.”

They strolled through tidy streets of carefully tended homes and soon found themselves standing outside a neat white cottage with a picket fence and proper little flower garden. A sign on the gate declared *BONNET* in blue letters. Stella felt breathless and slightly frightened; it had happened so fast.

“Should I say Victorine was my great-grandmama?” asked Lucie.

“You can’t! If they’re relatives they’ll know it’s a lie. I think it’s time to tell the truth. Or something close to it. Just say that I’m a foreign student writing a paper about Victorine and we think that she might have lived here once. Do they know anything about her?”

They walked up the path and knocked. Inside, a dog was yipping, and when the door opened, a small black-and-white whirlwind dashed outside to weave excited circles around them. Behind the dog stood a plump white-haired woman, her round face lightly dusted with flour. “*Oui?*”

“Madame Bonnet?” Lucie asked politely.

The woman nodded, and Lucie began to speak in breathless French. Stella watched the woman’s face grow increasingly animated; then she was opening the door wider and beckoning them inside.

The tidy house smelled deliciously of butter and sugar. In the sun-splashed living room, one small table held a bowl of flowers, another a bowl of fruit. It was, Stella thought, exactly the way you’d imagine the home of a fairy-tale grandmother. She felt herself begin to relax.

As Lucie spoke, Madame Bonnet nodded her head. Straining to understand, Stella got the distinct impression the woman knew about Victorine. After a few

minutes, however, she disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a small bag. She handed it to Lucie and then, to Stella's intense disappointment, led them to the door.

"What just happened?" Stella felt she'd been kicked out of paradise. She looked sadly back at the closed door.

"Madame Bonnet said her parents moved here in 1930."

Stella's heart sank. "So they didn't know Victorine. She was already dead." She felt defeated; they had been so close.... She gave a dejected sigh. What now?

"But she said her mother is still alive, and she's going to ask if she ever heard anything about Victorine."

Some hope, then. A small amount.

"The problem is..." Lucie reached into the bag, pulled out a cookie, and handed it to Stella. It was still warm. The little girl continued: "Her maman is very old, very deaf, and lives out in the country. But Madame Bonnet is going to visit next weekend, and she'll ask if she remembers anything. She said to come back in two weeks."

Stella sighed, feeling defeated. "I guess we might as well. But it's a long time to wait, and I think we need a new plan. Let's go see Mademoiselle Duseigne and find out if she's heard from those colleagues in New York."

THEY BARELY SPOKE as they rode back to Paris. But when they got to the Département des Étampes, the librarian greeted them so warmly that their spirits began to rise. She ushered them out of the beautiful Salle Labrouste and into one of the small conference rooms. "I've heard from the Morgan Library." She opened a file, produced a photocopied document, and pointed at a line. "You see, Manet *did* mention Victorine in his little *carnet*. Although," she added, with a small moue of irritation, "he misspelled her name." She snorted. "Typical! But he wrote down her address, and that tells us something. During the period he was painting *Olympia*, his model was living at seventeen rue Maître Albert." Stella appreciated that Mademoiselle Duseigne was speaking very slowly, hoping she would understand.

"I know that street!" cried Lucie. "It's near my father's bookshop."

"It's a nice neighborhood now." The librarian smiled down at the little girl. "But when Victorine lived there..." She stopped for a moment. "Let us just say that the street was once known as 'the rue Perdue.' Need one say more? Huysmans described the neighborhood..." She handed Stella some pages she had xeroxed and pointed at Lucie. "*Disons que ce n'est pas un endroit pour les enfants*. Perhaps you can find someone to translate this for you."

"Was it worse than the neighborhood she was born in?" Stella asked.

“You cannot imagine. Much worse. The place was desperate, dangerous. I also found”—she riffled through her papers—“a description of Victorine written when Manet’s *Olympia* was presented to the state at the end of the century.” She stared down at the page. “This is not fit for a child either.” She sighed, turned to Lucie, and began to speak once again.

“She says,” Lucie translated, “that Victorine’s paintings were shown in that art exhibit...”

“The Salon?”

Lucie nodded. “Six times. And the first time, in 1876, it was a painting she made of herself.”

“A self-portrait?”

“That,” said Mademoiselle Duseigne, speaking in English to emphasize her point, “is the one you must find! Think how much it would reveal!”

Until this moment, it had not occurred to Stella that Victorine might have painted herself. Now the stakes had been raised. She had been hoping to find a painting—any painting—just to correct the record and restore Victorine’s dignity. But a self-portrait was another matter. If they found that, it would tell them how this woman, who had been turned into so many different people by so many different men, saw herself.

In 1876, Victorine would have been a mature woman; Stella tried to imagine how she might have painted herself. Seated? Standing? Inside or out? What was she wearing? Did she look anything like the young Olympia? In her search for Victorine, she had conjured up a strong, victorious woman who had overcome the odds. But what if she was wrong? What if the portrait was haggard, vapid, or fearful? For the first time it occurred to her that she might not like what she found.

It had been a long morning. Lucie had had enough. She tugged on Stella’s hand. “I’m hungry. Can we go get ice cream? Berthillon is only a *little* out of our way.”

STELLA WAITED UNTIL Lucie was asleep before asking Daniel to translate the pages.

They went into the Piano Room, and as Daniel began reading Huysmans’s words, he gave a soft low whistle. “No wonder she didn’t want Lucie to hear this. His description of the Saint-Séverin area is really disgusting! And while he says all the streets in the neighborhood are bad, Maître Albert is the very worst. It was, he says, where the very poorest of the poor lived.”

“Read it to me,” Stella urged.

“‘There, in the Hôtel de l’Aveyron, which can be seen from the corner of the square, only sixty centimes are required for the first night, and for those that

follow, thirty.

“ ‘But one must have seen these rooms, some of which contain up to fourteen pallets in a small room deprived of air, to imagine the horror of these refuges. The beds were infected with syphilis, the sheets were rotten, there was a bucket for a urinal, no chair, no tables, no soap, no towel. You had to leave the key in the door in case the police arrived. The whole neighborhood was dark and smelly, but the lowest of the low lived on rue Maître Albert.’ ”

“Poor Victorine! She was only a teenager.”

He picked up the other photocopied page, which contained a newspaper article written in 1890, when the painting was gifted to the nation. “Apparently the effort was spearheaded by Claude Monet, who raised the money to buy it.” Daniel studied the page. “This is horrible writing, florid and rather silly. But the gist of what the reporter says is that the model for Olympia was a prostitute who lived in ‘the most evil places.’ He ends by saying that she was ‘a stray of civilization destined for misery and the hospital.’ ”

What if I’m wrong? Stella thought. *What if that is the reality?* Then she remembered Lautrec’s lies and pulled herself together. “He probably knew nothing at all about her.”

“Of course he was wrong! From what you’ve discovered, Victorine was pursuing her artistic career and exhibiting at the Salon. Doesn’t sound all that miserable to me.”

“The guy was probably a prig who thought any woman who took her clothes off had to be a whore. And imagine how she must have felt, reading that in the paper! So humiliating. But...”

“What?” he asked.

“The neighborhood does sound horrid.” She shuddered; she had hoped for better for Victorine. “Why did she live there? Maybe she really was a prostitute.”

“Or maybe she lived in the cheapest place in Paris because she wanted to save her money to buy paint.”

Daniel was a glass-half-full person; it was what she loved about him. “You’re right. I have to find that self-portrait! To Manet she was a prostitute, a gypsy, a bullfighter.... The portrait is the only clue we’ll ever have to how she saw herself.” Although paint was not Stella’s medium, she wondered, for just a moment, how she might portray herself.

The Treachery of Images

STELLA HAD WOKEN EVERY MORNING with hope and a plan. Now she had neither. She'd learned a great deal about Victorine, but she had no idea what to do next. Perhaps Madame Bonnet would come up with some information, but the odds were slim, and she knew that in the meantime she should start exploring other avenues. Perhaps, she thought, she should wander around the Popincourt neighborhood in search of inspiration.

Lying in her little alcove, contemplating her next move, she heard a familiar voice. She opened the curtain to find Jules standing in the middle of the Children's Room. "Please get up." He held out a steaming bowl of coffee. "I have brought croissants as well."

Stella ran her fingers through her hair, eliminating the most obvious tangles, laced up her sneakers, and jumped down from the loft. There were definite advantages, she thought as they made their way to the Blue Oyster Tearoom, to sleeping in your clothes.

As she settled into one of the ratty armchairs, Jules handed her a croissant. It crackled loudly when she took a bite. "I have just had a most enlightening conversation with Mademoiselle Lucie."

"Did she tell you"—Stella took a sip of the milky coffee—"that we found the house where Victorine was living when she died?"

"She did."

"But it's probably a dead end."

"Lucie seems optimistic...."

"May I remind you," she said tersely, "that Lucie is seven."

"She also says," Jules plunged ahead, "that you have to wait two weeks for news. It's a long time. I'm on my way south to visit a painter, and since your project has come to a standstill, I thought you might join me. I'd be happy to have your company."

"I don't think so," she was starting to say when George stomped into the room. Had he been eavesdropping?

"No sane person turns down a chance to get out of this hot city in the summer. Go. It will do you good."

“Paul’s outside,” urged Jules. “My plan is to travel as far as Roanne today. It’s about halfway. I’ve booked rooms at my favorite hotel.”

Stella’s heart gave an involuntary leap. A real bed! With sheets—and pillows. Would she have her own bathroom? A tub? She could hardly remember such luxuries.

“Then tomorrow we’ll have a leisurely drive to Solliès-Toucas. We can stop at a market or two along the way to pick up supplies for the painter—he happens to be a superb cook.”

She had a tantalizing vision of a rural French market, tables laden with sunflowers and fragrant produce.

“Are you taking wine?” George asked.

“Of course. I wouldn’t dare show my face without a few of my father’s best bottles.”

“And they would be?”

“A 1928 Krug and a Romanée-Conti Richebourg from the same vintage.”

George looked impressed. “Perhaps I should come along.”

“I have a great deal of the ’28 Krug. My father thought it was the greatest Champagne ever made, and when they released it—just before the war—he laid down dozens of cases.”

“Didn’t I read that the Germans appropriated all the wine in France?” asked Stella. “How did he manage to keep his?”

“My father had many flaws, but lack of forethought was not among them. By the mid-thirties he was so certain war was inevitable that he built an ersatz mausoleum to hide his wine. By the time the Germans came, the mausoleum looked as if it had been there since the Romans. ‘Vere are the vines?’ the Germans kept shouting. Father looked meek and said that times were hard and he had been forced to sell them. He’d strewn Mother’s jewelry about as a decoy, and when they discovered the diamonds, they forgot about wine.”

“He did that deliberately?”

“We all knew Göring loved gems, and it was hideous old stuff. But those wines...” He gave a secret little smile. “It will be good to bring the Krug, and the Richebourg too. But it’s the third bottle that is going to impress.”

“What is it?” asked George.

Jules looked smug. “The 1945 Romanée-Conti.”

“Now I really will come along,” said George.

“Is there something special about that wine?” Stella sensed that she was missing something.

“It is very rare,” said Jules. “The spring of 1945 started out hot, but it was followed by hail and frost, so the production was minuscule. The domaine produced only six hundred bottles. It wasn’t just the weather; the vines were so

old the yields had declined, and after the harvest they ripped out all the vines. They replanted, of course, but they didn't bottle another vintage for seven years. There may be a few more bottles of the '45 hidden away somewhere," he continued, "but even if mine is the sole surviving bottle, it won't last forever. And there is no one else on earth who will get more pleasure from this wine."

"What about you?" Stella asked.

"I will appreciate his pleasure." Jules looked at George. "Are you seriously planning on joining us?"

Whitman snorted. "As if I'd drive halfway across France for a sip of wine!"

STELLA HAD FORGOTTEN how comfortable Jules's antique car was. And after George's prickly personality, Jules was delightfully uncomplicated company. "Tell me," she said as Paris disappeared behind them, "what France was like when those wines were made."

As Jules began to speak, Stella felt herself leaning into the story. She'd been spinning endless tales for Lucie, and it felt good to be the listener for a change. She settled into the seat, eyes closed, as Jules began: "It seems so long ago—1928. At that point in my life, I was rather oblivious to what was going on in the world. The war was behind us, I had fallen in love with the woman who would become my wife, and the future looked rosy. I remember my father going on and on, insisting another war was coming, but I thought he was an old fool. He kept railing about the Kellogg-Briand Pact."

"Should I have heard of that?"

"I doubt they teach it in American schools." His tone was sarcastic. "It was completely quixotic. Sixty-two countries agreed not to use war as a way of solving international problems. Can you imagine? 'Mark my words,' Father said when it was signed, 'we'll be at war within the decade.' He thought the American secretary of state—Kellogg—came up with the plan so America would have no responsibility for anything that took place in Europe. I thought he was being ridiculous. We'd just fought the war to end all wars and everyone else was making money, spending money, having a wonderful time. We simply could not imagine that the 1929 crash was just around the corner."

"Were you working?"

He made a wry face. "I've never thought of what I do as work. I got to know artists and then did my best to persuade my father and his friends to buy their work. It's pretty much what I do now. But it's different when you're young. It was so easy; artists were flocking to Paris, and you ran into them in the cafés. One day I was sitting in the Café de Flore and struck up a conversation with René Magritte. His show in Brussels had been a disaster, and he was desperate for

money. I went to his studio and found that his paintings moved me. I tried to get my father to buy that painting of the pipe—”

“*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*,” she muttered.

“René called that one *The Treachery of Images*. Father wasn’t interested; he hated surrealism.”

“I love Magritte.” She turned to look out the window. “I think I was about ten when I saw that one with the body on the table and two men standing outside, one with a club and the other with a net.”

“*The Menaced Assassin*! I tried to get Father to buy that one too.”

“When I found it at the Museum of Modern Art, I just stood stock still and stared. It was as if Magritte had cut me open and seen my inner thoughts. It made me feel less alone in the world.”

“What did you think he saw? I mean when he looked inside you?”

“That life terrified me. My mother was absolutely fearless, and I thought everyone was like her, that I was the only one who saw hidden menace everywhere.”

“You must have been so lonely!”

Nonplussed and embarrassed by the pity in his voice, she changed the subject. “I meant to ask: Who is this artist you’re going to visit? And why travel to him? Don’t artists usually come to you?”

“Richard Olney isn’t like other artists. He’s a hermit who lives in a tiny village in the south of France and has no telephone—”

“This was George’s idea!” she cried, suddenly understanding. “He put you up to this!” She was furious with George, with Jules, and with herself for being so gullible.

“Why would he do that?” He sounded genuinely puzzled.

“Because...” There was an edge to her voice. “James Baldwin told George that thirty-three years ago Richard Olney met my mother in Paris. More important, he met her lover. George thinks the lover might be my father and that this Olney person might know how to find him. So he called you up and suggested this little jaunt.”

Jules looked shocked and then annoyed. Then he began to laugh. “He’s a devious old fool, and he’s duped us both. When I told him I was going to visit Richard to try to borrow a couple of paintings for a show, he suggested I take you along. He never said a word about your mother. Or, for that matter, your father. He’s remarkably meddlesome, but you have to give him credit.”

I do not! she thought angrily.

Jules patted her hand. “He only does it because he cares about you.”

He’d read her mind, Stella grudgingly admitted. She remembered what George had said about children needing their fathers. *Easy for him to say*, she

thought, thinking of the way he looked at Lucie. Most children were not so fortunate; few fathers were like him.

Jules continued, "But you have a choice, you know. You need not come to Richard's if you'd rather not; you can simply stay at the hotel. And should you decide to come along, there's no need to mention your mother."

"But George has put me on the spot!" she insisted.

"Yes," Jules agreed. "He's forced your hand. But when you have children, you'll understand. Jean-Marie brought such joy into our lives. Our relationship has been difficult since his mother died, but I have every expectation that we will find our way back to each other. He is my heart, my soul. I know George feels the same about Lucie. Still, the choice is yours."

They were silent for the rest of the ride. Stella was in turmoil; she had long ago resigned herself to knowing nothing about her father. Wasn't it better that way? Remembering Baldwin's description of the chef, she thought a phantom might be preferable to that complicated character. Why go looking for trouble?

Lost in her thoughts, she barely noticed that the car had stopped. Looking out the window, she saw they had pulled up in front of a grand old stone mansion set in the middle of a manicured park. A man in a long, striped apron was running toward them, arms outstretched in welcome. "Monsieur, we have not seen you in too many years. Such a pleasure!"

There was no checking in, no exchange of cards or money. They were simply whisked upstairs and shown to their rooms while bellboys trailed behind, carrying Jules's luggage and Stella's small suitcase.

Jules pointed to a larger suitcase. "This one goes with Mademoiselle."

"But—" she said.

"Just a few old clothes that belonged to my wife. I thought you might like them."

"But they were made for her!" She thought of Saint Laurent walking around and around his clients. "What makes you think they will fit me?"

"They will." He gazed at her, seemingly waiting for her to understand.

She felt she was missing something but, consumed with questions about her father, she let it go. It was one mystery too many.

THE BELLBOY PRODUCED a key, opened a door, and led her into an airy room filled with shimmering light. Outside, leaves rustled gently against leaded windows. Stella stretched across the enormous bed, breathing in the quiet, the solitude. Then she rose, moving silently across the thick carpet to the bathroom. The tub sat in front of a long window; in the distance she could make out three deer at the edge of a forest. She turned the taps as far as they would go, threw in the entire

package of bath salts, and listened to the water splash musically into the basin. The scent of lavender filled the air. She took off her clothes and stepped into the tub, savoring the way the water felt against her skin. She lay back, luxuriating in the warmth, the quiet, the knowledge that she was utterly alone. At last, she stood and watched water ripple off her skin.

Wrapping herself in a thick white bathrobe, she walked into the dressing room and nearly tripped over Jules's suitcase. It was leather, old and obviously expensive. Curious, she carried it to the bed and sprang the ancient lock.

As the case opened, the scent of apricots and vanilla leapt into the air. Letting out a startled cry, she sank onto the bed. A wave of nausea swept through her. She was such an idiot! How had she not known?

She should have recognized, from the first, that there was something off about the way they'd met. It had all been too neat.... Did he pay the proprietress at Robes des Rêves to inform him each time a customer purchased one of his wife's dresses? Make her send them off to Les Deux Magots? And the Jeu de Paume! Little wonder, she thought, that Jean-Marie had come speeding down to Vézelay. Remembering the scene in the night kitchen, she cringed, feeling so dizzy she had to put her head between her legs to keep from fainting.

But how did the dress get into the shop? Had he sold it to that strange little shopkeeper? Suddenly she remembered the phone call when she was paying for the dress.

She stood up and then, her head still swimming, quickly sat down again.

"Don't panic." She said the words out loud, forcing herself to take deep breaths. She remembered how carried away she'd been at L'Ami Louis, how foolishly she'd jumped to wrong conclusions. Jules was George's friend; he was her friend. He had never taken advantage in any way.

And if it *had* been a coincidence...Who could look at a perfect stranger and say, "Excuse me, but that's my late wife's dress you're wearing"? And if it *had* been accidental, what a shock it must have been.

Or was she just making excuses for him? Fooling herself?

She began looking through the suitcase. The clothes were beautifully packed, swathed in layers of pristine white tissue paper that crackled loudly when touched. Rummaging about, she extracted a simple gray herringbone suit; the skirt was straight and short, the jacket cut like a man's. It was, she thought, a delicate message. By offering her this luxurious version of her own tweed uniform, Jules was telling her he knew her taste, understood her. She ran her hand across the fabric, appreciating its luxurious softness, unable to resist the urge to try it on. *If Jules and Séverine had had a daughter*, she thought, *these clothes would belong to her.*

It fit perfectly, of course, the red silk lining touching her skin in all the right places. In this understated, slightly mannish suit, she looked elegant, confident, self-assured. Gazing in the mirror, she did not see her own timid reflection but a woman who felt entitled to take up space in the world.

“My wife loved that suit,” Jules said when she met him in the lobby a little while later. He gestured at the tweed. “I had a feeling you would too.” He offered her a rather sheepish smile. “Are you angry with me? I wouldn’t blame you. I should have told you right away, but it was such a shock. And then it was too late.”

“So you didn’t set it up?”

He stared at her. “Set it up?”

Her face grew red. She couldn’t look him in the eye. “It occurred to me—I’m sorry—that maybe you sold Séverine’s dresses to that shop and asked them to call each time one was purchased.”

“You can’t really believe that?” He looked utterly astonished.

“You have to admit,” she said as they settled into the car, “that it was all very neat. First the shopkeeper tells me to go to Les Deux Magots. And there you are. Then she insists I visit the very museum where you once worked. It’s too much of a coincidence.”

He breathed out through his nose. “Well,” he admitted at last, “I suppose I have to concede that point. It was truly a strange twist of fate. I have no idea what made that woman suggest Les Deux Magots or the Jeu de Paume, but it was certainly not because of me. You must believe me when I tell you that my heart stopped when I saw you sitting there in Séverine’s favorite dress, eating just as she used to, so intensely, as if you were a guest to yourself. For a moment I almost believed she had come back.”

“You should have told me!” she cried.

“You may be right. But it seemed rather presumptuous. And...” He hesitated. “Not very believable. Like a pickup line.”

She nodded. He was right.

