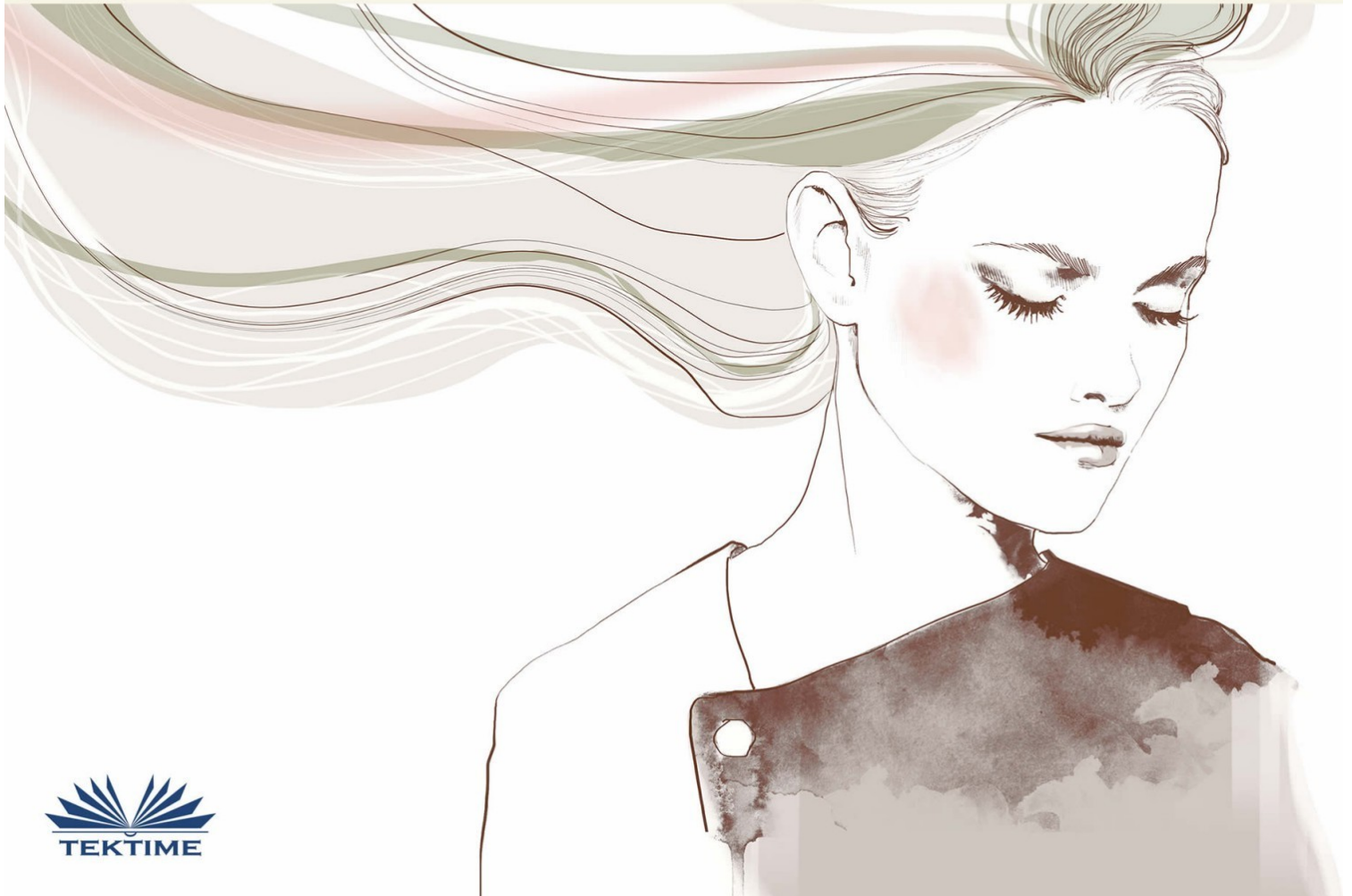


Emmanuel Bodin

Under The Summer Sun

Novel



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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Bodin E.

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Frank meets Svetlana in the corridors of the Paris metro station. Neither is aware that their relationship is at the starting point of a difficult love affair. Through desires and doubts, suffering will be inevitable. Frank meets Svetlana in the corridors of the Paris metro station. Neither is aware that their relationship is at the starting point of a difficult love affair. Through desires and doubts, suffering will be inevitable. From being passionately in love, to one rejecting the other, this story narrates the emotional journey between a young woman who has barely lived and a man ten years her senior. While one seeks love and stability, the other is more hesitant and gets lost along the way. Fear, doubt and suspicion develop one after the other, to the point of stifling the bond that once held them together. Deception, temptation and jealousy will be the final blow. Through risky unknowns and struggles, the quest for happiness is a joyful madness that plays an important part of life. Under the Summer Sun is Emmanuel Bodin's second book. The story revisits the characters of his previous novel, All To Play For, and acts temporally as a prequel: the first romantic encounter of our two protagonists.

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Novel

Translated from French by Delycia Romany

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“But falling in love is always a pretty crazy thing. It might appear out of the blue and just grab you. Who knows—maybe even tomorrow”

Haruki Murakami

For you...

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1.

That morning, during an ordinary goodbye that felt to him more like a final farewell and that in that moment seemed fateful, he had truly believed that it was the last time he would kiss her, the last time he would hold her hand, the last time he would take her home. Before disappearing behind the metal gate of her building, she had gently blown him a kiss and directed it his way using her palm. Surprised, he had eagerly responded with the same elegance, as if they were two lovers who could not bear the idea of parting for the day. His eyes had welled up with tears as he was aware of one tragic thing: the woman he loved was going to break up with him. He had supposed he would never see her again. Had she noticed his sadness? He preferred to think she didn't. What reason would she have had to think that he was so broken hearted? Between them, nothing had officially happened to signal a breakup. Except that he felt it floating in the air, like the smell of a powerful poison he could not fight against. He had remained silent, hoping he was wrong. Whether he had liked it or not, it seemed like it was over.

Bowing his head low, he had slowly crossed the pavement and trailed away from the building, assuming that he had to forget that neighbourhood. He turned in the direction of his shabby studio. There, he would be greeted by emptiness fed by latent solitude, with new tears for company.

She had made him grow accustomed to the ways of a delicate and sincere companion who regularly shared with him about her life, but at the same time not stifling her partner with constant daily surveillance. He himself also allowed her to breathe freely. Day after day, his head was spinning with different memories, which plunged him in an abyss of emotions. He had felt a sharp pain, like a phantasmagorical sensation of seeing his feelings brutally torn from his heart.

The emptiness had lasted for nearly two weeks. He had tried to reach her multiple times. In vain. SMS, phone calls, even e-mails all proved to be futile attempts to contact her. No answer, no messages, nothing. He did not understand, he wondered what could have happened to make his gem want to leave him, especially since they had planned to visit Venice together during the coming weekend.

Their love story had begun so marvellously. The romance of a few weeks seemed by no means to want to separate them. But there was one fateful date pending since the beginning of their relationship.

They had met in the Paris metro station; crowded corridors, people bustling everywhere. In the middle of the anthill, a lost young woman was looking in all directions. The station suffered from a huge lack of modernization. There were no signs giving directions. Only the regulars knew their way, like robots that were perfectly programmed and in sync.

He was just as annoyed as she was. He couldn't figure out his way either. Nonetheless, he was well familiar with these long tunnels. Since he owned neither a car nor two wheels and found the buses too congested and harder to find, he had gotten used to borrowing these molehills to travel far from home. When the weather was nice and he had to go somewhere that he considered close enough, he did not hesitate to make the journey by foot, for the obvious reason of the pricey ticket... There was also the *Vélib'*, the bicycle renting system admirably popular in Paris; but, still, the subscription offered did not appeal to him. He had already tried to remove the device, but it insisted on staying cemented to its mast. He did however find it to be an interesting concept, except that the logic of capitalist gain debased the ecological initiative. He had been struck by a dreadfully discouraging yet conflicting realization that when a political decision that benefits the public is made, as soon as it is implemented by ruthlessly ambitious private institutions, it only offers as a substitute an unfortunate observation of our economic system that an implicitly powerless simple agreement forces us to shamefully accept.

The young woman saw his head spinning and decided to approach him and ask if he too was looking for line fourteen. He did in fact have to take that line to the Saint-Lazare station to then take the commuter trail. He was going to meet with Stephanie, a painter friend of his. She however, was

going to Bercy, in the other direction. She was very much his type, physically. Her French was not the most perfect. Her accent revealed her Eastern origins. She told him her name was Svetlana and that she was from Russia. In return, he revealed his name to her. “Frank,” he simply replied.

Svetlana always preferred her friends to call her Sveta. She had been staying in Paris for three weeks now for work and took advantage of the opportunity to visit other European countries during her free time. Her job consisted of selling handbags in a store at the Galeries Lafayette. Being a storekeeper did not interest her in the least. It was very boring but it was the only way she would be able to live her dream of traveling to France. That way, she was able to get a temporary three month visa. That day, she was going to one of her colleague’s house, who was from Ukraine and had come to France for the same reason. They had planned a walk in the city. They also wanted to do some shopping.

Svetlana had suggested to Frank that he chose the direction to go in. She had told him that her astrological sign influenced her daily, but not necessarily always for the best. Libra: the sign of all instability! She always had difficulty making decisions, especially in important moments. A yes in the morning can turn into a no by evening. She had unveiled to him the details of her personality without even thinking about whether it was a bad omen to be like that in front of a complete stranger. She had shown herself to be spontaneous, natural and felt at ease in front of this man. She had immediately felt a positive aura and a reassuring feeling by noticing this man, lost just like she was.

