

Megan Schikora

The Paris Problem

Although there are technically two men in her life, she would never put it this way. To do so would seem, when gently worded, misleading, or more starkly, fraudulent. It would suggest romantic attachment. The truth is, they are using her, and she's a willing collaborator. She gets something out of it, too. She adds them together, adds up the values of the scraps that fall from their tables, wanting the sum to somehow equal that of a third man who is gone. Math has never been her strong suit.

The first man is a distant ex who calls when he has nothing better to do. When he wants to see her, they usually end up at a restaurant, where she sits across from him, picking at the meal he pays for, listening to him talk. He never asks her anything; he doesn't want to know. Once in a while, they watch a baseball game or a boxing match or go to the movies, staring ahead in the dark, not touching. And only on the rarest of occasions, if he's very, very drunk, they sleep in his bed, fully clothed. When she wakes in the morning, always before him, he's wrapped around her like the man in the Klimt painting hanging on her wall: "The Kiss". Only, they don't kiss. The cold hardness he brandishes afterward is like a weapon, meant to punish, to teach her not to count on these aberrations.

Why does she always wake up first? The sensations of tangled arms and legs, of his heat juxtaposed with the coolness of the crisp, expensive sheets, of rhythmic, unified breathing, jar her awake. Being held like this now is like landing abruptly, unexpectedly, in a foreign country.

The second man, the one she's fucking, started out as a date. Or, she thought it was. Imagine her shock when, much further into the evening, he informed her that he'd been "seeing someone" for years. She marched out then and there, brimming with all the outrage and indignation one might expect.

The thing was, she went back. She keeps going back. She's ashamed of this, but not too ashamed to stop.

He's a serial philanderer; his past is littered with betrayed ex-wives and girlfriends. But it's hard to care. Not when, on their second meeting, he has her pinned against a stranger's car outside a crowded bar, yanking down her jeans, taking liberties with her that boyfriends hadn't dared, even behind closed doors. His entitlement is infuriating. But these panting frenzies allow her, however briefly, to be nowhere, to feel and remember nothing. She rationalizes that they're worth all that inevitably follows, when he has retreated to his real life, and she is swollen and alone.

What do these men share?

Neither cares how her day was, will ever meet her parents or friends. Neither will catch her if she falls.

She tries not to think about it, and sometimes, mercifully, it works. But sometimes, it presses relentlessly, insistently in: full and vile knowledge of herself, of what she has lost, of what she has given away. It is as freshly hideous as a shimmering new wound.

They had known each other twice before.

The first time was as kids, when they shared an affinity for the broken and wandered aimlessly in circles that sometimes overlapped, trying to determine which drugs and clothes and bands defined them. These efforts were largely unsuccessful and often harrowing.

The second time was in college, when he frequented the café where she worked. He was polite in an arms-length way, smiling often and saying little. She sometimes made speeches to him about the Beatles and his astrological nature and felt that he was humoring her on these occasions. He dated girls who, by her estimation, had little to commend them.

This was the third time.

It happened like this: when she saw him at the bar for the first time in many years, she deliberated, as she always did when spotting people from her past, whether to speak, unsure if he would remember her. He did remember, and to her great relief greeted her so warmly that she was immediately at ease. Through their embrace came her muffled exclamation, I haven't seen you since your wedding!

Funny you should say that. His smile was rueful. I'm getting divorced.

A collection of peculiar circumstances, which some may call Providence, occasionally thrusts together two particular people in a particularly uncanny way at a particularly tumultuous time, which some may call crossroads. This causes them to do things they wouldn't normally do. So he, feeling drastic during this obliteration of the life that until recently had been neatly mapped out before him, proposed this trip to Paris approximately two hours into their reacquaintance. It was a radical departure from his typically methodical nature and otherwise practical propensities. And she, demoralized by an ever-lengthening string of failed romances and in danger of becoming cynical, accepted his offer as a final act of faith. This was how they found themselves two months later on the curb at the Detroit airport, a pile of luggage between them, smoking their last cigarettes before the long flight.

During takeoff, the plane abruptly dropped, bucked, shuddered violently. The groans it emitted suggested it was not destined to make it across the Atlantic, and several uneasy moments followed. Gradually, the silence was punctuated by small bursts of nervous

laughter and conversation, and soon, order was restored. The cabin darkened; most of the passengers dozed. But hours in, they were still wide awake, edgy with anticipation and nicotine withdrawal. She posed a question.

