

## CHEZ L'ODÉON ET FILS: OTHER WOMAN TELLS ALL!

*Gail Gilliland*

My father always said I would probably die in the bathroom. “Mark my words, Lisa,” he’d say whenever our family was on a driving vacation and I had to stop. “Someday during some great catastrophe, the police will be running around, warning everybody to get out, and there you’ll be in the bathroom, left behind.”

I actually thought about my father’s prediction when 9/11 happened in New York. I was living in the Boston suburbs, and had been divorced from Nigel for about six months. I’d stayed home from work that Tuesday because I was sick, so I didn’t even know about the attacks till around one o’clock when I started feeling better and went downstairs and turned on my TV. In the midst of my disbelief as those two planes slammed into the World Trade Center over and over, I thought: Was there some woman like me in one of those hundreds of bathrooms? Some woman calling out to the firemen: “Help! I’m trapped in here, in the women’s room!” That’s when I remembered the job interview I’d had at the watch factory in Switzerland, back when I was in my twenties, living in Europe by myself.

The Odéon et Fils watch company in Lausanne was at the end of a little street that went straight up. I was just recuperating from my stint with pneumonia, and by the time I’d climbed to the top, I was out of breath. I clung to one of the ivy-entwined columns on the porch of the homey-looking little mustard-colored stucco building with its nice green shutters, and decided that my landlady’s doctor in Geneva was a champion of understatement. He’d told me: “Mademoiselle Lloyd, in such a severe case of pneumonia, you weel steel find yoorself, for a leetle while at least, zat when you do a leetle walking, you weel loose your bress.” As I stood there inhaling deeply, I felt a hot, white stab deep inside my chest, at the same time getting only half a lung’s worth of the freezing air. Meanwhile, a plump, middle-aged woman with graying hair stared at me with alarm through a window of the watch factory. I tried to smile back so that I might give the impression, *It is only I, Madame! Mademoiselle Lisa Lloyd, this year’s delegate to the National Geographic expedition to the highest peak in Europe, takes a rest.*

The woman at the window ventured out. “Are you all right, Mademoiselle?” she asked in French. “It is rather a steep hill, I am afraid. You are here, no doubt, for the interviews?”

I said I was, and she showed me into a sort of living room, where about ten other *young ladies*—we were all soon to be addressed collectively as *jeunes femmes*—were seated on various loveseats and cushioned chairs. The applicants’ attention was riveted on a tall, slim, silver-haired man wearing black trousers, a black-and-white striped morning coat, and a gold *pince-nez*. “Ah,” this individual said as I entered. He glided over to me, balancing a tray expertly with one hand. “Would you like a *café crème* perhaps, Mademoiselle? Or a *jus d’orange*?” He smiled through white teeth that were so perfect I decided they must be false.

I took one of the thimble-sized orange juices he offered. I’d had too much coffee on the train, and as a result, I already had my eye out for *la toilette*.

The man grinned at me as if he approved whole-heartedly of my choice. “We are all just getting to know one another now,” he said pleasantly, indicating the other candidates with a delicate nod. He looked down at a list of names on a clipboard. “*Voyons*. I believe we have all been accounted for, except. . . . *Alors, c’est vous, Mademoiselle Lloyd, l’Américaine?*”

“Oui, Monsieur,” I said. “It is I.” He checked my name off his roster, and I looked around in a discreet attempt to figure out the interior layout of l’Odéon. My roommate Sarah while I was at Berkeley was an architecture student, and she told me that her coursework made it very easy for her to *find a John*. She demonstrated this knowledge to me in various public buildings whenever the two of us went over to San Francisco on the bus. She would tell me, *With the foyer here, Lisa, you see, and the staircase here, the bathroom, if I’m not mistaken must be. . . .voilà!* And sure enough, it always was. Now in an attempt to channel her skills, I surmised that the toilet must be on the right side of the building, most likely under the imposing, maroon-carpeted central staircase beyond the hall.

“Won’t you sit down, Mademoiselle Lloyd?” The man with the pince-nez motioned to a little chair. “Madame Presler, *notre secrétaire*, will be back any moment, and then we’ll all get started, shall we? It won’t be long.” With an expansive beam of good humor clearly meant to encompass without bias one and all, he pivoted on his black patent slippers and sped away.

