

FLUCTUAT NEC MERGITUR¹

Carol Willis

Cecelia's skin pricked in the cold air of Saint-Gervais. The cathedral was almost empty; the nuns receding silently after their late morning prayers. Only a ponderous Asian man in a facemask milled around, admiring Chastellain's stained-glass windows behind the main altar. In a side chapel, seated next to her, Martin studied his phone. High above in the solemn gloom, the Virgin Mary held her hands clasped piously together her eyes upturned to the dust motes floating languidly. She was not watching.

Cecelia ran a hand slowly up Martin's thigh, her finger grazing his crotch.

"What are you doing?" Martin hissed, pushing her hand away. The rickety cane chair creaked loudly as he shifted. He pocketed his phone and tugged on the hem of his jacket.

¹ She is tossed by the waves, but does not sink.

“Sorry,” Cecelia said, stinging slightly from his rebuff. “I don’t know what came over me.”

An elderly couple, dressed in thick woolen coats with hats and gloves, emerged from the shadows like specters. They shuffled noiselessly down an aisle toward them, eyes drawn by the large mural of the Virgin Mary. The man whispered, leaning in close to his wife, one hand held tenderly at the small of her back. His wife smiled. A Mona Lisa smile. Subtle and intimate.

A curious pang, like deep-seated hunger, mysterious and painful, gnawed inside. The otherworldly fairy-tale atmosphere that had momentarily released her from this world vanished like a dream. Cecelia glanced up again. The Virgin Mary’s expression was wan and strained, dark circles under her eyes. Poor girl.

She and Martin were surrounded by numerous figures in various throes of ghoulish devotion. The crumbling walls and fluctuating temperatures rendered many of the oil paintings faded. The wealthy kings clutched jeweled scepters, now dull and tarnished, their elongated faces sallow and sickly. Cracks zigzagged like fault lines through the murals and now the blushing bride high on the wall across the transept had a rip up her cotehardie. Angels

appeared as though their wings were clipped and on the verge of toppling out of the sky.

What *had* come over her? This place, somber and strange and weirdly perfumed, sent through her some kind of arousal, not sexual, exactly, but the lust for the full glory of some passion before it faded completely.

Next to her, Martin seemed to grow smaller, almost as if she were submerged, sinking away. Cecelia leaned lightly on his arm to break this odd spell, but he shook her off. He stood abruptly, striding toward the exit, his footsteps echoing across the stone tiles.

She hurried after him, ignoring a quizzical glance from the couple. “Martin, wait,” she whispered, but he was already an indistinct figure in the distance.

Outside, the bright winter sun cut through a crack in the bank of clouds. She held a hand over of her eyes, squinting. A gaggle of motorcyclists gathered in the parking lot, AC/DC blaring from tall portable speakers. A burly, gray-bearded man, clad in a black fringed leather jacket, leaned a proprietary arm atop one speaker, mirrored aviators reflecting the cathedral’s flamboyant Gothic facade.

Martin stood waiting at the bottom of the steps, hands jammed inside his jacket pockets, staring at the cyclists.

“Why did you run off like that?” Cecelia asked, catching up to him. She slipped her arm through his and followed his gaze. A skirl of guitars split the air. “Only in Paris,” she said, raising her voice to be heard.

Martin did not respond, snubbing her with stony silence.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Oh, come on. Are we getting too old to flirt?” She tugged playfully on his arm. “No one was watching. Only the nuns. They were probably thrilled.”

Martin shrugged, his shoulders hunched, the tips of his ears like white marble. He sniffed, and cleared his throat. Nearby, a group of young students chattered, alternating staring at their phones and pointing at the church across the street. Martin seemed glad for the ruckus as it saved him from the conversation. She longed to grab him by the shoulders and say something foolish and affectionate.

A distance had cropped up between them. It had begun this morning at breakfast, after Parker’s texts. A warning in the back of her mind. A twanging.

Maybe it began long before—before she had come to Paris. The slow creep of disconnect that had been growing ever since she had decided to travel on her own after taking early retirement.

