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Very Handsom Men

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VERY HANDSOME MEN

Tina watched a few big rabbits coming out of the brush and sitting up still as statues in the sunlight. She supposed this was more interesting than the beach. It was too windy on the beach, and besides, the tide was coming in. You weren't allowed to sit on the dike and watch the waves. A sign in Flemish or Dutch said so. A grassy pasture led from the dunes behind the dike down to a salt marsh where the bushes looked like sage brush and the dirt where there wasn't any grass was streaked with white. Seepage from the dike, Tina decided. Part of the marsh was fenced off, and some people with binoculars stood at the fence and watched birds. It was some sort of fish or bird preserve, or perhaps it was a rabbit warren.

She reached to touch Janine's hand to point out the rabbits, but Janine was watching two men walk by, so she pulled her hand back. *Lapin à la moutarde*. She had seen that on a menu somewhere. She'd probably have that. She wondered if restaurants raised the rabbits or if waiters were sent out at night to knock some over the head. The rabbits looked like they'd sit still enough. She couldn't really ask a waiter where the rabbits came from. He'd look surprised and lie, or else he'd pretend he didn't hear and say, "That's right, Miss," and then have something urgent to do. Perhaps she would come out here and wait and watch to see if anyone hunted them.

Janine smiled and waved to the two men. One of them, the fat one, was older and wore a loose windbreaker to hide his paunchy belly. The other man was handsome and had a nice tan. He was wearing a red pullover and had pushed the sleeves up past his elbows. Pink trousers, white shoes. Perhaps he had only been playing golf. They waved back. Janine waved again. Tina leaned closer to Janine and said in a deep movie star voice, "*Je t'aime ma chérie, je t'aime.*"

"Stop it," Janine said, and smiled at the men. They kept walking.

"Do you want to go to Bruges tomorrow?" Tina asked, "We could take the train and be back here for dinner if you like."

"I don't know."

Janine kept plucking at her sweater and brushing sand from her jeans. Tina watched the countryside. Flat as the ocean. Green. All that pasture and all those milk cows. In the distance a dark line of

trees blocked at least a sea of pasture from her view.

"I kind of like the beach," Janine said, "What's in Bruges?"

"A cathedral. Canals. There's supposed to be jousting."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

Tina could hardly keep from smiling. The only things that really broke the flatness were the points of church steeples in the distance and the hotels down the beach to her left. They didn't seem very tall.

"You know. A couple of knights beat each other with sticks until one of them falls off his horse. Like in Camelot."

They watched an old fat man (there were a lot of them) walk his dog. One of those short-haired bowlegged ones that are supposed to be dangerous. The kind you didn't dare let in the same room with a baby. Tina wondered if she could remember what the French for "curb your dog" was. Something stupid and literal that sounded pretty funny when translated stupidly and literally back into English.

"Make your dog do in the gutter, Mister," she said.

"Yeah, Mister, ocean your dog," Janine said loudly. "Give me a cigarette," she added.

"You're supposed to be quitting," Tina said and held out the pack and then took one herself.

"I know."

The wind blew strands of Janine's hair into her eyes and she shook her head and faced the breeze. She knew she had lovely hair. Tina blew smoke out through her nostrils and smiled. What a difference a cigarette could make when you really needed it. She knew why Janine was always quitting — to deprive herself just enough to make every one taste so good. There was something about the flatness that reminded Tina of something else. The wind blew smoke-like wisps of sand off the tops of the dunes near the dike. That's what it was. The wind. The flatness and the wind. It was just like the desert, except for the dike, of course.

And there was the man with his dog. Tina might have to go to the bathroom pretty soon, too. Something. *Avoir envie*. "To want to wee-wee," according to her French-English dictionary. Tina couldn't imagine it ever being a matter of *wanting* to. If she had to, she could go in the bushes. That was one nice thing about Europe. Everyone would politely look away and not whisk her off to jail. The Swedish girl she had learned all the French slang from had said that she'd seen a group of nuns in Paris form a circle at the curb and when they walked away, one of them had left a little puddle right there on the

sidewalk. Two miles to the hotels and not a single bathroom between here and there. Of course she could hold it if she really had to. That is, if she had to go in the first place. She stood and brushed sand from her jeans.

