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FICELLE

BY BARRY BREMMESSEL

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A young woman — waif-like (some might say), sitting as she was, her arms folded and pressed to her chest — this rather despondent-looking woman, most obviously American, stared out the lobby window at a man as he made his way through puddles of water and onto the sidewalk in front of the hotel. He was barefoot, his pant legs rolled tightly above his ankles. He carried a small burlap sack, and around his neck hung a basket covered with a tattered and muddied cloth. He walked slowly, pausing at the corner to gaze into the window of a bookstore, a librairie.

“Librairie,” the young woman whispered to herself. “Librairie...librairie.” The whisper dropped in volume until she was merely mouthing the word. “Librairie...librairie...la librairie.”

At a small table, near the front desk, stood the woman's husband. A solid man, perhaps shorter than most (some might say), but there was muscle — real girth — beneath his brown suit. “Football, UC Davis,” he would explain, if one were bold enough to ask how he achieved his form. Or, “USMC, seven years.” Yes, maybe the military. Both, perhaps. Regardless, he now stood impatiently, waiting for the clerk to secure a taxi. Several companies had been contacted, but none was able to supply a vehicle due to the unexpected rain. This relentless, pounding rain on such a cold night.

“In a small town such as this, monsieur, at night, no one likes to walk. Not in the rain. Not even the Europeans.” He smiled ever-so-slightly, his statement only partially in jest.

The woman's thin form, her face particularly, was reflected in the window, though blurred by the imperfections of the glass. Her husband glanced at her briefly, and then at her reflection, until another couple hurried past the hotel. He took a few steps closer to the desk as he pulled a few bills from his pocket. He slid a couple of franc notes across the polished wood until it rested next to the clerk's hand. “Keep trying, huh?”

Without acknowledging the money, the clerk picked up the telephone again. And once more the man turned toward his wife, or rather her image. “Hey, are you okay over there?”

She was silent. The rain spattered against the window with each gust of wind, returning to a rhythmic drone when the air became still. A gurgle — like that of the myriad fountains they'd seen on this trip — emanated from the rusted gutter just above the window, a dented, orange-brown strip of metal barely attached to the eaves.

It wasn't until her husband started toward the window that this woman spoke to him, still in a whisper: “Ben,” she said, “I want us to walk to the station.”

The clerk stopped dialing. The sound of rain tapping on the window grew in volume as both men

stood silently. The clerk looked up at the husband, who briefly met his eyes; but the husband quickly turned toward his wife again.

“But don’t you see how hard it’s raining?”

She tore herself away from the scene outside and faced her husband. “Please, Ben,” she said, in a more audible tone, a pleading, begging tone, like that of a child whose life depends on a chocolate bar or a blue music box or the bicycle with the pretty basket in front.

Her husband looked again at the clerk, who made no effort to respond. He glanced out the window once more, at the sheets of water running down. “No, I don’t—”

She struggled out of her chair, the back of it knocking twice against the wall with a dull thud. “No, Ben. Please. You know the— You remember. It’s such a short walk.”

He was silent, motionless, yet his face contorted with exasperation; how he seemed to loathe this emasculating uncertainty that lately had engulfed him with more and more frequency, each time he’d lost the upper hand, each time the situation so quickly spiraled out of his control. “Well, now...Are you sure?”

She stood erect, gaining her balance, smiling faintly at her accomplishment. “Yes, Ben, please.” Her eyes grew wider. “I’m sure.”

In the evening the lobby was dark; the chandelier provided little light. The walls, the furniture, the decorative objects placed about seemed to absorb the yellow glow of the bulbs, swallowing up every drop of light, the room growing a shade darker with each tick of the dinged, dented clock in the corner. As the clerk shrugged, looking at the husband with a shared expression of defeat, it seemed almost as if he, himself, was being absorbed by the room.

“Thanks for all the help, there, uh...you know? All the....” The husband reached over and patted the clerk’s shoulder. “I mean it.”

The clerk neither recoiled at nor welcomed the contact, but seemed to understand it. He nodded, his mouth drawn to the side in an empathetic show of resignation. My hands would have been tied, too, in the matter, the clerk’s eyes seemed to convey in this silent conversation between them.

The husband turned, and picked up their three suitcases. He pressed the smaller one in the crook of his elbow, almost dropping it twice as he walked over to the front door. He looked once more at his wife’s reflection. “We’re not going anywhere ’til that scarf is tight and that coat’s buttoned up.”

“Yes, I know.” She turned and stared at the suitcases as she tied the scarf, and buttoned all but the top button of her coat. “Can we hurry now? Please?”