The sinking feeling returned. Why had Martin come to Paris? He hated traveling. He considered sightseeing a chore. Despite his initial show of support saying, “It’s fine. No, really, it’s fine. It’s something you’ve always wanted to do.”

Maybe it was not fine at all.

Martin pulled his arm from hers and zipped his windbreaker, the Nautica one she had given him for Christmas many years ago. Rumpled, it was the color of dust and too lightweight for December. Snowflakes gathered on his collar like dandruff.

They walked in silence down the sidewalk waiting for the snow to come. The early afternoon clouds were low and heavy, the sun retreating. But for now, only small flakes swirled randomly, lightly dusting the sidewalk.

As they strolled down the Rue de Rivoli toward the Louvre, they settled into their usual inconsequential banter, pretending everything was fine. Cecilia looked around admiringly. Beauty and architecture like religions. They

passed the gaudy town hall building. Perched on the roof and clad in fine patina, French baroque figures regarded them dispassionately. As they reached the busy crossing at Rue de Renard, Martin stopped and slipped his phone from his pocket.

“Everything okay?” Cecelia asked, stealing a glance at the screen but too far away to read.

“Fine. Just Parker,” Martin said, turning away from her.

“Checking up on us?” Cecelia asked, amused at the idea of a role reversal with their son.

“Give me a sec,” Martin said, texting a reply with his thumbs.

“Sure,” Cecelia said, pretending to examine an array of colorful handbags in a window display. It was pretending because she considered herself too ordinary for such extravagances. Martin, too. Not unhappily ordinary, though. She had always considered them to be happily ordinary. Their marriage easy and gladly casual. Filled with petty details, its noise, its rumblings, its passions, trips to the beach, to the grocery store, to piano lessons and daycare. Surface stuff. But under this crushing tonnage of mundanity, she had always believed there to be another place, deep and burnished, where the true measure of them lay. Something extraordinary beyond the inconsequential barrage of minor

sufferings and triumphs. In the cathedral's wavery gloom she had felt on the cusp of discovery, a glimpse into some great mystery.

In the window's reflection, Cecelia adjusted her scarf. What if surface stuff was all there was?

Martin turned back to her, his phone still in hand. "Okay. We can go."

"Martin, the purple ostrich leather tote or the orange cape satchel? What do think?" Cecelia asked, pointing to the bags in the window. But Martin was already charging ahead through the intersection.

"Let's walk through the plaza," Martin said over his shoulder, hurriedly steering them through the bustling crowd. She followed, Martin's head bobbing, as they wended through a maze of twinkling evergreen trees with big red bows, and large gold bulbs dangling from their branches. Jaunty Christmas Carols played.

Several days before Martin arrived, the employés municipal had cleared the town hall plaza of a small city of gray-domed tents. Cecelia had watched as refugees, mostly single men, a few families with young children, confused and afraid, were rounded up by gendarmes and shuttled away. She stood numbly as neon-vested workers swooped in, sweeping up discarded face masks and other debris, hosing down the cobblestones, quickly transforming the

space to a glitzy winter wonderland. Now, children sucked on peppermint sticks, waiting in line to ride the merry-go-round while harried parents gulped hot chocolate.

In the last two months, Cecelia had witnessed this several times. Make-shift tent cities assembled and dismantled with disconcerting regularity, plastering slogans such as, “Ouvrons grand les jeux”—Games wide open—and Terre de Jeux 2024 in their wake. With nowhere to go, refugees along with their desperation routed and rerouted to other makeshift tent cities, pushed further and further to the fringes—Stalingrad, Barbès, and as far as Nanterre—to camp on the streets and under bridges along with crack dealers and drug lords.

Cecelia and Martin passed a Wallace fountain. The blue-green iron-glazed goddesses—charity, simplicity, temperance and goodness—offering clean water in perpetuity to the city’s people. A man, weathered with graying sideburns, scrubbed his swarthy face, a bottle of soap, orange and flowery, propped on the edge. His brown corduroy waistcoat, thin and shiny, hung loosely, the sleeves damp. As the man splashed icy water onto his face, she met his eyes ringed with misery. For a moment, she was lost, unmoored from Martin, from Paris, from the Christmas music and city lights.

