

Vertigo

Standing in the Eiffel Tower's shadow, the tourists negotiated their next vacation highlight. Melissa Foreman, mid-thirties, held two dripping ice cream cones in one hand and half a ham sandwich in the other as their three children played king-of-the-castle on the fountain in the square. She had giving up trying to coax her unruly black hair into a ponytail and sprigs of it hung loosely at chin-length on her freckled round face. The teal linen blouse that had promised no wrinkles when she bought it for the trip clung sweatily to her shoulders and hips in an unreasonable May heatwave, and blistered feet scorned her expensive camel sandals. She continued the argument that they'd been having since they'd started planning over a year before.

'No, Tom. You go, I'll be fine here. It's spring, it's Paris, the sun is shining and this is the best spot in the world to people-watch. Take the kids, you guys can take pictures from the top. I'll be right over there.' She pointed to an empty bench beyond a wave of chattering tourists.

Her husband was unsympathetic. 'We'll only be up there a minute, Mel—this is the chance of a lifetime! You're telling me that I've brought the whole family to France and now my wife won't even go up a stupid elevator in the Eiffel Tower? Give me a break!'

Tom's 6 foot 4 frame geared up for familiar indignation and disappointment. At 38, he carried the paunch of a desk jockey with a chronic pretzel habit. His jeans hung in folds from a tightly cinched waist and he'd rolled up the sleeves of his navy checked shirt. Annoyance pierced his stance as he folded his arms and glared.

They'd had the 'Tower Talk' before. That's how Melissa thought of it, capital letters and blazing marquee. They'd worked it over in their planning. Paris? Yes. The Eiffel Tower? Yes. All the way to the top? As with so many of their disagreements over the past few years, the answer was yes and no. Tom derided her vertigo on rollercoasters and cliffwalks, but the 'Tower Talk' elicited his most open disdain. He decided that unwillingness to 'go all the way' amounted to a lack of appreciation for how hard he'd worked to get the family to Europe on the vacation that she wanted more than he did anyway. That had been an ugly fight, a wordless weekend after his late nights at the office and her accusatory silence. So, the 'Tower Talk', expected? Yes. Unwelcome? Still.

Melissa carried them along in this familiar dance by calling the kids into play. As she watched them sprint over, she checked off a mental list. Eleven, nine and four. Boy, girl, boy. Jake, Amy, Thomas—family names, inherited names. Then they were with her, clamoring for their snacks and tumbling over telling her who'd won their games.

Thomas, the littlest, the loudest. 'And then... and then... there were these birds... pidgeons... and we chased them and Mom where are all the squirrels like I have in my tree outside my window at home and *Mom* can you hold my ice cream it's all melty and where's my juice?'

Amy revved up her complaints, inventing conspiracy from her brothers. 'I *told* them not to push me but Jake tried to put gum in my hair and then they ran away and they don't want to play with me and *it's not fair!*'

Meryl McQueen

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Jake just announced his boredom with his siblings and asked when they were ‘gonna do anything fun.’

Placating her daughter with a promise of girl time later that afternoon, Melissa held court with her kids and announced their upcoming adventure. ‘You guys are going to take the elevator with Dad all the way to the top of that tower, and when you get up there I want you to look down here and see if you can spot me, okay? Don’t worry Thomas, it’ll be just like your ‘Where’s Waldo?’ books at home, remember? I’ll be right here waiting, and then we can all go take a boat on the river.’

Tom resigned himself to losing the discussion as choruses of ‘yeah, cool!’ and ‘let’s go, Dad!’ rose and peaked. As she watched her children sweep up her husband in their enthusiasm and carry him to the line that snaked into the Eiffel Tower, she remembered to exhale.

On automatic pilot, Melissa dumped the remnants of lunch into the nearest trashcan and grabbed a wet wipe from her backpack. She washed her hands and took a half-hearted swipe at the chocolate stain on her beige capri pants. At two o’clock on a hot afternoon in late spring, Melissa Foreman wandered around the base of the icon towards the designated meeting place bench. Wishing for her Birkenstocks, which she’d left back at the hotel as unsuitable footwear for romantic days in Paris, Melissa dislodged her feet from swollen discomfort. She slumped on the bench, took a firm hold of the backpack on her lap, and closed her eyes.

