


MY BELT

LARRY O'CONNOR

 SINCE I CAN remember, I'd been saving Paris. After college, when all my friends were traveling to Europe, I stayed home. I wanted to be ready. I wanted to go with the woman I loved, strolling the Champs-Élysées, buying postcards along the Seine, listening to street musicians playing for a sou. Over the years, romances bloomed, then faded, and when I did get married, our working lives and a baby got in the way. Finally, after eight years without a honeymoon, I convinced M. that it was time to go.

The night before the day we were to leave, I climbed the stairs with drinks and surprised M., who was sitting in bed propped up with pillows reading a novel. I looked at M. over my glass of an expensive French wine—white and chilled the way she liked it—and she returned the gaze over her reading glasses. “In Paris,” I said as she pushed her glasses to the top of her head, “in Paris, you’ll see, everything will be all right.” We would sleep late, stop worrying about the bills piling up, the leaks from the roof that were staining the bedroom walls. We’d walk the streets of Hugo, savor the paintings by Degas, the sculptures of Rodin. *Un autre espresso? Croissant? Un morceau de pain? Certainement. Pourquoi pas?*

M. put down her book on the bedside table. "Some wine?" I offered. "But of course," she replied. She tossed an overstuffed pillow aside and inched closer to me as I poured from the bottle. "Imagine foie gras like you've never tasted, desserts made in heaven," she said. "Did you know that even in the best restaurants people bring their dogs? There's a place in the Bois du Boulogne where a couple bring a Great Pyrenees. It lies on the floor, perfectly behaved, before a roaring fire." She sipped slowly. "Waiters weave in and out around the dog like magic. Never miss a beat."

M. put down her wine and we kissed. We hadn't kissed like that in ages. In recent months, M. and I had taken to reading novels or looking at mediocre videos before bed, dropping off to sleep with just a peck on the lips. Now she was wide awake. I took a long, delicious drink, then started sneezing. Sulfites. We'd gotten a cat a few months before and I'd developed an allergy and wine with sulfites only made it worse. Hacking and wheezing, I ran past M. into the bathroom, pressed the atomizer into my mouth, and squeezed.

The next day we were an hour early at Newark International Airport. M. was in the ladies' room when I noticed a young woman in a wheelchair and her handsome companion exchange lovers' smiles. He reached for her hand and she arched her back. With her free hand, she grabbed the nape of his neck and pulled him close. The woman wore a plunging blue top and the man nestled his head in the V of her breasts, first brushing her skin lightly with his lips, then laying his head gently on her like silk.

Finally, M. returned, her eyelashes curled, cheeks rouged for the Newark-to-Paris night flight. I drew M. to me and hugged her. "What is it?" she whispered, sensing the change in me.

"In Paris," I said, "everything will be all right."

She smiled, tweaked my nose. "In Paris, they discovered sulfites."

I kissed her and raised the tickets before us like a torch as we approached airport security. Before putting down our carry-on I no-

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ticed the lover was now sitting in the wheelchair. The woman was nowhere to be seen.

LIKE MOST PEOPLE, expectations make me anxious. The larger the expectation the more nervous I become. When it comes to romance I've always been in conflict. Bring flowers, light candles, establish the mood. Then poof! Nothing. It's too forced, not natural. A woman expects the particulars of romance, yet in my experience love vanishes under the pressure of such attention.

Spontaneity wasn't my thing, either. Only fools rush in, I was told as a boy. I've always been someone who saves the best for last. I was the child who separated my Halloween candy, hoarding my favorites, the caramels and peanut butter cups. I'd leave them for so long that they'd get so stale I couldn't eat them. If only, I'd wish at times, I were an insatiable taker, someone who feasted on the best, the ripest, and then, when appetite waned, left the rest; a man who loved and lost, loved and lost, married, divorced, remarried, what the hell.

Someone once wrote that the art of living was a series of give and take, ebb and flow, light and dark, life and death. Keep your expectations under wraps. Otherwise, you're going to be sorely disappointed.

