

Faith, Hope and Fiction

City of Light

By Patricia Crisafulli

She should have been packing for Paris: filmy dresses that skimmed her thigh just above the knee and strappy sandals with impractical heels. No jeans and sneakers for her as they cruised the galleries of the Louvre or strolled among the sidewalk artists of Montmartre. Ever since they toasted their plans on their fifth wedding anniversary five years ago, Sheila had savored every detail of the dream excursion.

The past two years, however, had produced unexpected disappointments. Steve lost his job and wondered for nine months if he would ever be hired again; when he was, it was for a third less salary than the good old days when things like prosperity and security were taken for granted. Her job paid the bills and provided health insurance, more than some people had, but was barely enough.

Through those tough days, in the back of her mind there was always Paris—ten days to do it right; just the two of them, while Dillon played with his cousins at her sister Cindy's in Minneapolis. Somewhere along the line, the savings account she had thought of as the vacation fund had gone to help pay the property taxes, and despite all good intentions the money had never been replaced, even after Steve went back to work.

They never talked about Paris; neither of them had brought it up even once. To do so would be cruel and selfish, Sheila knew. Steve never mentioned it out of guilt, she figured, although it was just as likely that he had simply stopped thinking about the trip because it was never going to happen. Instead, there was a cottage borrowed for a long weekend from a colleague of Steve's at his new job; a generous offer from someone who did not know them well. When Steve came home a few weeks ago and announced they could get away for the Fourth, Sheila knew that this was her consolation prize.

Her disappointment shamed her, wagging a gnarled finger that she should be grateful they had each other, their health, a house to call their own. Others weren't so fortunate, and here she was pouting over a trip that was never meant to be. She would have a good time: go fishing and eat hotdogs, play Frisbee with Dillon, and hold hands with Steve while walking in beat-up sneakers down sandy paths. It was good, it was wonderful, she told herself yet again, and before they left that morning she would banish the plans that never materialized and seize those that did.

In the thirty minutes she expected Steve to be gone to get gas and coffee, she packed the blue-and-white cooler with deli meat in plastic sleeves, containers of potato and macaroni salads, packages of chicken breast, and a value-pack of hamburger, all purchased on a run to the grocery store the night before.

Barefoot, in faded navy shorts and a white t-shirt, Sheila crossed items off her list: ketchup and mustard, lettuce and tomatoes, sandwich bread, coffee, cereal, a box of granola bars. Pushing her blond hair, still damp in the back from the shower, behind her ears, she felt the accomplishment of the cooler and two canvas tote bags filled.

While she waited for Steve, Sheila went outside to water the hanging pots with a hose and sprayer, a good soaking to keep them from drying out before they returned on Monday. As

she made her way back to the house, the prickle of grass on the soles of her feet recalled how she had gone barefoot all summer as a kid, the grass stain working so deeply into the creases and calluses that it couldn't be soaked or scrubbed out.

Sheila took a deep breath, inflating her rib cage and raising her shoulders, and exhaled through her mouth. It was time to wake up Dillon.

Upstairs, Sheila knocked on Dillon's door and called his name. Stepping inside the bedroom, darkened against the morning sun, she took in the smell, warm and a little musty. He had her straight nose and Steve's jaw and chin with a tiny cleft in it. The eyes that fluttered open were the same hazel-green as hers.

"Time to wake up, Dill." Her hand met the cup of his shoulder through the covers and patted three times.

"Are we going now?" Dillon sat up, fully awake.

"In a little while. Dad went to get gas and coffee. He should be home soon." Glancing at the clock on Dillon's dresser with large illuminated numerals, she noticed Steve had been gone forty-five minutes already.

"I'm hungry." Dillon stretched. His camouflage-print pajama top rode up, revealing a skinny kid belly.

"Get dressed and come down stairs. I'll make you something."

While Dillon got ready, Sheila stopped in the master bedroom across the landing to fasten gold hoops in her ears and apply a touch of makeup even though she had vowed to be bare-faced all weekend—just sunscreen and moisturizer. She studied her reflection, deciding that a brush of mascara and a bit of pink lipstick made her seem happier, perkier.

"Anybody here?"

Sheila put a smile on her face. "I'll be right there."

Dillon raced down the stairs ahead of her.

