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# **The Secret Lives of People in Love**

Written by Simon Van Booy

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**A Oneworld Book**

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## *Little Birds*

**T**HIS MORNING I WOKE up and was fifteen years old. Each year is like putting a new coat over all the old ones. Sometimes I reach into the pockets of my childhood and pull things out.

When Michel gets home from his shop he said we are going out to celebrate – maybe to a movie or the McDonald’s on boulevard Voltaire. Michel is not my real father. He grew up in Paris and did a spell in prison. I think he was used to being alone, but we’ve lived together so long now, I’m not sure he could survive without me.

We live in Paris, and I think I was born here, but I may never know for sure. Everyone thinks I’m Chinese, and I look Chinese, but Michel says I’m more French than bread.

It is the afternoon of my birthday, but still the morning of my life. I am walking on the Pont des Arts. It is a small wooden bridge, and Americans sit in colorful knots drinking wine. Even though I’m only fifteen and have not had a girlfriend as such, I can tell who is in love with who when I look at people.

A woman in a wheelchair is being pushed across the bridge by her husband. They are in love. Only the back wheels move across each plank. He tilts the chair toward him as though his body is drinking from hers. I wish he could see her face. She clings to a small cloud of

tissue. They look Eastern European. I can tell this because they are well dressed but their clothes are years out of style. I'd like to think this is their first time in Paris. I can imagine him later on, straining to lift her from the chair in their gray hotel room with its withering curtains swollen by wind. I can picture her in his arms. He will set her in the bed as though it were a slow river.

A filthy homeless man is squatting with the American tourists and telling jokes in broken English. He is not looking at the girls' shaved legs but at the unfinished bottle of wine and sullen wedge of cheese. The Americans seem good-natured and pretend to laugh; I suppose the key to a good life is to gently overlook the truth and hope that at any moment we can all be reborn.

The Pont des Arts is wooden, and if you look through the slats, you can see boats passing beneath. Sometimes small bolts of lightning shoot from the boats as tourists take pictures of one another, and sometimes they just aim the cameras at nothing in particular and shoot – I like these kinds of photographs best, not that I have a camera – but if I did, I would randomly take pictures of nothing in particular. How else could you record life as it happens.

Michel works in a shop on the place Pigalle. Outside the shop is a flashing arrow with the word *Sexy* in red neon. Michel has had the shop since I can remember. I am forbidden to visit him there, though sometimes I watch him at his desk from the street corner. He likes to read a poet called Giorgio Caproni, who is dead, but Michel says that his words are like little birds that follow him around and sing in his ear.

If you saw Michel, you might cross the street because he has a deep scar that runs from his mouth all the way across his cheek. He told me he got it wrestling crocodiles in Mississippi, but I'm fifteen now and just humor him.

He has a friend called Léon, who sometimes stays the night with us because if he drinks too much, his wife won't let him into the apartment – though he always makes an effort to explain how his wife has beautiful dreams and that he doesn't want to wake her with his clumsiness. One night, while Michel was in the bathroom, Léon told me how Michel's face came to be scarred.

“Before you lived with Michel,” he said breathlessly, “there was a terrible fight outside his shop. Naturally Michel rushed outside and tried to break it up.” He paused and slid a small bottle of brandy from his shirt pocket. We each took a sip, then he pulled my ear through the brandy fumes to his mouth. “He was trying to save a young prostitute from being beaten, but the police arrived too late and then the idiots arrested Michel – she choked to her death on her own –” But then we heard Michel's footsteps in the hallway and the words disappeared forever, lost in the wilderness of a drunk.

Michel would throttle Léon if he knew that he'd told me this much, because he tries to pretend that I don't know anything and that when I get into the Sorbonne, which is the oldest university in Paris, I'll leave this life behind and visit him only at Christmas with gifts purchased at the finest stores on avenue Montaigne and Champs-Élysées. “You don't even have to wrap them,” Michel once marveled. “The girls are happy to do it right there in the shop.”

I like to stroll around Notre-Dame, which is on its own private island. I like to see tourists marvel at the curling beauty of the stone frame. It reminds me of a wedding cake that is too beautiful to eat – though perpetually hungry pigeons know the truth, because hundreds of them drip from the dirty white ledges, pecking at the marble with their brittle beaks.

