

LAST CALL WITH THE LIZARD KING

This is the middle—middle age, middle class, fair to middlin', in medias res, etc. Fear of the end is what brought me here. The end of my joint savings account and family discount to Gold's Gym. The end of my wife's homemade macaroni and cheese and her long yoga legs wrapped around mine when we make love. The end of squabbles with our daughter about the condoms Sheryl and I found in her closet while we were snooping for evidence that illicit teenage sex was taking place in our Brooklyn brownstone in our absence. (Illicit teenage sex *was* taking place in our Brooklyn brownstone.) I was forty-five, fifteen pounds overweight, with a soon-to-be ex-wife, ex-daughter, ex-dog, ex-house, and as of two weeks ago, ex-job. I was also standing next to Jim Morrison's grave at Pere Lachaise Cemetery, the fading Parisian light glinting off the amber Coke bottle I'd filled with cheap whiskey.

"You're going *where*?" Sheryl had said when I told her about my travel plans.

"Paris," I said. I'd called to give her my itinerary in case Alison should need me while I was abroad.

"What would she need you for?" Sheryl said. Her voice sounded like white bread—artless and bland. When we were first married, she reminded me of sweet pain au chocolat.

"No reason, I suppose," I said.

"Traveling solo, or will someone be accompanying you?"

I cracked open a beer and took a long pull. "You know that's over, Sheryl. It never really began."

"Are you drinking?"

I took another pull. “Pellegrino,” I said.

“Mixed with what?”

“Just tell Alison I called.”

“She won’t call you back.”

“Tell her anyway.”

She’d hung up without saying goodbye, or have a safe trip, or don’t forget to pack your shaving gear. *You know you always forget to pack your shaving gear, Tom.* When I splayed open my suitcase on the hotel bed forty-eight hours later, I realized I *had* forgotten. I bought a Gillette Bleues and Maison du Barbier cream at a supermarket in Marais, along with three bottles of Coke Lite and one jug of French rotgut.

I was on a mission—I would take my last drink in the city of my birth, the spirit of Mr. Mojo Risin my star witness.

Jim Morrison died in the apartment he shared with his common-law wife, Pamela, at 17-19 rue Beautreillis on July 3, 1971, the day I was born in a dingy flat less than two miles away. This is my parents’ claim to fame—their only child crowned in their bathtub while the Lizard King lay dying or dead in his. My father, on sabbatical from UNC-Chapel Hill to finish his book on French Symbolist poets, was certain I’d become a writer like his favorite Rock star. Turned out I was an even more pretentious poet than Morrison, but I had a knack for teaching, so I followed my father’s path instead. Maybe I followed it a little too closely. He was a divorced alcoholic by the time I was five, and an unemployed English professor two years later. The official reason the University gave for his dismissal was

neglect of duty. The truth was he was banging undergrads, one of whom reported him to the Dean after he gave her a B in his World Lit class.

“Like father like son,” Sheryl said to me after she read the handwritten letter addressed to Oblivious Wife of Philandering Professor. “You’re just like him. Right down to the Maker’s Mark.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “It was one time. With one girl.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

I stared at the decanter of bourbon on the credenza and tasted its sharp heat sliding down my throat. I swallowed. “I slipped, Sheryl. I’m sorry.”

“Why’d you do it?” It was the requisite question, the one I’d seen coming as soon as she shoved the letter in my hand. But there had been no time to contrive an answer.

“I don’t know,” I said.

She worked her fingers through her cropped hair. She’d had it bobbed and bleached on her birthday and immediately regretted it. The new style made her *look* forty-five, she said, her tear-streaked face burrowed in my chest. I’d assured her she was still beautiful and young, then left to teach the night class I’d canceled so I could fuck a twenty-year-old Homecoming Queen standing up in my locked office, her term paper tucked in my briefcase by the door. I’d committed two egregious sins that evening: cheating on my wife, whom I loved, and giving the Homecoming Queen a B.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know,” Sheryl said. In that instant, her voice made the permanent shift from fancy French pastry to Wonder Bread. “Why’d you do it?”

