

Souvenirs of a Rainy Afternoon
by
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The wind blew back through the open window the smoke from her lungs. The cigarette was held in a sad practiced hand. She sat in a chair, by the window wrapped in the hotel's bathrobe. The fabric of the chair was covered with gold and blue stripes and dotted with yellow fleur-de-lis, a symbol of her country that had slightly more history than what she carried inside. The wooden arms of the chair were covered with the same cloth - just the three wooden claws extended out on either side of her tiny body.

Another failed afternoon lover sat across from her in an identical chair, as she lit a cigarette. She blew smoke out the window against the New York breeze that brought a chill into his 10th floor hotel room. She chose to look at the wet distant streets and not into the eyes of Ryan.

Earlier, in the bedroom, his hard bold erection had made her murmur, "So big," but it left with the bubbles from the bottle of Veuve Clicquot. She wrapped her naked body suddenly in the bedcovers, muttering, "I'm ugly, so ugly."

There was nowhere for Ryan to hide. He could no longer focus on her body, kept lean on cigarettes and alcohol. Her breasts, which she had declared, "Are not big enough," surmounted her petite fragile body with ample nipple to satisfy most men. Her flat stomach belied the fact that she had brought forth two children. One child she had in her teens, "It's quite usual in Europe to do so," and the other less than two years ago to a husband that had already left. Four was the number of husbands, but she'd only one true love and he didn't count amongst them. Dying papa did not approve and there was the family name to consider. Her lover was not of the right sort. Many husbands from the

right family were preferable to one proletarian. They were to be used as amusement, for brief affairs and lost afternoons.

Pulling the robe tighter around her neck, she reached for a cigarette and another glass of champagne. Sleep, she needed sleep. She'd been drinking even before she had met her stranger for a brief lunch. It had taken less than one glass of Clicquot and an untouched, French onion soup for her to ask, "Will you take me back to your room? You like me, no?"

She had given him her number at a reception that she despised attending. Yet another family duty she hated, but long ago her ability to defy was destroyed. Even then the man sensed the danger, the disruption she could create in his life, but the broken brown eyes, the short midnight black hair that created the illusion of carelessness drew him. Blackness surrounded her and clothed her. She hated the land she was forced to live in because her last American Jewish husband would not let her take her child back to the country that could understand and therefore nourish her.

Taking her number, he'd promised himself not to use it. A long winter and a cancelled meeting betrayed him. Alone, in a place he did not visit often, his mind drifted to her number. Not brave enough to call, he sent a text out into the unknown. "I'm in town." Then he went to look at the rain soaked strangers.

The reply was not long in coming, "Who are you?"

"So easily forgotten," he wrote back. "I'm the gentlemen who saved you from boredom at the delegate's function on Park Avenue."

"From San Francisco?"

"No Boston."

“Call me.”

He smiled. There was moment of doubt. A thought for his commitment and responsibilities, but he called.

“Hello, H el ene?”

“Yes?”

“It’s Ryan.”

“Ah yes, the man from Boston.”

“Yes.”

Silence. This was the moment. Jump into her world or walk away limb, but intact.

“I find myself at a loose end this afternoon...certain meetings I arranged cancelled at the last moment...?”

“I’m available,” she responded. “Meet me at Montebello on 55th between 3rd and Lexington. You can buy me lunch, because my dog of 15 years is dying.”

“Yes, I mean, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t, I’ll cry and I’ve been doing it all morning. 2pm?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” She hung up the phone without saying goodbye.

It was fun sitting in a beautiful, expensive restaurant with a woman who could order champagne unselfconsciously at two in the afternoon. H el ene knew the wait staff and maybe a few of the businessmen who made a point of passing their table. So many afternoons and so few distractions, or maybe too many distractions. For all the hate she threw out at the world, she was a woman who’d been trained and raised in the great capital of love, Paris.

She laughed at Ryan's jokes and at the right moment asked, "You take me back now?" The first time Ryan laughed her off, but the second time he had forgotten all the reasons why he should say no.

The bite had been playful, but then painful. It would leave a mark and he could not afford that. The physical violence of her little punches were more shocking than hurtful. The bravery of women was astonishing. He tried to pin her arms, but she fought with her whole body. Her legs would push him away, whilst her arms tried to bring him closer. He could get no rhythm and she did not wish to kiss, just bite. Pushing him away in broken English, with sharp demanding French, she shoved Ryan's head roughly towards her lips. Ryan obliged, but already her behavior was weakening his resolve.

