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French Lessons

Written by Ellen Sussman

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French Lessons

ELLEN SUSSMAN

Canvas

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The Tutors



Brilliant sunlight spills through the windows of the Vivre à la Française language school. It has been raining for days—for weeks—and the sudden flash of sun through a break in the clouds causes everyone in the dreary office to stop for a moment and turn their faces toward the light. It's early morning and no one is quite awake—one young woman murmurs, *"Bonjour, soleil."* Nico smiles. Then the door slams and everyone stirs, suddenly alert. Nico blinks and looks around, hoping for a sign of what he already knows: Something's different. It's not just the sun. It's the day, new and promising. Every corner of the office looks sun-washed and bright. Even the ghostly girl behind the desk offers Nico a half smile when she hands him his daily work sheet.

Sure enough, today's teaching assignment promises something new—Josie Felton. He likes the name. It's so very American, and he imagines a blond, ponytailed girl, ready to conquer Paris. *His* Paris. He'll show her the way. He tucks the computer printout with her name and the details of their lesson—meeting

time, duration, level of French, areas of concentration—into his back pocket.

It's time to meet Chantal at the café.

Nico walks out of the language school onto rue de Paradis. Before he turns to the corner restaurant, he looks down the street in the other direction. Something has caught his attention—a gasp, the rustle of fabric, a bare arm. He squints in the sun and sees two people at the end of the street. A woman pushes a man up against the wall of the building. Her arms, bare and tattooed, a lightning flash zigzagging across tan flesh, pin the man's shoulders. She leans in for a kiss that takes a long time. Someone pushes through the door behind Nico and bumps into him.

"Sorry," he says and steps aside.

Nico looks back. The woman saunters away. The man runs his hand through his hair and walks toward Nico. It's Philippe. Nico's first thought is of Chantal—did she see the kiss? He looks toward the café and Chantal is there, sitting at a table outside, reading a book. Nico takes a breath.

Philippe reaches him in a second and smacks his arm.

"I'm late, man," Philippe says in French. "Order me an espresso."

"Got it," Nico says.

Philippe heads into the language school and the door swings closed behind him.

Nico, Philippe, and Chantal have coffee together on Monday and Friday mornings after they get their assignments at the school. There are other French instructors—who teach regular classes rather than individual sessions, mostly older men and women who seem to have nothing in common with these three—though sometimes Nico wonders what he has in com-

mon with Philippe. Maybe they only really share one thing: an attraction to Chantal.

Nico hurries to the café. He can see the curve of Chantal's neck as she peers at her novel, her umbrella perched at her side, her cardigan neatly buttoned. He thinks of her in bed last week, after they made love, her hair fanned across the pillow, her body beaded with sweat, her features soft. A different person. He wants both of them.

He leans over and gives her a kiss on each cheek, then slides into the chair next to her. He smells her perfume, something that reminds him of the Mediterranean, and he has the odd sensation of stepping into the cool water of the sea. He looks around—the café is crowded and noisy—and every conversation seems too loud and hurried. A man shouts at the driver of a car who blasts his horn in response. Nico imagines a different café, somewhere in Provence. Let's drive to the sea, he would say.

He can feel the heat of the newly hatched sun on his back. Chantal tilts her head and looks at him as if she wants to read his thoughts. When they made love she pulled him onto her, so that all the space between them disappeared. Now he feels the need to touch her. First her mouth, where there is a hint of a smile. Her lips are full and he sees that she has worn lipstick. Does she always wear lipstick?

"Philippe is late," he says in French. "He'll be here soon."

"Of course," she says.

"Do you have your American again?" he asks.

"The last day," she tells Nico. "I'm a little sad about it."

"He's stolen your heart?"

She shakes her head. "He hasn't tried."

"And if he tried?"

"He's a happily married man," she says. "There aren't many of them. It's good to find one once in a while."

Nico imagines Chantal next to him in a convertible, like a young Catherine Deneuve, a scarf around her hair, the sea stretching along the coast, the road twisting through green hills, the air full of the smell of lavender.

