

15 Days Apart

The train arrived with one last jolt. Inside, Isabella Carter-Jones gathered her belongings and, when appropriate, lurched leftward from her seat into the leather briefcase of a man in the aisle. His body was made of iron, it seemed. Isabella dumbly recoiled from the contact. She straightened her hair, and thought, "Ouch."

The man tipped his hat. For all appearances, he was a Frenchman, which did not surprise Isabella, who was traveling the French countryside. But then again, what was he doing on this railroad line, which was not especially for commuters? Isabella could not make sense of it, and studied the man more carefully.

His moustache was too perfect, reminding Isabella of the cartoon logo for Batman, of all things. She remarked to herself that in that logo, as somehow here, in the moustache, animation and architecture conformed for an overwrought symmetry. She could not exactly explain the effect. Also, the man's tie was noteworthy, suggesting a zealously tasteful conservatism. What else could Isabella conclude about emerald green ellipses in perfect vertical columns along a navy blue background? As for the man himself, his hair was trimmed to a flawless horizontal layers, and supported a lint-free bowler hat of perhaps one size too small. No, this man did not belong in

Avignon unless he sacrificed the entirety of his free time to commuting from Paris.

Isabella decided to speak. "Do you have the time?" she inquired in French. Without looking either at Isabella or his watch, the man extended his arm far enough for his sleeve to draw back from his wrist. His forearm contained patches of hair that seemed to grow upward along his body, instead of downward. Where the hair grew, it was extraordinarily thick, and some strands, poking free of the dense clumps, revealed perfect right angles in their short, gleaming length. While Isabella contemplated the image of staples, never reading the wristwatch, the man withdrew his arm and easily shook his sleeve and cuff into place.

"Thank you," Isabella said. The train doors silently slid open and she awoke to her surroundings, shrugging momentarily to make a tangible note to herself of what was probably the end of her otherwise confusing encounter with the man. She tugged a final zipper on her huge, fading backpack, and wrestled into the straps, which dangled like tribal breasts.

Since Barcelona, where her girlfriend Jessica Bayswitz gave up on the formalized itinerary of their trip, Isabella had taken advantage of any opportunity to master her equipment. In moves as fluid as an Hawaiian love dance, she sometimes could spear the limp straps one, two, three, of her pack, wicker beach bag, and camera bag, and complete the unbroken gesture with her hands at her waist for a quick,

needful tug of her t-shirt and realignment of her fanny pack. Jessica had insisted on squandering their unequal savings on taxis and porters, increasing their helplessness. In her absence, Isabella recovered her bearings to the point of physical self-sufficiency, a tighter rein across her purse, but not yet so far as to the question the weight and cumbersomeness of her chosen load.

"Would you like some help?" the man asked, indicating Isabella's bags.

"Excuse me?" she wondered.

"Your bags," said the man, and instantly lifted everything but the backpack with the same hand that offered the watch. Isabella blushed, and experienced amazement. She felt immediately and inexplicably like a temporal throwback of some kind, a cultural misfit in all places and times; what her own generation had just a season ago, as she graduated college, outgrown calling a retro. She could not produce a useful thought. Instead, her mind was awash in disjointed images from her past: the cloying collegiate boys whose embraces she had slipped through, one by one, like a basketball; the slatted wooden board on which, as a girl, she and her overweight mother, side by side, had chopped vegetables; the small prop-plane that crashed near her home before she was born so that random, rusting pieces of metal transformed girlhood walks in the woods into leafy scavenger hunts for jagged shards of treasure.

Meanwhile, her bags dangled steadily in the man's clamped, extended hand. To Isabella they looked a fish net in the process of draining, afterward to reveal the thrashing catch that was, after all, her life, in all its inevitable pungency. Luckily, the zippers appeared sound. Nothing, so far, had torn or otherwise separated the new seams she had, thank God, stitched across a former tear in the front pocket of the fanny pack. The bulges did not threaten any immediate, internal explosion, sending dirty t-shirts everywhere. But none of this brighter side changed the fact that the man held a camera bag that was really a very private laundry bag for expired undergarments; that in direct contradiction of Isabella's will and character, the fanny pack was stuffed to bloating, like an expatriate piñata from Spain, a very Catholic country, with dozens of forms of contraception; that blaming an absent friend upon discovery by the man was not bound to be convincing, despite any high content of truth; and worst of all, that now under the dark influence of these crashing insights, Isabella reckoned for the first time that her passport and traveler's cheques were no longer in her possession, where they belonged; that this was the experience her tour book could never repeat often enough to prevent: the day-time robbery.