Steve stood at the kitchen island with two white bakery bags. Dillon dove into an enormous frosted doughnut dotted with sprinkles and took a long sip on his chocolate milk through a straw. Steve produced a blueberry muffin for himself and raisin-carrot for her. "Your latte, my lady." He handed a tall paper cup to her with a flourish.

When Dillon finished eating he began pulling on Steve's arm to hurry up so they could go. Steve made exaggeration chewing motions, which put Dillon into a fit of giggles.

"How about brushing your teeth?" Sheila wrapped up half of her muffin and put it back in the bag.

"I thought we were on vacation," Dillon complained.

Steve snorted a little laugh.

"Your toothbrush is not."

Dillon stomped across the kitchen and up the stairs.

Reaching across the kitchen island, Sheila ran her fingertips along Steve's whiskery cheek.

"Hey, I'm on vacation." He gave her a wink over his coffee cup. "Like father, like son."

Traffic posed no problem on a Saturday morning as they headed north from the Chicago suburbs toward Wisconsin; most of the travelers had left on Friday night, no doubt. But Sheila hadn't come home until five, racing to get Dillon from the park district summer day camp. Steve had worked until six-thirty to finish a program upgrade.

As they headed up the highway, a jet followed a flight path to land at O'Hare. The plane was large, the kind that flew transcontinental or even trans-Atlantic. For a moment, Sheila indulged herself in a fantasy of taking off somewhere exotic where you could go all day without hearing someone speaking English. She craned her neck to watch the plane.

"Was is it?" Steve asked.

"Nothing." Sheila smiled back at him and picked up the printout of the directions from Jack on how to get to his family's cottage. "We want Double B, not just B," Sheila read from the email Jack had sent them. "That's what Jack wrote: 'Do not take B. Wait to get on Double B.'"

"Why do they call it that?" Dillon piped up from the backset where he busied himself with a battle waged between two action figures. "I thought highways had numbers."

"We are in a strange and distant land," Steve replied with mock seriousness. "Be on the lookout for inhabitants, Dillon, friend or foe."

The two of them played an impromptu game of friend-or-foe, judging the occupants of every car they passed. Sheila let her mind wander and drifted into a light dose, dreaming of herself in a white dress running up an endless flight of stairs to get to a museum before it closed.

"Hey, co-pilot, you with me? Double B ahead."

Sheila jolted awake and stared at the road sign. She read from Jack's directions: two more lettered highways and then a turnoff onto a narrow road.

After reached the second highway, Sheila read Jack's note about the next turn. The road was on a curve and hard to see. Their landmark would be a falling-down barn and an old silo. Dillon spotted it first. As Steve slowed down, Sheila took a mental note of the intersection.

"Didn't Jack tell you there was a grocery store not far from the cabin? We need to get milk and maybe some eggs," Sheila said.

“Vernon Corners,” Steve replied. “Can you find that on the map?”

“I’m hungry,” Dillon called out. “Can I get an ice cream at the store?”

“We’ll have lunch at the cottage,” Sheila said, ignoring Dillon’s protest.

“I’ve got a surprise for later, something Jack told me about,” Steve promised.

Dillon pestered all the way to Vernon Corners for a hint.

The grocery store sign read, “Propane. Charcoal. Worms,” in different colored letters. It was the kind of place that people might think of as quaint, although for just a moment Sheila felt saddened by the peeling paint and the rutted parking lot.

The door creaked open on a long spring and snapped shut behind them. A motor hummed as an old ceiling fan rotated over the checkout counter where a man in a red t-shirt that matched his sunburned face rang up a six-pack of Coke and a Styrofoam box of bait for a teenage boy.

“I haven’t been in a place like this since I was a kid,” Steve murmured. Sheila felt his arm slip around his waist. “Shall I buy you one of those fine-looking premade sandwiches, delivered last Tuesday? Or maybe a duck call? How about some chewing tobacco?”

“A girl could get spoiled in a place like this.” Sheila spotted the dairy case and double checked all the dates on the milk.

Dillon approached with a bag of cheese doodles. Sheila was about to protest, when Steve gave him a high-five for picking out the best junk food ever made.

When Sheila joined them at the counter with a carton of eggs, a package of bacon, and a half-gallon of milk, she groaned at the mound of snacks they had picked out. .