Several of the other applicants were whispering in little bouts of conversation. I sat on the edge of my chair and bored my fingernails into my palms, trying to alleviate the growing pressure on my bladder. *Try focussing your attention on something else for awhile, Lisa*, my mother had always interjected whenever the discussion between my father and me about stopping at a bathroom got too heated in the car. But her trick wasn’t working. Where, oh where, was *la toilette*? I began to mourn over, apologize to, all the toilets I’d been talked into passing up in my then relatively short young life. I was about to slip out of the room to intensify my search, when a mild female voice spoke close to my left ear. “How did *you* hear about this job?”

I turned to see a slim, dark-skinned woman, beautifully dressed in an Italian knit. “Ruth James,” she said, offering me her hand. Ruth smiled and offered me a Gitane from a Laykin et Cie gold case. She looked like one of those tall, elegant Black women who were featured in French fashion magazines. “It’s the pits, isn’t it, trying to find a job?”

I accepted the first cigarette I’d smoked since I’d been sick. “Thanks,” I said. “A friend of mine told me about it.”

I meant Rémi Prah, of course, my landlady’s son. Rémi had seen Odéon’s ad in the *Tribune de Genève* and felt led to bring it to me at the youth hostel, where I was staying after his mother threw me out. “*Tiens, Mademoiselle*,” Madame Prah said when she confronted me about my relationship with her son. “You will find *vos bagages* below on the sidewalk! I will not support this imbecility of an idea that a sixteen-year-old Swiss boy and a misguided twenty-three-year-old American so-called student can even in their grandest imaginations fall in love.”

I lit the cigarette Ruth had offered, but as soon as I inhaled, I choked. She waited, her brows knitted with concern. “You’re not a national, then?”

I knew how to make that observation by now myself. You just had to pay close attention to the speaker’s L’s and R’s. But I’d already assumed Ruth couldn’t be a national in this land, made up as it was almost completely of white people, and blonde at that. Once, in a fit of indignation toward some governmental policy, Rémi had told me that, in spite of its official neutrality during World War II, Switzerland had not been all that opposed to Hitler in point of fact. He insisted that all the world’s tyrants still had secret Swiss bank accounts. And this was years before it all came out.

“No,” I said when I could breathe again at last. “I’m American.”

“Me, too,” Ruth said. She crushed out her cigarette and lit another. “My travel visa’s run out, and this is the only job that includes a work permit. Right now, I don’t have enough money to eat, let alone go home. If I don’t get a job pretty soon, the good people of Switzerland will just have to deport me in a cedar box.”

Even though it hurt, I laughed. “So why did you come to Switzerland in the first place?” Maybe she would give me the same reason I’d given my parents’ friends before I left. *Oh, did you hear that, Charles? How impressive! How noble! The Lloyds’ daughter Lisa is going to Geneva to get a degree in international relations!* But after sitting through five boring lectures at the University of Geneva, with four hundred Swiss students who, depending on their gender, were either chatting up the young woman beside them or painting their nails, I’d decided I didn’t want a degree in international relations after all.

“I just came to Europe to travel,” Ruth said. “I wanted to get out of Chicago and see the world. Soon as I finished high school I worked till I saved up enough for a charter flight and a Youth Hostel card and a Eurailpass.” She sighed. “And then one day while I was on the train from Geneva from Paris, I met a Swiss businessman and fell in love.”

I noticed she spat out the words *Swiss businessman* pretty hard.

“He worked for a company that designed album covers for a recording company. He kept saying how he hated his work, that it wasn’t *art*. He’d been a promising young artist with a lot of talent while he was in school, but now, he said, he just felt trapped. He said he was desperate for the kind of deep, penetrating conversation he and I were having on this train. He made it sound like his whole life depended on seeing me again. So, to make this long story short, I told him where I was staying in Geneva, and he called me up. He asked if he could do a series of sketches of me in the nude. After a few months, when I told him I had to go back to Chicago because I was running out of money, he found an

apartment for me and set me up. That lasted, let me see, for about a year. But when he stopped showing up to pay the rent, the owners rented the apartment to someone else.”

She crushed out her third, half-finished Gitane, and crossed her lovely long copper-colored arms across her chest. Tapping her perfect feet against the rungs of her chair, she added: “He didn’t come back because I’d had a fit when he told me he was married.” She was hugging herself as if she were cold. It struck me that she would be perfect as the heroine of one of those French movies where the American girl gets involved in something sinister she doesn’t comprehend.

“It took this man a whole year to tell you that?”

She looked across the room. “One believes what one wants to believe, I guess.” Turning back to me, she asked: “Have you ever been in love with a married man?”

In retrospect, her question almost seems prophetic. But back then I could say with a little laugh: “Not yet anyway. I’m too busy being in love with a sixteen-year-old.”