"I'm going to walk across the border a few more times," she said. She really only needed to walk around a bit.

She went in the opposite direction from the hotels. On the walkway the border was marked by a post painted red and white. In stripes like a barber's pole. She walked up to it and drew a line across the path with her foot. She hopped back and forth across the line a few times, then stood straddling the border for a while.

"Dear Grandmother, Imagine yourself standing in Indiana and Illinois at the same time, only they speak different languages in the two states. Like standing in Texas and Mexico at once! I walked into Holland and back 742 times. It was exciting! Love always, Tina." The hotel gift shop would have just the right card.

She imagined having to speak Dutch out of one side of her mouth and French out of the other. But most of the people in Knokke spoke Flemish, not French, and she didn't know any Flemish or Dutch. She put her back against the post and slid down until she was half sitting.

"I'll have a little trim, please," she tried to say out of one side of her mouth. "*Salud, pas comme ça!*" she tried to say out of the other. English was easier in asides to the audience, she decided. She stood up and walked away in a huff, glancing back over her shoulder at the invisible, shrugging barber.

There were two men with Janine. One of them, a very handsome man, was squatting beside her and smiling and offering her a cigarette. The other man stood behind them and smiled as if he didn't understand what they were saying. He had thick glasses and it seemed with that silly grin that he couldn't see them either. *Complètement aveugle*. Janine always attracted handsome men. They liked women with big breasts. It had something to do with male beauty and calcium deficiency, Tina thought. She took long steps like a movie star as she approached them.

"This is Franz," Janine said and the squatting man nodded, "And that's Wim. He's a doctor. They were in Africa when I was. Isn't that something?"

"Well, Mr. Stanley, it isn't every day we get to meet a great explorer," Tina said to Franz. Janine grimaced and held up one hand

as if to shield her head. "Please introduce me to your friend," Tina continued, "A doctor? Oh no, it couldn't be. . ."

She looked over at the standing man, Wim, who politely coughed into his fist, and she let her mouth drop open a little. Then she turned quickly back to Franz. "I am the Pope's daughter. You may kiss my ring," she said and held out her hand.

Franz just glared up at her. That was the problem with this country. Too many Catholics. Even those with no faith were still way too superstitious. Janine hid her face in her hands. Tina shrugged and stepped around her and took Mr. Wim Livingstone by the arm. He quickly said something to Franz in Flemish or Dutch and received a curt reply. *Ver dommen* or *verboden* or something. Tina didn't know. When Wim looked at her his smile didn't lose any of its fixedness.

"*Vous ne parlez pas l'anglais, n'est-ce pas?*" she said, leading him away from the others.

"*Ah, non,*" he said. He could read a little English, that was all.

He wasn't a very handsome man. He wasn't fat, but he was big in a round sort of way and had little pale, hairless hands. His long, curly hair was thin and when he smiled it was obvious he needed his teeth cleaned. Besides being practically blind and not knowing any English. No, he wasn't attractive at all.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm on vacation," he said, "Like everyone." He was a doctor. A jungle surgeon in a little hospital in the Congo. Which would be fairly interesting if he were attractive.

"I'm a rich heiress," Tina said, "My father is a cattle baron. Ever hear of the Marquis de North Dakota?"

He hadn't. He didn't have a radio. This was his first vacation in four years. It was hard to keep up with the news *en brousse*. If she would please excuse him he had to be getting back to his friend.

"Well, good-bye, Dr. Wim," she said and turned and began walking in the direction of the hotels. Nice talking to you. Be sure to tell Janine to meet me at the café.

Tina thought she'd wear her long black dress to dinner and afterward change back into her jeans. Only thin, short-haired blondes looked best in black. No matter how many times Kate Smith sang "God Bless America" on T.V., Tina wouldn't be convinced that big women looked good in dark colors. But then, they usually knew so little about fashion. Janine might look good in orange or pale blue or purple or even red. Or very best in a wide striped combination of them all.

