

A woman in silhouette is walking away from the camera on a train platform at night. She is wearing a dark coat and has her hair blowing in the wind. To her right, a train is blurred, suggesting it is moving. The platform has tactile paving. The scene is lit with a cool, blueish light from overhead fixtures, with a warm, yellowish light from the train's interior visible in the distance.

# *Vuja Dé*

A 'short' by  
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## 1.

The train from Brussels to Paris was at the last stop before Gare du Nord.

One hour to go, he thought.

He leaned forward in his seat to look out at the station platform. It was unusually quiet for 3:30 on a Friday afternoon. He noticed a woman with two young kids, a boy and a girl, standing and staring at the train, as if looking for something or someone.

All of a sudden, the little girl, she looked to be around six, yelled, "Poppa!" and ran off. Soon a man walked into the scene, carrying the little girl to the woman who was now holding the boy. The man and woman kissed. And although he couldn't hear anything through the window, he really didn't need to hear anything to know that they were in love.

A smile crossed his face as he watched. He knew what the kind of love he was seeing felt like. He had enjoyed it himself, years earlier. A love so simple that words weren't necessary to convey it. A glance. A touch. The way a man would smile at a woman could communicate a love that even the best of novelists would be hard-pressed to find the proper words for.

A man is lucky, he thought, to experience a love like that once in his life. Most don't. That he did, at least for a few years, meant that he could count himself as among the fortunate.

Yeah, but that was then, wasn't it?

A movement caught his eye, taking it from the family to a woman walking by his window. Tall, probably five nine or ten. Mid-30's. In shape. Perhaps 128 pounds. Formidable. You could tell by the way her tailored skirt fit around her buttocks with just enough tension that said, look, but don't mess with me, even though you may want to.

She wore her hair up. It would look nicer down, he thought. But wearing her hair up, especially with the horn-rimmed glasses that were framing her face, gave her a mask of imperviousness, which he was sure was intentional.

It was auburn—the color of her hair—with a light touch of red, just enough to be noticeable. The briefcase she was carrying—no make that a leather folio, not a briefcase—was the same auburn color as her hair. It was obvious that everything about this woman was planned, designed to create an effect, he thought. An effect that, at least on him, was achieving exactly what she had no doubt intended.

He twisted his body to try and keep her in view, but she had walked out of the frame of his window.

C'est la vie, he thought.

Sitting back, he found himself smiling. He had known women like that. Women who would allow no weakness to show, somehow trying to prove that they were not vulnerable or frail. Over time, he had, of course, learned how to play them. How to get through their defenses.

Or, so he had thought.

Until the day he realized that he was the one who was usually being played. Interesting choice of words, he thought. Being played. But then, it is all a game, isn't it? Something that we all do. Take on a role to keep our real selves hidden. Our most vulnerable selves. To be honest about who we are—no, that would be too painful to reveal. Too dangerous that the truth about our deepest self would be exploited, used against us. So instead, we walk through life as if at a masquerade ball, hidden behind the clothes we wear, the job title we have, make-up, hair color—all aspects of our outer selves, all costumes that we present to the world as our personal protective suit of armor.

Add to that, the stories. The ones we create about ourselves. At least, our make-believe selves. Stories we repeat so often that even we start to think they are true. We act them out. We live the lie. And then, before we know it, we are the story that we've created.

Our true self is lost.

But what's truly sad is that we not only live the lie, but we're quite happy living the lie. And once we reach that point, there's no going back. The story has become the armor, never to be penetrated.

Never to be removed.

Through the window, he watches as the conductor takes one last look up and down the platform, blows his whistle and mounts the train. Slowly the wheels start turning.

Finally, he thought. Now for some rest.

Putting his head back, he shut his eyes. It hasn't been an easy last five years. The divorce. Relocating. Long-distance, single parenting. Turning forty-two. (Yikes. How did that happen?) Paris will be a chance to recoup his losses. A figure of speech. To recoup his lost self, he meant to say. To find out if he was, in fact, living a lie.

