

# **International Affairs**

by

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## **Chapitre 1 : All About Eva**

She was born Eva in southern England and learned some French at secondary school.

A smattering of the language helped her a bit when she took phone calls from France whilst at work. It didn't happen often and usually she would ask the caller to hold, then transfer the call to someone fluent in the language.

She continued to live in England and had been married at a young age to a postman named Laurence Prescott. They didn't produce any children and at times Eva thought it may have been a rash decision to have wed so young.

The sparkle went out of the relationship fairly quickly and she wanted to do something more exciting.

Not a bad looking girl, she attracted the attention of men at work and later had an affair with her boss who lavished presents on her and took her to hotels. Later she got pregnant.

The boss was somewhat older than her, married with children, and was never likely to leave his wife. It was not an uncommon story and they both knew that. Young woman falling for the allurements of goodies and special attention.

The boss may have never known Eva was pregnant with his child. She didn't rush to tell him, the affair ended and she moved on.

One reason it ended was because of the phone call she received at home one evening. A woman calling herself Geraldine said "I've been his mistress for three years, how long have you been his mistress?"

The caller sounded convincing and Eva imagined her boss with a wife and perhaps a string of mistresses, all falling for the same silver-tongued patter she had fallen for.

In due course Eva and Laurence were divorced on the grounds of her infidelity and she then resorted to using her maiden name of Clements, wanting to leave memories of the marriage behind.

## **Chapitre 2 : Motherhood**

Sometimes Eva wondered if she should return to studying French. She was a girl with a romantic imagination and often had thoughts about the bright lights of "Gay Paris" and all its attractions.

But for the present she had a child to think about and support. For all the best reasons she left the firm where the father of her child worked and found a better paying job for a while as her bump became very obvious.

Until her confinement she did some agency temping, but even that was a little troublesome because she had difficulty getting close enough to the desk to reach the keyboard comfortably. According to old wives tales it must be a girl, she thought. Boys are always carried further back, aren't they?

Although members of her family were disappointed in some ways by her behaviour they supported her. Her brother, Robert, and his wife, Wendy, visited often to check on her and were, perhaps, her strongest supporters. Wendy craved a baby of her own and babies were the main topic of conversation.

Always rather headstrong, Eva had taken a flat which became her child's first home. Joseph, or Joey as she preferred to call him, had proven those old wives wrong!

To pay the bills Eva got a full time job and was grateful for the help from family members, neighbours and other friends as Joey grew up.

She was able to afford a small car and they got around locally, managing to keep all the normal appointments necessary in their lives. Annual holidays were normally spent with relations, sometimes at their home, sometimes at a holiday camp or resort.

Even a couple of day trips to France and Belgium were fitted in.

But Eva still hadn't seen the bright lights of Paris, or ambled along the streets or Montmartre, or seen the gargoyles of Notre Dame.

One Sunday morning she was listening to the radio whilst taking care of a pile of ironing. Some old pop songs were being played and one was titled "Our Day Will Come" by Ruby and the Romantics.

"My day has already come", thought Eva to herself. "I have my wonderful Joey. But maybe, just maybe, another day will come and put some additional joy in my life".

Eva had no complaints. She was generally content but always missed having a lover, someone just for herself.

She remembered seeing an old TV show with a character whose surname was Gently. A woman in the show had said dreamily "Gently, what a wonderful name for a lover!"

The iron hissed and Eva suddenly refocussed on what she should be doing. "Brown scorch marks on school shirts are not such a good idea!" she thought.

### **Chapitre 3 : Tempus Fugit**

The days and years rolled by and she often thought back to past events, good and bad.

Her marriage was one thought, although she didn't dwell on that for long. Best left behind.

Most thoughts were about Joey and his progress through the early years.

There were the high chair days of feeding him, or trying to. Spend half an hour preparing food, then half an hour picking it up off the floor. Amazing how children that age seem to get nourishment from throwing food around instead of eating it!

The school things. First day, leaving her little man with strangers. But they got past it and everything worked out OK.

The inoculations, the colds, the bugs going round, parents' evenings, school plays, sports days, exams, photos, all those things"

When Joey was little Robert and Wendy visited often and used "to hang out" for a few hours.

One day there was a phrase book on the coffee table.

"Ah, French, the language of diplomacy", said Robert.

"Ah, peeess off yoo eenglish peeg!" Wendy responded quickly, in a phoney French accent.

