

It was the Paris-Geneva train. Joe and Ria were going to Geneva for Christmas. Joe and Ria had been in Europe three months. Ria had never been to Europe before. She was nineteen, with wide grey eyes that made her look younger. Joe was twenty-eight, and looked older. Sometimes people looked at Ria and Joe in a way that made Joe smug and Ria uncomfortable.

They met in a bar in Ria's home town. Ria was skinny and Scandinavian-looking; she was Danish Californian. She had never been to Denmark. She told Joe this over an illegal beer on her eighteenth birthday; Joe bought her another. Ria was studying for her SAT and wanted to go to New York for college to study Art. Ria was studying Painting and Algebra and Sociology and Fashion Tech. She liked Joni Mitchell. Joe bought her four illegal beers and fed her an illegal joint round the back of the bar, and then he took her home and fucked her.

Ria had only slept with her ex-boyfriend before. Joe liked that about her. She was a good girl.

They were in love, of course they were in love. One night in Joe's apartment (two rooms and a toilet) they had been lying, stoned, on his futon, and he had said, *come to Europe with me*. They were reading the beat poets. *Come to Europe*, said Joe. Ria rolled over and looked at him. *I'm not kidding*, said Joe. *Come to Europe. Fuck New York. It's all happening in the Old World. Europe. Home of the poets.* Ria couldn't remember any American poets. *Home of all the fucking poets, Ria, come to Europe with me. Ria, Ria. Come to Europe.* And Joe put his hand on her waist, traced the curve of her bare hip. *Come to Europe. I love you. I can't go without you. You will come, won't you. I love you.*

So Ria came to Europe.

Ria's mother was dead and her dad and her stepmom just wanted her to be happy because she had had such a bad time of it. Ria didn't even remember her mom but her step grandmother thought that a troubled childhood could really mess up a person's life.

Ria didn't think she had had a troubled childhood, but she did think that maybe if it got her to Europe with Joe she should say she had.

So Ria cried on her stepgrandmother's shoulder and she talked to Lucille, and Ria's dad, and so- Ria came to Europe.

They landed in Spain. *Pablo Neruda*, said Joe, wisely. *Best fucking poet in the pantheon.* Ria agreed, because Joe knew so much about poetry.

In Spain Joe worked in a bar in Madrid, and Ria waitressed, and painted. *You live in a box of paints*, said Joe, mockingly. It was October and still kind of warm. They didn't see sights because Joe thought they were bourgeois. One night there was a fight in the bar and Joe had to quit before they asked him to leave. They went to the beach. Joe said it was cliché, but Ria thought it was beautiful, secretly. The wind stirring the sand, and the sea. They went paddling in the moonlight and Ria

held Joe's hand, and they had sex in the hostel, quietly, so as not to wake the people in the other bed. Ria liked the beach, and they were happy there.

It was November when they came to Paris. Joe wanted to go to Lisbon but the tickets were cheaper to go to Paris, and then he found a copy of *Down And Out In Paris And London*, and so it was decided. They saw the Eiffel Tower and got high in the backstreets and bathrooms of the hostel and bummed through the barriers, like every one else. They went to seedy bars and Joe couldn't believe how much cocktails were. Ria didn't really know where he was comparing prices to but she got embarrassed when he said how expensive they were and the waitress heard. It wasn't the waitress' fault. Joe bought some hash and sold it on. Ria spent a lot of time looking in shop windows and wishing. Ria rang her dad from payphones. He said he and Lucille missed her. When was she coming home? Ria said she didn't know. Not for Christmas? No, Ria said. They were going to go to Geneva for Christmas because of the snow.

Geneva?

Geneva, said Ria.

Joe looked at her.

Why?

Because of the snow, said Ria. *Because of the snow, you know?*

Joe shrugged. *I don't care anyway.*

Ria knew that he didn't care. Geneva.

They booked a train for the 22nd, with the money Ria's dad and Lucille sent her for Christmas. Joe never seemed to talk to his family, but then he was a proper adult. Joe didn't really talk about his family either.

He once admitted to having three older sisters (Lana, Sara, Stephanie; much older. Married. Kids maybe even.) and to having had had a brother.

Joe's brother was dead. *It's fine*, Joe had said. *It's not like we were ever close. He was into sports.* And Joe had made a face. *Mourning isn't my scene, you know, baby?* Ria knew.

