

# April Come He Will

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Summary: During his world travels, Clark befriends a cinema student in Paris, France. Is their budding friendship strong enough to overcome their separate fears in the aftermath of an unfortunate encounter?

Story Size: 18,118 words (105Kb as text)

Disclaimer: The usual disclaimers apply: Clark Kent and his family belong to DC, Warner Bros, etc. The original characters are all mine, though. The real ones belong to themselves.

This fic was written for fun, not for profit.

“April Come She Will” is a song written by Paul Simon (© 1965). I’m just borrowing the lyrics for a while. Please, don’t sue me. (You can hear the song, courtesy of [YouTube](#))

Explanatory notes are at the end of the fic. Even though I was born and bred in Paris, some historical research was necessary: Time flies and some details of the city as it was in the 1990s were a little hazy...

All my gratitude goes to Cuidadora, my talented & wonderful Beta, and to Brianna, my great GE.

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## Part I – “April come he will / When streams are ripe and swelled with rain...”

### Paris (France), April 1991.

Sandrine Demazières seized her shoulder handbag and slipped out of the movie theatre seat. The end credits were still rolling on the screen, and the lights were half lit, so she managed not to tread on her companion’s toes as she passed by him. *The big oaf would have earned it*, she thought uncharitably. *Couldn’t he take “no” for an answer?* When she said she wanted to go to the movies, she meant just that, not some groping in the dark.

When she had safely reached the central alley, she glimpsed back at him and could not restrain a titter. The picture of an obviously bored Marc still frozen in a daze struck her as funny. Well, he had reaped what he had sown, sitting for nearly two hours in the Action Christine cinema for a rerun of Albert Lewin’s *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*. It was one of her favorite movies and she never tired of endlessly seeing it every time a Latin Quarter art theatre showed it. Obviously, he didn’t care for 1950s-*avant-garde*-fantasy movies with Surrealist overtones.

Sandrine hastened her pace. Marc wouldn’t be stuck in that daze all day, and she wanted to be as far away as possible when he snapped out of it. The last thing she wanted right now was to be stalked by a man who was disappointed she didn’t want him romantically. Where he could have gotten the idea, she didn’t know; in the space of a few weeks, Marc seemed to have transformed from childhood friend into a hopeful would-be lover. Sandrine just wanted to reminisce about the finest parts of the plot she knew by heart, as well as delight in James Mason’s charming broodiness and Ava Gardner’s outstanding beauty. She could *not* have enough of Mason’s velvety voice. So, having to engage in small talk with Marc instead would be no treat for her!

Her musings were cut short when she suddenly ran into a brick

wall. She nearly bounced back from the impetus, but a solid hand held her steady before she could trip.

“*Je suis vraiment désolé! Vous n’avez rien ?* [I am really sorry! Are you alright?]”

The “wall” had spoken to her.

She raised her head and saw a half-laughing, half-apologetic face in front of her. The owner of both the face and the hand that was supporting her elbow released her as she answered, “*Non, non... Tout va bien. C’est moi qui suis désolée, je ne regardais pas où j’allais !* [No, no... Everything’s all right. I’m the one who is sorry; I didn’t watch where I was going.]”

The man’s grin reached his eyes, and he replied in French, “*Eh bien... [Well...] We did clash, but not by night.*”

He was alluding to a poem written by Mathew Arnold – the one that James Mason’s character, the Flying Dutchman, quoted to Ava Gardner’s Pandora in one of the most moving scenes of the movie.

Sandrine sighed as she recalled the beautiful yet tragic moment between the doomed sailor and Pandora. He was about to reject Pandora’s love, because he knew that she would have to die to redeem him and allow him to shed his cursed immortality. The fact that the 1950’s Pandora was the reincarnation of the wife whom he had strangled in an unjustified fit of jealousy centuries before, was an added layer in a myths-filled angst-ridden fascinating love story. Sandrine didn’t believe in such supernatural stuff, but such romantic escapism was irresistible; after many viewings, she had memorized the poem.

She laughed and replied in her native language, also referring to the movie: “Yes, we did. Are you a Dutchman, too?”

He shook his head. “Nope, sorry. I’m from Kansas, actually.” The man’s French was nearly flawless.

“Are you? Your French is very good.”

Indeed, she could barely hear the hint of an accent – one she could not really define.

Regretfully, she took a step back. He was gorgeous, sure, and she wouldn’t have objected to some more ogling, but she *had* to get away. As she looked around the lobby for any sight of Marc, he came in from the crowd which exited the theatre.

Zut [Drat], *I’m doomed*, she thought. *I really can’t dodge him now.*

Her uneasy glance may have betrayed her, because the at least six-foot tall, dark-haired hunk she had collided with asked, “Is this man bothering you, *mademoiselle*?”

“I wouldn’t say *that* exactly, but I don’t really want to speak to him right now.”

Marc was homing in on them, his brows puckering in jealous indecision. As he neared, Kansas Man told Sandrine, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, “Zank you for shifting our French lesson, Mamzelle. I am zorry for troubling you again, but I absolutely need a hand for correcting zis gunk. Deadline, y’know.” He vaguely gestured towards the backpack that was hanging from one of his shoulders.

Kansas Man was now speaking in a preposterous, thick-accented French. He sounded like a perfect bumpkin and even managed to look the part, from his hunched shoulders to his thick olive-colored coat that had seen better days.

Surprised, Sandrine answered, creditably enough: “*Ce n’est rien, Monsieur... euh...* [That is nothing, Mister... err...]”

*Mon Dieu*, she didn’t even know his name!

“Kent,” her savior seamlessly supplied.

“Err, *oui, Monsieur* Kent. Glad I could be of some help.”

“From what I hear, you really need it!” Marc exclaimed, glaring at Bumpkin Man.

“Oh, stop it, will you?” Sandrine snapped, her patience wearing thin. “You don’t own me, and I never promised you anything. So go home like a nice guy and let me do my job.” Marc’s body language screamed he would do neither. “Scram, I

said!”

Marc opened his mouth and, just as quickly, snapped it shut. Puzzled by his sudden meekness, Sandrine looked at her new “student.” He hadn’t moved a centimeter, but he somehow exuded a... something... that wore away any willfulness Marc would have had to tarry.

Shrugging his annoyance away, Marc left reluctantly.

Once they were alone in the *cinéma* lobby, apart from a few people waiting for the doors to open for the next showing, Sandrine asked Tall Dark and Handsome Man slowly: “How did you know...?”

“—That you’re a French language tutor? Let me show you.”

He opened his backpack and took out a stash of printed sheets, a large notebook, a copy of *Le Monde*, another of *The Daily Planet*, and then a worn out copy of the last *FUSAC* magazine. He shoved everything back into the battered bag, except *FUSAC*. The magazine was already opened and folded at the ads section, and hers was circled by a red line.

Well-known to the English-speaking community of Paris, *FUSAC* offered ads for nearly everything under the Paris sun and articles explaining the finest points of French life for Expats and foreign students in Paris. Sandrine knew the magazine well. For the last three months, she had found some of her best customers from the ad she had placed — the one offering French conversation and tutoring for a modest fee.

One of her most original and appreciated lessons was discussing American movies with her customers after a movie theatre *séance* [screening]. Being a movie buff, it enabled her to kill two birds with one stone. Besides, as she always said virtuously, being an impoverished student at the *Fémis* [the French state film school] didn’t give her a lot of opportunities to increase her income, apart from the occasional babysitting job. As a result, her cinematic knowledge grew, and her customers were satisfied. The true risk, obviously, was going to the movies with a childhood friend.

Gorgeous Man explained, sheepishly, “I could not help hearing you yesterday when you began discussing the latest movie with your charge. I thought you could provide me with a nice story.”

Sandrine let it slide, following his line of thought. “*Only Angels have Wings?* Are you a Cary Grant fan, too?”

“Not particularly. But it appealed to me.” He smiled deprecatingly. “Friends of mine do fly.”

“Do they?”

Clearly, this was a private joke of sorts, one she wouldn’t be privy to, so she inquired: “So, do you read all the ads in *FUSAC*?”

“Actually, I do.”

Her stunned expression had given her away, because he added: “All part of the job. Looking for stories, I mean. I got the last one that way. You cannot imagine what incredible tales are lurking sometimes behind formatted ads.”

He leafed through the magazine and showed her a page where the headline stated: “*Why is it called...? Pastries and desserts*’ by C. K.”

“I see.”

“Your ad really stood out. And I couldn’t help being reminded of it, yesterday, when I heard you dissecting *Seuls les anges ont des ailes*.”

His French was really flawless. He had even given the movie title in the French translation. It impressed her.

“I see,” parroted Sandrine.

Suddenly, it seemed very important to know where the conversation would lead. She thought quickly. *A story. He said something about a story.*

Before she could have second thoughts, she grabbed his arm. “Come on! You obviously don’t need any lessons, but I *do* need a coffee. I’m buying. This is the least I can do for a knight in shining

armor.”

He went with her very willingly.

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A teapot of green tea later, Sandrine knew a lot about her companion.

Clark Kent was a journalist residing in Paris. He was freelancing for *FUSAC* and occasionally sold articles to other magazines. One of his most recognized works had been the coverage of the anti-Gulf War marches in Paris earlier in January. He had managed to convey the feelings of some of the protesters without losing his objectivity, or so he believed. Obviously, he was quite proud of that.

Clark was currently an *au pair* [lodger] in the *rue Gît-le-Coeur*, which was a short distance away. He did some daily house chores for his old landlady, and in exchange, he was lodged almost *gratis* in her ten-meters square *chambre de bonne* on the sixth floor. He had found the arrangement through *FUSAC*, of course. Obviously, he didn’t mind climbing all these stairs. He looked very fit under his heavy wool sweater.

“The room is spartan,” Clark acknowledged, “but it is more than adequate. After all, I just sleep there. And this is only temporary.”

“Oh?”

“I travel a lot.”

She felt a stab of envy. Apart from some exchange student sojourns in England, she merely knew a bit of Spain and Italy and had never set a foot in America apart from her virtual trips, courtesy of Hollywood movies.

Clark talked with enthusiasm of his trips to Nepal and Australia; of ancient tribes and weird customs; of cultural misunderstandings he managed to keep funny and entertaining, deriding his own naiveté; and of knowledge gained about the relative values of humankind, and then the conversation veered into arcane 30’s and 40’s movies. She could not help being impressed with his large cinematographic understanding and told him so. He reciprocated, and she told him about her cinema studies, including her professional goal, to be a documentarian—not a filmmaker — even though she did like immersing herself in fiction, living the character’s lives, and believing in them.

Reality was what fascinated her.

She longed to right some wrongs with a camera crew, bring into the light a parcel of reality for all to see, and make it easier for others to grasp the truth through her storytelling.

But there were tricks to be learned to ensure viewers got the message, and the 30’s and 40’s professionals were masters at it. So, going to the movies was as much work as pleasure.

He smiled. “A true workaholic, then?”

They were so engrossed in their conversation that, without them noticing, the afternoon died and evening tiptoed in. The deepening darkness reminded them of the late hour.

“Thanks for the tea,” Clark said politely as he got up and prepared to leave the café on the *Place Saint-Michel* [St. Michael Square].

“Don’t mention it. You’re a cheap first-rate knight. But I’m glad you didn’t bring the horse,” she joked. “Watering your steed would be out of my league.”

He chuckled. “The right answer would be that I left it at my parent’s farm, but alas, we only grow wheat.”

