Curious how memory plays its tricks.

Tree remembered the bistro side of La Closerie des Lilas being much larger than the intimate dark wood ship’s cabin that confronted him. It had been years since he was last here and during that time, Lilas had expanded in his mind to accommodate constantly growing memory.

A friend had brought him for lunch the first time he was in Paris in the early eighties, another of those places that had drawn Tree because it was a Hemingway hangout.

 Since then, the brasserie had become something of a Paris touchstone for him although he wasn’t certain why. Nothing particularly remarkable had ever happened to him here. The food was good without being memorable. Still, in the glow produced by the tiny wall lamps, with the piano player at the entrance tinkling away at Gershwin’s “Summertime,” Tree relaxed, feeling much more at home swimming in the nostalgia of his past than he was among the young of rue Montorgueil.

Tonight, with everyone on the terrace enjoying the summer evening, Tree pretty much had the interior of the brasserie to himself. Just him and whatever ghosts of Hemingway lingered. He occupied a stool at the end of the bar near the brass plaque marking the place Hemingway used to sit.

For a moment, Tree was tempted to order a kir royale, his drink of choice in the old days. He dismissed the impulse, asked for sparkling water and a menu. He would eat something at the bar, briefly inhale nostalgia, and then get back to poor, sick Freddie.

“Wait a minute,” he said to the bartender.

“Monsieur.”

“I’ve changed my mind. A kir royale, si’l vous plait.”

Why not? he thought to himself as the bartender nodded and went away. I’m in Paris, after all, and for a single night reliving long-ago youth—a youth that would include a kir royale at La Closerie des Lilas. Or maybe two.

The bartender returned and placed a glass filled with a bright liquid the color of a pale rose on the bar in front of him. Tree stared at it for a time and then lifted the kir royale until it glittered in the light of the Closerie. He placed the edge of the glass to his lips and took a deep swallow.

The sweet, biting taste filled his mouth, and then made its way languidly through his body, as if to warm him with the memory of what it was like to sit here with a few of these inside him. Of course, it was never the first that got you into trouble. It was always the second and then the third.

Well, he thought, putting the unfinished glass back on the bar, he wasn’t going to get into any trouble tonight. Those days were long over.

“You are in my seat,” a voice behind him said.

He turned to find a young woman standing there. He had a sense of blonde hair tumbling around bare shoulders, a short skirt and long legs.

“Is this where you sit?” he said.

“It’s where Hemingway sat, so that’s where I have to sit.”

Tree got off the stool to make room for her, taking his glass with him.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

“I’ve sat there many, many times,” he said.

“I’m Cailie Fisk,” she said, offering a slim hand.

He took her hand. “Tree Callister.”

“Tree? That’s an interesting name.”

“It’s short for Tremain. When I was growing up the kids all called me Tree.”

“Nice to meet you, Tree.”

She perched on the stool, very still, closing her eyes as though attempting to draw in the essence of Hemingway. Her eyes popped open again and she looked at him. “I wonder if he really did sit here. I mean, how does anyone really know?”

“I’ve thought the same thing many times.”

“He does talk about the Closerie in *A Moveable Feast*, so I suppose the chances are pretty good that his elbow must have nudged this part of the bar, however inadvertently.”

“I’m surprised someone your age is even interested in Hemingway.”

“I’m fascinated by all things Paris,” she said. “When you’re growing up in St. Louis, that’s a million miles from Paris, so I embraced all the clichés. The Eiffel Tower. The impressionists. Hemingway in Paris. The unrealistic, romantic view they keep for the tourists. But then I’m the kind of girl who gets to London and rushes over to see the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. Old things, but enduring. I like that.”

The bartender came over and arched an eyebrow? “Madame?”

She ordered a kir royale.

Tree looked at her. “Why a kir royale?”

“I don’t know. I read somewhere that if you came to La Closerie des Lilas you should order a kir royale. So here I am at the Closerie ordering a kir.”

“That used to be my favorite drink.”

“Used to be?”

“Back in my drinking days in Paris.”

“What’s that you’re holding?”

“It’s a kir royale,” Tree said.

She smiled. “Your drinking days appear to have returned.”

“Nostalgia overcame me for a minute there,” Tree said.

“How did it taste?”

“Not quite the same.”

“It never does, I guess. You came here for work?”

He said, “I was a newspaperman in Chicago.”

“But you’re not anymore?”

“Not for a long time.”

“What do you do now?”

What to say to that? “Now I’m a private investigator on Sanibel Island in Florida.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Some days I wonder,” he said.

The bartender placed the kir royale in front of her. “What’s in this?” she said.

“It’s crème de cassis which is a black currant liqueur. An ordinary kir is topped with white wine. With a kir royale, they add champagne.”

