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The Woman in the Fifth

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One

That was the year my life fell apart, and that was the year I moved to Paris.

I arrived in the city a few days after Christmas. It was a wet, gray morning – the sky the color of dirty chalk; the rain a pervasive mist. My flight landed just after sunrise. I hadn't slept during all those hours above the Atlantic – another insomniac jag to add to all the other broken nights I'd been suffering recently. As I left the plane, my equilibrium went sideways – a moment of complete manic disorientation – and I stumbled badly when the cop in the passport booth asked me how long I'd be staying in France.

'Not sure exactly,' I said, my mouth reacting before my brain.

This made him look at me with care – as I had also spoken in French.

'Not sure?' he asked.

'Two weeks,' I said quickly.

'You have a ticket back to America?'

I nodded.

'Show it to me, please,' he said.

I handed over the ticket. He studied it, noting the return date was 10 January.

'How can you be "not sure",' he asked, 'when you have proof?'

'I wasn't thinking,' I said, sounding sheepish.

'Évidemment,' he said. His stamp landed on my passport. He pushed my documents back to me, saying nothing. Then he nodded for the next passenger in line to step forward. He was done with me.

I headed off to baggage claim, cursing myself for raising official questions about my intentions in France. But I had been telling the truth. I didn't know how long I'd be staying here. And the airplane ticket – a last-minute buy on an Internet travel site, which offered cheap fares if you purchased a two-week round-trip deal – would be thrown out as soon as 10 January had passed me by. I wasn't planning to head back to the States for a very long time.

'How can you be "not sure" when you have proof?'

Since when does proof ever provide certainty?

I collected my suitcase and resisted the temptation to splurge on a cab into Paris. My budget was too tight to justify the indulgence. So I took the train. Seven euros oneway. The train was dirty – the carriage floor dappled in trash, the seats sticky and smelling of last night's spilt beer. And the ride in to town passed through a series of grim industrial suburbs, all silhouetted by shoddy high-rise apartment buildings. I shut my eyes and nodded off, waking with a start when the train arrived at the Gare du Nord. Following the instructions emailed to me from the hotel, I changed platforms and entered the métro for a long journey to a station with the aromatic name of Jasmin.

I emerged out of the métro into the dank morning. I wheeled my suitcase down a long narrow street. The rain turned emphatic. I kept my head down as I walked, veering left into the rue La Fontaine, then right into the rue François Millet. The hotel – the Sélect – was on the opposite corner. The place had been recommended to me by a colleague at the small college where I used to teach – the only colleague at that college who would still speak to me. He said that the Sélect was clean, simple and cheap – and in a quiet residential area. What he didn't tell me was that the desk clerk on the morning of my arrival would be such an asshole.

'Good morning,' I said. 'My name is Harry Ricks. I have a reservation for –'

'Sept jours,' he said, glancing up from behind the computer on his desk. 'La chambre ne sera pas prête avant quinze heures.'

He spoke this sentence quickly, and I didn't catch much of what he said.

'Désolé, mais . . . euh . . . je n'ai pas compris . . .'

'You come back at three p.m. for the check-in,' he said, still speaking French, but adopting a plodding, deliberate, loud voice, as if I was deaf.

'But that's hours from now.'

'Check-in is at three p.m.,' he said, pointing to a sign next to a mailbox mounted on the wall. All but two of the twenty-eight numbered slots in the box had keys in them.

'Come on, you must have a room available now,' I said.

He pointed to the sign again and said nothing.

'Are you telling me there isn't one room ready at this moment?'

'I am telling you that check-in is at three p.m.'

'And I am telling you that I am exhausted, and would really appreciate it if—'

'I do not make the rules. You leave your bag, you come back at three.'

'Please. Be reasonable.'

He just shrugged, the faintest flicker of a smile wandering across his lips. Then the phone rang. He answered it and used the opportunity to show me his back.

'I think I'll find another hotel,' I said.

He interrupted his call, turning over his shoulder to say, 'Then you forfeit tonight's room charge. We need twentyfour hours notice for cancellation.'

Another faint smirk – and one which I wanted to rub off with my fist.

'Where can I put my suitcase?' I asked.

'Over there,' he said, pointing to a door by the reception desk.

I wheeled over my suitcase and also took off the computer knapsack slung over my shoulder.

'My laptop is in this bag,' I said. 'So please—'

'It will be fine,' he said. 'À quinze heures, monsieur.'

'Where am I supposed to go now?' I asked.

'Aucune idée,' he said. Then he turned back to his call.

At a few minutes past eight on a Sunday morning in late December, there was nowhere to go. I walked up and down the rue François Millet, looking for a café that was open. All were shuttered, many with signs:

Fermeture pour Noël.

The area was residential – old apartment buildings interspersed with some newer ones from the ugly school of seventies brutalism. Even the modern blocks looked expensive; the few cars parked on the street hinting that this corner of town was upscale and – at this time of the day – lifeless.

The rain had quieted down into an insidious drizzle. I didn't have an umbrella, so I marched back up to the Jasmin métro station and bought a ticket. I got on the first train that arrived, not sure where I was heading. This was only my second trip to Paris. The last time I had been here was in the mid-eighties, the summer before I entered graduate school. I spent a week in a cheap hotel off the boulevard Saint-Michel, haunting the cinemas in that part of town. At the time, there was a little café called Le Reflet opposite a couple of backstreet movie houses on the rue . . . what the hell was its name? Never mind. The place was cheap and I seemed to remember that they were open for breakfast, so . . .

