

PARIS IN APRIL

April fantasized about escape. While dusting lampshades at work: if the department store caught fire, she would shimmy up the water pipe and crawl out through the vents. Riding her bike home on Comm Ave.: would they wonder if she was dead? Would anyone think to check inside the ceilings? In bed: after she escaped the vents, she would find a new job in a new city and maybe a new haircut. The possibilities, the what ifs, buoyed her across her days until the idea of change mirrored change itself.

So when the phone rang at 3 a.m. and a voice, melodic and unfamiliar, explained that they needed her in Europe, April's heart leapt.

"Me?" she said, rubbing her eyes awake. The Parisian nurse on the other end pressed further and April received the information in drowsy waves. Her mother, a flight attendant, had a stroke, on her way to Cairo.

April could barely whisper a response—her throat had grasped the words before her mind could. She asked her to explain more. Could she walk, talk, when could she come back home? But the nurse spoke only a little English and asked that a family member come to Paris as soon as possible.

April booked a flight for the following evening. In the morning she called her boss and told him that she needed the week off for a family emergency. It was Monday. Her boss, a young man, younger than she, told her that she needed to take vacation time and he'd have to find someone to cover her shifts. She contemplated for a moment, gathered her hypothetical trips and holidays, allowed them to drift away, and agreed.

On the airplane April slept. She read a gossip magazine. She didn't think about the flight attendants who paced the aisles and asked to collect her trash. When she arrived in Paris, April directed the taxi driver to the only two words she could find, Eiffel Tower, where she had booked a nearby hostel room for 20 euros a night. It was Winter 2009 and the Parisians around her tucked their chins and mouths behind scarves and black coats, silently navigating the wide, grey streets. April allowed herself a moment underneath the Tower's steel supports and tilted her head

back as if to swallow the sublime depth. Then she found an outdoor café and waited for hospital visiting hours to start.

April had learned at the time of the phone call that Ruth had been on a four-hour layover in Paris coming from Lebanon and going to Cairo, an unusually long flight shift. A security guard found her writhing on the floor next to the gate, a box of Madeleine cookies crushed underneath her. The medics couldn't come soon enough. They had to transport her in a baggage trolley out of the terminal and to the airport medical center.

April pushed away the image, heavy and round in her memory, but it kept rolling back: her mother half-paralyzed, body jolting as the cart swung through the terminal around passengers and their luggage. These anxieties shape-shifted within April as she waited at the cafe. Her mother's health, yes, but the issue of money, too, haunted her thoughts. The plane ticket had cost twelve hundred dollars, over half of her savings account, and while she considered this one reason why people saved money, she felt the vague security lift from her body. April dragged her pinky finger through the middle of the nesting hearts and licked the sweet froth. She knew this was an inappropriate thought and immediately felt guilty, which followed with the thought that her mother wouldn't survive, or at least, would not be the same again.

Growing up, it was April's grandparents who babysat while Ruth was in the air. When Ruth came home she let April eat spoonfuls of condensed milk and mangoes for dinner, until April told her she wanted a responsible dinner, so Ruth began buying frozen meals with compartments for corn, potatoes, and enchiladas. April loved her mother. She had never questioned their dynamic until a group of schoolgirls said her mother was gone all the time because she didn't love her. The schoolgirls wore matching patent leather ballet flats and blew pink bubblegum balloons that popped over their noses. The boys teased them; the teachers gave them gold stars. April was plain in comparison, with skinny limbs but a round belly, skin blotched by rosacea, her hair cut into an unattractive bowl. She went home to Ruth and relayed this message, not in tears but with genuine contemplation.

“Is it true, Mom?” she asked. “Is that why you leave for days at a time?”

It wasn't April but Ruth who became emotional. She knew how cruel other people could be. Ruth gave April half a chocolate donut and told her to ignore this hostility-- of course it wasn't true.

The air in Paris had turned frigid after only an hour. April could feel the chill from the wrought iron chair through her jeans. She decided to walk back to her hostel and wait there instead. When she arrived at her room, she found two German tourists and one Australian man who had a long blonde braid that swung between his shoulder blades. April introduced herself to the Australian, Nicolas, but not to the Germans, who took their backpacks and left as soon as she entered the room.

“I've been away from home for 16 months,” Nicolas told her and asked, “Are you a traveler?”

To which April replied, “My mother is a flight attendant.” In reality, April had only been to Canada and once to California to visit her cousins.