“Your parents are farmers?”

“Yeah.” A shadow passed over his face.

“You miss them?”

“I wish they were here. They always dreamed of seeing Paris in the Springtime.”

“The Gene Kelly Effect, huh? The reality is so much more trivial, and yet, so utterly magical. Anytime I step on one of our bridges crossing the river Seine, I feel like I own the world.”

He nodded. “I understand the feeling. I also felt the same on

St. Charles Bridge in Prague. It was so beautiful. One could almost feel the centuries flowing under one's feet."

They let silence slip between them, each of them lost in memories of crossing different bridges. Sandrine confidentially whispered: "And, you know, when the wind is blowing hard, I feel like I could fly, and I might reach the other bank without even touching the water. Or maybe having to swim."

"I don't advise you to try the latter."

"I'm not such a fool." She shuddered. "A man nearly drowned a week ago — during the recent two days' thaw."

There had been an unexpected and sudden release of the exceptional harsh weather. For two glorious days, summer-like weather had interrupted the seemingly never-ending ice, cold, and snow. Yesterday's snowfalls had left the Paris pavement slippery. The pristine white of new-fallen snow had been replaced by muddy grey after the streets were salted to prevent ice formation.

However, February 1991 had heralded snowstorms, unprecedented in France since 1987. The roads were blocked, aerial traffic was problematic, and trains could not ride on frozen tracks. Night temperatures had reached 12°C below zero [10.4°F]. Newspapers had printed pictures of sleigh rides in Brest and even Nice, as well as horrendous traffic accidents where vans skidded and fell into the ditches. And miraculous near misses had also occurred on the *périphérique* ring-road [beltway] that circled France's capital city.

Sandrine wondered how Clark was enduring that kind of climate. Living under the zinc roofs of Paris was notoriously romantic, but it could prove hellishly cold during the winter and oppressively hot during the summer, depending on the building's insulation. *Rue Git-le-Coeur* was a pretty street parallel to the *rue Saint-Michel* and conveniently close to the Seine and the Saint-Michel Bridge, but it was also the heart of the oldest *quartier* [district] of Paris. Many houses reached back to the eighteenth-century; therefore, their main appeal wasn't modern comfort, but grace.

She went on with her anecdote: "That drunken *crétin* [dolt] made a bet with his best friend; he said he would swim across the Seine. He jumped from the *Pont Neuf* ["New Bridge"] and nearly didn't make it."

She shivered in empathy, almost feeling this imaginary cold seep into her bones. The water was so muddy and dark; the currents, treacherous — one would be pulled unrelentingly under. The times when people could bathe in the Seine belonged to bygone eras.

As the tale went, the two men were almost dead drunk when they made that bet. The one who stayed dry had even taken photographs to document the bet, while his friend had almost died by drowning.

The photographs published in *Le Parisien* were blurry, having been taken in the evening after sunset. But it was still possible to see a dark dot surging from the water in one of the pictures. And in another, one could clearly see the flabbergasted expression of the suddenly stone cold sober man, sprawled on the parapet that he had originally jumped from.

Both men rambled on with confusing tales of guardian angels and UFOs, while the police had merely issued a request for witnesses in order to close the file. A few days later, as winter came back with a vengeance, the foolish swimmer wouldn't have made it, even with a forceful nudge from his putative guardian angel. That jump into the Seine water would have been deadly with the addition of shock from cold exposure.

"Clark, this is too bad you weren't around. This would have made a fine human interest story for you. This kind of *fait divers* [short news item] is attention-grabbing."

Clark fidgeted. "This isn't exactly the kind of articles I'm writing."

"You may be right. There's nothing newsworthy in inherent

stupidity."

Sandrine rose and picked up her coat. Clark hastened to her side and helped her slip it on. She smiled at him. "You are a *preux chevalier* [valiant knight], Clark. Not many men, even French ones, do that anymore."

"My pleasure."

She hesitated, suddenly shy, and in a rush, probed: "If you do... I mean... I'd like to see you again. That is, if you want someone to show you around. Or go to a movie. I'd be delighted to..."

*Zut*, she was babbling like a schoolgirl. She was pathetic. He was just drinking tea with her to be polite, and he never even got his story.

"If... if you think there is a story in my *séances de cinéma*, well, I'm all yours."

She nearly bit her tongue in mortification. What had possessed her to blurt that aloud? *I did, my girl*, her subconscious sneered.

Thankfully, he didn't even blink. He was chivalrous to a fault, even to a slightly bulky, short haired, 22-year-old brunette with a taste for cheap and brightly colored ethnic clothes.

"I'd be delighted, Sandrine. Lewin's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is showing next Tuesday at 2:30 PM at the *Action Christine*. Care to join me? I've never seen it in a theatre."

"Gladly."

Thus began their friendship.

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## Part II — "...May, he will stay / Resting in my arms again..." Paris (France), May 1991.

Years later, when she looked back on May 1991, Sandrine realized that all the evidence was there for her to see, scattered like the pieces of an unsolved jigsaw puzzle. Despite what she had told Clark, she hadn't been able to identify and assemble them, revealing the full picture. However, she had been able to sense some ominous undercurrents... which she dismissed as existing merely in her imagination.

Snippets of unrelated events would flood her mind: her then-delight at the appointment of a woman as French First Minister, domestic annoyances like the misplacement of her jade earring, and most of all, her obvious worry about her *Fémis* movie project.

As part of her curriculum, Sandrine was supposed to write and direct a movie that would testify to her artistic and organizational skills as a director.

Also, every fourth-year student, including herself, had to volunteer as a crew member for her fellow students' projects. It would be a pleasure to be involved with some of them, but she didn't look forward to taking orders from Marc, as they were at the time barely on speaking terms.

Their childhood friendship had been shredded. Nothing was left of it. Now, both of them had erected a wall of silence to protect their shattered feelings — Marc's grew out of unrequited love and Sandrine's sprung from the loss of their childhood understanding. Yet, they had been as close as fingers in the same hand, their nearness reinforced by their shared dreams and successes. All these years had been obliterated by two hours of sitting side by side in a movie theatre. Nowadays, they were acting worse than strangers, only because Marc's ego was doing its best impression of "jilted lover." How stupid of him, not to have had the good sense to leave matters as they stood!

Well, that was Marc's loss. And hers, too, if she was honest enough to admit it.

After many restless nights, Sandrine had chosen to weave the restoration of the historic rooftop near Clark's place into her fiction. The skill and precision of the workers and the sheer romance of it appealed to her, and she believed she could manage to convey the thrill of the centuries-old gestures without her film being too *cliché*.

Clark had already agreed to let her cameraman use his

*chambre de bonne* as a starting point. She would begin with a tracking shot from Clark's doorway, right through the window placed high in the slanted ceiling of his room, so the audience's point of view would soar in the sky and focus on the Paris skyline, and then...

At that point, Sandrine had stopped talking and gesturing, settling her half-filled cup carefully back on her saucer before the brown liquid overflowed on the tablecloth.

"And then?" Clark inquired.

Sandrine shook her head. "It would spoil the surprise to explain everything, wouldn't it?"

Clark neatly folded his paper napkin near his plate and leaned back in his chair.

He had finished drinking his hot chocolate, and a few crumbs remained on the china before him, reminding Sandrine that Kansas Man, as she still privately named him, had consumed a *Saint-Honoré* and a *religieuse au chocolat* without strain.

How could he eat so much chocolate without feeling awfully sick?

She had barely managed to drink half of her cup. *Angelina's* hot chocolate was renowned for its potency on weak stomachs, but still, she had wanted to introduce Clark to the delights of the famed *salon de thé* [tea room] where posh grandmothers and neatly-attired children still mingled with tourists, snobs, and chocolate gourmets.

Clark's faintly caustic voice cut into her chocolate-induced heaviness. "So, you managed to draft the *Police nationale* into it? Good for you. Helicopters will add a lot to your masterpiece, I'm sure."

She removed her chocolate-stained napkin from her lap, crunched it into a ball, and threw it with unerring accuracy at Clark's chest. "Stop teasing me, will you?"

Undeterred, he went on, "And Wagner's '*Ride of the Valkyries*' will enhance your big tracking shot along Paris rooftops nicely."

"Not Wagner. Mozart. Mozart's *Elvira Madigan* concerto to be specific," Sandrine told him smugly.

"At least, I know you're listening to me."

"Not to you. To Mozart."

Showing appreciation for her guided tours of some out-of-the-way places, Clark had invited her to a concert in the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*. Their seats had been on the upper tier, but they had savored the beautiful 1930's architecture, the sensual piano playing of Maria-João Pires, and Sandrine's first real outing in classical music. She had previously thought classical music stuffy and snobbish, but Clark had persuaded her to the contrary. It was a long shot from her usual *Indochine* and *Téléphone* rock bands obsession, but she was gingerly beginning to explore some of the Austrian composer's masterpieces. And, as the icing on the cake for their evening, she had also enjoyed window-shopping outside the Dior boutique on the Avenue Montaigne, laughing at the idea of wearing such eccentric dresses.

"Helicopters and Mozart don't go together," asserted Clark mock-seriously.

Sandrine deliberately frowned. "No use, Clark. I won't tell you. You'll have to *see* it." She paused. "When I'm done." She paused again and then playfully pointed at him. "And there are no helicopters in the mix."

"Even when I let you loose in my *chambre*?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"Clark, your place is so cramped we won't all fit in here! Not you, me, the cameraman, and the camera! Don't take it personally, but in this instance, *you* are the superfluous one." Clark's face fell with comical dismay. "Don't worry. I promised you we won't trample your bed. Too much."

Too bad they'd have to stand on it to open the window and film the opening shot she had envisioned.

Clark looked down at his empty plate. "I knew it. I've been bribed."

"Yes, you have." Sandrine sipped her chocolate. "Want another *gâteau* [pastry]?"

"No, thanks. I'm full."

Sandrine raised her right eyebrow, or at least, tried to. *Flûte*, this was harder to achieve than Leonard Nimoy made it look.

Shrugging the thought away, she asserted, "At least, think of it as your contribution to art. When I'm famous, I'll give you an exclusive: *My Long Road to an Academy Award*. People will fight for the honor of interviewing me. No, better still: when I'm running for the *Palme d'Or* at the Cannes Festival, I'll invite you to the Carlton, so you'll have first pick of the peroxidized *starlettes*. Interested?"

The joke fell flat. Clark didn't show any enthusiasm at this idea. Most males would have.

Sandrine added, more seriously, "Thank you for your help. You'll be credited for the soundtrack idea and the sky above your window."

Clark snorted. "I won't let you film it if you don't tell me what you're using it for."

"Relax, Clark. My movie comes with a 'No Sky Was Harmed During Filming' label," Sandrine retorted, capitalizing all the words. "Besides, everyone is entitled to keep secrets from time to time."

"You still haven't told me all your little filming secrets?" Clark's face was so innocent it could have belonged to a two-year old.

Sandrine blushed. Quite a bit.

To tell the truth, she had been inordinately open with him – much more than a bare month's acquaintance warranted. Some part of her knew that she had somehow elected him to take Marc's place as her best pal, confidante, sounding board, and surrogate brother. But she would have to be careful: someday, Clark would leave Paris, and she would stay here, coping as best as she could with the redoubled loss of friends.

