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Poor Little Rich Girl

How can someone fall madly in love with a city, my husband was always asking me, but there was no simple reply. I could argue that it was one of the artistic capitals of the world, where historical monuments and modern sky-scrapers rose through a blue-grey fog. This was not a valid reason, Mark would say, and I had to agree, one doesn't fall for concrete buildings and cement sidewalks. I could never describe my feelings for Paris and he would conclude, "You know honey, we're really better off in Cleveland. Stop your day-dreaming. We simply can't move there."

Mark's job with the law firm was going well now after years of struggling along trying to decide what we wanted to do with our lives. He had always more or less wanted to be a lawyer like his father, but money was lacking during the early years of our marriage and it was only after much scrimping and saving that we were able to pay his way through school. He complained that I was a poor, little, rich girl and that having been brought up in a wealthy family I knew nothing about hardship, but his school years taught me something about the difficulties of living on a low income.

He was a quiet, hard worker, conscientious and efficient in his job, and this the firm had appreciated, but our social life had suffered and our traveling days of yore were over, our romantic first encounter at a sidewalk café seemed only part of a distant past.

"Are you ready, honey?" Mark called impatiently. "The Schneiders will be here any minute now."

"Have you seen my gold earrings?"

"You're not even dressed yet! Come on, let's get a move on it."

"I'll get dressed when I'm good and ready," I snapped. "I can't find my earrings."

A horn honked outside and Mark's hands flew up in a fit of rage. "Now you've done it! What can I tell them?"

"Tell them that I'll be down in a minute and stop getting so worked up."

"I'm not worked up!" he bellowed, "But goddam it this is the office party and for once I'd like to be on time."

"So what if it's the office party. It'll be a drag as usual."

"Honey, this is important for us. The senior partner will be there and he's been talking about a promotion for me."

"Does that mean you want me to be extra friendly with him?"

"Oh, stop it," he scowled as he tore down the stairs two at a time and flung open the front door. "We'll be right there, Jack. Hi, Betty! You look stunning."

I slipped on my pale blue sequin-covered dress, ran a comb through my hair and gave a final flick of mascara to my eyelashes before joining the others. Mark was settled in the back seat chatting with Betty about who would be at the party.

"Mary Sanders just discovered that she has breast cancer, so I'm sure she won't be there," Betty was saying.

"What a shame," Mark added. "She's only forty, isn't she?"

"Forty-five, dear," Betty babbled as Jack put the car in gear and we headed down the drive. "Tom Heathner and his new wife will probably come. You know she's twenty years younger than he is and was his former secretary." Betty was warming to the subject and rattled on about the scandal the Heathners' marriage had created, before moving on to the Bodys who were on the verge of divorce. I lounged back in the soft maroon cushions of the Cadillac, half listening to the office gossip, my mind wandering to times when the conversation had centered on revolutionary student activities.

"It's nice to have young blood at the office," Betty concluded her monologue as we drove up to the country club. Light streamed through the windows of the old tudor structure, glittering on the crystallized snow which lay on the surrounding hills. I shivered as we walked through the oaken doors into the soft, background music and boisterous crowd beyond.

"Hello there!" Al Sutton, the senior partner, boomed at us. "I thought you'd never get here!"

"Ah, sorry Mr. Sutton, are we late?" Mark stuttered as he shook the snow off his coat and boots.

"I bet it's that lovely wife of yours who had a few last minute touches to add. Hello, Laura! Come here, I want you to meet someone." He grabbed my arm and swept me forward through the bubbling group of merrimakers, stopping at last in front of a rather good looking dark-haired man who must have been in his late thirties.

"Laura, I'd like you to meet Jim Ruthers, a new partner from New York. Jim, I think you'll enjoy Laura. She's one of the few partner's

wives with whom you can discuss politics, but be careful, she's a socialist!"

He ducked back into the crowd as he said this leaving me at a loss for words. "Socialist is a bad word around here. I don't know why he said that," I laughed nervously as I glanced over my shoulder to see if I could find Mark and the Schneiders.

"It doesn't scare me," he replied. "Al knows that I enjoy a stimulating discussion. He's been dying to introduce us. Apparently you're married to a boy scout and every once in awhile you get fed up and explode into a revolutionary tirade."