He hadn't booked a hotel. He didn't know how long he'd be there. The whole Paris idea was rather spur-of-the-moment. His business was done in Brussels. He had no one waiting for him back home in San Francisco. Why not slip into Paris, get a hotel, spend five days—a week—recharge? Any business needs, if they manifested, could be handled online.

After all, he always liked Paris. To him, it was the most romantic city in the world. Hell, he honeymooned there. So indeed, why not, he thought? Live a little. Chip away at the goddamn armor.

He felt a movement in the seat on his right. Someone had sat down next to him. Ever since the train left Brussels, that seat had been empty. The privacy and space had been nice. Without turning his head, he slowly opened his right eye to see who his seat mate was. If he didn't move, they just might think he was asleep. At least he hoped that would be the case. The last thing he wanted to do was talk.

He saw the tailored skirt, fitting snugly across the thigh and buttock. In her lap was a leather folio, auburn in color. He knew that if he turned his head a bit further for a better look he would see the face with the hair worn up, the same color as the folio, with just enough red to be interesting.

## 2.

He didn't say anything.

She reciprocated.

They were both just sitting in silence. Although he had to admit that he found hers much more interesting than his.

His glance went to the row of seats in front of them, across the aisle. Both of those two seats were empty. As were the two in front of those two. She could have sat in one of those seats with room to spread out, now that the train was moving and there were no more stops before Paris.

But no.

He heard her cellphone vibrate. Opening the leather folio, she reached her hand in, found the phone and without looking at whom the call was from, pressed the off button.

The vibrating stopped. Did she know who it was from and not want to talk to them? Or, was she uninterested in whom might be trying to reach her?

Either of those two options intrigued him.

Adjusting slightly in his seat, he turned his head even further to the side facing her. As he did so, the fragrance she was wearing wafted over to him.

Nice, yes, very nice, he thought.

"That's twice now I caught you staring."

Her English was perfect, just a hint of a French accent. Since she chose to speak English rather than French, he assumed that she had realized that he was an American.

"You were staring at me through the window earlier. When I was on the platform."

She had not yet turned to look at him. If he wasn't looking at her, he would have thought that she was speaking to someone else. But she wasn't. He was caught and had to reply.

"I didn't think you noticed."

"You don't think a woman knows when a man is paying attention?"

"But you never looked my way."

"Some things are not necessary. Just like it wasn't necessary for me to sit here, next to you. I'm sure you've noticed that there are other seats available."

He nodded. "So...why did you?"

"I bet myself that you would continue to make believe that you were asleep even if I sat here, next to you. I wanted to see if I was right."

"So, obviously, you lost," he said.

"Not something I'm used to, losing."

For the first time, she turned her head to look at him. "And you, do you lose often?" she asked. Her eyes were penetrating, emerald in color and focused on his. He found it disconcerting. Out of nervousness, he smiled sheepishly before looking away.

"I guess it depends," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Depends? Depends on what?"

"On the game being played."

"I see. Okay, well, let's say the game of business," she replied. "Do you win or lose at such a game?"

"Mostly win."

"And if the game is poker?"

"Good days and bad days."

"And how about the game of love?"

This disarmed him. Love? Love used to be easy. His game to lose. And lose, he rarely did. But now, with the divorce...

"Love?"

"Yes, romantic love. Not the love of a child. Or of a dog, no. The love of a woman."

He hesitated. He was finding this entire conversation intoxicating, and yet, at the same time, somewhat dangerously intimate, especially with a complete stranger. That said, he didn't want it to stop. No, not yet.

"May I ask the same question of you?"

"You may. But not yet. When the time is right."

He glanced at his watch. Seeing this, she smiled. "Yes, you have about thirty minutes to tell me whether you win or lose at the game of love."

