

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

Linda McMullen
In the Red

If Harvey was willing to spring for the Kempinski, I couldn't say no. He barked at me not to deplete the minibar, then patted my *derrière* and handed me a plane ticket.

"You get this done, I'll pay for your ticket to Nice," he said. "Then you can splash out with your boy for a week."

"First class."

"Business. Don't push it."

He was clearly remembering that business in Bucharest, so I didn't.

"I need a dress."

"You get an extra hundred."

I frowned.

"I presume you recognize clearance racks."

"Two hundred."

"I can find another blonde, Abby."

I took the hundred.

My Kate Spade knockoff and I trundled into BCBG, bypassing the full-price new arrivals, scowling at last season's castoffs. But *lo* – tucked amidst retro florals and hopelessly gauche mesh, was a red silk slip-dress, cut down to *there*, slit up to *there*. *Parfait*. The over-eager salesgirl oozed over and offered a fitting room.

In Josh's absence, I took a moment to admire the flash of *décolletage* the dress offered. *Josh...* Edith Wharton-hero good looks and plebian interests – NASCAR, bowling...

...and me.

We met in POLS 232 (Comparative Government). From our first group project – God bless the emotionally astute TA who put us together – I fell. Crashing. Headlong. Pick your preferred cliché. My body ached for him as a knife seeks a whetstone – to feel that spark...

He told me, later, that it was mutual. Right from the start.

He didn't tell me he was a legacy until much later.

I didn't tell him I was on a (partial) scholarship for longer.

And I definitely did not elucidate my means for managing tuition, room, board, and books.

It wasn't terribly difficult to de-magnetize the anti-theft device. I redressed, retied my sneakers, and waited for Her Unctuousness to address the next customer (judging by the conversation, a twelve imagining herself a ten). The dress whispered against the inside of my op-art handbag. I opened the door – *no, a fourteen pretending to be a ten* – and sprinted past their disbelieving faces, a deserted Auntie Anne's, and a 50% off sale

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

at L'Occitane (*should've stopped there first*), before bolting to the front of the cab line. A feint for the vehicle – a little *moue* – « *O, pardon, Monsieur* – » maintaining the pretense that I, apparently a charming *française*, had misunderstood the quaint American custom of standing in line. Happily, Monsieur, glimpsing peace and plenty through my white tank, allowed me to take his cab.

I told the driver to wait at my apartment while I retrieved my suitcase.

“Now...the airport, please.”

In the cab, I called Darlene, the owner of the *Brasserie Occidentale*, and reported that I was too unwell to work.

I changed planes in the morass that was and is Charles de Gaulle. I contemplated calling Josh – we were in the same time zone! – but no, duty called. I located the lone Air Algérie desk and gate in Terminal 2E, which evidently only rose from Brigadoonesque mists a mere seven minutes before boarding.

My hand-written ticket indicated that Harvey's reconnaissance was good: there would be no computer record of my travel.

The Algerians – with mordant precision – had nicknamed their national airline *Air Couscous*. This proved prescient as we lurched toward *Afrique sous-saharienne...*

CDG-ALG

Right over the Riviera. Josh...

Josh adored Nice. He and his friend Travis, were taking some time off, making a (presumably blue) film with Travis's bombshell girlfriend Marina. Travis's Wall Street-denizen father was bankrolling their artistry, while I scraped mashed *frites* off the floor at Darlene's. Josh was using his time in Nice to develop a Plan B. (Plan A was having taken the Foreign Service exam right before graduation. I put him off when he suggested I should take it, too: “Come on, Abby, isn't that what you want? Double majoring in French and poli sci? What else would you do?” But background investigations and credit checks are fickle things.)

It had been six months since our last visit, when he put that long-researched Kimberly Process diamond on my finger...

ALG-XXX

On the plane, I read the dossier Harvey had thoughtfully provided. I refreshed myself on the post-colonial struggle and the rebellion and the peace process and the upcoming elections...and dozed.

I dreamt...I, in designer sunglasses and a yellow sundress, blessed with Audrey Hepburn's poise and a parasol, clutching a vintage case, sailing on a replica steamship northward from Algiers toward the Riviera...I awaited the feel of Josh's arms around me...

