

*Julian Gallo*

**We'll Always Have Paris**

**T**he cobblestone street below is wet with rain, though now it is only misting. Daylight begins to peek through the clouds. There's a peaceful silence to it all, disturbed only by the occasional putter of a scooter somewhere unseen. It smells of rain, of spring, and the trees along the street below have begun to burst into life. The shop across the street is still shuttered, a boulangerie where Daniella bought three pan du chocolates the afternoon before. It isn't much of a view but at least there is one. The last hotel Victor stayed in only offered a view of an air shaft. Besides, the view behind him is much more pleasant. Though morning, the daylight hasn't quite made it through the window, shrouding Daniella in shadow as the twisted bedsheets partially hide her nakedness as she sleeps face down on the bed, a shock of dark hair on the pillow shielding her face. He still can't believe she actually showed up but there she is, naked, sexy, and peacefully asleep.

The room is small, barely large enough for the double bed it houses. There's also a writing desk, cheap, from Ikea, white with a single angle poise lamp, a telephone, and the contents of both their pockets scattered across its surface — passports, loose change, wallets, keys, two cellphones, and a pack of cigarettes. He craves a cigarette but he's not allowed to smoke in the room. The narrow ledge outside the window could conceivably act as a makeshift balcony, so he grabs a cigarette from the pack and steps out onto the ledge, pulling the windows closed behind him.

The first drag satisfies his craving as he leans on the railing and looks up and down the narrow street as the mist begins to dampen his hair and face, leaving tiny speckles on the cigarette. It's all right, though. He only needs a few drags to kill the craving he'd been feeling since waking up. He checks to be sure the windows are closed to keep the cigarette smoke from drifting into the room but he knows people can probably smell it, though he no longer does. If he cranes his neck, he can just make out a partial view of Sacré-Cœur but he doesn't want to risk tumbling three stories to the street below.

Seeing her lying in the bed seems almost unreal, and perhaps it is. Maybe once daylight fully creeps into the room he'll discover that naked body under all those twisted sheets is just his pants or a piece of his luggage. But no, she's there, all right. Still sleeping off her jet lag. She isn't that rebellious college kid anymore. She's a grown woman now, middle aged, a little heavier perhaps, as everyone is, but no less beautiful. In fact, she's probably even more so. She can use the rest. Neither of them are as young as they used to be.

He takes one last drag from the cigarette and sends it shooting off into the misty rain and reenters the room, taking great care not to awaken her. He quietly climbs back into bed and lays beside her, watches her sleep. Is she really here, after all these years?

Daniella stirs, turns over on her back and stretches into a yawn, though she's only seeking a new position on the bed. She's not ready to awaken and he's not able to get back to sleep. Her movement allowed the bed-

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sheets to slip from her torso, leaving her exposed, but still covering her below the waist. He wants to reach out and touch her but he doesn't want to awaken her, or perhaps even startle her. In the first moments after she awakens, she probably won't remember where she is and who she is with, or more importantly, what she did. It's ironic in many ways and none of it makes any sense, but he promised himself not to question it and just let things happen, whatever that is. Now here she is, sleeping, relaxed, beautiful, the daylight now beginning to illuminate her face, revealing someone else — and older version of herself, a grown woman, sexier, and intensely more desirable.

Her eyes flicker open and she again stretches into a yawn, her hair covering her face. She brushes it away and sits up, leaning on her elbows, looking around the darkened room still half-asleep, as if trying to allow her mind to register the unfamiliar surroundings. She sits up now, covers her face with her hands, her hair falling forward. She yawns again, then looks at Victor lying on the bed watching her.

You were smoking, weren't you? I can smell it.

Outside on the ledge, he says. I tried not to let it wake you up.

She eyes the pack of cigarettes on the desk, then slides down the mattress, the sheets falling away from her naked body, and grabs them. She removes a cigarette and places it between her lips, then opens the windows.

You're not supposed to smoke in the rooms, he says.

She shrugs and lights it, blows the smoke towards the open window.

It's raining, she says.

Only misting.

That's okay. I like it.

She stands up and walks to the window, unconcerned she's naked, and pokes her head out, followed by her hand.

It's not so bad, she says, then turns to face him.

They hold one another's gaze for a moment before she picks her underwear and bra from the floor and puts them on.

I need to call Allen, she says, reaching for her cellphone, tell him I got in all right. He's probably worried.

Victor doesn't say anything as he watches her sit on the edge of the bed, press the phone to her ear.

How many hours ahead are we?

Five or six, I think, he says. I'm not sure.

What time is it now?

A little after seven.

She counts the time difference with her fingers, takes a long drag from her cigarette, and tosses her dark mane across her shoulders. There's something incredibly sexy about the way she does it, reminding him of those actresses he adores in all those French and Italian films. In the half-

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light she sort of resembles one, as does this scene, which he wishes he could photograph.

She's all right, she tells her husband. She got in early yesterday evening and just went to sleep. Jet lag. They make a bit of small talk and then she hangs up, leans forward to place the cellphone back on the desk. She takes one last drag from the cigarette, then drops it out the window.

It's strange, isn't it? How long has it been since we'd seen one another? Twenty years?

About that, he says.

She crawls across the bed and kisses him softly.

It seems so... I don't know...

It's best not to discuss it, he says. Just let it be.

This seems to please her and she kisses him again, then crawls back to her side of the bed, sitting upright now, gazing out the window.

I can't wait to see it, she says. You've been here before?

Many times, he says. I love this neighborhood.

There's something so romantic about it.