As Nicolas described in a casual manner the 30 countries he had already visited—all of Southeast Asia, most of South America, the United States, Finland, and Europe— he began to undress in front of her, hidden only partially by the bedpost. He was thin but with broad shoulders that were marked with tiny scars. A lizard tattoo on his right hip peaked out the top of his shorts. April wasn't sure where to put her eyes, so she lay down on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

“When did you arrive in Paris?” he asked.

“This morning,” she replied.

“Where will you go? Notre Dame? Versailles? The Louvre?”

“I'm not sure. I have to see my mom. She's here too.” April thought about sharing more, but wasn't sure what else she should say.

“Groovy,” he replied. April looked over and he was fully dressed in a down coat and boots. She felt slightly disappointed.

“Well if you want to go to Versailles today, I'm going.”

“Thanks. I’m meeting her in a little while. But maybe tomorrow.”

A knock on the door broke their conversation. Nicolas answered. It was a blonde woman in a pink jumpsuit, her face closed like a tulip.

“Ready?” she said, and Nicolas walked out with her.

Loneliness dragged April from the initial distraction of her arrival. She went downstairs and asked the man at the front desk—an American—for directions to the hospital, which was only a 10-minute walk up Rue Lecourbe. He drew a red line on her map left, then right, and April followed it exactly, hardly even noticing the buildings decorated with ornate thresholds or the cantor of city noise rising and falling as she passed by the storefronts.

She arrived at the hospital lobby and explained that she needed to see her mother, and so the nurse called another nurse who spoke English (the woman April had spoken with on the phone) and she brought her to her room in the intensive care unit.

Ruth was asleep on her hospital bed, her palms face-up against her sides, her mouth parted slightly as though in mid-speech. April and Ruth had the same face-- a nose that curved naturally into their broad eyes, a mouth that bowed like a half-moon, a soft chin and long neck -- that made them glow with a kind of warm sadness that inspired affection. Ruth was still in full makeup from work and the bluish jade hue of her gown reflected off of her skin.

April ran to her mother and collapsed across her chest.

“Mommy,” she said and released a sound, half laugh, half cry. She hadn’t used the name Mommy since she was a little girl. Ruth still didn’t have muscle control in her mouth and so her response came out stilted, “A-pil,” and so she settled for “baby,” saliva bubbling from her lips as she bumbled the sounds. April got into bed with her and recounted the phone call, the plane ride, the taxi ride, the Eiffel Tower, the hearts in her latte, her roommate with the lizard tattoo, and by the time April finished her mother had fallen back asleep.

The doctor came in. April scooted out of the bed and patted her hair down. He told her that Ruth had suffered a mild stroke, that she had lost some muscle control along her left body and face which caused issues with vision, mobility, and that she was having some difficulty with memory recollection. But they were able to stabilize her quickly, which meant she had a greater chance of a full and quick recovery. They would start rehabilitation tomorrow.

“We will do as much as we can here, but she will have to continue her treatment in the United States.”

“How long will she stay?”

“We can say better in the coming days. A week, maybe. Maybe two.”

April found the lyric in his words hypnotizing. She listened to every syllable, every pause.

“Two weeks?” she repeated.

“We’ll know more when she’s ready for therapy.”

April sat in the room next to her mother for a while longer, admiring her round fingernails and smooth cheekbones. Even asleep after a stroke she looked calm and healthy. April kissed Ruth goodbye, wishing that she’d recover as gracefully as the doctor had suggested.

She walked back in a mess of thought. April told herself that it would be cruel to enjoy Paris without her mother and decided that she would read in her hostel room. But then she remembered how at peace Ruth looked and how often she told April to leave her room as a child. When she arrived at the hostel she compromised that if she found Nicolas he would invite her for a drink, in which case, it would be rude to say no. But when she opened the bedroom door the place was empty. She flicked off the light and returned to the lobby where the hostel had organized a sangria social. A few other people, including the American from the front desk, were seated in foldout chairs and beanbags, sipping wine from clear plastic cups. April poured a glass. The American waved to her:

“Find the hospital ok?”

“Yes,” said April, and then he went on chatting with two other girls.

After another sangria, April went to bed. The room was still empty when she fell asleep. In the middle of the night she heard Nicolas enter the room and stumble over his suitcase, snicker quietly, then fall on his mattress and snore like a chainsaw.

The Germans never returned. When April woke in the morning, Nicolas was asleep with his feet on the pillow and his head at the foot of the bed, pants and shoes off and coat still on. The Germans’ beds were stripped and their bags were gone. April picked up Nicolas’s pants, which were flung in the middle of the room, and folded them on his locker, organized his shoes, then brought her toiletries to the shared bathroom.