Sometimes tourists go in and pray for things. When I was very young, Michel used to kneel at my bedside when he thought I was

asleep. I would hear him praying to God on my behalf. He referred to me as peanut, so I'm not sure if God knew who he was talking about – but if there is a God, then he probably knows everything and that my real name is not peanut.

After smoking on the steps of Notre-Dame and making eyes at an Italian girl posing for her boyfriend, I am now in the Jardin des Plantes. Michel and I have been coming here on Sunday since I can remember. Once I fell asleep on the grass and Michel filled my pockets with flowers. Today I am fifteen and I'm taking stock of my life. Even though I want to go to university and eventually buy Michel a red convertible, when I think of those Sundays in the Jardin des Plantes, I want to do things for people *they* will never forget. Maybe that's the best I can do in life. It is cloudy, but flowers have burst open.

It's amazing how they contain all that color within those thin, withering segments.

Michel's shop sells videos and now DVDs of mostly naked women having sex with all and sundry. Michel said that sex is sometimes different from love, and he never brings anything home; he said that what happens on the Pigalle, stays on the Pigalle. Sometimes when I watch him from the street, prostitutes walk by and ask me if I'm okay. I tell them I have a friend in the industry, and they laugh and offer me cigarettes. I'm friends with one prostitute in particular, her name is Sandrine and she says she is old enough to be my grandmother. She wears a shiny plastic skirt and very little on top. I can't stand in the doorway with her because it's bad for business. The skin on her legs is like leather, but she is very down-to-earth. She knows Michel and told me that he was once in love with one of the girls, but that nothing ever came of it. I tried to get the name of the girl when I

was twelve, hoping that I could bring them together, but Sandrine took my head in her hands and very quietly told me that the girl was dead and that's the end.

I would like to know more about this girl because Michel has never had a girlfriend, so she must have been something special. Sandrine sometimes buys me a book and leaves it with one of the other girls if she's working. The last one she gave me was called *The Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness*.

On this cloudy afternoon of my fifteenth birthday, I can see Michel sitting at the counter reading. If he knew I was here, he would be angry and express it by not talking to me for a day or so. It would put him in no mood to go out tonight, birthday or no birthday. I watch from within a crowd of shadows. Michel is reading. In Michel's books of Caproni's poetry, he has written his own little poems in the margins. Once, in a foolish moment, I opened one of his books and began to read one; he snatched the book from me and it ripped. We were both very upset.

He told me that his poems were not meant for me – that they were little flocks of birds intended to keep the other birds company. When I asked him who the poems were for, his eye pushed out a solitary tear that was rerouted by his scar.

He finishes work in four hours. He'll be expecting to find me at home watching TV ready to go out. He said I can go anywhere I want tonight, but times are hard. I think he has bought me new sneakers because I saw a Nike shoebox under his bed when I was vacuuming. I didn't open it. I like not knowing.

I know he's been saving for this night for the last two months. In the cupboard under the sink is a wine bottle full of money. When neighbors hear glass breaking in Michel's apartment they know someone is having a birthday. The neighbors like him, though it

takes everyone a while to get used to his scar and the fact he's been in prison.

We live in the 11th arrondissement. The districts curl around Paris like a snail's shell. Sandrine is not in her doorway yet or perhaps she has already found some business. Michel serves the customers while balancing a cigarette between his lips. He rolls his own and tips back his head to exhale.

Walking home, I always like to pass the Pompidou Centre. If you've never seen it, you may think that it's under construction, but that's the way it was built, and you can see inside through giant glass walls. I like to watch tourists threading their way through its body like ants in a colony. Outside is a gold pot the size of a bread van. No one has ever planted anything in it, so it's probably just for show.

Michel has told me that today's my fifteenth birthday, but he doesn't know for sure. No one does. The story of how we met is an interesting one.

Michel says that before he found me, he was a very bad man, but that I changed all that. On the day he got out of prison, he says he was on the Metro, and I must have been about three – or that's what he says. He says everything happened in a split second. The doors of the train closed, and there I was, looking at him. He says my parents were standing on the platform banging on the glass of the door and screaming. He says I must have stepped onto the train by myself and then the doors closed before they could get to me. I often ask him what my parents look like, and he looks very sad. He says that they were the most elegant people he'd ever seen. He says my mother was an Asian princess and wore the finest furs with lipstick so red her lips seemed to be on fire.

