

# The Things We Love

Flair thinks back on their morning, traversing the spidery Parisian grid, venturing through four separate Paris arrondissements, or districts, as their walk dictated, from the Sacré-Cœur Basilica, the church on the hill, to the Père Lachaise Cemetery. Starting down the Boulevard de Magenta, they wandered through the streets and neighborhoods. It was a long, but enjoyable walk. Each was in good humor, commenting on the strange and half-familiar things they saw: a storefront—*Au Palais des Princesses*; the broad but tight rowhouses, then the sudden open spaces, like suns breaking cloud cover.

It was all old. The buildings, the architecture, even the news kiosques, like giant antiques set in the middle of their path, as if they were but children in a concrete wonderland. The foreignness, the smells—roses muted by heat, food and trails of trash. They were swimming in foreign language, in a foreign movie. The writing was cute, with its squiggly accents—*cédille*, *accent aigu*, *grave*, *circumflexe*. Even all of the traffic and business appeared cuter than what was found in the US; anger and frustration was voiced through car horns, but even those horns sounded polite and almost embarrassed, like the comical expressions storming across their faces. There seemed to be a hint of humor behind even the most exasperated. Was it because she was new to the city, or was this truly Paris? The language was similar or even a facsimile of the English, but by now she expected differences, however minor: *Tabaks*, *Office Depot*, *Informatique*, *les cyclistes crisscrossing*, the youth who seemed so determined and mature.

As she walked with her companions she sank down into herself more than usual; her hunch grew more pronounced. Tony was blond, muscular, and had a thick neck and eyebrows. He wasn't the most sensitive companion, but she found herself enjoying their playful verbal skirmishes; he was fun. Allison was dark and quiet, but intellectual in a way that made Flair want to know what made her tick.

Flair experienced looks from handsome men. She locked eyes with a leather-strapped young man at a bus stop, his eyes the pale blue eyes of a Siberian Husky. Her long neck always made her feel related to the greyhound. Her greatest wish in childhood was for her neck to shrink to normal. In bed she had curled into a ball, hunched her shoulders tightly, as if preparing for impact, and prayed to a god (for she tried more than one) to stop growing. She used to drift to sleep imagining gruesome ways to stunt her growth.

Enormous statues rose from the horizon, like a pop-up book, or stepped at them from behind drab concrete—*sans avertissement*. The dirty scents even seemed sweet. Mopeds crisscrossed the city. All of Paris looked down on them—a giant of a city, seeming to care for them, smack in its palms, as if they were the children in Oscar Wilde's *Selfish Giant*, who the giant comes to love after experiencing the unbearable fruitlessness of continuous winter.

Her nose is small, and unsymmetrical if you happen to stare, as both Allison and Tony have found occasion to do. She has an expressive face, which acts at times as a night light, attracting others (who may be scared of the dark) to her. She often wonders why she attracts any attention at all. But it's not her nose that worries her. She conceals a much deeper secret, which permeates and informs nearly every aspect of her life—she was born with a defective heart and already had a heart transplant at the

age of thirteen. She will need another, because hearts do not last forever, especially transplants. Neither Tony or Allison would be able to understand her at this time.

They couldn't see over the enormous walls of the Père Lachaise Cemetery. It was beautiful inside. They rambled down and up its alleys, under trees, past numerous, intriguing dead-end pressed brick paths. Tombs rose and dipped on their meander, like waving dorsal fins of a stone dragon at sea. The sunlight-shadow mix from the leaves speckled the graves, granting the place more dimensions than it actually possessed, as if the generous cemetery had summoned the underworld up for a cup of tea.

When they finally reached Oscar Wilde's grave, Flair laughed to herself when fully confronted by the austere Sphinx, carved from his tombstone, having been pelted with stamped lips. Someone had taped a note to the stone, on which was written:

“And all men kill the thing they love,  
By all let this be heard,  
Some do it with a bitter look,  
Some with a flattering word,  
The coward does it with a kiss,  
The brave man with a sword!”

“What the hell does that bullshit mean?”

Flair was disturbed at Tony's reaction, but she also wasn't sure what it meant, or if she even believed it herself.

“It's from a longer poem. He wrote it after seeing a fellow prisoner hung. Hanged?”

“Hanged, I think,” said Allison.

“What was he in prison for? What, was he a thief? Or did he murder someone?” Tony licked his thick lips.

“Sodomy.”

“What? Because he was—pardon my *French* ladies—screwing someone in the ass?”

“Oh my God, that is so crude,” said Allison, her weak protest broken up by group laughter.

“It was love. And he defended himself by reading Shakespeare's sonnets,” said Flair.

“But perhaps he too ended up killing the thing he loved. He does say *all men*. God Tony.” added Allison.

