

Love's Whisper

You approached me that first day smiling the smile I fell in love with, but whether you already had your plan for me in mind or not I don't know. I felt vulnerable when the allure of a familiar muse enticed me. You lounged on a bench in the park and undid buttons of a dark peacoat, revealing a white neck line.

Love's Whisper. I flashed on the image of a woman in a diaphanous cloth, seated in an artist's studio. My words burst out loud, the title of a painting from memory.

Excuse me, what'd you say?

With your head tilted, you held a sideways smile that embellished brown eyes, rosy cheeks, and curled brunette strands dangling below a pull-down cozy cap. You smoothed wrinkles of your jeans, and then patted the vacant space on the bench.

Come sit, you said. Call me Kiddo.

Your eyes caught a glint of gray twilight, and I imagined you sprawled across a large rock, a curly-haired Cupid angel primping your hair. We were alone and I wanted to be polite, at my age, and not frighten you. I know how encounters may be taken the wrong way, and cause distress.

Raymond, I whispered. My name. I'll sit for a moment.

I shuffled through brown leaves scurrying on a dirt path between us, and sat at the edge of wooden slats. I stretched my legs, pushed wind-blown strands of hair from my forehead and fixed my scarf under a light jacket.

Relax Raymond. You seem distracted—are you feeling well?

Your comment broke the illusion and I offered a meek response: I feel out of place at times. When my head is full, I take walks trying to empty all that trash.

Ah, I know the feeling. Working out regrets from the past?

Rather, my future as well as the past, I said.

Nostalgia shows all over your face.

My life changed fast, I said. I'm settling in this new place after four months.

Like you're going through a fog, you said. You come out the other side and everything is in a new light.

Like that, yes.

I read people like a book, you said. Go on tell me, I'm a good listener.

A breeze cooled the air. Not knowing if I should say anything, I admired your profile. Stretching my arm over the back frame, I caught a scent of lavender from you drifting my way.

The image of you sitting here, I said—your pose brought to mind paintings of Guillaume Seignac, a French artist.

You nodded. I've seen his work and know a little of his life.

He's *always* in my mind, I said. I explained that Seignac studied with prominent artists in Paris in the 1890s; he portrayed women in the classical style, draped in cloth, often having a Cupid angel whispering in their ear. His work, I said, is part of an exhibit of French art being arranged here. I'm the city's new art gallery director.

Your face brightened, as you joked, oh, I now know *the man in charge*.

I let out a laugh burying my earlier discomfort.

We chatted about life and our lives, what we liked, the latest movies we've seen, books we've read. Dimming daylight signaled an end to our conversation.

A scampering squirrel caught your eye as you asked, do you live around here, Raymond?

Near the metropolitan theater, know it?

Gone to movies there and concerts. You stood and buttoned your coat. Let's go have a drink, Raymond. Would you mind? I'd like to hear about your French art world.

I paused, knowing I had nothing to do that evening. My night's in your hands—I'm all yours.

You tucked up your collar. I'll take you to a club, not far from your *domicile*, okay—*d'accord*?

Ah, I speak *francaise*, too.

Twilight dappled our walk to the iron gate at the edge of the park. You hooked your arm around my elbow.

We neared the downtown lights. While I kept bantering of feeling out of place, your voice took on a deep tone, muffled by the coat collar pulled-up. It's strange, you said. You go for a walk and taste freedom, yet feel vulnerable, and forget who you are.

Perhaps fate brought me to you, I said.

We turned at an alley off the main street and stood below a flashing neon sign above an arched doorway.

Here we are. Your breath sent a wisp in the air.

At the door, a leather jacket wearing layers of gold chains blocked the entry way but allowed us in without paying a cover charge.

On us—said leather jacket. We owe you, Kiddo. Leather jacket stood aside, asking you, is he your gray-haired Ace?

A friend who feels lost, you told him. First time.

Whatever—takes all kinds.

You took my hand, leading the way. Inside we found a teeming entourage of flamboyant players in costumes like we had stepped into the past: the days of artist Toulouse Lautrec in Paris where he sketched portraits of writers, artists, and dancers in the famous Montmartre neighborhood.

