

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Stacey Naughton
Chapter 1

THE SUN BEATS DOWN as she squints, trying to decipher another street sign. Duolingo didn't prepare her for navigation as well as she thought. She's lost. Again.

She spots a man, older, but notices he's the only person not paired up or buried in headphones. She steadies herself and runs through the verbs she knows.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur,*" she says politely.

She notices his graying chest hair peeking out from his crisp linen shirt. The pale blue stands out against the navy-and-white awnings fluttering behind him. He pauses, curious to hear what this American woman will come up with.

"*Je suis — ah, je suis perdu?*" she manages in a poor accent.

The gray pavés feel uneven beneath her flats as she shifts, hoping he understood.

He kindly asks where she needs to go. At least, she thinks he does.

The sun continues to press down. Her anxiety blooms. Her armpits grow damp, her hairline sticky. Her handsome helper waits patiently.

She tells him the name of the bookshop. Holds up her book — the one she's been reading all over his country — and explains she's on her *tournée de promotion du livre*.

Listening eagerly, she recognizes that she must turn left, then right. She hesitates, then thanks him.

"You're welcome," he says in perfect English.

Stunned, she blinks. "You're American?"

He laughs gently. "I am."

"And you let me flounder like that?" she asks, embarrassed. She feels like she's failed a test.

Without her noticing, he's turned her toward the correct direction. They start walking together.

"I'm an English professor," he explains. "I wanted to see how you'd do." He looks her up and down appraisingly. "Not bad."

He guides her to the next street before introducing himself. "I'm Tom." He shifts his bag higher on his shoulder and extends his hand.

She pauses, noticing the deep laugh lines beneath his round tortoise-shell sunglasses before offering her own.

"*Je m'appelle Maggie,*" she says, smiling. "That one I've got down."

They make small talk as they walk. It becomes clear he's escorting her the rest of the way.

"So you're a writer?" he asks, motioning to the book in her hand.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

"*Oui*. It sold well in France, so I'm doing a few readings. This one's supposed to be at a tiny bookshop with a big online following," she explains.

He stops in front of a quaint shop at the end of the road. Books are displayed in deep evergreen windowpanes. Hers sits prominently in the front, advertising her event.

"Look at that," he claps softly. "Your reading's tomorrow?"

"I just wanted to make sure I knew how to get here," she says, sitting in a café chair on the sidewalk. "I got lost before my last reading and was late. It was so embarrassing."

"Ah— maybe I'll stop by. Is owning the book a prerequisite?"

"No," she smiles, "but my bank account would appreciate it."

He chuckles, fishing a card from his deep brown wallet. "If you need help getting around— here. I'm on break."

She notices he isn't wearing a wedding band. Then again, neither is she. The heat keeps sliding hers off.

She thanks him and watches as he walks back the way they came, wondering if he'll really show up tomorrow.

Chapter 2

Tom studies his reflection in the mirror. Some sunspots, but not many. Creases streak across his forehead, but again, not many. His gaze drops to his chest, his stomach.

Could be flatter, he thinks. Not bad for a man turning 50 tomorrow.

He pads to the closet as the cat he and his neighbors have an unspoken agreement to feed weaves between his legs, eager for dinner. He wants something breathable. The evening air has offered no relief from the heat. Tailored chinos. Linen button-down. Sneakers.

Feeling faintly ridiculous, he grabs her book, unsure if it's customary to bring an author's own novel to a reading. He's never been to one. As he pours kibble, he asks the cat what he should be. She meows gratefully and eats.

Admittedly, the book isn't for him. He read the first few chapters but prefers historical fiction. The author bio revealed she's married. Tom is surprised by how much that disappointed him. He nudges the cat good-bye and heads out, eager for something he can't quite name.

Maggie is perched on a stool when Tom arrives. In a sea of well-read women, he's the only man. She notices him as he slips into the back. She tucks her hair behind her ear, suddenly uneasy. She wonders if she looks okay in her chartreuse silk pants and usual white tank. Fingering the gold charm around her neck, she clears her throat.

"*Bonjour*, everyone," she starts shyly.

She introduces herself and gives the same speech she's delivered across the U.S., London, and twice now in Paris. As she begins reading,

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

women shift in their seats, sticky with heat. Tom sits with one ankle resting atop his knee, watching curiously.