She lifted the glass off the bar. “To Hemingway and nights in Paris,” she said.

He touched his glass to hers. “To Hemingway,” he said.

She took a tentative sip and smiled. “It’s delicious. Are you not going to have a drink?”

“I think I’ve had enough,” he said.

 “Come on, Monsieur Tree Callister from Sanibel Island, you can’t toast Hemingway and Paris and then not drink.”

 “Maybe you’re right,” he said with a grin, and finished off the rest of his kir.

 His eyes watered, and he felt that warmth again. The room softened around him. Or was that his kir-fueled imagination?

“So let me see, Sanibel Island,” she said. “That’s off the west coast of Florida, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. In fact, the agency I run is called The Sanibel Sunset Detective Agency.”

“And how many agents does Sanibel Sunset Detective employ?”

“Just one,” Tree said.

“You?”

“I’m the Sanibel Sunset detective.”

“I see. Are there many calls for private detectives on Sanibel Island?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Everyone thought I was crazy, including my wife. But there is business as it turns out.”

“You’re in Paris with your wife?”

“Yes, we’re here celebrating her birthday.” Now Tree was beginning to feel embarrassed, and the burning in his face wasn’t just the result of the unexpected liquor in his system. He hastened to awkwardly explain: “She’s come down with some sort of bug. I ducked out to get something to eat.”

“I’m sorry to hear she’s not feeling well,” Cailie said. “I hope she’s going to be all right.”

The waiter returned and asked in English if they wanted menus. “I haven’t eaten anything today and I’m starving. Have you eaten yet?”

“No, not yet,” he said.

“Why not get something together, and then you can get back to your wife, and I’ll go back to my lonely, miserable hotel room.”

“Now I’m starting to feel sorry for you,” he said.

“Maybe that’s the idea.”

“A beautiful young woman in Paris, you won’t be lonely for long.”

“In the meantime, I am hungry.”

Tree thought of Freddie back at their apartment. She probably was sound asleep. And he *was* hungry, and, he had to admit, the kir royale had released something inside him. He felt loose and free tonight, like the old days in Paris. Why not dinner? He glanced around at the unoccupied tables and booths. “Why don’t we sit over there against the wall?” He turned to the bartender. “Is that all right?”

“Bien sûr, monsieur.”

They took their drinks to the table. Cailie sat facing him and the waiter brought the menus.

“Tell me about yourself,” Tree said. “You grew up in St. Louis. Are you still there?”

She studied the menu a moment before she said, “Very much so.”

“What do you do there?”

“Right now, I’m not so sure.”

“No?”

“It’s the sort of confusion that occurs in a life when your sister is killed, and you break off with your fiancé, and all the things you thought were certain in life suddenly aren’t so certain anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Tree said.

“Don’t be sorry about the fiancé,” she said. “He’s a jerk. But my sister was a different matter. We weren’t very close, but still, she was my sister. Everyone in the family was devastated, of course. My parents are having a terrible time with it. I had to get away. I’ve always wanted to come to Paris, and so I thought, well, if I’m ever going to do it, then maybe now is the time.”

“And was that a good decision?”

She paused to consider this. “I think so,” she said carefully. “Although it turns out you can’t outrun your demons—or your memories.”

“You certainly can’t outrun your memories,” Tree said. “That’s the trouble with Paris. It holds onto them for you and waits for you to come back and then springs them on you.”

“Maybe,” she said with a shrug. “But I’m a newcomer, remember. So I bring dreams to Paris, not memories. Overall, Paris has been a fine escape. I don’t have to think about my sister here, I don’t have to think about anything but seeing and experiencing all the things I’ve always dreamt about the city.”

“What happened to your sister?” he asked.

Cailie appeared not to have heard the question.

A server arrived and so they ordered: the red mullet filet for him; simple chicken for her, accompanied by a glass of Pouilly Fuissé. He declined wine. The warming effects of the kir were beginning to wear off, leaving him with a slight buzzing in his head. He should never have had that drink. When their meals arrived, they ate pretty much in a silence filled with Gershwin and Cole Porter, and some Henry Mancini, courtesy of the piano player.

By the time they finished, the few diners inside the brasserie had departed. The piano player had closed down for the night. Tree ordered the check, feeling a lot more sober and somewhat relieved: he was enjoying his time with this lovely young woman, but he could not quite shake the guilt he was feeling, thinking of Freddie sick and alone while he dined in style at a fashionable Paris bistro. Now it was ending, and he could get back to Freddie.

When the bill arrived, Cailie insisted she pay. “It’s my treat,” she said. “I was expecting a boring evening all alone in Paris. Then here you are to make things a lot more interesting.”

“I’m not sure how interesting I made them,” Tree said.

 “Would you like to do me a favor?”

