

Silence Like Deep Water

by Simon C. Larter

YOU THINK PARIS WILL FIX EVERYTHING, but it does not. If you can just get away, the two of you, leaving behind the angry recriminations and broken families, you think you can make a new start in a little apartment over a *boulangerie* on the rue du Cherche-Midi, where the smell of baking wakes you along with the rattle of buses up the potholed street, and where you can both write undisturbed in cozy bistros over *café crème*. But it has not worked out that way.

She gets sick on the flight over—the airplane air, she says—and the cough lingers through December and January. She runs a fever the first two weeks, so you unpack everything yourself, giving her the larger share of the space in the miniscule armoire, taking regular breaks to bring her water and check that she is comfortable. Your French is good, but you do not know how to buy drugs for her at the *pharmacie*, and she insists she is fine, so you unpack, and occasionally moisten the cloth on her forehead. She is beautiful even when she is sick, with her long hair fanned out on the pillow, her pale skin contrasting with the blooms of color high on her cheeks. Sometimes she tosses and turns with the fever-dreams, and you cannot rest, but lie next to her, listening to her fitful sleep and the night sounds from the street outside: the occasional car, the slurred conversation of the drunks on their way home from the bars, and, when the night is nearly spent, the muted talk of the bakers in the kitchen below your bedroom. Her body burns when she brushes against you, but in the daylight she insists she is fine and that she only needs some water, and a little bread, and perhaps the cloth on her forehead cooled under the faucet.

She loses weight, but she is still lovely, and by the end of January she is smiling more and eating the simple pasta dishes that are all you know how to prepare. She is laughing the way she did before,

and everything seems as though it will be all right, even though the international cell phone you bought before you left rings now and then when your wife has had too much to drink and wants to scream at you or beg you to come home because the children miss you and she misses you and you bastard how could you do this to us? But you never stay on the phone for long, and there is always a bistro and *café crème* and the writing to take your mind off things.

By February it seems as though all is well again. You write together in a *café*, in silence, for hours at a time, and the calls on the cell phone are less frequent now. It is a comfortable silence, filled with shared purpose and the pleasure of being in Paris in winter with the rain drumming on the windows and the sounds of the *café* around you and the studied rudeness of the *garçon* — which you do not mind because it is part of being in the place you want to be with the woman you love now.

The nights are cold but it is all right because you can make love to keep the chill away, and afterward lie against one another under the sheets with your skin still slick from the effort. You can buy a bottle of wine for just a few Euros and make love, and everything is all right as long as you have one another to lie against in the night and the writing during the day in bistros with *café crème*. It seems now as though everything will be good and that Paris will be everything you hoped it would be.

April in Paris is gorgeous with the cherry blossoms spilling into the fragrant air and the daffodils blooming gold in the crisp sunshine, and the pleasure in her eyes and on her lips at the sight sparks a simmering warmth in your chest. On dry days you forgo the *cafés* and write at a table in the Jardin du Luxembourg, and you glance up now and then to find her watching the children floating paper boats in the *bassin*. You ask her if she is all right and she tells you she is fine, just that she loves to watch the children, and you smile and reach across the table for her hand. The children are precious, but you do not look at them because you do not wish to be reminded of what you have left behind, only to be writing in the sun in the Jardin du Luxembourg with the woman you love and the babble of Parisians rippling around you.

Sometimes it rains in April, and the wind whips through the nar-

row streets and drives the rain against the windows, and it is pleasant to lie together in the dark with the staccato spatter of water on glass and love one another and wake with her sweet-smelling hair tickling your face. On rainy days she does not want to go to the bistros, she says, because she can work better at home, and you offer to stay home with her but she tells you to go, and the way her eyes crinkle at the corners when she smiles soothes the worry that wants to worm in your mind. You go to the bistros and write, and when you come home she kisses you and all seems well other than she will not come with you to write.

When the weather turns sunny she still does not want to come to the cafés. This concerns you, but you tell yourself she needs more time to adjust to life in Paris. She still comes to the tables in the Jardin du Luxembourg, but she does not watch the children anymore—now when you glance up she is staring into the distance and often does not notice that you are looking at her. You tell yourself she is thinking about the words, but you know this is not true and yet you cannot find a way to ask her what is the matter. After a time she no longer comes to the Jardin with you, but in the evenings there are the cafés and the wine and sometimes the opera, and it is easier to believe things are all right, and that in a week or two she will want to write with you once more in companionable silence over *café crème*.

