

Paris: Week 105

Lundi

Carlo stepped onto the Paris Metro M12 train toward Mairie d'Issy precisely at eight o'clock. He had today's copy of *la Repubblica* tucked under his arm. He wasn't going to read it, so it sat on his lap as he looked out the window from his normal seat across from the door where he entered, facing in the direction of the train.

"Hi."

Carlo thought he heard a tiny croak but continued to look out the window. The dark walls of the underground tunnel passed by. He felt a small tap on his knee.

A young girl, probably around the age of six, had taken the seat next to him. Her striped tights should have clashed with her polka dot dress, but the patterns helped tie the ensemble together. That and the strawberry blonde, curly pigtails and lavender Mary Janes.

"Hello." This time she said it with a quick wave. Her pigtails bounced.

Carlo grumbled a quick hello and looked away again.

"My name is Franny. What's yours?"

Carlo glanced back towards the young girl and found expectant eyes waiting for an answer. He shifted toward the window and watched the train pull away from another stop. He noticed his reflection in the window. The dark creases by his eyes and the camel-colored cap he wore to cover his thinning white hair.

Suddenly, two purple dots appeared in his peripheral vision. He faced the seat in front of him and saw the Mary Janes swinging off the edge of the bench. Franny still looked at Carlo, waiting.

“*Jay-ma-peel* Franny. Do you speak French? My mom told me that’s how I say ‘My name is.’”

This kid can’t take a hint, Carlo thought. He wasn’t great with kids, never had been. He saw his own now about once a year, less since he’d lost Katherine. Well, since they’d all lost Katherine.

She had always been the better parent. She had soothed Clara’s first broken heart and wrapped Ale’s cast in a plastic bag so he could shower after he broke his arm. She connected with their kids in a way that Carlo had never been able to. At least, he had never been able to without Katherine to help prod him along. He used to feel guilty. He used to obsess over birthday presents for his grandkids, checking with Katherine several times before he decided what to get. Now, in front of this mop of pink curls, he wanted to move seats.

“*Je m’appelle* Carlo. French, English, *and* Italian.” Carlo turned his gaze to the door to check the stop, but added, “Where’s your mom anyway?”

“She’s over there on the phone.” Franny pointed to a row nearby. “She told me it was a work emergency. I wanted to sit closer to the map up there.”

Carlo looked down the row to ensure that this girl was, in fact, with her mother.

“We’re on vacation. My dad didn’t come, though. Mom was okay with it, but I’m confused.” Franny was looking at the map above them, not Carlo. He wasn’t looking at her either. “When I asked him why he couldn’t come, he said he had to work. But he takes trips all the time. He has a job he can do from anywhere. This month he’s hardly been home at all. Why didn’t he want to work from Paris for a week?”

“Franny, let’s go.” The woman on the phone picked up her large purse and stood in front of the door waiting to get off the train. She continued her phone call, not yelling, but clearly

angry. Franny slid off the seat until her purple Mary Janes reached the ground. “Ow-re-vore!” She waved at Carlo again.

Carlo waited until she passed but then watched the blur of colors and enthusiasm exit the train with her mom.

Mardi

Carlo never boarded the Metro with a destination in mind. But he did board the M12 train every morning at eight. He hadn’t set his alarm clock in years because his body knew to wake him up at seven. Alessandro, the owner of the bar underneath Carlo’s apartment, knew him by name and had his café and croissant ready for him at seven thirty.

Today was no different. He sat on the train and watched the morning commuters board with their briefcases and earbuds. A few teenagers flipped through flashcards and pointed at diagrams in a textbook, studying for a test on their way to school. Carlo’s *la Repubblica* sat in his lap. He flipped to the Arts section and noticed a headline mentioning a new exhibition at the Vittoriano. *Giovanni Boldini, Katherine would have loved that.*

He had met Katherine when they were both young university students. Carlo had lived in Rome his whole life; his parents were in love with the city. Carlo fell in love with the city when he met Katherine Miller in a local bar on a Tuesday night. She was from Ohio, studying art history at the American University of Rome. Carlo had noticed her sitting alone, cheering her friends on as they sang a Madonna song on the karaoke stage. He noticed her black outfit, her purple shoes, her red hair, the pencil tucked into the pocket of her jeans. Some force pulled him toward the bar. He expected to sit for just a minute, offered to buy her a drink while her friends sang. Small talk quickly turned into discussion, though, and Katherine spent hours telling Carlo

about Botticelli and Michelangelo and Bellini and Caravaggio. He saw his city in a new way as he watched her excitement, her animation, her bubblyness.

The night ended too soon. After being shooed off the stools by the bartender trying to close up, Carlo drove Katherine back to her dorm in the early hours of the morning. He kissed her goodnight and felt something he'd never felt before. *This girl is different*, it told him. They married shortly after they both graduated, but took time to travel before settling down in Rome and starting a family. They went to Barcelona and Colorado, Argentina and Tokyo. Carlo was always thankful for this time with Katherine, especially when she got sick.

After the funeral, he saw Katherine everywhere. The corner bar with their favorite cappuccinos. The grocery store with fresh produce she had used in her cooking. The gelaterias where they dipped her ice cream in white chocolate. The museums. Especially the museums. He started avoiding these places until he realized he couldn't go *anywhere* anymore. Sure, Carlo had lived in Rome his whole life. It was *his* city in a way. But it had become Katherine's city when Carlo fell in love with her, and the place lost its charm when she was gone. So he moved to Paris, a city that Katherine was always ready to leave after a few days. "It just feels too anonymous, doesn't it? Like how every hospital room looks the same. I'd get lost here." She boarded the plane home with an extra spring in her step.

