

A MAN AND A WOMAN

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Late March cloaks Deauville in grey. This is her favorite part, when off-season has emptied the town and the horizon is invisible and the beaches stretch dizzily far into nothing. The sand is cool as she sits along the shore, the suede of her coat doing little against the wind. Galloping horses flicker in and out of the fog and she hears her mother say, Ghosts, Marie.

Those aren't ghosts, she'd answer, to which her mother would reply, Reach out and touch them, then. And the horses would vanish back into the grey before she could.

Muffled hooves crescendo again behind her. She waits for them to fade, but the sense of disruption never leaves. Her head tilts up.

Desolée, the man says. He stands apart, windblown and unfamiliar. Sorry, he repeats in English when she doesn't respond. Didn't mean to disturb you.

You're not disturbing me.

If he notices her voice, raspy from disuse, he doesn't comment. Aren't you cold?

No. Would you like to sit?

My train is in twenty minutes, he says, but he's already settling beside her.

Are you here for the film? she asks.

What film?

'A Man and a Woman.' Filmed here in the sixties.

Is it good?

Very. Why are you here, then?

Oh, I wish I knew, he says. But I want to hear more about this movie. Tell me.

It occurs to her that this is unwise, speaking to a stranger on the infinite grey of the beaches. There isn't much to tell. It's good, like I said, but unrealistic.

Every film is.

No, this one in particular. Imagine—the woman sends the man a telegram to confess her love, and he drops everything to drive across France and see her. What if she changed her mind in the span of his drive?

Did she?

Of course not. That's why it's unrealistic.

Hm, he says, and then: I like that.

The lack of realism?

The faith that it could be realism.

Wind blows across the sand, stinging her face. It doesn't always look like this, she says. The town is prettiest in summer.

And more crowded?

Overwhelmingly.

His laugh ripples the fog. I came at a good time, then.

You still haven't said why you're here.

I said I didn't know. He lies back, dark hair against the ground. Maybe because of Danielle.

**Hm, he says, and then: I like that.
The lack of realism?
The faith that it could be realism.**



Girlfriend?

Ex-wife. She always said she wanted to honeymoon in Normandy, but then kept changing her mind—'How can we fly to France and skip Paris?' Driving me crazy. Then getting mad when I said she was driving me crazy.

So you honeymooned in Paris.

Like a goddamn cliché. His head turns. And you?

I live here.

Is that all?

Is that all? She lives here in the sense she can't recall when she last left. She sleeps in a bed that's falling apart, cooks in a kitchen that belonged to her mother.

I like it, she says.

He doesn't press. Give me a tour.

Don't you have a train?

I did. But that was before I discovered 'A Man and a Woman,' so now I need the full experience.

She can't remember her last real conversation, but he's dusting off his jeans, offering a hand up, and she accepts.

I wanted coffee, he says as they walk back across the beaches. But it's a ghost town.

Deauville's only alive for tourists. Sand turns to wooden slats beneath their feet. Everyone comes for the blue water, but it's more cinematic like this, I think. Her breath clouds in the chill. Let's find coffee.

They curve through cobbled roads past shuttered storefronts to the café that never closes. Maybe she should've let him take that train. She can't recall how this began.

You know what's funny, he says as they sit by the window. Danielle loves cafés. But she hates coffee.

So she orders tea?

No, she hates tea too. She'll visit cafés for the thrill. Said she loved the atmosphere, but I think she got this perverse excitement from being surrounded by coffee. So she'd drag me with her, make me order something just for the 'atmosphere.' Isn't that fucked?

Her throat hitches on a laugh. Is that why it ended? Paris, cafés?

Hardly. *Their drinks arrive, his features blurring through steam.* She was having an affair.

The café smell lines her lungs, coffee beans and steamed milk, and maybe she's equally perverse, breathing in the scent of his ex-wife. I'm sorry.

She made me freshly-squeezed juice every morning, what a darling. *He lifts his cortado.* One day it tasted off. She said something about switching orange brands at the store, bullshit like that. Later I took out the trash and inside was some empty Tropicana bottle. With pulp. As if it'd trick me into believing it was freshly-squeezed.

You determined infidelity through juice?

Absolutely. Eventually I caught her bringing the guy home, but it all started with the Tropicana.

Her spoon clinks against her cup. That's why I never make promises.

He studies her. Divorced?

Something like that.

They finish their coffees and venture across the docks, sailboats drifting against ropes in colorless waves. They pass grand hotels and abandoned casinos and talk. Time turns forgettable. Deauville is small and their conversation runs long, and they loop around the town perimeter.

You said you don't make promises, he says. Why not? Risk is the point.

She shakes her head. I avoid risk. And mutual promises are worse.

Like wedding vows.

Exactly. You have to keep your promises and trust the other person will too. Why set up that disappointment?

Is it so hard to keep your word?

That's not what this is about.

His gaze finds her bare hands. Earlier, about divorce. You said 'Something like that.'

The boardwalk echoes beneath her boots. Afternoon light has dulled, bearing witness to her hesitation.

I got scared, she says. *This man she met hours ago doesn't deserve her words, but suddenly she can't stop.* I kept believing I loved him, that it was nerves. But then it was the wedding day and nothing had changed. So I left. *She stares at the expanse where the seashore should be.* Sometimes I think I should call him. Apologize.

Don't you think he should've realized how you felt?

I never told him.

You shouldn't have had to.

She turns, wind whipping her hair, and they regard each other: ragged edges, less alone.

I'll take the next train, he says. *Her chest twists. She nods and they move toward the station, beaches fading behind; her hands are cold and she wants to reach out but doesn't know what for—his shoulder, his face. Her arm falls as they step inside.*

Thank you, he says, for the tour.

The intercom announces the train. Time slips; she finds his eyes. Neither acknowledge the absurdity of their circumstances, the things she shouldn't have said. You're welcome.

He offers a hand. Sebastian.

Marie.

We should meet again, he says. Late March, on the beach.

You won't be here.

I will.

Deauville is cloaked with grey. He stands close, windblown and familiar. The train doors open and there is a warmth in her face.

I'll be here, she says. I promise.



Lien-Huong Nguyen is a junior studying Media, Culture, and Communication with a Creative Writing minor. She enjoys witty dialogue, pretty stationery, and full-circle endings. Ash is a sophomore in Applied Psychology. She loves exploring pretty places such as cafes and museums, and looking for corgis in NYC.