A car honked; a siren bawled. Cecelia was startled, shaking as if she were wet. In the distance, rock music blared; the smell of tobacco smoke trailed. The man at the fountain still eyed her. A pleading look. She wanted to do something, but she couldn't say what.

“Don’t stare,” Martin said, under his breath. He reached clumsily for her hand, pulling her away. “What’s gotten into you?”

The sky, a hard white with clouds edged in gray, appeared brittle. High above, the sun kept changing positions. It was now a hazy white ball behind the hardness. It did not warm at all.

She glanced at Martin. His face a grim mask, narrow furrows etched about his mouth and forehead. He is enduring. Enduring this walk. Enduring this visit. The cavity inside her expanded, like freezing water inside a crack. She wrapped her coat tighter around her waist.

“I could ask the same,” she said, suddenly tired. Tired of always feeling like she was on the wrong side of things. Tired of always having to work out why Martin was upset.

Cecelia squeezed his hand before letting go. She sang along to one refrain of Jingle Bells but gave up. “Look, I’m sorry. At the church, I—”

“Forget it,” Martin said, checking his phone, before slipping it back inside his pocket.

“Was that Parker again?” Cecelia asked hopefully. “Is he coming here for Christmas, after all?”

Martin shook his head. “No, he’s staying in LA.” He did not look at her.

A crow squawked above, pitching and landing in front of them, pecking at breadcrumbs on the pavement. Pigeons complained and jockeyed for their turn. One flew up and Cecelia ducked instinctively, bumping into someone on the sidewalk. “Sorry!” she said, before switching to French. “Excuse moi!” she muttered, but the stranger was already gone.

Cecelia suspected something was simmering beneath Martin’s placidity. He harbored deep-seated resentments, only to surface later. Like today. Deflecting his ill-ease onto her. But then he had always done this. Deflected. Long before she retired and began traveling, since the early days of their marriage. Martin, pretending he minded nothing while minding very much. His seemingly innocuous question of “What’s gotten into you?” with the implication being, of course, that something was wrong with her.

Martin asked, “So, where are we going? What do you feel like doing?”

As if they had not discussed this already. They had decided this morning to go to the Louvre because *Martin* wanted to go. So, she bought the tickets and downloaded them to her phone. Martin knew this.

Cecelia refused to follow the script. “I have no idea. I was just enjoying the walk. What do you feel like doing?”

“Oh, me too. I’m just happy to be here with you.”

Liar. Martin had not been happy since he arrived. He sniffed the air as if there was something warm and savory wafting in the air. There was not. Heated air rose from metal grates in the sidewalk sending up pungent odors of urine, diesel fuel and rotting food.

By unspoken agreement, they continued west, in the direction of the museum. They passed under the department store lights. Hung like icicles, white blinking bulbs seemed to drip light onto those walking beneath. Christmas music played. Passersby dressed in dark overcoats, colorful scarves wrapped tightly, everyone’s breath coming out in white puffs of steam. Tourists, Parisians, Cecelia could not tell, awash in the soft lilt and melody of French and occasional Russian, English and Spanish.

There was an energy in the air; a momentary uplift of spirit. Martin must have felt it too. He pulled her close and leaned in, his breath warm on her exposed ear. "I want to buy you perfume from a store in Paris."

Apparently, she was forgiven for her transgressions.

She thought of the elderly couple in the cathedral, imagining Martin putting his arm around her, and guiding her into the store, insistent. In her mind's eye, she sees herself and Martin, shoulder to shoulder by the perfume counters, spraying heady-scented oily mists onto her wrist, smiling and cooing, "Oh, I like this one," and Martin, eyes gleaming, insisting she try another one. They had done this once, many years ago at Macy's in New York City. For a moment, Cecelia believed she could smell the perfume on her wrist, the scent lingering in the air as they exited the store, a glittering box wrapped and tucked deep inside her bag.

But they walked past the store and the next one, too. Le Bon Marche, BHV Marais, Sephora, Samaritaine. Martin did not even glance at the sliding glass entrances, his uttered promise of just seconds ago already forgotten.