Without necessarily wanting to, Frank had personified the male who takes the initiatives. The path he chose had turned out to be the right route for Svetlana. She thanked him and was already preparing to leave him. Pushing his shyness aside, Frank asked her if she would like to explore Paris with him as her personal guide, one of these days. Slightly hesitant, she stared at him, wondering about this man’s intentions. Was this a serious man or a man simply looking for an adventure? A profiteer perhaps?

Once the moment of surprise passed, Svetlana let out a big smile, after which she gave in to the offer by candidly replying with a typical: “Why not...” So, they exchanged numbers. A polite exchange followed. They wished each other a pleasant day and said goodbye, shaking hands awkwardly.

Frank went his way, a huge smile on his face like a fool, a smile he tried to hide a little, so people wouldn’t watch him like he was crazy. On his journey, Frank could not stop thinking about the cheerful face he had just encountered. A soft, radiant face, full of grace and abundant tenderness. He wondered if he would really see this girl again. Was he lucky enough that she would actually accept to walk around with him? He wasn’t so sure. To get rid of a potentially bothersome person, it is easy to go in the other direction after offering him a lie as a liberating lie, such as a fake phone number that would make it seem like she was willing. Should he have tried to call her at that moment to see who would pick up? If it was really her who answered, what would he have said?

Frank was overthinking it. Unconsciously, he had already set his sights on this young woman. He had been celibate for several months, without being able to forget his ex. However, this new blond with sparkling blue eyes had managed to change things in a blink of an eye, with a smile. Is this the desire to move on? The beginnings of an unexpected crush? Throughout the journey, he kept thinking back to that pretty little face that just came out of nowhere, like a stroke of luck, a gift from life, or a poker game where the first set of cards was fantastic. And yet... what could possibly determine his destiny? The future offers a multitude of surprises, without any kind of warning. Desires bubbled inside him. An innocent call could eventually end up changing aspects of his daily life. A major upheaval that would bring oxygen back into his life and erase the memory of the one he had loved before. Can it be that simple to change, to forget about the one who he carried in his heart and still thought about regularly? Probably... but there will always remain some desire, which would prove to be everlasting.

When he got to his friend Stephanie's house, Frank could not nor did he want to keep that chance encounter to himself. Those few minutes invaded his mind again. Lurking around was the danger of getting his hopes up after such a brief conversation that could very possibly go no further than that. This young woman had dazzled him since the moment he first laid eyes on her. Stephanie was aware of her friend's past disappointments. She seemed happy for him and hoped that it was the beginning of a beautiful romance, if he were to see her again. She warned him though, not to make it such a big deal just yet in case nothing came of it.

Frank had met Stephanie in an online chatroom a few years ago. Although at first there was an attraction between the two, they had preferred to maintain distance between each other. A friendship would develop.

Short and brunette, Stephanie's physique was the opposite of Svetlana's. She possessed an undeniable charm that easily captivated a man, especially if he turned out to be single, as Frank was when they met. On one hand, this woman's intelligence had attracted Frank. On the other hand, she smoked a lot. The smell of cold dry tobacco proved to be an obstacle between them over time. Over the first few weeks, the lust had turned into a form of camaraderie. They enjoyed spending time together, talking about their similar tastes when it came to movies, art and literature. He has had many opportunities to have sex with her since they oftentimes spent evenings together, such as tonight, but Frank had been very cautious not to. Even though Stephanie never outright said anything, her tender demeanour towards him and the seductive way she dressed were all just an invitation to sex.

For a friendship to develop between a man and a woman, one must never, ever, sleep with the other person. Sometimes, and even often, there is an unspoken infatuation, a craving to be with the other, while knowing fully well that neither of them wanted a meaningful sentimental future with the other. If they dared cross that imaginary barrier, best case scenario says they become friends with benefits. At best, that would last a few months until one of them falls for someone else who better fits as a partner for a romantic relationship. However, worst case scenario says that it remains one drunken night adventure. Both options offered a similar fate: a failed effort at building a friendship. After the deed would have been done, there would be no hope of achieving this form of sympathy they share. They would both come out as losers. Often, the decision of whether or not to be together is made in the first few days or within two weeks after meeting each other. It is a weird period because the atmosphere becomes thick with expectations, illusions, desires and concerns. Sometimes you tell yourself, "It's her... She's the one!" But then you realise it is just a fantasy and that special something disappears forever. If they had nothing from the start, then a friendly bond, so beautiful and special, could have grown between them.

In rare occasions, the opposite happens. After period of great friendship, only after a certain time and in the same moment, the two friends yearn for something so. They like each other so much that they end up getting even closer... One simple mistake could possibly ruin years of good friendship, all for one quickie.

Strangely enough, when a woman breaks up with a man, she sometimes says she still wants to be friends with him. How does a guy have an ordinary friendship with a girl that he sincerely loved and still wants? Male-female friendship seems unlikely if they have previously shared pure feelings. That's a horrible idea to even think that! It's a downgrade from his previous role. As a friend who was once so close, he is now asked to keep a certain distance and observe without having much of an opinion. Worse yet, there is a possibility that he can happen to meet the new suitor, and that he can gauge the seduction game of this new companion who already imagines being able to have sex day and night with the one he loved. How unbearable! Just thinking about it makes his stomach turn. Friendship seems quite simply inconceivable and improbable after having been through a loving relationship in all sincerity. Maybe years later... even so, one would need to be able to truly forgive the other for whatever led to the breakup.

Stephanie was showing Frank her latest canvas paintings. She had a very surrealist style that was difficult to describe, as human figures, often distorted, amalgamated to a more chaotic atmosphere. A very personal touch emerged. Nonetheless, she was never able to exhibit her works, to this day. Frank had no doubt that the hour of glory for his friend would come. She had obvious talent. Fortunately, she did not depend on her art to make a living. She worked in an office for a firm that sold refrigerator handles. She managed the commercial relationship with client companies directly on the phone. She got bored a lot. However, she took advantage of the opportunity to flirt with potential buyers who would then become her lover for the night. This job seemed to be her way of dealing with the annually increasing cost of living imposed by the operation and deterioration of today's society, which perpetuate successive leaders for fear of losing their advantages, because they are concerned only about their themselves, while the people—the citizens—find themselves crushed and scorned under the yoke of new indigestible laws.

After a good meal of pasta and watching the movie *In the loop* that makes a complete mockery of our shameful governments, Frank had returned home. On the train, he thought about Svetlana again. He hesitated to call her but he was curious as to whether she had given him her real number. He started to compose a text message since it is easier to write than to make a call without knowing in advance what they could talk about together. At the last moment he changed his mind. He was afraid that a message asking about her was too hasty and that after reading it the young woman would only want to distance herself from this man who was still a stranger and who oddly wondered about how her day went.

The next morning, at seven, the vibration of Frank's phone woke him up. He hated when his rest was cut short like that. The solution would have simply been to turn off the phone but it also served as his alarm clock. Normally, he woke up at around nine o'clock. He did not have anything in particular to do. He usually used the time to watch movies, read books, and drink beers with his friends while sharing updates on their respective lives. Sometimes he stayed at home and did research online while thinking about possible photo essays he could create. Occasionally, he looked at the job offers. This search made him quickly sink into a state close to depression. The same ads came back tirelessly. And yet, when he wrote to the companies, they didn't find it necessary to contact him back. Apart from taking pictures of Santa Claus in the winter and being the photographer at a school or weddings, there was nothing in his field. Frank had already done these types of jobs and found them to be boring and unstimulating... They did not require a single artistic fibre in his body. Nothing really completely suited him. At least not over long periods of time.

Whenever he left on a reporting assignment, filth and misery inspired him... And Paris was filled with them! Taking postcard snaps did not interest him. To each his own creative universe.

Frank rubbed his eyes. On the phone screen was a text message from Svetlana. This surprise had made him jump off the bed. In the message, Svetlana mentioned that she would be free on the coming Sunday. She would appreciate having a guide to show her around a nice neighbourhood in Paris. She had ended her message with an innocent smiley face emoji. Surprised to have received the text, a profound joy overpowered Frank. He no longer had to torture himself in trying to decide whether or not he should contact her, she had handled it first. That approach meant a lot for him. This woman seemed sincere and really wanted to see him again, walk around with him and get to know him. Maybe she wanted something else too? Frank probably went too far there. This delight would keep him in a good mood for the three days that separated him from this meeting. The psychological torment of the memory of his ex-love was already leaving him. Frank felt ready for a new love story. He responded favourably to her instantly. He also took the opportunity to give her his email address. Svetlana had reacted by giving him hers, again followed by a smiley identical to that of the previous message. This simple icon brought out so much kindness through such a brief exchange that he was sure he had met a wonderful girl.

That evening, Frank waited patiently in front of his computer screen. He had added Svetlana as a contact on Skype. Suddenly, the stranger who he had been waiting for so excitedly connected. She told him about her job as well as her troubles, as if Frank had become an intimate friend that she had been talking to for years now.

She explained to him that at her workplace, the atmosphere was not the happiest. The manager regularly lashed out at the workers that she thought were incapable. Frequently, there were thefts. Nobody noticed anything, not even the watchman. Immediately, hysterical and paranoid, she would accuse each of her workers in turn, even imagining an internal conspiracy against her.

Most of her colleagues were from abroad. Dreaming of discovering France, people travelled to the country during the summer season when a greater workforce was usually needed. Other than Svetlana from Russia, there was a Moldavian, two Ukrainians, one Chinese and a Brazilian. Two French women completed the team. Their boss was also a French woman, with Korean roots from her parents. As for the woman who was managing the shop at the time, she was French. This business was a real melting pot. Some of the saleswomen could not speak a word of French. They compensated for this shortcoming by perfectly mastering English, which became necessary when talking with customers who were often tourists and did not understand French. Svetlana was able to practice the languages she had learned. She found that to be the only advantage of that job.