Tina sat at a table in an outdoor café on a stone parapet overlooking the beach. It was deserted. A gull planed over the grey-green water. Except for an older man dressed in black she was the only customer. She couldn't tell if the man was attractive or not, but she didn't think so. He sat facing her at the farthest table. He had a narrow head and a kind of pasty complexion and was very thin. Perhaps he was tubercular.

The waiter arrived and she ordered a cup of coffee and a *gaufre*. If Janine were there she would have ordered one of those cream-filled puff pastries. The ones with the glazed strawberries on top that Janine liked so much but was trying to deprive herself of. Tubby, the world's fattest man, weighed over a thousand pounds and attracted millions. Even princes and movie stars came to see him. That was Janine's problem. No real sense of sacrifice. The man in black seemed to be winking at her. Or maybe it was just a nervous tic. Tina decided that she had to go to the bathroom after all and got up and went into the hotel.

The waiter was standing at her table and looking around in all directions when she came back and sat down. The nervous man was still there, but he didn't really seem to be staring at her. Tina took some bills from her pocket and flattened them on the table. The young prince or king in uniform pictured on the money was very handsome. *Merci, mademoiselle*. The waiter replaced the bills with some coins picturing the same man.

From the street a long-haired (but fairly nice-looking) young man dressed in a faded blue shirt and jeans approached her table. He was carrying an orange knapsack.

"Excuse me, Miss," he said, "I couldn't help but notice that you're. . ."

"*Desolée, monsieur*," she interrupted, shrugging her shoulders and pointing to her ear, "*Je ne comprends pas l'anglais*." She smiled beautifully as he backed away mumbling. She should have had a cigarette in her hand. That would have been more elegant. She lit one and tried again. A beautiful smile with an exhalation of smoke in the direction of the receding backpack. Perhaps if she bought some of those high boots and rolled up her jeans to mid-calf like the Parisian girls, that kind of mistake wouldn't happen.

Americans. She certainly hadn't come to Europe to meet *them*. All they wanted to do was complain and rut in a sleeping bag on a beach

or in some public park. But the French weren't much better. *They* liked to feel you up in dark alleys. And Italians were just butt-pinching fairies.

She was getting a little disappointed with her tour. It hadn't been a success. She hadn't met a single baron or prince. Or even a cat-burglar for that matter. She'd have settled for a movie star if he were a handsome man like that French fellow, Belmondo. Though she couldn't see why everyone raved so much about his acting. Actually, acting is so easy, don't you think, Mr. Belmondo? After all, it isn't like painting which takes so much *talent*, ha-ha. All it takes is mood, *n'est-ce pas*, Belmondo? And of course, as Mr. Belmondo and I were just saying, one has to be able to recognize a moment of tension. Take Janine here, for instance. (Pause to elegantly exhale smoke.) She'll never be able to act because, well, I really hate to tell you this to your face, but frankly, Janine, darling, you just don't know tension when you see it.

Janine came up to the table and plopped down in a chair.

"I'm so mad at you!" she said, resting her elbow on the tabletop. She leaned toward Tina. "You almost ruined *everything*! Tina, why do you have to be so rude?"

"I think I'll have another cup of coffee and maybe a pastry of some sort. Want one? We can always have a late dinner."

"All right," Janine said. "What got into you anyway? It seems like every time I meet someone nice you have to start acting so *bizarre*."

Tina ordered two coffees and asked the waiter to bring out an assortment of pastries and cakes so they could choose what they wanted. She turned and smiled at Janine.

"Really, Janine, what did you expect? Did you ever take a look at good Dr. Wimpus or whatever his name was? I could see a mile off he wasn't my type."

"Well you didn't have to try and spoil it for *me*!"

Tina reached across the table and touched Janine's hand. "Didn't he remind you of that little man in the Popeye cartoons? The one that eats all the hamburgers?"

"Well, I guess he wasn't very attractive, but I'm sure he was nice."

"Nice? He was dreadful. Do you know what he said to me?"

"What?"

"*Mademoiselle*, I weeeel gladly pay you Tuesday for one, ow you zay in Am3rica, ambergaire, *aujourd'hui*."

"Oh Tina," Janine said, "I'm sure he wasn't all that bad."