Such was their banter. Friendly and harmless, guaranteed to make each other laugh. Not too loudly, though, don't want to wake baby up. It took long enough to get him to sleep.

Some nights Eva didn't sleep much. She wasn't fazed by it, though, and usually read a book until she felt the need to turn off the small bedside lamp and at least try to get some shut-eye before the morning rituals and work the next day.

She visited the local library sometimes and borrowed a few books to take home for nights like that. Nothing too heavy. Romantic novels, that kind of stuff. Easy to read and easy to put down, except for those parts that caught her attention and started the tug-of-war. Do I lie down and try to sleep or find out what Katy did next? That kind of thing!

The romantic versus the practicalities of life! It was mostly answered when she glanced across the room at Joey's cot. "You win", she'd say to herself silently and switch off the light.

#### **Chapitre 4 : Training Days**

The firm she had worked for after leaving school was very good at training. Eva had once been sent on a course at a college in Marylebone Road in London, where she met a mixed bunch of other attendees from different backgrounds.

On day one the course leader ran a typical ice-breaker exercise of "Getting to know you". Each attendee spoke to the person next to them, made a few notes, then introduced their new neighbour to the room. It was a well-tried method which worked.

Eva jotted down the names as each introduction was made and arranged them in an elongated circle on her notebook page. Thereby she had a seating plan with names. "Hope they don't change places after lunch and scupper my efforts!" she thought.

She wasn't bad at remembering names but thought there may be too many in the room to recall too soon.

Her preference when dealing with strangers or new acquaintances was to address them by their first name, if appropriate, and smile. Having the name and seat positions was good.

"Diane", she said during a lull when the speaker had stepped out of the room for a few minutes.

Diane was a woman, probably in her late forties, who was sitting almost directly opposite Eva.

She looked across, flattered that someone would remember her name so soon and speak to her with such a warm smile.

"I just love your necklace. Hope you don't mind me mentioning it."

"Thanks", replied Diane. "It was a present from someone special and I wear it each day to remind me of them. Glad you like it too!" and she smiled back.

As the few days of the course progressed Eva found out more about her fellow trainees. The course was not only for employees of her firm and the other each had their own stories.

Diane said she wanted a fulfilling job of a certain kind but was told she'd need a degree to get there. She said she did a degree but still couldn't get a job she wanted.

It seemed that everything Diane did was tinged with sadness and Eva wondered if she was a naturally depressive person. Diane hadn't enlarged on the necklace story so maybe it was someone she had lost. Eva didn't ask.

Next to Diane, on her right, was Hugh. He was quite a tall man who said his background was in architecture. He said it was generally held that architects can't think unless they have a pencil in their hand and smiled as he held his pencil up and waved it in the air.

During the introduction round Hugh had said he hoped one day to go on a cruise on one of the really old fashioned liners. "Not the Titanic, I hope", one of the others had quipped, then looked a bit shamefaced as he realised Hugh might have found the remark offensive.

On the other side of Diane was Androulla, a Greek girl who said she used to be the manager of a high street store that sold posters, framed pictures, and that kind of thing.

Enlarging on matters of introductions and first impressions, Androulla, who intimated that her friends call her "Drooly", said she'd had a vacancy for an assistant at the shop at one time.

A young man applied and called in just after the shop closed for the day. As he walked in he tripped and fell flat on his face, then got up laughing. Drooly said she laughed too and their shared humour was so heart warming she hired him on that alone: because they got on together.

The lunch breaks were fairly long and one day a bunch of the trainees went for a walk around the block. They picked up a burger in a bun in Baker Street and ate whilst walking.

One of them, a man named Geoff who was a bit shorter than Eva, suddenly said "Artichokes!" and pointed to a display outside a small greengrocer's shop in a back street. "I love those, but you don't see them very often, I'll see how much they are."

He bought the two artichokes, said he was looking forward to cooking them that evening, and looked as if someone had really made his day.

Eva was pleased for him but couldn't remember when, or even if, she had eaten artichokes.

At a different time Geoff told some of the group that he lived alone and had sometimes travelled abroad on his own, managing to survive by doing various jobs as he could find them. He said in one country in the east he made a living by teaching English.

"Do you speak that language?" Eva had asked.

"No", Geoff replied.

"Then how did you teach English, did you train as a teacher or something?"