They’d left Portland in the vice of a cold snap, where she’d run around reclaiming winter clothes from the mothballs she wrapped them in in April. In the excitement and meteorological confusion, she’d overpacked, stuffing a third suitcase with sweaters and jeans. For the past week, they’d sweltered. Predictably, first in Rome and Florence, now in Paris, Tom had complained about everything. The heat, the service, the hotel, the food, the prices. He used the bulging extra suitcase as a constant reminder of her incompetence. She berated him for crowing at the top of his voice about how awful the people were, and cuttingly mocked his inability to read menus in Italian and in French. Mostly, they fought at the end of long days spent ricocheting between museums and cathedrals. Their voices were hoarse birds scratching as the children slept restlessly in trundle beds and bunks.

Melissa coddled precious moments of solitude, trying to capture her vision of Europe in spring. The steady thrumming of a dozen languages bathed her ears, soothing incomprehension that cradled and rocked her. She tasted an early European summer on her tongue, diesel fumes and coffee steam and crowds. She felt the sun’s conversation with the flagstones, a trill of rising warmth. Melissa coiled her feet more tightly beneath her and looked around.

Idly, because she’d marked this time as hers, Melissa traced the outlines of passersby: an old woman in black shuffling along with a stringbag of vegetables; two angular blond backpackers in t-shirts and shorts asking directions from an information kiosk; half a dozen art students making charcoal sketches of a building’s coarse smog-stained façade; a tall man with his back to her in a tailored gray suit cooing earnestly into a cellphone; a mother and a stroller and a dog. Her gaze fixed again on the tall man as he leaned his whole body into the conversation. She didn’t look away.

Vertigo

Before thoughts turned to language soup in her head, Melissa's body knew it was him. Eel legs, fish gulped breaths, and an added flush that burst from beneath sunburn and sweat. Obliging, then, her mind bullet-pointed the blanks. Francesco ('never Frank') Alberoni—Venice native, went to college in New Hampshire for the Bennington surrounds, studied architecture, worked at summer camp, B.A. with honors, followed family wishes home.

She'd only shared one part of his life, but it had been enough. As a medieval history major at Boston College, Melissa decided that summer waitressing or retail in her leafy Connecticut hometown would drive her crazy. So she applied to be a camp counselor on Lake Clare in New Hampshire, and met Francesco on day one. Between shepherding their charges to soccer, lacrosse, swimming, drama, water skiing, tennis, and horseback riding, they filled in childhood histories and plotted futures in the stars. Three summers running, pocked with semester visits and even one family Thanksgiving, they played house. Melissa pretended he didn't have looming family obligations back in Italy after graduation; Francesco ignored the snide remarks from her family about 'American values' and 'settling down'.

When it came, the goodbye was not impossible. They packed up all the children from Camp Maukee into waiting yellow schoolbuses. With a late August chill fumbling across the lake, they promised 'friends' and left it there. A hundred times in first semester, in her overheated apartment two frozen blocks from campus, Melissa picked up the phone. A hundred times, instead, she picked herself up from that broken heart and made her way into the world.

Tom was easy, and obvious. They met three weeks before she graduated, at an MBA party at Harvard. He had all the right credentials, down to sharing a Patriots obsession with her father. He'd been athletic, he was handsome and ambitious, and he made her laugh. He'd make money, buy a house, they'd have three children, she'd be safe. They'd been happy: his rising star, her teaching, four-bedroom Cape Cod, perfect yard and the kids right on schedule.

Still, in the sixteen years since Francesco had last turned his back to her, Melissa had caught sight of lookalikes once or twice. Sometimes it was short cropped tight brown curls, or pianist's hands. A few years before in Boston she'd watched a balding businessman mimic exactly the long, loping gait. Sitting alone on a chipped paint bench in Paris, Melissa saw first love again from a distance and was lost.