A quick study of the métro map on the carriage wall, a change of trains at Michel-Ange Molitor, and twenty minutes later I emerged at Cluny-La Sorbonne. Though it had been more than twenty years since I'd last stepped out of this métro station, I never forget my way to a cinema – so I instinctually turned up the boulevard Saint-Michel and into the rue des Écoles. The sight of the marquee of Le Champo – advertising a De Sica and a Douglas Sirk festival on their two screens – provoked a small smile. When I reached its shuttered doors and peered up the rue Champollion – the name of the street I had forgotten – and saw two other cinemas lining its narrow wet pavement, I thought, Fear not, the old haunts still exist.

But at nine in the morning, none of them were yet open, and Café Le Reflet was also shuttered. Fermeture pour Noël.

I returned to the boulevard Saint-Michel and started walking towards the river. Paris after Christmas was truly dead. The only working places nearby were all the fast-food joints that now dotted the streets, their neon fronts blotting the architectural line of the boulevard. Though I was desperate for shelter from the rain, I still couldn't bring myself to spend my first hours in Paris huddled in a McDonald's. So I kept walking until I came to the first proper café that was open. It was called Le Départ, located on a quay fronting the Seine. Before reaching it, I passed in front of a nearby newspaper stand and scored a copy of Pariscope – the 'What's On' guide for the city and my cinephile bible back in 1985.

The café was empty. I took a table by a window and ordered a pot of tea against the internal chill I felt coming on. Then I opened Pariscope and began combing the cinema listings, planning my viewing for the week ahead. As I noted the John Ford retrospective at the Action Écoles and all the Ealing comedies at Le Reflet Medicis I felt something that had been absent in my life for months: pleasure. A small, fleeting reminder of what it was like not to think about . . . well, everything that had so preoccupied me since . . .

No, let's not go there. Not today, anyway.

I pulled out a little notebook and my fountain pen. It was a lovely old red Parker, circa 1925: a fortieth birthday gift, two years ago, from my ex-wife when she was still my wife. I uncapped the pen and started scribbling down a schedule. It was a blueprint for the next six days that would give me space in the mornings to set up my life here, and spend all other available waking time in darkened rooms, staring up at projected shadows. 'What is it that people love most about a cinema?' I used to

ask my students in the introductory course I taught every autumn. 'Could it be that, paradoxically, it is a place outside of life in which imitations of life take place? As such, maybe it's a hiding place in which you cannot really hide because you're looking at the world you've sought to escape.'

But even if we know we cannot really hide from things, we still try. Which is why some of us jump planes to Paris on forty-eight hours' notice, fleeing all the detritus we've left behind.

I nursed the pot of tea for an hour, shaking my head when the waiter dropped by to ask if I wanted anything else. I poured out a final cup. The tea had gone cold. I knew I could have sat in the café for the rest of the morning without being hassled. But if I just continued to loiter without intent there, I would have felt like a deadbeat for hogging a table all that time . . . even though there was only one other customer in the café.

I glanced out the window. The rain was still falling. I glanced at my watch. Five hours to go until check-in. There was only one solution. I reopened Pariscope and found that there was a big cinema complex over at Les Halles which started showing movies at nine every morning. I put away my notebook and pen. I grabbed my coat. I tossed four euros down on the table and headed out, making a quick dash for the métro. It was two stops to Les Halles. I followed the signs to something called 'Le Forum'; a bleak concrete shopping centre, sunk deep into the Paris earth. The cinema had fifteen screens and was like any American multiplex in some nowhere suburban mall. All the big US Christmas blockbusters were on show, so I chose a film by a French director whose work I didn't know. There was a screening in twenty minutes, which meant first sitting through a series of inane advertisements.

Then the film started. It was long and talky – but I followed most of it. It was largely set in some slightly run-down, but hip corner of Paris. There was a thirtysomething guy called Mathieu who taught philosophy at a lycée, but (surprise, surprise) was trying to write a novel. There was his ex-wife Mathilde – a semi-successful painter who lived in the shadow of her father, Gérard. He was a famous sculptor, now cohabiting with his acolyte, Sandrine. Mathilde hated Sandrine because she was ten years her junior. Mathieu certainly didn't like Philippe, the info-tech business executive that Mathilde had been sleeping with. Mathilde, however, liked the lavish way Philippe treated her, but found him intellectually exasperating ('The man has never even read Montaigne . . .').

The film began with Mathieu and Mathilde sitting in her kitchen, drinking coffee and smoking and talking. Then it cut to Sandrine who was posing naked for Gérard in his country atelier while Bach played on his stereo. They took a break from this modelling session. She put on some clothes. They went into his big country kitchen and drank coffee and smoked and talked. Then there was a scene in some expensive hotel bar. Mathilde was meeting Philippe. They sat at a banquette and drank champagne and smoked and talked . . .

On and on it went. Talk. Talk. More talk. My problems. His problems. Your problems. And, by the way, la vie est inutile. After around an hour, I lost the battle I

was fighting against jet lag and lack of sleep. I passed out. When I came to, Mathilde and Philippe were sitting in a hotel bar, drinking champagne and smoking and . . . Hang on, hadn't they done this scene already? I tried to keep my eyes open. I didn't succeed. And then . . .