PARIS IS NOTHING like Newark, I thought that first morning in France. Underfoot, one felt the tramp of ages past, the wet clack of heels on stone before the turrets of l'Hotel de Ville. The Beaux Arts apartments along the Seine were large, gray, yet at human scale. I imagined open rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows. The buildings I saw resisted nothing, not the scudding clouds across the sky, not the dreams of restless souls.

"I'm starting to come back," I told M.

"Me, too," she said.

"We could order a coffee, no?"

"We could order a coffee, yes."

It was June in Paris and tourists were everywhere, but a stone's throw from our hotel we found the perfect café. A young Parisian was deep into *Le Monde*, visitors had the good sense to keep *Insight* guides out of sight, waiters cleared tables in a single movement. A gypsy boy was playing folk songs on a squeeze box. Although many of us at the café gave him spare change, he stopped only before M., who had smiled at the child toddling at his side. "Bonne chance," the musician said as he waved goodbye.

Like high school sweethearts, M. and I returned arm-in-arm to the front desk of l'Hotel des Maronniers on rue Jacob, a hidden street in the Latin Quarter. On either side of the little street, five-story apartment buildings drew scant attention to themselves. It was quiet, even peaceful. Never had I been so deliciously tired, so ready for love.

While M. did the check-in, I took the key to our room and went upstairs. I flopped down on the bed and tried to get comfortable but my belt was new and stiff and digging into my side, so I took it off and put it on top of the armoire. Then I unfastened the top buttons of my shirt and lay back on one of four pillows that had been plumped for us. Fresh air filled the room and I took deep, satisfying breaths. The window opened onto a garden of flowering chestnut trees and songbirds; glass-topped dining tables and white chairs stood on crushed stone.

I woke to M. at my side, gently nudging me awake. "Darling, . . ." she said, smiling. Propped up on my elbows, I looked around. The room was big, half the top floor of the country-style hotel; the bed firm but not hard, just the way we liked it.

"Don't you just love the view," I said, reaching for her.

"Yes, dear, I do, but . . ."

"And the light is *magnifique, ne c'est pas?*" I said, rising above her, feeling amorous after my brief rest.

"Yes, . . . but honey, would you mind so terribly if we looked at another room?"

M. traced her hand down the bedspread with a look of disgust. The fabric was a bit coarse, but then I noticed its red brocade, which matched the carpet, the wallpaper, the headboard—even the toilet door. M. had dreamed of just the right room, something country French, charming and elegant, not one that looked as if it belonged in a Turkish bordello. We owed it to ourselves, she said, to insist on the right room.

While I'd slept, the maid had shown M. to a room down the hall. We made our way there and M. hugged and kissed me. "Isn't this much better?" she asked. Hardly, I thought. The room was in an alcove and was small and stuffy. The view to the garden was blocked by a giant tree and the window was half the size of the window in the other room. Worse, we were probably paying the same steep price for a room half as big. But M. seemed so happy that I lacked the heart to argue with her. "It's lovely," I said, then we lay down on the inoffensive bedspread and went to sleep.

It wasn't until I got up from the afternoon nap that I realized I'd left my belt in the other room.

"Don't worry about it, the maid will get it," M. said.

"No, no, my trousers will fall down," I said, knocking on the bordello door. There was no answer. I tried the door but it was locked and we'd also left the key in the room.

"You're right," I agreed finally, "It will get turned in to the front desk. Let's have a good time."

Our hotel manager suggested a restaurant in the style of Toulouse Lautrec that was a favorite of Princess Di, and we savored the antipasti, the carpaccio and parmesan, the homemade wine. We began

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wondering whom the lovelorn princess had met secretly at this café—a ship captain? her chief of staff? an Italian busboy?

My shirt rode up my back as I leaned forward to kiss M. "I love you," I said. "I'm so glad I waited to see Paris with you. It's a dream, a dream come true."

That night we fell into each other's arms—and went to sleep. I awoke at dawn with stomach pangs from the bistro food and took some medicine. But it was no good, the stomach pressure never let up. I sat in bed and watched M., sleeping like a baby, curled up in a ball. All I had to do was reach out and touch her and she would open to me, hold me tenderly. Instead, I felt sick and uncertain. A church bell tolled. In the half-light the blue flowers of the wallpaper looked greenish, mottled, like I imagined my insides to be.

