

Georges' Bridge

"Hello, it's me." The sharp tang of cleaning products hit my nose as I opened the front door. I put my bag and coat on the free coat hook and carried the shopping into the kitchen. The surfaces shone like polished glass and the sun bounced off the sink dazzling my eyes." Georges, you've cleaned, that's my job."

He sat on the sofa in the living room, his feet up on his wooden coffee table, dusting one of his many framed photographs. He moved his legs as I sat down next to him.

"I can't sit here and expect my daughter-in-law to wait on me hand and foot." He always speaks to me in French.

He had a framed photo in his hand of his late wife, it was taken in Paris on Georges' bridge, the Pont des Arts overlooking the Seine. It's where Georges proposed to his wife, he calls it 'the most magical and romantic place in the world'. The side of the bridge is covered with padlocks, a long line of masses of metal. They're called 'lovelocks', for many years couples have secured these padlocks to the Pont des Arts and thrown the key into the River Seine below. Georges believed that if you put a lovelock on the bridge your love will last forever. But I don't, I'm not a romantic person. Georges' son proposed to me on that bridge too and we had our names engraved on a lock and secured it to the bridge. But it didn't last forever.

"I had a letter from Daniel today, would you like to read it?"

His son moved to France, I always wondered why Georges decided to stay behind, but I liked that he was there and that I could take care of him.

"No. It's fine. He writes to you."

"He won't mind if you read it."

"But... he won't know."

"Then I'll tell him in my next letter."

"Sorry, I don't want to read his letters." There was no point lying and saying that I'll read them another time because Georges knew me too well and he'd know if I was lying.

"I should hit your heads together. Life's too short for people in love to be apart."

"Georges."

"You can pretend all you want. You don't talk about him or say his name. You won't even read his letters. And you've taken off your wedding ring! But I know! I know you still love him and you always will." He reached over and squeezed my hand, it felt dry and cool next to my warm, clammy one. I didn't say anything, there was nothing left to say.

Georges changed the subject: "I'm thinking of taking my trip to Paris soon. I want to visit our bridge, I know it's early but I didn't go last year. And I want to go before it's too late, who knows if I'll be around by..."

"Georges! You have plenty of time." I hated it when he talked like that. I felt a pang in my chest, he looked well and he'd been taking care of himself since the incident the previous year; sticking to a healthy diet. I thought he'd cheat and I'd find hidden sweet wrappers or smell cakes baking when I opened the front door, but he listened.

He patted my hand. "Don't worry, I'm just being prepared. You should come with me to Paris. You need something to cheer you up, you've been miserable for too long."

"I'm not miserable, Georges."

"Then stop acting like you are. Daniel will be busy working so you won't see him. You can take a holiday from work can't you?"

"I don't know, it's busy and.."

"Life's too short," he interrupted. "You're always working, live a little." He nudged me. "You can enjoy some French pastries." He had a sparkle in his eye.

"You can't," I warned him.

"No, but if you come and have some I can live vicariously through you."

I laughed, but not even the promise of pastries could convince me.

"It's good to hear you laugh. Now let's have some tea, yes? Our programme is on soon."

It was some weeks before he mentioned the trip again and I forgot until I opened his front door one morning and his suitcase was sitting by the stairs. I heard keys jangling and Georges came down the corridor with his coat on, putting his passport in his pocket. Did I miss something? Did he tell me he was going today?

"Where are you going?"

"Paris. The bridge, I told you. My taxi's on it's way." He pulled the handle of his suitcase out, wheeled it around and went outside to wait for his taxi.

"You're going now? Alone?"

"Yes. You said you didn't want to come."

"Have you got your tablets? How long will you be gone?"

"Hmmm, I don't know. I could stay a while and have a bit of a holiday."

"You should've ordered more medication then."