They had decided to walk around the area of Montmartre. Svetlana had not yet been able to visit Paris. Now that she had more time, she wanted to catch up. She had only seen the Eiffel Tower, and just from the outside. When Svetlana saw the metal mass, she thought, “What? This is the famous Eiffel Tower? It’s really not that extraordinary!”

Her Ukrainian friend who accompanied her had had a total lack of reaction. Known around the world as the symbol of France and “its liberties”, this monument had a pitiful effect on these two women, quite far from the initial excitement they first felt on seeing different pictures of it before they came. All the magic of a shot is hidden in the correct balancing of the shutter that defines the exposure time and the opening of the diaphragm that lets the light through. The choice of focal length should offer a good angle of view and a judicious frame that can give life to any fantasy.

Svetlana’s lack of time, which limited the number of places she was able to visit since her arrival was due to an end of year assignment that she had not yet completed and had to send to her teacher as soon as possible. To connect her passions—art and French—Svetlana wanted to translate into Russian and subtitle several songs from the movie *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. It was her favourite French film. Despite being a little later than the deadline, Svetlana had sent in her work online, once she was done. Then she got the highest mark. How exciting! She could now be sure that she was moving on to her fifth and final year, with congratulations from the teacher as an added bonus. As a reward, she allowed herself to enjoy her free time and relax as much as she wanted after all her hard work.

During the three days of waiting, Frank had received an e-mail from one of his friends, Elijah, who he had studied the same post-baccalaureate curriculum with and who, for some obscure reason, then turned to the cinema. A few years later, Frank joined him. Elijah justified this choice with a quote from Jean-Luc Godard, from the movie *The Little Soldier*, “Photography is truth. The cinema is truth twenty-four times per second!” The truth twenty-four times per second... this idea provokes so much thought that no words can describe the lasting impression.

Elijah had become quite a gifted filmmaker in his genre, a genre that alternated between genius and madness, and which lets a powerful uppercut slip in this snobbish industry that hides a “big family” of false-asses, in which many people hold hatred and jealousy for each other, or who would play a dirty trick on you for no good reason.

Elijah was staying in Lebanon for two months. He was thinking about his second feature film. Just like the previous project, this production would come to fruition thanks to some generous sponsors who knew one of Elijah’s close friends and who were not asking for anything in return. The cost of producing the film would amount to less than five thousand euros, and being surrounded

by a few passionate and precious friends who believed in his work. In his email, Elijah informed Frank that his script would be finalized soon. His Lebanese friends were doing well, his family too. He breathed freedom, far from Parisian oppression, far from his dilapidated palace of fifteen square meters, a living space representing the size of one of his bathrooms in Lebanon and in his own words, “The size of my crappers!”

Paris... the artificial heart of France. City of sacrifices and sufferings in hopes of one day “succeeding”.

Frank had replied to the message. He updated him on the details of the past few days, detailing how he had met the eyes of a pretty Russian girl who would perhaps make him forget about the one who had made him feel so bad the previous weeks: his ex-girlfriend, who was also a foreigner. He only considered this person as an ephemeral lover when she came to relax and enjoy herself during a usual Parisian trip that she did once or twice a year. Frank promised to keep him informed if anything happened with this young woman and told him to enjoy his vacation in the sun before returning to looking himself up in a discoloured Paris.

2.

Svetlana and Frank had agreed to meet up at the Abbesses metro station. He planned to show her Montmartre as well as the Basilica of the Sacred Heart of Paris. The weather was not very accommodating; huge grey clouds threatened to pour down. A few beams of sunlight poked their way through the thick cloudy layer here and there, as best as they could. What sad weather for a first date!

Frank had been waiting for ten minutes now. He was not early. No, Svetlana was late. He had already tried calling her but he had gotten her voicemail.

In front of the station's exit, a married couple had just appeared out of nowhere. Followed by a film crew, these people had invaded the tiny place. Seeing all the equipment, Frank thought for a moment that it was a production for a show. There was a cameraman with a Steadicam around his waist. The equipment seemed heavier than the camera itself which was a small digital camcorder. Another person was pointing a portable light. An assistant guided the cameraman who only relied on the LCD screen. A fourth guy prevented an entire assembly of people from advancing too far—the presence certainly of both families and friends. Frank had moved away from them so as not to be seen. The lovers took acrobatic poses, while obstructing access to the metro. Frank found the whole charade ridiculous. This is the kind of craziness that having too much money causes.

People had finally been able to get out of the underground station, once they were finally allowed to pass. Frank still could not find Svetlana, in this wave of people. He continued to follow the commotion from the couple. Then he turned to watch children screaming around a carousel. Nearby, a clown had started juggling. Tourists circled around him. On the right, a man added a beat by turning the handle of a music box. What an anachronistic atmosphere! The charm worked. The magic of Montmartre was exposed to the eyes of all, despite a gloomy weather.

When Frank had looked again in front of the metro station, a woman started to run in his direction. Frank had not immediately recognized her but it was Svetlana. She had let down her slightly wavy hair that day.

Svetlana had a technique to easily curl her hair. She took a shower, then she made braids that she then undid one by one. This process required a lot of time, but her hair remained styled for about three full days. Just the day before, Svetlana had washed her long mane, so that Frank could see her defined curls. Her hair was ash-blond at the roots and bright at the ends. Seeing it at a glance, the colour seemed chestnut brown, quite light. Frank seemed to like the length of her hair, that reached a little lower than her shoulders, and its distinctive natural colour.

In this unexpected behaviour, Frank had noticed her sweetness and felt an immediate attachment to her. Did he fall victim to what is typically called “love at first sight”? Hard to say. In any case, he was hypnotized, seduced and bewitched by her presence. This real spontaneity combined with her innate and undeniable charm made him weak. One without the other would have produced a different effect.

He had already met very beautiful women who were too arrogant or not very friendly, or even those who were so eager that it overshadowed all their attractive traits. Svetlana's appearance was full of joy, warmth, and was striving to offer a grace that separated her from the multitude.

They had exchanged a kiss on each cheek, both embarrassed and delighted to see each other. She apologized for being late. Frank did not need her to. She was easily forgiven. Her simple radiating aura was enough to redraw a smile on the face of any man in a state of depression. To him, Svetlana a pretty star, which, like an aurora, flooded the sky and the Earth with a special, magical, unique and grandiose atmosphere. She was a hymn paying homage to life.

Frank thought for a while about the best route to climb to the Sacred Heart. They had finally decided to take the first street in front of them, knowing that they had to venture on the sloping roads ahead. Frank, however, had come here on many occasions, without ever taking the same path. There

were quite a few access roads. He was very fond of this neighbourhood. He found it perfect for a romantic walk, especially if the sun honoured the day with its presence. Despite not having the best weather, the pair really wanted to get to know each other. They talked about a little bit of everything and nothing, as often happens when two people arrange to meet up and hit it off during a first outing. They both asked questions to get to know each other better, to see if each one reacts correctly, and to see if their conversation could easily flow from one topic to another. Svetlana had told him many random little details. Amongst other things, she did not know how to listen to her voicemail. The instruction manual that came with the SIM card did not have much useful information. Since they were connected to the same operator, Svetlana had given him her phone to show her how to do it. The menus were displayed in Russian! Frank had not been able to navigate through her phone. She had an old coloured Nokia that had clearly been through a lot. Once the summer was over and she had a little money put aside, she was hoping to buy a smartphone. She would return to the technological race and especially to that of consumption... Apart from a caveman, who could resist? This evolutionary process is part of everyday life. Nobody is forced to acquire the latest version of an object, sometimes for a simple change of design and a fake new function presented as revolutionary; revolutionary only for your wallet. Frank took out his Samsung, a very old model, too. After searching through the menu, he told her the right combination of digits that would give her access to her voicemail.

Listening to her voice messages, Svetlana had burst out laughing. There were only three people who had her French number because she knew very few people in Paris and her friends mostly contacted her on the Internet. The first to get her number was her Ukrainian colleague, the second was a Russian friend who came to France to work in a restaurant, on the west coast, by the sea. Svetlana would have hated doing that kind of job. She preferred hers, although in her eyes it did not really suit her. The culprit who had left her two messages was none other than Frank... who wondered why she was laughing so much. He had simply told her that he was at the place and that he hoped she was doing well. Frank stared at her with a soft look. Svetlana's cheerful and spontaneous disposition pleased him immensely.

They had crossed through several alleys before arriving in front of the basilica, exhausted, following the innumerable slopes they had had to climb. The place was crowded. All weekend long there were performances of acrobatics on skateboards. Multiple CRS officers were present to ensure safety. Between two rows of barriers, they had taken the one and only authorized path that allowed access to the steps of the building. To get to the hall, they had to slalom between the hesitant tourists.

Inside, the crowd was piling up! They were forced to take small steps moving forward. This slow progression helped them to recover from the gruelling obstacle course they had just crossed.

Although a nonbeliever, in the sense of the divinity of Christ—a man who was raised to the rank of son of God so that the ruling bodies of the time could better control the populace—and not the rejection of a message of hope filled with words and noble ideals for mankind and his neighbour, Svetlana questioned herself, sought herself. She wondered about the value of life, about the human condition, which for her necessarily had the most meaning. Nevertheless, she appreciated the grandiose spectacle that this interior offered. They had just entered the lair of one of the last masterpieces built in Catholic France, and they continued their walk by completing the tour. They then went to the basement to visit the crypt. Afterwards, they had climbed to the top.