The waiter appears. He's young, bored, and reeks of last night's booze. Nico wants to tell the kid to go home and take a shower. When he looks around the café, he realizes that most of the customers are younger than he is. He's thirty-two years old—when did he become an old guy? Nico orders a *café crème* and an espresso for Philippe. When the waiter leaves, Nico waves the stale air away.

"And you?" Chantal asks. "Who do you have today?"

"A woman. I don't know if she's young or old. Also American. High level of French."

"Lucky you."

"Apparently she's a high school French teacher. Why would a French teacher need a tutor for a day?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Chantal tucks her hair behind her ears. She, too, looks older than the girls who flutter in their chairs, texting on cell phones, giggling with their friends. Nico hears the high-pitched voice of one girl—*"Mais non, c'est pas possible!"*—and the girl swats at a boy's face. The boy leans forward and brushes his thumb across the girl's lips. Nico pulls his eyes away. He looks at Chantal, who sips her espresso. She is twenty-eight. She is a woman compared to these girls. Again, he wants to touch her. He looks at her fingers resting on the table. She wears a simple silver ring, something that could be mistaken for a wedding band.

He reaches for her hand and pulls it closer to him. The band

has something etched on it. Finally he sees that it's a vine, encircling her finger.

"I like that," he tells her.

"It's a broken promise," she says.

He waits for her to explain, feeling the heat of her hand in his.

"Philippe gave it to me," she tells him, and her hand drifts away.

Nico looks across the street. Still no sign of Philippe.

"I have news," he says. He wants to tell her before Philippe comes. He leans forward, ready to share his secret. He has told no one. "I sold my poetry collection yesterday!"

"Bravo!" Chantal says, her eyes wide. "And I didn't even know you were a poet!"

"I don't tell many people." In fact, he has only confessed his creative aspirations to his parents, who complained that he should give it up and devote himself to a real career. And so he didn't share the news with them last night. Besides, he's not sure how they'll react to the poems when they finally read them.

"What do you write about?" Chantal asks. Her face lights up—this is the Chantal he fell for weeks ago, the woman who listened to him tell a long story about his first girlfriend in Normandy and who asked him, with so much kindness, "Will you always love her best?" "No," he had told her, "I hope not." He did not say: Maybe I will love you best.

"It's a series of poems that are all about the same story. A boy is kidnapped from his home. He's gone for twenty-four hours. Each poem is a different version of what happens to him in those twenty-four hours."

"Who was kidnapped?" Philippe asks, dropping into a seat at their small, round table. He sets his messenger bag on the ground beside his chair.

Nico feels a tightening of his chest—he has lost the chance to tell her more.

"Were you kidnapped?" Chantal asks.

"It's just something I wrote," Nico says. Another time, he'll show Chantal the poems. He'll tell her the story of his day in the root cellar. In a quick moment, he feels the terror that he has lived with for so long. He's a child standing on the top of a tower of wooden wine boxes. The air smells of earth and potatoes and wine. He peers through the gap in the top of the hatch and can see the legs of policemen, dozens of policemen, their black boots stomping through wet mud. Even now, years later, he's not sure whether he's more scared that they'll find him or never find him.

He hasn't told anyone about that day. Now he's written thirty poems, inventing and reinventing that single experience of his childhood. Last night on the phone the editor told him, "'This book will be a gift to us all. The rest of us have our childhood experiences. You have your childhood experience and your bounteous imagination. Every day can be re-created countless times. In the end, we don't know what's true. And yet it's all true, isn't it? It's a lifetime of possibility in one day."

Nico didn't know how to answer her. Now he wonders, will this book set him free? The experience itself matters so little after all these years. But the secret has become enormous, foul, rotting. Now he has swept up the mess of it and created poems. Could she really have called the poems lovely? Breathtaking? Nico wants to tell Chantal all of this.

"Is it like a mystery? A thriller?" Philippe asks.

"Who'd you get today?" Nico asks Philippe. Philippe lights up a cigarette.

