[repost] Two tales of the careless man: his past and his future

The Friend
by □□

Two months after I moved to Paris someone told me he was here too. I called him. He said yes. He said, come for tea. I asked when. He said, anytime. After a pause, cheerfully, "I don't have a job."

He sent me the address. Boulevard Raspail. I couldn't withhold a wicked laugh, envisioning his contentedness as he settled on, and settled in, this particular street. It was a dull two-storey brick building. He was living in the attic. When he opened the door the first thing I saw were not his eyes, those beautiful eyes that used to outshine everything they carefully caressed, but the little Vermont window behind him. I could not speak. At the moment the sunlight was dripping in. I remembered he once told me he'd very much like to have such a place, unadorned, unfurnished, with just a little Vermont window that always seems self-consciously out of place. It came as a surprise that he was capable of keeping promises, but of course it was a promise to himself.

A table that was on the verge of collapsing. Piles of books on the floor. There were papers scattered everywhere, on the floor, on the windowsill, beside his pillowcase. I had never seen so many papers, in all possible colors and shapes. Hand-written. Typed. Pale. Tinged yellow. Creased. Smeared. Soaked in rain water and then dried by an inadvertent breeze. Napkins with the names of nearby cafes with his proud, but idle, handwriting.

He was wearing a shirt intended to be of dark brown, but the sleeves were of a different color. He sat on the windowsill. I sat on the floor. He looked at me, head slightly tilted. His whole body seemed to be swaying in his hollow shirt, though he hardly moved. He was not beautiful anymore.

I asked, tentatively, "what are you up to?"

"Nothing much."

But the class schedule of Paris I, which gratuitously rested near my feet, betrayed his reticence. I imagined him, with half of a baguette and a rotten apple, pensively smoking cheap cigarettes on those sandy stairs in front of the university building. He realized what I was looking at, "they have a great philosophy program."

"But you once said philosophy is cold."

"I enjoy watching people there. Philosophy people have interesting faces."

I couldn't say anything.

He kneeled on the floor, and showed me a book about ghost stories of each Parisian street. "I found it in Saint-Germain." One haunting soul for each street. One daunting cliché for each of his sentences. I was not surprised that after so many years his French was still broken, with an unapologetic accent. As he spoke, the sentences were literal translations from English that gave them an amusing absurdity. In the center of the dingy room sat a carelessly thrown mattress. The linens desperately needed washing. Dirty plates hugging each other. There was a glass of milk. Two lazy apples. I said, fruits, serviette et boîte à lait. His eyes twinkled for a second, either out of appreciation or bewilderment.

Now his fingers pretended to be carelessly fiddling with a pile of letters,

ostensibly inviting inquiries into the stories behind them. I was shameless

enough not to bother asking. But he told me without provocation, about this girl and that girl. Amorous intrigues without much substance, which seemed to matter to him only in phrases. He spoke of the names with contempt. "They are so fucking stupid, but fuck they are such wonderful creatures." He sighed remorsefully. He was what he always had been. He sincerely mistook his sensuality for romance, his vacillation for sentimentality, his idleness for philosophical confusion. When he lied he did not know he lied. When you pointed it out to him he said, oh, but dear, lies are beautiful.

I glanced at his manuscript, "may I?"

No, he said.

Can I bribe you with something? I smiled.

He didn't even make a sound.

I wouldn't dare read it. The last time I came upon something he wrote, I was horrified. His pretense of refinement was so desperate as to seem vulgar. Second-hand phrases and second-rate intellect. I felt sad for him. In him I could see one of the laughable characters who haunted the Latin Quarter with their sorrowful glances, drank day and night, slept with any girl they could pick up, until their hairline receded to a point of no return, until their eyes turned into an ash gray, and until finally, they presented their wasted lives, as a practical joke, to the younger generation of failures.

The Father
by Ming

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