Frank decided to pay for her. Like most monuments, this sanctuary was no different: to go up, you had to take out your credit card. This capitalist gesture made it possible to maintain the buildings, to minimize the number of “curious people” and also, the best yet, to create some jobs. Basically, it was for a good cause. For the good cause then, Frank had bought two entries. And above all, he got them for his own good cause...

A state of the art, cutting edge technological facility stood in front of the clientele. Without even having to chat with a ticket clerk, anyone could carry out the transaction to pay for the passes. A modernity that contrasted with the old cathedral.

Svetlana was holding a camera in one hand. She did not use it, which intrigued Frank. He had asked her if she wanted him to take a picture of her. She had nodded and handed him the camera. Svetlana looked good on the screen. She was so photogenic she paid tribute to postcards. Frank was aware, however, that she would not give them to him. Any photographer, whoever it is, likes to keep proof of his work, even if in a digital form. Even though the shots were not taken under professional conditions and with consumer equipment, what he liked most of all was nothing more than the image of Svetlana. He then took out his old cell phone that did not have very good resolution and immortalized his model in different poses, once again. Despite the lower image quality offered by this product, he figured that at least he would have some memories of that day for if he did not get another chance to see this young woman who he found more and more amazing as the time went by.

At the top, Frank had again lingered to play with Svetlana. He gazed at her, admired her for a long time, prolonged the poses. The shutter was triggered several times in a row. Tourists watched and had to wait to pass. Frank did not even notice the backup he was causing. He had escaped into a closed universe, hypnotized and enchanted by his subject. He directed her, and governed her gestures and conduct. Svetlana obeyed, like a well behaved and obedient model. This girl's magnetism acted on Frank like a spell that would have taken control of his emotions. As for her, she had perfectly well noticed his little game. Charming, she set herself free in the atypical fantasy of the character. By his attitude she thought he was gallant, kind, sweet, and especially desirable. She was attracted to him.

"Let him have fun so passionately and see if any good will come of it," she thought.

When Frank had regained his usual behavioural state, in one look he realised the trouble that he had caused. Nobody dared to disturb the man who had been transmuted through an artistic trance. The visitors waited as if they had seen a street show. Embarrassed, Frank smiled. With a wave of the hand, he let them know they could now walk around.

Approaching Frank, Svetlana said that he had acted like a mean person by blocking all those people. In the future, she would have to be suspicious of him.

Frank had given her back her camera. He replied that she would keep a good memory of this place and that putting that device in his hands could become dangerous, especially when the model is so good at what she does. Frank had told her that she looked great on camera. While posing, she had fun in front of the camera. It might be interesting for her to appear in original outfits for fashion spreads, using a less mainstream camera that would offer pictures of a much higher quality.

Svetlana had never thought of it. She said she would think about it.

"In the meantime, I'll put the camera in my bag," she added.

After they had completed their tour, two tourists had accosted them in front of the building. In English, they asked how they could pay for the passes to explore the heights of the Sacred Heart. In cash or by card?

Frank had not understood their question. Like all good self-respecting French people, he knew only the official language of the country. While Svetlana was scrutinizing him with her big blue eyes and smiling tenderly, Frank had answered them, "Sorry, I do not speak English," in English. He had begun moving away from them as quickly as they had been approached. Svetlana stayed put. She translated the question for Frank so that he could understand it. He turned around and was surprised to see that she was still standing near them. He came closer to mention what he had seen before: there was an automatic machine to pay by credit card and a counter with staff who took cash. Svetlana translated what he said immediately after, as Frank, who was captivated as he watched her, found that she mastered English even better than French. He was fascinated to discover that at only twenty years old this young woman spoke three languages. He told her that in her company it would be impossible to get lost abroad because she knew Russian, English and French. She jokingly replied that she knew she was the perfect woman. In this case, they should plan a trip together. Frank thought about it, surprised by this reaction. This suggestion could not have had an ounce of seriousness. As a result, there was no follow-up.

At that time, Frank did not know that Svetlana had already bought tickets to visit Belgium and the Netherlands in the coming days. They were short trips but still special for Svetlana who wanted to discover Europe. She didn't think she would ever get another opportunity to do so. Somehow, she hoped that Frank would propose to join her, more for fear of a solo exploration than some ambiguous thought. Frank was not going to say anything like that when she told him about her plans. Deep down, he would have liked to accompany her, even the idea had crossed his mind. Except that, financially, he could not afford it too much. In addition, another constraint prevented him, professional this time. Their schedules were not compatible. It was useless for him to dwell on the thought.

Frank had suggested that they continued their trip by visiting the Parc des Buttes Chaumont, which she accepted willingly.

The journey had taken a good hour. Frank had underestimated how long it took to walk to there from the basilica. On the way, they continued sharing snippets of their respective lives. Frank had told her about his photography work. Svetlana found this very interesting. For her, photography was a wonderful form of artistic expression. She had pointed out that he had not brought a camera to immortalize their outing. She was teasing him...

"But I do not have any of my own... I rent it when I need it for a report or a photo shoot," he explained.

She was surprised. She had not realised that professional equipment was so expensive, especially optics. Frank did not need it for more than two days at a time, so renting was the best choice. It was a choice that allowed him to avoid having to endure a consumer credit that he would have struggled to pay back, pushing his already unstable situation to a worse place. In that moment, Frank considered himself as just another other tourist using his phone to take pictures. Svetlana was a very bad photographer. She preferred to look at the photos. On the other hand, her parents wanted her to bring back some pictures. They had never had the opportunity to travel across Europe.

Conversation between them flowed effortlessly. Frank was genuinely beginning to fall for her. From time to time, he corrected some mistakes with her French. She was happy he did that. Yet she would have hoped more from a Frenchman who mastered the language. Svetlana wished that Frank had interrupted her every single time she made a mistake and that he corrected the construction of her sentences too.

Staying in France caused a great cultural shock for Svetlana. Life and people here seemed different from back home. She did not feel comfortable hearing conversations in French all around her. She felt like her French language skills weren't that great. Her colleagues tried to reassure her: they themselves thought they did not have enough knowledge to speak properly in French. However, unlike Svetlana, they were happy just being understood by the French.

Frank thought it was normal for Svetlana to face difficulties, since she was in France for the very first time. She was not familiar with the sound of the language. Svetlana was surprised that Frank understood everything correctly when she spoke. She was also surprised to understand every last word he said. At the store, dialect problems arose when she had to decode the gibberish of some customers who were nevertheless native French people. So, their clear exchange delighted her. The communication was so smooth it allowed them to focus on getting to know each other.

When Frank did not correct Svetlana, it was because the fault seemed minimal to him. Above all, he was accustomed to spending time with foreign women and decrypting their strange sentence constructions, in some cases. As Frank did not pay attention to all the mistakes, he was a little taken aback whenever Svetlana realised that she had just made an error. Frank tried to reassure her: it was only minor faults in the conjugation or placement of words. Nothing serious, according to him. For her, making such mistakes seemed like the end of the world. She was ashamed of it and considered herself worthless in French. She wanted to master the language perfectly.

To get to the park, they had crossed a large part of the nineteenth arrondissement, some of the gloomiest corners of Paris among which it would be possible to award the gold medal of French

rot. And this filth is a good business, the price per square meter is higher than in sunny southern areas. Svetlana felt like she was at home. It was the buildings, the shops, the particularly ugly and dirty aesthetics that reminded her of the city she came from. It was not at all like the touristy areas that visitors strolled through to admire. Here, they roamed an area at the antipode of Paris that sells through postcards. And yet, in these places the greatest human values are certainly hidden, far from this false and mannered bourgeoisie.

Once in the park, they had gone to Belvedere Island at the Temple de la Sibylle. That day, a zipline was suspended. It spanned the lake to reach the mainland thirty meters below. It was the works of an association that wanted to introduce teenagers to the thrills of treetop adventure courses. After the descent, they were invited to discover other activities in an adventure park in the Paris region. It was a kind of demonstration-sample marketing in partnership with Paris city hall. Frank and Svetlana watched several young people jump into nothingness. Although at first the device seemed impressive, they did not actually move very quickly. Arriving on the other side was smooth, someone being there to help them. They stopped to take some pictures. Frank shot Svetlana again from different angles.

While admiring the view, they were able to see just how far they had walked. The Basilica of the Sacred Heart seemed very far and small from there. Leaning on the railing, their bodies had begun to brush, voluntarily and timidly. Unable to do anything else on this cliff except watching young people attach themselves to a rope, they had headed for the suspended bridge. Here was still the association. This time it offered an introduction to rock climbing for children. Or rather a rappelling descent that brought them eight meters below. Still on the railing, they lingered there for a long time. Time flew by, as they revelled in each other's company.

Svetlana had told him about her family. Her mother was from Ukraine and her father was a native Russian. She missed her sister a lot. They trusted with everything, like two very close friends. Svetlana lived two hundred kilometres from the family nucleus. She only visited them during the school holidays. The rest of the time, she lived in a student hostel in Irkutsk city centre, ten minutes from her school. One of her art teachers was a young Frenchman, barely thirty, whom she found attractive. She would not have been against something happening between them in a different context. Frank supposed she was telling him this information to indicate the direction to take. He had to show her the will of a man who wants a woman. In any case, they laughed. Their hands were getting closer and closer.

Frank had put his hand gently on Svetlana's hand, that had been playing around beside his. She did not try to pull away, which confirmed Frank's thought. From that point on, he was sure that their outing would evolve into so much more. This girl was as flustered as he was. Now, he had to get it together and muster up some courage to bring down the next set of barriers.

