

1

IN THE DREAM, LYING IN HIS ARMS, SHE HEARD A STRAIN OF COOL JAZZ smooth as a moon ray sliding on glass. He was murmuring something crucial about love, but his words were lost when the captain intoned, “Flight attendants, prepare for landing.” Damn. She opened her eyes. The girl in the seat beside her smiled. “We’re going down. Almost there.” Three billion sleep-deprived hours from Chicago, Swissair shuddered through one last storm bank of low-slung ebony, and they dropped into Zurich alive. When they cleared customs, her seatmate, about the twins’ age, gathered her own slim suitcase and IBM laptop and helped her find a baggage cart. “*Mais*, Aleesone, you carry all zat around Europe on trains?”

“Just this big case, the smaller black one, and this old typewriter—it’s very light, nothing to plug in, so I thought it would be simpler than a computer. Anyway, then there’s my tote bag for books and my purse and hairspray—can’t live without my American hairspray.”

“*Mon Dieu*, a typewriter in ’92,” the young woman murmured. “Maybe you can get rid of some of it as you go along.” She was taking a quick domestic flight on to Geneva and found Alison’s rail fixation insane. “You won’t change your mind?”

“No, I want to see the countryside.” And it was cheaper.

BEYOND THE green hills, Bern fell away in the rain. In the stations, four musical notes in rhythm with her pulse extended like a stretched chord before train announcements. Geneva meant a terrible time with all the baggage, changing trains. Heaving bags up and down steps was going to be her lot, so doing it often at the beginning would indicate how bad it was going to be. Bad.

They hurtled toward France. Mountains loomed, and here were the tunnels. The train cut like a scythe, spewing flowering bushes, sounding its whistle like a clangorous klieglight as they edged into a tunnel.... *The hell with him. With all men, who-whoee*. She was riding the whistle signaling their emergence.

Chambery. Change trains. A beefy man lent a hand with her bags and entered her first class compartment; did she think she owned it? Her eyelids felt as if he were standing on them. Keep alert. But he didn’t bother her, and after twenty-four hours en route: Grenoble.

Frowning at her luggage, the driver aimed for midtown and the Rue de la République. She’d flown the ocean from the center of the universe and emerged light-years into the Alps to find the young in jeans and weird hair. Nineties rock whanged and thumped from a loudspeaker at an outdoor café. Maybe they were all U.S. students abroad for their junior year, except that they all spoke French. What would Stendhal have said if he could’ve seen the great-great-great grandchildren of his pals wearing eighty earrings per lobe and drinking good old ubiquitous Coke for breakfast? Never mind, he was a sophisticated man. A rare man. Trustworthy.

The Hôtel Le Grand was dowdy, commercial, but the tv and radio broke the silence. At the cafeteria next door, she bought enough raspberry tarts and coffee to last all day, took the lift to her room, and watched old, bad *90210* reruns to avoid calling the Stendhalists. She’d written she was coming; they’d told her to call Suzanne somebody on arrival. OK, if she didn’t go home.

She spent the next day in bed, too. Near twilight, she arose, noting in the big bathroom mirror that she looked like a fat Venus on the half shell. “You’re in Grenoble,” she told the mirror. “Keep it simple, dress, go find some fresh coffee. Begin.”

SHE NOTICED him right away even though she never noticed young men any more, any man, but there they were, two ships at small adjacent outdoor tables, each with a book, and she'd smiled slightly and he'd smiled back.

Finally, after the horrid cappuccino had been deposited, and she was deep into the Caraccio biography, he'd cleared his throat and asked in a heavily accented baritone, "English or American?"

"Heavens," she said.

"Comment?"

"I was just surprised to hear someone speaking to me. When you're a tourist..." Stupid, never tell people you're alone, why talk to him at all... "Chicago, USA, Division Street America, dear Studs." Unintelligible. So she quickly said she was here on business to research her biography of Stendhal.

"Stendhal?" His grin was irenic. "I'll help you. Stendhal did not like Grenoble."

"Oh, but he did, at heart." She had yet to meet the local Stendhalians, learn of their efforts to comfort the townspeople who thought that their nineteenth-century native-but-renegade son had loathed them. All they had to do was read Henri's attempt at his own obituary, lines like, "Young Beyle conceived a horror of this town which persisted until his death."

"His real name was Henri Beyle," said the young Frenchman. "Stendhal was just the name he took for his writing. He was born here."

