

Enchantée

It's a French film. It opens with accordion and the low hum of a male narrator's voice, the rattling of a bicycle chain.

On second thought, it's not that at all. It's a French film, yes, but it opens with no accordion, no kiss on the cheek, no 'enchantée'. It is quietly but assertively autobiographical, and as you watch it you wonder about the way your emotions have become so universal. You wonder when the phrase, 'you're not alone' started feeling more damning than comforting.

But you don't wonder long, because really there is no film, no midnight existentialism. Really, you're still sitting in a café on West and Third and it is a Tuesday morning in your little college town, so the streets still draw long, shallow breaths.

You were up late. Or maybe you never went to bed- you were busy, after all, watching some French movie that ended with a puff of cigarette smoke. You should be asleep, but Maria is here and Maria is enough to be awake on a Tuesday morning, even in the slow, sad parts of the city.

Maria is- well, Maria is a something. A family friend. You've known her since you were in the eighth grade and her family moved into the split-level house next to your family's split level house. She watched you paint your mother's garden fence the same summer the old library burnt down. You listened to her singing along to the radio in her bedroom before her prom date arrived. She passed a cigarette to you, from her poised fingers, red lacquered nails, and laughed when the smoke caught in your throat. That was New Year's Eve, right? You must have been seventeen, then. You must have been happier.

Now, the last time you've been home was a year ago. You let yourself in the front door, your family pictures already stripped down from the living room walls. Upstairs. The first step was the only one that didn't groan complacently under your weight; as a kid, you and your brothers always skipped the last stair as you thundered through the house, weaving figure eights around your tired mother. Your bedroom was exactly how you left it. Blue and green bedspread, lampshade aged with sun and cobwebs. Books you left on their spine for so long they crumbled, stacks of old drawings in every desk drawer.

Your mother leant against the bedroom door and asked what you wanted to keep. You looked around. It can all go, you told her. She shrugged, the moving men took it all away, and your parents moved to Florida.

Next door, Maria's father was having congestive heart failure. When you took the train back to your little college town, she sat next to you. She wore a red rose behind her ear and when you patted her back, she ignored how large, how vulgar your hands must have felt.

But it's not that at all. No, it's Tuesday morning in the café where Maria works and you are thumbing lazily through a book you think you might have read before. You two would be alone, if it weren't for Manuel. Manuel sleeps, his worn, bearded face pressed grotesquely against the counter, perched but just barely on a barstool. Maria brings you a coffee and sits down.

"What are you reading?"

You check the front cover. "Hemingway." It hasn't changed.

Maria nods. She leans back in her chair and wipes absentmindedly at some long-cemented stain on the table. You lapse back into silence, easier than falling asleep.

Nights at the café are different, of course. Manuel unsticks himself from the bar and cranks up the music, all rolling guitars and screaming trumpets. Maria lets her ponytail down, tucks a red rose back behind her ear. Her long black hair all swept over one shoulder, she blows kisses to customers and the young men shivering outside the café windows, their breath fogging up the glass.

Latin roots, she says she has, and while the truth is that she grew up eating grilled cheese sandwiches and playing little league soccer in a small town in Ohio, when she dances for the café she might as well be in a rustic villa of Guadalajara, for how she moves. It's like out of an old forties romance, the way she moves; she wears a red dress on Saturday nights and when you go to see her she leaves scars of painted lips on your blushing cheek, and if you could only never wash it off...

But really, that's not what it is. It's no French film, there's no hot air balloon, no frightening pop of champagne. It's not even a set of heels, clicking dry down an empty city street, no. It's you, and maybe you're alone, finishing your coffee, leaving too much in tips, letting the bell jangle behind you as the glass door of the café swings shut.