FOR YEARS WHEN I thought of lovemaking I'd go back to that cold February night twenty-five years ago. The girl I was dating lived in a nearby town and I was driving her home. That night in the car she kissed me hard and insisted that I stay.

"But your parents—your brother?" I said. We were eighteen years old.

"Don't worry about them... I love you," she said, pressing the weight of her body to mine on the cloth bench seat of my father's Chevrolet.

As quietly as possible, W. and I pulled out the day bed in the den. Her brother was a bit younger than I, but he'd worked summers on a farm and was big and strong for his age. His room was directly above the den. Down the hall from his room was the parents' master bedroom.

W. was wearing only her panties, the girl-school kind—wide, round, and bone-white. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I noticed her smallish breasts, rising and falling as she lay still on her back. Her skin was shiny and translucent, like Catherine's in *Wuthering*

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Heights. In the car, and again on the front porch, we'd kissed and groped at each other in a frenzy. Now, in this bed beside her, I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling, at the piano, at a forest landscape on the wall. Again and again, I rose on top of her. But it was no use. On the day bed in the den of my girlfriend's father's house, I couldn't do a thing. I lay awake for an hour or two, then left her sleeping, stole out the door, and drove home.

THE BELT WAS not at the front desk the next morning, and the clerks were adamant: they could not remove anything from the room without the permission of the new guests. M. pulled at my hand, told me to forget it, we could find another belt. "Uh huh," I said, looking past her as I wrote in my journal.

During our frequent travels together writing in our journals has become our way of setting the stage for intimacy. If we each have an hour or two to write, to work on our novels, bits of stories, or magazine assignments, then in the afternoon we can be together, go for long walks, make love.

"What are you working on?" M. asked after breakfast in the hotel courtyard.

I turned the journal toward her and she read:

OCCUPANTS OF ROOM 53

Please forgive the intrusion. Before I took up occupancy in Room 51, I had for a brief time been an occupant of your room and left my belt behind on top of the closet. Could you be so kind as to retrieve it and leave the belt for me at the front desk.

Sincerely,
Occupant of Room 51

"A touch too formal, don't you think?" M. said with more than a trace of sarcasm as she handed the journal back to me.

"Maybe, but I think it will work," I said with a wink. M. was laughing to herself as I swept by her, rushing to put the page I'd ripped from my journal under the door of our former room.

French coins were heavy in my pockets and with every step I took that morning in Paris, I was afraid my trousers would fall down. In the Musee d'Orsée, my briefs showed. We asked a tourist to take our photo by the Eiffel Tower; with one arm I hugged M. to me while the other was holding up my waistband. I'd arrange myself at cafés, prepared to write in my journal, but I couldn't concentrate. "C'mon, let's go," I said finally, pulling M. in and out of mens' stores in the Latin Quarter, where ordinary-looking belts were going for one hundred dollars. We couldn't afford that; we were stretching our finances as it was.

Near the end of the day we stopped at the front desk of our hotel before going upstairs. No belt.

"It was your fault you forgot the belt," M. said "If you hadn't been so careless..."

"There was nothing wrong with the other room," I blurted, jumping to my feet. "There was light, a breeze, a beautiful view."

"Why didn't you tell me that then?" she snapped. "Why don't you ever tell me what you feel?"

"I was showing you, damn it! I wanted to make love in that room. With you!"

I glared at her, thought for the first time in my life that if I could get my hands on a belt I would thrash her with it. Then, suddenly feeling faint, I collapsed on the bed. I had waited a lifetime for Paris, the city of love, of Balzac, the place where Henry Miller, a hero of my youth, set down the wisdom of the heart.

"If you hadn't wanted to change rooms," I said, barely above a whisper.

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“Perhaps if we tried some stores in the outskirts, the prices would be affordable,” she suggested.

Yes, I agreed, that was a good idea. We caught a bus, but it didn’t seem to get anywhere. *La Petite Ceinture*, the route was called. The Little Belt.