A crowd waited at the corner, leaning forward eagerly. A bus rumbled close to the curb. Someone lit a cigarette. Martin trudged ahead, leaving her to tuck in with the throng to cross the street.

The cold penetrated under her coat. The distance stretched between them. Something kept pulling them apart. She kept thinking about Parker's texts.

This morning, she and Martin ate breakfast at The Favorite Café. Quintessentially Parisian, with pink and white striped awning and a pink neon sign blinking "Bienvenue!" faux flowers hung overhead like they were in an arboretum. It had been her idea, but Martin agreed readily. Like he always did. She had taken a photo of Martin as they waited for coffee. Despite his slightly dopey smile and not quite awake eyes, it was a good photograph. *It was!* Even Martin had said so.

She had immediately texted it to Parker with the words, *avec amour, de Paris!*

She and Parker were always going on like that. Texting and sharing silly videos. She thought Parker would appreciate the candid photo of Martin. But instead, what she got was *He looks so done with all your BS*. The text had brought her up short.

Your BS.

Is that what Parker really thought of her?

A darker thought crept in. Is that what Martin really thought? Parker likely did not come up with that on his own.

She and Parker had always been close. Their only child. Parker understood her sense of humor, her outlook on life in ways Martin did not. Parker had never made her feel old or irrelevant or ridiculous. Cecelia had always believed Parker was proud of her.

By taking early retirement, she eschewed the convention of working until the traditional retirement age. And Cecelia thought she was modeling something important for Parker's future self. Imparting some valuable life lessons about working hard and socking enough money away to pursue one's dreams.

Parker had said, *Cool. Good for you, mom.*

She had thought he meant it. But she could not get the text out of her mind. In a rare moment of transparency, had Parker revealed himself? Or worse, Martin? Did they really think all this traveling around on her own was bullshit?

Had they just been indulging in what they thought was a midlife crisis?

It was Martin who suggested he visit while she was in Paris. "I'll come for a week. We can do the Louvre," he had said. He had bought a plane ticket before she had time to respond. Touched by his initiative, which was most un-Martin like, she had said, "Of course. That would be great" despite the inexplicable ambivalence that wormed in the back of her mind.

Parker's text had struck her as a betrayal. *Martin had come to her!*

She had shown Martin the text. "Oh, he was just joking, Cee," Martin said, brushing it off and lowering his voice. "He's twenty-five. He was kidding. It just came out wrong."

Why had Martin insisted on flying over for what amounted to a long weekend? She and Martin were not a romantic couple. But they "got along." They had stayed together through all the minor squabbles, a few dreadful major ones. Cecelia had never once contemplated leaving. She assumed Martin had not either. Was he worried she was leaving him?

Martin pointed to a statue, on which thin patches of powdered snow gathered. His hand trembled. In profile, his face seemed so drawn and his skin so pale she could see the blue lines of his veins giving her the sense she was glimpsing decades into the future. She felt a spasm inside, the fleeting twinge of that curious deep-seated ache she could not name.

They made it to the Louvre, escaping two young women in hijabs on the corner, armed with clipboards and blue pens. Cecelia guided Martin to the Richelieu entrance, bypassing the long line outside the pyramid.

"I love that you know these things," Martin said, almost skipping down the escalator.

Cecelia smiled. She enjoyed pleasing Martin like this. She pushed Parker's texts aside. The earlier distance, the uncomfortable silences, receded as they roamed the crowded halls. They argued good naturedly whether the Caravaggio was this way down the corridor or the other.

"We came out from seeing the Mona Lisa, and we turned right," Martin said, patiently backtracking.

At last, they found the Caravaggio, both exclaiming, "There it is! We must have walked by it a dozen times!" Laughing and sighing, they carried on like this, bemoaning the audio guide as glitchy.

"What do you want to see next?" Cecelia asked, relieved Martin's good mood had returned.

"El Greco," Martin said. "El Greco is my favorite," he said, reminiscing for the umpteenth time about their visit to Crete and the small village in which the painter had been born.

She sat down, leaving Martin to ponder the El Greco alone, and reread Parker's texts.

