

Amour Fou
Linda McMullen

If Hollywood is right, human beings only get one meet-cute per lifetime, and my bad luck is that I've already exhausted mine.

Imagine me, the twenty-year-old girl-woman with her own passport and her parents' credit card, struggling between customs and the baggage area, stepping out (of America) at last. Then: the slow-motion ri-i-i-i-i-ip as my beloved blue backpack's left seam surrendered. Books, pencils, crosswords, snacks, headphones, maxi pads, and my already-creased *Welcome to Your Study Abroad Experience* folder spilled out onto the over-waxed floor of Charles de Gaulle. And then, from the overnight-flight-induced gloaming... Kyle.

With an old-school flourish: "Can I help you?"

He had duct tape in his backpack. Why? How? Did I even care about the why and the how in the face of that 200-megawatt smile?

Face burning beneath the Parisians' scorching-yet-languid scorn, I nodded. Maybe even said "thank you." (Probably. I'm from the Midwest, it's reflexive.) I re-gathered my things with a fairy-tale heroine's diligence. Meanwhile Kyle had not only restored my bag to functionality, but also had trimmed both sides with tape, such that the repair looked (from a distance of three-plus feet) like an intentional part of the bag's design. I mumbled heartfelt, if provincial, praise. Kyle offered, "*de rien, ma chère*," and handed me a pen I'd missed.

He sat beside me on that half-dozing yet exhilarating bus ride into the French heartland.

Naturally we didn't have any courses together at the language school, his French had already lapped mine four or five times. Nevertheless, after waging a losing battle against the *passé simple* in my literature class, I would wander out into the courtyard. There, we'd come together; I'd ignore the pitying glances of the other girls. We'd swap the English-language books that had made the suitcase cut: Austen and Brontë for *Vonnegut* and *Wodehouse*. During our precious half-days, we'd spend sunlit afternoons strolling among the half-timbered houses and down eighteenth-century streets in search of a *jambon fromage* and pocket-sized museums.

This incandescent joy co-existed with my jealousy of his preternatural abilities, which included developing friendships with actual French people. I caught glimpses of him in cafés with dark-haired androgynous visions versed in Rimbaud and wine and angst. I — with innate Midwestern pragmatism — galumphed back to my host family's house to review my verbs.

And then, one day after class, while the other girls rolled their eyes... I decided I had to know. I glimpsed Kyle leaving, walking down a curving lane, where he disappeared from my view. But like the ugly American *rustaude* I was, I shouted after him:

"Kyle!"

He turned, smiled. "*Oui, ma chère?*"

"Would you..." My face blazed with the heat of a thousand Iowa-summer suns. "Would you like to... go on a date sometime?"

His eyebrows knit with concern, and his voice was heartbreakingly gentle: "Carrie."

We remained friends, after that semester, after college, into adult life. He and his husband just sent me a birthday card: *Meilleurs vœux*.

Linda McMullen is a wife, mother, diplomat, and homesick Wisconsinite. Her short stories and the occasional poem have appeared in over eighty literary magazines. She received Pushcart and Best of the Net nominations in 2020. She may be found on Twitter: @LindaCMcMullen.