And yet, Clark's leaving was also one of the reasons Sandrine had allowed him to become such a good friend so quickly. Talking to him was like baring one's heart to a complete stranger while traveling by train. The odds of seeing each other were so astronomical low that one could confide without damage.

So she unburdened herself with him, and he with her – their easy and natural relationship founded on the tastes shared by movie buffs, as well as the same curiosity and openness.

They had compared their upbringing, as both their families came from "redneck" areas – him from Kansas, her from the Creuse – and their cultural shocks when they moved to the Big City for college and university. And they had talked about everything under the sun. With Clark, what you saw was what you got. This quality was one Sandrine had enjoyed finding in many American people she had met and befriended. Some of them had even become regular pen pals after they went back home.

Sometimes, Sandrine almost believed that they were intimate enough to metaphorically hold each other close, protecting each other against professional hardships and drawing strength from their closeness. Not that they ever did. For all his friendliness, Clark had a very American upbringing, which prevented the light touches and physical proximity Sandrine had so enjoyed with Marc – when he was still her best friend.

Clark's intent look reminded her she had not answered him. She hastened to say, "Of course not!" She smirked. "As if you told me all your secrets!"

"Now... Sandrine, you already know about me embarrassing myself in Tokyo—"

"—Good blackmail material, by the way—"

"—And about my kindergarten girlfriend—"

"—kissing you full on the mouth. Really yucky—"

“—and, what about, oh,” he lowered his voice, “my stepping on the foot of a Nigerian Princess while waltzing?”  
 “It happened only once. Not secret enough.”

He made a show of thinking then offered in a more thoughtful tone, “Is my sending out resumes in London enough of an admission for you?”

Sandrine inhaled sharply then hastily drank some chocolate to hide her disappointment. Despite herself, she couldn’t help being sad, knowing he would not stay much longer in Paris. She would really miss Clark.

“Will it be your next stop?”

“I’m not sure yet. My piece on the Iraqi refugees was picked up and could be sold in syndication. It will help me find a more permanent job. *FUSAC* was fine for a while, but...” He sighed. “A source implied there is something big brewing, a national health scandal or other. However, in France, I don’t have the network or enough weight to look into it. I drew a blank.”

Sandrine put her hand on his arm and patted it. “Hey, don’t you worry. You’ll have your big break. I’m sure of it.”

“Hope so.” He seemed dejected for a split second then smiled. “Till then, I’ll keep out of your sky. When do you plan to start filming?”

“Will next week be okay?”

“Fine with me. I’m planning a short trip to Montpellier. Madame Leroy will lend you the key. She’s quite excited by your film. You’ll have to credit her, too; technically, it’s her *chambre...* and *her sky*.”

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Tendrils of rose-colored streaks were expanding in the sky, grey clouds barely covering the beautiful image, when Sandrine locked Clark’s window. The sun would soon plunge behind the horizon, darting its last rays on the rooftops. The weather had turned inclement as it had many times before, the frozen air spreading other shades into the illuminated silver rooftops.

Sandrine’s surroundings were as bare as their current lodger had intimated.

The room held a single bed, a cupboard whose shelves were half bare, a small desk and chair, a battered suitcase with “C.K.” initials embossed on the side, and clothes hanging behind a drawn curtain. The bed was sagging in the middle, and not because she had jumped up and down on it. From the look of it, many previous occupants must have stood in the same place, stretching to maneuver the opening of the window that faced the rapidly darkening sky. Someone—Clark?— had pinned a photograph of the Taj Mahal palace on a wall and another picture of a formal French garden on the one facing it. A framed small picture of an older couple sat on the desk. In a corner, an electric hot plate sat on top of a small fridge.

Olivier had already left, carrying the heavy bags containing the camera and all the technical stuff. The staircase was so narrow that he had had some trouble negotiating the curves.

God only knew how the bed frame had reached its destination. It might explain why this battered bed was still there. Madame Leroy’s *au pairs* would not complain, as they were the beneficiaries of her generosity; lodgings in Paris were quite expensive for students, and if someone had one almost rent-free, one would not look a gift horse in the mouth.

A sudden slithering sound echoed above Sandrine’s head.

She froze and tried to identify it. Something skidded on the rooftop. Not a cat, then. Not pigeons, either. ‘*Here be Dragons*,’ she irrelevantly thought, as she hastily picked up her bag and left, feeling somewhat nervous.

As she went down the staircase, her mind was still trying to identify the sound.

It had almost sounded like footsteps. How could it be?

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### Part III – “... June, he’ll change his tune / In restless walks, he’ll prowls the night...”

Paris (France), June 1991

From the start, this evening had been an unbelievably stupid idea.

If there was something Sandrine hated more than spinach, it was nightclubbing. So, how she found herself in a cramped night club on the *rue de Rivoli*, on a Saturday night, she couldn’t quite understand.

That same afternoon, Sandrine had finished the last cut of her first movie as a director. She hoped it wouldn’t be her last. She simultaneously felt dead tired and wonderfully elated.

“It calls for a celebration,” Nathalie, her temporary assistant asserted, and then she proceeded to convince Sandrine that one was in order.

As Sandrine already knew, restraining Nathalie’s eloquence was like trying to fend off a hurricane. Her discourse was another instance of her ability to convince even the most reluctant of listeners. Nathalie had begun her tirade as eloquently as she usually did – her speech hasty and her gestures jerky in her haste to persuade.

In the end, Sandrine had relented. *Anything to make her stop*, she thought wearily. However, all she dreamed about was soaking in a long warm bath and then, spending a quiet evening with a book. Sandrine’s two roommates were away, and she wished to make the best use of their common bathroom, while indulging in the peace and quiet.

Conceiving and directing her first feature film had been huge and stressful work, as she knew that her *travail d’élève* [student’s work] would be a sort of business card, introducing herself to the professional world she wanted to make her own.

The realization that in a few months’ time, she would have to find a job in her field made Sandrine even more eager to grab any occasion she still had for a little R & R. She couldn’t very well count on her French lessons to tide herself over: her schedule and her need for solitary work had had precedence. So, the lessons had been ditched. This was too bad as they did increase her small income. And, honestly, she couldn’t expect her parents to supplement her basic necessities any longer. They had done enough; it was time for her to be on her own.

But her dream-evening was not to be. Even if a blanket of tiredness made her bones ache, Sandrine could not deprive Nathalie, “her” actors, or “her” crew of this last collective outing.

Team spirit was a fine thing, and this very evening would put an end to her first venture into directing.

A shrewd part of her mind also knew that if she resisted, she would carve for herself a reputation of aloofness and snobbishness that would not serve her well in her career. Reputations traveled far, even from the *Fémis*, and she would have to inspire respect as a *female* director. Being respected without being too familiar or being friendly without inviting insolence was like walking a tightrope.

It was now past one in the morning. Standing near the bar, her now warm Diet Coke in her hand, Sandrine surveyed her surroundings. The closely knit crowd that had formed the *Fémis* people when they arrived, dancing and laughing together, had long since disintegrated. Everyone had scattered along the three floors of the *discothèque* [nightclub].

Glancing to her right, Sandrine saw that Philippe and Régis were still hanging together, trying half-heartedly to convince a redhead to dance some sort of dislocated-drunken mambo with them. *Well, good luck to them!* It would not be easy to do that kind of step over *R.E.M.*’s “*Losing My Religion*.”

The vibrations of the next song invaded Sandrine’s body, the bass so loud that she could almost feel the sound reverberating inside her teeth. It seemed to flow along with the stroboscopic violet, green and yellow lights, while insinuating into the plush

couches along the walls and gliding on the gliding black floors and stairs.

The overall lights were so muted that sometimes, one merely saw the phosphorescent effects of the rotating beams on the white and light-colored clothes of the dancers. From Sandrine's vantage point on the top floor, she could easily look down the stairs, and it seemed as if all these shadowy human dancers were daemonic specters escaped from Murnau's *Faust* or *Häxan*.

Unfortunately, they weren't as mute as the characters of these silent movies. Suddenly, some of the nearby revelers began to bellow in what barely passed for singing:

*C'est dans la nuit de Rebecca* [This is in Rebecca's night]  
*que la légende parti-ra* [that the legend wi-ill spread]  
*à cet instant et à chaque fois* [at this instant and every time]  
*elle voudra le revoir au moins 3 nuits* [she'll want to see him  
 again, at least for three nights]

*à cet instant et à chaque fois* [at this instant and every time]  
*ils se donnerent rendez-vous 3 nuits...* [they arranged to meet  
 for three nights]

Their voices screamed louder, even more off-key than before as they continued, "Three niiiiights..."

Horrified, Sandrine put down her Coke on the counter, covered her ears, and hurried down the stairs. Her head was beginning to pound as fast as the beat of the song.

This was more than enough. Nathalie or no Nathalie, she was going home.

Right now.

In any case, none of her companions would notice her flight.

*La Scala* nightclub had different levels that were so packed full of people that it took her twenty minutes to reach the bottom level, get her coat from the cloak room, and make good on her escape plan.

Once she reached the street, she inhaled the still-warm air of the night and sighed in contentment.

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Her relief didn't last more than a heartbeat.

A quick look at her watch told Sandrine that it was nearly half past one. She cringed. She should have left earlier, rather than indulging the others' feelings and staying longer than she had planned.

Of course, now there was no *Métro* [Subway] and no buses either, except the few lines of the *Noctambus* that ran all night. She would have to walk along the *rue de Rivoli* until she reached the *Noctambus* bus stop, which was located on the Châtelet square. And then she would have to walk again after reaching the more convenient stop until she arrived home. At best, she wouldn't reach her bed until three in the morning.

*Zut de zut de zut!* she thought angrily.

Swallowing bile at her own stupidity, Sandrine began to walk with a brisk stride. At least she had had the common sense to wear flat pumps.

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As she walked, her self-recriminations abated and something like nervousness took its place.

The *rue de Rivoli* was too quiet.

Sandrine could almost believe that she was the only human being left in the world. The straight street was one filled with tourists' souvenirs shops, restaurants, cafés, and take-away food, while the Tuileries Gardens were located on the other side of the street. Then, they were replaced by the Louvres Museum, while on the other side, the *Palais Royal* and its garden hid behind the square bordering the Louvre, briefly replaced the long arched gallery where the shops opened. After this short architectural respite, the arched gallery above the sidewalk continued with its classical regularity. Ahead of her, if she walked for a few more minutes, she would see historical department stores with the *Samaritaine* a few hundred meters ahead and closed shops on each

side of the street.

But, despite her quick stride, Sandrine was still in the cultural side of the district. In a few meters, she would leave the Louvre behind, its imposing front obscuring the low moon.

A few cars hastened by in the deserted street, speeding toward the glory of the *Place de la Concorde* with its eons-old central obelisk and the luxuries of the Crillon Hôtel near the American Embassy. The sound of their passing disappeared as quickly as dreams do when one is about to wake.

Without intending to, Sandrine hastened her pace under the historical archways that covered her side of the street. At regular intervals, the suspended stylish street-lights projected a yellower illumination than those on the other side of the street. In this tiny part of the district, opposite the Louvre, the shops went upscale; the windows offered antiques, textiles and leather goods, projecting additional light onto the pavement.

To Sandrine, the street, so crowded in daylight, seemed to stretch further in its deserted state. Even the evaporating leftover heat of the day contributed to this gloomy near silence, smothering the faraway sounds of the sleeping metropolis.

The silence was making Sandrine definitely nervous. She moved faster.