That depends on how you choose to see it. For us, perhaps. Maybe not so much for those who live here.

She rises from the bed and leans out the window, bracing herself on the small wrought iron railing.

How can anyone not find this view romantic?

I didn't say it wasn't, he says. I'm just saying the grass is always greener.

It's everything I imagined it would be.

He allows his eyes to trace the contours of her body, the way her hair spills down her back. It's a vision he often fantasized about when they were young, but that was the only realm where it existed. In some ways she's still that twenty-something art student, but when she turns to look at him, time has now etched itself into her features, but she's no less beautiful.

You didn't think I was actually going to show up, did you?

Honestly? I didn't.

I can see that, she says, leaning on the edge of the bed, pushing her hair away from her face with a sweep of her hand.

What happened last night...

Don't even mention it, he says, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her eyes. Just let it be, as I said. No sense in making too much an issue of it.

It was nice. I had always wondered what it would be like.

It was beautiful, he says. I often wondered, too.

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Did I live up to your expectations?

I didn't really have any. It was kind of sudden.

She laughs, then flashes a smile, that familiar smile which once had him so smitten, only now the laugh lines around her mouth are more pronounced.

That's okay, she says. I didn't have any expectations either.

It just sort of happened, huh?

Sort of, she says, rising from the bed again to gaze out the window. I mean, I thought about it. I thought about it for a long time — but you probably don't think about me like that anymore.

Occasionally I remember, he says. It was a long time ago.

Silly kids, she says, then turns to face him. We're not silly kids anymore, are we?

Far from it. A lot of water under the bridge.

I appreciate you don't hate me for being absent for so long.

I understand. We each have our own lives now.

I was such a silly kid, she says, then sits on the edge of the bed and touches his face. But I always thought of you, always remembered.

I think about you too, more than you realize.

Is it all good thoughts?

Now it's his turn to laugh. He touches her face, caresses her cheek with his thumb.

For the most part, he says. There's no bitterness, if that's what you mean. I wouldn't have agreed to meet you if there had been.

She rises from the bed and returns to the window, her hair slightly blowing in the morning breeze.

It's raining, she says.

Does it matter?

No, not really. It sort of makes it that much more romantic. Where's that restaurant you were telling me about?

Nearby, he says. A short walk. It will give you a chance to see the area. If you love the view, you're going to fall in love with it. It just does something to you. That's why I keep coming back.

Remember when I used to tell you how I wanted to come to Paris with you?

I remember, he says.

He leaves it at that, not wanting to get into the ridiculous fantasies he concocted imagining such an excursion, the way they were then. It probably would have made matters worse, in fact. It lives more in his imagination and perhaps that's where it should remain.

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Don't be surprised if Allen calls me often, she says.

He's still the jealous type?

He is. Sometimes I think...

He waits for her to continue but she doesn't, climbs back on the bed and crawls over to him, kisses him softly.

It's strange, isn't it, all this?

No offense, he says, but I'm trying not to make too much of it.

What do you mean?

You know what I mean.

She lies down on the bed and drapes her arm across her forehead, stares at a spot of peeling paint on the ceiling.

I suppose so, she says. We're not the same people we were, though last night, it sort of felt as if we were. I think about those days more often than you realize. I still have the letters you sent to me.

He feels a twinge of embarrassment. He wishes he never wrote them. Silly missives, written by a love struck young man. He'd hoped they were no longer in existence and is surprised she held onto them.

They were nice, she says. Why wouldn't I keep them? You know, you were the only man I ever knew who expressed himself that way to me. It was nice. Don't you think I appreciated it?

I don't know, he says. Maybe you did at the time. I think we were both living an illusion then. We were young, full of romantic notions. We read too many books, I think.

Her laugh is pleasant, playful.

Remember when you used to send me all those books? I still have them, you know. In my studio. I think of you whenever I see them.

A studio, huh? That's something you always said you wanted.

It's just a room in the house. Allen allowed me to choose one to work in. I don't work as much as I used to, though. I sometimes wonder...

She doesn't finish her thought. It doesn't matter now. What matters is the moment. What matters is the week ahead and neither one of them have a clue as to how it will transpire. Either it will be a fulfillment of a long held fantasy or it will reveal the ugly reality of the situation, that once she returns home, she will continue her life as a middle aged mother, married, with a wonderful home she isn't about to give up for any silly romantic notions. This is her one chance to live the life she always imagined, the life that never materialized. Not that she isn't happy with her circumstances, but the current moment clearly indicates what he'd always suspected — that something is amiss. He doesn't push her, doesn't want to, and accepts the current moment for what it is.

He leans down and kisses her softly on the mouth. She returns the kiss, then nuzzles her nose between his neck and shoulders. They hold one another's gaze for a long moment, each not saying anything, allowing their

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eyes to do the talking for them. The connection is still there, regardless of the passing years.

I'm glad I'm here, she says.

I'm glad you're here, too.

I'm glad there are no expectations, she says. If anything, we'll always have Paris.

He laughs, then kisses her again.

The cellphone rings and her smile morphs into an expression of disappointment and irritation.

This is going to happen a lot, I'm warning you, she says.

He doesn't say anything and allows her to climb off the bed to fetch her cellphone. It's her husband again but she doesn't answer it. She sends the call directly to her voicemail and places the phone back on the desk, turns to look at Victor lying there watching her.

She can't remember the last time anyone looked at her that way, including her husband. Time and familiarity allows for taking things for granted, routine, and expectations. There are no expectations now. Just a chance to live, to be free, to be what she once was.

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