

Time found us

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Time found us

Home... a word with more sentimental charge than geographical significance. I have run for centuries, tirelessly, to find my place. I'm ready to come home now. And you?

Prologue

Ava

Paris

7 July 2019, 10:15

A thin veil of dust drifted to the floor, shimmering in the faint shaft of sunlight that slipped through the half-drawn curtains. The room felt heavy with silence: the kind that clings to old furniture and faded ornaments, an echo of forgotten voices. In the leather armchair sat her outline, fragile and still, a silhouette carved from shadow. Only the faint rise and fall of her chest, the slow effort of each swallow, betrayed life within her.

Her eyes, dulled and tear-stained, stared through the space before her, seeing nothing, as she had for two days now. I moved closer, wanting to bridge the distance, to touch her, to remind her that I was here. Yet even now, she neither saw nor heard me. Presence, I had long realized, was something I could no longer offer.

With an almost epicurean conviction, I died first without fear, knowing that my troubled soul would never accompany me into the light. I knew I would return one day, the day I would get the chance to set things right.

I had appeared in her life two months ago. I knew the moment had come, so I began following her everywhere, reading her most hidden thoughts, penetrating her intimacy. In the morning, my journey took me through Inverness, where I paused by a small house. Inside, two women, a mother and her grown daughter, sat by the window, sharing coffee and quiet laughter. For a brief moment, I watched them, breathing in the warmth of their togetherness, the simple fortune of having one another.

Then a sudden restlessness stirred within me. Without lingering, I turned back toward Paris, where I knew Ava waited: silently, patiently.

I came back to set things right.
And this time, I will not fail her.

Our paths, crossed down the memory lane

Ava

Paris

5 May 2019

The metro screeched to a halt. I squeezed into the crowd, books clutched against my chest like armour. The air was thick with heat, perfume, and impatience. Paris pressed in from all sides: careless, hurried, indifferent. People refused to move, blocking the aisle like immovable statues. My bag dug into my shoulder, my thoughts racing faster than a TGV.

I was late. Late for an art exhibition, late in life, almost late to myself. This year I would graduate. I could see it: my parents' proud smiles, the weight of every sacrifice they had made, all invested in an only child who had no intention of staying. Paris had never felt like mine. I didn't want the city, didn't want the noise, didn't want the chaos. I wanted a quiet town, a library, a desk by the window, a life that moved slowly and deliberately.

The metro screeched again. My stop. I pushed forward, stepping into the muted sunlight of a lifeless street. Five minutes later, I

stood before the old building that housed the exhibition. Its door loomed like an invitation, or perhaps a challenge. I entered, registered, and hesitated. The room was vast. Paintings crowded the walls, each one a universe. I felt small and lost. The theme for this upcoming project - *the subtle sublime in art* - demanded more than casual attention. We were to choose a painting, compose a text, capture its essence.

Hours passed in a blur of sketches and notes. My mind ached. I was ready to leave when a faint, hidden painting drew me in. Its simplicity stunned me. Its anonymity intrigued me. A quiet calm descended, sinking into my bones. I stood there, immobile, until voices broke the silence.

“It’s like a winter night, snow sifted through a sieve,” said an elderly lady, soft and deliberate.

“Or a starry desert night,” added a younger one, quick and sharp.

Without thinking, I spoke:

“It’s the perfect image of a hidden world where souls travel, ceaselessly, for centuries, waiting to meet again.”

They turned, eyes wide.

“Where does such imagination come from?” asked the younger woman.

I held her gaze. Her presence was commanding, yet warm. Tall and effortlessly elegant, she carried herself with a scholar's poise, softened by an unexpected warmth. A shiver ran down my spine. The elder inclined her head, offering a wordless seal of approval.

"Why souls," the younger pressed, "and not snowflakes or stars?"

"Because I see movement, voices, a dance. Some lines are finer, some dots shine, some dim. They swirl, a ballet of spirits, preparing to descend, to start anew, to fulfil promises. And some wait still, their time yet to come."

The elder smiled while the younger kept studying me, unsure whether to question or simply absorb.

"I notice that your mother seems to agree with me," I added, smiling.

"Oh, we are not related," the younger said. "God, where are our manners? I'm Prof. H  l  ne Villeneuve, this is Prof. B  atrice Duval. University of Bordeaux. And you?"

"Ava Duchamp," I replied. "Faculty of Arts, Paris. Dissertation in progress."

Brief conversation followed, light, warm, yet charged with unspoken curiosity. Professor Villeneuve suggested the small town of Inverness in Scotland for further studies, a quiet town with

rich culture and friendly faces, the place she was aiming to return to the coming months. A lamp in the night for a wandering heart.

I thanked them. They left, the sound of the door closing echoing in the gallery. I returned to the painting. Inspiration had found me. Ideas poured onto paper. My task was complete, yet my journey had just begun.

On the way back home, I sank into a seat, letting the city blur past the window. Scotland flickered in my mind: its wilderness, its quiet streets, the promise of a new life. My heart whispered certainty even as my mind hesitated. Why is it that we tend to ignore the advice of others? Those with experience stand by the roadside like lantern bearers in the dark, ready to guide us toward the right path. Yet we search for excuses to turn them away. Instead, we pull out our own flashlight, its batteries long dead, and wander into the unknown on our own.

Your confession is mine

Hélène

Paris

5 May 2019

Leaving the exhibition did nothing to quiet my mind. The image of the young woman we had just met lingered with me: her voice, her unusual way of seeing the world, the unfiltered honesty in her words. First impressions are rarely reliable, yet something about her defied that rule. She hadn't tried to impress us; if anything, she seemed unaware of the effect she had.

Béatrice and I walked toward the old town in steady silence, the kind that leaves you too much space for thoughts. I was still replaying the girl's interpretation of the painting when Béatrice broke the quiet.

"How about we go have lunch somewhere?"

I nodded, grateful for something tangible to focus on. We agreed that no project could be written on an empty stomach. A small family restaurant near the exhibition drew us in: warm, bustling, affordable, a rare gem in a city with prices that rival a miniature Monaco.

I had known Béatrice for nearly seventeen years now, since 2002 to be more precise, when I started teaching at the university. We were colleagues more than friends, connected enough to know the outlines of each other's lives but not the details. She knew I was married to Xavier. I knew she was a widow. Beyond that, we tended not to cross those lines. Respect or indifference? I could never tell. But today, that boundary felt thinner.

She had been patient all morning, circling her questions with care. The tension grew so thick I finally cut through it.

"Are you surprised that I advised the young woman to study in Scotland?"

"Don't be naïve," she replied, raising an eyebrow. "Knowing you this long, nothing surprises me about your altruistic nature. You've guided many students. But you've never encouraged any of them to go to Scotland. That's one thing. But the bigger question is: how is it that you're moving permanently to Inverness this year? Does Xavier know? I met him, remember. A presence that won't fade. But I doubt he's the type to drop everything and start a new life in another country."

"It's not complicated," I said. "From the moment Ava spoke, I felt... a connection. Strong, inexplicable. As if I had known her forever. And no, Xavier isn't coming with me. We're getting a divorce."