 “Sure, what can I do?”

“Do you mind if we share a taxi?”

“Of course not.” Why wouldn’t he share a taxi, after all? At this time of night, it would be hard enough to get one cab, let alone two.

 I’m staying at the Lutetia. Do you know where that is?”

“On Boulevard Raspail. I’ve stayed there many times.”

“If you could drop me off, that would be great.”

To his surprise, they found a taxi waiting outside—his lucky night for cabs in Paris. They were only five minutes away. They rode in silence down the wide boulevard to the hotel. When they pulled up in front, Cailie said, “This is really embarrassing.”

“What is it?” Tree said.

“The fiancé I was telling you about? I broke it off, like I said, but he’s followed me to Paris.”

“This guy is here?”

She nodded. “That’s why I went to La Closerie des Lilas tonight. He was bothering me, so I jumped in a taxi and, not knowing where else to go, I told the driver to take me there. My fiancé doesn’t know a whole lot about Paris restaurants, so it worked. Would you mind walking me to my hotel room, just in case he’s lurking around.”

“Sure,” Tree said. “But if he’s threatening you, you should go to the police.”

“Well, I’m not particularly anxious to deal with the French police, and it’s just for tonight. I’m flying back to St. Louis tomorrow. Besides, I’ve got the Sanibel Sunset detective with me, so I’ll be all right.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Tree said. “But let’s get you inside the hotel.”

She insisted on paying the driver. They went up the front entrance steps. The lobby was deserted, no sign of unhappy fiancés. Tree had stayed at the Lutetia during the eighties when it was in its five-star glory. Tonight, the lobby appeared shopworn, a grand dowager still trying to put on a good front, but no longer able to hide the fact that age was catching up with her—a bit like himself.

Tree followed Cailie to the bank of elevators. “I’ll say goodbye here,” he said.

“Humor me, please, Tree,” she said. “Stay with me until I get to my room.”

“All right,” he said. Yes, that was the polite thing to do, he thought. The last few moments in the final act of the production titled *Reliving Your Youth*—making sure the beautiful young woman got safely to her room.

She smiled her thanks. “It’s probably nothing. But just in case.”

They took the elevator to the sixth floor and stepped into a long corridor done in drab greens and browns. “I was just thinking,” she said. “Maybe you’ll expand your agency. Soon you’ll need another Sanibel Sunset detective.”

“Why? Do you have experience as a detective?”

They reached the door to her room. She inserted a card in the lock, and the little light blinked green, and the door clicked open.

“Sanibel Island sounds intriguing.”

“It’s a unique, lovely island, no question,” Tree said.

He held the door for her and she went through saying, “Come in for a moment.”

He followed her inside. The door hushed shut behind them. He had an impression of two single beds pushed together—a bad habit at the Lutetia, Tree thought—heavy drapes, French doors open to the cooling night air. Cailie Fisk in a blur descended, wrapping her arms around him, her lips anxious to find his mouth, her slim body pressed hard against him.

He was so taken aback that for a moment he did nothing—the telling, damning, weak moment that was to haunt him. Then, realizing what he was doing, or wasn’t doing, he jerked away in the same panicky manner he might have dodged a punch.

“What are you doing?” The words sounded forced and lame.

“It’s Paris,” she said, curiously out of breath.

She reached around, doing something to her blouse. The next thing, to his astonishment, she was naked to the waist. He backed toward the door, turning away from the glowing invitation of her body.

“What’s wrong with you?” she called.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“You’re what?” Cailie amazed.

He reached the door. Cailie crossed to him, her face twisting into anger. “You fool,” she said. “You stupid fool.”

“I thought I was helping you,” was all he could think to say.

“Get out,” she yelled. “Get out of here!”

He struggled to open the door. She called him more names and then he was outside, the air conditioned silence of the corridor wrapping around him. He took deep breaths, assaulted by conflicting emotions, among them, he had to admit, stirring lust, but also—the detective rising—suspicion. What was a stunning young woman doing coming onto him like that? What was she up to?

He half expected Cailie to come after him. But her door remained closed as he stumbled thankfully into an elevator.

Outside, a sleepy doorman stepped off the curb to flag down a taxi for him. As he waited, it occurred to him that maybe he still held some untapped attraction for women, an allure obscured by marriage and Freddie’s overwhelming presence. Let out on his own, women could not resist him. He could hear Freddie’s echoing laughter as the doorman held the taxi door for him.

 By the time the taxi dropped him off, and he climbed the stairs to the apartment, it was nearly one o’clock, and he was exhausted—tiring work escaping beautiful, predatory women.

Freddie lay curled in the bed, barely visible in the darkness. She did not stir as he finished undressing and eased himself next to her.

He lay there, feeling empty and sick and terribly guilty in Paris.