The man moved with the light load of passengers through the aisle to the doors, and Isabella followed. She thought briefly of her mother watching soap operas in the relative bliss of their suburban home; of her phone call across the

ocean to explain how evil of that kind is not confined to TV, mom, you were right to be worried. Oh, Angel. . .

A tear formed in the quarter moon of Isabella's lower eyelid. She was resigned, she believed, to her fate, the only solace for which was firstly statistical and then later a support group if necessary, but somewhere in the States. As she took countless baby steps toward the uncertain future outside the train, she pulled in her shoulders, as if withdrawing her limbs into the tortoise-shell of her back, which was all she had left. Her neck sank collapsed like an accordion bag, and a small groan, like the instrument's last breath, climbed out her throat.

Was there reason to be worried? The man crossed the threshold of the train onto the platform, which roasted in the late afternoon sun. Before turning around to Isabella, he scanned the assembled faces of the station, and smacked his lips. Isabella came up beside him and looked meekly toward his chin, which jutted forward at a pronounced angle. His large Adam's Apple swiveled near the base of his neck, and rose. The man lowered Isabella's possessions slowly onto the platform, like potatoes for bartering.

"Adieu," he said, wiping his free palm on the lapel of his suit. He did not pursue eye contact, but this time tipped his hat toward a nearby shadow. Isabella watched him walk mechanically to the stairs, descend them for the unpaved parking lot, cross that, and remove from his hip pocket the keys for a sparkling Renault Espirit. He opened

the door and smoothly climbed in. Moments later, the engine turned over softly and the antenna went up. The car idled without moving for several minutes. Isabella could see through the clean rear windshield that the man was adjusting the rear view mirror a great deal. A code of light bounced off it in accordance to how the man manipulated it. Occasionally, the exhaust pipe gleamed also. Isabella love-danced into her awaiting gear and ran down the steps.

The man's name was Henri. He worked as a foreman in the Evian plant in nearby Toulouse. No, he never dressed the part, but he also challenged stereotypes in other ways, such as treating his crews with a wealth of humanity, as opposed to the expected inflexibilities of a captain on a schedule. On one occasion, as an assembly line bogged down at the premature labor pains of a mother-to-be, Henri quipped that the water had broken, punning heavily, and sent not only the woman, but everyone home early, asking modestly in trade that the present team work an extra hour the following day. Or so Isabella deciphered as she sank back into her plush bucket seat, which captivated her with its extraordinary comfort in comparison to the overnight trains of her latest weeks. She tried to think in French, but hardly was thinking at all.

In fact, between unconscious sighs of pleasure, Isabella drifted like a leaf on the gentle trade winds of Henri's generous self-expression. His words echoed in an

unfamiliar chamber of her mind, an undeveloped place where her translation apparatus held no authority whatsoever. Yet a paradox followed: the language was making total sense. Isabella could make mental pictures of the words without recognizing their English counterparts first, or caring what anything formally meant. Nor were the images of any caliber or category she had ever birthed before. This was alien thought for Isabella, the first apocalyptic step toward insight into one's unquestioned limitations. As green hills and ancient trees passed the windows, Isabella inwardly warmed at the idea that she could get along without nervous attempts at small talk or flattery. She felt a new, decidedly French, relaxation in her bones. There was no reason to be other than herself.

What was that self? It was not time for that. Instead, the car stopped in front of a large house on a long, rolling stretch of land. In one direction, the sun sank beyond the entrance to a thick patch of forest; in the other direction stood a distant structure suggesting a barn with a windmill. Henri helped Isabella with her gear, using his free hand to manipulate more keys, which jangled as they left his pocket. Isabella guessed at twenty to thirty pocketed keys to account for that much racket. She would never find out how many, however, because Henri had withdrawn the right one, it seemed, and crossed the driveway to the house already extending the same arm that bore the watch and first held the bags. The arm was rigid in its

quest for the keyhole, and transported the key there with remarkable finesse, as when a man lightly flicks a sword at arm's length to skewer a distant bean from the ground. In this fashion, Henri thrust his key at the doorknob, mystically turning it before it seemed possible for the latch to release. Yet the motion carried off as if obedient to a power in Henri that forced time itself to accommodate his gracefulness. He turned to Isabella and nodded his head for her to cross into his home.

