

He'll Always Have Paris

by

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The swinging doors slammed open. Cedric looked over from where he was sitting on a lab stool, chewed thumbnail between his teeth. His shoulder length blond hair was coated with the shine of someone who has only wet their hair down and not washed. His red streaked eyes were a sure sign of his having been recently woken up.

He watched Dorian backing his way through the doors pulling a gurney behind him. "Dorian," Cedric said, then immediately fell silent as Dorian turned around. There was panic in Dorian's eyes and a waxy pallor beneath the stubble on his face that betrayed a lack of sleep.

"Dorian," Cedric said again, that one word betraying multiple emotions: a layer of fear spread over top concern for his friend, concern for his own wellbeing, and simple anger at letting himself become involved in this.

"Hook her up," Dorian said before moving to a lab stool of his own and sliding a keyboard across the table to rest in front of him, his fingers impatiently tapping the spacebar while he waited for the monitor to respond. With a hiccup of light the screen became active making Dorian's face even more hollow with its sickly glow. He was normally a handsome man with short brown hair that was always perfectly combed. Tonight, though, it was full of unruly licks and his white lab coat, which usually added to his presence as the overall leader of their research team, was cast by the computer's light into awkward shades of green and blue. A large coffee stain down the front appeared to still be wet. Cedric didn't respond.

"I said hook her up," Dorian said.

"Dorian," Cedric said for the third time.

"I said hook her up!" Dorian screamed and Cedric jumped forward to the gurney. Coffee stain or no coffee stain, Dorian was a commanding presence.

Cedric hadn't turned on any lights when he had arrived at the lab, partly because his still sleepy eyes had been craving the dark, and partly out of some deeper sense of wanting to remain hidden. He gripped the cool metal rails of the gurney and began wheeling it towards the corner that contained the only real source of brightness in the room in the form of three light stands hovering over two parallel stainless steel tables. They each rested in front of a large circular opening in the wall and were on tracks which would let the tables slide into these separate openings.

Cedric slowed the gurney down and wheeled it into place next to one of the tables. He looked over at Dorian, now leaning back and typing furiously on the keyboard, and decided not to ask for help lifting her onto the table right now. Nibbling on his thumbnail Cedric decided that he could start attaching the required instruments and transfer her later. He was too scared to interrupt Dorian again to ask for help.

Cedric looked at the sleeping form and said one last prayer of internal remonstrance. He was still staring down when Dorian's voice, calmer now, startled him out of his thoughts.

"I removed your keycard's signature from the logbook document." Dorian said. "The cameras are on power-save mode in all the hallways and will remain that way throughout the night. You haven't logged into any of the computers. Technically I could have done this all by myself. If anything goes wrong I want you to leave. It will be like you were never here." He smiled. "I don't expect you to stick your neck out for me. I accept full responsibility for tonight. I just appreciate you being here."

Cedric hands didn't stop what they were doing nor did his head lift up to look at Dorian. "If something goes wrong, Dorian, your wife will wake up in a few hours from what I can only hope is a nominal dosage of sedative to find herself in a strange room with her husband laying on the table next to her in a coma."

"And you," Dorian insisted, "will be nowhere to be found. Let's lift her." They transferred Dorian's wife, Tabitha, onto one of the cold metal tables.

Things had calmed down since Dorian's frantic entrance and Cedric took this opportunity to try talking to him again. He hadn't attempted this since the phone call from Dorian that had woken him up in the first place.

Cedric steadied his hands and began working at a much slower pace. "We're not ready for this," he said.

Dorian was back over at the keyboard now and the rattling of his fingers was louder than his response. "We've had successful runs before," he said.

Cedric was relieved to hear that the edge was gone from Dorian's voice. This was the closest thing to a rational sentence he had heard from his friend all night. "We've had successful runs in removing small amounts of emotional trauma from young adults," Cedric said.

"See? Successful runs," Dorian said, index finger repeatedly tapping at the enter key.

