

ONE

My plane leaves for Paris in less than an hour. I'm not sure my luggage is going to hold up: a roll-aboard with a zipper that sticks; a carry-on heavy with journals and books, its straps already stretched too thin.

I've crammed everything I think I'll need for a month into these two bags.

Mid-November and it's eighty-three degrees in Los Angeles. Mid-morning and the sky's a milky blue tinged with smoggy gold.

The cab drops me off at LAX. I drag my bags through the sliding glass doors into the terminal, flooded with sunlight, already sweating under the coat I've slipped on so that I won't have to carry it.

I've checked the roll-aboard and rushed to the gate before I remember what I forgot: I don't have a way to reach Jack in Paris; we haven't made any plans for how we'll meet one another there. I find a payphone and dial the number of his house in New Mexico, relieved when I hear his voice.

"*Bonsoir*, Susannah!" he chirps. Though it's bright day outside everywhere — except in Paris, where it's dusk.

"That's *evening*," I tell Jack. "That means *good evening*."

"Oh," he says. He's coming to France in two weeks; he'll need to know how to say hello.

"Do you have a number in Paris?" I ask. "How will I get in touch with you there?"

"Call Pierre," and he gives me the number. "Pierre's English is better than Isabelle's. Call him as soon as you get

to Paris, and ask him to call Isabelle. Ask him to ask her to call me here. I want to be sure I can stay at her place.”

I add Pierre’s number to the list of names and numbers in my notebook, a list that’s grown in the past few days.

“And how will I find *you* there?” Jack asks.

“I have no idea,” I say.

And then I hear my flight being called — the final call for boarding — so I pick up my carry-on, and run.

TWO

And what am I running from? Los Angeles falling away, already, beneath me — forever: too bright, too flat. My life as a stranger everywhere. The way I keep failing and failing at love. My fear of being trapped inside that shining flatness, too. Perhaps what Baudelaire described as *l'horreur du domicile*.

And what am I running toward that I've only glimpsed but keep longing for? A city with grit on its heels and the smell of tobacco on its breath. A river that glimmers, as if with stars. A world inside the world, just out of reach, more *real* somehow.

It's 1994; I've just turned 38 years old, an age when a woman in Los Angeles begins to disappear. Okay, I think, *disappear*. Close my eyes above one city; open them in another city halfway around the world.

THREE

I have this list of names and numbers and enough cash to last a month in Paris, if things go according to plan.

What plan?

On my list are the names of people I met in Paris last summer, and the names of people I've never met, the friends of friends, and the names of people whom friends of my friends have met in places I've never been.

Les amis de mes amis sont mes amis. A fragile web.

I've known Jack since 1989, when we met teaching poetry at a summer camp for over-privileged kids. Jack met Pierre and Isabelle in Indonesia two years ago. They traveled together for ten or twelve days. Now Isabelle writes letters to Jack. And Jack writes letters to me in which he says he can't figure it out: Pierre and Isabelle used to be lovers but now they're just friends. So they've told him, he says. I've never slept with Jack. Well, I slept with him once, but the bed was wide. That was the year I went to New Mexico to celebrate our birthdays, which fall on the same day in early November, thirteen years apart. This year he asked me to come to New Mexico again, but I had this trip to Paris planned.

"I won't have time," I said. "Why don't you come to L.A. instead?"

"I hate L.A.," said Jack.

So he decided he'd meet me in Paris. We'll have a belated birthday dinner and he'll have a chance to see Isabelle. A reason. A good excuse. Besides, in all his travels, he's never been to Paris.

Also on my list is the name of a man, Farouk, who's promised to put me up for the month. Or so I've been assured by *une amie mutuelle*: a woman named Karen, who I met in Paris last summer at a party of expats and French hangers-on. She wanted to stay in my L.A. apartment for the month that I'd be gone; so, in exchange, she's arranged for her friend in Paris to let me stay at his place. Farouk has a big apartment, Karen's assured me, and works long hours and is rarely at home; she's explained our arrangement to him and he's agreed to everything. "Don't worry," she's said repeatedly, though I've never spoken to Farouk.

What I'm doing, I tell myself, is what my mother calls *stepping out on faith*.

Nothing beneath me now but miles and miles of sky.