Because I wanted to see if I could, I thought. Because I'm middle-aged and fifteen pounds overweight and the last time my wife agreed to fuck standing up was before our daughter was conceived. Because I'm a self-centered prick.

Because I'm a cliché.

I moved into a studio apartment in Bay Ridge the next week. I was fired a week after that. I had five thousand dollars in my checking account and no job prospects. A trip to Paris seemed as ridiculous as clean underwear and toothpaste. Right after Alison refused to speak to me when I phoned on her birthday, I renewed my passport and bought a plane ticket to Paris. I needed to find a way to reclaim my life—and my family. I needed to stop drinking. And I wanted to do it in true literary fashion, complete with symbolism and subtext, if not subtlety. I would go to the City of Light and love and libations and literature. I would begin again at the beginning.

I nursed my whiskey while I waited for the horde of American baby boomers to move on to Oscar Wilde's grave. They wore tie dyed t-shirts, Jim Morrison's face emblazoned on the front of some, Doors logo on the others. They sang "Light My Fire" and "Break On Through" and read poems from Jim's book *The Lords and the New Creatures*, a collection of vacuous, self-indulgent dross. Despite my father's erudition and reverence of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, he loved it, and I'd often drifted off to sleep to my father's slurred timbre reading Jim's verse instead of "Jack and the Beanstalk" or "Hansel and Gretel." His final words before lights out were always from the Doors' song "Soft Parade":

You cannot petition the lord with prayer!

Can you give me sanctuary

The paradox haunted me, even then.

The baby boomers made way for an American tour guide shepherding a rowdy herd of high school kids and their harried teachers. I wasn't drunk. Not yet. I would be by the time I finished the bottle—not too drunk to navigate the metro back to the hotel, but enough to stumble once or twice along the way.

One of the high school kids—a girl with a nose ring and black eye shadow—tapped me on the shoulder. “Would you take our picture?”

“Sure,” I said.

I set the bottle on the ground and she handed me her cell phone. She locked arms with a boy with a matching nose ring and shimmied in front of Jim's headstone, pouting for the camera like Ann-Margret, ala Kitten with a Whip. I clicked the button and previewed the shot.

“You're squinting,” I said to her. “Want me to take another?”

“Hells yeah. I don't want to look like a douche on Facebook.”

Her boyfriend snickered. “You already look like a douche on Facebook.”

She swatted his arm then nodded at me. “Ready.”

I snapped another picture. “This one looks good.”

“Awesome,” she said, retrieving her phone.

“So who else is buried here that's worth a look?” her boyfriend asked.

He reminded me of those libidinous boys Sheryl and I suspected were the reason for the condoms in Alison's closet. I glared at him. “No other Rock stars.”

“How about the cute dude from that James Franco movie—*Tristan and Isolde*?” the girl said. She took a selfie with the flowers on Jim’s grave in the background. “Are they buried here?”

“That’s an opera by Wagner,” I said. “Tristan and Isolde aren’t real people.”

The tour guide babbled about the Doors and Jim Morrison’s soiree in Paris. She left out the part about his 1969 Miami arrest for and subsequent conviction of indecent exposure, and that he’d absconded to Paris while awaiting his appeal.

“If you’re looking for a legendary couple,” I said, “you might check out Abelard and Heloise’s tomb.”

She looked at me quizzically. “Who’s that?”

I hesitated. “In short, Abelard was a middle-aged teacher in the twelfth century who seduced one of his students—Heloise.”

“That’s gross,” she said. “What happened to them?”

I hesitated again. “Her uncle had him castrated, and he became a monk.”

A group of German speaking tourists elbowed their way past us. I teetered into Condom Boy, splashing whiskey on both of us. He sniffed and grinned.

“Way to goose security, dude.” Heat crawled up my face and burrowed in my receding hairline. “It’s all good,” he said. “Wish I’d thought of it.”

