

Where Would I Be Without You?



A Gallic Book

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THAT SUMMER

Our first love is always our last

Tahar Ben Jelloun

San Francisco, summer 1995**Gabrielle, a twenty-year-old American student**

That summer she was in her third year at Berkeley and often wore faded jeans, a white shirt and a leather jacket. With her long straight hair and her green eyes flecked with gold she looked like Françoise Hardy in the photos taken by Jean-Marie Périet in the sixties.

That summer she divided her time between the campus library and the fire station on California Street where she volunteered as a firefighter.

That summer she had her first serious love affair.

Martin, a twenty-one-year-old Frenchman

That summer he had just completed his law degree at the Sorbonne, he was in the States to improve his English and explore the continent. As he didn't have a penny to his name he took odd jobs, working more than seventy hours a week as a waiter, ice-cream seller and gardener.

That summer, with his shoulder-length dark hair, he looked like the young Al Pacino.

That summer, he had his last serious love affair.

Berkeley cafeteria

'Hey, Gabrielle, you've got a letter!'

The girl sat at a table reading. She looked up from her book. 'What?'

'You've got a letter, honey!' repeated Carlito, the cafeteria manager, as he put a cream envelope beside her cup of tea.

Gabrielle frowned. 'Who from?'

'From Martin, the French boy. He's not working here any more but he came by this morning to leave this for you.'

Gabrielle looked at the envelope in puzzlement and slipped it into her pocket before leaving the café.

The immense lush campus, dominated by the clock tower, was bathed in summer sunshine. Gabrielle wandered along the paths and walkways of the park until she came to an empty bench in the shade of some ancient trees. Then, in the peace and quiet, she opened the letter with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity.

26 August 1995

Dear Gabrielle,

I just wanted to tell you that I am going back to France tomorrow.

I wanted you to know how much the time we spent together meant to me. Those moments in the campus cafeteria discussing books, movies, music and generally putting the world to rights meant more to me than anything else I experienced in my time in California.

When I was with you, I often wished I was a character in a novel. Because a character in a novel, or a film, wouldn't have been so awkward about telling the heroine how much he adored her, how he loved talking to her, and what a magical feeling he had when he looked at her. It was a painful, sweet and intense feeling. An amazing feeling that I've never felt before. A feeling that I wouldn't have believed possible.

That afternoon when the rain took us by surprise in the park and we sheltered in the library porch, I felt, and I think you did too, such fierce attraction that I was momentarily shocked. I know that we almost kissed then. I held back because you had told me about your boyfriend who was travelling around Europe, and who you could not cheat on. And I didn't want to be one of those blokes you despised who hit on you without knowing whether their advances were welcome.

I do know though that had we kissed, I would have been in seventh heaven, not caring whether it was raining or not, because it would have shown that I meant something to you. I know that the kiss would have stayed with me for a long time, like a glorious memory to hold on to when I felt alone. But actually some people say that the most beautiful love affairs are the ones that don't get

the chance to develop. So perhaps it's the same for the kisses that don't actually happen.

When I look at you, I'm reminded of a film's twenty-four frames a second. With you, the first twenty-three frames are light and luminous, but the twenty-fourth reveals a real sadness, which is such a contrast to the inner radiance you seem to have. It's like a subliminal image, a hairline crack: a tiny flaw that defines you more surely than all your qualities and achievements. I often wondered what was making you sad. I often hoped you would tell me, but you never did.

Please take care of yourself, and try not to give way to melancholy. Don't let that twenty-fourth frame take over. Don't let the demon have the upper hand.

I want you to know that I found you as magnificent as the sun. But I know you have people telling you that all the time, so I am just like all the others after all.

I'll never forget you.

Martin

Gabrielle looked up. Her heart was racing. It was so unexpected.

From the very first lines, she'd realised that the letter was special. Of course, she knew what had happened between them, but not how Martin felt. She looked around her, worried that her face was betraying her emotion. When she felt tears coming, she left the campus and took the subway back to downtown San Francisco. She had planned to stay longer at the library, but she knew that she would be incapable of doing so now.

Sitting in the carriage, she alternated between surprise at Martin's letter and the painful pleasure she took in reading it. It wasn't every day that someone paid her that kind of attention. And usually when it happened it was because of her looks, not her personality.

Everyone thought she was strong and outgoing, when in fact she was fragile and still a little bit lost in the contradictions of being a young woman. People who had known her for years weren't aware of her distress. But he'd sensed this in her and had understood everything in just a few weeks.

That summer, the heat had overwhelmed the Californian coast – even San Francisco with its microclimate. In the carriage the passengers seemed lifeless, as if stunned by the summer torpor. But Gabrielle was not among them. She had suddenly become a medieval heroine, transported to an age of chivalry: an age in which courtly love made its first appearance. Chrétien de Troyes had just sent her a missive and he was resolved to transform her friendship for him.

She read and reread her letter, which did her good, but was also painful.

No, Martin Beaumont, you're not like the other guys.

She felt happy, desperate and undecided.

So undecided that she missed her stop. Now she had an extra station to go through in the heat to get back to her place.

Nice one, she said to herself. She obviously wasn't much good at being a heroine!