

## *L'amour fou*

Sasha's feet felt like blocks of ice as she trudged down the blustery, cobblestone street towards the gas-lit glow of the Café Flore en Île. The wind whirled, causing her leather pants to cling to her legs like an icy balm. She had been so excited to wear them around Paris – they made her feel more like a millionaire rock star than a poor graduate student who squandered her grant money on impulse buys – that she hadn't realized how much they would attract the cold. Her thin, black turtleneck sweater seemed to direct the frigid air right through to her chest, prompting her lungs to shrivel up in defense. The wind lashed against her back, hunching her forward. Her every clipped breath fought its way out into the cold, warming her nose for a millisecond, and then disappearing into the frozen night. She stopped to light a cigarette for the heat, burning a tiny hole in the index finger of her left glove in the process.

Sasha was the only person on the street, and few lights shone from the terraced apartments above her. Paris at 2200 on a Sunday in December was an unlikely time for traffic of any kind along the main street of this gem of an island in the middle of the most magical city on earth. But Café Flore en Île, on the tip of the Île St. Louis looking back towards Notre Dame, was pleasantly full.

She felt a bit self-conscious as she opened the door, bracing for the disapproving glances of the wait staff she was certain she'd encounter.

*"Bon soir, mademoiselle,"* a tuxedoed waiter said, half bowing with a mock grandiose effect that indicated he knew she was no one important. *"Êtes-vous seul ce soir?"*

Sasha looked around the room. It was ornate with wood paneling and a decadent Louis XIV chandelier overhead. The patrons, all at least twenty years older than she, screamed landed gentry. Silver- and white-haired couples filled the mahogany booths along the wall; several more youthful couples of various permutations sat around the middle, the women in dark grays, blacks and reds, the men in navy blue jackets or dark suits. The light of the fireplace cast a playful glow over them, glimmering in reflections of the real silver silverware, and the room quietly hummed with clipped, late night conversations, the contents of which she could just make out with her functional French. She was tired and hungry, and felt foreign and young. Yes, she was indeed *seule*.

A suit-clad maitre d' emerged from behind his podium and smiled a wanton grin. He snapped for the waiter to follow him as he showed Sasha to an undesirable table beneath the specter of his manager's area. She was the lowest rent customer they would see all night, she thought as she sat down, her stomach growling. A well-dressed Brazilian woman she'd met last night at a chamber music

concert at Sainte-Chappelle had recommended the place. Now, as she scanned the pricey menu, Sasha thought it must've been a trick.

After having being alone in Paris for several days, Sasha had been so grateful for the conversation that she hadn't picked up on the woman's cavalier tone. Rehashing their exchange in her mind now, though, it seemed obvious.

The woman had looked Sasha up and down, eying the tear in the left knee of her jeans, the pilling of her one-ply scarf, the beaten-up Custard DJ bag laying at Sasha's feet, looking like an unstructured heap compared with the taut, pebbled, hand-stitched leather of the woman's Hermes pocketbook perched atop her lap like a royal canine. They were as crude a juxtaposition of street style and class as any the Saturday evening concertgoers would've seen under Sainte-Chapelle's gothic arches.

"Where are you from?" The Brazilian woman had asked through a clenched jaw.

"I'm American, but I'm living in England at the moment. I've just finished a graduate course in literature at Oxford," Sasha had explained, mesmerized by the glittering array of jewels on the woman's fingers and wrists. Sasha imagined the woman to be the wealthy widow of a Brazilian sugar cane magnate, traveling around Europe incognito.

"Your family let you go to England by yourself?" the woman was aghast.

Sasha blushed, realizing that to a woman of a certain age, her 23 and a half must indeed look young.

"It is good to study Shakespeare in England, I suppose," the woman said haughtily, lowering her voice as the chamber group posed to perform.

"Actually, I study more modern literature, like..." and the music began. The 13<sup>th</sup> century chapel wasn't heated, and Sasha's teeth chattered, apparently disturbing the fox-fur clad Brazilian woman's enjoyment. After the concert, she gave Sasha a curt "*Au revoir*," and strode off into the night, leaving Sasha shivering alone on the steps of the church.

Sasha closed the heavy, gilt-edged menu. The only food she could afford would be a cup of *chocolat chaud* and a basket of bread and butter. Anywhere else, that would've been punishment, but she reminded herself that in Paris you could eat well, if not sparingly, for \$2 or \$200. She straightened her spine against the rounded-backed chair and lit another cigarette, instructing herself to enjoy the evening. She was returning to England tomorrow and would be headed back to the States a few days later, maybe for good. Her bank account was almost empty, and convincing her parents to fill it was always easier in person than over the phone.