“On vacation.” Steve nudged her lightly with his elbow.

Despite Dillon’s pestering requests, the snacks stayed unopened in the car. Jack’s directions said the last turnoff was exactly four point three miles from the grocery store. As the

odometer measured the distance they approached a dirt road with nothing to distinguish it except a metal marker with a reflector on top. They drove through an open field and then into a stand of trees, passing several cottages, many of which had cars out front. Dillon asked a dozen times which one was theirs. Jack's directions said to drive to the end of the road.

"All this land belonged to Jack's grandfather at one time," Steve explained with a wave of his hand, palm up, across the breadth of the windshield. "They sold a lot of it off over the years, but kept the cottage."

Sheila had never met Jack, but had heard Steve mention his name plenty of times. When Jack offered the cottage for July 4th weekend, Sheila had asked why his family wasn't using it. Steve's reply echoed in her memory now: Jack and his siblings all had their own summer places, including his brother's big house on Lake Geneva where the kids could go swimming and boating. The cottage was apparently too laid back for a houseful of teenagers.

If they had made the trip, they would have stayed in small, old hotel, mostly because the grand places like the Georges V would completely exceed their budget. An internet search had produced a dozen places, including one in the very fashionable neighborhood of the Sixteenth Arrondissement caught her eye. Sometimes she still looked it up, just to see the pictures.

"Didn't you say there was a pond nearby?" Sheila shifted her position in the front seat of the car and pushed the annoying thoughts away.

"Yup. And we're going to do some fishing, right, Dillon?"

"Right!" The boy raised Spiderman and the Incredible Hulk into the air.

The road ended at a wide parking area in front of a white cottage with dark-green trim. Two sets of windows flanked the front door, and hastas sprouted by the wide steps. A hydrangea bloomed in the corner.

“Uh-oh, forgot the key.” Steve’s eyes widened dramatically.

“D-a-a-a-a-d.” Dillon kicked at the dirt with the toe of his sneaker.

“Gotcha!” Steven dangled the keychain from his fingers.

“Let’s just go in, honey, before we end up with a major meltdown.” Sheila patted him on the back.

A large open room took up most of the cottage interior, with a wide picture window opposite the front door yielding a view of the deck and, beyond it, a sloping lawn and path that led over the crest of a grassy hill. Dillon ran off to explore which of three bedrooms he wanted, choosing one with blue wallpaper and a double bed.

Steve insisted on unloading the car, carrying in the cooler for Sheila to unpack. The galley kitchen was small, with an old gas stove and a white enamel sink. Sheila ran the water which came out crystal clear and cold. Cupboards held dishes and glasses, clean but filmy from sitting unused for so much of the time.

She carried her suitcase to the other end of the cottage to a large bedroom with yellow walls and a white painted headboard over a queen-sized bed. Ruffled curtains crisscrossed windows on two sides. Across the way, Sheila inspected the bathroom with its shower and a toilet and sink in matching pink.

At the other end of the cottage two tiny bedrooms faced each other: one that Dillon had chosen and another that had twin beds at right angles. “Can we stay here a long time, Mom?” Dillon asked her.

“We’ve got the whole weekend.” Sheila ran her fingers through his hair. “How about lunch and exploring?”

Steve unlatched the back door, letting in a gust of breeze through the screen that carried the scent of water and freshly mown grass. They ate sandwiches on the deck and then followed the path down the hill toward the pond, larger than Sheila had envisioned—really the size of a small lake—with cattails at the rounded ends and ripples across the surface.

“There’s the surprise.” Steve pointed to a rowboat hauled up on the bank. “Jack told me they use it for fishing.”

Dillon raced back toward the cottage to get his swimming trunks on.

“That’s not all the surprises, by the way.” Steve caught Sheila up in a hug and gave her a kiss. She leaned against him and closed her eyes.

Steve and Dillon fished from the rowboat, catching two sunfish that they threw back in. Dillon made a fort in the sandy dirt at the edge of the pond for his army men, as Steve rowed Sheila across the pond and back.

After spending the entire afternoon outdoors, Sheila headed toward the cottage to start dinner, but Steve intercepted her. “Why don’t you take a walk and then relax or something?”

“Trying to get rid of me?” Sheila adjusted the brim of her sunhat.