"I know." Always. Like receiving gifts she already owned.

"But how strange that you choose a writer of so long ago."

Like a broken record. You could stamp your feet, howl, tear out your hair. Her mother's voice, long distance: "You've always been so smart; what's the point of carrying on about some old, and I mean old, obscure writer no one's ever heard of?"

You could cry, "Because we're so much alike," or you could open your tote bag and pull out Henri's *Diaries* and find yourself in his "mad emotions coupled with a cold analytical intellect." No one understood. The young man was gazing at her intently. The carved *GQ* face made him look like a Stendhal hero: Fabrizio in *The Charterhouse*. "Excuse me?"

"I say only that my name is Michel, and what is yours?"

"Alison Miller." Old enough to be your mother, Fabrizio. "I have twins, they're twenty-two, Abbie and Dan. Michel's his middle name, Daniel Michael Miller."

He nodded, as if aware that motherhood was protection against gigolos. "Allesone, charming. And do you like it *dans la ville*?"

No harm, really, this amalgam of their languages. Teach him a little English, practice her French, as she had with her seatmate on the flight. The Euro young treated older women as if they were no different from themselves. But this young man was doubly friendly, so interested. "I told my mother—she lives in Iowa—there hasn't been a great Stendhal biography in years. This is my chance to leave my imprint; I don't know the French word."

"Eempreent?"

"The immortality of authors. Ruskin said... Ah well, it was lost on her, too. She said I was just avoiding George, and my father never liked to face facts, either. Babble, babble."

"Who is George?"

"My late husband, except I haven't killed him yet. I made the mistake of telling her about my Stendhal dream; I have this dream where I'm Gina, the character in *The Charterhouse of Parma*."

"Ah, the book by Stendhal. I have read it."

"Yes, so I told her about being Gina, and she said if I'd had a better marriage, I wouldn't be dreaming about dead Frenchmen. So she asked me to bring her something Italian—I'm going to Italy after I leave here—so I said, 'Leather?' and she said, 'A man.'"

They laughed companionably. He was probably a con man, but what the hell...confide in strangers, never see them again. He told her haltingly about his last love affair and that he was still sad. "Madame Gina, it is difficult to find a woman of my age who has the kind of interesting mind you have. But, tell me, you do not admire an American writer the way you admire Stendhal?"

"You sound like my friend Jean Perry, she teaches high school English, she said I should go research Hemingway, he lived right in Oak Park and I wouldn't have to spend such a fortune. But I said I don't love Hemingway."

Of course Jean had been more direct. “Why Stendhal?” The Perrys and Alison and George Jerk had convened over pseudo-Mexican food at Garcia’s in the suburbs. “Why not Balzac or Zola?”

“Why a diamond instead of cubic zirconia?”

“Another margarita,” George had flagged a passing waiter.

“George is bored by my Stendhal love.”

“Addiction,” George said.

She’d tried to explain her fascination with the biographies, finding fourteen about him at libraries and used bookstores, and felt limp, childish, like those housedress women still carrying on about Elvis. She hadn’t dared tell Jean about the dreams, not with Howard Perry sitting there dying to ask George when he’d first noticed the madness. But Howard was a polite man, maybe the reason Jean married him, too polite to cheat on his wife.

“Isn’t one life enough? Why read fourteen?” George had reminded her of a large bull moose, the same profile. She and George were getting along worse than ever in those days. Later, she’d wondered why she hadn’t known he was up to his Mussolini chin in his last nymph’s satin sheets.

“Fourteen biographies?” The young Frenchman smiled as he rose and pulled his chair around to face her. Place Grenette was filling now with happy-hour celebrants, and the waiter was pleased to discover the newly vacant adjacent table.

“When you love an author, you want to read everything. I read *The Charterhouse*, then *The Red and the Black*, then *Lucien Leuwen*. Then all the fiction, his letters, diaries, everything, then the biographies. You know, I told Jean that night I was thinking of researching my own Stendhal biography. Stating it made it suddenly more real.”

The young man’s smile was dazzling. “All of this for one of my townspeople, perhaps my ancestor. That you should come so far.”

“But I feel he could be my ancestor, too, we’re so alike. When I first read his diaries, it was like reading myself. Robert Sage, he translated the diaries, Sage said he was too passionate for the eighteenth century and too intelligent for the nineteenth. A classicist, yet sensitive.”

