



Paris Street; Rainy Day, a short story

by Don Gauger based on the 1877 oil painting by Gustave Caillebotte

Lily had been distracted all day. It was midafternoon and she found herself dusting the same parlor end table over and over again. What had Madame said to her earlier? *Lily, you are miles away.* There was something else, something important, but Lily just could not remember.

Her thoughts always returned to the other day. She'd stopped at the bookseller's shop on her way back from the cheese monger.

The old shopkeeper kindly let her browse the new journals, none she could afford.

Lily had found a reprint of *L'invitation au voyage* by Charles Baudelaire. Her elderly grandmother back in Brittany greatly admired Baudelaire's poems. Lily missed her family, but opportunities for young women to work as domestic servants were good here in Paris.

Her reverie was interrupted by a loud group of young students in fashionable frock coats and starched collars. The men were all jokes and good fun, until Lily found herself trapped in a side bay as they made sport out of her. One young man's speech was overly familiar, but the others simply laughed as Lily blushed in shocked silence.

It was then that a young man rose from behind a stack of books at a small cafe table in the window bay. "Mademoiselle, are you tired? Please have my seat." He held his chair for her as she gracefully sat, looking out the window as she recomposed herself. He gave a light "Pardon" as he crossed to the table's other chair covered in a tall stack of books, which he lightly placed on the windowsill. The sound of laughter faded as the men exited the shop.

The young man introduced himself as he sat, "If I may join you? My name is M. Henri Russo. Let us ignore those unfortunate impertinences." Lily noticed the caduceus pin on Henri's frock coat lapel. "If I may ask, what were you reading? Ah, I see you read poetry; that journal is an excellent edition." Lily looked up timidly at Henri and saw nothing but kindness.

The owner had quietly placed a small tray with two demitasses of coffee and creamer on the table and disappeared with a gentle smile. Henri was already offering his own journal to Lily, "Since you like poetry. You must read this journal's latest edition; it has the lovely *Premier Sourire du Printemps* by Théophile Gautier." Lily wondered at Henri's slight accent; not Parisian, and certainly not Brittany. It was as if Henri read her thoughts, "My family are from Alsace. We own an old wine bottle making business that has done well over seven generations. I was accepted to medical school here in Paris. My classmates are mostly a good group, but they sometimes got overheated around pretty young women." Lily blushed at that, and Henri changed topics. "In this rainy weather that is neither winter or spring, I most miss my grandmother's cooking. Her *lapin à la moutarde* always makes me feel whole and well again."

Lily smiled, "I miss my family too." Lily told Henry that she was from Quimperlé in Brittany, its lacework much sought after by connoisseurs. Lily's lacework and seamstress skills helped get her current housekeeper position. Sundays she went for Mass at Saint-Augustin Church. Afterwards, if the weather was fair, she might sit in the Square Marcel Pagnol, where grand ladies promenaded with their stately escorts. "Life is much simpler back at my village. I miss my family every day, but my future may be in Paris. My cousin has a workshop here. Her lace work is very fine. I hope to join her one day."

Those agreeable minutes over coffee ended too soon. Lily made her excuse to leave and return to work. Henri rose and lightly insisted, "This set of poems are well worth reading. Please, you must let me give you this poetry journal." Henri walked to the counter to make payment.

Lily gave Henri her profuse thanks adding, "You are too kind Monsieur."

"Shall I walk with you back to your employer's household?"

She shook her head no, "Thank you for your thoughtfulness but I feel I must decline your invitation." Lily gazed at Henri without moving.

The shop door creaked as a patron entered, breaking the reverie. Lily, journal in hand, said a last thanks and good day as she left.

These memories circled in Lily's thoughts as she dusted the parlor end table. She drew a crumpled note from her apron pocket and read Remember to get more cheese for tonight.

Lily's eyes flew to the mantle clock. The cheese mongers would close soon! Heedless of the light rain and chill she hurried out the service door, sprinted up the alley and out onto the main concourse with only the briefest pause as the carriages and pedestrians hurried by. She must get to the cheese shop before they closed.

Henri was feeling restless. He reflected on the demands of medical school as the carriage threaded its way down the street. Medical studies demanded all his time. He rarely joined his classmates for a festive night out. He knew success meant solitude and

concentrating on his study, yet concentrating now seemed so hard. Something about the young woman he had met days before had made concentration impossible. Nights when Henri sat working, reviewing textbooks or writing a paper, he'd suddenly find himself staring off into space thinking about Lily. This charming young woman was so unlike the Parisian women, with their studied ways and self-confidence. Here was a quiet and shy young country girl not yet hardened by city life. It was unreasonable to think he'd fallen for her, even ridiculous. He knew almost nothing about her. His thoughts wandered. Might they chance to meet again one day?

