

The Weekend

Paris rose up slowly towards her. She was familiar with the city now, and with this flightpath. It was a clear February morning; she could easily recognise landmarks they had visited, the boulevards and gardens they had walked along, in their many visits to the capital. As usual, he had let her have the window seat, and she held his hand as the plane fell towards the earth. He watched her. He liked the way she pressed herself right against the window like an excited child. For the first time, he noticed a few strands of grey in her dark blonde hair.

When they'd met in the departure lounge at Heathrow a few hours before, three months had passed since they'd last seen each other. She had held him tightly for what seemed like too long, and he had kissed her forehead and said how much he'd missed her. He was planning to ask her if she knew this weekend marked the eleventh anniversary of their affair, but right then he decided not to.

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They always stayed at the same hotel and, whenever possible, booked the same room. In the small lift, he pulled her towards him and kissed her; she responded by opening her mouth and pressing her tongue against his. He moved his hands from her hips to her ass and she giggled hotly against his face.

"I'm already wet," she said, and he kissed her with greater purpose. The lift was old and creaky and cold and smelled of disinfectant.

As soon as they entered the room—on the sixth floor—they fell onto the bed. He lifted her dress and pulled her tights and panties down while she slid his jeans to his calves. As she rode him, he fumbled out one of her breasts and played with the nipple. She became more breathless and moaned his name. He thrust rapidly into her until he started to cum, and she came with him. For a moment in the wintry gloom they forgot everything. Her cunt was hot, and he felt it convulsing around his cock. She lay her head on his chest. He wondered if she could hear his heartbeat. She liked feeling him soften inside her.

"God, Ben," she whispered. "God."

He knew the moment she fell asleep because from one second to the next she suddenly weighed more. He remembered the first time they'd slept together. His main recollection of that night was not their frantic fucking, but rather when she had rolled into his

arms in the early morning—for days afterwards he could not stop thinking about how warm her breasts had felt against his skin.

His exertions and the heat of the room's A/C had made him queasy. He wanted to switch off the heat and drink some water, but he didn't want to disturb her sleep. It seemed important to him that he felt this way, that he still cared about waking her. The air smelled of their airplaned bodies and fuck fluids—a tang of plastic and salt and musk. He was still intrigued by her body; he never tired of her scents of submission, of her soft, puffy fingers and her plump thighs wrapped around his pelvis. And, still, her breasts's particular warmth across his chest.

He kissed her hair and stroked her back, then gently moved her off him as he sidled from the bed. She sighed and turned and wriggled under the thick white duvet, drawing it up to her face. He put on his underwear and turned the heat down. In the bathroom, he leant on the counter over the sink and studied himself in the mirror. People were often surprised to learn that he was 53—he could easily have passed for seven or eight years younger. He was still lean and muscular. That he was in a foreign city with Charlotte remained a novelty. They had fucked on four continents, and were determined to make it seven. He knew that he loved her. He was sure, too, that he loved his wife and wished there was some way for her to be happy without him.

Back in the room, he stood at the window while Charlotte mumbled and turned in dreams. It was a Friday. Below, people were rushing about, doing whatever Parisians do during the week. He wished it were raining. He loved Paris in the rain, the way it turned everything black and sombre. Later, they'll go for coffee in the low sun and watch people and talk about how lucky they are to have found each other; how incredible that they still ache for the other's presence, that they still fuck with such loud desperation.

He wondered if they would be doing this in another eleven years from now, and then again and again after that. Meeting and fucking and feeling each other get old until one of them finally dies. Maybe he'll ask her if she's ever thought about this. He got back onto the bed and watched the TV on mute, making up stories about the people on the screen.

They still held hands. She had stopped doing this with her husband years ago. The way he clung to her had always been too needy; he was a good, loyal human being, but he evoked in her feelings of shame and pity—shame for the cruelty, both apparent and clandestine, she

often inflicted on him, and pity for the way he idolised her and so plainly expressed that he couldn't live without her. Whenever her friends said they wished *their* husbands were as kind and doting as Christopher, she smiled and said, *I know*; but inside she thought, *But this isn't what I want*. She tried very hard not to feel this way, to think such callous thoughts, but she had no control them. Emotional intelligence and logical rationale—she had been blessed with both, and neither was able to dissuade her from understanding that she had married the wrong man.