I woke when the plane bump-lurch-clunked onto the runway: I was transported from the languid warmth of the Riviera to the full-body assault of the tropical heat. Inside the airport I nabbed my suitcase, fended off the tip-crazed porters, and procured a cab with a smoking carburetor. «*Kempinski.*»

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

This job gets me halfway back to zero, I thought. Halfway. Hold it together.

At the hotel, I showered, conducted the necessary feminine pruning, dressed, and called the number Harvey had provided.

«Allo?» a male voice snorted.

«*Bonjour. Je suis la collègue de Monsieur Bond.*»

Harvey, a die-hard 007 fan, had chosen an appropriate toxic-masculinity alias.

«*Vingt heures,*» he said, and hung up.

There was still an hour to go until eight, so I called Josh on Skype. I said that I missed him. And that I was having problems with my video.

“Do you think you’ll be able to come visit?” he asked.

“I sure hope so. I’m watching the fares.”

“How’s work?”

“Oh, you know. Slow. I’ve been getting open-to-four shifts, not a lot of dinners.” Because Darlene was still angry about the week I missed. In Bucharest. “I’m hoping for a big night. Don’t be surprised if I turn up on your doorstep sometime.”

“I’d be ecstatic,” he said, then the conversation took a slight turn, toward mutual relief. It *had* been six months.

At quarter to eight, I left a key at the reception and took a seat in the lobby. Promptly at ten-thirty a black car with tinted windows appeared outside, and the Colonel burst in. The hotel staff were blasé about his bodyguards and their dangling AKs.

We exchanged perfunctory greetings; he expressed approval of my dress and Harvey’s having obtained «*une américaine qui parle français*» for once. (Harvey said the Colonel always paid for quality: a cheap Russian wouldn’t do.) I took his arm, and he took advantage of the opportunity to brush his arm against my breast. We strode toward the dazzling ballroom.

Michel discreetly pointed to Emmanuel Diallo; he looked like his dossier photo, or like an African edition of every earnest Jimmy Stewart character ever.

Huh. You never can tell.

Michel introduced me plausibly as «*Angélique,*» the daughter of a «*patron,*» (gesturing vaguely toward the visiting Exxon executives). Then, Michel steered us in a devolving snail-shell spiral around the *Libération* party leader.

«*Colonel,*» said Diallo, offering a tight-lipped approximation of a smile. Possibly he was thinking of the 243 *Libération* party members gunned down or detained by the military during April’s unrest, but it was impossible to say.

The Colonel begrudgingly replied, «*Monsieur,*» but introduced me before taking himself off.

«*Bonsoir.*»

Diallo expressed his relief that he didn’t have to try to carry on in

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

English. Meanwhile, my red dress worked magic; Diallo watched it ripple like a frozen invalid watching the oscillations of a spontaneous blaze. He invited me to dance.

Mais oui.

He was, I assessed, *largely* committed to improving the lives of his fellow citizens. Not without official and unofficial personal subsidies...and spoils for the western province he called home. But *generally*.

It seemed a shame. But I wasn't being paid for my political discernment.

The acting president droned through a speech about promoting peace and reconciliation between *Libération* and the *Front Démocratique*, erasing the difficult legacy of colonialism, and pursuing new friendships, particularly with *nos amis les américains*, justly renowned for their *franchise*....

That was me, a frank and open entrepreneur, a franchisee of Harvey, Inc.

Come on, Abby, this is half your credit card debt. And soon you'll be able to apply to State too.

Just like Josh.

« *Qu'est-ce que tu fais ce soir?* » Diallo asked.

What are you doing this evening?

« *Qu'est-ce que tu veux?* » I returned.

What do you want?

It was but the work of a moment, to get him upstairs.

He unzipped my dress, let it waft toward the floor, and unhooked my bra; I pressed my back against him as he buried his face in my neck, and cupped my breasts. Our bingo-board's-worth of taboos, and his palpable desire, stoked my own pleasure: *I purred*. He was old enough not to rush, and worldly enough to treat the encounter as a *pas de deux*. *Yes, I thought, test me, touch me, tease me...*

I loved my fiancée, truly. *When I'm a wife, I thought, I won't want. For anything. But until then...*

I want to be wanted.