Cecelia sighed. Perhaps her early retirement and traveling around without Martin had threatened him. Perhaps Parker had seen this side of Martin she

had not. It was a humbling thing to think her adult child had more insight than she.

Your BS.

The words were angry. Intending to wound. Perhaps Parker was angry. Angry that she had retired early. Angry that she was off traveling without his father. Never mind that Parker lived on the West coast, and they on the East. Maybe Parker was more traditional than she had assumed.

Which begged the question of what tradition looked like to Parker. Her at home with Martin? Doing what, exactly? Keeping house?

Then there was Parker's other text. The one that came after Parker's snarky comment about her photo of Martin at breakfast. The one intended for Martin mentioning someone named Nadine. Cecelia held the phone to her chest, considering. The crowd thickened around her.

Martin approached her bench. A far-off look had returned to his eyes.

Cecelia pocketed her phone, standing quickly. The lingering feeling akin to hunger pangs snapped at her.

"Let's go," Martin said, sighing heavily as if in surrender. "I'm hungry."

After lunch, they passed by the Kurdish Cultural Center. Flowers and flickering candles were piled high by the main door. Pungent cindery remains of burned placards and protest signs filled a makeshift bin along the sidewalk.

She and Martin huffed up the steep steps to Sacre-Coeur Basilica. “So, do you want to go inside?” she asked Martin, eyeing the line snaking around the building. Hopefully, he would say no but she would let him decide.

“I’m game,” he said, looking past her at the view.

Paris lay before them a mass of crowded buildings. Smoke billowed out of the stacks of the power plants along the Seine in the distance. The dome of the Pantheon broke the horizon. It was astonishing how level the city was from this view. Remarkably even like the meticulously manicured trees lining the sandy paths in the Jardin de Plantes, trimmed and trained over decades, each tree only allowed to grow to the same height and width as its neighbors. The French loved control and order. Or at the least the appearance of it.

As they waited, Martin studied his phone. Cecelia longed to knock it from his hands. Was this visit simply to keep up appearances?

The line moved quickly. A busker, a young, dark-skinned man, strummed American pop songs on a janky guitar. His voice was out of tune and he sang too loudly. Cecelia rolled her eyes as people clapped. The man sang with an

accent that was not French. Many such men were ringing the cathedral, laying out blankets, displaying their wares: small gilded Eiffel towers that blinkered, shiny gold locks, and other knick-knacks only tourists swept up in the moment would purchase.

She was cold and tired. The man's voice grated on her. The crowd's reaction, sentimental and ridiculous. She wished they had never come.

Martin tossed the man a few coins. She heard the plink, plink, plink followed by richly accented *merci Monsieur, merci beaucoup*.

She raised an eyebrow at Martin and shook her head.

Martin refused to look at her. The distance between them gaped. His hands were still jammed in his pockets. They had not left his jacket except to check his phone since the Louvre. Hunched over, trying to make his body a small target against the cold, he reminded her of an adolescent refusing to wear a jacket in winter.

"Why don't you buy a hat and a pair of gloves? There's a guy selling them over there," she said pointing to a panoply of colorful woolen gloves and hats carefully displayed on a white cotton sheet. Business was brisk. Like selling umbrellas on a rainy day. Another dark-skinned man in a kufi cap squatted

next to it, his hands in constant motion; his eyes continually scanning the crowd.

Martin shook his head. "I'm good," he said, teeth chattering. His face was so pasty white, it almost gleamed in the waning light.

"You don't get points for needless suffering, Martin," she said. "Buy a hat and gloves, at least you'll get something for your money."

Martin sighed as if she were the unreasonable one.

"Suit yourself," she said, instantly regretting it. It put him back on moral high ground, somehow. To keep herself from scolding further she bit the inside of her cheek, and a metallic tang filled her mouth.

The inside of the nave was a bewildering mix of religious mosaics and stained glass, lacking the muted reverence of Saint-Gervais. Everything was gilded and shining. Hundreds of candles flickered, thin ribbons of smoke curled upward and disappeared into the vaulted ceiling. In the sanctuary, nuns sang harmoniously, their high fluty voices reverberating. A farce of tourists jostled for a look, blatantly feigning ignorance of the rules as they held their iPhones aloft, recording and clicking photos in front of the sign forbidding any photographs or live recordings.

