

The Mutt

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I fell in love like a dove flying head first into a window pane. When I first met Étian, his poetic words masked in a thick Alsatian accent swept me away without my acknowledgement. He was enrolled in an engineering program for his master's at Boston University when we were both at the same bar off Mass Ave. His dark curls foiled around his eyes, making him seem mysterious and allusive. I was hooked.

We met two years ago and have since moved to Ittenheim, France, a quiet town that feels more lonely than it does quaint. Étian always said it reminds him of his hometown, Colmar; however, whenever we traveled there to visit his parents, it was much livelier. In Ittenheim, the roads were hardly paved and the landscape was barren. There were few trees to separate the houses which clumped in pockets of neighborhoods in between expanses of vast nothingness. We each had our own small front lawns that acted as an unspoken showcase of gardening talent. I had none, but Étian maintained some sort of order so our house wouldn't look particularly worse than the rest. Our backyard was only about 50 square feet, but the fence made it feel even smaller.

Everything began to bloom in early April. Étian and I had just returned from the tulip festival in Amsterdam, where every square inch of grass is covered in tulips. We stayed the weekend in an Airbnb that overlooked the Keukenhof gardens, flowers lining the mile-long expanse organized by color. We walked hand-in-hand across the gardens and the decorated windmills.

At one-point Étian said, “Makes you wish we could grow something like this at home.”

“You’re more than capable. I, however, kill everything I try to care for.”

He squeezed my hand and sighed, “We’ll plant plastic ones this year, the neighbors won’t even notice.” We both knew they would though.

This was our second year at the tulip festival. Last year we made the six and a half hour-drive one week after moving to Ittenheim. Despite my plea against traveling, Étian has said it was one of the things he missed most about living in Europe. At that point, he could’ve convinced me to do anything with him. I’d already moved continents despite Maman’s warning and incessant pleads for me to stay. I reminded her that she was welcome to visit us whenever and that she still had Cecile, who remained the favorite anyhow. She still hadn’t though.

Our first tulip festival I had no idea what to expect. I figured there’d be a few gardens of tulips, maybe some fair rides. Carrying the memory of my hometown’s apple festival held every fall, I remembered the apple food items and the rides that Maman always deemed unsafe. The tulip festival was a combination of expansive flower fields, parades, farms, and city streets that breathed life into the fresh spring air.

During our last day Étian and I bought I package of yellow tulip bulbs that I would kill later that month after over watering them. As we continued walking through the tulip gardens, he would look at me and mutter “Impressed yet?”, as though he brought me here to reaffirm my decision to move.

It was cliché and I was newly in love and I wanted to hate every minute of it, but that was the difference between seeing it and feeling it. Afterwards, we decided to make the Tulip

Festival an annual road trip. Our second year was slightly less magical than the first, but I blame it on the lack of first impression.

When we got back from Amsterdam, Étian spent more time working and gardening than elsewhere. I liked seeing him invested in his hobbies and his projects at work, but when he had interests they tended to consume his day. He was never the type to leave things in their own spaces, he was constantly reading botany books or sketching new framework to engineer the next morning. One of the things I grew to love most about him was his passion.

While Étian would come home late from work, my secretary position at the Council of Europe meant I was home by 5:30pm at the latest. There were always chores around the house that needed to get done. Sometimes I would leave them for Étian, but after he'd been occupied almost until bedtime, I'd begun doing them myself. Mid-April was my favorite month for cleaning, that was probably the American in me. I wore my favorite baggy t-shirt without pants, played some variation of alternative music, and deep-cleaned the house section by section.

On the day I was cleaning the foyer, I left the door open to air out the house. This was a common practice the French embraced, opening the windows to circulate the must out of your home. While I insisted this only needed to be done in older homes, Étian told me it was just something every French person did and he couldn't bear without it. I thought it mostly a cultural norm and who was I to question someone else's lifestyle?

While spraying and wiping the dust from the corners of the doorframe, a soft high-pitched whimper echoed from beyond the screen door. I thought it was part of the song, even though that made no sense whatsoever. I continued wiping and the whimpering went on, just

subtle enough to mask its origin. Opening the door and stepping into the sunlight, the spring air had broken crispness and relaxed to a serene awakening of life around the house. Étian had just begun planting our garden, the few stems hadn't even sprouted from the soil yet. Our forsythia shrubs had green leaves and were starting to grow buds on the tips of their branches.