As she walked by the *Oratoire du Louvre* [a seventeenth-century Protestant Church], whose end bordered the street with its backyard, Sandrine suddenly heard an echo to her footsteps. Unconsciously, she slackened her pace in order to hear it better.

The attack came so suddenly Sandrine didn't have the time to turn around. Suddenly, a hand grabbed her by the throat as another tugged on the strap of her purse. She let go of a muffled scream and twisted desperately around in order to dislodge the weight that was squeezing her neck, her left hand flying to it to try to pry her attacker's fingers open.

The inflexible hand released a little bit of pressure before taking another grip.

During the slight reprieve, Sandrine screamed louder, while the man took hold of her free arm and twisted it behind her back. Surprised, she nearly let go of her bag; in her panic, she had thought of protecting her purse first. It contained her keys, wallet, some change, and she could not risk losing it. She was still reflexively clutching it with her right hand, instead of trying to dislodge her attacker with both hands.

Infuriated, the man jerked harder.

Sandrine's breath caught. Out of breath, she began to suffocate, feeling herself falling onto the pavement under the cold eyes of Admiral Gaspard de Coligny. The commemorative effigy of the Protestant leader murdered during the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre seemed to look down on her with unrelenting irony from his position behind the iron railings of the Church as a memento of men's atrocities.

Desperately, she felt her strength wane as her lungs begun to burn. However, a sudden release made her stumble. Sandrine's head hit the railings and things blurred for a while.

When she got her breath back, she was folded up on her side, her purse strap still draped around her shoulder, her bag maintaining a hard bulge between her thigh and the pavement. Uncertainly, she got up on all fours, and then tried to stand up, her hands grasping the nearby railings.

She later realized that she could not have blacked out more than a few seconds.

As she tried to get up, the street light for that part of the street went out unexpectedly.

The stylish lantern, which was hanging from the apex of the arch above them, had blown. It overhung the part of the pavement that bordered the street itself, so the scene of the action was plunged into additional darkness, as the next illuminated shop windows were across the perpendicular street to the *rue de Rivoli*.

In the increased dusk that enshrouded the street, Sandrine

perceived that her assaulter—with brown hair, jeans, and a dark long-sleeved sweater—was confronting another man.

Slightly dazed by her sudden freedom, Sandrine couldn't really understand what was going on. She must have been knocked out and was unconscious or dreaming or something. There couldn't be a man effortlessly preventing her would-be assailant from reaching her and moving so fast things were even more blurry, making her head spin.

When Sandrine managed to stand upright on trembling legs, she saw her would-be robber rush past her in a burst of speed. Sandrine went sprawling on the pavement, surprised by the suddenness of this movement.

She stayed where she had fallen. She wasn't hurt, but she preferred to sit there on the pavement. At least, she wouldn't fall further. Her legs felt like cotton-wool.

She looked around her, vaguely studying her surroundings. She noticed that shards of glass littered the curb where the stylish lantern had been.

Sandrine's teeth began to chatter.

After a short interval, strong hands helped her to her feet.

"Are you hurt?" a very deep and gravelly voice asked her.

*Almost like James Mason's*, she irrelevantly thought.

"No. Just shook me up a little," she answered mechanically.

She craned her neck trying to see her rescuer's face. He held himself in such a way that she couldn't see it. Sandrine squinted, trying to concentrate. It was difficult to do so. A delayed reaction settled in, and she leaned against one of the pillars along the archway.

Good old Coligny hadn't batted an eye during this succession of astounding events. *The poor dear had seen civil wars, mass massacres and assassinations*, Sandrine thought dizzily. *Nothing here to get his knickers in a twist. Nothing at all.*

A rumbling noise broke the silence, and the flashlights of a passing car briefly illuminated the face of her rescuer.

Sandrine gasped. It was covered with a ski mask, or the kind of mask thieves wore when they attempted a robbery in any self-respecting TV movie.

She backed away, sliding away from her cozy rest along the arch. Taking one step at a time, she moved back from the man in black, staring at the frightening ski mask. She felt like laughing. How stupid could this be? *Out of the frying pan and into the fire*, she thought hysterically.

Not daring to lower her eyes from the man without a face—as *if it would make a difference!*—she backed away from him, crossing the little perpendicular street to the *rue de Rivoli*.

Her luck held. She didn't even stumble on the pavement as she walked backwards on the other side of the *rue de l'Oratoire*.

Her luck came back with a vengeance.

She turned her head, and there it was. A taxi was stopping a little farther away on that street.

Feeling a little more daring now that she was separated from the masked weirdo after crossing the street, Sandrine ran to the taxi as it discharged a passenger.

"I need a lift, please," she breathlessly asked the driver.

"All right, come in," he replied.

The door slammed. The car sped on its way, but there was no one to be seen at the feet of Gaspard de Coligny's statue. Only shards of glass on the pavement and the twisted and charred metal casing of the overhead lantern attested to the last few minutes.

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Fortunately, Sandrine had enough change in her purse to pay the fare. This unexpected expense would mean more spaghetti on her menu next week, but for once, she didn't mind too much.

When she arrived home, she immediately crawled into bed, letting her clothes remain where she had dropped them.

The ringing of the phone woke her up. Her alarm clock indicated 9:00 AM, and she smothered a curse.

Sitting up gingerly in her bed, she muttered, "I'm coming, I'm coming" and limped into the common sitting room, feeling like an eighty-year-old arthritic woman. Fortunately, the caller kept ringing.

Sandrine crashed on the battered couch in the common living room, picked up the phone and said, "*Allô?* Philippe-Demazières-Baron Apartment, here."

"Sandrine, is that you?" Clark's voice said on the other side of the line.

"Err, yes. What's left of me, anyway," she said. "Clark, how are you?"

"What do you mean?" questioned Clark, his concern obvious.

"Oh, nothing much. I was mugged last night. No problem!"

Sandrine answered, with feigned carelessness.

It didn't fool Clark. "I'm coming," he stated. "Don't leave. I'll be there in about..." His voice trailed as he thought. "A half an hour. Is your code still the same?"

"No, err, yes," Sandrine stammered. "Please, don't trouble yourself. I'm okay, just a little sore." This was a gross understatement. From the way her muscles ached and her *derrière* [backside] stung, she imagined it would be black and blue at least for a fortnight. "The code's the same, but I don't need..."

"I'll be there in half an hour," Clark reiterated more forcefully, and then he hung up, effectively cutting off her protests.

"Oh, *zuuuuuu!*" Sandrine moaned, looking at herself with dismay. Her hair was standing on end, and she was still wearing her night t-shirt; she was a sight. She groaned and hobbled to the bathroom.

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Clark had been right to insist, Sandrine thought contentedly. Friendship, coffee, and fresh *croissants* were the restoratives she needed.

She finished her tale with as much animation as she could. Her shoulder still hurt where she had bruised it on the pavement, so she gestured with the other hand, emphasizing her words as she spoke. "It was just unbelievable; the guy was wearing a ski mask. A black ski mask!! In June!"

"Maybe he wanted to be a Zorro to his damsel in distress," Clark offered falteringly.

"Pff! I don't think so. He was really scary," Sandrine paused. "No, he wasn't, actually." She collected her thoughts. "He scared me, though. It was so — so sudden..."

"He did help you, didn't he?" insisted Clark.

"All right, so he did," she agreed reluctantly. "You're right; he *did* ask me if I were hurt. All the same..." She faltered, feeling ridiculous for doing so. She was in one piece, no great harm done. Her guardian angel—if she had one all her own—had been a busy little bee last night.

Sandrine's eyes met Clark's. As usual, she was met with gentleness and his usual determination to understand. His eyes begged her to go on with her tale, so she went on: "It happened so fast. I'm not sure I can recollect what really occurred. This was so weird, you know. Things kind of went in slow motion, and yet, they unwound so fast that I cannot—"

"Remember everything?" Clark interrupted.

Strange how Clark seemed almost... satisfied, when he said that. No, not that, he was... Busy sorting out her memories, Sandrine let the impression slip away.

"*Non, non.* That's not it. There's *something...*" she began.

Something lying in wait on the frontier between awareness and forgetfulness.

Something that felt a bit off.

Something she could not put her finger on.

Something she *should* remember.

She concentrated, and snapshots of the previous evening came back in distorted shapes. Hands blocking her attacker's grasp. Hands helping her to get up. Hands she felt squeezing her throat,

blocking her windpipe. Hands... feet...

The feet of her savior weren't touching the ground—they weren't touching the ground!

Sandrine's face must have blanked out, because Clark's voice intruded into her consciousness: "Sandrine... Sandrine! Are you all right?"

She hastened to reassure him: "*Mais oui*, stop fretting!"

Sandrine concentrated further, but nothing of value came flooding back. The editing was good, though. The images wound up in the canister of her brain and flickered into their proper order. Yet, the film cutter had managed to give an impression of speed and urgency. Shots and reverse shots sped in her mind with an oblique slant, then with low-angle shots of when she had found herself on the pavement.

Still, whatever comparisons she made, she could not escape that rock-hard certainty. At one point, while he had made her mugger spin around with an impossibly regular arc, Zorro Man's feet were slightly off the pavement. Meager, ridiculous millimeters, but still...

She was absolutely sure of it.

Her shocked stare had then focused on his feet, which dangled at her eyes' level, as she was then half-sprawled on the street. *The man was wearing dark sneakers*, she dimly remembered. Jumble-sale ones. As if it would help her to understand who or what he was!

"Sandrine... Sandrine!" Clark's voice intruded into her daydreaming. She lifted her head and blurted out: "He was floating!"

"Hein ? ! [Eh? What?]"

As this typically French interjection escaped Clark's lips, a flicker of a smile crossed Sandrine's face. For a second, her thoughts diverted, as she considered how fluent her American friend was in her native language, down to the vernacular little turn of phrases most foreign speakers never really picked up.

"What do you mean? *Floating?!?*" Clark *did* sound sort of worried.

*Zut*, she *had* done it. Sandrine grimaced, realizing how daft she would seem to Clark if she confided what she had really seen. His first impulse would be to run away, never to be seen again, if he grasped what she had meant. He would label her "*tarée*," "*folle*," "*cinglée*," "*crétine*," [wacko, mad, moron, etc] if he knew.

Best not to tell him too much. He was so kind that he would pester her until she went to see her doctor, who would gorge her with antidepressants and sleeping pills and whatnot, and they would erode her mind, and she would feel like a tinned vegetable at a time when she needed reactivity and creativity to achieve her dreams.

No way. NO WAY.

Opting for some fast creative fibbing, Sandrine smiled sweetly at Clark and told him instead: "My guardian angel, he was floating around. I'll bet he was."

She took a sip of her now-cold coffee and made a face. "Ugh! This blend is really atrocious. How could you drink yours?"

"It was boiling hot," replied Clark, deadpan. "No taste at all."

"Eh! It's all your fault. I told you not to come!"

"Are you sorry I did?" he countered.

"No. Of course not. Don't think me ungrateful, Clark, but don't you have better things to do than babysitting me?"

Sandrine got up and poured the offending coffee into the kitchen sink. "Want some tea instead? I've got some Oolong which isn't half bad." Without waiting for his answer, she filled the kettle. "Marianne hates tea. At least, I'm sure she hasn't drunk mine."

"These roommates of yours aren't that wicked," Clark said.

"Don't bet on it. You're always seeing the best in anybody, but I assure you, sometimes, I wish them to take off for parts unknown. I'll be glad to have my own place one day, even if I'll

miss them... occasionally".

