

*The Story with the Rope*

“Welcome,” the doormat read. Riley scuffed his boots against the “W” and, with that, dropped the last box off in the apartment. The walls of each room varied in color: The kitchen a dull yellow, their bedroom a very unobtrusive green, and among the rest was a pink bathroom. With some thought, Annika devised a story for the walls.

“The previous owner. Renter? Whomever. She’d unfortunately suffered the tragedy of a lost child. Rose was her name. The child, I mean. The mom...her name is Luna. She’s French and one day, several months after the tragedy had occurred, she’d sit on the couch in the living room looking out at the fig tree and contemplate killing herself.”

“You’re not setting up a pleasant tone for our inaugural move-in day, y’know.”

“Shh. Shh. Anyways, she goes to the hardware store. Figures she’ll buy some rope but, while she’s there, she bumps into a man she knew way back in high school. BACK IN FRANCE. She thinks, ‘That can’t possibly be Michél, can it?’ He’s holding — you guessed it — a can of pink paint.”

“You hungry? I’m gonna order Indian from that, whatever it’s called, Clay Pot or wherever.”

“Why’s he holding the can of pink paint? Yeah. Get me whatever you think I’ll like. So... why with the paint? Well, he got to thinking that some decorating might help him get out of his funk...”

“Wait. Why’s he in a funk?”

“That’s the thing! He doesn’t really know. He just doesn’t feel the zest for life anymore that he once did. So he figures sprucing up his apartment couldn’t hurt and, besides, it’s kind of a boring place he lives anyway. Plus! It’s not allowed. Strictly forbidden by the owner. Or leasing people. Whomever.”

“Wow, this is *too* real — hi! I’d like to place to an order for delivery.”

So he looks over and spies Luna. She's just staring at him. They were never friends when they were in school together. Never talked on-on-one. Not even once!"

"I don't really know. You have any nightly specials?"

"By all accounts they shouldn't recognize each other nearly twenty years on, but they do. He points at her like, 'hey, it's you!' But no words come out of his mouth. He starts walking over and then, all of sudden, they're facing each other."

"Specials are only for restaurant diners. Okay. Could you recommend me something then?"

"What are you doing here,' he asks."

"I can't check the website for the menu. I don't have internet yet."

"That's when it hits her. She's there to buy rope to go home and kill herself. So what's she gonna say? 'Buying rope,' she says. 'I can see that,' he responds, seeing the rope in her hand. She smiles and she can feel the warmth on her face that the smile brings her. It's an unfamiliar warmth. Something she clearly hasn't felt for a long time. It starts to fade, then it's gone. 'But I meant what're you doing here? In Texas?'"

"Look. Whatever your most popular dish is. Two of those. One mild, the other slightly more spicy."

"So she says, 'Oh, y'know, just living my life.' It's such a casual response. One she really didn't have to think about but now her mind is rocketing at full speed. 'Yeah,' she thinks, 'I'm just living my life.'"

"Riley. No, Riley. With an 'R.'"

"Well, Luna, it's great to see you. Let's grab a bite sometime. Catch up,' he begins. 'How about right now?' she responds. 'Well I'm kinda buying paint right now, y'see?' 'There's a hot dog place just up the road. We can walk there.' Then, after a brief moment of consideration, he says okay."

“Babe, hey have you seen my wallet? I need my card.”

“Just use mine. It’s in my purse on the bottom half of the chair over there. Anyway, so, they go out for hot dogs which kinda amuses the hot dog stand guy because he can’t recall seeing anywhere, even in the movies, two French people eating hot dogs. He laughs to himself as they walk away. She then realizes that they’re really not far from her apartment. ‘I live just a few blocks over. Wanna come over?’ So they do.”

“I know I said Riley, but the card is under the name ‘Annika.’ No I don’t—fine, I don’t care. Make the order out to Annika then.”

“Now they’re hanging out in her apartment. Which is now our apartment. There’s more furniture and it’s certainly more home-y but, y’know, an apartment is an apartment. They’re just sitting on the floor by the coffee table drinking coffee that Luna made when Michél asks her, ‘So, what’s the story with the rope?’”

“Sounds great, thanks!”

“And Luna just breaks down crying. All of a sudden just heavy, watery tears. Like, more watery than normal, start streaming down her face. He doesn’t know what to say.”

“Wait. Hold up. I think I missed that last part.”

“He wants to say, ‘I’m sorry,’ but he honestly isn’t sure that he is because he doesn’t know why any of this is happening but here’s what he does know. He doesn’t feel that empty well of unhappiness anymore. He just wants to make Luna feel better. So he scoots over to her and puts his hand on her back. She falls into his shoulder with her heavy sobs and he just lets her cry it out. For the better part of twenty minutes he just sits silently on the floor and lets her weep into his shirt. By the end of it he isn’t unhappy, she’s not unhappy. So they just lie down and let sleep wash over them.”

“...And?”

“And what? That’s what happened.”

“What about the pink paint?”

“Oh! Well, they just had a can of pink paint now. What else were they gonna do with it?”

“So they just...paint the bathroom?”

“Yup!”

Riley, then, kicks off his boots and sits on the floor with Annika.

“So what’d you get?”

“Couldn’t pronounce it if my life depended on it, but I got your’s with a little extra spice.”

She leans over and kisses Riley on his cheek.

“Sounds delicious.”