“I meant to tell you at dinner, but you never gave me the chance.”

Stella thought of that strange meal at L’Ami Louis. How would she have reacted if he’d told her she was wearing his wife’s dress? Most likely she would have been even more panicked than she already was.

“And later,” he said, “when we met again at the bookshop, it felt awkward. And since you had returned the dress, it seemed there was no need.”

“But why tell me now?”

“It is too big a secret now that we are friends. You would eventually discover that Séverine was my wife, and it would prove even more awkward.”

Now that we are friends... Stella hugged the word to herself. She had never had a real friend before coming to Paris. Now she had Jules and George and Lucie and Daniel. Perhaps even Rachel as well. And so she asked the remaining question.

“What I don’t understand,” she said, “is *why* you are selling Séverine’s clothes. It can’t be for the money.”

“Of course I am not selling her clothes! Why would I do such a thing?”

“So how did that dress get into the shop?”

“It’s a very long story.” He looked out the window; they were pulling up in front of a restaurant. “And rather depressing. But if you insist, I promise to tell you the whole sorry saga. But not right now; it would ruin what I am certain will be an excellent dinner.”

As they got out of the car, she read the plaque in front of the restaurant aloud. “Maison Troisgros.”

A man was approaching, almost glowing in his beautifully pressed whites. Despite the costume, he did not look like a chef: He was too lean, his white beard too long, his face too humorous. He had a slightly turned-up nose and a mouth that seemed intent on repressing mischief. “I am happy to see you, *mon vieux!*” He gave Jules a hearty clap on the back. “It has been too long. And this is?”

“Stella St. Vincent, meet Jean Troisgros. He and his brother are trying to change the way France eats.” Stella watched the chef take Jules’s arm and steer him past the front door. Jules pulled away, trying to resist. “*Non!* Not in the kitchen! Not tonight!”

“But of course you will eat in the kitchen!” The chef was implacable. “Do you think that after all this time I am going to deprive myself of your company? *Après tout*, you’re such an old man, who knows if I will ever see you again? So I will join you.”

“But—” Jules began.

“*Pas de buts. Je vous ai fait un menu très simple.* I have made you a very simple dinner. *Vous allez voir.*” And with that he swept them, irrepressibly, into the kitchen. Behind his back, Jules gave Stella a hopeless shrug.

The kitchen was remarkably comfortable for a fancy restaurant, and a small table was set in a corner: three places and an enormous silver bucket. “The ’66, of course.” The chef pulled a bottle of Champagne from the ice. “To toast your return.” He filled the flutes, held a glass out to each of them. Stella and Jules looked at each other, then quickly away as their glasses briefly touched. A flicker of amusement crossed the chef’s face. But all he said was, “*Soyez les bienvenues dans notre maison,*” before emptying his glass.

A waiter approached with a large plate and set it on the table. Stella looked down at a small pink circle set in the exact center. It was surrounded by an even

pinker puddle. “What is it?”

“Ask your companion.” The chef’s smile grew more mischievous. “He knows.”

“You’ve had foie gras before. At L’Ami Louis and at L’Espérance.”

“But it doesn’t look anything like what we had there!” She thought of the thick slabs with their apricot-colored fat at the bistro, and the ethereal melting squares in Vézelay.

Audibly offended, the chef drew in his breath. “You cannot compare us with other chefs!”

“The brothers Troisgros,” Jules said, jumping in with an explanation, “have discovered an entirely new way to prepare foie gras. It is called *sous vide*.”

“Under empty?” she translated.

“Not exactly. *Vide* in this case refers to a vacuum. The foie gras is vacuum-packed and then cooked for a long time at extremely low temperature.”

“Why?”

“Taste it!” the chef insisted. “You will have your answer.”

The foie gras was cool and smooth, the texture almost fluffy. Then it began a vanishing act—as she sat there, it simply evaporated from her mouth. She found the experience so intoxicating that she took another forkful, carefully including a bit of the magenta puddle. What was it? A bit sweet, with just the slightest bitter edge. “What’s the sauce?” She pointed with her fork.

“You tell me.” The chef’s smug smile said she would not be able to identify it.

She took up the challenge, concentrating hard. The flavor was familiar. Not something she ate every day but something she recognized. Thick and rather jammy, the taste hovered between fruit and vegetable. She took another bite, trying to reel the flavor in as it danced away, teasing, just out of reach. The color said beets, but the taste said something else. Then she had it. “Rhubarb!”

“She has a good palate.” Troisgros said it grudgingly.

“Can you believe”—Jules turned to the chef—“that this young woman spent her entire first month in Paris without experiencing a single decent meal?”

“*Quel dommage*.” He sounded sad rather than shocked. “What a shame. *La vie est trop courte*...”

Jules gave Stella a long look. “He’s right, you know. Life is far too short.” He reached for the Champagne, filled all three glasses, and drained his own.

She followed suit and turned to the chef. “This *sous vide* technique, do you use it for anything else?”

“We are only beginning to understand it. So we experiment. But we have found that when you cook meat at very low temperature, nothing is lost. The juices remain inside. It is quite remarkable. I am sorry my father is no longer alive; he would have been enchanted.”

“Was he a chef too?”

“No. In the restaurant of my parents, my mother was at the stove. But my father was the one with big ideas. He despised heavy sauces and ornate garnishes and insisted my mother use local products and serve them very simply. Like this.”

The plate the waiter now set before her looked like an abstract painting: vivid green shot through with bright-coral slashes.

“Taste!” he urged.

It was clearly a fish but so sweet she did not recognize it. Looking at the color, she hazarded a guess. “Salmon? Or maybe not. It doesn’t taste like salmon.”

Troisgros looked very pleased. “That is because it was caught just this morning in the Allier, our local river. But also because we preserve the color by slicing the fish very thinly and searing it for just a few seconds.”

“So it’s almost raw?” She wasn’t sure about this.

“In Japan they eat their fish raw.”

She took another bite; the herbal sauce flirted with bitterness. “The flavor is so green I feel I’m eating color.”

“Sorrel.” He gestured to the waiter, who removed the plates and then set a single small bird surrounded by sliced fruit in front of each of them. “*Sarcelle aux abricots*,” he announced.

“*Sarcelle*?” Stella did not recognize the word.

“It’s a freshwater duck,” said Jules. “I can’t remember the word in English.”

“Teal,” Troisgros supplied.

Stella closed her eyes and tried describing the flavor. “It tastes wild.” She began to dream herself into the dish as if it were a painting, imagining a golden field in the sunshine, feeling the air rush past, hearing the sound of her own wings. Circling in a great joyous arc, she spotted a tree covered in tawny fruits, breathed their perfume in the air.

“I wanted”—the chef was watching her—“to give you the essence of the animal. To let you taste what the duck ate on her flight through life.”

“It’s wonderful.” Her cheeks flared; Jules was looking at her the way he had that day in Vézelay, when they were eating omelets. As if he was seeing the world through her eyes. As if he was enjoying her experience.

“Try this.” A plate of morose-looking lettuce was set before her, and she glanced at the chef, startled. He lifted his chin, indicating her fork; she took a bite. It was lettuce but unlike any she had previously encountered. “Lettuce’s leap toward stardom,” she said, teasing out a mineral flavor and, just beneath, a taste that was remarkably earthy.

“One of our kitchen gardeners grew these lettuces and urged us to braise them. When we did, we discovered an entirely new vegetable.” The chef stared

sadly down at the mass of sodden leaves. “But I can’t make them beautiful. Do you think we could serve *that* to our guests?”

“You just did!” She took another bite. “And anyone who can’t appreciate this doesn’t deserve to eat here.”

Next there was a wheel of Époisses, the dripping cheese filling the air with its seductive funk. Like all the other dishes, it sat in the middle of a very large plate. She frowned; she had just gotten it. “It’s a stage!”

“What?” Jules looked puzzled.

“The plates,” she said. “They’re enormous, which makes you take the food seriously. It’s a bit of theater. It’s...” She groped, trying for an analogy. And then she had it. “This is not a piece of cheese.”

She picked up her glass, hoping she’d remember it all in the morning.

Strangers

ACCUSTOMED TO THE NOISY MORNING bookshop sounds, Stella woke to the luxury of silence. She burrowed into the ironed sheets, appreciating the cloudlike softness of the pillows, the hint of lavender they gave off. Sun was pouring through the windows and she lay there, feeling the most extraordinary sense of peace. In allowing herself to become a Tumbleweed, she had nearly forgotten the deep joy of privacy.

But in the silence, she suddenly remembered what she was doing here, and all the joy drained from the morning. Why had George put her in this spot? She knew he meant well—but did she really want to find her father? What good could it possibly do?

Though...A tiny voice inside Stella would not be silenced. Maybe you'll like him. Maybe he'll like you. Maybe you'll finally find out who you are. What if this is your only chance and you're too cowardly to take it?

More confused than ever, she went into the bathroom, stepped into the shower, and turned on all the taps until a fierce waterfall was pummeling her body. She welcomed the assault, turning the dials so the water was so hot she could barely breathe, then reversing them to a cold so intense she felt her heart almost stop. Hot/cold, hot/cold, hot/cold. The water crashed down, erasing everything but the violence of temperature. After the hurried sponge baths in the bookshop restroom, it was overwhelming. She stepped out feeling not merely clean but cleansed.

While she was bathing, someone had silently delivered breakfast to her room. A silver tray sat on the table by the window, holding a bowl of fruit, a basket of croissants, butter, and jams. Pots of hot coffee and warm milk sent fragrant steam into the air. She filled a bowl with milky coffee and sat looking into the garden, savoring the solitude, trying not to think.

After eating, she went into the dressing room and contemplated Séverine's beautiful suit. She had been so comfortable last night, but now she pictured herself climbing from the car to face the hermit artist. Would this man, who had removed himself from the world, judge her for wearing such ostentatiously expensive clothing?

Did she really care? She remembered the look of pleasure on Jules's face when he had seen her wearing the suit, and the thought of his generosity warmed her. With a toss of her head, she threw her jeans into Séverine's suitcase, closed the latch, and slid into the skirt.

"You didn't tell me," she said as Paul started the car, "how Séverine's dress ended up in the Place des Vosges."

Jules sighed. "It is not something I would say in front of Jean. And"—he looked apologetic—"I hoped you might forget."

She gave him a withering look.

He sighed again. "But I didn't think you would." He steepled his fingers in that characteristic gesture of his and sat arranging his thoughts.

She waited.

"I told you," he began, "that Saint Laurent considered Séverine a muse, so you can imagine she had quite a fine collection. When she died, I decided to donate all her clothes to a museum. My secretary—"

Stella started. This was the first she'd heard of a secretary, but then, he was always so modest when it came to his work.

"—thought the Victoria and Albert Museum would be appropriate, but I felt the clothes should stay in France. Fashion, after all, is part of our patrimony. I offered them to the Musée de la Mode et du Textile at the Louvre, but it seems caring for old clothes, even very valuable ones, is surprisingly difficult and expensive. We are in the process of establishing a fund to maintain the collection, but in the meantime, Séverine's clothes remain in her closet."

He looked out the window; they were back on the *route nationale*, heading east. "About a year ago I was walking through the Place des Vosges when I saw a familiar dress in a shop window. I told myself it couldn't possibly be Séverine's, but I decided to go in, just to make sure.

"Little Madame Gauthier—you met her—fetched the dress. When she put it in my arms, I knew at once it *was* Séverine's."

"Apricots and vanilla..." she murmured.

"Yes, her scent lingers. I was so shocked I went quite white. Madame Gauthier went to fetch a glass of water. When she brought it, she said, 'I see you are familiar with Séverine.' I was struck by the way she said it—as if the dress were alive, and we were discussing an encounter with an old friend. Then the most extraordinary expression crossed her face. She looked guilty."

"Guilty?"

"She said she'd known from the start there was something wrong about the woman who'd sold her the dress, but she was so excited to get it, she ignored her misgivings. Later, when the woman turned up with another early Saint Laurent,

Madame Gauthier asked how she'd acquired it. The woman drew herself up and said haughtily that it was none of her concern."

"Another one of Séverine's?"

"Madame Gauthier said she could not accept the dress without knowing its provenance, and the woman finally offered that the clothes had belonged to her late mother." He spread his hands. "And then of course I understood."

"I don't."

"Eugénie. Jean-Marie's fiancée."

"Are you sure?"

"I described the Empress, and Madame Gauthier nodded. She showed me three more dresses and I recognized each one."

"Does Jean-Marie know?"

"You can't suppose I've asked him!" He sounded genuinely shocked. "He's so infatuated with the woman he probably wouldn't believe me, and if he did, it would break his heart." He looked distressed. "I keep asking myself why she would do such a thing, and none of the answers are good. Does she need money? Certainly not for any legitimate reason. Is it simply for spite? That doesn't bear thinking about."

"So you're going to let her steal all of Séverine's clothes?"

"Of course not." He looked out the window. "The whole thing is extremely unpleasant. Vulgar."

How sad, Stella thought, that this unpleasant woman had come between Jules and his son. Was this why Jules had been so kind to her from the first day they met? Did he yearn for a child who appreciated him and enjoyed his company? Impulsively, she asked, "Do you think I should ask Richard Olney about Celia's chef?"

"I would not presume to tell you what to do," he replied.

"Don't be evasive. I could use some advice."

"If you insist." He spoke with obvious reluctance. "I think that if you do not take this chance, you will regret it later. I did not have the easiest relationship with my father, but at least I know who he was. And that knowledge makes me understand myself better."

"But what if he's horrible? I'm not sure I want to know who my father is."

"From the little you've told me about your mother, your father could hardly be worse."

"You have a point," she admitted. The car was slowing down. "Are we there already? I thought it was a long drive."

"We're only in Lyon. I can never resist stopping at the market here."

From the front of the car, Paul grunted his approval. "Those Lyonnais have more sense than you Parisians."

The chauffeur rarely offered an opinion. Stella was curious. “Why do you say that?”

He put an expressive thumb at the bottom of his nose. “In Lyon they were not so stupid as to tear down their market. Paris”—he gave a disparaging little grunt—“has not been the same since we lost Les Halles.” Stella grimaced, remembering the flashy mall that had replaced the food market.

“You may not understand.” Jules tried to explain. “When I was a boy, I used to go to Les Halles with our cook and stare at the pigs with their grinning heads. Later I’d look at the polite little piece of meat on my plate and know it was once a living creature. A market makes people remember where their food comes from. When they tore down Les Halles, a piece of Paris went with it.”

“Do they have whole animals in the Lyon market?”

“I cannot promise you pigs or cows. But there will surely be birds. And perhaps,” he added, smiling, “a few snails.”

But what they saw first was cheese. Great piles of cheese. “Saint-Marcellin.” Jules had stopped to examine a precarious pile of ceramic crocks giving off a heady perfume that made Stella think of mushrooms. “This is the true food of Lyon. They eat this cheese as the rest of us drink water.” He picked up a crock and held it out to her. The little round disc was pale and soft, like a deflated baseball. He put it down and picked up another covered in dark mold. “It’s a simple cheese,” he explained, “and it changes radically with age. We’ll buy one for Richard.” He replaced the crock. “But not here.”

They walked beneath dangling sausages that sent out a sharp, spicy scent and past cases filled with chickens with bright-blue feet, jaunty blond plumes, and regal red crests. Curled up on a bed of parsley, the birds could almost be sleeping. She stopped to stare, but Jules kept going, moving toward a small white-haired woman who stood, hands on broad hips, watching his approach. “*Mais non! Jules? Ce n’est pas possible!*” She came around the counter to embrace Jules. “*Qu’est-ce que vous faites à Lyon?*”

“I had a longing for Saint-Marcellin.” He kissed her on both cheeks. “My young friend here has never had the pleasure, and of course she must begin with the best.” He turned to Stella. “Saint-Marcellin is a pleasant little cheese....” The woman began to bristle until he added, “Unless, of course, it comes from La Mère Richard.”

“*Je ne vous le fais pas le dire.*” No false modesty here.

“Saint-Marcellin used to be a dry hard cheese with no personality. Then Renée Richard looked into its soul and understood that it had a secret longing to be soft.”

“*Oui.*” She was picking up first one cheese and then another, gazing fiercely at each disc as if she could see through the crust. At last she said, “This one!” and

gave a pleased little nod.

“*C’est pour Monsieur Olney.*”

She dropped the cheese. “*Dans ce cas, pas celui-là.* He likes his Saint-Marcellin young and dewy, whereas you have always preferred yours a bit more mature. But”—she stared pointedly at Stella, who blushed—“perhaps you’ve changed?”

“I am far too old to change.”

“*Bon.*” She selected a little crock of cheese, then reached for a larger wheel and began wrapping it in paper. “You must take this Saint-Félicien as well. Tell Monsieur Olney to bring up one of his Burgundies. The older the better.”

“Speaking of Mr. Olney.” Jules gestured around the market. “Is there something else that might give him pleasure? Something he cannot find in Provence?”

“Oh, *Provence...*” She said the word as if it tasted bad. “They are slipping. The last time I saw Monsieur Olney, he was lamenting the demise of the *boucherie chevaline* near his home.”

“What’s a *boucherie chevaline*?” Stella whispered to Jules.

“A butcher specializing in horse meat.”

People ate horses? Stella shuddered at the thought.

“*Frites,*” Renée continued, “are not worth the eating unless they are fried in horse fat.” She pointed across the aisle. “Maurice still keeps a supply.”

The notion was revolting. “Really?” Stella scurried to keep up as the energetic little woman headed toward the butcher.

“But of course!” The two older people answered in chorus. “When I was growing up...” they both began, and then, laughing, stopped again. “There were *boucheries chevalines* all over France,” Renée continued.

“But you know, there aren’t as many farms as there used to be, which means fewer horses,” Jules added. “I thank you, Renée. You have thought of the perfect gift.”

AS THEY TRAVELED south, the air grew warmer, the colors more vivid. Jules rolled down the windows and the car filled with the scent of lavender and sage. Stella leaned back against the seat, comfortable in her tweed cocoon, feeling as if all the bones in her body had become softer. The countryside moved past in a blur of greens and yellows.

The roads became narrow and increasingly steep, and then they were climbing a vertiginous path that seemed meant for cows rather than cars. “It’s a poor excuse for a road,” Jules noted, “but Richard built it by hand, carrying the sacks of cement on his back.”

The greens outside the window were now interspersed with streaks of violet and blue, and the air took on the licorice tang of wild fennel. Then the car was groaning to a stop in front of a strange little cottage. “When he found this place, it was a falling-down old farmhouse, and barely habitable. But he’s been working on it, little by little, ever since,” Jules told her.

It still wasn’t much, she thought—more an idea of a house than a place where somebody actually lived. She strained to imagine how it would feel to be out here in the country with no car, no phone. It was like going back in time. Did he have running water?

As they got out of the car, she saw a man coming through the cottage door. Richard Olney was short and shirtless, and he looked like he was part of the place itself, just another plant that had blown in and put down roots. He carried a bottle in one hand, while the other held four wineglasses, stems threaded through his fingers.

“Paul!” He greeted the chauffeur first. Murmuring something in rapid French, he offered up one of the glasses. Paul tried to refuse. Ignoring him, Olney put the glass in Paul’s hand and filled it.

She thought of Snow White. This small man with his deeply lined, slightly sardonic face was not what she’d expected. She looked down, regretful; the smart suit was a mistake after all.

Olney wordlessly handed Stella and Jules a glass each. He splashed in wine the color of fading pink roses. He then held his own glass up, oddly formal. “It’s good to see you, Jules. Who is this?”

Jules introduced Stella, and Olney stiffened. He scrutinized her face. “St. Vincent. Any relation to Celia?”

“You remember her?” She hadn’t expected that, and the words emerged in a squeak.

He regarded her with a certain amusement. “I don’t imagine there are many people who don’t. What is she to you?”

“My mother.”

“Ah. Condolences.”

“So you’ve heard that she died?”

He looked chagrined. “I hadn’t. Was it recent? I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be.”

The look he gave her was penetrating—and strangely comforting. He touched her glass with his. Gently. “You must tell me all about her. But not just yet. Come.” He led them inside into a dark, rustic kitchen with a low ceiling. A fire crackled in the huge hearth; above it, copper pots gleamed on iron hooks.

It was the most particular house she had ever seen. Like a couture suit, it seemed precisely tailored to Richard’s body. She watched him go to the hearth

and throw on more logs; they flared briefly, then settled to a comfortable glow. He refilled their glasses as Jules began piling their packages onto the long wooden table.

“*Graisse de cheval!*” It was a shout of sheer delight. Richard bent over a large lopsided basket beside the hearth, reached in, and unearthed a few dirt-encrusted potatoes. Setting them on the table, he handed Stella a knife. “I can’t remember the last time I had proper *frites*. Peel these. We’ll fry them right away.”

The potatoes were as homely as stones and surprisingly heavy.

“What else have you brought me?” He sniffed the large wheel of cheese. “What is this? I don’t think I know it.”

“A Saint-Félicien from Renée Richard. She says we must have it with old Burgundy.”

“How not?” He gestured around the room at the empty bottles perched on every surface, at a pole festooned with hundreds of old wine labels. The doors, Stella realized, were made out of wine crates. And now, beneath the scent of burning wood and drying onions, she detected the piercing scent of wine turning to vinegar. Looking at her twitching nose, Olney pointed to a barrel in the corner. “It takes good wine to make good vinegar.”