Isabella obliged, and surrendered to wonder. Had her brief glance of the natural setting ignited any dumb curiosity within her, there was nevertheless no comparison to her feelings upon dropping her backpack somehow like an anchor within the first four walls of her new accommodations. Although perfectly flat, the ceilings of the immediate rooms, visible in various directions on account of a winding staircase and spacious partitions for human traffic, gave the powerful impression of a vaulted architecture, whose second story would be checkered with pyramidal valleys and peaks. Because it alternated between light and less light shades of blue, the paint throughout these rooms greatly heightened, if not the first place created, this effect. It was difficult for Isabella to pinpoint the source of the impression, and wandering beneath its artificial sky, she fell willing prey to many overriding distractions.

To begin with, the windows were cut in the shape of perfect pentagons, the top triangular panels of which were painted bluer to match the ceilings. Also, the abundant Persian carpets and tapestries swam with animals both familiar and impossible, and Isabella walked within the woven myths on the walls too concerned over the possible caked dirt on her hiking boots. So why not take them off? The idea was entirely blunt, like an axe-stroke of unsolicited inspiration. It flashed in Isabella's mind as a sort of movie-short: two huge, dislocated hands landing the instrument upon a log's awaiting head, cleaving its body into long half-moons, which were suddenly her boots. Isabella returned from the thought, and smiled at Henri, who stood across the room, smoking a pipe. His mouth slowly released smoke as if materializing impermanent, soundless words. Without hesitating, Isabella bent over at the waist and unlaced her footwear. The dark blue laces were long, and extended well beyond the top eyes of each boot. From there, they wound onto the carpet like rainfall seeking the sea, seeking the air again, seeking the land. Isabella stepped free of these confining waters and clamped the boots easily in her hand. She drew back an iron screen from the nearby fireplace and put them inside on a trellis, closing the screen over them.

In her socks, Isabella roamed further into the richness of the house. Where bare, the floors imparted to her feet a sensation of smoothness that she equated to a long

possession of the property by Henri's family. Somewhere in the mists of his past was a matriarch with a tacit wisdom regarding splinters, guessed Isabella. She pictured that woman as a heavysset scowler in a bright red bandanna over the whole of her hair, highlighting the exposed ears, which were top-heavy. Her dress would be black and cut loosely for practical, agrarian living. Its enormous black buttons were its only ornamentation.

Isabella did not linger over the omissions in her vision of this woman. As with a televised image, so soon giving way to more images, she took instead what was immediate and tangible to the mind's flooded eye, and disregarded all avenues of concern that might lead elsewhere to what was not so tangible. Similarly, having watched so much TV in her life, Isabella was by no means familiar enough with visions arising behind, not in front of the eyes, to add much critical acumen to the process. For the time being, her place was very squarely the place of the initiate, or beginner. And like all initiates, she clung to her miracles instead of dissecting them. Lest they alter their timber, she would not hamper or otherwise interfere with their flow. The analogy is of one, who for the first time in ages, cannot bear to change a channel despite its present lapse into commercials.

Then Isabella found herself in front of a painting, in response to which her jaw dropped. This was not any TV, but the filtered manifestation of her previous imaginings. In

the foreground, an old woman hunched over a small fire and pile of large potatoes. She wore a red bandanna over the whole of her head, contrasting and accentuating her dreary, white complexion and red, scowling lips. Her dress contained two visible, large black buttons, which reflected the flames. Two ravens flew in the green background sky like images thrown there by the buttons. Overall, the painting was 8 X 10 feet, and after studying it awhile, Isabella realized with returned surprise that it was huge. She also awoke to the knowledge that paintings of similar dimension, and countless smaller ones, were all over the walls; that to some degree, the gaping walkways between rooms were themselves like the frames of paintings created every second by life; additionally, that the front door had been no different; that somewhere in a parallel universe, perhaps, was a young woman like herself, traveling alone like herself, but unlike herself preparing an itinerant dinner of bread and cheese from a grocery store local to an uneventful train station, where there does not materialize a man named Henri, about whom this other young woman will instead spend her night thinking, imagining, never really meeting and going home with him, but knowing him as she determines him in accordance to some familiar Southern Pacific fiction or other, in which the lonesome islander falls in love with the sprightly island guest and only so little time to woo her; the urgency; the diplomacy; the two motherless children with faces full of paradise. . .