One afternoon at the end of May you come home from the market to find her weeping as she washes dishes in the tiny, porcelain sink. Her long hair is bound in a loose ponytail and strands have escaped to cling to the wetness on her cheeks, and her eyes are red from crying. The sight of her settles a cold mist in your stomach. She says she is tired of being here in a city where she struggles to communicate and where the heat from the bakery makes the apartment stifling during the day and the cafés are too noisy for her to write in and anyway she misses her family. You tell her you can find another place, one that is not above a *boulangerie*, perhaps a cottage out in the country where you can still get the milk delivered to you in the morning and the view is of the Pyrennées and maybe vineyards, and there will be no one to disturb your writing and the wine will still be only a few Euros, but she tells you that is not the point, and that she is tired of feeling alone, no friends to go out with nor family to call without having to think of

the time difference. You are silent for a moment before you ask her if you are not enough. It takes her a long time to answer, and when she does she cannot look at you but whispers with fresh tears tracking her cheeks that you are not, and that she is sorry.

You ask whether things would be easier at home where she could be closer to her family and friends again, and she says maybe that would be good but she does not know. She does not know about anything anymore. Then you smile and tell her you want her to be happy and whatever makes her happy is all right with you but the smile feels brittle and your pleasure at being in Paris with her is draining through the soles of your feet to evaporate in the arid exhaust of the ovens below. She smiles back but it seems strained.

The next few weeks are hot, and the air is still and stale in your apartment, and the few breezes bring only the scent of automobile fumes and warm refuse from the street and underneath it all the moist dankness of the river. You look for lodgings back home but every time you try to talk to her about it she shrugs and says she is sure you will find something nice and it will be all right, and you can feel her pulling away from you. You take her out to a cozy restaurant and share a couple bottles of Pinot Gris but the silences between you are long and are no longer the comfortable silences filled with shared purpose. Now the silences do not seem to have a purpose at all other than to deepen the chasm between you, and the wine cannot erase that knowledge but can only push it aside for a moment, and on the one night in June when the breeze freshens the air in your apartment you make love with an urgency born of foreboding. It feels like a valediction.

It does not surprise you when, at the end of June, she tells you she is flying home next week, and that she is sorry. You knew it was coming but to have it confirmed twists in your gut, and afterward when she leaves to walk to the market you pace the floor and sometimes stop to lean against the wall and bend double against the pain. But by the day she leaves the weeping is finished and in its place a terrible quiet that rings with the echoes of broken expectations. Of course it is raining as you see her to her taxi. Once her belongings are loaded there are no words, can be no words, only a lingering kiss on the cheek and whispered regrets and the soft scent of her hair and skin that is washed away by the misting rain before her cab has disappeared from view.

Paris was supposed to fix everything but it has not. Now it is just you in the apartment over the *boulangerie* and all of the space in the miniscule armoire is yours and the smell of baking bread still wakes you in the morning but all the warmth is gone despite the midsummer heat that sparkles in the dusty air. She is gone now, and you cannot write anymore because all the bistros nearby are bistros you went to with her, and the *café crème* does not taste the same anymore, and you know that the *garçons* are no longer being rude to you because they notice that you are freshly alone and the French understand misery very well. When you walk into the apartment late in the afternoon the silence is louder than any sound you have ever heard, and the hot emptiness inside makes you squeeze your eyes shut and hang your head and wait until the wave of feeling has passed, although you know it will come again soon, when something you see or hear or taste or smell reminds you of her.

You cannot rest, and lie at night listening to the ticking of old timbers cooling and the soft scratching of mice behind the walls and the sounds from the street outside. In the daylight you try to convince yourself that you are fine, and that you just need to focus on the writing and find a bistro where the *café crème* tastes right and the *garçons* are rude to you the way they should be, but every woman you see with long hair the color of hers or a slender neck and collarbones like curved wings against an endless, pale sky makes you look away and blink against the sting of moisture behind your lashes.

You buy a bottle of wine for just a few Euros and sit against the wall beneath the window in the bedroom drinking and wondering how long it will hurt like this. The wine does not help the pain but it makes the wallowing easier and less self-conscious. You wonder where she is now, what she is doing, and hope that she is happy, happier than you could make her — because that is what she deserves — and you think at last that it was a mistake to come to Paris at all. You hoped that it would fix everything, but it has not, and all you have to show for it are the pages you wrote in the bistros these past few months, pages which now seem banal and naïve, and filled with feelings you cannot recall now except as faint flutters beneath the pall of regret.

You remain awake long into the night, listening to the street noises ebb and flow and finally fade to silence that presses against your

skin like deep water. There is nothing now but an apartment that reverberates with her absence and empty rooms that project her image in your peripheral vision, and you feel now that Paris no longer holds anything for you. You wonder how your family is, and think of the last time your wife called you to tell you of something important in their lives that you were missing and how she had not screamed at you but spoke in a voice thick with weariness, and that had been harder to listen to than the recriminations. Your children have spent nine months without their father and the weight of this settles on your shoulders like stone.

When the cell phone rings, startling the quiet air, it is as though someone has thrown you a lifeline.