

Happily Ever Never

By M.D.Taverner

She fished a migraine pill from her purse, chased it with an Evian from the mini bar, and left her hotel room before she lost her nerve.

Looking down at her feet as she walked to the elevator, she felt even guiltier at the sight of the gold lamè Pradas that Martin got her. They should fit in perfectly with the Parisian fashionistas but now that she was here they felt somehow, conversely, like a gross mismatch with the person wearing them—and who that was, exactly, she wasn't sure anymore.

Three voicemails from her mother. More guilt. If only she could just hit pause on her present circumstances and disappear into her surroundings. Foolishly, that had been the plan.

So, if she couldn't let her thoughts go, she would take this time to mull it over. He loved her, she was pretty sure of that. But did she love him? In the beginning yes, but was it the *idea* of having found someone what she was truly in love with, or him?

The elevator descended its seven flights and when the doors opened, a striking dark-skinned man in a meticulously tailored tuxedo greeted her with a nod and a "Mademoiselle." It was almost cinematic the way he offered his arm and ushered her off the elevator. If this wasn't his usual job routine, she must have looked as desperate as she felt.

His gold badge had the name *Etienne* donned in black calligraphic loops with the title *Concierge*. She was surprised at the service, considering she'd gone with one of the least expensive hotels she could find online.

"Your first time to Paris, Mademoiselle? American?" he asked, with a thick local accent.

"Oui," she managed, with a shrug and an eye roll. So much for feigning sophistication. Not even the Pradas had thrown him.

"If you will, where is your destination?"

"Um, autobus s'il vous plait? La Tour Eiffel, monsieur?" She knew she was doing a hatchet job on the pronunciation judging by his stifled smile—although he wasn't snubbing her attempt, which was the response her French teacher had warned her about a million years ago in the classroom.

How was it that her teenage dream of going to Paris on her own, to read and write at cafes, and test her grit amongst the poets and the artists had fallen to the wayside? How could she be turning twenty-eight in a month and she'd never given it priority? It brought a sting to her eyes now as the regret threatened to choke her resolve.

"Close. Quite close. I will take you there if you please," he offered.

Too bad her phone internet service wasn't registering and she hadn't thought to bring a guide book. It was very gracious of him but she started to wonder if it was a hefty tip he was after.

So be it. She needed the help. When in Paris...

She felt like a maiden on escort with the dashing young man walking her to the hotel doors. He held them open (Martin had stopped doing that—hadn't he?), and when she stepped out, the sights and sounds filled her like an empty vase suddenly brimming with full blossoms.

"Different than America, you think?" Etienne asked.

"Oui! I have no words." And she didn't.

They walked down the street in the Spring sunshine and she let her surroundings unfold. It was everything she'd expected—it was nothing like she could have imagined in her black and white framework, internalized from textbooks and daydreams.

Before she knew it, Etienne was stopping and pointing out a bench in the street.

"It is here. Would you like me to wait until it arrives? We are on French time, not American, so they come when they come." He smiled and helped her to sit.

"No, merci, Etienne." She reached in her purse for some Euros.

"Mademoiselle, no! No money." He waved off the bills and stepped back. "I will perhaps see you later. Ask for me if you need any more help."

She was surprised he didn't take the tip. Hopefully it hadn't been an insult there. But she was sure a lot of money exchanged hands in Paris. Strange. She was learning how much she hadn't learned before, actually coming here in person—how much there was still to learn. And how little time she had to take it all in.

For the moment she was perfectly in heaven to watch the people go by. One thing was true, the way people dressed and presented themselves was like something she'd never witnessed. There was certainly no mid-West American comfort-wear here. The women were

stunning, the scarves, the sunglasses, the hairstyles were incredible. They made it look effortless. Her green wrap dress suddenly felt frumpy and over thought as she looked around.

“Excusez-moi?” came a voice. She realized it was a request to share the bus stop bench with her, and it belonged to a man around her age with dark wind swept hair, alarming dimples and light eyes. Before she could say something stupid in her awful attempt at French, his small dog leapt at her ankles and started biting at her slingbacks.

“June, no! No chien!” He tugged at her leash and the little white dog hopped in his lap. “I am so sorry! And your shoes, they are so elegant.”

It hadn't even registered to her to pull back and protect her pricey footwear.

“Oh, no problem. They're just a pair of stupid shoes. She's really cute. I like her name.” She realized he'd spoken to her in English. She must wear her American heritage on her sleeve.

He smiled and she actually blushed—blushing like an idiot and then suddenly she realized that she wasn't wearing her engagement ring. But it wasn't premeditated. She just didn't want to be mugged for the paper-weight- sized Tiffany. Her hand felt so much lighter without it. But, who was she kidding flattering herself.

“Thank you, you are very kind,” he replied in his thick accent.

She looked straight ahead and focused on watching the people and compact French cars go by.

“Yes, her name is June, after the painting. Do you know Flaming June?” he asked.

She smiled and nodded. It was her favorite.

“So, my grandmother, she used to say: ‘the bus benches are the best places to make big decisions.’ Well, in French of course. She was very wise woman. I think it is good advice, no? I think she liked the idea of a neutral place, where you are not coming nor going, just sitting. You sit and wait and think.”

She turned to him. It felt like he picked up on her indecision, somehow. “Your grand-mère sounds like a wise woman indeed. Did she pass the gene along?”

“I am impressed with your French language just there, mademoiselle. You must be a regular to Paris.”

She laughed out loud. “And *I* noticed you skipped the question there.”

“I am unfortunately not wise, but I am intuitive I think. And I am a very good listener.”

“You don’t say.” June sat at her owner’s feet looking up at her. “Maybe it’s your dog that disarms people.”

“Yes, you may be right. But watch this: You are at a point in your life where you have a big decision to make. And I feel like the decision has a yes or a no answer.”

She felt her throat go dry.

“Are you sure you’re not a bus stop psychic looking for business?” She grinned but his face remained serious.

“I assure you, I am not. Will you tell me your story? I am a very good listener and the bus to the Eiffel Tower is a long wait.”

She smiled warmer. She felt a mysterious lifting of the weight of her decision. She was just a girl in Paris in Spring.

“Did the whole bus stop-bench-sitting give me away?”

“No. It was my intuition.” He pointed to his forehead. “You got my gears turning.”

“OK. Two conditions: One, we have this conversations while walking—I want to see all of your beautiful city and I don’t have much time. Two, you promise you’re not an axe murderer?”

He clutched his heart. “Me, a murderer?” He turned backwards on the bench. “Etienne, am I dangerous?”

She suddenly noticed Etienne strolling up the street near them. He waved and she realized the men knew each other.

“Never! Monsieur Julian is an upright gentleman. I have known him a long time: since last evening when he saw you enter the hotel and said his heart broke into a million pieces.”

He shrugged. "I'm humiliated, but I won't deny it. Let's go for that walk?"

She didn't answer in words, instead she slipped off the suddenly cloying slingbacks and set them on the bench. At that moment, barefoot in Paris was feeling like just the right fit.

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