But then she was a pretender, too, wasn't she? She and Martin had been pretending all day. Herded by the flowing crowds, pretending to contemplate the Virgin Mary or stations of the gilded crosses, Martin feigning interest in artwork, she feigning interest in Martin.

Relieved to exit, Cecelia thought about Martin's impromptu visit, Parker's texts, the loneliness that clawed her insides. The rising ocean of distance between them.

She walked out, bundled up against the cold. Biting cold. She did not mind the cold. But this felt different. A piercing, sharp like a knife. She took a quick intake of breath as if she had to snatch her breath from the cold. They were on their way back to the apartment, but she felt she was on her way to somewhere unfamiliar, to someplace unknown. Something had happened since Martin had come to Paris as if they were both breaking apart, fragmenting in the frigid air.

On the steps, she listed as she was about to place one foot down. She felt as though she were cracking, causing her to pause mid-stride, her foot hovering in the air. The ice-filled cavity inside finally fracturing, a long, drawn-out fissuring that cleaved her in two. She grabbed the handrail, off kilter, as if she were tilting with the curvature of the earth. A rushing filled her ears.

“Martin?” She turned back to Martin, who seemed to recoil from the question with his phone in his hand.

“What?”

As she looked at him it was as if she were seeing him for the first time. His face was brittle, his eyes vacant. He seemed a stranger to her.

The rushing receded. The idle chatter and hoots of laughter from the crowds returned to her. As she glanced around, everyone was walking, arm in arm, phones raised in an endless stream of selfies and social media moments.

Martin was silent, having moved ahead on the sidewalk. The way back to the apartment was long. Rue Monmartre was wide, and busy with cars and foot traffic. She struggled to keep up.

Thick lavender shadows between the buildings closed in around them. Her heart thumped slightly against the warm lining of her coat. Her ears were alert—which is why she had to step out onto the hard cobbled stones of the road. She needed to hear the clatter of her footsteps. To drown out the torrential rushing between her ears that swelled again and made her dizzy.

Ahead, Martin’s figure seemed to be retreating, getting smaller and smaller. “Martin!”

He slowed but did not stop. Cecelia wondered at the cracking, her body reaching a crescendo.

“Martin, stop!” People glanced in her direction before scurrying away.

Martin stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Motionless, his head, gray and featureless in the gloam, was bowed, and he hunched his shoulders, bracing himself.

Cecelia caught up to him, pulled her phone out, and held it in front of his face.

“Who is Nadine?”

The text from Parker glowed like a beacon in the dark. The text intended for Martin, but sent to her by mistake.

Have you told mom about Nadine yet?

“Who’s Nadine?” She had asked, holding out her phone over a half-eaten plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, blithely assuming Nadine to be Parker’s new girlfriend.

But Martin had shrugged under a mask of disinterest, before cramming the last flakes of a croissant into his mouth. Instead of answering, he had said, “Let’s go,” waving down the server and hustling her out of the door and into the cold air that had cut them like knives. The awkwardness in Saint Gervais

followed by the discomfoting stroll down the Rue de Rivoli, then the slow return of familiar comradery as they roamed the Louvre and had coffee and blancmange at Café Marly.

Cecelia thought things were back to normal. This pulling apart and snapping back together *was* normal for them. So, she had let Parker's texts go. She had dismissed Nadine entirely.

Only on the long walk from the palaces of the Louvre to the Sacre-Coeur Basilica did Cecelia finally recognize the pitched feeling that had yanked her all day. Like a rubber band, she and Martin had stretched and snapped back until the band had broken. The realization like one of the broken ends hurling back and smacking her in the face.

Martin's forehead glowed incandescent, like cracked white marble, in the light from her phone. Her forehead, was smooth and warm against the ice-cold stream of air.

"Have you two been texting all day?"