"Hit me," she said.

"What?"

"Hit me!"

When the slap did not land, her eyes snapped open. "Hit me."

"I...that's not something I do," he said. This was when she grabbed the condom and threw it across the room.

Protected in the comforter's embrace, H el ene's eyes flickered like a car's blinkers that could not decide left or right. Inelegance hung on her words as her English deserted her with every slumbering breath.

"Yes...no,...Je ne sais pas...Laissez-moi tranquille!...Papa...D esol e."

Asleep, she looked even smaller, lost in the folds of another stranger's bed.

Ryan looked down at her in confusion and mounting panic. Picking up the rumpled rubber between thumb and forefinger he placed it in the bathroom trash can.

Going back for the wrapper that sat on the corner table next to the bed, he saw H  l  ne's watch had become entangled in the shiny packet. The metal links clicked on the glass-covered top as he moved it and H  l  ne's eyes opened for a moment. Whether she'd recognized him or not, he did not know, but her face became serene again.

Ryan gave himself a stern look in the bathroom mirror. He'd fucked up. He knew it and now he had to correct it. His tanned naked flesh glowed green in the bathroom's light and he decided to take a shower. The water was hotter than he normally liked it, but he did not adjust it.

Turning off the water, he pulled back the curtain to find H  l  ne urinating. Ignoring her, he grabbed a towel as she wiped herself and without washing her hands made her way past him, their bodies just missing each other in the small space, for which Ryan was grateful.

He made his way directly to his clothes and dressed. H  l  ne was in the small sitting room that adjoined the bedroom. He found her sitting in the chair by the window, silhouetted by the moody New York afternoon and her cigarette smoke. In her left hand she held the yellow and beige striped curtain hanging between the chair and the wall, in her right the cigarette and the champagne glass.

"Sometimes it is the only thing to do," she said, indicating the glass in her hand.

Ryan nodded and went to the galley kitchen to get a small plate for her cigarette ash. As he placed the plate on the table in front of her, she nodded her thanks without looking at him. Moving the thirteen roses he had bought her onto the couch, he sat in the chair opposite her. The red clashed with the blue fabric.

The walk back to the hotel had been a meandering one through the rain. H  l  ne took a perverse pleasure in having Ryan hold her umbrella that turned from pink to mauve as they dodged traffic while he held it high above her, with her head snuggled into the hook of his arm. The first stop was for the champagne, which came elegantly boxed in a yellow/orange box with bold black text. Ryan knew his role and reached for his wallet. The next stop was at the drug store to pick up condoms, a tooth brush, “because I smoke and you do not,” and a pair of stocking socks, because her feet were wet. The last stop was the florist. They asked two doormen, before finding one on the corner of 54th and 3rd, almost back to where they had started.

“Flowers are romantic and you can’t expect me to sleep with you without a little romance,” she said too loudly.

He had to get her to leave, but H  l  ne didn’t seem to be in a hurry.

“I have evening appointments.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

“I’d rather you didn’t. Sometimes people come back for a drink.”

“Are you embarrassed by me?”

Ryan did not answer.

“Another lover?” asked H  l  ne.

“No. Business.”

“I need to sleep.”

“I’ll call you a cab.”

She picked up the champagne bottle and poured the last into her glass.

“After this.”

Ryan nodded.

Lighting another cigarette she said, "I have nobody, except you my lover."

In the silence that followed she puffed half of her cigarette. Putting her head back on her knees, tears broke over her eyes, staining grey the cloth of the bathrobe. She sought her glass and raised it to her lips.

"I have responsibilities," Ryan said.

"Yes, yes, I know you are married."

"I can't..."

"Do not cry to me. I ask you to be my lover and you insult me with your family."

"I'm trying to understand this...this situation."

"What's there to understand? We came to fuck and we did not."

"Please get dressed, I must leave shortly," Ryan said.

Over the rim of her half empty glass, she studied him. Decision made, she finished her drink, there was no more game left to play. With a slight stagger, she made her way to the bedroom to get her clothes. Ryan relaxed when she left the room. He considered closing the window, because the rain had grown heavier and was splashing into the room. He decided to keep it open a while longer to remove any lasting smell of smoke and perfume.