The reading unfolds smoothly. She answers questions, then offers to sign books for anyone interested. Tom queues behind a woman in a red dress who gushes over the author. He wonders if his sister's heard of her.

Maybe I'll mail her the book.

"You came!"

Is she excited— or am I imagining it? he wonders, sliding his book toward her pen. He asks her to make it out to Kathleen.

"Your wife?" she asks lightly.

"My sister," he says.

He thinks he sees her eyebrow lift, chides himself for being hopeful. Then she asks him to dinner, making it seem very real.

"The manager recommended the place across the street," she says, gathering her things. He watches as she slides a fresh coat of red lip gloss over her pouty lips.

They decide to sit outside. The full moon glows in the navy sky like a luminous pearl in its shell.

Tom offers to order a bottle of wine, which she politely declines. He instinctively looks at her waist before quickly looking at her tanned face again.

"No," she laughs at him. He cringes at his behavior. "I just don't like it. If you're doing the ordering, I'd like a dirty martini."

He teases her for her palette. "I know— I shouldn't say this too loudly given where I am, but I also don't drink coffee."

Tom looks at her in horror.

"That one I do like," she admits, "But it makes me too anxious." She wiggles in her seat, as if to demonstrate what happens after a cup.

Their conversation flows, a river of easy words between the two. She laughs at one of his self-deprecating jokes, head tipped back, neck exposed. Tom likes this feeling. He can't remember the last time he made a woman laugh like that.

His wife, he thinks. Before.

"I've never been to a book reading," he admits, before taking a bite of his entree.

She rests her fork and asks him what he thinks.

"You're very good."

She laughs. "At reading? Thank you, I've been doing it for most of my 38 years."

He lets the number register before speaking again. "No, no," he says, feeling flustered. "The book— a lot of women seem to like it. I heard them speaking while we were in line."

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Maggie looks at him slyly. A smile curves to one side of her mouth. Her coup glass smudged her lipstick. She dabs at it politely, as if she could feel the mistake. "But not you."

Tom shoulders sag, looking defeated. "No, sorry, it's not for me. I like World War II books," he admits.

So does my husband, Maggie thinks before smiling. "It's alright. I've had worse reviews."

Their evening wraps up and Tom offers to walk her back to her hotel. She accepts and they amble side by side, enjoying the evening.

Tom dabs at his brow with his bandana before turning to say goodbye. He feels silly for the pang of sadness in his chest. He's just met this woman. Before he could wish her well she asks him what he's doing tomorrow.

"I don't have plans until the evening, why?"

"Interested in being my tour guide?" she asks earnestly.

He couldn't think of a better way to turn 50. They agree on a time and he walks away with a little extra vigor in his step.

Chapter 3

I know she's married, he tells Clara, frozen in time on his bedside table.

He loves that picture. She's in a white shirtdress, standing in a lavender field, sunhat tilted. It hadn't been enough.

Brushing his teeth, he wonders what his wife would think of Maggie. She'd compliment her skin. Say she's beautiful. She is. Her green eyes light up when she laughs.

The next morning, Tom puts on his summer uniform of pressed chinos, linen shirt and sunglasses before heading out to meet Maggie. He checks the mirror to check if 50 ushered in any new grays. Pleased to see the same amount he went to bed with last night, he lathers on sunscreen and steps outside.

The cat blocks his doorway.

"Why are you always here?" he asks fondly.

He picks up a latte from the cafe next to his building. Maggie waits outside her hotel in a navy sundress, straw hat hiding her eyes. He chuckles to himself. She has no idea he's 50 today.

"Bonjour!" she calls. "What— no coffee for me?"

He smiles and asks where she'd like to start. She gives him the run-down of the day she's planned.

Tom points out this and that as they make their way toward the Pantheon. As the day stretches he thinks back to when he first moved to Paris, just after college. The way Clara once showed him everything.

They stop for lunch and she asks what he's doing the rest of the weekend. He tells her he's having a few friends over tonight.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Eagerly taking a sip of water, she asks what for. She's pulled her hair back into a low ponytail and drags a wet napkin along the back of her neck.

"Ah, well, um," he stammers. "It's my 50th birthday today."

Maggie throws her napkin down. "Your 50th birthday! Why didn't you say so? Gosh, I feel like a jerk. You're spending your day showing me around Paris. You probably couldn't be more bored."

