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1972 — She Thought It Was Still the Trip

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A story created for Léa

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CHAPTER I

The Committed Ones

Léa had never fit in her own decade. That was the running joke.

Her friends said it every time she showed up in the same suede jacket, the same faded flares, boots scuffed to the colour of old honey. Born fifty years too late, they said. She just smiled. Her apartment was full of vinyl bought for two euros in village flea markets. She knew the crackle before every song better than the songs themselves.

The party was at Chloé's house in the country, a stone farmhouse with a garden gone wild. Someone had brought something small and paper-thin. Léa hesitated, then didn't. First time. Why not, out here, under this much sky.

Later she lay alone in the long grass behind the house. Headphones on. An old record, one of the sad slow ones, playing off her phone. The stars had gone soft at the edges. The music felt like it was coming out of the ground.

And she thought, very clearly, the way you think things when you are not entirely yourself: I wish I could have seen all this when it was real.

Then she slept.

She woke to the smell of coffee and petrol.

The grass was wet. The light was thin and gold, very early. A few metres away stood a camper van, cream and rust, its rounded roof beaded with dew. A young man with hair to his shoulders crouched by a camping stove, stirring something in a dented pan. A girl in a crocheted vest sat on an upturned crate, braiding another girl's hair. A transistor radio hissed and hummed on the van's bumper, a man's voice singing through the static.

Léa sat up slowly. Her headphones had slipped around her neck.

"Morning," said the young man at the stove, not looking up.

A woman with a scarf knotted around her head held out a packet. "Cigarette?"

Léa took one without thinking. She looked at the packet. She had seen that design in antique shops. She laughed.

"Okay," she said. "Okay. You people are incredible."

The woman lit the cigarette for her with a match. "Incredible how?"

"The commitment. Look at you. Look at all of this." Léa gestured at the van, the stove, the radio. "Chloé didn't tell me she'd hired actors."

They glanced at each other. Nobody laughed.

Léa pulled her phone from her jacket pocket. Eight seventeen. No service. Sixty-three percent. She turned the screen toward them like a magician showing an empty hat.

"See? Still going. I'm still in it." She raised the phone and took a photograph of the van. Then of the girl braiding hair. Then of the pan.

"What is that?" asked the girl in the crocheted vest.

"Where are we, anyway?" Léa said. "Whose field is this?"

The young man at the stove finally looked up. He had kind eyes and a nose that had been broken once. "Near Bourges. Give or take."

"No, I mean… when."

He frowned, as if she had asked a question in the wrong language. “Nineteen seventy-two.”

Léa laughed again, delighted. She lay back in the grass and laughed at the sky. When she sat up they were all watching her with the patient, slightly wary expressions people reserve for the very drunk or the very holy.

“I’m from twenty twenty-six,” she announced. “Ask me anything. Who wins the World Cup. Anything.”

The woman with the scarf smiled gently and took the cigarette packet back. “Sure you are, love.” She said it the way you’d speak to a stray dog. And Léa saw herself being filed away, neatly, under a heading: the strange one. The hippie who’d taken too much.

Which was fine. Which was funny.

She stood, brushed the grass from her flares, and lifted her face to the sun.

It was warm. Ordinary. It had the plain, steady weight of a real morning. There were no soft edges anywhere. The coffee smelled exactly like coffee.

Léa stood very still, and for the first time, she did not feel like laughing.

CHAPTER II

Twenty Euros of Nothing

She walked to the village because she needed to prove something to herself.

It was less than a kilometre, a white road between fields of young wheat. Her stomach ached. She had not eaten since the party, and the party felt very far away now, like a story someone else had told her.

The village had a church, a fountain, and one shop with a faded sign. A bell rang when she pushed the door. Inside it smelled of bread and floor wax. A woman in a blue housecoat stood behind the counter, arms folded.

Léa took a baguette from the basket. Then, after a moment, a bar of chocolate in paper she recognised from a museum of advertising. Her hands were not quite steady.

She pulled the folded twenty-euro note from her back pocket and laid it on the counter.

The woman looked at it. She did not pick it up. She tilted her head, the way you look at a child's drawing of money.

"What is that?"

"Twenty," Léa said. "Twenty euros."

"Twenty what?"

The silence stretched. Somewhere behind the counter a clock ticked, loud and slow. Léa looked down at the note, at its pale colours and its little windows and bridges, and for the first time she saw it the way the woman saw it. A pretty rectangle. Play money.

Francs. Of course. France still had francs.