"But the process we've developed," Cedric tried again, "allows an audio-visual exploration of the frontal lobe by another person. You're talking about hooking up and exploring the temporal lobe which..." Dorian swiveled on his chair and stared at Cedric. Cedric stopped talking under his eyes. But once Dorian had turned back to the keyboard Cedric felt himself needing to speak again. "There just has to be an easier way."

"Nope," Dorian said, his belief that this was his only recourse caused the word to become clipped and harsh in his mouth.

"You two are having problems but that doesn't mean-"

"I'm losing her," Dorian said. As soon as Cedric lifted his head he was sorry he had done so. The blinking screens, Dorian's waxy eyes, even the coffee stain down his front all revealed an inner weakness in Dorian that Cedric didn't want entering into their work environment. Dorian was hurting right out in the open. "I love her and I'm losing her. She won't talk to me. She's withdrawing. And if there's a reason or if there's...if there's...this guy she works with. His name is

Gunderson. I think maybe they...if there's someone else..." Dorian stared for a few seconds, then turned back to the keyboard. Cedric felt relieved to no longer be facing him. Instead he focused on the work his hands were doing.

"If there's a reason I'll find it and we'll work through it," Dorian said, now standing next to Cedric.

Dorian walked around to the other table and gathered up the various devices that needed to be attached to his skin to monitor his vital signs and keep him in touch with Cedric. Everything else that the procedure needed was done inside the tubes.

As Cedric watched he realized that Dorian was right about one thing. He could have done this all by himself. Once the program was started at the terminal Dorian could have keyed in any delay he wanted. Then he could have gotten his wife's body and his own ready, lay down, and waited for the tables to recede into the tubes in the wall. If he was successful in his mission then he wouldn't need Cedric there at all. If Dorian failed while inside his wife's mind, on the other hand, and Cedric weren't there on the outside to lead him back, the rejection plus the overload would be too much for Dorian's brain. He would essentially be trapped inside his wife's memories while inside his own head.

But the bottom line, Cedric realized, was that Dorian was right, if need be he could make it appear as if he had never been here.

"Okay," Dorian said from the opposite table. "Wish me luck."

The last few hours played across Cedric's sleepy eyes: the phone call waking him up, the badgering and pleading to get him to come down to the lab, Cedric trying to say "No" but knowing that he could never deny his friend anything, the frantic rushing about once Dorian had arrived, and now Dorian lying next to his sedated wife ready to slip into oblivion. Cedric didn't even have a chance to open his mouth to reply before Dorian's table began sliding him headfirst into the cylindrical hole in the wall.

Once his feet had disappeared from view the thick metal door slid shut with a clang. Cedric knew that sensory deprivation had proved to be a key element in starting the process, but he had always said that the once all the bugs were worked out the first cosmetic move they should make was to redesign the doors. It reminded him too much of the similar rolling tables a block away at the morgue.

He looked down at Tabitha. Even in the harsh brightness of the light stands and under heavy sedation she still looked beautiful. Then the table began moving and she disappeared into her tube, her feet fading from view, the door clanging shut.

Dorian waited in complete darkness. The sensation of lying on his back slowly faded as it became difficult to believe he was oriented in any particular direction. There was some humming from the machine, even heavily dampened it was still audible, and he made a mental note to look into this when he was back at work.

Then, like sunrise in pitch black, a world gently became visible. He was standing on a street in an undeniably urban setting, although it was nothing like any city he had ever been in. Slowly the light grew, or the darkness faded, depending on how he squinted, and as he watched short stone houses started clustering all around him, hemming in the street from either side. Pedestrians and vendors began to appear as the connection between his mind and his wife's began to grow, his consciousness becoming more and more dependant on her presence for its sense of self and sanity.

"Everything looks fine from out here," Cedric's voice said, and Dorian turned to see a small speaker box hovering in mid-air to his left. The speaker box was a fragment of Dorian's own consciousness, a tie to his own self that always took a form personal to the visitor. It would balance the need for something that would allow him to communicate with the outside world while not clashing too much with his sense of reality. It was meant to be both unobtrusive but also comforting. A computer generated facsimile of Cedric himself, for example, would be too jarring. The speaker box was a holdover from happy far distant memories of a family trip Dorian had taken with is parents to see a movie at one of the last working drive-in theaters left in the world.