"Where have they gone, by the way?"

Sandrine brought two tea cups to the table and sat back down. "Marianne's boyfriend keeps her busy somewhere—she'll come back in two days, and Jeanne is visiting her folks for the week."

"Ah!" From his tone, this news didn't please Clark one bit.

"Ah—what?" She frowned. "Don't you believe I'm able to take care of myself? Schwarzy-El is a pretty good bodyguard, anyway," Sandrine countered lightly.

"Schwarzy—"

"—El," completed Sandrine. "My guardian angel. Lots of muscles, great timing, tireless, has been getting me out of scrapes for the last twenty-odd years or so."

"I see." Clark smiled. "Must be a pretty busy guy."

"You can't imagine! Although, sometimes, he sends people to do his job. Like you or Zorro Ski Masque Man..." Her face fell for a few seconds, then she went on, brightly, "So, you see, I'm never quite alone."

The shrill whistle of the kettle provided a welcome interruption. Sandrine got up, noticing with dismay that her legs seemed to ache more and more as she brought it back.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'll be all right." Her unconscious wince told the contrary.

"Hmm," reproved Clark, obviously not convinced. "Did you take some aspirin?"

"There isn't any left. I took them all this past week," admitted Sandrine, pouring hot water in the cups.

"I'll bet. But this project of yours is finished and done with. You could use some from the way you're tottering."

"I know," Sandrine snorted. "I move with as much poise as a drunken duck on a moving walkway!"

"You should rest this afternoon," said Clark solicitously. "I can go and bring you some tablets."

"No thanks. I'll go to the chemist when I leave the police station." Looking at his furrowed brow and the lines of concentration on his face, her train of thought halted abruptly. She wondered if he feared she wasn't up to it. Hastily, she added, "It's a chore, but I have to do it. I was lucky, but some poor other girl might not be..."

"Do you want some company?" he proposed.

Suddenly, the prospect of hours spent in a stuffy waiting room in order to report a mugger she could not even properly describe looked a lot better.

"Would you really?" she asked, trying not to show how eager she was.

He smiled at her. "Hey, that's what friends are for. Besides, it could be educational. I've never been into a French police station."

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This wasn't one of their most pleasant hours, or one of the funniest, but it certainly was one of the most insightful.

After Sandrine explained why she was there, a young policeman directed them to the waiting room, assuming that Clark was her boyfriend. She looked at Clark from the corner of her eyes, wondering how he would take it, and seeing he didn't flinch, she let it go.

"Why didn't you say anything?" she whispered when they found a seat in the half-filled corridor. Chairs were lining the walls, not far from the office where a harassed woman welcomed the waiting people. On the other side of the wall, a woman was trying to keep her two children from bickering. An exasperated middle-aged man looked at his watch every five minutes — as if looking at it would make the time go quicker. Sandrine prepared herself for a long wait.

"The man at the front desk—he obviously thought we were together—"

Clark looked at her uncomprehendingly. "Aren't we?"

“Together *together*,” she insisted. “I’m sorry about that.”

“No problem. Moreover, he’s obviously prejudiced. From the way he interrogated you, in his eyes, a poor frail lonely female is clearly a logical victim. Knowing that you’re not single raised you one notch in his estimation. This might help your case.”

“That,” Sandrine said gravely, “is the sign of a real moron. And it’s so unfair.”

“I agree. The problem is not the assaulted victim – it’s the mugger. Alas, this kind of attitude is fairly common. I’ve seen it in many places.”

Again, Sandrine wondered how many countries Clark had visited, and what kind of things he had seen and done to have such an intimate knowledge of the workings of the average policeman around the world.

“Yet, one wonders where the famed French *galanterie* [chivalry] has gone. Down in the sewer, with the man’s brain, no doubt,” she went on.

Clark laughed. “This is not your usual style to think in *clichés*.”

“But one does sometimes, doesn’t one?” retorted Sandrine. “And, yet, between the two of you, you are the true embodiment of supposed French gallantry.”

“Thus proving that *clichés* are vastly overrated.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching people enter and leave.

The children kept quiet for a while, then began to run between the chairs, their mother ineffectively trying to keep them on their seats. Clark pulled a long rubber band out of one pocket and began to show the youngest girl how to create geometrical figures with it. The game provided them with twenty minutes of quiet. Fortunately, the woman’s turn came and she exited, cranky children in tow at the obvious relief of the other people still waiting.

From time to time, when Sandrine looked at a perpendicular corridor, she noticed less savory characters being escorted to whatever place they had to go by policemen. She shivered. Maybe the man who had tried to strangle her was on the premises.

“Two hours, and how many to go?” grumbled Sandrine.

“Well, you can’t expect to be a high priority,” Clark told her.

“I know, I know... If I weren’t such a responsible citizen, I wouldn’t even be here, and you wouldn’t be losing your time, too.”

“This was my choice,” he replied.

Trust Clark to be always polite and gentle. The wait was making Sandrine edgy, and the hard chair wasn’t helping any. Being truly interested in Clark’s affairs as well as desirous to take her mind off her aching butt, she began to ask him about his latest articles.

Clark was always interesting to listen to and involved in whatever he happened to be doing, but when he was speaking about his work, he truly waxed poetic.

Sandrine realized it was people who were important to Clark. Neither the thrill of the chase for information nor mastering his craft by finding the right words to touch the reader was as important to him. He used empathy with his article’s topic as the hook to draw in the reader. In his writing, he endeavored to ensure that those he wrote about were accurately portrayed. He strove to paint with words a complete picture of people as a whole, including their mind, cares, and issues.

Was that why Clark traveled so much? To see what was on the far side of the horizon, just beyond his reach? And once achieving it, finding it inadequate and looking beyond it, hoping to find that unseen something or *someone*?

*Maybe it was*, Sandrine mused, looking at Clark’s animated profile as he related with energy his dialogue with one of the *bouquinistes* [secondhand or antique booksellers] whose shop was installed on the banks of the River Seine since the middle of the

nineteenth century. His interview of a woman— whose “box” specialized in French literature—had degenerated into a discussion about Victor Hugo’s first printings, ending with various grumbings from the elderly bookseller about Americans who were looking for collector’s editions because they happened to have seen *Les Misérables* musical. Clark had turned her monologue into a very funny column about the evolution of a classical masterpiece into a piece of popular culture, also musing, as he stood watching the towers of Notre-Dame cathedral above the opposite bank, about how real landscape benefited from imagination and fictional characters took a life of their own.

Clark ended up unearthing his first draft from his backpack. Sandrine read it avidly, recognizing in his writing the same carefulness to develop the woman’s point of view, as well as her nostalgia for a literary past that probably never was. He always maintained a certain balance in his demonstration that didn’t disguise his love of literature. She also recognized the faint regret he also felt once he learned that the bookseller now had to tourise cheap souvenirs among their wares. There were so many tourists promenading on the banks that the dark green metal boxes that held the merchandise could no longer specialize only in books, magazines, and “old papers.”

There was not a sliver of smugness in Clark when he admitted that he was satisfied with his efforts. Merely the pride of a good craftsman, admitting that his skills gave his 2D words a third dimension and substance that others could contemplate and ponder, like a potter transforming clay into *une œuvre d’art* [a molded work of art].”

That was what made Clark a brilliant writer, Sandrine believed. He was good, and with more experience, he would be even better. He already had the tools of a good journalist – the ability to grab attention and make one read, no matter how frivolous the subject.

“*Mademoiselle, c’est à vous!*” [Miss, it’s your turn!]

The woman from the office was standing before Sandrine. She was so intent on her reading, she hadn’t heard her. Blushing, Sandrine gave the sheaf of paper back to Clark and hastily got up.

It was finally time to make her statement, to watch various photographs of would-be suspects, and to be assured that the police would contact her if they found the mugger.

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#### **Part IV – “...July, he will fly / And give no warning of his flight...”**

##### **Paris (France), July 1991**

Sandrine was panting when she reached the landing. Between the summer heat and her being out of shape, the climb to Clark’s sixth floor was taking its toll.

Catching her breath with difficulty, she paused before knocking on Clark’s door.

No one answered. *Zut! Where could he be?*

Sandrine had had no news for a fortnight, and she was beginning to worry. The last time she had seen Clark was when he had dropped by her apartment in June to comfort her after the assault from which she had escaped. It was a good thing he had come with her to the *commissariat*: the sour smell of sweat, dirt, and fear would be forever imprinted in her brain when anyone would utter the words “police” and “policemen.” Of course, there had been no news of her assailant. Not that she had expected any.

Clark’s silence was unusual and that increased Sandrine’s sense of something ominous hanging over her. She had been passing through the *Quartier Latin*. Usually, when she did so, she used the payphone standing on the corner of the *Place Saint-Michel*, ear the River Seine. Clark usually laughed when she unflinchingly called him while standing a few hundred meters from his building. He called that “checking on my progress like a mother hen.” Still, Sandrine never would have intruded on his privacy and drop by without being announced.

But this time, she had. Believing in being prepared, she found her note in her handbag and bent to insert the envelope under the door.

Clark might be interested in meeting Nathalie's *fiancé*. He was an archaeologist and currently engaged in salvage excavation near Paris. An apartment building was going to be erected on his present dig. A mechanical shovel had uncovered part of a Merovingian cemetery; this had stopped any additional progress on the building site, and the archaeologists had flocked it. They had six months to finish their mapping and excavating before the builders returned. Nathalie had told her excitedly that one of the men still had leather shoes on, and that there was some funerary equipment. This was just the kind of subject Sandrine hoped one day to document, and a visit to the dig may interest Clark and provide him with a fine human interest article.

The white paper disappeared under the wood panel without a hitch, as the irregular floor left enough space for it to slide under.

She waited for a second, and then turned, preparing to reverse her effort.

She had barely put her foot on the first step down when the door behind her opened. Clark stood on the entrance of his abode, a little ruffled and short of breath himself, holding her envelope in one hand.

"I'm sorry, Sandrine, I didn't hear you knock." He gestured inside. "Won't you come in?"

Wondering how her knocks hadn't crossed the cubbyhole Clark called his room, she did.

Under the sloping tin roof, the heat was even more stifling than in the staircase. Sandrine's brow was swiftly beaded with sweat, but Clark must have grown accustomed to it, because he looked nearly as fresh as if he had come out of a fridge. Although the window was wide open, there wasn't any fresh air in the room; the sun beat relentlessly on the roof, sending off waves of heat. How could Clark stand it?

"Do you want some water? I have some Coke, if you prefer," offered Clark. "Sorry, no Diet Coke. Do sit down." He waved vaguely. Piles of clothes and a few miscellaneous items cluttered his bed, so Sandrine chose one of the hard wooden chairs.

"Water will be fine, thank you," answered Sandrine, wondering how she could surreptitiously wipe her face without looking like a wimp. Fortunately, she wore no makeup.

Miraculously, the tiny fridge even contained real ice cubes. Pointedly looking at her, Clark filled a glass three-quarter ice and added some water. Sandrine took it with undisguised delight and emptied it almost in one gulp; then, she picked up a single cube and let it melt rapturously in her mouth.

Handing the glass back to Clark, she commented: "Just like I like it! Thanks, Clark. I swear that you know me better than my mom does."

"Want a refill?"

"Yes, thanks." As he did so, Sandrine took better stock of her surroundings. "What are you doing? Sorting out your laundry?"

