

The French Have a Word For It



A Short Story by Josh Lanyon

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“Colin?”

Something about the deep voice was familiar. Colin Lambert looked up from his sketch pad, squinting at the tall silhouette blocking the blanched Parisian sun. It was a golden autumn afternoon and the last of the tourists were crowding the cafés and narrow streets of the “village” of Montmartre. The background babble of French voices, the comfortable scents of warm stone and auto exhaust and Gauloises and something good cooking—always something good cooking in Paris—and the old world colors: the reds of street signs and awnings and the greens of ivy and window shutters and the yellow of the turning leaves and fruit in the grocer stands...all of it faded away as Colin gazed up, frowning a little.

“It is Colin, isn't it?”

Gradually the black bulk resolved itself into broad shoulders, lean hips, black hair and gray eyes. Colin blinked but the mirage didn't vanish, in fact it smiled—an easy, rueful flash of white. “You probably don't remember me.”

“Thomas?”

Not remember Thomas Sullivan? Did anyone forget their first love?

Colin was on his feet, sketch pad tossed away, chair scraping back on cement. He moved to hug Thomas and Thomas grabbed him back in a rough, brief hug, laughing. They were both laughing—and then self-consciousness kicked in. Colin recalled that he wasn't seventeen anymore, and that Thomas wasn't—

And never had been.

He stepped back, Thomas let him go, saying, “I can't believe how long it's been. You look...” Words seemed to fail him.

Colin knew how he looked. He looked grown up. Ten years was pretty much a lifetime in puppy years, and he had been such a puppy back when Thomas knew him.

Knew him? Back when Thomas had been his bodyguard.

“How are you? Are things going right for you?” There it was: The Look. That keen, searching gaze—wow, Thomas's eyes really were gray. Not just something Colin had imagined or remembered incorrectly.

Gray eyes. Like cobbled streets after rain or smoke or November skies.

And Thomas's smile conveyed a certain...er...*je ne sais quoi* as they said over here. A friendly understanding. Like Thomas had been there, done that, and made no judgments—but nothing surprised him anymore either. It was almost weird how little he'd changed. A few faint lines around his eyes, a little touch of silver at his temple. What was he now? Forty—something?

Every woman in the café was looking at him. A lot of *les hommes* as well.

“I'm good. I'm great,” Colin answered.

“Yeah?”

And Thomas was still studying him. Measuring the boy against the man? Or just wondering about what scars the bad times had left?

Colin said firmly, “Yeah. I'm here painting.”

“Painting?” Thomas looked down at the sketch pad as though he'd only noticed it.

“Well, sketching just now, but yeah. I'm painting. What are you doing here?”

“You're a student?”

“No. I'm a...doing this.” He nodded at the sketch pad, then reached down to flap the cover over the rough sketch of a steep flight of steps. It still sounded so...not exactly pretentious—or not only pretentious—but unlucky to say I'm a painter.

Thomas's smile widened. “Good for you. And you're making a living at it? At your painting?”

“Er...define making a living.” Colin laughed, and Thomas laughed too, but his gaze continued to assess and evaluate. Well, old habits probably died hard. Especially for a guy in Thomas's line of work.

“What are you doing in Paris?” Colin asked again.

“The usual. A job.”

Well, whoever the client was, they were lucky to have Thomas on their side. Still, Colin preferred not to think about Thomas's job—preferred not to remember that time in his own life. “How long are you here for?”

“Tonight. Just tonight.”

Colin was aware of an unexpectedly sharp jab of disappointment. “Oh. Right.”

They continued to stare at each other and then Thomas looked around at the small, crowded tables. “Do you have time for a quick drink?”

“I'd like that, yes.”

They had wine, of course. Beaujolais Nouveau. The waitress brought it out, chilled, with two fluted glasses, perfumed aromas of plums and blackberries wafting into the bright cold autumn air. And for the space of a glass of wine, they could have been alone in the world.

An occasional fat drop of rain splashed down; there were dark clouds rolling in from the distance, crimson and gold leaves scattered the sidewalk, bikes and motor bikes flashed past like giant insects. Neither man showed any inclination to hurry away.

“It's beautiful here. I see why you love it,” Thomas remarked, leaning back and glancing around the crowded street as though only now recalling their surroundings.

“I do love it. You're right.” Colin studied Thomas's ruggedly handsome features. It was not a face that gave a lot away. “Are you still...what are you doing these days?”

“Same thing.”

Colin's memories veered sharply. Not a path he wished to travel. “So you never went back...to the FBI?”

“No. I stayed in the personal protection industry after I left your grandfather's employ.” Thomas suddenly grinned. “I don't know if I ever told you, but I was always proud of you for choosing to go away to college on your own terms.”

“Even if it did put you out of work?”

“Even so.”

Colin's smile twisted. “You said you'd stay in touch.”

Thomas's gaze dropped to the red and white checked table cloth. “I shouldn't have. I was always a terrible letter writer.”

That had hurt. Thomas had meant...a lot. Had probably even known how much he meant, so to just drop out of Colin's life? Not even the occasional Christmas card? Yeah, that had hurt. There had even-embarrassingly-been a few tears shed over that.