Ben's hand in hers made her feel safe. She loved how she felt led by him, how, when he sensed she was uncomfortable or scared, he squeezed her hand to let her know it was going to be all right. Often, when they were fucking, he clasped her hands to the mattress, or above her head, or behind her back, and she instantly wanted to cum for him. He had long slender fingers that he said couldn't be washed free from the perfume of her cunt.

Unless there was an exhibition they wanted to see, they didn't bother with the art galleries anymore. They'd been to them all, as with the monuments and cathedrals. What they liked doing most was walking along the Seine and finding new cafés and restaurants, and browsing second-hand bookstores. Some days their conversation barely ceased; others, they walked largely in silence and lazed in a park, or paused on a bridge to hold each other and watch the dark river flow by.

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There was a restaurant on Rue de Rivoli they always went to on their first night in Paris. It was a still, crisp evening; people were out, and the streets smelled of candy and wine and cigarettes. She linked her arm in his as they walked with their hands in their coat pockets. Every time they side-stepped a splattering of gob on the pavement, they laughed in disgust and remarked at what uncouth peasants the French really were. He had always liked her laugh, which was a kind of geeky giggle; it was the only laugh that had ever sexually aroused him. There was a certain way she sometimes laughed in bed—usually when either he or she was doing something particularly kinky—and it made him want to run away with her forever.

He watched his breath become briefly visible as he walked. It made him think of smoking. He thought about buying a packet of cigarettes after dinner and smoking one or two as they walked the streets, just for effect. Later, they could smoke in bed as in some old movie. Then he remembered he would likely end up coughing and having a sore throat for the rest of the weekend. Maybe a cigar. He would have a cigar somewhere.

She liked the feeling of strength in his arm when they walked like this. She wished someone could photograph them just as they were right now. The photographs that she had of them were in an encrypted folder on her computer, to ensure they could never be seen by anyone else. Every so often—usually late at night when Christopher and the girls were asleep—she opened the folder and looked at her favourites, or went through all of them, even though there weren't really very many. They'd been to a lot of places and experienced wonderful things, but so much of it had gone by undocumented. What disheartened her wasn't so much that there was no physical legacy of the times they'd spent together; it was that their entire relationship had always had to be compartmentalised—she'd had to place all the time they spent together, all the things they'd done and said, all the things she'd felt, into a specific part of her mind, and much of it was lost or fading away.

She'd never told anyone about her affair. She was sure no one would understand her reasons, and she was also wary that the one person she told might one day turn on her. However, there were occasions when she really wished she could tell someone about her and Ben; not just about a random experience, such as a holiday or weekend like this one, but their whole history. It was an urge that had confounded her somewhat over the years. She one day realised that her talking about her relationship with Ben would not only make it seem more real, it would mean that at least one other person would know that all this had happened and that it was meaningful and extraordinary. There were nights now when she lay in the dark, quietly tearful at the thought of her and Ben dying without a single person ever knowing what had passed between them.

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Nearing the restaurant, they decided to detour through the Jardin des Tuileries. The sound of their walking changed as they moved from the pavement onto the garden's sandy walkways. The Eiffel Tower twinkled in the near distance. Ben thought they would probably walk to it tomorrow, simply because they could. He used to think Paris was a city that was hard to get tired of, hard to get out of your system, but he wasn't so sure anymore. The past few visits, he felt he'd actively had to seek out something magical, instead of it simply appearing to him as it once had; this of course, didn't make it magical at all.

The sight of the park's rows of still, bare trees in the cold caused something to turn awkwardly inside his chest. The branches looked like giant arthritic fingers. The bark appeared damp and rotting. When Charlotte paused at the fountain at the far end of the park,

he broke off from her and sat on one of the benches. He watched her as she leant over and dipped a hand into the water. He wondered if this would all finish in some catastrophic way. Either his wife or her husband would find out and the one who hadn't been caught would probably have to say, *Well, I can't just leave. How will I explain it?* He used to worry about her falling pregnant, but now this scenario was his biggest fear—one of them ending up shamed and alone while the other simply had to carry on with their life. Despite more than a decade of deception, neither could bring themselves to leave their spouses. He still didn't know what this said about the types of people he and she were.