Tina looked around and didn't see the waiter anywhere. It would probably be a little while. The slowness of French-speaking waiters is a function of their language: *travail*, to work, from the latin, *trepalium*, instrument of torture. In the kitchen, the cook was breaking the poor waiter's bones. Tina offered Janine a cigarette.

"No thanks, I'm quitting," Janine said.

Didn't Janine think it would be nice to dress up for dinner? Wearing slacks was so American. Janine nodded.

One arm in a sling, the waiter finally arrived with a tray of goodies. Tina suggested Janine try the cream cake. *Celui-là*. Next to her favorite kind. With a finger Janine indicated her choices and the waiter set down the platter. Using large silver tongs, he delicately placed them on her plate. Tina smiled. It was a wonderful afternoon.

At dinner Tina was stunning in her sleeveless black gown and Janine looked nice in the bright peach, pink and azure swirled chiffon Tina had convinced her to buy that afternoon. It set off the red in Janine's hair so nicely. The maitre'd had placed them at a table near the center of the large dining area. He knew beauty when he saw it.

Tina noticed as she ate her oysters that a group of well dressed men, who were drinking after-dinner drinks and smoking cigars, were regarding her quite intently. And of course they were looking at Janine, too. But there weren't very many people in the restaurant. Having arrived so late, she couldn't really expect a crowd. It hadn't been her fault that no-one knew where *lapin à la moutarde* was served. She knew she had seen it on a menu. But it could have been in Paris or Nice now that she thought of it.

"Excuse me, *Monsieur*. Could you tell me of a restaurant that serves rabbit?"

This old gentleman couldn't say exactly. He and his wife never ate out. His wife made pretty good rabbit, though. He waved vaguely, toward the sea. Try one of those. They're sure to have it. His dog barked in agreement. She and Janine looked at the menus on the doors of at least a million places.

An old tweedy man and an equally tweedy dog. Grrrrr. "Excuse us, *Monsieur*. Nice dog you have there. Bet he likes to chase rabbits. Speaking of rabbits. . . ."

A small boy had led them to this restaurant (where his uncle was a waiter, probably). Tina could tell by the heavy velvet drapes inside that it was expensive. Neatly printed on a sign in the window:

Lapin de garenne à la sauce moutarde 300F

A la carte, no less. But since they had come this far. The group of men, business types she imagined, got up and moved out through the door that led into the street.

Janine ate in silence. She started her second soup, a mushroom *bouillon*, thin and clear with a faint odor of earth. It looked delicious. "You can come along, you know," she finally said.

"Oh no," Tina said, "I want to get a good night's sleep anyway. For the train ride, you know."

"You won't be in the way."

"I won't be there at all."

Tina noticed that there were only two other couples in the whole restaurant. Humorless Franz and Fat Wim were probably waiting at the hotel. Janine excused herself to go make a phone call. "I'd best let him know where I am," she said.

Janine was really wasting her time, Tina thought. There was nothing so special about Franz. But then, Janine tended always to see more in a man than there really was. She still raved about some fellow, Jack, who she had met in Africa. The waiter arrived with the main course and Tina asked if it was *lapin sauvage* or if it was tame.

"*Comme dit la carte, mademoiselle, 'y a du lapin de garenne,*" the waiter said.

"*C'est domestique?*"

"*Non, mademoiselle, c'est pas domestique.*"

The waiter smiled. They always smiled. *De garenne* might mean "factory fresh" for all she knew. She smiled.

"Would you please bring me another spoon?" she asked. "This one is spotted."

She held up the spoon to the light and he plucked it out of her fingers and coolly walked away. French was such a nice language for nastiness. Janine returned and sat down and sipped her wine. Franz would meet her here.

The rabbit was very good. And done just right. Tina pulled long strands of flesh away from the bones and dipped the meat into the sauce. The mustard made it savory and hot, and the sauce was smooth on the roof of her mouth. Somehow the aftertaste was not that of spice, but of the meat. Tina chewed slowly; Janine attacked her rabbit, eating it quickly with big bites.

A noisy motorcycle sped past outside. Above their table, the chandelier tinkled to the vibrations of the *bruit*. Tina smiled and laid

down her knife and fork.