"No. I would hold up a pen and say 'pen'. They would say 'pen' and one step at a time they learned English. They wanted to learn so it was easy!"

"How beautifully simple", thought Eva, "No first declensions, no Saxon genitives, just cat-sat-mat and learn by practice."

After lunch that day Androulla entered the training room wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat she had bought somewhere along the road.

She was an easy target for comments and the first came from Dave Biddiscombe who said "I'm waiting for the holes for the ears!" With her big Greek nose she clearly brought to mind the image of a seaside donkey and everyone in the room laughed.

Androulla had heard most of the jokes before and when a few of them got into the elevator to go home one evening someone said "Beware of Greeks bearing lifts!", she retorted "Or even lifts bearing Greeks!" and laughed with them. She wasn't easy to offend and nobody wanted to offend her.

Eva wished everyone could get along like that without taking offence the way some ultra sensitive people seem to.

She found the different attendees had their own wavelengths, areas of interest, and sense of humour.

One of the guys John Christian, was talking to Colin, a rather serious ex-navy officer. John referred to a training video they had been shown and said "You remember what they told us in that film with the lady with the big knockers..."

Colin snapped "Lady with the big knockers, what kind of language is that?"

"Monty Python language", replied John.

"Oh, Monty Python!" said Colin, evidently finding John's "language" acceptable so long as it was in context with some cult thing Colin approved of.

Eva overheard a number of small points of conversation that she found interesting. One was from an older man, Glen, who had travelled abroad a lot and said in countries where they served Turkish coffee you waved your little finger to tell the waiter when you didn't want any more refills.

Some of the points of etiquette and custom applying to different locations around the world she had heard mentioned in TV adverts for one of the large banks.

You had to be careful not to be offensive whilst abroad and learning how to behave from someone who knows was important. Even back then, as she pondered these things, a seed of an idea was forming in Eva's mind.

## **Chapitre 5 : Malheureuse Anniversaire**

The day came soon enough and so did the cards. "Joyeux Anniversaire", "Happy Birthday", "Buon Compleanno", from family members and friends. E-mail messages too.

Joey said to Eva "Maman, c'est mon anniversaire aujourd'hui. J'ai dix-huit ans!"

Age 18. The legal age of majority. Her baby boy was now an adult. She cried a little, partly because she was happy for him and happy for her, partly through pure emotion, partly with relief because eighteen years of being a single parent takes its toll, no matter how strong you are.

The birthday celebration was good, everyone agreed that.

Joey had started to go out more on his own and with his pals. Eva expected that any time soon he might announce that he wanted to move out and share a house with some friends or something like that, but no such thing had occurred yet.

A few days later things changed, badly.

It was the knock at the door that every normally intelligent adult never wants to hear.

It was the sight nobody ever wants to see. Two police officers in uniform. One male, one female with that look, that serious look, that stops your breath and stops your heart.

She didn't have to ask or wait for them to speak, she knew. She knew. She knew.

She held the door open and moved her head to to the right to beckon them in. She sat down and gestured for them to do the same. She knew she had to sit down. She knew they would suggest it anyway, they always did. But they didn't have to suggest it because she knew, she knew.

What it is that tells a mother her child has died she didn't know. Whether it was telepathy, an extra sense, an instinct, she didn't know. She only knew what they were going to say and she didn't want to hear it.

She breathed in deeply through her nose, sat upright, pulled her shoulders back and asked them.

"What happened?"

Even before she spoke tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she was unaware of them.

The WPC was so moved she had trouble containing herself and almost started to well up too. But her male colleague sensed it, perhaps with peripheral vision, and squeezed her arm just firmly enough and without Eva noticing it.

"Just to confirm, you are Miss Eva Clements?" the officer asked.

"Yes, I think you know that already. What happened. Tell me, please, what has happened?"

"You have a son named Joseph?" the officer continued.

She nodded.

"I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you", he continued, "Your son was involved in an incident and has died. I am very, very sorry."

"Where? What incident? Where is he?" she sobbed.

"He was in London and was accidentally shot as he came out of a building."

"What building, why was he in London, what do you mean shot? No, No, No, it can't be my Joey, my beautiful boy, he can't be dead, he can't be!"

The WPC moved over and put her arms round Eva's shoulder the way she had been trained to do, but knew, even without the training, that it was little comfort.

They asked the usual question "Is there someone we can call?"