“I doubt that these”—Jules set his bottles on the table—“will be going into your vinegar barrel.”

Olney’s eyes narrowed as he studied the labels. “You sure you want to part with them?”

“Can you think of anyone who would appreciate them more?”

“But still...” He looked at Jules. “I’m warning you, not even the ’45 will induce me to let you have that portrait of Jimmy you used to covet.”

He pointed to the wall. Looking up, Stella saw, among the haphazard jumble of paintings, a trio of portraits all featuring the same man. She recognized James Baldwin’s ugly-beautiful face. In one he was asleep, in the second drinking coffee, and in the last simply seated in a chair, staring out with the huge eyes that took in so much more than those of ordinary people. There was something vaguely familiar about the style, and it hit Stella that the paintings reminded her of the portrait in the apartment on Madison Avenue. Was Celia’s painting by Olney? The one Stella had talked to when she was growing up? She’d have to ask.

“To be honest,” said Jules, “there is little I covet anymore. These days I am more interested in giving than getting. It’s age, I suppose. When I decided to ask you for some paintings for the show, my first thought was that it would give me great pleasure to share these wines with you.” He took a sip of the rosé.

Stella picked up her glass and watched the wine swirl. She inhaled its briary scent, noting that it was unlike the timid, slightly prissy rosés Celia had served at

her soirées. “I didn’t know a rosé could be so...” She groped for the word. And then it came to her. “Muscular.”

Olney nodded. “Nobody on earth makes rosé like my neighbor Lucien Peyraud. He understands Mourvèdre.” He took a satisfied sip. “You know, if I were still painting, I’d paint you here, peeling potatoes in your beautiful suit.”

She smiled; so the suit had not been a mistake.

“But alas.” Olney sighed. “I rarely paint anymore.”

“That”—Jules sounded sad—“is a shame.”

“You may be the only one who thinks so. My paintings never sold, you know, and I’ve dedicated the last five years to my encyclopedia.”

“Believe me, I’ve heard,” Jules told him. “You have no idea how it irritates my compatriots that you—*un Américain*—have become the great expert on French food. I don’t mind that. But it pains me to see you squandering your talent. You were born to paint. I want your Baldwin portraits for a little show a friend is putting together for his new gallery. You’ll be in good company.”

“Perhaps.” The artist was vague. Stella wondered if this was because he wanted to keep his pictures for himself or because the gallery was new.

The fat was bubbling in a pot on the stove. The potatoes went in, were snatched out, then plunged back in. They emerged crisp and golden; Richard sprinkled them with salt and piled them on a platter, then set a heap of tiny marinated fish on the side. They ate with their fingers. The potatoes were burning hot, the insides nearly melted, making the contrast with the cool, slick anchovies almost erotic.

“There are more than twenty different varieties of anchovies,” Richard said, licking oil from his fingers, “and when I was in the market yesterday, I saw a new one. It was slightly plump, and I was intrigued. I asked the fishmonger to sell me some, but she turned up her nose. ‘*Oh, non, monsieur, ce n’est pas pour vous. Ce sont des étrangers.*’” He saw Stella’s look of incomprehension and translated. “Oh, no, those are not for you. They are strangers.”

“After more than twenty years you’re still a foreigner?”

When Olney laughed, she noticed that his teeth were slightly pointed. “You misunderstand. I’m not the stranger; the fish is. The fishmonger felt they were unworthy of me because they come from somewhere else. Any food that travels more than ten kilometers is *d’origine étrangère*—and therefore not fit for local consumption. It’s why I love living here.”

“The horse fat was *d’origine étrangère*,” she pointed out.

“True. But fat lasts. And horses travel.”

JULES'S WINES WERE opened, decanted, fussed over. They both watched Olney take the first sip of the 1945 Romanée-Conti, his eyes growing wide as he held the liquid in his mouth. Then he took another, closing his eyes in pleasure. *If he were a cat, she thought, he would be purring.*

She took a sip. And understood. She was drinking liquid rubies.

But they did not discuss the wine. When she remarked on it later, Jules shrugged. "What would we say? The wine spoke for itself. We were drinking time, drinking history, tasting the past. You can't talk about that, and only idiots would try."

Instead, they cooked.

She had expected the heat and tension Baldwin had described when he'd told her and George about the night in Belleville, but this was different: easy, comfortable. Olney seemed happy to have their company, giving Stella small tasks as Jules strolled about the room, looking at the paintings.

"Prep these." Olney handed her a heap of asparagus.

"What should I do with the peelings?"

He pointed to a bowl. "Perhaps I'll make soup tomorrow." He set a couple of speckled eggs on the table. "Have you ever made hollandaise?"

She had not. He handed her a mortar and pestle, showed her how to drip the melted butter, drop by slow drop, into the yolks, nodding approvingly as she worked. "You have good rhythm and great patience," he said. "Two of the four things required to make a cook."

"What are the other two?"

"Good ingredients. And imagination."

Stella remembered watching Celia cook, thinking how Olney's approach was entirely different. Celia would stride into the kitchen like a conquering hero, a warrior intent on subduing ingredients. For her, food was a weapon, and she was interested only in the final result. Olney, on the other hand, was intent on enjoying the journey. Patrick and Baldwin both found pleasure in the kitchen, but for Olney, cooking was much more than that. It seemed that he didn't just enjoy cooking; he was totally absorbed in it. It must be, she thought, the way he painted, and she understood that he had simply traded his brush for a knife.

Now he handed her one. "Go outside and cut a branch of rosemary. A substantial one."

"What for?"

"To baste the lamb." He indicated the gigot turning slowly over the fire.

"What a good idea." When she returned with the herb, its piney scent mingled with the aroma of roasting lamb, and she realized how hungry she was.

STELLA HAD ANTICIPATED that dinner would be filled with talk about the old days, but she was wrong. Richard missed Paris and was eager to know what was taking place in the museums and galleries.

“All anybody can talk about is the Gare d’Orsay project,” said Jules. The city was in the process of turning the grand old railway station into a museum. “It’s a wonderful space,” he continued, “and when it’s finished they’re going to move all the paintings from the Jeu de Paume over there. The paintings will be much happier.”

“That reminds me,” said Stella. “You promised to tell me about working at the Jeu de Paume during the war.”

“It was a long time ago...” Jules seemed embarrassed.

“You were at the Jeu de Paume during the war!” Richard looked at Jules with new respect. “You must have known Rose Valland. What an amazing woman!” He turned to Stella. “Have you heard of her? She rescued French art from the Nazis. It’s quite a story.”

“Tell me,” said Stella, eager to know more about that moment in Jules’s life. He’d told her he’d worked with a remarkable curator named Rose, but whenever the subject of the war came up, he grew strangely reticent. She remembered how embarrassed he’d become when George called him a war hero.

“Ask Jules. He’s the one who knew her.”

Jules sighed and shrugged, then gave in. “She was a blacksmith’s daughter from rural France.” As he told them about Rose, Stella could almost see the small bespectacled woman. Born in a time when educated women were rare and educated working class women nonexistent, Rose received a scholarship to an *école normale* and went on to earn increasingly impressive degrees. By the time she was thirty-two, she had graduate degrees in art history from both the *École du Louvre* and the University of Paris.

“Despite all her education,” sighed Jules, “no museum was willing to hire a woman, and she ended up earning her living as a high school teacher. But she wanted to stay in touch with the world of art, so she became a volunteer at the Jeu de Paume.”

When the Nazis marched into France, Jules continued, they began systematically looting the country’s treasures. They used the Jeu de Paume as their staging area; over the years, more than twenty thousand works of stolen art were sent to the museum to be sorted. Göring himself came to pick over the spoils. But the Germans were intent on secrecy, so they fired everyone who worked at the museum.

“The problem was,” said Jules, “they soon realized they needed *someone* who knew their way around the place. And there was mousy little Rose, a nobody, a poor woman, a lowly volunteer. So they put her in charge. There is”—he smiled

—“a certain irony in all this. Rose finally had a position worthy of her talent and education.”

At the time it would have been impossible to earn a graduate degree in art history without speaking German, but the Nazi elite had such contempt for women that it did not occur to them that Rose might understand what they were saying. She was so invisible to them that they spoke freely in front of her as they discussed where each piece of art was being sent. For four years Rose kept secret notes about every painting and sculpture. “It was extremely dangerous,” Jules concluded.

“But.” Stella was puzzled. “If they fired everyone but Rose, where do you come in?”

“I didn’t exactly *work* there,” he admitted.

“I see.” Stella couldn’t keep the disappointment from her voice. “So what you said about Rose wasn’t true?”

“It was true.”

“I don’t understand.”

Richard was looking from one to the other, following the conversation the way a person watches a tennis match.

“What Rose was doing was extremely dangerous. The Resistance was worried, and they secretly contacted me for advice. Together we figured out a way for me to get inside,” Jules explained.

“How?”

“Someone had to clean the place. The Nazis generally used prisoners for menial work, but they thought this was too sensitive. And they certainly were not about to clean their own toilets! So I hung around outside the museum, pretending to be a drunken half-wit, until a colonel had the sudden inspiration that I was the perfect solution to their problem.”

Richard stared at him. “You. Cleaned. Bathrooms?”

Jules gave him a scathing look. “It was not exactly Omaha Beach on D-Day, but I did my part.”

“You must have been such a comfort to Rose,” said Stella. She wondered if she would have found the courage to do what Rose had done.

Richard started to say something and changed his mind. He pointed to the wooden salad bowl. “Pass me that.” He filled it with heaps of lettuce, roquette, endive, and mâche, tossing the greens with a sharp vinaigrette until the air filled with a clean, bracing scent. After the richness of the meat, the bitterness and acidity were very welcome.

Richard passed the plates around and cleared his throat. “So,” he began, “may I ask about your mother now? Who did she end up marrying?”

“No one.”

“Then who was your father?”

“I have no idea. She would never even tell me his name.”

He gave her a sharp look. “How old are you?”

When she told him, he said simply, “Then I suppose you want to know about the night I met Celia’s chef.” He was so quick! As he took a long sip of wine, she wondered how closely his account of the evening would resemble Baldwin’s.

“When I first got to Paris, there used to be this little restaurant up in Montmartre called Chez Tito. Nobody had ever given the place a second thought—until Django arrived. None of his dishes should have worked, but that man could blend anchovies with chocolate and make you beg for more. I went as often as I could manage to scrape the money together. It was above my touch, but I couldn’t stay away.”

Interesting, she thought. Baldwin hadn’t mentioned this particular detail, hadn’t said the chef had a reputation. And the way he’d described the evening, the food had been mostly a backdrop to seduction, not the main event.

“I was certainly not alone: We were all in love with him, or at least the idea of him. It wasn’t just his food; he was gorgeous. Django would come strolling out of that tiny kitchen and strut around the room, glorying in the attention. He had his favorites, but I was certainly not among them. No matter how often I went, he never noticed me.

“Then one night in Belleville...My apartment was full of people I knew and people I didn’t. I was standing at the stove, looked up, and there he was. Gooseflesh raced up my arms and down my back. What was he doing there? Then I saw he was not alone: There was a woman on his arm, hanging on for dear life as if he were her property.

“It didn’t matter. He saw me—he finally saw me!—and walked over, picked up a knife, and began chopping onions, bumping up against me so I could feel the heat of his skin through my trousers.”

Okay, she thought, *here comes the seduction*.

“Sometimes I dream of that night. I’d never had an experience like it; we were making silent music, and as the night progressed, our food became more and more outrageous. He took the fish—a beautiful piece of cod—and began slicing it into paper-thin sheets. Nobody ate raw fish back then, but somehow I understood what he was doing and began slicing limes and chopping herbs. It was like that all night: We were dancing in the kitchen, our bodies moving together, putting out plates of food and ignoring everyone else.

“I went into a kind of trance and lost the capacity for thought. We were just grooving. And then, suddenly, Celia was throwing things. It was operatic—she stamped her feet, hurled dishes to the floor, and swore at him using language I’d never heard from a woman. He just put his head back and roared with laughter.

That made her even angrier, and she shouted even louder. Then she whirled around and ran into the rain. And that was that.”

“And Django?”

“Oh, he stayed the night.”

“And afterward?”

Olney looked straight at her. “What would you do? If you’d had a perfect night?”

She swallowed, understanding. “You never saw him again.” What she was feeling was relief. Her father—if this Django was indeed her father—had vanished into the mists of time. She could forget about him.

“Lightning doesn’t strike twice, and I was afraid of getting hurt. I was content to keep that one night special, and so I spent the next few weeks making a painting of him.”

Could it be? Heart beating so rapidly it almost hurt, she asked, “Do you still have it?”

He shook his head. “I have no idea what happened to it.”

“Did you paint him cooking?”

“I tried, but I couldn’t get it right. He was such a whirlwind in the kitchen, and I couldn’t capture that energy. Then I thought of the Marché d’Aligre, and it seemed right. It was his jungle, and he stalked through it.”

“I think Celia bought your painting,” she said. “It used to hang on our living room wall. I used to talk to it.”

He smiled at her. “That makes me happy. That painting got Django out of my system, and then I heard he’d gone back to her. I really don’t know, but he loved drama; she certainly provided that. In some ways they were alike; he was young and restless, and she never struck me as a person you could count on.”

“She never struck you...” Stella repeated. “Are you saying you saw her again?”

He shrugged. “She came to Paris from time to time. We had mutual friends. But Celia held that night against me. And even if she hadn’t, we couldn’t be friends. I was not her kind.”

She looked at him. “What do you mean by that?”

He looked into the distance, searching for the right words. “There was a reason she took a lover who did not speak her language. She was an alpha female. She preferred her women weak and her men silent or rich. Or preferably both.”

Stella thought of the acolytes. She thought of Mortimer.

“But the timing is right; he could be your father. After all, she bought the painting. She must have told you *something* about him.”

“All she ever said was that she met my father in a bar.”

“Chez Tito wasn’t much more than that. It’s possible.”

Stella's feeling of relief dissipated, leaving behind a sudden desire to know more. If this man, this Django, was her father, perhaps Jules was right. "Is there anything you can tell me about Django? His last name?"

"If I ever knew it, it's gone."

"You must know something!" She was feeling strangely desperate.

"I did hear a rumor—it was a few years ago now—that Django was working with that young chef at the casino in Enghien-les-Bains. It might be true. Young Passard's food reminded me of Django's. I could imagine them working together."

"Alain Passard?" Jules spoke up for the first time. "I've heard about him. He is the youngest chef ever to earn two Michelin stars and his food sounds interesting."

"It is." Olney's nose twitched, as if recalling lost aromas. "When I went to Passard's restaurant, the meal began with slices of raw scallop topped with caviar; that reminded me of how shocking it was when Django fed us raw fish all those years ago. Then there was a marvelous Saint-Pierre. Passard had peeled away the skin and papered the fish with hundreds of bay leaves before covering it back up and steaming the fish until it had absorbed all the flavors of the herb. The man loves herbs and uses them in the most fascinating ways. That also reminded me of Django. There was a fat sweetbread skewered with a sprig of rosemary until it was nothing more than an herbal cloud. And the salad was the tiniest herbs, all different. Beautiful simplicity."

Stella was tasting the flavors in her mind as he described them.

"And dessert?" Jules asked. "Was that interesting as well?"

Olney's eyes gleamed. "It was a tomato!"

"A tomato?"

"Yes. Stuffed *à la vanille*."

"Where is Enghien-les-Bains?" Stella asked.

"Just outside Paris. Argenteuil. If I were you..." Olney took Stella's hand and patted it a bit awkwardly; it was not a gesture he seemed comfortable with. "Django was a wanderer. He could be anywhere in the world. It was just a rumor, after all."

Again, that feeling of relief. She had been doing fine without a father. She didn't need to know. But right behind it came another voice, saying she was a coward, taking the easy way out. Would Victorine have given up? Or Rose? What they had done had taken much more courage. "But," she heard herself saying, "he might be my father. Shouldn't I at least find out?"

Olney looked at her, all seriousness now. "Django was your mother's lover, but he was surely not the only one. And even if he is your father..." He let the words trail off, and nobody said anything for a few beats. At last he spoke again.

“Let me put it this way. Django was talented. He was handsome. He was the most exciting man I’ve ever met. But he did not seem like the kind of man who would stay in one place very long. Trying to track someone like that down might be harder than you think. I wouldn’t want you to get your hopes up.”

She looked toward Jules, wondering what he thought. But he just gave a little shake of his head. It was up to her.

Olney patted her hand again. Then he rose from his seat and disappeared into the cellar. He returned cradling a dusty bottle of Cognac, poured the amber liquid into their glasses, and raised his own. “To hell with the past.” He tossed down the liquid and threw the glass over his left shoulder. It shattered with a satisfying crash.

Pandora's Box

THE NEXT MORNING, STELLA WOKE with yet another memory of drunken goodbyes and a long ride through midnight streets. All her nights with Jules seemed to end that way. Looking around, she recognized the old-fashioned wallpaper; she was back in the Vézelay château.

She sat up and glanced out the window. The sun was high. Was it still morning or already afternoon? She made her way to the bathroom, noticing that Séverine's suitcase had been unpacked. The suit she had been wearing hung, clean and pressed, on padded hangers, and she had a hazy memory of taking off her clothes and climbing into bed. Her neatly ironed jeans lay folded across a chair. How long had she been asleep? She filled the washbasin with water and plunged her face into the icy liquid.

The house no longer felt frightening, and she made her way through the stifling antique-filled rooms without difficulty. The dining room was even more beautiful than her memory of it, and Brancusi's bird welcomed her like an old friend.

Jules sat at the table, sun shining on his silver hair as he calmly peeled an orange. He silently poured coffee and milk into a small blue bowl and handed it to her as she sat down. "Enghien-les-Bains?" he asked. "Shall we go?"

She bent her head to the steam, remembering all the things Richard had said. "I don't know. Advice?"

Jules offered her a section of orange and she put it in her mouth, savoring the sweet spurt of juice. "If I were you, I'd be very careful about opening that particular Pandora's box."

She nodded. "I've been thinking the same thing."

"And speaking of Pandora's boxes..." He hesitated. "Would you like to see if there is anything in Séverine's closet that you'd care to take?"

"I don't need more clothes!" Her voice was sharper than she'd intended.

"Of course you don't. But I need to see if anything new has gone missing, and to be honest..." The look he gave her was almost pleading. "I'd rather not be alone."

It was, she thought, the least she could do.

He led her through many halls, up flights of stairs, across galleries, until her head was spinning. The château was so big! At last he opened a door and led her into a large windowless room; when he pressed a button, hidden lights gently illuminated the space and she could see that it was paneled in light wood. Two walls were devoted to drawers and mirrors, and a third was covered in photographs and drawings. Jules pressed another button and Stella watched a wall slide silently open.

There must have been a hundred dresses, but in that riot of color Stella was drawn to only one. She ran her hand across the spill of champagne-colored silk. Jules watched as she stroked it. “That’s the dress Séverine wore the night we met Eugénie. She searched a dozen vintage shops before she found it.”

“Why this one?” The dress was almost weightless; it would, she thought, lifting it from the hanger, feel like wearing nothing.

“Madame Vionnet was Jean-Marie’s favorite couturier. She bought it to please him.”

“Jean-Marie knows fashion?”

“Oh, yes. I told you that he and Séverine were close, and from the time that he was very small, he accompanied her to all the shows.”

“I can see that he inherited his mother’s taste. It’s beautiful.”

Jules stroked the silky dress. “He loved the simplicity of Vionnet’s clothes and was very sad that he never had the chance to meet her; she closed her salon at the outbreak of the war. He told me that she called herself ‘an enemy of fashion’ and followed nobody’s lead. One of the things that impressed him was that she had been a very thoughtful employer: She had a resident doctor and dentist for her workers, offered them maternity leave and even daycare. But Jean-Marie said what he liked best was that she once said that whenever a woman smiles, her dress should smile with her. I’ve always thought that was rather poetic.”

He stroked the dress again, as if his wife were wearing it. “Jean-Marie went with Séverine when she was searching for the dress. They had such a good time!” His face grew somber. “I’m glad they had that last moment together, because she fell ill right after that. And then, so quickly, she was gone.” He held the dress out to her. “Take it,” he urged. “Please. It would make Séverine happy.”

“But what would I do with it?”

He offered her an enigmatic smile. “You never know. Life has so many surprises. And when the right occasion comes around, you’ll be prepared.” He indicated the other clothes. “There must be something else here you might want. Séverine would have liked you very much, and I know it would give her pleasure to know you were wearing her clothes.”

It was, she thought, as if he had invited her into the family. She was unable to refuse. While he rummaged among the dresses, she chose a simple black jacket.

Jules looked at it, disappeared into the closet, and emerged with a silk blouse in a pink so pale it reminded Stella of the inside of a seashell. "Séverine always wore this with that jacket. She said the fabric was like pearls; it warmed to her skin as she wore it." Stella reached to touch the lustrous fabric, and it rippled beneath her hand.

"Is anything else missing?" she asked. "Has the Empress struck again?"

"Yes." He produced a slightly sad smile. "With unerring instinct, she has chosen the one dress Séverine considered a mistake. It was from Saint Laurent's bolero period; it featured a taffeta skirt in a shocking shade of magenta and a black top laced like a corset. I thought it looked like something a dancer in the Folies Bergère might have worn to perform the cancan. Séverine agreed; she said it was not for her, but Saint Laurent insisted. She only bought it to please him—and she never wore it."