"Err, not exactly, I—" began Clark, while she went on with her teasing, "—remodeling your closet?"

She suddenly paused.

Indeed, clothing was piled up on the bed; however, as Sandrine focused, she also noticed that Clark's suitcase lay open in a corner. It was already filled with toiletries and shoes wrapped in plastic bags. On Clark's tiny desk, a stack of neatly labeled folders and old *FUSAC* issues were obviously waiting to be placed next to the portable typewriter that Clark had already packed. More telling than all these preparations for departure was the framed picture of Clark's parents that no longer sat on his desk.

Sandrine blanched. "You're leaving," she stated accusingly. "You *are*. Just like that."

Mechanically, she seized the glass that Clark was silently offering her and drank. Her throat suddenly felt so parched that

she wondered how she would continue talking, far less speaking articulately.

"I wrote you a letter," Clark said. He visibly squirmed under her accusing look.

"Wrote me a letter? And that absolves you of everything?" Sandrine exclaimed, springing to her feet.

"Oh, wonderful, he wrote me a letter," she told no one in particular, raising her eyes to the ceiling and gesturing wildly. The ice cubes chimed in the half-filled glass she was still holding, and a little water sloshed on her hand.

Turning back to Clark, Sandrine added with stressed politeness: "Thank you so very much for writing it, Clark, you are *so* thoughtful and nice and..." Words utterly failed her, and she looked at him more closely. During her outburst, he had merely buried his hand in his jeans pocket, looking sheepish. His awkward body language calmed her ire... a little.

Her anger faded abruptly, only to be replaced by despondency and an acute feeling of betrayal.

She tried to push it away to the back of her mind but failed. *Clark owed her nothing*, the reasonable part of her argued. *He was free to do whatever he wanted*. They were friends, not lovers. She wasn't in love with him, or he with her; no, they didn't have that kind of bond. However, friendship had its duties as well as its privileges. Friends were supposed to be compassionate and kind. Friends didn't lie to each other. Friends didn't ride away in the sunset without saying goodbye. Friends didn't desert friends, unless they weren't truly friends.

"Sandrine..." Clark began. "Yes, I wrote you a letter. I have to leave Paris in a hurry, and I couldn't reach you."

"Couldn't you phone?" she angrily asked. "You never thought twice about doing so."

Besides, her answering machine was now fixed, and Clark knew it. He had left her a message in early June, when he had needed some answer to a tricky French detail for one of his articles. *That excuse won't wash*, she told herself fiercely. *Let him extricate himself from his half-baked lies*. "So? What's going on?" she asked with intensifying exasperation.

Clark turned back to his suitcase. "Forgive me, but I have to continue packing. My plane leaves in under four hours from Roissy airport, and I'm already late as it is."

Without waiting for her answer, he began to fill his suitcase methodically with garish ties, shirts, t-shirts, and suits alongside his other possessions.

"Oh, fine. Go on with it," Sandrine said. "Sorry to be such a hindrance. I'll go." Nevertheless, she made no move of leaving.

"You never were a hindrance, Sandrine," he replied, bending over the suitcase. In a few minutes, he had filled it; then, he scanned the room checking that he hadn't forgotten anything. "Surely, you know that."

"It doesn't look like it," she snapped back. "If I hadn't come here by sheer chance, I'd never have had the possibility to bid *adieu* [farewell] to you."

"Not *adieu*, nothing so definite. Paris hasn't seen the last of me," he asserted with a smile. "You can trust me on this."

"Where are you going?"

"London. I've had an offer from—"

"Oh, what difference does it make for me, this or that newspaper?" wailed Sandrine. "You'll be gone all the same."

Clark's tense face stopped her spell of self-pitying. "I'm sorry, Clark," she amended, "but I'm going to miss you dreadfully." Sandrine took a last sip of her now tepid water and added with a conscious effort, "I hope it's a good offer and an excellent opportunity for you."

"I hope it will be..."

Clark continued explaining in hurried sentences that the vacancy was unexpected, that he was merely on a waiting list, and that he had to present himself the following day for an interview.

Speed was thus of the essence, and only his knowledge that Madame Leroy would have a long list of applicants to fill his place in the *chambre de bonne* had lessened his guilt of leaving her so unexpectedly before the end of the month or the customary three months warning.

His words left Sandrine's ears like snowflakes on a hot ground, dissolving as they fell and melting away without a trace. She truly heard one out of three, not even registering the name of the paper where Clark would be employed as a stopgap or where he would live in the London metropolis.

*Clark was betting on an uncertain job, taking his chances in a different place. In Paris, he already had job offers and friends and... This meant Clark was desperate to leave, and that something—or someone—had pushed him away. Who had? Whom was he trying to escape?* Sandrine puzzled.

Clark's next sentence suddenly brought her back to earth. "... so, I'll send you my address so we can keep in touch." His voice held real regret when he added, "I wish I could see your next masterpiece. Please, tell me all about it. Remember,"—his voice lowered in mock-secrecy—"helicopters and Mozart don't go together."

Sandrine's voice croaked as her throat constricted: "I shall remember."

She went to the sink and washed her glass, dried it, and put it back on the near empty cupboard. The last time she would ever do this simple task here, she knew. The finality of the small everyday gesture nearly undid her.

His packing done to his satisfaction, Clark went to his desk and gave an envelope to Sandrine. "There, you may as well have it." Not stamped, it was merely addressed to "Mademoiselle Sandrine Demazières".

*If he were so pressed by time, how would he have assured its delivery to her if he wasn't to post it? Probably through Madame Leroy's goodwill,* she supposed.

Sandrine took it with shaking fingers and put it clumsily in her purse.

Frantically, because the clock was ticking away and she didn't want it to be truly goodbye, Sandrine probed: "I can come with you to the airport, you know. We can talk on the way in the bus," she added, trying to forestall his polite refusal. "Truly, it's no bother."

She must have been too pushy, because, all of a sudden, Clark's face closed. Sandrine backpedaled, feeling like a fool. "Err... If you wish it, I don't want to intrude, of course."

"Sandrine—" Clark interrupted himself, then in a move that was as sudden as it was unexpected, engulfed her in a quick embrace. She went limp in his arms, acutely aware of the feeling of protection and ease she always felt in his presence and already feeling more her future loss. Marc's hugs had never felt so brotherly; but again, Sandrine and Marc had been children together, while Clark's friendship and support had come as they were both adults. Their choice and their mutual pleasure. Or so she had thought.

"Traveling hasn't made parting easier for me, you know," Clark whispered into her hair. "Don't come with me. Parting isn't 'sweet sorrow,' it's the worst part of my life."

"Sure," she answered, half believing it. "I understand," she added in a flat voice but gave him a peck on the cheek. "Adieu, Clark."

The hug ended as quickly as it had begun. Sandrine bit her lip, thinking that it seemed like he didn't really want to spend one minute more with her than he had to.

Because she didn't want him to see her cry, and because she didn't want to humiliate herself further, Sandrine left the room, carefully shutting the door behind her. She knew as it closed that a part of her life had locked up with it, definitively.

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## Part V — "...August, die she must / The autumn winds blow chillily and cold..."

France, 1991-1993

For years, Sandrine castigated herself for their broken friendship and her inability to keep friends.

Telling herself that she had been too forward, too earnest.

That she had frightened Clark off.

That she had mistaken his politeness for attention and his kindness for deeper feelings.

That calling her "friend" meant nothing to him, as he didn't even want her to come say goodbye at the airport.

That he had mistaken her friendship for something more on her side.

Actually, years afterwards, Sandrine still squirmed when she imagined how embarrassed Clark must have felt, mistakenly believing that she had "chased" after him.

It stung. It really did.

It stung so much that she never understood that she had overreacted, destabilized by her two successive losses: a childhood friend whom she had considered as a brother and a newfound friend from overseas whom she had loved too quickly, because of the disappointment of the first one.

So, not trusting herself, Sandrine disdained all friendly overtures made by her fellow students. Her last months before her graduation were solitary ones.

She even scorned Marc's awkward tries to mend their rift. After a while, Marc stopped, and Sandrine saw that he was chatting up a pretty young thing in her first year at the *Fémis* — a student he could easily impress with his expertise and seniority. Sandrine didn't even really care.

*Which is worse? Sandrine sometimes asked herself. Being alone in a desert, pathetically eager for any human interaction? Or being alone in a crowd?* She never really found out.

She was outwardly friendly but truly elusive. She talked, laughed, relaxed, chatted, and played all the right moves with the right people. Everyone said that she was good company, entertaining and nice, but she knew otherwise. Inside, she felt hollow. Dead.

With determination and an almost manic energy, Sandrine buried herself in her work. Work was good. Work was filling her days and furnishing her nights with dreams of achievements, aspirations of technical perfection, and new goals within reach. Work was something that kept her mind occupied and her heart muzzled.

When her *Fémis* movie was shown at the *Cinémathèque française*—as was the custom for all the students— it gathered much attention from the professionals who scouted new talents. So, she didn't have too much trouble finding both a producer and funds for her next venture: her first full-length feature, titled *Perte* [Loss]. Sandrine would have preferred to direct a documentary, as she always wanted to do, but she put that dream on the back burner. She could always direct one when she had made a name for herself.

France nurtured her talented daughters. Sandrine's new project very quickly secured an *avance sur recettes* [advance]. Two Foundations also helped: a French one, which was noted for its intuition in detecting new talents, and —to Sandrine's astonishment—an American one, LexArts.

Sandrine's script, based on her experience, was elusive yet grounded in such a widespread reality: loss. The dialogues of her movie were so razor-sharp and humorous in a desperate way that it touched the audience.

Among the fluidity of her work, the professionals also observed an impossibly virtuoso shot that made the viewer almost believe that one was flying through the sky before crashing down, one's metaphorical wings melted away by the scorching sun. The subjective strength of that emotional experience fascinated

viewers and made the professional people pay attention.

*Loss* was even selected for the Cannes Film Festival in the *Un Certain Regard* section. It became an instant hit when it was released in a few art theaters in Paris.

Word of mouth slowly grew among the cinema goers. It was the beginning of her successful career.

Sandrine may have been afraid to connect with people and bare her innermost feelings, but she found out that she knew how to make her crew respond to her directions. And people felt at ease before her and her camera. After a while, she understood that she had a knack for making them express themselves through a camera lens, caressing their souls with respect, light, and the camera's eye. She knew how to listen, and they responded in kind. Though she didn't bare herself before others, she never lacked empathetic and sympathetic listening. At least, along with her inability to trust others, this was a quality she had borrowed from Clark.

Speaking of Clark...

Sometimes, Sandrine still wondered what kind of articles Clark would have written about the Cannes people. Surely, he would have enjoyed and relished the ridicules and idiosyncrasies of the professionals, the airs the actors put on at will, and the atmosphere. He would have especially appreciated the premieres of many foreign films and the public debates with filmmakers and actors. Clark was so curious and open about other people, other experiences, and other views of the universe.

Perhaps, he would even have gathered material for one of his wonderful human-interest stories and written an article with his particular brand of perception and compassion. For who was closer to Terence's maxim than Clark? "*I am human, and I think nothing of which is human is alien to me.*"

Indeed, Clark would have understood what lurked behind some of the most outrageous statements of this peculiar crowd. Sometimes, Sandrine almost imagined what Clark would have said, and she smiled reminiscently. People stared, but they quickly learned that when Sandrine was engrossed in watching nothing in particular, she was best left alone.