“Hey,” the girl said, “wanna pass the hootch around behind what’s-their-names’ grave?”

“Abelard and Heloise,” I said. “And what about your group?”

“They’ll never know we’re gone.” She leaned in close and whispered in my ear. “I’ve got a Doobie Brother in my purse.”

Suddenly, I felt hip again, like a high school stoner smoking weed under the bleachers during lunch period. I wondered if Alison was a part of that clique. I'd never detected any signs of drug use in her—no red eyes or incessant sniffing or sour breath. As far as I could tell, her only piercings were the two in her earlobes her mother had taken her to the mall to get when she was twelve. If she had tattoos, she'd hidden them in places I hadn't seen since she was in kindergarten. Her musical proclivities tended toward Beyonce and Kanye West, and unlike her girlfriend with the purple streaks in her hair, Alison's hair was still the same auburn color it had always been. I wondered what she'd think of her old man if she could see me now—invited to cop a hit and an adult beverage by kids who use words like *dude* and *awesome* and carry roaches in leather satchels like tubes of lipstick. It didn't occur to me that this was exactly the sort of behavior that had sent her running to her mother's corner in the first place.

I pulled out my map of the cemetery and studied the legend. "We're here," I said, pointing to plot thirty-five. "Abelard and Heloise are plot thirty-seven."

Condom Boy looked over my shoulder at the map. "All we gotta do is cross this street and walk up the next one?"

"More or less," I said.

Their tour guide directed the group onward. Kids and chaperones shoved off without noticing their two escapees.

"See what I mean?" the girl said.

Condom Boy pulled a Magic Marker from his jeans pocket and surreptitiously scrawled *Cleveland Kyle and Veronica were here* on the tomb next to Jim's.

"Motherfuckers gated off his grave," Cleveland Kyle grumbled.

Veronica clucked her tongue. “They cleaned off the graffiti, too.”

I screwed on the top on the Coke bottle and stared at Jim’s headstone. He and his wife were another doomed couple—too much drink and drugs and other celebrity indulgences. Jim OD’d first; three years later Pamela followed suit, both of them only twenty-seven years old at the time of their deaths. *Thank Jesus they never had kids*, I thought.

“I can’t hang out too long,” I said to Veronica. *Hang out*. Do kids still use that expression? “And we can’t drink all the whiskey.”

“Howcome?” she said.

“Because I need it for something.”

Cleveland Kyle rolled his eyes. “Whatever, man. Let’s just go.”

We walked along the cobblestone street in division 6 under a canopy of chestnut trees in full spring bloom, past Gothic tombs the size of telephone booths and moss-covered memorial stones, toward division 7. A woman pushing a baby carriage trailed us, cooing something in French to its occupant. Pere Lachaise is like a city within a city, complete with panhandlers and buskers and cultural landmarks. There’s even a waiting list to purchase plots, like rent-controlled apartments on the Lower East Side.

“I thought you said it was around here,” Veronica snipped.

“I said more or less.” My eyes darted from one nondescript grave to another.

“Let’s just go behind that big-ass one over there,” Cleveland Kyle said, pointing to a tourist-free tomb near a copse of trees.

I flashed on myself sitting in a dank Paris jail cell, my one phone call a desperate plea to my estranged wife—*Sheryl, can you wire me some money? I just got busted for smoking grass with two juvenile delinquents I met at Jim Morrison's grave.*

"This was probably a bad idea," I said. I checked my watch. "It's almost closing time, anyway. I should head back."

"Head back where?" Veronica said. "To Morrison's grave? What for?" In the splintered sunlight straining through the trees, she looked eerily like Alison, sans nose ring.

I swigged the whiskey. I was over halfway through the bottle. There was time enough to finish it with Jim if I hurried.

"I'm on a mission," I said. "You wouldn't understand."