Ruth broke into an enormous smile. “Well, honey,” she said, patting my knee, “there’s not that big a difference between you and me.”

I wanted to make her feel better, so I asked, “But if you and this Swiss businessman who wants to be an artist really love each other, isn’t that enough?”

She stopped smiling, and leaned over until her face was almost touching mine. The smooth brown skin of her cheeks stretched taut over clean, high bones. “Listen, honey,” she said. “Ain’t no white man on this earth, no matter where the bastard be from, give me that shit.”

I sat there, not knowing what else to say. The last time I remembered feeling like this was when I was a little girl and my father took me to the hospital to visit my youngest aunt, his sister. She was only twenty-eight when she got cancer. She was a brunette, with dark-lashed eyes and delicate pink skin, and she had almost climbed to the top of her advertising agency when she was diagnosed. She laughed hoarsely as my father led me in, amused by my enormous bouquet of flowers. “It’s bigger than you are, Lisa. Put them in water for me, will you,” she ordered my father. “No. On second thought, just lay them here on my bed. Maybe I can manage to get the hell out of this fuckin’ body before they wilt.”

The man with the pince-nez came back into the room and smiled at one and all. I put my right leg over my left knee and tried not to think about how badly I had to pee. By now, I had begun to shiver.

“Well, good luck,” Ruth whispered.

“The same to you,” I whispered back.

“*Eh bien, Mesdemoiselles,*” the pince-nez man said. The middle-aged woman who had witnessed my shortage of breath through the window stood at his side. “Please allow me to officially introduce ourselves.”

As he looked around, I noticed that his gaze rested a fraction of a second longer on Ruth than on the rest of us. “I am Monsieur Féruçon,” he said. “Manager in charge of human resources at Odéon. We are a small *maison*, and so we tend to think of our employees as *une famille*. If you are chosen to work with us, you will comprehend precisely what I mean. Besides myself, there are the Messieurs Odéon, *le père et fils*, and there is the excellent Madame Presler, here on my right, who serves us faithfully as *notre secrétaire*. Then, of course, there are, at the machines and tables, all the rest.”

He paused and smiled. *You will find me very easy to work for*, he seemed to say. “If you are chosen to work *chez* Odéon, you will not only have a most secure future in terms of benefits and retirement plans, but you will be part of one of the finest makers of precision Swiss watches, an establishment of which, even after years of service, you will be most proud.” He nodded at the woman by his side. “Madame Presler has been with the company for twenty-four years, while I am happy to say that I have been employed nineteen years in this *grande maison*. To work at Odéon et Fils, as the young Swiss might say of such pleasant pastimes, is *très sympa*.” He chuckled briefly at his little joke.

*Très sympa!* That was how Rémi had described Mick Jagger the night he snuck into my room to tell me about his trip to London with his school to see the Rolling Stones. *J’ai vu Mick Jagger lui-même, Lisa! Il était très sympa!*

I didn’t see how I was going to get to the bathroom before we all filed into the room in front of which Monsieur Féruçon and Madame Presler now stood like ushers at the cinéma. Beyond them, in the room awaiting us, I could see a big projection screen with some writing on it, and three rows of desks. “And so, *Mesdemoiselles,*” Monsieur

Féruchon was saying, “if you will just follow Madame Presler? We will all go in and sit down and make ourselves at home before we take our test.”

Perhaps it was, as my mother had tried to convince me for years, a *mental thing*. Reasoning with me was always her way of trying to help. *You know, Lisa, the bladder is really just a small balloon, so it stretches. It stands to reason, then, doesn't it, Lisa, that your bladder can expand if it needs too, and you can wait?*

I clung to this thought now the way someone else might have clung to a Bible verse. I walked in with the others and sat down in a desk in the testing room. I clenched my fists. It couldn't take that long. *Really, Lisa. You'll be out of here in no time. You can wait.*

Madame Presler passed out the passage we were to translate. We were given five minutes to read it before we began, *sans dictionnaire*. The passage consisted of several paragraphs about watches that someone—Monsieur Féruchon, perhaps?—had created especially for the occasion. It was about a little boy who had received a watch from his uncle as a birthday gift.

I looked in desperation at the passage. Not once had it ever occurred to me while I was preparing for my interview at the watch company to look in my paperback *Mansion's* for words like *stem*, *mainspring*, *convex crystal*, *encasement*, or *minute-hand*. Why did the tiny fellow in the story have to be so smart? I might have been able to handle his enthusiasm if the precocious little brat had stuck to something more juvenile. Say, *un montre-bracelet de Mickey Mouse?*

“Ready now, young ladies? I am now going to set this stopwatch.” I wished that Monsieur Féruchon would stick to his native French, but he said the word in English. *Stopwatch* was probably going to be another word I would have to know. “All ready, *jeunes femmes? Alors, commencez?*”

Ten heads, including mine, went down obediently.

