

The bite of the air was cold upon the old man's neck. In the distance, he could see speckled pigeons pecking aimlessly at the ground. The man was very old, and he sat quietly on the park bench, watching as the tourists struggled with their French. Although morning, glancing up, the man could see the faint outline of the moon still left over from last night. The sun was weak, as if it had given up trying to burst through the grey clouds. The man stood up. Moving carefully, as though afraid to break something, he walked to a small building near the edge of the park. Its wooden walls provided no respite from the bitter wind. It would be snowing soon. This was the Post Office, and was set to open soon. Already, a small queue of aged men was beginning to appear outside. Each seemed older than the other, but to the man, seemed much younger than him.

A small bell signalled the opening of the day. A young clerk hurried up to the door, flipped the sign and swung it open. Her name was Céline and every week liked to talk to the man, how things were going on at home, how he was coping. It was their little routine, and to the man, one of the highlights of the week. The queue shuffled forward and each man left with a small envelope stamped with red letters "GOUVERNEMENT". It was the man's turn. Céline nodded her greeting but for once didn't say anything. She silently handed over the man's envelope and attempted a smile. She looked very tired. There were dark shadows underneath her eyes and the corners of her mouth drooped downwards. The old man thanked her and walked outside.

He put his envelope into his faded wallet and walked towards a small stretch of shops. The first one was the tobacconist's and it was here that he directed his feet. A little bell signalled his arrival as he pushed the glass door open. The man who worked here was middle aged and balding slightly. Once he had been called Jean. The old man remembered well. Jean's skin was stained brown from the cigarettes but his face was worldly and sun beaten. When the man entered the store, Jean glanced up and broke into a large grin. He told the old man that he was his favourite customer. There was no response. He said it every week. Already waiting was his twelve pack of Rothman's that he ordered every week. The old man pulled out his wallet, slit open the envelope and pulled out a small blue bill which he handed over to Jean. It was taken without thanks and placed into an ancient cash register which chimed as it was opened. The old man drew his packet of cigarettes into his pocket and left the store, back into the freezing air.

His bench was waiting for him. The old man drew a single cigarette from its packet, placed it in his lips and lit the end of it. It was done very quickly and was a well practised manoeuvre. The lighter disappeared into the folds of his clothes. The lines in his face appeared as he sucked away on his cigarette, his tongue exploring the fine textures of the paper. He wore a bowler hat which had faded with age. His dark jacket matched it. His suit trousers, once expensive were fraying at the ankles. There was a hint of a wedding band on his finger, but that too seemed tarnished in the grey sky. A cloud of smoke curled around his head and he sat quietly, drawing and then exhaling. The old man pulled a small bread crust from his coat. He broke off a bit, scrunched it into a ball and tossed it towards the birds. There was a mad rush of feathers as they fought over it. The old man laughed. He threw another and another. The squawking was unbelievable and they climbed over each other in their desperate attempt to get the miniscule crumbs. The bread was quickly gone and the pigeons left, as if nothing had happened.

There was a little boy selling food a small distance away. As the tourists lined up to buy something to drive away the cold, one of them, a man came and sat down on the bench. He was big. American, thought the man. His wife waited in the queue but soon came over with two small boxes of food, the steam mingling with his smoke. Both she and her husband were young. The woman sat down between the two of them and glanced over at the old man. "Bon-jaw" she said loudly, in a big southern drawl. She turned to face her husband and had an extremely loud conversation with him. Something about the weather. The European tourists turned coldly away from them. The old man lost track of what they were saying. His English was not good. That didn't matter, but he stared at the couple anyway. They were very interesting and the old man tried to take in as many details as he could.

The husband was very large, his belly sagging over his belt. As the old man watched, small bits of food seemed determined to escape from his oversized mouth and fall into his lap. He took no notice of them, but soon, a small pile was beginning to appear. His fingers, as he held the food, were smeared with grease and all sorts of other unpleasant things while his teeth chewed automatically. His wife was the opposite, petite and dainty, using a napkin to wipe away any possible chance of mess. She was stunningly pretty in a way, her hair bound up tightly but a few wisps escaped. They framed her olive eyes and suntanned skin. The old man chuckled to himself – the pair was chalk and cheese.

They waited on the park bench for a long time while they finished their food. The old man finished his cigarette, stubbed it out on the ground and lit another. He only had twelve to last the week but today was wintry and the smoke warmed him from the inside. As he watched the couple, small snowflakes began appearing and got trapped in the wife's hair. She stood up and shook them out, her eyes beaming.

"Honey, its real snow!" she exclaimed. She held her hands up for a few moments and watched as the snowflakes, each one different, gently floated onto her palms. Her husband seemed less impressed. He stood up as well and together they held hands and walked out of the park. The old man glanced in the vacated space and discreetly, quietly, meticulously, followed.