After placing her meager order with the visibly dismayed waiter, Sasha opened up “In Between the Sheets” by Ian McEwan, which she’d voraciously been reading all weekend. Tonight, though, she decided to use it as a shield, enabling her to stare around the room at the mature, graceful diners without being too conspicuous. She worked out a system of hiding her wide eyes behind her book, and then taking exaggerated sips from her mug, making a point to purse her chapped lips and suck in her cheeks when she replaced the cup on the saucer. Out of the corner of her right eye she caught a solitary glass raised in the air in a toast. Lowering her book, she peered across the dining room and realized the glass was attached to the long arm of a tall, tan man who was sitting by himself.

Fashioning a one-eyed squint, she tried to figure out how old he was without getting caught peeking. Just as she decided he was very handsome, he looked directly at her. Embarrassed, she quickly hoisted “In Between the Sheets” back up to her face, dislodging her now cold cup of hot chocolate from its saucer and spraying viscous liquid around the perimeter of the table. Sasha then knocked her knife off the table while she mopped up her little mess, bringing her waiter running over to manage the disaster.

A hearty laugh from across the room overpowered the waiter’s, “*Pas de probleme, mademoiselle.*” It emanated from the head attached to the arm attached to the hand that was toasting no one a minute ago. It disturbed the waiter at his work, causing him to knock a glass of water on to Sasha’s plate. Her face burned with humiliation. I’m making the staff work their asses off and I can’t even afford a real dinner, she thought.

Then another waiter arrived at Sasha’s table. Sweat glistening on his forehead, he fumbled for the English words necessary to say, “Ah, le monsieur, heee would like, ah, if you dine with heeem?”

“I’m sorry?”

“*Le monsieur là,*” the waiter stammered, pointing to the mystery man. Now that Sasha could look at him unencumbered, she determined that he was about 40. He had wavy dark brown hair and defined eyebrows that framed green, nicely spaced eyes. His face leathered like a well-aged, high-end Italian leather bag, and it sat atop a tanned neck, thick enough to indicate a muscular build, but not so thick as to imply overzealous buffness. Catching Sasha’s open-mouthed stare, he winked, smiled and waved back unabashedly.

A smile broke out across Sasha’s lips as she realized this could be her Paris moment. French men had approached her all week, but their smarmy self-seriousness and obnoxious inquiries about whether all American girls gave blow jobs eradicated any physical attraction she initially might have felt. But something about this man seemed... better. Maybe it was his age; maybe it was that he was here in this

beautiful restaurant. Sasha couldn't suppress the wink that shot itself back at the man as the waiter panted, anxious for an answer.

*"Ah, oui. Je voudrais manger avec lui,"* she purred demurely.

*"Très bien, mademoiselle,"* the maitre d' chimed in from behind her. A third waiter scampered across the dining room to Sasha's table carrying a silver platter of food. Balancing it on his extended left arm, he used his right arm to mime scraping non-existent crumbs away, then laid the contents of the tray out along the empty place setting across from her. An art deco, three-tiered tray of oysters was set in the middle, followed by a plate of foie gras, adorned with caviar-topped toasts. Then there was a pot of escargot, a bowl of mussels, something that looked like a plucked pigeon and finally, a goat cheese salad. A bottle of Perrier-Jouet sat in a lavish silver bucket wrapped in a towel to the right of table, and crystal champagne glasses were set aside Sasha and her soon-to-be companion's place settings.

These preparations for the stranger's arrival had caught the other diners' attentions. Sasha realized the watchful eyes absorbing each move the 6 foot, 3 inch man made in getting himself to her table would soon be on her, and a flame of expectant excitement lit inside her. She was almost breathless watching him swagger like the Marlboro Man towards her table. He wore a soft wool black jacket that fit him perfectly over a French blue broadcloth shirt and a darker blue and silver quilted, heavy silk tie.

But his jeans were what sealed the deal for Sasha. Well worn in all the right places, his long legged, button-fly Levis were the perfect antidote to any stuffiness he otherwise might have portrayed and cast him, too, as an outsider in the restaurant. She turned over her spoon to see if she still had any lipstick on. She didn't, and there was no way she could put it on at the table now. He was ambling towards her, and for a moment conversation hushed, plates and silverware stopped clanking, time froze and Sasha and her man were the only people in the restaurant. She pictured herself in a flowing white dress against a backdrop of rose petals as her knight approached her. The room took a collective gasp of giddy anticipation. He finally reached the edge her table, extended his hand to her, and said, "G'day." Nodding his head, he added, "I'm Nick, and I believe this seat is for me."