"Isabella, I would like to introduce you to my children, Aloe and Louis."

"Enchanté," said the first, a seven year-old with precocious manners and grooming. Presented with Isabella's hand, she took hold of the fingers and performed and a perfunctory curtsy, her head bowed for an extended duration to transmit deference and good will. In turn, Isabella curtsied, not worrying exactly how to do so. As her eyes reached Aloe's, the girl quickly winked, and carried on as if she hadn't.

"Enchanté," giggled Louis, his hands too busy with a plastic sword and shield, reminiscent of Roman gladiatorial gear, to shake hands, curtsy, or any of that business. Instead, he galloped an invisible, unruly horse around the carpet's perimeter, and upon returning to his point of departure, lunged the sword into Isabella's midriff, where it took impermanent hold, bent along the blade, and withdrew. "You are like Papa!" he exclaimed. "I will feed you to the lions to appease our Christian god!"

Uncertain of how Louis might carry out this threat, and how therefore to cooperate with it, Isabella turned to Henri, whose eyes were fixed on his daughter in an expression of fatherly delight that knows all delight will inevitably pass, this delight must pass too, but not now, now it exists, made more valuable by its impermanence. Without outwardly acknowledging Isabella, Henri rolled up his sleeves, having left his jacket elsewhere, and clamped

his hands upon his thighs over slightly bent knees. The simple action put in motion practiced reactions from Aloe, who raised the back of her hand against her forehead and melodramatically sighed, and from Louis, who ran frantically in place.

"The Giant," boomed Henri, "is very hungry, is always hungry, is here to eat, and eats children." Over these continuing phrases, which came out eventually like a mantra, Aloe shrieked once, and mock-fainted, collapsing onto the floor. As Henri lumbered toward her, Louis flew from his position, charging with his bent sword held forward, glancing Henri's side. Louis circled him and struck blow after blow. With the side of the sword, he paddled his father across the backside two times, squealing with laughter. Under this assault, the Giant was distracted from Aloe, and turned upon Louis with a slow, annoyed growl. Louis held his ground. The Giant approached slowly. Louis trembled. He abandoned his horse and ran to the next room, shrieking wildly.

"Isabella, save Aloe," he cried. But Aloe was already draped over her father's arms. When Henri turned, Isabella could see the girl's reposed face, and again received a quick wink from the nearer eye. Again, the wink was fast enough, and left so little trace on Aloe's face, that it did not interrupt the current proceedings in any way. With Louis still shouting in the other room, Isabella assumed a

posturing stance before Henri, and eyed him as a foe in the wild.

"You will not eat the child," she earnestly warned.

"is very hungry," said Henri, "is always hungry."

"Then try me," Isabella protested.

"will be less hungry," said Henri, approaching Isabella without releasing his daughter. Isabella grabbed for the child, but quickly snagged her right wrist in Henri's tight grip. He reeled her in like a well-hooked fish, allowing her the illusion of heroism as she continued her efforts for Aloe. There was really no use to them. In one easy maneuver, as if the Giant for one second were permitted to contradict his usual sluggishness, to seek favors from time, Henri pulled Isabella to his shoulder so that her feet hung like a canopy over Aloe. The Giant snorted and grumbled. With nowhere in particular to take the two ladies, no obvious lair, he walked slowly throughout the room, concentrating on the paintings. After two revolutions, he gently released them to the ground, and bowed politely.

"I'll kill Louis!" exclaimed Aloe, reinvigorated, and she ran from the room to make good her words. Henri walked to the window and took his pipe from the sill.

"They're lovely," said Isabella.

"Oui," said Henri, puffing at a match.

"Thank you for bringing me here."

"You will clean yourself for dinner. If we talk more now, you will see me too much as a giant." Henri bowed again. Isabella lightly laughed at his concern. She opened her mouth to address it, and Henri spoke instead. "Louis will not come to the table," he said, "until I finish my first bites." To Henri, this prediction was terribly amusing, and he laughed loudly.