Michel said that her long black hair curled about the edges of her face, as though it were too intimidated by her beauty to go near her



features. He says my father was a tall American with one of the most expensive suits that had ever been made. Michel says he looked like a powerful man, but so handsome that his strength played second fiddle. He says they wept and pounded on the glass like children; he says that he had never seen people in so much anguish.

Michel says I began crying as soon as the train started moving and that he remained on the train until the final stop to see what would happen to me. He says he took me home and that I cried for a year about as often as it rained. He says the neighbors came over in one group to find out what was going on. When I was older I became angry with Michel for not finding my parents, and I imagined them living in a palace in New York, which they kept in darkness until they found me, their only child. Michel told me that he searched for them for a week without sleep or food but later discovered they'd been killed in a plane crash outside Buenos Aires. In my wallet I keep a map of Argentina that I ripped out of a library book. Sometimes I trace my finger across the city and wonder where their plane went down.

When I was nine, Michel gave me the option of going into an orphanage but explained how he had grown up in one and they were not pleasant.

I love to ride the Metro, even though gangs of Algerian boys sometimes spit at me. When the train pulls into the station where Michel found me, I often look around frantically. I can't help myself. Michel says they were the finest and gentlest people he had ever seen and that I would grow up to be just like them. One of Sandrine's prostitute friends once said I looked just like Annie Lee, and Sandrine slapped her, which shut her up. Maybe I'll ask Sandrine who Annie Lee was when I'm older.

Our apartment in the 11th is quite basic. All the windows open into a courtyard of other windows. With the lights out, I can see

people's lives unfold. A person's life is a slow flash, and I watch my neighbors argue, make up, make love, and fry meat. I can tell that one of my neighbors is unhappy, because he sits by the telephone and sometimes picks it up to make sure he can hear a dial tone, but it never rings when he's at home. Michel says his wife left him, and if there's ever a time I can't think of anyone to pray for, I should pray for him.

I can hear Michel's key churning the lock.

"Happy Birthday, peanut!" are the first words out of his mouth. He kisses me on both cheeks and tells me to get ready. I switch off the television and look for my dirty sneakers behind the door. They're not there. Michel lights a cigarette with a chuckle.

"Go and look under my bed," he says.

I was right, and I shout something from the bedroom so he knows I've found them. He wants to know how they fit. I love the smell of new shoes.

I'm looking forward to having an American hamburger tonight – the same kind my father probably used to relish. Maybe we'll see an American movie. *Men in Black II* is playing all over Paris. As I press Play on my stereo and look at my face in the mirror, I hear a smash from the kitchen and a couple of the neighbors cheer through open windows.

Michel knocks and then pokes his head around the door.

"Prêt?" he says, and I say let's go then.

We walk arm in arm through twilight. Paris never gets too dark, because when natural light dissolves, you're never too far from a streetlamp – and they're often beautiful – set upon tall black stalks, each lamp a glowing pair of white balls in love with its very own length of street. Sometimes, they all flicker to life at the same time, as if together they can hold off darkness.

*Little Birds*

I can tell that Michel wants to hold my hand, but I'm much too old for that now, and instead he smokes and tells me that no matter where I go in life, I'll be thought highly of.

I wonder if Michel is a famous poet. My teacher at school told me that poets come from all walks of life and that their gift is God-given. I wonder if people will flock to Michel's grave at Père-Lachaise Cemetery a hundred years from now. I wonder if they'll leave their own poems at the foot of his tombstone and then talk to him and maybe thank him for his little birds, which sing to them in moments of darkness.

Michel pays for the movie tickets with change from the wine bottle. The girl doesn't seem to mind. Her left eye is off-center. She slides Michel the tickets without counting the coins. She studies his scar as we slip past her glass box. Michel hands the tickets to the usher. He rips them in two. Michel tells me to save the stubs, so I open my wallet and the map of Argentina falls out. Michel quickly picks it up and looks at it without unfolding it. I snatch it from him and shove it back into my wallet.

"Peanut's little birds." He laughs.

Then we find our seats in the darkness and disappear into the film.