I just- I guess family isn't my scene. Kids. Joe made a face. *You know that, baby. I don't need people, really. I'm independent. Broke the bonds of emotional co-dependency.*

They made friends, in Paris. Friends like them, who wanted to smoke and get high in dark corners of the hostels. One night an English boy called James talked to Ria about painting, and he put his hand on Ria's knee, and Ria giggled. James Evans was clean-cut, and eighteen. James Evans was going to model in New York

after he had had his gap year. James Evans had money to spare. He put his hand on Ria's knee, and Ria giggled, and didn't move his hand.

What the fuck was that, said Joe, afterwards. *What the fuck was that about, Ria.* Ria was sleepy and happy and high.

What the fuck was what, baby?

What the fuck was that. That. That hand on the knee British kid.

It wasn't anything.

Oh, really?

Yeah, really.

Oh really really? You fucking slut, said Joe. *You whore. Flirting with that fucking British kid.*

I didn't flirt.

You say you're sorry right now.

Sorry, Joe.

Say it like you mean it.

Joe wasn't aggressive, not normally. He was just high, and tired.

Say it like you fucking mean it, you little bitch. Bitch.

I'm sorry, Joe.

You're sorry for what?

What?

You're sorry for what.

For- I guess- I dunno, Joe- for- for flirting with the British guy?

You admitted it, said Joe. *You fucking cunt. I fucking knew it.*

He kissed her then, and it wasn't a nice kiss. He bit her lip and it bled.

You fucking slut. You're mine. Okay? Okay. Okay. Okay. Okay.

He kissed her again.

Mine.

He ripped her shirt.

In the morning he seemed to have forgotten all about it.

November went quickly. So did the money. Ria sold her second-favourite ring. Joe was writing the Great American Novel. *What's it about*, said Ria. *It's not about anything*, said Joe. *It just is. The Great American Novel. I am the last great American novelist.*

The Christmas lights were coming on in Paris. Joe and Ria went to the Marais and danced to a klezmer band in the street, and they laughed a lot. *Didn't I tell you it was all happening in Europe?* said Joe. Ria agreed that it was. She bought a jumper for ten euro in a vintage shop there. She painted a picture of Joe, but it didn't come out very well. One of the rooftops was better. Lucille sent Ria a care package, via the hostel. It had her favourite jeans in. Joe said she looked good in them, and it was true, she did.

She felt odd, the week after the care package came. A little lost, a little nervous. Butterflies in her stomach. She thought maybe she missed home.

On the night of the 21st Ria and Joe went out for dinner with the last of the money from her dad. Joe ordered nut roast. Ria ordered spaghetti, and when it came she didn't even want to eat it. She felt oddly nauseous.

Aren't you going to eat that?

For fuck sake Ria.

We aren't made of money.

Money doesn't grow on trees.

Ria had two reluctant forkfuls and was sick in the restaurant bathroom.

Joe was all for suing the restaurant- he thought the capitalist system was evil, but that you might as well milk it- but Ria thought they should just leave quietly, and they did. Joe swore at the restaurant lady as they left. He held Ria's hand, and stroked her thumb with his.

That night Ria couldn't sleep; the hostel was grimy, and the beds were small. She thought, rebelliously, that she was tired of hostels. She was getting to hate hostels. In the morning, the 22nd they caught the train. It was the Paris-Geneva train, 12: 20 from Gare de Lyon. Gare de Lyon was the greyest of stations, and it was the greyest of days, and Joe was reading a fat science fiction book. *DEATH COMES TO US ALL*, it said, in hacker green letters, and then, in bigger letters, *BY CASPAR MORTIMER*.

He thought the end of the world was coming. Joe was big on conspiracy theories. *Closer to fact than fiction, baby. 2012, it's gonna be the big one.* Ria thought probably he was right; he knew a lot about it all. They were sitting at the very end of the carriage, with the luggage.

Joe read, and Ria watched the luggage rack, and listened to Joni Mitchell. *It's coming on Christmas, they're chopping down trees, putting up reindeer, singing songs of joy, and peace...*

Two Arab men put their suitcases on the rack. Ria wondered if they were terrorists. A girl in a mink coat put her case on the rack; Ria thought she looked like a princess, but Joe said she looked chubby. Her hair stood out round her head like a halo. An old lady put her case on the rack, on top of Joe's rucksack. He swore. The case fell, and she said something in French that even Ria could tell was swearing. Joe pretended he didn't see, and the woman's husband picked up both the case and the rucksack and set them back down.