"*Bof,*" Philippe says. "No one. I've got my regular at eleven. No

one else. Clavère is trying to fuck with me. He wants me out and he won't fire me. So he keeps telling me that he doesn't have students for me. I am so fucking done with this school." Philippe blows out a stream of smoke. His cheekbones hollow and his face changes—for a moment, he looks haunted. Then he smiles and again he looks handsome and self-possessed. Nico imagines that he comes from money, despite his cheap shirt and ripped jeans.

"You going to get another job?" Nico asks.

"I'm going to focus on my music. I've got better things to do than babysit some American girl who can't conjugate the verb *être.*"

"The one with the tits," Chantal tells Nico.

"Ah-hah," Nico says. Philippe has told them that if it weren't for the woman's breasts, he would not be able to stand his two-hour sessions with her.

Nico looks at Philippe and Chantal across the small table and notices something different: Chantal has edged her chair slightly away from Philippe. She will not look at Philippe. Did she see the kiss? he wonders.

Philippe and Chantal are lovers; Nico knows that. And yet he can't quite believe it, now that he's spent some time with them. They're shadow and sunlight. What would draw Chantal to the dark corners of Philippe's life? But then he remembers the first time he saw them together at a meeting at the school. They stood against the wall in the back of the classroom. Philippe wrapped his arms around Chantal and she leaned back into him. They both looked dreamy and slow, as if they had spent the day in bed together and had thrown on clothes at the last minute to make it to the meeting. As their boss droned on about the challenges of teaching the Japanese, Philippe whispered in Chantal's

ear, and Chantal closed her eyes, snaked her arm around Philippe's back, and let her lips part as if ready to make a sound too intimate for such a public place. Nico remembers thinking: I want to know her.

Now they're both looking at him across the table, as if waiting for something.

"You got enough gigs to carry you?" Nico asks. He doesn't really know what Philippe does, music-wise.

"I auditioned a lead singer last night," Philippe says. "She rocked."

"And so you fucked her," Chantal says.

Nico has never heard Chantal curse. Finally, Chantal and Philippe glare at each other. Nico thinks: I shouldn't be here.

"I had a dream about you last night," Philippe says. "You were standing in the middle of the Champs-Élysées. Naked. A crowd of tourists were cheering and tossing coins at your feet."

"I slept with Nico last week," Chantal tells Philippe.

Nico looks at Philippe but says nothing. He hadn't imagined this. What had happened that night with Chantal was so personal, so private and contained, that he never thought about the possibility that she would tell Philippe.

"No problem, man. I don't blame you. She's hot. Look at her. You'd think that she's an uptight bitch. But she's really hot."

"Philippe," Chantal says. Her voice is mournful.

Nico remembers the surprise of Chantal's skin. He undressed her slowly that night while the boat rocked and the light of the summer moon filtered through the porthole. He had imagined a different terrain—white skin untouched by the sun, a long, thin body. But her skin was tanned and her body dipped and rose in lovely curves. She lay on her side and they faced each other. Though he waited for her to stop him, to change her

mind and ask him to leave, she gave him permission with her watchful eyes, with her playful smile, with her silence. He ran his fingers along the rise and fall of her body, neck to shoulder to waist to hip to the long stretch of her glorious leg. The landscape of Chantal, he thought.

Revenge sex, he reminds himself. Chantal didn't need this morning's display on the street corner to confirm what she already knew.

"Tell us about your book, Nico," Chantal says.

He looks at her, surprised. She offers a strained smile. Has he lost her? Of course he lost her. He never had her.

"Not now," he says. "Tonight. I'll buy a bottle of champagne at La Forêt."

Nico remembers the euphoria he felt after the phone call yesterday from the editor. I'll tell Chantal, he had thought immediately. And through the long, restless night, he had imagined her pleasure at his news. He imagined her gentle questions, her admiration, her new respect. He had guarded his poems with a fierce secrecy and now, instead of enjoying the expansive pride he expected, he feels an odd sense of loss. Did he think he'd win her with poetry? Had he foolishly thought he had already won her with a night of sex?

