



My Airborne Valentine

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"Bonjour! Bienvenue!" said the flight attendant with a smile as she checked my boarding pass. "You're right in the front. Just go straight and it will be the second seat on your right. Enjoy your flight with French Air." Thanking her, I made my way as directed.

As I got settled into my seat, a man made his way down the aisle, and stopped right in front of my row. He was old; possibly in his late-seventies or even early eighties, judging by the wispy white hair around his head, upon which he had adorned a tweed cap. His skin had that pale, slightly discoloured tinge about it that really old people have, and he stood slightly hunched. He rechecked his boarding pass and the seat number marked on top a few times before reaching upwards to stow away his luggage. However, even though he seemed to heave with all the strength he could muster, he only managed to raise the small suitcase up to chest height. Placing the case back down, he caught his breath for a while. He seemed to be debating whether to call an attendant for help.

He appeared so helpless in that moment that I immediately stood up and offered to help him. Together we stowed his baggage away.

"Thank you, young lady", he said while sending a brilliant smile my way. The smile lit up his entire face, and I noticed

he had striking blue eyes behind the pair of round wire-rimmed glasses. I returned his smile reflexively.

He settled into his seat, and soon our seven hour flight to Paris took off. I usually tend to converse with whoever I get seated next to on planes, and fortunately for me, my companion turned out to be a chatty old fellow. Somehow, the man reminded me a little of my grandfather, and it was perhaps due to that reason that I felt oddly at ease with him. He introduced himself as an American by the name of Jack Shepperd, and insisted that I call him by his first name. Employing the quintessential travel question we inquired after each other's reason for travelling to Paris.

"I'm trying to put a bad experience behind me with this holiday," I said.

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

"Since I graduated last fall, this year, I consented to an arranged marriage. With our family's respectable position in society, my parents quickly found me a suitor.

"Our families' first meeting was going as well as could be expected, till I mentioned that I am a writer. His mother laughed at that, and said that of course I wouldn't continue this 'silly job' after marriage. I directly asked why she hadn't mentioned early on that she had a problem with my working after marriage."

"You've got guts," interjected Jack with his eyebrows raised. I smiled.

"Thanks. They were real hypocrites though. They acted very offended at my words, saying 'Oh no, we're not those kinds of people. We will let you do whatever job you want, but writing is too 'out there'. Women shouldn't have wild opinions like that.'"

"Preposterous," exclaimed Jack.

"Quite right... After that, I politely declined their offer and left. My parents felt guilty for making me go through that experience. And being the opportunist that I am, I slyly used this to coax a holiday out of them. Of course being in Paris alone on Valentine's Day will just make me feel like I also pulled one over on that woman by having "wild opinions", " I revealed with a chuckle.

Jack laughed with me, saying he hoped I found what I was after. I was quite sad to have told him a tale which would only solidify whatever incorrect stereotypes he had about our country, but I couldn't change the truth.

"Enough about me. Tell me your story Jack. Why are you flying to Paris?"

"I'm flying to Paris because my wife wants me to", said Jack, staring into the distance as though he was recalling some long forgotten detail.

"Is she in Paris?" I asked.

Jack seemed to not hear my question. "We started a world tour three years ago," he began, "Eileen and I. It was our fifty year marriage anniversary gift to ourselves. We travelled all over the globe for two

months. Paris was to be our last destination. It was my wife's dearest desire to spend Valentine's night under the open sky in front of the Eiffel Tower.

"However, it wasn't meant to be. On a snowy evening in December that year, when we were at a hotel overlooking the Himalayas, my wife passed away in her sleep. It was the most beautiful demise anyone could ask for, and it left me absolutely heartbroken.

"For two years I mourned her passing. I wondered why I still lived while my purpose here had moved on. That was when I realised that I had to carry out this last duty for my wife. She lived in me, and so I had to fulfil her last wish alone, for the both of us", concluded Jack with tears in his eyes and a lingering hint of determination.

His story inspired me beyond belief. Here I was, trying to prove who knows what to a woman I had only met once in my life, while there existed a story so wholesome not a foot away from me. Suddenly, I realised the futility of my purpose for this journey, in the face of this blatant display of the purest love.

"Jack, I want to accompany you on your journey to honour your wife's last wish, if you don't mind. Would you like to be my Valentine?"

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