A grand, group sigh of disappointment was expelled. G'day? This wasn't the bush – this was Paris! No one that dashing should dare strut across this gorgeous brasserie to announce his Aussie self and squash my dreams of European playboys and princes, Sasha wanted to cry out. Instead, she focused on the glimmer in his eyes, brushed her bangs off her forehead and said, "Yes, I think so."

"You're American." He sounded surprised and disappointed. "I thought you were a Pom." He settled into his chair and picked up his champagne glass.

"Why?"

“Your book’s in English,” Nick said, gesturing to it. “Dead giveaway.” Sasha wanted to die when she realized that the cover of her book was a picture of a half-naked woman propped up on a ravished bed. Nick smirked, and then snapped for one of the waiters. “Champagne for the lady,” Nick commanded, without asking Sasha if she wanted any.

“Americans speak English too, you know.” She hoped she sounded half chastising, half flirty, and sipped her delicious champagne.

“What’s that quote? About Britain and America being separated by a common language?” Handsome and clever, Sasha thought as he stared intently at her, his green eyes boring holes into her gold-flecked baby browns.

“Well, I’m glad you let me over, anyway,” he continued. “I don’t speak French and I was hoping to be able to talk to someone about how wonderful all this tucker is.”

Sasha’s face went hot when she realized the waiter would soon bring her little basket of breads and Nick would know that she couldn’t actually afford to order anything. She nervously knocked back half her glass of champagne, her nose itchy from the bubbles. “I haven’t ordered yet,” she decided she’d say.

“I know. That’s why you’re going to have what I’m having.”

It was a gallant gesture, and Sasha was momentarily flattered, but she hated all the food in front of him, except, maybe for the toast the caviar sat upon. Unsure how to communicate that to him without being rude, she batted her eyelashes and said, “I couldn’t possibly. I have to catch an early train and really should be going soon.”

Nick ignored her and started transferring oysters on to her plate. “Where are you going?” Ew. The oysters looked like little pools of membranes in their iridescent shells.

“Back to England.”

“But you’re American.”

“Yes, but I live in England. I’ve been studying at Oxford,” she sighed wearily. No one who lived outside of America seemed to believe that Americans lived outside of America, too.

“No wonder you’re in Paris then. The food’s way better.” With that he scooped an oyster up off her plate and held it up to her lips. “Go on,” he grinned mischievously.

“Actually, I’m not a big fan of oysters.” She scrunched up her nose and connived the most polite possible way to maneuver his big hand away from her face.

“But you’ve never had *these* oysters. Go on. Give ‘em a go. I promise you’ll like ‘em.”

“No, really,” Sasha protested, her gut churning. “I’ll stick to the champagne.”

Nick frowned, realizing she couldn't be convinced. "Suit yourself then." He emphatically sucked down an oyster to prove his point, smacking his lips together afterwards. "Delicious," he pronounced. Then, "I guess they don't teach taste at Oxford."

Sensing his ego was bruised, Sasha tried to change the subject. "What brings you to Paris? What are you doing so far from home?"

"I own a few restaurants in Melbourne, actually," Nick added with a self-assured nod. "And every year the French government does a sort of exchange program between French and Australian chefs where you tour the wine country for two weeks, learning about the local cuisine and eating at all the Michelin restaurants in the south. We call it Bordeaux vs. Shiraz, like a football match." He laughed at his joke and summoned the waiter over to refill his glass.

While she couldn't think of a single example of Australian cuisine beyond Vegemite, Sasha decided that this Australian restaurateur was nonetheless impressive. Her brain was pickling in alcohol and her vision blurry as she assessed him: he looks good, and, accent aside, sounds good, and I have done quite well for myself in luring him over here. He's much better than any French guy, she decided. "It's been amazing," Nick said. "I've learned so much about the food and wine here that I'll use at my restaurants back home, and even better, it's all been paid for by somebody else."

He kept placing unwanted parts of his elaborate meal on to Sasha's plate, extolling the virtues of each rejected item. It wasn't until he got to his salad and they had finished off the champagne and a bottle of Châteauneuf de Pape that Nick was ready to talk about something other than food. "Where are you from in America, then?" he asked.

"California."

"Oh hey! My wife and I used to live in Los Angeles! Where are you from?"