She had quoted it to Jeannie: “‘Among his contemporaries, the older men looked on him as too advanced, the younger men as too

old fashioned, the general public as incomprehensible and eccentric.’ And so inconsistent. Doesn’t that remind you of someone?”

Jeannie had stared at her. “You think it’s you?” Such a good friend, with her dear, booming Carol Channing voice and her great fake, dark-red hair covering the gray. Lounging in front of Jeannie’s fireplace, mourning the years since they’d given up smoking, still stuffing themselves with popcorn to compensate.

“Ah, I can see this sensitivity you have in common,” said the young Frenchman, signaling the waiter for two more coffees; she insisted on paying for her own. Whatever the con, he was kind to be so attentive.

She smiled, thinking of the way most people’s eyes tended to glaze over when she started on Stendhal. Most people had never heard of him in the first place. “Who?” they said. “I get to Grenoble and realize I’m alone, I shouldn’t take up your time.”

“But I am enchanted,” he said. “Please tell me more, I want to understand what it is you feel in common.”

Kind but obtuse, like the others. “I just keep finding me, my thoughts, in his words. And, when he was young, he lived in books, like I did.” She remembered telling this to the therapist consulted about George and his nymphs. “Falling in love was being attracted to the mind and the heart. Very cerebral, verbal, but a sensualist.”

“Ah, how fortunate. I have much in common with Stendhal. I am a sensualist.” Again the smile, the Fabrizio eyes. The man began to talk of the sensualist’s yearning for fine things. She thought of Henri’s love for food and clothes, cashmere waistcoats. She was a sensualist before she married George. “But most of all,” he leaned closer, “I am a sensualist in affairs of the heart. Love of material things matters less than how one behaves.” How many older women had told him he could’ve passed for a young Jean-Louis Barrault? The cheekbones.

“Yes, behavior, but intelligence and sensitivity, too. Stendhal hated hypocrites, snobs, though he was a snob; what is the word in French?”

“The same: snob. The condition of being a snob is *snobisme*.”

“Intellectual snob, I mean; nothing to do with money. His father lost it in land speculating, like George in the stock market, few years ago. I went from part-time to full-time work.”

“What is your career?”

“PR writer. Public relations. I earned every cent to take this trip. My mother says that’s where I learned the obsessive behavior; PR people define the word. My clients get hysterical over cat food and car wax. I have to climb out of vats of trivia.”

“I would like to become a pierre writer.”

“Are you at the university?”

He smiled. “I am not so young. I am an actor; I work at the radio station. But I most admire artists. Stendhal’s mind and heart. What a mind you have, like Stendhal, I can see that.”

“Thank you. He loved art, Mozart, the nineteenth-century things I love.” She sighed. “I even look like him, less overweight, of course, but round faces; dark hair, though mine’s gray; and my eyes are more hazel, but the same look in our eyes, a certain hunger, maybe, I don’t know...” She thought again of the therapist. You do know. Don’t think about it.

“You are a charming woman, so beautiful.”

Quel stupid. The shining eyes warned her; she’d been far too open. Should’ve guessed, all that fake seductive flattery. The charm now would be to thank him for his attentiveness and flee without causing either of them any embarrassment, and so saying her heartfelt merci, she arose, caught her heel on a cobblestone, and fell.

He was instantly out of his chair, and together they examined the slender ankle on the brink of swelling. Commiseration was extended, along with the strong arm of neo-Barrault Lochinvar, helping her up and then down the rue to the nearby hotel entrance, into the tiny elevator. And before she could cope with the French to be charming but assertive enough to say, “Stop, enough, leave me right here,” he was opening her door with her key and what did he expect her to do, for God’s sake, tip him?

He deposited her on the bed. Sex was the last thing on her mind. In the room’s murky light she saw he was following a single track, hurrying to remove his jacket, then his tie. Stasis, like a beached whale or a dead canoe. She watched to see what was next, and, sure enough, he began to unbutton his shirt, blue and white striped, and the stripes became a blur till they slid into a circle and she remembered a glass marble with the same design Abbie had kept for years in her T-shirt

drawer. “No, no, I don’t even remember your name.” Maybe it would have sounded more relevant if she hadn’t had to say it in French.

His smile flared, hot milk teeth. “Michel.”

“*Ah yes, like my son, le nom de mon fils.*” *Nom de plume, la plume de ma tante*, cut the hysteria, think. Her first sex crisis in years and the crux was age vs. youth. “Now, Michel,” (gently, he mustn’t hate Americans for the rest of his life), “I’m fifty-four.” She wanted to say she hoped she didn’t look it, but the French verbs were elusive. And how old was he?

