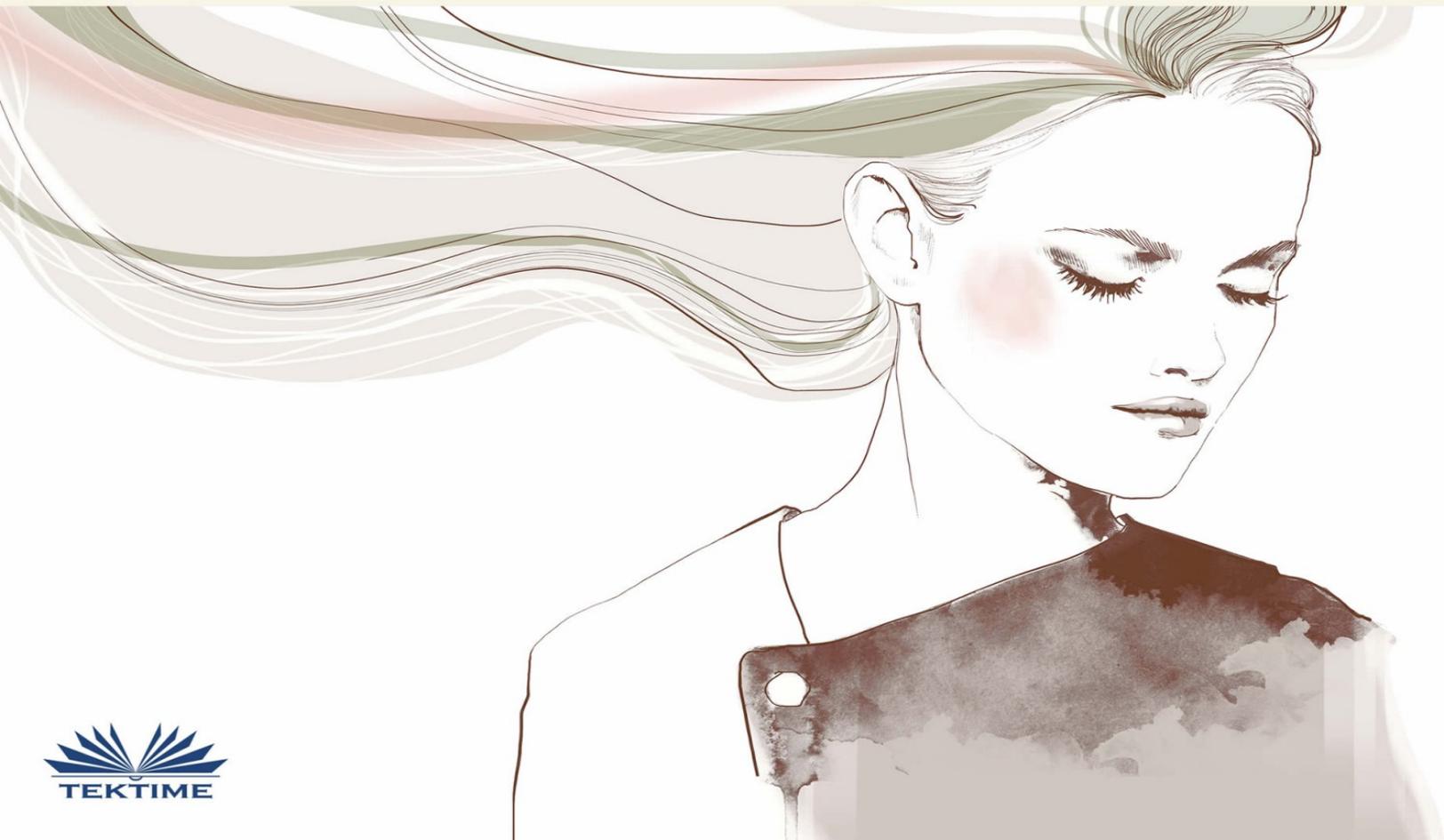


Emmanuel Bodin

Under The Summer Sun

Novel



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1.