“If we had crashed, and we knew it was coming but we still had a couple minutes before we went down, and you could make one phone call, who would it be?”

He took his time answering. This kind of careful deliberation, she was learning about him, was characteristic. She waited.

“I wouldn’t call anyone,” he said finally, his eyes fixed on her. Even in the dark, their liquidity and depth exposed her. “I’d just look at you, and try to see your soul.”

She was learning this, too: he had a way of putting things, when she was simply making careless conversation, that left her suddenly gutted.

Having found their hotel in Montparnasse, cranked open the tall, shuttered windows of their little room, and flung themselves across the bed for a nap, they wandered out into the evening and walked the Seine for the first time. A green-eyed, laughing blonde, she’d heard the river described. They passed the shimmering gold statues of the Pont Alexandre III, the sprawling glass-domed Grand Palais, the stalls of books and trinkets and Toulouse-Lautrec prints. And suddenly, venturing into a neighborhood and rounding yet another corner, they found themselves quite by accident gaping up at the Eiffel Tower. Afterward at a nearby café, they sat outside, shoulder to shoulder with their neighbors in a long row of tiny tables.

The steaks brought by the high-spirited waiter were thoroughly bloody because this, they ascertained, was the way steak should be eaten, the only way, therefore making the American question of patrons’ preferences unnecessary. Her dessert was a dense chocolate mousse in a simple ceramic bowl, but his was an elaborate parfait adorned with streamers, something a little girl might order. This made them laugh, and the girl next to them paused in her incessant cell phone chatting to share their joke. She toasted them and asked if they were Israeli. On their other side was a man in biker leathers, who traded his Gauloises for their Camels.

They stayed for hours. They drank so much wine. They held hands across the table. And they shared a prevailing sense of extraordinary good fortune, having found the perfect café for the first night of such a trip, the perfect company, and the perfect beginning to their adventure.

The distant ex has stopped calling. He isn't responding to her texts, either. Weeks pass in silence, and in an acutely lonely moment, she tries one more time: "Wondering why we're not talking anymore. Gonna tell me ever?"

A half an hour later, she gets her answer: "Started dating someone. Don't want things to be weird."

That's that; she has served her purpose. She wonders, again, what it is about her that makes her so easy to discard.

They each knew things that the other didn't, like the language. After years of neglect, her knowledge of it was limping and survivalist; during one dinner, for instance, at the Marquise on Rue de Vaugirard, she meant to say something quite reasonable to the waiter, and instead asked him accidentally to come sit down with them. The waiter, only briefly bewildered, realized this was not her true intention and tactfully turned away. Nevertheless, her efforts were overall respectable and quite helpful in navigating the city. She also knew the cafés her beloved Hemingway and Joyce and Fitzgerald used to frequent, gleefully guiding him to each.

"This is great," she bubbled, as they sat on the terrace at Les Deux Magots, peeking over its screen of tall, slim shrubs at St. Germain des Pres. "We could live here."

We. He had incorporated this pronoun so readily in so many conversations- where we will travel next summer, the house we will share next year- that she had begun to do it, too.

“We could be just like Hemingway and Hadley. We’ll go to bullfights in Spain and ski in the Alps and eat well every day and be poor and perfectly happy.”

“Okay, let’s.” He was laughing. “But we can’t be Hemingway and Hadley; you told me he left her.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That’s true. But we could be them, you know, before that.”

“Deal.”

She grinned at him, and, sipping from her flute, was as ebullient as the sparkling gold liquid it contained.

He knew about Napoleon, who fascinated him, whose tomb they visited at l’Hotel des Invalides. “Isn’t that a funny translation?” she had remarked about the massive military compound as they roamed it. “A hotel for invalids.” It was, he explained, where wounded soldiers had come to rest, heal, die. He also knew about the scientists whose names adorned the first tier of the Eiffel Tower, about their inventions. He told her about them as they stood beneath the structure, gazing up, intertwined. This French habit of constant touching, freely and without self-consciousness, was one they had noticed immediately and adopted with gusto.

Their differences were complementary and their similarity was in their temperament, a perfect contentment to wander without plan. This was how they found the break dancers on Boulevard St. Germain and the shop where he bought a music box that played “La Vie en Rose”. This was what brought them to Notre Dame during Mass, spilling out into the plaza, the crowds bisected by long lines of priests offering Communion. Each was attended by an altar boy holding a large black umbrella over him for protection from the afternoon sun. This was what led them down to the quay with their panini on thick crusty bread from a street vendor. As they sat on the wall, eating and dangling their legs over the river, a group of teenagers stood nearby in a circle, hands and feet touching. Their game appeared some mysterious hybrid of Twister and Charades. They watched the teens and waved to the people floating by on open-air tour boats.