I wouldn't have worn that either, Stella thought, taking one last look at the beautiful clothes. For just a moment she imagined how it would have felt to be a little girl playing in this closet, knowing that someday, when you were grown, this would all belong to you.

"I CAN'T HELP feeling a little sorry for the Empress," she told Jules later, when they were in the car headed back to Paris. "It's so sad, so desperate."

"You wouldn't feel that way if you knew her. The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that she is doing this out of spite. She's sending me a message; she wants me to know what she's up to. It's insidious, but she wants to cut me out of Jean-Marie's life, and she thinks this is one way to go about that." A sudden smile crossed his face. "It has just occurred to me that I should do something equally outrageous to irritate her."

"It seems you do that simply by staying alive."

"I do. But think how much more annoyed she would be if I compounded that crime."

"How would you do that?"

His smile changed into a cheeky grin. "I could always remarry."

"What!" She looked at him, startled. "You can't be serious!"

"It is the best idea I've had in ages!" He looked absurdly pleased with himself. "You heard what Jean-Marie said the morning you met. Such a ridiculous idea would never have occurred to him, but Eugénie is clearly afraid that I will marry a young woman who will give me more children. French law requires parents to leave the same amount to each child, so if I were to have two or three more children, Jean-Marie's inheritance would be considerably diminished. I'm fairly certain that's the reason she hasn't insisted on setting a

date: She wants to make absolutely sure that Jean-Marie will inherit every penny.”

“But you would never disown him!”

“I couldn’t, even if I wanted to; French law forbids it. But Eugénie thinks everyone is as mean-minded as she is. I don’t believe she’s capable of love, and she certainly does not understand how much I love my son or realize that there is almost nothing I would not do to ensure his happiness.”

She stared at him, speechless. He was obviously in earnest. Would he really remarry just to annoy the Empress?

He laughed at the look on her face. “Don’t fret, my dear; I am certainly not thinking of you. I like you far too much to suggest such a thing; you deserve so much more.” He looked at her for a moment and then shook his head, as if deciding not to say whatever was on his mind. Then he removed a tape recorder from his briefcase, saying, “Would you mind very much if I do some work? I leave for London in the morning, and I have a great deal to do before I go.”

“*Londres, Monsieur Jules?*” Paul’s voice cut in, sounding slightly panicked. “You said nothing to me.”

“I have just decided,” he replied. “I have had an idea.”

He began dictating instructions into the tape recorder. Stella listened, fascinated, as he discussed pieces he wanted to purchase for various clients’ collections. She remembered that when they first met, she had considered him a lonely old man. How wrong she’d been. No wonder the Empress worried; he was still so full of life.

She dozed off to the sound of his voice and did not wake until Jules clicked off the tape recorder. Looking out the window, she saw they had reached the outskirts of Paris. “Sleep well?” he asked.

“I did. No dreams.”

“May I ask a question? Are you happy being a Tumbleweed?”

“Yes.” She said it automatically, but she was thinking about the clean sheets, hot water, and quiet of the past two days. “I like feeling that I belong there, and I’ve never really had friends before. But...” She stopped. She wanted the moon.

“But?” he inquired.

“It’s chaotic. I miss my privacy. And I’d forgotten how nice it is to feel clean.”

He burst out laughing. “I have a proposal for you.” Seeing her face, he quickly added, “Apologies: The word was badly chosen. But I have a little flat on the rue Christine. It isn’t much; I bought it years ago as a place to store paintings, but you would be welcome there.”

She frowned; she couldn’t help herself. He had a secret apartment? Misinterpreting her reaction, he said, “Don’t let your imagination run away with

you; it's small and rather primitive. Two rooms and a hotplate. There isn't even a telephone. But you would have privacy. A bathroom with a tub. And it's ten minutes from the bookshop. You could be a Tumbleweed with your own place to sleep. And," he added with a touch of mischief, "to hang your new clothes."

She hesitated. She knew she could trust him. She hoped she could. But moving into his apartment? Surely this was just another sign of Jules's generosity...but she was suddenly nervous. Did people buy apartments just to store paintings?

"Let me show it to you," he suggested. "Before you make up your mind."

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HE HAD NOT exaggerated: A very small flat waited at the top of five steep flights of stairs. There were a few sticks of furniture—a small bed, a few chairs, a rickety table. But the walls were filled with paintings, light danced through the rooms, and a bird sat on the windowsill, warbling a welcome. She was enchanted.

Paul took her downstairs to introduce her to the concierge, a dumpy, dour woman who looked at her suspiciously. "*Une autre?*" Madame Greco asked. "Does this one at least speak French?"

"*Très peu,*" Paul responded, and the woman let out a little hmmpf of disapproval. But Stella had heard what she said. *Une autre*. Another one. Jules had obviously adored his wife, but he was a wealthy, sophisticated man; what did she know about their lives? Who were these *autres* and *how many* had there been? When Jules held out the key, she hesitated.

"How long will you be gone?"

"I am not entirely sure. A week, perhaps two."

She let out a little sigh of relief. She would stay until he returned.

Rue Christine

“YOU’RE BACK!” LUCIE THREW HER arms around Stella as soon as she entered Shakespeare and Company. “You were gone sooo long! It must be time to go see Madame Bonnet.”

She laughed. “I was gone only two days, and Madame Bonnet said we should return in two weeks.” She ruffled Lucie’s hair as she inhaled the shop’s familiar scent. It was good to be back.

“It felt like you were gone longer.” George looked up from the pile of books splayed around his feet, glaring at Stella as if she was responsible for the mess. “I’ve been looking everywhere for that Saroyan book and I can’t find it.”

“It was in the Blue Oyster Tearoom when I left.”

“What are you waiting for? Go get it!”

Returning with the book, Stella strained to identify the feelings that were surging through her, analyzing each emotion as if it were a flavor. She was still annoyed about the devious way George had engineered her visit to Richard, but that sensation was muted by other feelings. Anticipation, she decided, mixed with ordinary irritation, a pinch of guilt, and a great dollop of reassurance. She wondered if this was how most people felt when they came home.

“Well?” Holding out an impatient hand, George snatched the book from her fingers. “How was your trip?”

“I ate at Troisgros. I went to the market in Lyon. I drove through Provence and cooked with Richard Olney. And, of course, I got to spend time with Jules, which is always enlightening.” She was entertained by his obvious displeasure.

“You’re burying the lede,” he snapped. “Who cares about all that? What did Richard tell you about Celia’s chef?”

“His name is Django.”

His laughter rang out. “Trust Celia to find a Django!”

“And after that night in Belleville, Richard never saw him again.”

“But surely he’s *heard* something?”

“All Richard could tell me is that a young chef named Alain Passard is working in Enghien-les-Bains and there’s a rumor that this Django might be with him. He told us that if Django is alive, and if he’s in France, it could possibly be true.”

“Did you go there?”

“I’m not sure I want to.” She threw this down like a gauntlet and waited for his response.

Whitman did not disappoint. “I can’t believe it!” he cried.

“Django might be there, but he’s probably not. And even if he is, which is a big if, and even if he’s my father, which is a bigger one—what if he wants nothing to do with me? I’ve gotten along fine without a father so far; why go looking for trouble?”

“You disappoint me.” He scowled at her. “I did not believe you could be so lily-livered.” His eyes sought out Lucie, and Stella understood why this meant so much to him. George was thinking of her father—whoever he might be. For the first time she realized that there were two people Celia had robbed.

“What does Jules think?” Whitman’s eyes were still on Lucie.

“You know Jules. He thinks it’s up to me.”

Whitman grunted.

“In any case, he’s gone to London.”

Whitman shrugged. “He’ll be back.”

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STELLA SETTLED BACK into the shop as if she had never left. If Whitman noticed she no longer slept there, he never mentioned it, continuing to treat her as a member of the Tumbleweed tribe whose time belonged to him. Daniel, who had taken possession of her alcove, was delighted that he did not have to move.

“You don’t mind, do you?” he asked earnestly. “Patrick began nosing around and I was afraid he’d appropriate it. I planned to move as soon as you returned. Which”—he looked balefully at the Irish poet, who was deep in conversation with Rachel—“is more than he’d do.”

For her part, Rachel was so besotted with Patrick that she floated through the shop in a haze of oblivious happiness. “Thank God you’re back” is all she said. “You can take the kid off my hands.”

Lucie, of course, was aware that Stella was no longer sleeping at the shop, but with the tact of a seven-year-old she kept it to herself. “Will you take me to your apartment?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Stella. “I want to introduce you to the cat.”

—

ON THE NIGHT she’d arrived, a sleek gray cat had climbed through her window and instantly claimed both Stella and the flat for her own. Wary of becoming attached—Stella had never even contemplated a pet—she refused to give her a name. The animal did not seem to mind. Each morning when the sun hit the very center of

the bed, the cat stretched luxuriously into the puddle of light, purring so loudly the walls seemed to vibrate. Stella found herself spending hours there, curled up with the cat beside her. As she counted down the days until they could return to Madame Bonnet's, she continued to live like a Tumbleweed, sleeping at odd hours, reading her daily book, eating whenever hunger hit. Eventually she'd make her way to the bookshop, where she'd wait on customers, recommend books, run errands, copyedit articles for the magazine George occasionally remembered he was intending to publish. It also fell to her to make sure Lucie was adequately fed.

She had strayed so far from the life she'd once known that she was able to take each day as it unfolded. She made friends with the butcher down the street and stopped in at Poilâne so regularly the *vendeuses* all knew her name. After a week, the apartment building's chilly concierge, Madame Greco, even unbent enough to offer a cheery "*Bonjour*" each time Stella passed her door. When she thought about her life in New York—the dreary apartment she hadn't lived in for months, the shabby bodega on the corner, the supermarket reeking of bug spray—she understood that it no longer felt like home.

She had been at the apartment for ten days when she woke to one of those still, hot summer mornings when the air is so heavy you can feel it pressing on your skin. Downstairs, Madame Greco stood in the hallway, blowing out a stream of cigarette smoke that hung unmoving in the stillness. "*Il fait affreusement chaud aujourd'hui.*" It's too hot.

Stepping out of the dark passageway into the stifling heat, Stella gasped. The relentless sun beat down. The air felt so dense that breathing was difficult. Approaching the rue des Grands Augustins, she watched her reflection in the window of the shop on the corner grow larger with each step she took. It was a beauty salon. Stella suddenly felt how her hair clung to her neck, so sweaty, so cumbersome. She remembered what Rachel had said about short hair. Without giving herself time to think, she turned in to the shop. "*Je voudrais*"—her French was careful—"*couper.*" She made large cutting motions with her hands.

The hairdresser, a beefy woman with glossy black hair and large red lips, gave a bored Parisian shrug. Reaching out a chubby hand, she took Stella's chin, turning it one way and then another, studying her. She gave a brisk nod. "Very short." It was a judgment, not a question. "*Comme Jean Seberg.*" She handed Stella a plastic cape, settled her in front of the washbasin, and began sluicing cool water over her head. Picking up a pair of shears, she set to work with short, decisive strokes. Hair floated to the floor, and as it became a haystack at her feet, Stella panicked. She closed her eyes. What had she done? The nape of her neck felt naked and terribly vulnerable.

More water. A potion smelling vaguely of green figs. Hot air. Miserable, she kept her eyes pressed tightly shut. At last, the ministrations ended. “*Ouvrez les yeux, madame.*” The coiffeuse sounded amused. Open your eyes. “*Courage!*” She shoved a mirror into Stella’s hand. “*Magnifique.*” Her voice brooked no argument.

Stella’s hair, short as a boy’s, made her eyes appear larger and her chin more pointed. Her vague, forgettable face, the one that could vanish in a crowd, was gone. In its place was something open, piquant, and seemingly curious. She had a wild notion that if she set the mirror on the counter right this minute, she could have her old self back. But it was too late; she ran her hand across the top of her head, experiencing an almost giddy sense of lightness.

Was everybody looking at her? Feeling horribly exposed, she scurried to the bookshop. Timidly opening the door, she found George standing in the front. He looked up and bellowed, “What have you done?” as every eye in the shop swiveled toward her. She felt the way she did in anxiety dreams: naked in public. “You’ve turned yourself into a boy!”

Daniel let out an uncharacteristic wolf whistle. “Wow!” His eyes glowed. “You look like a different person.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Rachel was smugly pleased. She glanced at Whitman, who famously trimmed his hair by singeing it with matches. “At least someone around here has the sense to go to a professional.”

“My method,” Whitman retorted stiffly, “is extremely effective. Not to mention free.”

Lucie bounced over, tugging on her fat blond curls. She looked up at George. “Can I cut mine off too?” she pleaded. “Please, please, please?”

“Not today,” he replied.

“You always say no,” she said, pouting.

“I did not say no. We’ll discuss this when your mother returns from England. She’ll be back soon.” When Lucie started to argue, Whitman quickly changed the subject. “Isn’t it time you went back to visit that woman in Colombes?”

“No,” said Stella. “We have to wait two more days.”

Bonfire

WHEN THOSE TWO LONG DAYS had passed, Stella arrived at the bookshop to find Lucie waiting anxiously outside. “I couldn’t sleep.” She hopped from one foot to the other. “We’re going to find Victorine’s paintings today. I just know it.”

Walking to the Métro, Stella tried to lower the child’s expectations. “It was such a long time ago, and it’s not very likely the deaf mother will know anything about the people who lived in the house before her.” She was aware that she was also talking to herself. When this turned into a dead end, they would be right back where they’d started. Then what?

But really, what were the odds the woman would remember anything about the former inhabitants? It had been more than fifty years! By the time they arrived in Colombes, Stella had convinced herself that this was a wild-goose chase.

But Lucie, full of optimism, rapped eagerly on the door when they arrived at Madame Bonnet’s house. Once again the little dog flew out, followed by her flustered mistress. “Sorry for my English.” Madame Bonnet led them into the kitchen, seated them at a small white table, and poured fresh lemonade from a frosted-glass pitcher. “I will”—her accent was very strong—“try to tell you what Maman remembers.”

So there was something! Stella felt her heart leap.

“You can say it in French,” said Lucie. “I’ll translate.” Madame Bonnet looked enormously relieved.

“Maman was only a child when they came here to Colombes, but she remembers that there were whispers because she lived with another woman.” Her voice went down as she added, “They were together, just the two of them, for more than twenty years. Everyone thought they were...”

She stopped, hesitated, looked at Lucie, blushed, and continued in a whisper, “*Ils pensaient qu’elles étaient amants.*” Then she added, almost apologetically, “Well, one was an artist, so maybe that’s why they thought...” Her hand did a little dance in the air.

“But the paintings,” said Stella. “Ask if her mother ever saw any.”

Madame Bonnet shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she told them. Her parents had purchased the house after the death of Victorine’s companion. Because there had been no children and no relatives, the neighbors had come in and simply taken

whatever they wanted. “What Maman remembers,” Madame Bonnet continued, “is the huge bonfire afterward where they burned everything that was left. She remembers watching someone throw a violin into the flames, remembers wishing she had taken it for herself before it was too late. And she remembers how the bonfire flared up, very high, when they tossed in the paintings.”

“Oh, no!” Stella blanched. “They were burning paintings?”

Madame Bonnet gave a Gallic shrug. “Nobody wanted them.” Seeing Stella’s stricken face, she touched her arm, eager to be helpful. “Maman reminded me about old Monsieur Poitou.” She pointed across the yard to a house three doors down. “He must be a hundred years old and he’s spent his whole life right there. Perhaps *he* remembers something. Why don’t you go ask?”

Dispirited, Stella and Lucie walked reluctantly down the street. The day, which had seemed so promising, had grown dim. How could they have burned Victorine’s paintings? “We might as well ask,” said Lucie in a small voice.

“I guess so,” said Stella. “Since we’re here.”

Monsieur Poitou took a long time coming to the door. They could hear his slow footsteps and then the door creaked open, squeaking in protest, to reveal a small frail man with a few feeble white hairs sprouting from a nearly bald head.

“*Oui?*” His voice was high and filled with suspicion. He did not ask them in.

Lucie put on her sweetest voice as she asked if he remembered the women who had once lived in Madame Bonnet’s house. No, he shook his head, he did not. Stella’s heart sank. Then he suddenly let out a strange laugh, opening his mouth so wide they could see that he was nearly toothless. “*Mais je me souviens du grand incendie...*”

Lucie translated: “He remembers the big fire after the old lady died.”

He lifted an arm, pointing to the house on the far side of Madame Bonnet’s. Lucie interpreted as he spoke. “My friend Madeleine, who lived over there, kept saying she wished she had taken one of the paintings. I dared her to go get one, and she did! She was very brave. She darted in and snatched it from the fire just as it was about to go up in flames.”

“Ask him if she still lives there.” Stella was so excited she shouted the words.

The man shook his shiny head. “She is dead. Quite dead.” He launched into a long, querulous saga. Stella understood it was something about the house. It had stood empty for many years, but now some stupid young American was living there, and he obviously had more money than sense.

“Workmen!” he complained. “And more workmen. Day and night it goes on! Clouds of dust and so much noise a person cannot hear himself think. He won’t listen to me. But you”—he pointed at Stella—“are American. It is up to you to go reason with your compatriot.”

“He says,” Lucie relayed, “that you need to tell him to be more considerate of his neighbors.”

“What I need to do,” said Stella as they made their way to the American man’s house, “is ask if he’s found any paintings. If Madeleine snatched one from the fire, it might still be there.”

Lucie gave a happy little skip. “This is it!” she crowed. “I just know we’re about to find one of Victorine’s paintings!” As they passed Madame Bonnet’s house again, she pointed. The curtains were twitching. “Look. She’s watching us.” Stella could feel Madame Bonnet’s eyes following them as they made their way to the door.

The man who opened it was young, dark-haired, and, in his plaid pants and polo shirt, very American. Behind him the house was dark, and he squinted into the sunshine.

“Sorry to bother you”—Stella was happy that for once she did not have to rely on Lucie’s translation—“but your neighbor suggested we come.”

He sighed. “Old Poitou? What does he want now? The old geezer is always complaining.” He held out a hand. “Tom White. Come on in and tell me what heinous crime I’ve committed this time.”

He led them inside, and Stella looked around in dismay. Sawdust lay on every surface, and bedraggled lengths of ancient wallpaper curled off the walls. The wooden mantel had been nearly stripped of its paint. There was no furniture, only a table saw, which occupied the middle of the living room. Stella circumnavigated the space, peering into other rooms, but they were in much the same state. The house had been undressed, stripped bare. If there had ever been paintings here, they were surely gone.

“Was the house empty when you bought it?” asked Stella.

“God, no,” he said. “The place was filled with junk. Awful old stuff; it felt like a mausoleum. And it had that terrible old-lady smell, you know? I couldn’t stand it, so the first thing I did was call Goodwill—or whatever they call it here—and tell them to come take everything.”

“Everything?” Stella was heartbroken. It was truly over. This had been the last hope.

“Yes. But you haven’t told me why the old guy sent you.”

Stella barely heard him. She felt hollow. What now? They had found Victorine, but to no avail. What next? Should she give up? Was it time to go home? Did she even have a home anymore?

“I asked you”—Tom White looked at her as if she wasn’t all there—“what the old guy wanted.”

“He wants you to make less noise.”

He laughed. "Then he's in luck. Two weeks ago I finally went up to the attic, and what did I find? More junk! The Goodwill folks never even went up there. I was going to call and ask them to come back, but my girlfriend's arriving from California today and she loves old stuff. We're going to spend her visit going through it all, so you can tell old Poitou that things are going to be very quiet for a few days."

"What kind of junk?" She allowed herself a glimmer of hope.

"Oh, you know. Trunks filled with old linens. Broken old toys. Some silver too. It's kind of a kick, actually. The first day I was up there, I found some paintings, and yesterday I unearthed an incredible mirror."

Stella's heart thumped. "Paintings? You found paintings? What kind?"

"You know, old stuff. Landscapes. Paris scenes. A couple of portraits. The old woman must have been a collector, but I didn't think much of her taste. I took the whole lot to the flea market at the Porte de Vanves."

Stella's heart was beating so loudly she thought he must be able to hear it. Trying to control her excitement, she asked, in what she hoped was a casual fashion, "Who'd you sell them to?"

Tom White shrugged. "Not a clue. I just walked through the market until I came to a booth that had old paintings. The guy said none of mine were worth much, but he thought he could sell them." He gave her a rueful smile. "Look, I don't want to be rude, but my girlfriend will be here soon, and I want to try to clean the place up a bit. But you can go back and tell that old busybody that he'll have his peace and quiet for a while."

Fishing for the Moon

“SO NOW I SUPPOSE YOU and Lucie will be haunting the Porte de Vanves,” grumbled George when they returned to the bookshop. “The market is only open on weekends, so you should go tomorrow. Might I offer a suggestion?”

Stella was surprised. It was so unlike him to ask before offering unwanted opinions. She nodded.

“The paintings are probably gone by now, and time is not on your side. Call Jules. Nobody in Paris knows more about the art market. He can tell you which dealers specialize in old paintings. And if your paintings have already been sold, he’ll be able to find out where they’ve gone.”

“But we don’t know they’re Victorine’s. They could be by anyone.”