They had decided to continue their walk, after having lingered for quite some time in that place. Frank's right index finger caught Svetlana's, who was beginning to retrace their steps. On the way, he got hold of her left index finger, like a hook. Their fingers could have easily become untied. The sensation of her touch was pleasant. They both knew that what they wanted was their hearts to get involved in the game of intertwining. Their knuckles clutched, Frank had proposed crossing the bridge to go to the waterfall on the other side. As her only answer, Svetlana had widened her eyes. As they walked she strolled closer and closer to his body. She had told him verbally that she wanted to see this place. Frank's left hand had captured Svetlana's left hand and offered it to his right hand. Ten fingers were hugging each other. Their mouths were walled in a silence that delighted them. A strong heat spread from this contact and brightened Frank. Feeling the softness of the hand of a highly desired woman becomes a pure moment of liberation. However, the gesture invites the man to continue the game of seduction even more. It is in that moment that you know something important has just happened and that something more serious is about to manifest itself. It's like sealing a pact or signing an act. Before this agreement, they were just two foreign shadows. Now, they embodied two souls united together through which the other carried the hope of a new love.

At the waterfall, Frank asked Svetlana if she wanted to take pictures, once again. She had accepted, with a gesture of the head. Her eyes shone like a thousand stars together. Like a little girl, she ran to get in position in front of the waterfall, came back to leave her bag at Frank's feet, and then ran back to pose. When the fun of taking pictures was over, Frank returned the camera to its owner. In return, she had given him her hand again. They had played this innocent and naive game at two other places in the park. A hunger for each other started to grow within them.

While sinking into a remote area of the park overlooking the small Paris belt and where some fruit trees were hidden, they had crossed several couples kissing. They smiled, a little embarrassed by the situation. The two watched each other, lowering their heads... Deep down, they were waiting for the same exchange. Being in that area was the perfect opportunity to make this sweet exchange happen, except that Frank had not felt the click, blocked by a certain shyness. He had preferred not to brutally provoke this act. He wanted it would happen as naturally as possible.

It was now evening. The cold had begun to spread. On an isolated dirt road, Frank had asked Svetlana if she would have dinner with him. Surprised by this unexpected proposal, she had hesitated about the answer to give. "Was she presentable? What was this man really looking for?" An embarrassing procrastination had taken place. This hesitation had astonished Frank. He wondered. Did he just start a new speed too quickly, at the risk of destroying the entire clutch? He had supposed she would have said yes, without flinching. What was holding her back? She who had not let go of his hand in the afternoon!

Suddenly, Svetlana replied, "Okay!" A simple word that was bitterly out of her mouth as a radical decision that would have impacted the rest of her life...

Frank felt relieved. A smile had swept across his face. They had then slipped out of the park and strolled down the adjoining sidewalk. Their hands did not separate once. They caressed each other's fingers more intensively, generously. Their palms had established a sense of sensuality between them.

On the way, they had stopped for the first time, for some useless reason since they were already talking. The true purpose of this halt was instinctive. The two lovebirds found themselves eye to eye. Slowly, Frank's gaze lowered, madly seduced by the gaze of the goddess in front of him. Oh yes, Svetlana wanted the same thing as Frank! She no longer waited for him to bravely prove his burning desire for her.

Feeling convinced and confident, Frank drew closer to her face. He wanted to taste the sweetness of her lips that strut boldly a few inches from his. Feeling certain in what was about to happen, Svetlana bit her lower lip, instinctively, offering the flowering of a small scarlet sting. Brain overload! Frank's body had deviated from the initial target, caught in an unspeakable panic. He stayed at a distance from her, staring at the blue glint of Svetlana's intrigued vision that wondered how and why he had suddenly abandoned aborted the mission. Turning his eyes away, dismissed by his own instincts, he took hold of her hand to continue their walk.

Frank tried to figure out what had caused that cut on her lip. Did she want him so badly? His quick attempt had ended in failure. He had deflated at the last second, a few inches from the mouth that he was lusting after and that was taunting him. It was the golden opportunity he had been hoping for since the second he had gripped her fingers. Yet still, he had allowed that important moment to bypass them, that important move that makes it possible to move forward, because he would be freed from the essential act, like an invitation card offered that gives access to all the grandeur of a passion in the making: a love story could begin. Why is the first kiss always so complicated? Why does it cause so much apprehension, even when both parties knew that they wanted it? Just as he perceives the moment when her lips are willing to unite with his, he could feel that burning body snuggle between his arms.

Any man would have jumped at the chance to feel these plump, sparkling, perfectly hydrated lips against theirs. Frank had to taste them before the end of the night. He wanted her badly and swore to himself that he would not let her go as freely as she had come, knowing fully well that he

might not see her again if he did not do what he had to. He felt that he had to place his unforgettable signature as a seal on their date.

They had taken the road towards a restaurant that would rise up by chance in front of them. Frank was completely lost in a neighbourhood he did not know. They were walking without any sense of direction.

They stopped a second time, with the same intentions. They examined each other closely. Desires intensified. They mentally and silently devoured each other. Neither of them had dared to cross this indescribable invisible barrier. There were only a few inches separating them from a sentimental relationship. It was so stupid! Frank knew that Svetlana would not make the first move. It was up to him to step up, to prove to her that he had the guts to kiss her to testify to this natural appetite between two beings who like each other and attract each other, irresistibly.

Frank had felt a hesitation similar to the first attempt. They started back walking... What was happening? Frank felt it, Svetlana was waiting for nothing but his temerity. Where was it? He had missed two excellent opportunities. The third one had to be a home run. Otherwise, he could say goodbye to the beautiful Svetlana: she would not want to hear from this incompetent clown after that.

He was attracted to everything about her: her body, her mannerisms, her personality. With her, a sense of trust put him at ease. So what was he afraid of? Frank had decided to postpone his final attempt till the very end of the night, in order to avoid any further pathetic moves. After having dinner and especially after throwing back a few drinks, he would definitely have more courage for it.

After a while, an Indian restaurant appeared in front of them. Frank's wallet would have appreciated this place but Svetlana did not seem too excited about eating there. More than that, the ambiance was nothing romantic. They continued wandering around until they had come across a more animated area. Around the square were several coffee shops. The first one they had gone to was closed for the night. The manager was very apologetic. They had then crossed the street to enter the cafe on the opposite side. From the outside it was not much of a looker, but the interior was very chic. A little too chic... Frank knew for sure that the bill would be damn high. But who cared! This woman who was accompanying him was well worth a financial effort. He did not plan on skimping on their short night out. Not at all! His goal was to completely win her over and make her his next companion.

A waitress had seated them in a quiet and cozy corner. The table was surrounded by two leather seats. They had talked, they ordered, ate and drank. The attraction between these two was intense: their fingers intertwined, soft glances met with jovial smiles and sweet talk, and their hearts were beating hard and fast. The charm worked perfectly, within the rules of the art.

Once the hefty bill was taken care of, they had gone in search of a metro station. Svetlana lived in Montparnasse so they had taken the same line. Frank took advantage of that by walking her home.

Svetlana lived in a hostel for young workers. The room was tiny. The rent, although high for a single room, was not too bad for being in the city. In front of the gate of the building, Frank had spoken up first saying, "I had a great time and I..."

He had not had time to finish his sentence before their lips had drawn close and collided. They had uncontrollably been drawn to each other. There, at that precise moment, was the dawn of a situation that would fire up the days that followed.

Their tongues had hit it off well. They exchanged saliva. Both bodies had merged. Through this kiss a lot of tenderness was exchanged, in a form of exquisite sweetness that had diluted slowly, releasing a tangy taste. After having desired it so much, this moment was like a deliverance for both of them.

Quite a few times, Svetlana told him that she had to go inside. On weekdays, the guard closes the doors at one o'clock in the morning. On the weekends, they stayed open until two o'clock but they were quickly approaching that time. Frank did not want to let go. Svetlana did not want to go home. The moment of grace was prolonged.

Before the final unravelling of their arms and lips for the night, Svetlana had asked Frank when they could see each other again. The next day she had to leave to visit Brussels. She would not come back until Tuesday evening. Since her train ride was in the evening, Frank had proposed to accompany her to the station. He would come and pick her up here as soon as he finished his workday. Svetlana's eyes had answered for her mouth and she smiled, before verbally confirming the next day's rendez-vous. They had kissed one last time.

As for Frank, he would begin a job as a caretaker-concierge in a building for three weeks. It was a job that did not give him any satisfaction. Cleaning the dirt and taking out the garbage did not allow him to flourish as he wanted. Only the salary was okay, thanks to a complementary end-of-contract bonus which made up for any benefit that an appointed caretaker could find in this job, since there is usually low-cost, almost free accommodation provided. In the heart of Paris, and for some residences, this privilege is a luxury; a form of decency compared to how astronomically high rent is in this bougie town. An undeniable attraction for many owners.

However, this bonus no longer exists. It was cut by a government that passed new legislation and believed that these people—these substitutes, these precarious job-workers—earned too much money, plunging them even more into a financial imbalance. From that point on there is no longer a financial motivation; all that remains is a form of disgust, both toward the government that oppresses the proletariat and acts only in the interest of the highest spheres of finance of which it is fully dependent—deliberate slave limit—and towards work also when it comes into conflict with our deepest aspirations. By a policy of excessive austerity, our leaders have legitimized and anchored in our minds that unreasonable practices are developing. No need to talk about the demotivation of an unemployed person faced with a job proposal with a pay that skates around minimum wage. Who can survive living in Paris with a thousand euros net per month? The monthly rent of a decent studio is at least seven hundred euros. Most often, it flirts at around eight hundred. The calculation is fast and simple. A meagre income cannot offer an honest living. That is just salary to barely survive.