“That’s it, huh? Well, I’m afraid that it might take more than thirty minutes. And if I tell you my story then that will leave no time for you to tell me yours.”

“Are you staying in Paris?”

“I am.”

“How many days?”

“TBD. I was thinking five, maybe longer.”

“Which hotel?”

“I haven’t booked one yet.”

“I see.” She paused as she looked down at her hands. It was obvious to him that she was thinking something through. Finally, nodding to herself as if she had come to a conclusion she slowly turned to face him.

“Trust me. There will be time.”

### 3.

Her apartment was one large floor consisting of three bedrooms, two baths, a small kitchen, but large dining and sitting room. His first reaction was that she must make a lot of money to afford an apartment of this size in Paris. Either that or she had married well.

They had come from the train station by taxi. She smiled when he held the door open to let her get in the taxi first. When their legs touched in the back seat, she didn’t move away. Then again, neither did he.

“If you don’t like my apartment, then by all means, find a hotel,” she had said on the way over. “But I have a hunch that you will find it to be to your liking.”

He did.

She kicked off her heels when she entered, putting the leather folio on the credenza by the door.

“Please, make yourself comfortable. I need five minutes.” And with that, she disappeared into one of the bedrooms.

He realized that he didn’t even know her name. When he asked on the train, she had changed the subject. And when he tried to tell her his, she stopped him. “We can worry about all that later,” was all she said.

The thing was, it didn’t seem to matter. There was already a familiarity between them that far surpassed knowing names. In some way, the sharing of names would only disappoint. But still...

He walked around the apartment, taking it all in. The floor to ceiling windows, the Eiffel Tower visible in the distance, the city of Paris below, its lights starting to shimmer in the early evening twilight. Framed photos on a side-table revealed a family. From the age of the photos, it was her family from when she was a child. A photo of a husband seemed to be missing. As did any of her with small children.

The art on the walls was eclectically interesting. Art Deco city-scapes, extra large canvases, in which the buildings portrayed all shared sharp, well-defined angles. This in contrast to a Zen-like display of seven Chinese calligraphy brushes of different lengths, widths and colors, hanging serenely in a row on the wall.

No, this was a single woman's apartment, not a married one. If he believed in *feng shui*, he would say that it had been *feng shui'd*. Taste is what it conveyed. Taste, and perhaps a loneliness that comes from being strong. Strength can scare and intimidate. At least strength that comes in a female form. It makes most men nervous.

He knew because he was one of those men, too, once, back when he was married. He did what married men were supposed to do. Played the role. The part. He saw a woman's strength as something intimidating so he would concede when confronted. Look where that got him. Then, he saw a woman's strength as a negative. Now he saw it as a positive. And surprisingly, something quite attractive.

As was the fact that she had invited him to her apartment. She gave him the out, if he didn't like it, he could leave, she had told him. Very matter of fact. But she had somehow known that he would like it. "How did she know?" he found himself saying out loud.

"How did I know what?"

He turned. She had re-entered the room without him hearing her. She had switched from her business attire to an ivory-colored cashmere sweater and black leggings. Her feet were bare. Her hair was down. He was right. It did look better down.

"That I would like your place."

She stared at him, a coy smile crossing her lips. "Would you like a drink?" she asked.

He watched her as she walked over to a liquor trolley that was up against the wall. "Yes," he finally answered. "But I do have one drinking rule I abide by."

Her face took on an inquisitive stare. She cocked her head to the side, as if to say go on.

"I never drink with someone whose name I don't know."

“Really?” she said. Picking up a bottle of Scotch she poured two fingers into a crystal glass. She then did the same with another glass. Picking both glasses up, she carried them over, handing one to him.

“Never?”

He could only smile. Shrugging his shoulders, he raised his glass to hers. “To breaking rules,” he said.

She nodded, walked over to the sofa and took a seat, pulling her legs up under her. “Just so we understand each other, this is not me trying to pick you up.”