"Well, I certainly hope that young man's motorcycle starts in the morning," she said.

Janine sat up straight, "Oh me too," she said, swallowing, "I hope he doesn't have an accident. You know, like go through a plate glass window and be horribly scarred." She drank some wine.

"Not me. I hope he doesn't fall down and skid his face a hundred yards on the pavement."

"Or hit a child and have to regret it the rest of his life."

"Yes, poor boy," Tina sighed and sipped her wine, "better that he's instantly killed."

They each cupped a hand to an ear and leaned ever so slightly in the direction of the street and listened carefully to the traffic outside. Janine was being so pleasant.

Janine hurried through the salad course and the fruit courses and skipped desert and coffee. She gulped down the rest of the wine in her glass and said, "Gotta run. Franz is at the cafe next door."

"Have a good time," Tina said and smiled. Odd that he hadn't presented himself at table like a proper gentleman. Janine stood and began to fumble in her purse and Tina just waved her away, saying, "I've enough. We'll settle it later. Go on."

Tina lingered over her *soufflé aux fraises*. Of course Janine would have to tell a man like Franz right from the start to keep his hands off. But telling someone with no character flat out, no sex, didn't always mean it worked out that way. You couldn't count on every handsome man to be a gentleman. She drank two cups of coffee, very slowly, and a plate of cheeses was brought. She had a slice of a soft one that she thought would be camembert but it turned out to have a mild walnut flavor. Then she had some gruyère. Then some brie. Then another soft cheese flavored with garlic and caraway. She could stay in Europe for years just for the cheese alone, she thought.

Final coffee and a brandy. Then she smoked. She didn't like people who smoked between courses. Janine did that sometimes. *L'addition*. Payed with a handsome *pourboire* for the maître'd. When she got up from the table she felt a little lopy. But the crisp night air and the walk back to her hotel snapped her right out of it.

She was wide awake and didn't feel like sleeping at all. Too much coffee, perhaps. She changed into her sweater and jeans and flopped down on top of the bed. Reading was no good. She didn't feel like

reading. Too late for T.V. She looked up *garenne* in her French dictionary.

noun, feminine (lat. *wareнна*, a prelatinate word)

1: Rabbit producing factory, usually made of sand or wood. 2: That part of a river or stream reserved for fishing.

garennisque adj. Having the qualities of a rabbit factory or fishing preserve.

garennissement adv. Rabbit-factory like in action.

se garenner v. To rapidly change or transform oneself into a fishing preserve or rabbit factory.

She got up from the bed and put on her car coat and gloves and then searched through her suitcase for the flashlight *Europe on \$10 a Day* recommended every traveler carry. Ten dollars and then another ten or maybe as much as twenty or thirty for food if one wanted to do it right, Tina thought. The whole point was to relax, to enjoy. She could see skimping here and there on hotels but never on food. She wanted none of that. After starving a couple of days who could look at a cathedral and not see gingerbread?

The beach was different at night. The dunes weren't the same. Too many shadows. The sound of the ocean seemed louder than in the daytime, more ominous. Probably because that's all there was. The sound of water. As Tina moved away from the hotels she switched on her flashlight. It wasn't really necessary. The clouds reflected a muddy yellow glow from the city lights. She wouldn't trip, but she felt safer with the light on.

There seemed to be quite a number of couples out there in the sand. She certainly hoped it didn't rain later tonight, at least not in torrents. After she had walked a long time, she noticed ghosts of bushes in the warren ahead of her. It seemed so barren, so much like a desert. She half-expected to see snakes—the ones that always bite people lost in the desert. She stopped near where she and Janine had been that afternoon and turned off the light and waited.

Janine, she supposed, was having the time of her life. That is, if one could with someone like Franz. Janine seemed to always go for the same type: hairy men with muscles and dark suntans. Tina liked that, too, but she especially liked men with Clark Gable mustaches. The motorcycle fellow in *Les Bonne Femmes* had been ideal but she never did catch who played the part.

