

frankie, i've just heard—jp's had an accident. he drove off the road near st-étienne, wrapped the car round a tree. he's been taken to the local hospital—don't know how bad he is. i'll let you know as soon as i hear anything.

xavier

Frankie closes the laptop and pulls herself up off the bed. In the shower room she stares at the hairnet of cracks in the basin and then raises her eyes to the mirror. As she curls on mascara, her hand trembles and the wand hits her eyelid, smudging it black. She licks a finger and rubs the eyelid clean. Brushes away wisps of hair that have strayed onto her face. Tries out a smile.

The room is crowded. There's soft lighting, bright cushions on pale sofas and original artwork on the walls. Frankie stands in the corner furthest from the door. In black jeans and t-shirt she's underdressed for the occasion, but she's not going to let that bother her.

'*Alors...* What are you doing in Paris?' It's conversation, not a question. He says it with his eyes fixed on the other side of the room.

'Waiting to be discovered,' she says.

'*Ah bon.*' He nods, his eyes still fixed. There's a scratch of blood on his neck where he must have cut himself shaving.

‘It’s always been a fantasy of mine—starring in one of those moody French films.’ She knows he’s not listening. She can’t remember his name and he certainly doesn’t know hers—his eyes did that sideways thing when she told him. ‘A tale of unrequited love on the banks of the Seine, or...’

‘*Vous m’excusez.*’ He’s reeled in by his eyeballs before she can finish.

Frankie gulps down some wine and reaches for a crisp. Through the guests she sees the man home in on a young, well-dressed guy by the door. Smiling to herself, she grabs some nuts.

Simon appears: open face, crinkly eyes, a bottle in each hand.

‘You okay, Frankie?’

‘I feel like a mouse the cat won’t eat,’ she says, glad to revert to English.

‘Sorry?’

‘Doesn’t matter. I didn’t want to be eaten anyway.’

Simon grins and refills her glass.

‘So have you settled in all right? Must be pretty cramped up there.’

‘It’s fine for a mouse.’

‘Well I hope the mouse can cope with summer in the rooftops. The worst of the heat’s still to come, you know.’

‘Who’s on the fourth floor?’ says Frankie, glancing upwards.

‘That flat’s... It’s not really lived in as such.’ He scans the room. ‘Most of this lot are arty friends of Monique’s. I’ll introduce you to some of them when I’ve got rid of this vino.’

He makes his way through the guests, filling glasses and curving an arm around Monique’s slim waist as he passes. They complement each other perfectly: the blond, suntanned Englishman and his mahogany-eyed French wife.

Bits of shell fly everywhere as Frankie eats the pistachios one-handed. She wipes her hand on her jeans and stares into the room. The bodies all seem to connect with each other, but they have nothing to do with her. She can be who she wants with these

people, let them think what they like. After all, singles are more mysterious than couples: they leave more to the imagination.

Monique comes over with some chap. He's tall and everything about him is dark and lean; his hair spills over his face.

'Frankie, this is Antoine. He wants to practise his English. Just don't get him started on Surrealism!' A knowing look passes between them, leaving her out. Frankie swirls the wine in her glass. Removes a crumb of pistachio shell with her finger and flicks it onto the floor. When she looks up Monique is eyeing her intently.

'*Bon.* Time to check on the twins.' Monique withdraws her gaze and leaves the room.

'So you're a friend of Monique's?' Frankie says to the tall man in English.

'In a way.'

She expects him to say more, but he doesn't. He just stands there.

'What do you do?'

'This and that.'

'I've only just met them. Last week, when I got here. I'm renting a room upstairs, on the top floor. It's good to have neighbours, though I don't really know them yet obviously, I only got here...'
What on earth's going on with her mouth? She swigs back more wine and glances around. Switches her glass from one hand to the other.

'Can't stand parties,' says Antoine flatly. 'Talking to strangers—not worth the bloody effort.' He strokes a thumb down his beer bottle, drawing a line in the condensation.

'Well, I don't know, it depends.'

'Scottish?' He peers at her through his hair.

'Well spotted.'

'Monique told me.'

'Ah.'

He takes a slug of beer. 'I spent time in London once.'