“No, just giving you a little break. Dillon and I have some things to do.”

The road they’d driven down wound through maples and oaks and then the occasional clearing where a cottage or small house appeared. A few people looked back at her from their front yards as she passed; most of them waved. Not a single car approached in either direction. Her mind drifted but did not depart to any other place other than this quiet track and the wind

tousling the trees and ruffling the tall grass in the field. She followed the road all the way back to the marker and then turned around.

Dillon got up from the front step and ran toward her, yelling something about needing to go inside and change.

“What?” Sheila laughed.

“Dad said. You have to go inside and take a shower and then stay in your room until we call you.”

Dillon grabbed her hand. Sheila felt the grittiness of his fingers and palm from playing in the dirt.

A purposefully brief shower washed away sunscreen and bug spray. Sheila wrapped herself in a towel and finger-combed her hair, and then put on a green print sundress that brought out the color of her eyes. She'd packed it just in case they went into town one evening. As she waited in her room, stretched out across the bed to read a novel, the shower ran two more times. She recognized Dillon's footsteps first as he padded back to his room. Steve appeared, a towel around his waist, in search of clean clothes.

“So what are you up to?” Sheila set the book aside.

“We're almost ready for you. Sorry, this is taking longer than I thought. I figured that your surprise would be more pleasant if Dill and I didn't smell like algae.”

As he pulled a t-shirt over his head, Steve gave her a second look. “You look nice, by the way. I always liked that dress.”

Sheila fingered the silky cotton material and looked at the pattern of paisley and flowers.

“Don't go away. We'll be right back for you.” Steve leaned over and kissed her, once and then a second time.

With Dillon on one side and Steve on the other, Sheila allowed herself to be led with her eyes closed down the little hallway, across the great room, to the deck. When she opened her eyes, she spied two stubby pillar candles, which she recognized as the ones in the upstairs guest bathroom back home. A bouquet of roses lay on the table between them.

“Happy Anniversary, honey.”

“Where did you get the flowers?” Sheila gasped.

“This morning during the gas and coffee run. They’re from the grocery store, and I had a heck of a time hiding them in the back of the car so they wouldn’t wilt.” Steve put his hand on Dillon’s shoulder. “My buddy, here, was my co-conspirator.”

“Now you know why Dad said he would unpack the car,” Dillon piped up.

“But wait—there’s more.” Steve held up one finger.

At the corner of the deck, plugged into an outdoor socket, was a boom box. When Steve pressed a button, Edith Piaf, the French *chanteuse*, began to sing.

“Will you let me have this dance?” he asked.

Sheila surrendered to the embrace, forgetting to move her feet at first, and then followed Steve across the deck as Dillon galloped circles around them.

“It’s not Paris, honey,” he whispered in her ear.

Sheila closed her eyes, wondering for a moment if Steve had been aware of every time she daydreamed and brooded. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, yes, it does. I know you were looking forward to that trip. And then everything happened.”

Sheila tried to interrupt, but Steve didn’t yield. “I want you to know how much I appreciate everything you do, for me—for our family. You kept the faith and you kept me

positive all the time I was off work. I thought I could restore our vacation fund, but I just haven't been able to yet. I will, one of the days, I promise. Maybe even by next year."

Perhaps they would go, or maybe they wouldn't, Sheila thought. If they made a big trip, it could be to another destination, and maybe Dillon would even go with them. But the fantasy of Paris couldn't stand up to the reality she lived in this moment.

They ate outdoors and shared a bottle of wine. Dillon turned his tongue and fingers orange with a dessert of cheese doodles and drank a root beer. By nine o'clock, he began to fade, and needed help washing his face and encouragement to brush his teeth. Twenty minutes later, he was sound asleep.

Steve and Sheila sat on the deck as the clear sky dimmed by slow increments. When dusk fell, they strolled hand in hand down the path toward the pond, listening to the night sounds of tree frogs and a bird that sang to the first stars.

One green glow, brief as a match strike, illuminated, followed by two more. They stopped and waited. "The City of Light?" Steve chuckled softly.

"Better," Sheila replied, wrapping both arms around his waist. "Nothing will ever compare to this."

Fireflies rose out of the grass and danced around them, putting on a light show just for two.