
ALICE IN PARIS

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Part I
The Butterflies

“Go there, I don’t know where. Bring back that, I don’t know what”.
Russian proverb

“Look at Lindsay,” said Declan admiringly, “he doesn’t give a fuck”. It was the summer of 1985 and the three of them: Lindsay, Declan and Alice, were at an open-air festival in Paris, in some bois, it might have been the Bois de Vincennes. While the musicians were taking a break, Lindsay had sauntered from the audience onto the stage, grabbed a pair of sticks and started playing the drums.

The three of them were staying at the same cheap hotel on the Rue Mouffetard in the 5ieme, dank from the squeeze of young backpacker bodies and a shower drain clogged by a mess of hair. Alice had arrived from Canada, from Montreal, a month ago, in May. A taxi had dropped her off at the top of a hill, near Rue de la Montaigne St Genieve, and the farther she descended the rabbit hole warren of medieval streets the more deeply she fell in love.

At the bottom of the rue Mouffetard there was a market teeming with life, the way scores of amoebas slide into each other and merge under a microscope, mating. At the street’s very end there was a church, St Medard, behind which was a tiny park where dark green iron benches were impressionist paintings mottled by the shadows of chestnut trees. Mothers pushed babystrollers as though in slow motion. A cluster of old men played boules more slowly still, as though they had more hours in their lives than the babies did.

Time was almost done away with.

It was the most marvellous place Alice had ever been.

She had come to Paris for the summer to learn French, or so she thought and told anyone who asked but, really, it was not why she was there.

Declan, who was Irish, a Dubliner, had lived in Paris for more than a year. He got up early every morning to go to an office, where he worked as a translator. Alice was attracted to the lilt in his voice and his spiritedness.

“Alice, I’m a rogue, a rascal and a rascalion” he announced proudly, some weeks into their relationship.

When they had sex he liked to fantasize that she was a chambermaid or a schoolgirl.

Declan was the man she slept with; Lindsay, who came from the other side of the planet, was her kindred soul.

It was a place called the Butterfly Café, the place that Lindsay was from. Every morning Alice would go there with her notebook to write. It was a cubby-hole dug deep beneath the earth, the tunnels running through and around it leading farther than even the imagination could go, farther than Australia where people were reputed to walk upside down, heads grinding into the pavement, feet flinging in the air (“I wonder if I shall fall right through the earth!” exclaimed another Alice, the character in the Lewis Carroll book, drawn from a real live girl. “How funny it’ll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downward! The antipathies, I think —” (she was rather glad no one was listening this time, as it didn’t sound at all the right word) “— but I shall have to ask them what the name of the country is, you know, Please, Ma’am, is this New Zealand, or Australia?”).

The café had the kind of décor you almost never see in the globalized, style conscious world of the present: the simplest of round, wooden tables and straight-backed chairs and on the faded walls collections of butterflies pinned inside glass cases. It belonged to the black and white world of the 1920’s, unchanged more than half a century later, and was the kind of café where you could see an old woman sitting with a dolled up poodle and the poodle would have its own seat. The woman could have been Gertrude Stein’s partner, Alice B Toklas — tiny like a field mouse, black like a bat — had the decade coincided with her time on the planet, which it hadn’t.

“Have some wine”, the March Hare said to Alice in Wonderland. “But there isn’t any”, Alice replied. “I didn’t say there was,” said the March Hare.

The Butterfly Café was the home of all the Alices and of Lindsay, who accepted each of them just as they were. Sure a lot the butterflies in the room were dead, the ones that had the pins right through them, the ones in the cases that I told you about, but there were more that were alive, their hearts beating like you wouldn’t believe, you could feel the beating, it was a part of you, and yet they were invisible.