She bet old Jack from Africa had been tan and muscular. Tina bet he was just like Franz though the way Janine told it he'd practically

died for her. That was something special. She would like to have a man do that for her sometime. Give her his water so she could make it back to the outpost while he died in the desert. Or give her his coat so she wouldn't freeze while the dogs carried her on the sled through the blizzard to the Mountie station. And he saying, "Don't worry. I'll just build a little fire to keep warm." And the last time you see him he's gathering twigs in the snow. A fellow like that would break a girl's heart.

There was something moving in the brush. It made a lot of noise. There were lots of somethings crashing through the bushes. She quickly flashed on her light in the direction of the nearest sound and something froze at the dim end of the beam. She couldn't tell what it was, perhaps only a taller bush. She moved closer, keeping whatever it was frozen in her light.

It was a waiter. Tall, red-coated, he was wearing a ruffled shirt and an apron. He held a club high over his head and gripped a gunny sack in his other hand. At his feet a rabbit cringed, its red eyes glowing at her. She decided she didn't want to speak with him. She shined her light away and heard a quick thud.

Sending her beam dancing about the bushes she noticed several faint waiters who turned into statues or shadows as the light touched them.

"I don't think you should be out here, Miss," a man's voice said in French from behind her. She caught her breath and turned.

"Wim?"

In the distance a rabbit's high-pitched scream was quickly cut short. She trained her light on the man's eyes. It wasn't Wim. Even blinking and wagging his head from side to side in an attempt to shade his eyes this man was handsome. Clipped mustache. Square, clefted chin. He wore a light trenchcoat and a dark hat.

"I'm sorry officer," she said quickly and pointed the light at his chest. Of course he had to be an inspector or something to regulate the killing. After all, these people weren't barbarians. "I was just going for a walk," she added.

"You had better come away," he said and guided her with an arm around her shoulder, "This isn't anything for a woman to watch. All that blood and brutality."

Yes. He was very handsome. He had a deep melodic voice, like a French Gary Cooper. And the grip on her shoulder was confident,

protective. They headed back toward the hotels. She had a thousand things to ask him. Why red coats?

Required by law, he answered. Red coats and ruffled shirts, but the laws weren't specific about trousers. A waiter could wear knickers or kilts if he liked, and nothing could be done about it, although it was customary for everyone to wear black trousers with a satin stripe along the outseam.

She was fascinated. Of course if he acted like anything but a gentleman she'd have to lay it on the line, no sex. Not in the sand, anyway. He offered her a cigarette and lit it for her, then lit his own. She could see he had bushy eyebrows, always a sign of virility. *Seduire*, to seduce. In the French dictionary the synonyms were: to attract, captivate, enchant, bewitch, ravish, subjugate. The order in fairy tales with wicked princes. Perhaps he was a prince of a sort. She already felt a little bewitched.

He smiled. She couldn't see his teeth but she knew they must be nice. They walked along and she stopped and exhaled smoke deeply through her nostrils and touched his arm. She tossed her head like she'd seen Janine do. It was Janine's best gesture. Tina felt more attractive, even though she knew she didn't have the hair for it.

"Don't you just love the wind at night?" she said, "And the sound of the waves? I find it so romantic."

It hadn't been, she reflected as she smoked. It hadn't been romantic at all. She undressed and got into bed and thought she might wait for Janine to get back. She'd have to think of some way to make it all sound witty and interesting so that Janine would be impressed with how brave she'd been.

He was handsome, she thought, but his vocabulary gave him away. He suggested they do dirty things. No, she'd said, and slapped him lightly on the cheek to let him know she was a lady. He wasn't a gentleman, though. He grabbed her tightly by the arm and suggested something unmentionable. He used all the slang the Swedish girl had taught her and even some words she had to ask him to explain. *Faire un pompier*. Janine could never guess what *that* meant. She'd remained calm enough to cry. He let go of her arm and slapped her hard. That was when she was able to run away. Fortunately he wasn't able to follow her.

"I lost the flashlight," she would say to Janine. She wondered if she

should have a handkerchief and should blow her nose at that point or if that would be too melodramatic. A cigarette might be enough. Just stopping and coolly lighting a cigarette. Maybe she should begin packing her bags. One thing was settled. They'd be going to Bruges.