The clerk watched as the couple made their way outside. They disappeared into thickening fog. He pushed the telephone into a nook under the rack of keys to his right, and then retreated to a small office behind the desk, peeking through the crack in the door for a moment before closing it tightly behind him.

Outside the rain fell harder than it had been just moments before, and there was a rumble of thunder as the couple approached the edge of a small park. Despite the force of the drops against her face, the woman walked quickly ahead of her husband.

“Hey, take it easy there! We’ve got time!”

She paused at the street corner. Soon her husband, slightly out of breath, caught up with her.

“Now listen, I want you to take it easy.”

“I will, Ben. But see that man across the street?” She pointed toward the intersection, past the hôtel de ville. “Will you call out to him for me?”

Her husband squinted and focused on the man. "That guy?"

The man who'd strolled by the hotel earlier, the one who was carrying the small burlap sack, the handsome man from Côte d'Ivoire stood before another bookstore window and seemed entirely unaffected by the storm. "Yes. Hurry now, before he starts walking again."

As he set the suitcases down, placing them against the trunk of a tree in a vain attempt to protect them from the rain, the husband focused in on the man's bare feet. "Hey fella! Wanna come over here for a minute?"

The man turned.

"Who is he?" the husband asked.

"You remember, don't you, Ben? At the market square yesterday?"

After a moment, it seemed the man recognized the couple. He waved, and started to work his way through a row of parked cars. "Je n'en reviens pas! C'est trop tôt, non?"

She smiled and kept her eyes focused on him as she spoke to her husband. "Ben, do you have any money left?"

The husband hesitated. "Well, sure, but—"

"Quarante," his wife said to the man.

The man lifted the cloth from the basket, and the woman reached in and took hold of a small doll, perhaps antique, though difficult to tell. Its blue dress was frayed along the hem, and there was a chip in the stained porcelain face, just above the left eyebrow. She pulled it slowly from the basket, and when it was completely in view, she took it in her arms to protect it from the rain. "Give him forty francs, Ben. Please?"

For a few seconds, the husband stared at this man. An awkward silence followed, and it seemed as if...well, perhaps...just perhaps the husband was thinking this man might be good enough to offer the doll for free, given the circumstances. When it was obvious that this was not to transpire, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. He counted them. Twice. "Thirty-two francs. Is that okay?"

The man stepped forward and took the money. He smiled faintly at the woman, then turned and walked in the direction opposite of where he was headed before. He stopped near the corner, and stood perfectly still, looking up at the sky. Suddenly, as if hearing another call, he hurried back across the street, past the bookstore, and disappeared into the fog.

"See, Ben?" the woman said as she held the doll in front of her. "Look what the eyes are made of. Glass. See?"

He leaned over and studied the doll. "Yeah. That's nice. Real nice."

"I'm so glad I found her again. Just look, Ben. See how she fits in my arms? It's the exact same one my—"

"Yeah. That's important. Now do you think you're ready to start walking again? You sure you don't want to try to—"

"Here, Ben. Hold her. Hold her for just a minute."

He at first hesitated, but then took the doll and held it awkwardly in his arms. "Look at that. It fits right in my arms, too. How do you like that?"

"She does, doesn't she?"

“Yes, sir,” he said, and held it up for a closer look. “Cute face, too.”

His wife put out her hands. She moved closer, and her husband started to hand back the doll, but stopped. “Whoops. There’s something we’d better...huh, that’s a problem.”

“What?” his wife asked, stepping toward him.

“The string’s starting to come loose around the arm. See?”

She took the doll and found the spot her husband had just described. “Oh, no. Oh, Ben, but—”

“No big deal. I’ll take care of it. I’ll track this guy down and get our money back.”

“But, Ben, no. I don’t want to make...it’s just a couple of stitches. Just a couple of stitches and she’ll be as good as new.”

He brushed his hair back to stop the rain from dripping into his eyes. “You’re kidding me, right? The guy just gypped us out of forty francs!”

“Ben, he wasn’t trying to—”

“Look, I didn’t fly four-thousand miles to have some French nigger treat me like a—”

The woman tugged at the doll’s arm. It tore. The doll tumbled from her hands onto the sidewalk.

“Whoa, there! You just broke the damn thing!”

His wife turned and headed for the crosswalk.

“Wait a minute, now! Hey! Melinda!”

She removed her scarf, and loosened her coat. “Leave it there, Ben!” she cried out, stepping into traffic. “Please, just leave her there.”

Her gray, wrinkled coat stood out in the sea of dark haute couture as she weaved her way along moving cars. She held between her pale fingers the string from the doll’s arm. She stared at it as she tilted her head away from the sting of the raindrops. “Ficelle,” she whispered. “Ficelle...ficelle... la ficelle....”

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