The life of a human being does not mean much. What matters is amassing riches... If a commoner ends up on the streets or dies of starvation, it did not really matter... When one is nothing, it is better to return to nothing without being noticed... Politicians are the friends of the wealthy. Hand in hand, they seek not a single not a single interest of the people. They show that they are only capable of making big, beautiful speeches to further lull the masses who begin to stir, to be indignant, to revolt even. At best, they manage to feel a little disdain for the populace. Not much else. They are far too busy negotiating arms deals or starting a new war. Citizens join forces, shouting "Stop!" They don't listen and they ignore the roaring crowds. The gap between government disconnected from social realities and the population is irreparable. These leaders are our ruin. They are responsible for all the misery a country suffers.

Frank had watched the young woman enter the building. She officially became his new girlfriend. Then he had gone in the direction of his home, a thirty-minute walk to Denfert-Rochereau. On the way, he had a smile on his face, eyes that sparkled and the mind that went over the evening they had just shared. The next day, an entirely different matter awaited Frank. He had to get up early, roll up his sleeves and slog without intensity, passion, or brilliance; like a robot, a living dead.

Svetlana had just spent an exceptional day like she had rarely experienced before. She had not gotten to know many boys yet. Her experiences had all been short-lived. She naturally placed a sweet hope in this encounter. What is more romantic than two people who were brought up in two very distinct universes that happen to find each other? Frank had managed to seduce her with his simplicity, his kindness and his listening skills. He was sincerely interested in her. Even before their first kiss, Svetlana had noticed that she already meant something to him. She had also been charmed by his artistic side. An artist a little lost in his dreams and his life, but an original that you don't come across every day.

In her bed, tracing her fingers along her lips, Svetlana ran through the day's events in her mind, noting the effect they had on her. She wondered why her previous encounters had not sparked such intense desire. What was different about this Frenchman, though so plain and ordinary at first sight? Frank was that typical slender young man with an ordinary face and short brown hair that you could come across in every city. A beard a few days old hid slightly hollowed cheeks, while giving him that dilettante or bohemian look as the last shave was more or less spaced, far from the normative and angelic look of a bureaucrat with smooth skin. Frank had been so kind and considerate to her that Svetlana could only succumb. Did she come to meet a guy who would fulfil her and who would make her discover new and beautiful feelings? The man who would leave a mark on her life? The one she would really fall in love with? Svetlana felt a great need to see him again quickly to reassure herself in what she felt. She was also eager to be in his arms. She began to dream and hope... Svetlana had never really loved. Secretly, she yearned for what could come of this alchemy. Why not now? Was it risky to go headlong with a Frenchman living more than seven thousand kilometres from her home? Would she crash into a wall, with no chance of recovering? This overflow of questions had her head spinning. She could not sleep. Although internally agitated, she felt serene. No man had ever seduced her like that and sparked so much desire in one day. Luck was definitely on her side. At that moment, Svetlana sensed that this time it would be different from her previous relationships.

3.

At home, Frank took a shower before going to bed. Exhausted, but delighted, he had woken up after only four hours of sleep. For once, the cause of a long exhausting night was not his annoying neighbour. The man acted as if he was the master of the building. He did not care and he hated the other tenants, often staring at them with a superior air.

At work, firstly, Frank had checked the trash room of the building. He had to create some order after the chaos of the weekend. All the containers were filthy with rubbish to the ground. Such a sight quickly gave way to sickness. He then started cleaning up the place. He had swept the hall and mopped the floor to remove the grime. It is hard to find yourself further away from your deep aspirations. Over the years, he had begun to understand that he would certainly never succeed in his photographic work. He did not know it yet, but the future reserved for him something different and more fulfilling.

In the buildings, the less he got along with the residents, the better the stay was. He always hid somebody to remind him of its fate, even involuntarily. He only needed a few negative thoughts and words to undermine his self-esteem. He had to remain a stranger, to avoid indulging too much, to work like a bear, to speak as little as possible of his ambitions, even if the most curious ones often proved the most enjoyable people to mingle with. The problem came from gossip that spread very quickly. Revealing to someone a desire for success in the artistic community while cleaning vestibules for many years was difficult and could represent the fantasy of an absurd person who forgot to keep their feet on Earth, far removed from any economic reality.

The cleaning over and Frank was lying on the bench, waiting for the postman to arrive. He was trying to relax his body a bit from the exhaustion.

As soon as he received the mail, he sorted the letters and then distributed them to the residents. Then, his role would be nothing more than being present, waiting, in the event that an occupant would need a service or that some rare trouble would occur in the residence.

It was finally 8 pm and the end of his work day. Frank had hurried to close the door to go to the metro; direction Montparnasse. As he got to the address where Svetlana was staying, he had called her. She was still getting ready. She had gone down nearly ten minutes later. They smiled at each other. Svetlana had thrown herself into his arms, they languorously kissed each other. Frank took her hand and they returned to Montparnasse station to go to the Gare du Nord.

Svetlana and Frank were sitting side by side as she rested her head on his shoulder. He stroked her hair. They seemed like a young couple very much in love. Yet less than twenty-four hours separated them from their first kiss. Frank appreciated those moments that seemed like nothing, but to him magical in the course of life. They are rare and very precious.

They radiated the harmony you feel reflected the image of a sweet and touching painting you admire. Sitting in front of them, a man watched them. His eyes were red, as if sadness had invaded him. Frank had examined him with a fleeting glance. He had drawn this conclusion. To make sure of that, he had once again glanced at the man who was still looking at them deeply. This attitude intrigued him. Was it their lovey-dovey behaviour towards each other that put him in this state? Did he recall, for example, a former companion, whom he had long been in love with before she left him? Frank felt affliction for this stranger. But, to each one his trouble to carry. Frank too had been through the painful experience of such a disappointment in the past, with the feeling of dereliction and isolation when love rejects you. He knew that loneliness is a hard test to go through. He was aware that the more the suffering persists and the more the joy will be amplified when a new happiness will be invited in your life.

The Thalys train was ready to go. Frank had accompanied Svetlana to the right car. They kissed each other some more, prolonging their separation for a few minutes. The travellers went aboard the train as their kisses continued. A ticket inspector waited calmly beside the door. The departure

time arrived. The travellers went aboard the train as their kisses continued. A ticket inspector waited calmly beside the door. It was time to leave. Svetlana freed herself from the arms that embraced her. She had left her pink jacket with Frank. The weather forecast was hot and humid. She asked him to give it back to her when she returned. It was a way to test a form of trust between them. Would Frank come looking for her, with her coat in hand or forget her? Would this man be reliable and serious, or would he prove to be just another joke among the mass of Parisian playboys? A short test that would offer initial answers.

Frank quickly waved Svetlana goodbye as she disappeared inside the train.

With the jacket around his arm, Frank went back to the station. He paid particular attention to the precious garment that had just been handed to him.

Going up a flight of stairs, his cheerful smile had vanished. Frank found himself face to face with a paramilitary triad that stared at him, barracked and armed with *famas*. This pink coat around his arm looked suspicious! What did this fag stash away below?

This kind of ghost that roamed the Parisian railway stations presented a double vision of unpleasant aggression in the urban landscape, through their rifles and their greenish costumes—the colour of the bad days—perpetuating year by year a sad parade. Safety ostentation cannot produce anything good. Even if it offers a lure of security to the French, the government deploys above all the fear among the citizens and perhaps also a little dislike. The best result is obtained with an invisible protection. That way, there is no provocation or exasperation, like the civilian police dispersed or concealed throughout Paris. No need to sugar coat anything and gratify the inhabitants—neither the tourists—of a very ugly image: that of a France who is afraid, of a France on the defensive, vigipirated in the red since 2005! Moreover, could these soldiers distinguish a terrorist from an average citizen? For sure such an individual would pass under their radar unnoticed. Because, immersed in a crowd, they remain undetectable. No offense to those who rule us...

These soldiers stroll up and down like puppets. They themselves are tired of walking for hours. However, they have very little choice. These young people are subject to ridiculous orders. They can only focus on their jobs and they have to show up at a certain time at a certain place and march around there as slowly as possible. On top of everything, they are paid a very small bonus at the end of the month, for a dull and old-fashioned show. A soldier adds only one image in the collective unconscious: war and desolation. The complete opposite of a civilized and serene society.

At home, the evening went by in the typical fashion of that of a bachelor. A quick meal in the microwave, a refreshing shower followed by a solitary hand job, a Hollywood circus movie, and then off to bed.

The next day, the cycle began again. The same uninteresting day of work was waiting for him. In the evening, everyone could read the joy on his face. With Svetlana's jacket again around his arm, he languished in the line. The Thalys had just stopped. A crowd of people rushed to find their relatives. Frank had to move several times or Svetlana might not have noticed him in the same corner, blocked by people. When she appeared, she wore an immeasurable smile and gave him a look that any guy would want the woman he adored to give him, Svetlana went straight for Frank's lips. She did not hide how happy she was to see him. Their kiss was eternal, as if this short absence had tested their attachment and their patience. That day, Frank noticed that they were already devilishly infatuated with each other; that day, he felt that their romance would last well beyond a now alarming expiration date; that day he was wrong. He was right about the passion he was beginning to feed, about the bright glow that he could see in her blue, sparkling eyes that devoured him, about that radiant smile that told him what the girl's heart felt without her mouth having to say it, about the velvety and caressing hands that lingered on the contour of his face, about that kiss that melted like a candy between his lips. He was right, except for the most fundamental part: he naively believed that love would become stronger over time. He had been right only about the strength of the bond that had united them,

without thinking for a second that it would become possible for all this happiness to be in the past within a few weeks. In that blessed moment, how could he foresee the catastrophe to come?