Half an hour later Robert and Wendy arrived, both with faces devoid of any colour.

The torrents of tears continued with nothing said for many minutes, whilst the police officer waited patiently to finish their task.

The WPC had to excuse herself for few minutes. It was her first "inform the next of kin" bad news call. For the male officer, it was the fifteenth, but he was a parent too and knew it never gets any easier.

After some time it calmed down and Robert asked what exactly happened.

The male officer responded "There was drive-by shooting. We think it was gangs, probably drug related, but we don't have all the information yet. Joey was with some friends and got hit in error."

"Did he suffer? Did my son suffer?" asked Eva, horrified at the sickening thought.

All those years she had protected him, even broke bad news things to him carefully to insulate him from the unpleasantness of life, just for him to be struck down in the street. He had only just become an adult. Even if they found who did it they would still be alive. Her Joey wasn't. Where was there any justice?

Robert, Wendy, and Eva all asked questions. What was Joey doing there? Who was he with? Did they go into some sleazy clip joint or something? Were they taking drugs? What were they up to?

The officers told them what they could. Joey was with three friends and they had simply gone to see a late film, a normal feature film on the regular circuit. As they left the cinema Joey was shot in the head. The target had been someone else but wasn't hit. One of Joey's friends, Denis Daley had been slightly injured.

The police couldn't add any more but promised to keep Eva informed.

She didn't sleep at all that night and had no interest in reading novels.

## **Chapitre 6 : Lonely Days And Lonely Night**

The only small comfort, although not much of a comfort, was that Joey had not suffered.

The feedback from the police, the coroner, and Eva's own doctor, whom she saw about something to help her with the tragedy, was that death would have been instant.

From all the evidence and the very best information and scientific thinking, it seemed clear that it was a painless but very final end, albeit to an innocent young person.

Friends and relations said "At least that's something to be thankful for", and similar words, all meant with sincerity. But Eva was intelligent enough to expect that and although she knew those things were meant with the best of intentions, it did little to ease her grief.

In due course the official reports were issued, cause of death confirmed, along with the "no suffering" part, the perpetrators were arrested and convicted, Joey's friend recovered OK.

The funeral was attended by many and the costs were met by the authorities.

Eva had a mountain of paperwork to complete. Home Office stuff, solicitors, etc, etc.

Then it was all over.

She was alone again.

The self-doubt arose in her mind, her natural cheerfulness had ebbed and she was at an all time low in her life.

There was emptiness. So much love in her heart but nobody to give it to.

She thought back to the people she had known and wondered what they would do if it happened to them. Nobody could really know the answer to that. But she thought about the artichokes.

Someone else who lived alone and amused himself with simple things. Taught foreign people to speak English by just getting on with it.

That's what she had to do, get on with it!



Eva asserted herself and spoke to employment agencies, some of which recruited for overseas appointments.

"Why not try to live some of your teenage dreams and go live in la belle France?" she pondered.

## **Chapitre 7 : Over The Channel**

Her first overseas appointment was at L'Université Américaine à Paris.

Under "languages" on the application form and on her CV she showed "Anglais, langue maternelle". English was her mother tongue but she managed to convince the recruiters of her seriousness about becoming fluent in French very quickly.

Eva had read about an Australian pop singer who had enjoyed some success but wanted to do better. She went to America, sunny California, and whilst there decided to reinvent herself. She learned French, became fluent in the language and recorded songs in it. If Tina could do it, so could Eva.

During the first few months Eva found la vie Parisienne was her cup of tea.

The American university staff were very good to her and she was allowed to settle more or less at her own pace. The duties were clerical to start with as she found out where the doors led, so to speak, then she moved on to the subject of language training.

Her task was twofold. She had to learn French and she had to teach English. The cat-sat-mat approach her friend on the course in London had talked about was not entirely alien to the university staff and there was a market for taking people off the street and introducing them to a few basics.

Eva knew that in England many colleges and some universities, such as Exeter, offered adult basic education classes. There was a high level of illiteracy and innumeracy in Britain and the classes were designed to help people get on the first rung and help themselves along.

She didn't think the need in Paris was much different, but her interest wasn't in basic literacy, it was in helping people acquire new language skills.

She started by sitting in with a professional language teacher then eased in, perhaps the way teaching assistants do in England.

## **Chapitre 8 : A Person Of Interest**

One day he was there: in front of her.