"I can see that my reputation has preceeded me, Mr. Ruthers. I'm afraid though that you're going to be disappointed. I'm not up for socialism this evening." I remarked acidly as I attempted to edge towards the bar, but my retreat was cut off by Al Sutton who arrived with a whisky sour in his hand. "I believe this is your usual drink, isn't it Laura?" he said.

"Why yes, thank-you. You seem to know my likes and dislikes pretty well, Mr. Sutton."

"Just call me Al. Actually I think it's a refreshing change to have a dissenter amidst the bureaucrats."

"Something like having a bull in a china shop?" I jibed.

"You could say that. Tell me, what do you think of the new French government?"

I had seen this question coming, but now that it was asked, I didn't quite know how to field it. I was sure Mark would want me to humor him, but Al Sutton didn't approve of playful politics. He delighted in hard core answers and wasn't against locking horns from time to time.

"I think they're going to have a hard time coming up with a coherent policy in view of the fact that the French are split fairly evenly between the left and the right, but Mitterand's got a good team behind him and he could bring about a major, positive change."

"Yes, but what will this change mean economically speaking?" Jim counterattacked.

"It's hard to say," I continued turning towards him, but his bright, clear, brown eyes glared back at me and I pivoted towards Al before adding, "I definitely don't believe in the overly pessimistic outlooks predicted by American economists. They have a tendency to translate everything into terms which are valid in the United States, but which aren't applicable in Europe. Socialism in France in a way of life, a tradition."

"It's a way of life which agrees with you, I gather," Mr. Ruthers remarked as Al Sutton drifted off to greet the last late arrivals.

"I don't disapprove, if that's what you mean."

"You lived in France at one time, didn't you?"

"Yes, that's where I met my husband."

"It must have been difficult to return to apple pie America."

"One has to adapt, I suppose. My husband had to return for his job, then we got involved here and haven't been able to return since."

"There you are, Laura! I've been looking all over for you," Mark called as he burst upon us.

"Mark, I don't know whether you've met one of the new partners, Jim Ruthers."

"Hello," Mark said curtly. "Dinner's being served and the Schneiders are saving us a place." He snatched my hand and dragged me through the herds of hungry people headed towards the dining room. He half seated me, half threw me into the chair next to Jack, before resuming his conversation with Betty who was giving him a run down on everyone in the room. Mark had learned early on, that in order to get ahead in the firm, you needed to know who everyone was and what their motivations were. With this information to mind, you could needle the right person into lining you up for a promotion.

"This looks like an interesting group," Jim Ruthers remarked sarcastically as he slipped into the empty chair next to me.

"That's the firm's new radical and he's on good terms with Al Sutton," Betty said in a whisper that carried across the table. I glanced uneasily at my neighbour, but he was absorbed in his soup and made no comment. Snow was falling quickly outside the large bay windows creating a silent, icy world, while inside platters clattered and voices rose in a crescendoing din.

"Why do you want to return to Paris?" my neighbour asked as the pork chops and apple sauce were being brought out.

"Did I say I wanted to return to Paris?"

"That's what you implied."

"Cleveland's a very fine residential city," I said arching my brows.

"Yes, but there's not much going, is there?"

"You moved here. You must have your reasons."

"I'm being trained to take over the management of the firm's Paris office."

This was the last thing I was expecting him to say and for a moment I was caught completely off-balance. Here was this cocky, new lawyer from New York, baiting me onwards, eager for news of Paris, tantalizing me with the forbidden fruit. He irked the hell out of me and I wanted to tell him exactly where he could get off, but I stabbed my pork chop and remarked, "I didn't know the firm had a Paris office."

"Actually, I've let the cat out of the bag," he said in a low growl. "The office is to be opened in April, but it won't be announced officially until after Christmas."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked, my eyes narrowing. There was something strange and off-color about his new recruit and I couldn't quite figure out what game he was playing.

"Because I want you to come with me," he said coolly.

"You're joking," I sneered.

"I'm perfectly serious, but take your time and think it over. After all, you have until April to decide."