He took my panties off, reverently, and laid me down on the bed with all the gravitas of a prince bedding his blushing bride. And...*heureusement*, he was not as Catholic as all that, because he liberated a timely *préservatif* from his wallet.

Nous voilà...

He was excellent.

There was no difficulty whatsoever about persuading him that I should be on top, once he understood that I sought to *extend* his pleasure...

...oh...

O là là!

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

...

...all right, all right, here we are, and *where in hell is that* –

And I heard it: the click of the electronic lock. I turned my face away, but the flash's corona rippled across the walls. The nimble photographer captured a poignant tableau: a married-with-three-children, devoutly Catholic, staunchly-leftist, future President of *la République, in flagrante*, with «*la blonde.*»

Mission accomplished.

He was too stunned to react immediately, but then treated me to a patois of French, his native language, and Quentin Tarantino, of which I nevertheless got the gist.

He pulled on his clothes – perhaps aligning the proper appendages with the proper holes – spat in my face, thus dampening an otherwise pleasant encounter – and vanished.

I sighed, and dressed.

The local press was feeble, but the intelligence services redoubtable, so I packed, and went to charm the clerk into allowing me to change my room. Five thousand francs in his pocket ensured a «*bien sûr.*»

I slept.

^

Before dawn, the Colonel's man met me in the lobby, waved the clerk off with 2000 francs (*Huh. I overpaid.*) and produced a small faux-velvet bag. I checked the descriptions and quantities of the dirty little rocks against Harvey's list, and held them to the light. Deep inside one, I could make out rosy gleamings.

«*Merci, chef.*»

I had to find my own way to the airport. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that hired goons are cheap.

I returned to my apartment, with a battered suitcase and a bag full of rare stones.

Harvey said, "Good, you didn't fuck this one up," and stacked photos of Benjamin Franklin before me. Ten piles of twenty-five pictures.

I attributed my pay from Bucharest to a lucky Lotto draw; this larger sum, I reasoned, required the reappearance of a long-lost, suddenly-deceased, great aunt...Wouldn't Josh be surprised!

I called to tell Josh about the unfortunate demise of Auntie Mildred, and the ten – er, *two* thousand dollars I had abruptly inherited. "It'll be tough to get time off again so soon –"

"So soon?"

Aaagh! "For Darlene, asking for *one* day off after *three months* of perfect attendance counts as 'soon'," I explained. "But I'll be there before you know it."

"That's great, because..." His metaphorical drumroll hung in the air –

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

"I got the call!"

"Josh! That's *awesome!*"

"Yeah," he said, missing modesty by a hair – he mooed with joy through the phone, gleeful at the prospect of a diplomatic portfolio. Or maybe it just seemed that way. Naturally I wasn't jealous.

We went through several rounds of attaboy-and-aw-shucks, and then I took a bath, scalding enough to remove several layers of skin.

Afterward I scrolled through the online news, to gauge the fruits of my recent efforts.

The newspapers blazed in tabloid-yellow fonts:

«*Cherchez la femme!* »

Diallo, scandalisé.

La chute de Diallo.

'Chute' is a false friend – it's 'downfall' – but all I could imagine was that poor cinematic-throwback Diallo descending from square 87 to 24 in Snakes & Ladders. Apparently, that was about the sum of it: Diallo's party had denounced and renounced him, and his injured wife (pictured) had thrown him out. *Clearly not the kind who ever asks to be on top.* He seemed to have aged five years in a few days, as if his own personal troubadour were a sad trombone.

It was his choice, though. He's an adult. He could have passed me by.

Michel's sure to get that cabinet position now.

I folded up a few Franklins to keep me company at the mall. I wore a hat, and steered clear of BCBG.

Darlene was as loath to release me from her clutches as any self-respecting witch from Grimm. So weeks went by before I could secure a ticket to Nice – but I got one. I wended my way to Paris...then the Riviera...and Josh's apartment.

After concluding the immediate tumult of joy/Dionysian rite, we went for the traditional walk along *Promenade des Anglais*. Josh took me to dinner at a *restaurant gastronomique* – happily, just as advertised. Then we returned to his flat and enjoyed a second sort of banquet.