They also found themselves, during “Hippolyte et Aricie” at the Garnier, bored by it. After the initial sheepishness of admitting this to each other during intermission, they laughed and finished their champagne and merrily embraced their joint defiance in

the face of propriety. Instead of returning to their seats, they roamed the grand opera house, taking in the sweeping marble staircase and lamp-lit balconies and the great gold-washed halls. Then they ambled outside to the front steps of the Garnier and joined the crowds there, drawn by a man playing Chopin. He had rolled his piano right up the sidewalk to the front of the opera house. They sat listening, having a far greater time than they would have inside, and eventually wandered off to a café in the surrounding neighborhood. There, they drank Bordeaux out of large fishbowl glasses and became a bit drunk and sang Beatles songs to each other and had a very lovely time indeed.

“Where should we go for our next trip?” he asked, his eyes shining.

“Anywhere.” She leaned toward him. “What do you want to do next?”

“Everything.” He leaned in too and kissed her. “With you.”

The philanderer wants to see her. It’s been a while, and she quickly agrees—too quickly, she immediately thinks, regretting. The only thing she’s had going for her is her ability to seem nonchalant. This conversation takes place on the phone at ten o’clock on a Tuesday night.

“So.” Her tone is carefully measured. “Where and when were you thinking?” He usually picks out-of-the-way bars with little traffic, places he’s unlikely to encounter anyone he knows.

“I could be at your place in an hour,” he offers.

“Wait—“ she is taken aback—“Tonight?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“It’s kinda late, isn’t it? I thought—“ She pauses and tries again, hoping to sound less flustered. “I just didn’t know you were talking about tonight.”

“Yeah.” His voice is soft, husky, wheedling. “I need to see you.”

“Do you want to meet somewhere? We usually go out...” She cradles the phone between her ear and shoulder, chewing anxiously at the chipped polish on her thumb.

“Look.” Suddenly, he’s business-like, almost brusque. “I have a window. And I don’t know if I’m gonna have another one anytime soon.”

She continues to chew her nail, to deliberate. Then, finally, “Okay.”

“Good. See you in an hour.”

It is well after midnight when she hears a light rapping on her front door.

They had, for the last two months, talked extensively on many things the way people do at the beginning of relationships, when they are new to each other, and the other person is a seemingly bottomless well. They wanted to hear all of each other’s stories. These talks had so far taken place primarily on her kitchen counter, with coffee in the morning or wine in the evening, Mumford and Sons or Mozart in the background, lasting for hours. They continued in Paris and turned, that particular afternoon in the Luxembourg Gardens, to her writing. He wanted to know about it, he said, his hand passing continuously over her hair. She lay perpendicular to him on the blanket, her head resting on his stomach.

Her mentors, the two writers she respected most, had told her essentially the same thing: Stop writing about girls who are sad about boys. It’s so tiresome. But, she explained to him, that posed a problem, a violation of one of writing’s cardinal rules: write what you know. Girls who were sad about boys was all she knew.

“If I’m ever truly happy,” she told him, “I’ll never write another word.”

“If you’re ever truly happy?” he echoed. Then, quietly, “You will be. And then your writing will just change.”

She considered this, stretched a little, turned her head toward the shouts and laughter. A cluster of children raced past, each clutching a small toy sailboat.

He propped himself up on an elbow and lifted her giant Jackie Os to see her eyes. “You should write this story. Our story.”

He paused. “What would you need?”

Having described her process, in which all things must first be handwritten on good heavy paper, he determined that she must also have a good pen, and that he would get it for her, here. The next morning, they struck out on his mission to find the famed pen shop he’d read about online, and they walked and walked, hunting for the obscure address he’d scrawled on the back of a receipt. When at last they found it and peered in the window, they saw only drop cloths and scaffolds and sheets of drywall.

“No.” His face fell. He was so earnest, so crushed, that she held him there on the street as sweetly as she could. Thank you for thinking of it and for trying, she said; it was a lovely gesture. And though the pen was not meant to be, it hardly mattered, because something was happening as they searched for the shop and talked about writing and the importance of a good pen: a shift in her conviction that she could and would only ever write sad stories.

