



My First French Lover

- I DIDN'T SET OUT TO sleep with Philippe. For one thing, he was my parents' friend; for another, he was married.

On one of their many trips to Paris before I lived there, my parents met Philippe Roussel, an ophthalmologist, at Aux Charpentiers, a neighborhood restaurant near Saint-Germain des Près, where long, family-style tables bring you into closer contact with other diners than you might wish. In his travel diary, which I discovered after his death, my father reported that the French friends who had recommended the restaurant had said that “while not modern or elegant it was a place where intellectuals came to eat.”

My parents were all for intellectuals, as long as I didn't marry one. And while traveling in France, which they had been doing since the mid-1950s, they prided themselves on eating at restaurants not listed in the *Michelin Guide*. Sitting across the narrow table, the doctor noticed my father putting drops into his bloodshot eyes. He struck up a conversation

with my parents, offering his professional services. After dinner they all went back to his office around the corner on the rue Jacob, where the eye doctor treated my father by injection. As if that were not enough (“This could only happen to me,” my father noted in a rare burst of personal reporting), Philippe then invited my parents into his living quarters adjacent to the office for drinks and music. Philippe, it turned out, was not only a great eye doctor but a brilliant pianist. He played from memory for an hour. The music so moved my father that he crushed the wine glass he was holding in his hand. The following year, when they became better acquainted, Philippe played tennis with my mother, who was not accustomed to losing, and beat her 6–2, 6–2, 6–4, “a fine game,” according to the diary entry, despite the score.

I never knew what I liked most about the story, which my father had told more than once: my father having his eye injected by a total stranger, or my father so stirred by Schubert that he broke a glass listening to the music.

• WHEN I ARRIVED IN PARIS in the early fall of 1961 to study at the Sorbonne, I made an appointment to see Philippe about my contact lens prescription. A few weeks later he invited me to a party at his apartment. The following day, when I got back from my job teaching English at a lycée for girls, I found his card with a message scrawled in brown ink: “*N. Vous avez fait des ravages.*” The ravaged victim of my charms turned out to be a Japanese painter who had been passing through Paris. He wanted to practice his English over dinner, but I wasn’t in the mood for more lessons. Within the week, Philippe invited me out to dinner himself. We drove to Montparnasse in his red Volkswagen convertible with the top up and his hand under my skirt.

I wasn’t completely surprised to find Philippe’s hand creeping nimbly under my garter belt. I had already been initiated into this practice by Monsieur Delattre, the phonetics professor, during the summers I spent at Middlebury College’s French School, where all the students signed a Language Pledge—*un engagement d’honneur*—not to speak a word of English for six weeks, under threat of expulsion. We were willing

prisoners of the Pledge, endlessly correcting each other, alert to the slightest infraction, even while kissing. “Perfecting” our French was the fantasy that inspired compliance.

Monsieur Delattre would pick me up at my boarding house and we would go for long drives late at night down deserted country roads. I learned French slang words for penis—*queue* and *verge*, surprised that they were feminine nouns, while *con*, “cunt,” was masculine, and also meant a guy who was a jerk—with no clue that nice girls were not supposed to know those expressions, certainly not use them. I cared only about my accent and getting the gender right. I justified the fingers by the phonetics. As it turned out, the French professor’s hand-in-the-crotch-while-driving routine on Vermont country roads proved to be excellent preparation for my first year in Paris. I almost didn’t mind being another stop on a stick shift. There was something seductive and guiltless about being a good pupil.

After an extra rare steak au poivre washed down with a bottle of Saint-Julien at the Coupole, we drove back to Philippe’s apartment. He poured champagne for both of us and played a late Schubert sonata, cigarette drooping French-style from his mouth, the ash dropping slowly over the piano keys. I didn’t break a glass, but I was impressed. Philippe had hesitated between the conservatory and medical school, he told me. A little after eleven o’clock, he stopped playing and suggested—very quietly—that I spend the night. I can’t say that I found Philippe physically attractive—tall, thin, with a long beaky nose and thin lips—but he somehow forced you to like his ugliness.

“It’s late, you know. If you leave now, you’ll disturb the concierge.”

“But you’re married.” The concierge was the least of my concerns.

“Anne has gone to the mountains with our son. She won’t be back for two weeks.”