Again, he shrugged his shoulders as if to say as you wish.

“What this is, is”...she paused and he saw her shake her head. “Well, to be honest, I’m not really sure what this is.”

He took a seat on the other end of the sofa. “So...what is it to you?” she asked.

He took a sip of the Scotch, using it as chance to think. “I think most men would say that it’s a dream. A beautiful and mysterious woman sits down next to him on a train, a train that, as you mentioned, had many other empty seats that she could have chosen from, and, after an hour’s conversation, invites him to her apartment and offers him a drink. Yes, I would say that most men would say that’s a dream.”

She was nodding. “I get that. But you do realize that you have no reason to trust me. I could have brought you here to rob you or do you harm. But I’m sure you thought of neither of those, did you? Only of sex.”

He found himself blushing, but only because she was right.

“So before we do something to each other,” she continued, “either harm or sex, I have three requests.”

Tilting his head to the side, he smiled. “Which are?”

“You never ask my name. And, you never tell me yours.”

Slowly he helped himself to another sip of Scotch. This seemed like a strange request. But hell, if that’s all it takes. “Fair enough. And the third?”

“When you look at me, you must promise to always see me as if you are seeing me for the very first time.”

“You mean...you mean like at the train station?”

“Yes. So tell me, when you saw me there, on the platform, walking by your window, what did you see?”

“What did I see?” He was thinking back. He wanted to get this right. “What I saw is someone I wish I knew better. Someone who knew who she was and where she was going. Someone who took no shit from anyone but would let the person she loved get through all of her defenses and touch the truth that she hid from the world.”

She smiled. "So you think I'm guarded? Really?" She laughed.

"Aren't we all?"

"Indeed we are. And you truly saw all that? In me? Just by walking past your window?"

Nodding, he turned to look at her and saw that she was smiling.

"Good. Good. Then I was right after all," she said.

"Right? Right about what?"

"About you."

#### 4.

And so it began.

Three beautiful days and nights with a complete stranger that he knew inside and out without ever knowing her name.

"This is...this is...this is..." he found himself stammering, trying to find the right words. It was the morning of day two, a Sunday. They were lying in bed. The windows were open and the sound of church bells were softly floating in.

"Shuuu," she murmured as she snuggled even closer into him. "Don't overthink it. That's what's wrong with life. We overthink even the most beautiful things."

He started to laugh. "But I don't even know your name."

She touched his hand as it was gently caressing the upper part of her thigh. "You know my body. Isn't that enough? Besides we promised that we would never ask."

He asked her why that same afternoon. He didn't want to, but he couldn't help himself. It seemed like such a strange request. Why not know her name? "Because," she told him, "it creates a familiarity that no longer allows you to see me as something new, something fresh."

"But sometimes familiarity is good, isn't it?"

She nodded. "It can be, yes. But most times, it's a prison. A prison that stops us from looking, from even trying to see the other person. We think we already know them which stops us from ever really knowing them at all."

"And you think it starts with knowing someone's name?"

"It has to start somewhere, no?"

He was curious, though. When she would be in another room he found himself looking around the apartment for a letter, envelope, magazine subscription, anything with her name on it.

She caught him in the act later that same day.

‘You won’t find anything,’ is all she said in an even-tempered voice. She wasn’t angry that she caught him looking. There was no judgment in how she said it, as if she realized that human nature would make anyone do the same.

It was the morning of day three that he had finally asked, “If not your name, then what do I call you?”

“What do your eyes see when you look at me,” she replied. “Call me that.” Different adjectives ran through his head, beautiful, gorgeous, caring, sexy, intoxicating, intelligent, vulnerable.

“Not vulnerable,” she corrected him, when he first tried it. “Not that. Never that.”

“But what if that is what I see when I look at you?”

“Then you need to look harder,” is all she said.

He wouldn’t call her nouns. If he called her ‘honey’, her response would be that no, she wasn’t something that you put in tea. Same with ‘dear’. She’d just shake her head. Babe? “Never,” was all she said.