When happiness surrounds you, you believe like a fool that it will stay with you forever. This is an unfortunate mistake. Nothing remains constant in life, neither love, nor friendship, nor work, not even money. Nothing lasts forever. All good things only last for a while, all good things survive only a period of time, all acquired property only provide a limited supply of prosperity. When the blessed time is over, the opposite invites itself, becoming a party pooper and suddenly taking over from a once flourishing season. The latter will always be judged too quickly. Just as the opposite is valid, a painful or difficult period is replaced by pleasure. Everything comes to those who find the strength to wait, to continue to build or to walk towards the dreams that drives him, towards goals that he strives to achieve.

After a full make out session in the middle of the station, so happy being reunited, Frank had suggested to Svetlana that they had dinner at his home. She happily accepted the invitation. This trip abroad seemed to have seduced her. On the way, she had told him what she had seen: the Palais-Royal, the Grand-Place, the European Parliament... in short, the most touristy places that were nothing like her hometown. She was delighted, radiant, dazzling. Secretly, already a bit in love. Life was becoming delicious.

Svetlana was not particularly hungry, so they had a small meal. Frank had opened a bottle of white wine. To go along with it, they nibbled on a few slices of salmon.

Svetlana did not have a habit of eating a lot at night. Generally, she preferred to eat some fruits that seemed healthier for her body. She often compared herself to her mother who had a slimmer figure. Although she was not too hung up about it, Svetlana did not consider herself thin enough.

They sat on the bed, side by side. The table was in front of them. Svetlana taught Frank a few words in Russian. He recited them, but forgot them almost immediately. Frank was not good at languages, unlike Svetlana. The only language he would master would remain French. She had asked him to pronounce in Russian, "*Ya lyublyu tebya*," which meant "I love you". He struggled to say it, which made Svetlana laugh... a lot. His accent amused her. She was laughing so hard she couldn't control herself. Frank became overwhelmed with desire. Suddenly he jumped on her and kissed her passionately. Consumed by a similar craving, Svetlana had let herself be carried away and they had rolled around on the mattress.

During the impulsive kiss, Frank's hands took advantage of the situation and slid lower down. Svetlana had blocked and pushed them away, before questioning Frank. She wanted to know what he wanted from her, really. Although the situation seemed obvious, why did he ask her to go to his place? Frank had explained that she had won him over in the park, that he had been touched by her naturalness and her spontaneity. He really liked her, quite simply. Svetlana smiled and said, "okay." Just a small word that offered him his approval to continue what he started. She started kissing him again, and then asked him if in France relationships always evolved so quickly. Frank had just smiled in response, before sliding a hand towards her chest.

Svetlana felt Frank's sincerity. For this reason, she had agreed to go further that day. She had never rushed to make love. She felt completely transformed. She thought that she behaved like a little boy with a high libido. Usually, successive dates grew towards relationships that led to more intimacy. Usually, successive dates grew towards relationships that led to more intimacy. The French seemed to her very sure of themselves, and with a one-track mind on sex. The internationally famous reputation of the French lover seemed just about right. Svetlana had just realised this for herself and she was excited to taste the French flavour.

When they were both dressed in the traditional nude costume, moving side by side like two earthworms, Svetlana told him she did not want to get pregnant. He had to put on a condom. This remark made Frank smile. He had not imagined for a moment venturing without this protection. However, he appreciated that she cared about that. He grabbed two boxes from the closet, letting her

choose the kind she preferred. Obviously, Frank had anticipated this opportunity. Svetlana rejected the brand she did not know. This amazing discernment amused Frank. Both kinds were worth the same. Frank's inclination went even for the other brand, because it was thinner and guaranteed better sensations. It did not matter! He felt it was a priority to put his partner at ease. He had put on the hood that Svetlana had already unwrapped. She was lying down and patiently waiting to receive Frank between her legs, ready to receive his rod. Before turning to the more serious things, Frank had carried his head between Svetlana's thighs. Few women do not like cunnilingus. Since she was just ready for him to ride her, Frank had deduced that maybe her experiences with that were not that great.

Svetlana had closed her eyes to feel the dynamic shivers running through her body. Their movements were sensual, except that Svetlana was hoping for something a less... gentle. When it comes to their sexuality, women are so different that men can only perceive what they want once an initial thorough examination has taken place. Svetlana wanted extreme sensations. She hinted that he should not hesitate to be more vigorous. Frank did not have to be asked again. He had chiselled her like a raging bull. The bedding burst at the seams and jerked on all sides during the vibrating impulses and moved away from the wall it was attached to. A heat worthy of a sauna had invaded the room. The window was fogged, the two bodies were sweating immensely. Svetlana had moaned in total bliss for several minutes before screaming in pain. Frank's hip had just hit the top of her thigh. The intensity she had begged for had suddenly become unbearable. She had asked that he calm down a little bit for the rest of it. Frank did not mind. He could go so rough forever anyhow. Their entertainment had continued through a peaceful sensual time.

A quick individual shower, then they lay down in the bed that had just crossed a turbulent swell. Svetlana had snuggled up in her partner's arms and laid her head on his chest, whose body had just turned into a voluptuous pillow.

Frank caressed his sweetheart's hair. He adorned her face with many kisses. Between the gentle touches, he asked her what time she had to get up the next day to get to work. Frank had set his alarm clock at seven to ten to get ready. Svetlana had jumped, surprised, almost furious, without bothering to answer his question.

"What?! You work tomorrow? Why didn't you tell me anything before?"

Frank was speechless, surprised by the excessive reaction, unexpected. He had watched her, serene. Svetlana was pouting.

"I'm disappointed, Frank. I thought we would sleep in together. I would have gone home if I had known."

"Did you not enjoy the evening?"

"Of course, yes! I loved! It was very..."

"Very good?" Frank asked her, cutting her off.

"No! Much more than that! There are no words to express what I felt. It's just that I wanted to sleep in late the morning. Because of my trip, I am very tired."

"You can sleep, Sveta. When you want to go, you just have to slam the door. Okay?"

"Okay!"

Svetlana's smile had returned. They both stretched out at the edge of the bed. Svetlana rest her head on Frank's chest. While caressing her silky hair, Frank wondered if leaving her alone at his home was a good idea. He had only known her for a few days. What was there to steal from him? Nothing very precious. She seemed like a trustworthy person, innocent of all amorality. He hoped that he was not wrong. She did not look like a woman who stole from people. Rather, it's quite the opposite. If he wanted to create a romantic story with her, he'd have to trust her at some point. If in love there is nothing but mistrust, then no noble feeling can reside there.

After a last passionate embrace, slowly, the two lovers had fallen asleep, soothed, blissful.

At the appointed time, Frank's phone vibrated. He had to get up and go to work. Svetlana was still tired. She opened her eyes with difficulty. Exhaustion held her senses. Frank advised her not to

worry about him and stay in bed. But, the back and forth between the kitchen, the bathroom and the bedroom occupied her attention.

Thirty minutes later, Frank was ready to go. Svetlana was still lying under the sheets, sleepy and naked. She had watched him get dressed, tidy up their mess from the night before and drink his coffee. Before disappearing, he had wished her a pleasant day. Then he covered her with endless little kisses. This exchange of fluid to them was amazing. Frank lingered. He could not manage to separate from her. Every step he took, he would come back to kiss her again. He could not go out of the apartment anymore. She absorbed him completely and did nothing to let him go. She received and gave, without counting. A mysterious, ineffable charm had already bound them. An inherent magic is the only thing that could transform love at first sight into such hungry passion. Frank appeared already very much in love. With resignation, he had to find the strength to unstick himself from her to avoid a being too late. Svetlana gave him a dejected pout. She stared at him with her shimmering eyes... Another kiss. The last. For sure. Then, he cleared out from the place, like a thief. The slamming of the door signified their separation for a few days. Each would go about their daily tasks.

These activities were nothing but their respective jobs. Frank was mopping the floor while Svetlana was selling handbags. In the evening, both were exhausted, for different reasons. Frank lived in a building where the simple calmness of his parents' home here only reflected a gruff fantasy. He could not fall asleep until two o'clock in the morning, at best. As the working hours were fixed, he could not enjoy sleeping in on mornings. Frank returned exhausted. As for Svetlana, her job drained and fatigued her with the obligation to remain constantly on her feet. It is forbidden to sit except on their lunch break. After so many hours standing on her feet and listening to the customers' requests, once at home, she collapsed on the small bed of eighty centimetres that looked like a child's bed. The room was not very large: nine square meters and poorly furnished. Only the essential things occupied the little space. A desk with a bench and a large wardrobe completed the furniture. Near the entrance door was the shower tray, simple and banal, cubic. The hostel housed only women, to avoid any conjugal problems. Typically, the rooms are rented to foreigners who came to France for a few months to work. For the few French women who lived there, their lives had taken a bad turn. They had found themselves in financial difficulty. They were usually divorced women or women thrown mercilessly to nothingness and ruin by their previous partners. In this place, they found hope towards a brighter tomorrow. "At least," some say, "they are not on the street."

One of Svetlana's colleagues was staying at this residence; a Moldovan with whom she got along more or less well. They were not always on the same wavelength, unlike her Ukrainian friend who was basically her personality twin. Physically though, this was not the case. Although both tall, the Ukrainian had dark hair and was slender. Svetlana envied her thinness, even if in return this girl was suffering from a Lilliputian chest. Svetlana also did not have very developed breasts. For her body size, it seemed to her that what she had were a little too small. One of her exes had drawn her attention by pointing out that if she had a cup size of about a thirty-six C or D, she would have enjoyed a body likely to captivate any male! Would not she rather have looked like a vulgar bimbo? To create a certain illusion, she used padded bras like many young women her age.

At work, Svetlana never had the same hours two days in a row. She hated to start late in the morning or worse, early in the afternoon. On those days she would finish after nine o'clock. That was very late to go home. She did not like not being able to enjoy free time after her work day.