“Why are you so reluctant to call Jules?” Whitman stared at her, eyebrows raised.

“I’m not sure he’s even in Paris.” There was, she knew, an edge to her voice. “The last time I saw him was almost two weeks ago and he was leaving for London.”

“Just call him,” Whitman insisted. “I have his number and you owe him that much. After all, this was his idea in the first place, and the least you can do is tell him what you’ve discovered.” He gave her a long look and repeated, “Why are you so reluctant to call?”

Stella knew exactly why: She hated the thought of leaving the flat on rue Christine, but she had promised herself that she would when he returned. She could not get Madame Greco’s words out of her mind. Another what? Still, Whitman was right: She had to let Jules know what they’d found. She went to the phone and was relieved when it was answered by a high, rather reedy voice that did not belong to Jules. The secretary perhaps?

“Monsieur Delatour is not in, but I will be sure he gets your message.” The man was distant, polite, formal.

“Please tell him that I may have located one of Victorine Meurent’s paintings.”

“I will inform him.”

“Is he in Paris?”

“I regret that I am not at liberty to say.”

When she relayed the conversation, Whitman shot her a look of pure disgust. “But if he *is* in Paris, he’ll walk through that door today. It’s Friday, and he’ll want to be there first thing tomorrow.”

George had underestimated Jules: It took him exactly forty-three minutes to get to the shop. Stella was in the Children’s Room, reading with Lucie, so absorbed it took a few beats before she sensed his presence. She looked up at his long face, shining silver hair, and expressive mouth, thinking again how much he resembled a Modigliani drawing. She had forgotten how beautiful he was.

“I like your hair” was the first thing he said. He handed them each a peach. “From my garden. Now tell me about your adventures.”

“I helped!” said Lucie. “I want to tell.”

She was a good storyteller; her imitation of grumpy Monsieur Poitou was perfect.

“And afterward you went to the house of the woman who snatched the painting from the bonfire?”

Lucie nodded. “And the man who lives there said he found a few paintings in the attic. He didn’t like them, so he took them to the flea market at the Porte de Vanves.”

“Porte de Vanves? Are you sure?”

Stella and Lucie looked at each other. “Yes,” said Lucie.

Stella nodded. “That’s what he said.”

“Then I’m sorry to tell you they’re not likely to be Victorine’s.”

“I never really thought they were.” Stella tried to keep the disappointment from her voice.

“Of course, it’s possible,” Jules countered, clearly trying to keep hope alive, “that your young man is an idiot who knows nothing about art. But when people think their paintings are valuable, they don’t go to Vanves, which is mostly for bric-a-brac. The good paintings, the ones that are worth something, go to the big market at Clignancourt. It’s the largest antiques market in the world.”

“I’m sure he said Vanves,” Stella insisted.

“Then I would say our chances of finding the paintings—whoever did them—are not bad. Few serious art dealers bother with Vanves. Still, we should get there early; Paul and I will collect you tomorrow morning at six.”

“I’m coming too,” said Lucie.

“Well, of course you are,” he replied.

THE SKY WAS a pearly pink when they set off, the moon still a soft smudge in the morning sky. Jules pointed to it. “The rag and bone men of Paris who used to sift through the garbage looking for objects to sell were called *pêcheurs de lune*.”

“Moon fishermen!” Lucie was delighted. “We’re moon fishermen.”

It sounded so romantic that Stella was vaguely disappointed when Vanves turned out to be nothing more than a sprawling garage sale stretching across a few leafy city blocks. Jules led them past tables filled with broken china and around a man playing a ragtime tune on a rickety piano. He dropped a few francs into the man’s cup and headed straight for a stall selling old etchings.

The seller was obviously thrilled to see him, but he shook his head when Jules explained what he was looking for. “No paintings today. Sorry. Why not try...” He pointed across the street to a colleague displaying tabletop sculptures. “He bought some oils a few weeks ago. Maybe he’ll have something.”

Stella leaned in, trying to follow the conversation, while Lucie, who had spied a table of toys, skipped off to examine them. When Stella looked around, the child had vanished. Where was she? Stella pushed her way through the crowd, frantically calling Lucie’s name. Eyes darting about, she tripped in front of a booth filled with antique sewing machines, skinning her hands and knees. Brushing herself off, she ran onward. As she sped past an instrument vendor, she bumped against the table, sending a mute, stringless violin into the air; she managed to catch it just before it crashed to the ground.

Lucie was still nowhere to be found. Stella dashed frantically from stall to stall, pushing strolling shoppers out of her way, calling the little girl’s name. The ragtime piano played on, the tinkly sound turning into a nightmare soundtrack. She felt her heart pound against her ribs as she looked for that curly blond head. What if Lucie ran into the street? The child seemed to have vanished into thin air.

As her panic rose, Stella forced herself to slow down and take deep breaths. People didn’t just disappear; Lucie had to be here somewhere. She bent over, sore hands on bleeding knees, trying to quell the dread. When she finally lifted her head, she spotted Lucie kneeling on the sidewalk only a few feet away. The relief was so fast, so overwhelming, she felt herself begin to swoon.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Stella’s voice cracked. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. I was so worried.”

Lucie didn’t answer. She just knelt there, staring at a painting propped against a card table right in front of her. Lifting a finger, she pointed, then reached out to touch it. “It’s her.” She moved aside to give Stella a better view.

Could it be? Intensely aware of the people milling around them, Stella was strangely reluctant to look where Lucie was pointing; so much was riding on this! Instead, her eyes fixed on a woman pushing a stroller with a little boy in it. He began to cry, and his mother handed him a pacifier. “*Regarde*”—the mother pointed at the painting—“*la belle dame*.” The child stopped crying; the woman moved on.

“It’s Victorine,” said Lucie, “isn’t it?”

Stella watched the woman until she and the stroller were swallowed up by the crowd, then finally turned back to look at the painting.

It wasn't her.

"She doesn't look anything like Olympia," Stella said. She moved closer to the painting, until she was near enough to touch the elegant woman in a yellow silk dress. This woman was mature and extremely self-assured, her shoulders creamy white, her neck long, her face utterly disdainful. Had she ever known a moment of hardship? This was definitely not Victorine. The disappointment was intense.

"She has red hair," Lucie pointed out.

"She does. But this is a wealthy woman. Does she look like she ever lived in the lowest streets of Paris?" She remembered Huysmans's description of the rue Maître Albert with its syphilitic sheets.

"But her face!" Lucie insisted. "It's the same."

Stella studied the painting, homing in on that cool, appraising gaze. And suddenly she saw it. Could it be?

Now they were both staring at the painting, looking for Olympia, hoping for Victorine. People rushed past, intent on their shopping. Snatches of conversation drifted down. Examining the wrinkles on the face and neck, Stella calculated: Victorine's self-portrait had been accepted at the Salon of 1876, so she would have been in her thirties. When Manet painted *Olympia*, Victorine was still in her teens. A person could change a lot in more than a decade, especially if her life was hard. Stella focused on the eyes. She thought they might be the same.

"Look!" Lucie pointed to the top left of the canvas.

"What?" asked Stella.

"Look!" Lucie insisted again.

Stella squinted. And there, in very faint paint, she could just make out a signature: "V. Meurent."

Stella suddenly found that it was difficult to breathe. How could they have found her so fast?

"*Ça vous plaît?* You like it?" The owner of the stall had noted their interest and come over. He looked from one to the other, eyes narrowed, assessing the possibilities. Then he inclined his head to Lucie.

Noticing the action, shoppers wandered over, standing at a respectful distance to watch this interesting transaction.

"She looks just like the photographs of my great-grandmama." Lucie offered the proprietor her most adorable smile.

"In that case," he said, playing to the audience, "of course you must have her. I will make you a good price."

By the time Jules found them, the deal was done. “Doesn’t she look just like Great-Grand-maman?” Lucie twinkled up at Jules.

“Exactly like my dear mother!” he said gravely. Then, turning to the proprietor, he asked if there had been other paintings with this lot. Sensing an even larger sale, the man led Jules and Lucie off to look at them. Stella, unwilling to let Victorine out of her sight, simply sat on the sidewalk next to the painting.

She could not take her eyes from Victorine’s face. As *Olympia*, Victorine had been a naked teenager staring defiantly out at the world, daring people to judge her. But this Victorine was a grown woman who had moved beyond that; her own opinion was all that mattered to her now. She had invented herself and she knew her own worth.

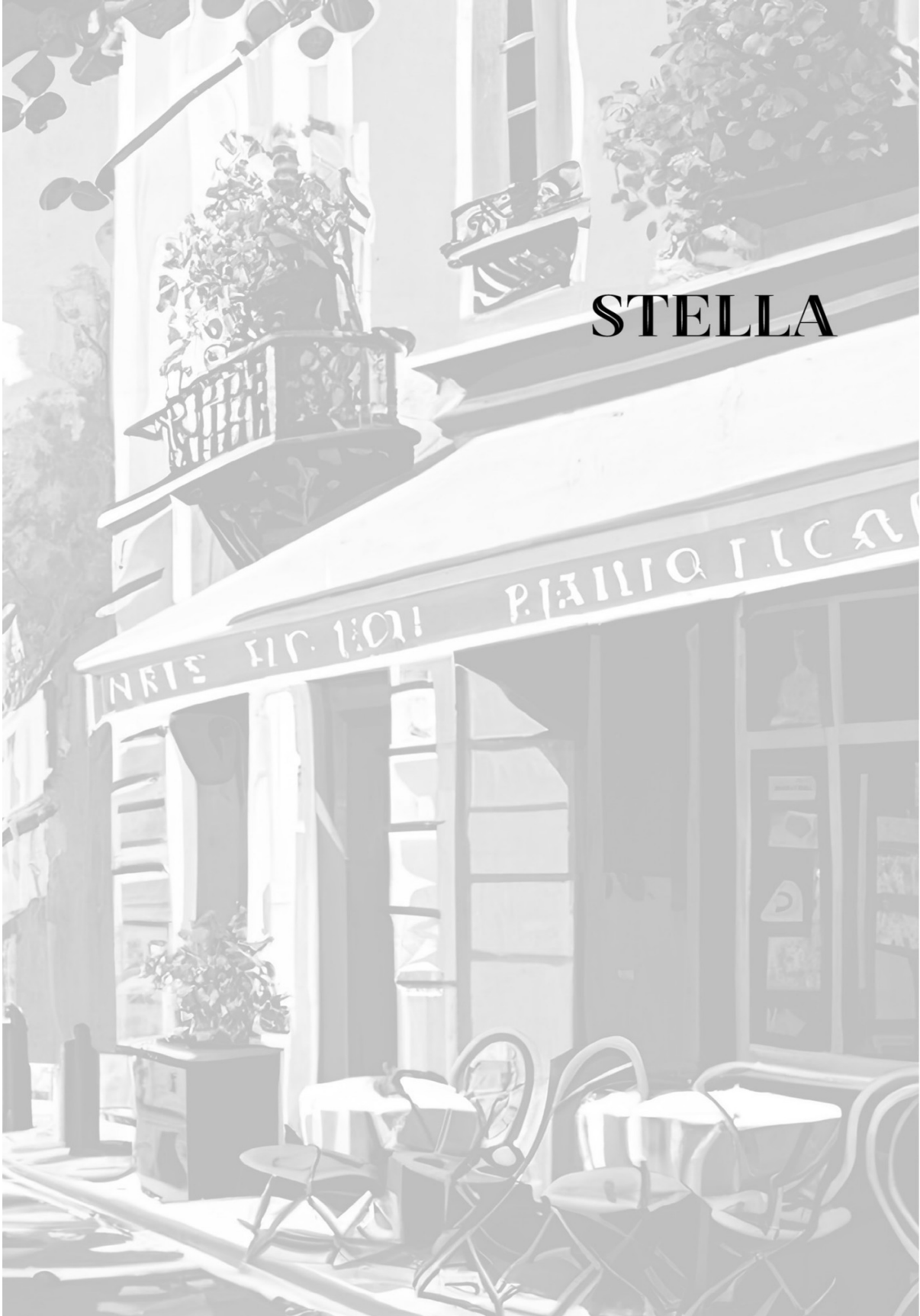
Stella found that she was smiling. If the men who had attacked *Olympia* with their canes had understood this portrait, they would have burned it on the spot. “Look at me,” Victorine was telling the world. “I am Somebody.”

Jules and Lucie came back, sadly shaking their heads. “Nothing there,” said Jules. “Victorine was a talented painter, and the other canvases are all junk. But you’ve found an important painting, and we should not be greedy.” He scanned her face. “How are you feeling?”

“Happy,” she said. “I was so afraid that if we found the self-portrait it would be a disappointment, but I could not have hoped for anything better than this. Victorine was triumphant! She achieved her goal, made something of herself. I want to celebrate.”

Jules, in that uncanny way of his, instantly understood. “You want to go to Enghien-les-Bains.”

She looked straight at him. “I’m ready now. Ready for anything.”



STELLA

Salad Day

BACK ON THE RUE CHRISTINE, Stella and Jules carried the painting upstairs. Opening the door, she was painfully aware that she'd left in a hurry that morning. The flat was a mess, but Jules merely looked around and said mildly, "This place seems to suit you."

The cat came up and sniffed his leg, clearly approving, before leaping back onto the unmade bed. Stella tried to imagine what Jules was thinking about the piles of books, the dishes in the sink, the wedge of cheese on the windowsill. But all he said was, "You're the only person who's ever made this place a home."

"I love it here. And to be honest"—she gave him an embarrassed smile—"I hate the thought of having to leave."

He started. "Why would you have to do that?"

"Because of *les autres*."

"*Les autres*?"

"The day you brought me here, Madame Greco said to Paul, '*Une autre*?' So I naturally assumed..." She was blushing.

He stared at her in obvious astonishment. Then his shoulders began to shake. "Oh, my dear. I am flattered. But you know very little about French affairs of the heart. For one thing, I am much too old. And for another, this would hardly be the place." He gazed around the flat and she saw it through his eyes: a shabby little space he considered a warehouse. "I offer you two tiny rooms with nothing to recommend them—"

"Nothing to recommend them!" Her voice rose.

"I meant no disrespect. But the kind of women you were referring to—*les autres*, as you put it—would not be tempted by anything so modest."

"So if they are not your lovers, who are all those 'others' Madame Greco referred to?"

Jules looked slightly embarrassed. "I suppose you might call them my Tumbleweeds. Over the years I have lent this flat to a number of young artists. But it's been a while since anyone has stayed here; please stay as long as you like."

She was relieved. But also realistic. "I can't imagine that Jean-Marie would approve. Nor, for that matter, would the Empress. And speaking of that, how is

she?”

“Increasingly aggressive.”

“Aggressive?”

“On her last visit she appropriated four Chanel suits, leaving a large space in the closet. She wanted to make sure I noticed.”

“What are you planning to do about it?”

“I will tell you on the way to Enghien-les-Bains,” he promised. “Unless you’ve changed your mind?”

“No.” She looked at the painting of Victorine, which now rested precariously on the disreputable table. “But let’s go tonight, before I lose my courage. When I think of the battles she fought to become the person she wanted to be, it makes me ashamed of my fears. This may be the only chance I’ll ever have to meet my father, and I don’t want to spend the rest of my life regretting that I was too cowardly to take it. And”—she offered him a tremulous smile—“I suppose now that this mission is accomplished, it must be time to go back to New York. My money is running out and my job won’t wait forever.” She had a sudden thought. “I think I’ll wear the Vionnet dress. It will make me smile and give me courage.”

He gave her an approving nod. “It will look wonderful with your chic new hairdo. Madame Vionnet would very much approve.” He looked at her again. “And Séverine as well. I wish she could see you.”

“HAVE YOU THOUGHT,” Jules asked later as Paul drove them to Enghien-les-Bains, “about what you will do with the painting?” His face was serious. “If it turns out to be an authentic Meurent, it may be the only one in the world. It should be worth quite a lot.”

It had never occurred to Stella that the painting might be valuable. Or, for that matter, that it belonged to her. She had been doing this for Victorine, had never considered the consequences. “Does the painting really belong to me?” she asked.

“You paid for it, did you not? If we can authenticate the painting, there should be no problem with provenance; it came out of the artist’s last-known home, so it clearly was not stolen. Are you intending to keep it?”

“Of course not,” she said. “What would be the point in that? Victorine needs to be out in the world; she deserves her moment.”

“Well, my dear, if it really is a Meurent—and if it is the self-portrait displayed in the Salon of 1876—I imagine there will be a great deal of interest.” He stopped briefly before adding, “You will become a rich woman. I might have to start charging you rent. If, that is, you intend to stay in Paris.”

Did she? She had never considered staying, but she realized the thought of leaving now was extremely unsettling. Paris was the first place she had ever felt

at home.

“There is certainly no need to decide right away,” Jules continued. “It will take some time to get the painting authenticated. And right now we need to discuss tonight’s strategy. How will you discover if Django is here?”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” she admitted, realizing that she’d been expecting him to take the lead. “I suppose I’ll just ask. But then what? If he is here, and if I’m able to meet him, what are the odds that he’ll remember a long-ago affair with an American tourist? We should probably just have dinner and forget about Django.”

“It is entirely up to you,” he replied.

She was nervous as she walked into the restaurant, and she stroked the dress for courage. To control her anxiety, she concentrated on the sensory details around her. As they stepped over the threshold, she smelled red-wine vinegar, a touch of lemon, a hint of vanilla. There was the scent of roses too and, hanging above it all, the faintest memory of cigar smoke. As the maître d’ led them through the dining room, an entire bouquet of perfumes floated toward them: at one table, there was a prickly carnation aroma; at another, cloying gardenia filled the air.

She looked around, took in the low lights, crisp linens, and crystal, seeing that efforts had been made to flatter the patrons. She looked at the waiters, bent almost double as they poured out drinks, and absorbed the musical murmur of conversation.

They sat, and she listened as Jules discussed the menu with the captain. When they moved on to wine, the man’s face lit up, and as he poured the first bottle, he bent lower than any other waiter in the room, paying homage to both pedigree and price. “Le Corton-Charlemagne.” With the next, he bent even lower. “La Tâche,” he whispered, rubbing his lips together as if he could taste the words.

Stella found herself drinking far more than she had intended. By the time the chef came out to serve the salad, she was pleasantly intoxicated. She looked at Alain Passard’s square, serious face beneath the tall white toque and said, “I’m surprised that it is the salad that brings you out of the kitchen.”

“Vegetables get so little respect”—the chef produced a solemn bow—“and I am hoping to change that.”

He set the plate in front of her. Small lacy leaves of chervil twined around frilly parsley and spears of tarragon and sage; as he twirled the plate to show it off, she thought of a model on the runway at a fashion show. Blue borage petals, the color of a tropical sea, were scattered across the top like little jewels. She looked up at the chef again. “Who would not appreciate this? It’s so beautiful.”

His austere face relaxed until he was actually smiling. Perhaps that is why the words leapt from her mouth before she could stop them.

“Is there someone named Django working in your kitchen?”

The smile vanished. “*Oui, Mademoiselle*. That one has a very high opinion of himself. Are you acquainted?”

Stella’s heart pounded. “I think he was a friend of my mother’s,” she managed. “Do you know if he used to cook in Montmartre?”

“Who has not?” He shrugged. “But why not ask him yourself? I will tell him to bring your dessert.”

Later, try as hard as she could, Stella could never remember what they’d eaten. She remembered Jules’s pleasure, but she herself could barely taste the food; all she could think about was the man who was going to bring them dessert. How would she know if this Django was the chef Celia had once covered in hot gratin?

HEADS TURNED WHEN the man entered the dining room, and not because of the elaborately arranged bowl of fruit he carried. He was tall and, despite the silvering hair beneath the toque, still handsome. He had olive skin and an arrogant face with strong, bold features. But it was the way he moved that drew attention—he had the dangerous grace of a tiger, stalking through the dining room as if in search of prey.

There was no doubt. It was him: the man in Celia’s painting.

He set the fruit on the table and crossed his arms across his chest, his face so contemptuous it was almost a sneer. It was clear that he did not appreciate being summoned. His toque sat slightly askew, adding to the general air of insolence. “You wanted me?”

Jules indicated Stella. “Mademoiselle believes you may have known her mother.”

The chef inclined his head, just a bit, allowing his expression to become slightly bored, as if saying, “This again?” He turned toward Stella, conveying utter indifference.

“Celia St. Vincent?” Stella’s throat was so tight the words were a squeak.

The man rocked back on his heels and stared at her. “*You* are her daughter?”

His English was heavily accented, but with those four words he managed to convey a great deal. An acknowledgment that he had known Celia, and in the biblical sense. Admission that their liaison had been memorable. Astonishment that Stella could possibly be related to his former lover, followed by a narrowing of eyes that saw something—what?—in her face. And finally, his black eyes boring into her, a dawning sense of what this encounter was about. He looked at Jules. “*Elle a quel âge, cette fille?*” It was a hoarse whisper: How old is she?

Stella's heart began beating so hard it felt too large for her chest. How could this be happening? She had thought she was ready, but it was too much. She had not really believed she would find Victorine's paintings, had decided on this dinner in a reckless moment, and now this.... She wanted to get up and run from the room.

As if in a dream, she heard Jules say, "*Elle a presque trente-trois ans.*" And then, after a glance at the man's face, "*Voudriez-vous vous asseoir?*" Would you like to sit down?