Katherine was still here, of course. Carlo saw her. But here he could catch a break from seeing her on every corner. So he sat on the Metro with no destination. He had been doing so morning after morning for two years now.

Some days without his wife were bearable. Others were not.

As he skimmed the Boldini article, he wiped a tear from his cheek.

Today would be one of those unbearable days.

Mercredi

Carlo had left his copy of *la Repubblica* at home. He sat and watched the train pass through tunnels and stops, people getting on and off.

“Carlo!” Two purple Mary Janes ran toward him. “You’re here!” Franny hopped up onto the seat across from him. Her mother trailed behind her, busy checking emails on her phone. She sat a few rows away.

“Guess what I saw yesterday?”

Carlo assumed that if he waited without speaking, Franny would tell him. He looked her way. Today she was wearing a magenta tutu.

“The Eiffel Tower! Mom showed me a picture of it before we came, and it didn’t look very big, but in person, it’s huge. Mom said there are staircases that go all the way to the top, but I was too scared to be that high up. And Mom got a call from a lawyer that made her upset, so we had to take a break. Maybe I’ll go back when I’m bigger.”

“You’ve seen it once, you’ve seen it a million times, kid.” *Unlike the ancient ruins in Rome*. Carlo thought about the rich history of his city, how it had been around for centuries. Paris had even been a part of the Roman empire. *Rome, I. Paris, 0*.

“Why do you speak English, but live in Paris?” Franny twirled her hair with her fingers. The purple polish on them matched her shoes.

“I grew up in Rome, actually. My wife was American. Now I live in Paris. So I speak Italian, English, and French.”

“Did your wife speak French?”

“No, she preferred Italy to France.”

“But what about America? That’s where I live. I like it there. Didn’t she like it?”

Katherine had been proud of her home, the states. Her family still lived in the Midwest, so she had taken the kids and Carlo there often to visit. He could never decide if it was Rome or himself that kept her in Italy.

“She did. But she liked Rome more.”

“I’ve never been to Rome. Do you like it there?”

“Of course I like it.”

“But you like Paris more?”

“No, that’s not what I said.” Carlo felt trapped in this question and answer game that so many young children enjoy. *How can I make a six-year-old understand?*

“Did you and your wife like the same things? Sometimes Mom and Dad argue because they don’t like the same things.”

“Yes, we did. I didn’t like everything she liked, but that was okay. We had plenty in common.” Carlo noticed Franny’s mother take a phone call. She pulled a small notepad out of her purse to jot down a few things. All he heard her say was something about a court date and her lawyer.

“So you both liked Rome?”

Carlo glanced at the map above their heads. He thought about the places he could get to from these stops—the Orsay Museum, Moulin Rouge, Place de la Concorde. He thought about how, although he had lived in Paris for two years now, these tourist attractions would always feel like just that—places for visitors. Places he didn’t belong.

“Yes, we both liked Rome. We both liked it a lot.”

Juedi

The Metro was running slower than normal. Carlo grumbled about it. He didn't have anywhere to be, of course, but he didn't like changes in his routine. His pocket started to vibrate, and he pulled out his flip phone.

"Hey dad, how are you?" It was Clara.

"I'm doing fine, honey, how are you guys?" Carlo hated talking on the phone in the Metro. He hadn't talked to his daughter in a few weeks, but he hated feeling like everyone could hear their conversation, even if it was in Italian.

"Good, good. Busy as usual. I just wanted to call to make sure you had written down the date of Maddie's dance recital. She's really excited about her grandpa being there." Carlo could hear the hesitation in Clara's voice. He slid his datebook out of his back pocket, and flipped forward three weeks. Carlo looked at where Maddie had written "My Dance Recital" in pink sparkly pen and listened to his daughter say, "Do you need any help booking a flight or anything? The kids can't wait to see you."

"Clara, don't you worry about me. I will be there."

"Great. Oh, and dad?" She paused and cleared her throat. "I found a box of Mom's old postcards when I was cleaning the house. You know, the ones she made everyone send her anytime they set foot in an art museum?"

Carlo laughed. He didn't want to cry. "I know the ones. Set them to the side. I'll look through them soon. Bye honey."

"Bye Dad, see you soon."

Carlo had forgotten about Katherine's extensive postcard collection. He always loved the way her face lit up when she found one in the mailbox. It reminded him of the night they met, the night she illuminated the city.

“Uh, excusez-moi, sir.” Carlo felt a tap on his shoulder. *Franny?*

He looked up to see a Metro employee hovering over him. “This is the end of the line.”

Carlo looked out the train window and saw the Mairie d’Issy stop. When he stood up, his copy of *la Repubblica* fell to the ground. He noticed how crumbled the pages were, the ink smudges on his hands. He must have been fidgeting this morning. Franny’s words were replaying in his head. *So you both liked Rome?*

Venerdì

Carlo never had a destination in mind when he boarded the Metro. Sometimes, along the way, he was inspired to get off and explore the city, walk through a museum, or lounge in a garden. Today, he thought about where he really wanted to go. Somewhere between the Madeleine and Concorde stops, he found his destination.

He stepped off the train and walked with his head held high. He paid attention to each step he took on his way up the stairs and out of the station. They felt important.

The man at the taxi stand nodded a greeting, and Carlo gazed at the quaint, Haussmann buildings in front of him. A woman three stories up stepped out into the sun to water her pot of peonies. She swatted at a nearby pigeon and ducked back inside.

Katherine wouldn’t have wanted Carlo to be here.

“*Bonjour*, where to?” The taxi driver rolled down his window and waited for a reply. The meter ticked as Carlo took another look at the busy Paris street. He opened the door to the taxi and slid in.

“Charles de Gaulle Airport, please.” Carlo shut the door. “I’m going home.”