With effort Henri put those thoughts aside. The task at hand was a prepaid carriage ride back to the bookseller's shop to collect a useful medical text he'd ordered for his chosen specialty, ophthalmology. It was expensive, but easier than working from the school library's sole edition that was never on the shelf. Henri was confident that owning a copy would let him pass his midterm exams. There was his modest budget to consider. If careful, he thought he could just save enough for one night out with his friends--that is, once he'd passed his final exams.

As the carriage jostled down the busy cobblestone street, plans and studies floated through his head, but Henri's thoughts returned to Lily. He gazed out into the evening rain. As it fell, his attention shifted. Something had changed outside. Somehow, somewhere the nearly setting sun's faintest diffuse glow subtly worked its way under the clouds. Echoes of that golden glow lightly filled the avenues; even the wet street looked beautiful. Henri's gaze rose and his breath stopped. There in the boulevard, wet, without a coat stood a young woman. It was Lily. His carriage began to turn the corner. Henri leapt up banging on the roof of the carriage cab, calling out, "Stop! This will do!" Without pausing for the carriage to fully stop, Henri swung from the cab, pushed off the carriage wheel and darted towards Lily.

Julian and Isabel Courtney made their way along the wet pavement. They took their usual after-dinner walk. Sometimes they'd stop at one of many small art galleries. A table in a small cabaret was another joy. They rarely missed their evening stroll, even in light rain like tonight. Isabel always paid close attention to their clothing with a careful

eye towards fashion. Her husband was a successful businessman, and their attire showed the world that they were rising and taking their place in society. Yet Isabel chose modestly. Other women could recognize the quality of their clothing. Tasteful small choices, discreet embellishments of fine jewelry, completed her ensemble. Nothing too flashy or vulgar.

Isabel was proud of Julian. He worked hard building up his optics company, whose highly skilled workers made the finest eye glass lenses in Paris. Apprentices were sent to Switzerland for special training, once senior workers approved them as full team members. Julian was rightfully proud of the high quality their team had achieved.

Julian reflected on the changing world, and his place in that world as they strolled. He glanced at those passing by in the street, capturing the image in his imagination, much as a photo might. Now his company made fine optics for photographic equipment too. "My dear, our sales are rising with the popularity of photography. Demand is high-- people seemed obsessed with photos."

Isabel responded in kind, "I just read a critic saying, *one day photography might replace the fine arts of watercolor and oil painting*. Do you think that is possible?"

"There is much debate against the cheap copying of nature by a purely mechanical process that lacks artistic merit--some argue it is the very loss of the soul of artistic expression." Henri replied with enthusiasm for the topic.

"Yet still, photography seems like a rather democratic art form, helping to bring the visual culture to the middle class, what with its accessibility and affordability." Isabel added, "Wasn't there the celebrated work of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon? Some critics suggest he is proof that photography was an art form."

Julian agreed, "Photography as a fine art seems to stand at a crucial turning point. Ah, but, then there is always the Mona Lisa."

Isabel glanced at her husband. She knew his passion for the visual arts and could anticipate Julian's announcement when it was time for their annual visit, almost a pilgrimage, to the Louvre Museum and the Mona Lisa. Julian could stand patiently waiting across the room, quietly taking in the master's work. Only when the crowds thinned would he approach the masterpiece.

Whenever Julian thought of photography his thoughts always returned to the Mona Lisa. "It seems that photography, with its depth of field and focal points, has made the critics forget Leonardo's ability to use sfumato, with its suggestions of lines and the blurring of features, to bring the world's most famous smile to life."

"The muse with the fugitive smile that might break into a laugh at any moment." Isabel encouraged.

"Leonardo had breathed life into his painting. Could anyone produce a sfumato-like effect with photography?" Julian wondered.

"I remember reading of an English photographer, Julia Margaret Cameron, who a critic suggested had done just that. I wonder if any local galleries might have her work?"

"It is all about mastering the light." Henri reflected. "Perhaps with very good optics in the hands of a true artist, then storytelling could be told with photography. So much depended on the quality of true light."

In that moment Julian's thoughts were interrupted; he took a small sharp breath and gasped. Isabel felt the change in his step and paused slightly, much as a skilled ballroom dancer reads their partner's movements. She recognized what was happening: suggestions of the sun's last rays had found their way beneath the hazy clouds and through the misty rain. A soft golden hue had transformed the world around them into that special moment of "the golden hour", that elusive artistic muse. Isabel gave Julian's arm a gentle squeeze. He gave a satisfied sigh of contentment.