"It was kind of hard to say goodbye," Thomas admitted. "I guess I tried to make it easier on both of us."

"Sure."

Thomas seemed uncomfortable, so Colin changed the subject. He didn't want to scare Thomas off. They had little enough time as it was. "So what's the job? Can you talk about it?"

"Not really," Thomas said. "Routine stuff. No drama."

"Yeah," Colin said dryly. "That's what you probably said about my case to your buddies at the Bureau. It's plenty dramatic when you're on the other side."

"Your situation was different." For an instant there was a glimpse of the professional Thomas Sullivan. Despite the easy smile, the frank gaze, he could be brusque and hard as nails. He was the man who had—almost single-handedly—saved the life of the kidnapped fourteen-year-old grandson of one of the richest men in America. There had been a lot of media attention on Special Agent Sullivan after that daring rescue. It couldn't have been easy for someone who valued his privacy as much as Thomas.

Absently, Colin moved his glass inside and out the ring of wet on the table cloth. He really didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to remember the ninety-six hours he'd been kidnapped and held for ransom by John Riedel, a disgruntled former security officer at one of Mason Lambert's bottling companies.

It wasn't a big trauma for him. Well, it probably was, actually, but it's not like it haunted his days and nights. He had got past it, had moved on, and had even managed to forget a lot of it. Learned to trust people again, and— even harder—learned to trust himself.

Watching him, Thomas said suddenly, "You sure everything is okay? You hugged me hello like I was the cavalry and you were down to your last bullet."

Colin chuckled, looking up. "I hugged you hello like you were the first familiar face I'd seen in nine weeks. I'm not quite as fluent as I thought I was. It gets lonely sometimes." He thought it over and admitted, "Or maybe I was just kind of thrilled to see you again. I'd sort of given up on that."

He didn't mean it to come out like an accusation, but Thomas must have heard something. He gave another of those lopsided smiles and said, "I guess you sort of had a case of hero worship when you were a kid."

“It wasn't that exactly. Well, I guess it was, but it wasn't only that.” Colin took a deep breath. “Um. I'm not sure you ever noticed, but I'm...gay.”

Thomas let out a sudden soft exhalation—as though he'd been holding his breath. “It...crossed my mind a couple of times.” His tone was grave enough but he was struggling to keep a straight face.

“That obvious, was it? At fourteen?”

“Not at fourteen, no. At sixteen, sort of. Seventeen, yes.”

“Just another way I managed to disappoint Grandpappy.”

The amusement faded. Thomas said vaguely, “It's probably not that bad.”

“No. Probably not.” Colin finished the last mouthful of his wine. He'd made it last as long as he could, knowing Thomas would be saying goodbye soon after that final swallow. He would have things to do and places to go. “I knew from the time I was little. And when I got older, I couldn't help but notice that I didn't find girls very interesting. Not the way my friends did. I was trying very hard to talk myself out of it. But then you came along. And I realized it wasn't something I was going to grow out of.” He added quickly, “I hope you're not offended, me saying this to you.”

Thomas's dark brows shot up. “Why would I be offended?”

“Well, I just mean...”

Meeting Thomas's steady, smiling gaze, something clicked into place for Colin. Warmth flooded his face.

“Oh.”

Thomas's grin widened.

“I'm an idiot.”

Thomas laughed. “No.”

“Yeah. I am.” He was shaking his head. “God. Now I really am embarrassed.”

“Why? It's not like that was a conversation we were ever going to have.”

“I don't know why not. We talked about everything else.” Especially at first. Especially after he'd been dumped back into the nest: the fledgling the cat had chewed up. Colin had still been in shock and terrified. For a time it had been hard to let Thomas out of his sight. Thomas had represented safety, security and fourteen year old Colin had latched on tight. Thomas had accepted it with good grace.

Maybe he understood that being taken had done something to Colin. Shattered his belief in people, made him understand how thin the veneer of civilization was, how fragile its protections against what his grandfather referred to as “the barbarians outside the gate.”

You didn't get over that right away—but you did get over it. If you worked at it.

Colin pushed back in his chair. “It's too bad we didn't talk about it. It might have made things easier for me. Knowing an adult who was gay, who I could have asked—”

“There is no way we were ever going to have that discussion.”

Colin was a little startled at his vehemence “Sorry?”

“Nothing.” Thomas rose. “Do you have time for another drink?”

Colin nodded eagerly and Thomas disappeared inside the bistro. The waitress appeared shortly after with another round. So that was the good news. Thomas wasn't in a hurry to say goodbye.

He puzzled over Thomas's odd attitude about not discussing being gay with him, but then Thomas finally came back, took his seat. He smiled and Colin blinked in the brilliance of that smile.

“So, why France? Couldn't you paint in the good old U.S. of A.?”

“Sure. But Paris...well, Montmartre. Monet, Picasso, Van Gogh.” Colin added prosaically, “Plus it's over three thousand miles between me and Grandpappy.”

“Things not so good between you?”

Colin shrugged. “I just needed a little room.”

“Three thousand miles ought to do it.” Thomas sipped his wine. “What was the problem? He didn't want you to become an artist?”