"I knew he'd bail," Cleveland Kyle grouched. "You're probably just some old dude who gets off partying with his kid's friends. You draw the line at anything harder than booze, though, huh? Nothing below the belt."

Nothing below the belt. By god, I'd misjudged this kid. He was wittier than most of my seniors—my former seniors, that is.

"Kyle . . ."

"No, really, 'Nica, he looks like our fucking French teacher. Killer goatee, man."

I made a mental note to shave off my goatee when I got back to the hotel. Now I knew why Alison hated it. Now I knew why I'd hated my own father's when I was her age.

Veronica gave me the once-over with her black eye shadow eyes. "Are you a teacher?"

"I was once," I said.

"You sure know a lot about that Abelard guy—him and that girl, his student, right?"

Cleveland Kyle draped his arm over Veronica's shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Let's go. He's a total creeper."

I watched them disappear around the bend, wishing like hell I was sitting in a quaint café on the Left Bank, a whiskey and soda in hand, the ghosts of Hemingway and Fitzgerald calling for another round. They were always a better fit for me than a Kerouac-wannabe with black leather pants and an Oedipal complex.

Now there's a creeper for you, you little shits, I thought.

I snaked through a row of graves, looking for a shortcut to Jim's. Creeper or not, we had a connection, and I'd made myself a promise. I had to find him again.

"Excuse me, sir." A man with a British accent carrying a crumpled map approached me. "I'm looking for Edith Piaf."

Hers was the first grave I'd visited when I arrived at the cemetery. Sheryl loved Edith Piaf, and we both loved *La Vie En Rose*, the biopic about her.

"She's in division 97," I said. "I'll show you on your map." I took a step forward and felt a sharp sting on my left thigh. "Shit!"

The man shook his head. "Yellow jacket. Nasty little things. I've seen a couple of nests in this area. You're not allergic, are you?"

"No," I said. I massaged my leg. The stinger had had no trouble penetrating my thin khakis. Years ago, I was stung on the cheek while Alison and I played Frisbee in Prospect Park, and my face blew up like a red water bottle.

Bottle . . .

I searched the ground for mine. The man saw it first, rolling toward his feet. He bent down—in slow motion, it seemed, one vertebra at a time, his fingers brushing the bulging

body with the logo wrapped around it, his hand grasping the neck, its life blood streaming out, pooling around the base of a headstone. He raised the bottle chest high in triumph and presented it to me like a sacred offering.

“Here you go,” he said cheerily.

I took it and peeked inside. Empty—except for a few drops of backwash, empty.

“Thanks,” I said.

“You’re alright?”

I could feel the burning welt forming on my leg. “I’m fine,” I said.

“Well, then.” He folded his map and carried on in search of Edith Piaf.

I stood there cursing Jim Morrison, although I knew my predicament wasn’t his fault. So I cursed the entire species of stinging insects. Then I cursed God for creating an entire species of stinging insects. I understood the significance of bees in sustaining the planet’s ecosystems, but yellow jackets and wasps and hornets? What was their purpose in life? They ruined perfectly innocent trips to the park and July 4th picnics at Sheryl’s parents’ beach house on the North Carolina coast (Alison—ankle) and our one and only family camping trip in the Adirondacks (Alison again, forearm). Only Sheryl had managed to escape the poisonous wrath of *Vespula maculifrons*. But then, I doubt she would tell me now if that status had changed too.

I poured the remaining liquid on the ground and crushed the bottle.

Mission *not* accomplished.

A cemetery guard caught my eye and said, “Fermeture.” Closing time.

There was only one thing to do—return tomorrow with a fresh bottle of Coke Lite filled with French rotgut and begin again, which meant this was not the end but still the

middle, and I was still within the perimeters of my promise and, as such, completely justified in locating a quaint café on the Left Bank, the ghosts of Hemingway and Fitzgerald calling for another round for us all. I fished my metro pass from my pocket and started for the exit. The last words my father said to me before he died when I was seventeen echoed in my head:

This is the strangest life I've ever known.