

WHERE'S MY HAT,
WHAT'S MY HURRY?



2003

TELL ME, Alma, when were we last in Paris?" he said.

"My God, Carl," Alma said, "don't you remember?
Only two years ago."

"Ah yes," Carl said and wrote on his notepad. "2002." He
glanced up. "And before that, Alma?"

"In 2001 of course."

"Yes, yes. 2001. And then there was 2000."

"How could you forget **the** new century?"

"The false new century."

"People couldn't wait. They had to celebrate a year too
soon."

"Good old too soon, good old Paris. In 2000." He scribbled.

She glanced over and leaned forward. "What *are* you doing?"

"Remembering, recalling Paris. How many visits."

"How nice." She leaned back, smiling.

"Not necessarily. Were we there in 1999? I seem to recall—"

"Jane's wedding. Sam's graduation. We missed that year."

"Paris missed, 1999. There." He struck a line through the date.

"We were there in 1998, 1997, 1996."

She nodded three times.

He went down the years, all the way back to 1983.

She kept nodding.

He wrote the dates and then spent a long time looking at them.

He made some adjustments and scribbled some comments beside some of the dates and then sat for a moment, brooding.

At last he picked up the phone and punched in a number. When he reached it he said, "Aragon Travel? I want two tickets, one in my name and one with no name, today on the United flight at five to Paris. I'd appreciate your getting back to me as soon as possible."

He gave his name and credit card number.

He put down the phone.

"Paris?" said his wife. "You didn't warn me. There's no time."

"I just made up my mind a few minutes ago."

"Just like that? Still—"

"Didn't you hear? One ticket with my name. One with no name. Name to be supplied."

"But—"

"You're not going."

"But you've ordered two tickets . . ."

"Name and volunteer to be supplied."

"Volunteer?"

"I'm calling several."

"But if you only waited twenty-four hours—"

"I can't wait. I've waited twenty years."

"Twenty?!"

He jabbed **the** phone buttons. Far off, **the** phone rang, a high voice fluted.

"Estelle?" he said. "Carl. I know this is impromptu, silly, but do you have an up-to-date passport? You do. Well—" He laughed. "How would you like to fly to Paris this afternoon, five o'clock?" He listened. "No joke, serious, Paris, ten nights. Same room. Same bed. Me and you. Ten nights, all expenses paid." He listened and nodded, eyes shut. "Yes. Yeah. Yes, I see. Well yes, go on. I understand. I could only try. Maybe next time. Hey, I understand. I can take no very well. Sure. So long."

He hung up and stared at **the** phone.

"That was Estelle."

"I heard."

"She can't make it. Nothing personal."

"That's not how it sounded."

"Hold on."

"I'm holding."

He dialed. Another, higher voice answered.

"Angela? Carl. This is crazy, but could you meet me at United Airlines, five this afternoon, small carry-on, destination Paris, ten nights, champagne and pillow talk. Bed and breakfast. You. Me?"

The voice shrieked on the phone.

"I take it that's a yes. Wonderful!"

He hung up and could hardly stop laughing.

"That was Angela," he cried, beaming.

"So I gathered."

"No arguments."

"A happy camper. Now would you—"

"Hold on." He left the room and came back a few minutes later carrying a very small suitcase and tucking his wallet and passport inside his coat pocket.

He stood, swaying and laughing in front of his wife.

"Now," she said. "Explanations?"

"Yes."

He handed her the list he had written ten minutes ago.

"1980 through 2002," he said. "Our time in Paris, correct?"

She glanced at the list. "Correct. And?"

"We were in France together all those times?"

"Always together, yes." She scanned the list again. "But I don't see—"

"You never did. Tell me, do you recall in all our trips to Paris, how often did we make love?"

"What a strange question."

"Not strange at all. How many?"

She studied the list as if the total was there.

"You can't expect me to name the exact times."

"No," he said, "because you can't."

"Can't—?"

"Not even if you tried."

"Surely—"

"No, not 'surely,' because not one night in Paris, the city of love, not one night ever, did we make love!"

"There must have been—"

"No, not once. You've forgotten. I remember. Total recall. Never once, not once, did you call me to bed."

There was a long silence as she stared at the list and at last let it fall from her fingers. She did not look at him.

"Does it all come back now?" he wondered aloud.

She nodded silently.

"And isn't it sad?" he said.

She nodded again, quietly.

"Remember that lovely film we saw so long ago when Garbo and Melvyn Douglas looked at a clock in Paris and it was almost twelve and he says, 'Oh, Ninotchka, Ninotchka, the big hand and the little hand almost touch. Almost touch, and in a moment one half of Paris will be making love to the other half. Ninotchka, Ninotchka.' "

His wife nodded and a tear appeared in her eye.

He went to the door and opened it and said, "You do understand why I have to go? Because next year I might be too old, or maybe even not here."

"It's never too late—" she began.

"For us, yes, too late. Twenty years in Paris too late. Twenty weeks and twenty July 14 possible nights, Bastille Days, and all of it too late. My God it's sad. I could almost cry. But another year, I did. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she whispered.

He opened the door and stood there, staring at the future.

"Oh, Ninotchka, Ninotchka," he whispered and went out and was careful to shut the door with no sound.

The concussion thrust her back in her chair.