

Lips that Touch Liquor: The French 75

by Alicia Aho

The French 75

1 1/2 ounces of cognac

1 ounce of lemon juice

1 teaspoon of sugar

6 ounces of champagne

For the rest of that night, everything Mickey looked at appeared to have a halo of music, something nearly visible that he could almost but not quite hear, something he knew was so beautiful it must have been composed by the gods themselves. He could tell Joe was feeling similarly moved, since the barman was unusually gregarious and unflappable -- once he even patted a sobbing, heartbroken woman on the shoulder and poured her a drink on the house, something Mickey never thought he would see in his lifetime.

And Lola -- Lola outsparkled the sequins on her dress. Something of the gold in the cloudberry champagne swirled within the liquid of her voice and warmed everyone who listened: it was faint, but you could see it if you realized what to look for. As they finished the last number of her first set, she looked down at Mickey and smiled. Mickey grinned back and thought his face might break with joy. From the corner of his eye he could see Joe beaming at the heartbroken woman, who was now staring at him hopefully with a wide-eyed, limpid gaze.

And all this after only a single glass of the stuff, Mickey thought.

Only Sam was his usual laconic self. During Lola's break, Mickey had found a moment to wander over to the dealer's table. Sam glanced at him once and turned over the top card. "Ace of diamonds," he said.

"Which signifies what, precisely?" asked Mickey.

"It means something is going well at the moment -- and you know what happens around here when something is going well."

"Sam, you are the most superstitious son of a bitch I've ever met in my life."

"It means things are about to go downhill."

"And my daddy was Genghis Khan."

"Scoff all you like, Mick, but you know I'm right. That Finn's going to bring us trouble."

"Your cards tell you that, too?"

Sam shook his head. "You know better than that, Mick. The cards just tell me what's going on right now. It's up to me to figure out how that's all going to play out. The ace tells me we've just managed to grab on to something good, real good, better than maybe anything we've ever seen before -- but it's my guts that tell me as soon as other people find out about that something good, they're going to try and take it away from us."

"Never had you pegged as a worrier, Sam."

"We so rarely have anything worth worrying over, it's never come up until now."

Mickey laughed, but it only lasted a moment. He was looking at Joe, who appeared to be doing a bang-up job of sweet-talking that heartbroken woman onto a brand-new road that looked good and scenic but would certainly only take her right back where she was now. "You're probably right," he admitted. "But if the good parts aren't going to last, shouldn't we enjoy them more? No point in borrowing trouble."

"Better to borrow some now if it means less of it later." But Sam was smiling now, too.

Although Mickey knew Sam was right -- Sam was almost always right -- he was able to put it out of his mind. He was swimming on a sea of hope, buoyed on currents of it'll-all-turn-out, and this probably explained why, after the Elysium closed and Lorelei went home and Sam and Joe brought out the battered metal frying pan for an early-morning meal, Mickey stayed at the piano, working out some quiet themes of his own and smiling to himself. Eventually, he headed

backstage right to the living quarters, and had the dubious privilege of witnessing a six of diamonds before heading to sleep in his own modest bed.

Once, some years ago, Mickey had taken the time to ask Sam what he wanted most out of life.

Sam had taken time before he'd answered. "A happy ending," he said.

"What, with the villain overcome and the damsel no more in distress and everybody sings and dances at your wedding, that kind of thing?"

"Yes," said Sam, "and no." He shuffled absent-mindedly through the cards as he spoke. "It might be more accurate to say that what I really want is an ending."

"Well, then, congratulations," said Mickey. "Out of all the men in the world, I have found the one who looks forward to death. You'll get your ending, I guarantee it."

"No -- death is just *my* ending. I want *the* ending. I want there to be something besides the story just going on and on forever."

"Why?"

"Because otherwise there is no story. Otherwise nothing makes sense."

"You're not making sense," Mickey replied.

"No," said Sam, "let me put it this way. What's the point of the boy who cried wolf?"

"If you libel wolves they come and eat you?"

"Ha ha. If you raise the alarm for fake dangers often enough, people won't believe you when you raise the alarm for real ones."

"Very nicely summarized, Sam -- I can't think why Aesop was so long-winded about it."