"I've decided. I won't be going. Will you have some butter, Mr. Ruthers?" I asked as I reached for the bread plate.

"Think it over. If you want to have coffee together some time, you can call me at the office. I'm taking a long shot, but I think we're the same kind of people. By the way, if you should decide to come, there are no obligations attached." Then, without looking at me, he rose, said his good-byes and disappeared into the hallway.

The rest of the party was mundane and uneventful. Mrs. Tithers latched onto me after dinner and insisted that I join their embroidery group. "We meet every Tuesday morning and you'd just love it, deary! We have an excellent teacher too." Betty introduced me to a few new faces as we were heading towards the door and this launched us into a lengthy discussion of the Christmas party and who would be doing the decorations. Mark encouraged me to join one of the organizing groups, but I bowed out of that and we finally bade our farewells and slipped out of the door.

I was exhausted when we reached home and felt like taking an aspirin before tumbling in bed, but Mark was sparked by the evening's activities and wanted to talk. "You and Jim Ruthers seemed to be having a fascinating conversation," he remarked casually as he strolled into the dressing room.

"He's into French socialism," I sighed as I peeled the barrettes from my hair.

"Is that all you talked about?"

"Yes, why?"

"Didn't he tell you anything about his assignment in Paris?"

"Is he going to Paris?"

"Yes. That's what you'd like me to have, isn't it? I almost got the assignment before he was recruited. He must be a pretty interesting guy. Not bad looking either."

"Mark, stop trying to aggravate me. I'm tired and I want to go to bed."

The discussion had stopped there and Mark hadn't brought it up again during the following weeks, although we both felt it hanging in the air like a weight over our heads, the forbidden circle, the untouchable barrier. I received a letter from an old schoolmate in Paris, but I didn't mention it to Mark who was too absorbed in his work to be interested in anything else. We went to Mark's family for Christmas and the New Year's was spent quietly with a few friends.

In early January I received a call from Jim Ruthers suggesting I have coffee with him some afternoon when I was downtown and since that sounded more amusing than the embroidery group, I accepted. Jim told me about a big law case he was to try at the end of the month and a play that had just opened, would I like to go. I hesitated, then realizing that Mark would be out of town for a week, I said I would.

"The Best Little Whore House in Texas" turned out to be a pleasant comedy and afterwards we stopped by the Playhouse Club for a drink. I was feeling light-hearted and giddy for the first time since we had arrived in Cleveland and Jim cracked a few jokes about the whorehouse business in Texas. He put his arm around me as we strolled down the nearly deserted street to his car and once inside he grabbed my shoulders and pulled me to him. At first his embrace was overbearing, filled with desire, slowly growing tender and pleading. That night I did not return to the desolate house in the suburbs.

This opened a new and difficult period for me. Never before had I been unfaithful and I quickly found that a double life was cheap and insincere. I was constantly caught between them, indecisive and hesitant, sometimes hungering for one, the moment afterwards yearning for the other. This situation could have continued for quite some time, with Mark caught up in his work and oblivious to my duality and Jim frustrated but hopeful, if we hadn't quarreled.

It began in a stupid way, on a snow-filled, icy night when Mark couldn't find the car, and rapidly grew into a major battle. I stood shivering on the curb, yelling at Mark that he was scatter-brained and too ineffective to be a good lawyer. My remark hit a soft spot and he flew off the handle.

"I should never have married you to begin with! You don't know how to be a loving wife, to encourage a man in his work, to found a home and family. All you want to do is to go out and have a good time. When the going gets tough, you clear out!" He bellowed, his voice cutting into the silence of the night.

"You're a bore, Mark. You never talk about anything but the office, our home life is non-existent and you're no good in bed!"

"We're simply too different, Laura," Mark said in a hoarse whisper. "I realized this from the start, but you wanted so desperately to get married and I loved you so."

There were so many things to be said, eventually to be worked out together, but the place and timing were wrong, we were both angry cold and the words which spilled out were too harsh to be swept away afterwards. We were slipping down the road of no return, screaming our pent up feelings to the wind, yelping for help like wounded dogs with our tails between our legs, but later we realized that we couldn't undo what had been said that night.