“If only it was that simple. No. No. He was always supportive. Arranged for me to have tutors, picked the best art college he could find, and started to plan my first show.”

Thomas said nothing.

Reluctantly, Colin said, “However I explain this I'm going to sound like an ungrateful shit.”

“So?”

"I said I wanted to study in France. That I just wanted to...try and do it on my own. Without his money or the family name to pave the way. I wanted to do it for real."

Thomas nodded noncommittally.

"And that hurt him. I knew it would, no matter how I tried to say it. So then he brought up the kidnapping and said that it wasn't safe. That it would never be safe for me because I would always be a target now." He grimaced. "I got angry."

"I'm not surprised."

"And I said I'd take my chances. And then he got angry and said that since I wanted to do it all on my own, I could try supporting myself like everyone else had to who wasn't as lucky to be born into a family like mine."

"Oh boy," Thomas said. That was something Colin had forgotten until now. Thomas never swore. Never. Rarely even raised his voice. Not even when he was negotiating with a raving psychopath who kept threatening to blow a hole in a terrified little kid.

Colin smiled ruefully as he said, "It sort of deteriorated from there. I said that suited me fine and he said we'd see if I lasted two weeks."

"And you've lasted nine and still counting. Have you called him since you got here?"

"Nope. And I don't plan on it."

"He's probably worried sick by now."

Colin smothered the flash of irritation. "I send him a postcard every week. Knowing Grandpappy, he's probably got the phone rigged to trace me if I do call. Which means he'd be here on the next flight trying to blackmail me into coming home."

"You send him a postcard every week?" Thomas sounded surprised.

"Yeah. Why?" Colin added, "I mail them from different parts of Paris."

Thomas's mouth twitched like he was trying to keep a straight face. "Tricky."

Colin laughed. "No. I know it wouldn't be hard to find me if he sent one of his henchmen after me. I'm not trying to hide from him, just give myself a little breathing room. I'm nearly thirty, you know?"

"You just turned twenty-seven."

"I'm flattered you remember." He was too, which was surely a sign of what a goof he was. Well, once a goof, always a goof. He said earnestly, "God, I wish you were staying longer. It's so great to see you."

Of course that might be all on one side.

But Thomas was eyeing him in that steady, thoughtful way. He said slowly, "Do you have plans for tonight? Maybe we could have dinner?"

"No, I don't have plans. In fact, I could cook if you like." God knows what he would cook. He'd have to take the money he had put aside for art supplies to buy food fit for company, but it would be worth it to get Thomas back to his place because...well, you never knew. Thomas had hung around chatting with him all afternoon and there was something in the way his gaze held Colin's just a few seconds too long every time their eyes met...

Colin wasn't seventeen now or a virgin, and Thomas Sullivan showing up in Paris for one night was like a fantasy come true.

But Thomas said, "How about I take you to dinner? You can pick the place—one of your favorites—and we'll make a regular evening of it."

"Seriously?"

Thomas nodded.

"I would—yeah! That would be great." Almost too good to believe.

"I've got some things to take care of. What's your address? I'll pick you up at seven."

Colin gave the address and Thomas jotted it down in a little notebook. Then he pushed back his chair, metal scraping cement, and rose. "I'm glad I found you, Col. I'll see you tonight."

Col. The old nickname. What a lot of memories that triggered—not all good. He didn't want Thomas confusing him with the kid he had been.

Colin wasn't even sure what he answered. He watched Thomas disappearing down the cobbled street, that easy long-limbed stride, at home anywhere in the world.

When Thomas was out of sight, he gathered his things and walked in the

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other direction, up the hill.

Colin lived in a 19th century block of apartments and shops. His particular flat was above a boulangerie and every morning he woke hungry with the

warm scent of rising bread and buttery croissants drifting through the floorboards. He was very happy if a little lonely. Sure, it was worrying to be poor, to be uncertain that he could make the rent and to have to choose between food and paint, but he was happy just the same. Happy in a way he had never been before.

It had something to do with pursuing his life's dream. It had something to do with finally being on his own—and surviving. And it had something to do with the way the morning light streamed through the old windows and the way the silver moon shone over the grey slate rooftops. It had to do with the rustling leaves of the chestnut trees, the old Parisian songs, and the muffled laughter from the cafés below.

It was all still new, still exciting and vibrant. Maybe that would change one day. Maybe the day would come when he didn't notice the light or the colors or the shapes and shades of this old and beautiful, foreign city. When he was tired of being hungry and being lonely. But for now every single day was an adventure.

And tonight felt like the greatest adventure of all. Thomas Sullivan was in Paris and tonight they would dine together. And, perhaps, if Colin was lucky...

He went through his meager wardrobe looking for something presentable to wear. Something that wasn't paint-stained or torn. Not a lot in the jeans, tees, and flannel shirts to choose from. He had not come to Paris to socialize. He found a clean pair of Levis and then he discovered a soft lambswool sweater in a lemony bisque color that he'd forgotten about. It looked nice with his blue eyes and dark hair. Speaking of which: he needed a shave and a haircut.

He couldn't do much about the hair; it was always a mop, but he shaved and studied himself narrowly. He looked presentable. More importantly, he looked his age. So hopefully there wouldn't be any problem there. Assuming Thomas's mind was running on the same lines as his own.