Charlotte sat with him on the bench. She searched for his hand and he gave it to her. Her palm was damp and cold from the fountain, but the rest of her body against his was warm. He moved in and kissed her on the cheek, then she turned her face to him and opened her mouth.

* * *

They hardly spoke over dinner. This was nothing unusual. They'd had a general catch-up at the hotel after fucking. That they could sit comfortably together in silence for long periods was one of the things that sparked and sustained their attraction. Both hated small talk to the point that they rarely even said hello or goodbye to each other. They saw no purpose in it, for there was no beginning or end to their togetherness. Inanity depleted them, while conversations about things they considered significant seemed to pass without time.

Because they were ten years apart, he had aged quicker than she had. He was almost completely grey now. She loved the deeper lines on his face and the silver stubble on his taut skin—he had become more and more masculine to her; gruff, wisely-worn, and sinewy. *How wonderful that this man loves me, and that I love him, endlessly.* After all this time, she could not reconcile him being hers but also not being hers. She wanted all of him—all of his mind, all of his body, all of his love—but she was now certain she would never have it. Almost daily for the past few years, she had made up stories where they left their spouses and were together. Though it was difficult, it also seemed so easy—just like that, they were entrenched and unhindered.

He liked reaching across a table to brush her cheek. He knew he could do whatever he pleased with her, but this singular act remained his most precious.

* * *

As rain hit the window, they heaved and rolled and shouted in the dark. There had always been a brutal tenderness to their fucking—passages of slow awareness, interspersed with torrents of frightening conviction. Often, they came with a suffocated laughter, body and mind joyfully appalled at what they'd just partaken in. At the beginning, there was an assumption—borne from adult experience—that their carnivorous compulsions for each other would one day subside, but it was evident every time they indulged in each other that this had not happened yet.

Neither was so foolish or cowardly as to never consider whether the inexhaustibility of their desire was driven by the bliss and frivolity that marks infidelity. Unburdened by the insipid rhythms of domesticity, Ben and Charlotte were free to enjoy each other as new lovers do, except that their original, untethered infatuation had lasted eleven years. They liked talking about what their lives might be like if they were together, but both knew that the likelihood of them ending up bored and contemptuous was just as strong as their assumptions about a partnership of unquenchable physical and intellectual arousal.

“Is this going to be the last time I see you?”

She asked him this almost every time they met up. After all these years, after so much had been said and felt and experienced in so many places, Charlotte still could not shake the suspicion that Ben was on the verge of ending the whole thing. He didn't like the perceived power this lingering worry of hers gave him. He felt it apportioned almost all the responsibility of their affair to him, as if only he had the authority to keep it alive or kill it. He also thought it undermined all the affection and expression of deep feeling he had shown her. Did she think she was merely his plaything, something to suspend in a limbo of longing for his ego's enjoyment?

“I don't know why you keep saying that,” he'd say, and she would say something like, “I'm just preparing for it,” or “I'm just protecting myself.” Sometimes she would just go, “Because... Oh, I don't know,” then spill her eyes to the ground, as if she was afraid to state her reason, or the answer lay where she was looking, behind her gaze.

That night, as they slept, a storm rolled across the city, lifting roofs and throwing tree branches across empty wet boulevards.

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The tapping woke them both at the same time. “Goddammit, what is that?” Ben mumbled. He looked at his watch on the bedside table—08:12. She’d been dreaming of a tent in a drizzly forest, and now realised the dreamsound of raindrops hitting the canvas was the tapping entering her sleep. She felt Ben’s weight leave the bed, and heard him walk towards the window. He opened the curtains. There it was, on the narrow ledge.

“It’s a bird,” he said.

Charlotte turned and saw Ben squatting at the base of the large window. Beyond it, Paris was draped in a thick sheet of fog. “Hey little guy,” Ben said. Charlotte got up, slipped her gown on, and came over to the window. She stood behind Ben and placed a hand on his bare shoulder.