He smiled, the smile said he knew I'd get flustered about him going to Paris alone. After he collapsed the previous year all I did was worry about him. That year I

spent months lying awake each night wondering how he was. I remembered the hospital visits with the rain streaming down the windows and getting time off work to take care of him when he returned home. And the arguments: his son wanted to take him to Paris, he'd be happier there back home. I said he was too ill to travel, he should stay here. Was he too ill? Or was it just that I didn't want him to go? I never asked Georges what he wanted. When Georges got better his son moved to France and Georges stayed, so I assumed that maybe I was right and that Georges had wanted to stay in Britain. Otherwise why didn't he leave with his son?

"I can't leave you behind." Georges said, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Please come."

"I have to work."

"Book some time off."

"I can't just go right now."

He smiled at me and winked. "Then I'll wait."

He never did book a taxi, he staged the whole affair to convince me to go with him. Once I relented that was it, he wouldn't go without me and I couldn't hold him back.

The weeks and hours until our trip seemed to speed up until I was standing on the Pont des Arts again, the Seine flowing smoothly below us, a long boat gliding along its surface. The trees next to the river chattered in the breeze, a flurry of leaves at their feet. It was so familiar like I was home again and the memories came unbidden from the depths of my mind where I'd kept them locked for so long. My eyes followed the line of lovelocks secured along the bridge, there were so many of them.

"Isn't it magical? They say that if you put a lock on here and throw away the key your love is unbreakable." I overheard someone say.

Georges heard too and smiled. "You can pretend that being here doesn't bother you, but you can't fool me. Memories have a way of making us remember how we really feel."

"Georges, what are you going on about?"

"You still love Daniel."

When was he going to stop saying that? I opened my mouth to speak but he spoke before I could: "Let the past go and stop lying to yourself. Why do you think you've been so miserable? You still love him. How long will it take before you realise that?"

He was so serious and I didn't know what to say because he was right. I looked away from him to hide my expression. I looked across the bridge and for a moment I thought that I was seeing things. Daniel was standing on the other side of the bridge looking at me. I watched him walk over and all the pieces came together: the letters, the mention of the trip to Paris and how Georges convinced me to go by making me worry he'd go alone. Georges had planned this.

Daniel and Georges hugged each other and Georges nodded at me, winked and left us standing awkwardly together. It's strange how my heart still fluttered with excitement even though we'd been apart for a while. I wanted to run my hands through Daniel's hair and be close to him again. I remembered our last meeting and how the arguments took over my mind and coloured my judgement. But I realised this time that I'd missed him and the arguments were just noise in my head.

"How's Pa been?" Daniel asked.

"Good. He's sticking to his healthy diet."

He nodded. "Good."

There was an awkward silence and we just looked at each other.

"I didn't know you'd be here," I told him.

"It's my favourite place in the world."

"Georges' too."

"It used to be yours."

It was true and it still was my favourite place. I had good memories on that bridge. And as I stood there with the memories on the edge of my mind and Georges' advice about letting go of the past lingering, I started to push all the lies I'd been telling myself away. Maybe seeing Daniel made me accept the truth about my feelings. I smiled and said to him without thinking: "Do you remember where our lock is?"

Daniel looked surprised that I'd mentioned it, he'd been the one to try and solve things after all. "How could I forget?"

We found it easily and our hands brushed as we reached for the lock. Our lock is simple with our names engraved on the metal, immortalised along with the date of our engagement. I remembered how happy I had felt on the day that Daniel proposed, a warm feeling had filled my body and mind and everything had felt so perfect. How could I lie to myself for so long? Pretend that I was capable of moving on and leaving him?

He took my hand in his and looked at my empty ring finger.

"I couldn't really let you go," I told him. "Taking off my ring and avoiding you didn't change the way that I felt." There were so many problems still between us, the old arguments but life is too short.

"I can't let you go either. No matter what you do."

This time I'll listen and try to change, I thought as I stood there holding my husbands' hand. Georges watched from across the bridge and I thought that he was probably winking at me and smiling. He knows me so well.

I wonder if it hadn't been for Georges would I have be standing there, in my favourite place in the world, feeling hopeful and almost complete again? He was the bridge that breached the distance between us. George never left me and wouldn't let me forget Daniel. If he'd left maybe I would've moved on, who knows?

Georges says it's the Pont des arts that brought us together but I don't believe in that romantic notion. It was Georges all along.