Stella saw the chef mouth, "Thirty-three." Then time seemed to slow down as she watched the man collapse into a chair.

Collecting himself, he sat up and turned to Stella. "*Et ton père?*"

"I have no father." Her voice was angry, aggressive, daring him to deny it.

But all he said was, "Everyone has a father."

"Not me!" Stella felt defiant. "Celia erased him. For her entire life she refused even to tell me his name."

"She is gone, then?"

"She died almost a year ago."

"I am sorry." He sounded genuinely grieved. "I always expected to see her again. *Mais le temps a passé...*" He sighed heavily. "And now it is too late." He looked at his hands—they were shaking a bit—and plucked a peach from the basket, busying them by peeling it with precise strokes. They all watched the skin curl onto the table in a perfect parabola.

Jules signaled the waiter for a glass, pointing at Django, and they all watched silently as the wine was poured. Django took a long draft, set the glass down, and began cutting the naked peach into perfect crescents. Then he looked at Jules and asked, "*Comment dit-on 'zodiaque' en anglais?*"

"I don't believe in astrology." Stella's voice was brusque, cold. "But if you want to know when I was born, it was December third, 1950. I believe that makes me a Sagittarius."

Django counted back on his fingers. And then, to her horror, he burst into noisy sobs.

The room went quiet as diners turned to stare at this loud man with tears streaming down his face. Stella wanted to disappear. Her heart continued to thump loudly in her chest, and she wondered why this had seemed like a good idea.

"*Elle ne m'a rien dit,*" he cried. "I never knew of your existence." As his eyes devoured her, she squirmed. She didn't want a father. And certainly not this one. As a child, she had talked to the man in the painting on the wall, imagining him as someone she might like to know. But she had not thought about who he would

be, had never considered that he would be a complicated, emotional human being with needs of his own.

Jules seemed equally uncomfortable; he was uncharacteristically quiet. It occurred to her that he too was having a difficult time with the notion that this man might be her father. Django's sobs stopped, but tears continued to stream down his face and an uncomfortable silence hung over the table.

Stella was the one who broke it. She couldn't stand it anymore. "What is your last name?" she asked.

"Renard," he replied. "Would you like it?"

She laughed, then Jules did, and when Django joined them, the buzz in the dining room finally resumed and people returned to their dinners.

Jules found his voice and began peppering Django with questions. Where was he from? Where had he worked? How had he become a chef?

As her father told the story of his life, he could not keep his eyes from Stella, and his hands kept moving toward her, eager for contact. She found herself pushing her chair away from the table, making it impossible for him to reach her. She saw now that she had been prepared for his skepticism, anger, denial, and rejection, but she had never considered the other option. She was utterly unequipped to deal with a fond father.

"What have I done?" she wailed as Paul drove them back to Paris. "This was a terrible mistake!"

"Not so terrible," Jules soothed. "You need not let that man into your life. So much has changed in the last few days. Why not give yourself some time? Put him out of your mind for a bit. Focus on Victorine's painting. The main thing right now is to have it authenticated and find out what it is worth."

"I hope you're going to help."

He patted her hand. "Of course. And in the meantime, try not to think about Django. It must be a shock—you've conjured a father out of thin air."

And then he added, almost to himself, "And just imagine how he must be feeling!"

Virevoltant

SHE SPENT A RESTLESS NIGHT. Finding the man who might be her father was a shock, but reconsidering Celia was an even bigger one. For the first time, she thought that Celia's reasons for sending her to Paris might not have been selfish after all, and if that was the case, it was the first kind gesture her mother had ever made. She did not think Celia had sent her here to find her father, but perhaps she had sent her here to find herself? Was this her way of saying she was sorry? It was a daunting, uncomfortable notion. She tossed and turned and woke up only when she heard someone pounding on her door.

Stella blinked into the light, sat up, listened. The banging continued, imperious, persistent. She wrapped herself in a sheet and went to open it, eyes gritty with sleep.

Django was standing there. She did not remember giving him her address. "I'm taking the day off." He pushed rudely past her and into the flat. "Put on some clothes. *Je mourrais pour un café.*"

"No," she began, irritated. She wasn't ready for a father yet. She needed time!

"Bah!" he said. "All I'm asking is that you join me for coffee. *C'est un petit rien.*" He picked up the clothes she had dropped on the floor, shoved them at her, and pushed her toward the bathroom. She could hear him wandering about as she dressed, snapping his fingers, opening cupboards and closets, poking into everything. It was as if he owned the place. She wished she had a dog who would growl at him. The cat was useless against intruders.

"*Dépêche-toi,*" he shouted at her. "Hurry. I need coffee." He hustled her down the stairs and out to the street before she'd even washed her face.

She noticed the way people turned to look as he passed. He gave off an electric charge, sending so much energy into the air that she could actually feel the atmosphere change when they walked into a bistro on the place Saint-Michel. A waiter hurried off to fetch bowls of café au lait, and the *patronne* herself, a blowsy woman wearing heavy makeup, brought a plate piled high with buttered baguettes, set it on the table, and ran painted fingernails across the back of his neck. "*Mon Django,*" she cooed. "Where have you been?"

"*Ça et là.*" It was said with a carelessness that told Stella he was accustomed to adulation. Expected it. She thought of the way Celia moved through the world

and then considered the difference. This man had all the warmth that Celia had lacked.

The woman stood, awkward, clearly expecting an invitation or at least an introduction. When Django offered neither, she finally moved off, dejection etched in every line of her body. Django took a long sip of coffee and looked up at Stella. “Nice neighborhood you live in. *Très cher*. How do you manage?” Was it an accusation?

“The apartment belongs to Jules.”

“But he is so old!” Django’s face darkened. “You have an *arrangement*?”

“No!” She bristled. “But in any case, I don’t believe that’s any of your business.”

“*Mais je suis ton père!* I am your father!”

“You have been my father for less than twelve hours,” she snapped.

“But now I am your father *pour toujours*.” He reached out to take her hand. She dodged him and put it in her lap. He sighed, lit a Gauloises, and inhaled deeply. “*C’est toi qui m’as cherché*. You found me. Now you must accept the consequences.”

“Consequences?” Who the hell did he think he was?

He gave her a knowing look. “Celia suited me very well, but I cannot imagine her as a mother. *Elle était égoïste*. She thought mostly of herself. When I was younger, I was not so different. And last night, when I saw you were my daughter...” He spread his arms. “I understood that my life has been empty.”

Spare me, she thought. It felt too familiar, like being back in the apartment on Madison Avenue. He was like Celia: unapologetic in his self-centeredness. *How nice for him*, she thought; just as his life was feeling empty, she had conveniently turned up. He wanted her to fill his life, give it meaning. *No, thank you very much*.

“I am like—what did you say you call yourself?—a tumbleweed. *Virevoltant*. I tumbled from here to there, never putting down roots. A fine life when you are young, but in the end...” He gave a little sigh. “*On se sent seul*. Lonely.”

Stella looked into his handsome, confident face, feeling a flash of anger. Much of it, she realized, was directed at herself. What had she expected? She remembered Richard describing the way Django had blown into that party and wordlessly seduced him. How had she fooled herself into thinking that any man Celia loved would be someone she would care to know? “I don’t need another Celia in my life,” she said. “I may interest you today. But...” She left the sentence hanging in the air.

“I am not Celia!” he insisted. “*Tu verras!* I will show you!”

“No, thank you,” she said. “I’d rather not.” She studied the strong lines of his face. “Besides, you don’t know that I really am your daughter. I mean, take a

close look. I certainly don't resemble you."

"No. But you look very much like my mother."

"I do?"

"I will show you. *J'ai une photo.*" Again he reached for her hand. Again she moved it away. She remembered Richard's words: *He did not seem like the kind of man who would stay in one place very long.*

But over the next few days, Django proved annoyingly persistent. He refused to take no for an answer. He was there every morning, waiting outside her building on the rue Christine, and when Stella began leaving early for the bookshop, he simply followed her. He was impossible!

She watched, incredulous, as Django turned his charm on George the moment he walked through the door. He spent the day at Shakespeare and Company but kept his distance, watching, making mental notes. The next day he arrived with a box of Lucie's favorite cookies and a bottle of wine. "*C'est vraiment triste.*" He opened the bottle and poured a glass for George. "If only I had found your store sooner. I would have liked to be a *virevoltant.*"

George took an appreciative sip and held out his glass for more. "It is never too late," he said.

"*Bon,*" Django replied. "I will cook for you!"

"The kitchen is rather a mess," George replied, frowning. It was not what he'd had in mind. "And the cupboards are bare."

"*Rien?*" Django dismissed his objections with a wave of his hand. "It makes no matter. There is *always* something."

George capitulated. "Lucie, show him the kitchen."

Lucie put her hand in Django's and led him upstairs, Stella trailing behind them, grudgingly admitting that the man really was making an effort. He wasn't Celia after all.

At the threshold, Django stood, calmly surveying a landscape of dirty plates piled with crusted food. Then he picked Lucie up, stood her on the table, and wrapped a kitchen towel around her waist. "*Ce n'est pas si dégoûtant que ça,*" he said cheerfully, "*on aura fini de nettoyer en un rien de temps.*"

"What did he just say?" Stella asked Lucie.

"That it's not too disgusting, and we can quickly clean it up."

He made it into a game. Lucie giggled as she tossed him the plates, which he caught behind his back, over his head, between his legs. Standing in the doorway, Stella let herself imagine for the first time how different her life would have been if he'd been living with them on Madison Avenue. Even if he'd shown up only now and then, it would have been so much better.

Mess tamed, Django clapped his hands. "*Au travail.*" He opened the cupboards to examine the motley collection of half-filled jars. "Now we work."

Next he went to the tiny refrigerator, excavating a wilted head of lettuce and four withered carrots. He sniffed at the bottle of milk, grimaced, made a sad-clown face for Lucie. "*Le lait a tourné.*" He set a couple of squishy tomatoes on the table and then emitted a small squeal of glee. "*Les citrons!*" He grabbed the lemons and, to Lucie's delight, walked across the room juggling them with remarkable ease.

"You should be in the circus," Stella said coolly.

"But I was!" He let the lemons come to rest, one by one, on the table. "*Regarde!*" He picked up the eggs sitting on the windowsill and tossed them into the air. Lucie watched, rapt, as he juggled them across the room. Next he unearthed two ancient baguettes, tossed one to Lucie, shouted, "*En garde!*" and began a mad duel around the table.

Stella started to understand how Richard must have felt that night in Belleville. The kitchen was clearly Django's natural habitat: His face softened, his movements became more assured, and his voice, always commanding, became even more confident.

"*Aide-moi.*" When the duel came to an end, he looked over to Stella, holding up some bedraggled onions. "Slice them as thin as you can."

She shook her head, refusing to actually enter the room.

"I'll help," said Lucie. He handed her a dejected head of parsley. "What are we making?" she asked.

"*Je ne sais pas,*" Django replied. I don't know.

Stella wondered if this was true. Tantalizing aromas were already filling the air. Remembering the careful way the cooks she'd met chose their ingredients—the snails at L'Ami Louis, Taeb's saffron, Baldwin's asparagus—Stella thought Django was more like a magician, conjuring dishes out of thin air. By the time George nudged Stella aside to poke his nose in the door, Lucie was strewing crisp breadcrumbs on top of a thick vegetable potage, and Django was stirring a tart lemon pudding. Downstairs, customers lingered; people who had intended on stopping in for a moment stayed on as increasingly seductive scents wafted through the shop.

Unwilling to admit that he was pleased, George tasted the pudding and grumbled, "You've used up all the eggs. And I wanted gingerbread for tonight's reading."

"Gingerbread!" Django pulled a face. "*Nous sommes en France.* I will make something more appropriate." Still standing in the doorway, Stella wondered how he would manage this; he'd used everything in the kitchen except an aged pound cake resembling a rock, a handful of desiccated dried apricots, and the sour milk.

"We'll make some coffee." Django was tearing up the stale cake. As she watched, he produced curds from the sour milk, cooked the apricots into jam, and

soaked the cake in coffee. With a flourish, he pulled a bar of chocolate from his pocket. “*J’ai toujours du chocolat sur moi.*” He melted the chocolate, stirring in the last of the coffee. “I always have chocolate. You never know when you will need it.” Against her better judgment, Stella was charmed.

Lucie stood close by, watching him layer the coffee-drenched cake with jam, curds, and chocolate, grabbing each spoon as he finished. “Will you make this for my birthday?” she asked.

“No.”

“Please,” she begged.

“For your birthday I will make something better.”

AFTER THAT, DJANGO showed up at the bookshop every day, and he was never empty-handed. He would walk in carrying lumpy string bags, scoop Lucie up, and vanish into the kitchen. Before long the shop would be filled with delicious aromas. Stella tried to stay away, but she could not. She never went into the kitchen herself, but she loved standing in the doorway, watching Django cook.

He was like a jazz musician, joyfully improvising, imagining tastes that ordinary people could not. He pulled ingredients apart and reconstructed them in endlessly surprising ways: clear little cubes that tasted of just-picked tomatoes still warm from the sun, or cheese puffs that floated into your mouth and simply vanished, leaving a trail of flavor in their wake. One day he melted chocolate, mixed in chilies, and wrapped the sauce around tart orange ice; people begged for seconds.

She’d never met anyone like him, and as she watched him cook, Stella saw that in the kitchen all the qualities that made him a poor choice as a parent or a partner turned into strengths. Utterly unafraid of failure, he was willing to try anything. It was the source of his creativity. He was a confident person who pleased himself; if it didn’t work out, he simply moved on.

But not with regard to Stella—as the weeks went by, he remained resolutely in her life. “You have to give him credit,” said Jules. “The man is as tenacious as he is talented.” He had taken to stopping in almost every day, just to see what strange and wonderful new dish Django had invented. “He’s really trying.” His tone was almost admiring, and Stella wondered if he was comparing Django’s efforts to his own with Jean-Marie and coming up short.

Meanwhile, Jules’s experts had all agreed that their portrait was the one Victorine Meurent had exhibited in the Salon of 1876, and the close-knit art world was beginning to buzz. “Have you thought what you will do when you sell the painting?” he asked her.

Stella found the thought of going back to New York increasingly depressing. She pictured her life there: the small charmless apartment, the routine work, the dreary food, and lonely hours. These months in Paris had opened all her senses; she now needed so much more.

And then there was Django. Stella was sure that if she went back to New York, he would follow her. It would be intolerable. The man had no concept of boundaries and seemed to take Stella's continued resistance as an invigorating challenge. To her intense irritation, he had made friends with Madame Greco, who invited him in to smoke Gauloises with her and then let him into Stella's flat when she was not home. Stella would come back to find new furniture: an antique lamp he'd found at the flea market, an easy chair (which the cat immediately claimed), a pair of ornate candlesticks. One day he tacked a crumpled black-and-white photograph above the hotplate: a little boy sitting on his mother's lap. The photograph had been torn and taped together, but it was easy to see the boy was Django. Stella peered at the woman's face, looking for the resemblance. She had to admit that Django's mother—her grandmother, she realized with a jolt—did look like her. It was strange to think she had gained not just a father but an entire family.

"Where was your father?" she asked him one day.

"He died right before that picture was taken. *Accident de voiture*. A car accident. Maman married his brother; in those days *c'était ce qui se faisait*. They took care of their own."

"So your uncle became your father?"

He shook his head. "*Non*. He wasn't a bad man, but we had nothing to say to each other. I left home as soon as I could."

He too had been a lonely child, she thought, and found herself slowly warming to him. "You ran off with the circus?"

"As I told you. I was thirteen. I stayed a few years. *Et après, nous sommes allés à Biarritz*, and I decided to stay. I got a job peeling potatoes in a restaurant."

"Why Biarritz?"

He shrugged. "*Cherchez la femme*. When the affair ended, I went up the coast to Normandy, *et après*, Paris."

Django's next move was to take over Stella's tiny kitchenette, filling it with pots, pans, and silverware. Plants appeared in the flat: mint, chervil, parsley. "And," he announced one day, "a nameless pet—*c'est trop triste*. Too sad. I have given the cat a name; *elle s'appelle Brel*."

"Brel?"

"Jacques is my favorite singer."

"I can see why Celia kept you a secret."

"*Elle n'aimait pas Jacques Brel? Or was it animals she didn't like?*"

“She hated animals, called them filthy beasts, but that’s not what I meant. What Celia wanted most was to be admired. Adored. She considered life a competition, and she would have hated having a child who preferred the other parent. Knowing you were irresistible, she simply made you disappear.”

Django’s face flooded with joy. He threw his arms around her in a smothering embrace. “*Tu m’aimes!*”

He smelled of sage and lemons, melted butter, and the spicy aroma that was his own. Stella extricated herself from his arms. “I never said that. I never said I loved you.”

Glass Houses

THE OPPRESSIVE SUMMER HEAT HAD given way to a crystalline fall, and Django was still there. He had graduated from coming by while Stella wasn't home to bringing her fresh fruit, pastries, and hot coffee every morning and staying on to share breakfast with her. Annoyed at first, she grew to like the little ritual. Jules began stopping in to join them too. It was, she thought, very cozy. And it made her feel safe, like having the two-parent household she'd dreamed of as a child. She had always appreciated a schedule, but this was different. It was, she realized, the first time she had ever allowed someone else to make one for her.

"Interest in your painting is growing," Jules announced one morning in mid-October, "and it's time to move forward. Why don't we give a little party and invite the most promising buyers to come view the portrait?"

"Here?" Stella gestured around at the tiny space.

"I was thinking," he said gently, "that we might do it at my house."

"*Un dîner!*" Django jumped up. "*Parfait!* I, of course, will cook."

Jules looked pleased but not surprised. "In that case," he replied, "you will want to look at my kitchen. Would you like to come now? Paul is downstairs."

Django grabbed Stella's arm. "You come too." Had they planned it?

The three of them said little on the ride, staring out the window as they watched the houses grow larger, the gardens greener. Paul stopped the car before a fanciful wrought-iron gate, which slid open on silent hinges. They drove into a tangled garden so lush it was hard to believe they were still in Paris. Through the dense foliage, she could just make out a house in the distance, winking and glowing in the sunshine like a giant firefly. Jules looked at Stella's surprised face. "You imagined me in that mausoleum of my parents'?"

"Why *wouldn't* I think that?" She was indignant. "Vézelay..."

"Oh, Vézelay." He waved it impatiently away. "I don't *live* there."

"But you live here? Since when?"

"Most of my life. After we got engaged, I took Séverine to meet my parents, and she stood outside that horrible house looking utterly miserable. The butler had not even opened the door before she said, 'I would die if I had to live here.' And so of course I had to find her a different house."

"And such an ordinary one," said Django.

Long and low, the house was made entirely of glass and wood, so that it was nearly transparent, with a modesty that was more Japanese than French. It seemed to hover above the ground—a delicate creature that might, at any moment, take wing and soar into the sky.

“Séverine,” said Jules, “walked through the gate, stood right where you are standing now, and said, ‘It’s so beautifully wild. Let’s call it Le Sauvage.’ Then we went inside and didn’t leave for days.”

Django looked amused.

“You moved in before you were actually married?” Stella asked. “Did your parents know?”

“Of course not! They would have been shocked. Almost as shocked as they were when I showed them the house. They were appalled.”

“*Et ton fils?*” asked Django. “How did your son feel about Le Sauvage?” Stella wished she had thought to ask the question herself.

“He loved it as much as we did. When he was small, he spent entire days outside, pretending to be in Africa or on the Amazon; we had trouble luring him in for dinner. He was always bringing his friends here. Until he discovered literature, he wanted to be an architect and make what he called ‘more happy houses.’ But then...” Jules stopped for a moment, taking a ragged breath. “After Séverine died, he found coming here too painful. This is very much her house, and for me she is everywhere, which gives me great comfort. But Jean-Marie feels only her absence. It makes me sad, but of course I understand.”

But how could Jean-Marie stay away? In her walks through Paris, Stella had not seen anything that remotely resembled Le Sauvage. The house seemed to merge with the landscape, walking so lightly on the land it nearly vanished. The interior had the same effect; as they entered, the walls seemed to melt away. It was an astonishing architectural trick, creating the illusion that they were not going inside a building but merely inhabiting a new space. Stella stood on the threshold, enchanted, trying to imagine how it would feel to live here.

“*C’est vachement beau,*” murmured Django, gliding across pale wooden floors. “So beautiful.”

“And when,” Jules continued, “Jean-Marie brought the Empress here...”

“She hated it!”

“Oh, it was much worse than that. This house is a threat to everything she holds dear. On her first visit, she walked in and said, ‘*Mon Dieu,* it’s so empty.’ ”

It was true: There was not much furniture, but each piece was beautifully crafted. Stella walked through the spare, light-filled rooms, running her palms across handmade chairs, thinking how different this was from the cluttered château with its centuries of accumulated objects. Jules, she thought, might consider this house Séverine’s, but she thought it also expressed him perfectly.

“The Empress has a strong belief in the power of both possessions and antiquity,” he said. “In her world, even the most awful objects become dignified with age.”

“She doesn’t seem to think age has done much for you,” Stella pointed out.

“She’s given up on me. As far as she’s concerned, the only decent thing I can possibly do is die. And when I do...” He gestured around the room and Stella imagined it, saw the wrecking ball hit the house, watched it come down, shattering the beautiful furniture.