The bird was tiny, smaller than her balled fist. It seemed young and it was beautifully coloured—glossy blue, with touches of yellow and red on its wings and breast. It looked up at Ben and Charlotte with little dark eyes that slowly blinked. Ben gently tapped the window.

“Don’t,” Charlotte said, “you’ll scare it away.”

“I think if it was scared it would have flown away already,” Ben said.

“Do you think it’s hurt?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s just sheltering from the wind.”

Charlotte moved from behind Ben and lay down on her stomach, her face level with the bird. She was aware of how huge and frightening they must appear to it. The bird seemed to look directly at her. It was sitting very still, and its damp feathers fluttered in the breeze.

“What should we do?” she said.

“Nothing. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“But it was tapping at the window.”

Ben let out a short, sharp laugh.

“You think it was trying to communicate with us?” he said. “They’re always tapping at glass. They think it’s another bird.”

The room smelled of their sex. The window was just one large pane. It could not be opened. The bird stared back at Charlotte. It was so very small and alone. Charlotte felt a hot hollowness rise up inside her. Ben turned and went to the bathroom.

Charlotte pressed a finger to the cold window.

“Are you okay?” she said softly. Her breath showed on the glass.

She gently tapped the window with her knuckle, hoping the bird would react and fly away. But it didn't move. It just tilted its head and blinked at her in that slow way.

Ben returned from the bathroom and sat on the bed. He was aroused by the sight of Charlotte lying on the carpet, and could clearly make out the shape of her ass under the silk gown. He imagined going over and lifting the gown to her waist, then fucking her like that for all of Paris to see.

"I'm sure it's just stunned," he said, hoping to lure her from the bird and back to bed. "Let's go have breakfast. When we come back, it'll probably be gone."

* * *

Charlotte picked at her scrambled eggs while Ben watched people walking by, their umbrellas inverting in the wind. He could never get over just how deep and ravenous a man's sexual instincts were. Despite having Charlotte at his regular disposal—and all the indecent indulgence that entailed—as he sat there, he found himself assessing almost every woman who passed by. Swiftly, he evaluated their faces and bodies, and wondered what it would be like to be in bed with them. Every few minutes he would see a particular woman—young, middle-aged, old, it didn't matter—who sent a pang of yearning through his life. Ten years ago, he considered whether this absurd insatiability would one day wilt; now he knew it never would.

"What shall we do today?" he said.

"Nothing," Charlotte replied. She was staring into her plate. "I want to go back to the hotel. I want to see that the bird is okay. You can do whatever you want, but if the bird is still there when we get back, I'm staying with it."

"I'll stay too, then."

"I don't want you to."

"Why not?"

"Because I can see you think I'm being ridiculous," she said, looking up at Ben.

"I don't think you're being ridiculous."

"You do. You're cynical about the whole thing. That poor creature. I think it's hurt. Apparently it hailed last night."

"There's nothing we can do, Charlotte."

"There is, actually—I'm staying with it for as long as I can, even if it's through a window. I can't bare the idea of it being alone."

When they returned to the room, the bird was still there. It hadn't moved. Charlotte lay on the floor again, and the bird turned to look at her. She knew now that it was injured, or sick. She so wanted to touch it, to hold it in her hand. Ben stood over her, then bent down and touched her back.

"I'll leave you then," he said.

"I think that's best."

"I'll have my phone with me. Call if you want to meet me. I won't go far."

"Okay, Ben," she said. She turned to look at him. "I'm sorry. It's just... I can't enjoy myself knowing this poor thing is out here. I just can't."

* * *

The day was still cold, but the wind had died and the clouds had all but dispersed. Ben tried to remember the last time he'd been let loose on his own in a big city. It must have been before he met Caren. He'd travelled quite a bit in his twenties; sometimes it'd been for work, but mostly he'd explored the world on his own insistence, backpacking through Europe, America, Thailand and Australia. He'd rarely travelled with friends—he found it just got complicated—and he certainly never travelled with a girl, unless it was one he met along the way.

There'd been a few such occasions—the Russian girl who could recite the opening paragraph of *Lolita* and whose parents really worked for the KGB; the blonde Canadian whose opening line to him was, "I see, I want, I take,"; the Portuguese whom he learned to ski with in France; the wild Australian who fucked him in a tent in some star-drenched desert. These were encounters Ben still looked back on with feelings of warmth and a youth well spent.

