

At November's end Val had turned down an invitation for a Florida Christmas. Three days before the holiday, Madeleine abruptly accepted Jean-Claude's offer for Noël en Paris, with plane fare included. Val didn't see her off. It was only a long weekend, she said when she phoned him on returning to Queens. She loved Paris and the Parisians—it was like going home. Val drives in that morning (Myron shuttered the store for the week), eager to see her and anxious to get out of the empty house. James had cooked a tasty Christmas turkey then decamped to his parents' on his way to the Catskills. At the door Madeleine jumps into Val's arms, squeezing him as he regrets foregoing splurging on a present for her. In fact he'd looked at jewelry in the village weeks earlier, but the vibe after the apartment jam session kept him in a holding pattern, and then her trip aborted any purchase. Oh, but it's amazing how things no longer matter in an embrace with undefined expectations.

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The Nova capitulated at a Stop sign in Queens. Val pushed it to the curb and walked away. It would stagger again someday, he mused; its final resting place lay to the east, where it would return in spirit like a declining elephant. Himself, the live human, he had been sleeping less, raveled as he was around the spool of Madeleine. Falling for her had brought vertigo, and Jean-Claude's second return from Paris had newly disrupted their intimacy, evoking a sense of crisis. Ding, says the elevator, ding.

Val: Salut, mon petit chou!

Madeleine: Salut, salut! And Happy New Year!

He enters and sits and she sits on his lap, dense for her size. Neither of them would depress a scale much and the ballerina might be stronger if they submitted to a comprehensive battery of physical evaluation. Her shoulders look edible under her spaghetti straps. She'd painted her nails a darker shade of blood for the evening. Val wears a new blue blazer and surplus loafers with oversized buckles. The apartment is quiet.

Val:           Everyone is gone?

Madeleine:   Oh yes, they have their own parties—but none quite like ours!

Returned to its standard arrangement, the living room speaks differently to him now. These were the grounds of his inspired jam, when the electricity crackled through him and scattered. After accepting sincere praise that night, he'd gone out on the street to cool down and collect himself. Later he'd nodded off on this very sofa as the French drummer soloed.

Val:           It's near Times Square, the party?

Madeleine:   In a fabulous penthouse owned by a client of Jean-Claude's.

Val:           Do you think you could fix my bracelet? I meant to tell you—it's a little loose.

Madeleine:   Oh, let's see!

She slips it off and brings it to the dining room table. Then she disappears down the hall and returns with a satchel of tiny tools.

Val:           I've been reading about the history of the universe.

Madeleine:   Yes, I remember, sweetheart.

Val: Yeah, black holes, the big bang. They didn't tell us about all that stuff in high school.

Madeleine: Better to leave science to the scientists and everything else to us.

Val: The author talks about really strange concepts like superstrings, infrared slavery, and the world sheet. Did you know the mass of the universe is dominated by dark matter whose nature is unknown?

Madeleine: More mystery, less history, says this dancer.

She snips the bracelet with scissors.

Val: Maybe you're cutting a superstring right now.

Madeleine: Mais non, c'est une toile.

Val: It's a star?

Madeleine: No, darling, "une étoile" is a star—"une toile" is a web. I should tell you that Jean-Claude has invited me to Paris again. I would have my own apartment for an extended period of time to make contacts.

Val:

Madeleine: I haven't accepted yet—because of you.

Val:

Madeleine: I can't imagine our being apart.

Val:

Madeleine: We're not going to discuss it anymore tonight, sweetheart. Voilà!

Now the bracelet fits. He pulls down the blazer's sleeve.

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Val listens to the windstorm in the shaft and regards the pair in the burnished elevator door. They'd shouldered through the crowd in the street, then Madeleine announced their names at the security desk, where they signed in. There she is, reflected, beautiful in bronze or any metal. The door opens. The penthouse is not an apartment but a cocktail lounge with a panorama of the neon crossroads. Their party occupies two booths near the grand piano. There's a drum kit and a stand-up bass at rest; the musicians haven't arrived yet. Bisous, bisous, kisses, kisses, salut, salut, hi, hi.

Jean-Claude: Ah, the rock star is here. The American Jean-Louis Aubert!  
That's a stunner—a comparison to Téléphone's frontman.

Val: That was a fun night.  
The velvet horseshoe is too wide for continuous conversation and Val falls quiet. Their places are set with china. The waitress serves bread, escargot and salad. Wine is poured. No one seems to have ordered and there are no menus. Madeleine said it was all paid for but Val doesn't know whom to thank. Each guest gets a brick of beef with sauce, potatoes and garnish. The spoken French flies around Val. In the lounge the partygoers are all European, or seem so. He is unperturbed; this little fish can swim in anyone's pond.

Here come the drummer and bassist, each with a graying beard. Here comes the singer-pianist, a young medusa with a serpentine tattoo at her nape, half-hidden by her dress. The trio's understated, traditional opening belies her intense mien, which Val

deems fierce. Madeleine plucks him to the parquet floor and they shuffle slowly as the lights darken. Val knows she's withstanding the instinctual tug to dance formally. Still, she smiles and follows his crude step-and-slide. Between random one-two's he ad-libs a squiggle. He leads her back to the table, where she partners up with Jean-Claude, who unsurprisingly exhibits practiced skill. He knows how and when to let Madeleine twirl, though with negligible style. Val could twirl and dip her so much better if he learned how to dance. Life presents conspiracies, he sees, and if you don't insist on becoming fluent in their languages, the scoffing is all on you.

The waitresses wheel out buckets swaddled in linen. Squawk—someone is blowing a noisemaker. It's 11:30. Val peeks under the cloth. Ah yes, champagne. The label is like parchment and the scrip is ornate. One of the names listed includes *la particule*; the others are polysyllabic in the old style. Two stag Frenchmen are chatting on the other side of the horseshoe—they're not the jam session musicians, who are not here, pas ici. Himself, lui-même, he sits alone in the present tense next to the dance floor. He hasn't recognized a song yet. The pianist returns his gaze sharply, nearly snarling while she tweets. There's Madeleine, his little cabbage, swaying by the window, choreographing an imaginary breeze. She'll rejoin him though he is inessential; they all will, before midnight. More snarling from the medusa—Val can't tell if she's defiantly proud or overwhelmingly bitter to be here. Maybe she'll play a song he knows from somewhere. He feels a duet building.

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