We chose a wobbly table midway between a long bar and a theater stage enclosed in glass. The players mingled about, their voices rising in a pitch above the music. You ordered an orange tequila sunrise and I had a seven and seven.

Kiddo, *darr-lin*—so grand seeing you. At our table stood a woman with a fluffy pompadour over a buxomed Marie Antoinette gown like a sketch taken out of Lautrec's portfolio. Her voice resonated as she leaned down, air-kissed your cheek, and extended a hand toward me for a courtesy kiss. I'm La Fontaine—call me for a good time honey, if she dumps you.

La Fontaine asked you, is he the one? Not bad—a bit older.

Don't know, you said, maybe, maybe not. You flashed your sideways smile as I picked at cashews in a small bowl.

La Fontaine swung her arm taking in the room. We're celebrating a birthday, she said. Our *diva* over there wanted a *Paree* night—and we know how Scorpio acts when *she* wants something. Oh, guests arriving—must go for greetings. *Ta ta*.

I sipped my drink and the liquor hit hard. I told you all about the Paris art world and the work of Guillaume Seignac.

I know his work. Your eyebrows arched as you asked, are his paintings valuable today?

A few are worth a lot, I admitted, if they're put up for bid at an art auction house. Worth more today, than when the artist added his signature. One or two might sell for thousands of dollars—considering collectors' tastes.

What a huge responsibility, Raymond. You've earned people's trust and artists' admiration. I can help, if you'd like.

The disc jockey's music alternated between hip-hop and hard-nosed rap, while blending in string instrumentals of old *Paree*. A few costumed players interrupted our chat. Each gave me a side glance as if I were a rare attraction.

What's about to happen, I asked.

Watch the stage.

In scenes of comic relief, the costumed players entered behind the stage's glass wall. In the foreground, they flaunted with each other, bending at their hips. They blew kisses, teasing the audience.

When a burst of fog began venting down behind the glassed-in stage, players feigned their plight as if seeking escape; they extended their hands flush against the glass wall. La Fontaine appeared on stage and waved, *come along darr-lins*, and led them into the fog. The *Paree* spectacle triggered my recent dream where I meandered alleyways full of vendors, selling fish and fruit, and avoided horse-drawn carriages moving over cobblestones.

You lowered your head across your arms on the table, then pulled up quickly, and touched my shoulder, saying, Wednesday night, meet me at Red Rose Cafe. You rose from the table.

What—you leaving me already?

Come alone, Raymond. We have much to talk of—about art, about us. You waved at the few players left on stage behind the glass wall, and exited passed the doorman in leather.

I felt abandoned, realizing I didn't know who you were or why I met you at this moment. While I doubted finding out anytime soon, I had more drinks and indulged in the theatrical spirit.

Old *Paree* appealed more than being alone in the dark of my single *domicile*.

On Wednesday, I freshened up after a difficult day at the art gallery setting-up the exhibit: long distance calls for a shipment, a fuss over credit card payments, a large order of hors-d'oeuvres for the opening. I spruced up wanting to look sharp, trimmed my beard and mustache, and added a tab of Camus aftershave. All for you.

At the Red Rose Cafe, I grabbed a booth near the fireplace. Heat from crackling wood filtered into my bones while musicians with instruments entered for an open mic night. Each surveyed the room, the audience. A large man came in, his hair a greased mess. He wore a flamingo shirt, tagged with *Aloha Love and Mercy*. He came to my booth. I'm Archer, he said as he squeezed in. Buy me a beer—I'll trade this here demo-recording I made, he said—it's the *only* copy. Might be a collector's item, *some day*. Listen to the lyrics of *Finding Lost Time*—if you need a ticket home anytime.

I figured buying drinks for a guitar player fit local bar custom, not uncommon, and ordered a beer for Archer from the waitress. He gulped it down. I tossed him a few dollars for his music.

While I drank more brews waiting for you, I caught the last song when Archer orchestrated all the musicians on stage for an oldies song called *Pink Cadillac*. Just like in a Montmartre club, the sounds riveted the audience; they sang the lyrics, clapped to the drum beat, and foot stomped.