Thinking again of the way Thomas's gaze had held his, the way Thomas had watched him so closely, Colin was pretty sure he wasn't wrong in believing there was some interest there.

At seven o'clock, right on the button, Thomas knocked on his door and Colin's heart leaped in his throat with something very like stage fright.

He was smiling at the ridiculousness of that thought as he opened the door and Thomas smiled back.

“Hey.” Thomas wore dark jeans, navy turtle neck and a leather jacket. He looked unreasonably sexy even in this city that prized elegance and sophistication so highly.

“Hello.” Colin stepped back and Thomas walked into his small, tidy flat. “Did you have any trouble finding it?”

“Nope. I'm very good at finding things.” Thomas answered absently, looking around, checking it out. There was not a lot to see. An “American kitchen” with a two-burner range, refrigerator, and toaster oven. A few essential pieces of furniture: a battered armoire, a small table and chairs, and lots and lots of canvasses and art paraphernalia. In the closet-sized bedroom was a brass bed—the sheets freshly laundered. “It's nice.”

“Thanks. I like it.”

“Smells good.”

Colin nodded. “You should smell it in the morning.”

And perhaps Thomas would, given the way he was smiling as their gazes locked yet again.

This was one of Colin's favorite times of day. The twilight turned a rich indigo and purple and the shadows lengthened on the winding streets below. The first stars twinkled over the rooftops. At this hour the 18th arrondissement looked much like it had in the paintings of Van Gogh.

It smelled just right too: a hint of woodsmoke, a trace of rain, turpentine and paint, all mixed with the heady scent of café crème drifting from downstairs.

Thomas's eyes seemed to promise to consider the possibility, but all he said was, “Quaint little neighborhood. I couldn't park anywhere near.”

“No, it's a pedestrian square.” Artsy and residential. There were several cafés and about a five minute walk to the Metro stop. A lot of old timers complained Montmartre had changed past all recognition, but in Colin's opinion it still had a small village feel to it. Very, very different from anywhere in the States. Montmartre was a nightclub district too, but Colin didn't do nightclubs.

Thomas walked over to one of the stacks of painted canvasses. “You've been busy.”

“Yes. That's what I came for.” His nerves tightened. He knew he wasn't bad. He'd sold a few things—but everyone sold paintings in Paris—and it really mattered to him what Thomas thought of his work. Maybe that was silly because Thomas would probably be the first to admit he was no art expert.

He picked up a canvas; a small study of Cimetière Saint-Vincent.

When he didn't say a word, Colin said self-consciously, "I'm trying to do in oil and alkyds what Brassai did with his photographs. You know, capture that mood, that feeling, that emotional texture of Paris at night, the moonlight shining on the wet streets, the secret walkways and gardens, the shadows of iron railings against brick walls."

Thomas said slowly, "I don't know who Brassai is but these are... excellent." He looked up, serious. "Really excellent."

Colin laughed, scratched his nose in a nervous gesture held over from boyhood. "Thanks. They're not, though. But I'm getting better."

"I've never seen anything like this. You only paint in black and white? What do you have against color?" Thomas was rallying him, his expression flatteringly impressed as he put the one canvas down and picked up another, this of the Place du Tertre

"Nothing. There's a lot of variation in black and white, you know. Besides, I use browns and grays and blues, too. I want to capture the way Paris tastes and smells, you know?"

"And you think it smells blue?" Thomas was examining the delicate lines and details of the staircase and funicular.

"In the winter. Brown in the autumn." Colin loved his browns: burnt umber, raw sienna, burnt sienna, cinnamon, nutmeg, chestnut, bister, fawn, russet...

"Green in the spring." Thomas looked up, his eyes quizzical.

"And summer." Sometimes-rarely-he used green in his work, very dark green shadings. The greens of moss growing at the base of cracked fountains, or overgrown ivy, or the deepest of forests.

Thomas had picked up another painting. He said slowly, "And black and white at night."

"Yes," Colin said, pleased-probably disproportionately so-that Thomas got that. Starlight and black water, empty streets and white tree trunks, old buildings and shadowy figures.

"Looks like a lot of lonely, dangerous places," Thomas remarked.

Colin kept his expression neutral but it took effort-he felt that instant tensing at the suggestion that he wasn't safe, needed to be more careful, couldn't afford to take chances. Like he didn't already know? Like he needed a reminder? But he was not- refused-to live his life in fear.

"I'm careful." His voice came out more flat than he'd intended.

Thomas said, "Good. I'm glad."

It had never occurred to Colin to wonder, if he and the adult Thomas were to meet, whether they might have nothing in common. Might not even get along. The idea saddened him.

Thomas's look grew inquiring. "Something wrong?"

Colin shook his head.

Thomas put the painting aside. "Are you hungry? Did you figure out where we're going?"

Colin shook off the strange flash of melancholy. "I did. Chez Eugene. It's close by the Basilica du Sacré Coeur."

"Near the place where all the artists hang out."

"Right."

"Place de Tertre."

"Place du Tertre, yes."

"I was there earlier today." Thomas seemed about to say more. He changed his mind. "Are we walking or driving?"