Look harder she would remind him. Look until you see. I mean, really see. As if for the very first time.

She even had a phrase for it.

*Vuja dé.*

He corrected her when she first said it. “You mean déjà vu, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. Déjà vu means...well, you tell me...what do you think déjà vu means?”

He had to pause to think about it. “Déjà vu is like when you’re some place that you’ve never been and feeling like you’ve already been there or experienced it before.”

She nodded. “Right. It’s when the new feels familiar. So then vuja dé... which I consider to be the opposite of déjà vu would mean...?”

“Well, I guess then the opposite of déjà-vu would be seeing something familiar and feeling as if you’re experiencing it for the first time.”

She smiled. “Exactly. In French, there is a saying for it—*jamais vu*—meaning never seen. Now think about that in the context of a man and a woman. Looking at your partner, familiar as they may have become, and always seeing them as if for the very first time. When everything they do is fascinating. Everything they say is interesting. How could that not keep a love fresh?”

“Maybe. But to me...I mean, I think it would be...I don’t know...I think it would be exhausting.”

She nodded. “You’re right. It is hard. Very hard. I mean, falling in love is easy. But...staying in love, psssh...c’est impossible, oui? And why? Because love

becomes familiar. It becomes like déjà-vu. So even when we see something new in our partner, we feel as if we seen it before. We don't appreciate it. We become jaded. The relationship becomes routine. We never see our partner grow and change. Even as they are doing just that, growing and changing right before our eyes."

She paused to look at him. "I mean, you're divorced. You know.

He nodded.

"But to be seen," she continued, "to be truly seen, to me that's the sexiest thing in the world. Yes, it requires more work. I mean, it requires more work on the part of the person looking but..."

"But?"

"But...you tell me. Is it worth it?"

It was, he had to admit. If the last three days were any indication, then it truly was.

"So to you...vuja dé...it's like being in love," he said.

"Not *being in* love. It is love," she corrected him. "Taking the time, the effort, to see someone, with all their faults, to look at them and only see them as something new and exiting...yes...if that's not love, then truly, what is?"

"And that's why no names?"

She nodded. "You know what they say about familiarity...about what it breeds?"

He did. But he was curious. "So have you done this, this...vuja dé thing before...with, you know...someone else?"

Are you asking if I've ever ever been in love?"

"Yes. You did say on the train that you would tell me."

"Been? Or, now?"

That stopped him. Now would mean...no, no...he didn't want to go there. "Let's start with been."

"Define love," she responded.

"You just told me that it's being seen."

She shook her head. "No. I want *your* definition of love."

"It's when you would do anything for someone else."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Like promising to never ask their name?"

Her smile told him what she was asking. Shaking his head, he found himself backing away from her. "No, no, no...I didn't say I was in love with you," he said, defensively.

"Must one say it to be it?"

She was looking right at him, no, not looking at him, but seeing him, truly seeing him. He felt something suddenly release inside his heart. The tears started involuntarily. He had to turn so she wouldn't see them.

The vibration of her cellphone broke through the silence. Reaching over she picked it up off the table and looked at the screen. "Shit. I'm afraid I'll have to take this one." She got up and headed to one of the bedrooms. "But let's get back to this when I'm done," she said, before shutting the door behind her.

He was actually relieved. It would give him a chance to regroup. Walking out on the balcony, he found himself thinking, am I? In love? He looked down on the city of Paris. He had been in love before, his honeymoon, here, Paris, but that felt nothing like what he was feeling now. So was that love, or, was this love? And what did he love, if he was in love, with this woman whose name he didn't know?

Was it the mystery he was in love with, the newness, the intrigue? Or, was he in love with the woman herself? He did know that when he looked into her eyes he could not look away. He mentioned it to her and she smiled and said the reason why was because she stared back.