She undressed carefully so that her clothes wouldn’t touch the communal tiled floor. The shower water came out in loud bursts at first and then a steady, strong stream. April let the water run over her eyelids and lips. At 30 years old, she had lost interest in exploring her body-- after too many brief and listless relationships, she had begun to associate intense pleasure with teenage virility. But in the semi-private space of this shower something in her mind relaxed, perhaps from exhaustion, and she finally felt her skin underneath fingers and palms. She laughed a little and experienced the sensation over her nipples, between her legs, around her neck, down her back. Occasionally she could hear the metal door slam and a toilet flush, so she would stop, wash her hair routinely, and then continue again, until her hands were so pruned they no longer glided freely. She toweled off, put on her jeans and grey t-shirt, and went back to the hostel room.

Nicolas had woken up. She pretended not to notice and straightened the items in her locker.

“Did you fold my pants?” he asked. His voice was dry and low.

“Oh. Yes. They were in the middle of the floor.”

Nicolas rolled over and sat up, patted his cheeks a few times, and let out a big yawn.

“I want to go to Notre Dame today,” he said. “Do you want to come?”

April waited for some intentional space between his question and her response, which she deemed natural but perhaps came across as aloof.

“What time are you leaving?”

“Anytime you want to go.”

“O.K. I have to see my mom again at 3 p.m.”

Nicolas made a joke about how Americans are so preoccupied with time and April giggled forcibly, but then clarified:

“She’s in the hospital.”

“Oh April,” he said and apologized. “I didn’t know. If you can’t go then, well, that’s all right. I understand.”

“No, it’s O.K. The doctor said she’s doing very well. Let’s go to Notre Dame.”

As they walked, Nicolas explained that they would take a subway to Notre Dame. April saved her subway ticket, a small slip of paper, and told Nicolas she would make a collage about her trip. On the subway she saw a girl with a purple wig and a pet rat on her shoulder, and a man who used a machine to roll his own cigarettes.

“Look,” she said to Nicolas, and pointed to the wigged woman, but Nicolas shook her off.

“Shh, stop pointing--” he whispered.

They arrived at Notre Dame and immediately Nicolas walked ahead to take photographs. Inside, the walls vibrated from the glow of hundreds of lit candles. The building itself smelled dry and musty, the way a space so cavernous but frequently traversed maintains the aroma of both time and occupancy. April lit a candle for her mother. Nicolas was chatting with other tourists, so she knelt down at a pew and prayed. She had never prayed before, she and her mother didn’t follow a religion, but still, April pressed her palms together and held them close to her heart.

With her eyes closed, she didn’t see God. April saw darkness, and in that darkness she saw hints of blues and pinks twirling through a galaxy; she felt her eyes rotate down and back even though there was nothing to see, and for a while she

forgot where her body existed in space. For the time she only existed inside a deep vacuum of herself, no thoughts, no memory or worry, just twinkling black, until a gentle pat landed on her back. Nicolas wanted to show her a statue of the Virgin Mary. She opened her eyes and sucked her life back in. The force made her dizzy and she held on to Nicolas's elbow as he led her to a nativity scene arranged in the corner.

When it was time, April decided to go to the hospital directly. The joy from her morning had faded and she felt a painful ache to see her mother. Nicolas directed her from the train and they parted without a hug.

"See you later, maybe?" said April.

"Sure, let me know," Nicolas replied over his shoulder.

Ruth was sitting up straight when April arrived this second time. Her face was cleaned of all the makeup and her skin looked shiny and taught. She had practiced walking with the doctor, which she did in small shuffles around the room, like a very slow procession. April asked the nurses how she could help, and they suggested that the two of them play memory games while April fed her a bowl of rice pudding dusted with cinnamon.

"O.K., here's a hard one," said April. "Do you remember the first word I spoke?"

"No," Ruth replied.

April said she didn't remember either.

"No, that's it. Your first word was 'no'."

April pressed the space between her eyebrows.

"That's awful."

"Oh, well. You were just a kid who hated the food I gave you," Ruth told her, but seeing her daughter's withered expression instead said, "Or maybe your first word was 'mama'. That's a common one."

April's brow softened. "How about the town where I live, mama?"

"Where you were born—Allston."

“And where you live?”

Ruth paused and searched the wall in front of her.

“I can’t think of the name,” she said.

“It’s alright. You live in Jacksonville, Florida. You used to live in Allston but you moved to Florida.”

Ruth wiped a bit of rice pudding that had fallen out of her mouth. In regaining muscle control, sometimes her arm and face would spasm involuntarily.

“I remember that Boston is too cold.”

“I know. But maybe you should come back with me when we go home. The hospitals are very good there. I can help you with your therapy.”