They were heading towards the town. The husband towered over his wife, and his vastness dwarfed her. She toddled along in tall stilettos, often tripping on the cracks in the cobbles. Every time she did, the old man would smile and increase his pace, all the time watching them. The husband would hoist her up by the wrist He startled a flock of pigeons that were crawling around and they took off immediately. The rustling from the wings made the couple turn around. They looked straight at the man but didn't see him. He was just a wispy old man, why should they care? The old man turned his collar up against the cold. He consoled himself that it was like this every winter. Since the snow had started falling, the temperature seemed to plummet even more. But the old man didn't care; he had been seized by some kind of frantic energy. His cigarettes lay forgotten, deep within his coat.

The couple reached the town square. In the corner, an enormous cathedral dominated the horizon, staring menacingly down towards the people. It was here that the pair walked. The square was almost deserted, with most people having hurried into the multitudes of cafés to sip

warm cups of coffee and curse the weather. The two Americans seemed not to notice the cold, or perhaps that was what they had come for and kept walking towards the cathedral. The old man's legs were tired but he continued on at his frantic pace. He hoped they wouldn't go inside the cathedral – he would not follow them inside. Luckily for him, the pair stopped on the stone steps outside. The old man smiled to himself and sat down on a seat opposite the large doors.

To any passing person, it would appear that the old man was fascinated by the soaring towers or the enchanting bells of the cathedral. They would think that he was staring at the birds nesting in crooks in the roof or at the many spires which stretched into the heavens. They would be wrong. The woman sat on the steps with a big grin on her face. Her husband pulled out a camera, but it wasn't one with film like the old man was used to but had a small screen and a blinding flash. He took shot after shot of the woman: smiling, laughing, pretending to be sad. The face changed every time the camera flashed, but the old man could see the same electricity in her eyes, even from this far away. Each photo would be marked with this spark, dancing behind her eyes. The old man tittered, laughing at the husband. His bulk entirely obscured the camera and each photo seemed an enormous effort to take. The cathedral served only as a backdrop, as if the Americans had decided it should be hurried into a small corner.

The woman ran forward and dragged the husband onto the steps. He seemed reluctant, but eventually gave in. He held the camera high up and aimed towards the both of them, while the woman wrapped her arms around him and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek. Both of them collapsed into giggles, rolling around on the steps like children, the whole time the camera snapping away. The snow was in their hair. The old man, still watching the pair of them, guffawed and chortled like he was young again. It was hilarious. He hummed to himself a forgotten song. It was like a memory of a song, or a memory of a memory of a song, but it seemed appropriate. It was from another time, but too long ago for anyone to remember. He hummed and he clicked his teeth and tapped his shoes on the pavement, as if these Americans were doing some sort of perfectly choreographed dance to music that only the old man could hear. Nobody looked at him. Nobody stared at him. The woman's laugh seemed to carry through the frosty air – it was her harmony to his melody.

Freezing, damp but beaming, the pair of them clawed up themselves off the street, using each other as leverage. The husband wrapped a podgy arm around the woman and together they hurried into a small building next door. It was called "Clarence's", and the old man could smell the warm roasting coffee beans wafting across the square. It filled his nostrils with a delicious scent – so delicious he thought perhaps he should go inside. That's what he told himself. Nobody looked up as he walked through the door. He could feel the dampness from the outside steaming off him. A crackling fire in one corner threw its heat across the room and the old man undid his jacket and hung it on the coat rack. At the very end of the café sat the American couple. They had already received their coffee. The old man came and sat down near them. A pretty waitress came around and took his order. He ordered eggs. He hadn't had eggs in a very long time. Too much trouble to cook them. His food came and he nibbled away at it, all the time keeping his eyes on the American woman. The old man asked the waitress what the time was. She told him. He nodded once and returned to his eggs. The pair of them seemed very happy, he with his bowl sized cup and she sipping elegantly with her little finger poking out. The old man finished his

eggs. He stood, stretched and found the waitress. Opening his wallet again, he pulled out another small blue bill and pushed it into her hand. She smiled her thanks and returned to the register.

The couple were now by the fire, defrosting. The old man couldn't decide what to do. He made up his mind. He walked carefully over to them. He stood there nervously, until the woman glanced up at him.

"Hello there," she said.

The old man stared down at her. He swallowed. He caught a waft of perfume. It was fruity and tangy and danced around his nostrils.

"Excuse me," he said, through heavily accented lips.

"What do you want, sweetie?"

He paused for a moment before he spoke.

"Un baiser", he whispered. A kiss.

The woman looked confused for a moment and looked at her husband. He didn't speak French. He stared back at her and shrugged and shook his head. To him he was just a crazy old man. A kiss? What kind of question was that? The old man didn't know what to think, or even if he was thinking at all. He stood awkwardly, his shoulders hunched over. This was stupid. He nodded once to the woman and turned away to the freezing cold.

The door chimed as he left the cafe, feeling the warmth from his bony fingers quickly get sucked away. The snow was getting deep and the old man left small footprints as he hurried away. He glanced once back to the cafe. The woman was standing there. The old man stopped. She lifted her arms up. He looked down. She was carrying a thin, woollen scarf. She held it up to him and he took it. It was his. There was a faded red stripe down the middle. She stood there while the old man wrapped it around his neck. It was very cold.

"Thank you very much," whispered the old man.

The woman just smiled but as the old man turned to leave, she stretched out, and kissed him, once, on the cheek.