Svetlana liked to look at the handbags. When the opportunity arose, she would hang them on her arm. She imagined that it was hers. Her daydreaming was usually cut short. Either a client came to ask for information, or she wanted to buy the one that Svetlana was holding.

Brands like Cartier, Ralph Lauren or Dolce & Gabbana easily surpassed a thousand euros. Other kinds were even close to two thousand. There were all sizes, from disproportionately giant to miniscule. Svetlana was fascinated with them and often admired them. As she was entitled to a twenty percent discount on the price by being a saleswoman, she made weekly favourite purchases at the

great benefit of her employer. Generally, she did not spend more than fifty euros, including discount. If Svetlana was paid more, she would not have hesitated to invest in the luxurious items from the shop. In a way, she was a real fashion victim, but also of the consumer society. Without a purse on her arm, Svetlana did not feel whole, as if a part of her femininity was missing.

The workweek ended without meeting, so they had made a date to spend Saturday evening together at Frank's apartment.

Frank had just received an SMS from Svetlana. She explained to him that she had gotten lost. She was in the neighbourhood, except that she had not remembered how to get to his place. Frank called her back. He advised her to wait for him at the metro. He went to join her. At the spot, Frank did not see Svetlana. She was not in the right place, which further complicated the situation. According to the descriptions of the environment she had given him on the phone, Frank had guessed that she had come out the metro too early. He went to meet her, barely a ten minute walk. Arrived at the station, behind a sign that contained the map of Paris, he had distinguished two female legs that protruded from a short skirt. He realised immediately that it was her. He had approached her and held her neck between his thumb and middle finger. Surprised, she had contracted.

“Haaaaa!”

Svetlana had just let out a little cry of surprise more than fear. She had turned around. He smiled. They kissed languidly, not caring about the presence of any passer-by.

Once at the apartment, they went straight for the bed. Dinner could wait. Their appetite was much more carnal. With the tumultuous act of love accomplished, Svetlana had asked him if he had ice cream. In the summer, he liked to eat it occasionally; he had a box in the freezer. They were big magnums. Svetlana was satisfied. She wanted a second one. Their workout had made her hungry. Before going to bed, they took a shower together, between the exchange of caresses, foam and kisses. Svetlana had not brought anything to sleep in. She was so eager to meet him that it had slipped her mind. She asked Frank for a T-shirt. Frank had chosen a specific one that would offer the greatest comfort to his gem. Made of microfiber fabric, the fabric was lightweight and extremely soft. Svetlana appreciated the clothes he lent her. The velvety appearance provided a pleasant feeling against her skin.

In the bed, in the dim light, relaxed on Frank's chest, Svetlana questioned him. She wanted to know if he had a child. The question had come out suddenly, without warning. Frank was quite surprised. Asked like that, the question seemed intrusive to him. Had she looked in his papers and documents when she was alone in the morning, after their first shared night? To him the subject seemed natural to talk about, but why did she ask about that so specifically and not on anything else? Had she looked for information about him, out of curiosity, to know him better? If that was the case, he did not appreciate this behaviour, which would indicate an abnormal curiosity or an unhealthy suspicion—basically an intrusiveness he did not want. However, it was useless to lie to her. Frank had already considered telling her about this important part of his life.

“Yes, I have a child...” he replied.

He would have liked this discussion to happen much later, once he had been assured of the proper evolution of their relationship. He was aware that at the beginning of a story everything appears under wonderful auspices; *La vie en rose*. Everyone knows how amazing Aphrodite is before she turns into an Amazonian warmonger. On the other hand, the question was welcomed because it gave him the chance to make things clear. He then asked her if this revelation was a problem for her. She had told him no, for the moment she was not bothered. What did she mean by “for the moment”? This reply intrigued Frank, even if it was a positive reaction; unless he saw in it the sign of certain immaturity or a potential wish to pursue nothing serious with him; take advantage, enjoy the freedom, without ever investing. Yet, in comparison with his ex who behaved in a diametrically opposite way, he was surprised to notice that at a young age this woman seemed to react positively. However, for the ex in question, Frank had thought that she was absolutely honest in her intentions with him. The

situation had revealed to Frank what her true desires and feelings were. His disappointment only meant that he had had a sincere desire to be with her.

In a few words, Frank had explained to Svetlana how he had managed to become a father without ever having considered it. Svetlana did not fully understand the situation. In consolation, she wanted to look at pictures. He had warned her that he did not have many. He could not spend much time with his son. His relationship with the mother was very tense. From their story, no romance to tell. Between them, the doors of the Chthonian powers were ajar. The alacrity of the first days had given way to a rough battlefield. Frank had brought out an album which presented the child from birth until he was one and a half years old; he was still very small. Svetlana had appeared happy to discover the little lad. She had asked him about the colour of the skin, "Isn't he too dark?"

Frank froze, flabbergasted by the involuntary invective. How could she ask that question? Frank had simply replied that he was less so than the mother. He tried not to linger on the question. Svetlana apologized, noticing Frank's reaction. She had continued to turn the pages. She was looking at the different shots. Frank watched her. He realised that she was squinting her right eye from time to time, as if she were trying to better distinguish certain details. Did she have a vision problem? Frank wanted to know. Svetlana gave in. Her right eye was suffering from ametropia. She did not want to wear glasses. Her visual perception was pretty good overall. Although she was short-sighted, her left eye had no problems. She had become accustomed to this eye arrangement. As long as it remained stable, she would be fine.

Svetlana congratulated Frank on his little boy. She thought he looked cute and energetic. She apologized again for her absurd remark. Frank would not hold it against her. He wasn't even thinking about it anymore. He asked her if she was planning to have children someday. She was in no hurry and confided her doubts about it. Would she act like a worthy mother? Would she be able to raise offspring? She was not convinced. She was afraid of not having the necessary authority. Frank was forgiving and lenient with her. She should not worry. The day she gives birth is when her maternal instincts would kick in. She would know just what to do at the right moments. He also added that he was convinced she would spread an extraordinary affection. Her little ones could only be happy when such a warm-hearted woman broods on them. Svetlana smiled, touched by these pleasant words. She closed the album and handed it to the owner. Frank put it in the drawer of a dresser; right back where he got it from. Afterwards, he had approached Svetlana to kiss her. They made love, again.

They woke up gently, late the next morning. They left relaxed and very much in love. Frank had made tea for her. For himself, he had filled a cup of coffee. He enjoyed drinking tea too, but mostly after lunch. After dinner, an herbal tea satisfied him, while watching a movie.

In the evening, Svetlana had to go to the station for her trip to Amsterdam. She told him that the train was leaving the Gallieni station. Frank was surprised to hear the name of the metro station. He asked her to show him her tickets. She made a mistake when she bought tickets, a mistake she had not noticed. In Gallieni, there was the big bus station for coaches serving Europe, and in no case would a train be waiting there. Svetlana was shaken by her carelessness. The journey would be long and tiring; she would have to spend the whole night in it.

From that revelation, Svetlana hesitated. The attractive price was justified by means of locomotion. Frank explained to her that nothing obliged her to set foot in that country if she was afraid to go that way. Nevertheless, he tried to reassure her. It would be a shame not to enjoy her stay anymore because of a careless mistake. Otherwise, she could always go to work with him. However, the place would not offer anything exciting for her. Although Frank would have preferred an extra day at her side, it turns out that the disadvantages of some are not necessarily advantages for others. For her sake, it was better that she did not give up on this trip.

In the meantime, they devoured some sushi that had already been thawed. Frank had bought it after learning that Svetlana loved sushi, as she had mentioned during a previous conversation. He wanted to make her happy.

In the afternoon, they went out for a walk in Montsouris Park. At the entrance to the park was an ice cream vendor. Svetlana could not resist the urge. They got three scoops each: vanilla, raspberry and peach. Then they trailed along the lake. The heat was stifling. Sorbets tend to liquefy so they tried to gobble them up quickly. Sticky juice dripped down the cornets and spread over their fingers. Fortunately, Svetlana's huge purse—a tote bag—hid a bundle of tissues and a bottle of water to clean their hands.

On a sloping plot of land covered with grass, they had settled near a tree where they benefitted from the shade it provided. The ethnic and social diversity of Paris was greatly represented by the groups gathered around these few square meters. The idlers basked in the sun and allowed their skin to bronze. Intellectuals turned pages of their different books. A sportswoman was doing yoga poses. A little further away, a person of Asian origin practiced chi kong. In her own bubble, isolated from everyone, she had blocked out everything around her. A man had just stopped running. He was stretching in a variety of positions in front of a woman sitting on a bench. She was peacefully reading. As if to show her his interest in her, he then joined her at the other end of the seat. He watched her with even more insistence. The age gap between them seemed huge. The man in question must have been nearly twenty years older than she was. Yet, the young beauty did not move an inch. She did not show it but she was waiting for the man to say something to her.

At the bottom, on the flattest area, a group of teenagers were having a bit of fun. The young people were dancing on reggae music. A boy a little older than the rest of the group seemed to be teaching them basic movements.

The atmosphere was filled with camaraderie. Sunny Paris gave everyone the desire to find a partner and couple up. The aroma of love was dispersed in the air and filtered by the lungs, before contaminating the body and the psyche with orgasmic appetites.

“It's really the city of love,” Svetlana said.

Frank smiled. He thought about that common description of the place. He remembered an ex who claimed the opposite. According to her, romantic Paris did not really exist. She came to this city with too many expectations. The contemporary reality had disappointed her.

Frank had contented himself with a moderate opinion: “It seems. But I think that seduction works the same way in all countries. It's not like that in Russia?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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