"Let me just check a few more things before you begin to explore," Cedric's voice said, and some part of Dorian felt a small wave of joy at the way the speaker's sound crackled.

"Actually, Dorian? I'm going to run to the bathroom real quick before we get started. I'm going to switch off out here so nothing happens that I don't want to," Cedric's voice said, and before Dorian could answer the speaker box disappeared.

Dorian's initial reaction was calm, but as the seconds drifted by panic began to form at the base of his spine. His stomach became uneasy. Without the connection to Cedric Dorian was lost in this world. He looked around at the strange dress and décor and atmosphere. The unknown city seemed hostile and lonely. If he started to lose control or remained here to long it was possible for him to destroy everything he saw, his own consciousness included.

Technically he had been truthful with Cedric. Dorian only needed him along as a safety net, and Dorian was thankful that over the years of working together Cedric had become more of a friend than a co-worker. He would never have dreamed of asking any of the other technicians to help him with something like this, plus Cedric's closeness with him and Tabitha would make this whole process run smoother. But while Dorian had spoken the truth on purely technical terms, the fact was that he wasn't here to actually create a breakthrough with his wife. They had drifted apart so much that he didn't believe that would be possible. He was only here looking for clues that he could use to approach her again in the real world. And without a breakthrough she would never accept his presence here and without that acceptance he was a prisoner without Cedric.

Dorian began to picture things going wrong on the outside. Maybe there was more security to the lab than he knew about and the police had been alerted. Maybe they were talking to Cedric now. Maybe Cedric was arguing with them that he had to get back to the computer or his friend might start to lose his mind but the police weren't letting him go and were going to take him in and leave Dorian all alone for ever and ever and-

"Okay. Sorry about that," Cedric's voice said, the speaker box again bobbing in mid-air next to Dorian. "Would you mind doing some jumping jacks or stretching a bit, any sort of physical exertion?" Dorian complied, relief at Cedric's return and joy at being in this, now safe, new place caused Dorian to smile as he touched his toes. Cedric ran him through a few more physical exercises before announcing: "You look all set from here."

"Great," Dorian said. "Now I just wish I knew where I was."

"I've got nothing out here," Cedric replied. Dorian could imagine him sitting at the computer screen trying to analyze the strings of data flooding across three computer monitors for a clue of what sort of reality Dorian was currently occupying. For his part, Dorian began to walk along the street. Vendors and markets were set up everywhere and a young blind woman selling flowers walked past him. Nobody was speaking English.

"It looks familiar," Dorian said, glancing down a tiny side street, "but very old. It might be—"

He stopped as he rounded a corner and caught sight of a river. The city continued on the far bank, and in the middle a familiar structure sat upon an island. "I've got it," he sighed.

"Where are you?" the speaker box crackled.

"She always did romanticize this place. Ten percent of the male population dead, economic ruin everywhere and an entire infrastructure destroyed...but, hey, at least wine is cheap."

"I don't get it," Cedric crackled.

"I'm in Paris in the 1920's," Dorian said, finally answering his question. "The Beat Generation lived here; Tabitha absolutely loved anything to do with this place."

"The Lost Generation," Cedric said.

"What's that?"

"The Lost Generation," Cedric corrected him. "The Lost Generation lived in Paris after World War One. The Beat Generation was in America in the fifties."

"Doesn't matter," Dorian said. "I just want to find Tabitha."

"Just thought you might like to understand where your wife chose to hide."

"I get it," Dorian said, staring to walk towards the island, The Cathedral of Notre Dame looming large in the middle of the river. "Writers, quaintness, and perfect hindsight. None of the problems that come with living in the real world."

"If it's at the forefront of her brain like this then it's probably pretty important to her."

"Either that or she's trying so hard to get away from me she's been coming here constantly."

"Yes," Cedric said. "There's that too."

"No way to know."

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