"The point, you bastard, is that unless you have the ending where nobody cares that the boy is yelling and the wolf eats the boy, you don't know what it all means. If there's no ending, there's no meaning. And I desperately need there to be a purpose, even if I'm not alive at the end to understand what it is."

"This is getting a little too apocalyptic for my taste, Sam. It's a short step between wanting the world to end and figuring out a way to help it along."

"Oh is it? Gosh, I'm so very sorry that my deepest desires make you feel squicky on the inside, my friend."

"Sorry."

"And what is it that you want most of all, hmm? Tell me, so I can make fun of you and completely dismiss it."

"Seems fair . . . What I want is to find someone who can't get on without me."

"How romantic."

"It will be, if I do it right. I want there to be one person in this world who needs me, one person whose world is better when I am in it, even if it only lasts for a single day before she changes her mind and swears she never wants to see me again."

"She."

"Of course it's a she."

"What if there were a man whose world is better when you are in it?"

"Are you coming on to me?"

"Let's say I were. Would that be enough?"

Mickey thought for a second. "No," he said. "It'd be nice -- but it wouldn't be enough."

"We'll keep an eye out for the right woman then."

"Yeah, I'm sure she'll be along any day now."

Two years later, a young woman had walked in and asked for a singer's audition. She'd been wearing a grey skirt and a green blouse and Mickey had eyed her legs and thought she was pretty enough to put on stage. The Elysium had only been open for a month, and it had not been a good month. Joe hadn't said a word in three days except to clarify someone's drink order -- and even then it wasn't a long list, since the crowd had yet to find the place. A torch singer would be a much-needed draw for business, if she was good enough.

Joe had shrugged and said, "Let's see how you sound."

So Mickey sat at the upright piano and playing the opening bars of "Who's Sorry Now?" And the woman parted her lips and sang.

And Mickey Wright was lost. Her voice took that long, loping melody of heartbreak and triumph and wrapped it around his heart with unbreakable loops. His hands trembled as they raced across the keyboard, offering notes the way minions scatter flower petals along the route of a traveling queen. By the end of the first verse his eyes were misty, and by the end of the song he was a wreck, with tears streaming unchecked down his unshaven face. The woman finished the number and looked at him expectantly. She raised her eyebrows in surprise when she saw he was weeping. He wiped the tears away and tried to compose himself. It took him a second or two to untangle his tongue. Joe's eyes were wide in astonishment, and Sam's grin nearly split his face in two.

Mickey turned to Joe and said, "If you don't hire her on the spot, I quit."

"Well," Joe said at length, "we can't have that. What's your name?" he demanded, turning to the woman on the stage.

"Lorelei Upchurch," she replied, and turned to Mickey. "What's yours?"

"Mickey Wright," he said. "And those two gentlemen are Sam Varias and your new boss, Joe Barnes." He grinned, suddenly buoyant. "Welcome to the Elysium, Miss Upchurch."

"Please," she said, "when I'm on stage, call me Lola."

Joe pulled a hundred dollars from the till and with a crafty, mischievous glance, sent Lorelei and Mickey out with it to procure Lola a wardrobe. The pair spent an hour in some of the mid-range shops close to the theater district, during which time Mickey pronounced only a handful of carefully chosen words and communicated mostly with movements of the head to indicate yes or no, with the occasional shrug for variety. Lorelei Upchurch and the various shopgirls chattered like birds and pecked away at the merchandise, searching for precisely the right cut and color to suit Lorelei's admittedly charming physical features while presenting the right air for a nightclub singer. Lorelei was adamant on this point: "I

should look as though I had made the acquaintance of sex and its associated emotions, but not as though we had been bosom friends for a decade." One salesgirl offered something light pink and covered in flounces and frills -- Lorelei shook this off with a laugh. "I'm a woman, not a porcelain doll from a Victorian schoolroom." Another held up something red with flounces on the shoulders and slit up past mid-thigh. "Or a Victorian whorehouse," Lorelei said. Mickey loosened his tie and cursed Joe Barnes and tried to remain unobtrusive in the background.