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The married man with whom I fell in love at the newspaper where I went to work in Boston when I at last went home, loved to have me tell this story to his friends. I would be sitting there, editing my share of AP copy in a corner of the office, just praying for the moment when Nigel would suddenly announce to the others with his beautiful *afrikaaner* accent, “Lisa and I have to work late, fellas. We're going to go grab a bite to eat for a little break.”

That happened sometimes. More often, though, someone he'd known in the far reaches of the British Commonwealth—he himself was from *Sath Africa*—would come into the office around closing time, and say in one of those Empirical voices something like: “Hall-o, Nigel, old boy! Care to take us up on a cuppa cha?”

Before abandoning me to my own devices, my married man would whisper in my ear: “So sorry to have to do this, Lisa darling, but it can't be helped.”

But first, he would introduce me. “This is my *newsclark*, fellas! A grand girl, really! Not *atan!* like most of the girls who come *hya* as interns. No, Lisa is a good *gebri*. She works *veddy habd*.”

The men who had come to visit would laugh appreciatively. I could see the visualization in their eyes. Lacey red nighties. Thin, tan legs. *Ah, how jolly for good old Nigel to be unfaithful to his little wife!*

I wanted to shout at them: *But it isn't like that, fellas! Nigel loves me! His wife doesn't understand him! Besides, he has never exactly slept with me, so far.*

For at that time, ours was still the sweetness of not ever having had quite the right opportunity to consummate our love. If Nigel took me out to lunch, he held my hand beneath the table. If he drove me home after work before picking his children up at school, he had barely enough time to rub his lovely South African hands between my legs.

But the very worst moments of what was our not-quite affair occurred when, in an attempt to divert the attention of his visitors, Nigel told them: “Lisa tells the funniest stories, fellas! She spent a lot of time in Europe before coming *beck*. She even learned to speak the language!” Resting his arm across my shoulders in a fashion that appeared more comradely than amorous he'd proudly add: “Quite something for an *Ameddikun*, don't you think?”

And with that crooked smile I could not resist, he begged me: “Lisa, tell them your story about the time you took that translation test at the watch factory in Lausanne while you were an illegal alien.”

So I would tell Nigel's friends how I got a few of the words mixed up on that translation test. And I would tell them that, later, when I called the watch factory to inquire how I had done, Monsieur Féruchon asked me in a puzzled

voice how I could possibly have confused the word *compte-secondes*, or stopwatch, with *toilette*. “For the term in English for bathroom, *n’est-ce pas*, Mademoiselle Lloyd, is *la toilette*?”

As the men all laughed, Nigel told them: “Lisa toured around Europe a little longer after that. She was waiting for something better to come along.” The *something better*, of course, he meant, was him.

Nigel and his friends left to go drinking together, and to eventually return home to their families—all those round blonde wives and pig-tailed, innocent daughters, all those spoiled sons with their short, clean nails. As for me, I would slip down the hall to the elegant black marble bathroom there in the newspaper building where we worked, and I would sob inside the now familiar toilet stall. Afterwards, I would run cold water in the sink, and scrutinize my face in the mirror, my nose big and round and red like some sort of clown. I did not look like Scarlet O’Hara when I cried.

When Nigel came into the office the next morning, he would be careful not to mention what he had allowed his friends to assume about the two of us. Instead, he would try to get me to laugh at the way people always twisted things. Then he would pull me to his strong and well-shaped chest, and as I snuggled deep into his shirt that smelled of his wife’s lemon-scented laundry starch, Nigel would chuckle. “Good thing, isn’t it, Lisa,” he would say with the wonderful accent that became my cruelest ghost. “Good thing I didn’t make you tell them the entire story about what happened there at the watch factory? That before you finally found the bathroom, you wet your pants?”

I have to admit that the man I did eventually marry after my fling with Nigel — the man who, as they say, *fathered* my daughter Tiffany, an only child — was exceptionally kind in this regard. He never once complained if I told him I had to go to the bathroom. Sometimes, if we were taking a trip in the car, he even stopped at a gas station before I asked. Still, I went ahead and divorced him. Basically, I think I was bored.

And, *Boredom*, I think all these years later. Would that have been so bad?