She surprised him by reentering the room carrying her clothes, dropping them on the couch, so that they partly covered her roses. She looked him calmly in the eye and shrugged off her bathrobe to stand naked in front of him. He knew not to look away it would have been an insult she wouldn't have tolerated. She was beautiful. Reaching for her red bikini panties, the only color she allowed on her body, but black, she climbed

with surprising steadiness into them. A stirring in Ryan's groin brought a surge of relief to him and a wry smile to H el ene's face, as she put her black strapless bra on, she noticed the stretched fabric in his pants.

As she put on her stockings and shoes the alcohol came back to bother her. Ryan kneeled putting her shoes upon her feet and tying the laces. She smiled, placed her hand on his cheek and caressed it.

"You'd make a good lover."

Obediently he held her coat as she put her arms into the sleeves. Bending like an aged village woman, she retrieved her roses from the couch and cradled them in her left arm. She was now ready to leave. He escorted her to the elevator, and they did not speak in the hallway or on the way down. As they entered the busy hotel foyer, the world like a wave broke apart any remaining intimacy that existed between them. She stood frail and small on the sidewalk as Ryan tried to hail a cab. Finally, she called him back from the curb with a wave of her hand.

"Give me twenty dollars," she said.

Confused, he reached for his wallet, pulled out a twenty and gave it to her. Taking the money, she put it in her pocket and without raising her umbrella, stepped into the river of people and gave Ryan a sad smile, before disappearing, with the roses held tight.

A sense of relief rolled over him as he closed the door. He picked up the plate and champagne glasses, he took them to the kitchen, washed the ash off the plate and swirled the glasses under the water. Drying them with the paper towels provided he put them back into the small cabinet that was attached to the wall above the sink. He reentered the sitting room and he closed the window. There was a wet spot on the carpet, but that

would quickly dry. The bathrobe still lay on the couch. Ryan picked it up and took it into the bedroom and hung it in the closet. Unfurling the comforter from the bundle she had left it in, Ryan smoothed it over the mattress and started to rearrange the pillows. As he picked up one to plump it, he noticed a scrap of light blue material. He picked it up. It was a perfect square with a little red arrow drawn on it to indicate the top.

He turned it over, and a chill run through him, on the other side was a triangle with a circle surrounding it, there was also writing, neatly written words that moved across the cloth from left to right through the circle and pyramid. He could not read or write French, but he knew enough of the language to know the writing was not French. His first urge was to get rid of it, but his catholic upbringing or some story he heard drinking with his friends in the garage, welled up inside him and stopped him from throwing it in the trash. Should he call H el ene and tell her she'd forgotten it? Did she leave it on purpose? Not wanting to hold it any longer, he placed it on the table in the sitting room and sat on the couch.

In the store, H el ene had picked up the beautiful red roses, turned to the shop owner and asked, "How many roses are there in this bunch?"

"Twelve, miss,"

Ryan thought it a strange question, because he assumed that a bunch always consisted of twelve.

"I'll need one more," she replied. "Thirteen is a much better number," she told Ryan.

He smiled at her, willing to play along.

Pulling a card from the rack by the cash registrar she said, “Would you fill out the card? My English is not so good.”

“What would you like it to say?” Ryan said.

She thought for a moment and then said, “A love that lasts forever is a love for which death is the only release. Yours forever, my lover.”

As he was finishing the thirteenth rose was brought from the back of the shop. H  l  ne intercepted it.

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

Ryan reached for it, but at the last moment she pulled it away and handed it to the shopkeeper.

“Damn it,” Ryan said.

As H  l  ne pulled the rose away a thorn caught the flesh of his hand and broke the skin. Red pearls of blood gathered and one dropped onto the still open card. Taking his hand and the card at the same time, she put his hand in her mouth to suck and handed the card to the shopkeeper. Two customers waiting in line behind them watched H  l  ne’s display.

“Do you want another card, miss?” asked the shopkeeper.

“No, that one will be fine.”

Ryan’s picked up the square piece of cloth and took it to the kitchen. Looking through the drawer, he found the matches. Holding a corner of the fabric, he lit the opposite corner and watched it burn, holding it over the small sink. The flames started licking around his fingers, so he dropped it into the sink. He waited until it had consumed itself and then poured water onto it to break apart the ash, which swirled around the metal

basin, and disappeared down the black hole. Once every last scrap had gone, Ryan went back into the sitting room and did something he hadn't done for a long time. He prayed

The End.