Eva was in the Reception area. Sitting at the desk looking for a schedule, she was aware of someone standing nearby, perhaps mistaking her for the receptionist who had popped to the loo, as they say in Paris, English people that is.

"May I help you?" enquired Eva, in English. After all, they were in an American university.

"I have come to see Mr Piechota, I have an appointment wiz 'im at eleven", said the stranger.

He was about six foot one, she reckoned, 1.85 metres in metric. With neck-length dark hair, average build, grey eyes and very smartly dressed.

His broken accent suggested he was not a regular speaker in English and that got her interest.

Someone had once said in a TV interview that with foreigners it's the innocence that appeals. Their lack of knowledge or lack of practice in a language makes them seem vulnerable and can endear the listener to them.

Eva felt a bit endeared to this guy, for a number of reasons.

"Just a moment sir", she said. "I'll see if I can ring through and check."

Eva had been shown the ropes in reception. Hers had been a many-hatted job to start with and for continuity of business the staff sometimes had to step in at short notice to help out.

The visitor had given his name as Henri Guillon and someone came to collect him after Eva had successfully confirmed his appointment. She didn't know the nature of the business or what Mr Piechota did there.

When the receptionist returned from her toilette visit Eva asked if she knew either of them.

"Chuck Piechota works in audio-visual", said Maryclaire, a native of Michigan who had lived in Quebec for a while and was fluent in English, French and Spanish. "The caller may have been a rep or a consultant or something. We often get people like that coming here."

"Nice looking guy", said Eva.

"May look tasty, don't be hasty", could be a heartbreaker, said Maryclaire.

They both smiled and Eva went back to her room upstairs.

A couple of weeks passed and she saw him again.

Maryclaire had been on reception duty when M Guillon called into ask about courses in English.

With her tongue in her cheek Maryclaire said most of the tutors were tied up in classes at the moment but perhaps he would like to speak to Eva Clements who was involved with some starter classes.

After ringing upstairs, Maryclaire gave Henri Guillon directions to Eva's room and off he went.

Weak at the knees describes some of what she felt.

He stood in the doorway while they introduced themselves and she noticed the warmth of his hand as they shook in the normal polite way.

"Asseyez-vous" she said and gestured to a chair. Eva smiled as she said it, partly to be a good hostess, but partly because she remembered the first time she saw the phrase written in a text book. "Starts with ass", she thought, "Must mean sit your ass down!"

"How can I help?" she began.

Henri told her his English was not good and he was interested in improving but wasn't sure if he could commit to a long formal course because he travelled around a lot.

Eva suggested one of the Drop-In Centre self-paced courses they ran and he took down the details.

Being a bit impertinent, Eva said "I heard the French say the best way to learn a language is in bed. Don't you have an English girlfriend who could help? Just joking of course!"

His English wasn't that bad and he smiled knowingly.

"Not yet", he said, "But who knows?"

"Well", thought Eva, "Maybe he doesn't have a girlfriend. Probably got a French wife."

A week or so later she saw confirmation that Henri Guillon had booked a place at the Drop- In Centre, a small building not far from the University, and was due to get started that morning.

Part of her job was to help ensure smooth continuity so she decided to look in and see how things were at the Centre.

She saw Henri at one of the learning desks and nodded in a friendly way, as if to ask "Is everything OK?" He smiled and nodded back.

She was still there just before the normal lunch break and he approached her at the notice board.

"Miss Clements, you have been very kind to me. Would you allow me to take you to lunch. I would be very honoured", he said, and smiled.

Eva looked at her watch and made a quick decision.

"OK, I mean thank you, that would be very nice."

After gathering their things they left together and he walked her to a bistro that was fairly packed but had some spare seats.

"Order anything you would like." he said.

They each chose a light snack and coffee.

The tables were quite small and personal space was at a minimum. She liked the feeling of closeness and liked his after shave, which she had detected the first time they met.

Eva didn't know what he was thinking, she hoped his thoughts aligned with hers.

After lunch he was headed to the car park where he had left his car earlier that day and Eva was headed back to the University building.

"Thank you for your very pleasant company, I hope we see each other again soon, a tout a l'heure", he said, smiled warmly and walked away.

"Make that very soon", thought Eva.

"I know that glow!" said Maryclaire as Eva walked past the front desk. "You just had a hot dog, didn't you!"

