

## THE DEPARTURE

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*“Je vais en France,”* he said staring at the tired carpet. Twisting and shifting his weight, seeking comfort against the indifferent fabric seat, persisting he arched his back into a stretch.

*“Excellent, pourquoi?”* A floral voice replied.

Unexpectedly, finding himself looking up and answering, *“Excusez?”*

*“Pardon-moi. Pourquoi, allez-vous France?”*

*“Ah. . . sorry, I—ah, I don’t—je suis ne parle . . .”*

*“Pardon me, you said ‘you were travelling to France’. I thought you were speaking to me.”*

*“Sorry. No, just practicing. Practicing with the floor I suppose.”*

*“Of course. You’re learning French before you go to Paris perhaps, yes? You know, it is better to practice with someone? I think this is because I have never known a floor to help with language. It’s true that French floors don’t mind language, they can be terribly polite though, they just listen quietly to anything you might say. Do your American floors lay listening as well?”* She winked and smiled in a soft light manner warming away any frost of ridicule that might have otherwise been found in her words.

*“Yes. Right.”* He said nodding. *“I suppose not much help then.”*

*“So,”* politely offering her hand, *“I am Marie. I am travelling home to France today. And you? If not to speak to floors, then why? Pourquoi, allez-vous France.”*

Laughing a short soft burst of air, equal in embarrassment and uncertainty, *“I can’t really say.”*

*“Ah, yes. A new language is difficult. Crossing languages you try to bend words you know into the ones you remember. What is your reason for travelling, in English?”*

Thinking about her question, he searched. There were a multitude of reasons for leaving. For not staying. For making a change. If justifications for leaving were the same as the reasons to travel then it wouldn’t matter where he was going. He could get on any train and just roll away. But that wasn’t his path. He was awaiting a flight to France.

*“It’s not a language barrier. Well not just a language barrier. I don’t have the words at all. I’m just not sure.”*

*“So; je ne sais pas ce que.”*

*“I’m sorry, what does that mean? I’m still learning —”*

*“I don’t really know.”*

“You mean that you don’t know what the phrase means or that the phrase itself means that you don’t know?”

Smiling warmly, tucking a long errant lock behind her ear. “Clever,” slipping her boarding pass between the pages of a paperback and setting it into a small soft leather handbag. “It means there is something unknown. It’s French phrase we use; I don’t think it translates perfectly. Language goes like this.”

He sat there nodding. Regarding Marie in her dark, loose fitting clothing, flat shoes, three quarter length skirt; fashionable yet comfortable. By her side rested a rolling carry on, slinging the handbag over the handle telescoping towards the skies they would soon be flying.

“I could say, that’s life – *c’est l’vie*. Or *la mort vient toujours* – death always comes. But these phrases mean different things to me than to you. Yes?”

“I’m just trying to learn some French,” retreating along a path, seeking comfort, yet drawn towards the striking stranger sitting across the aisle.

“Of course.” He appeared uncomfortable to her. More than merely the discomfort borne by travelers facing deprivation of physical comforts and nourished by reheated pseudo-food available throughout the concourses. There was a disquiet worn in contrast to his otherwise handsome dress and calm veneer, as though he was balancing on a dilemma. “But it’s not that easy, especially if you don’t know why. Pieces are always lost in the conversion, especially with language. You may write with a crayon or a pencil or a pen, but they are all slightly different. It comes with nuance. I may say, ‘France is a long flight’ because I’ve only ever flown through Europe but you may say, ‘No, not such a long time’, maybe you’ve been to Australia. We’re not wrong, just talking about different experiences.”

Perceptions he corrected her, while realizing she was right, “I’m flying to Paris first,” he conceded, “but maybe I’ll go to the mountains after. Grenoble, perhaps; it’s supposed to be majestic. Before it gets too cold, then maybe elsewhere.”

“So you’re going to travel.” Her smile still flashing in her eyes.

“Marie. Yes, Marie, correct?” he paused although drawing resolve from the rigid fabric chair, still regarding her across the row from where he had been enjoying his solitude. Travelling. Fleeing. Seeking. Similar words for ostensibly the same action, but yet slightly different. “There are gaps in language, even without the translation.”

Somewhere in the background, an announcement straining to be heard called for the Lynn party outbound to L.A. gained his lapsing consideration. Having confirmed the information was indifferent to his travel, he released the noise to be consumed the cavernous acoustics of the airport and his own apathy. With a fleeting distraction trying to imagine who the party might be. Whatever repeating announcement the Lin’s were required for rejoined the din.

“In life too. There is the gap between now and then. Between our birth and our death. Voids between things that we fill with our choices.” Pausing and reaching into her handbag, “*bonbon*? Candy?” Extending the opened bag towards him having conveyed one past her maroon lips.

Raising a hand and shaking his head in a polite yet distracted refusal he asked, "What if we don't fill them?"

"Then they're still full. Of other things, opportunity maybe. Or maybe just potential."

Full of space. His satchel containing only his passport, a mobile phone and the pad of paper he had picked up from the hotel last night, a sign of vacancy or opportunity. "I'm not sure why I'm going, but yes, I am travelling."

"No one really does. France is for the patient. If you take the time you'll find whatever you're looking for there."

"I'm going for a change," he finally surrendered, as if explanation enough. Thinking that

"If that's all, do you really need to go to France?"

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