“Trente-trois.” His fingers had resumed the unbuttoning of the striped shirt. He was lean and tall, every inch the Gaul who knows the image is to smolder without being oily.

All that time, sitting at the little table in Place Grenette, she’d been captivated by the missing button on his jacket and his dandruff—so much confidence in a good-looking young man to pull off such carelessness—and the good English and the cheekbones, of course, but thirty-three? “You see how ridiculous, how young you are.”

Never laugh at a Frenchman with conquest on his mind. His eyes glittered, perhaps with tears of horror, and his fingers paused on the last button. Now! She couldn’t rise to turn on all the lights, but the lamp switch nearest the bed was handy, and she pressed it at once. The bed was hardly big enough for one, much less this exquisite specimen and her disintegrating self.

From beyond the drapes came the honking horns of the bad drivers who congested the traffic thronging day and night to the Rue de la République. The Bureau of Tourism lay below; she might’ve screamed for help if she could’ve reached the window. She could damn near hear the clinking of wine glasses on Place Grenette. “It’s not that you’re too young; I’m flattered.” Too friendly. His fingers had happily resumed their search for the last button. Be firm, but remember the guidebooks: “You are a guest in their country”; politesse was the key. Was there a polite way to decline a con gigolo? What were the French words for “George has bruised me like a bad plum”?

“But even if I wanted to make love...” He began to unfasten his pants. “Oh please, it’s impossible!”

“Your foot hurts?”

Actually, it did, the ankle, ruined years ago when she tore the ligaments skiing, and when she so much as twisted it slightly, the pain returned to remind her of her youthful folly. All the adorable beaucoup follies. So, voilà, the damned cobblestone, and look what happened when you never learned to keep your mouth shut, especially about the George insanity. Damn George.

“You don’t like me,” Michel was pouting.

“I do, but I can’t. There’s something I didn’t tell you.” She pointed to the engagement diamond and wedding band that surrounded the garnet guard ring on her left hand. They looked old, both the hand and the rings.... And the hunger and longing, a white pang like a stomach cramp, years lost and nothing, just zero nothingness ahead, and she lied, “George and I are back together, reunited.” More firmly now: “So you see, I am married, and I cannot.” Rueful, final, better. She held her breath. He might pull a knife on her. She was all too recently released from the wilds of Chicago, and there were visions of various Apache dances of lust and death she’d seen in ancient French movies, probably starring Barrault and his cheekbones.

“Ah,” Michel was nodding slowly. She saw the flash of comprehension in the little boy blue eyes, the respect and admiration. She envisioned the cartoon caption that haloed her head writ large: Faithful Wife. Quel unique, after all. The charming Miss Frigidaire—was it Cole Porter?

She watched the shirt as it was rebuttoned, tie slung Montand-like over one shoulder. Why did men like him, who didn’t matter, have all the good cheekbones? *C’est les vie et guerre*. The goodbyes were tender but not wrenching. He’d saved face; she’d saved body. Welcome to France. In her makeup kit, on the dresser next to the bed, was a bottle of Empirin with codeine, in case of migraine; one pill was usually enough if she caught it in time. She took two, removed her clothes, glad she was the one doing it, and curled into a fetal knot. Her ankle throbbed. In retrospect, Michel’s gallantry was rather charming. Most of the American men of the ’gos were as charming as soiled Kleenex, including those who fooled around with nymphets who were about three years old.

A pity, though, they couldn’t have talked a bit more. She could’ve

asked which book of Henri’s he preferred, *The Charterhouse* or *The Red and the Black*? Or maybe the schoolteachers here were still so mad at Henri for knocking Grenoble that they didn’t assign his books.

Maybe the people here would be nasty when they saw how she felt about him. Maybe she’d better take off for Paris and have Garrett coddle her. Or hurry to Italy, or switch off the bed lamp.

She should have told Michel how to cure his dandruff.

She wondered if she looked fiftysomething. Most ’gos women didn’t, like Jane Fonda or Susan Sarandon, but they colored their hair like crazy and had facelifts.

“Only women of a noble character are capable of providing me happiness,” Henri said in the *Diaries*.

She lay in the dark, limp as thread gone off its spool, pondering the question of nobility when everyone thought she was obsessive and crazy. There were already enough Stendhal biographies and who cared, he’d died more than 150 years ago, and blah and blah.