Joe looked up from his book and smiled at Ria, and she smiled back. She still felt a bit strange.

The train pulled away from the platform, and Ria watched the city fall into the suburbs fall into nothing. It was quite quickly outside Paris that it got to be green, and brown. The train cut through the hills like they were made of butter. On a lonely road there was one house, and one car driving away from it.

It was not a house, Ria saw, with mild interest, but a café. Café De Loup, it said on the outside. There was a picture of a wolf, taller than the first-floor windows, and Ria kept looking at it, even after the train had really disappeared it into the distant blur of passed and past.

There were villages with tall church towers, and fields of white cows lying down. A little red and green plastic house in the garden of a much bigger falling down house. Trees dripping, and everything seemed very wet outside the window, wet, and heavy.

Outside a village Ria saw a field of donkeys, and the train slowed to go through a station for just long enough for her to see that there were six, and none of them exactly the same.

So many animals everywhere. She wondered if they were cold. If they heard the train go past.

The ticket inspector asked for their tickets; she gave him hers, and he stamped it. His badge said MELKIOR, in capital letters. She smiled at him, but he didn't smile back, and she sat there a while looking at the ticket, idly.

22nd December, train to Geneva. 1st November, train to Paris. They had been in Paris a long time. The money had gone in her account on the 13th November.

James Evans had touched her knee on the 8th November. Ria wished she had kept a diary.

There was something Ria couldn't put her finger on that was bothering her.

There was something important that she had forgotten, something that should have been, but wasn't, maybe?

Ria scabbled.

Dates, dates, something was bothering her about the dates. A birthday? Lucille's birthday? Birthdays were easily discounted. What was she missing, what was different, what was important?

And then she had it.

Fuck. Fuck.

Ria counted back days. Her last period had been the 17th October. October. October.

Not possible. They had been so careful.

Ria was regular as clockwork; you could set your watch. Since Lucille had first talked to her about it, when she was twelve and scared. Every month, never different. They had been so careful.

No. Not possible. So careful. Completely and utterly not possible.

Ria. Ri. Ri. You okay? I was calling you for ages and ages and you didn't even look up, Ria. Didn't even look at me. He pouted, and the pout looked so at odds with the angles of his face. Kiss?

Ria kissed him on the mouth, lightly.

What's wrong? You're distracted. I can feel it, Ria. I can feel when you aren't thinking about me. I'm intuitive. Emotionally intuitive.

I'm fine, said Ria. Hungry.

Go get some food, then.

Ria stood up, uneasily. *Yeah. Yeah, I will. See you in a bit.*

Joe didn't reply.

In the next carriage, Ria leaned against the wall. Put her hand on her stomach. One hand, just testing. There was a baby crying somewhere. Her mind flickered briefly to a future that wasn't hers. Her and Joe in a nice flat somewhere with a

baby. No. Not possible. She took her hand off her stomach and ordered a coffee. No. No baby. No flat. No nice. Not possible. *I broke the bonds of co-dependency*, she heard Joe's voice say in her head.

She downed the coffee in one, and went back to Joe, slightly steadier. Medicinal caffeine. The announcer called a station over the tannoy.

Mesdames et messieurs, dans quelques instants, Bellegarde. Bellegarde, mesdames et messieurs.

People were getting their cases down. The Arab men did not. The old lady and the girl were, and the suitcases all fell like dominoes. Heavy dominoes.

Baby, you wanna smoke?

Joe looked at her, behind the girl in the mink coat.

What?

You wanna smoke? We're at a station. We're stopping.

Smoke. Yeah. Yeah. Sure.

The girl in the mink coat stepped aside to let Ria get back to her seat.

Outside there was snow. Ria had never seen snow.

Look!

Yeah.

The sky was heavy and grey, but the clouds were split pink, spilling sunshine through onto the snow in the hills and valleys. It was very, very beautiful.

Joe didn't look up from his book.

It's beautiful.

Yeah.

She felt a sudden need to kiss him; to touch him. To ascertain something-everything- anything. She flung her arms round his neck, kissed his mouth.

Not like that, he said, detaching her arms. *I can't take your weight.*

She looked at him.