Half-closing her eyes against improbability, Melissa watched Francesco twist against the conversation in his ear, free hand gesturing to drive home his side of the story. He stood about 30 feet away, and as he moved in rhythm with the lively dialogue she glimpsed a confirmatory profile. Then he took a step or two sideways to avoid a string of schoolchildren parading past in uniform, and the movement banished any doubt.

Hide-n-seek? Or run to catch up with the past? The seesaw of opportunity fluttered in her head, and Melissa bit an indecisive lip. Francesco was still talking, unaware that a parallel universe had opened up in a chasm a few steps behind him. Melissa clutched the backpack full of juiceboxes, crackers, Kleenex, and guidebooks. She willed him to turn around, or disappear.

Vertigo

Snap! She imagined the sound of the phone shutting as Francesco flashed it into a suit pocket. He turned abruptly and hurried in his signature stride, angled slightly away from her. As he passed the bench, six feet to her right, the squeal of brakes and crunch of metal made them both cock their heads to a spot just over Melissa's left shoulder. Realizing it was just a fender bender, Melissa swivelled her head back to the square. It was too late to duck.

'Melissa? Sei tu? Non ci posso credere...I can't believe it!' The English/Italian mix spilled out in the river of his voice and he took two steps toward her before pulling up short. She filled in the silence a moment too late for comfort.

'I...Francesco. Hi there. I didn't see you...how are you? What are you doing in Paris?' The lies and the innocuous questions helped her regain lost ground.

Barefoot, she stood to greet him. A peck, a hug, and he asked to sit down. They shuffled around small talk—her fear of heights that had kept her on the ground, his family business that had brought him to Paris on a Wednesday in May. He'd been closing a deal before heading out to the airport on an evening plane home. Home, to his wife and young son in Venice.

While they talked, Melissa focused on a spot just above Francesco's right cheek. Then, as they ran out of family members to ask after and coincidences to remark upon, she took the plunge. Expecting fireworks and heralds, Melissa made eye contact. What she saw there made her laugh, a throaty sound of release and recognition.

Reflected in her ex-boyfriend's dense hazel eyes, where she'd anticipated romance and a life thrown into chaos, Melissa found distant fondness. Not even nostalgia peered back at her—just a Doppler of passion lived, and spent, and passed along the way to better things. Gazing up at Francesco as he sat beside her, Melissa fell in love with her life. This time, when he turned to go, they made no vows. Instead, two strangers wished each other well.

Abandoning the bench for a cooler spot in the shade, Melissa slipped her sandals back on. They seemed to chafe less as she sauntered across the avenue, and her blouse fanned her in the gathering breeze. Fifteen minutes later, returning to their meeting place, she heard her family in the crowd. Jake's gushing commentary reconnected the five travellers.

'Mom, and then it was *sooooo* cool we went up in this elevator, and you can see out the sides, and Thomas started to cry and Amy shut her eyes cuz she's a scaredy cat but I kept mine open the whole time. And then we were at the top and there were these guys hanging off ropes from the sides painting and it was just like Spiderman and can I do that when I get older?'

After brushing off her brother's insult, Amy was just as keen. 'Was not! Dad held me right up to the railing and you could see all these little people down at the bottom and we looked for you but everyone was like miniature dolls really hard to see and we took tons of pictures!'

Releasing Tom's hand, her youngest son reached up and said, 'Mom, I'm sick of looking at new stuff and my legs hurt. Can we go home now?'

Vertigo

Melissa pulled Thomas into her waiting arms and turned to her husband. He looked tired too, but the children's joy still echoed on his face. He managed a trademark lopsided grin and Melissa stepped off the cliff to meet him. 'I saw a babysitting service in the hotel, and I packed my little black dress. How about you and I come back to the Eiffel Tower tonight? I've made a reservation at that bistro down the street for seven, and the elevators only close at ten.'

WORD COUNT: 2368