Something cold slid down through her chest and settled in her stomach, right where the hunger was.

She thought of everything in her pockets. A phone that could reach nobody. A bank card for a bank that did not exist yet. A key to an apartment that had not been built. All of it, useless.

Only her clothes were real here. The suede jacket, the flares, the boots. The things she had spent years hunting down in flea markets. The costume she had put on every morning for a decade, half in love and half in defiance. That was the only reason the woman in the housecoat was looking at her with suspicion instead of alarm.

Nobody would ever question her. Nobody would ever help her, either.

"I'm sorry," Léa said. She took the note back. Her voice sounded thin.

The bell rang again behind her.

"Ah, there you are." It was the young man from the stove, the one with the broken nose. He set a handful of coins on the counter without looking at them. "She's with me. Sorry, madame. She's foreign. She gets confused."

The woman sniffed, took the coins, and slid the bread across.

Outside, he handed Léa the baguette and the chocolate and then, without asking, steered her to the café on the corner and ordered her a coffee and two eggs. He sat across from her and watched her eat with a kind of scientific interest.

"I'm Julien," he said.

"Léa."

"So. Foreign?"

"Not exactly."

"Rich, then. That money looked expensive."

"Not that either."

He smiled. "Then you're mad. That's fine. I like mad. Most of my friends are mad." He tapped the table. "We're going to a festival. Three days south. There's room in the van if you can sit on a guitar case."

She should have said no. She should have asked for a telephone, a police station, a doctor. But she had no number to call. No one to call it. The only people who knew her name were fifty-four years away.

So she said yes.

An hour later the camper coughed onto the main road. Léa sat wedged between a guitar and the girl in the crocheted vest, whose name was Nadine. The radio played a song she knew by heart, and everyone sang the wrong words.

She watched the country slide past the window. Fields. Poplars. A tractor. A hand-painted sign for a garage. No billboards. Not one logo she recognised. The world looked scrubbed clean and strange, like a photograph before anyone had written on the back of it.

She was terrified.

And under the terror, faint and steady as a second pulse, something else was beginning. Something that felt very much like being awake.

CHAPTER III

The Difference Between Loving It and Living It

The days had no edges. That was the first thing she learned.

Nobody checked the time. Nobody checked anything. When the van broke down outside a town whose name she never caught, they simply waited, and within an hour a farmer appeared with a rope and towed them to a cousin who had a barn. That night they slept in straw. Someone produced a guitar. Someone always produced a guitar.

There were no maps in the van. Julien navigated by asking. He would lean out of the window at a crossroads and shout to an old man on a bicycle, and the old man would point, and that was the map. It worked. It astonished her that it worked.

They argued about music for hours. Real arguments, red-faced, with hands flying. Nadine thought a certain new album was the best thing ever recorded. The drummer, Marc, said it was rubbish and the band had sold out. Léa listened with her mouth shut, because she knew how the story ended. She knew which of these records would outlive them all. Hearing them fought over as brand-new, as unfinished business, was like watching people argue about the weather of a summer she had already lived through.

Her phone she kept in the inside pocket of her jacket, against her heart. Fifty-one percent. Forty-four. She stopped taking pictures of pans. She took one of Nadine asleep with straw in her hair. One of the road ahead through the cracked windscreen. One of Julien's hands on the strings. Each photograph felt like spending something she could not earn back.

Nobody knew who she was supposed to be. That was the other thing.

At home her days had been a hum of small demands. Messages. Notifications. The faces of people she barely knew, telling her what to want. Here there was only the road, and the heat, and whoever was sitting next to her. She had not felt this unwatched since she was a child.

So on the third night, by a fire in someone's orchard, when Julien started a song she knew and looked at her across the flames, she sang.

Quietly at first. Then not. Her voice came out lower than she expected, steadier. Nadine turned. Marc stopped drumming on his knee. Julien did not stop playing, but he smiled the way people smile when a door opens in a house they thought they knew.

"Where were you hiding that?" he said afterwards.

"Twenty twenty-six," she said.

He laughed. She had stopped minding that he laughed.

She fell for him the way you fall asleep in a moving car. Without deciding to. His patience. The way he asked for directions like it was a pleasure. The broken nose, which he never explained.

But she kept her eyes open, too.

At a petrol station a man in overalls asked Julien whether “his girl” could be trusted to pay. In a village bar the owner served the men first and did not look at her when she ordered. Nadine mentioned, lightly, that she needed her husband’s signature to open an account, and Léa realised she had never once seen Nadine drive the van.