"Let me grab a jacket and we can walk. Unless you'd prefer someplace closer?"

"It's a good brisk night for a walk."

Colin grabbed his jacket and they went downstairs and stepped out into the cold November evening. The cobbled streets were shining in the lamplight. It had rained, but the rain had passed. There was not a cloud in the night sky. The stars sparkled overhead.

They walked and talked, continuing up the winding street to Rue Lepic then turning right towards the intersection of Rue des Saules and Rue St-Rustique. Colin pointed out various places of interest. Interesting to him, anyway. He hoped they were interesting to Thomas. If not, Thomas was good at hiding his boredom.

"The Auberge de la Bonne Franquette was the one of the favorite hangouts of the Impressionists," Colin said, pointing out the white restaurant as they hiked past. "Toulouse-Lautrec, Utrillo, a lot of penniless artists lived and worked around here—there's a museum dedicated to Dali up there."

Thomas smiled, his face enigmatic planes and shadows in the lamplight. "I can see why this is Mecca for an artist."

They followed Rue Poulbot to Place du Calvaire, and at last right round to Place du Tertre. The square was brightly lit and still crowded with artists and easels, the cafés were ablaze with music and lights.

They found Chez Eugene without trouble, the famous brasserie in the shadow of the magnificent Basilique du Sacré Coeur. Outside tables with red umbrellas were charmingly arranged between heaters and romantic globe lamps within a white picket fence.

Inside it was warm and crowded and cheerful. There was confetti on the floor and Chinese lanterns hung from the ceiling. There were wooden horses and a musical organ. The waiters were dressed like real Parisian street urchins from the last century, with caps, suspenders, and cravats.

“What do you think?” Colin asked.

He couldn't read Thomas's smile at all. It seemed almost...affectionate. “I like it.”

“Okay, yes there are merry-go-round horses, but the food is great,” Colin said. “You'll see.”

Thomas laughed, but the food was excellent—as was the wine—and the company was even better. Colin had the lobster ravioli and Thomas had the veal, and they sampled each other's meals and talked and drank more wine and smiled into each other's eyes.

Thomas teased Colin about being a starving artist and Colin teased Thomas about being a cowboy; Thomas was originally from Wyoming and the papers had made a big deal of his “western” background after the daring rescue of Mason Lambert's sole heir. The fact that Colin could joke even about that much was probably a good sign, though Thomas probably didn't even notice.

All too soon they were finishing their melon and sorbet, draining their glasses, and starting the long walk down the hillside steps.

The smoke of their breath hung in the night air. Thomas put his arm around Colin's shoulders and Colin's heart sped up with happy anticipation. He was pretty sure that he and Thomas were going to spend the night together; the very idea made his head lighter than the wine they'd consumed.

Back at Colin's the lack of furniture became apparent when they brought their espressos from downstairs up and sat down at the little table in the uncomfortable wooden chairs. Colin didn't own a sofa and seduction wasn't quite as easy in the kitchen nook, although he was game—and Thomas showed no sign of wanting to bail.

"Are you...seeing anyone?" Colin asked tentatively.

Thomas sipped his espresso. Said in that measured way, "No. I was seeing someone for a while but it turned out we were both married to our jobs."

"Can't you have both?" Colin cocked his head, and Thomas said slowly, "At the time I didn't think so."

The look in his eyes brought color to Colin's face.

There was a crash against the wall dividing his apartment from the one next door. He jumped. Even Thomas tensed at that crash, immediately ready for trouble.

"What was that?"

"Oh no," Colin groaned.

"What?"

"The Sackos are at it again."

"The what?"

"My neighbors."

"Are they throwing chairs at each other?"

Never mind the chairs, something that sounded a lot like a kitchen table hit the wall, followed by smashing glass and then raised voices.

Thomas's eyes went wide. "What the heck?"

Colin started to laugh. "I think maybe it's a French thing."

"Le Homicide?"

"They're not going to kill each other. At least, I don't think so. They never have yet. It's kind of like...you know those beatnik skits of French guys in striped shirts and berets, cigarettes hanging out of their mouths? And they're always throwing around some sleazy mademoiselle. Like in *Funny Face*."

Thomas blinked. "I'm not following."

"*Funny Face*. It's a film with Audrey Hepburn. She comes to Paris—well, anyway. There's a scene where she does one of those French beatnik dances..."

Thomas looked bemused—but he was grinning. "I see. Your neighbors are on the colorful side."

"Er, yes."

More splintering and shattering glass.

"They must be heck on dining ware."

Colin groaned and then started to laugh again.

Thomas asked mildly, "How long is this likely to last?"

"Hours," Colin admitted.

Now it was Thomas starting to laugh. "Yeah? Well, why don't we go to my hotel?"

Colin looked hopeful. "Yes?"

"Oh yes."

Thomas did the drive in record time. He was staying at the Hotel Lutetia in the heart of one of Paris' most fashionable and arty districts, Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The hotel had Art Deco architecture, period furniture, crystal chandeliers, a Michelin-star chef, and the flirtatious notes of sound of jazz music curling from drifting through from the highly popular bar—none of which was remotely of interest to Colin.