“Oh, no,” she said. “Jean-Marie would never let that happen! You know he wouldn’t.”

“Thank you, my dear.” He gave her a smile. “Of course he wouldn’t.”

“*Où est la cuisine?*” said Django. Where is the kitchen?

Jules pointed, and Django set off in the direction he had indicated. At the door he stopped, rendered momentarily speechless. One wall was made of glass; another was covered with giant lithographs of Campbell’s soup cans vibrating with color. A long marble counter ran down the middle of the room; in the center, potted herbs reached toward the light. Django walked reverently through the space, admiring shelves heaped with copper pots, the handmade La Cornue stove, the two big stone sinks. When he spied the large wood-burning oven, he went over to give it a loving pat, as if it were an animal that had wandered in from the garden in search of a snack.

“I will cook a wonderful meal for you!” he announced. And then the most extraordinary look came over his face. “On one condition.”

“Money is no object,” Jules said quickly.

“Oh,” said Django dismissively. “Money, *et puis quoi encore?* I don’t care about money. I will only cook your dinner if Stella will assist me. Until now she has refused to join me in the kitchen, and I never truly know a person until I cook with them.”

Lost and Found

THE NIGHTMARES BEGAN.

In one dream, Django sent Stella to the market for a brace of ortolans. Although she scoured every corner of Paris, there was not a bunting to be found. Desperate, she took the train to Lyon, walking through the market until she found the stall where blue-footed chickens lay curled in their plumage. *Pas d'ortolans*, said the butcher, gesturing for her to join him behind the counter. Looking furtively around, he pulled out a secret cache of small wild ducks.

Teal, roared Django when she returned. He tossed the hapless birds into the garbage. *Je t'ai demandé des ortolans*.

In the next dream, Django needed snails. She journeyed deep into rural France, where a farmer raised his herd on a diet of truffles, berries, and nuts. The man packed the snails into a stout wooden box, and Stella boarded the train home. But while she was gazing out the window, thousands of the creatures crept from their box to slime their way across appalled passengers, who went screaming into the night.

You are useless! Django shouted, flinging pots, pans, and rolling pins at her head when she came back empty-handed. *You are not my daughter!*

The dreams where she cooked were worse. She cut off her fingers, spilled boiling water on her toes, forgot cakes in the oven. And every morning, just before she woke, Stella was a little girl again, facing a mountain of dirty dishes in her mother's kitchen. When Celia came in, as she always did, she uttered a single sentence: *You have no father, you silly child. Whatever made you think you did?*

"It's just one dinner," said Daniel when she told him the dreams. "What's the worst that could happen?"

She considered this. "Django keeps saying he never really knows someone until he cooks with them. I'm afraid I'll disappoint him."

"Oh, Stella." He put his arms around her. "He told me you're the best thing that's ever happened to him."

"He did?"

He nodded. "As for me..." He hesitated, avoided her eyes, and said shyly, "My nightmare is that you'll leave Paris and I'll never see my little sister again."

"Really?"

“Really.”

The morning of the big dinner, she repeated Daniel’s words over and over to herself, a tiny mantra, as she made her way to Le Sauvage. Django was already there, and he took her hand, sat her down, and set a steaming bowl of café au lait on the table. “I made this for you.” He handed her a plate: The fragrant apple tart was still warm.

“When did you have time?”

He produced one of his shrugs. “I wanted the day to start well for you.” He sat down, lit a cigarette, let out a stream of smoke. “Are you acquainted with leeks?”

She was not.

“It makes no matter. You will know what to do.”

She doubted it, but when he handed her an apron and a pile of leeks, it seemed he was right. She had been watching people cook since she’d arrived in Paris, and now she stopped thinking, picked up a knife, and began to slice, her hands moving in easy, effortless motions. She filled the stone sink, tossed in the greens, and swirled them about, enjoying the sensation as the leeks shrugged off their sand.

Django handed her a heap of parsley and she stood next to him, allowing his rhythm to become her own until they were moving together. In the air, the tang of lemons. The aroma of chicken stock. Beeswax mingling with butter. Chocolate melting into oranges. Her spirits rose with the scents swirling through the kitchen.

They spoke little; they had no need. They were a team, their minds melded more effortlessly than Stella had imagined possible. They massaged butter into chickens, boned fish, opened oysters. Django set a flat of speckled eggs on the counter. Next to it, a ceramic bowl. He opened his hands and Stella broke the eggs, dozens of them, across his outspread fingers, watching yolks separate from whites. It occurred to her that she had tortured herself for no reason: She was very happy.

He showed her how to make puff pastry, rotating the dough again and again. Copying his motions, Stella felt the butter become one with the flour. “*Très bien.*” Django nodded. “*Je suis tellement en colère quand je pense à toutes nos années perdues...*”

“What are you saying about lost years?”

“That I am very angry when I think of all the years we have lost. Never, *pas une fois de toute ma vie*, have I cooked with someone as with you. Just think: If I had taught you to cook when you were a little girl, we could have made a restaurant together.” He set the dough in the refrigerator, sat down at the table, poured them each a glass of wine. He lit another cigarette. “*Ma fille, tu as du talent,*” he said. “Do not turn your back on this gift. You have true talent.”

She stared at him, thinking, *So this is how it feels to have a father!* For the past few months Jules had felt almost like a father, but this was different. This was a connection that was more than mere liking, more even than love. She had never felt that by knowing Celia she would begin to know herself, but with Django the thought was always there. Impulsively, she put her hand on his arm and asked, “Is it too late? Couldn’t you still teach me?”

He studied her carefully for a moment as a huge smile spread across his face. “*Non, ce n’est pas trop tard.*” He hit his head with his open palm. “Not too late at all. We could open a restaurant.”

“What?” She looked up, startled.

“Very small. *Peut-être vingt couverts.* Just us, *toi et moi.* And I will teach you everything I know.”

Years later, when the press asked what it had been like to cook with her father for the first time, she said, “I felt I was finally where I was meant to be. Coming to Paris changed my life. First I found Victorine, then I found my father, and in the end I found my calling. And thanks to all of that, I finally fell in love.”

But in the moment, all she said was, “Where would we get the money?”

“Jules likes you.” He exhaled, sending smoke into the air. “He’s very rich. He would surely lend it to you. Then too”—he grinned—“all those experts we are feeding tonight seem to think you are in possession of a valuable painting.”

Chez Django

THE PORTRAIT SOLD TO A Boston museum for a startling amount of money; Stella wanted to invest it in the restaurant, but Jules wouldn't hear of it. "You never know..." What he left unsaid contained a world of possibilities. "I will back your restaurant myself."

Reluctant to accept his money, Stella protested. What if they failed? But in the end she gave in. She suspected her growing closeness with Django unnerved Jules. Afraid that he might lose her, he wanted to secure a place in her life.

Jules surprised her, however, throwing himself into the project with a passion he normally reserved for art. He and Paul spent days driving through Paris, slowly circumnavigating the city in search of the perfect location. When he came upon a small Montmartre storefront high on a narrow street, he was triumphant. "You must come see it now!" he insisted.

He led them across cobbled sidewalks and down tiny twisting streets, the great dome of the Sacré-Cœur hovering above them like a benevolent moon. At last he turned onto the rue Lepic and pointed to a small shop, its windows so grimed with dirt it was impossible to see inside. "It's not much now." He opened the door. "But it has possibilities."

When they walked in, Stella could not help letting out a little moan; the place smelled of mold and mouse droppings, and the floor was littered with garbage. Torn wallpaper hung in dispirited tatters, as if it had lost the will to cling to the sagging walls. A filthy counter ran the length of the room, leaving just enough space for three tiny tables. Dust hung heavy in the fetid air.

"*C'est parfait!*" To Stella's stunned amazement, Django began twirling in ecstatic circles, taking in the room. He ran his sleeve across the counter and pointed; a glimmer of white was peeking out. He rubbed more vigorously, pushing the thick layer of dirt aside. As he polished the marble with his sleeve, he said happily, "I have come home."

"Home?" It did not look like any home Stella cared to inhabit.

"Home!" Django spread his arms, encompassing the neighborhood. "Chez Tito was just down the block." When Stella looked blank, he added, "My first Paris restaurant? Where I met Celia? It was like this, *très petite*." He laughed into her solemn face. "You have lived such a safe little life, *ma chérie*... You have

never known the joy of taking something that has suffered, had hard times, and turning it into a thing of beauty.” Stella thought of Victorine. “What you lack, *ma fille*, is vision. You need to look at this, this...” He groped for a word and finally conceded, “*Ce taudis*—this mess—and see not what it is but what it could be.”

For Stella, it was one of Django’s most appealing traits: He was open to possibility. Where she said no—which was so much safer—he said yes, eager to take risks. Was she too old to learn from him?

They worked for weeks, ripping sheets of old linoleum off the floor. It was, thought Stella, like excavating an archaeological site; with each layer, they uncovered another piece of the past. At last they reached the bottom, to find the wide, scarred oak boards hidden underneath. They sanded the wood until their pores were filled with dust, and Stella fell asleep each night still feeling the sander vibrating in her hands. It was unpleasant work, but when they finished, the floors had a buttery softness so seductive that Stella removed her shoes every time she walked through the door; she liked the feeling of the wood caressing her bare feet.

Next they attacked the wallpaper, tearing off shredded strips. It was oddly satisfying work. When they finally reached plaster, they applied coat after coat of stucco, until the clean scent had vanquished the musty aroma in the air. A new room began to emerge: white, airy, open.

Daniel came by every day, Lucie in tow, to help them paint and polish. To the little girl, the space was a perfect playground, and when Django presented her with a tiny paintbrush of her own, she danced around the room. As dusk fell, they would all troop back to the bookshop, where Django commandeered the kitchen to teach Stella his favorite dishes. Day by day she grew more confident.

One afternoon he showed her how to make lobster bisque. “It’s all about the shells,” he told her, insisting she grind them into a paste to thicken the soup. Then they gently poached the meat, adding it at the very end. Tasting it, she had a thought.

“What if we stirred in just a touch of tomato? Early on, when we’re sweating the vegetables?”

Django considered it. “You may be right,” he replied. “Tomorrow we will try it.”

The following day they did it her way, and when he took a spoonful, Django let out a shout of delight. “Did I not say she had the talent?” he asked, offering Lucie a taste.

“It is better,” she replied solemnly.

Their cooking rhythm had been easy from the start—they were like dancers moving in perfect harmony. But after the lobster bisque, Django began treating her like a partner rather than an apprentice, constantly asking her opinion. What

did she think would improve this dish? Could it use more acid? More time in the oven? What if they left it raw? He employed every sense when he cooked; his nose told him when a dish was ready, and his ears told him when a sauce was right. He stuck his fingers into the hottest pots: Touch, he said, was the only way to know when meat had reached the right temperature. As she watched him work, Stella felt each of her own senses become more acute.

It was the same in the markets. Watching him pinch fruit, weigh melons in his hands, and select potatoes one by one always made her think of Celia's painting. It occurred to her that for once she had not dreamed herself into a painting but had made the dream real. The notion gave her enormous pleasure.

She followed Django as he examined mushrooms, patiently bypassing inferior specimens until the vendor with the best *mousserons* and *sanguins* showed up. For truly great mushrooms, he insisted, patience was required.

He was even more exacting about meat. He refused any bird without feathers, ruffling the plumage as he contemplated his purchase. He leaned in to sniff the carcass of each animal he bought and fondled the flesh of every fish. It was, he said, the only way to discern quality.

The vendors treated him with great respect, as if selling him their wares was a privilege. When he first introduced her, exclaiming, "My daughter!" to each person in the market, they had all looked quite shocked. And then, always, there was a little smile, as if they were pleased for him, pleased that he was not alone after all. Examining her own feelings, she was astonished to discover that what she felt was pride.

"What are you calling the restaurant?" his favorite cheesemonger asked.

"When it is ready," he said with that confident air, "the restaurant will tell us its name."

He was equally evasive about the menu. "When the time comes," he said inscrutably, "we will know what to serve." He had already decided that each day's offerings would be different; he and Stella would visit the market every morning before making their menu.

"What if people don't like what we're serving on the day they come?" Stella asked.

He shrugged. "*Tant pis*. They can take it or leave it."

THEY HAD HOPED to open before Christmas, but the holidays came and went and the storefront on the rue Lepic remained a work site. Then, one morning in late January, they walked in and saw that the walls were smooth, the windows sparkled, the counter gleamed. The room was ready. All their restaurant lacked was furniture.

They began haunting flea markets, unearthing hand-carved stools, beautiful old café tables, and bentwood chairs. When they happened upon a trove of small Tiffany lamps, they purchased those as well. Django befriended a pretty vendor specializing in antique appliances, who proudly showed them a zinc sink that had belonged to one of the original *bouillons* of Paris. A week later she brought them an antique meat slicer. “It’s lovely,” Stella protested as Django counted out the francs, “but why do we need a meat slicer?”

“Look at it!” he said. She had to admit it had the sturdy beauty of early industrial objects, and when they lugged it back to the rue Lepic, Jules was ecstatic. Marcel Duchamp, he said, had coveted this very machine.

They installed the sink behind the marble counter and lined the hand-carved stools along the front. They brought in the three small tables, added chairs, and turned on the lights, which gave the room a jewel-like glow. To Stella’s delight, the once-shabby space had become a restaurant with a raffish personality: It was casual, elegant, and strangely sexy. Gazing around the room, Stella turned to her father. “You were right. This place has told us its name.”

“It has?”

She gestured around the restaurant. “If this isn’t Chez Django, I don’t know what is.”

His smile was huge.

Then the red tape began. Neighbors told them dispiriting stories about difficult inspectors, and Stella dreaded each visit from the fire brigade, the police, and the *conseil général*. She studied the regulations, convinced they would never be able to pass the Direction Départementale de la Cohésion Sociale et de la Protection des Populations. She need not have worried—Django, in his element, knew exactly what to say and who to charm.

She recalled the languid days at Shakespeare and Company and the agonizingly slow search for Victorine, but now time sped up. Could it be, she wondered, because here in Paris, in this restaurant, she had finally found the place where she belonged? She was in the whirlwind now, and suddenly it was February, and they were firing up the stove.

“Didn’t you tell me you arrived in Paris in March?” They were writing out their first shopping list. “What day?”

“I don’t remember the exact date,” she said. “But I can check my passport.”

“Perfect!” he said when she told him. “That gives us a little more than a month; we will open on the twenty-second.”

Midnight

NOW THERE WERE ONLY THREE weeks until the opening. The day started as it always did, with a trip to the market. The spring had turned cold, and as they walked they rubbed their hands, trying to keep warm in the dark. They always arrived early, while the vendors were still setting up, and today Django's breath was visible each time he asked, "*Quoi de bon aujourd'hui?*"

He moved slowly through the stalls, his arrogant nose twitching as he ferreted out hidden treasure: the season's last morels lurking beneath a pile of potatoes; tiny artichokes the color of violets, secreted away for a three-star chef; a wild duck, its shiny blue-green feathers concealed among the barnyard birds. Today he spotted a pile of verdant green shoots and shouted, "*L'ail des ours!*" while joyfully scooping them up.

"Bear's garlic?" Stella asked. "I've never heard of such a thing."

Django smiled. "Wild onions. The first of the new season. *Ils sont si bons.*"

"What will we do with them?" She watched him imagine one dish after another, before rejecting them all. Then his eyes traveled to the butcher in the opposite stall and his face lit up. "*Lapins!* Of course. We will stuff rabbit loins with wild onions and serve them with a ragout of morels."

It was amazing, she thought, this ability to pull recipes out of the air, to invent dishes on the fly. She watched him approach a pile of lively langoustines, wondering what he would do with them. Back at the restaurant, he picked one up and watched the tiny animal punch the air with its claws, vainly trying to grab his finger. "*Pauvre bête*; only yesterday he was swimming in the ocean. And tonight he will be our hors d'oeuvre. What will you make with him?"

"Me?" she squeaked. But she was pleased by his trust. Stella studied the kicking crustacean. "Little ravioli? Filled with langoustine mousse. Truffle shaved on top. And a reduced essence of the shells." She was tasting it in her mind.

"Excellent!" He clapped her on the back. "Make the pasta with those duck eggs we bought."

She formed a nest of flour, broke the bright marigold yolks into the center, and felt the cooking claim her. She had incorporated the eggs into the flour and

was starting to knead the dough when Jules came through the door. Stella immediately saw that something was wrong.

He looked haggard as he walked slowly. Alarmed, she asked, “What is it?”

He sat down heavily, as if the motion hurt, and let out a long sigh. “I didn’t want to tell you, at least not until the restaurant was open, but it seems it can’t wait.”

“What is it?” she said again. How had she not noticed how fragile he had grown? Even his once-silver hair had acquired a slightly yellow cast. She was furious with herself.

“It’s my heart. I’ve been having palpitations. My doctor assures me”—he spoke with typical calm—“that I still have a long and prosperous life before me, and I certainly intend to be here to celebrate your first Michelin star. But he thinks, just to be safe, that I should no longer be living alone. And so I’ve come to ask if you would consider leaving the rue Christine and moving into Le Sauvage? There are three empty bedrooms.”

She did not think twice. How much had changed, she thought, remembering her anguish last summer when Jules had first offered his apartment. Now her first thought was that he had invited her into his life, asked for help, treated her like a relative. Her second was for his health. “You’re sure,” she prodded, “that it’s not more serious than you’re letting on?”

He shook his head. “On my honor.”

“In that case,” she replied, “may I bring Brel?”

The cat instantly forgot she had ever been a city creature, stalking into the garden to pounce on plants, claim every sunny spot, and terrorize any beast foolish enough to cross her path. She had found her native habitat. Watching her, Stella remembered what Jules had said about Jean-Marie: He had loved the garden so much they’d had a hard time luring him inside. How sad, she thought, that he was no longer able to enjoy this wild and wonderful place.

Still, it was easy to understand why Jean-Marie found Le Sauvage so painful—his mother’s spirit was etched into every line of the house. She recalled Jules telling her that Jean-Marie had called this a “happy house.” Would he ever feel that way again? Her heart went out to him.

“I think it’s the most perfect house I’ve ever seen,” she told Django after her first night there. They had finished shopping and were back at the restaurant, feverishly testing recipes, stirring stocks, and rolling pastry. “My one fear is that this will spoil me for ordinary life. I can’t live at Le Sauvage forever, but how will I ever be happy anywhere else?”

“Your problem”—he pulled an onion tart from the oven—“is that you always look for reasons to be unhappy.” He handed her the warm, savory pastry and she

inhaled its spicy scent. “When fortune smiles, you immediately start to worry about how it will end. Why not enjoy the moment?”

She was about to concede the point when the door burst open with a dramatic bang. They looked up to find a woman standing in the doorway, hands on hips, glaring. When Stella saw Jean-Marie skulking behind her, she knew her at once: the Empress. Platinum hair pulled into a tight chignon accentuated an oval face, the skin so pale you could almost see the fragile veins beneath it. She had ice-blue eyes, glittering with a fury that seemed to be echoed by the diamonds around her neck. Lifting an accusing finger, she pointed it at Stella.

“You are taking advantage of a sick old man.” Her voice shook with rage. “First you lure him into investing money in your”—she looked around the room with loathing and spat out—“*restaurant*. Then you move into his house. What next? Here in France we have laws against such schemes. You have left me no choice: My lawyers are drawing up papers to have that poor pathetic man declared incompetent and put away for his own good.”

“Put away?” She was even more horrible than Jules had said.

“If we do not take the necessary steps, you will steal everything.” Standing behind her, Jean-Marie gave an involuntary jerk of surprise, and his eyes went wide with shock as the woman sighed and added dramatically, “It’s an old story.”

“*Honi soit qui mal y pense*,” muttered Django. He turned to Jean-Marie with cold contempt. “Have you no shame? Your father may be ill and he is certainly old, but he is the most competent man in Paris. *Comme tu le sais très bien*. If you had a heart, you would be caring for him instead of leaving that to my daughter.”

“*Mais...mais...mais...*” Jean-Marie’s face flooded with color, and he hopped from one foot to the other like an egret in distress. Studying him, Stella realized that he’d had no idea what his fiancée was up to; he looked truly miserable. Had the Empress been watching him instead of Django, she would have been appalled: He was regarding her as if she was a stranger.

“*Tais-toi!*” It was hard to know if the Empress was telling Jean-Marie or Django to shut up.

Django ignored her. “If I were you”—the look he now gave Jean-Marie was confiding, almost compassionate—“I would go visit the little dress shop in the Place des Vosges.”

The Empress’s face became ashen. “How dare you!” she shouted. “You, you, you...” In her anger she could only sputter, “You guttersnipe thief. You are part of this scheme. Do not think, for one instant, that my lawyers will not be looking into you as well.”

“Enough!” Jean-Marie had found his voice. Seizing his fiancée’s hand, he turned on his heel and, to her obvious distress, tugged her out the door like a recalcitrant dog on a flimsy leash.

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“HOW I WISH I’d been there!” Jules said it for the third time. He and Stella were sitting by the fireplace at Le Sauvage, glasses of ancient amontillado in their hands. “Tell it to me again.” He twirled his glass, sending the wine’s nutlike fragrance into the air. “Of course Jean-Marie was not part of her plot!”

“He seemed...” She searched for the right word. “Anguished” is what she came up with.