'Doing what?'

'Bugger all.'

Frankie smiles, though she knows she shouldn't: he can't help his accent.

'Why Paris then?' he says.

'Um... fresh start. I needed to get away, do something different. And I'm doing some artwork while I'm here—a portfolio for Art College. That's the plan anyway.'

'Art College? Okay. Let's sit down.'

The sofas are inaccessible so they sit down where they are, on the floor, with their backs against the wall. The buzz of conversation reverberates up through Frankie's buttocks. She watches people's legs, the shuffling feet. And she sees Antoine's knees on the edge of her vision. She's very aware of his knees.

'Bored?' he says.

'Not really.'

'But you'd prefer not to be here.'

'I don't know.' It's true: she really doesn't know.

He takes the empty glass from her hand, gets up and crosses the room: an easy gait, his slim dark legs weaving through. She feels the lack of him beside her and finds herself guarding the space. But it's an old trick, going for more booze, not coming back.

Monique drifts back into the room, followed by a woman in a bright pink sari.

Bright colours are vulgar; stick to black.

It's striking, the sari. Monique is striking too: those intense, deep-set eyes and the way she moves, the fluidity of her gestures. The air hardly knows she's there as she glides her way through it. Behind her a vast canvas dominates the wall: one of her own creations, no doubt, with abstract blocks of colour cut through by a single black line. The sort of art people always claim they could do themselves if they could be bothered, only they never can and they never do. And anyway, it isn't that simple: there's nothing

random there, no spontaneity. Frankie has an urge to scribble on the canvas with a marker pen, slash through it with a knife. She squeezes her fingers into the crook of her knees.

Monique's head is poised against a sheen of mauve, her dark hair as sleek as the paint. She's chatting to the woman in the sari. When Antoine joins them Frankie tries not to look, doesn't want him to see her looking. They glance across and she can't help but feel they're talking about her. Antoine is smiling, almost laughing. He has a glass of wine in one hand, a bottle of beer in the other. That's my glass, you bugger, bring it here—I need something to do with my hands.

Monique touches Antoine on the arm. He laughs for real and Frankie looks away.

The bookcase beside her holds bulky art and travel books, collections of photographs, a *Collins-Robert*, an atlas, a thesaurus. Higher up is a jumble of French and English paperbacks. Frankie twists her head in both directions to read the spines: Flaubert, McEwan, Sagan, Keats... The names blur out of focus and she sighs. The last time she sat on the floor beside a bookcase with a man she'd just met, he seduced her. Or forced himself on her, depending on how you look at it. He was twice her age and she made the mistake of marrying him.

Antoine hands her the glass and reclaims the space beside her. The room is interesting again. Interesting enough for her not to leave just yet.

'So you're an artist?' she says.

'Not really.'

'I thought maybe you worked with Monique, or in the same field, though I suppose anyone can be interested in art, can't they?' The wine's still talking crap. She throws back some more.

'I don't know much about Surrealism,' she goes on. 'I mean, I know it's Dalí and Matisse and that, but...'

'Magritte.'

‘Magritte, yes, I always get them muddled—the names that is, not the paintings. Magritte did that one of the pipe, didn’t he?’ Antoine nods wearily, but that doesn’t stop her. ‘The one that says, ‘This is not a pipe’, because it isn’t, I suppose, it’s just a picture of one, isn’t it?’

If it’s not worth saying, don’t say it.

‘Actually, I’m more into music than art,’ she says. ‘I sing in a rock group—retro punk. I’ve got a sackful of safety pins upstairs.’

‘And I wrote the Marseillaise.’ His face barely cracks at the edges.

He drinks from his bottle and settles back into the wall, his elbow pressing into her arm. She pretends not to notice, but she’s paralysed. She doesn’t dare move, she hardly dares breathe. What’s happening here? She doesn’t know the guy, he’s impossible to talk to, his hair is a mess—and his elbow is electrically charged.

They sit like this for ages. They don’t even talk. Simon refills her glass a few times and her wine-drinking arm—the one not being touched by Antoine—is the only bit of her she moves. With the party droning on around her, she leans into his shoulder and doesn’t care what anyone thinks. A punk rocker can do what she likes.