Ruth inched underneath the covers on her bed.

“Sure, honey. We’ll see.”

A week passed and April only saw Nicolas in brief passing, mostly while he was still asleep in bed. Ruth had made tremendous progress. She walked on her own, her mouth no longer drooped, she kept up in increasingly longer conversations, her peripheral vision steadied.

During the time of her mother’s recovery, April had developed a routine. She would wake up, have breakfast at the hostel, take the subway to the Seine and walk along the water, then go back to the cafe, drink a latte with hearts, and visit Ruth. At the hospital, the mother and daughter pair would play cards and try to read French magazines out loud to each other. April bought silver nail polish from a pharmacy and painted her mother’s nails. The doctor had taken a liking to April and Ruth as well, and brought them sugar cookies his wife made, or stopped by to check her blood pressure and practice his English.

Unconsciously, April started to think of Paris as her home. She called her boss from the hostel on Sunday morning and told him she would need another week off, that her mother was still recovering. He told her that he couldn’t pay her for it because she didn’t have any more vacation time. April hardly recognized that she

still had a life back home, so accustomed to Paris, her mother, her small hostel bed she'd become.

"That's fine," she told her boss. "This is important."

It was that same day that the doctor told April that Ruth would be released in a few days.

"We're expecting that she will be well enough to go on Wednesday," the doctor told her, and April clasped her shirt collar.

"Are you sure? She's still having trouble with vision. She can't walk very fast. I asked her the other day to alphabetically list all the countries in Africa and she couldn't. She's always been able to do that."

The doctor thought April was anxious about her mother's recovery and assured her that he would connect her with a good hospital in her home area. But actually, April was anxious about returning to Boston.

"I want her to come home with me," April said, but the doctor advised against it.

"It will be comforting for her to get back in her own space. Find a routine again."

April left the hospital cracked with pain. She knew she needed to buy a plane ticket home and if she waited too long the prices would be impossible. She used the hostel computer and drained the rest of her savings account for her return flight on Wednesday. "How awful this trip has been," she thought. If only she had just stayed home, her feelings wouldn't have swelled to the point of combustion. She went back to the hostel room, burst, and laid down on the bed, her face pressed against the pillow. She pretended to suffocate herself for a moment, and then she let out a sob.

Nicolas returned from his day spent at the Louvre, his third time there in the week, and saw that April was upset. He decided that he better not get involved. He went into his backpack and pulled out a stack of magazines which he began to sort through and dump into the garbage pail. April cried louder, perhaps on purpose, and

Nicolas paused, contemplated whether he should leave or try to console her. But before he could decide, April spoke first.

“When do you go?”

“I think tomorrow,” he said. “I’m taking a train to Switzerland. And you?”

“Wednesday. I just bought a ticket back.”

“Is your mother doing better?” Nicolas reckoned that she wasn’t, which must have been the cause for all the tears, but when April said yes, much better, Nicolas took a harsher tone.

“Then why are you crying?”

“I don’t know.”

She sat up on the bed and wiped the mascara from under her eyes.

“Hey,” she said, and Nicolas could sense where her tone would take them.

“Can we have a drink tonight? I’d love it if you could take me to a spot you know. Someplace I wouldn’t have found on my own.”

In truth, Nicolas didn’t know of any such spots, but his traveler’s prowess would never allow him to admit as much. The way April phrased the question, “I’d love” “you” “take me” “on my own” elevated his ego into a moment of rapture.

“I could do that,” he said casually. “Let me think of a place.”

April found the lipstick she kept in the back pocket of her knapsack and used a little on her cheeks and lips. She brushed her hair into a side part and tucked the loose strands behind her ears. Nicolas changed into a wool sweater and April watched him undress without turning her eyes, as though they had known each other for years. She explained to him the progress her mother had made since the stroke and he returned genuine words of encouragement.

On their way to the subway, Nicolas dropped into a store and purchased a bottle of cheap clear liquor, which he stowed in his jacket.

“This will keep us warm,” he said.

April thought that maybe he would take her outside the city. Or to a bar in Mouffetard where all the famous writers sat and discussed war and peace, life and death.

But really, the underground spot Nicolas had in mind was a staircase that led onto the Seine, a place April knew well from her daily rituals before the hospital. She couldn't help but confess this to Nicolas, too, who crouched onto the stairwell and opened the liquor bottle.

"O.K., Ms. Paris, but have you ever swung Sambuca, out of a bag, with an Australian, by a river?"

She hadn't. In fact, April didn't drink very much at all, and after four or five sips she felt dizzy and nimble. A boat passed by and the passengers waved at them. Nicolas stood up and lifted his arms yelling, "Ahoy mate!" and collapsed back down laughing.

