

SUNDAY WITH SIMONE

"I'll start," I say. I unfold the slip of paper and read the words aloud:

One is not born a woman, but becomes one.

They gaze at me—the three of them, lounging around my dining room table, glasses of Bordeaux in hand, their faces quizzical. Except Francois' because he's seventy-one and a philosophy professor and French. He knows the answer to the implicit question:

"Simone de Beauvoir, no?" he says. He's lived in America for over forty years, but his English is still broken, like his ties to home, his family, croissants, escargot—all things French, except fine French wine, a passion for which we share.

"That's not fair. Of course he knows the answer," Kat says. She's forty-six—like her husband, Vincent, and me—with a degree in Feminist Studies and she knows she should have guessed the answer. "You just gave him a point, Celeste."

"Remember the rules of the game," I say. "I'm Simone for the rest of the night."

She motions for me to pass the bottle. "This whole category is biased toward him. Why'd you choose twentieth-century French intelligentsia?"

"Because I'd just read *The Mandarins* when I won the game last time." I hand her the bottle and she fills her glass. "Next time you can choose—if you win tonight, that is."

Vincent kicks me underneath the table. "It's a game, ladies. A game."

Francois unfolds his own slip of paper then stubs out his cigarette on the crumb-filled dessert platter, the one my mother gave us as a wedding present. Vincent glimpses indignation on my face and kicks me again.

“Godard,” Kat blurts. “Jean-Luc Godard.”

Francois peers at her over his glasses. “I have not yet read the quote.” He never mastered the art of contractions.

She gives a clipped laugh. “Go ahead. Read it.”

He crumples the paper and recites the words from memory:

There were myths to be destroyed. Therefore, we had to kill those myths for cinema to be reborn.

“You see? Godard. Your favorite director. We *all* know that.”

He exhales a plume of smoke through his nose. “You leave me breathless, *mon cherie*.”

“Don’t call me *mon cherie*,” she says. “You always use that trite expression on game nights. It’s such a bore.”

Vincent pushes away from the table. “We need music.”

I press my palms over my ears dramatically. “We already have some.” The apartment walls are thin and the neighbors love Ted Nugent.

Vincent drops *I Put a Spell On You* by Nina Simone into the CD player. *She is not French*, Francois always says when I play her music. He’s right; she was born in North Carolina. *But she became French, which makes her more French than you*, mon cherie, I always retort.

Vincent drapes a sheer red scarf over the lamp by the sofa then shimmies back to the table like Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris*. He sits next to me—close enough to brush his leg against mine. I slide my hand up the inside of his thigh and loll my head against his

shoulder. He smells like coconut shampoo, the pricey kind you find at hair salons. Kat watches us, in that cool, austere way of hers, and I slide my hand farther up his thigh.

“No one touches anyone until *after* the game,” she says sharply. “Not like that, anyway.”

Vincent’s face flushes. “You’re right,” he says. “We’ll wait. We’ll all wait.”

I light a stick of incense and set it at the end of the table to mask the lingering stench of Brussels sprouts. Francois cooked them on the patio grill, but like the stifling July heat, the pungent smell of braised vegetables has been seeping through the gap in the window seal all evening.

“Your turn,” Vincent says to Kat.

She fishes a slip of paper from her skirt pocket and clears her throat:

I don’t want nutrition. I want food.

“Alice B. Toklas,” I say.

She hesitates then mutters, “Yes.”

Francois blows her a kiss. “*Consolez-vous, mon cheri*. The game is not ended. And the night—it is young.”

“Indeed,” she says scornfully. “The *night* is young.”

Francois gestures to the notecard in Vincent’s hand. “Monsieur?” His voice is smoky, like vintage cognac and dark chocolate. He straightens his tie. He always wears one on game nights—a tie and white oxford, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his thick hair unwieldy, gray at the temples, like Marlon Brandon in *Last Tango in Paris*. “That’s who he looks like—a middle-aged Brando,” Kat told me after she first met him, standing in the Philosophy Department office during registration the fall of our senior year. She insisted

the three of us sign up for one of his classes. We did, and then we signed on—first as lovers; then as couples, of a sort, anyway. The game was born shortly thereafter. Actually, Francois had played it with friends at the Sorbonne when he was a student, but the riots of '68 disbanded the group—one member went to prison, another was badly burned by a Molotov cocktail. Francois' father, a loyal Gaullist, disowned him for his role in the protests, so Francois disowned his father, and everything he associated with him, including France herself. He stayed with a former lover in Prague until Soviet troops put an end to the "Prague Spring," after which he—and his game—came to America.

Book clubs are so bourgeois, he told us. He proposed a different kind of club—something more compelling, a kind of competition. We were intrigued. The goal, he said, was greater than merely winning. And there were rules—rules that must be obeyed. *You agree to follow them, oui?* he said. *We agree*, we said, without compunction or conjecture. Once again, we signed on. And the game had bound us together for over ten years.

Vincent reads from his notecard:

We are our choices.

"We are our choices?" Kat bellows. Her reserve, what little she'd brought with her tonight, leaches like blood from her face. "Anyone could have said that, Vincent."

"No names, Madame Toklas," Francois insists.

"What am I supposed to call him? I don't have a fucking clue who he is." She bums one of Francois' cigarettes. She's become a chain smoker since her daughter's birth eight weeks ago.

Vincent pops the last of his crepe into his mouth then belches loudly. He's drunk. And he's crass. Middle age has not refined him. Neither has the punctilious world of real

estate investing, in which he ensconced himself post-graduation. “Do the rest of you want to venture a guess?” he asks.

I shout it a beat before Francois: “Sartre!”

Francois lets loose a dry laugh and bows to me. “My compliments, Madame de Beauvoir.” He pats Kat’s hand. “You did not win, Madame Toklas.”