Yet, after parting ways, Clark had gone on with his life and Sandrine with hers. Still, she missed him and missed sharing her elation with a true friend.

But Sandrine had had a second chance. Ski Mask Man had saved her from being seriously hurt at least, and she was eager to seize the opportunities offered her. Maybe "Schwarzy-El's deputy" had been sent for a reason. Maybe she, Sandrine, had something to achieve that no one else could do. She found courage in this, and it fed her determination when she had to fight for funds with a difficult producer; when she had to convince an actor to let go; and when she had to convince him that presenting his best profile to the camera *wasn't* what motion pictures were about.

Feeling like a survivor, physically as well as emotionally, Sandrine plodded on with her life, not daring to look over her shoulder for fear of losing her momentum.

Then, beginning in 1993, Clark sent postcards sporadically from different countries. Because he didn't know her new address, he sent them c/o the *Fémis*.

And it was like a spring rain to her parched soul.

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### Epilogue – "September, I'll remember / A love once new has now grown old"

#### Paris (France), September 1993

Sandrine had been half-heartedly flipping through channels when it happened.

It was pure luck that she did so; she usually scorned TV. Not that there were a lot of choices to flip through – apart from the five channels most people received and *Canal+* (the cable channel that showed movies), a favorite of hers. There were two other cinema channels, but this evening she only had the choice between *La*

*Discrète*—which she had already seen four times and wasn't in the mood for another showing—and *Edward Scissorhands*, which she refused to watch.

She needed something to pick her up, not another proof of human nastiness and ingratitude.

*France was not noted for an abundance of TV channels*, Sandrine moaned. She sighed tiredly and settled for a late talk show, waiting for the late newscast. Sipping her chamomile tea, she nestled into her sofa, her mind reviewing all the things she would have to do in the morning.

The musical strains punctuating the credits of *Le Journal de la nuit* [late night bulletin] woke her up from her doze. Her empty mug had rolled on her stomach, burying itself into the folds of her dressing gown. Sandrine put the ceramic cup on a side table and straightened up. Her hand extended toward the remote, intending to switch off the television.

Suddenly her half-asleep haze vanished, and she abruptly perked up.

The usually unruffled Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, star anchor adored by most of the female French population, was introducing the late news bulletin in a voice trembling with excitement. Behind him, a photograph of a shuttle hung in midair with the headline: "*Apparition d'un homme volant* [A Flying Man makes his appearance]."

Completely awake and mesmerized, Sandrine stared at the footage of the rescue of the Metropolis Space Shuttle by a mysterious Flying Man. A—*Flying Man*!?

Her breath caught, and for a moment, she wondered if she would ever breathe again.

She reacted automatically. Sandrine sprang from her sofa and frenetically searched for a video cassette. Fortunately, she saw one lying near the VCR, free of its cellophane wrapping. She pounced on it, freed it from its box, and popped it into the video recorder, which made a burring noise as it began to record.

On her television screen, Poivre d'Arvor was still expressing an eager curiosity. Seated near him were two experts—one from the military and the other from the European space program—whose disagreement about the flying man's nature bordered on hostile.

A few moments later, Poivre d'Arvor inquired, with a mildness that could not disguise his high opinion of himself, whether the flying man could be labeled a 'Little Green Man.' Sandrine could not help snickering. The ploy was *so* obvious. Startled, the experts stopped their argument, and in the ensuing silence, the anchorman inserted smoothly: "Let's watch this exclusive footage brought to you by TF1 one more time."

For this second showing, Sandrine's video cassette was smoothly recording the evidence Sandrine's eyes half-refused to admit.

Yet, Poivre d'Arvor had one more trick up his sleeve. This time, the footage was a bit longer, presenting a closer look at the hero of the hour than the previous shot.

Sandrine squinted at her television screen. The film was blurry, and the hands controlling the camera had badly shaken at one point.

Still, she could make out the outline of the flying man but could not really see his face. The primary colors of his costume, so very like a 1930s circus acrobat's, helped define him, nonetheless. And in the stark blue of the American sky, the red cape was a very nice touch.

A part of the young filmmaker admired the way it flapped in the currents of his flight; another one wondered how she could reproduce these Greek statuary movements on a screen. A tiny one—the tiniest, so small she wasn't quite aware of it at this moment—wondered what seemed so familiar about this "Eighth Wonder of the World."

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That night, Sandrine dreamed of Clark.

They were both standing before the *Fontaine Saint-Michel* in the Latin Quarter, one of the preferred meeting places of the students attending the nearby Sorbonne University. As usual, people were laughing, hailing each other, while others crossed the nearby streets or were busy clapping for the street dancers that exhibited their skills on the central sidewalk of the square in front of the fountain.

As dreams often did, Sandrine found herself in the middle of the crowd, as if she had been transplanted there all of a sudden. As for Clark, he appeared before her as if he had dropped from the skies, and it irritated her. Yet, his mischievous smile and kind eyes were the same.

Sandrine hesitated, and did what she never had done in the flesh: she threw herself into his arms. After a heartbeat, dream-Clark's arms enfolded around her, and she discovered that he smelled like pines.

No, he smelled like that hiking trail she had trod when she was twelve years old, and her grandparents had showed her the old smuggler trail near Antibes. The pines' fragrance, the warmth of the sun filtering through the pine needles, the waves of the Mediterranean caressing the rocks below had somehow conglomerated in her brain, establishing the pattern of earthly security. As these figments of her memories of an enchanted afternoon swirled together, she felt a sense of safety and contentment.

It was no wonder she reminisced about it. In his way, Clark evoked security, too.

Sandrine's dream-self raised her eyes and saw that he was smiling at her. She told him, "I missed you, if you must know."

He kept on smiling without answering.

The voice who answered Sandrine was rusty with disuse. "Whose fault was it?"

"Not mine," she asserted.

"Humph. I'm not so sure," the voice continued.

Clark's mouth was still smiling, and Sandrine was pretty certain he hadn't uttered these sentences. So, she took a step back and looked around.

On his mock-rocky pedestal, St. Michael was lowering his arms. He deposited his sword of fire at his feet as the figure of Lucifer—who used to wriggle precariously about at his feet—went limp, mumbling: "I'm taking five. Even the Devil must take a nap, sometimes."

The Archangel stretched his arms and wings. Meeting Sandrine's astonished eyes, St. Michael shrugged, "I was getting cramped. You have no idea how difficult this is, staying like this, keeping Evil at bay for all eternity."

"Oh, I can imagine," Clark piped up.

"You *will* know..." asserted St. Michael, portentously.

As both males – if one may be of the opinion that an Archangel is of the masculine gender – were discussing the pros and cons of sword fighting, Sandrine got bored. She raised her head higher. Above them, the twin sculpted figures of Power and Moderation were holding the coat of arms of the flying wonder whom she had watched on television instead of those of the City of Paris. They nodded with approbation, seemingly smitten with Clark.

Sandrine felt a spurt of anger and cried out: "Oh! Let me be, you two! You could not move a toe without falling off your pedestal." The twin goddesses smiled benignly at her, their mouth corners extending upward.

Shocked out of their amiable discussion, St. Michael and Clark looked disapprovingly at her.

"Is she always like this?" asked the Archangel.

"Mostly," sighed Clark. "But she can be reasoned with."

"*Hé, ça suffit comme ça!* [Hey, enough of this!]" Sandrine exclaimed. "Don't talk about me as if I weren't here."

The two guys didn't pay any attention to her outcry and continued their estimations of her strengths and foibles. Deciding that disdain was the better part of valor, Sandrine turned on her heels and wandered off to watch the street dancers; then, she clapped enthusiastically and very demonstratively when one of them did a perfect spin on the sidewalk.

Once the dance concluded, the crowd dispersed, and Sandrine found herself once more near the fountain. Clark and Michael were still absorbed in their discussion. Discussing her had obviously grown stale, and they were now on the subject of Schwarzy-El.

"Schwarzy-El?" Sandrine said, puzzled. "But... I made him up! He never existed!"

"You shouldn't say that," reproved Clark. "A figment of imagination can occasionally spring into existence, you know." Sandrine shrugged deprecatingly. "No, don't do that," he added. "Just because you're unaware of it doesn't make it less real."

"Less real? Like what?" Sandrine said. "An angel of my own making!"

"If I may say so," a male voice intruded into their exchange, "I'm quite real."

Sandrine glared at the Archangel. "You're sort of real, I'll grant you that. You're made of bronze, and I don't know what else. Someone *real* designed you in his workshop, a long time ago. So... you were once a sculptor's spark of fancy." *So there*, her tone underlined. *Don't mess with me, I'm alive; you're not. Not really.*

Unfazed by her virulence, St. Michael looked at Clark. "Good luck to you, pal. I'm not sure she's really getting it." He sighed theatrically. "Such a pity. With all the hints we dropped."

Not taken aback by this sudden change of topics, Clark winked back. "Oh, don't worry, she'll come round."

The statue stretched once more, extending its arms towards the sky, before half-leaping and half-flying back to its pedestal. With its toes, it nudged Lucifer lightly. Awakened, the prone figure of Evil groaned and twisted back into its awkward previous position, while St. Michael raised his arms in his usual posture. The surface of the bronze rippled in sparkling waves; a few seconds later, the fountain was back to its old appearance.

Startled, Sandrine looked around her. Obviously, no one in the crowd standing a few meters away had noticed anything weird. For all they knew, it was just an ordinary day on a crowded square, favored by passer-by and tourists who were taking photographs before the fountain.

"Don't look so surprised. People usually see what they want to see."

Clark's voice. He was still here, then. Slowly, Sandrine turned and saw that her American friend was also watching the now-frozen Archangel, amusement obvious on his tilted face.

"Do they?" Sandrine asked, feeling breathless all of a sudden.

"Oh, they do," Clark assured her. "Besides, you also considered it before you fell asleep."

*This is absolutely crazy*, one part of her mind whispered. *Of course, it is*, the other one retorted. *I'm dreaming. Anything can happen in dreams.*

"Are you a mind reader?" Sandrine exclaimed in alarm.

Clark laughed. "Not yet, rest easy! Still, you should consider all the facts."

Sandrine smiled back perfunctorily. "Am I supposed to take it personally? Picturing things is my job, as you well know."

"I'm just here to help you remember," Clark said cheerfully. "Even if I'm not really here at all."

"How typical!" she said peevishly.

"You're dreaming," Clark said reasonably. "Of course, I'm not here at all. You're not, either."

"But what is the point of all this?" Sandrine asked no one in particular. "You're not very helpful, you know, Clark. By the way,

I never dreamed of you, isn't it weird?" she wondered aloud. Shaking her head disbelievingly, she added with an honest afterthought, "Not that I can remember it, anyway."

"Then, perhaps you should ask yourself why you're dreaming this dream right now—" Clark suggested. As he spoke, he began to fade, from his feet up. The erasure of his silhouette picked up speed, and his face was half-solid when he let fall, "—and why this dream of yours is also populated with angels."

The *Place Saint-Michel* was now shrouded in mist. Sandrine thought, with the weird logic of dreams, *I've got to get in the métro before this fog gets too thick*, and she ran into the nearest entrance of the subway.

When she woke up, the gray stairs fading slowly into cotton-like mist was the last image remaining in her retinas.

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He is him.

That illogical, grammatically nonsensical sentence was the first which popped up in Sandrine's mind when she awoke.