AS FAR AS my friends were concerned, I’d lost my virginity that night on the day bed in W.’s father’s den. The only part I would leave out as I told the story again and again was how we never really did it. I’d get to that part and smile, blush, shrug. Guys clapped me on the back to hear about how I had landed in W.’s day bed, a pullout couch in her father’s den. If you’re going to do it for the first time that was the place, said the school quarterback, socking my shoulder. I told myself that such a lie was harmless, just a matter of going along to get along and would have no lasting effect on me.

But for years after the sexless night on the day bed with W., I didn’t sleep with a woman. Whenever it came to the moment of decision, I backed off, said, no, no, talked in my fake Robert Redford voice about my respect for a woman’s honor. I had decided that I was saving myself, waiting for the woman whom I truly loved. Half-truths about love sculpt the foundations of a guy’s social rites and codes of honor—there were my own expectations about love and the potential for love, but the expectations of my peers, too.

In looking back I suppose that it was true that the young women I was seeing were often not right for me. But the greater truth was that I was scared of real intimacy, of exposing the petty lies I was telling myself and the people close to me. When telling lies becomes not only easy but a part of you, what chance does love have?

THAT NIGHT AS M. slept, I was up, my mind racing as it hadn’t since I was a teenager. But instead of thinking about girls, sports, and cars, I imagined the standing water collecting on the roof of our first-floor

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addition, the flaking brick facade from our brownstone which needed pointing. How was K. holding up at Grandma's, the dog at Gordon's?

I dreamed that I was walking the streets of Paris. I was hungry and needy and looking for a place to eat and rest. As I moved through the city, I recognized the stores, the people, and not in some superficial way. With each step I felt more connected to the city, but with increasing anxiety. The streets themselves were spinning in circles; one street was indistinguishable from the next. Paris is circular, spherical, like the workings of the brain and the intestines. One either feels the pressure of the bowels or the brain.

I awoke in a cold sweat and stayed awake until dawn. M. was sleeping at the corner of the bed.

Paris was slipping away from me.

AT BREAKFAST THE third morning a thin man walked by with a smartly dressed companion. His double-breasted sports jacket was strategically closed, snugly buttoned at his waist. Not only was I convinced that this man had taken my belt, but in my sleep-deprived state I was certain he was wearing it under his expensive coat.

If not him, then there was this other man, a German car salesman with a pasty face. But he didn't wear my belt out of doors. He preferred to model it for his wife before the mirror, putting it back where he got it, on top of the armoire. Or the genteel English fatherly type on the fourth floor. Who would suspect him?

I'd toyed with the idea of staking out our former room, dressed in a loud shirt and holding a brochure to the Louvre. By seeming nonchalant and waiting for my prey to come bounding out the door, I could catch him red-handed. But if the man could steal, would he be shamed into admitting the crime? It was his word against mine.

The next day the Occupants of Room 53 checked out before we woke up. We asked the maid to search the room. No belt. I imagined a man taking the belt down from the armoire, fingering the

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fine leather, the designer clasp. Then, into the garment bag, zip, snap, gone. My belt would travel on to Frankfurt, Rome, Copenhagen—to other trips and adventures—while I would soon be heading home, wondering where we would find the money to fix the roof.

ON OUR FIRST date I drove M. in my un-airconditioned car in one hundred degree weather to a suburban movie plaza to watch *Bull Durham*, the baseball movie. Hot air poured through the open windows as M. took off her sandals and put her bare feet on the dash. Her sundress flapped in the wind of the moving car, and we talked and joked—about what, I don't remember. I remember only how right that moment felt, of how I was beginning to fall in love with her. Something inside me was giving way, and I found myself talking freely about my feelings as I hadn't in years. M. remembers only that I didn't take her hand, that I didn't touch her in any way, not in the car, the dark of the movie, or in the parking lot afterward. She was convinced that I was gay.