He swears he's enjoying himself. "I had no plans during the day!"

She eyes him cautiously. "If you say so," she says slowly.

He takes a sip of water, wondering if he should invite her, but the moment passes. It's been so long since he's asked a woman out. And she's married, why would she say yes, he thinks.

A light breeze sweeps through the street, breaking up the stale summer air. Tom takes it as a sign. He musters up the courage as they arrive at Notre Dame.

Wow, she exhales.

He studies the side of her face. Notices her single dimple. The faint scar near her eye.

Wow, he thinks.

"Would you like to come to my party tonight?" he finally manages. He keeps his gaze straight ahead.

She turns her attention away from the church to analyze her tour guide before bringing her eyes back to the historic building in front of them.

"Yes," she confirms. "I would like that."

Chapter 4

"Why do you keep looking at the door?"

One of Tom's colleagues confronts him as she grabs another drink from his fridge. He brushes her off. It's 8:45. She's not coming.

Someone turns the music up. Another friend grabs his hand and pulls him onto the balcony to dance. He smells a cigarette, spots who's smoking it, and reaches over for a drag.

"Tom, did you hear me?"

He realizes his friend Oscar has been talking to him. "Who is that?"

Tom peers through the balcony doors, past the crowd filling his living room, and sees Maggie.

He wastes no time answering. She beams as he jostles through his sea of guests towards her. They greet each other with a hug. A few women nearby exchange puzzled looks.

"I'm so happy you came," he shouts over the music.

She dazzles in a green silk skirt and another white tank. The same

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

charm necklace she wore last night rests on her chest, the dim light catching the gold.

The night slips away. They dance. They drink. They sing “Happy Birthday” twice— once in English, then again in French, teaching Maggie the words as they go. Her cheeks are flushed as she stacks plates in the sink. Moonbeams spill through the kitchen window.

“You can leave that,” Tom says as he walks out the last of his guests. He eyes her, wondering.

“I’d better go,” she breathes. The summer air is thick and stale from the warm bodies that filled the room moments earlier.

Do you have to? Tom thinks, but forces himself to nod.

“Tom,” she begins— but the rest never comes. Her lips find his.

He startles, then instinctively wraps his arms around her waist. She feels different than Clara had— smaller, more fragile. He thought he would’ve forgotten, but a memory muscle sparks awake. His body remembers as his hand slides slowly up her skirt. Dropping to his knees, he pushes the fabric higher, finding her with his mouth. Suddenly he stops and looks up, asking with his eyes if this is okay. Any of it. All of it. Maggie nods, her hands threading through his hair. A low moan escapes her.

Tom feels her tense around him. Heat builds, like a fire being lit. Breathing hard, she pulls him back to his feet. They shed their clothes where they stand and walk to the bedroom at the end of the hall.

As he lays her down, Maggie notices the photograph on the nightstand.

“Oh, Tom,” she says softly, understanding.

She wraps her legs around his waist, drawing him closer. He looks down at the sadness in her eyes and shakes every thought away.

The night is theirs. Only theirs.

Chapter 5

Maggie wakes with her head a little buzzy, her mouth dry. Her heart broken.

She brushes her blonde hair out of her face and props herself on a man’s chest that doesn’t belong to her husband.

“Good morning,” he whispers, breaking the quiet.

She tells him her flight is at noon. He tells her to miss it. She laughs, considers it.

He kisses her shoulder as she slips out of bed. The hardwood is cool beneath her bare feet as she treads down the hall. Pulling her shirt over her head, she notices a framed photograph of a younger Tom beside a dark-haired, sinewy woman. He catches her looking as he steps into the doorway.

“Clara,” he says. “She had skin cancer. You’re my—”

He lets the rest hang. Maggie nods. She understands.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

“What will you tell—”

“Nothing,” she says.

“Will we?”

“See each other again? I hope we do,” she confesses.

“Will we?” he asks again.

She shakes her head gently. “I don’t think so.”

The words settle between them.

Outside, a delivery truck rattles over the pavés. Paris is awake.

She grabs her purse and kisses him once more— this time it feels final.

When the door closes behind her, Tom smiles faintly and pets the cat waiting impatiently for breakfast.

Some things, he thinks, are meant to exist only once.