He is him. But who is he?

Consciously or unconsciously, Sandrine delayed meditating upon the question until her brain was nearly exploding with it. She engaged in her morning routine with an enthusiasm which was merely a way to avoid thinking about it.

She picked up her mail, threw away her garbage, bought some vegetables, and then went to the bakery to get a *baguette*. As she exited the shop, her attention was drawn to the *marchand de journaux* [newspaper seller]. She crossed the street and bought a handful of them; then, she walked back home.

The front pages all told the same story:

*Le Figaro's* displayed: "*Etats-Unis: sauvetage de la navette spatiale. Apparition d'un homme volant.*" ["United States: Space Shuttle Rescued. A Flying man turns up."]

*Libération* stated: "*La Navette Spatiale a eu chaud: sauvée par un surhomme.*" ["A Little too Close for the Space Shuttle: Saved by a Superman."]

As for *L'Humanité*, it merely said: "*Lancement réussi pour la navette spatiale.*" ["Successful Launch of the Space Shuttle."]

All the copies of *Paris Match* had been bought before Sandrine could buy one. That was too bad, the pictures were usually of good quality in that magazine. She was pretty sure that the weekly magazine had had to hastily redo its front page to accommodate the latest marvel of the world, and that one actress or politician would curse the newcomer for being relegated inside instead of gracing the cover of the magazine. The issue would probably become a collector's item, as it had been when Kennedy was assassinated. At least, the Flying Man had had the good sense to make his appearance on a Tuesday, the day before most of the Weeklies were published.

However, all the newspapers showed B&W grainy pictures of the shuttle; in its corner, another one was pasted, a close up where one could distinguish a human form holding up the shuttle, the being dwarfed by the thrusters next to him.

One of the less legitimate papers, the rag Sandrine had guiltily bought, was more inclined towards gossip and interviews of personalities who would stay "famous" for a few months, if not weeks. It also featured color pics and an interview of a witness—one understood after a while that the so-called witness had probably seen this on TV and raved over the phone about it to her cousin, who happened to be the editor of the Weekly. Calling the hero of the day "a God" and "a Miracle," the obviously babbling woman also alleged that he was "an Angel of Mercy, and a Sign of —"

Sandrine never really knew what the man with the red cape was supposed to herald. She dropped the magazine, and it stayed there on the carpet at her feet.

An angel. . .

St. Michel. Schwarzy-El. The anonymous angel who had

picked up the drunk as if by chance from the *Pont Neuf*—a bridge not so very far from the *Place Saint-Michel*.

A memory came unbidden. *Only angels have wings*. . . Maybe, it was so.

However, a man—a man she once knew quite well—really flew without wings and acted like an angel. His feet didn't touch the ground, but he didn't have to flap wings to escape gravity.

Maybe it was time to reconnect and admit one's mistakes.

Maybe it was time to admit that a double misunderstanding had come in the way of a precious friendship.

Clark hadn't been afraid of her.

He had been afraid of discovery, of the reaction Sandrine had had at first, when she had recalled his feet didn't touch the ground.

Yet, years later, he had wanted to keep in touch, even though she had never made use of the return addresses he had thoughtfully written down.

She went to the desk where she had filed her correspondence. In a few minutes, she had browsed through Clark's postcards. Where had he last written from?

Metropolis. So there.

Sandrine laughed aloud. Her laugh sounded liberated and carefree.

Clark had written he was applying for jobs, and that he would let her know his address when he had one.

This time, Sandrine would write back.

And maybe, just maybe, in time, she could give Clark some little tips to misdirect his audience or to point them in the right direction.

Understanding how people saw reality was a great asset. But reality didn't always have to expose the naked truth.

Even angels needed their privacy.

Fin

## NOTES

### Part I

*Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* is a 1951 British movie directed by Albert Lewin, starring Ava Gardner and James Mason. It mixes several myths or fantastic stories, like (of course) Pandora's, the Flying Dutchman's and inserts into them some reincarnation and Shakespearean subtexts, along with surrealist's images. Man Ray and Giorgio De Chirico had a hand in the imagery of this masterpiece. It has recently been restored in a very good copy.

The poem alluded to is "*Dover Beach*," a poem by Matthew Arnold. The relevant part is:

"Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night."

"**Why is it called: Pastries and Desserts**" is a real life article. It can be found [here](#). Clark is such a trivia collector that I figured he might have written something along these lines.

According to [Wikipedia](#), a *chambre de bonne* is "a type of French apartment consisting of a single room in a middle-class house or apartment building. It is generally found on the top floor and only accessible by a staircase, sometimes a separate "service staircase". Initially, these rooms were intended as the bedroom for one of the family's domestics, and the name originates from the colloquial name for such maids: a "bonne à tout faire"."

The harsh 1991 Paris weather is documented.

*La Fémis* is the main French film school training future professionals. Note that the fourth-year students spend their last year fulfilling an individual end-of-studies project and taking part in their classmates' projects. See also [Wikipedia](#).

*Rue Gît-le-Coeur*: the name of the street (meaning "Here lies the Heart" in French) is a phonetic corruption of "Gilles le queueux" [Giles the Cook].

*Pont Neuf* [literally "New Bridge"]: it was the first bridge constructed in stone in the late Sixteenth Century. Another novelty was that no houses stood on it. The previous bridges were built of wood, and many burned down, or were washed away in flood. See [Wikipedia](#) (One may see houses on the other bridges, on the 1615 map.)

### Part II

*Angelina* is a reputed tea room and shop, on the Rue de Rivoli, in front of the Tuileries Gardens, and not far from the Louvres. It was founded by Rumpelmeyer in 1903. (See [Wikipedia](#) and [Trip Advisor](#) with pics.)

A **St. Honoré cake** looks like [this](#) and a *religieuse au chocolat* looks like [this](#). (There are coffee-flavoured and chocolate-flavoured religieuses. Both are divine.)

The **Théâtre des Champs-Élysées**, built on the [Avenue Montaigne](#), is a beautiful [Art Deco theatre](#) which offers operas, concerts and plays. It is very near the Champs-Élysées Avenue.

Clark's piece on the **Iraqi refugees** relates to the "Provide Comfort" operation, held in April 1991. One may assume Clark was near the Turkey frontier before he went to France.

The pianist **Maria João Pires** did perform Mozart sonatas and concerti at the Théâtre des Champs Élysée in 1991, which was Mozart Bicentennial Year.

The **French national health scandal** developed into the so-called "infected blood" scandal. See [Wikipedia](#).

*Indochine* and *Téléphone* are two French rock bands. You can listen to some songs on Youtube (courtesy of [this topic](#) and [this one](#)).

### Part III

*La Scala* was a 1990s nightclub on the *rue de Rivoli*, not far from the Louvres Museum. It was then very popular because entrance was free for the women...

Murnau's *Faust* is a silent movie filmed in 1926. *Häxan* (*The Witches or Witchcraft Through the Ages*) is a very famous 1922 Swedish silent movie. Both are masterpieces.

*Noctambus*: they were buses running all night long in Paris and the nearby suburbs. The actual name is *Noctilien*. The name is a portmanteau formed out of the words *noctambule* [night person, night-bird] and *bus*.

*Place de la Concorde*: need I really explain what it is? Have a look [here](#).

As for **Hôtel Crillon**, the best explanation is [here](#).

*Oratoire du Louvre*: it is a seventeenth-century Protestant church situated between the 145 rue Saint-Honoré and 160 rue de Rivoli in the 1st arrondissement of Paris, across the street from the [Louvre](#). (See also [Wikipedia](#).)

If you want to visualize where Sandrine was assaulted, well, it's [here](#).

**St. Bartholomew's Day massacre**: in 1572, this targeted group of assassinations along with Catholic mob violence was directed against the *Huguenots* (French Calvinist Protestants) during the French Wars of Religion, in Paris and in the country. There were 2,000 to 70,000 victims. Calvinist Admiral Gaspard de Coligny was murdered two days before.

**Schwarzy-El**'s name is the "angel-ization" of Arnold Schwarzenegger.

**Bouquinistes**: second-hand book sellers whose "boxes" are situated on the banks of the River Seine. You'll find pictures on

[Wikipedia](#).

### Part V

**The Cinémathèque française**, located in Paris, offers daily screening of worldwide films; it holds one of the largest cinema archives, with 40,000 movies and related documents and objects. (More on [Wikipedia](#))

*Avance sur recettes* [revenue/receipts advance system]: it was created in 1959 and is intended to encourage creation in the cinematographic field and to support original and quality projects which are considered unlikely to benefit from traditional and / or high funding from other economic actors. The funds are granted by the decision of a committee (composed of personalities of the sector). One of the three specialized colleges deals with first feature movies. Nowadays, about 60 films a year benefit from this system, which has helped young filmmakers.

*Un Certain Regard* [meaning literally, "a certain glance," but it's a play on words also meaning "in another point of view"] is a section of the Cannes Film Festival. It introduced movies that are more original and adventurous than the official selection. The prize was created in 1998. (See [Wikipedia](#))

**Colette Marchand** (1925-2015) is a real French actress who was also a Ballerina. She was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in 1952 (for her performance in *Moulin Rouge*, directed by John Huston). I have absolutely no idea if she was living in France in the 1990s. Her performance in Sandrine's fictional movie is a tribute, not an infringement on Madame Marchand's public image. Biography on [Wikipedia](#)

### Epilogue

**Timeline**: The Pilot aired on September 1993, and for the purpose of this story, I decided that both Clark's first interview for a job at the Planet and Superman's first appearance happened during that time.

**Canal+** (*Canal Plus*, meaning *Channel Plus*) is the first French premium cable television channel launched in 1984.

*La Discrète* is a very popular 1990 French movie. (See [IMDB](#).)

**Fontaine Saint-Michel** is described on [Wikipedia](#) and you will also find a picture of it.

'**Chemin des Douaniers**' in **Antibes**: here are some pics and a map of this old "Customs walk" in the South of France that were found on [a personal weblog](#) (not mine!)

I changed the **headlines of the French newspapers**. No one in France would write a headline with "*C'est magnifique!*" (Maurice Chevalier did in vintage American movies, but it's an exception to the rule...)

*Le Figaro* is the oldest French daily morning newspaper, founded in 1826; it has a center-right editorial line.

*Libération* [Liberation] is a daily morning newspaper founded in Paris by Jean-Paul Sartre and Serge July in 1973 in the wake of the protest movements of May 1968. It has a centre-left editorial position.

*L'Humanité* [Humanity, mankind] is a daily morning newspaper that was formerly an organ of the French Communist Party; it was founded in 1904 by Jean Jaurès, a leader of the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO).

In Part I, Clark had a copy of *Le Monde* [The World]: this daily afternoon newspaper was founded by Hubert Beuve-Méry at the request of Charles de Gaulle (as Chairman of the Provisional Government of the French Republic) on 19 December 1944, shortly after the Liberation of Paris. It is one of the most important and widely respected newspapers in the world. (See [Wikipedia](#))

And, on a last note, it may interest you to know that **Sandrine** is held to be the feminine version of Alexandrine, from the Greek "Sandre." (The masculine counterpart is Alexandre, Alexander in English) It has two meanings: "the one who protects men" or "the

one who pushes back men”, thus someone with a warrior’s virtues. Others believe that the name is another version of Cendrine [Little cinder], who is another name of... Cinderella. It also was one of the top female names given in the early 1970s.