That morning, during an ordinary goodbye that felt to him more like a final farewell and that in that moment seemed fateful, he had truly believed that it was the last time he would kiss her, the last time he would hold her hand, the last time he would take her home. Before disappearing behind the metal gate of her building, she had gently blown him a kiss and directed it his way using her palm. Surprised, he had eagerly responded with the same elegance, as if they were two lovers who could not bear the idea of parting for the day. His eyes had welled up with tears as he was aware of one tragic thing: the woman he loved was going to break up with him. He had supposed he would never see her again. Had she noticed his sadness? He preferred to think she didn't. What reason would she have had to think that he was so broken hearted? Between them, nothing had officially happened to signal a breakup. Except that he felt it floating in the air, like the smell of a powerful poison he could not fight against. He had remained silent, hoping he was wrong. Whether he had liked it or not, it seemed like it was over.

Bowing his head low, he had slowly crossed the pavement and trailed away from the building, assuming that he had to forget that neighbourhood. He turned in the direction of his shabby studio. There, he would be greeted by emptiness fed by latent solitude, with new tears for company.

She had made him grow accustomed to the ways of a delicate and sincere companion who regularly shared with him about her life, but at the same time not stifling her partner with constant daily surveillance. He himself also allowed her to breathe freely. Day after day, his head was spinning with different memories, which plunged him in an abyss of emotions. He had felt a sharp pain, like a phantasmagorical sensation of seeing his feelings brutally torn from his heart.

The emptiness had lasted for nearly two weeks. He had tried to reach her multiple times. In vain. SMS, phone calls, even e-mails all proved to be futile attempts to contact her. No answer, no messages, nothing. He did not understand, he wondered what could have happened to make his gem want to leave him, especially since they had planned to visit Venice together during the coming weekend.

Their love story had begun so marvellously. The romance of a few weeks seemed by no means to want to separate them. But there was one fateful date pending since the beginning of their relationship.

They had met in the Paris metro station; crowded corridors, people bustling everywhere. In the middle of the anthill, a lost young woman was looking in all directions. The station suffered from a huge lack of modernization. There were no signs giving directions. Only the regulars knew their way, like robots that were perfectly programmed and in sync.

He was just as annoyed as she was. He couldn't figure out his way either. Nonetheless, he was well familiar with these long tunnels. Since he owned neither a car nor two wheels and found the buses too congested and harder to find, he had gotten used to borrowing these molehills to travel far from home. When the weather was nice and he had to go somewhere that he considered close enough, he did not hesitate to make the journey by foot, for the obvious reason of the pricey ticket... There was also the *Vélib'*, the bicycle renting system admirably popular in Paris; but, still, the subscription offered did not appeal to him. He had already tried to remove the device, but it insisted on staying cemented to its mast. He did however find it to be an interesting concept, except that the logic of capitalist gain debased the ecological initiative. He had been struck by a dreadfully discouraging yet conflicting realization that when a political decision that benefits the public is made, as soon as it is implemented by ruthlessly ambitious private institutions, it only offers as a substitute an unfortunate observation of our economic system that an implicitly powerless simple agreement forces us to shamefully accept.

The young woman saw his head spinning and decided to approach him and ask if he too was looking for line fourteen. He did in fact have to take that line to the Saint-Lazare station to then take the commuter trail. He was going to meet with Stephanie, a painter friend of his. She however, was going to Bercy, in the other direction. She was very much his type, physically. Her French was not the most perfect. Her accent revealed her Eastern origins. She told him her name was Svetlana and that she was from Russia. In return, he revealed his name to her. "Frank," he simply replied.