So Alice, the Canadian one, with the flat Canadian accent and the calm Canadian demeanour, a temperament other nationalities consider dull, would go there to write, and some of the time that was what she would do. The rest of the time, the edges of that swath stitched every morning with writing two metres long, she would look around and reflect and muse and nurse a coffee crème, the purchase of which gave her the right to sit at a table for as long as she liked. She liked to be alone in the company of strangers, with the bustle of the Rue Mouffetard market outside the door, the shouts of “deux francs le kilo” mixed with the smell of something pungent, like a Roquefort, and with the perfect rouge of apples that had been grown on a small farm somewhere, organic before the word organic was used, in a region with a beautiful name, because in French nearly all names sounded beautiful to her Canadian ears.

It was the Paris of Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, which she had read in Montreal alongside Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* and books by other North American writers

who had lived in Paris in the early 20th century when American power and influence were on the upswing.

They all formed part of the backdrop of her being there and their Paris was in some ways hers, a literary and romantic one where people and centuries merged the way the amoebas in the market did.

“In Paris he met, Hemingway, Braque and Matisse” as the wry New Yorker cartoon went (an ordinary man’s forlorn face drawn with a pencil above it), “Nothing came of it”.

The first weeks of summer passed, long and languid the way they used to be. It was not yet the solstice, the night of the music festival, when time, which had been loose and soft and flowing, like the yarn Alice had been writing with, became sharp and pointed, like the needle tip she ran it through.

From the Butterfly Café, buoyed by successfully travelling down to Australia and back – “an inner journey of amazement in a state known as grace, “as a life coach might have put it (“Have some life coaching!”), as the March Hare or the Mad Hatter might have exclaimed, had they or it been in Paris at the time, which they hadn’t, or had encouragement or courage been) – Alice would take out her metro map and choose an arrondissement she didn’t know, which she’d set out via either the Place Monge or Censier Daubenton or Cardinal Lemoine metro to explore. Each day she chose a different neighbourhood to meander through, taking pleasure in getting lost, a flaneur (or was the word too grand for her?) stumbling upon squares and parks and alleyways as though she was the first to discover them. It was as if the entire city and its beauty belonged to her.

Walks were events. Especially for a butterfly or a bat or a bird, added Alice.

Lindsay joined her on a walk once. He was part of a group she’d hang out with at the end of the day, sometimes eating couscous with merguez sausages and drinking Stella Artois at the Place de la Contrescarpe, all of them staying at the Rue Mouffetard hotel. There were some Israelis, a Dane, an American and Lindsay, who was Australian. He was quiet and thoughtful and hefty, though not overweight, just big and solid. He had a roundish, handsome face and a closely shaved head.

“You will be successful in work and unlucky in love”, an astrologer had told him and he repeated to Alice. He was travelling around the world for a year, the way Australians do, trying to decide what form to give his life, spread out so expansively then it seemed it would never come to an end.

“I would be happy to have a job shining apples”, he said, not as a reply to the astrologer, to whom he just listened but to Alice. Alice said nothing, uncertain amidst the assortment of responses flitting, fluttering, in her head of which one to choose. She was attracted by his interest in simple, sensual pleasures and at the same time startled by and curious about his lack of ambition and the contrast with what the astrologer had told him. How could a person be successful merely giving lustre to apples?

She briefly imagined him sitting on a bucket holding an apple so shiny it had the perfection of a strawberry in a story she had loved as a girl, where a poor, blind boy had grown a strawberry – months and months of care for the one thing he could give – and

offered it in tiny cupped hands to a princess. It was the only story about a princess Alice had read where the pretender – and what an odd word THAT was – took care.

Declan had his spanking fantasy, she had her indulgence in an apple one; that lustrous, forbidden fruit.

The rubbing was so delicious the bite just had to be delayed. Or no, the truth was this: Lindsay was her friend and she didn't dare let him know that she wanted to reach out and touch him. It was less risky to have a simple boyfriend, Declan, whose attraction was as straight and as charged as power lines.

That was how it was in an unarticulated sort of way for Alice in her feelings for Declan and Lindsay, in the times and spaces that made up the early days of summer 1985, leading up to the solstice when the Butterfly Café turned upside down and the glass cases the butterflies were in shattered, leaving powdery wings and tiny, black bodyparts in tatters on the floor.