PACKING, TRYING to decide if she should put her mini-cassette recorder in with the books or wrap it in her white T-shirt, she tucked the phone into submission under her chin and assured her mother, long distance, “This is not a midlife crisis. I told you a million times I’m following my dream.”

“You’re escaping. But why put an ocean between you? Just give him the divorce and get on with your life.”

“This has nothing to do with George.”

“Pity to spend all your hard-earned money. But since you’re dead-set on this, at least call me a few times, collect. Call me from Milan and Paris. Listen, Alison, avoid dark alleys.”

SHE HAD removed the tape recorder wrapped in the T-shirt from the tote, too bulky, and tucked it between her white pumps, then packed the books on the desk. If only she could take the old huge dictionary. She’d read that it was quintessentially American to be inarticulate in despair. Damn well not her. *L, M, N*... she looked for “nymphet,” expecting a reference to Nabokov, but the definition was merely that of a small nymph.

“Nymph” was interesting: “Greek or Roman mythology...minor nature goddesses, represented as beautiful maidens living in rivers, mountains, trees, etc.” Or lying under George on Lake Shore Drive. “Lovely young woman, literary or playful usage.” Playful. The entomological entry was predictable: “the young of an insect without complete metamorphosis; a pupa.” Stupid little bitch. (Pupas weren’t noble).

Both nymphalid butterflies (ah, perhaps butterfly addict Nabokov picked up the Lolita term here) and the water lily nymphaea had been listed, images rather too lovely, and thus depressing. But then there was the prize: “nympholepsy: (1) in ancient times, a state of frenzy that was believed to seize any man who looked at a nymph,” which certainly defined old George to his advantage. And one that applied to her: “(2) a violent emotional state, especially one believed to result from desire for some unattainable ideal.”

Terrific. Was the urge to write a fresh, wonderful biography of Stendhal from a woman’s viewpoint unattainable? No. She had packed a smaller, less helpful dictionary.

NO MORE men in her life, no more sex. She lay in the minuscule room in Grenoble and listened to the taxi horns on the rue below. This is insane, she thought. Can’t make it. How on earth will I make it? Rain spattered the windows beyond the shades...

Speeding into the night, skirting groves of birches and fragrant pines...flashes of city neon in wet shimmering dots and dashes recede into country blackness...row upon row of nineteenth-century carriage houses and tall poplars... A powdery snow has followed them across oceans and decades through the massive, carved oak doors that open into the great entrance hall. Ornate chandeliers. She’s in the red gown Gina wore in The Charterhouse. Henri tugs at a velvet pull to summon help and envelops her in his greatcoat. He calls her Gina. She feels the Crystallization, his word for the love process. She feels his hands on her hips. She tells him, “Henri caught Gina beautifully but she couldn’t catch Henri—a paradox.”

“You have him now,” he says. “This is the Crystallization. Can you feel it happening?”

“That, and several other things.”

Ornately framed family portraits line the winding marble staircase. They follow the aged butler to a landing where Henri pauses before the amused image, in oils, of a woman with the unfortunate features of a Pyrenees goat. A countess, Henri says, “who excels at green gnocchi and at memorizing the librettos of Italian operas.” She says her cooking is tragic and her Italian meager and could they compromise on something they both love? She mentions Mozart.

The bedroom is a suite, shabbily festooned with frayed silk draperies; a large, tarnished brass bed; linens clean; gaslight soft... The thick panes of glass keep the night snow at the back of their awareness...she tests the bath water gushing from groaning ancient pipes. The gaunt, ragged butler floats into the room, bearing a silver tray: pasta with wild mushrooms, a fragrant loaf, wine.

Expansive gestures. The old man looks at them and nods as if he knew and remembered. Henri’s face shines like new gold in the gaslight. “Why did you seek me? Byron is prettier.”

His arms are muscular, strong. She wants to feel every sinew, memorize every black hair on the golden flesh. She says, “Byron’s writing is not prettier.”

“Strange woman, you prefer my wit to his height?”

There is some wordplay about wit or width and they are in the brass bed. His hands caress her breasts...she hears his delighted gasps of breath, feels his tears warm against her face, knows only the tolling of a bell.

The—

The telephone on the night table.

Her passport, the concierge was saying, might be picked up at the front desk. He hoped her stay in Grenoble would be enjoyable.

Definitely the best dream. Maybe it was the best because she was here.