I had finally admitted that I was returning to Paris with Jim, and Mark had replied that he had suspected things would turn this way. We couldn't pick up the pieces of a broken marriage and it was best for both of us to follow our separate inspirations.

From that evening on, we had been ghosts sharing the same house, sleeping in the same bed, exchanging only an occasional "yes" or "no." Uneasiness seeped from the walls as we eagerly awaited the departure date like drowning rats reaching for driftwood. We avoided each other whenever we could, purposefully keeping odd hours and by the time the spring rains came, I had practically moved in with Jim.

The day of departure finally arrived and we had planned to go to the airport in separate cars, meeting only once the plane was airborne. Mark had insisted on driving me and I had accepted despite my lover's protests. Jim had grown difficult in weeks, demanding that I make a clean break with Mark. I had weasled out by saying that I never saw him and that it would be easier to write from Paris.

Now in the car with Mark, I wished that I had made my decision, that the umbilical cord had been cut and that I could feel my wings light and airy to soar away. I didn't feel breezy at all, but heavy-hearted and apprehensive. Mark had asked me what my plans were and I had told him that only the present mattered. He laughed and said this was typical of me, to sail off in a cloud of confusion leaving only question marks behind. I hadn't told him that I was pregnant, fearing that he might fly into a fit of rage and try to force me to stay in order to claim his child. Once in Paris, we could be divorced calmly and he need never know the exact date of birth, that the baby could, in fact, be his.

We had chosen to leave on a weekday in the hopes that the airport would be at a lull and we could slip away unnoticed. Mark parked the car and helped me out with the bags, before trodding sullenly through the swinging doors to the check out counter. Jim was several counters down checking his bags, but Mark gave no sign of recognition, took the stubs handed to him and continued down the hallway to the gate. Once there, he slumped into a plastic chair and gazed absent-mindedly out at the runway.

Jim came sweeping up behind me and whirled me into his arms as his happiness burst upon him. "Twelve hours from now we'll be in Paris,

darling!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "There will be so many things to do! I'll take you to the Opera and we'll want to make a trip to Rome." He watched the figures flip into place on the timetable and frowned as he noticed a delay for our plane. He paced up and down in front of the glass window, helplessly observing the fuel trucks pull up. "We really should go to Morocco in the fall," he said returning to me and taking my hand. "How marvelous to be young and free in Paris with the world at our feet!"

I had rarely seen him as gay as he was now, bubbling at me with a new idea, then moving towards the table to see if there had been any new modifications. He fairly pranced down the freshly polished corridor, oblivious to Mark who was seated directly in front of him and ignorant of all that which did not concern his objective, his green light blinking in the distance, beckoning him onward. I stood there hypnotically watching his glee, touching from time to time my stomach. It couldn't show yet, no one could have guessed, although I was sure. Life breathed and kicked within me.

"Eastern flight 441 destination New York is now boarding at gate 55," the loud speaker blared.

Jim grabbed his briefcase and dashed towards the boarding area, then hesitated and came towards me reaching to grasp my arm, but his hand came up empty. "Come on, Laura, let's go," he said impatiently, but seeing that I wasn't following, he returned and finally said, "What's the matter? It's time to board." There was no time to explain what I didn't understand myself. The escape route lay open, hauntingly enticing and yet my feet wouldn't move. In a few hours I could be borne away from Cleveland boredom, shutting out the monotony of a suburban existence to flutter towards my beloved Paris, the nostalgia of youthful hours whiled away on the Seine, the carefree days of yore, but I didn't move.

"Come on, Laura," Jim said again with urgency.

"No, Jim, I'm not going with you," I replied in a hollow voice.

He must have stood there for two full minutes in silence, his mouth gaping and a bewildered look creeping across his features, trying to figure out if I meant what I said. When the last boarding call came, he hesitated no longer and with a decisive step, and no word or jest of good-bye, he headed down the ramp. Mark sat motionless until the plane soared into the sky and he remained there for some time afterwards. It was late in the evening when he rose at last and moved with leaden steps towards the exit. I followed him slowly, painstakingly down the hall, the heart and hope of my world having taken off hours before. I was going back to the little house with the prim, green lawn, back to where I had been and to where I apparently would stay.