Svetlana always preferred her friends to call her Sveta. She had been staying in Paris for three weeks now for work and took advantage of the

opportunity to visit other European countries during her free time. Her job consisted of selling handbags in a store at the Galeries Lafayette. Being a storekeeper did not interest her in the least. It was very boring but it was the only way she would be able to live her dream of traveling to France. That way, she was able to get a temporary three month visa. That day, she was going to one of her colleague's house, who was from Ukraine and had come to France for the same reason. They had planned a walk in the city. They also wanted to do some shopping.

Svetlana had suggested to Frank that he chose the direction to go in. She had told him that her astrological sign influenced her daily, but not necessarily always for the best. Libra: the sign of all instability! She always had difficulty making decisions, especially in important moments. A yes in the morning can turn into a no by evening. She had unveiled to him the details of her personality without even thinking about whether it was a bad omen to be like that in front of a complete stranger. She had shown herself to be spontaneous, natural and felt at ease in front of this man. She had immediately felt a positive aura and a reassuring feeling by noticing this man, lost just like she was.

Without necessarily wanting to, Frank had personified the male who takes the initiatives. The path he chose had turned out to be the right route for Svetlana. She thanked him and was already preparing to leave him. Pushing his shyness aside, Frank asked her if she would like to explore Paris with him as her personal guide, one of these days. Slightly hesitant, she stared at him, wondering about this man's intentions. Was this a serious man or a man simply looking for an adventure? A profiteer perhaps?

Once the moment of surprise passed, Svetlana let out a big smile, after which she gave in to the offer by candidly replying with a typical: "Why not..." So, they exchanged numbers. A polite exchange followed. They wished each other a pleasant day and said goodbye, shaking hands awkwardly.

Frank went his way, a huge smile on his face like a fool, a smile he tried to hide a little, so people wouldn't watch him like he was crazy. On his journey, Frank could not stop thinking about the cheerful face he had just encountered. A soft, radiant face, full of grace and abundant tenderness. He wondered if he would really see this girl again. Was he lucky enough that she would actually accept to walk around with him? He wasn't so sure. To get rid of a potentially bothersome person, it is easy to go in the other

direction after offering him a lie as a liberating lie, such as a fake phone number that would make it seem like she was willing. Should he have tried to call her at that moment to see who would pick up? If it was really her who answered, what would he have said?

Frank was overthinking it. Unconsciously, he had already set his sights on this young woman. He had been celibate for several months, without being able to forget his ex. However, this new blond with sparkling blue eyes had managed to change things in a blink of an eye, with a smile. Is this the desire to move on? The beginnings of an unexpected crush? Throughout the journey, he kept thinking back to that pretty little face that just came out of nowhere, like a stroke of luck, a gift from life, or a poker game where the first set of cards was fantastic. And yet... what could possibly determine his destiny? The future offers a multitude of surprises, without any kind of warning. Desires bubbled inside him. An innocent call could eventually end up changing aspects of his daily life. A major upheaval that would bring oxygen back into his life and erase the memory of the one he had loved before. Can it be that simple to change, to forget about the one who he carried in his heart and still thought about regularly? Probably... but there will always remain some desire, which would prove to be everlasting.

When he got to his friend Stephanie's house, Frank could not nor did he want to keep that chance encounter to himself. Those few minutes invaded his mind again. Lurking around was the danger of getting his hopes up after such a brief conversation that could very possibly go no further than that. This young woman had dazzled him since the moment he first laid eyes on her. Stephanie was aware of her friend's past disappointments. She seemed happy for him and hoped that it was the beginning of a beautiful romance, if he were to see her again. She warned him though, not to make it such a big deal just yet in case nothing came of it.

Frank had met Stephanie in an online chatroom a few years ago. Although at first there was an attraction between the two, they had preferred to maintain distance between each other. A friendship would develop.