His face crumpled with shame, and he squeezed his eyes shut. Tears leaked from under his eyelids. His body seemed to shrink, as if trying to fold his frame in on itself.

A rage, so white hot, she felt sweat form on her forehead despite the cold.

“When were you going to tell me?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t want to. Not like this,” he whispered. Childishly, his eyes were still shut as if he could make it all go away.

Her body trembled from his betrayal, almost as if the ground beneath her feet were rumbling like an earthquake, with tectonic plates shifting. His visit had been a lie. He had not come to Paris because he missed her as he had claimed. He had come to Paris to say goodbye.

“How long has Parker known?” She hated Martin for embroiling him. For confiding his imbroglio to their adult son, for manipulating the narrative and for putting Parker in the position of holding secrets, deceiving his mother and, of siding with his father. *Have you told Mom about Nadine?* It was unforgivable.

Instead of answering, Martin brooded, his face serious and weary. His chest shuddered with shame or the from the cold. “Let me ask you, Cee. Are you happy?”

Cecelia put her phone away. “What does that have to do with anything? You’ve been running around having an affair and you want to know if *I’m* happy?”

“You’re the one running. You left me,” Martin said quietly.

Steam rose from several gray tents huddled in the hell strip, the thin nylon fabric rippling weakly.

“I’m traveling! I didn’t leave you,” she said. Cold lashed her face. Her mouth dry; and she swallowed back a growing tightness. From inside one of the tents, someone coughed.

“Really?” Martin gave her a sad look, before pulling out his phone again. “You left me a long time ago.”

“What are you talking about?” Snow fell onto her eyelashes. She wiped them away. “So, this morning. At Saint-Gervais. That wasn’t about me at all, was it?” Anger licked her words. “You’ve been texting her all day, haven’t you? Answer me!”

“Nadine is my therapist. Or was,” Martin said, pocketing his phone again. “I’m in therapy. Was in therapy.” Tears filled his eyes, and he wiped his nose. He cleared his throat.

“Nadine was your therapist? You’re having an affair with your therapist?” Cecelia tried to laugh but it came out like a honk.

Martin looked away. The snow fell in large ashy flakes. The white reflected the city lights, giving a glow to the night. A young couple passed them, their feet falling in soft thuds on the snowy pavement.

“Why did you even bother coming here?” Cecelia asked.

“Why did you?” His voice quavered.

“Don’t put this on me.”

“Different question. Did you even want me to come visit?” Martin stamped his feet. A ghastly light from a street lamp cut a long shaft along the sidewalk.

She remembered her initial prick of annoyance when he told her he was coming. Then relief, relief that she would not be expected to return home for the holidays. Then happy that he was willing to come join her, if only for a little while. But today, dogged by an aching loneliness and a mysterious longing for something she could not name, she tasted the first swills of regret. This morning, in the gossamer light of Saint Gervais, she was confronted by the immense and unchallengeable reality that underneath the surface there was no gleaming trove of meaning and substantiality.

Comme ci comme ça.

They had stayed in a lackluster and ordinary marriage simply because it had been easy. And what made it easy to stay had made it easy to leave. And in Martin’s case, leave her for someone else. How banal. The power of her own imagination had been no match for the rotgut of their own indifference. No. She was not happy. She had not wanted him to visit.

High on the hill of Montmartre, a carillon sounded. “Martin,” she said. But stopped, choking back sobs. Despondence rilled through her.

“Don’t,” he said with such finality, a vague sense of terror gripped her. “I’m leaving in the morning. I’ll find my way back to the apartment.” He turned, shivering, walking along the shaft of light away from her.

Her skin thrummed, and she felt weightless, almost as if she were floating. Untethered and finally free of the gravity of the earth, she had the sensation of hovering above the sidewalk, rising higher, until the people and tents were but tiny colored dots. She watched as Martin, now but a small blurry figure below, turned a corner and disappeared.

Noise from the streets was distant and a quiet solace came over her, almost as if she had put her head underwater. She moved her arms and legs, dog-paddling in the air. She was swimming through the falling snow, soaring higher and higher. The Eiffel Tower, a beacon of light, so close she could almost reach out a finger and touch it.

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