"We'll meet at seven?" she asks. Of course. They always meet on Friday nights. But everything has changed.

The waiter arrives and places their coffee cups on the table.

"Du sucre," Philippe says. The waiter always forgets to bring sugar.

"Will you come?" Chantal asks Philippe when the waiter leaves.

"Tonight? Who knows. By this evening you will have run off with your American," Philippe says.

"Enough," Chantal says, quietly dismissing him with a slight wave of her hand.

The waiter slides a bowl of sugar cubes onto the table as he hurries by. Philippe drops three into his cup. They all sip their coffee. Nico looks at the young couple at the next table; they are now kissing.

Finally Chantal looks up at Nico and says, "Champagne would be nice."

"Seven P.M., then."

"I'll be there," Philippe says, and he slams his empty espresso cup on the table.

Nico looks at Chantal. She gives him a smile that is filled with secrets. For him? He doesn't know her despite a night of lovemaking that has sent him into each day yearning for more. Does he yearn for more of her? He doesn't even know that. He is a fraud, a poet with no understanding of his own desires. Does he just long for desire? No, it's love he wants, he assures himself.

"I'm tired of Paris," Chantal says.

"Why?" he asks.

"There's too much noise. It's too gray. Sometimes I feel like I can't get enough air."

Nico looks around. Along the rue de Paradis he can see a *tabac*, a *papeterie,* and a *plombier* tucked in among the apartment buildings. It's a street like almost any street in Paris, and yet he loves the way the new sunlight hits the tall windows of the nineteenth-century buildings, the way the café spills into the street, the way the pedestrians rush past, all of them hurried and impatient. Paris has entranced him ever since he left Normandy at eighteen. He even likes the relentless rain. Today,

though the skies are clear, he expects another onslaught of storms. The rain suits him—it keeps him inside on his days off, writing and listening to jazz. But of course Chantal would hate this weather. She is meant for sunshine.

"I'm going to London," Philippe says. "In September."

"You didn't tell me," Chantal says quietly.

"We've got a gig—I don't know, I might stay. We can record a demo tape there. My drummer has a friend who can get us into a studio."

"That's great," Nico tells him.

Philippe glares at him.

Nico reaches into his pocket for a couple of euros to pay for his coffee.

Chantal looks at her watch. While she reaches into her bag for money, she says, "I would move somewhere warm. Somewhere very green."

Philippe drops coins on the table and charges off, his messenger bag banging against his back. He doesn't say goodbye.

"Why did you tell him?" Nico asks Chantal.

"I'm sorry."

"I thought it was between the two of us."

"It never is."

"Why not?" He tries to see her eyes but she bows her head and swirls the last bit of espresso in her cup.

"We all bring so many people to bed with us. We're never alone."

"He's furious."

"Because I changed the rules. I'm not supposed to play the same game that he plays."

"And now? What game are you playing?"

Chantal looks up. She reaches out and touches his cheek. "I don't know. Philippe has made me into someone else. I would like to believe in love again."

They had talked for a long time in bed after making love that night. When Nico told her about his high school girlfriend, how they would sneak out of their houses in the middle of the night and sleep in the hayloft in the barn, Chantal had said to him, "Young love teaches you how to love. You're so lucky. Most of us spend years trying to learn the ways of love." Nico knows that Chantal believes in love. But she was drunk that night, she was cheating on her boyfriend, and she wants to forget what they did.

She stands up and gathers her things. With her purse over her shoulder, she starts off toward the métro station. She looks back.

"I am done with all this," she says. "I'm ready for whatever the day might bring." She offers a dazzling smile, something full of hope for something else, someone else.

Nico watches her leave. He tries to hold her in his view as long as he can. The sun ducks behind a cloud and then reappears, bathing the street in new light. Chantal disappears into the entrance of the métro. Nico pulls the paper out of his back pocket and opens it. *Josie Felton.* He looks at his watch. It is time.