Something took over Sasha's body and forced an answer out of her mouth while her brain spun like a cyclone, trying process the fact that two courses and three glasses of champagne after he'd invited himself to her table, he'd just said something about a wife. Then again, she tried to reassure herself, he did also use the words "used to," which could mean that he *used* to have a wife, but doesn't any more. More likely, though, it was that he and his wife lived in Los Angeles at some point in the past, and that said wife still very much existed. She hoped it was the former as she looked at his left hand. He wasn't wearing a ring.

"The world's a small place, isn't it?" Nick commented, picking at his teeth.

Emboldened by the effects of alcohol on her empty stomach, Sasha piped up, seeking confirmation. "Not so small that your wife couldn't join you on your trip, though."

“Australia is very far away,” Nick replied smoothly, leaning in towards her. “Give us a cigarette.”

“I didn’t realize you smoked.” With one finger she nudged the box an inch towards him. He’d have to come and get them.

“I don’t,” he said, making a quick sweep of his hand across the table to snatch the box of Gauloises. Lighting up, he inhaled with a snort, and then stifled a cough.

Sasha knew that cigarettes are a non-smoker’s on-ramp to indiscretion. Nick’s foot slid across the floor and searched for Sasha’s under the table. His hand did the same above it.

She had never been with a married man before. She had never been with an Australian before. And she had never had sex in Paris before. It might be my last time in Paris for a while, she reasoned with herself, sliding lower in her chair so that she could play footsie, too. And Australia *is* really far away.

She thought of the last time she had sex and wondered if, like Europeans, Australian men were uncircumcised. She thought of how cold it was out, and how the weather forecast had predicted snow. She thought of her depressing, moth-eaten two-star hotel near the Gare du Nord, and how expensive a taxi back there would be. Then she struck a deal with herself: if he’s staying at a really nice hotel, someplace warm and luxe and beautiful, someplace that’s the right setting for a tryst, I’ll go home with him.

“So where are you staying?” Sasha asked, noticing that it was past midnight and that the restaurant was almost empty.

“The Ritz.”

She faked a yawn. “I think it’s getting late.”

“I think you’re right.” Nick snapped his fingers for the waiter, but the maitre d’ came instead. “The bill, please,” Nick said. “And could you call a taxi?”

Sasha’s stomach dropped when she realized it could all be that easy. She lit another cigarette and tried to remember whether she was wearing nice underwear while Nick carefully charged what must have been an astronomical bill to a credit card from a bank whose name she didn’t recognize.

Then, the harsh sound of Nick’s chair sliding across the parquet floor.

“Well, I should be off. Thanks so much for keeping me company. Your beauty complimented the food very well.” He towered over her, his hand extended. Sasha stared at it like it was a hook, frozen with confusion about what was happening. Was he actually just getting up and leaving her?

Realizing her hand wasn’t forthcoming, Nick took it from her. He lifted it up to his lips and pressed them slowly down, first against the top of her hand, then against her gathered fingertips. “You

really should have tried the oysters,” he said with a wink. Then he dropped her hand and headed towards the door.

The eyes of the remaining patrons of the now painfully quiet dining room followed Nick out of the restaurant and into the Mercedes taxi waiting outside. Then they darted back to stare at Sasha, who sat alone among the ruins of the evening.

She looked out the velvet-draped window at Nick’s outline in the backseat of the cab. His elbow rested against the foggy pane and slowly, he raised his hand in a controlled wave. The cab pulled away and she lit her last cigarette, rueing having given Nick one. Now she’d have to stop off for some before going back to the hotel. Her lighter seemed to be low on fluid too, she noted as she flicked the flint again and again, trying to catch a spark. She got up and went to steal a matchbook off an adjacent table.

The maitre d’ glided over to her rescue. “*Pour mademoiselle,*” he said, handing her a book of matches. But instead of lighting them for her, as any decent Frenchman would’ve done, he skated back to his post by the door.

Even the waiters are blowing me off, Sasha sniffled, as she lifted the matchbook cover. It wasn’t the stately dark green of the Café Flore en île matchbooks, but instead a regal purple, with yellow block capital letters, spelling out Atlantic Bar and Grill. Underneath was an address: 129 Spring, Melbourne, VIC.

Stunned, Sasha’s heart leapt. Nick did want her after all. There would be a night of sex at the Ritz in Paris, and she would return home feeling like Lady Brett Ashley, sufficiently seduced in Paris. Her hands shook as she lifted the matchbook cover, expecting to see a phone number, or the number of his hotel room, or note saying, “Meet me in fifteen minutes – Nick.”

But there was nothing.

by Emily Lauren Burg  
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