God help him, next they bought shoes. Mickey knew there had been eras when the sight of a woman's bare foot had been considered the height of erotic titillation, and it had made him shrug and reflect to himself that it takes all kinds. But now, watching Lorelei Upchurch slip a jeweled high-heeled shoe onto one slim high-arched foot as her voice still throbbed in the back of his brain was as close to religious feeling as Mickey had been in quite some time. Actually, in as long as he could remember. For one wild moment he imagined building a cathedral in her honor, with stained glass windows and really fantastic echoes, so her voice so soar as high toward heaven as human ingenuity would allow.

He shook himself. This was crazy. He didn't know anything about her: he'd merely looked at her and listened to her sing. And just as relevant was the fact that she didn't know anything about him, either. Suddenly Mickey was concerned that there was not a lot about him for a person to know. He played piano rather well, but plenty of people did. He liked pretty girls, and he liked pretty women even more, and apparently he could be totally slaughtered by a beautiful voice while still walking around and giving the casual observer the idea that his world was the same as it had been this morning. Was this stoicism? Or was it a more sinister type of distance? He thought about his friends and coworkers, who were the same two people. He realized he hadn't had a true conversation with anyone in months.

And maybe it was the loneliness, or the dread of more loneliness to come, or maybe it was something about this Lorelei

Upchurch that made him temporarily insane, but when they had finally spent most of the wardrobe budget (even the jewelry, which Mickey found gave him a respite from shoe-related fantasies) he picked up the myriad parcels, turned to her, and said, "Are you hungry?"

And miracle of miracles, she nodded.

They found a small cafe that was not too expensive. Lorelei had impeccable manners, Mickey realized, and felt that his own were rather subpar. He tried to ask questions that didn't feel cheeky or invasive, and was forced to the horrible realization that such questions do not actually exist. The best one he could think of was to ask what songs she was hoping to sing. And she had a list prepared, and most of them he knew. And he asked if she would be willing to learn new songs, and she told him not to be an idiot, which he took as a yes, and by the end of the brief meal they had the rudiments of a show jotted down on a napkin with the pen Mickey had happened to steal from the place where they bought the shoes. (Not as a memento. Honest.)

Mickey found himself entranced by the joy that Lorelei couldn't keep from her eyes or her expression. She honestly couldn't believe they'd given her the job right off the bat.

"If my voice teacher were here now," she laughed with delight. "She's the pruniest old woman you've ever seen in your life, and her approach to performance involved a great deal of me walking around the house curtseying with a dictionary balanced on my head."

"Can't imagine how that would improve your voice," Mickey offered.

"It didn't, of course," said Lorelei. "But she was used to teaching society girls and debutantes, whose parents wouldn't dream of ever letting them set foot on a stage. Maybe opera, if they were very lenient and the girl was very talented. But a common stage? Where ordinary people can understand all the words and just any old person can walk in and have a listen? My mother would have had the fit to end all fits."

“And yet they gave you singing lessons.”

“Oh, you had to have accomplishments. You had to be able to do something pretty in front of guests so they wouldn't think you just sat around all day, wasting time and wondering when your life would end.” She toyed with the heel of a piece of bread, suddenly thoughtful. “I suppose piano teachers are a different sort altogether.”

“I wouldn't know,” said Mickey. “Oh, I had lessons after I begged my mother for six straight months. And they found someone on our street would agreed to teach me for a dollar a lesson, but she didn't keep me as a student for very long. I never could get the hang of reading music,” said Mickey. His brain was still sorting things out while his tongue answered her question.

“No?” said Lorelei.

“Something about the lines,” he went on. “Those thin black lines always looked as though they were holding down the notes. As though the music was caged. I could play anything I heard, or near enough, but I couldn't play anything by reading it. It would break my heart, and the way it sounded! It drove my teacher to despair. After the first month she told me never to come back.”

Although the neighborhood Mickey grew up in was not as rough as some, he could still see that Lorelei's upbringing had been substantially different from his own. The shine hadn't been rubbed off of her yet.

Mickey knew it would be. It happened to everybody, in this world. He'd known what the world was from the time he was fifteen, when his new sister died and his mom went shortly after, leaving Mickey alone and on the street. He wished he could promise himself that he could keep that fading from happening to Lorelei, but he knew it was better for her if it did, in a small way. She had to survive, the same as the rest of them.

But this he could and did promise silently as he followed her back to the After Eight with an armful of tantalizing packages: she would always be able to depend on him.