“But wouldn’t she mind?”

“That’s my problem, not yours. If it doesn’t bother me, why should it bother you?”

I knew from the French movies I had seen that the more you talk about it, the further you commit yourself to doing the very thing you say you neither wish nor intend to do.

"I'll be careful," Philippe continued, softly, taking advantage of my silence. "So what can happen?"

"But," I lamely started and stopped. Philippe had a subtle voice that ranged between irony and caress that was hard to resist.

"Darling, you're not a child. Tell me, what could happen?"

"Nothing."

"So if nothing can happen and no one finds out, no one will get hurt, right?"

"Right," I said, reluctantly, though I knew it couldn't be that simple.

"So why not?"

I could never find a strong rejoinder to "Why not?"

Philippe drew me a bath in the most beautiful bathroom I had ever seen. The walls were painted a dark eggplant lacquer. They gleamed. Philippe sat on the edge of the tub in his white terry cloth robe, smoking and pouring a capful of Obao bath oil beads that turned the water turquoise blue. After watching me for a while without speaking, he brought me a robe that matched his (the kind I had only seen in the expensive hotels my parents liked to stay at), and holding hands, we walked slowly down the carpeted corridor in silence to the bedroom.

We lay on the bed, kissed lightly, and shared a last cigarette. Still not speaking, Philippe climbed on top of me and, within a matter of minutes of intense activity, rolled off neatly with a small groan. He took a cigarette out of his pack, tapped it lightly, and lit up.

"Et moi?" I asked, startled by the smoke signals that suggested closure. Philippe dragged on his cigarette, and offered me a puff. It wasn't about smoking, but I couldn't find the words. I took a cigarette from my own pack instead, and lay silent in the darkness. This was not what happened in any of the foreign movies I had seen.

"Débrouillez-vous," he said, after a while, propping himself up on one elbow. He pointed languidly to my other hand, which seemed to mean that if I wanted more, the rest was up to me.

"Do it myself? Is that something French?" I finally asked, torn between humiliation and curiosity.

"Oh," Philippe said fondly in English, "American girl," as though the answer should be obvious.

“Only until I know whether it’s going to be a *passade*,” he added, “or something serious.”

A passing fancy. I wondered how he decided. As I fell asleep, I forced myself not to think about Philippe’s wife.

The next morning the Swedish au pair brought us breakfast in bed: café au lait and warm croissants with butter and jam. I was stunned as much by the elegance of the breakfast (beautifully laid out on the tray, with simple white bowls and pitchers of coffee and hot milk) as by their complicity. (When did he tell her what to do, and wouldn’t she mention his overnight guest to his wife?) But I didn’t ask these questions (Did he sleep with her too?) and instead acted as though I understood the rules of the game, as though I did this sort of thing all the time. After breakfast, Philippe placed the tray outside the bedroom door, as if we had spent the night in a hotel, and started up again. Afterward, he took my face between his lovely long hands and wiped away the crumbs on my lips.

“You’re a sweet girl. You turn me on,” Philippe declared, kissing me.

Then he walked down the hallway that led to his day as a doctor in the other part of the apartment. “Let yourself out,” he said, his hand on the doorknob. “You’ll come to dinner when Anne gets back. I’m sure she’ll want to meet you. You’ll like her. She adores your parents,” he added, as if to reassure me.

I walked back slowly through the elegant streets of Saint-Germain. It was briefly sunny that morning and I sat for a while on a rented chair in the Luxembourg Gardens, watching the children sail their tiny boats in the pond despite the cold. Was this the beginning of a story or a one-night stand? A passionate affair or a *passade*? When would I know? This was, I had begun to see, the problem with “experimenting,” my parents’ code word for what they took to be my vast sexual experience. By definition, there was no way to know beforehand how an experiment would turn out. If Philippe was typical of French lovers, I was headed for disappointment. He seemed to have performed better on the tennis court with my mother.

“I went to a party at Anne and Philippe’s house last night,” I reported the next day in my weekly letter. “They served blanc de

blanc and foie gras.” (I actually wrote “*foie de gras*.” Those were early days.) “I met a charming Japanese painter, who wants me to teach him English.”

If I had gone to Paris to escape from my parents, it had not taken me long to return home in my mind, even through my lies.

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