"I saw that lizard tattoo you have," April said and touched his side. "It looks like it's crawling out of your pants."

"It's for my brother. He died from a deadly lizard bite in Australia."

"Really?" said April, who turned to Nicolas and put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make fun."

Nicolas laughed. "Of course not! I don't have a brother. It was a stupid thing I did when I was a teenager."

April might have found the joke funny if she hadn't been drunk, but the mixture of the cheap Sambuca, her impending departure, and memories in the hospital turned her mood on its heel.

"Don't joke about that," said April. "If something happened to my mother... to my mother..." and from there she started to weep. She tore the bottle from Nicolas and knocked back a big swig.

"Easy there," said Nicolas, but before he could take the liquor for himself, April grabbed onto his hand and placed it on her leg.

Neither said anything and at first Nicolas tried to move away, but April held on tighter.

“What is it about me that you don’t like? I know you liked that woman in the pink jumpsuit. What’s so good about her? What’s so bad about me?”

Nicolas didn’t know what to say. He denied any attraction to the girl in the pink jumpsuit.

“I met her once. We walked around the Arc du Triomphe and got hot chocolate on Rue de Rivoli. She was a tad boring, honestly.”

Nicolas had spent more than just one day with Julia, the girl in the pink jumpsuit, and in actuality he had been quite enamored with her. There were a few nights where he snuck into her room and they made love quietly next to the sleeping strangers in her four-person bunker. She had left for Sweden a few days prior and it affected Nicolas deeply. He made her promise to write, and she said she would, but he was convinced that it was a lie. Throughout the days his mind leapt into spells of jealousy. He cursed out loud, alone, in public, the way disturbed people might, and his obvious affection for Julia, an affection that interfered with his nomadic oeuvre, made him even more grieved.

So while he did not find April attractive, his impulse to forget Julia overwhelmed him. He moved his hand away and April grabbed it again, pushing it closer to her groin.

“Please,” she said, and Nicolas relented.

“Come on, April. Don’t beg. You don’t have to beg.”

He put his hands inside her pants and fumbled around, his fingers twitching without accuracy or intention, but April told herself that it was the best sexual encounter she’d ever had. She tried to reciprocate but he was limp, so they buttoned up, no longer able to stand their exposed skin against the frigid air. They shared the bottle on their way back to their room, both feeling half empty and half full.

The next day April woke up late and found that Nicolas was already gone. He had left her a note, which he slipped underneath the corner of her pillow.

I'm sorry to leave without saying goodbye. I had to catch my train. Write me, please, you're a lovely girl. Good luck to your mum. He scribbled his email address at the end.

She clutched the note to her chest. "I will write Nicolas as soon as I get back to Boston," April told herself, and it was this possibility that got her out of bed.

April's last days in Paris consisted of many formalities: her mother's discharge paperwork, her recovery plan, the plane ticket home. She had to book Ruth a separate flight because she needed to fly at a lower altitude. They gave her compression socks to prevent blood clots. Ruth would return to Florida where a nurse would visit her at home twice a week.

When it was time to leave the hospital, April applied Ruth's makeup with her mother's instruction. She wiped beige cream over her cheeks and into the lines on her forehead. She plugged her eyelashes with sticky black mascara that dotted the skin above and below her eyes. Using the tip of her ring finger, Ruth wiped pink petroleum jelly on April's lips and then on her own. She donned a pair of April's jeans and a grey t-shirt. They folded the bluish jade hospital gown on the chair, then linked arms to the taxi, like two women on a stroll through an English garden. Ruth had traveled to so many cities for so many years, but never with her daughter, and this pride composed her despite the fear.

"Thank you," she said to April. "You're a very good daughter."

At the airport, April picked up a crossword puzzle at a bookstore and they tried a few at the gate. Ruth did pretty well. She remembered the words cologne, Billie Holiday, and time step. The gate attendant called the passengers on Flight 6186 to Jacksonville, Florida. Ruth mouthed along with the words. Eventually she would return to work, domestic flights only, but it would take nearly a year of recovery. April would call her mother every day and ask about her progress, always surprised by how much her mother relearned. On their final day in Paris, April watched her mother board the plane like watching a child on her first day of school. Ruth shuffled along and a young flight attendant helped her down the gate.

“I’m a flight attendant too,” Ruth told her and showed her the badge. Apparently there was enough space in first class, so they gave Ruth her own row, which Ruth would recall to April for many years. “Some people could be so kind,” she said, a phrase April had never heard her mother uncover before.