When the music ended, everyone left after a rousing good time. You had not come so I paid the waitress, and she said, oh, you must be Raymond, right? Here's a note from Kiddo. Can't be here tonight.

Inside an envelope I found a city map and hand-written note: *Raymond, I don't have your number. Tonight we play a game of hide and seek—and escape. You will recognize names of paintings. Follow the map. Je t'aime, Kiddo.*

Dotted lines connected X-marks on street routes. I buttoned up and stepped into the chill outside. The game started in the adjacent block at a hotel lobby, where a desk girl handed me a note: *Follow Psyche to the stars*. The map denoted the top floor of a red-brick building, and its planetarium.

A bearded man inside directed me to a large telescope. Through the eyepiece lens, the glow of a waxing November moon overwhelmed the stars; I found Orion but not the Pleiades cluster. The man handed me a note: *follow the Wave*. A dotted line pointed to an X-site two blocks away, a bookstore with its door ajar. I peeked inside. A light on an easel revealed a large print of a painting by Guillaume Seignac, one called *Indolence*. A woman lounged across a chaise lounge. Taped at the corner, a hand-written note read: *take the print for your journey*.

Outside I again checked the map. I recognized the next place marked by an X: the art gallery that I managed, a four block uphill walk. Upon arrival, I found the front doors

unlocked and the security system unsecured. I switched on overhead lights and crossed white marbled floors to the back gallery room.

My breath escaped as did a sound of dread: *oh no, no*.

My body crumpled against the wall.

Frames on the walls stood naked; four empty spaces where I had hung paintings by Guillaume Seignac, now gone missing from the exhibit. Each vacant space held a single lily, emitting a scent of lavender.

I felt betrayed by your smile and slouched to the floor. The print I held from the bookstore slipped from my hand.

On the opposite wall, a sketch of a hand pointed the way: *go to the elevated rail track, enter an open car*. After the doors closed, a note tied to a silver pole read, *wait until the damn thing stops*. The motor churned as the railcar traversed the track, and picked-up speed through all stations. Thick fog blanketed the track, and white droplets streamed against the windows until the wheels screeched to a stop at a platform in an underground tunnel.

Morning light penetrated down a far staircase onto the platform. A plump man in a sweat-laden white shirt sat on a plastic chair; his arms folded in front until he raised a hand and pointed at the staircase. I scrambled up the concrete steps and found myself outside within sight of the Eiffel Tower. From where I stood on the Left Bank of River Seine, the Louvre Museum sat across the river in grayness. I leaned against a concrete flood wall, and scanned the familiar setting.

Below I saw you—*you* sitting on a concrete bench at the river's edge. I undid the latch of a waist-high gate leading down.

I drew close to you. Instead of brunette hair, curly blonde hair dangled at your shoulders. You wore an expensive Max Mara wool and cashmere coat.

A fluffy brown cat lay at your side.

Kiddo?

Call me Marguerite here in Paris.

A new *name*, a new *coat*—what of the *paintings*?

They're safe here, you said. At your feet rested a canvas bag, revealing wrapped ends of rolled oil paintings, three to be exact. Except for *Indolence*—that painting just sold at a high bid at an art auction. Two hundred fifty two *thousand* dollars.

I asked, which *Indolence* painting? There were seven paintings done in eighteen ninety three.

I remember, you said. Seven times I sat modeling for each portrait. Cold months. No heat in that salon studio, and me—*me*, wearing a long thin veil of see-through cloth.

I reached inside my coat pocket and took out the recorded music and the map that led my way to Paris.

Your smile brightened below those brown eyes, as you said, also I found an old playback deck if you feel a need *to return* after listening to *Finding Lost Time*. We'll live well here. We can afford a lavish *domicile* where Guillaume Seignac once lived on the famous Montparnasse Boulevard, at number eight four.

I turned toward the River Seine and tossed the recording into the water.

Come sit. You picked up the cat, opening a space on the bench. Okay, *d'accord?*

The smile I fell in love with drew me in, again, when you said, let me tell you of a new plan I have in mind *for us*.