Eye contact, she told him, if held for more than three seconds, fires off endorphins within the system. It creates a connection that can be stronger than touch. Truth and lies are found in the eyes. And, love too. Always, love.

So was he? In love?

Before he could formulate an answer he heard the buzzer from the downstairs outside door. Walking back in from the balcony he saw that she was still in her room, the door still closed. Shrugging his shoulders, he went to the intercom and pressed the button to talk.

"Oui."

"Fed Ex," he heard a man say. With his sophomoric French, he was able to discern that what the man downstairs needed was a signature. He pushed the buzzer allowing the delivery guy into the building. Her bedroom door was still closed as he heard the knock in the entryway.

Having no choice, he went to open it. The Fed Ex guy handed him an envelope. "For Catherine Devereux."

He looked at the delivery guy, stunned, as he was handed the handheld computer and told where to sign. "Merci" was all he heard as the delivery guy turned and left.

Shutting the door, he couldn't stop staring at the label. All he could see was her name. Catherine Devereux. Catherine Devereux. Shit. It's not as though he asked, he told himself, guiltily. He didn't ask. He was told.

Hearing a door open behind him, he turned. She was standing there, looking at the Fed Ex envelope in his hand. He watched as her head dropped. "So now you know," she said in resignation.

He held his hands out meekly as she slowly turned and walked towards the window.

"I...I...I didn't ask. I signed, yes, but really...I mean, c'mon, what choice did I have?"

He saw her take a deep breath as she stared out the window, her back to him.

She held up her phone. "That call...that call was from my company. They would like me to be in Naples tomorrow. For a meeting. Then fly on to Athens, Istanbul, Beijing. More meetings I'm apparently needed at."

She turned back to face him and pointed to the Fed Ex envelope in his hand.

"That...what you have in your hand...those are my tickets they sent over."

"Are you...are you...are you going?"

"I told them no." She looked down, shrugging her shoulders as she did so. "But now..."

She didn't finish her thought. She didn't need to.

"How long?"

"I don't know. Awhile. Two weeks...more...it's an open return."

"Which means...?"

She said nothing, just looked at him with a sadness in her eyes.

"It's just a name," he said.

"No, no, no, I wish. You see, it's not just a name. It's the beginning."

He was confused. "The beginning? The beginning of what?"

"Of the end," was all she said before turning and disappearing back into the bedroom.

## 5.

It took him twenty minutes to gather his things. When he told her he was done, she came out of the bedroom. Her face was flushed. She had been crying. Holding his arm, she walked him down the stairs to the front door of the building.

"So tell me, you said on the train, you said that you had come to Paris because you were searching for something."

"Not searching. I said I felt lost."

“Lost, yes, that was the word. And now? Do you still? Feel lost?”

“I guess so. Lost, yes, probably. But also, strangely enough, found.”

“Found, oui, good. Of that I can be glad.”

As they stepped outside onto the steps, he gave her a final embrace. “It was nice not knowing you...as Catherine,” he whispered in her ear.

He held her head in his hands and looked into her eyes. Tears were flowing down her cheeks as she tried to smile. “It’s funny, but by not knowing me, I think you were the only one who ever truly has.”

They held each other for maybe a minute more before he spoke.

“What is it they say in France? Au revoir?”

“Some do, yes. But I prefer à bientôt.”

“And that means?”

“Bye. For now.”

“For now. Yes, I like that.” He turned to go but then stopped and looked back. “My name, would you at least like to know it?”

“I don’t need to know your name to know who you are.”

He nodded knowing she was right.

“And by the way,” she continued, “the next time you need finding, come see me.”

“Come see you. Yes. I’d like that. To see you.”

He paused before continuing. “But only as if for the very first time.”

A soft smile crossed her lips. “Oui. Only as if for the very first time.”

He looked deep into her eyes, knowing it would be for the last time.

He found it hard to smile, but somehow found a way. And then, with tears in his eyes, turned and left.