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All men kill the thing they love. The words haunt her. Flair decides it is true and that it relates to Allison, the quiet one, although she can't quite put her finger on it. Allison, who is so careful about her words, like she's afraid of what might come charging out of her mouth if she doesn't keep constant watch; it's endearing. She sees Allison now, curls and glasses buried in her guidebook, as they sit across from the Notre-Dame Cathedral. Flair recalls the structure's appearance in the bright sun yesterday. She swears it was a whole different thing, like a different person, dressed in yesterday's clothes.

“You know this is like Monet's paintings of the Cathedral. Was it this one?”

Allison and Tony glance at each other.

“You know, when he painted the same Cathedral over and over again in different times of the day—morning, afternoon in the bright light, evening sunset—“

“Oh yeah. Amazing!” chimes Allison.

Tony makes an exasperated expression. “Let's go. The party awaits, yall.”

“Aren't you even just a little curious about art?”

“Not really. I'd rather just have a good time. Anyway, so what? He painted this cathedral at different times of the day. What, did he leave his hat out for money, like one of those mechanical human statues we saw earlier? Or, did he have a *real* job?”

“Well, he wasn't a panhandler!”

“He was an artist, wasn't he?”

“Not all artists are starving Tony, and certainly not all artists are panhandlers.”

“I must have hit a nerve. So-rry. You...artist lover.” Tony laughs, apparently waiting for a reaction from the girls, but nothing comes and he stops.

Only now Flair sees the Cathedral in its own light; it also seems offended, perhaps only by the heartless passage of time, or by the flippant inching of day to night. Her sight is enhanced in this vacuum of sound, like a blind man's delicate ears. It is different, completely. Now intricate and defined, spotted by artificial light, crevasses and shadows revealed. In the day the sun bleached it indiscriminately, but the dusk, with its backdrop of Egyptian blue, provides safety for the Gothic cathedral's nooks and crannies to express themselves. Bricks reveal their individuality, the story-carved arched tympanum rises from the boxy doors. It is not only darker in color, but darker in...soul, in weight, more ominous, filled with such potential, magical...Does Tony get this?

But it hits her. It's not only the cathedral's character that changes in the light, it's that it also reflects the personalities and moods of those around it—improbable, but an odd memory tells her it's true. Before her transplant, long ago, she remembers moving out of her old house and leaving a small part of her behind, a part still attached to the house, forever stuck to it, like a nearly-invisible stubborn patch of scotch tape once cut neatly by a child to hang her erstwhile favorite drawing.

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The party is stuffed with unashamed smokers, laughter and drinks; wine is de rigueur. Full of zest, the trio begins to fill themselves with alcohol. Allison hangs at the social edges, measuring her sips.

It is in the kitchen's artificial light that she knows it—she has a terrible crush on Allison. In this light, in this paucity of light, Allison's figure is cut tragic. Her physical quirks and unique potentials creep out, like hermit crabs. Allison is semi-content in the center of this festive maelstrom, a dark glistening sparkle hangs in her brown eyes as she cautiously lifts the glass edge to her thin lips, often grasping the goblet with both hands, like her private miniature rock of Gibraltar. She's framed by Egyptian blue wallpaper.

Allison guardedly lifts—spindly fingers that appear strange and artificial-looking—a side of her curly dark hair over her shoulder, revealing a naked shoulder blade. Flair finds it hard to remove her eyes from the newly-revealed skin, and she imagines that Allison is making certain gestures just for her pleasure. Silly. At most Flair's willing to concede that this is all happening on a subconscious level. Enjoy the ride Flair, no sudden movements.

Flair turns her back and leaves the kitchen, striking up a conversation with a Frenchman sipping a beer, wearing a gray flat cap, who holds certain quiet and endearing traits of Allison's—he seems content to

stand and observe and talk only a little. He's an artist, working on a portrait series, combining people and their pets. On his phone he shows her. A woman's face, feline ears, just one cat eye, whiskers sketched on one cheek. She's intrigued, has often fantasized about meeting a real artist and is content to let herself go under his spell. He invites her to walk outside for fresh air, and boldly takes her hand as they go. Here is something she won't have to kill.

As she crosses the threshold, she looks back at Allison, now a kitchen silhouette, nearly one with the wallpaper. What will the future hold? She'll need a new heart, and maybe soon, and wonders if she'll still be able to love Allison this same way, with this same intensity—Allison burning through her thoughts, her image embossed into her mind, like the embrace of a finely-charged, sensitive body—with a new donor inside of her. So much will change. Her body will age. She may be a completely different person. They are sisters. Flair, the cathedral and Allison, forever bridged in time, forever transforming in the light, forever becoming new images, unfolding works of art. Will she still feel everything?