“It’s just how it is,” Nadine said, when Léa’s face did something.

It was not how it had been in the photographs. The photographs had only ever shown the fire and the guitar and the hair. Not the small daily weight of being told where to sit.

She loved it anyway. She simply loved it differently now. With her eyes open.

On the fifth night the phone showed one percent.

She scrolled back through what she had spent. Nadine’s straw. The road. Julien’s hands. And one she did not remember taking. Nadine must have grabbed the phone. Léa and Julien, side by side on the bumper, his arm not quite around her.

She looked at it a long time.

And as she looked, the edges of the screen went soft. The fire behind her blurred. The music came up through the ground.

Léa knew that feeling. She had felt it once before, in the long grass behind Chloé’s house.

Something had opened. Something was waiting.

CHAPTER IV

The Album on the Back Shelf

The fire had gone to embers. Down the valley, past the dark line of the trees, the festival glowed on the horizon like a second sunrise. They would reach it tomorrow. Julien had promised.

Léa sat on the bumper with the phone warm in her hand and the world going soft around her.

She understood what was being offered. Not in words. The way you understand a door is a door.

She could stay. Sing tomorrow in front of that glow. Learn the names of all the songs before anyone else did. Wake every morning to coffee and petrol and Julien asking an old man on a bicycle which way was south.

Or she could go back to the people who knew her name.

Chloé, asleep somewhere in a stone farmhouse. Her mother, who called on Sundays. Her small apartment full of records bought for two euros, every one of them carried home like a rescued animal. A life she had spent ten years pretending she did not belong to.

It was hers. That was the whole of it. It was hers.

Julien was tuning the guitar across the embers, head bent, not looking at her. She wanted to tell him. She wanted to say: you were right, I was mad, and thank you for the eggs.

Instead she watched him. The broken nose. The patient hands. She let herself have that, one more time.

"Goodnight," she said.

He looked up. Smiled. "Big day tomorrow."

"I know," she said.

Then she lay back in the grass, put the dead headphones over her ears, and closed her eyes. The music came up through the ground. The edges went, all of them.

She woke to the smell of wet grass and someone laughing.

Chloé stood over her, holding two mugs. "You've been out here for hours. Three, maybe. You missed the sunrise."

"Three hours," Léa said.

"Give or take. Come inside. You look like you've seen God."

Léa sat up. Her jacket was damp. Her phone was in the inside pocket, against her heart, exactly where she had kept it. She pressed the button.

Nothing. The screen stayed black.

"Dead," Chloé said. "Charger's in the kitchen."

Léa did not go to the kitchen. She sat in the field for a long time, until the sun had the plain ordinary weight of a real morning, and told herself what any sensible person would tell her.

You slept. You dreamed. It was very good paper.

The months went by the way months do.

She charged the phone that afternoon and it came back empty. No photographs. Not the pan, not the straw, not the road through the windscreen. She had known it would be empty. She had known before she looked.

She went back to work. She wore the suede jacket. Her friends made the joke and she smiled at it, but differently now, the way you smile at a song you once sang badly and loved anyway. She drove herself everywhere. She opened a savings account, on her own, and stood on the pavement afterwards feeling foolish and grateful.

In October there was a flea market in a village she did not know, on a white road between fields.

The crate was under a table, behind a box of chipped plates. She knelt. She went through it the way she always did, by feel, sleeve by sleeve. Nineteen sixty-eight. Nineteen seventy. A band she had never heard of, nineteen seventy-three, the cover a bad painting of a road.

She turned it over.

Four people on the bumper of a cream-and-rust van. A drummer with folded arms. A girl in a crocheted vest. A young man with a guitar and a nose that had been broken once.

And beside him, half in his shadow, a young woman in a suede jacket, flares, boots the colour of old honey.

She was smiling. She was holding something small and dark and rectangular against her chest. The way you hold something that is running out.

Léa stayed on her knees in the ordinary afternoon light, the record in both hands, and said nothing at all.

Léa, twenty-five, was born fifty years too late — or so her friends tease. She collects old rock records, suede jackets, worn denim, and a longing for a world that ended before she arrived. One summer night in the French countryside, lying in the grass with her headphones on, she wishes she could have seen it all when it was real. She wakes beside a camper van, among long-haired strangers cooking breakfast on a camping stove, and a radio playing a song that hasn't yet become a classic. It is 1972, and no one is laughing at her jokes about the future. What she thought was still the trip becomes the choice of her life.

This story exists in a single copy.

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