

MATTHEW CHARLES NINI

La Vie En Rose

THEY STOOD OUT IN the *Champs de Mars* near the riverbank in the light spring rain. She was glad, he supposed, that it was raining on their first day in Paris. She had endlessly repeated during the trip over that it absolutely must rain on their first day in Paris. Her primary demand met, she stood there next to him, starry eyed, looking upon her homeland as she had never done before.

When he had first met her during the war, her spirit was sunken, and when he first saw her carrying a pail of water into her mother's house, he was certain that this was a fallen angel. With her dark hair, chestnut eyes, and olive skin, she seemed to be treating the war as if it were an attack against her dignity, and she held her head trying to pretend that it didn't bother her.

That same angelic face, now softened somewhat, was staring up at the Eiffel Tower.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said to him.

"Genevieve, I think it's the most hideous thing I've ever seen." It was as if someone had ripped the tallest antenna from City Music Hall and wedged it between two cobblestones in an Ancient Roman street.

"Oh, don't say that. You don't really think that, do you, Arthur? It never bothered you before. You just say that to sound intellectual like Balzac or Hugo. They hated the *Tour Eiffel*, I know, but only because it didn't fit in with their Romantic sensibilities."

He wondered if "Romantic sensibilities" was a paradox. She was never the intellectual type. He liked to think that what breeding she had came from him while they lived in New York; just as all his friends went away to Paris to learn what it is to be American, she had become a French lady in New York. And now he had come to Paris to visit his expatriate friends and allow her to see her homeland once more, and he detested the place. Paris was better on those damp evenings during the war, when the trenches were

no more than a mile-and-a-half from the city, and one could see the Eiffel Tower even from the German side. He somehow didn't remember it then. It seemed inauspicious during the war, when all of Paris was silent, and the two of them would sit together on her mother's front step saying absolutely nothing. The language barrier did not impede their courtship in any way. She would still rest her head on his shoulder as they sat on the front step, and he would find ways to make her laugh, and they would dance to the gramophone while she sang, and when it ended, he would say "encore," and she would blissfully start the music once more and continue to dance and sing. She was still more charming when she was silent, something he deeply admired about her, and indeed the French nation as a whole. He had tired of American women and their glibness. When he first brought her to New York, she would often listen to the chatter of women going by, and shaking her head, she would whisper to him, "*Baveuse!*" He never learned what that meant, but he continually agreed to it.

"Come," Genevieve said, "let's get out of the rain and go into the café. I suppose you are starving."

"I'm quite alright," he said, "but I could use a drink."

They hurried into the little café near which they were standing. Underneath the eaves of the quaint structure was an old man playing the accordion. The melody was distinctly French, and the whole scene was for Arthur an impressionist painting come to life. It was beauty found in banality, glorified by perception, and it seemed to him somewhat surreal.

"He is playing *La Vie En Rose*," Genevieve said. "Do you remember it?"

"I do," he answered. "We used to dance to it a long time ago, before we were married. What does it mean?"

She smiled wistfully. "*La Vie En Rose* is a feeling that is like looking at the world with rose-tinted glasses, and everything is emblematic of love. It is looking at someone and saying unrestrainedly, 'How I love you!' and not even knowing that you are speaking. Some say that it is just being in Paris."

"Would you sing it for me?"

She pulled her chair up to his and sang softly:

*Quand tu me prend dans ses bras,
Tu me parle tout bas,
Je vois la vie en rose,
Tu me dis des mots d'amour
Des mots de tous les jours,
Et ça me fait quelque chose ...*

As she sang, he was reminded of Paris at the end of the war, when Paris was in its most downtrodden state in centuries, yet the indomitable French spirit was more resilient than ever. The day that he returned to her mother's house, Genevieve hurriedly went to fetch the bottle of champagne she had saved for his return. She had never had champagne before, nor for that matter could afford it, but it was the most concrete example of love with which she could supply him. Arthur could tell she didn't much care for the champagne, and it apparently had ill effects on her that night, but she insisted on making him breakfast the next morning and going to the *Champs de Mars* with him to see the celebrations. She was still the headstrong girl he had known, but somehow lacked the vivaciousness that he found so enthralling.

*Tu es entré dans mon coeur,
Une part de bonheur
Dont je connais la cause,
C'est toi pour moi,
Moi pour toi dans la vie
Tu me l'a dit, l'a juré
Pour la vie.
Et dès que je l'aperçois
Alors je sens en moi
Mon cœur qui bat*

She finished softly, enunciating roundly the beautiful words which ended the song. Her French was unchanged. This was the same exquisite voice that had taught him every word of the language with which he was familiar. She would first say a phrase and then have him repeat it—*Pouvez-vous me diriger au Musée du Louvre, s'il vous plait?* She had him repeat this banal phrase, and then inject it with her own wonderful interpretation. When he had first met her, he found it delightful how even the most prosaic of phrases can be made beautiful in French, and how banality in general seemed to contain beauty in France. People even found the hideous Eiffel Tower beautiful in its simplicity, but he knew better. There, towering over them almost placidly, as it always had, stood the hideous thing, as comforting and as quaint in all its invented majesty as ever. If the Eiffel Tower were a person, Arthur thought, she would be a very humble, motherly sort of person who would stand to protect all her adopted children in times of need. Compared to the worn countenance of the rest of Paris, the Tower seemed a brash young upstart, too aloof for its own good, but at the core of it, as all Parisians knew, he thought, there was something so quintessentially French and beautiful that shone forth for the entire world to behold.

Genevieve had not spoken since she finished the song, and seemed unusually reticent. She found it strange that he was staring so intently at his detested tower.

“I thought you said that you found the *Tour Eiffel* hideous.”

“Well, I’ve changed my mind.”

“I knew you would come around eventually,” she said, embracing him.

“Well darling,” he said at length, “it sort of grows on one.”