Monique crouches in front of them with a tray of nibbles: small savoury biscuits, green and black olives, more pistachios, foiled mini-cubes of *La Vache Qui Rit*. One moment they’re in bowls on the tray, the next they’re all over the place—down Frankie’s front, in her lap, on the floor. Monique is fussing, scooping up biscuits and olives. The pressure on Frankie’s arm and shoulder has gone and Antoine is kneeling beside her, retrieving bits from the floor. She sits there, surrounded by nibbles. There’s a fish-shaped cheesy biscuit floating in her wine. She should be irritated. She should be worrying about the grease on her clothes and helping to pick stuff up. But there’s a fish in her wine.

She giggles. Can’t stop giggling.

‘Frankie?’ says Monique, bemused.

Frankie holds up her glass. 'A fish...' It's not funny, it's really not that funny. '*Un poisson... dans la boisson!*' Her face is doing all the wrong things. She's shaking and the wine is rocking in the glass.

Monique smiles weakly. Finishes cleaning her up, brushing her down, salvaging what she can. Frankie can't speak. Her cheeks are wet with tears and her stomach aches.

You're ugly when you're drunk. Really ugly.

That's it, she's blown it. Antoine will go and sit somewhere else now, find someone else not to talk to. Fighting another onslaught of giggles, she manoeuvres the glass in the direction of her mouth: with the wine inside her, there'll be less risk of spillage.

'*Le poisson rouge boit du rouge,*' Antoine says with mock solemnity. Then he gets up and leaves the room. The space beside her is empty again and embarrassment floods over her, hot and dry, killing the laughter dead. She blushes from the inside out. All that's left in the wine glass is a lump of soggy biscuit.

'Thanks for coming, Frankie.' Simon's cheek touches hers, one side then the other—a fleeting contact of skin. Monique hovers next to him. Her eyes grip Frankie's face for a moment, then she links an arm into Simon's and steers him back into the party.

Which just leaves Antoine. He's come out of the toilet and is standing in the hallway.

'I'm going now,' says Frankie, avoiding his gaze.

'Okay.' He bends to kiss her. She panics and leans to the wrong side.

'Sorry,' she says. 'It's ... I'm out of practice.'

They try again. This time she feels his lips on her cheek, smells the beer on his breath. For an instant, she thinks... But he homes in on the other cheek. His hand fizzes on her arm and weight drains from her head. She turns, swaying, directing her feet towards the door.

'*Bonsoir,*' he says as the door closes behind her.

Shit. She's walked away, just walked away and left him standing on the other side of the door. She doesn't know how to do this. She hasn't a clue how it works.

Well at least he knows where she lives.

It's quiet on the landing. Dark. The smell of someone's supper clings to the air. Her arm still tingles where he touched it and her cheeks feel flushed. Despite efforts to control her mouth, a stupid grin keeps springing back. She fumbles for the light switch, the timer ticking lazily as the darkness flips to white: vertical lines, horizontals, a curve here and there. She focuses on the verticals. Two whole flights of stairs to negotiate before the *minuterie* runs out.

It's a long way up. Her footsteps echo round the stairwell, bouncing back at her off the walls. A hiccup escapes and tumbles down, followed by a giggle. Still one more floor to go: the narrow bit, twisting steeply up into the roof.

The floorboards creak on the top landing. Groping blindly, Frankie finds the light switch for the toilet and holds her breath. It could do with bleach, rubber gloves, but she hasn't got round to that yet. Positioning her feet on the ridged footprints, she squats over the hole and concentrates hard on staying balanced.

Antoine. Sounds like a novelist or a designer. A restaurant critic, perhaps. No, too slim for a restaurant critic. Might be a film director, if she's lucky. And older than her—she always assumes people are older. Mind you, younger would be fun for a change.

She stands up shakily and jumps back from the *turque* as water gushes over it. Not so sozzled she'll get her feet wet.

Her room looks dull and uninspiring: bed, table and chair; sink and camping stove in the corner; piles of papers, books and clothes. She needs to get organised, finish unpacking, but there's nowhere to put things.

Everything in its place, including you.

Damn it. Why can't he leave her alone?