Jules looked pleased. “I never dreamed she would go so far, but I find it rather wonderful.”

“Well, I don’t!” snapped Stella. “There is nothing funny about this. Could she really have you declared incompetent?”

“No, no, no.” He patted the air, pushing the notion away. “I may be old and ill, but my reputation remains untarnished. And I still have friends in high places.”

“What about me? Could she make trouble?”

His smile faded. “It’s true there are laws against taking advantage of elderly senile people. But since I do not fall into that category...” He put his glass down and reached for her hand. “My dear, these are empty threats. What I do is entirely my own business. You are in no danger.”

She was not convinced. The woman had been so venomous, so determined. “I don’t understand why you seem so pleased. It’s all so, so...” She trailed off.

“Vulgar?” he offered. “Which is precisely what pleases me. My son and I may not see eye to eye right now, but this plan of hers is venal, cruel, and utterly unprincipled. He must be appalled. Surely this will make him see that woman for who she really is. I suspect he’s had doubts; after all, he has yet to marry her. Nevertheless...” He offered her a beatific smile. “I believe I will call my lawyers. It is never wise to be unprepared.”

She remembered him telling George that he had kept his ear to the ground during the war years. “In those days,” he’d said, “the more you knew, the more likely you were to stay alive.” He was not, she thought, quite as sanguine as he seemed.

A phalanx of lawyers arrived the next morning just as Stella was leaving. As she made her way to the restaurant, she wondered what Jules was up to, but when she got to the rue Lepic, an inspector from the *préfecture* was poking around, asking impertinent questions. It was exhausting. Distracted by the endless red tape, she forgot about Jules’s visitors, and by the time she got home they had gone.

But Jules was there, strolling about with an impish grin on his face. “Everything is fine,” he said. “I’m feeling much better now that I’ve taken care of

the legalities. Rest assured, you have absolutely nothing to worry about. Oh, yes, and Jean-Marie is on his way over to sign some papers.”

“Oh, dear,” she said, preparing for unpleasantness.

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BUT THE MAN who entered the house was not the person she had previously encountered. He seemed taller and straighter, and he was almost smiling. She had been right: Without the stern stuffiness, Jean-Marie was remarkably handsome.

He kissed Jules on both cheeks and noted that he was too thin. Then he said, with a wistful air, “I’d forgotten how beautiful Maman’s house is.”

“I’ve always thought so,” Jules replied, as he reached for a bottle of wine.

“I went to the Place des Vosges this morning,” Jean-Marie blurted out.

“Yes?” Jules busied himself opening the bottle and filling the glasses. “Corton-Charlemagne 1978.”

Jean-Marie inhaled and let out an appreciative sigh. “Do you know Maman’s clothes still carry her scent? It was a shock, almost as if she were there. When I asked the *propriétaire* where she had gotten the dresses, she described...”

“Eugénie,” said Jules.

Jean-Marie breathed heavily and put his head in his hands. “I had no idea. Forgive me, Papa.”

“It’s been a long time since you called me that,” said Jules.

Feeling like an intruder, Stella slipped out of the room. Two hours later, when Jean-Marie left, she noticed that Jules had new color in his cheeks.

—

JEAN-MARIE BEGAN STOPPING in at Le Sauvage every day, staying longer each time, obviously eager to make amends with his father. Stella watched the two men discussing art, literature, food, politics... It was as if they were simply picking up an interrupted conversation. With each passing day Jules looked happier and healthier; even his hair recaptured its shine. As for Jean-Marie, Stella occasionally caught him stroking a chair or a lamp, as if reconnecting with old friends, and each time he ventured into the garden she could see a dreamy smile cross his face. Before the week was out, Jean-Marie had shed Eugénie and moved back into Le Sauvage.

That night, when Stella went into the kitchen in search of a midnight snack, she found Jean-Marie eating a piece of cheese as he stared out at the moonlit garden. “Hungry?” he asked. When she nodded, he cut a wedge of Brie and handed it over.

“It’s so strange,” he mused. “When my mother died, I was so miserable that I thought the grief would never end. This was her house, and I just couldn’t be

here; she was everywhere and it was too painful. But it has become more bearable with time.” He stroked the kitchen counter. “I wish you could have known my mother. She was like this house: beautiful, original, calm.... There was nobody like her.” He cut another wedge of cheese.

“Jules feels your mother’s presence here too,” she said, “but that seems to give him comfort. He keeps saying he hopes that one day you will be able to find peace here.”

“Didn’t he tell me your mother is also gone? Have you made peace with that?”

Stella laughed. “Celia was nothing like Séverine, and we were never close. She gave me no peace while she was alive.” Then she stopped and considered. “But she sent me to Paris,” she added slowly, “and somehow being here has allowed me to understand who she really was. She made herself up, invented herself from scratch when she was just a teenager, walked out on everything and everyone she’d ever known. I always thought she didn’t like me, but I’ve come to understand that the person she didn’t like was really herself.”

“How sad,” he said.

She took a bite of the cheese and chewed it thoughtfully. “The saddest thing is that I think she and my father might actually have been happy together if they’d given it a chance.”

“Papa says your father is remarkable, like no one he’s ever met.”

“Really?” She felt a surge of pride.

They met again the next night, and the night after that. Slowly, without discussing it, they created a secret ritual: Around midnight they would creep into the darkened kitchen, drink wine, and talk.

“I’ve been thinking,” she told him on the third night, “now that you’re here, there’s really no reason for me to stay. As soon as the restaurant opens, I’ll move out.”

“Don’t,” he said simply. “For two very good reasons.”

“What are they?”

“For one, Papa would be miserable if you left.”

She studied Jean-Marie, waiting for him to continue.

“And I wouldn’t like it either.” He reached out and touched her cheek, softly, almost tentatively, as if he wanted to say more but was holding himself back.

At that moment Jules ambled into the room. They both jumped and quickly moved apart. He gave a soft little laugh. “Did you think I didn’t know? It makes me very happy to see Le Sauvage come back to life. Your mother would be so pleased.”

Opening

“YOU SEE,” SAID DJANGO THE next morning as they stood in the restaurant peeling and chopping, “there was nothing to worry about after all.” The counter was heaped with greens, onions, herbs, and carrots. The scent of the stocks burbling on the stove filled the air. He gave her a knowing look. “You will never have to leave Le Sauvage.”

“We’ll see about that.” But she was remembering the way Jean-Marie had stroked her cheek in the kitchen. “Right now what we need to do is decide what we’re going to cook for opening night.”

He looked amused. “You are blushing,” he said, “*et tu changes de sujet*. But me, I am serious.”

“What are we going to cook?” she demanded.

“We have plenty of time,” he said. “We have over a week to decide.”

“I would feel better if we had a plan,” she insisted.

“I don’t like plans,” he said. “But if it makes you happy, I will do this for you.” It was a concession. “Just this once,” he warned. “After the first night, we will be spontaneous. *Allez*, let us begin with the guest list. Who’s coming?”

“Jean-Marie,” she began.

He looked up at the ceiling, as if imploring the gods. “And who does she name first?”

Stella blushed again.

“Didn’t you once tell me he had a passion for escargots?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s invent a new snail dish for him. No garlic. No parsley. Something *complètement original*.”

“Hmmm.” She began thinking of flavor pairings. “Hazelnuts,” she mused. “Shallots. A bit of cream. Maybe Champagne.”

“*Noisettes et escargots?*” She watched him taste it in his mind. “I like it. Perhaps a touch of vadouvan? That will make Richard happy too. *Après ça*, we must do something with those beautiful langoustines from the market; their season is so short. To amuse Lucie, we will serve them in the shell.”

“Grilled?” she asked.

“Poached,” he replied. “With a Japanese sauce I have been inventing. Soy sauce. Butter. A touch of ginger and splash of lime.”

“George won’t eat that!” Stella protested.

“*Au contraire*, George eats anything. He does not count. *Et puis encore après*, something *très simple*. *Une grillade*. *A magret de canard?*”

“Jules is bringing Burgundies.”

“Then we will make a clear truffle sauce for the duck. And afterward a *petite salade* of bitter greens.”

“Dessert?” she wondered. “It’s too early for fruit. The pears and apples are old and the berries aren’t ripe yet. Chocolate?”

He shook his head. “A cheap trick.”

“Lemon! Daniel loves lemon.”

He nodded solemnly. “Tart. Very tart.” He turned and began snipping the violets off the little plants behind the counter.

“What are you doing?”

“I will candy them. They lend a certain *je ne sais quoi* to a lemon tart. I imagine your Mademoiselle Duseigne will appreciate that.”

ON OPENING DAY, Stella climbed out of bed feeling shaky and out of sorts. What was she doing? She was no cook. She dressed quietly and hurried off to the market before Jules and Jean-Marie were awake, unwilling to face either of them in this anxious state. But the market gave her no comfort; today when she looked at Django, she saw only a stranger, and as she followed him into the market, she felt irritable and out of place.

It was all too much; she had dreamed too big; she would certainly fail. Terrified, she suddenly longed for New York and the safe little life she had left behind. She was feeling so depressed that she did not notice Django’s mushroom man beckoning her over until he reached out and touched her arm. “*Viens*,” he said conspiratorially. “I have saved something special just for you.”

Looking surreptitiously around, he pulled a pile of huge cream-colored mushrooms from beneath the counter and placed them in her hands as if they were jewels. “The *cèpes* of springtime are very special,” he whispered. “And these are the only ones in Paris.” He gave her a wink. “They will bring you good fortune on your opening night. And tomorrow you must tell me how you have prepared them.”

It was only the beginning: Every vendor, it seemed, had set some special ingredient aside for them. They all wished them well, and as Stella contemplated this unexpected bounty, her confidence returned. As they carried the gifts back to

Chez Django, she knew they were about to make their favorite people very, very happy.

“READY?” DJANGO HANDED her a duck.

“*Oui, Chef.*” As she began boning the bird, her entire body relaxed into the rhythm of the kitchen. She rolled out pastry and grated lemon peel, thankful for the muscle memory.

In the middle of the afternoon, Paul arrived with cases of wine from Jules. Django opened them and held the bottles up. “He’s sent us a whole case of the ’66 Krug!” He rummaged in another box and whistled. “A ’62 Richebourg. *Il est complètement fou!* And look at this!” He lofted two bottles of prewar Château d’Yquem.

By then the air was rich with tantalizing smells. Roasting ducks, caramelizing onions, reducing wines. Butter, flour, meat stocks. Always, above it all, the fine, clean scent of lemon. Stella and Django lit candles, folded napkins, and set plates, glasses, and cutlery down the length of the counter. Django lit a Gauloises, and the deep funky scent of the tobacco joined the other aromas. “Chez Django,” he said with satisfaction.

As the guests arrived, he handed them each a hot, flaky snail pastry and a glass of Champagne. People filled the room, getting to know one another. Stella overheard Madame Bonnet telling Mademoiselle Duseigne about the nice young man who had moved in next door. “Although,” Madame Bonnet confided, “I have been trying to decide whether I should tell him what happened to that painting in his attic....”

“Don’t,” said Mademoiselle Duseigne, with characteristic decisiveness. “What is the point? It will only make him miserable.”

Daniel and Jean-Marie discovered a mutual passion for the poetry of Lorca, and Jules regaled George and Richard with stories about the war. Listening to the happy sound of their voices, Stella remembered Celia’s stiff dinner parties, glanced over at Django, and felt incredibly lucky.

Her father was in his element, working his way down the counter and improvising personal little tidbits for each guest. He sliced a raw black truffle for Richard Olney, spread it with butter, sprinkled it with salt, and fed it to him with his fingers. Stella watched, remembering what Richard had said about him the night they met.

Django was, Stella thought, a kind of magician, conjuring each diner’s desire. For George, there was caviar-topped parmesan custard served in a hollow eggshell. For Jules, those special *cèpes*, sauteed in butter and *vin jaune*. He

carved radish roses for Mademoiselle Duseigne and turned a buttery little bun into a rabbit for Madame Bonnet.

“What about me?” cried Lucie, staring jealously at the little bunny bun.

“You, *ma petite*, will have to wait for dessert.”

He had made Lucie her own cat, a Brel fashioned from pulled sugar. By dessert time, however, Lucie was fast asleep, her head pillowed on her arms. “I thought that might happen,” said Django, “which is why I made her something that lasts.” For just a moment, Stella ached for the little girl she had once been, the one without a father.

AFTERWARD, AS THE guests spilled into the street, Richard lingered. At last he shrugged into his coat. “You,” he said to Django, “are going to be the toast of Paris. And even more insufferable than before. If such a thing is possible.”

“We will,” said Django cheerfully, “and it is. Tomorrow the real story begins.”

“Speaking of tomorrow night...” Jean-Marie looked at Stella. “I have brought you a present.” He went out to the car and returned carrying a long flat box. “For luck.”

She knew, even before she lifted the lid, that she would smell apricots and vanilla. “Are you sure?” she said.

“It was my mother’s favorite dress. She would be happy to know it will remain in the family. But you must look at the label.”

Black thread on white silk, spelling out *Christian Dior*.

Above the couturier’s name, where the number should have been, another name.

Stella.

Author's Note

"I love that Paris chapter," said Susan Kamil about my last memoir.

"The one about the little black dress?"

Susan nodded. "I want more. Could you please turn it into a novel?"

Susan was the best editor I have ever encountered (I'm not alone in that assessment), and so I considered her words carefully. It was a blustery day, and I stared down at the rain pelting the sidewalks of midtown Manhattan, grateful to be inside. Impervious to the weather, a young woman was skipping from puddle to puddle and as I watched her splash between the buildings, Lorca's words about New York's "furious rhythm, its geometry and anguish" floated into my mind. I thought of a sunny day in Paris...and just like that I had the story.

Shockingly, unexpectedly, Susan fell ill a few months later. When I asked if there was anything I could do for her, she said, "The best gift would be to write me that book."

I went home and started writing. When she passed away a week later I kept writing, but she was with me, looking over my shoulder, muttering "Uh-oh" every now and then when I was tempted to embellish a sentence. Susan was not just an editor: She became your collaborator, your partner, and now she was inside my head. Each time I took liberties with the many real people who walk through these pages I could feel Susan's cool appraising stare on me. "You're going to have to explain that," she said every time.

Here goes.

Although I have been a frequent visitor to Shakespeare and Company, I never got up the courage to speak to the late George Whitman, the bookstore's famous founder. But I have known many people far braver than me and heard endless tales about the amazing man who allowed thousands of book lovers to read, write, and sleep in his shop. It was, for so many, a life-changing experience and I hope I've done George and his Tumbleweeds justice.

Whitman had a daughter late in life, but we have never met. Sylvia Whitman now runs her father's fantastic bookshop, but unlike the little girl in my book, she did not spend her childhood there among the Tumbleweeds. Lucie is entirely my invention.

Stella's employer, on the other hand, is a real woman who ran the Vanguard Press from 1952 until it was sold to Random House in 1988. Evelyn Shrifte was one of the few powerful women in a male-dominated industry, and when I worked for her in the early seventies I grew to love her.

I knew John Ashbery too. A couple of years before his death in 2017 he invited me to his Hudson home to explore his kitchen. That afternoon he spoke about his love of food, lent me a thick scrapbook of recipes he'd collected while living in Paris, and told me stories of his life there. It is true that he, James Baldwin, and Allen Ginsberg (two people I was not fortunate enough to have met) all spent time at Shakespeare and Company during their sojourns in the city.

Richard Olney was close to James Baldwin, and he did, indeed, paint a wonderful portrait of the writer. I've put Olney in Paris a year or two before his actual arrival there, but I don't think he'd mind. We met a few times, only in passing, and my deep admiration for him comes from reading—and cooking from—his books. Like so many American food lovers, I have found him a huge inspiration, and if you're not familiar with his books I urge you to look them up.

Jules is, of course, entirely fictional. Still, the more I learn about the intrepid Rose Valland, the more I find myself wishing she'd had a colleague to help with her dangerous self-appointed mission to save French art from the Nazis. All the other details about this extraordinary woman are, to the best of my knowledge, accurate.

Except for Django, whom I conjured from thin air, the chefs in the book are all real people who changed the shape of dining in France. When Stella eats the food of Antoine Magnin, Marc Meneau, Jean Troisgros, and Alain Passard, I am recalling my own transcendent meals in their restaurants. The same is true of Robert et Louise, which has been one of my favorite Paris restaurants since the sixties—when I did, indeed, find Jeanne Moreau at the next table.

As for Victorine-Louise Meurent...In the late sixties, when I was studying art history, I became so enthralled with the model for Manet's *Olympia* that I wanted to write my master's thesis on her. Sadly, my professors did not consider Victorine a sufficiently serious academic subject. But she has stayed on my mind, and that day in Susan's office, I knew she was going to appear in my novel.

Details about Victorine’s life are hard to come by, but bit by bit I was able to trace her footsteps. Her paintings, however, remained maddeningly elusive. As I finished the first draft in 2020, the only known work by Victorine was *Palm Sunday*, a conventional painting of a pretty young girl holding a palm frond. Discovered in 2004, it now hangs in the Musée Municipal d’Art et d’Histoire in Colombes. Although it is a sweet and accomplished painting, it reveals very little about the artist. I kept wishing there was something more.

Then the Covid pandemic hit and I put the manuscript aside to work on a film. Picking it up again a year later, I entered Victorine’s name into Google, and nearly fainted. A dealer named Edouard Ambroselli had found Victorine’s self-portrait at the Porte de Vanves flea market and sold it to Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts! I was ecstatic; the portrait tells us so much about Victorine.

The Susan who lives in my head was equally excited. “Are you going to let Stella find the portrait?” she inquired.

Of course. I couldn’t resist. It is, however, an enormous liberty: In the book Stella finds the painting in 1983, and at that time there was not a single known painting of Victorine’s in existence. I am sure there are more out there, and I can’t wait until they are found.

As for the little black dress that started it all...

In 2002, I wandered into a shop called La Petite Robe Noir and stared at racks of beautiful vintage dresses. (The shop, owned by Didier Ludot, no longer exists.) The shopkeeper told me the dress I had fallen in love with—my dress—was the first design Yves Saint Laurent created for Dior. It fit me so perfectly that she called Monsieur Ludot and begged him to reduce the price. He did—to \$6,000.

I didn’t buy it, of course. But in its own way that dress changed my life. It brought me Stella, Jules, Django, and all the other characters in this book, and I am very grateful. I have loved every minute I’ve spent with them. I think Susan would have liked them too.

For Susan Kamil, my beloved editor, who asked me to write this book. It makes me so sad that she will never get to read it.

Acknowledgments

There is another thing about this book that would have made Susan very happy. When she passed away her former assistant, Clio Seraphim, stepped in to edit the manuscript. Susan thought the world of Clio and she would be pleased to know that she was, once again, absolutely correct. Clio's extraordinary editorial acumen, her thoughtful comments, and her enthusiasm have made this a far better book. Great editors are an extremely rare breed and Clio is definitely one of them.

As always my agent, Kathy Robbins, has been my first reader and most trusted guide. When I told her I worried that I was having too much fun writing this book, there was a silence. Then she said, "From now on, too much fun is what you have to aim for."

I am also grateful to the many people at Random House who helped bring this book into the world. As you will know from meeting Stella, I have great regard for copy editors and I have been blessed with two of the best. Production editor Loren Noveck and Kathy Lord are, in true Stella fashion, literary detectives. They didn't just correct my grammar; they chased down every detail, looked at maps, studied paintings, and as I worked through their comments they felt like true collaborators.

How fortunate I was to have David Koral as my French reader; he saved me from endless embarrassment. The brilliant Susan Turner has designed this book, and, as she always does, made it easier to read. Thanks too to designers Robin Schiff and Cassie Gonzales, who created the beautiful cover that launched this book into the world.

And finally thanks to the entire team at Random House: Karen Fink, Rachel Parker, Madison Dettlinger, Windy Dorrestyn, Andy Ward, Rachel Rokicki, and Caitlin McKenna. No book could be in better hands.

I wrote much of this book while staying with my friends Robin Green and Mitchell Burgess, and I thank them for giving me a room with such a great view. More than that, I thank them for letting me be such a terrible guest. Every day that I was with them I went upstairs and disappeared into the streets of Paris.

Finally, as always, my love and thanks to my family, Michael, Nick, and Monica. What would I do without you?

BY RUTH REICHL

The Paris Novel

Save Me the Plums

My Kitchen Year

Delicious!

For You, Mom. Finally.

Garlic and Sapphires

Comfort Me with Apples

Tender at the Bone

Mmmmm: A Feastyary

EDITED BY RUTH REICHL

The Best American Food Writing 2018

Gourmet Today

The Gourmet Cookbook

Remembrance of Things Paris

History in a Glass

Endless Feasts

About the Author

RUTH REICHL is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the memoirs *Tender at the Bone*, *Comfort Me with Apples*, *Garlic and Sapphires*, *For You, Mom. Finally.*, and *Save Me the Plums*; the novel *Delicious!*; and the cookbook *My Kitchen Year*. She was editor in chief of *Gourmet* magazine for ten years. Previously she was the restaurant critic for *The New York Times* and served as the food editor and restaurant critic for the *Los Angeles Times*. She has been honored with six James Beard awards for her journalism, magazine feature writing, and criticism. She lives in upstate New York with her husband and two cats.

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