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They were still undressing as they fell on the bed...

"Colin. Col. Wake up. You're having a nightmare."

He jolted back to awareness. He was in a dark room—a strange room—and a strange bed, and he was not alone, but the voice was reassuring and familiar. And for once it had survived the end of the dream. The joy of that brought unexpected tears to his eyes, chasing away the last shadows of the nightmare.

"God," he jerked out. "Thomas?"

"Right here."

"Sorry."

"No need. You okay now?" Thomas's voice was soft and intimate.

"Yes. It's been years since I've..."

"It's probably me," Thomas said grimly, sliding his arm beneath Colin's shoulders, pulling him close. "Stirring up a lot of subconscious memories, waking up things better left sleeping."

That was probably true, but not what Colin wanted to think. "Nah. It was probably the lobster ravioli." He settled his head on Thomas's shoulder,

getting comfortable again. He smiled faintly. "I can't believe you're really here. You can't know..."

How often I dreamed this. He wasn't dumb enough to say that, though. Talk about scaring a guy off.

Thomas's breath was warm against Colin's face. He smelled warm and sleepy and of a vaguely familiar woodsy scent from Colin's boyhood. Thomas must still wear the same aftershave. His fingers absently threaded Colin's sweat damp hair.

"Do you remember much about it?"

Colin had no doubt as to what Thomas was referring to.

He swallowed hard and said, "I remember everything about it. When I let myself. But it's better not to think about it."

Or he'd be too terrified to leave the house—as he had been for three years.

He could feel Thomas thinking, considering and discarding comments. In the end he just kissed Colin's forehead, warm lips nuzzling. Colin wriggled around and found Thomas's mouth with his own.

When their lips parted, he whispered, "I wish you were staying longer."

Thomas said quietly, "I wish I were too."

Colin rested his head on Thomas's shoulder, breathing quietly. "Thomas?"

"Mm?"

"What did you mean yesterday afternoon when you said there was no way we were ever going to have that discussion?"

He could feel Thomas trying to focus. "What discussion?"

"About you being gay?"

"Oh."

Silence.

Colin thought Thomas would not answer, but then he said, "Because at seventeen you were an engaging, attractive young guy and it might have been difficult to preserve a safe distance if you'd known..."

Colin smiled. "I'd have certainly done my best to bridge that distance."

Thomas laughed sleepily. "And I'm not sure I wouldn't have let you."

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Colin woke to the sound of rain against the window and a raging thirst. Quietly, carefully, he slipped out of Thomas's warm embrace, edged out of the bed and padded into the bathroom.

A glance back at the bed showed Thomas still sleeping peacefully. They still had an hour before he had to get up and start getting ready for his flight. Colin wanted to make every minute of that hour count; Thomas could always sleep on the plane, and if all Colin was going to have were memories, he wanted as many as possible.

In the bathroom, he relieved himself, flooded a glass with lukewarm tap water, gulped it down. Refilled the glass and guzzled that down too.

On his way back to bed he glanced at the phone on the night table. The red light was blinking to indicate Thomas had a message. His gaze focused on the pad of hotel stationery placed there for the convenience of the guests. There was a phone number written in Thomas's firm hand.

It was a number Colin knew very well. It had once been his own—or rather, his grandfather's. Mason Lambert's private phone number.

The strength seemed to leave his body. He put his hand on the nightstand to keep from sitting on the edge of the bed. He felt...like he'd been hit by a car. Weak, shaky, stunned.

Was there a reasonable explanation for Thomas to have that number?

Sure, all kinds of reasons. And none of them applied. Colin knew with absolute certainty that Thomas Sullivan had come hunting him.

And found him.

And fucked him.

The betrayal was so massive he couldn't seem to think beyond it for a few seconds. He remembered their conversation of the day before—the careful, assessing way Thomas had studied him.

“So what's the job? Can you talk about it?”

“Not really. Routine stuff. No drama.”

“You bastard,” he breathed, raising his head to stare at the bed. Thomas continued to sleep, untroubled, unaware, a small, content smile on his firm mouth.

Colin straightened up. For one brief moment he considered waking Thomas to tell him what he thought of him. To tell him how he'd looked up to

him all these years, admired him, worshipped him, maybe-loved him, certainly. A kid's love, true enough, a first infatuation. Not what it...might have been if they'd had time. If Thomas hadn't been lying to him the whole time.

But what was the point?

What could Thomas say that would change anything?

Nothing.

And the conversation was going to be even more humiliating than this—and this was humiliating enough. The fact that it had not occurred to Colin once, not even once, that the odds of meeting Thomas Sullivan in Paris after all these years were astronomical? Way beyond the possibility of romantic coincidence. It just went to show what a sap...what a...*quel imbécile stupide et crédule*. As they said over here. Or screamed as they threw chairs and dishes.

As silent as a cat burglar, Colin found his clothes and dressed, grabbed his trench coat. On the way out, though, a thought occurred to him.

He tiptoed back, picked up the pad and set it on the pillow beside Thomas.

Thomas might as well know his little ruse was over. He'd been found out—and Mason Lambert with him.

