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Bathroom Break

by Reyna Marder Gentin

Caitlin was a person who considered her words more carefully than most. Sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, she'd pause, look up, and run through a list of words in her head until she hit upon the one that most accurately captured what she was thinking or feeling. Conversely, at other times she'd cast her eyes down, the word she needed remaining just out of reach. So when Nick proposed spending their tenth wedding anniversary in Paris, she hesitated, looking heavenward before responding.

Surprised, shocked, stunned, flabbergasted, gobsmacked.

When clarity came, Caitlin wrapped her arms around Nick's waist, pulling him in close. "Paris! I'm blown away!"

It wasn't as though Nick entirely lacked spontaneity or never went out of his way to please his wife. Just a few weeks before, he'd surprised Caitlin with last minute tickets to a rock concert at Madison Square Garden. Caitlin wasn't familiar with the band, didn't know the music. To make matters worse, she'd been sandwiched between Nick and a guy who smelled intensely of burnt sausage and spent the better part of the evening picking wax out of his ears and wiping it on his jeans. Still, she'd appreciated the thought.

But the grand romantic gesture, that was unusual.

"I just thought, you know, ten years is a long time," Nick said.

"That's a strange way to put it," Caitlin said.

Nick shrugged, disengaging her arms from around him. "Don't be so literal. You know what I mean. It's just a long time to be married."

And of course, ten years was a long time.

It was long enough for Caitlin to be tasked with purchasing birthday gifts for all of Nick's nieces and nephews, but not long enough for Nick to let her in on the juicy private secrets of his dysfunctional family.

It was long enough that Caitlin could predict how their arguments would end, but not long enough that they could avoid having the arguments altogether. It was long enough that Caitlin could identify the woman in any crowd who would turn Nick's head with the slightest swing of her hips, but not long enough that she didn't care. It was long enough

that no one asked anymore when she and Nick would start a family, but not long enough for Caitlin to give up hope.

They'd met as junior analysts, working for the same partner in an old, established firm. Late nights in the office, later ones in Caitlin's apartment. For a year they'd kept their involvement on the down low, afraid to let an office romance affect either of their careers. When things became more serious, word started to get out among their friends. When they got engaged, they came clean with their boss, figuring there'd be a way to salvage the work situation for both of them.

"No one is being forced out," a woman from HR with dyed red hair and a too-tight red suit to match assured them. Unable to stand the ambiguity, Caitlin pushed to know where they stood.

The answer came swiftly. "Nick would do himself a favor to avail himself of other opportunities."

"Nick?" Caitlin had assumed she'd be the expendable one. Nick was a superstar.

"It looks bad for the company for a woman to leave under these circumstances," Nick explained to her.

"It's fine. It's better this way," he said.

Caitlin couldn't force Nick to tell her how he really felt. But the words ran through her like fire, searing her insides.

Humiliated, jealous, despondent, emasculated, enraged.

"I picked this hotel for the location," Nick said.

The rationale sounded good, but the place didn't look promising. The building was short and squat, the once-majestic gray of the stone exterior thrown off kilter by the dank green moss growing in the cracks. The lobby was dark, the light swallowed by heavy crimson curtains that obscured the windows, and the floral carpet was worn and stained. The air was choked with the smell of cigarettes, and Caitlin succumbed to a lengthy coughing jag before the concierge handed her a bottle of water.

"Right this way, Madame et Monsieur." The bellhop led them to a small wood paneled elevator that creaked crankily as it rose to the fourth floor. His dark curls framed a baby face with cherubic red lips, and Caitlin had an urge to tip him generously and tell him to run for his life. Instead, she followed silently as he opened the door for them.

Surprisingly, the room was bright and appealing, with large windows looking out over the wide boulevard, a comfortable sitting area in one corner. In the center of the room was a king size bed with lavish white pillows and a white down duvet strewn with red rose petals.

"Oh, Nick! How lovely!"

Nick barely looked up as he fumbled in his pockets for a tip. "I didn't do anything. I just mentioned it was our anniversary.

But it was enough. Afterward, rose petals sticking to damp spots on his back, Nick stood, silently, at the window.

Contemplative, pensive, distant, removed, alone.

"Let's get something to eat," Nick said.

They settled into a small cafe on an adjacent block. It was mid-afternoon, too late for lunch and too early for dinner. The place was quiet, save for the boisterous conversation among some children, maybe the owner's, at a table near the back. Caitlin ordered the salad nicoise, because she recognized it on the menu. Nick ordered the foie gras.

"Really?" she said. "Are you sure?"

"We're in Paris, aren't we?"

Caitlin shook her head. "Your stomach is a New Yorker."

They drank cafe au lait and ate in silence, as married people do. Caitlin pulled out her phone and checked to see which was the closest museum. "The Musee D'Orsay," she said. "Impressionists."