Short and brunette, Stephanie's physique was the opposite of Svetlana's. She possessed an undeniable charm that easily captivated a man, especially if he turned out to be single, as Frank was when they met. On one hand, this woman's intelligence had attracted Frank. On the other hand, she smoked a lot. The smell of cold dry tobacco proved to be an obstacle between them over time. Over the first few weeks, the lust had turned into a form of

camaraderie. They enjoyed spending time together, talking about their similar tastes when it came to movies, art and literature. He has had many opportunities to have sex with her since they oftentimes spent evenings together, such as tonight, but Frank had been very cautious not to. Even though Stephanie never outright said anything, her tender demeanour towards him and the seductive way she dressed were all just an invitation to sex.

For a friendship to develop between a man and a woman, one must never, ever, sleep with the other person. Sometimes, and even often, there is an unspoken infatuation, a craving to be with the other, while knowing fully well that neither of them wanted a meaningful sentimental future with the other. If they dared cross that imaginary barrier, best case scenario says they become friends with benefits. At best, that would last a few months until one of them falls for someone else who better fits as a partner for a romantic relationship. However, worst case scenario says that it remains one drunken night adventure. Both options offered a similar fate: a failed effort at building a friendship. After the deed would have been done, there would be no hope of achieving this form of sympathy they share. They would both come out as losers. Often, the decision of whether or not to be together is made in the first few days or within two weeks after meeting each other. It is a weird period because the atmosphere becomes thick with expectations, illusions, desires and concerns. Sometimes you tell yourself, "It's her... She's the one!" But then you realise it is just a fantasy and that special something disappears forever. If they had nothing from the start, then a friendly bond, so beautiful and special, could have grown between them.

In rare occasions, the opposite happens. After period of great friendship, only after a certain time and in the same moment, the two friends yearn for something so. They like each other so much that they end up getting even closer... One simple mistake could possibly ruin years of good friendship, all for one quickie.

Strangely enough, when a woman breaks up with a man, she sometimes says she still wants to be friends with him. How does a guy have an ordinary friendship with a girl that he sincerely loved and still wants? Male-female friendship seems unlikely if they have previously shared pure feelings. That's a horrible idea to even think that! It's a downgrade from his

previous role. As a friend who was once so close, he is now asked to keep a certain distance and observe without having much of an opinion. Worse yet, there is a possibility that he can happen to meet the new suitor, and that he can gauge the seduction game of this new companion who already imagines being able to have sex day and night with the one he loved. How unbearable! Just thinking about it makes his stomach turn. Friendship seems quite simply inconceivable and improbable after having been through a loving relationship in all sincerity. Maybe years later... even so, one would need to be able to truly forgive the other for whatever led to the breakup.

Stephanie was showing Frank her latest canvas paintings. She had a very surrealist style that was difficult to describe, as human figures, often distorted, amalgamated to a more chaotic atmosphere. A very personal touch emerged. Nonetheless, she was never able to exhibit her works, to this day. Frank had no doubt that the hour of glory for his friend would come. She had obvious talent. Fortunately, she did not depend on her art to make a living. She worked in an office for a firm that sold refrigerator handles. She managed the commercial relationship with client companies directly on the phone. She got bored a lot. However, she took advantage of the opportunity to flirt with potential buyers who would then become her lover for the night. This job seemed to be her way of dealing with the annually increasing cost of living imposed by the operation and deterioration of today's society, which perpetuate successive leaders for fear of losing their advantages, because they are concerned only about their themselves, while the people—the citizens—find themselves crushed and scorned under the yoke of new indigestible laws.

After a good meal of pasta and watching the movie *In the loop* that makes a complete mockery of our shameful governments, Frank had returned home. On the train, he thought about Svetlana again. He hesitated to call her but he was curious as to whether she had given him her real number. He started to compose a text message since it is easier to write than to make a call without knowing in advance what they could talk about together. At the last moment he changed his mind. He was afraid that a message asking about her was too hasty and that after reading it the young woman would only want to distance herself from this man who was still a stranger and who oddly wondered about how her day went.

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