When the distant ex resurfaces, she rebuffs him in an effort to restore her principles. By the time he tries again, weeks later, her principles are wavering. A confrontation ensues. And finally, after another week, she wearily hoists her white flag. She needs company. They are on their way to their usual diner.

“I just don’t see why we always have to *talk* about everything.” He’s driving quickly, talking quickly, staring straight ahead. Best to get this all out of the way now, so they can enjoy their breakfast. She is sitting shotgun.

“I mean, you’re always so *emotional*,” he continues. “Everything’s a big deal with you. It’s like—“ He’s searching, drumming his fingers on the wheel. “It’s like you’re—“

Like you’re a girl who will always be sad about a boy.

“Like you *want* something from me. I don’t know.” He pulls into the parking lot, steals a sidelong glance at her. She’s gazing out the window. “You know I can’t give you anything. Right?”

“I do know,” she says dully. For all his faults, dishonesty isn’t one of them.

“Then are we cool?” He kills the engine.

“Course we are.”

They head in.

Sitting across from him in the booth, she pushes her eggs around her plate. She laughs at his jokes. She listens to him talk about his golf game, the car he might buy, his next trip to Vegas. She smiles and interjects, just enough, so he will think she is really there.

They spent their last full day wandering the Louvre, overwhelmed by its sprawl, pausing dutifully in front of the most famous works. The crowds fatigued them; they were ready to join all the couples in the courtyard by the pyramids. They lined the low walls of the fountains there, draped across one another, contentedly stretched in the sun like cats. But as they made their way out, a sculpture halted them: “Psyche Revived by Cupid’s Kiss”.

“That’s beautiful,” he murmured.

“It really is.” The intertwinement of the winged male figure and the woman he enveloped, who reached up to him beseechingly, was perfect in its symmetry, grace, reciprocity. This moment captured in marble the full realization of longing.

They slowly circled the piece several times in opposite directions, studied it from different angles, met again in the middle. He smiled at her. “I’m so glad we saw this. I’m gonna remember this.”

Heading for the exit, he rested an arm across her shoulders and cast one final look back at the sculpture. “I think,” he said, “that he is saving her from something.”

She took one more look of her own and replied, “I think they are saving each other.”

The next morning, they packed, intersecting each other's paths across the suite. It had a wrought iron balcony looking out across the porthole-windowed rooftops and down onto l' Avenue de l'Opera; he had splurged on this last hotel. And as they finished, all the troubles waiting for him at home, which had been banished till now, crowded back in. She could see it on his face.

"I can't believe it all fit." She tried to keep her voice light, gesturing toward the luggage.

He looked stricken.

She took a step toward him. "Everything's gonna be okay, you know," she said quietly.

He looked like he was going to cry.

She took another step, and he came wordlessly to her, encircling her, dropping his head on her shoulder. And that's when the music box, the last thing to be coaxed into the last bulging suitcase, began to play "La Vie en Rose". They stood listening in the middle of the room, still and interlocked, until the song dwindled, wavered, and died, mid-melody.

The philanderer, perhaps detecting a chill in her latest responses, has realized that he may need to lay the groundwork again. To reinstate the precursory outing, the ritual of seduction. He asks her to meet him at The Penalty Box, a squat, windowless pub with a bike rack out front for the DUI crowd. It is also a sort of hotel for invalids, a place for emotional cripples to shut themselves away from the world.

"You doin okay?" he asks her, once all the catch-up and small talk is out of the way. They are sitting at the bar, a hodgepodge of particle board and plywood. His hand rests on her thigh. To an outsider, it may look attentive, tender.

"Yeah, definitely." She is awash in cheap, watery beer; tomorrow's headache will be vicious. "You?"

"Good, good. Everything's good." The resting hand starts to massage. "You just look a little lost. I'm not trying to ruin the night—"

What's ruined: Mumford and Sons. Mozart. An entire country. Faith.

“Not trying to get too serious. I just want to know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Besides what you’re about to do?” She raises an eyebrow at the hand that is inching higher, becoming insistent. She thinks for a moment. Then, “There actually is something. Something you can tell me.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“What would you do if we were on a plane that was about to crash, and you only had a couple minutes left?”

A grin spreads across his face, still boyish and handsome, though he is well into his forties. “Easy. I’d take you in the bathroom. Might as well go out with a bang, right?”

He chuckles a little at himself, then leans close. His breath is hot and electric near her ear.

“Let’s get outta here. You done?”

Yes. She’s done.

She allows him to lead her to the car.