But oddly Colin felt very little anger at his grandfather. At least that betrayal had been motivated by love and concern. Aggravating, but genuine nonetheless. His grandfather couldn't believe that Colin was safe and healthy and happy without proof—and control. But that was more about not trusting the world than not trusting Colin.

So Colin placed the pad of hotel stationary with the telltale phone number in the still-warm pillow indentation, and then he let himself out of the hotel room, closing it carefully, soundlessly.

The rain was coming down in a silvery mist when he reached the pavement.

* * * * *

He began walking.

At eleven o'clock Colin was sketching in the Square Jehan-Rictus. His fierce concentration was disturbed momentarily by the vision of a distant silver jet tracing its way through the slatey sky above the famous I Love You wall.

It was probably not Thomas's plane, although—he glanced at his watch—the time was about right.

The righteous anger that had fueled him all the way back to Montmartre and his apartment—and then out again to work in the tiny park behind the Place des Abbesses, drained away. He was suddenly conscious that he was cold, that it was starting to rain, and that he would never see Thomas Sullivan again.

He lowered his sketch pad and stared at the long rain-streaked rectangle of 612 navy blue tiles of enameled lava bearing the inscription I Love You in over three hundred languages.

Je t'aime. That's how the French said it. Plenty of ways to say it. Plenty of ways not to say it.

Belatedly, it occurred to Colin this had been a really bad choice of a place to work that day. It was not a good day for working outside, in any case. He decided to go buy a bottle of mulled wine, head home and get drunk.

Instead he continued to sit and stare blankly at the glistening wall. His face was wet, but that was surely the rain because he was far too young to sit crying on a park bench like one of the elderly refugees who came here to gaze at the message of hope, to reassure themselves the world really wasn't that bad a place.

At least he had the square to himself. Not many people visited the park in this kind of weather. It was not much of a park in November. Most of the trees had lost their leaves with the night's rainfall.

Winter was right around the corner.

He really needed to pull himself together enough to get home.

The scrape of shoe sole on pavement. Footsteps on sodden leaves behind him. Colin glanced around, instinctively—he never quite lost that uneasy awareness of who was around him—and stiffened.

Thomas, face flushed with cold and possibly something else, was coming down the walkway. His eyes were dark and unreadable. Apparently he hadn't been kidding about being good at finding things.

Colin jumped up. He told himself the excitement surging through him was anger and shock, but there was a portion of disbelieving joy in that riotous clamor of emotions.

Still a few feet away, Thomas bit out, "For someone who paints a lot of shadows, you sure see things in black and white."

"Are you going to tell me I'm wrong?"

"It's not the way you think."

"I'm the job."

"Yes. But—"

Colin turned and started walking.

Thomas caught him up in two steps. "Will you just stop and listen a minute? Yes, you were the job, but the job was just to check up on you, make sure you were okay. I accomplished that before we finished our drinks yesterday afternoon."

"Bullshit. Your mission was to get close to me and make sure I stayed safe."

"My mission?" Thomas's eyebrows shot up. "That is some imagination you've got. My mission wasn't to sleep with you. What do you think I am? What do you think your grandfather is, for crying out loud?"

For crying out loud. If he hadn't been so angry, he'd have spared a grin for that. But he was angry. Angry and hurt because Thomas had violated the trust Colin had placed in him from the time he was a kid.

He struggled to get the words out without revealing that embarrassing naïveté. "I think my grandfather...has a God complex. I have no idea what you are, and I don't want to know." He didn't walk away. He should have been walking away by then. But he wasn't too angry and hurt to notice that Thomas had missed his flight to find him and talk to him.

Instead it was Thomas who half turned, looking skyward in exasperation.

"You cut off all communication, Col. Mason was worried. You're all he has."

"I *didn't* cut off all communication. I-I tried to set some parameters. You know how he is."

"I know he's a frail and elderly man who loves you more than anything on the planet. And I know he's worried sick."

That took some of the wind out of his already luffing sails. Colin did worry about his grandfather, was conscious that he wasn't getting any younger.

He said, and he could hear the resistance warring with guilt in his tone. "Look, I love my grandfather, but I don't have any illusions about him—maybe you do, but then you don't know him that well. He doesn't ask and he doesn't listen. He uses money to control and manipulate. He always has, he always will.

"I know. I do realize that. I know him better than you think. But it doesn't change the fact that he loves you and is worried about you. I'm not saying you should go back, I'm just saying you shouldn't shut him out entirely."

That caught him utterly off guard. "You're not saying I should go back?"

Thomas shook his head. "I don't think you should go back until you're ready. But you do need to let him know where you are."

Colin swallowed hard. "You didn't tell him?"

Thomas gave another of those brisk head shakes. "I told him I found you, I'd seen where you lived and you were all right and that I'd talk to you. See if you were okay with letting him know where you were, but that I wasn't going to reveal that information if you didn't give permission."

Colin opened his mouth, but Thomas added, "And I'd told him that before I ever agreed to have a look for you. There was no way—assuming you were okay—that I was going to get in the middle of your private war."

"It's not a war."

"Sure it is," Thomas said easily. "It's your war for independence. And, believe it or not, I'm in favor of that."

"Then why didn't you just tell me yesterday?"