However, there was one girl whose memory he tried not to retrieve too often. And if he was compelled to think about her, he would set a timer for it—15, 30 minutes—then afterwards push the thoughts far down into him and hope they took a few months or even a year to fully surface again. Her name was Beatrice, and he had met her here, in Paris, when he was 33. He had been dating Caren for about a year and, though he didn't know it, this solo trip would be his last. Four years later, he was married with a daughter.

They'd met outside the Louvre. She'd approached him and said a strange man had been following her and would it be all right if we pretend to be a couple for a moment so the

man will go away. Without hesitation, Ben said, “Why pretend? I’m on my way to Notre Dame, come with me.” He put her arm out for her and she took it.

After visiting Notre Dame, they ended up aimlessly walking through Paris, talking about books and music and films. She lived in Mexico City. What was that like? Ben imagined black skyscrapers shrouded in a reddish yellow dust fog; gridlocked traffic; gun fights. They sat a while on the banks of the Seine, watching people, other couples. They had not touched yet but she sat close to him and her hip was warm and soft. *Be-a-trice*. That was how it was pronounced. He never knew her age but guessed she was about five years younger than him. She was staying in an apartment that her grandmother owned. The building used to be occupied by the Three Musketeers, whom Ben had always believed were fictional. It was almost midnight and Ben had no idea where he was, where his flat was from here. I’m totally lost, he said. She said it was okay, her flat wasn’t far from here—if you don’t mind you can sleep on the couch. Of course, of course, Ben said and just then it started raining, big heavy drops out of nowhere and neither of them had an umbrella and they were laughing because there was no shelter and he knew exactly what to do he put his arms around her narrow waist and she tilted her head because she felt safe and her hair was stuck to her forehead and he kissed her on the sidewalk in the empty dark as the rain came down.

They spent the next two days together, fucking in her grandmother’s bed, holding each other on train platforms and visiting Versailles, where he fingered her in the vast gardens. In a park across the road from the palace, she slept with her head on his chest and when she woke in the fading light she moved her face close to his and he could smell her whole swollen life on her breath and see the glowing spark in her eyes and he clutched her and drew her hard into him and his heart ached because he knew she was the one he had been longing for.

That evening—the last—they were standing on Pont Neuf watching the Seine rush brownly by. Beatrice took out her notebook. I’d like to stay in contact, but only if you want to, she said as she wrote. The piece of paper she gave him had her email address on it, as well as her name, as if she thought he might forget her. She had also written:

“Te quiero”

“Yo también”

“What does this mean?”

“Say the first one,” she said.

“*Te quiero*,” he said, tentatively.

“Very good. *Yo también*.”

“What does it mean?”

Without faltering and without blushing she said, “It means you love me and that I do, also.”

Not knowing what to do, Ben laughed and quickly held her to him so she could not see his face, his eyes.

“You tricked me,” he said, gazing at the Seine.

“You have tricked me also, Ben.”

The next day he walked her to the Métro, and while he was watching the careful way she bought her tickets from the machine he told himself not to feel anything. They held onto each other in the echoey station and their affections felt rushed and inadequate, as if they had only just met, which they had, but it did not seem this way. He could tell she was crying from the way her body jumped in his arms.

“I hope you will write to me,” she said.

But he knew he wouldn't. Whatever could be done with a man in England and a girl in Mexico City? It sounded so far away, but in the end it probably wasn't. Plus, he was with Caren now.

They kissed one more time and he felt out of his body. When she broke away from him, she did not look at him; she quickly turned and walked down the arched passage before disappearing round the corner. Still today, still today, he cannot say why he didn't run after her.

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Ben drank a coffee in a café in Montmartre and allowed himself to think a little more about Beatrice. He knew he had kept that piece of paper he gave her in a tin somewhere; he wondered what would happen if he found it and sent her an email. What would he say? She'd be in her late forties now and probably married with children. Or maybe she was divorced. He'd write something like, “Remember me?” and a few days would go by with no answer, and he'd think her email address didn't exist anymore, or that she had chosen not to reply or, worst of all, did not remember him. But then one morning he'd open his inbox and see her name and his heart would boil and cave in. “Of course I remember you, Ben—I still think about you and wonder where you are.”