But then we began to do everything together. We were attending a writers' conference in Richmond, Virginia, and after classes we toured the historic capitol buildings, visited Poe's House, marveled at the antebellum grandeur of the Jefferson Hotel. At parties, we moved among strangers with the ease of a happy couple celebrating an anniversary. Even before our second date, I had helped her with her wash, folded her warm, intimate things with mine. When we visited Hollywood Cemetery we didn't see the graves of Jefferson Davis and John Munro, we followed the antics of two mad squirrels and laughed as they tumbled over each other in the heavy heat. Sex was passionate and tender, not like anything either of us could ever remember in a long time.

At the end of a day near the close of the conference, I bought a dozen candles and arranged them around M.'s room when she was out. I lit the candles, put a rose in a vase, chilled some wine. When

she returned, M. stared hard at me for a beat, then turned aside the glass of wine. "It's all going a bit too fast for me," she said, her eyes glowering. We argued bitterly and that night was the first night in a week we did not make love.

For hours I wrote in my journal, the unlit candles surrounding me. In a broken-down car rattling through the warehouse district of a faceless city, I'd fallen in love with a woman. On our second date we'd attended an exhibit on slavery. Giant reproductions on beige backdrops depicted colonial drawings of heroic figures at a slave auction; a single video image of crude leg shackles accompanied an explanation, "Some slaves remained in the home." We were repulsed and amazed, stirred to anger, then, in exasperation, laughter. I knew that intimacy was built by a steady stream of tiny measures, not by grand, set-piece gestures. But I couldn't let go. By setting up the big expectation I inevitably found myself back on the day bed in W.'s father's house, forever trying to make it right, to make love with the beautiful girl I'd lost so long ago. And like that night a quarter century ago I would try and try again but never succeed.

I left Richmond that summer weekend not knowing if I would ever see M. again. We were living in different cities then and for what seemed like a long time we didn't speak. Finally, we did begin to see each other and a year later we were married before a few friends and family. But aside from bringing home flowers and the occasional theater ticket, I rarely lay in wait for love.

Paris was only confirming what I already knew, what I somehow couldn't bring myself to admit. In my life, plans for love always fell flat.

THE AFTERNOON OF our fourth day in Paris, M. and I stopped at an open-air market to buy some cheese, fruit, and a bottle of wine for a picnic at the Luxembourg Gardens. Marie de Medici had guar-

anted the beauty of this public space more than 370 years ago when she prevailed upon her husband, Henry IV, to improve the plumbing. He had to repair and reopen the old Gallo-Roman aqueduct to do so, and fourteen fountains had to be built to carry off the excess water. Marie's gardens were the reward. I felt M.'s eyes on me as I was telling the story, carting the bag of food and drink in one hand, holding up my trousers in another.

Then a straight-backed man in a safari suit loped into view carrying at arm's length an oversized map. He was wearing a wide-brimmed safari hat, with a thick scarf wrapped about his neck like a rainforest snake. A Montgomery Clift lookalike, oblivious to the crowds of tourists and fashionable Parisian couples on their lunch breaks, the safari man high-stepped his way through the gardens in as straight a line as he could manage.

"Looking for Livingston, I presume," I said.

M. laughed and in the dappled light under the chestnut tree she looked beautiful. We arranged two chairs in the shade as a man and a boy approached us for food. They both looked tired and wan, and M. pulled two peaches from our bag and gave them each one. The man returned the peach given to him, but accepted the gift for his son with a smile before walking on. I touched M.'s cheek and she moved toward me and we kissed. Then I lifted her from the chair and from our knees we continued kissing under the chestnut tree. I'd learned as a boy there's a place in the small of the back where in a northern winter the cold settles. The trick is to relax that spot and release the warmth. It seemed funny to think of that then, while kissing M. on the grass in the Luxembourg Gardens, but I did and such heat as I couldn't remember washed over me.

Then M. offered me the peach. As I reached forward to take a bite, I noticed the leaves of the chestnut tree as they rustled in the breeze. Shafts of sunlight danced on the ground. There were many

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people in the garden that day, but I don't remember hearing their voices, only the sound of the fountains, the steady splash of water. I took a bite of the peach M. held in her hand. It tasted sweet. Juice dribbled onto M.'s hand and down her wrist. It was the best peach I'd ever eaten. I licked juice from M.'s arm and then held the peach out to her and she tasted it too.