The whimpering continued faintly through the breeze. I walked around the house, down the front pathway, to the end of the driveway and still found no source. As I began to reenter our home, I spotted the end of a tail shaking from behind one of the forsythia shrubs. Moving the branches, there was a brown and white spaniel-looking dog, crouched by the edge of the house. I slowly inched my hand towards him and he just stared at me. He let out a small whimper when I touched his fur, but otherwise had no reaction.

Minutes later I brought out water and leftover chicken scraps in separate bowls and placed them in front of the dog. He looked at the dishes, then me, then the dishes. When I came back half an hour later, both were empty and the dog was gone.

I didn't bother to tell Étian about the dog until he came back the next day. This time he was sitting on the front step as I came home from work. I could see he was definitely some kind of spaniel that had short white fur with dark brown patches. He was smaller than our neighbor's poodle. He watched me exit my car and walk up the pathway to the front door. I greeted him in a high-pitched way I'd only ever reserved for Étian's newborn nephew. After putting my things down, I gave him more bowls of water and leftover chicken, this time I included a drumstick. He left after an hour, taking the drumstick with him.

Étian thought I was fooling him at first. "Is this some kind of joke to make me seem gullible?"

“Why would I lie about a dog?”

He smirked and shrugged without removing his eyes from his book. “You like to kid.”

“What should I do if he comes back?”

“Take a picture.”

Two days later, the dog returned. Scruffier than last time, he displayed the bone in front of him, proud to have brought it back. Out of chicken, I instead gave him salmon with his water and then took a few photos while he ate. He watched me clean the floors of the foyer through the screen door for about an hour before he vanished, taking the bone with him.

After dinner when Étian was reading, I sat next to him and draped my legs over his lap. When I showed him the photos, he remarked how much the dog resembled his childhood pet.

“But you see, I wasn’t joking!”

“No no, I believe you. And you fed him the salmon; he’s a lucky dog.”

“Do you think he’s a stray?”

“A what? Stray?” He repeats, putting extra emphasis on the ‘y’ as he pronounces it.

“*Un chien errant*,” I translated.

“Ah,” he nodded, immediately storing this vocab in his mental archive. I envied his ability to remember these translations and never trip over them again. He wanted to improve his English, so it was what we primarily spoke at home. Étian also spoke German and was learning basic Arabic. He had a knack for picking up languages, and somehow genuinely enjoyed doing so.

He wrapped his arms around my legs and studied the photo once more. The dog's eyes were looking straight into the camera. He didn't look sad or excited, just had a blank stare that pierced the screen. I didn't need to look at the photo to remember; it was burned into the back of my brain.

At work the next day, I asked my two of my coworkers what I should do about the dog.

"In America we'd hang up posters saying 'Lost Dog', is that a thing here?"

"I've never seen it," Yvette answered. "You could try asking your neighbors, but I think if anyone was missing a dog they would have come to you by now."

"Stray dogs are a good sign, Ava," Lorraine said from the opposite desk. "They are attracted to your radiance."

"Or the free food," I admitted.

"Would you keep it?" Lorraine asked.

Yvette squinched her face. "Keep it? What if it has some disease?"

"It will be forgotten and killed in a pound anyway."

"What about a shelter?"

"They're usually full. Stray dogs are everywhere in France, but I'm surprised they're in your small town."

That night, Étian and I ordered *flammekueche* for dinner from our favorite shop in Strasbourg. He gave me the edges of his pieces because he never finished them. His team at work was narrowing down on a prototype to build for a client, he'd been especially stressed

about producing a working design. It probably wasn't the best time to start the conversation, but I blurted the question out nonetheless.

"Would you want to get a dog?"

He smirks before taking a sip of Riesling. "Can we take care of a dog?"

"You didn't answer my question."

Slight disapproval, he puts down his wine glass. "*Cherie*, we're gone most of the day."

"You are, I'm home at 5:30 sharp." When he doesn't respond I say, "I feel like I'm asking my mom."

"Can you take him to the vet?"

"Of course."

"We're not taking in a dog with disease."

"No way, I just cleaned the whole house."

He grins, "I should've helped you do that. It looks great."

The dog didn't come back for weeks though. Even though I'd only seen him three times, whenever I pulled in the driveway I still hoped to see him perched on the front steps. I hadn't had a dog since Cecile and I begged Maman for a beagle just before my eighth birthday. She eventually caved, and we had one for twelve years. While I wasn't the sole caretaker of her, there was a sense of comfort when I'd come home and she'd run up to me. With Étian gone most of the day, I craved that feeling again.