I mean my shoulder is sore, baby, you know that.

Mm-hmm. I guess.

I mean I can barely take my own weight, you know what I'm saying?

He laughed. She didn't.

I love you, baby, you know that?

I love you too, she said.

He frowned at her.

That didn't sound right.

I love you too, she tried, gathering herself. I love you too?

Better.

He tapped his mouth, twice, with two fingers, like he was blowing her a kiss.

Kissy?

She kissed him. The old lady raised her eyebrows, and she kissed him harder, tasting the inside of his mouth, as if she had never kissed him before, as if it was the last time. Ascertaining.

Woah woah woah, said Joe. Woah woah woah. Slow down.

We gonna go smoke, then?

Yeah. Smoke.

Ria stood up. She felt in her pocket for her lighter.

If we're gonna go smoke I'm gonna need my coat. I'm not- I ain't- she corrected herself- used to snow-

Joe laughed.

I ain't seen it. Why should I have seen it?

I'll find it.

The train pulled into the station. The old lady was asking her husband over and over the same question; she asked the girl in the mink coat, and the girl shrugged. *Sais pas. Desolee.*

Ria put her bag on her shoulder, and waited for them to get down. She took the end of the suitcase for the girl in the coat.

The sun outside was hitting the snow, and it sparkled, and Ria jumped down the two steps, and laughed like a child.

What?

The snow.

Oh.

Ria lit her cigarette. She looked at Joe.

He was looking at his book about the apocalypse.

She looked at him, considering. She looked at him, and at the snow, and down the platform, to where the old lady and her husband, and the girl in the coat were walking away, and she thought about how he had broken the bonds of co-dependency, and how he wouldn't take her weight, and then suddenly, she knew, she knew everything she needed to know.

She put her cigarette out, carefully, on the edge of the bin.

I'm just- I'm just going to the bathroom.

Fine. Be quick. See you on the train.

Joe didn't even look at her.

She knew everything she needed to know. He'd get over it. Mourning wasn't his scene.

Ria looked out over the valley, and the snow streaked with sunshine, and the spires.

Bye, Joe, whispered Ria.

She walked, slowly, down the ramp. Her bag was on her shoulder with her passport and her bank card and her phone. She put one hand on her stomach.

Hi, baby, whispered Ria.

The girl in the coat was smoking outside the station, and she grinned at Ria.

Merry Christmas, said the girl.

To you too, said Ria.

You're American?, said the girl.

Yeah. Californian. You?

English, said the girl. What are you doing in Bellegarde?

Ria paused.

I'm going to get in that taxi, that there, and go to a hotel and sleep in a clean big bed for a few days.

Sounds good, said the girl.

Yeah. And then, said Ria, I'm going to look at the snow. And then I'm going to ring my dad and then I'm going to paint. And then go somewhere else. And then I'm going to have a baby.

A baby?

Yeah, said Ria. A baby. An actual baby!

There were butterflies in Ria's stomach again, but they were good butterflies.

Above, she heard the train pulling out of the station. It whistled. She wondered if Joe had even noticed she was gone.

I'm going to go somewhere exciting and paint and have a real actual baby that is all mine and all itself's.

Sounds good, said the girl. She stubbed out her cigarette. Congratulations. And Merry Christmas again. And Happy New Year. 2012. Wow. That came quick. Apocalypse and all that.

Nah, said Ria. It's all bullshit. It's gonna be fine. Just fine. Better than fine.

The girl laughed. *Yeah. Of course. Right, I'm off. Nice talking to you. Congratulations. Good luck.*

Thanks, said Ria.

The girl went off up the ramp, to the platforms.

Ria said to the cab driver, *hotel?*, and he nodded.

Hotel Genève?

Ria nodded.

She sat in the back of the taxi. She wound the window down, and looked out.

Her iPod was still playing Joni Mitchell. *-li-for-nia, coming home, gonna see the folks I dig...*

Ria put both hands on her stomach.

The valley was all laid out before her like a feast, the lake, the lights, the shops and spires and steeples, and best of all she saw the snow all shining in the last pink shards of the sunset.

Look, baby, whispered Ria. *Look at the sun on the snow. Isn't it beautiful?*

California, I'm coming home, sang Joni Mitchell.

Merry almost-Christmas, baby, said Ria, and she smiled.