Eva smiled at the double-entendre and pretended to wipe dressing from the corners of her mouth, while Maryclaire sat pointing at her and laughing a kind of 'gotcha' laugh.

"Enough of this frivolity", said Eva, "Get on with your work!" They both laughed a bit more then got on with their work.

Two days later Henri phoned Eva at the University.

"I am being very forward", he said. "I would like to invite you to the cinema if you are free. There is an old film "Un homme et une femme", you know, A Man and a Woman from the nineteen sixties, with Anouk Aimée and Jean-Louis Trintignant.

There are subtitles in English but it is only on for one night on Saturday. I thought we may both learn from it. I can do the reading and you can do the listening. We can both do the watching!

Are you free on Saturday? It is not far from where you work"

Eva's first reaction was to jump at the chance but she was at work and perhaps a little less romantic than when at home. She wasn't sure what the rules were about teachers going out with students and she hadn't asked her friend Maryclaire about that.

Technically he wasn't her student because he only used the Drop-In Centre along the road and didn't have an assigned tutor. She guessed it would be alright.

"Thank you, I just checked my schedule and I do have a free evening this coming Saturday. Is that what you meant?"

They agreed to meet and enjoyed the film together. It was not a teenage 'snuggle up in the back seats' kind of event but it was warm and she did squeeze his arm during a couple of touching scenes in the film. He was a gentleman throughout.

After they left he asked if Eva was hungry and wanted to eat somewhere. She said she was peckish, had to explain what that meant, and they grabbed a snack from a stall on the way to the car park.

She was thoroughly relaxed and happy.

## Chapitre 9 : Sleepover

Henri told Eva that he was staying in an apartment provided by his company whilst he was working in the Paris area and asked if she would like to see it. "It's at a place called St Cloud", he said, "Not far from here. I can get you home before midnight so you don't turn into a legume or something!"

They both laughed and she almost spilled ketchup down her dress, but managed to flex her body just in time.

The apartment was modern and very clean. He said the company got cleaners in to 'do the business now and then' as he put it, so he didn't have to do much housework himself.

She didn't want a drink. They were still standing.

"Ferme tes yeux", he said quietly. She closed her eyes and he kissed her gently on the mouth.

She stood still.

"Ouvre tes yeux", he said and she opened her eyes.

"Your turn", he said in English.

"Regarde moi", she said in French, followed quickly by "Ne bouge pas".

She kissed him full on the mouth, in French.

They stood swapping intimacies for a full ten minutes then they said "Allons au lit", almost in unison.

It wasn't a rushed matter.

It was doucement and as subtle as when he had asked her to close her eyes.

Subtle and soft and caring. No tearing at clothes or desperation, pianissimo.

Their bodies merged and she was fulfilled. If there is an opposite to general anaesthetic this would be it, she was livened, complete, and then relaxed: Total aesthetics. Art, beauty, and taste, with the appreciation of beauty.

The appreciation of the senses. The sense of touch.

She laid unclothed and he traced the whole of her body with his finger. She lived every millimetre of it and in her mind it was in full technicolour, with all the meanings that romantics assign to the colours of the palette. A kaleidoscope of satisfaction.

They slept for hours where they had laid down.

It was midway through Sunday morning when she woke. He was still there, rousing slightly but still mostly asleep. She looked at him for what seemed like hours, but was only a few minutes.

"How could you do this to me?" she asked herself.

"When you find out, do it gain, soon, very soon!"

Eva eased herself up and and quietly, very quietly and softly, explored the apartment until she found the toilette, then la cuisine.

There was an ordinary apron hanging on the back of the door so she put it on for protection, plus a bit of modesty, of course.

He woke fully when she put the tray down on the small table.

"Petit déjeuner est servi", said Eva. Then added "What would you like, sir?"

"Embrasse-moi!" Henri replied.

The coffee wasn't too cold when they sat up.

In the afternoon he drove Eva back to her home. On the way he told her he owned a house near Evry, some way outside the centre of Paris. It was a few miles south along the Boulevard Périphérique.

Eva had heard about that road and how it was wise to keep off it at the end of the summer break when everyone was returning home. Choc a bloc!

In the evening she was still glowing and wished she hadn't had to sleep alone that night. But much of her life had been spent alone so she was no stranger to it.

Work continued as normal and she had a couple of liaisons with Henri. The odd lunch and some evenings at his apartment. They may have been in St Cloud but she was floating on Cloud Nine!