At the beginning of May, I returned from the grocery store with bags of items to make Étian's favorite meal for his pre-birthday dinner, *croq au vin*. The dog was back on the front step, watching me pull in and take the bags from the car. I greeted the dog as if he never left, he continued to look at me. He was significantly thinner and his hair was dirtier. He looked apologetic, the way a dog looks at its owner when it did something wrong.

I put the bags in the house, quickly placing the refrigerated items away, and I left everything else on the kitchen floor. Grabbing a spare towel and a pair of gloves, I went back out and slowly approached the dog. He whimpered, but made no effort to escape. I wrapped the towel around him, put him on the floor in the back of my car, and took him to the vet feeling like I'd just kidnapped a child.

He was cleared of all diseases and given shots for safe measures. After I took him to a groomer; he didn't like that. When he got back to the house, he roamed around while I put the rest of the groceries away. I began making dinner and he sat in the doorway and watched the entire time. He never even begged for food, just observed me moving about the kitchen while I occasionally gave him chopped up carrots. Étian came home around eight o'clock, greeting me with a kiss on my cheek before he noticed the dog.

"He's back. He's in our house. Did he break in?"

I knew he was joking but I decided to humor him. "I caught him trying to steal your silver watch. I told him he could do a few chores in exchange for not calling the cops."

"Well you're the one cooking dinner. He's not very good at this repayment-thing."

“He’s cleared of any diseases, he got his shots, and he got cleaned at the groomers.”

He slowly approached the dog and put out his hand, waiting for the dog to close the distance. “He’s cute. Kind of looks like my aunt Maguerite’s dog.”

The dog began to sniff Étian’s hand before finally allowing him to pet him. “Have you thought of a name yet?”

“Étian?”

He gave me a stern side-eye then turned his attention back to the dog.

“Okay really, I have no clue.”

“He looks like a ‘Beau’.”

“Beau?”

“Yeah,” he mutters, scratching the dog’s ears.

We ate dinner, giving him our scraps because we hadn’t bought any dog bowls. The next morning we went out and bought everything a dog could need, organic food, blankets, winter accessories, a leash, and five different toys. I think Étian was more excited than I was at that point. Whenever he stayed up late on the couch, Beau would curl up next to him until he went to bed. He only barked when people came to the door, and that was rare.

Having Beau gave us an excuse to leave the house more often, to take him on walks or get him out of the house. We were both surprised at how well-behaved Beau was. He never even once peed in the house. He offered me company when Étian stayed late at work, and was the perfect alternative since neither of us wanted to have kids. When I showed pictures of Beau at work, Yvette would remark “Wow, you’d never know he was a grungy mutt at one point.”

I called Maman about once a week to stay in touch and update her on my life, though sometimes it would be every other week. It made me feel bad, but the thought would escape me when life got more hectic. I was always the one to call her anyway. Things especially got hectic once we got Beau. When I finally called her after a week and a half, I asked how business was.

“As always, if anything it’s gotten better. My new assistant makes madeleines to perfection.”

“So you’ll keep this one?”

“You say that as if I’ve gone through many.”

“No, I just mean I know the last two weren’t good workers.”

“They were awful, they kept burning things and wasting ingredients. But Jasmine is perfect, I could see her taking over the shop.”

Maman liked to throw it in my face that neither Cecile nor I wanted to take over the business. Cecile was living two hours away in New York City, working to develop a new software. I had no plan to come back to the US in the near future.

“That’s great!” I waited for her to ask about my life, but I knew she wouldn’t. “Étlan and I got a dog?”

“A dog?”

“Yeah, his name is Beau and he’s really cute. I’ll send you a photo right now.” Once I sent it I waited a few moments. “Did you get it?”

“He looks scruffy.”

“Yeah, he’s some kind of Brittany-Spaniel mix. He would come up to our doorstep frequently, so we just decided to keep him.”

“You got him off the street?”

“Yeah, but he’s a sweetie.”

“*Ma puce*, you can barely take care of yourself.”

I paused for a moment. “Well I’m doing great, thanks for asking.” When she didn’t respond, I said, “I need to go, I have to feed Beau.”

“Give Étian my best.”

“I will.”

“*Bisou*.”

“*Bisou*,” I muttered heart-heartedly before hanging up.

Étian was outside planting flower bulbs in our garden. He’d been planning the type of perennials for the last few weeks and was excited to begin the process. I looked at Beau, who was sound asleep in the armchair across the living room. His food dish in the kitchen was half full.