"Sure," Nick said. She pondered agreeable or apathetic, but gave him the benefit of the doubt.

They wandered through the crowded galleries of the museum, sometimes together and sometimes apart, keeping pace with each other. Toward the end of the exhibit Caitlin found Nick in front of a series of five paintings of the Cathedral at Rouen. He was standing very still, his hands clasped behind his back and head tilted to one side.

"What are you thinking?" Caitlin said.

"I guess probably something along the lines of what Monet was thinking."

"Go on."

Nick didn't look at her, but she felt his concentration. "How something so familiar can seem so altered in a different light."

Caitlin had more immediate needs.

"I have to pee really badly. Too much coffee," she said, looking around to see where the bathrooms were. Nick followed her as she walked toward the stairs to the lower level. When they reached the entrance to the toilets, Nick turned left into the men's, and Caitlin turned right. "Meet you back here," she said. He gave her a wave with the back of his hand.

In the stall, Caitlin forced her jeans down over her hips, a frenzied moment of half-squatting before sitting down as she

sighed into the moment of release. She always waited too long.

When she was done, she washed her hands, studying herself in the mirror. What had Nick meant about the familiar looking different? She took her brush out of her bag, ran it through her hair. Then she reapplied her eyeliner, and smoothed on some lip gloss. If anyone had changed over the ten years they'd been married, it was Nick, not her. But it couldn't hurt to spruce herself up a bit. Who didn't look better with some make-up?

Caitlin returned to the hallway, but Nick wasn't there yet. He was always done before her, the line in the women's bathroom ensuring that he'd be outside, leaning against a wall, checking his email when she emerged. It was strange to have the roles reversed. She leaned against the wall and pulled out her own phone, ran through her work emails to make sure there was nothing that required immediate attention. She'd continued to advance in the ten years since Nick left the firm, becoming one of the more prominent and influential women partners. For the most part, the more junior analysts would know not to disturb her on her brief vacation, but still, there could be emergencies. When she looked up from her phone, five minutes had gone by, and no Nick.

"It must be the foie gras," Caitlin said to nobody in particular. Envisioning her husband and his temperamental digestive system, she could feel his stomach churning, the sharp gas pains. She checked her phone for a text message from him from inside the bathroom stall, but knew there wouldn't be one—he was too intensely hygienic to type on the toilet. She'd just need to wait a bit longer, hope that it passed, and not say she'd told him so.

Another five minutes, and Caitlin's concerns grew. What if the rich foie gras didn't just disagree with Nick, but made him ill? She stood as close to the entrance to the men's room as she could and didn't hear any terrible moaning sounds, but maybe he'd passed out from the pain, was sitting slumped on the toilet? She thought about going into the bathroom to check on him, but there'd been quite a bit of traffic in and out and she didn't see how she could.

When an older couple approached, Caitlin asked the gentleman, in her best terrible high school French, if he could look for her "mari" in the stalls. He nodded and quickly entered the men's room, leaving his wife smiling sweetly and saying something in a soothing voice that Caitlin didn't understand. The man returned, shaking his head slowly, before he and his wife nodded at Caitlin and returned to the restrooms.

How could she have missed Nick when she came out before? Yes, she'd taken a few extra minutes to check her face, but it hadn't been that long. And she'd only done that because he'd made that cryptic—nasty?—comment about looking different in different lights. It didn't really matter now. She'd head up to the gift shop; he must be waiting for her there.

Amidst the posters and the postcards and the tee-shirts, Caitlin scanned the large room for Nick. She walked purposefully toward the Monet section, in case Nick had gravitated there, hiding now behind a replica of the Rouen Cathedral. But he wasn't there.

She pulled out her cell to check to see if Nick had contacted her, but there was nothing. She called him, but it went directly to voicemail. She texted, but he didn't respond. With each failed attempt, she felt more unsure of what to do next. A trickle of sweat ran down her back into the waistband of her jeans. Where could he be?

Caitlin pushed her way out of the giftshop back toward the main entrance, ignoring the store employee shouting at her and pointing at the exit. She asked the woman at the front desk to page her husband. But even as she heard his name broadcast over the speaker system like a child who's wandered away from his mother, she knew in her bones that he was gone. Left her in Paris on their tenth anniversary.

Caitlin walked out of the Musee d'Orsay, Nick's name still echoing off the walls in the lobby. She sat down on a nearby bench, her head in her hands, looking down at her feet. She waited for the words to flood her, the string of expletives, the harsh insults Nick surely deserved at this moment. But the words didn't come.

When church bells rang out at six p.m., Caitlin looked up reflexively at the sky. And then the word she'd been reaching for came down to her.

Free.