## **Chapitre 10 : Au Revoir Belle France**

Henri phoned one morning, saying he wanted to see her as soon as possible because had something important to tell her.

They met for lunch at the bistro again and he told her, quite delicately, that his firm wanted him to take a position on an island in the Caribbean Sea.

He explained "They want someone on an island where French is the official language. Haiti is too corrupt so they chose another one. The idea is that I will be based there but go to other islands in the group when necessary."

He went on.

"There are many islands in the area. Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados, Dominica, Guadeloupe, and lots of others. I may even get up to the US Virgin Islands. The idea is to grow the business."

"Does that mean you will be travelling forever and I'll never see you again? Is this a goodbye lunch" asked Eva, looking hurt and concerned, the usual brightness suddenly gone from her complexion.

"Is this another dashed dream?" she wondered.

"No, no. I will travel by plane. It will be away from the island for two or three days at a time, perhaps once or twice a month. Once the contacts are made most of it will be done by phone and Internet."

"But how far away is this island of yours?"

"About nine thousand kilometres from Paris."

"What?"

"A little over four thousand miles, like going from London to Canada", he added, hoping it sounded less distant.

"Can I come with you?" she asked, with a nervous tremble in her voice.

"I'll ask", he promised, "Jamais désespérer." He smiled, kissed her, paid the bill and started to leave. "Phone you ce soir!", he said.

He did.

Later he went to see her at her home, the very neat apartment she loved so much.

They sat and had coffee, with a few petit fours she had picked up after work from an old Prisunic convenience store.

Her eyes were a little glazed and although she wanted to hear the verdict she was afraid of what it might be.

"I had to push the boss for an appointment, the big boss. He is the one who makes decisions about who goes where because it affects the marketing strategy."

"Why do people always have to prefix bad news with a lot of introductory waffle?" thought Eva. "Why can't they just say it?" But she remained silent, not wanting to interrupt and offend this special man who had captured her heart.

"He said it's OK!" Henri said. "You can come with me, if you still want to, that is."

The colour returned, Eva got up, made fists, held her elbows close to her ribs and jumped up and down.

"Shame, I was hoping you would be pleased", said Henri with a wry grin on his face.

He got up, retrieved his brief case from where he'd left it by the hall stand, and took out a wad of papers.

After looking through them quickly he handed Eva some coloured brochures and an information sheet.

She sat down, scanned the pages and picked out some descriptive passages.

"The island of Martinique is an overseas region of France located in the Lesser Antilles in the eastern Caribbean Sea.

The Population is under half a million.

As part of France it is within the European Union, and its currency is the Euro. The official language is French, but almost the entire population also speaks Antillean Creole."

Eva had heard of Creole, a kind of hybrid mixture of two languages that they speak on Mauritius, where the extinct dodo bird once lived. "Don't they also speak Creole in New Orleans, or somewhere down there?" she asked herself.

She continued reading, selecting a few stand-alone paragraphs to get an overview of what the blurb was telling her.

"There exists a blend of French and West Indian cultures.

The largest town is the capital, Fort-de-France.

The island features steep hills, narrow streets and La Savane, a garden bordered by shops and cafes.

There is a statue of Joséphine de Beauharnais, a native of the island, who was the first wife of Napoleon Bonaparte.

There are Museums & Galleries."

"I have not read it all yet, is it interesting?" Henri asked.

Eva continued reading and read some parts aloud for his benefit.

"The island is volcanic in origin, has stunning mountain views and Mont Pelée still smoulders."

"So do you, ma belle!", said Henri and kissed her on the back of her neck, making her wriggle and shiver slightly, ever so slightly, delightfully slightly!

She smiled inwardly, took an exaggeratedly deep breath, and continued reading.

"Martinique is a mountainous stunner crowned by the still-smouldering Mont Pelée, which once destroyed the island's original capital, St-Pierre, in the early twentieth century.

There is a striking diversity of landscapes and atmospheres. As in many locations around the world, it suffers from uncontrolled urban sprawl in some places, particularly in and around the busy capital, Fort-de-France.



Life and travel both become more sedate as one heads north or south through some of the island's delicious scenery. The rain forests of the mountainous northern part are thought by many tourists to be the most spectacular. The south also has its fair share of natural beauty, including lovely bays and miles of unspoiled luscious beaches.