“When did Madame Toklas ever win anything, except Gertrude Stein,” I say. “And she was no prize.”

Nina Simone’s haunting voice pipes through the speakers—“Marriage is For Old Folks.” Francois twists his gold wedding band on and off his finger, as if he were comparing the weight of marriage with the buoyancy of bachelorhood.

Kat takes a long drag on her Marlboro and looks at me pleadingly.

“You’ve been away from the game for too long,” I say to her.

“You’ll get your groove back soon,” Vincent says. “It’s the baby. Hormones, probably. Especially at your age.”

“I can’t believe you said that.” She flicks her cigarette into her water glass then begins stacking dirty dishes. “We should go, Vincent. You make an ass of yourself when you’re drunk.” She putters to the kitchen, her anklet, a gift from me to celebrate her return to the fold this month, coruscating in the flickering candlelight from the table. I watch her scurry about, setting dishes in the sink, covering a bowl of salad with plastic wrap, rummaging through her purse for her car keys. I notice the tiny heart tattoo on the back of her calf, the baby’s initials inked in red in the center. She had never wanted children before. She’d always said that. We had both come from conservative families in conservative small towns and we’d clawed our way on hands and knees from opposite sides of the country all

the way to Berkeley. We'd found Mecca. We'd found each other. We were brilliant young women, we told ourselves. We were beautiful, powerful—Liliths in a world of Eves. I would be a writer, dressed in black capris and black turtleneck, with a black pixie cut and pensive pixie face. She would sing, in college theater then Broadway then Paris and Rome. She would be the next Maria Callas, with flaming red hair and gold-flecked eyes and one-word name—Kat. We would lead an avant garde life, an artist's life, defying propriety and conventionality. I never thought maternal instinct would hit her at forty-five. I never knew it would change everything.

Vincent follows her into the kitchen. He was always following someone. He followed her from their small Southern town to California, then he followed Kat and me to Francois.

I toss my beret on the sofa and yawn. Sweat prickles my armpits. How uncouth, I think. How un-French-like.

"I win again," I say to Francois, sweeping my finger through the candle flame. "That's what she's been worried about all night, you know. She was nervous you or I might win."

"She worried more *you* might win," he says with a sigh.

"That never seemed to matter before."

Kat and Vincent argue loudly in the kitchen.

"Shouldn't you go in there?" I say.

He taps his lighter on the table in time to the music. "*Pourquoi?*"

"Because you're her partner tonight, Monsieur Godard."

He smirks. "Am I?"

"*Oui*," I say. My voice sounds remote, impassive, even to me, and I wonder if it has always sounded this way.

Francois lights another cigarette then leans back in his chair and croons the lyrics to the song:

Marriage is for old folks

Cold folks and it's not for me

One husband, one wife

Whaddya got? Two people sentenced for life.

The bickering in the kitchen intensifies.

"This could go on forever," I say.

"Or . . ." He claps his arms together like a slate board at the end of a movie scene.

"*Fin.* Curtain." He pauses. "You are working on another book?"

I uncork the last bottle of wine and let it breathe. "You know I am."

His eyes bore into mine. "Not about all of us, I hope."

Kat trudges into the dining room. She sits back down and folds her hands in her lap.

"This is the last time," she announces. "I'm out after tonight. I don't—"

"I have another quote," Francois interjects:

Art attracts us only by what it reveals of our most secret self.

"Godard on Godard," I say blithely.

Kat is unmoved. "*This is not art. We are not art.*"

"No? Art is what, *s'il vous plait?*" Francois asks.

I groan. "Let's not get into that. We'll be sitting here all night. Besides, one definition leads to another, then we're on to questions of ethics and morality in art and art as representation of life or definition of life and so forth, and before you know it, it's midnight." I glance at the clock on the mantle. *Let's get on with the unmantling*, I think.

“Good art should be amoral,” Francois says. “Or immoral. But *never* moral.”

“Maybe amoral art repels some of us,” Kat says.

Francois shrugs. “It must attract before it can repel.”

I’m suddenly curious. “Why did you choose Alice B. Toklas?” I ask Kat. “A woman whose story was told by someone else.”

Kat blanches. “I love her strength,” she says. “She didn’t need to be the star. She didn’t need to be a musician or sing or write. Ultimately, she made other choices, ones she knew better suited her.”

“Maybe she took the easy way out,” I say flatly. “Maybe she had regrets no one ever knew about. Maybe she even had a lover no one ever knew about, someone else she would have liked to have a life with, if she’d been brave enough.” I’m being cruel, opening old wounds. “Never mind,” I say. “Doesn’t matter, does it? As you said, Madame Toklas; she made the choices that suited her.” I pour everyone another glass of wine.

“I’m not Madame Toklas, goddamn it.”

“Rules, *mon cherie*.” Francois strokes Kat’s hair. “You say *after* tonight you are out. But we are not done yet, are we?”

Vincent drains his glass. “Then let’s get on with it. Have you decided?” he says to me.

“I thought I had. Now I’ve changed my mind.” I blow out the candles and drag my chair to the other side of the table, next to Kat. I wipe the sweat from her face with a napkin then kiss her forehead. “Madame Toklas?” I say sotto voce.

Her eyes are glassy, her mouth tight. “What difference does it make?”

She unbuttons her blouse and guides my hand to her breasts, swollen with nourishment meant for someone else.

Vincent follows Francois into the bedroom, his gait capricious, Francois' carnal.

"What was that he said—Monsieur Sartre, I mean?" I ask Kat.

She stares at me blankly. "We are our choices."

I nod, my hand gliding between her legs. "We were once," I say.

At midnight we will become something else, the four of us—something muted and mercurial and separate.

And I will write about it.

We will become art.