No, this was absurd. Of course it was absurd. But sitting in that café as the low winter sun streamed in and reflected off the tables and the glasses and the coppered coffee machine,

Ben asked himself why, *why* it should be so absurd—what he had felt during those two days with Beatrice was more than he had ever felt for anyone, including Charlotte. What if she would be the one to finally make him content? He could get divorced and ask Beatrice to come and live with him in the UK. Maybe she already lived in the UK. She wouldn't even have to work—just be with him. It was so simple, so possible. If he could just find her note. He was sure she'd written her surname on it—if she still used it, it would be easy to find her. These days, you could find anyone on the internet. *Be-a-trice*. Looking down at the table and out the window, he whispered her name, feeling its shape haunt his mouth. He took a deep breath. When he released it, the tripping, tumbling way the breath came out exposed his sorrow and for a moment he clutched at the air, clawing at it, as if this might reverse the years.

* * *

When Ben returned to hotel room, Charlotte was gone. There was a note on his pillow—“Gone for a walk. See you later ♥” He went to the window and saw that the bird was still there. It appeared to have shrunk since the morning—it was sitting with its feet tucked under its body and had pushed its neck and beak down into itself so it was nothing more than a ball of feathers with tiny grey-lidded eyes.

Remembering what Charlotte had said, Ben did not tap on the window. Instead he lay down on his stomach as she had, so that he was level with the creature. He accepted that something was wrong with the bird, for if it was healthy it would have long since flown away. The storm had died down—there was no need for the bird to be here. It was not protecting itself or trying to preserve energy for its journey home—it was sick or injured and would reach an agonising end on this windowsill, while everything else in the world carried on unaware and indifferent. He could feel his heart pressing into the carpet, for it beat now with a dark, rhythmic desperation that was less about the poor bird's impending death and more his projection into Charlotte's sorrow. For tomorrow they would have to leave this room, this hotel, this city, knowing that the bird would still be there, confused and scared and cold and starving. Ben felt a blackened knot rise up from his heart and into his throat. He held it there for as long as he could, for he was frightened to let it out; he was frightened of the sound it would make and how that sound would expose something about him that had been tortured and imprisoned for decades.

He screamed, and the scream's terrible gritty weight rebounded off the thick glass and climbed back into him again, burning his eyes and asphyxiating his Being. The bird opened its eyes and looked at him.

“Go!” Ben shouted. “Just fucking go! Please. Get up and fly away.”

But the bird only gazed at him blankly, as if looking at its reflection in the glass, believing it had been the source of the scream. Ben clenched his fist and began pounding at the window, first with one hand, and then a moment later the other. The bird was unmoved; only its colourful feathers fluttered slightly, beautifully, in the breeze. The window was so thick that Ben's banging merely caused a dull, pathetic thud. He continued to hit the glass until he was exhausted, and dropped his hands to the floor.

Lying breathless on the carpet, Ben thought, *What if it isn't injured? What if it's chosen to sit here and wait for its end?* He knew this was a ridiculous notion—no healthy animal wilfully gave up on itself—but part of him wished this to be true so as to alleviate his sense of helplessness. If he believed the bird was there by choice, it would absolve him of responsibility.

Just then, he heard the door behind him unlock. He didn't turn around. He didn't need to. The fading light outside had turned the window into a mirror, and he watched a flipped version of Charlotte entering the room. Neither of them said anything. She put her bag down on a chair and lay on the floor next to him, slightly apart. They did not look at each other, only at the bird. He could smell her, that scent of warm blanket and faint menthol he had known and loved all these years. She detected that muscly heat coming from him, and listened intently to his calm, tidal breathing.

Some minutes passed. In front of them, The City of Light grew dimmer, as did the room. Ben and Charlotte looked at the bird; they also looked at their own reflections, and the reflections of themselves watching each other. The darker it got, the clearer they appeared.

At last, in the humming gloom, Charlotte said, “What are we going to do?”

“I don't know,” Ben replied. “I just don't know.”