The island is a superb playground for outdoor lovers, with numerous activities readily available, both on land and at sea.

On average, the temperatures are always high.

A lot of rain (rainy season) falls in the months: May, June, July, August, September, October, November and December.

On average, the warmest month is September and the coolest month is January. September is the wettest month. March is the driest month."

"Rain, just like London and Paris", she thought, "But look at the temperatures. Eleven degrees in Paris, twenty six in Martinique. Typically between twenty and thirty there. I can handle that".

"Perfect, When can we leave?" she said, with mischief in her voice.

"You will have to get a job there first." said Henri. "It is part of France so you do not have to have a visa, but I will have to travel around the islands sometimes so you will need something to occupy your mind. Otherwise you will sit around and get fat."

He prodded her lightly in the ribs and she thought "Do that neck thing again!"

He did better.

## **Chapitre 11 : Holiday Of A Lifetime**

"That's what friends are for", said Maryclaire.

She had told Eva that an opportunity had arisen in the States and she, her good friend Maryclaire, was going to live in California.

"Matchmaker Mary", as Eva dubbed her after she first got Eva and Henri together, was moving on.

But so was Eva.

Maryclaire had many connections abroad and knew a lot of the University staff. She had picked up details of a vacancy at the Chamber of Commerce on Martinique and urged Eva to apply, quickly.

Eva did. That was why Eva had thanked her.

The updated CV Eva produced showed Education: L'Université Américaine à Paris.

That helped clinch it. She got the job, teaching the English language to people in Fort-de-France on Martinique.

The flight took about eight and a half hours.

The accommodation was good. The company had found it for Henri but he rented it from his own income. His house near Evry in France was rented out to an American family whilst the breadwinner was on an assignment for his employer, a multi-national Petrochem company.

The income from that covered the rental on Martinique, with change, and Eva's income was pocket money.

She settled into the job quickly. Most of the staff at the Chamber were female and about half of them were natives of Paris, so she felt at home, even though she was Anglaise.

The hardest part initially was understanding the local dialect. Antilles Creole was a bit different to Parisienne French but she soon got the hang of it.

"Qu'est-ce que vous dite 'hang of it' in Antilles Creole?" she wondered.

Eva found she could always rely on the "holding up a pen and saying 'pen' method" and did so now and then as an ice breaker. "Thank you, Geoff", she said silently and thought back to the friendliness of all those "classmates" in London.

Henri did pretty much as he had outlined in Paris. He was away now and again but she had made new friends and wasn't lonely. He brought her back a gift from each island he visited and she found a special place to display them all together.

"I might draw a map next time you are away", she thought, "and show where they all came from."

## **Chapitre 12 : Special Moments**

They were on a beach. He was lying chest down and she was gently brushing sand off his back, singing a daft ditty, some of which she made up as she went along.

"My Henri  
cher Henri  
he's the only homme for me  
with a knick knack paddywack  
give a dog a bone  
my French hunk came rolling home!"

"What is a paddywhack?" asked Henri casually.

"An Irishman who lives in Liverpool." answered Eva.

"What!"

"Never mind", said Eva. "I think it's something to do with a sheep's neck actually, but it doesn't matter, I was just messing around."

"You English!" said Henri with a deliberately heavy French accent, and grinned.

"Yep, I guess that pillow talk language-learning method doesn't cover everything, does it!" she replied.

"No, I Guess not", he said.

"Mind you", she went on, "If you start at the pillow and travel further south, that bit works!"

"Still don't know what you mean", said Henri.

"Do you think forty one is too old?" she asked.

He lifted his head and looked round at her with curiosity.

"Too old for what?"

With her right hand she described a large arc in front of her belly, then pretended to reach.

"Mal de mer?" he asked.

"Nausées matinales, mon amour. Morning sickness!"

"What?" he smiled, looked puzzled, then smiled again, with incredulity.

She sang another made-up ditty.

"J'ai quarante-et-un ans  
Et Je suis enceinte mon cher  
Mai Je ne me soucie pas  
I'm so happy I don't care"

He joined in with his own hastily thought up ditty.

"Mon fille, mon fils  
what is your name  
how will you respond when we call  
they say name your kids after where they were born  
Martin or Martine  
Guess that's all!"

She applauded him with a light hand clap, then laid down beside him.

They stayed on the beach for hours.

They stayed until the Caribbean sun set on another perfect day.

**The End**

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