Thomas sighed.

Colin tensed, remembering. Remembering too much. "Everything that happened between us was a lie."

"No."

"All those bullshit questions yesterday afternoon. You already knew the answers: that I was here painting, that I'd argued with—"

"That's all I knew. It took me two days to track you down."

"Fine. So it was a fact-finding mission. That doesn't make it better." Maybe if he didn't feel like such a fool...

Thomas gave him a long look. "Your feelings are hurt and your pride is injured. I understand. I apologize. Now do you want to hear my side of this or do you just want to tell me the way it is?"

What was the point? Maybe Thomas's motives had been pure. It didn't change the fact that he didn't feel what Colin did. That Colin had made a fool of himself—and that Thomas had encouraged him to do so. He said quietly, bitterly, "No, I don't want to hear your side of this. I already told you that." He bent, picked up his sketch pad, lunch bag.

Thomas's hand closed on his upper arm. "You're going to hear it anyway. You owe me that much."

"I owe you?" Colin straightened, glaring. "Well, this ought to be good. Go ahead."

"You think last night was just about you? You think I didn't have a stake in what happened between us? That I don't have feelings about what happened? Grow up!"

The unexpected heat in Thomas's face and voice startled Colin. He said stiffly, "Okay. Sorry. What did you want to say?"

"What I wanted to say was yes, I came looking for you as a favor to Mason, but I was already in this country finishing up a job. That's the first thing I want you to understand."

Thomas took a deep, steadying breath and Colin realized that this mattered to him, that the words were not coming easily. "I didn't come hunting you. I was already here, and since I was already here and had a couple of days to kill, I agreed to have a look for you to put your grandfather's mind at ease. And because I cared whether you were alright or not."

"Yeah, you cared so much you never so much as sent me a postcard."

"Colin." Thomas raked a hand through his hair. "There's a considerable age difference between us. It might not mean a lot now, but it sure as hell meant a lot when you were seventeen. Or even when you were in college. You think I wasn't aware that I had an inside track to your...affections? I could have had you any time from the point you...formed an attachment to me. I kept a distance for your sake as much as my own."

"Your own?"

Thomas responded to the wariness in Colin's voice with exasperation. "Yes, my own. If you haven't noticed that I've got feelings for you then all I can say is you're the first blind artist I've met."

Colin didn't know what to answer. Thomas said, "Okay. So mission accomplished by the time we finished our first glass of wine yesterday afternoon."

Colin thought back to the previous day. "You went inside the café and phoned my grandfather."

"Yes. And from that point on, I was on my own time."

Colin didn't know what to say. He was still rattled from his emotional high dive. He'd been so sure of Thomas's betrayal, so convinced that he had

made a fool of himself the night before—plunging from the giddy high of falling in love and believing it was even reciprocated to splashing down into ice cold reality of Thomas's real agenda.

Thomas added, “Last night was about you and me, and nobody else.”

Colin protested—and he could hear the childish, aggrieved note in his voice, “Then why didn't you tell me—why'd you go on letting me think your running into me was just chance?”

“I was going to talk to you this morning. And I'd have done that if you hadn't flipped out.”

He ignored that. “Why didn't you tell me last night—*before* we slept together?”

“You want the truth? We had one night. I didn't want to spend it talking about your grandfather or the past—let alone risk you freaking out. I wanted to...explore the present with you. See if there was...maybe a future.”

Thomas held his gaze steadily until Colin had to look away. He stared moodily out at the gray green shrubs. Was he being unfair to Thomas? Being unfair to both of them maybe?

“I don't know if that was selfish or not,” Thomas said, watching him. “I think that's what you wanted too.”

If he was realistic, yes. He had wanted Thomas to stop viewing him from the perspective of the past, to see him as a desirable adult rather than the traumatized kid he'd been. Last night he had wanted to pretend—wanted Thomas to go along with the pretense—that they were meeting for the first time.

Thomas said almost gently, “It's not a black and white world, Colin.”

He looked back at Thomas who was watching him steadily, gravely. “You missed your flight.”

“This was more important.”

Colin took a deep breath and exhaled, let go of the anger, the hurt, the disappointment, and the fear. He tried for a smile although he felt out of practice.

“So...where do we go from here?” He waited to hear Thomas say they didn't go anywhere, that they would always be friends, but he had to hurry to catch the next flight out of Paris...

Thomas said, “I spent the last two and half hours searching for you. Let's start with breakfast—or whatever they call it over here.”

"Petit déjeuner."

"Right. Let's start there. Where's a good place to eat? Some place we can talk."

"Is there still a lot to say?"

"I guess that's up to you."

Colin thought it over. He said, "Croissants and petit pains with cheese, jam, honey, and nutella, okay? Good coffee?"

"I'm hungry," Thomas said evenly, "but it's not so much the food as the company I'm interested in."

"I was thinking I'll fix you breakfast."

Thomas relaxed a fraction. He smiled, his eyes tilting in the old warm way. "Oh. Okay."

"We just have to make one stop on the way."

Thomas raised his brows inquiringly.

Colin admitted, "I think maybe it's time to buy a tube of red paint."

* * * * *

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The French Have a Word for It

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