We gloried in sleeping-eating-walking-touring-drinking-and-not sleeping, and I basked in visions of halcyon days, complete with Fauve-school lighting and J. Crew-catalogue-worthy picnics. Even life's minutiae were better. We cooked; we washed the dishes; I balanced my checkbook leaning against his legs.

Then, one evening, Josh sat filling out his security clearance forms, while I amused myself with the crossword: 23 Down, 7 letters: *Samson's betrayer. Delilah.* 48 Across: 9 letters: *Unwanted correspondence?*

"Do you remember when we went to Rome?"

"Easter week, last year," I replied. *Blackmail.* 52 Down: *Imitation of life?* That was right after Bucharest. It was glorious: I, in *artiste* mode, sketched

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

pale imitations of the Trevi Fountain; Josh read aloud the racier stories from Giambattista Basile.

Art. It's art.

"Do you remember the dates?" he asked, rising.

I shook my head.

His hand moved – *I should have known, definitively* – he reached into the *sanctum sanctorum* –

...my purse...

...and extracted my passport.

I, still as any idiot damsel bound to the railroad tracks, merely goggled as he paged through it. His brows careened toward one another –

"Why are there African stamps in your passport..."

"...from a few weeks ago..."

"...for just two days?"

There was a complete dearth of answers written on the ceiling.

"Abby?"

I scanned my mental stacks for something plausible; my brain offered *nothing*. *OK, pull it together. Lowest common denominator between the truth and respectability.* "I...got a job."

"A job," he repeated. "What kind of a job?" He considered the stamps. "Was it drugs? Were you carrying drugs?"

Would that have been better?

"No."

"Then *what?*"

When I hesitated, he said that he would still love me no matter what, but for God's sake, why couldn't I answer a simple question?

I allowed that my job was to disrupt an election.

In spite of this satisfactory answer, he became a dog with a festering bone. His face said I would lose if I failed to answer.

So, I told him.

His face cycled through the entire rainbow; I saw his aristocratic, Puritan-ancestor lips form the entire Hester Prynne litany of accusations. It seemed like such a terrible scene to have. So, I blurrily located the Rome dates in my passport – "It was March 24th through April 1st" – and he watched stonily as I assembled my things. There were a thousand affectionate and tender things I wished I could say. Usually my words danced like a ribbon on the breeze, but then, sometimes, something caught, and they wound themselves around a flagpole. Because in spite of myself, beneath my horror-movie mascara and my pre-haunting-Scrooge level of avarice, I was still as trip-over-the-carpet-and-fall-on-my-face in love as I

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

ever was.

Damn.

Self-recrimination and regret: my losses built, the crescendo of a melancholy symphony. Josh – my better half...

...then I conjured all that loss entailed. I'd spend Christmas on the couch at Mom and George's music-box of an apartment in San Francisco, *without Josh*. And there went all my dreams of summers in Nantucket and winters in Vail, of kissing tens of thousands in student loans goodbye, of a future flaxen-haired brood with Josh's *savoir*, without any of the *'faire'*.

"Josh..."

As he closed the door, he dropped the one, unforgivable, c-faring word...

I wasn't Scarlett. Tomorrow was not another day.

I discovered a café with wifi, reserved a space in a hostel (*ugh, a twelve-bed room*) for the night, mechanically sobbed through the business of changing my tickets and Josh's excessively pointed farewell. An email from Harvey appeared.

How's it going?

I wrote back, *It's over. Josh found out*. And then I wondered, suddenly – did Diallo have somewhere to stay, afterward?

Harvey responded: *Sorry to hear that*.

Followed by: *You up for another job?*

No.

Which hurt worse, I wondered, Diallo's pride or his heart?

I bet it was the latter.

Harvey wrote, *You're almost there already*.

No.

\$5K, Monaco. Pick up photos and a sworn deposition.

My reflection in the café window was the very antithesis of Audrey – blotchy, makeup-streaked, *déclassé*.

Ugh.

You mean \$5K plus expenses. Decent hotels. And, under the circumstances, full minibar privileges.

Harvey writes back: *You're at the Hôtel Nice Excelsior tonight, and the Hôtel La Pérouse tomorrow. Go to the Casino Monte Carlo tomorrow at seven, find a man with a black dahlia in his lapel. You can wear your new dress again.*

And, finally: *Don't go overboard with the minibar.*